

Vagina Museum Auction



During the Covid lockdown in 2020, the stress, not to mention the boredom of our confined status resulted in more than a few unexpected online purchases. Scrolling through Twitter one evening, I saw that the gloriously named Vagina Museum in London, vaginamuseum.co.uk was hosting an auction of artworks to raise funds.

My curiosity piqued, I read on. The Museum's founders had heard about the Penis Museum in Iceland and wondered why there was no vagina equivalent. So in 2017 their project to spread knowledge about gynaecological anatomy and health, and erase mystique and stigma, began with pop-up exhibitions in feminist libraries and festivals. Crushing,ly, soon after moving to permanent premises in 2019, the Covid-19 crisis hit and the Museum faced permanent closure, unable to cover its costs. So to the auction...

The Museum set up an online silent auction site. Fifty-eight artists created unique pieces based on the vulva and donated the proceeds to the Museum.

There were paintings, scarves, lino cuts, sculptures, and other artefacts. Many were beyond my budget but the PussyPot was not. I put in a bid, and went to bed. In the morning, I found I had won the item!

PussyPots are hand thrown ceramic bowls with a vulva at the centre, unique—'just like the bodies that inspire them'. As the ceramicist, Meredith, writes, 'Our world is dominated by phallic forms; it's time things got a little more yonic.' Her project for 'pussy



positivity' is all about starting some 'much needed conversations to combat the shame and insecurity so many women feel about their vulvas.'

Though surprised to find the bowl was going all the way to Sydney (I added an extra £20 to cover the postage), Meredith and the Museum packaged it up safely and I received my very own

PussyPot in November. I'm looking forward to a post-Covid world when I can bring it out at a dinner party for one of those conversations!

If you want to read more about Meredith's work, you can find her at pussypots.com

Jessica Stewart

A study of victimhood in the media ... and how men are using it

Like many of my best ideas, the concept for my thesis came from a combination of passion, luck and a whole lot of procrastination. I majored in American Studies at university mostly because I was obsessed with *The West Wing* and satirical American news shows.

For my Honours thesis, I wanted to analyse the link between culture and politics which these shows encapsulated so well. I had no idea how to do so in a meaningful way until I stumbled across a segment about Trump's ability to wield victimhood. I found this concept of contested victimhood absolutely fascinating.

Rather than partisan media and popular opinion drawing a distinction between victims and perpetrators, they are now (whether consciously or not) more likely to distinguish between a real victim and someone 'playing the victim'.

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Membership Renewal

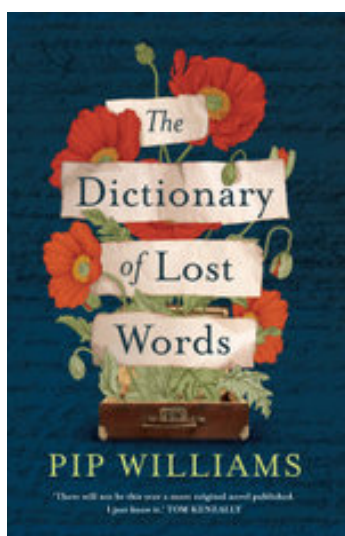
Renewal is by calendar year – see page 7. Thank you to those who have already resubscribed for 2021.

Book club update

Searching for lost words

Due to uncertainty with restrictions due to Covid, the Library Book Club cannot yet advise a date to recommence Book Club meetings.

However, the first book for discussion in 2021 will be Pip Williams' much-lauded *The Dictionary of Lost Words*.



Set at the height of the women's suffrage movement, it tells the story of Esme who finds neglected or discarded words dropped in the Scriptorium, where men compile a dictionary. She discovers that words relating to women's

experiences often go unrecorded, so she decides to collect the words for her own dictionary.

An absorbing and imaginative reading experience about the power of words awaits you!

Kris Clarke



It has been a quiet few months on social media

for the Library but the most popular item on Facebook with 235 hits was our congratulations to Wiradjuri woman, Tara June Winch, who won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for her novel *The Yield*.



