



Five Bells

Gail Jones

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On a radiant day in Sydney, four adults converge on Circular Quay, site of the iconic Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Crowds of tourists mix with the locals, enjoying the glorious surroundings and the play of light on water.

But each of the four carries a complicated history from elsewhere; each is haunted by past intimacies, secrets and guilt: Ellie is preoccupied by her sexual experiences as a girl, James by a tragedy for which he feels responsible, Catherine by the loss of her beloved brother in Dublin and Pei Xing by her imprisonment during China's Cultural Revolution.

Told over the course of a single Saturday, *Five Bells* describes four lives which chime and resonate, sharing mysterious patterns and symbols. But it is a fifth person, a child, whose presence at the Quay haunts the day and who will overshadow everything that unfolds. By night-time, when Sydney is drenched in a rainstorm, each life has been transformed.

Five Bells is a novel of singular beauty and power by one of Australia's most gifted novelists.

Five Bells Details

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From Reader Review Five Bells for online ebook

Susan Johnson says

The action of this beautifully written novel takes place on a summer day by the Harbour in Sydney. Four people cross paths at Circular Quay in the shadow at the great Harbour Bridge and the spectacular Opera House. Their memories stretch back into their various pasts. A Chinese immigrant imprisoned under Mao; an Irish woman mourning her dead brother and a couple who shared a teen-age romance in a remote town in Western Australia.

This book is a reminder of Australia's present day multiracism while still retaining a link to bush towns and Aboriginal culture. The evocative description of beautiful Sydney Harbour ties Australia's multi-cultural present to the arrival of the first fleet crammed with British convicts on a summer's day in 1788.

A well-written book that gives you a great feel for Australia.

Steve lovell says

The start of my timidity came that day on the beach; it marked the time from which my reduction had its beginnings. At least it does in my mind. Perhaps it was also age creeping up on me, but the surety I had prided myself on slowly started to dissipate from that event on, gathering momentum markedly in my last few years. But it could have been so much worse – it could have turned out as with James in Gail Jones' remarkable 'Five Bells'.

By that time I was in my fifties – and the final decade of my teaching career. The camp to that point had gone smoothly – only a few minor hiccups to be expected when a large group of students are in each other's company for three days and two nights. I had an experienced crew with me and after having led so many during my previous thirty years, my organisation was down pat. In the back of my mind, though, was always the law of averages. I'd done so many without major incident, would my luck continue to hold. As it turned out – it didn't.

It was the last morning. We'd packed up the students at Detention River and took the buses to Boat Harbour Beach for a swim, lunch and culminating in a return to school by three – a laid back day to wind down after the frenetic activity of the previous two.

Camps have a pattern – or at least mine did. We were dealing with students on the cusp of teenagehood – youngsters with the juices of adolescence already flowing, for the most part – always extremely pent up about being away from families and with their mates for such a period of time. Some were new to the school, being understandably nervous about the new cohort they found themselves in. The aim of the first day was to push the students reasonably hard in their activities in daylight, as well as keeping them up as late as reasonably possible before bed to cut down on the amount of post lights out misdemeanours. Sometimes it worked, invariably it didn't – but generally tiredness prevented much that was untoward from occurring. We would have them up very early the next morning as well, ready for another full day. By the end of that second day, usually finished off with a social, the campers were well and truly out on their feet and the second night was a doddle. But still, all of this took its toll on the supervisory staff as well, but at least a better night's sleep was had. I was starting to feel the pinch after all these camps – I wasn't getting any younger. The weekend following usually was a write off and I struggled to be fresh come Monday, the start of another teaching week. I was already thinking of pulling the plug. The events of that last day gave me the

excuse – at least to myself.

Boat Harbour Beach is one of the most beautiful on the island. A narrow road wends its way down a steep decline to its dazzling white sand and when Bass Strait is blue, its little cove is a glorious vista – as it was that Friday morn. It is also notably safe – a constant venue for school events. I had the usual arrangements in place – a senior member of the local surf club to oversee, the other staff changed and ready, just in case. Being a non-swimmer, I excused myself from that role and attended to other duties.

Soon after we arrived Bruce, the life saver, bought his surf-ski out from where it was stored. A little later he moved it down onto the beach. Just before I started to get lunch ready for the horde, I noticed he had moved it to the water's edge. I found out later he was reacting to changing conditions, imperceptible to the untrained. He was deeply attuned to wind and tide, with his prescience being one of the reasons I never became a 'James'. The second was the lunch siren which I rang shortly after. It bought the bulk of the students out of the water where they were having a ball – but when tucker is in the offing all else for most becomes secondary.

