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## Women's empathetic interventions in true crime storytelling

*True crime's predominantly female audience is well documented, and research published in the United States characterises true crime podcast fans as 'female, active, involved' (Boling and Hull 2018; Vicary and Fraley 2010). After the success of Serial, hundreds of millions of new, 'predominantly female' listeners worldwide sought longform nonfiction storytelling that captured or elaborated on their personal interests and expectations, resulting in new configurations in true crime. Yet prior to this rapid, gender-informed expansion in the medium, another shift in formula was underway in Australia's literary nonfiction scene, where a series of high value nonfiction books authored by women and published as True Crime, were already transforming the genre. Acknowledging the ambivalence of authors whose literary works are categorised as true crime, my research explores the ways that women are impacting its narrative and aesthetic conventions. In this paper, I show that in their complex world views, self-implicating strategies, and their readiness to centre victims and survivors, these Australian literary nonfiction texts foretold the true crime boom. This is a case study of women writers whose empathic interventions demonstrate the possibilities for ethical enactments of true crime.*

**Keywords:** true crime, literary nonfiction, empathy, women, genre

### Before the boom, there was a shift

*At this moment in history, we're witnessing a significant evolution of true crime narratives in popular culture (Murley 2017: 288).*

*It is probably quite accurate to think of the canon as an entirely gentlemanly artifact (Robinson 1983: 84).*

The phrase 'true crime boom' is commonly used in popular media to define the recent phenomena of true crime content populating digital television and podcasting (Telfer 2019; Weinman 2020), and the content commonly cited as sparking this trend are the American podcast *Serial* (2014), the Netflix documentaries *The jinx* (2015) and *Making a murderer* (2015) (Horeck 2019). True crime writer and podcaster Tori Telfer refers to this 'boom' as having been 'midwifed into being with "prestige" true crime' (Telfer 2019), her use of the term 'midwifed' signalling the gendered nature of the cultural production, as the creators and producers (and yes, consumers) of true crime media are – increasingly – women. By contrast, Hazel Wright's characterisation of the modern genre stems from the literary tradition as one that 'was grandfathered in by Truman Capote's 1966 *In cold blood*' (Wright 2020: 9) – a definition echoed widely in the field, despite the text having notably lost its credentials in Ian Punnett's (American) theory of true crime (Punnett 2018). Accompanying the digital expansion of true crime entertainment is a discourse among content creators, academics, critics and consumers evaluating the genre's many ethical problems. However, beginning at least a decade prior to *Serial*, Australian literary nonfiction books authored by women and published as true crime were already troubling the norms and tropes of the genre. These texts challenge reader engagement and confront archetypes with a range of strategies, underscoring the ethical tensions and narrative resistances recently explored in contemporary true crime content in both literary and digital forms. Viewed as a body of work, these Australian nonfiction crime texts act as forerunners to significant developments in contemporary true crime storytelling. The question this paper intends to answer is: how can Australian female-authored literary nonfiction be used to illustrate the possibilities of an empathetic narrative framework for creators (and consumers) of true crime on all platforms?

### Genre trouble

*Texts ... do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them (Frow 2014: 2).*

Helen Garner, Chloe Hooper and Kate Wild are three Australian writers who have produced literary nonfiction texts exploring a violent public act or private trauma through a deeply personal reflexive approach. Published between 2004 to 2018, these texts demonstrate a range of affective narrative strategies which serve to destabilise or deconstruct true crime's conventions. Reading and reflecting on these texts in

the context of recent cultural and scholarly debates about true crime, I identify some distinguishing narrative strategies. Aside from their categorisation as true crime, these texts are chosen for their wide acclaim and popularity with Australia's reading audiences, although there are other examples of women's literary nonfiction written in and around the true crime formula, published domestically, which also illustrate this argument (e.g. *The trauma cleaner*, Sara Krasnostein (2017); *Small wrongs: How we really say sorry in love, life and law*, Kate Rossmanith (2018); *Eggshell skull*, Bri Lee (2019); *The winter road*, Kate Holden (2021)). Crucially, the books cited in this essay are not marketed as archetypal true crime titles, and at the time of their publication would more likely be housed under 'Literature' in bookstores – despite each of them gaining awards for true crime writing, among other, perhaps more reputable, accolades. Significantly, none identify as true crime writers and in an interview with author Kate Wild, she says she was uncomfortable categorised as such for the publication of her first book for fear of being typecast, among other reasons (*Kate Wild interview*, October 2021).

