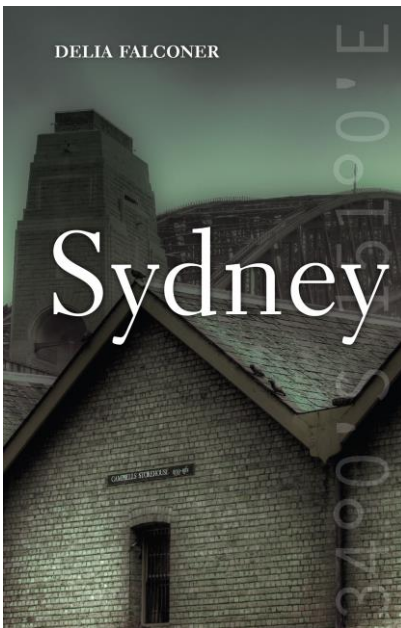


A PORTRAIT OF A CITY



Delia Falconer's *Sydney* (2010) is a memoir of her hometown. It draws upon personal memories and stories, as well as urban myths, and historical records, to reveal the feral materiality and whimsy of the so-called 'Emerald City'.

Falconer evokes the "pulpy smell of iodine from the over-warm February harbour", the browned pages of First Fleet Lieutenant William Dawes' notebook (and the intimacies of the Eora language within), the gaudy harbourside carnival of Luna Park, and the blooms and rot of jacarandas; this is a city that is more than the accusations of shallow and glitzy that are leveled at it. To tell the 'truth' of Sydney seems to be to grapple with its complexity. As

Falconer writes of one of her first impulses in taking on the project -- it was to come to grips with how people have thought and dreamed here.

Here, she talks with Tara McLennan on the creative and personal process of writing through the undercurrents of our city.

- Alyssa Critchley

What do you believe to be the most important things creative non-fiction has to offer readers and writers alike?

First, I should say I'm a bit dubious about the term "creative non-fiction". I think all good non-fiction writing should do the same things: show a strong, clear and logical use of language; engage the reader's empathy; and enlarge their picture of the world. That said, I'm aware there's more creative license in the kind of personal account New South commissioned me to write. Instead of having to deliver "news" or remain impartial I was able to explore my own sense of Sydney. As a reader of nonfiction, I like structures in which there is more than one part, in which there is spaciousness, and in which the different elements are brought together in interesting or stimulating ways. Lawrence Weschler's essay *The Light in LA*, which explores the unique light of the city from very different

perspectives - a poet, an astronomer, etc. - remains one of my all-time favourites for these reasons.

In *Sydney* I enjoyed the challenge of being able to move between 3 elements — my own personal experience of the city from the 70s onward, the larger history of the city, and the big themes or moods of each chapter, like "Showing Off". I hope this created some surprises and shook some of the events and places I was writing about out of the narratives (often touristic) to which they're usually attached.

Writing my first non-fiction book, I had certain rules in place for myself before I started, derived from being a reader: first, to try to avoid rehashing some of the better-known or even tired stories associated with Sydney, e.g. the building of the Opera House. And to follow Bruce Chatwin's advice to himself when writing *In Patagonia*: no mooning, moping, or thrilling - i.e., to translate every feeling into detail. As someone with an academic background, I also added not over-analysing or expressing my own opinion too much.

Instead, every element of the book had to tell a story, which wasn't easy! I would add that one of the surprises of writing non-fiction was that it struck me as having an even greater duty to the story than fiction.

How do you think the city of Sydney has influenced your life as a writer and your creative practice?

Sydney's my hometown. I grew up here, it formed me - so in every way, I guess. In my book I talk about some things that run very deep through the history of Sydney: its eighteenth-century roots, its constant conflicts between the urge to beautify and destroy, the abundance of so much remnant and semi-feral nature that gives the city a kind of unfinished aesthetic, the swift tragedy of its beginnings in terms of the near-decimation of the Eora, and its complex climate. I have always loved the way all of these things come through in so much Sydney writing and art: often as a mix of the visionary and earthy, because, as I wrote in the book, you can't escape the physical here. As I wrote I became more and more aware that all these things are all part of my sensibility as a writer and my love-hate relationship with my city. I always feel a certain freedom here: a sense of being liberated by the city's intense sensuality and its skeptical, often bawdy, sense of humour.

One of the main themes in the book is the 'haunting' of Sydney's past. How have your personal memories become haunted or affected by writing the history of the city?

The book was more an expression and exploration of a sense I have always already had that the city is haunted in some way beneath its sunshine - that it's far more complex from within than it seems to outsiders. The whole book is an attempt to tease these feelings out. In my introduction I describe Sydney as being like Mozart's music - that sense of beautiful notes flung out over the abyss. Interestingly, it's this sense of hauntedness to which readers have responded most positively.

What advice would you give to up and coming writers wishing to explore the theme of 'place' in their work?

Try to look beneath the surface, past what you think you "should" write about a place, and especially what its boosters and tourist organisations tell you. Be prepared for this to be really difficult. It's the case more and more these days, I think, that you travel somewhere in the world and find that you're only presented with one or two main "stories". Traveling to Savannah some time ago, I found it impossible, in the brief time I was there, to get past the heavy promotion of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*: every tourist itinerary seemed to be tied to this book, and the town had been reduced to a handful of key "sights". I think this is happening everywhere, including here. These ways of speaking place are very powerful and I feel it's important to try to connect with the stories and people that don't fit the tourist trail or usual picture. I feel huge gratitude to writers who do this for me, and preserve the different layers of a place: New Yorker Joseph Mitchell's portraits of old New York in *Up in the Old Hotel*, for example, or Ivan Vladislavic's *Portrait With Keys*, a very un-touristy portrait of modern Johannesburg. Fiction and nonfiction both teach you that you have to trust your own gut. Most writers, I think, worry about going out on a limb - that they're the only person to think or feel something. Experience has taught me that what I feel most strongly often connects most with strongly with other people.

Delia Falconer is the author of *The Service of Clouds* and *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers* and

***Selected Stories*, both shortlisted for a raft of major literary awards. She is also the editor of *The Penguin Book of the Road* (2008) and *Best Australian Stories* (2008 and 2009).**