



Razorhurst

Justine Larbalestier

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The setting: Razorhurst, 1932. The fragile peace between two competing mob bosses—Gloriana Nelson and Mr Davidson—is crumbling. Loyalties are shifting. Betrayals threaten.

Kelpie knows the dangers of the Sydney streets. Ghosts have kept her alive, steering her to food and safety, but they are also her torment.

Dymphna is Gloriana Nelson's 'best girl', experienced in surviving the criminal world, but she doesn't know what this day has in store for her.

When Dymphna meets Kelpie over the corpse of Jimmy Palmer, Dymphna's latest boyfriend, she pronounces herself Kelpie's new protector. But Dymphna's life is in danger too, and she needs an ally. And while Jimmy's ghost wants to help, the dead cannot protect the living . . .

Razorhurst Details

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From Reader Review Razorhurst for online ebook

Calzean says

Hard to see this as a YA novel. The writing suits the genre but a theme of underage prostitution, backyard abortions and some murderers could be classed as good need some maturity but maybe I am showing my age.

There is a lot to like. Sydney 1932 and all of its evils covering gang wars, prostitution, drugs, corruption and the lack of sanitation and running water for the poor. Life during the depression, difficulties faced by returned (and damaged) soldiers and the lack of social services are also covered.

The book also has two strong female leads who can both see ghosts, violence in the streets, bad guys, good bad guys, tragedy and a happy ending. Overall, it was a well told entertaining tale.

Melliane says

Mon avis en Français

My English review

I'm always drawn to novels featuring ghosts and this one was no exception. It must be said that the cover was fun and I was curious to see how the story would be.

First of all I must say that I was surprised to see the format that the author has chosen to present with this volume. Indeed in the story we follow Dymphna Campbell and Kelpie two young different women but who find themselves together with their ability to see ghosts. Each chapter is from the point of view of one of the two and the events progress like that. But in addition to this, between each two chapters we also have something very different, some ideas of the other characters, the Kelpie's past; parts which were ultimately not a progress on the story, but that gives us a better idea on the characters. I confess that I had a little trouble to be really interested in these chapters, in what was happening, I wanted to go back to the events. I'm not saying it was not interesting but it is true that I was a little disturbed in my reading pace. After, as I said it's not a bad thing because the story is very well done and interesting.

The world in which we find ourselves is led by two major Mafia members, a woman, Glory and a man, M. Davidson, two enemies who live together in a kind of uneasy peace. Yet all this will change with Dymphna, a young beautiful girl working for the woman but that Mr. Davidson is determined to recover. In addition to this, as always, the last Dymphna's boyfriend is found shot/dead ... why is that? That's the big question, but they all end up in the same condition. While she is in a difficult situation, the girl meets with Kelpie, a person she is determined to help! Yes, because unlike her, Kelpie can not separate her world and the spirit's and she is assaulted by all that is happening. But while the two team up together, they learn to understand, to trust and to need the one and the other, they will also have to help each other to survive whatever happen. In this way, we also have two very different boys but who have a little place in our heart, two people who will help the girls for their own reasons.

I was really curious to see how our two heroines would handle everything, how they would be able to survive what was happening and I admit that the author has really created a very interesting story for it. I will

not go into details but it's fascinating to see the life they follow, and finally even if they have the same age, they are completely different. One seems more adult, more responsible, while the other seems to be a little girl, not really knowing what it means to live.

It was a very interesting and different novel, and I took great pleasure in following the story. I wonder if there will be a sequel later or if it is the only novel but in any case I'm curious.

Susana says

Arc provided by Soho Teen through Edelweiss

Release Date: March 3rd

An atmospheric tale set in Sydney during the thirties.
A period fertile in gang wars, and consequent fights for power.

Confession time: This rating is more representative of the book merits, than my actual appreciation of it.

There's nothing wrong with it: It has a crisp writing, believable characters _ well, at least the ones that are alive _ a good portrait of a time and period. It taught me things I had never heard about.