#### **Helen Garner: Between moral outrage and the urge to comprehend**

Helen Garner's true crime book *Joe Cinque's consolation* (Garner 2004), focuses on the criminal trial of a young female student accused of intimate partner homicide. The book's sub-heading, *A true story of death, grief and the law*, flags the larger moral and social themes addressed in the text, to which the author lends the full weight of her subjectivity. Garner admits she is intellectually drawn to ideas and enactments of justice, and this is how she finds herself attending the young woman's trial. She also admits to less flattering instincts, and is candid about her private encounters of bearing witness: 'I wanted to look at women who were accused of murder. ... I needed to find out if anything made them different from me: whether I could trust myself to keep the lid on the vengeful, punitive force that was in me, as it is in everyone' (Garner 2004: 25). The book is named for the 26-year-old man who died from a drug overdose in 1997 at the hands of his girlfriend, Anu Singh. After being found guilty of manslaughter, Singh serves just four years in prison. Attending the trial not as an objective witness but as a 'passionate observer' (Eggs 2005: 122), Garner swings back and forth between moral outrage and an urgent impulse to comprehend what really happened. After voicing her initial revulsion for the 'damaged

infant, the vain, frantic, destructive, out of control girl' (Garner 2004: 19) standing in the courtroom, Garner – an Anglo, middle-aged, middle-class grandmother – strives to collapse the otherness of this young, Indian-immigrant student with mental health problems, who is categorised by the media as manipulative, narcissistic and 'Prozac popping' (Fitzgerald 2004). 'Call that mental illness? She's exactly like me' (Garner 2004: 38), Garner writes in response to Singh's psychiatric condition used in her defence. When the prosecution presents as evidence excerpts from Singh's diary, Garner, herself a prolific private and public diarist, admits to a moment of recognition and near camaraderie with the accused:

Surely, I thought, remembering with a shudder the reams of self-obsessed ravings that had flamed in the backyard bonfires of my life, a diary is the one place where a girl can indulge her unacceptable narcissism with impunity? (Garner 2004: 40).

Throughout the trial, Garner searches for parallels of understanding to resist the type of binary character portrayals that are the mainstay of courtroom narratives. Despite her self-confessed love of watching the courts and their scripted protocols, the author resists the dramatic plotlines and, instead, looks for insight in minor scenes and small exchanges. Moreover, none of the *actors* serve as token figures here, from lawyers, witnesses, family members, through to the accused and the deceased. Despite his physical absence, Joe Cinque is a vivid presence, in large part due to the stories Garner is told about his unblemished status as beloved son. She also shows him as a young man who made some poor choices, and who played a part in Singh's delusions.

Yet Garner does not conceal her deepening relationship with Cinque's family, in particular his mother, who becomes the moral and emotional hub of the text. Maria Cinque is not cast as the indistinct 'grieving mother' but as a sharply outlined person of passion and complexity, her clarity and conviction a counter to Garner's own struggles with partiality. Maria's bereavement colours everything, and despite Garner's ambition to write a true story about the ethics of the law and the function and failures of justice, her insights are constructed in proximity to intense maternal loss. After publication, Garner was criticised for building a naïve 'framework of good versus evil' (Maher et al. 2004: 234) due to her undisguised affiliation with the Cinques and an absence of any equivalent voices speaking up for Singh:

The morality play script Garner adheres to closes off any nuanced understanding of crime or the criminal justice system. In the framework provided by the binary construction of good and evil, the idea that Cinque might have died a wholly undeserved death at the hands of someone whose guilt is diminished by virtue of abnormality of mind cannot be countenanced (Maher et al. 2004: 234).

