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## Justine Ettler and Rebecca Johinke

# *A new audience for Justine Ettler's* The River Ophelia*: In conversation with the author*

*Abstract*
*This article, in the form of a conversation between novelist Justine Ettler and literary and cultural studies scholar Rebecca Johinke, looks back at the reception of the Australian novel* The River Ophelia *in 1995. It also looks forward to speculate how audiences may read the novel in 2018 and beyond, given that in October 2017 it was re-released in e-book format with a new Author's Note and Introduction (Ettler 2017a).* The River Ophelia *was a publishing sensation in Australia in the mid-90s as it describes sadistic and masochistic sex and domestic violence. Due to early reviews and the way it was marketed, it was labelled as 'dirty realism' or 'grunge'. In this article, the authors argue for a re-appraisal of the text as a feminist parody and as a highly intertextual postmodern work. In and through their conversation, Johinke and Ettler reveal the extent to which genre confusion, and the question of what is and isn't 'real' dominated the reception of the text at the time of its initial release, and how the intentional fallacy in cases where an author is conflated with a character can be adopted unselfconsciously, and indeed manipulated by, publishers and critics in the marketplace. In light of recent feminist activism around domestic violence and sexual abuse, such as the #MeToo campaign, the authors also discuss the depiction of domestic violence in* The River Ophelia*, and how certain representations of sex and female desire might play out in representations of abusive relationships. The question of what is and is not erotic, pornographic, or romantic literature is also discussed, both in relation to* The River Ophelia*, and in relation to several other controversial texts that have been published since its first release.*
*Keywords:* The River Ophelia*, postmodernism, grunge literature*

## Introductory remarks (Rebecca Johinke)

In 1995, a year where the 'Ozlit' scene was already buzzing with lively debate about books like Helen Demidenko/Darville's *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (1994) (Geason 1995) and Helen Garner's *The First Stone* (1995) (Wark 1995), a 29-year old postgraduate student named Justine Ettler published *The River Ophelia* (1995), and it too became 'news' – as did Ettler herself. *The River Ophelia* (hereafter *TRO*) was labelled variously as 'erotic', 'pornographic', 'shocking', and 'abject' and became a publishing sensation. Ettler was interviewed for newspapers, magazines, radio and television, and, within months, the novel sold an astonishing 50,000 copies and became a literary and popular culture phenomenon (Paviour 1995). Prominent critics like Murray Waldren (1999), Don Anderson (1995), and Rosemary Sorensen (1995) all reviewed the book in colourful terms. Those reviews were quoted and, then requoted, thereby generating even more press. The novel was read as social

realism and labelled 'grunge' or 'dirty realism'. Ettler was crowned 'The Empress of Grunge' (Anderson 1995) and was saddled with being 'the voice of a generation' (Dawson 1997) and with leading the grunge 'movement' (Anderson 1995). Images of the black-and-white cover of *TRO* with a photo of a naked young blonde woman adorned bookshop windows and appeared in inner-city Sydney and Melbourne on walls, hoardings and posts. Ettler and the book were extremely visible on the streets and in the media.

What was usually missed in the maelstrom was that the heavily intertextual novel began as a direct response to Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) in the way that many feminist texts in the 1980s and 90s were feminist 're-visionings' of previous writing (Hutcheon 2000). As Linda Hutcheon observes, 'parody is intensely context-and discourse dependent [and it has] cast deep suspicion on the concept of intentionality' (xiv). *TRO* is also both an homage and an interrogation of the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* (1791) (De Sade 1964) and *Juliette* (1797-1801) (De Sade 1968), William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602) (1982), Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), and other texts. Indeed, the novel is divided into five sections labelled 'Sade', 'Ophelia', 'Hamlet', 'Juliette', and 'Justine'. *The River Ophelia* was intended as a postmodern parody of Ellis's novel – but from an Australian feminist female perspective – and the novel was abject in the extreme with scatological images of bleeding, leaking, vomiting and defecating bodies. The novel interrogates female desire and the characters' dark and abusive relationships, and features excruciating sex scenes and references to binge drinking and drug taking. It is both funny and extremely confronting. It is not a romance.

Justine Ettler's protagonist is named 'Justine' and readers and critics appeared unable or unwilling to separate the author from the protagonist and, in commercial terms, this helped sell the novel. The fact that Ettler was young, blonde and attractive, and lived an inner-city 'glamorous' student lifestyle in Sydney proved irresistible for the media. The attention, at first, was flattering. In an interview with *Who Weekly*, the young Ettler muses, '"It wouldn't bother me if people did read the book as autobiography. However, that's not how I intended it. The reason the character is called Justine has a lot to do with books like those of the Marquis de Sade"'. On the other hand, she muses, '"Perhaps I *want* the reader to think, 'Is it all true?'"' (cited in Paviour 1995: 54). While she had initially refused to discuss her private life when questioned by journalists, here Ettler let down her guard when talking with Andiee Paviour from *Who Weekly* in July 1995. She was more cautious in subsequent interviews as it was becoming clear that the media were far more interested in her personal life than in the postmodern playfulness of her text. Ettler's first novel (which was published after *TRO*) *Marilyn's Almost Terminal Adventure* (1996), also featured a protagonist named after a famous woman, here the movie star Marilyn Monroe, and it sold well in Australia and Germany ensuring that Ettler remained in the spotlight. It didn't take many months for Ettler to tire of the attention and she became increasingly wary of being conflated with her protagonist. Already armed with a BA and a MA and part way through a PhD looking at the work of American writers known as the 'Brat Pack', Ettler was fully aware of the intentional fallacy and the fact that an author's intention or way that they think the work *should* be read becomes irrelevant once a piece of work is out in the public domain. Regardless, the controversy became intrusive and wearisome, so Ettler hired a London lawyer to sever her two-book contract with Picador Australia and moved overseas.

