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**The perfect crime: trauma writing strategies in crime fiction**

Abstract:

Within a framework of trauma theory and its relationship to literature, this paper proposes a number of writing strategies that may enable crime fiction, in particular the domestic noir sub-genre, to portray narratives of trauma using textual cues that invite readers to enter the text in similar ways to trauma fiction. Despite the central role trauma plays in crime stories, the capacity for crime fiction to serve as a vehicle for representing trauma and to act as a catalyst for personal and social change has not been explored in any depth by critics or scholars. By employing an exegetical reflection and case study analysis of the writing of my completed PhD novel, *Ebb and Flow*, I show how analysis of these strategies can be aligned with the structure and literary devices typical of crime fiction. This analysis offers tools to write a form of crime fiction that may deliver similar benefits to readers as trauma fiction. This leads the way for further research into the power that crime narrative has to evoke change through psychological and emotional growth and other inherent benefits for a genre fiction audience, as well as a potential new arts and health market for crime fiction writers.

Biographical note:

Leanne Dodd is a lecturer in Literary and Cultural Studies at Central Queensland University. She is an author of three independently published crime thrillers with developing themes of trauma, a writing mentor, workshop facilitator and served for six years on the Management Committee of the Queensland Writers Centre, most recently as Chair. She has facilitated writing workshops and seminars throughout Queensland, including in the area of writing for wellbeing and health. *Ebb and Flow* was longlisted for Hachette's 2018 Richell Prize for Emerging Authors. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

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## Introduction

Popular fiction is a narrowly defined category that is written to appeal to specific audiences that are already familiar with the conventions of that genre (French 2005). A key feature of popular genre crime fiction's appeal is its formulaic predictability and the comforting way in which the world is restored to order. Despite its potential for amoral content, formulaic crime fiction is inherently a moral genre addressing moral questions (Spring & King 2012: 205). This frequently-used convention opens up a space for crime writers to represent productive responses to traumatic experience to a willing and receptive audience in a similar manner to trauma fiction.

Trauma fiction has been defined as 'narratives that help readers access traumatic experience' (Vickroy 2002: 1) and 'fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels' (Balaev 2014: 150). Trauma critic Anne Whitehead identifies novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Pat Barker's *Another World* (1998) as part of this emerging genre. However, the key delineations of trauma fiction are not only that trauma is embedded in the narrative, but that the narrative is associated with a fragmented form that simulates temporal disruptions caused by trauma (Collins 2011: 9). Whitehead recognises that novelists 'have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms' (2004: 3). Trauma fiction employs these textual cues to invite readers to enter the into the text and work through trauma.

Criminal events form the key subject matter of crime fiction, and these events frequently link to traumatic experience, accompanied by profound loss or fear. Crime fiction may also be associated with a fragmented form, employing narrative strategies such as analepsis (flashback) to reveal clues. These associations suggest crime fiction is an ideal vehicle for representing trauma and acting as a catalyst for personal and social change in a similar way to trauma fiction. Yet despite the central role trauma plays in crime stories, the capacity for crime fiction to achieve this purpose has not been explored in any depth by critics or scholars, possibly because critics continue to label genre crime fiction as 'artistically suspect' and 'low brow' (Du Buiteleir 2013: 315).

Within a framework of trauma theory and its relationship to literature, this paper proposes a number of writing strategies that show how popular genre crime fiction may be able to portray narratives of trauma using similar narrative strategies as trauma fiction. It analyses how the strategies used in trauma fiction can be aligned with the structure and literary devices typical of crime fiction through an exegetical reflection and case study analysis of the writing process for my research-led doctoral novel, *Ebb and Flow*, which is situated in the sub-genre of domestic noir crime fiction. This writing approach could provide writers with an altruistic means to contribute to personal transformation for readers, as well as developing new markets for their work in the emerging arts and health field.