But I have to admit that it was not my cup of tea...

For starters, the paranormal element in this story left me baffled as to its existence.

Also I didn't understand why Dymphna would be so interested in Kelpie all of a sudden.

Or the sudden romantic interest of Dymphna in _____.

Then there were one too many points of views, which had the undesired effect of making me feel as if I was reading a collection of short stories.

Characters would appear, and relationships would develop themselves out of thin air. For me that was the story's weakest point.

So, yes, I admit that I had to force myself to keep reading this. Even when the writing was that good.

Also I don't understand why this was labelled as YA. For me this basically historical fiction with a dash of paranormal in it.

But I believe it would be unfair to give this story only two stars, when it has so many positive points.

Would I recommend it?

Sure, if that time period interests you..if not, it may get tricky.

K. says

3.5 stars. Okay, let's start with the classification. I'm not sure I can call this a YA book in good conscience, even though I've shelved it as such. My usual rule of "What's the protagonist's age?" would class it as YA, but the fact that one of our two main characters is sixteen and also the classiest prostitute in Sydney complicates things somewhat...

ANYWAY.

Razorhurst is set in 1930s Sydney. In case you're unaware of the history, handguns were banned in Australia at the time because of a rise in communism following the Russian revolution. Don't even ask me to try and explain it because it makes very little sense now. All I can say is that the UK and Canada did the same. Whatever, handguns were banned, so criminals ran around with straight razors. Hence, Razorhurst.

Background aside, Razorhurst is the story of two girls from vastly different worlds. They can both see ghosts and they both find themselves caught up in something that threatens their lives and the lives of those around them. The action takes place over the course of **OMG THE LONGEST DAY EVER** but there are shorter flashback chapters in between to events from the lives of various characters that brought them to where they are now. So despite the story taking place in a single day, we still get a great sense of who the characters are without it feeling info-dump-tastic.

Speaking of the characters, they're pretty fabulous. The I-see-dead-people-and-they're-talking-to-me side of things was a fun twist on your standard historical fiction, and the language used was well researched and felt authentic.

Basically, I loved everything about this book except the ending. I was at 93% of the book and there still hadn't been any kind of conclusion to things, so believe me when I say that the ending felt rushed to me, and I was pretty underwhelmed by it. **BUT**. The story itself was fabulous and I'd still recommend it, because maybe people who aren't me would feel differently about the ending.

In short? It's Underbelly with ghosts. Uh, **YES**.

Tehani says

There is a lot to enjoy about this book, and I particularly like the ghosts, but I felt a little let down overall. For me, the pacing was a bit off, and some of the characterisation wasn't completely consistent in my eyes. In the end though, I simply wondered what the purpose of the story was. Not every novel needs to end happily, not every novel needs to end with a bang, but for me, this one kind of went out with a whimper, and I was a little disappointed in the payoff. I also had a bit of a problem with the emphasis on Kelpie's age (and her lack of knowledge of it for much of the book), especially as the first two instances it's mentioned are at odds with each other, which knocked me out of the reading experience (yes, it's supposed to be a contested issue, but the first time it's mentioned is very difficult to reconcile with the second - doesn't make sense!).

That said, I still gave it four stars, because it is still a highly readable, engaging book. Yes, I can be disappointed on one level and still enjoy the story on another. Kelpie was a really interesting point-of-view character, and her unfolding story drew me in. Probably my favourite character was Jimmy, and I was fascinated by his emerging story as well.

In all, I'd be reluctant to classify it as a YA book, which we're used to seeing from Larbalestier, but it's an interesting insight into the Australian urban issues of the period.

Shaheen says

4.5/5

O0o0o0o this was awesome.

1932 in Australia was a dramatic time. The Harbour Bridge was officially opened, the Great Depression had destroyed lives across the country, and unemployment had reached a peak of 30%. Razors had replaced guns as weapons for gangsters and Sydney was ruled by razor-gangs.