Ettler then spent several years living in London, writing and reviewing for major newspapers like *The Observer, The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Evening Standard.* Upon her return to Australia, Ettler continued reviewing, but for Australian newspapers such as *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning*

*Herald.* She started another PhD, this time in the Department of English at the University of Sydney under my supervision, where she narrowed her focus to the popular and critical reception of Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*. In 2013 she was awarded a PhD in literature for that project. Her thesis identifies the major shifts in criticism about the novel and discusses them in relation to the novel's problematic sexualisation of misogynistic violence. In her doctoral work on *American Psycho*, Ettler certainly acknowledges the merits of Ellis's novel and his work in general but she challenges the usual claims that the novel is a satire. Ellis, like Ettler, has been conflated with his protagonists and, like Justine, Patrick Bateman is a notoriously unreliable narrator and so comparisons between the two texts and their authors seem particularly relevant.

More than twenty years after that time in the spotlight, Ettler has re-released *The River Ophelia* in e-book format. The re-release of *TRO* includes an Author's Note (Ettler 2017b) where Ettler reflects about the controversy surrounding the novel. It also includes my Introduction (Johinke 2017) where I provide a close reading of influential reviews that influenced how the novel has been read and categorised. I refer readers to the e-book for that material on the reviews by Waldren, Anderson, Sorensen, Wark and others. In this interview, conducted via a number of email exchanges and face-to-face conversations in late 2017 and early 2018, we look back at the literary scene in the mid-90s and, amongst other topics, we reflect about *TRO*'s relevance in 2018 in the #MeToo environment and how new readers of the book may react to the themes of domestic violence, abusive and unequal power relationships, parody, and intertextuality.

## The conversation

**RJ:** Let's start with your observation in your 'Author's Note' (included in the re-release of *TRO)*, where you write that reading the novel now you are struck by how 'angry' and 'sad' it is (Ettler 2017b). Could you say a little more about that? It strikes me that perhaps the 'angry feminist' trope may have been employed by some of the reviewers who took exception to the novel? Do you think the anger and the violence were too confronting for more conservative readers?

**JE:** To answer this question I need to backtrack. As mentioned above, *The River Ophelia* is my second novel but my publishers, buying both my first and second novels at the same time, insisted on publishing it first. I had no control over this. In *Marilyn*, I employed a number of postmodern techniques, in particular that of naming my protagonists after famous women, in this case, the Hollywood star, Marilyn Monroe. My intention was for readers to become involved in a guessing game: is she named after Marilyn Monroe? Why? Is she supposed to have sex appeal, or to die tragically? In this way, the reader was participating in writing the novel, something I had learned about as a university student. By publishing *Ophelia* first, my publishers ensured that the reader did not have this information. They had no idea that I always named my characters after famous women. My new novel *Bohemia Beach* (2018) has a protagonist named after Cathy of *Wuthering Heights* fame (Brontë 1847). Readers coming to *Ophelia* without *Marilyn* assumed that I'd named the character Justine because she was based on me.

The reality is far less dramatic. *The River Ophelia* began in part as a conversation, a kind of dialogue piece, with Bret Easton Ellis after reading his novel *American Psycho* in 1991. Yes, Bret, I said to myself, that's all very

funny, but what about the women that Patrick (the protagonist) has sex with and then attacks and often kills? Who are they, and why do the ones who survive keep going back to the violent misogynistic perpetrators, the sadistic, sex addicted men? I was, upon reflection, more interested in these characters than in Patrick Bateman. I didn't understand what kept them stuck and wanted to find out. Aspects of Justine and her friends and the novel's plot emerged from this dialogue. It led to research into the origins of sadism and masochism in literature, among other things.

Telling the story of a woman who can't leave her abuser meant writing a profoundly sad and angry novel. In hindsight, I suspect Justine's story was very confronting for some people and it was easier to focus on the grunge label and later on the sex scenes than on the less visible issue of domestic violence. At a general level, I think society struggles to accept and therefore address the plight of women like Justine; there is a lot of denial. But failing to address the subject effectively silences these poor women. Worse still is the way society has a tendency to shoot the messenger shaming anyone who speaks out about such issues or who confronts people with unpalatable truths. So I suspect the object of some reviewers, consciously or not, was to shame me into silence. Focusing on the sex scenes, conflating me with my character and ignoring the violence that takes place in the novel – the assault and the murder – were all ways of avoiding the anger and the feminism inherent in the text. Some reviewers undoubtedly took exception to the novel because of its angry stance. I was particularly annoyed by those who, I suspect, deliberately read the sex scenes as pornography without the parody. The reality is that a lot of abusers are also addicts of some kind so the sex addiction is to me an integral part of the abusive relationship depicted in the novel. I remember one academic describing the novel as "pornography" in front of a group of academic peers. I was furious.

