



Melbourne

Sophie Cunningham

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Melbourne's city life told in diary form, this contemporary and personal portrait depicts major events from the Australian heat wave, which culminated in more than 400 bushfires, to the destructive deluge of a hailstorm. While walking through Melbourne's oldest suburb to its largest market, experiencing an Australian Rules Football game, and attending the comedy festival, writer Sophie Cunningham journeys deep into her own recollections of the city she grew up in, and tells stories from its history. She strolls by Melbourne's rivers and creeks and considers the history of the wetlands and river that sit at Melbourne's heart, for it is water, the corralling of it, the excess of it, the squandering of it, the lack of it that defines Melbourne's history, its present, and its future.

Melbourne Details

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From Reader Review Melbourne for online ebook

Rom Caitlin says

Really enjoyed reading this while holidaying in Melbourne. It gives a social history of Melbourne, while also giving a good insight into where to go and enjoy Melbourne. I think it gives a really good insight into the culture of Melbourne and certainly enhanced my trip. I'd recommend it to Melburnians too as a way to discover some extra parts of your city. The writer has a very engaging style.

Paolo Pietropaolo says

(Really, I mean 3.5 stars.)

During a recent 2-month sojourn in Melbourne, I saw this book everywhere - in the Readings in Hawthorn (which has a cameo appearance in the book), in bookshops in the CBD, outer eastern suburbs, Camberwell, down the Mornington Peninsula. On the penultimate day of my stay, reluctant to be leaving, I finally purchased a copy (at Hill of Content on Bourke St, for the record). I wanted to take a piece of Melbourne back to Vancouver with me, and this seemed to be the most appropriate artifact. The friendly bookseller warned me that although he had loved it, there was much in it that would not make sense to an outsider: he cited minutiae about the city's publishing industry as one example.

His review was spot-on. I loved many passages in this book, passages that I could relate to: an explanation of Melbourne's obsession with the AFL (thank you, finally I get it - and I'm also astonished and envious that sports and culture are so entwined in Melbourne...in Vancouver, instead, we have hooligans rioting over hockey games); a journey into the sewer tunnels underneath Hawthorn streets along which I'd walked many times, completely oblivious to what lay beneath; the exasperated and vivid descriptions of various weather conditions; and many more.

But I stalled on those passages that can only be relevant to those who have lived in the city for some time (or who are at least Australian and so familiar with many of the cultural references that went over this foreigner's head.) There was a lot of name-dropping that meant little to me. In this I found the book to be oddly schizophrenic: it seemed to alternate between being meant for readers such as myself, travellers and others curious about the city, and readers whose lives orbit around the day-to-day cultural vibrancy of Fitzroy, Carlton, and St Kilda.

However, since unfamiliar names are easily skimmed, this didn't slow me down much, and I'm still happy to have taken this piece of Melbourne home with me, in order to better remember and appreciate a city I love from half a world away.

Kevin Aston Hoey says

So pretentious it turned my stomach, such singular self indulgent name-dropping drivel masking as a geographical memoir

Louise says

Having been a resident of Melbourne for the last 7 years, and born and bred in Victoria, I was excited to read this book. I was in the end, however, disappointed.

Although I considered the book to be, in many ways, very "Melbourne", I did feel that the portrait provided was rather incomplete. I am not quite sure whether this was because of the way the book was written, or because the author's view and experiences of the city seemed so far removed from my own. Indeed, the occasional "soap-box" passages did nothing to improve my relationship with the book.

The book did make me think about the different attitudes people towards their idea of "home".

An ok read, one that would probably be experienced by other Melburnians in very different ways, but for me, well, nothing to write home about.

Narrelle says

To begin with, I want to say what a beautiful object the book *Melbourne* is. When people go on about the texture, weight, feel and smell of real books in the e-book debate, this is the book they mean. *Melbourne*, written by Sophie Cunningham and published by New South Books, is exquisite. A small, solid hardback, its elegant dustcover sheaths a simple cream cover embossed in gold. It looks like a book made for princes. The inside cover is an old-style map of Melbourne with icons highlighting features of the city. The pages are thick, rough-edged paper which provide a real tactile joy.