## Background

The production of the creative work for my doctoral project was performed through research-led practice. *Ebb and Flow*, informed by trauma theory, attempts to illustrate how narrative strategies that mimic the symptoms of trauma can be aligned with the fast-paced linear narrative and literary devices typical of the popular crime novel. My aim was to create another space to re-write a traumatic past that offers an opportunity for writers and readers of crime fiction to work through and come to terms with their own experiences of traumatic events, but to also engage and entertain customary readers of the crime genre.

*Domestic Noir*

I chose domestic noir as the crime fiction sub-genre for the creative work because it lends itself to the topic of domestic violence and its traumatic aftermath, themes that the novel attempts to portray. The term 'domestic noir' was first coined by author Julia Crouch in 2013 in an attempt to distinguish her own work from the more generalised popular crime thriller category. She describes the domestic noir as a sub-genre that 'concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants' (Crouch 2013: para 12). This is, indeed, the situation in which *Ebb and Flow*'s protagonist Florence (nicknamed 'Flow' after a childhood incident in which she almost 'flowed' out to sea and drowned) finds herself. *Ebb and Flow* revolves around the disappearance of Flow's four-year old daughter Charlie from their waterside home. Acting out from her own childhood trauma and the aftermath of domestic abuse by her father, Flow is suspected of being responsible for Charlie's disappearance.

Domestic noir crime fiction may attract criticism that it promotes stereotypes of male-gendered violence and female victimisation, thereby maintaining the status quo, but statistics show domestic violence is gender-biased. A 2014 federal government study (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2014) reports the risk to women is three times that of men, with one in four Australian women having attested to being the victim of violence or emotional abuse by an intimate partner. As Charlotte Beyer argues, 'portrayal of female bonds, experienced as they are in extreme conditions, is important, because such themes and ideas explore the role of language in inscribing patriarchal structures and strategies for resistance; socialisation and the encoding of gendered identities' (2010: 95). *Ebb and Flow* aims to portray knowledge of violence-induced trauma to throw light on oppression, as well as offer strategies for resistance and post-traumatic growth for its readers. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth writes, 'such works posit trauma against its reality as a discrete past event, locatable, representable and curable, a symptom of a culture's need to "forget" traumatic events while representing them in oblique form' (1996: 3). Domestic noir, in my view, creates a space to represent the reality of domestic violence, its traumatic effects and its 'cure'.

When author and writing lecturer Tara DaPra states, 'the success of a piece of writing is proven by readers connecting with the writer's words, knowing on some basic level that what the writer has composed touches on a truth of human experience' (2013: 5), the premise seems to be that readers might learn from what they read. Should readers not, then, learn the truth? And the cold, hard truth is outlined in the statistics collected by the ABS (2014). *Ebb and Flow* aims to portray this knowledge of violence-induced trauma and paths for post-traumatic growth and recovery.

I also selected the domestic noir sub-genre to capitalise on one of the reasons people choose to read about such traumatic experiences. Jean-François Lyotard explains this in terms of postmodernism:

The Postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the attainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (1979: 81)

Domestic noir is capable of presenting stories that are naturally difficult to represent due to their traumatic nature, because people already have an expectation of these potential *unenjoyable* postmodern elements. It, therefore, makes a good vehicle through which to attempt to achieve my aims.

The research I undertook before writing *Ebb and Flow* adopts the challenge of using a domestic noir narrative to mirror the fragmented and repressed nature of traumatic memories, while maintaining the fast-paced elements of crime fiction. Dissociation is the filter through which I re-write Flow's childhood trauma, but *Ebb and Flow* is intended to be a commercially publishable crime novel. It is fragmented by flashbacks to Flow's traumatic childhood in an attempt to add tension to the narrative by implicating her as a suspect in the crime. Flow suffers from dissociation, with a co-conscious protector sub-personality who she has named Ebony (Ebb). Hence, the title of the novel, *Ebb and Flow*, takes on two meanings, both as the nicknames of the character/s and as the metaphorical ebb and flow of the two personalities, and ties into the water theme of the novel. The story is told through two distinct voices: Ebb's, which acts as protector to carry the primal wound and reveal the traumatic memories for the reader to witness, and Flow's, which has repressed these memories. Flow is able to assume a life of complicity by allowing Ebb, the negative side of her personality, to take responsibility for her self-destructive behaviour.

