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'Based on a True Story': The problem of the perception of biographical truth in narratives based on real lives

Abstract
Despite a sustained interest in the ethical issues around writing narratives that are 'based on true stories', much of the public discourse around this matter has fallen into a repetitive and non-productive rut. This begins when a published work, usually a memoir or work of investigative, biographically focused journalism, is exposed to contain some obvious untruth. Outraged media commentary fans a firestorm of literary scandal, which often increases book sales and then dies out. While these conflagrations could prompt significant investigation around both the complexity of attempting to represent reality in writing as well as what contemporary readers' demands for authenticity reveals about them, too often public discussion as well as more scholarly discourse stalls either at the same stage of backward-looking moral superiority or post-modernist explanations that all truth is relative. This paper uses a detailed case study approach, focusing on a series of factually based works by Australian playwright Nick Enright to illuminate some of the practical and ethical challenges writers face when they draw on the power of real stories to create cultural product.

Rachel: This is history. Our history.
A Property of the Clan (Enright 1994: 20)

Despite a sustained interest in the ethical issues around writing narratives that are 'based on true stories', much of the public discussion around this matter has fallen into a repetitive, non-productive rut. This begins when a published or screened work, usually a memoir or work of investigative, biographically focused journalism, is exposed to contain some obvious untruth. This is commonly in relation to authorial claims regarding the writers' life experiences, memories of these experiences, or reporting of research findings (see Brien 2006). Outraged media commentary fans a firestorm of literary scandal, which often increases book sales and then dies out. While these conflagrations could prompt significant investigation around both the complexity of attempting to represent reality in writing and what contemporary readers' demands for authenticity reveals about them, public discussion as well as more scholarly discourse often takes one of two now-predictable positions. In this, discussion generally stalls at either backward-looking moral superiority or postmodernist explanations that all truth is relative.

This article uses a detailed case study approach that focuses on a series of factually based works by the late Australian playwright Nick Enright (1950-2003) - the plays *The Property of the Clan* (1994) and *Blackrock* (1995), and the Australian film based on the latter, *Blackrock* (1997) - to illuminate some of the practical and ethical challenges writers face when they draw on the power of real stories to create cultural product. Instead of beginning, however, with the extent to which these works are either fact or fiction, this discussion starts with, and focuses on, the audience reception of these works and what this reveals about the care authors must take in such situations. This is important as, in my reading, the most significant and ongoing problem for Enright was not how or why he wrote these pieces, but how audiences read, and understood, not only these texts but also his intentions in writing them. How Enright, in turn, responded to these public perceptions and the ramifications of his responses, is also revealing and, therefore, worthy of consideration.

In the 20 years since schoolgirl Leigh Leigh was raped and murdered on Stockton Beach - the relatively isolated suburb of Stockton, bordered by the port of Newcastle, the Hunter River and the Pacific Ocean, at the end of a road some 20 kilometers from Newcastle - the story of her life and death have been written and rewritten many times. Hundreds of sensational newspaper, magazine, television and radio stories have etched the so-called 'Leigh Leigh case' into Australian public consciousness. This media chronicle, together with the police records, court transcripts, academic commentaries and a series of government reports of inquiries into the police investigation, creates a considerable and sometimes contradictory documentary record of what happened to Leigh. Within this context, Enright's plays *The Property of the Clan* (1994) and *Blackrock* (1995) and the film *Blackrock* (1997) have been, and are, understood by viewers - including many students who continue to study the plays and/or film as part of their high school curriculum - to be further factual accounts, largely portraying the actions, thoughts and motivations of the individuals involved in the crimes. This perception has endured despite repeated claims by Enright, the film's director Steve Vidler and producer David Elfick, that the works are completely fictional. Take, for instance, the unequivocal assurance from Enright as *Blackrock*'s scriptwriter that, 'All the [film's] characters ... were inventions, as unlike the identities in the Leigh Leigh case as possible' (Enright n.d.). Among the many who have rejected this claim, however, are Leigh's family who just as immovably believe that the works not only narrate Leigh's story, but also distort the facts of her tragedy.