**RJ:** That anger and the sadness certainly underscores *TRO*. I must say I found the descriptions of Justine endlessly waiting for the phone to ring and of almost stalking Sade very depressing (and it made me very grateful for the invention of mobile phones). The unequal power relationships in the novel are very disturbing. I hope readers in 2018 will be more alert to the abuse and to the gender politics in the novel.

You call the novel a 'postmodern novel about domestic violence' (Ettler 2017b: xi) and it is encouraging to see that Jay Daniel Thompson's recent review of the book in *Overland* has picked up on the domestic violence theme (Thompson 2018). How do you think conversations and representations of domestic violence in Australia have shifted (or stayed the same) since the novel was published in 1995?

**JE:** Describing *TRO* in this way hints at the riddle at the heart of the text. While I resisted describing the novel in such terms in 1995, the world has moved on around this issue.

It's great that Rosie Batty was named Australian of the year in 2016 and that her campaign about domestic violence has been so visible. There's more acceptance about this issue as a result. On the other hand, a lot of her focus is on the children in such cases – not that I have a problem with that, it's just that I'm still worried about the women and girlfriends. I worry most people will just think that any woman in a relationship with an abuser and who doesn't leave has her own problems and therefore it is her fault if she sticks around to be repeatedly abused: women aren't as financially dependent as they used to be so obviously, you just leave. But I find this attitude a bit callous. It neglects the whole Stockholm syndrome aspect that can happen when a woman falls in love

with a man and only later discovers that he's an abuser. She may have low self-esteem – I think a lot of women in our society probably do – and she may have a whole history of abuse and trauma from childhood and other abusive partners. But even if she doesn't, even if she has a fairly sturdy sense of self and comes from a functional family, the trauma bond that results from the abuse can cause a misplaced loyalty to the abuser that makes it difficult to leave and, in some cases, impossible to leave without treatment. I feel protective of these women and I want to help them. They seem injured and vulnerable to me. And what if, as is often the case, they have kids to the abuser? Protecting and helping the women is often inseparable from protecting their children.

Justine is in denial about the abuse in her relationship and it's only the careful reader who pays attention to certain clues who will understand the novel in the way I intended it. It seemed logical to me that a character as complex as Justine would work well if she was also an unreliable narrator.

In terms of the representation of domestic violence in texts, a couple of things I saw recently come to mind. Films like *Atomic Blonde* (Leitch 2017) suggest women are equal physically to men, but clearly this is just a fiction. The first time I noticed what has become a kind of genre was back in 1996 with Geena Davis in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Harlin 1996).This kind of text creates a sense of physical equality that, while desirable, can be as insidious as it is delusional. If women are physically equal then they are less victimised by men which while it may empower women, and, don't get me wrong, I think empowerment is the way to go, it also lets perpetrators off the hook: a man physically abusing a woman is not much different from two guys having a punch up.

This illusion of physical equality is related to a misconception about physical and sexual abuse. For example, if a woman slaps a man's face in an argument a lot of people today would say that if the man then punches her back and knocks her to the ground that the woman started the fight and so is an equal perpetrator of physical abuse.

But I'm not so sure if women are physical abusers of men as often as people claim. For something to be truly physically abusive there must be an element of fear, even of terror: is the man who has been slapped really in fear or terror of what the woman might physically do to him next? I think not, unless she has a gun. I personally think women tend to be more capable of physical or sexual abuse towards children than towards men because with most men there is an absence of terror due to the physical discrepancy.

In the recent BBC drama, *Last Tango in Halifax* (Wainwright 2012- ), the character Gillian (played by Nicola Walker) has a child to an abuser with whom she had been trapped in marriage and whose father she claims to have murdered. Again, statistically, this kind of thing doesn't happen much in real life though when it does the media tends to hone in on the freak. What I find interesting is that we now represent women as being capable of murdering their abusive husbands even though the reality is that most women may want to murder them but stop at the revenge fantasy. I can't help but wondering, too, how does Gillian manage to kill him when all that time she couldn't leave him, or defend herself from his repeated attacks?

Perhaps the most significant recent event though in terms of societal denial about the abuse of women is the November 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. To me this is much more a 'no' vote to the idea of a female president than a 'yes' vote to him. Sadly, it seems

contemporary Americans would prefer to have a misogynistic real life 'American psycho' – remembering of course that Donald Trump was Patrick Bateman's idol in Ellis's *American Psycho* – running the country than a woman. As the most powerful man in the world his election represents a victory for misogyny that I fear may be difficult to reverse.

