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# Black Glass

by Meg Mundell

Scribe, 2011

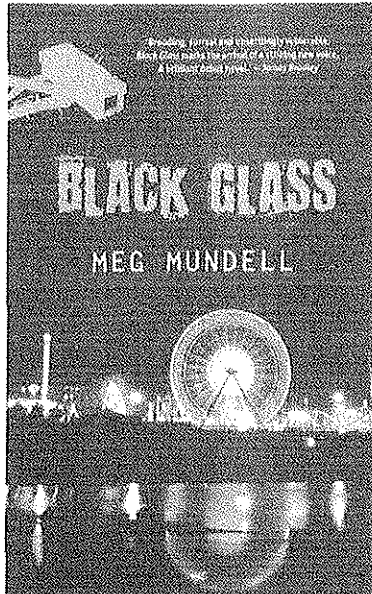
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The setting is Melbourne: a decayed, polluted, class-ridden, anxious Melbourne in an unstable world. Financial insecurity, chemical spills, civil unrest, a crisis over water and war over oil mean that life is insecure, and closely monitored by the increasingly nervous government. If you have the appropriate documents you're not too badly off, but if you're an 'undoc' like young teenage, Tally, and her older sister, Grace, whose father is killed in an explosion which may have something to do with his drug-dealing, life can be tough. Tally and Grace have lived a nomadic life with their father in the 'Regions', but have often dreamed of escaping to what they imagine will be a better life in the city. After their father's death, Tally and Grace become separated, and although they both head for the city, their attempts to survive and to find each other take very different paths. Tally links up with an Indigenous boy nicknamed Blue, whose dream is to travel to Uluru and meet up with his family. The dangerous job Tally and Blue are forced to take highlights even further the inequities in this society. Grace becomes involved with a theatre act involving magic, but when her mentor becomes ill she has little choice but to agree to become part of an underground racket euphemistically titled 'rejuvenation therapy', which is not as innocent as its perpetrators make it out to be.

*Black Glass* is told by both Tally and Grace, along with several other characters including 'Milk' Dabrowski, who is a 'moodie', which means that he specialises in subtly 'tuning' an environment with lights and smells and sounds to control people's emotions, and therefore, potentially their actions. With a security summit and a potentially close election forthcoming, the government is nervous about the level of discontent amongst the populace, and Milk is approached to create, without the public's knowledge, a 'kind of spring clean for the city's collective unconscious'. In this world, the line between keeping a close watch on people and controlling them is frighteningly thin.

In amongst the journeys of Tally, Grace and Milk, we also meet journalist Damon Spark, and through his story we learn more about people's fears and frustrations in this 'age of covert manipulation'. Tally, Grace, Milk and Damon's stories ultimately converge in a dramatic event that demonstrates how unpredictable life can be.

*Black Glass* has many strengths as a novel, including characterisation (although I did feel that Tally often



comes across as older than she is meant to be, but then again people would grow up quickly in this world). There is suspense, clever dialogue, skilful unfolding of the plot, and some heartbreaking moments, such as when Tally meets a woman who has met Grace but, because Grace has changed her appearance and her name, the woman doesn't connect the girl she has met with the girl whom Tally describes. There are also some brilliant passages in which the attempts various characters and organisations make to control others are couched in chilling euphemisms.

For this reader, however, the greatest strength of this outstanding debut novel is its evocation of place. The accounts of Milk 'tuning' the environment and people are particularly engrossing, especially

the scene in which he manipulates – not always successfully – the players at a casino. And you don't have to be a Melbournite to ache at the description of 'the forgotten Maribyrnong River, a dank and boggy waterway that smelled like it had taken its last gasp' or the ruined Docklands, or the reference to Geelong as 'a small, unglamorous satellite city an hour south-west, now little more than a factory-scape thanks to all the chemical spills that have fouled its harbour'.

Defining what a young adult novel is has long been acknowledged as problematic, and I anticipate that *Black Glass* will probably make its home on the adult fiction shelves. This is partly because of some of the language and the explicit sexual nature of one particular scene, but it is mostly because of the relationship between the young adult characters and the dystopian world. Most young adult texts dealing with dystopias (Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*, Jill Dobson's *The Inheritors*, Jean Ure's *Watchers at the Shrine*, for example) set up the young adult protagonist against the adult world and focus on the young adult's psychological – and often physical – journey, and the struggles of adolescence for the protagonist are often linked with her or his changing relationship to the dystopia. *Black Glass*, on the other hand, seems to be as much concerned with the dystopian world (it could almost be seen as another character in its own right) and the adults within it as it is with the journeys of its young adult characters. Nonetheless, *Black Glass* is likely to appeal to mature readers of sixteen and upwards, especially those with a keen ear for the unstable nature of language and how easy it is to manipulate meaning.

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