Annual General Meeting 2021

The Library's Annual General Meeting will be held on 13 April 2021 at 11 am, followed by a light lunch at 12 noon. The venue is the upstairs Seminar Room of the Ultimo Community Centre, corner of Harris and William Henry Streets, Ultimo, Sydney. If a face to face meeting is not possible, the meeting will occur via Zoom. Members will be advised by early April. All members are welcome to the AGM, but there may be restrictions on numbers.

Nominations are called for the following positions: Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and no fewer than five and no more than nine ordinary members of the Board. Nominations close on Friday 26 March. Please consider nominating for the Board yourself or suggesting it to a friend. Nomination forms can be sent in an email attachment or are available from the Library.

Board meetings are held on the second Tuesday of each month at the Ultimo Community Centre. There is no Board meeting in January and April.

Please RSVP by Friday 26 March for catering purposes or further advice about whether a face to face meeting is proceeding.

Jessie Street National Women's Library

Australia's National Women's Library is a specialist library, its focus being the collection and preservation of the literary and cultural heritage of women from all ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

Aims

- To heighten awareness of women's issues
- To preserve records of women's lives and activities
- To support the field of women's history
- To highlight women's contribution to this country's development

Patrons

Quentin Bryce AD CVO; Elizabeth Evatt AC; Clover Moore Lord Mayor of Sydney; Professor Emerita Elizabeth Anne Webby AM

Board of Management

Jozefa Sobski, Chair; Suzanne Marks, Vice Chair; Jean Burns, Treasurer; Sherri Hilario, Secretary; Wendy Chester, Michele Ginswick, Robyn Harriott, Barbara Henery, Beverley Kingston, Susan Price, Janet Ramsay, Beverley Sodbinow

Editorial Team

Kris Clarke, Jessica Stewart, Editors;
Tinderspark, Graphic Design

Victimhood continued from page 1

To make matters even more confusing, the term ‘victim’ itself has negative connotations of weakness and lack of agency and so can be used to undermine those who are characterised as such. So, while being *considered* the true victim is good, actually *being categorised as* the victim is not. Although my studies focused on the American experience, the weaponisation of victimhood for political gain can be seen across the western world.

I wrote about three women in American politics: Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Alexandria Occasio-Cortez, each from a different branch of the American government and involved in controversies to do with victimhood. My research highlighted how much our political perceptions and biases influence who we identify as the true victim (and who is merely ‘playing the victim’) within media narratives. Many of these preconceived notions concern gender stereotypes, such as the ongoing depiction of women as damsels in distress in popular culture, from fairy-tales to superhero movies, reinforcing a status as the ‘weaker sex’.

Furthermore, there is a continued perception of women being led by intuition rather than logic. The media is more likely to question women’s version of events and ask whether they are coming forward as a victim out of confusion or misplaced vindictiveness, rather than logical thinking. This line of reasoning can transform the depiction of a woman from a true victim to someone who is merely ‘playing the victim’ for political benefit.

An example of this is how right-wing media portrayed Dr Christine Blasey-Ford during the 2018 Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings. Though initially presented as the perfect victim, even by Fox News who described her testimony as ‘a disaster for Republicans,’ right-wing commentary argued that she had overemphasised her alleged sexual assault. Senator Lindsay Graham called her irrational, stating that: ‘Miss Ford has got a problem, and destroying Judge Kavanaugh’s life won’t fix that problem.’ Note how Graham invoked the gender of the participants by referring to Dr Blasey-Ford as “Miss” yet using the judge’s professional title. Here, too, we see how the stereotype of the irrational woman presents her as a ‘victim’; it is often contrasted with the rational man, who must be either a victim of circumstance, or a saviour.

In Australia, a recent example is actor Eryn Jean Norvill’s sexual assault allegations against actor Geoffrey Rush, and his ensuing defamation case against *The Daily Telegraph* which published the allegations.

Rush was presented by his supporters as the true victim of sensationalist slander which cost him both materially and in reputation. Yet Norvill, who stated in court that Rush made her feel ‘frightened’, ‘threatened’ and ‘belittled’, was dismissed as mad, ‘prone to exaggeration and embellishment,’ and ‘playing the victim.’ However, it was Rush who was really ‘playing the victim’ by dismissing the sexual assault claims as a ‘symptom of the current [Me Too] climate’.

