

1948

Slumming it

The Harp in the South is Published

The Harp in the South, published by Angus & Robertson in 1948, was the first novel of one of Australia's favourite authors, Ruth Park (1917-2010). It has since become established as an Australian classic, with the claim frequently made that "it has never been out of print"—an extraordinary feat for a novel published over sixty years ago. Park herself claimed that *The Harp in the South* had been translated into some 37 languages—another remarkable achievement. The novel remains a perennial favourite with Australian readers, coming in 14th in the "Australian book that means most to Australian readers" poll conducted by the ABC and the Australian Society of Authors in 2003; and recently described by Delia Falconer in *Sydney* (2010) as "one of the city's most loved novels." It has also been adapted into a stage play (co-authored by Park and Leslie Rees) and filmed as a television mini-series in 1986 to a screenplay by George Whaley.

By any measure, *The Harp in the South* has had a remarkably sustained impact since publication. Equally remarkable, however, was the novel's life prior to publication. For although *The Harp in the South* was a first novel, by the time it "hit the streets" both the novel and its author had been at the centre of controversy for over twelve months.

That *The Harp in the South* was ever written can be traced to an accident of war. Park was born in New Zealand in 1917, where an otherwise happy childhood was disrupted by the depression. It was an upbringing that imbued her with a life-long sympathy for people doing it tough. The young Park was determined to make a living as a writer—as she put it, a "storyteller ... was all I ever wanted to be." This ambition took her firstly into journalism and writing for the *Auckland Star*. In late 1940 she travelled to Sydney for the first time to meet her Australian pen-friend D'Arcy Niland, another fledgling writer. After returning to New Zealand Park received an offer to move to the United States and work with the *San Francisco Examiner*. These plans were undone by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, several days before her planned departure, which made travel to the USA impossible. Niland persuaded Park to return to Australia instead, and they were married in May 1942, ten days after her arrival.

The newly wedded couple spent some months in outback New South Wales after Niland—who suffered a congenital heart problem—was "manpowered" to work in shearing sheds. Park accompanied him to undertake work as a shearers' cook. The couple was, however, deeply committed to their vacation as writers—Park later wrote that for she and Niland "writing was life itself." Returning to Sydney they faced a city gripped by a wartime housing shortage and found that the only rent they could afford was in the down-at-heel suburb of Surry Hills. It was a place that Park was to remember for its "scrawny terraces; ruinous cottages ... sagging roofs; snaggletoothed fences and warped green shutters." But it was the human experience of grinding poverty that was to make the most impression on Park; the wretched housing, drunkenness, petty crime, and underlying violence. "My life there" she

later wrote, was “like a visit to some antique island where the nineteenth century still prevailed.”

Park did, however, develop a fondness for the people enduring these grim conditions, and their “fundamental human virtues of kindness, friendship and loyalty.” It was also in Surry Hills that Park and Niland had their first child; and where, despite the squalid circumstances, the pressure of living in wartime Sydney, and new motherhood, Park began to make her mark as a writer. In particular she started a long career writing radio plays for the ABC, commencing with the children’s series *The Wideawake Bunyip*. In the same period she also began writing and publishing short stories for adults.

If the outbreak of the Pacific War led to Park being in Australia, then its cessation also played its part in the writing of *The Harp in the South*. In October 1945 the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced they had “set aside £30,000 to stimulate the development of Australian art and literature,” and that a prize of £2,000—one of the richest of its type in the world at the time—would be made to the winner of a “Competition for novelists.” The *Herald* made it clear that the competition was a contribution to post-war rehabilitation.

... the emotional stress of war may have brought to light latent talent among those serving in the Forces or in other branches of the war effort. As the result of their service during the war, they enter upon the days of peace with a rich store of experience. These recent years of endeavour have made indelible impressions upon them, and ... the "Herald" is seeking to encourage the potential talent in these men and women.

