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Genre and gender: reading domestic noir through the lens of feminist criminology

Abstract:

The contemporary crime fiction trend of domestic noir evinces literary themes and features that align with biases and advancements in criminological research, most specifically in feminist understandings of women and violence. Using the methodology of criminologist Drew Humphries as a conceptual framework, I analyse Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014) to explore how key concepts in feminist criminology addressing domestic violence, including Critical Feminist Theory and Social Learning Theory, are useful in a textual analysis. I then demonstrate how this understanding of the production and subversion of generic features in domestic noir can be useful to inform creative work, with reference to my thriller novella *Girl Crazy* (2019).

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Domestic noir – crime fiction – Liane Moriarty – creative writing – feminist criminology

Introduction

The crime fiction canon is underpinned by assumptions regarding criminality and victimhood that reproduce hegemonic masculinist concerns, for example, the use of violence against women as an inciting incident to propel male characters into conflict (Jaber 2016; Munt 1994; Cranny-Francis 1990). However, women crime novelists subvert and re-invent the crime fiction genre. The Golden Age of crime fiction saw women crime writers 'derided for their so-termed feminization of the genre and their light-hearted portrayals of domestic murders' (Walton, Christianson, & Walker 2015: 4). Domestic suspense novels of the 1940s–70s centralised the '"feminine" discourse' and explored marriage as a site of entrapment for both men and women (Peters 2018: 11). The 'Second Golden Age' of crime writing, in the 1980s, saw the rise of feminist crime fiction, with narrative elements of women in paid work; the value of women's social and non-traditional familial networks; and the intersection of gender, class, race, and sexuality in criminal justice issues (Cranny-Francis 1990: 175).

In contemporary crime fiction, a genre has emerged that draws from the conventions of these earlier works to produce domestic noir, which, as I will demonstrate, aligns with an increasing public interest in gendered violence and the menace of intimacy. Reading domestic noir through the lens of feminist criminology enables us to see the ways in which women are voicing traumatic experiences through fiction, which reveals narrative strategies and elements of craft useful to contemporary crime writers. This article focusses on using Critical Feminist Theory and Social Learning Theory as a reading lens for Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014), interrogating alignments between theory and craft in ways that generate options for crime writers seeking to voice women and girls'' experiences of domestic violence, then evaluating my experimentation with these techniques in my own work in progress.

Humphries' feminist framework

The work of criminologist Drew Humphries advances a conceptual framework investigating how feminist criminology informs the manufacture of sub-generic features in both journalism and fiction. Humphries argues that feminist criminology challenges, reframes, and improves legal definitions and data collection regarding women and violence (both as victims and perpetrators), and, in doing so, impacts both reportage and dramatisation (2009: xi).

Humphries' framework is founded on theoretical choices that prioritise the fourth and fifth concepts advanced by Daly and Chesney-Lind's influential work of 1988, *Feminism and Criminology*: that 'the production of knowledge is gendered' and, in response, feminist criminology places women at the 'centre of intellectual inquiry' (qtd in Vann 2018). This framework supports a textual analysis using the 'basic tools of feminist analysis' and 'intersectionality' to 'address the prospects for changing representations of women and violence' (Humphries 2009: 13). Using this framework, I conduct a textual analysis of Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* to illustrate the ways in which domestic noir's literary themes and features align with advancements in criminological research, specifically, voicing women's trauma through feminist theory addressing domestic violence. The methodology aims to explore and challenge

'masculine assumptions about women's experience with violence' (Humphries 2009: 24), which aligns with what Miller has termed the 'active turn' of domestic noir:

> The female protagonist in these texts is not restricted to a small number of roles: the inert body to be looked at, dissected and penetrated both criminally and then in the pursuit of justice; nor is her only participatory role as part of an established patriarchal culture, in the position of police officer or pathologist. (2018: 90)

The textual analysis adopted in this research is an analysis of writing craft, which involves, firstly, a close textual reading to analyse structural, thematic, and language choices and their effects; then, developing from these analyses a series of options for achieving similar effects in a work in progress; and, lastly, experimenting with these techniques and evaluating whether they have worked. This approach allows for what Rita Felski terms 'post-critical reading', that is, moving beyond the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' to instead 'conceive of works of art as sources of illumination or insurrection rather than as documents to be diagnosed and found wanting' (2009: 28–29). The rising popularity of domestic noir, as evidenced through both commercial sales and critical reception (Vann 2018), warrants 'turning to novels that represent and think through processes of readerly recognition, analyzing how formal devices encourage or attenuate such processes, exploring the deeper philosophical implications' (Felski 2009: 32). As Humphries claims, a 'recurring tension, a sense of gender injustice, finds expression' through generic techniques (2009: 26). Or, as crime writer Elizabeth Mariaffi puts it, 'there really is a bogeyman in the closet, and we've been talking about him all along' (n.d.).