While elements of the following reconstruction are still unproven in law, it now seems almost certain that on 3 November 1989, during an unsupervised teenage birthday party at a Stockton surf club, 14-year-old virgin Leigh Leigh had sex on the beach with a boy aged 15. There is strong evidence that this was rape. When she returned to the party bleeding, distressed and seeking assistance, one of the party's bouncers, 19-year-old Guy Wilson, also demanded sex from her. When Leigh refused, he shouted obscenities, spat on her and pushed her to the ground. A group of some ten boys and young men then gathered and stood in a semi-circle around her as she lay in the gravel. Yelling abuse, they kicked her, spat and poured beer on her face and threw bottles at her prone figure. Similar physical and verbal assaults continued inside the crowded clubhouse where she sought refuge, and again on the beach, where some time later Leigh was violently (and possibly gang-) raped, beaten, strangled and struck on the head with a six kilogram block of concrete until she died. The second bouncer, 18-year-old Matthew Webster (who was, with Wilson, the only person aged 18 or over at the party), was gaoled for her murder but, aside from charges against the (still publicly unnamed) 15-year-old for carnal knowledge - for the attack Leigh had claimed was rape - and Wilson for assault, the other perpetrators of these crimes have never been apprehended or charged (*R v Matthew Grant Webster* 1990, 1991).[1]

This judicial resolution proved unsatisfactory for Leigh's family, and from the time of Webster's sentencing until his release in 2004, Leigh's mother, Robyn Leigh, with the support of the Newcastle Legal Centre, campaigned for both the re-opening of the case and an examination of the police investigation, to obtain, as she often said, justice for her daughter. Supporting this view, criminologist and academic Kerry Carrington has written extensively on the case, alleging poor and possibly corrupt policing, and

stating as certainties that Leigh was raped more than once, and that there were more perpetrators implicated in the crimes than those arrested and tried (Carrington 1994, 1998; Carrington & Johnson 1994, 1995). This view was supported by the New South Wales Crime Commission's review of the police investigation in 1996 (Whelan 1996), and its referral of the matter to the Police Integrity Commission (PIC) in 1998 (Whelan and Tink 1998). The PIC found that the police conduct in the murder investigation had jeopardised further convictions in the case and recommended that five police officers face criminal charges, others internal prosecutions, and the head of the investigation be stood down (PIC 1998; McAloon 2001).

Although the film *Blackrock* was released in 1997, almost a full decade after the murder, it was still popularly perceived as a biographical record of the people involved in Leigh's life and death. The genesis of the film contributed significantly to this perception, beginning in late 1991 - two years after Leigh's death and a year after Webster's sentencing - when Brian Joyce, director of Newcastle's Theatre-in-Education company Freewheels, approached Enright to write what commonly became known as the Leigh Leigh story. Enright, who had just completed the to-be-Academy Award nominated script for *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), was known for his ability to dramatise real-life stories, but refused, feeling the facts of the case as he understood them were too horrifying for such a dramatisation (Kelly 1994: 66). Joyce did not, however, give up and subsequently captured Enright's interest by describing how the crime had become a taboo subject for the young people of the area. Attracted to this aspect of the project but uncommitted to an approach, Enright undertook a series of research interviews with teenagers and adults in Stockton and then started writing. By early 1992, he had a draft that was read publicly in the Stockton/Newcastle area and then rewritten, taking into account this response. Local involvement, as Enright acknowledged, was extensive, and involved him in repeatedly referring back to his community sources including counsellors, schoolteachers, students and mothers (Enright Archive).