Park decided to enter, and for her subject matter she turned to her experience of Surry Hills. In *The Harp in the South* she produced a graphic account of the lives of three generations of the Irish-Catholic Darcy family, living in a cramped, vermin-infested and dilapidated terrace at 12 ½ Plymouth Street. Although the novel tempers its realism with a streak of romanticism that was typical of Park’s fiction, she did not shy away from depicting the hard realities of slum life, including domestic violence, drunkenness, abortion, prostitution, suicide and rape. *The Harp in the South* also includes one of the first accounts in Australian fiction of a sexual relationship between an Indigenous man (Charlie Rothe) and a non-Indigenous woman (the central character, Roie Darcy).

On December 28th 1946, the *Herald* announced the winners of their competition, including (from 175 entries) the first prize to “Miss Ruth Park ... for “The Harp in the South.” Park was described as “a young New Zealander.” The paper gave considerable coverage to the competition, including a synopsis of the winning novel; the judges’ report; 2,500 words by Park giving a potted version of her life story including an account of how the novel came to be written; and a 1,700 word review by returned serviceman and war-poet Shawn O’Leary. Both Park herself and O’Leary emphasised the slum setting of the novel, and O’Leary stressed the confronting nature of the subject matter.

Miss Park has spun her story about the slums of Surry Hills and smashed out a book which cannot be for the squeamish. ... ‘The Harp In The South’ bludgeons

the reader about the brain, the heart, and the conscience, and leaves him reeling from its impact.

O'Leary also noted the relationship between Charlie and Roie, observing that although Charlie was "partly aboriginal," "his heart and his soul were completely white." Further comments also served to fix the novel at the junction of fiction and social commentary, with O'Leary reporting that the "novel is primarily a photographic social document," and the judges' report describing it as a "social documentary."

The Harp in the South was serialised over twelve daily instalments between January 4th and 17th. The response from readers was rapid and vehement, with the first complaining letters appearing even before the serialisation commenced. In all, the *Herald* published 43 letters on the topic—including one from Park—in the fortnight of its serialisation. If this does not seem such a large number, it is worth noting that at the time the paper was typically running only 4-6 letters per day. On January 11th the *Herald* published a "symposium" of 19 letters on *The Harp in the South*, and shortly after (14th) ran a second letters section devoted entirely to the novel. The paper also provided a running tally of the letters "for" and "against" the novel, eventually recording that, "Of 122 letters received on this subject, 68 have praised the novel and 54 condemned it." Alongside the letters the *Herald* also reported on public meetings held to either discuss the merits of the novel or condemn its publication in a family paper. As Park later wrote it was a "hideous clamour ... not only in the literary world, but in Australia at large."

Just how much the furor stung Park was made clear in two autobiographical volumes, *The Drums Go Bang* (1956) and *Fishing in the Styx* (1993). That she should have been affected is unsurprising given the stridency of the criticism ("a wallow in depravity, filth, and crime, playing down to the lowest-minded readers"; "this morbid story of lust, immorality, deceit, and squalor"; "no better than an open sewer, spreading disease and death all around"). Park attributed much of the rancor to two of her personal attributes, "I was a woman and I was not an Australian." Certainly there is evidence that her gender was an issue for some readers ("If the story was really written by a woman, then I am very sorry, for it destroys all the nice things I have believed about women's minds"). There is, however, no evidence on the basis of the published letters that there was any obvious objection to Park because she was a New Zealander.

What is apparent is that there is a great deal of unease about the stories that Australians should be telling about their country at this particular point in time. As Park herself noted, the controversy provided "a unique psychological study of the popular mores of the later 1940s." For if the War had inadvertently shaped Park's life and the novel, then it also cast a shadow over the ensuing debate.

In the immediate post-war period Australia—and perhaps Sydney in particular—were at an uncertain stage in their development. The hesitant acceptance of modernity had been diverted by depression and war, and the many adjustments to the nation's social and economic structures and international alliances that followed from the Pacific War left unanswered many questions about the future. For the first time Australia had reason to

believe that the world was looking in this direction, and there was an obvious sensitivity regarding the nature of the stories the nation chose to tell about itself.

The first letter in the debate, from “Book Lover”, was published on January 2nd, complaining that the three prize winning novels “all sounded rather sordid” (the judges had written of the second placed novel, Jon Cleary’s *You Can’t See Around Corners*, that the main character was “a criminal, impelled to commit robbery, rape, and murder”). More importantly “Book Lover” touched upon what would be a recurring theme in subsequent letters—how did this reflect upon Australia?

