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There was nothing, there was nowhere to go: writing Australian rural noir

Abstract:

When I embarked on my doctorate in creative writing, I wanted to write about the decline of an alternative community in the 1980s, similar to the one in which I had grown up. A noir novel seemed the perfect vehicle for the dark themes I planned to explore, and promised to be very different from the private eye series I usually wrote. Typically, noir is located in urban environments and many studies of noir fiction and film maintain that an urban setting is integral to the genre, speaking as it does to the anxiety and alienation of modern life, feelings of anonymity and of being the outsider, and the corruption and criminality of the city. Much contemporary noir fiction still takes place in metropolitan areas; however, there is, increasingly, a sub-genre situated in rural locations, as illustrated by the rise of 'Country' or 'Hillbilly Noir' in the USA. Australian crime fiction has long made use of the bush and outback as a location – usually as a site of conquest where the hero ultimately triumphs over the antagonist; however, noir narratives are different, invariably ending in destruction and defeat. This article will investigate Australian Rural Noir through a comparative textual analysis of Kenneth Cooke's *Wake in Fright*, Chris Womersley's *The Low Road* and Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites*. It will consider the ways in which Australian rural noir uses landscape to subvert the pastoral paradigm and will examine the tensions between the exterior landscape and the interior life of the protagonists, reflecting on the particularly Australian cultural anxieties implicit in these texts. I also discuss my own research-led practice, the challenges involved in being an insider researcher and, finally, consider whether this nexus between the critical and creative helps or hinders the creative writing process.

Biographical note:

Leigh Redhead is a postgraduate student at the University of Wollongong, where she is completing a PhD on Australian noir fiction and writing a 'Hippy noir' set in an alternative community in rural Australia. She is also the author of *Peepshow* (2004), *Rubdown* (2005), *Cherry Pie* (2007) and *Thrill City* (2010), a crime series featuring stripper/private investigator Simone Kirsch.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Ten years ago I read a novel that was partly set in the 1970s, in an alternative community in rural NSW. I had grown up in a similar place around the same time, in a small town named Elands, and was eager to see the Australian version of the 'hippy' experience finally fictionalised. However, I found the scenes set in the alternative community disappointing. Most of the hippies seemed to live a utopian existence of blissful spirituality and endless drumming circles. They shared everything, and cared for each other as well as the environment. When one of the characters transgressed from this ideal and was violent towards a woman, he was quickly banished and idyllic equilibrium restored.

This was a far cry from the real-life alternative community that I knew. While there were many positive aspects to the alternative lifestyle in the 1970s and early 1980s, such as social freedom, creativity, environmental and political action, self-sufficiency, sustainability and a close-knit community – there was also a negative side. Personality clashes and relationship breakdowns were widespread, as were drug abuse, untreated mental illness and incidents of child neglect. An anonymous interviewee in Helen Hannah's book about Elands, *A Peaceful Revolution* (2011), explained it thus:

> There was sexual abuse and domestic violence. With the violence, a lot of stuff would get covered up and unspoken, because of the dope growing. There were women badly mistreated who didn't get support, because no-one wanted police in the community … There were a few years in the late 1980s when people started talking about child sexual abuse. It was like the lid had come off. People felt safe enough to mention things they were concerned about. It created some distrust between the men and the women. It had been that you were expected not to have an opinion … A lot of the men now know that it wasn't acceptable, whereas they might not have known that earlier on (2011: 39).

My experiences were similar to those of people who had grown up in other alternative communities in Australia at around the same time, and I deduced that the author of the novel I had read had not actually lived in such a place. That certainly does not preclude someone from writing about it, but for the sake of verisimilitude it is vital to get one's information right. Most of the rest of the novel had obviously been meticulously researched and I wondered where the scenes in the commune had come from. Turning to the acknowledgements section I discovered that one of the primary sources for the 'hippy' scenes was a counter-culture figure who had once been in a relationship with my mother. He had spent the past thirty years dining out on his part in the Aquarius movement, putting a positive spin on the events of the time, and his role within them. No wonder the scenes did not quite ring true.

A decade later, I was a crime writer embarking on a creative writing doctorate, researching and attempting to write a Rural Noir novel. I had spent the past decade writing a series about a female private investigator which had variously been described as 'hard-boiled', 'lightly fried', and 'Tart Noir': *Peepshow* (2004); *Rubdown* (2005); *Cherry Pie* (2007); and, *Thrill City* (2010). But as any noir aficionado knows, the term is hopelessly overused and descriptors like 'Tart Noir', 'Tartan Noir', 'Nordic Noir' and 'Domestic Noir'[1] are applied to novels that are often not noir at all.