**RJ:** Yes, a case of truth being stranger than fiction, perhaps? There's so much we could say about Trump but back to the book… Like Patrick Bateman, Justine is an unreliable narrator and there are many unanswered questions in the novel. Can you talk a little about *TRO*'s experimental postmodernity? In many ways, the novel is about trust and the quest for truth and certainty. I mean this in relation to the characters and how they interact but also the reader's relationship with Justine and with you as author.

**JE:** I'm reminded of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) (Dostoevsky 1955), a modernist novel about murder wherein the novel's modernist techniques leave questions about the story unanswered and unanswerable. *TRO* similarly doesn't take a moral position about the events it depicts and leaves this as something that must be worked out by readers. Also, there are unanswerable questions about *TRO*'s plot. To see the violence and work out what's really happening – to resolve the novel's postmodern ambiguity – the reader has to join the dots. The novel doesn't show who assaults Justine, the reader has to work it out; to decide is it or isn't it Sade? The newspaper report and various clues about a serial offender could all actually be read as part of Justine's denial. If it's not Sade, she doesn't have to leave him or go through the pain that will involve. None of this is explained in the novel but it is implied. The reader can't trust what Justine appears to be thinking/doing, she must look at the clues.

Anybody who's known the girlfriend of an abuser knows they lie to themselves about what's happening; they're in denial. But when Justine's beaten up and left unconscious, she's finally forced to confront her reality. Later, in the scene in the nightclub when she and Sade openly erupt into violence, Justine appears to be an equal perpetrator. However, while she does hit Sade, Justine is not an equal perpetrator because she doesn't inflict terror.

So, while it's true that there are a number of ways of reading the novel and the reader has to make up their own mind, I intended for domestic violence to be the deeply buried truth of the novel and for Justine to be a postmodern heroine. As an unreliable narrator, Justine's account can't be trusted because she's too busy lying to herself so she doesn't have to leave, and yet on another level she knows she has to leave Sade, and in the end, she does. Justine is quite a survivor.

I think another important difference today is that representations have to be very clear to make their point. Back in the 90s one could be more ambiguous as there were prominent feminists debating these issues in the media, whereas recent media (pre-#MeToo) have tended to behave as if feminism was a moot point.

**RJ:** Much like the American 'Brat Pack' novels, most of the so-called 'grunge' books feature frank depictions of sex, drinking and drug-taking, and *TRO* is clearly carnivalesque: it's funny and it's about sex, power and relationships. However, people have been writing about Bacchanalian revelry for hundreds of years and scholars have been critiquing humorous texts and parody for almost as long. Clearly this is one of your main points in writing the novel, but the reaction to the book was very conservative and seems to ignore that literary tradition.

Instead, a lot of discussion occurred about the difference between 'erotic fiction' and 'pornography'. At the time publisher Nikki Christer said that she thought you were 'establishing a new genre for women. It's "Where do you draw the line between erotica and pornography?"' (in Paviour 1995: 54). The difference seems clear to me and I would not label *American Psycho* as erotic or even pornographic either – it's an interrogation of masculinity, capitalism, power and violence. However, I'm interested in hearing what readers (rather than critics) had to say about *TRO* and whether they found the writing erotic, pornographic, or something else?

**JE:** To me the whole question of Justine's sexuality isn't the central issue. Her sexual behaviour is a symptom masking what's really going on at a deeper level, which is to do with power. If there is an issue in the novel to do with sex it's about sex addiction – which, incidentally, is on the rise due to the digital revolution, so *TRO* is more relevant than ever as more women are placed in the unhappy situation faced by Justine as the girlfriend of a sex addict. The whole nude cover thing irritated me from the start. It's misleading. I had no control over the cover.

**RJ:** Yes, the way the book was aggressively marketed, and the cover photograph by Craig Morey and the cover design by Mary Callahan were much talked about and several articles published at the time commented on the cover (Dale 1997; Turner 1998). There was certainly a trend at the time to feature naked women on the cover of Australian literary novels, which led to some of them being termed 'erotic literature'. As Thompson notes in his recent *Overland* piece, the fact that the original cover also included the tagline 'an uncompromising love story' speaks to the way the novel was originally marketed whereas the new version corrects that misinterpretation and is marketed as 'a dark anti-romance' (Thompson 2018).

**JE:** The original cover actually won an award, though I prefer the new one.

The main readers who found the novel erotic or pornographic were men. Some women read the sex scenes in the novel as empowering, as a kind of prototype of *Sex and the City* (Star 1998-2002) which, incidentally, *TRO* predated by three years. Justine's sexual behaviour is based on the premise that if she can do what a lot of men do and have casual sex, then that makes her equal, though in her case it doesn't work. Most women, however, read it as a send-up of male-oriented pornography. I don't know any women who found the novel erotic or read it as eroticism. Although, I do remember teaching a class on narrative writing and catching guys in the back row passing around a dog-eared copy of *TRO* with the 'sex scenes' marked with yellow post-it notes.