Textual analysis: *Big Little Lies*

Published in 2014, *Big Little Lies* is the sixth adult novel by Australian author Liane Moriarty. The novel explores the relationship breakdown between a network of both childhood and adult friends, and extended family, centred around a small primary school, as well as how those tensions are the key to solving the murder of someone in that network. Both the killer and the victim are not revealed until the climax. The author resists the term domestic noir because she gets 'frustrated by the women's fiction label' (Tominey 2018: n.p.), although the novel is regularly marketed and received as such, ranking third on the Goodreads domestic noir list ('Domestic Noir Goodreads' n.d.).

The novel features two epigraphs. First, the schoolyard chant 'You hit me, you hit me. Now you have to kiss me.' Second, the fictional Pirriwee Public School anti-bullying statement, including the statement that 'Pirriwee Public is a BULLY-FREE ZONE'. The juxtaposition of these epigraphs points to the theme of the escalating cycle of domestic violence, and raises questions about the intergenerational impact of violence. As will be shown, these conceptualisations of domestic violence align with two major fields of criminological thought: Critical Feminist Theory and Social Learning Theory.

Humphries' conceptual framework aligns both news reportage and dramatisations of gendered violence with criminological theory, which enables us to observe how the rise in popularity of domestic noir occurs against a backdrop of an increased culture of interest in domestic violence. Mentions of the term 'domestic homicide' rose sharply

in Australian newspaper reports measured in five-year increments from 2000–2015, shown in the graph below (Figure 1). To generate this data, I conducted a series of searches in the Factiva database on the parameters: Australian newspapers, 'domestic homicide', and [year]. To test the reliability of the trend shown, and to allow for regional variations in terminology, I conducted parallel searches on related terms: 'domestic violence', 'intimate partner violence' and 'family violence', all of which confirmed the trend.

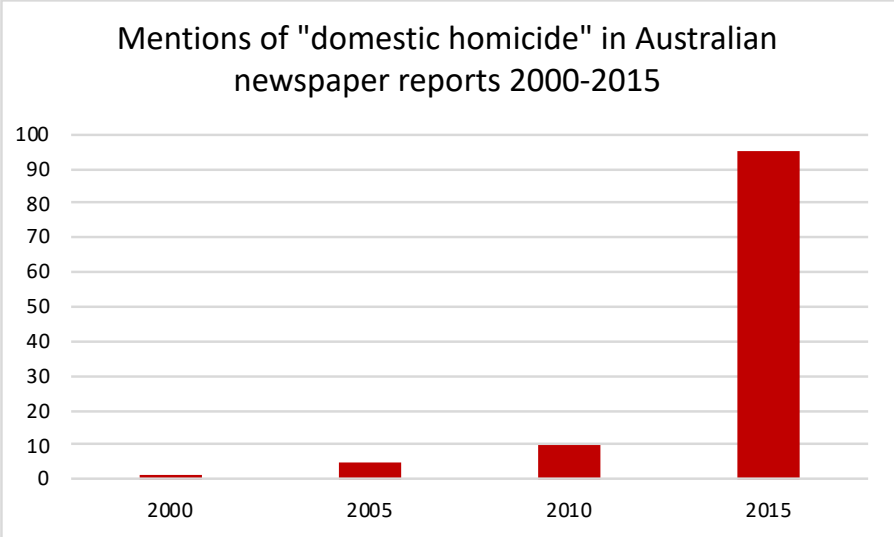

Figure 1: Mentions of 'domestic homicide' in Australian newspaper reports 2000–2015