It's against this colourful and dangerous backdrop that we meet Kelpie, a homeless orphan girl looking for apples. She finds Dymphna, Gloriana 'Glory' Nelson's 'best girl', next to the body of her most recent boyfriend. Hunted by both of the Sydney mob-bosses, Glory and Mr. Davidson, the two of them try to reach the dubious safety of Dymphna's benefactors.

Kelpie is small, malnourished, and she can see and talk to ghosts. She has been surviving on the streets of Surrey Hills with the help of some unlikely folk, including hit-men and the ghosts that haunt the area. Kelpie is smart, determined, and extraordinarily brave. Dymphna shares many of the same qualities, but their backgrounds couldn't be more different. Dymphna is practical and clever, having survived so long in her world of crime, sex and murder. I liked how resourceful she was and how she genuinely cared for Kelpie.

The plot of *Razorhurst* surprised me since it takes place over one day. One very long, very eventful day. So much happens throughout the novel that sometimes it's jarring when someone goes 'oh it's only noon', but it works in this case. The characters never seemed to be in a hurry to do anything, even when they were saying they were in a hurry. I think the style of storytelling adopted in this narrative takes away from the urgency the characters must have felt.

A story that begins with a body covered in blood and ends with another body covered in blood, *Razorhurst* brings this volatile and perilous time in Sydney's history to life well. The author has obviously done her research, and the book makes subtle but accurate references to the political and social climate of the times. In many ways, this book could have worked well as a crime-drama without the touch of supernatural, but I enjoyed the creepy vibe the ghosts brought to the atmosphere.

This is the first novel by Justine Larbalestier that I have read, and I am sad that I haven't picked up any of her earlier books. *Razorhurst* is a brilliantly crafted story that will keep you flipping pages until the wee hours of the morning, despite being slightly lighter in speculative fiction elements than what I usually read.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher for review.
You can read more of my reviews at [Speculating on SpecFic](#) .

TheBookSmugglers says

I always find interesting to hear about the ideas behind stories. In a recent Big Idea essay, Justine Larbalestier talks about how *Razorhurst* starts with a place, rather than with a character's voice like her previous novels. The story goes that, upon learning that her gentrified Sydney neighbourhood of Surry Hills was home to slums, violent gangs, brothels and shady business ran by crime ladies back in the 20s and 30s, she was moved to learn more about its past and that road led down to *Razorhurst*.

Kelpie grew up in the streets of Sydney, a malnourished urchin that never knew her parents, doesn't know her own age and can barely read. Kelpie has seen ghosts all her life and was effectively brought up by some of the friendly ones. The not so friendly ones have been a source of torment she can't block out.

Dymphna is a charming, beautiful dame, the most famous prostitute of these parts. She too can see ghosts but unlike Kelpie she has learned to cope with their existence by all but ignoring them. Caught between two competing mob bosses – Gloriana Nelson and Mr Davidson – Dymphna is the former's "Best Girl" and the

latter's obsession. Her ambition is to become a boss herself and to run Surry Hills but things don't work according to plan.

Razorhurst is a snapshot of this particular neighbourhood in the 30s and it follows Dymphna and Kelpie as they cross paths for the first time over the murdered corpse of Dymphna's lover Jimmy and then must run for their lives. Taking place within the hectic, violent and engrossing hours following that encounter, the novel also offers a vibrant – albeit brutal – account of their lives leading to that point as well as of the lives of many of Surry Hill's inhabitants with short interludes inbetween chapters. Also, ghosts.

It makes perfect sense actually, the addition of ghosts here, given the nature of this story as it is so very easy to imagine not only this place but also these girls to be haunted. And haunted they are: both Kelpie and Dymphna can see and talk to ghosts, an ability they share, a secret they both carry. This shared curse is perhaps the only thing they have in common beyond the way that Razorhurst has affected their lives because everything else sets them apart: from their own bodies to their demeanour, from their past to their possible future.