Despite Singh's daily appearance in the courts, Garner fails to present her with the same complexity as her victim, and this narrative ellipsis is compounded by the defendant's legal right to silence – a facet of the law which openly frustrates the writer. Instead, Garner turns this 'research gap' into a feature, keeping the accused at a remove, imagining her way into the young woman's head, and again failing (Rossmanith 2014: 109). In an essay titled 'I' written in 2002, Garner explains her process of trying to understand and write about unknown others:

The deal is this: if I'm rough on myself, it frees me to be rough on others as well. I stress the unappealing, mean, aggressive, unglamorous aspects of myself as a way of lessening my anxiety about portraying other people as they strike me. I have learnt, to my cost, that this will not always stand up in court. The intimate involves other people. But where do I end and other people begin? (Garner 2002)

Garner does not mask her bias against Singh, even while she admits at times a strong identification with her (B. Brennan 2017: 209), a bias which Singh has since criticised in interviews with the media after her release from prison (Adams 2004). In *A writing life*, Bernadette Brennan's biography of Garner's writing, we come to understand the author's anguished attempts to find an ethical place to stand to capture the emotional truth of the case. Writing in her journal, Garner describes her 'clashing thoughts' as 'sick with pity for the Cinques, sorry for the Singhs, curiosity about Anu' (B. Brennan 2017: 211). Eventually, Garner lands on a strategy that might encapsulate all of it, one which Brennan describes as 'a voice which dances between a troubled, observing first-person self and a more detached, authorial third-person' (ibid: 211-212). This subjective-empathic construct enriches Garner's nonfiction writing, even when – as critics note – it gets in the way of the legal facts (Maher et al. 2004). Ultimately, Garner cannot tell 'both sides', and the asymmetry is intensified by Maria's moral pull. This is a facsimile of another perceived

narrative wrongdoing for her controversial nonfiction inquiry into sexual harassment, *The first stone* (1995), that 'seething site of defamation anxiety' (Garner 1997: 20) for which the author paid a heavy price. In *Joe Cinque*, Garner's ethical tussles are stand-ins for the readers' own, and her failures of objectivity reveal something truthful about the incomprehensible nature of the crime, absolving the author-as-mediator from her 'significant failure to provide a meaningful context for this crime' (Maher et al. 2004: 234). Garner tells the story of her first direct encounter with Maria in the women's bathroom at Melbourne court during the trial as the moment that sealed the book's fate. Seizing the opportunity to ask for permission to tell her son's story, Garner understood Maria's consent to mean she could no longer play the part of the detached witness. Seeing the Cinques failed by the justice system because of Singh's too-short sentence, and becoming so entangled in a mother's grief, Garner offers up this book as a gesture of moral restoration, a small consolation, for their loss.

In her next nonfiction book, *This house of grief: The story of a murder trial* (Garner 2014), Garner is enmeshed in another complex crime and punishment narrative. Here again, the author trades in the 'transmission of affect' (T. Brennan 2004: 18) by capturing her shifting mindset during the trial of a father accused of killing his three children. At first Garner refuses to believe this 'dull, lonely, broken-hearted man' (Garner 2014: 84), Robert Farquharson, is a monster or murderer – a position she shares with his former wife, Cindy, who defends her ex during the first trial. As Garner works hard to try to understand the 'sad father...in the shit car' (Garner 2014: 330), she reveals to the reader 'the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent' (Gornick 2002: 35). This time, Garner has made no emotional pact to the grieving families, and so she is free to immerse herself in the shifting dynamics in the courtroom, closely watching the wounded families, the faithful jurors and the performing lawyers. Garner as writer-witness-mediator captures the affects of atmosphere and emotion in 'the House' as Farquharson's trials and appeals extend throughout seven years. The exertion of paying attention over a long timeline, of urgently needing to 'find out why men kill their children' (B. Brennan 2017: 249), becomes a weighty undertaking. When Garner's grip on certainty begins to recede, it takes with it her last hope of the journalist's detached view:

To have my residual fantasies of his innocence dismantled ... filled me with an emotion I had no name for, though it felt weirdly like shame. ... I was straining to hold it at bay. I wanted to think like a juror, to wait for all the evidence, to hold myself in a state where I could still be persuaded by argument. (Garner 2014: 108)

When Farquharson is found guilty on three counts of murder and receives a thirty-three-year sentence, Garner comes to understand that nothing about such a morally incomprehensible act could be settled in the courts, and everyone will go on living in 'an abyss of suffering where guilt or innocence have no purchase' (Garner 2014: 50). 'What was the point?' she asks. 'What was the truth?: Whatever it was, it seemed to reside in some far-off, shadowy realm of anguish, beyond the reach of words and resistant to the striving of the intellect' (Garner 2014: 319).