Why I wonder, are the majority of books dealing with Australia melancholy if not sordid? Surely gracious living is not so unknown in this country that it could not be given some place in its literature.

On January 4th—the day of the first instalment—a letter from E.Y. Pulley was asking readers to “Think what a bad advertisement it is for Australia,” and J. Hague-Smith declared that, “It is hard to find any really well-written novel to send abroad which does not convey the impression that we are a lugubrious and complaining race.” On the same day, however, the first of Park’s defenders emerged, with R. Ewins keen to argue for the merits of this distinctly Australian novel:

... people would have our local authors produce novels similar to the technically excellent but mentally somniferous British fiction in which lords and ladies while away their apparently endless leisure hours getting in and out of ludicrous situations with great facility and a maximum of brilliant but improbable repartee.

This post-war desire to break from “mentally somniferous British fiction” is also reflected in other letters by Park’s defenders, who disparage the prevailing forms of fiction that feature the “delicate thrust of an ephemeral boudoir dilettante”; or focus on “the meanderings of wealthy bachelors and beautiful heiresses.”

This was not, however, primarily a debate about literary merit, or indeed even (as has been contended) a disagreement about whether Sydney had slums or not. Both “sides” conceded that Surry Hills was indeed a slum—the issue was whether this was something Australians should be telling the world, or indeed themselves. As Margaret Anderson of Killara argued:

To think that in a young clean country (clean as compared with the older countries) such unadulterated filth should be given first prize, and put out to the world as representing Australian life, makes my blood boil.

And from Robert Campbell of Surry Hills:

The story has no merit, and can only add to the damage already done to the prestige of the Australian people by the silly Dad and Dave pictures.

On January 11th *Herald* proprietor and editor Warwick Fairfax felt the need to personally undertake a lengthy defence of the decision to publish *The Harp in the South*, in which he also addressed the question of how the novel might reflect on Australia.

The question what anyone thinks of Australia after reading 'The Harp in the South' matters as little as what they think of medieval Denmark after reading 'Hamlet.' What does matter is what they think of Roie and her mother, of Hughie and Grandma.

Reading these letters over six decades after the event we can see a foretaste of the many debates that lay ahead about the sort of Australian society that would emerge in the post-war years. In broad terms these are arguments about the acceptance of, or resistance to, modernity, or as one letter writer called it "this realistic atomic age." It was a debate between either embracing change in a world that was irresistibly changing, or the desire to retain something (or everything) of Australia as it was when its isolation was ensured and its influences narrowly derived. We see powerfully in these letters evidence of a nation unsure of its place in an altered world, and concerned about the power of story-telling to define how its sees itself, and is seen by others.

The stories emerging from these letters may not have been read overseas, but those contained in *The Harp in the South* certainly were. Angus & Robertson were also concerned by the novel, and made it known that they were publishing only because of an agreement with the *Herald*, but in 1948 the novel was published in Sydney, London and New York. This was one of a number of moments in that year that marked the reorientation of Australia as it assumed a new postwar posture at home and abroad. William Dobell won a controversial Archibald Prize with his portrait of Margaret Olley; the first FX Holden rolled off the production line; and the Nationality and Citizenship Act (1948) was introduced into the Federal Parliament, establishing the principle that Australians were first and foremost citizens of their own nation, rather than British. In arts, industry and politics, change was afoot.

The publication of *The Harp in the South* also began properly the career of Ruth Park, author. It was a career that was to include many highlights, including canonical texts for Australian children (*The Muddle-Headed Wombat*) and young adults (*Playing Beattie Bow*), and further novels for adults. These included Park's second novel *A Poor Man's Orange*, a sequel to *The Harp in the South*, which was serialised in the *Sunday Herald* in 1949. And once more the letters pages were alight with indignation and delight.

Further reading

Park, Ruth. *A Poor Man's Orange*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1949. Park, Ruth. *Fishing in the Styx*. Ringwood: Viking, 1993. Park, Ruth and D'Arcy Niland. *The Drums Go Bang*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956. Park, Ruth. *The Harp in the South*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1948.

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