This is probably my favourite thing about Razorhurst: these two girls and the way they come together. The most affecting and heart-breaking element of their portrayal is the question of age: both barely in their teens and yet circumstances – tragedy and poverty – have dictated their actions and as such Kelpie is almost a child whereas Dymphna is treated as an adult.

Dymphna and Kelpie's lives are as tragic as they come but in no way less than fully rich and engaging. The most heart-wrenching thing of all: Dymphna is adamant to become Kelpie's protector when she herself needed to rely on others for her own protection in a world that thinks less of women even when they are powerful and famous. This novel – among other things – offers an incredible portrayal of this world and its precarious balance between feminism and misogyny, offering a skilful take on female empowerment and agency with a great pair of main female characters.

Razorhurst is another excellent book from a favourite author and a Notable Book of 2015.

Joy says

This and similar reviews can be found at Thoughts By J!

Razorhurst is a historical crime novel written for the YA crowd. Set in 1932 Sydney, it follows two protagonists who have the ability to see ghosts. Kelpie is a young street urchin who was enticed to enter a house in Surry Hills by a ghost, who had promised she would find apples to eat. What she found was lots and lots of red ... but no apples. Kelpie instead stumbles upon Gloriana 'Glory' Nelson's number one razorman with his throat slashed and blood splattered all over the walls. And standing beside him in shock was the infamous Dymphna Campbell, Glory's "best girl".

Dymphna is the other protagonist in the novel, and knows of Kelpie's ability to talk to spirits as she shares the same curse. Known as the "Angel of Death", every one of Dymphna's men ends up dead within a few months or less - and the same goes for Jimmy Palmer, her most recent squeeze. At the opening of the novel, Dymphna clutches a card from Glory's rival, Mr Davidson, suggesting Jimmy Palmer was assassinated. She

begins to fear for her life as Jimmy and her were planning to take over Razorhurst, and killing Mr Davidson themselves. As the coppers approach and not knowing what to do, Dymphna makes the split decision to run, taking Kelpie with her.

It's hard to believe that all 363 pages of this novel revolves around that one singular day, a day that Dymphna deems as one of the worst days of her life. While it wasn't surprising that her boyfriends all ended up dead, it was different this time because she and Jimmy had expected to succeed in their takeover. With him dead, she had no way to know whether Glory and Mr Davidson knew of their scheming. The whole situation is made worse as Jimmy comes back as a ghost and decides to haunt Dymphna.

Razorhurst is a very fascinating story based on real life events in the 1930s. Situated in Surry Hills - or Sorrow Hills - the way Larbalestier describes everything from that period shows the extent of research she did when writing this book. You truly feel immersed in the environment. At the end of each chapter is also a short snippet of some historical background information on the characters and settings mentioned in the novel. At first, I found it distracting as I wanted to get straight back to the story, but as the novel progressed, this snippets were extremely helpful in painting a stronger image and personality of all the characters.

I loved reading from both Kelpie and Dymphna's perspectives, and thought they each had very strong and distinctive voices. Kelpie, having lived on the streets since her foster mum passed, acted like a child although she was the same age as Dymphna. Dymphna on the other hand behaved much older due to the profession she was in. To put it bluntly, she was Glory Nelson's best whore.

The main link between the two girls was their ability to see ghosts. Dymphna had always been meaning to speak to Kelpie before the death of Jimmy, and wanted to teach her how to ignore all the spirits and thus prevent herself from going insane. Ironically, she never managed to talk to Kelpie until they were suddenly thrown together that day.

What I enjoyed most about Dymphna's character was her smart mind. She self-taught herself how to ignore the ghosts surrounding her, even though their touch sends her stomach reeling. She's also able to connect many of the dots, and makes *logical* decisions at every turn. Even when there is no positive outcome, Dymphna chooses the path that would less likely get her and Kelpie killed.