My private eye novels certainly are not noir – they adhere strongly to the narrative

conventions of the private investigator genre, which I absorbed by osmosis after reading mystery novels and watching crime stories on film and TV. Teen detective Trixie Belden led to feminist private eyes such as Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Sara Paretsky's VI Warshawski, and my budding crime writer's brain was soon hardwired to the sorts of characters, plot and structure required of the genre. Although it was certainly possible to play around with conventions, they were firmly in the classic Hero's Journey model as set out by Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008) and Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007). After initially refusing the call to investigate, my detective is on a trail of false leads and red herrings, encountering double-crossing tricksters, violence and romance, a midpoint where everything seems lost, finally figuring out 'whodunit' and then having a near-death experience before triumphing over the forces of corruption, punishing the bad guys and restoring some sort of order.

This is a very different approach to storytelling from the downbeat endings of classic noir novels by James M. Cain, Jim Thompson and Patricia Highsmith or contemporary noir authors like Megan Abbott, James Sallis and Daniel Woodrell. Charles Ardai describes hard-boiled crime novels as fundamentally optimistic, and noir novels as pessimistic. Of noir he writes, 'any apparent order is generally illusory; things don't work the way they're supposed to; justice is rare and, when present, often accidental … and the would-be justice seekers who try to hold them accountable often fail or die trying' (2010). As I got older, these noir novels became the sort of books I loved to read and hoped one day to write, with protagonists that included 'the weak-minded, the losers, the bottom-feeders, the obsessives, the compulsives, and the psychopaths' (Duncan 2000: 8). Or, as Haut describes them, 'psychologically scarred inhabitants of a morally ambiguous world' (1999: 4-5).

I decided that an Australian alternative community in the 1980s, when the bad behaviour increased along with the price of marijuana, was the perfect setting for a Rural Noir novel. Forget loving flower children, there is no one so noir as a misanthropic hippy. As one of my characters, Kyle, puts it: 'For a bunch of so-called hippies, there wasn't a hell of a lot of peace and love around' (Redhead unpublished). However, if you had asked me at the beginning of my doctoral research what exactly constituted a noir novel, I would not have been able to provide an answer. Literary noir has always been difficult to pin down, Otto Penzler asserting that 'noir is not unlike pornography, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it' (qtd. in Ellroy and Penzler 2010: ix).

Noir versus hard-boiled

Influenced by German Expressionism, the original noir films were black and white and used the play of deep shadow and light as a central motif. This visual style helped to emphasise the themes of darkness and disintegration in the films, which were often based on hard-boiled detective and crime fiction like that written by Hammett and Chandler. As a result, hard-boiled detective fiction is often described as noir. Andrew Kincaid, discussing Irish Noir, links it to hard-boiled, describing the detective in a traditional noir novel as 'the moral center of the story' (2010: 48). However, many

scholars disagree. Lee Horsley argues for a broader definition of noir, which goes beyond the hard-boiled detective figure who is tough but essentially romantic, and who always restores order (2009: 1). She maintains that although 'private eyes play a part … so do transgressors and victims, strangers and outcasts, tough women and sociable psychopaths' (3). In other words, noir can be hard-boiled, but hard-boiled is not always noir. In this respect, Horsley (agreeing with film scholar James Naremore) posits that noir is useful as a 'label' or 'organising principle' (6) rather than as a specific genre or style. She goes on to discuss how noir texts 'accentuate fear and anxiety, ambivalence and vulnerability' (8).

Christopher Breu comments on the fluid nature of noir, describing it as a 'negative deformation' of a number of different genres that 'reworks their positive or utopian content into self-cancelling allegories of failure and futility' (2009: 199-200). Slavoj Žižek speculates that noir is 'a kind of anamorphic distortion affecting different genres' and 'a vampire-like entity, which, in order to be kept alive, need(s) an influx of fresh blood from other sources' (1992: 199). Fluck identifies three different types of noir narrative: the ordinary or bourgeois citizen who is drawn into crime (often as a result of a chance encounter with a femme fatale) like *Double Indemnity*'s Walter Neff; the sociopathic protagonist who does whatever it takes to gain money, social status or power, exemplified by Highsmith's Ripley or Thompson's malevolent sheriffs Lou Ford and Nick Corey; or the noir with an investigator figure as narrator, such as the ex-junkie private investigator Josephine in Sara Gran's *Dope* (Fluck 2001: 290). Fluck argues that the narrative drive in noir comes from weakness and guilt (300). Another useful definition was given to me by Sue Turnbull, who reminded me that noir is an acronym for Negative Outcome Is Required. Here, 'negative' did not have to mean death, although it certainly included it. Negative could mean no change from a bad situation, imprisonment, or the death of a dream (personal communication, 9 September 2014). But what of Australian noir?

