

# **Hungry Ghosts: A Novel**

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## ABSTRACT

'Hungry Ghosts' is an account of thirty-six hours of a young woman's life following her arrival in Singapore. Sarah, the protagonist of the novel, is accompanying her partner Paul on a business conference. It is increasingly apparent that Sarah's motives for leaving her home town, Adelaide, have more to do with her need to escape than her commitment to Paul. A room in an international hotel offers Sarah the comforts of a cocoon, where signs of previous occupation and ties to the past are erased on a daily basis. But Sarah is obviously dislocated from her surroundings, which are in turn out of step with the external environment: the air-conditioning is freezing; the orchids are plastic and nod in an artificial breeze. In this sterile environment Sarah is troubled by flashbacks of what she has left behind.

Sarah begins to emerge from her cocoon, venturing into a big city that, for her, could be anywhere. She recognizes places generic to big cities as well as a few unique landmarks, becoming aware of the continual and universal tensions of progress and the past. In this way the novel becomes a study of the role of memory, ghosts and the absent dead, all of which play a part in informing Sarah's present and her understanding of the future.

At the hotel Sarah encounters a group of war 'pilgrims'. A mother, her son Bradley and an elderly British Army Major are all on a 'pilgrimage', and, in their different ways, all trying to make peace with the past and its insatiable ghosts. As Sarah learns their stories and witnesses the battles they wage, she is forced to challenge her own beliefs about being able to leave traumatic events behind. Her absent mother haunts her on the sun-drenched streets of fast-moving Singapore. A bond begins to form between herself and Bradley who, like Sarah, has been left out-of-whack by a recent calamity.

'Hungry Ghosts' explores several dualities: the claims of the past, both cultural and personal, balanced against the demands of the future; private memories that must be reconciled with the demands of public living and progress; the world of the mind that is dependent on the physical body occupying 'real' space. The novel examines the strangely transitory spaces that people can find themselves in: the liminal areas of grief, travel,

dislocation, the unfamiliar. It asks why, in an age of globalisation, the claims of place, and in particular of home, remain so strong.

My exegesis, written as three essays, addresses three aspects of my manuscript, 'Hungry Ghosts'. In the first essay I look at the importance of 'place' in my novel, and the different types of 'places' I explore. In the second essay I look at how contemporary theories on war commemoration, coupled with my own research and witnessing of 'actual' events, have informed my depiction and treatment of the theme of war memory. In my final essay I reflect on the role mourning has played in the development of my manuscript, considering both the challenges it has presented to my narrative and the ways in which it has strengthened it.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date 14.7.09

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