Kelpie is also a very loveable character. While not as smart as Dymphna, she's a survivor just for having stayed alive by herself for so long. She often spends years at a time avoiding human contact, speaking only to ghosts who sometimes lead her to food and shelter. Kelpie is smart in her own way - she knows that she should avoid conflict, knows that she shouldn't trust people easily, and to never tell others about the ghosts. The fact that she's avoided child welfare for so long is just a testimony to her common sense as well.

Razorhurst is definitely similar to a YA version of *Underbelly*. It's filled with intrigue, crime and gangs of

razor-wielding men. I went into the book with no expectations, and left feeling extremely satisfied. While I had hoped there would be more bloody action and gore, I was still happy with the way the story went. The only flaw I would pick on is the timeline. There was SO much packed into this one day, it was sometimes a little hard to believe. There just seemed to be endless hours. I understand the urgency would probably be affected if the story occurred over a few days, so it's not a flaw that affected any part of the story. Just my own personal nit-pick.

Overall, *Razorhurst* was an amazing read. If you're looking for a YA inspired Underbelly read situated in 1930s Sydney, then this is definitely the book for you. Even if you're not into these types of stories, do give it a go. I was never a fan either, but *Razorhurst* has me yearning for more!

Thank you to Allen & Unwin Australia for providing me with an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

C.G. Drews says

Razorhurst was a totally new reading experience for me.

1930s in Sydney? Ghosts? Gang wars? People slicing each other up with razors (because guns are illegal and Aussies are very thrifty)? Colour me intrigued.

I had a great time reading it! There's a few things I'm twitchy about, but let's talk about the awesome first, yes?

It actually features two strong female characters! Huzzah! I love books about girls with strong friendships, and Dymphna and Kelpie are awesome. They're total opposites. Kelpie is a malnourished little wisp, and Dymphna is a neck-deep in gang wars. They meet over a murdered body. That's always BFF material, don't you think?

Also: Ghosts. Ghosts everywhere. The ghosts were frustrated and sneakily hilarious. My only issue was that there was so many ghosts, it took me a while to figure out who was alive and who wasn't. Awkward for me. But Kelpie was practically raised by ghosts (isn't that awesome?!) and she hears and talks to them. Of all the ghosts books I've read, this is the most original and interesting.

So what are my quibbles?

I'm only twitchy about how impersonal the story felt. It's written in 3rd person, and usually I love that, but this time I felt like I was being *told* a story instead of being *in* the story. The narration was almost omnipresent. I never got lost inside *Razorhurst*. Which is probably a good thing, because being sucked into there? I probably would've died. Dead people, dead people everywhere.

It's probably not 100% my style of book, but it was interesting.

Razorhurst is bloody, gory, and unique.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

Justine Larbalaestier's *Razorhurst* is gritty, intriguing novel blending history and the paranormal to create an interesting and exciting story with crossover appeal for both young adult and adult audiences.

It's 1932 and the tentative truce between Sydney's rival underworld gangs, headed by Gloriana Nelson and Mr Davidson, is on the verge of collapse when Gloriana's right hand man, Jimmy Palmer is murdered in his bed.

For Dymphna, Gloria's 'best girl' and Jimmy's girlfriend, Jimmy's death is a problem. Was he murdered by Mr Davidson in a calculated move against Glory, or was he killed because Glory learned of his and Dymphna's plans to oust her?

Climbing into the Surrey Hills dosshouse housing Gloriana's men in search of food, street urchin Kelpie is shocked to find Dymphna standing over the body of her murdered lover.

Both are forced to flee as the police close in, with Dymphna insisting Kelpie remains with her for protection, but safety is hard to come by on the streets of 'Razorhurst'.

Razorhurst is told from the alternating perspectives of Kelpie and Dymphna, interspersed with brief omniscient vignettes. Both girls are feisty, brave, and smart, but most importantly they are survivors. Kelpie is an appealing character. When her mother died in childbirth, she was taken in by 'Old Ma' who raised her as best she could. Upon Old Ma's death, desperate to escape the Welfare, Kelpie took to the streets, surviving with the occasional kindness of local hard man, Snowy, and the ghosts that she can both see and hear that haunt the streets.