**RJ:** That must have been a disturbing (or perhaps just irritating) classroom incident. It certainly doesn't read like erotic fiction or a romance to me! Have you read or seen EL James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) or any of the follow ups or films? The phenomenal success of the book(s) surprised most critics and many feminist critics have said that the book eroticises domestic violence. Do you have any thoughts?

**JE:** Comparisons of *TRO* to erotic or pornographic novels like EL James' *50 Shades of Grey* (2011), and Nikki Gemmell's *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003) miss a significant part of what my novel is about. *TRO* is not a novel about women exploring their sexuality, or not primarily, anyway. Justine has sexual adventures/misadventures because it's the only way she can cope with loving a sex addict abuser like Sade; so, as a feminist, she sleeps around to even the score.

**RJ:** Yes, but I think the way Gemmell was conflated with her protagonist bears some similarity with the way you were depicted in the media as you were both young, attractive, and writing about sex (Cain 2004). But what about the supposed eroticisation of Anastasia Steele's subservient relationship to Christian Grey, which some have described as domestic violence in *50 Shades of Grey*?

**JE:** Is there a physical assault in the novel – a sense of terror?

**RJ:** Not exactly. Christian 'accidentally' hurts Anastasia in the first book as part of a BDSM (bondage, discipline, sado-masochism) role-play but the whole power dynamic has him financially and physically in control. However, their relationship is represented as a 'romance' where I do not think anyone would characterise *TRO* as a romance. Although, having said that I've already noted that the original cover featured the line 'an uncompromising love story'…

**JE:** I've only seen the follow up film (*Fifty Shades Darker* [Foley 2017]). I never seem to get around to reading the novels. I probably shouldn't say this but I looked away during the sex scenes. While I think I was curious about pornography when I was younger, these days I feel a bit sickened by porn, especially any suggestion of role play that puts women in a subservient role. Not having read the books I feel I can't really comment but I guess the concern is that the glamour of the novels and films could normalise domestic violence by eroticising it? I found the stalker scenes and the partner rape scenes disturbing and do worry that, the film certainly, presents Grey's abusive behaviours as sexy. I think it's important that young women are reminded of the reality in such cases: men who behave like Grey aren't tamed by love, as the film suggests, on the contrary, that sort of abuse tends to escalate over time.

If the novels do eroticise domestic violence, then that is a problem and it wouldn't surprise me because I think our society does that in general. If we define domestic violence as something that involves an aspect of terror or a real inequality, physically, or otherwise, then the financial inequality alone in *50 Shades* would make it a contender as a portrayal of an abusive relationship.

**RJ:** Grunge was a derogatory term applied by Baby Boomer critics to Generation X writers and so I understand why most writers whose work was originally defined as 'grunge' objected to that categorisation given that it implied that they were writing autobiographical social realism (which is often assumed for first novels). Later in the 90s, Ian Syson and Paul Dawson and others (Syson 1996; Dawson 1997; Bennett 1995) wrote about the 'grunge' label and most argue that it was primarily a marketing ploy devised to sell books to younger readers. Joan Kirby, however, thinks the term does have some utility although she understands writers' reticence about such a badge given that it was usually meant to be pejorative (1998). This clash of generations (whether real or manufactured) and subsequent (and predictable) musings about the Sydney-Melbourne 'divide' sold newspapers and magazines and – of course – books. Dawson goes on to say that this kind of simplistic reductionism says more about the critics than it does about the writers (1997: 125).

All these years later, it is interesting to look back at the group of novels read as 'autobiographical social commentary' (Dawson 1997: 119) and then described as 'shocking', 'cynical', 'nihilistic' and 'facile' and the careers of the writers – reluctantly – put in that grunge category. How would you describe novels like *Eat Me* (Jaivin 1995), *Loaded* (Tsiolkas 1995), *Praise* (McGahan 1992), *The Lives of Saints* (Berridge 1995) and subsequent work published by those authors? Most have now had long distinguished careers as writers and cultural commentators and they have produced work on a vast number of topics from

Chinese history and politics to the rights of refugees. It's not all sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.

**JE:** While I enjoyed being successful, I always felt *TRO* was incorrectly marketed, with an eye to short term gain at the expense of nurturing me as a writer. In the process, certain facts were omitted which prevented readers from making informed choices about the text. For example, the fact that I was working in an experimental postmodern way, not a realist way, that the novel was intended as a parody and that I was a feminist. These were all crucial bits of information that I passed on to journalists during the initial interviews but which always seemed to end up on the cutting room floor. The initial piece about dirty realism in *The Australian* came about because it was the only way we could get the cover of the book on the cover of the magazine, given I didn't want to talk about my private life in the interview. The main difference between *TRO* and the other novels listed above are that my novel isn't realist, and the other novels are. I don't think any of the other writers were postmodern in anything other than the historical sense. Another way my novel differs is the poverty represented has nothing to do with realism: my character Justine is poor as a parody of Ellis's Patrick Bateman who was filthy rich. I parodied this aspect of his text in my adaptation of the victim's perspective because a lot of his victims are poor – like the prostitutes Christy and Sabina – and their poverty is the reason they keep going back to Bateman even though he is dangerous.