Whomever the media and public decide to believe in these controversial cases, the ability to manipulate stories is particularly worrying in an era of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’.



Norvill, during the case (AAP)

As Paul Waldman wrote for *The Washington Post*, ‘victimhood *does* afford one a certain moral status that can be politically powerful.’ Victimhood has become increasingly competitive, and partisan findings about who is the ‘true victim’ can only serve to increase societal discord. We need to be aware of the true stakes of victim-

hood and the media’s ability to influence where our sympathies lie. Otherwise, we risk believing only those with media clout, or those who conform to traditional cultural expectations, which have disadvantaged strong women throughout history.

Language is critical when discussing victimhood. Negative connotations of ‘victim’ are actually reinforced when victims of sexual assault are rebranded as ‘survivors’. Use of the passive voice, unsavoury or controversial labels for murder or rape victims (eg drunk girl or prostitute) and ‘over-identification with abusers’ are ways true victimhood can be dismissed through language; these are explored in Jane Gilmore’s book *Fixed It*.

The depiction of women’s abuse as a private issue is another way to dismiss their victimhood and will often go hand-in-hand with arguments that a woman is only going public to get attention (thus they cannot be real victims, otherwise they would suffer in silence). Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew in *Rethinking the Victim: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Australian Women’s Writing* examine the depiction of violence against women in literature.

With a basic awareness of these issues, the discerning media consumer can analyse who is being depicted as the true victim, and who is playing the victim and think critically about the issue, deciding whether they agree.

— Elizabeth Baral

Eds: *The Library does not hold either of the above mentioned books. An omission that we would like to rectify!*

Truganini

by Cassandra Pybus

Book review

For many years, Truganini was described erroneously as ‘the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigine’. A figure of sadness and nostalgia akin to the last Tasmanian tiger, few Australians understood her reality or grasped what her death in 1876 really represented. Historian Cassandra Pybus, in the preface to her compelling new biography: *Truganini: Journey through the apocalypse*, published in 2020, says ‘a lot of what is said or written about her is myth and fabrication.’ Pybus sets out to correct these untruths using extensive documentation including eyewitness accounts, personal letters and official correspondence. She aims to bring Truganini back to life by recreating her as ‘a lively, intelligent and sensual woman.’

Her book sets out to dispel white Australians’ historical amnesia regarding the genocidal past, just as Henry Reynolds did in his seminal work *Why Weren’t We Told* or Bruce Pascoe in *Dark Emu*. This book is different because it is a female perspective seen through a woman’s lens. Pybus extracts a credible reality from the records of ‘pompous, self-aggrandising, partisan men who controlled and directed the context of what they set out to describe.’ Pybus addresses the sexual violence experienced by Tasmanian Aboriginal women and, in particular, abductions by white men which she says were overlooked by Truganini’s mentor George Augustus Robinson, the so-called ‘Protector of Aborigines’, whose journals supply much material for the book. Robinson’s duplicity is highlighted by Pybus’ exposure of the hidden agendas of his journal entries and letters which though appearing humanitarian often served his own financial ends rather than those of his charges – those dependants he had ‘rescued’ from the killing of many of their countrymen and the enslavement of their women. Their exile on Flinders Island did little to alleviate their suffering which later continued onto the mainland where Robinson quickly tired of his responsibility towards his ‘Van Diemen’s Land People’.

Pybus’ story has increased impact because of its relevance to her own life story. She herself is a beneficiary of Aboriginal dispossession in Tasmania. Her great-great-grandfather gained the most from the expropriation of Truganini’s traditional country of Lunawanna, renamed Bruny Island by settlers. She says ‘the life of this woman frames the story of the dispossession and destruction of the original people of Tasmania..... Its terrible

aftermath is the foundation narrative of my family.’ There are eyewitness accounts of young Truganini receiving food handouts from her ancestors, and of the older Truganini living in exile but walking across Pybus’ land, which had been her people’s country, in order to access her traditional hunting grounds.

In Australia, the process of colonisation meant the eradication of the First Australians. To our shame, Australia fails to acknowledge this aspect of our history. Nor do we value the oldest surviving culture on earth. Our denial facilitates their continuing dispossession and our wanton destruction of their sacred sites and feeds the racism that continually undermines their progress and resilience. A growing number of writers are endeavouring to turn the tide of ongoing injustice by shedding light on our dark history. Pybus sees her writing as ‘a moral necessity – these are people whose lives were extinguished to make way for mine.’