An object as lovely as this book ought to have magic in its pages, and it does. Sophie Cunningham's tale is part memoir, part ode to the city. I began by thinking the story was like some densely woven cloth, linking the past and present, connecting people and events across the city and time, but cloth is flat, and this story is deep and rich. So the *Melbourne* of these pages is more like close-growing plants whose roots go deep and intertwine, and whose branches and leaves mingle equally above.

It's all a pretty poetic approach, but what the hell—the book has a beauty and poetry that go beyond saying “this is a neat and evocative book about Melbourne and its history”. Cunningham's personal history is revealed along with the city's own story, and her emotional response to the places and people therein give the book real life and depth. Some of her experiences tally with or even cross over with mine, adding an extra tang of resonance.

Her story is full of extracts from essays, novels, emails and articles. The seasonal chapters flow from topic to topic, so that you may start with fruit bats in the gardens and end up at a book exhibition by way of Barry Humphries, football, TISM, indigenous history, Australian TV of the 1960s and the Victoria Markets. And every step leads logically from start to finish. Along the way she talks about things I knew only in passing or not at all, adding to my own stash of knowledge about my adopted hometown.

New South has produced a number of books that give personal accounts of Australian cities, including the award-nominated *Sydney* by Delia Falconer. Cunningham's *Melbourne* will surely be on upcoming lists. It

sings a song of home to those of us who love this place, and perhaps may even explain that love to people who come from anywhere else.

Jo Case says

Sophie Cunningham's *Melbourne* is not your average local history book. Stories of Cunningham's school days in Hawthorn and publishing adventures in Fitzroy and Carlton sit alongside the colonial settlement of Melbourne, the damming and many diversions of the Yarra, and events like the West Gate Bridge disaster of 1970, in which 35 construction workers fell to their deaths, or the infamous Hoddle Street massacre. Cunningham writes, 'The cityscape has been embroidered over the years with impressions of these larger public dramas, moments that nestle alongside more private and fleeting experiences.'

What makes *Melbourne* different – and completely engrossing – is this patchwork of public and private. It's the difference between riding an official tour bus around a city and having a resident take you on a personal journey, stopping by their favourite haunts while telling you stories that reflect the broader history of a city. The former is about getting an overview of agreed-upon significant icons and events; the latter is a deeper, if necessarily narrower, experience. It's about sampling the soul of a city, which is what Cunningham does brilliantly.

Melbourne is 'a city of inside places and conversation', she writes. 'It's a city that lives in its head'. And so it's appropriate that much of the book deals with Melbourne's cultural life, often drawing on the various essays Cunningham commissioned and published during her three years at the helm of *Meanjin*. She writes about the importance of AFL, which turns the city into 'a network of warring winter tribes', explaining the history of the game, but also sharing her passion for Geelong and its integral role in her long-term relationship. She charts the city's evolving culinary history, the evolution of the comedy festival, the city's music and theatre scenes, and of course, the world of books and publishing, which she explores from the inside.

What really makes it so pleasurable, though, is the novelistic telling, immersing the reader in Cunningham's Melbourne. The monstrously hot day in 2009 that spawned the Black Saturday bushfires is characterised in the inner-city by possums falling 'dead, out of the trees' in the Carlton Gardens and at the zoo by 'lions lying on their backs, sprinklers cooling them'. The sense of contemporary Melbourne being overlaid on the site of a displaced earlier civilisation – another world altogether – is evoked by descriptions of 'the waterfall that once fell around where Queen Street in the city now meets the river' and the fact that 'Melbourne's bike trails trace the tracks used by the Kulin nation'.

The differences between the post-settlement Melbourne of 100 years ago and the present are starkly evoked, too. In a pleasingly macabre image, I learned that much of today's Queen Victoria markets are built on the grounds of what was Melbourne's first formal cemetery. (Forty-five bodies were exhumed to accommodate the expansion of the markets!) And I was shocked and frustrated to discover that, 'In 1929, more suburban trains left Flinders Street Station in peak hour than they do now, they were more likely to be on time, and the city was considered to have one of the best railway systems in the world.'