Despite her deep reverence for 'the House', Garner knows the legal processes have failed to uncover what really happened that night; and she also knows her subjective study is not a locus for truth. Instead, Garner has written a testimony to the aspirations and fallibilities of the law, and the complex humanity enfolded in its institutions.

Central to Garner's writing practice are her experiments with the rules of literary nonfiction, and her interest in real life crime is something she has examined in public and in private (B. Brennan 2017). Her application of true crime's narrative structure – a murder, a trial, a sentence – is shaped by her subjective engagement with the difficult human experiences at the centre of her stories. 'The sorts of crimes that interest me are not the ones committed by psychopaths,' she writes to explain her curiosity about the Farquharson trial:

I'm interested in apparently ordinary people who, under life's unbearable pressure, burst through the very fine membrane that separates our daylight selves from the secret darkness that lives in every one of us. (Garner 2015)

About her nonfiction crime books, Garner is explicit in her intention to defy true crime's conventions, to tease out its affective power and in some way salvage its storytelling potential:

I think my main purpose in writing about murder trials is to tear these stories out of the trashy grip the tabloids have on them. I want to recount them in a way that gives

full value to the psychological complexity of the accused person's actions – also of the behaviour of the judges and jurors and counsel. (Garner 2017: 57)

Few Australian authors have accomplished more than Garner in terms of reinventing the genre and enlarging its impact and reach.

### Chloe Hooper: Challenging the true crime formula

Another Australian nonfiction text which significantly challenges the true crime formula is *The tall man: Death and life on Palm Island*, by Chloe Hooper (2008). The story focuses on the death in custody of an Aboriginal man, Cameron Doomadgee, at the hands of a white Australian police officer and the destructive repercussions that follow among the small island community off the coast of Queensland. Hooper was working as a journalist when she was invited to report on the trial by the lawyer representing Doomadgee's family. Hooper, a non-Indigenous Australian, travelled to the island for the trial and stayed with the story for several years. 'I wondered what I was doing here' (ibid: 33), she writes at the beginning. Having no prior insight into the Indigenous experience, Hooper quickly becomes alert to the smallest signs of tension and dispute with the policing and legal systems that shape their lives: 'For the Doomadgees, as for many Indigenous families, to be drawn into the law was to be drawn into an impenetrable labyrinth, all walls and no exits' (ibid: 47). Speaking with a white former police inspector, Hooper is thrown by his deep sense of connection to the island and its community and she sets out hard questions for him that she is unable to ask:

Can you step into this dysfunction and desperation and not be corrupted in some way? In a community of extreme violence, are you too forced to be violent? If you are despised, as the police are, might you not feel the need to be despicable sometimes? (ibid: 72)

During the trial, Hooper silently asks questions of Chris Hurley, the policeman accused of bringing about Doomadgee's death:

Do you ever dream of Cameron Doomadgee?

What do you think of the place you once chose to live, where good and bad are blurred and where you thought you were good?

Do you still think you were? (ibid: 190)



In court, Hurley turns his head and catches the author staring intensely back at him. Feeling herself exposed and chastened, Hooper quickly averts her eyes. Here she describes the rising sense of self-doubt revealing the author's uncertainty about her part in the events:

I don't know if he knew who I was; I suspect he did. With a weak smile I turned away, feeling my blood surge. I did not have it in me to stare back. He was a man trying to save his life and he seemed to be saying, 'How dare you judge me?' (ibid)

As she peels away at the deep layers of hurt, doubt and betrayal experienced by the deceased's family, Hooper is unable to lean on her journalist's impartiality. Moreover, in learning about the long and painful history of colonial trauma which fuelled the death of Doomadgee and damaged the Palm Island community, Hooper must reconcile with some hard truths: 'I had wanted to know more about my country,' she concludes 'and now I did – now I knew more than I wanted to' (ibid: 214). As a self-implicating witness, Hooper knows that she is unwilling and unqualified to speak for either side, and instead she makes space for the anguished voices of the dead man's family and his morally injured community.