The use of unreliable narrators is illustrated in the domestic noir crime novels, Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015). Both narrators demonstrate symptoms of mental illness, in Amy's neurotic behaviour in *Gone Girl* and in Megan's drunken depression in *The Girl on the Train*. Flow's character sits comfortably in this tradition. As readers witness how Ebb is capable of influencing Flow's behaviour, my objective is that they will begin to question whether she was capable of harming her own child under her sub-personality Ebb's influence. The narrative intention is to represent Flow as an unreliable narrator befitting of the conventions of domestic noir, thereby satisfying readers' expectations of the sub-genre. Carolyn Beasley argues society seems to need to believe murderous mothers are 'mad' to comprehend how they could break the laws of both crime and nature. Flow's behaviour positions her in what Beasley terms 'the space of a psychological "other"' (2016: 6), as Ebb influences Flow to act in ways contrary to socially constructed maternal behaviour. In *Ebb and Flow*, however, this allusion to mental illness is used firstly to illuminate the causes and effects of dissociation, highlighting Flow's maternal detachment as a symptom. Secondly, it acts as a strategy to create a red herring, a device frequently used by crime fiction to plant false clues in the crime plot (Spring and King 2012). This remains true to the elements that make crime fiction popular, as it eventuates Flow is not responsible for her daughter's disappearance.

### *Dissociation*

In *Ebb and Flow*, I chose to mimic the effects of the post-traumatic condition of dissociation stemming from childhood experiences of domestic and family violence. Also known as *primal wound* trauma (Firman & Gila 1997), this at times may lead to the splitting of the psyche. It has long been known that the human mind has the power to actively attempt to isolate itself from painful experiences. Psychoanalysts Thierry Bokanowski and Sergio Lewkowicz describe the splitting of the psyche, which 'lies in the suggestion that two or more parts of the self can be split in the mental world and go on to live lives that are concomitant and isolated' (2009: xvii). Psychologist John Rowan similarly defines this concept, which he calls the subpersonality, as 'a semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person' (1990: 8). He likens it to being taken over by a part of yourself that goes against your interests or will. As early as 1974, psychologist Patricia Middlebrook shared this theory but highlighted that this split could still be within the normal range of experience: 'the individual may not be a single unchanging self, but may be many selves, which change somewhat as the individual shifts from situation to situation' (1974: 103). Rowan suggests dissociation is not an either/or state but can exist along a continuum, seeing this as beginning with transient subpersonalities that vanish as if

they had never been (mood swings and drug altered states) moving toward relatively long-lasting subpersonalities which activate to carry out tasks and life activities specific to the dissociated state (the split personality) (1990: 9).

According to Rowan, there are extremely dissociated states at the furthest end of the continuum which are typified by fugue and amnesia (multiple personalities or alters), which he categorises as being outside of the range of normal behaviour (1990: 10). It is mainly these very dissociated states that are featured in popular crime fiction. Examples by bestselling crime fiction authors include Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* (1981), William Diehl's *Primal Fear* (1996), Mary Higgins Clark's *All Around the Town* (1992), Stephen King's *The Dark Half* (1989) and Sidney Sheldon's *Tell Me Your Dreams* (1998). Crime writers often exploit the condition, and it is kept hidden until the heart-stopping climax in which the author springs it on the reader in the solution of the crime. In *Tell Me Your Dreams*, while Sheldon aims for clinical accuracy in his narrative, he only hints at the trauma behind it in the first two parts of the novel. The cause of Ashley's personality split is kept a mystery so it becomes a plot device common to crime fiction of this nature. The alters carry the primal wound for Ashley as autonomous characters. Mentions of her cruel mother are ultimately used as a red herring to hide the real sexual abuse by her father. It is only hinted at when Ashley says her parents argued but she couldn't drag out the memory of what the argument was about, indicating she has repressed it (Sheldon 1998). This adds to the suspense and mystery of the crime novel but gives us no insight into the murders being committed. In Part Three, once the secret is revealed, Sheldon goes to pains to describe the condition – dissociated personality disorder – but the actual trauma Ashley suffered is only mentioned briefly. This leaves aside an approach which would enable readers to witness and comprehend trauma, and *Ebb and Flow* is an attempt to create a form of crime fiction that fills this gap without a cost to reader satisfaction.