This contact with people intimately involved with the Leigh Leigh crime encouraged, I believe, a set of local expectations for Enright's work, expectations that differed markedly from the playwright's. The Newcastle community was, moreover, not unaccustomed to such research practice, for by the time Enright began his interviews, another play, *Aftershocks* - created in response to the Newcastle earthquake - had been created by a process that was much discussed and debated in the local press (Brown & NWCAC 1993). The first recorded Australian earthquake to claim lives, leaving 13 dead, hundreds injured and billions of dollars of damage, this quake occurred only seven weeks after Leigh's murder; and the two events are meshed in local memory. The earthquake inspired Paul Brown and the Newcastle Workers' Cultural Action Committee to produce the play *Aftershocks*, an example of verbatim theatre in its purest form, composed entirely of an edited selection of personal testimonies of those affected by the disaster, and seeking 'to retain the authenticity and honest impact of the experiences of those whose stories were told' (Brown 1993: iii). Knowledge of the intent, process and outcome of *Aftershocks* may possibly have given Novacastrians a false impression of Enright's project - which he began almost simultaneously with the play's November 1991 Newcastle premiere - that he would similarly seek to represent *their* truth of what happened to Leigh. It is also pertinent to note that alongside his international fame, Enright, having grown up in Maitland (only some 20 kilometres from Newcastle), was welcomed into, and trusted by, the local community in a way that an outsider may not have been. Enright's motivations and working processes were, however, very different from those of verbatim theatre; his ultimate aim always aesthetic rather than historical, didactic or sociological. Enright has, indeed, described his writing (and research for this writing) as a process of discovering 'what it is that you're writing about' (Dunne 1998: 9).

The problem resulting from this situation is that although Enright himself often asserted that the resulting play, *A Property of the Clan*, is about why *any* group of boys might abuse *any* girl, and not about Leigh at all, the work was written specifically for, and with the assistance of, an audience that could, and did, make connections to the crime - even though the work never refers directly to Leigh Leigh. Enright also found this distinctive title in a psychiatrist's much reported court testimony on the group abuse Leigh suffered: that once she was raped, she became nothing more than a sexual object to the boys at the party: in the psychiatrist's terminology became the 'property of the clan' (Riley 1990: 10). This title immediately connected this play directly with Leigh, as did many other cognate details including the play's setting in an isolated surfside community and the description of the party.

What caused the most heated controversy within the local community, however, was not whether the play was factual or not, but the actual biographical similarities between the play's characters and recognisable real individuals, and especially, how closely the play's victim (Tracy Warner) and her fate approached Leigh's. Neither the rape nor the murder is shown on stage in *A Property of the Clan*, but the audience, knowing in tabloid detail what had happened to Leigh Leigh, readily filled in the specific detail of Tracy's grim fate from the meagre hints given in the script. Thus, the nightmare dreamed by Jade at the time her friend Tracy is killed is enough to suggest the group assault on Leigh: 'Faces. Full of hate. I was all wet. They were looking down at me, throwing things. Cigarette butts. Hate everywhere' (Enright 1994: 15).

Leigh's family met with Freewheel's Brian Joyce after *Property*'s preview performance to voice their concerns - including that one of Leigh's closest friends had been her cousin, Tracey (ABC 1996), a name that was obviously too close to that of the play's character Tracy. Indeed, when the concept of *A Property of the Clan* was first mooted, Robyn Leigh stated that she would prefer a documentary treatment of the material, and she did subsequently assist with such a work for ABC radio in 1996, an in-depth investigative piece which focused on the flaws in the police investigation rather than on the characters and actions of people involved: that is, a less biographically-focused work. The Newcastle press picked up the story, and the day after the play's opening, Freewheels, pressured by the mounting disapproval, attempted to distance *Property* from biographical fact, declaring the play was 'researched through a range of sources ... including, though not only, the murder of a young woman in Newcastle some three years ago' (McMillan 1992). Despite these denials, the staff at Newcastle High School (where both Leigh and Webster had been students) found the connection too close and did not book the play for their students. *Property* was, however, extremely successful in other schools and theatres in Newcastle (as it was on its subsequent lengthy tour of the region and around Australia) and won a number of prestigious awards.