While domestic homicide statistics are predominantly gendered with male perpetrators and female victims (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018: ix), a recurring narrative feature of domestic noir texts is the woman who kills an abusive man in an act of 'illegal justice', defined as 'when women use crimes ranging from fraud to murder in order to defend themselves from abuse' (Chesney-Lind and PasKo in Vann 2018: n.p.). In domestic noir, abused women killing violent men aligns with the principle articulated by domestic violence theorist Evan Stark (2009), that:

> Women's right to use whatever means are available to liberate themselves from coercive control derives from the mode men use to oppress them, not from the proximate physical or psychological harms they may suffer because of abuse. (5)

Stark's theory of coercive control takes into account the gendered nature of domestic violence explored in domestic noir, arguing that such violence is gendered not because men are intrinsically more inclined to violence, but because 'sexual discrimination allows men privileged access to the material and social resources needed to gain advantage in power struggles' (105).

In Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), viewed as the breakout bestseller that established the domestic noir genre, protagonist Amy Dunne kills Desi, the man who is holding her captive after she manipulates his stalking obsession with her to manufacture an alibi for her staged disappearance. In a subsequent bestselling domestic noir novel, Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015), the alcoholic Rachel stabs her ex-boyfriend Tom while Tom's second wife Anna, who has recently heard his confession to killing

his first wife, assists to ensure he dies. *Big Little Lies* also features a climactic 'illegally just' killing of an abusive man by a victimised woman. A complete reading of the many feminist literary strategies of Moriarty's craft are beyond the scope of this essay, so I will focus on two narrative elements in the text: domestic violence counselling and the motif of strangulation.

The influence of Critical Feminist-informed theory is evident in Moriarty's dramatisation of domestic violence counselling: the rise and fall of tension throughout the middle of the book is structured in line with the Cycle of Violence (see Figure 2) identified by Dr Lenore Walker (1979: 55). Alvarez claims that *Big Little Lies*' viewpoint character 'Celeste's little lie is centred around her inability to accept her identity as a victim and escape her marriage once she understands "The Cycle of Violence", a revolutionary theory that states domestic abuse is articulated in phases of escalating violence' (2018: 183). This theory draws from Critical Feminist Theory, which emphasises the gendered nature of domestic violence and forms the basis for widely used contemporary intervention strategies.

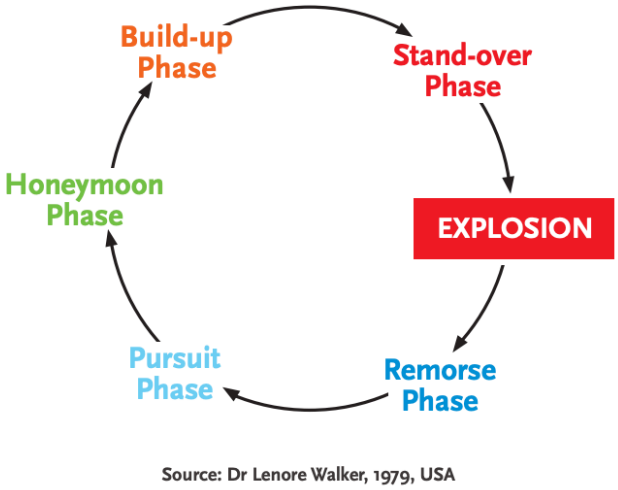

Figure 2: The Cycle of Violence (Brisbane Domestic Violence Service n.d.)

Throughout the text, the Cycle of Violence is shown multiple times in Celeste's marriage, both in direct dramatisation and in flashbacks, building to the final events in which the reader fears the next cycle will be fatal for Celeste. In counselling, we see Celeste work through denial, minimisation, and justification of her husband's repeated abuse and coercive control. The no-nonsense counsellor functions to confront readers with knowledge of the critical risk Celeste faces:

> 'He will hit you again,' said Susi.
>
> That detached professionalism again. No pity. No judgment. It wasn't a question. She was stating a fact to move the conversation forward.
>
> 'Yes,' said Celeste. 'It will happen again. He'll hit me. I'll hit him.'…
>
> 'So what I'd like to talk about is coming up with a plan,' said Susi. She flipped over a page on her clipboard.
>
> 'A plan,' said Celeste.