In *The Arsonist: A mind on fire* (Hooper 2020), Hooper revisits the 2009 *Black Saturday* fires that burned almost half a million hectares across the state of Victoria. In it, she strives to comprehend the motive of the intellectually disabled man responsible for lighting the blaze which killed 173 people and injured hundreds more – as well as extinguishing more than one million animals. Hooper conveys the devastated scene by channelling the voices of those who survived the visceral horrors of an inferno that was likened to 1,500 atomic bombs. Assembling the still raw recollections of those who lost partners, children, animals and homes, Hooper disappears and cites directly from their first-person anguish. Meticulously tracing the complex investigation into how and by whom the fires were lit, Hooper rarely strays from the impact of this large-scale devastation. There are few Australian residents who haven't in some way experienced the impact, directly or otherwise, of bushfires, and there is in general a shared respect for anyone who lives through the horrors wrought by proximity to a catastrophic fire event. Hooper channels this reverence for those who endured *Black Saturday*, as much as for those who do the painstaking work to understand and investigate the origins and causes

of wildfires. In *The arsonist*, the act of catching the fire lighter, 'a misfit named Brendan Sokaluk' (ibid: 173), matters less than trying to understand his motives and Hooper consciously resists the law's attempts at oversimplification: 'The legal contest had pitted the story of a fiend against that of a simpleton. But the two weren't mutually exclusive. Brendan was both things: guileful and guileless; shrewd and naïve' (ibid: 158). The culprit is hapless and ineffectual, and he is also capable of annihilating families, wildlife and entire forests. Even with all the available evidence, the personal testimonies, the investigation and the trial, Hooper accepts her inability to comprehend the arsonist and, despite her deep inquiry, his crime:

I have spent years trying to understand this man and what he did. My own motivations sometimes as indecipherable as his. And, I wondered, what if, having asked the police and lawyers dozens of questions, trying to get tiny details right, I essentially ended up with little more than a series of impressions? Would the result be ultimately a fiction? (ibid: 162)

In *The arsonist* and *The tall man*, Hooper resists satisfactory endings or anything that signals narrative closure. Instead, she deftly subverts true crime's reductive framing by asking the reader to sit with uncertainty and the discomfort of not understanding, at the same time asking us to acknowledge the complex histories, nuanced identities, ambiguous actions, and painful experiences of the individuals and communities at the centre of real events.

#### Kate Wild: Redefining the true crime genre

In *Waiting for Elijah* (Wild 2018), Kate Wild revisits the fatal shooting by police of a young, Anglo man in the grip of a mental health episode. She looks to everyone involved to understand how and why his death takes place. Through years of immersion in coronial inquiries, through conversations with police, legal and medical professionals, and through countless conversations with Elijah's family, Wild tries to make sense of what happened. Despite her professional credentials as a journalist and reporter, she is unable to formulate a clearcut narrative or construct a satisfying ending using the facts of the case alone. It's only when she implicates herself – as a witness, a mediator, and as someone who also lives with mental health challenges – that Elijah's story begins to take shape. Driven by her deep empathy for her subject and his family, Elijah's story becomes a catalyst for Wild to explore her own,

yet she also fears the consequences: 'If I told my story with Elijah's, I would be labelled. The phrase "mental illness" in conversation was the verbal equivalent of Elijah's bread knife – an ordinary object, able to strike fear' (ibid: 169). Wild points to the stigma of mental illness as the larger context for her inquiry, marking a shift in the narrative and allowing the real interrogation to occur: 'In the right circumstances, what happened to Elijah – it could have been my family. ... Sometimes I think it could have been me' (ibid: 184). In challenging the reader to consider the complex experience and prevalence of mental illness, Wild seeks to create meaning from Elijah's death. The author's search for understanding fuels the narrative, propelling the reader beyond the conventional signposts of an ending. When the coronial process is over, when all the legal protocols have come to an end and there are still no answers, the journalist continues her investigation. But now the urgency has intensified, as Elijah's story is entangled with the author's own. When the policeman accused of shooting Elijah walks away from the court without giving evidence or offering an explanation as to why he did it, Wild despairs: 'I wanted to chase him and pull at the skin of his face to force an emotion out' (ibid: 292). Wild continues looking for answers long after Elijah's parents divorce, re-partner and, in the case of Elijah's mother, after she develops cancer and dies. At times this approach appears to come at a cost. Yet it's through her intimate and personalised quest for knowledge that Wild's investigation is transformed into a highly affective and empathetic narrative – one with the potential to expand the reader's understanding.