In early 1994, the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) commissioned Enright to develop the 45-minute long *Property* into a full-length mainstage production. The play *Blackrock* eventuated, premiering in Sydney in August 1995. This play is more fictionalised than *Property*, with the story revolving around Jared (a completely invented character) who witnesses, without intervening in, Tracy's gang-rape. The play articulates Jared's moral dilemmas in facing the consequences of this inaction and the question of whether he should inform on his friends, and portrays his disintegrating relationships with his mother (who has breast cancer), his girlfriend (who finds Tracy's body), and his best friend (the murderer). Whereas *Property* examines the possible motives underlying an act of rape - contextualising the individual crime against Tracy with discussions of the Holocaust, the forced servitude of Indigenous children, and the oppression of a gay student - *Blackrock* centres on the boys involved in a single crime and portrays them as victims of their society, 'kids trapped in a world they didn't make and violent in response to it' in one critic's words (McCallum 1995). *Blackrock* is a riveting, moving and undoubtedly 'important' play, but public understanding and reception of this popular work continues to be both dependant upon, and complicated by, the connections viewers continue to make to the Leigh Leigh case.

Enright and the STC have always maintained that, while developed from *A Property of the Clan* (which was indisputably inspired by the facts of the Leigh Leigh case), the play *Blackrock* is an entirely fictional work. None of the promotional material emanating from the company mentioned Leigh or anything to the effect that the work was 'based on a true story'. However, every one of the numerous reviews of the play, all the feature articles about it, as well as most of the brief 'What's On'-type listings for the play made much of the connection, some ruminating at length on the case, and many featuring photographs of Leigh.[2] Although written and produced in Sydney, *Blackrock* remains identified with the area in which Leigh died, and not just by audiences, critics and journalists. Enright returned to Newcastle to workshop early drafts of the play with young actors in the city

(Enright 1996), the STC director described the sand and corrugated-iron set as suggesting 'those industrial places like Newcastle' (Berthold 1995), and the actors for this production reportedly prepared for their roles by 'looking at the beach culture that still exists around Newcastle' (Squires 1995: 8A).

While the latter drafts of this second play were still being written, Enright took the unusual step of also beginning to work with Australian actor-turned-director Steve Vidler on a screenplay for a film version, also to be titled *Blackrock*. In his screenplay, Enright attempted to move even further from Leigh Leigh's story by creating an even more fictionalised plot (focusing in more closely on Jared, his moral choices and the nature of male friendship), and claiming his research was 'generic ... these characters are drawn on a much wider basis of experience than just the interviews that I did' (Enright Full Script Treatment). The connection with Leigh was given new momentum, however, when the film was largely shot on location in the very areas where she had lived and died - Caves Beach, the Stockton ferry and Newcastle city. Vidler justified the choice as purely logistical: that nowhere else had such a suitable mix of industry and beach as close to Sydney. However, the southern steel city of Wollongong has places of very similar appearance and is only half the distance from Sydney.

The call for extras for the film was answered by hundreds of Newcastle teenagers but not everyone welcomed the production. When the crew arrived in Stockton they found previously arranged locations were suddenly unavailable and the local media hostile. *Newcastle Herald* journalist Jane Worthington articulated local objections that 'the details of the script [are] ... too close for comfort ... Leigh Leigh is still fresh in the minds of many Novocastrians. The similarities are not by chance' (Worthington 1996). A psychologist's interpretation that individuals from the area continued to identify personally with both the crime and the people involved because the killer was from within the community (Worthington 1996), seems proven by the often-voiced opinion that the film was raking over a private past and appropriating stories which belonged to the community - reproaches which were only inflamed by the film makers' continued denial of any connection to Leigh. The dead girl's family objected vehemently to the film, voicing their belief that the filmmakers were not only 'feasting on an unfortunate situation' (Rose 1997: 13) but also, and worse than this, trivialising and exploiting Leigh's tragedy and portraying Leigh negatively.

