
Text Classics promises to ‘unearth some of the lost marvels of our literature’¹ and one of its nineteenth-century treasures is this remarkable book. Published the year before Sherlock Holmes made his famous first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), this early Australian detective novel became the runaway international bestseller of its time. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold in London and it was subsequently translated into eleven different languages. It was wildly popular in Australia, particularly in Melbourne. In his introduction to this Text Classics edition, Simon Caterson suggests that the book’s setting in the Victorian capital ensured that ‘virtually every literate adult’ there read the book from cover to cover (vii).

My interest in *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was piqued during Australia’s National Year of Reading (2012). In June that year, Melbourne celebrated its own detective novel by holding a series of public readings in Federation Square. The ‘Weekend Read’, part of the Light in Winter cultural festival, was orchestrated so that chapters of Hume’s popular novel were read aloud in cafés, pubs, libraries and bookshops throughout the city during the winter months. ² Like the successful ‘One City, One Book’ programme popularised in the United States in the 1990s, the ‘Weekend Read’ promoted a community-based, citywide reading of a single novel at one time.

Fergus Hume’s mystery very much lends itself to this kind of reading: it is an enjoyable, exciting and satisfying story. Determined to escape from his unrewarding work as a Melbourne law clerk, Hume was very keen to write a bestseller that would capture the public’s imagination. He took his inspiration from Emile Gaboriau’s popular French detective novels, and set about writing ‘a book of the same class; containing a mystery, a murder and a description of low life in Melbourne’ (vi). The dramatic twists and turns of the sensational plot, the liveliness of the writing and the colonial setting immediately appealed to a wide audience. The same features attract readers today; the *Sunday Times* has listed the Hansom Cab mystery as ‘one of the 100 best crime novels of all time’.

The novel opens with a series of documents detailing the circumstances of a murder. First there is the newspaper report in *The Argus*:

> On the twenty-seventh day of July, at the hour of twenty minutes to two o’clock in the morning, a hansom cab drove up to the police station in Grey Street, St Kilda, and the driver made the startling statement that his cab contained the body of a man whom he had reason to believe had been murdered.

This is followed by a transcript of the evidence given at the inquest, presenting the testimony of the cab driver and introducing the physical clues to the crime: a chloroform-soaked handkerchief, a Russian leather cigarette case, and a soiled kid glove. The jury declares that the unnamed deceased was poisoned ‘feloniously, wilfully and maliciously’ by an unknown person, and a letter of reward is issued for information leading to a conviction for the crime.

The investigation proper then begins as the police detective, Samuel Gorby, and later the lawyer, Duncan Calton, enter the boarding houses, clubs and drawing rooms of St Kilda and East Melbourne. One of the pleasures of the novel is Hume’s vivid and realistic description of the city’s

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social milieu, from the elegant salons and well-provided dining tables of the very rich to the filthy rooms in the slums off Bourke Street. The cast of characters is similarly varied: cab drivers, burlesque dancers, landladies, prostitutes; doctors, lawyers, businessmen and heiresses. Hume’s verisimilitude is such that an enthusiastic reader can trace the progress of the novel on a map of Melbourne today, from the precise location of the Burke and Wills monument (where the fatal cab ride begins) to the Treasury Gardens, the Melbourne Club on Collins Street and the narrow laneways around the city.

Fergus Hume draws on the emerging features of detective fiction – the crime, the clues, the investigation – but also on the conventions of sensation fiction. Family secrets, concealed identities, mysteries, bigamy and murder were part and parcel of this popular genre that flourished in the 1860s. Like Wilkie Collins and Mary Braddon, Hume treats his readers to the excitement of disappearing wives, disreputable men, illegitimate children and any number of skeletons rattling in the family closet. The paper trail established at the beginning of the novel continues with stolen documents, half-burnt letters, cryptic notes and a hand-written confession. There’s even a highly dramatic (and fatal) sleepwalking scene. But as in all good sensation fiction, there is a serious side to the melodrama. Hume depicts a society that brutally divides rich and poor, one that fosters slum conditions and acute poverty, one where only the thinnest of veneers stands between wealthy respectability and social disgrace.

I recommend The Mystery of a Hansom Cab to anyone who enjoys reading Sherlock Holmes short stories, or to readers who take pleasure in the sensational aspects of the novels of Victorian authors like Charles Dickens. My recommended reading time would be a cold winter’s night: Hume’s delightful and entertaining novel is set in July in Melbourne. It goes well with an open fire, a glass of mulled wine and a comfortable sofa: perfect winter reading.

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