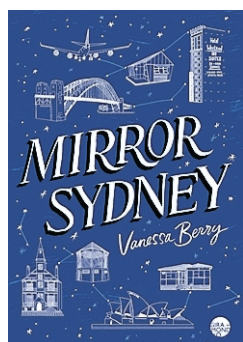


BOOKS

Reviews

Going off-piste in the city

REVIEW BY **BRADLEY GARRETT**

CITIES
Mirror Sydney
 VANESSA BERRY
 GIRAMONDO, \$39.95

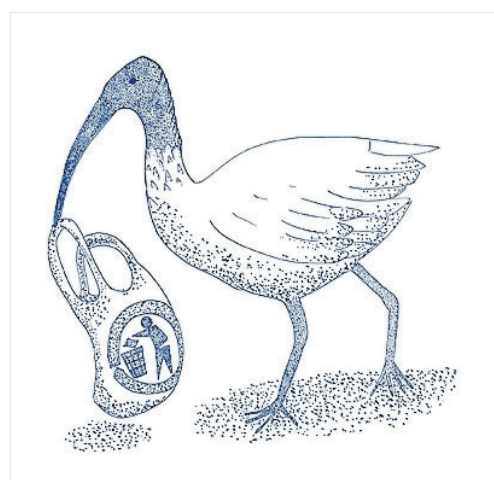
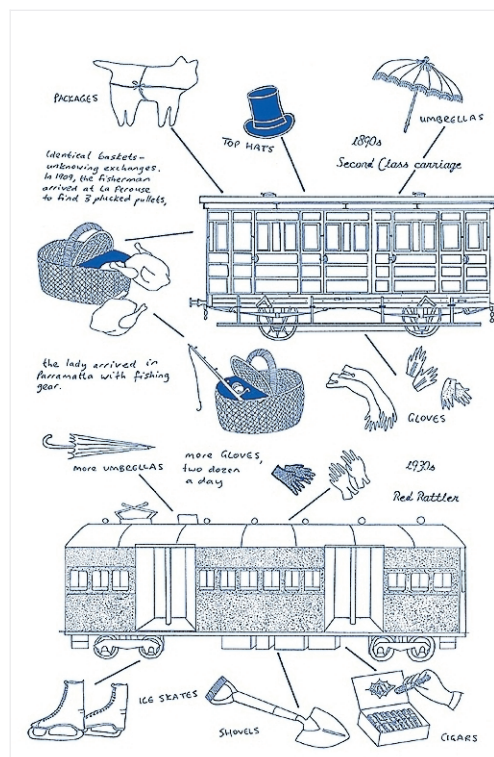
Sydney is a city too easily experienced as a representation of itself, a pleasant but slightly apathetic beachside shopping mall with a muted political heart. Vanessa Berry wants to suggest to us in *Mirror Sydney* that through sustained attention to the spaces of the city saturated by experiences of the past, another city comes into focus, a city that invites psychogeographic delving.

Through her explorations of the urban interior, Berry takes a position as Sydney's most prominent and prolific flaneuse, joining the ranks of respected urban drifters such as Lauren Elkin, Will Self, Iain Sinclair and Laura Oldfield Ford. What Berry offers in *Mirror Sydney*, however, is less self-indulgent than most work in that vein and departs from the radical tone of her European colleagues.

This is not to say Berry's work – which involves visits to some of Sydney's most seedy and bizarre locals – does not harbour political potential, but that she relays it without insult to more vicarious explorers. For readers predisposed to adventure, however, the book is an invitation to trouble.

As a recent transplant to Sydney from London, Berry's vivid descriptions of (what was to me) terra incognita inspired me to want to trace her path, to treat the book as an off-piste urban field manual. I began to have inexplicable encounters – every time I opened the book, I was either at, or minutes from, a place being described. Exploration ensued. From the site of the Wanda Beach murders, to CBD traffic islands harbouring manholes into infrastructure, to coastal walks traced through 100-year-old postcards, I found myself intersecting Berry everywhere I went and, through her, found peepholes into the city's veiled contours that harboured spatial incongruence and ghosts of the city's past.

In one instance, I had stepped into the Glengarry Castle Hotel near Redfern to read in my favourite sticky solarium. Cracking the spine, I was transported to Central Station via its ghost platforms (26 and 27), and learned that there had once been a graveyard where trains now converge. On my way out, I happened to glance up and was stopped short by an enormous sepia-toned photograph on the wall. The owner of the pub, registering my



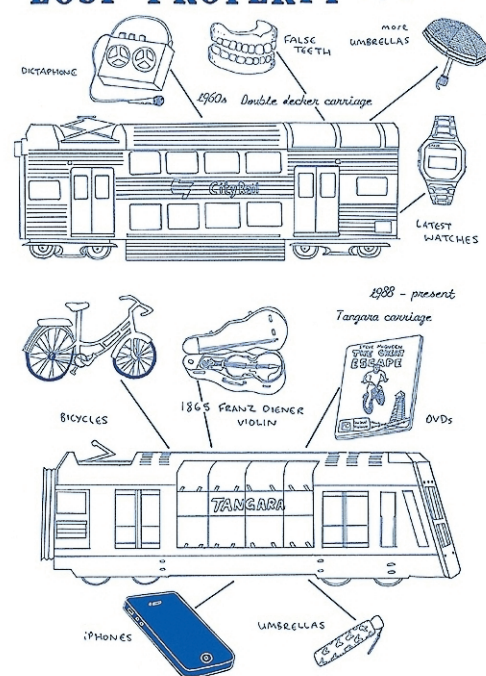
curiosity, told me that it was Central Station in 1890, before the graveyard was moved.