Although by the time of Webster's release from gaol on parole in 2004, Robyn Leigh and other members of Leigh's family had stated that, although 'devastated by this tragedy', they no longer held 'ill feelings' towards him and 'wish[ed] him well' (Chain 2004), members of the Leigh family have never expressed a view in public other than the certainty that each of these three works by Enright was a biography of Leigh, themselves, and those involved in the crimes committed against her. They were, thus, understandably outraged by what they read as a sympathetic portrayal of Leigh's rapists and killer in the filmed version of *Blackrock*. The thematic centre of the film is that the crimes against Tracy could have been committed by any of the town's young men, as they were themselves the hapless victims of their situations, with no agency in, or responsibility for, what happened. Vidler's reading of *Blackrock* was particularly inflammatory, that the film was: 'not as dark as it sounds ... it's so damned funny and entertaining and the boys are so sexy and so likeable you love them'. He went so far as to claim that, 'Even the boy who's finally killed her is a hero' (cited Litson 1995: 12). A script treatment, indeed, blames the party's mix of drugs, alcohol and sexual activity at the party for ensuing events, as 'a lethal combination that rears its ugly head and wipes out one of its numbers … It's the same cathartic result portrayed as the way to have a good time', the crimes 'almost inevitable' (Enright Full Script Treatment). In this worldview, the film proposes that Tracy brings her fate upon herself by attending the party, getting drunk, going willingly to the beach with Toby (where she is gang-raped) and flirting with Ricko (who kills her). Various characters suggest that Tracy provoked the boys. A mother asks her daughter, 'Don't you think she might have brought it on herself? Through drugs or alcohol, or ... just being careless?' (Enright 2007: 56). Only Cherie protests her friend's innocence, 'Nothing's anybody's fault. She raped herself. She killed herself. That's what youse all think', but her mother immediately counters this defence, 'You douse yourself in kero, then start playing with matches, you can't blame anyone else when you set yourself on fire' (Enright 2007: 58).

Although the exact facts of what happened to Leigh are still to be established in law, the critics, the press and Leigh's family found and reported many strong correlations between what happens to Tracy in *Blackrock* and what they believed had happened to Leigh. In the film, for instance, Tracy is left bleeding on the sand by the four rapists, and viewers find out that when she asks Ricko for help, he also attempts to violate her. When she fights him off, he kills her. Ricko confesses to Jared:

> I found her. Stumbling down the beach ... asks me to look after her ... Asks me to take her home. I said, 'Yeah, I'll take you home, babe, but first things first'. I lay her down on the sand, nice and gentle, but she pushes me off. Okay, she wants it rough, she can have it rough. I get her down again, and then she fuckin' bites me, bites me like a fuckin' dog. No bitch does that, mate (Enright 2007: 73).

After being raped on the beach and then enduring the group assault, Leigh left the clubhouse and was forced into a depression in the sandhills by Webster. He testified that he thought Leigh, though physically ill and virtually helpless, was 'a sure thing for sex' and when she refused, he 'lost it'. She fought for her life and although he testified he hit her only once, forensics revealed that Leigh was terribly beaten, with internal bruising to her kidneys and liver and severe wounds to her genitals.

It could be contended that the filmmakers built on the public knowledge about Leigh to enhance the drama of the film. For instance, Ricko tells Jared the murder was an accident, 'I didn't mean it. I only wanted to pound her. Things got rough, she hit her head on a rock, and she was gone. That quick' (Enright 2007: 61). Although Jared believes his friend, the viewer knows Ricko is lying - and this increases the drama of the scene - but this knowledge comes not from any information provided in the film, but because the press widely reported that Webster moved a considerable distance from Leigh to pick up a large piece of concrete, which he then proceeded to throw at her head. In the film, the photographs of Tracy the police show Jared are so gruesome they make him ill. Viewers do not need to be shown these images in the film, because it is common knowledge that the rock hit Leigh with such force that blood spray was found more than five metres from the body, with press articles adding to this data that the rock left her covered in blood and disfigured beyond recognition, with the entire left side of her face caved in.