Psychoanalyst Thierry Bokanowski emphasises that although the splitting of the psyche has a life-saving role in defending the individual from their trauma, it comes with consequences. In expending energy to maintain the split, the ego may suffer from anxiety, excitation, hysteria, phobia, obsessions, hallucinations, narcissistic libido and other perverse disorders (Bokanowski et al. 2009: 30-31). In *Ebb and Flow*, the theory of primal wound trauma underpins the development of the main character Flow. She experiences temporal shifts in personality while living an outward life of normality, leading her into many of the consequential and uncharacteristic risk-taking behaviours listed by Bokanowski. One of the aims of this doctoral novel is to explore narrative strategies to represent dissociation and adequately convey these mental shifts and behaviours, and their causation, in the text.

### **Narrative Strategies**

The following exegetical reflection and case-study analysis demonstrates how I attempted to align the narrative strategies employed in trauma fiction with those used in crime fiction.

#### *Fragmentation*

Fragmentation is a narrative strategy employed in trauma fiction to 'convey the fracturing of time, self and reality that ... accompanies traumatic episodes or recall' (Goldsmith & Satterlee 2004: 45). Critics and scholars have observed the use of literary devices such as analepsis (or flashbacks), non-linear narrative, delayed narrative and textual gaps in trauma fiction to produce a fragmented form that simulates the temporal disruptions of trauma (Felman & Laub 1992; Holyer 2011; Visser 2011; Whitehead 2004). I attempted to employ fragmentation in *Ebb and Flow*.

In *Ebb and Flow*, the crime drives the narrative forward in a fast-paced linear manner through the police investigation, which aligns the novel with conventional crime fiction strategies, but it also uses analepsis to move the reader between Flow's childhood trauma and her present. The story is persistently frustrated by digressions into the past where characters reveal family secrets, creating complexity and ambiguity that Knight (2010) suggests the reader must interpret and reconstruct.

One of my challenges in writing *Ebb and Flow* was to use narrative strategies to mirror the complexity of the latent and often unspeakable traumatic images, sensations and physiological responses caused by dissociation in the text. Trauma theorists, as far back as Freud, have described the effects of trauma on memory. In 1895, Freud wrote, 'trauma is characterised by a lack of integration into consciousness at the time that the event occurs; it can only be assimilated belatedly, in its insistent and literal return' (Freud & Breuer 2000: 174). Caruth (1996) suggests the traumatic event cannot become a narrative memory until the trauma survivor can integrate it into a complete story, the comprehension of which is denied by the patchy nature of traumatic memories: 'The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure' (Caruth 1995: 153). Traumatic memories are often repressed, and while trauma is relived in the nightmares and flashbacks of its victims, this is experienced as images and sensations as if they are happening in real time. Trauma survivors have little control over these intrusive memories so there is restricted conscious access to them. Trauma also changes a person's physiological responses to the world, causing symptoms ranging from hyperarousal of the nervous system, hypervigilance and sleep disturbances to numbing responses such as addiction, self-harm, detachment and dissociation (Amendiola 1998; Herman 1992). Some of these symptoms can be referred to in neurobiological terms as the fight/flight/freeze response (Van der Kolk 2014).