On the plus side, what was significant about the labels wasn't what they represented but the fact that young, media savvy, cynical and attractive writers were being published in greater quantities than ever before. The corporate publishing industry had discovered the lucrative debut writer market. In the US they had the Brat Pack, heirs to the glamorous Hemingway/Fitzgerald phenomenon and here we had dirty realism/grunge. I think this is what's important here, the emergence of young writers and the whole one-hit wonder thing. Then again, there's the controversial sex aspect to a lot of these novels. I don't mean to sound cynical but I'd hate for writing novels about sex to become a way for aspiring unpublished novelists to break in; a kind of attention seeking thing rewarded by cynical publishers and readers. In my case, there certainly wasn't anything conscious about using sex to get attention. I was aware that aspects of the novel were outrageous, but the angry young writer in me saw them as necessary. Male writers like Ellis were writing about sex in ways I felt were completely unacceptable so *TRO* was an attempt to reframe what was going on from a woman's perspective. Also for me, because my first novel had been rejected, writing *TRO* came with a real sense of freedom – this is never going to get published, was a kind of personal mantra back then – so I thought I could just do what I liked.

In terms of these specific books I think Jaivin's *Eat Me* (1995) is the least like a grunge novel partly because she belongs to a different generation from the other writers being ten years older. I think Jaivin's novel has more to do with a Baby Boomer mind-set than it has to do with the Generation X of the other so-called grunge writers. I think the other novels all have generational similarities to do with the breakdown of the nuclear family and the ubiquity of divorce, the enormous impact of the mass media and the culture of consumerism on identity, and the creation of and corporatisation of rebellious youth culture – though I think there are important differences. For example, *Loaded* spoke to a young generation of homosexual men about the casual sex that typified the gay lifestyle in those days. I can't comment on Tsiolkas' later books as I haven't read much after *Dead Europe* (2005). MacGahan's *Praise* is the most like grunge, though again, I haven't read much of his recent work so I can't comment.

**RJ:** Given there was so much publicity about Helen Garner's *The First Stone* at the time, it's interesting that critics didn't make more of *TRO*'s revelations about sexual harassment and discrimination in the academy – especially given you were a student at the time. Apart from one or two exceptions (Hammett: 1995), that seemed to get lost in the 'hysteria' about the scatological descriptions of sex. Interestingly, scholarship that has emerged in recent years acknowledges the links between Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977) and your novel as they are both landmark narratives set in urban locations and featuring young well-educated feminists experimenting with sexual relationships (Kirkby 1998; Dalziell 2007; Gelder & Salzman 2009). However, surprisingly, they still don't hone in on the link between the predatory behaviour of the male academics in *The First Stone* and *TRO.*

**JE:** Most of *TRO* got lost, I would say, in the hysteria about the abjection and the sex scenes as well as the false debate about grunge. For example, the thriller element got completely lost in the controversy – so I'm glad the Hammett review brought up the sexual harassment and discrimination in the academy. As someone who has experienced sexual harassment all I can say is I think the harassment of female students by men is common and the *First Stone* scenario is rare. Unfortunately, though, it seems our society's so misogynistic that it only takes a few exceptions to the norm and suddenly reality is all back to front: every female student is a potential wolf-crier and the structures rightfully put in place to protect vulnerable young women are being exploited by the vindictive few for the wrong reasons.

By defending a man accused of sexual harassment Garner's book could be read as supporting the patriarchy so it makes sense that this issue came to the fore with her book, whereas my novel was, by intention at least, supportive of victimised young women and therefore critical of patriarchy. So Garner and I, who belong to different generations, are also on opposites sides of the argument here. (It's been a long time since I read Garner's book so I hope I've got this right.) It is surprising that no one pointed this out, though it makes sense that the only person to write about *TRO*'s anger about discrimination and harassment in academia was a young female university student.

**RJ:** Documentary films like *The Hunting Ground* (Dick 2015) are helping to draw attention to the related topic of campus rape. That film has prompted some long overdue debates about safety on campuses and the drinking culture and so on, and Universities Australia *Respect. Now. Always.* campaign is doing important work. In February 2018, Nina Funnell and Anna Hush from the University of Sydney released *The Red Zone* report (Funnell & Hush 2018) which has reignited debate about sexual harassment and abuse, and binge-drinking and hazing rituals at residential colleges. Obviously, in light of the #MeToo movement, this should make *TRO* compelling reading for a new audience.

But, coming back to your role as the author, were you disappointed the intertextuality and the postmodern tropes and parody were glossed over? This is not to suggest that there is any one 'correct' way to read a novel. However, subsequent scholarship about *TRO* that I've been reading recently very clearly sees what you were doing, especially in terms of your engagement with Kristeva and abjection and your parody of Ellis, and they recognize the humour (Kirkby 1998; McCann 1998; Thompson 2012). How do you think a new generation of readers coming to the novel for the first time will react?