Dymphna was born to privilege but tragedy left her orphaned twice and she was forced to find a way to survive. As Glory's 'best girl', she has earned status among the underworld, but she wants more. She too can see and hear ghosts but hiding her ability has become second nature.

Larbalaestier's gangland characters are inspired by infamous Sydney identities (most notably Tilly Divine and Kate Leigh), and the author's research into the 'razor' gangs of Sydney, so named because straight edge razors were the weapon of choice during the 1930's.

I loved the historical elements that evoke inner city Sydney during the period. Grounded firmly in fact, the setting is fascinating and vividly drawn, from the slum of Frog Hollow to the seedy streets of Surry 'Sorrow' Hills lined with bordello's, opium dens and gambling houses.

Unfolding over the course of a single day the pacing of the novel is well managed, the action is non stop as Dymphna and Kelpie scramble to survive. There are explicit, though not gratuitous, references to violence and the occasional use of language. A touch of humour and romance tempers the ever present sense of menace and danger.

Entertaining, thrilling and original, *Razorhurst* is a great read I'd widely recommend and I'm really hoping Larbalaestier has plans for a sequel.

Ely says

Originally posted at <http://abooksofathomless.blogspot.com...>

I received this book from the publishers for review in exchange for an honest review. All thoughts in the review below are mine.

I think I should begin this review by mentioning how excited I was for the release of Razorhurst. I happened to find it randomly on Goodreads one day and I cannot even begin to explain my feelings. I think I even fangirled to my mum about it and said something like 'it's a 1930's, Underbelly-ish, ghost story for YA'. She told me to calm down. As you can probably guess, that didn't work so well.

I love absolutely anything and everything that is set between 1914 and 1945. That being said, I don't often read things set in the 1930's at least not anything that hasn't just been the lead up to WWII. However, the late 1920 and 1930's are my favourite times in Australian history. I find Australian history, in general, rather boring but that period is amazing. Razorhurst is a fictional version of that time period, of course, but it's based on some real events- mainly the Razor gangs of Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh. If you're interested in this sort of thing, I suggested to check out Underbelly Razor before you read Razorhurst, it just gives you a real good understanding of the time if you're not familiar. (Plus, look at those costumes!)

Okay, onto the actual book now! Razorhurst is set in Surry Hills, a suburb of Sydney, and focuses on two characters- Kelpie and Dymphna. It is a multiple POV book which is often a bit off-putting for me, but the girls have such different voices that it made it easy to tell between the two of them. Kelpie lives on the street, she's got no family, no money, nothing but she can see and speak to ghosts. Dymphna is the opposite, she's the 'best girl' for one of leading crime bosses, she's got money and she's strong and independent but she's called the 'Angel of Death'. Dymphna decides to take Kelpie under her wing and that's where the real action begins.

The narrative swaps between the two girls, but it also flickers into both Kelpie and Dymphna's pasts as well as a few others. These snippets of the past are like little story in between the actual chapters, there are ones telling where Kelpie grew up and all the different ghosts she saw. They were incredibly interesting to read and they always connected in some way to the actual story. I don't remember ever reading a book that does this, but I really, really liked it.

The characters are amazing, I love both Kelpie and Dymphna but the smaller characters are also wonderfully written. The writing itself is wonderful too. Not only is it enjoyable to read, there are certain slang words that have been used from the 30's to give it more of that realistic feeling and other parts of the language are very typically Australian, which was very interesting to read. The story itself is pretty fast-paced, the action starts almost right away and it doesn't really stop until the end of the book. Therefore, it was a pretty quick read but it also had me on the edge of my seat guessing what was going to happen next. The entire book takes place in the one day, so you can probably imagine how fast-paced it is for yourselves!