> 'A plan,' said Susi. 'A plan for next time.' (214-215)

Celeste's husband's discovery of her escape plan is what triggers his uxoricidal (wife killer) impulse, driving up the stakes of the climax and bringing us on a narrative journey from denial to acceptance, and then, climactically, to a call for action regarding the manifold consequences of domestic violence. Celeste's narrative aligns with Stark's observation of coercive control that '[n]owhere is the struggle between agency and victimisation more apparent than the process by which women forge safety zones … or escape strategies' (2009: 308). With her privileged levels of education and wealth, Celeste's character development interrogates concerns with the discourse of 'domestic conflict', where the socio-economic gains of women are used to shift agency, and therefore responsibility, to victims of domestic violence. But Celeste's character development engages a feminist understanding of domestic violence, which holds that the mode by which men oppress and abuse women means that: 'Whatever choices they have made, victims cannot be blamed for the violence. Abusers and murderers must be held accountable for their crimes' (Heeren and Messing 2009: 213).

Another strategy in the text that makes visible the scale, repetition, and impact of gendered violence is the recurring motif of strangulation, the narrative significance of which can be read through the lens of Social Learning Theory. Confusingly, the relevant sub-theory here is also termed the 'Cycle of Violence', but in this case the cycle referred to is *intergenerational*. Social Learning Theory's intergenerational Cycle of Violence is useful in understanding perpetrator behaviour and in addressing the intergenerational transmission of violence, wherein children learn aggressive behaviour through experiencing domestic violence such that, as adults, they have a higher probability of imitating this aggression in their own personal relationships (Cochran et al. 2011: 796).

Reporting in 2015, the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 'was given evidence that showed that strangulation was a key predictor of domestic homicide ... the act of strangulation within a domestic and family violence situation is a predicator of escalation and increased risk to the victim' (2015: 15). In *Big Little Lies*, there are three separate story threads involving strangulation.

First, there is the inciting incident, wherein strangulation is directly reported. Renata's daughter, Amabella, is bullied by strangulation, and Jane's son, Ziggy, is blamed: '"It wasn't an accident for heaven's sake," snapped Renata. "Someone tried to choke her. I can see marks on her neck. I think she's going to have bruises"' (45). This incident leads to the solidification of other tensions (such as between career and at-home mums), which underpin the major reversals throughout the middle of the book: blended families are formed and strained, friendships are forged and tested, memories are recovered and secrets are revealed.

Second, we see an oblique reference to a series of strangulations of Celeste by Perry: 'Her bruises could always be kept secret with a turtleneck or sleeves or long pants' (143). Guided by generic requirements to plant clues and red herrings without giving the twist away, with this oblique reference Moriarty skilfully avoids painting too direct a link between Perry and strangulation. The author also provides misdirection through a dramatisation of Celeste defending herself in a way that marks *Perry's* neck:

> He slapped her across the face with the back of his hand … She regained her balance and flew at him with her hands like claws. He shoved her away from him with disgust … There was a long, thin red scratch down the side of his neck where Celeste must have scratched him. (164-165)

Third, strangulation is dramatised with disturbing efficacy when a character we know as Saxon Banks twice assaults Jane, choking her in forced erotic asphyxiation:

> 'Ever tried this?'
>
> She could feel the hard clamp of his hands.
>
> 'It's fun. You'll like it. It's a rush. Like cocaine.'
>
> 'No,' she said. She grabbed at his hands to try to stop him. She could never bear the thought of not being able to breathe. She didn't even like swimming under water.
>
> He squeezed. His eyes were on hers. He grinned, as if he were tickling, not choking her. (196)

Banks strangles Jane again, urging her not to 'be so uptight', until '[s]he could hear herself making disgusting, shameful gagging sounds. She thought she would vomit. Her body was covered in cold sweat' (196-197). Note how closely we are in Jane's viewpoint here, feeling her distress: in contrast to masculinist tropes of crime fiction (as summarised in Miller's definition of the 'active turn', outlined in the section above), in Moriarty's dramatisation there is no titillated gaze masking the terrible impact of these assaults.

When we consider Social Learning Theory's identification of strangulation as a common precursor to domestic homicide, we can read these examples of the use of strangulation as a signal that homicide has a high likelihood of occurring at a point in the narrative after these events. The author uses these as systematically placed clues and red herrings to raise suspicion in the reader.