**JE:** I was incredibly frustrated by the autobiographical assumption and it was one of the reasons I took the novel out of print. No novelist should have to say this but given the scandal in the media let me say once and for all: I am not my

character. As with all characters, Justine and I share an affinity and some similarities, but no more than usual. I realise that in naming the protagonist Justine I was playing with fire once the novel attracted a mainstream readership, but my intention was to create distance between myself, the protagonist and the reader by inviting the reader to play a kind of guessing game. I was following a long tradition where writers such as Kafka named his protagonists K, and Kathy Acker named her protagonists Kathy.

Part of the problem has been the way the mainstream media have tended to resist the idea of experimental postmodern writing; anything that reeked of the academy. The predominant way of reading novels in this country is as realism where the novel is then filtered through the author's biography. I don't think much has changed – about journalism and postmodernism or about the reading public. Of course, the relationship between literature and the media has changed – with the fading out of traditional mass media and fading in of social and digital media – so the function of the media in relation to literature has changed. But I don't think the Australian readership at large is any more receptive to experimental postmodernity than it was then, though I'm happy to be surprised. Postmodernism is taught at high school now, so perhaps there's more awareness than I think? Then again, *TRO* was on HSC reading lists in the 90s so who knows? I'm actually very curious to see how new generations of readers will view the novel.

For me, as a young university educated writer in my 20s, postmodern theory potentially had quite radical objectives. I'd hate for that sense of zeitgeist to be lost through the passage of time even if the tropes are no longer in current usage. Part of presenting *TRO* in its historicity now is to highlight its postmodern tropes and what I was trying to do, which was to introduce these ideas to the mainstream and create experimental texts that would change the way we read and write and think. It sounds very aggrandising but I was in my 20s and I truly believed that writing could change the world. I hated realism and the Australian literary establishment at that time. I thought realism enforced the status quo in literary and political terms. Now I'm not so sure, I'm more sceptical about theory and more of a believer in practice. Given the dumbing down of today's public space I think feminism may need realism more than it used to.

**RJ:** I think there is a tendency to assume that women write autobiographical narratives and that postmodern experimentation might be the realm of male writers, and clearly that played into the way your novel was received. Of course, the whole 'dirty realism' label assumes and indeed capitalises on the assumption that you had all supposedly written novels about your own racy and risqué sex lives. In the *Who Magazine* interview you did back then you did discuss writing about your night-clubbing exploits in creative writing classes at UTS and your time touring with REM and I think that perhaps this helped fuel the fire that you were writing about yourself and your relationships in *TRO* (Paviour 1995). Obviously, there is a huge difference between writing about 'what you know' and writing autobiography and I think some critics elided the two.

**JE:** If I can just interject here. I had no control over what went in my PR and the publicity department insisted that REM went in there, hoping, I guess, that it might create some buzz, though Paviour was the only interviewer to ask me about them. (I find it interesting that my most damaging interview was written by a woman.) I dated the band's manager for three months. It was exciting to tour through Europe with a no.1 American band, to meet U2, to fly first class all over the world. But when I found out he had a girlfriend, I left. The autobiographical remarks are out of context: I was talking about my first novel,

*Marilyn* which was written as part of my BA in creative writing at UTS and part of which, in an early draft, was workshopped. First novels are often more autobiographical than others and mine was no exception. But to nip any confusion in the bud: *TRO* was never workshopped, the scenes that take place in the novel never happened that way in my real life. For example, Justine is beaten up and left unconscious in a laneway. Did that ever happen to me? No. The more interesting question, in my opinion, is *could* it have happened to me?

**RJ:** Thanks for clearing that up. You've written that many of the sex scenes were written as comedic 'piss-takes' and over the top parodies but the prominent critics who reviewed the book in 1995 failed to see the humour. And, your very funny descriptions of epic sex marathons and lines like 'Suddenly he lunged at me and speared me on the end of his tool' (Ettler 1995: 49) are clearly meant to be humorous rather than realistic life writing. It's only just occurred to me now but I've done some work on Valerie Salanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (1971) and it has always struck me that readers and critics have traditionally been at a loss for how to interpret a work that is both a scathing condemnation of patriarchy but also extremely scatological and terrifyingly funny. Readers are not sure whether it is a parody and they also have difficulty separating Salanas (and her own history of violence) with the contents of her book. And so we circle back to the whole 'angry feminist' trope and whether women (and feminists in particular) have a sense of humour. Do you think *TRO*'s humour will be more obvious to readers in 2018?

**JE:** The predominantly male high profile early reviewers may have missed the humour or even been offended by it – and one or two of the female reviewers too. All those "huge purple veined throbbing hard ons sticking straight out" that litter the novel. The confusion about these aspects of the novel is one of the reasons I'm including the Author's Note. I feel like I've been shamed because of what I wrote.

When I think of the single most important mainstream text to have potentially changed the way readers come to *TRO* since 1995 it's the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2002). Justine, my narrator is a bit like Carrie, the romantic heroine but crossed with Samantha, the female sex addict – I think she could easily be a character in the HBO series.