This is an honest and sensitive account of an Aboriginal woman’s life. Her traditional culture, one of reciprocity and simplicity, which she never fully abandons despite Robinson’s efforts, contrasts starkly with the acquisitive culture of the Tasmanian colonists. Truganini is depicted as an intelligent and pragmatic survivor of the attempted destruction of her race. Her extraordinary story demands our attention, because it has been either deliberately obscured or ignored for too long.

Barbara Henery

Saving Writing NSW

Last year, with no consultation, Don Harwin MP, NSW Minister for the Arts, cut Writing NSW’s multi year annual grant of \$175,000 to zero, a shock to the Centre’s Board. CEO, Jane McCredie, resigned from the state’s Literature Board, which had recommended that the Minister continue the funding, in protest. No help was to be had from the Federal Australia Council as it was not providing multi-year funding to State-based service organisations..

In 2019, the Centre’s budget was \$900,000, two thirds of which was raised by its own activities but, owing to Covid-19, the 2020 budget took a 30–40 per cent cut. Writing NSW employs 10 staff, providing paid professional employment to 300 people and catering to 10,000 students a year, the majority of whom are women. It cannot maintain this level of service, critical to the development of NSW writers, without secure ongoing funding.. These courses help writers earn enough without needing other employment.

Acclaimed crime writer Candice Fox has described the Centre as ‘a vital organisation.’ ‘You could go to them for industry advice, writing, editing and marketing.’

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Goodbye 2020

This year's Christmas party was held at Pappardelle Restaurant at Haberfield where about thirty volunteers gathered to celebrate the end of a challenging year.

After Jozefa Sobski greeted and seated guests, she introduced some new volunteers whom most of us have not yet met. She welcomed new Board members Janet Ramsay (profiled in the May 2020 issue) and Wendy Chester; Connie Dimas, who donated first prize to our very successful raffle; and acknowledged the valuable contribution of enthusiastic new volunteers Stella Wailes and Marc Smith (see November 2020 issue). She thanked all those who had generously contributed to keeping the Library afloat when fundraising events had not been possible and praised volunteers who had kept Library services operating, in particular Sherri Hilario.

Into the conversational hubbub, a feast of Italian appetisers – calamari, pasta and risotto with plenty of wine to wash it down – appeared at our tables. After some time, it transpired that many of us had eaten our fill and could not possibly contemplate the main course to follow! When takeaway boxes appeared on the tables it was evident a solution had been found.

Jozefa called our attention to honour one of our long-serving



members, Christine Lees, with a life membership.

Jozefa told us about all Christine's contributions in various roles at the Library since 2002, from Volunteer Coordinator, to chairing the Annual Luncheon Committee and maintaining IT systems. Christine was delighted to receive the life membership and recounted her memory of the early days when travelling by train to the Library with founder Shirley Jones, who 'had it all in her head' and would brief her on how things functioned at the Library. At the time, Christine had undertaken a course on quality standards and came to realise that her first task would be to begin documenting Library processes. Her final task that day – cutting the cake.

Happy to toast the end of this difficult year, we enjoyed Italian torte with tea and coffee as this most convivial gathering drew to a close. Many thanks to Bronwyn Thorncraft for taking the pictures at the lunch.

Kris Clarke

Lunch Hour Talks Please check website before booking

18 February: Natalie Conyer, *Present Tense*

After 1994, when South Africa moved from apartheid to majority rule, locally produced crime fiction became extremely popular. What does crime fiction have to say about the new South Africa, and how does it deal with real-life crime there?

Natalie's novel is a police procedural set in Cape Town and she will talk about her process, why she chose to write about South Africa and the challenges she faced.

22 April: Michelle Balogh, *Her Kind of Luck*

Born in China, raised in America, ran away from home at 16, Michelle Balogh's grandmother, Shan-Yi Balogh led an extraordinary, globetrotting life.

Michelle is a writer and illustrator based in Sydney. She drew on a trove of letters, diaries and papers she found at her grandmother's home, and her story is one of adventure, espionage and heartache.