In the scenes leading to the climax, there are two major reveals relating to the strangulation motif: first, it is revealed that Perry and Celeste's son, not Jane's son, is the bully who strangled Amabella at school: '"My son Max was the one who was hurting Amabella," said Celeste' (422).

Then, it is revealed that Perry, going by the name of his cousin, strangled and sexually assaulted Jane (which resulted in her pregnancy with her son, Ziggy):

> She cleared her throat and spoke again. 'I think we've already met.'
>
> Perry glanced at her. 'Really? Are you sure?' He inclined his head charmingly. 'I'm sorry. I don't recall.'
>
> 'I'm sure,' said Jane. 'Except you said your name was Saxon Banks.' (425)

Social Learning Theory's intergenerational Cycle of Violence is visible at the climax when it is revealed that Bonnie, who kills Perry when she sees him slap Celeste, is the adult child of a violent father:

> 'That's why your son has been hurting little girls,' said Bonnie …
>
> Perry exhaled … 'My children haven't seen anything.'

> 'Your children see!' screamed Bonnie. 'We see. We fucking *see*!' (432)

The reading lenses employed here reveal how Moriarty structures the plotline around the cycles of violence in Celeste's marriage, while using the strangulation motif to represent the intergenerational Cycle of Violence by drawing direct links between instances of schoolyard bullying, acquaintance rape, and domestic violence. By snapping two theories of violence – the Cycle of Violence and the intergenerational Cycle of Violence – into one unified flashpoint at the climax, Moriarty has imaginatively articulated a narrative that aligns with the public discourse of domestic violence as expressed through feminist criminology. The looming murder of Celeste (due to the escalating Cycle of Violence) is averted by Bonnie killing Perry (as a consequence of the intergenerational Cycle of Violence). We see how Moriarty crafts a narrative that explores the complexity of feminist gains regarding gendered violence, and their subsequent backlashes, to deliver a thrilling, subversive novel; one that, as evidenced by strong sales, reveals a storyline that many readers want to engage with.

Approaches to craft

This analysis links feminist criminological theory addressing gendered violence to representations of victims, perpetrators, crimes, and criminal justice in contemporary crime literature, specifically domestic noir. From this, I extrapolate a series of options for my work in progress, *Girl Crazy* (2019), a novella experimenting with techniques in the female Gothic tradition, in which the linear narrative is disrupted by an unreliable narrator's traumatic memories and impressions. *Girl Crazy* both references and subverts representations of girls and women in domestic noir, drawing on antecedent texts that centralise girls' and women's lived experiences of violence (as perpetrators and victims) to generate drama and interest through exploring female agency in tension with victimisation. In particular, *Girl Crazy* seeks to include significant representations of girlhood: while many domestic noir titles include the word 'girl', the female protagonist is typically a married woman (Mandel 2016). Additionally, *Girl Crazy* seeks to investigate patterns in domestic noir narratives that shift from situating violence solely within personal motives through to linking an understanding of gender and violence linked to intersectional structural dynamics (Cranny-Francis 1990: 175).

In writing this novella, I researched primary sources (including police records and media reports) and secondary sources (including criminological studies across a range of topics such as property crimes, adolescent arson, child abduction, and domestic homicide). The accompanying critical essay from which this article is drawn conducts textual analyses to observe any alignment of feminist criminology with generic themes, tropes, variations, and subversions, arguing that domestic noir literature dramatises ways in which women and girls seek safety by committing criminal acts ranging from fraud to murder (Vann, 2019).

The creative and critical research for this project was conducted simultaneously and iteratively in the Converging Strange Loops Research method:

> Strange Loops use a system to move from one place to another to arrive in a similar but not identical place. With [Converging Strange Loops Research] the researcher

> starts with an area or a broad idea and through a spiraling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves towards a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative works. (Boyd 2010: 136)