To respond to the challenge of representing these reactions, I explored affect theory and the principal of embodiment, which holds that all experience registers in the body through the senses, which leads to unconscious body-wide responses. Affect can be described as those bodily responses which are removed from cognitive knowingness and therefore arise from visceral perception (Massumi 2002) where 'the body is seen as the centre of identity, inseparable from sensory experience and perception' ('Embodiment' n.d.). Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile similarly suggest that 'embodiment tends to be forgotten or repressed' but that 'writing, by its aura of permanence and resurrective potential, points towards life and connection, even as it signifies absence and disconnection' (2012: para 14). Trauma fiction's fragmented narrative structure seems to imply that readers and writers might connect to embodied feelings and sensations unconsciously because it mimics the symptoms and effects of trauma in the way traumatic memory distorts time.

Literary critics Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub assert that literary testimony can 'speak beyond its words' (1992: 278) to mimic the effects of trauma, suggesting there is potential to gain meaning from the sub-text of the fragmented form of trauma writing. As trauma clinician and researcher Bessel Van der Kolk claims, if trauma survivors can find ways to connect their physical sensations to their traumatic experiences, they can gradually reconnect with self (2014: 101). As I worked on the early drafts of *Ebb and Flow*, I hypothesised these strategies could be used to reach trauma survivors and help them to identify with the text of crime fiction subconsciously through these temporal and bodily elements if they were able to be incorporated into the creative work. *Ebb and Flow* attempts to use narrative strategies that mimic trauma and its effects, specifically dissociation, to make these unconscious elements accessible to the wide audience crime fiction attracts.

To create a non-linear narrative that attempts to mimic the intrusive and unpredictable nature of traumatic memories, I experimented with the use of analepsis (or flashback). At the ends of some scenes, I employed conventional crime fiction devices such as hooks, where a question is left unanswered, or cliffhangers, where a scene is left in the middle of a precarious moment. In considering how the textual gaps that occur after these devices can align with the effects of trauma, I gave attention to placing these flashback scenes at critical points where memory might fail Flow. Readers must then reconstruct these memories out of order in the same way a trauma survivor experiencing flashbacks might, in their attempt to fill in the textual gaps. I still felt this connection needed to be strengthened, so I added triggers to associated traumatic experiences in Flow's life, such as a near-drowning and violent episodes involving her father. This aligns the strategies of crime fiction and trauma fiction, working backward and forward to resolve the trauma symptoms and connect clues to solve the crime. An example of this alignment can be seen when Flow is first questioned by the police about her daughter's disappearance. She panics, bringing suspicion upon herself.

*Idiot! Why did I over-react like that? She was just trying to do her job – to find Charlie. I pull absent-mindedly on my thumb until I feel the joint dislocate with a crack. A small voice niggles in the back of my mind.*

*She didn't believe you.* (Dodd 2018: 36)

The chapter ends with this hook, but triggers the ensuing scene where Ebb describes Flow being questioned by the police as a teen. It ends on a matching note, pairing it with the previous scene which triggered the memory:

You run to your bedroom, locking the door behind you. You watch through your window as the police car pulls away. So much for the police upholding justice and protecting the innocent.

*He didn't believe you.* (Dodd 2018: 39)

The linear narrative of the crime plot is frequently fragmented by these flashbacks to Flow's hidden traumatic past through the voice of her sub-personality, Ebb. Editor of *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, Michelle Balaev, suggests that literary critics think of trauma in terms of an 'unspeakable void' (2014: 16). As psychiatrist and trauma researcher Judith Herman explains, 'traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images' (1992: 38). Balaev suggests this classic literary model of trauma with features that 'refuse representation' therefore 'fails to fit the laws of structural and poststructural linguistics' (2014: 16) and that writers need to seek more modern approaches to represent trauma in literature. My approach in *Ebb and Flow* is to retain an element that is unspeakable in Flow's testimony, which must remain unspeakable until those memories are integrated into her consciousness. But for Flow to resolve her trauma, it first needs to be made coherent and linked to her history. The introduction of the sub-personality voice of Ebb was my attempt to represent these unspeakable memories of traumatic events that Flow cannot voice to make the story coherent and link to events in her past. This method aims to give readers access to Flow's past without disrupting the unspeakable void present in her memory. The approach accepts yet aims to move beyond the concept that trauma is unspeakable in literature.