Australian noir

My initial research led to my formulation of my own definition of Australian noir, and I developed a checklist which assisted me in deciding whether a novel fit the classification. The first priority was a negative ending, in which the protagonist is either killed, incarcerated or left in a similar situation of existential despair as they were at the start. The next was a protagonist who was guilty of something, and complicit in their own downfall. They had to know what they were doing was wrong, but be unable to resist their desire. There had to be some examination of class, economics and gender relations (all thematic noir staples), and I had to make sure that there were no elements of the uncanny present, as Australian Gothic literature, with its tropes of entrapment and disintegration, is often mistaken for noir. As I began to identify Australian noir novels, other, particularly Australian, cultural anxieties became discernible. Many of the novels were concerned with drug and alcohol use, patriarchal power structures relating to the law, church and state, institutionalised corruption and a particularly violent and misogynist brand of Australian masculinity.

Australian novels that can be identified as noir are small in number, diverse and not

necessarily marketed as crime fiction, which seems to suggest that Breu's definition of noir as a 'negative deformation of other genres' (2009 199) is accurate. Urban noirs include Dorothy Porter's verse novel *The Monkey's Mask* (1995), Andrew McGahan's *Last Drinks* (2000), Peter Robb's *Pig's Blood* (2001) and Wayne Grogan's *Junkie Pilgrim* (2003). Rural noirs I could identify were Kenneth Cooke's *Wake in Fright* (1961), Chris Womersley's *The Low Road* (2007) and Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013). All these novels have vastly different characters and settings, many straddle the divide between literary and genre fiction and, *Burial Rites*, an historical novel about the last woman hanged in Iceland in 1829, has not to my knowledge ever been described as noir.

Despite the fact that it is set in Iceland, I believe that *Burial Rites* is an Australian noir novel. Australia has a long tradition of crime novelists locating their books internationally, from Jon Cleary's Scobie Malone in the 1960s to Michael Robotham's recent award-winning novels. Just as historical fiction and science fiction are most successful when they reflect current-day anxieties, Australian-authored, overseas-set crime fiction often reflects contemporary local concerns. Author Angela Savage, who sets her Jayne Keeney private eye series in Thailand, argues that social and political issues specific to Australia are implicit in her novels.

> My books explore how people are shaped by their culture and what happens when cultures collide … I struggle to understand the reasons for the xenophobia that has resurged in the past two decades in Australian society. I am also interested in how high-level corruption plays out in the lives of ordinary people. My novels try to put corruption into context and show broad patterns of complicity … I believe these issues are entirely relevant to contemporary Australia (2012).

Hannah Kent grew up in Adelaide, and was inspired to write *Burial Rites* after a student exchange to Iceland. In an article for *The Australian* newspaper Stephen Romei writes that *Burial Rites* has an 'Australian sensibility … the understanding of a land that can produce beauty and terror' (2013). In the same article, author Geraldine Brooks, who mentored Kent, is quoted as suggesting the novel should have been considered for the Miles Franklin Award, and this despite the fact that the award is only open to books that present 'Australian life in any of its phases' (Perpetual 2016). She argues that:

> This business of books by Aussies having "nothing or almost nothing to do with Australia" is a narrow and blockheaded idea … Australianness, especially the rich multicultural stew of ordinary suburban life, empowers us to feel a stake in diverse cultures and histories. I think all of my novels, whatever their setting, area profoundly Australian books, and I think Hannah's is, too (Romei 2013).

Wake in Fright

Probably the ultimate Australian Noir, rural or otherwise, is *Wake in Fright* (1961) by Kenneth Cook. This novel tells the story of a young schoolteacher, John Grant, bonded to work in the tiny outback town of Tiboonda, an unbearably hot, dry, dusty 'variation of hell' (Cook 2013: 6) and a place where 'a man felt he had to either drink or blow his brains out' (12). When the novel opens, Grant is eagerly awaiting his six weeks' vacation, dreaming of swimming with the unobtainable Robyn in the cool waters of

coastal Sydney, taking refuge from the continent's 'dead heart' (5). While spending the night in mining town Bundanyabba (a thinly disguised Broken Hill) he attends an illegal game of two up, wins a lot of money, and then loses it as well as his wages check. Completely broke, with no way of getting to the coast, he lets a local buy him a beer, and then another and embarks on a five-day bender, enduring the aggressive hospitality of the locals. This eventually leads to a kangaroo-hunt-turned-massacre, a sexual assault by a Colonel Kurtz-type, Doc Tydon, and an ensuing mental fragmentation which strips Grant of all the hallmarks of civilisation and ends with him attempting to kill himself by shooting himself in the head. Suicide, it turns out, is common despite the locals insisting the Yabba is the 'best little town in the world' (26).