Venue/Time: 11.30am to 1.30pm Customs House Library, 31 Alfred St, Sydney — Circular Quay.
Cost: \$16 (members), \$22 (non-members), Including light lunch. Pay at the door. Book by noon Monday before the talk. Ph: (02) 9571 5359

ERA Report February 2021

As this is my first report, I'll start with some background for readers who may not be familiar with the Equality Rights Alliance (ERA), and its connection with the Library.

ERA is one of six alliances funded by the Federal Government. The others are the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA); the Harmony Alliance, representing migrant and refugee women; the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA); the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC); and economic Security 4 Women (eS4W). The role of the Alliances is to connect women and women's organisations over women's issues and to engage with the Australian Government on those issues.

ERA connects 64 women's organisations (including the Library) through member representatives—my role. Connected organisations can seek support for issues from ERA and the network. ERA engages with government through the Federal Office for Women and the Minister for Women, currently Senator Marise Payne, and by policy submissions to relevant ministers and parliamentary enquiries.

Important pieces of policy analysis issued by ERA, in conjunction with the other Alliances, over the past year included:

- * ERA Childcare Position Statement and a webinar for member reps, in which I took part.
- * Lead role drafting of the gender section of the NGO Coalition Shadow Report in the context of the Australian Universal Periodic Review to the UN Human Rights Council.
- * Submission to the Senate Select Committee on the effects of Covid-19.
- * Pre-Budget Submission prior to the October Federal Budget, including the following statement: 'It is imperative that Australia's Federal

Budget is responsive to the gendered nature of the Covid-19 crisis and is designed to optimize the role gender equity can play in Australia's economic recovery.'

- * In common with other women's organisations, including AWAVA, WEL and the National Foundation for Australian Women, release of a critical gender related analysis of the October Budget, followed by a media release.
- * Zoom webinar, together with YWCA, titled Breaking Down The #Blokebased Budget.
- * Joint press statement following the October Budget on the need for gender analysis to be regularly part of the Budget process. This refers back to the practice during the Hawke/Keating and Howard governments, but ended by Abbott, of issuing a Women's Budget Statement among the official Budget papers.

*Janet Ramsay
Member Representative on ERA*

Saving Writing NSW

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Pip Smith, named the *Herald's* Best Young Australian novelist in 2018, said it was crucial in providing a sense of community to writers in NSW. It is especially important to writers in regional NSW, as the Centre is not Sydney-centric.

The Centre's appeal for support to restore its funding generated a widespread response. Our Chair, Jozefa Sobski, set out the case in her letter of 8 September to the Minister:

'I write on behalf of the Board of Jessie Street National Women's Library and its members and supporters to protest your inexplicable decision to defund Writing NSW, the state's peak and long-standing organisation for writers, old and emerging in NSW. Our membership is diverse and strongly committed to the continuing growth and development of Australian writers, particularly women

from our diverse communities, including our burgeoning Indigenous writing community.

The Library membership understands that this decision is made as a consequence of a rationale to devote only 5% of long-term arts funding to literature. If this is the case, we deplore this as damaging to the literary community and importantly our vital, diverse and critical literary culture. In a time when community reflection and depth of thinking could not be more important, we witness your government budgeting to obliterate an important contributor to supporting and educating writers, at every stage of their careers.

The Library proudly houses a unique collection of the work of Australian women writers and poets, past, present and emerging. Due to the limited amount of government funds available for organisations like the Library, we operate solely through the generosity of volunteers, and are financially sustained by members and generous donors. This bucket of generosity is limited, as you would well appreciate and very hard to earn requiring hours of work. To throw Writing NSW into this environment, at a time also when all charities are struggling to meet people's needs, is devastating. In order to raise the revenue, you need paid staff. The modest Government grant to Writing NSW is repaid in a five-fold generation of revenue: an excellent return on the investment.'

Since then, the Centre has received the good news that a one-off grant of \$100,000 from the Federal Australia Council and \$190,000 from Create NSW will allow it to continue its work in 2021.

'However,' Jane McCredie said, 'restoration of our multi year funding from the state government remains vitally important if we are to have the strong future the writers of this state deserve.'