And as a final layer, there are the cultural changes the average middle-aged person has seen (though maybe not thought too hard about) over their lifetime. The recent phenomenon of 'bucket back' among Melburnians watering their gardens with assorted buckets of hoarded shower water is juxtaposed with 1970s (and 80s) childhoods running under sprinklers on green lawns, a 'lush image of excess' that seems 'as exotic, as

decadent, as dated, as *Mad Men*'s Don Draper drinking whiskey for breakfast'.

The overall effect is a kind of collage of an ever-changing city, a carefully compiled album of snapshots that reflect one person's considered experience of Melbourne. To be pored over, perhaps, over a drink at Fitzroy's Standard Hotel, or St Kilda's Leo's Spaghetti Bar ... or one of the many other local haunts favoured by this tour guide.

This review as first published at www.readings.com.au.

Jillwilson says

What would any Melbournite wish to write (or read) about Melbourne? What would the reading experience be if you were not from Melbourne? Sophie Cunningham's book is one of a series about different Australian capital cities - Delia Falconer wrote a similar book about Sydney, for example.

It is a beautiful book to handle - a small hardback with rough-cut old style creamy pages and a silky finish to the cover shot of a murky Melbourne laneway. And this book is SO laneway. I felt like I was in a very small club (of people) reading in a very small and hidden Melbourne bar. You will know if you are in the club if you open the book. Its about (and for?) people who live on the map which is printed on the inside cover. Like me - middle class, university educated, inner-city bleeding heart liberal (lower case).

So it was a book of confirmation, rather than surprises. I liked it but found it faintly irritating for that reason. There was nothing new in it for me. So that's why I'm wondering who the predicted audience is for this book. I read a lot of Kristin Otto's book 'Capital' last year and found it a whole lot more interesting - it is a different beast of course as it's about time when Melbourne was the capital of Australia.

If you want to see if you're in the club or not - make a list of the five writers most likely to be referenced in a book about Melbourne, about the top five topics that would be covered (the 'action' of the book takes place over a year in 2009), of ten iconic leisure activities....

I'll start you off - Garner, Tsiolkas, Flanagan, Brunettis, Crystal Ballroom, Skyhooks, MIFF, the G, Paul Kelly - need I go on? (Apropos of nothing I had a taxi driver yesterday who needed directions to the MCG. He shyly confided at the end of the trip that it was his first day. "Yeah, I gathered that mate," I said).

I like Sophie Cunningham's writing - I enjoyed 'Geography' when it came out. I like the club I'm in - but probably don't need to read about it.

Catherine says

Like spending quality time with a best friend, if you didn't love this city before reading this book you definitely will afterwards. A lovely intimate read.

Carolyn Mck says

This is the third I've read of this series about Australian cities and the one I liked the least. I grew up in Melbourne but it was a very different Melbourne to the inner city Melbourne that Sophie Cunningham describes. Her views are partial and rather self-indulgent, I thought. At times I wondered who she thought her readers were - perhaps the inner circle of people who knew the many names in the literary and artistic worlds she inhabits.

I did like the concept behind the book - it's always difficult to find a structure to suit a book about a city. Cunningham takes each season (and Melbourne definitely has seasons!) and uses them to move backwards and forwards in time to flesh out a sense of place, history and identity. But in the end her use choice of detail obscured any main themes she might have been aiming for. Overall, disappointing.

The Cats Mother says

I'm attempting a new strategy, the 50 page rule: if I'm not enjoying or interested in a book by page 50, unless there's a really good reason to keep going, I should give up and move on. I knew that this would be one of those by page 30, but pushed on to make sure...