It was then the rip hit. Unbeknown to myself, whilst I was serving up, Bruce and the other staff had gone into the sea, urging out the stragglers to shore quick smart. Still a few became caught and Bruce used the ski to get them in. One lad was a fair way out and starting to panic. Bruce was onto it in a flash and retrieved him before he was in any real danger. Still he was in shock and we rang the school to get his parents, as well as those of a few others who seemed somewhat affected by the scare, to come and retrieve them. It was whilst I was comforting that lad, in the warmth of the club rooms, that it finally hit me how lucky I'd been, how fortunate for us all we had Bruce and the lunch siren. There was no going back for me after that. I didn't want to push the odds any further.

Claiming age and the intrusion into staff's family life, the following year I changed tack to a series of day excursions for the students under my care – and that seemed to work just as well, without the risks. Boat Harbour still cast its shadow over me as annually the school picnic was held at the beach. As part of the management team I often found myself on these days again responsible for large numbers of swimming students as other senior people would find reasons to keep themselves at school on picnic days. It gave me the heebie jeebies. I began to dread that day. I came increasingly insistent that when large numbers left the school for excursions etc, more than one management person went along. As time went on and I more and more reflected on that day at the beach, the more the wind was put up me when it came to student safety – particularly when a nearby school actually lost a student to drowning on an excursion. Reading of James in 'Five Bells' bought it all back to me in the 'safety' of retirement.

At just over two hundred pages, Jones compresses much into a day in the life of Sydney's fulcrum – Circular Quay. I recently stayed in a Rocks hostelry, just across the road from the Museum for Contemporary Art, which features in the book but was sadly closed whilst I was there. I can attest to the vibrancy of this sweep of urban, harbour fringed land around from the Coat-hanger to the Opera House. Jones zeros in on four visitors to the hub, relays to the reader their back stories, then uses a fifth, a missing child, as the lever to bring the disparate quartet together at the one point in time. It is so beautifully done, with glowing prose. This is, as one would expect, a story of love and loss, as well as of reconnecting. Also featuring are the Cultural Revolution, Victoria Guerin and Kurt Cobain, The lovemaking between the youthful James and Ellie is lyrically wrought – 'He could feel her own breathing like it was lodged in his own chest; the union had not broken but there was the warm pounding of their hearts, almost pressed into each other, like a new organ shared.'

Of course there are parallels to Slessor's iconic 1939 elegy on the 1927 death of his mate Joe Lynch. His fate

is similar to one of the novel's foursome, without giving too much away. I am sure a discerning reader will nut others out as well. This somewhat (hopefully) discerning scribe couldn't find a false note in this engrossing read and was sorry he had waited so long to get to it on his bedside pile. He just thanks She up in heaven that a man wise to the sea and a screeching siren prevented the James thing afflicting his later years too. 'Five Bells' is terrific.

Jodie says

A very literary read with astonishing prose. The book is so poetic and there is not a single turn of phrase or paragraph that is wasted. It is a relatively short read, but it feels much longer, and I mean that positively. It is fantastic that a writer can make us feel and understand her characters in such a short book. I found myself re-reading a lot of the paragraphs, I had to, to absorb the beauty of the words. On page 12 there is this description from Pei Xing one of the four characters in the book, where she describes seeing the Opera House from the harbour:

There it was, jade-white, lifting above the water. She never tired of seeing this form. It was a fixture she relied on. The shapes rested, like porcelain bowls, stacked one upon the other, fragile, tipped, in an unexpected harmony.

To me that is just the perfect evocative description of that landmark. And there are a plethora more throughout the book. The book takes place over one perfectly luminous Sydney day at Circular Quay. Four people travel in and around the Quay, unbeknownst to each other, their stories are intersecting. It is brilliant the way Ms Jones connects them. Sometimes it is because they are talking about the same book, or have passed the same train station, or have caught the same ferry. Utterly brilliant. And the light, I just loved the way the light is described. Catherine is our Irish girl in this story, as she steps out into the day she is astonished at the light and exclaims "how do Australians cope with all this light". It is true, I have travelled, when I was in Europe in their summer, I longed to see our magnificent sky again. There is just something about it, it is so vast and hopeful, not closed and low like the Northern Hemisphere, and Ms Jones totally nailed that portrayal in this book.