### *Repetition*

Repetition is another narrative strategy I have identified as being used in trauma fiction. It has been observed to mimic the effects of trauma through devices such as analepsis, mirroring, recurring motifs and intertextuality (Hartman 2003; Russell 2009; Vickroy 2002; Whitehead 2004). According to trauma fiction critic, Anne Whitehead, 'one of the key literary strategies

in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot' (2004: 86). I attempted to test whether the use of repetition in crime fiction could aid in aligning its narrative strategies with trauma fiction.

Repetition permeates the text in *Ebb and Flow* with my use of a recurring water motif and mirroring of Flow's childhood trauma in the circumstances of her daughter's disappearance, reflecting the effects of trauma in their persistent intrusion into the linear mystery plot. Throughout the novel, I use a recurring dream sequence in which Flow imagines her daughter drowning in the lagoon. This mirrors a traumatic incident in which Flow almost drowned as a child, and these memories are re-triggered by the recurring water motifs in the novel. The dream also creates a red herring around Charlie's disappearance, casting suspicion on Flow, as this excerpt demonstrates:

*I see her blonde head go under for an instant. The water churns. A growing circle of ripples bears straight for me as she comes up with a guttural cry that turns me to stone. 'Mummeeee! Help!' She gives me one more wide-eyed look before going under for the final time. I glance down. Her blood is on my hands. (Dodd 2018: 44)*

This dream sequence recurs in shorter bursts and metamorphoses to become more threatening as it follows the plot lines, in this instance where Flow's husband, Justin, has become a suspect in Charlie's disappearance:

*It is night; the water is dark and murky; something splashes and slaps about in frantic motion; a shriek pierces the night; a blonde head goes under for an instant; the water churns; she gives me one more wide-eyed look before disappearing; I see Justin; there is blood on his hands. (Dodd 2018: 103)*

I use these red herrings to create a repeating circular plot which loops around the traumatic experience of Charlie's disappearance, hiding her real fate and the culprit in the crime. These strategies, with their focus on ideological themes and the human condition, break with the conventions of the genre crime novel to aid in the novel in aligning its strategies with trauma fiction.

### *Characterisation and intimacy*

For a crime novel to represent trauma as effectively as trauma fiction, it needs to explore the human condition by focusing on character rather than plot. Dealing with individuals, particularly revealing their angst and flaws, can move the focus of a crime novel from plot to character (Knight 2010). This strategy aligns *Ebb and Flow* with the criteria for trauma fiction, as it is as much a novel that explores the human condition of trauma as it is a crime novel.

Although I have written my previous novels in past tense, I decided to experiment with writing *Ebb and Flow* in present tense to mimic the way traumatic memories are experienced in real time. This fitted with my aim to reach readers who were also trauma survivors, who might sense temporal and bodily elements that mimicked trauma in the text. Because I wanted readers to doubt Flow's innocence, I initially considered writing her character from third person perspective, which allows alternate viewpoints to be visible to readers. I assumed it might be difficult to show her private thoughts in first person perspective, then try to convince readers they were not true. Research, however, indicated writing characters from a first person perspective could contribute to readers forming a closer connection with key characters (Spring and King 2012). I presumed that identification with the character suffering the traumas of the novel was important, and it might make for a more emotionally-charged crime story if readers related to Flow but were not quite sure of her innocence. I speculated this could lead to a more satisfying ending when she is found to be innocent.



