

**REWRITING URBAN NARRATIVES OF THE
AUSTRALIAN GREAT DEPRESSION**

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VOLUME 1

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Abstract

Rewriting Narratives of the Australian Great Depression is a thesis consisting of a novel, *Dadaville*, and an exegesis. Inspired by a Max Ernst painting of the same name, *Dadaville* is set in Sydney in 1931, a city in the grip of brutal poverty. The unemployed riot as they are evicted from homes in their thousands. Among them are nineteen-year-old Maxine Fraley and her damaged father, Jim. It's a time of looming revolution – on the streets, and in the world of modern art, where Maxine finds work as a life model, and begins a romance with a young radical, Ralph. But the harder Maxine fights the threat of homelessness, the further she is forced downwards and outwards, from the suburbs to slums to the urban perimeter, where in shanty towns of iron and sacking the city is remaking itself in grotesque imitation.

Because of its complex, symbiotic relationship with historiography, the historical novel has always played a key role in supporting, challenging or building ideas of nationhood. The exegesis examines the ways in which both historiographic and fictional narratives of the Australian Great Depression are enlisted in the service of a national mythology. My exegesis pays particular attention to the ways in which revisionist historiographies of the late 1970s and beyond reflect contemporary historiographic debates. These question the availability of historical truth and characterise written “History” as subjective, constructed and ideologically positioned. The exegesis then categorises historical fictions of the Australian Great Depression according to a working definition and considers them as companion pieces to those historiographies, also with varying ideological agendas. This discussion is informed by theories of historical fiction which underline the form's capacity to interrogate dominant cultural narratives. Further exploration of the tropological function of narrative in history writing opens up possibilities for historical fiction, as an inherently self-conscious form, to either contribute meaningfully to the process of narrativising history, or to question the very enterprise of historical truth-

making.

Fiction has the capacity to interact with historiography and memory to make new meanings out of the past, just as Dada sought, through art, to interrogate the grand narratives that its exponents believed led to WWI. Dada – and Surrealism, in its wake – re-evaluated the object, employing techniques that subverted the act of making. Meanwhile, the radical left of the 1930s saw the Great Depression as an inevitable stage of pre-revolutionary decay and took steps to hasten society's re-making. As an historical novel, *Dadaville* is analysed as a site of resistance and re-making, a fiction which foregrounds the politics of resistance and utilises the art movement Dada as a thematic signpost. *Dadaville* seeks neither to support nor supplant existing narratives of the Australian Great Depression; it suggests instead that a story can be interrogated without the aim of replacing it with another legitimating narrative.

Thesis Declaration

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