James is the character who suffers the most in this book, a few sad losses have tarnished him and he is basically barely holding on, living a kind of self fulfilling prophecy of one of his favourite paintings. Another favourite part of the book is from James where he has attended a funeral in his small home town:

At the funeral there were flowers, and suddenly it made sense, why this might be so. In this town with no florist, this tiny town on the edge of nowhere, somehow roses and lilies had turned up, somehow there were elaborate wreaths and cellophane-wrapped bunches, and he had no idea how or from whence they had arrived. Yet it made sense. Something offered so that everything did not have to rest inside words. Something with no purpose other than to declare that the beautiful exists and will not last.

I could go on about all the characters and their portrayal, but there is so much to discover in this book. It is sad and touching and agonising, and the ending leaves us with hope and mystery, which for me is perfect. I just loved it.

H H says

I've never read a more convoluted piece of rubbish in my entire life. I have so much to say but I will try to keep it brief, as every moment I think about this godforsaken book I lose the will to live. In particular there were 3 areas of concern;

1) Descriptive Language

Although imagery is usually pleasant in creating an image for what's happening in a text, Gail Jones used an overwhelming amount of descriptive language, causing so many confusing images to flash within my mind it gave me the literary equivalent of an epileptic seizure for 200 pages. Most of this descriptive language was confusing and nonsensical – “bowl of bright water, swelling like something sexual”. This absurdity was not limited to her descriptive language, the general story was so odd- “Miss Morrison's firm calves always soothed and reassured her.” Honestly.....What, pray tell, the fuck. I am so confused as to why this was included.

It honestly boggles my mind that these sort of sentences went through the first few drafts, edits by the author, an editor, and a publisher, and yet still remained in the final copy. If this is what they kept, I genuinely never want to know what they edited out.

2) Sexual Descriptions

Dear god. Where do I even begin? The long, never-ending paragraphs detailing the most absurd sexual conquests took up most of the novel. With these, Gail Jones put her utmost effort into scarring me for life. These scenes, these descriptions were so...gross and unnecessary and had the same sexual appeal of a mouldy baguette. Overall, these descriptions were incredibly reminiscent of sloppy fanfiction written a 12 year old whose understanding of sexual intercourse reaches the extent of the mild make-out scenes they'd read in Twilight.

3) Plot

This book lacked plot in its entirety. It was mainly 4 characters and their self-pitying moaning. Moaning on and on about their struggle of a life, their regrets, their 14 year old lovers.....yikes. The only one who had a slightly interesting story was Pei Xing and her experience under a communist regime, but the writer chose to overshadow that by spotlighting Ellie's tales of low self-esteem. Despite this crap, the whole book *still* seemed to be leading up to something, building. I thought that there *must* be something at the end to justify the previous 150 pages of rubbish. But, alas; just an underwhelming conclusion. No peak. No plot events. Just a lull conclusion. I mean, for a book that talks so deeply about sexual intercourse, it was barely able to reach a noticeable climax. Of course (view spoiler) but it happened in such a dull, uneventful way that instead of feeling any sort of empathy towards him, I instead found myself wishing he had done that on page 1 of the book.

So, if you want to read this “story”- dare I even call it a story since it had no real story – may I suggest you instead just submerge your head in a pool of arsenic for 2 hours or chug a healthy serving of glass shards as it will elicit quite a similar experience.

Felicity says

To be fair, I didn't actually finish the book so I'm not sure I can really rate it. But seventy pages in to a two hundred page book, I still had no idea what the book was about or what was happening. I think we have established well and truly on Goodreads that I like things like narrative and plot. I do make exceptions, but generally modernist and postmodernist writers aren't really my favorites. I really wanted to like this book, and it's possible that had I stuck with it...I might have. But it just couldn't hold my interest long enough. I didn't even feel like I knew enough about any of the characters to understand or empathize with them.

Tia says

Where the hyuck do I even start with 5 Bells. I only ask for two things in the books I read: a plot and at least one interesting character. 5 Bells had neither. I was forced to read it for English, and it has to be the most self indulgent piece of work I've ever read. It seems to be driven not by plot, or actual interesting characters, but by the authors sheer will to force a story to happen.

The plot was almost non-existent. A bunch of people spend the day at Sydney Harbour reminiscing about the past. Reminiscing about the past could have been interesting, if it weren't for the ridiculous excess of unnecessary description. The one plot point that piqued my interest, and broke the mundanity of the rest of the 'plot', was not fleshed out whatsoever, and just served as some random event to get Catherine and Pei Xing to meet.

