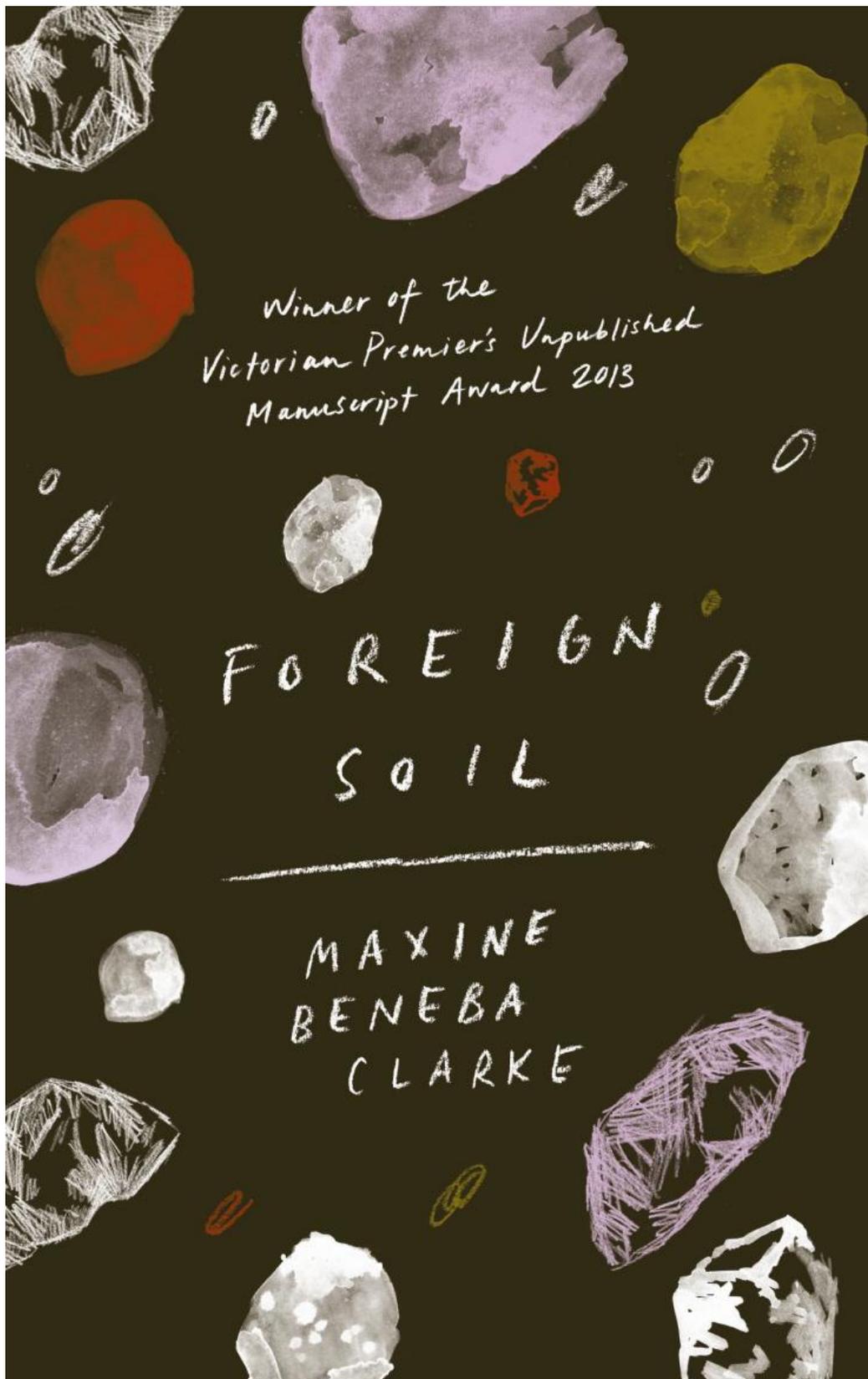


Reading Notes: *Foreign Soil* by Maxine Beneba Clarke



About the book:

With *Foreign Soil*, Maxine Beneba Clarke has sought to give a voice to the disenfranchised and the lost, the downtrodden and the mistreated. Telling stories that lie behind what we're reading in newspapers, she transports readers from grimy Footscray backstreets to a down-at-heel New Orleans apartment block, from Brixton in London to Kingston in Jamaica.

Clarke's background as a performance poet is evident in her rhythmic prose that seems to shimmy across the page. Revealing a deeply ambivalent take on hope and despair in the modern world, *Foreign Soil* marks the arrival of a major new voice in the Australian literary landscape.

About the author:

Maxine Beneba Clarke is a widely published Australian writer of Afro-Caribbean descent and the author of two poetry collections. As a spoken word performer, Maxine's work has been delivered on stages and airways, and in festivals across the country. Her short fiction, essays and poetry have been published in numerous publications, including *Overland*, *The Age*, *Big Issue*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Harvest*, *Voiceworks*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Unusual Work* and *Peril*. Maxine also writes an award winning literary blog at slamup.blogspot.com.

Discussion questions:

- 1.** *Foreign Soil* portrays characters positioned on the fringe of society. How did you respond to these representations? Did they challenge you as a reader?
- 2.** There are many versions of the 'other' in these stories: the visitor, the foreigner, the new student, the talented child. When considering the stories as a cohesive whole, what do you think this book is positing about this concept of the 'other'?
- 3.** Explain why you agree or disagree with the following statement from the reviewer for *Australian Book Review*:

These wonderfully performative stories thus have a decidedly old-fashioned but ethically crucial aim: to refine the reader's sympathies, to educate the heart.

- 4.** What did you think was the purpose for 'The Sukiyaki Book Club', the final story of the collection?
- 5.** Many of these stories end abruptly and readers are whisked away from the narrative at a crucial moment. Consider how in 'Harlem Jones', the Molotov cocktail is lit but not yet thrown. Do you think this technique is effective in the short story format?
- 6.** *Foreign Soil* lends itself beautifully to performance (the author is an award-winning spoken word artist herself) and the rhythmic prose almost 'leaps off the page'. Can you think of examples of this?
- 7.** Several reviewers referred to 'Gaps in the Hickory' as a stand-out story of the collection. What was your stand-out story and why?
- 8.** Maps are a recurring motif throughout the stories. For example: a map of 'Owstrayleah' in 'Big Island'; a map of Uganda in 'Foreign Soil'. Consider what these (and other maps) represent in the narratives.
- 9.** *Foreign Soil* has frequently been compared to Nam Le's popular short-story collection, *The Boat*. Can you think of other Australian short-story collections that are also comparable?
- 10.** Do you have a favourite moment from the book you'd like to share?