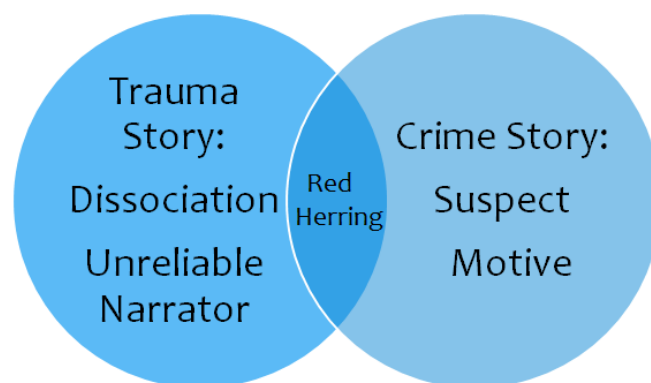
For my novel to work, I determined Flow needed to be written as an unreliable narrator. Gillian Flynn did this successfully in *Gone Girl*, using a fake diary format (2012). I did not want to duplicate this strategy so I completed further research on methods for creating unreliable narrators. I discovered they could successfully be written in first person perspective, particularly when incorporating post-traumatic mental illness into the character's persona.

I decided to experiment with writing Flow in first person to create greater intimacy and maintain the position of the reader inside the narrative. I initially wrote the memories of childhood trauma in Flow's child-voice, a strategy used by some trauma fiction writers (Whitehead 2004), with the narrative attempting to create an empathy with her childhood trauma and mental illness from the outset. I realised, however, this did not work because the character of Flow, suffering from dissociation, was detached and needed to have repressed her memories. This provided a challenge as to how I would reveal the trauma to readers. To resolve this, I decided Flow needed to feel, recognise and acknowledge her detachment for readers to relate to her.. Instead, I revealed Flow's repressed childhood trauma in flashbacks told by her sub-personality Ebb, who kept these memories locked away in Flow's psyche. I then experimented with bringing these memories intermittently to the surface of Flow's mind through triggers in the text.

I later decided to experiment with writing Ebb's voice in second person. I discovered it also allowed me to keep her voice distinct. I wanted her to remain 'child-like' because she is trapped in Flow's childhood trauma. For this reason, I decided to change the font to the more rounded Arial. This also allowed me to insert Ebb's voice distinguishably into other chapters by creating an identifiable pattern. To gauge how effectively this worked, I tested it on beta-readers and received this feedback: 'Ebb's voice creeps into the child's point of view...establishing a child's perspective on toys and TV [then] there's a tinge of adult bitchiness with the child-like desire to run away' and 'I caught on very quickly what was going on between the moving between characters.' (personal correspondence 16 March, 2016; 30 November 2017). This is how Ebb needed to sound: the child-like adult trying out adult behaviour. Ebb casts herself as the *naughty child* in opposition to Flow's tendency to conform.

In maintaining the elements that appeal to readers of crime fiction, voicing Flow in first person allowed me to create her as an 'unreliable narrator', which I hoped heightened suspense. Voicing Ebb in second person then created a dialogical relationship, aiming to give the illusion she is speaking to Flow through the use of the pronoun 'you'. The intention was to both strengthen Flow's status as an 'unreliable narrator' and strengthen the depiction of dissociation by conveying a sense of depersonalisation of the character. Ebb never becomes a comprehensive character. She is only represented through vague and impressionist memories to represent the difficulty in reconstructing a traumatic past and identity.

Flow's psychological condition becomes a plot device to portray her as an unreliable narrator, which casts her as a suspect in Charlie's disappearance and provides motive as the crime story unfolds. The two strategies overlap to create a red herring. Figure 1 demonstrates how these strategies are aligned to stay true to the elements that make crime fiction popular, while aligning with the strategies of trauma fiction to explore the human condition through character.