In *Waiting for Elijah*, as in all these nonfiction texts, the narrator is transformed from investigator to emotionally invested autoethnographer, whose subjectivity gets interwoven into the storylines, collapsing the gap between witness, mediator and participant. For the families and communities at the centre of these narratives there is no closure, and for the storytellers any conventional attempts at constructing a final act eludes them: 'Why couldn't I make this story end?' pleads Wild on page 268. In an interview conducted after the book's publication, the author admits the toll of trying to reach a conclusion: 'I wanted to be able to find an end to the story, so I could end the pain I was in as a witness to the story. I learned a valuable lesson' (Shute 2018). In coming to terms with the impossibility of knowing the absolute truth or finding an ending, in highlighting the complications inherent in our policing, legal and wel-

fare systems, and in showing her vulnerabilities and fears around her own mental health, Wild is interrogating and redefining the true crime genre.

### Reimagining the genre

*The genre relies upon the operation of sympathetic participation, upon affect, in narratives driven towards answers, illuminations and closures that are never fully achieved.* (Smith 2008: 28)

In her 2008 exploration of true crime, Jean Murley describes the archetypal American 'murder narrative' as 'rigid, formulaic, predictable, and almost boring' (Murley 2008: 2), 'atavistic in its intensely gendered appeal and misogynist subject matter and avoidance of race and multiculturalism' (ibid: 3), and one which stands as 'a countercurrent to the social progress and cultural changes' of the times (ibid). This case study of Australian literary nonfiction crime illustrates some of the ways women are rewriting the 'murder narrative' as a storytelling model built on empathy and self-inquiry, one which assembles the facts while acknowledging the difficulties in knowing them, and one that can serve as a framework for mirroring social progress and cultural change. To identify this gendered reimagining of true crime, I have located the following narrative and aesthetic characteristics:

- Centring victims, survivors and those with lived experience.
- Seeking intimacy and subjectivity, more personalising and less objectifying.
- Asking questions of self and society, with less focus on *whodunnit* and more on *why*.
- Articulating doubts and expressing private fears and experiences.
- Emphasising narrative ambiguities and complexities.
- Questioning the meaning of guilt.
- Querying the role, value and the cost of justice.
- Challenging the possibility of finding truth and recognising there may be more than one.
- Resisting conclusions and neat endings.
- Demystifying the perpetrators.
- Confronting gendered, domestic and family violence – less focus on random violent acts from unknown perpetrators.

- Including racial, social and cultural diversity  
– more marginalised and silenced communities.
- Acknowledging the moral and ethical implications of creating true crime.
- Contemplating the aftermath of crime or violence.

#### Empathic framework in action

Table 1 is a demonstration of how certain empathic narrative practices can be mapped against the cited texts.

**Table 1: Empathetic narrative practices in the texts**

CHARACTERISTICS & COMMENTS	TEXTUAL EXAMPLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Victims and survivors</li> <li>– Intimacy and subjectivity</li> <li>– Questions of self, doubts and fears</li> <li>– Moral and ethical implications</li> </ul> <p>Garner's response to the victim's mother and her all-consuming grief illustrates the author's deep, personal connection to and empathy for the Cinques. The author's self-interrogation shows the uncertainties and concerns pushing against her overriding sense of moral responsibility to tell their 'story'.</p>	<p><b>GARNER: <i>Joe Cinque's consolation</i></b></p> <p>For several minutes there was nothing on the line but the sound of her weeping. I was dumb with shame. How could I have thought that when I couldn't bend the story to my will I could just lay it down, apologise for the inconvenience caused, and walk away? Her son's murder was not an opportunity for me to speculate on images of disharmony and disintegration. It was not a convenient screen on which I could project sorrows of my own that I was too numb to feel. It was not even 'a story'. It was real. It was the brutal hand that fate had dealt her. It was the unendurable that she had to endure. Never in my life had I felt so weak, so vain, so stupid. (Garner, 2004: 270)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Victims and survivors</li> <li>– Intimacy and subjectivity</li> <li>– Questions of self and society</li> <li>– Ambiguities and complexities</li> <li>– Querying guilt, justice and truth</li> <li>– No (neat) endings</li> <li>– Demystifying perpetrators</li> <li>– Gendered, domestic, and family violence</li> </ul> <p>Here we see the author grappling with the complexities of broken families and the tragedy of retaliatory violence wrought by ordinary men. Garner comes to see everyone caught up in this intolerable calamity – including the perpetrator himself – as a victim.</p> <p>Despite her willingness to bear witness to years of legal entanglements, she concedes that the institutions designed to argue and resolve matters of morality, truth and guilt can never close the fissure caused by familicide.</p>	<p><b>GARNER: <i>This house of grief</i></b></p> <p>Farquharson's silence about what had happened that night, his inability or his refusal to say how the car went into the dam, was throwing everyone around him into a state of agitation that was hard to bear. ... We, his fellow citizens, could not live in such a cloud of unknowing. The central fact of the matter would not let us rest. It tore at our hearts that inside the plunging car, while their father fled, three little boys had fought with their restraints, breathed filthy water, choked, thrashed and died. There was something frantic about the way we danced attendance on the silent man, this 'horrendous snorer', this 'sook', this 'good mate' and 'loving dad' and 'good provider'; this stump of a man with his low brow and puffy eyes, his slumped spine and man-boobs, his silent-movie grimaces and spasms of tears, his big clean ironed handkerchief. (ibid: 287-288)</p> <p>At that moment I would have given anything to be convinced that he was innocent – and not because I 'believed in him', whatever that meant, but because, in spite of everything I had heard and observed and thought in this court, in spite of everything I knew about the ways of the world, it was completely unendurable to me that a man would murder his own children. (ibid: 290)</p>