In a dialectical process, issues raised in producing a first draft of the creative work were addressed in critical research, which then informed further drafts of the novella, which informed research directions for the critical essay, and so on. The term 'Strange Loops', meaning 'a meme, a unit of culture' (Boyd 2010: 6), has Gothic resonances of the uncanny that work particularly well for my novella. Since its conception, my creative project has sought to devise a girl and a woman character in a parallel narrative to explore instability of identity due to gendered pathways of trauma leading to criminal acts of self-protection. My early research into theories addressing juvenile female criminality supported my ideas for the first draft of *Girl Crazy*: I focus on a young girl, Tricky Teale, surviving sexual abuse and finding agency in firesetting, juxtaposed with the haunted woman, Allicia, losing her grip on reality as she is plagued by fragments of recovered traumatic memories. Criminological theory outlining the three development stages of fire-lighting behavior – fire interest, fire starting, and firesetting (Merrick, Howell Bowling, and Omar 2013: 1) – underpins Tricky's character.

However, in practice, the characterisation of Allicia as driven solely by traumatic memories was insufficient to carry the story: while Tricky was a strong and complex character, Allicia lacked depth and agency. I sought to craft greater moral complexity in her character: 'In the domestic noir she is an individual, in her own space, whether that be her commute, her gym, her home or some other setting; it is the place of her choosing, and she plays a crucial role in shaping and directing the narrative' (Miller 2018: 90). Upon completion of the first draft, I investigated criminological research that pointed to girlhood sexual abuse as a precursor or indicator of experiencing domestic violence as an adult: '[C]hildren's psychobiological development and adult function can be profoundly impacted by sexual assault … Child sexual abuse survivors appear to be particularly vulnerable to revictimization experiences' (Bloom 2003: 2). This led me to pinpoint domestic violence as a central theme in domestic noir and gave me ideas for the development of Allicia's character.

In my survey reading of fifty-four creative works, I found that a further feature of many domestic noir texts is the absence of direct dramatisation of domestic violence – instead, it is generally implied, or reported by an unreliable narrator: a woman protagonist, often affected by traumatic past issues, stuck in an unsatisfying relationship that diminishes her choices. I sought out contemporary crime fiction by women that referenced yet worked against this trope: Moriarty explicitly dramatises and/or reports domestic violence as a narrative driver. As a result, my second draft placed Allicia with a coercively controlling partner, which allowed both a deeper dramatisation of women's experience of trauma and a more complex set of circumstances to create the doubt and misdirection that domestic noir is known for. In representing Allicia's recovered memories as triggered by the escalating control tactics and suspected criminality of her partner, Ethan, I could imbue her character with agency as she seeks out the truth of both her past and her present. Through subsequent drafts, I strengthened these themes to drive the plot twists deriving from what Stark calls 'gaslight games': in domestic

noir, the woman protagonist, though unreliable and limited, is cast as powerful in the face of victimisation (2009: 456).

To further develop the link between girlhood trauma and women's victimisation, I rewrote the climax, in which Allicia is the viewpoint character, to include brief interludes in Tricky's viewpoint. This alternating and then melding of two female viewpoints was inspired by Joyce Carol Oates's *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), the first novel I read for this research project. Oates's mastery of moving from first-person singular to first-person plural narration to vocalise the shared experiences of intense girlhood friendships stayed with me throughout this project. In a 'strange loop' effect, this lands *Girl Crazy* in the niche I was originally aiming for: voicing girlhood trauma through to adulthood, using and subverting domestic noir tropes to effectively dramatise female experiences of surviving gendered violence, including the commission of self-protective criminal acts.

Conclusion

The textual analysis of *Big Little Lies* demonstrates ways in which domestic noir is forging an imaginative pathway that cathartically articulates and explores women's lived experiences of domestic violence as a function of hegemonic masculinist ideologies. As Humphries observes, 'In carrying out the practices associated with masculinity, men reap the benefits of authority, whereas the practices that define femininity press to marginalise women' (2009: 3). This observation aligns with the dominant motif of domestic noir literature: voicing gendered trauma via the female Gothic and other narrative strategies functioning to weave together complex fragments of women's experiences of traumatic abuse into compelling narratives. The dynamic association between domestic noir and feminist criminology is apparent in the way the text's narrative choices regarding the menace of intimacy align with various criminological theories and research findings. My creative work, *Girl Crazy*, experiments with generic features and subversions of domestic noir to find that, within a feminist literary lineage and aligned with criminological developments, domestic noir represents a powerful approach to dramatising gendered violence.

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