There are many other direct convergences between real-life biography and the film. Tracy's mother works in a nursing home (Enright 2007: 2) as did Robyn Leigh at the time Leigh died. Leigh's father called for the death penalty to be reinstated for his daughter's murder, while in the film Ken Warner cries, 'Prison's too good for them. I say a life for a life' (Enright 2007: 52). The parents in *Blackrock* are imaged as ultimately responsible for the crime due to their neglect of their children; at Webster's murder trial the judge accused all Stockton parents of gross negligence. Both Leigh and Tracy's classmates drop red roses onto their friend's coffin, then take up a collection and plant a tree in her memory.

These contiguities between dramatic characters and living individuals sit alongside many other details in the film that seem directly lifted from the factual record. The party in *Blackrock* is an almost perfect re-creation of the one that Leigh attended. It is at a surf club hired for the night, and attended by many local teenagers from the same school plus a few young men over 18 who are entertained by a band made up of local boys who are also from the school. In both cases (filmic and actual) the party spilled out onto the surrounds of the club and the beach, there were fights and, later in the evening, drunken and drug-influenced teenagers were seen vomiting, stumbling on the beach, or collapsed unconscious. From the windswept seaside setting to the media's intrusion, Tracy's funeral appears to be a direct re-staging of the published photographs of Leigh's service.

Although some of the above can be explained away as generic teenage or human behaviour, a number of details in Blackrock indisputably tie the film to Leigh's story in the same way that the title of *A Property of the Clan* connected the play directly to her. The clearly recognisable setting of Stockton and Newcastle is one such detail, but this is supported by a homemade poster Jared sees taped to a telegraph pole: a photo of Tracy over the legend 'Shame Blackrock Shame'. In Stockton, some fifty such posters

attracted national media attention. Attached to power poles across the town late one night three weeks after Leigh's death, these posters consisted of the dictum 'Shame Stockton Shame: Dob the gutless bastards in', printed over a drawing of three long-haired male figures (one of whom clutches a large rock) standing over a prostrate girl.

In the face of these similarities and parallels, the instances when the film differs markedly from Leigh's story did little to persuade viewers that *Blackrock* was not an attempt at factual documentary. While Leigh, for instance, attended the Stockton party with her parents' consent, as they thought the event was properly supervised, Tracy does not ask for permission as she knows this would be withheld. Tracy wears a short skirt, tight top and high-heeled sandals to the party, while Leigh wore a pair of modest shorts, a loose T-shirt and white sandshoes. Tracy's body was found the night of the party, Leigh's the next morning, both by teenagers who had been at the party, but in Tracy's case a girl, in Leigh's a boy. Mrs Warner is seen packing up Tracy's room the morning after her murder, whereas Leigh's mother told the press she had left Leigh's room untouched for months. Ricko suicides to escape capture, Webster was gaoled.

Assessing the relationship of the film to the Leigh Leigh case is not, however, as simple as tallying up correlations and discrepancies. While Jared, the film's protagonist, is undoubtedly as completely fictional as any dramatic character can be, even he can be read metaphorically as part of Leigh's story, representing everyone who had the chance to save Leigh, but did not. In such a reading, Jared is a cipher for the partygoers who stood by as she was assaulted, the neighbours who heard screams but did not investigate, the absent parents, and the police who investigated the party during the evening but (reportedly) did nothing. Similarly, while the graphic rape of Tracy is the key event of the film, central to the narrative and re-enacted in three different flashbacks, in Leigh's case the rapists were never prosecuted, as the police seemed to focus their energies on solving the murder. The accepted truth, however, as everyone except the court record now acknowledges, is that Leigh was raped. In relation to this fact, *Blackrock* could be read as a less fictionalised account of what actually happened than the judicial record, which continues to include this glaring gap. Superficially, *Blackrock*'s 22-year-old Ricko with his handsome, blonde, surf-toned muscularity could not seem more different from the 120 kilogram 18-year-old Webster, but a knowing audience can recognize many similarities between the two. Ricko, like Webster, grows up in a provincial town, is left to his own devices, and is on a path of self-destruction. Both are unemployed, having left high school before graduating and, referring to the pre-apprenticeship course in auto mechanics Webster completed, Ricko tinkers with his van in the film. Neither displays any real emotional depth and, with insecurity masked as bravado, are both prone to violence. While Webster's defense counsel called him 'a gentle giant', others described him as the town thug; similarly Ricko is the 'king of the kids', but parents are wary of him.

