

## Wendy Scarfe, *Hunger Town* (Wakefield Press, 2014)

There are many events in Australian political history that seem to be either forgotten or subsumed into grand narratives of overcoming long odds, profiting off the sheep's back or getting on with it in the spirit of the ANZACs. Wendy Scarfe's historical novel *Hunger Town* reminds the reader of the diverse strands of opinions and movements in Australian political history, and of the civil unrest that found outlet in protest and factional battles across a depression-ravaged Australia.

The story centres on Judith Larsen, a young girl growing up on a Port Adelaide River coal hulk during the Depression. Australia is in a state of political upheaval, and although Judith is lucky enough to have a father who works, the burgeoning unemployment, hunger and political movements affect her family. When her father takes her to the Working Man's Club, Judith discovers a mentor in Joe Pulham. He offers her books, shares his political and social ideas and leaves his small estate to her when he dies. This allows her to go to art school where she discovers a talent for cartoons and political satire.

When Judith meets her friend's cousin, it appears the two couldn't be less suited. He is a good-looking, charming young man with a head full of ideals and no prospects, and she is a clever, hard-working political satirist who understands the value of a dollar. Their marriage is a love story, but not in the romantic sense. It revolves around Harry's political fervour, and his blind commitment to his communist mentor, Nathan. His attachment to Nathan is the fuel for many marital arguments, and results in Harry's near death in war-torn Spain.

The inner lives of Harry and Nathan are only glimpsed because of Judith's first person narrative. This is a shame because Harry is a rounded character who displays vanity, tenderness, selfishness and passion – he is wonderful and flawed. Nathan, on the other hand, is a cold fish who stirs others to passionate protest and puts their lives in danger. He is the type of troublemaker who is always somewhere else when the trouble starts. Nathan's politics are clear, but the motivation for some of his actions remains opaque, and while this is often the way of the world, it would have been enjoyable to delve more deeply into his inner self.

I would also liked to have seen some differences in Judith's voice: her vocabulary and thinking remain the same from the opening narrative when she is a young girl of eight until she is a mature, married woman. Even though the narrative is looking backward at childhood, the continued use of first person gives the impression of being in the here and now with the child. When Judith sees a young Indian boy swimming near the hulk to retrieve the food scraps her mother has thrown overboard, she thinks he is a seal, but 'then a sliver of sun transfixed him...' and 'I raised my hand to wave, to acknowledge his cleverness – a piece of soggy bread did not seem distasteful to me.' The language and thought process seems too measured and formal for an eight-year-old. Allowing Judith's voice to 'grow up' at the same time she does would have added an extra layer of authenticity to her journey. Many of Judith's observations, from childhood to adulthood, reinforce a political or social observation, making it feel at times as if the historical weight of the narrative comes at the expense of character development.

*Hunger Town* is an ambitious work that reminds the reader of the sacrifices already made, and of those that may be required, to protect our democracy. It is a fascinating read for those of us who do not know Adelaide's political history, and for those familiar with this era it will evoke powerful memories of a time of political foment, union strikes, protest and police raids. The detail and breadth

of the story is breathtaking and the novel gives an incredible sense of the political and cultural milieu of Adelaide in the Depression.

**Kathleen Steele**

Book reviews: *Hunger Town* by Wendy Scarfe. Kathleen Steele.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>