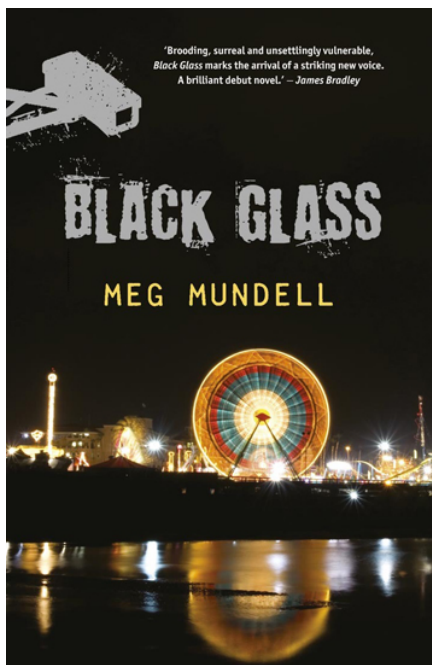


## Black Glass



*Black Glass*  
Meg Mundell  
[Scribe](#) 2011  
ISBN: 9781921640933  
\$32.95  
288 pp

*Black Glass* is gripping, frightening, clever and thought-provoking. It is written in an unusual style with an unusual structure and I resented every interruption that prevented me from reading it in one sitting.

Each chapter is divided into shorter sections, each headed by what looks like a reference entry in a surveillance file, quoting the location and the identified people and others who appear in that section. The writing style shifts between third-person narrative, diary entries, intercepted telephone calls or emails, conversations where only one person is heard and the other's words need to be inferred, 'normal' two-way conversations and interviews. The vocabulary used by some people includes new words and contractions that are reminiscent of 'newspeak' in Orwell's *1984*, including words for the various areas in and around the city:

Interzone, Subzone, Carnie District; and undoc, Crimbust, ID-net, AirDrone, sky-pod.

While *Black Glass* is a story or, more accurately, a number of interwoven stories, it is also 'situational'. It is set in Melbourne (Australia) in a near future. It is hard to know how near that future is, although there are some clues: all the technology is recognizable or imaginable from current technology and *Neighbours* is still showing new episodes on television. However, the description of some of the precincts in and around the city made me think it could be as much as twenty or thirty years away.

The central story is about two teenage sisters who are separated early on in the book – the older thinks the younger is dead and the younger is searching for her sister. The other story threads form a web along whose strands the sisters move.

Meg Mundell depicts a dark, forbidding Melbourne which is simultaneously familiar and strange. There is surveillance almost everywhere, manipulation of people in public spaces, corruption in public life, crime, low-life and more. There are areas around the city which are inhabited by 'undocs' (people without identity papers), who live shadowy lives and can easily be manipulated to work for criminals. Other citizens live in gated communities with their own security personnel.

It is possible that this slightly strange Melbourne already exists right under our noses – that we are merely unaware of it or choose to stay ignorant. We know from the media that there are 'classes' of people whose lives bear little resemblance to those of us who live in upper- or middle-class society – those of us who have 'honest' jobs. That the Melbourne depicted by Meg Mundell is perhaps not so different from the Melbourne I live in, is a sobering thought.

The author is adept at creating atmosphere that the reader can feel and smell, taste and hear, as well as see clearly. The whole work is filmic and would work well as a movie. The characters are interesting and fleshed out to the extent that makes them real – even the minor characters. Throughout the book I felt myself hoping that everything would turn out well for the sisters.

*Black Glass* engaged me totally and left me wondering about the city I inhabit. Although firmly set in Melbourne, it could as easily play out in any large city, which gives it a global appeal. There are warnings for us all in the plots and subplots – we seem to be inexorably heading into the future that Meg Mundell paints so masterfully and that should frighten us and spur us into action to create something better for ourselves and our children.