Speaking of Pei Xing, the Chinese stereotypes were laid on way too thick. Like yes I understand she's Chinese, no need to have her stopping to do Tai Chi or bringing up Mao every paragraph to remind me. This exaggeration of character also happened to Catherine where her Catholic background was brought up constantly so as to remind you 'she's special she went to a school with nuns'. I understand that a characters childhood is important in shaping them as adults, but it was so exaggerated it just became annoying, like I was reading the same thing over and over as we once again delved into the same memory of their over-stereotyped past.

Honestly, if it weren't for the extreme exaggeration of their cultural stereotypes, you wouldn't have been able to tell the characters apart. All their sections read the same, they had no distinct voice apart from each other. If you're going to have multiple point of views form different characters, then they have to at least sound a little different. It was like all 4 of the characters were self-indulgent loonies living in their past.

Honestly, 5 Bells got so tiring after the first chapter, nothing progressed whatsoever, there was no build up to anything, and it amazes me how a whole book was written about basically nothing.

Brenda says

This is my first read of a Gail Jones novel, and while the setting was well known, the story seemed all over the place to me.

For each of the four participants of this story, Catherine, James, Ellie and Pei Xing, their lives both in the past, and in the 'here-now' were told over the period of one Saturday on a summer day in Sydney. The four of them were each travelling, separately, but by train, to Circular Quay. Ellie to meet James, as they had

known each other as children, but hadn't seen each other in many years. Catherine, who was visiting from Dublin and had recently lost her beloved brother, Brendan, and Pei Xing, who had moved to Australia, and was consumed by her past in the prison camp of China's Cultural Revolution.

I wish I'd liked this more, because some of the writing is lovely. But I found it difficult to engage with the characters, and the plot didn't grab me either. The story was a little too repetitive, with the author revisiting previous scenes several times during the course of the book.

Overall, it felt like very little happened, and I was disappointed with it.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

Gail Jones begins *Five Bells* with an evocative depiction of a sunny day in Sydney's Circular Quay. I felt as if I stood in amongst the ebb and flow of the crowd, feeling the sun on my face, scenting the salt air, hearing the chug of the ferry and the squeal of a slowing train. From the corner of my eye I can almost see Ellie gazing at the water, Pei Qing exchanging a few dollars for an ice-cream, James frowning absently at the crowds, Catherine shading her eyes against the sun to watch the climbers on the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the delighted giggle of a little girl with pink clips in her hair.

From the first pages the language of this novel is powerfully lyrical. Jones introduces her characters by describing their reactions to the iconic landmark of the Sydney Opera House. For Ellie the building is an ode to joy, to James it's white curves resemble predatory teeth, like those a shark. Pei Xing admires the harmony of form while Catherine compares it to the drooping petals of a white rose. It is these evocative descriptions that give us insight into the characters state of mind. *Five Bells* reveals the lives of these four very different people who are passing through Circular Quay on a sunny, summer day and we follow them until night falls. Ellie and James, once teenage lovers are meeting for the first time in years and separately reminisce about their past together and their lives since. Pei Xing recalls her life under the communist regime in China as she travels to visit her torturer, while Catherine mourns her brother, tragically killed in a car accident. I found the pasts of these characters fascinating, particularly Pei Xing's story, but their present is largely unremarkable. Little actually happens in this novel but it is almost impossible not to be caught up in the secrets of these characters lives. The lack of plot and momentum can be off putting, though as *Five Bells* is just over 200 pages it's done before you realise it's not really going anywhere. This is not a novel you read for a compelling tale but to admire a beautiful turn of phrase and the occasional stunning insight.

Had *Five Bells* a more commercial story structure along with the gorgeous prose I wouldn't hesitate in recommending it but I think its rather pretentious literary bent limits its appeal. It is a worthy read but perhaps not an entertaining one.

Emma says

Well this book was a waste of time. The stuff it talks about on the blurb doesn't happen until the last ten pages, but it's not like they had anything else to put on the blurb because nothing else happens in the book.

Plus the chapters are like fifty pages which is far too long and was really annoying.

The majority of the book was random stuff about the lives of four people I didn't even care about. And the ending felt so rushed, we didn't even get any closure. There was one point in the book when I thought they could turn it around, I cared just a little bit about what was happening and I was kind of intrigued but NOPE the book didn't go in the direction I was hoping at all. In fact it went in no direction at all, we were presented with this concept and then the book was just like "ok so this is a thing now let's move on." The situation wasn't even resolved. (view spoiler)

Five Bells was marketed as 'realistic' and 'slice of life' due to the complete lack of events but even a slice of life novel has to have a common theme of sorts. This was all over the place and there were far too many coincidences for it to be 'realistic' or 'believable' anyway. There is no way that I would have picked this book up if I didn't have to read it for school, and the fact that I had to force myself to read a few pages before I had to take a break proves how little I enjoyed this book.