One of my book club friends lived in Melbourne and brought this back with her, but didn't exactly rave about it, so it's been on the shelf for a while. I was ready for something a bit different, but not too long, and open to a bit of non-fiction (unusual for me.) Some might enjoy this, but I found the burbling stream of consciousness downright irritating. The author jumps from personal anecdote to historical snippet to bland observation to quoting poetry with no common threads, and no structure; I found it tiring to read, and boring to boot. She describes the awful fires of 2009 but glosses over that, spending just as long recounting a wedding she attended. She repeatedly mentions Virginia without explaining who this is - partner, friend, sister, flatmate? It felt irrelevant. Similarly she name drops and mentions random previous jobs of no interest.

It feels like cheating to add this to my total for the year, but I wanted to review it, so have to. Discarded with relief.

Sally Edsall says

I wanted to like this book much more than I did.
Parts were okay, but it was vaguely irritating.

Melbourne writer Sophie Cunningham is disdainful of "the suburbs" (she grew up in Hawthorn) and looks at Melbourne from her smug complacency in Fitzroy.

Her world mostly extends from Fitzroy to Carlton, Brunswick and the city, with occasional forays to far-away St Kilda.

She does Pilates at 6:30am and rides her bike through downpours.

As befits a book about Melbourne there's a fairly long section about footy.

She spends rather too much energy on tedious mentions of Sydney. Yes, we "know" it's a physical, outdoorsy city with great weather! Focus, please. We just want to know more about Melbourne.

Damian says

Some interesting and recognisable people and places, but in the end, tediously parochial and self indulgent.

Steve Lovell says

I was mentally in quite an agonised state. It was the early 70's and for the first time I was venturing off my island to visit a place, to that point, I'd only seen on television, read about and listened to from afar on the radio. I was a late developer in terms of travel – everyone else I knew had made their rite of passage to destinations across the Strait, and beyond, to broaden their horizons, some never to return to my island. For various reasons, till my mid-twenties, I had remained adhered to Tasmania. But now, here I was, just after takeoff, staring out of the aeroplane – a stuttering old prop-driven Fokker – with ever widening eyes and increasing dread. Perched over the left wing, to my consternation something I assumed would be completely static and melded to the fuselage, appeared to be gyrating around of its own volition, seemingly, to me, completely out of unison with the movement of the rest of the airborne vehicle. The wing was obviously loose! At this rate it would soon fall off! Is there an emergency button I should press? Should I bring it to the attention of one of the seemingly unperturbed hostesses so she could inform the pilot that he would have to make a sudden descent to safety, presumably on King Island? Or maybe that is what a wing is supposed to do. It didn't seem logical to me, but then again, the thought went through my fevered mind that I was notoriously lousy at physics – so I decided to remain stum and closed my eyes to it all, hoping this nightmare of impending disaster would go away. Gradually, as the journey continued, I opened my eyes and realised that nobody else seemed to be in the lather I was, so I started to relax. After an hour or so of bumping up and down on the air currents, my hand, vice-like, gripping an arm rest, I landed at Tullamarine to commence my first 'overseas' adventure. I cannot say at any point I enjoyed that bumpity flight, or any of the flying I have done since. But I realised it was a means to an end I could endure, and the city of Melbourne soon became a frequent terminal destination.

Apart from the episode with the apparently fault-free wing, I remember zilch of that first visit to Australia's early capital city, but I was obviously hooked. The city has a hold on me. Living as we did on the coastline of my island with closest proximity to that metropolis, we, on the North West Coast, were far more fixated on Melbourne than we were Hobart-centric in those days of yore. The first television we watched, from 1957 through till 1962, when a station began operating out of Launceston, came in flickers from Melbourne over Bass Strait. In winter it was virtually impossible to pick up, but summer produced a more reliable signal. We were affixed to Happy Hammond's 'The Happy Show'; the drama of the courtroom in 'Consider Your Verdict'; 'In Melbourne Tonight', featuring Australian television's first superstar, Graham Kennedy; variety show 'Sunnyside Up', hosted by race-caller Bill Collins; and an early music show for teenagers, 'The Go Show'. All these programmes were Melbourne productions, indelibly imprinted on my juvenile mind. The Greater 3UZ was my radio station of choice, again emanating out of that city on the Yarra; the deep voiced Stan 'the Man' Rolfe my favourite DJ. Our island's best footy talent left the island to try their luck in the Melbourne based VFL, and we could read of their exploits in the Melbourne 'Sun', delivered to the Coast daily.