Finally, I want to mention two last things about the book...kind of. Firstly, it's a beautiful book. The cover is magnificent and very period appropriate which makes me incredibly happy. Also, at the start of every chapter the first few words are typed in this art deco font which really adds to the 30's feel of the book. What can I say? I love it when publishers and designers put a lot of work into their books, and I think Allen and Unwin is one of the best at this. Lastly, I want to mention the acknowledgments at the end of the book because Justine Larbalestier mentions some of her influences of the book. The two main ones are *The Harp in the South* by Ruth Park and *Foveaux* by Kylie Tennant, not only does it make me want to read these books but you can see through all the different books she mentions that Justine Larbalestier put a hell of a lot of work into researching for Razorhurst and I think that really shines through in the novel. Of course, that makes me very happy.

So as you've probably guessed from this ridiculously long review, I really, really love Razorhurst. It's definitely become one of my new favourites which means I probably won't shut up about it for at least of a couple of years. I apologise to you all in advance!

Alex Ristea says

There's a bit of a story attached to this review.

On my last night in Melbourne, I heard about Justine Larbalestier's book launch and decided to stop in, keen to explore yet another little neighbourhood before packing off to Sydney.

I am so glad I did.

Razorhurst is set in Sydney during the '20s and '30s when organized crime was rampant. These were the days where firearms were outlawed, so people started carrying straight-edge razors instead. If confronted by the police, it was easy to excuse them as shaving instruments.

If you look at mugshots from the time (and I did; more on that later), you will see people with grotesque L- or X-shaped scars on their cheeks. Once a sign of shame, they soon wore them as a badge of honour. "If I have this scar, and I'm still alive, you can imagine what happened to the other guy."

In short, I became completely engrossed with the history of this time. Sly-grog shops, prostitution, gangs, riots, and best of all: the two most feared and respected leaders during this period were both formidable women. I finished the book on my flight to Sydney, eager to explore the neighbourhoods where it was set.

It became such a deeper experience to see places that weren't in the guidebook and to get a feel for a part of Sydney that I would have missed as just a regular tourist.

My days were spent wandering the now-gentrified streets of Surrey Hills (nicknamed "Sorrow Hills") and Darlinghurst (from which we get "Razorhurst"). I even made it down to the former slums of Frog Hollow, where the temperature drops significantly, and if you close your eyes, you can almost feel the ghostly remains of the former inhabitants.

Imagine my shock when I'm getting purposely lost in Sydney and I turn a corner to find this staring back at me:

It was the same photo that Justine had pulled out in the reading and an image that has been with me ever since.

Turns out, it was a poster for the police history museum, which happened to have an exhibit on Sydney's criminal past. Exactly about the time in which this book was set. Excited, I spent another day in there, poring over thousands of high-quality, first-hand images and accounts from the time.

Now, I guess I should talk about the novel itself.

You can tell the research has been done. (Not in the least because later I saw some of the source material).

But the thing is, the world-building doesn't beat you over the head like so many Fantasy novels I'm used to. The author had so much to draw on, but showed enviable restraint in letting the setting weave its way subtly into the story.

The language and general writing quality are there—it's as ephemeral as the ghosts in the story themselves.

I loved the little page-long interludes which are short enough to give you a deep character insight but never overstay their welcome.

Razorhurst is a touching look into a hard, hard world, filled with broken, sympathetic characters. Don't think dark like some of the recent Fantasy we've seen, but more along the lines of a grungy, dirty depression-era vibe.

Overall, a lot of pieces came together to make this novel work for me. It was a delightful read, and absolutely made my Sydney experience a once-in-a-lifetime set of coincidences which I'll never forget.

Kelly says

This high-stakes, fast-paced historical fantasy set in 1932 Sydney is a bloody and wild ride. Told through the voices of Kelpie and Dymphna, it's a story of survival in a mob-run land, where there's a power battle between two leaders seeking for total control of Razorhurst. But more than being that, this is also a story about social class, about status, about allegiances, dependence, reliability, and more.