Annabel Smith says

This book was just too slow to hold my attention. The set-up for action/interaction took too long to grab me. I also struggled to stay abreast of who was who as it switched back and forth between characters.

Gail Jones was one of my lecturers at university and I was in awe of her vocabulary and the exquisite language in her short story collection *The House of Breathing*. I also enjoyed *Sixty Lights* very much. In this novel she seemed to be working in a more contemporary urban realm and I did not feel that it suited her style as much. I felt myself flinching when she used words like 'ritzy' and 'cheesy'.

Having said all that, I'm sure if I persevered this book would have much to offer - it is perhaps just not the book I feel like reading at this time.

Pat says

The riches and richness of this book were almost too much to bear. Well before the last page I realised that this would be a book to savour, many times over. Gail Jones uses language in such a way that it opens all your senses to the images, ideas and emotions she describes. The single, glorious summer Sydney day is one I have experienced myself and was startled time and again throughout my reading by the jolts of recognition that I shared with each of the characters. However, this was no mere nostalgia trip. The lives and emotions of her characters are so rich with detail that despite the brevity of the book, each one was so fully realised that I just wanted to continue reading about them after the last page.

I had the bonus pleasure of hearing an interview with Gail Jones at the Melbourne Writers' Festival last week. It added extra dimensions to the experience by explaining a number of levels of meaning that I was unaware of during my first reading. So much to look forward to when I re-read this!

Daisy Bell says

I had to read this for English, and it was a basic bitch of a book. Apparently she's won awards?? I can't see why with quotes like this:

"she saw the bowl of bright water, swelling like something sexual"

"Circular Quay... she knew from the lilted words it would be a circle like no other, key to a new world"

"she was filled with corny delight"

"the sight of Miss Morrison's firm calves always soothed and reassured her"

honestly, the countless sexual references reminded me of a little kid trying to prove how "cool" and "hip" they were by spouting weird innuendos

Quite frankly, I'm disappointed that the people of the Miles Franklin award would elect such a disappointing author.

Kellie Van says

Earth shatteringly depressing book. Flowery prose fails to disguise the utter pointlessness of this book!

Canadian Reader says

Reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *MRS. DALLOWAY* and evoking Joyce's story, "The Dead", Gail Jones's stunningly beautiful literary novel follows four characters as they move about near Sydney Harbour's Circular Quay on a glorious January Saturday. Prospective readers who relish the plot-driven novel should be forewarned that given its lack of significant external action, *FIVE BELLS* is likely not the book for them; rather, it is a work for readers receptive to a meditation on memory and the inner life. Jones provides us with her characters' responses to scenes around the harbour (particularly the lotus-like opera house), their recollections of the past, ruminations on the failures and losses in their lives, and their remembrances of seemingly small but significant and life-changing "moments of being" from childhood and youth. In the process, the author allows us to hear her characters' "inner music"—as a line from Pasternak's *DR. ZHIVAGO* puts it—a novel, which, by the way, all the characters know and allude to at some point in *FIVE BELLS*. Only two of the protagonists, Ellie and James, know each other: they share memories of childhood and adolescent sexual awakening in a small town in Western Australia. Even so all of the characters—Ellie, James, Chinese-born sixty-ish Pei Xing, and Irish journalist Catherine Healy—become linked, not only because they are all moving in the same milieu and responding to the same sensory inputs—a didgeridoo busker, a child's squeal, flags and umbrellas flapping, signs of a coming storm, bats and seabirds, the movement of the crowd and ferries—but also through recurrent images: of water, in particular, (very Virginia Woolf); the colours red and yellow; lungs, and snow (very James Joyce and Boris Pasternak)—among others. Themes of migrancy and displacement, literary translation, familial loss, and imprisonment also link the characters in this tapestry of images and impressions.

This is the first work of Gail Jones's I've read. Its impact on me is considerable enough to make me seek out other books by her and to find and read the Kenneth Slessor poem for which the novel is named. *FIVE BELLS* is a new favourite of mine and a book I've found myself thinking about repeatedly since I completed it.

Len says

I don't remember much and I would like to keep it that way.