There is much I love about Melbourne. Early on I was besotted by the hugeness of its CBD, the 'skyscrapers' and shopping joys of Myer, David Jones and later, Daimaru. As I became worldlier, it was the alleyways and galleries that appealed to me more, together with the aerial ballet going on at the MCG and, in more recent times, Etihad. I started to fan out, discovering the delights of Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy, Richmond, South Melbourne and bayside St Kilda. The trams were a constant, providing a means of transport I prefer to any other, trains included. In the noughties I took to travelling across to the various Winter Masterpieces, and I have fallen in love with many watering holes dotted around the place. The multiculturalism of the inner suburbs is a great asset, and these days just poking around Melbourne's nooks and crannies, with my camera at ready, is the best of pleasures.

As a place to live, I couldn't imagine leaving my idyll by the river on the suburban fringe of Hobart. To start with, Sophie Cunningham doesn't make Melbourne that attractive an alternative either, with her tales of that city's criminal history. She has spent the best part of her life there, is a writer of quality as her splendid 'Geography' attests, and so is eminently placed to give a personalised view of her home town on Port Phillip Bay. She resides with her partner, Virginia, only a short distance away from the inner suburb of her upbringing. Our Sophie is Melbourne through and through. Her take at first seemed to me to be somewhat too personal in that we were learning more about her than the city. But as we passed through her seasonal reflections and expanded out from her local haunts, the personal intensity loosened and we started to gain a vibrant picture of this constantly expanding, constantly changing, multicultural, cultured, bookish, coffee stimulated, tribal and street-artified urban sprawl.

The book is not entirely hagiographic. The warts are there too as the aforementioned criminal 'underbelly' is prominent, and of course there is the weather. No treatise on this city would be complete without reference to its worship of our nation's two greatest sporting events – the Boxing Day Test and the footy Grand Final. Forgetting horses going around in circles, it is the gladiatorial AFL that most captures her pen. Sadly Sophie is a Geelong supporter, and her dismissal of the magnificent Hawks' 2008 victory of the underdog against her team, in just one sentence, is the only real travesty in the tome. Her team has been in its pomp over the last few years so she should be one happy feline.

As is proper, Cunningham takes great effort on linking it all back to the pre-Bearbrass days of the First Australians, before the 1835 treaty and all that. Her use of contemporary literary extracts enhances her salient points, and some of the great yarns of the city. These included Barak's walk, the 'Angry Penguins', the Builders Labourers Federation's green bans that saved some of the city's heritage, and the story of travel publishers Lonely Planet. These are a few of many related that come to mind.

Cunningham's book is ultimately more homage than otherwise, and hit the spot for this reader. I have two trips there already planned for 2013 – I can't get enough. My latest sojourn flitting across the water was last spring. I was only staying a few days so, travelling light, I had only one set of clothes. I should have known better. On the first day I shivered as icy rain bearing gales came in from the south, on the last I sweltered as the north wind became a harbinger of the summer to come. The city's climate is noted for its fickleness and, to me, the cool months suit it best. Sydney is imbued with a summery sheen to match its razzle dazzle as the face of the nation, but for all that Melbourne is Australia's soul. Two immeasurably wonderful songs always seem to me the essence of Melbourne – Paul Kelly's 'Leaps and Bounds' and Archie Roach's 'Charcoal Lane'. Sydney songs are froth and bubble, Melbourne's have place.

Kirsten Em says

Self indulgent inner city rubbish. This isn't about Melbourne, it's about Sophie Cunningham and how many names she can drop.

Leonie Starnawski says

There were parts of this book that I really enjoyed and parts of it that revealed interesting historical facts about Melbourne - such as the small section about the West Gate Bridge disaster. But I really felt that it should have been presented more as "Sophie Cunningham's Melbourne", rather than a book about Melbourne written by Cunningham...it was a very personal story and at times it felt like it was written specifically for her friends.