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- Victims and survivors
- Intimacy and subjectivity
- Questions of self and society
- Doubts and fears
- Ambiguities and complexities
- Querying guilt, justice and truth
- No (neat) endings
- Demystifying perpetrators
- Moral and ethical implications

Wild deploys an astonishing level of self-scrutiny throughout her investigation. Here she candidly reveals her fears and anxieties, framing her narrative engagement with Elijah's story through a highly subjective lens. There is also a rigorous and persistent ethical interrogation into the meaning of guilt, truth and justice, as well as an exploration of the writer's role and responsibility as the storyteller. Finally, Wild delivers no black and white endings, only shifts in empathy and understanding, and an acceptance of the grey zone.

#### WILD: *Waiting for Elijah*

Faced with the end point of my argument, my rage collapsed. I didn't want Rich to go to jail. I didn't want him punished. I wanted him not to have killed Elijah, and if I couldn't have that, I wanted Elijah's death not to be Elijah's fault. I knew I was on dangerous ground. Whoever spoke controlled the narrative. ... Stories mattered, and if you got them wrong, they mattered even more. The human brain was designed to seek out narratives or make them up to make meaning of the world. If Rich did not fill the gap in my understanding, then conjecture, assumptions, and other people's versions would flourish in the opening. I wanted to understand more than anything what drove the most difficult decision in Rich's life. (Wild 2018: 211)

Why did the compassion I felt for Elijah not flood me for Rich in his illness too? ... Even if his decision to shoot was justified, Rich could no longer explain it to us. I should have felt sorry for the damage he had suffered, but all I felt was anger. (ibid: 293)

For the last six years, I had invested police with magical powers they didn't have. The trite realisation that they were just people in uniforms dawned in every scenario I watched. I had presumed police were equipped for whatever we asked of them – that's why they had the job, because they knew what to do when no one else did. But ... they were as self-conscious and tentative about exposing themselves to another human being as I was. (ibid: 388)

#### Conclusion

*A definition of empathy in its simplest form is to imagine ourselves in another's shoes* (Joseph 2016: 211).

As a creative methodology, abiding by any rigid list of writing techniques is not viable, or even desirable, for many writers of true crime, nor do the texts cited in this case study exemplify every one of them. But as a body of work, these Australian nonfiction crime narratives demonstrate how an empathetic framework can be used to convey the complexities and lasting effects of crime, trauma and violence beyond the forensic and legal processes. In essence, these stories compel us to imagine ourselves in somebody else's shoes. Moreover, by recognising such a framework the conscientious consumer is offered a way to ethically engage with, and critically reflect upon, true crime storytelling on all platforms. By meaningfully reimagining and rearticulating the genre, these writers demon-

strate the crucial role women play in facilitating public understandings of and uses for true crime, and in shaping the cultural discourse that surrounds it.

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