**RJ:** Yes, I can see what you mean, but for me I think younger readers of your book who come to it for the first time are more likely to draw comparisons with Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017) where the female lead Hannah is modelled on Carrie and she is also a budding writer. That series has famously changed viewer expectations of female sexuality, abusive relationships, and depictions of female nudity but please continue…

**JE:** I've only glanced at *Girls* but it's top of my viewing list.

I hope providing readers with a framework will help prevent *TRO* from being typecast again. *American Psycho* is one good recent example of a book that needed better framing, and I think *TRO* is one too. I believe if the PR or dust jackets of either of these novels had described them as postmodernist parodic – or feminist in *TRO*'s case – the novels would have been harder to misread and perhaps even less controversial.

I can't control what people think of the book and that's not my job or what I'm talking about here but I can do what I can to protect the work from being deliberately exploited. For example, to ensure that the sex scenes are not intentionally misconstrued as sassy pornography. With certain experimental novels it's important to try to ensure readers are not being deliberately misled;

isn't that just being a responsible author? This is why the manuscript itself is unchanged – I haven't touched it beyond a few typos. It was the omission of key information about the novel in the mass media at the time that bothered me, not the contents of the novel itself.

I think the history of scandalous controversial novels is also worth mentioning here. Novels like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Lawrence 1928) and *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert 1857) were controversial when first published but over time after years of scholarly reassessment they came to be appreciated as classics. Something along these lines seems to have happened with *American Psycho* and recent scholarship suggests *TRO* may be undergoing a similar process.

**Conclusion (Rebecca Johinke)**

As a postgraduate student myself at the time, I read and admired both *The River Ophelia* and *Marilyn's Almost Terminal Adventure* when they were initially released. I only met Ettler over a decade later when I became her supervisor in 2009. At that time, I made the decision not to re-read the novels or any of the media coverage and scholarship about the novels until she graduated. Thus, it has been a fascinating exercise to have this conversation and find out what it was like for Ettler to endure such media attention and to have her private life in the public spotlight. As this article demonstrates, it was clearly extremely frustrating for Ettler and other young writers at the time to have their fiction dismissed as salacious social realism by some prominent reviewers. The literature review that I undertook to write the Introduction for the re-release of *The River Ophelia* made clear to me that even when reviewers did have positive things to say about the novel, and many like McKenzie Wark did, those complimentary or more serious points were usually overlooked as it created more 'buzz' to write about Ettler's looks, or regurgitate sensational quotes that disparaged the book (1995). Twenty years later, as one would expect, opinions about the merits of the novel are mixed but, on the whole, they are extremely positive. Scholars like Jay Daniel Thompson, Joan Kirkby, Ian Syson Paul Dawson, Tanya Dalziell, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman all recognise the novel's place as a notable Australian novel. Inevitably, it is the first novel mentioned in any discussion about the Australian grunge 'movement' and it is also typically mentioned in relation to significant women's writing from that period. Scholars now, however, recognise where so-called 'grunge' sits in relation to Australian urban realism and the American 'Brat Pack' literature published in the 80s and 90s. As one would hope, not one piece of literary criticism I read makes the assumption that Ettler was writing autobiographically. That circus has passed. Comparisons are usually made with Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* as both novels interrogate female desire and self-actualisation and agency in urban settings and both complicate what feminist literature might look like (Dalziell 2007). Recognition of the way that Ettler engages with Kristeva's theoretical material on female bodies, abjection, and representations of Australian suburbia and cultural cringe offer another critical lens with which to view the novel (McCann 1998; Thompson 2012). Much to my relief, I confess, it was satisfying to see that, despite the serious content about domestic violence, most readers now recognise the novel's parodic humour and they are skilled at decoding the postmodern intertextuality. Critics now recognise that Ettler was attempting a difficult feat in writing about female subjectivity and desire and violent sexual relationships. Indeed, Joan Kirby argues that that '*The River Ophelia* offers the rare spectacle of a *successful* negotiation of the crisis of abjection in its painful, funny, intelligent, courageous account of the trials and tribulations of a heroine who owns, names and finally takes responsibility for the unownable aspects of subjectivity'

(Kirby 1998: 237 original emphasis). It will be fascinating to see what new readers and scholars make of *The River Ophelia* and *Bohemia Beach* in 2018.

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*Justine Ettler’s second novel,* The River Ophelia *(Picador 1995,) was an instant best-seller in Australia and New Zealand and has been taught at HSC and University level. Her first novel,* Marilyn’s Almost Terminal New York Adventure*(Picador), was published the following year to critical acclaim. Ettler made Australian literary history by being the first female debut writer to sell two books simultaneously to a mainstream publisher. In 1997 she was selected as one of six Australian authors to tour the UK as part of the New Images Writer’s Tour and subsequently moved to London where she lived until 2007. She worked as a book reviewer at* The Observer*,* The Evening Standard *and* The Times Literary Supplement*, lectured in Creative Writing, and worked as a reader for the London literary agency, Cornerstones, as well as for The Literary Consultancy. Her new novel* Bohemia Beach *(Transit Lounge, 2018) is due out this month. She has a BA, MA and a PhD which examined Bret Easton Ellis’s* American Psycho*.*

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