And if that weren't enough, this book features ghosts. Maybe "features" is the wrong word. This book has ghosts and those ghosts infiltrate the narrative in a way that we not only see them, but we understand what it feels like to be Kelpie, who can't stop hearing them all around her. We have to instead try to follow Dymphna's lead on how she handles those ghosts.

Woven between those two narrators is backstory into the lives of both girls. At times, the middle of this story sagged, despite the fact it was fast-paced and the entire story takes place in a mere 24 hours. But for readers willing to push through those chapters, the pay off and reward in the end is excellent.

This should appeal to fans of Libba Bray's *THE DIVINERS*. It's definitely Aussie-flavored, and while read it, I couldn't help do my own research into this period of time in Sydney's history. It's fascinating.

Tsana Dolichva says

Razorhurst by Justine Larbalestier is a YA historical fantasy set in Sydney in the 1930s. I have to admit, I didn't know very much about Sydney in the 1930s until I read this book but it certainly seems like it was an interesting period.

Razorhurst follows two main characters, both of whom can see ghosts: Kelpie, a street urchin and Dymphna, the most expensive prostitute in the city. Kelpie has survived on the streets in large part thanks to some ghost who have taken her under their wings, helped her find food and taught her general survival skills. Dymphna has survived mostly by being good at what she does and having the right appearance and upbringing to impress higher society types.

One of the things I found really interesting was the way the story was told. Alternating chapters were from Kelpie and Dymphna's points of view and in between chapters there were short, semi-omniscient mini-chapters (I'd call them sections but they did have headings, if not numbers) telling the story of someone's past, usually. If not a flashback to one of the main characters' pasts, then the back story of one of the secondary or incidental characters. As a story-telling method it worked really well. The reader gained information that neither Kelpie nor Dymphna knew, which fleshed out the plot and, in some cases, cast other events in a new light. Or gave us back story for the main characters which it didn't make sense to insert into the main narrative. In this way, Razorhurst is as much about the region of Surrey Hills more generally as it is about Kelpie and Dymphna specifically. I found it a really effective way to set the historical scene.

I enjoyed Razorhurst a lot. Larbalestier has a way of revealing information gradually that worked really well for me. There were some things we didn't learn about Kelpie until much later, which other authors may have foregrounded much sooner. I'd be more specific, but I don't want to ruin the reading experience for others. In part, though, I think this is also a reflection of how Kelpie hasn't had much opportunity — until the start of the story — to put her own life into context with those around her who aren't also living in the streets. For example, she doesn't even know how old she is at the start of the story and doesn't understand why people keep asking her that anyway. Dymphna, on the other hand, has always been very aware of her place in life and society and how to play the roles she needs to to survive. More acutely horrible things have happened to Dymphna, but she's also had more opportunities and knows how to make use of them. Kelpie, on the other hand, has mostly only had to worry about finding (barely) enough food and somewhere warm to sleep.

The ghosts are an important element in the story but not actually the driver of the plot in anyway. They're just another form of character and, at times, a challenge for Dymphna and Kelpie to overcome. The main plot is of the "who will try to kill us next and where can we be safe" variety, and the whole novel spans approximately twenty-four hours.

I highly recommend Razorhurst to pretty much everyone. Well, not younger-than-YA readers, since there's several short bursts of acute violence — the story does revolve around razor gangs, after all — but anyone interested in historical fiction as well as the more speculative element. I think the story will work for both types of readers, and for readers who don't usually read YA.

5 / 5 stars

You can read more of my reviews on my blog.

Khee says

Not sure how to review this, in fact have avoided doing so for over a week. It's not that I didn't enjoy the book, but the style evoked such strong echoes of both Kylie Tennant & Ruth Park (credited by the author) as to feel derivative. But the story has stayed with me, even though I didn't enjoy all the chopping back and forth and repetition of events thru different character's 'eyes'. Can't help feeling it lacks something, in the end.