By the end of the film, Ricko is dead, but Jared is redeemed, and as Enright himself stated, 'the movie's tough, I think it's unsparing. But I think it's finally optimistic' (cited Rose 1997: 13). For Leigh Leigh's family, however, there has been no such positive resolution. As the *Blackrock* shoot closed in October 1996, Robyn Leigh finally won her battle to have the case reopened, the New South Wales Police Commissioner Whelan (at the urging of the NSW Attorney-General) ordering a review of the police investigation and promising, 'it is time to stop the lies and cover-ups and to set the record straight; it is time for the truth to out' (Whelan 1996). At that time, Robyn Leigh, her life reportedly threatened by unknown aggressors, was forced into hiding, but in December 1996 she saw this NSW Crime Commission inquiry into the murder and the police investigation begin. Its findings exonerated the police only charging one murderer, but triggered a Police Integrity Commission (PIC) inquiry. The PIC report (released in October 2000) found the police investigation flawed but did not implicate additional perpetrators in the crime or stipulate that Leigh was raped. To add to the injury the Leigh family felt, it was also suggested that the police misconduct detailed in a later PIC report could have resulted in Webster having grounds for a new appeal against his sentence. By the time he was released in 2004, Robyn Leigh had reportedly given up her quest 'naming exhaustion and survival [as the reason] for letting go' (Elder 2004).

By the time the film was released in 1997, during the Crime Commission inquiry, Enright denied any direct use of Leigh's story and restated his fictional intentions: 'I've never researched the Leigh Leigh story. I [only] picked up the general outline of it and used its mythological shape as the starting point for the piece' (cited Rose 1997: 13). When interviewed in April that year, the writer tried to distance himself further, stating that even when writing *Property*, he 'deliberately stayed away from the actual case. I didn't talk to any of the participants. I didn't talk to anyone who was in any way involved in the investigation, that wasn't my interest' (cited Stewart 1997: 19). Newcastle similarly separated itself from *Blackrock*. A comprehensive feature article in 1999 on the youth-led cultural renaissance of the city detailed cinematic production in the Newcastle area from Mel Gibson's first film *Summer City* (Fraser 1977) and parts of *Mad Max* (Miller 1979) to a short film festival titled *Shootout* held in July 1999 to raise the city's cinematic profile, but made no mention of *Blackrock* (Morgan 1999).

Commercially, the film *Blackrock* achieved the benchmark figure of A$1 million at the Australian box office, but this sum reflects the extensive study of the eponymous play in high schools around the country rather than any particular recognition of the merits of the film in itself. Critics were lukewarm about the film, often utilising their reviews to air their views on the ongoing legal and political ramifications of the Leigh Leigh case. Moreover, reception outside Australia, where there was no knowledge of Leigh Leigh's story, was unenthusiastic. The response to its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival was unfavourable, reviews in *Variety* and *Premiere* were poor, and no American buyer was contracted for the film. It seems that, without the poignant and powerful narrative support of Leigh's tragedy, the film was judged as shallow and clichéd.

As I read the situation, the ongoing problem for Enright-as-author was not how or why he wrote these works. It was, instead, how audiences read, and understood, not only his texts but also his intentions, and how he, in turn, responded to these public perceptions once they were aired. Much of this was prompted by, it must be stated, factors completely out of the author's control as, for instance, in the case of the press' repeated use of photographs of Leigh in its reporting of the plays and the film. Two were repeatedly featured throughout the 1990s, the first showing Leigh in a school portrait shot, facing the camera in her school uniform, hair tied back with a little fringe, her cheeks round and smile childlike above her white Peter Pan collar. This pictured Leigh as the blameless victim of a terrible crime. In the other, and more widely used photograph, Leigh appears much older than her years. Her hair waves to her shoulders across her open neck shirt, she looks over her shoulder to the camera, head thrown back, lips parted. This is Leigh as seductive siren. A much-used promotional image for the film paired this latter eroticisation with a film still of Tracy at the party before she is attacked. Clutching a large bottle of spirits and a cigarette, she is hot and tousled, her hip, bottom and breasts thrust out provocatively in a short skirt, tight top and high-heeled sandals. Those who knew Leigh, and believed the film was about her, were understandably disturbed by this representation. The point here is that although the use of these images was out of Enright's sphere of influence, their use and effect should not have been ignored.