Serendipity swirled as I read *Mirror Sydney*, as if the act of absorbing all the esoteric knowledge it contained had shifted me into a different register. I realised about halfway through the book that reading it was literally altering my experiences in the city on a day-to-day basis. As a recent emigre, I cannot overstate how valuable this is, though I expect even seasoned Sydney explorers and life-long residents would find much of interest here. There is something childish about the book, and I mean that as a compliment: the covers are a refuge from banal rhythms of responsibility, an invitation to remain playful.

Berry successfully relays a sensibility that can only be cultivated through careful attention to the densely packed, and often opaque, stratigraphy of a city. Her explorations render a volumetric depth to the landscape, from 19th-century subterranean chambers to brutalist rooftops. She also plays with notions

LOST PROPERTY

on Sydney trains



of scale, telling local histories through lost and found objects.

But the book's sensibility stretches beyond the archaeological, it is also a meditation on the cities that Sydney never became, reminiscent of Darran Anderson's *Imaginary Cities*.

Berry pores over doomed architectural plans, studies failed bids, and meditatively sketches reminders of failed projects now regarded as follies in park and parcels around us. These alluring imaginary layers render the city an altogether more enticing proposition, a place fostered by chance as much as planning, and thus effectively undermines any possibility of experiencing Sydney as a representation of itself.

Mirror Sydney empathetically offers broad-brush history and infectiously interesting minutiae in equal measure; a collection of strands strung over the course of five years. Though many of these tales have been detailed on the blog of the same name, often in more depth, having them gathered here, and interspersed with hand-drawn snippets of Berry's adventures, is a real treat.

It is beautiful as an object, and as much as it will undoubtedly be cherished by tourists plucking it from Airbnb coffee tables, I also cannot help but imagine how many copies will be destroyed, like mine was, tracing weird desire lines through the city and discovering, as Berry describes it, "the radical potential of taking notice" through their own urban adventures. Perhaps the publisher, Giramondo, will consider churning out the next print run on waterproof paper.

Bradley Garrett is a research fellow at the University of Sydney and the author of four books, including *Explore Everything: Place-hacking the City* (Verso, 2013).

“I realised about halfway through ... that reading it was literally altering my experiences in the city.”

IMAGES: VANESSA BERRY

Filling the gap between image and reality

REVIEW BY **BRIAN McFARLANE**

When is a novel not a novel? When it is part-biography, part-cinema history, part-Hollywood gossip column, the ingredients all stirred dexterously together by a highly – even bizarrely – individual narrative hand.

If you grew up chortling at the antics of Laurel and Hardy, you probably felt poor little Laurel was bossed about by hulking Hardy. Reading John Connolly's book will sort this out for you: Hardy, always referred to as Babe, is much the gentler, while Laurel, the “he” of the title, is the tougher-minded. Their relationship, central to the book, outlasts the disputes and duplicities of their world, their numerous marriages, their rifts with producers and

directors. Connolly characterises them variously as “a rhyming couplet” or partners in a dance, “like a marriage”, but not like any of theirs, because they left a trail of marital wreckage in their wake. In real life they “must inevitably disappoint because it will be those screen creatures made flesh, with all the flaws of the flesh”.

“He” is, in the book's time-frame, “at the Oceana Apartments” where, post-Babe's death and in the time of his last marriage, he is living out his last days as he “chases butterfly memories”, and these provide the framework for Connolly's novel.

This surprising protagonist is “he” because Stan Laurel is not his real name and Connolly's concern is always for the gap between the person and the persona, for the image adored

by “the Audience” and the often-curmudgeonly guy with a complexity fans couldn't have guessed at.

Though the relationship between “he” and Babe is at the heart of the novel, there is also a great deal more going on. There is a vivid sense of film history, of the whole cavalcade of fact and legend as films grew up. The days of hugely popular two-reeler comedies that made names of Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle, as well as our protagonists, would eventually give way to longer celluloid ventures. Audience tastes, too, changed and “he” and Babe never quite recaptured their former glory days. Connolly invests this passing of famous days with some poignancy.

Behind the scenes, there is a supporting cast of vivid figures, such as producer Hal Roach,



JOHN CONNOLLY

FICTION
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JOHN CONNOLLY
 HODDER & STOUGHTON, 2017