I understand that discussions are now ongoing. It is not too late to write to the Minister or your local MP if you have not already done so.

Suzanne Marks

Museum of Australian Democracy exhibition

In August of this year, the Museum of Australian Democracy at its home in old Parliament House, Canberra, will hold an exhibition 'Democracy DNA', to connect visitors with the story of the Australian people and how we exercise leadership at all levels, engaging in the democratic conversation.

The exhibition is focusing on key achievements of the women's movement and its 'Moments of Achievement' include the first woman in Parliament Edith Cowan, elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Western Australian Parliament. It will capture the diversity of experiences of women across Australia over time: geographic, Indigenous, multicultural, demographic and class, then and now. It will reflect on the key moments of achievement and transformation where women as leaders came together to work for change.

The Library has been contacted to contribute materials, and will supply the WEL NSW questionnaires distributed to all parliamentary candidates in 1972, posters, and other materials.

We will report further in a future Newsletter when the exhibition is open for viewing!

Kris Clarke

Capital Investment Fund

Since it was launched in September 2009, the Capital Investment Fund has reached over \$470,000. Our target is \$500,000, the interest from which will provide essential support for Library operations. If you would like to contribute, please indicate on the membership/donation form on this page.

CIF donations since November 2020:

Julie James Bailey	Carolyn Bloch
Jean Burns	Anne Giles
Christine Jennett	Alice Oppen

General Donations since November 2020

Ruth Callaghan	Jean Gledhill	Anne Gorman
Rosalind Wallis	Robyn Ward	Dori Wiesniewski

Donations of material

Audrey Wacks Spinifex Press Wild Dingo Press

Membership/donation form

I wish to: join the library renew my membership make a donation

Date: ___/___/___

Title: Ms/Mrs/Miss/Mr/Dr/other

Name: _____

Address: _____

Preferred tel: _____

Alternative tel: _____

Email: _____

Please send newsletters by email instead of hard copy.

Membership Category

Full Member \$70 Life member \$1,000

Organisation \$140 Student \$25
(conditions apply)

Concession \$35
(Pensioner/Centrelink Concession Cardholders)

A membership year runs from 1 January to 31 December. Members joining after 1 October are financial until 31 December of the following year.

Donations (donations over \$2 are tax deductible)

I wish to make a donation of \$.....
 to the Library for general purposes
 to the Library's Capital Investment Fund

I am willing to have my name published in the Newsletter

I wish to remain anonymous

Payment Details

Enclosed is my cheque/money order for \$ (payable to Jessie Street National Women's Library)

Please charge my MasterCard/Visa with \$ _____
Name of cardholder: _____
Card no. _____
Expiry date ___/___ CCV ___-___

Signature: _____

Auto Debit Authorisation

I authorise JSNWL to charge this, and all future membership renewals as they fall due, to the credit card number above on this form.

I authorise JSNWL to charge \$ annually to the above credit card as a donation to
 the Library for general purposes or to
 the Library's Capital Investment Fund.

Signature: _____

Become a volunteer

I would like to help the Library by becoming a volunteer. (You will be contacted for an interview.)

Please forward the completed form to:
Jessie Street National Women's Library
GPO Box 2656, Sydney NSW 2001

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GPO Box 2656 Sydney NSW 2001

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Note: Please advise the Library if your contact details have changed.

Visit us:

523-525 Harris Street (cnr William Henry Street), Ultimo
Enter through the Ultimo Community Centre, Bulwara Rd
Please use the intercom for admittance

Opening times:

The Library is open to the public Monday to Friday 10 am to 3 pm

Borrowing policy:

The public can access items using the interlibrary loan system. The public cannot borrow items but may use them in their library of choice. A loan collection is available to financial members

How to reach the Library:

- * The Library is a 20 minute walk from Town Hall Station through Darling Harbour or from Central Station via the Goods Line walk or via Harris Street
- * Bus 501 (Railway Square to Ryde/West Ryde) at Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre stop
- * Bus 389 (Maritime Museum to North Bondi) at Harris and Allan Streets stop
- * Light rail from Central Station or Dulwich Hill to Exhibition stop
- * There is limited two hour street meter parking available

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