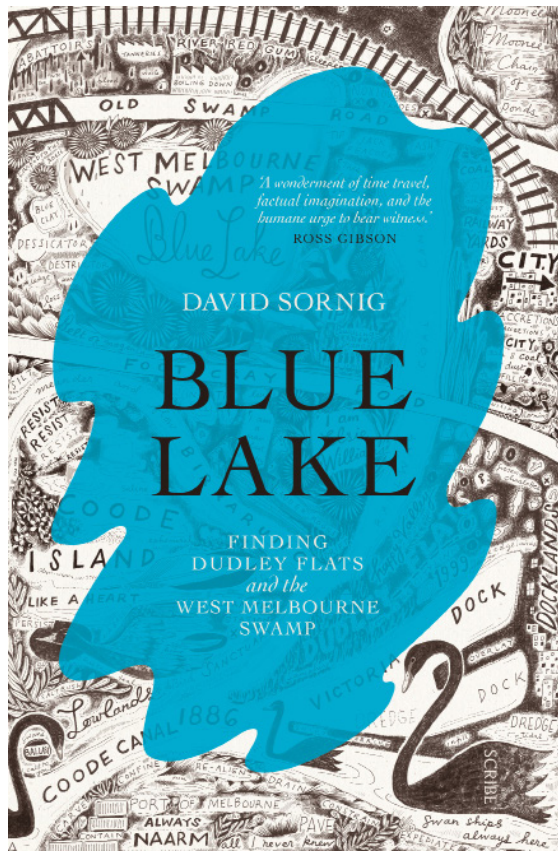


Blue Lake

DAVID SORNIG



BOOK DETAILS

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

David Sornig is the author of the novel *Spiel* (UWAP, 2009). His fiction and non-fiction writing has featured in the *Griffith Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Adelaide Review*, and *Kill Your Darlings*. He has lectured in creative writing and literary studies at a number of Australian universities and currently teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Melbourne. His essay 'Jubilee: A Hymn for Elsie Williams on Dudley Flats' was a finalist for the 2015 Melbourne Prize for Literature Writers Prize, and his subsequent work on *Blue Lake* was supported by a State Library Victoria Creative Fellowship. He lives in Melbourne.

I'm here already, in the bleak, awful hour on Dudley Flats in which the final dereliction of Elsie Williams will come to pass. I'm beginning with it, so you won't be under any illusion as to how it ends.

In *Blue Lake*, David Sornig examines how the 8km-square zone to the west of central Melbourne became the city's blind spot. Once a fertile wetland with a large blue saltwater lagoon, it passed through various incarnations: from boneyards and rubbish tips; through the Depression-era Dudley Flats shanty town; to the modern-day docks. Through it all, one thing that has persisted is its uncanny, liminal quality.

As well as being a social history and a psychogeographic contemplation, *Blue Lake* is a biography of three specific characters: Elsie Williams, a Bendigo-born singer of Afro-Caribbean origin; Jack Peacock, the king of Dudley Flats' tip-scavenging economy; and Lauder Rogge, a German hermit who lived for decades with sixty dogs on a stranded ship. By charting the rises and falls in their individual fortunes, Sornig reveals much about the race and class divides of their times and explores questions about those strange and singular places in the urban fabric where chaos is difficult to contain.

In masterful prose, Sornig exposes cracks in the colonial mythology of the ordered vision of progressive, urban Melbourne — a place where identities, both personal and public, have never quite been resolved. In doing so, he encourages readers to look harder at the places they live in — at the streets they walk, the buildings they enter, the empty spaces they pass — and to see in them intricate layers of time and history that have been hidden from view.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How deep do the traces of the past remain in the places you are most familiar with?
2. Can places be 'haunted' by their pasts?

REVIEWS

‘A scrubby sludge of lowland seeping through the centuries; three woebegone characters born two World Wars ago: everything nondescript and forgotten. Starting with these apparent dregs, David Sornig confects a wonderment of time travel, factual imagination, and the humane urge to bear witness.’

— **ROSS GIBSON, AUTHOR OF 26 VIEWS OF THE STARBURST WORLD AND SEVEN VERSIONS OF AN AUSTRALIAN BADLAND**

‘The destruction of the Blue Lake on the fringe of Melbourne has long been a sad symbol for me of the ugly order associated with the European conquest. But Sornig shows how in the “zone” of tameable mud that replaced this wondrous wetland, the soul of the country and an underground freedom miraculously survived.’

— **JAMES BOYCE, AUTHOR OF 1835: THE FOUNDING OF MELBOURNE AND THE CONQUEST OF AUSTRALIA**

‘Sornig uses the shifts in time, along with his own personal insights, to contemplate the way a city physically and culturally folds back on its past ... *Blue Lake* is unusually searching; its indirect nature and focus on memory has traces of the elegance of V.S. Naipaul, W.G. Sebald, and Annie Dillard.’ 4.5 Stars

— **BOOKS & PUBLISHING**

3. Do you know any other urban zones like the ‘blind spot’ of the former West Melbourne Swamp?
4. Visible homelessness has become more pronounced in Australian cities over recent years. Do you think that attitudes toward homelessness have changed a great deal since the Great Depression when people on the margins began to build shanties on Dudley Flats?
5. In *Blue Lake* the lives of Elsie Williams, Jack Peacock, and Lauder Rogge have been reconstructed mostly from the few traces they left on the public record. What do you think of the way the author sometimes uses what the historian Inga Clendinnen calls ‘Applied Empathy’ to speculate about their inner lives?
6. Which of the three Dudley Flats residents in *Blue Lake* did you most identify with? Were there any other characters you wanted to know more about?
7. How far are people actually in control over the circumstances of their lives?
8. What factors do you think contributed to Elsie Williams’ decline? How much do you think racism contributed to her instability?
9. How could sites like the blue lake and the original course of the Yarra River be recognised or restored? How should a balance be achieved between urban development and the natural landscape?



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