Figure 1: Narrative strategy alignment in *Ebb and Flow*

### Place

I decided the waterside setting and the hinterland town of Barainee should play a major role in *Ebb and Flow*. Writers of trauma fiction often employ place as a character motif, using it to provide readers with a position from which to gain access to the traumatic event (Baer 2000: 48). This strategy allows them to return to the event, as occurs in recurrent intrusive flashbacks. Whitehead claims that 'all efforts to confront and remember the past must be preceded by a consideration of the perspective from which we, as belated witnesses, view the event' (2004: 48). Using grim and threatening imagery to construct a place as character motif aims to further evoke traumatic memory. I have used place as a motif in *Ebb and Flow* to represent a threatening landscape to enhance the mystery of Charlie's disappearance in the crime plot. For example, Flow is frequently unmoored by the lagoon as it 'quivers and shimmers behind them, hiding its secrets deep below its surface' (Dodd 2018: 46).

Flow describes Barainee as 'a whole alternate universe suspended in a space somewhere between the civilised coast and the rugged outback' (Dodd 2018: 2). Emma Doolan (2016) considers the Australian hinterland quintessentially a liminal space, creating a potentially gothic landscape. I originally set the story by a lake, but this held a connotation of beauty, so I changed the setting to a 'dark and murky' (Dodd 2018: 43) lagoon, aiming to create a more gothic atmosphere. The dark and desolate nature of the gothic, where the mist's 'ghostly tendrils still hover above the lagoon' (74), was intended to paint Barainee as a grim, threatening place similar to that which also occurs in crime fiction settings (Lloyd 2014). According to Redhead (2016), gothic landscapes are also a place of displacement and entrapment. Flow finds herself displaced from her city life in Barainee, trapped by her loyalty to her new husband. Exiting the highway, which acts as a threshold between city and country, she is suspended in a liminal state where she is dragged back into her memories and trauma. These strategies aim to bring the role of place, as employed in crime and trauma fiction, into alignment.

### Language

Stylistic language is a narrative strategy used in trauma fiction, often with the intent of evoking rather than representing violence and traumatic experience. This type of language is used to distance readers from violence by juxtaposing unpleasant scenes with the aesthetic, using 'romantic, mythical language' (Russell 2009: 119). After formulating the plot for *Ebb and Flow*, I felt the need to create a closer link with the setting. Again, I made use of water metaphors, which evoke links to the drowning incidents and helps to distance readers from the less pleasant elements of the story. Amendiola states that 'metaphor provides an altered frame of reference that allows [trauma survivors] to entertain novel experience without

physiological hyperarousal and attending negative affect' (1998: 1). Sandy shields the young Florence from her father, reflecting, 'I don't want her to hear the rest of the filth likely to gush like a raging river from his mouth' (Dodd 2018: 10). I have also used metaphors to juxtapose traumatic scenes with the aesthetic. For example, the following occurs as the police begin to dredge the lagoon for Charlie's body:

Justin hovers amongst them, looking like a white lifebuoy bobbing in an echoing sea of blue and black. It makes me want to reach out and cling to him. He makes his way toward me, his steps forming a lifeline between the water and me. (Dodd 2018: 55)

In *Ebb and Flow*, I experimented with elliptical sentences that remove 'I' from the narrative to replicate the voicelessness experienced by trauma survivors. The following is an example from a scene in which Flow is experiencing alarm at Charlie's disappearance: 'I turn from him. Run toward the house. Rush inside. Dash up the hall to Charlie's bedroom. Expect to see her there. Can't let myself believe she is still missing – or worse.' (Dodd 2018: 25). This strategy helped me to align the text with the stripped-down prose used in crime fiction with the aim to build suspense as the action accelerates.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing case analysis, I have attempted to deliver evidence for breaking down barriers that prevent popular crime fiction from being considered as a valuable vehicle for representing trauma. Employing strategies to represent trauma in ways that serve similar purposes to trauma fiction offers an opportunity for crime fiction writers to attempt to portray trauma more realistically in their work for both altruistic reasons as well as to develop new markets for their work in the emerging arts and health field. This leads the way for further research into the power that crime narrative has to evoke change through psychological and emotional growth, and other inherent benefits that may exist for a genre fiction audience.

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