Similarly, some of the condemnation of *Blackrock* seems to reflect a growing public frustration with the legal system and it is worth considering how the public response to the film may have been different if justice had been seen to been done in the Leigh Leigh case. The film *The Boys* (Sewell 1998), for example, was also based on a brutal and much reported local crime (the 1987 abduction, robbery, torture, sexual assault, rape and murder of 26-year-old nurse Anita Cobby) but provoked very little of the criticism of *Blackrock*. *The Boys*, indeed, attracted critical acclaim, receiving 13 feature film nominations in the 1998 Australian Film Institute Awards and winning in four categories. Unlike the Leigh Leigh example, however, all of the men involved in Anita Cobby's kidnap, rape and murder were arrested and gaoled, with the main perpetrators' files marked 'never to be released'. Again, the results and consequences of the Leigh trials and related inquiries were not something within Enright's control. They were, however, so widely reported and discussed that it did not serve Enright well not to take them into account in framing his responses to journalists and others when asked about his work and its relation to Leigh's murder.

It is, of course, illogical to take writers of fiction to task for historical inaccuracy or anachronism, especially when, as in Enright's case, the writer not only makes no claim that his works portrays biographical truth but repeatedly, and vehemently, denies any such intent. The conflation of *Blackrock*, the film, with what really happened to Leigh Leigh almost a decade before was, however, so complete as to be farcical at times, as when a radio review asserted the film 'documented the murder of Leigh Warner on Blackrock Beach near Newcastle' (Davis 1996). Such conflation was, of course, like the use of Leigh's photographs, out of Enright's ambit of influence, but this example does reveal how completely the two narratives, the fictionalised *Blackrock* and the facts about Leigh Leigh's tragedy, became and remained intermingled in public understanding. This public could not, or did not want to, discern between fact and fiction. I believe authors have to recognise such readings and accept that a defense based on definitions of genre - in Enright's case, the explanation that the work is - not assuage authorial ethical responsibility.

This is important since, as Kendall L Walton has explored at length, all works of art 'serve as props in games of make-believe' (Walton 1990: 53), with the experience of being emotionally involved in a text, 'being caught up in a story' in Walton's words, experienced by audiences of both fiction and nonfiction. Many writers of fiction, moreover, aim for emotional truth in their stories. While readers of fiction do not, however, in Walton's opinion, 'really believe in the fiction' (1990: 6), readers of nonfiction works such as biography or history, while not naïvely accepting everything the author presents, engage with those works principally because they are seeking some biographical or historical truth. Recognition of such audience/reader behaviour and motivation underscores how much more care both Enright and the producers of his plays and filmscript could have taken when they undoubtedly drew upon real events to enhance the dramatic values of their public, albeit fictional, objects of entertainment. As writer and critic Robert Drewe commented in his review of the film, it was 'asking a lot of Australian audiences to expunge reality from their memories' (Drewe 1997: 16).

Notes

1. In January 1990 Wilson received a 6-month gaol sentence for having assaulted Leigh. The next month, the 15-year-old (who was never named) was also sentenced to 6 months custody in a detention centre, although this was commuted on appeal to 100 hours community service. In October 1990 Webster was sentenced to 20 years in prison for Leigh's murder. He was released in 2004, with an additional 6 years to be served on parole. return to text

2. This was also the situation during the return STC season of the play in 1996, and continued to be so for numerous ensuing Australian productions. return to text

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Keywords: biography; ethics; Nick Enright; *Blackrock*

TEXT
Vol 13 No 2 October 2009
http://www.textjournal.com.au
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