As well as his typically noir-styled poor decision making and reduced economic circumstances, the landscape plays a part in Grant's downfall. In many other places, he could sleep rough for the weekend before looking for a job, but conditions are too extreme: 'Grant felt himself exposed in no-man's-land ... doomed to wander the desolate terrain until he just dropped into oblivion' (61). Grant has to go indoors, and the only public indoor spaces are the pubs, where he will always be bought, not water, but beer. Grant requests water often, but it is always denied him as the locals tell him it is not fit to drink. Each day the heat and the hangover make him more dehydrated: 'the thirst was ploughing furrows in his throat' (90). And as his thirst gets worse, the only means he has to quench it are the beers his new companions continually thrust at him. He is forced to rely on the locals, and becomes complicit in their actions:

> Three of the kangaroos were dead. One had its leg broken and looked at them with undisturbed eyes. Joe smashed its head in with a branch he broke off a dead tree. Grant was surprised that he didn't feel particularly upset at the mass carnage. They were, after all, only kangaroos (122-23).

Later he decides he wants to try killing a kangaroo with a knife. But the wounded kangaroo is very small and warm; rather than a quick kill Grant botches the job: 'Sobbing, he drove the knife into its chest and its back again and again, and it stood there, mute, unprotesting, but it would not die' (131). He also tries to gut another, but it is not dead and its intestines spill out as it writhes in pain (132). Australia's national animal becomes a symbol of abjection. The kangaroo massacre seems to play out the violent misappropriation of Aboriginal Australia, and the horror and guilt that Grant feels lead to him drinking even more. His ensuing blackout leaves him vulnerable to Tydon's assault, which he remembers the next day in flashes, although he desperately tries to block out recent events. Grant has been violated, despoiled like the land which has been mined and turned into 'waste heaps' (138), and he begins to become like the landscape: 'Grant's face was taut and dry … dust caked on Grant's lips. His mouth was an arid gap in his head' (138-139). By the time he sticks the barrel of the rifle in his mouth, he is as empty and desiccated as the desert. He is also trapped: 'There was nothing else to do; tomorrow offered no hope … five weeks in the heart of Bundanyabba with no money and no food and nowhere to go' (187). The feelings of hopelessness often seen in noir surfaced here in an inability to escape.

The Low Road

Chris Womersley's *The Low Road* (2011) opens with a young delinquent, Lee, waking up in a motel room with a gunshot wound to the stomach. Next to him is a suitcase containing eight thousand dollars, which he has stolen from a crime boss. The novel is narrated by Lee, as well as two other characters: Wild, the disgraced, morphine-addicted doctor who helps him, and Josef, an older career criminal who is hunting them down to get the money back. As Lee and Wild go on the run, trying to reach a country surgeon Wild knows, the setting changes from the outskirts of an unnamed city to a small, also unnamed country town and finally an isolated country house. As the characters move towards the interior of the country (also unnamed and not obviously Australia), a novel which was sparsely populated to begin with becomes even emptier of characters. It also becomes bleaker and colder. Eventually it begins to snow.

The farmhouse is in ruins – the surgeon died of cancer six months before. While there, Wild removes Lee's bullet, then kills himself with a deliberate morphine overdose. Josef finds Lee as Lee is attempting to bury Wild in the frozen ground, and decides to take the money back but spare Lee's life. Lee, however, seems to have become contaminated by the dead, frozen landscape: 'In the hours he had been outside digging, the cold had stolen through his clothes and skin and then through his muscles until his bones were like ice' (Womersley 2007: 253). 'A wintry current ran through Lee' (255) and 'the cold sang right through him' (256). As a result, Lee makes a cold, typically wrong noir decision and shoots Josef. Now he is completely on his own, in a landscape he is ignorant of, and it leads to his death. His lack of rural knowledge about animals and weather conditions means that his attempted escape from the farmhouse by horse and cart is doomed.

The horse cannot pull the cart through the snow, and when the wheel gets stuck Lee whips the horse until it bleeds, falling to the icy ground and breaking its leg. Lee, futilely, tells it to stand up as he continues to flog its bloody hide and when the creature finally tries to stand on its broken leg it falls again making 'unearthly keening sounds that could only be of terror and pain' (275). Lee then tries to shoot the animal but the gun is jammed. He hits it in the skull with a fence post, over and over, and like the kangaroo in *Wake in Fright* it takes a very long time to die. When the animal does finally die we reach the climax of the novel: 'He looked around and was amazed to see that nothing had altered. It was barren … This was just some blank white space without obvious end. There was nothing and there was nowhere to go' (277). In this way readers are presented with remarkably similar wording to the climax of *Wake in Fright*.

Burial Rites

Burial Rites (2013) is a fictional reimagining of a true story – that of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman to be publicly executed in Iceland. It is generally described as literary fiction – yet the story is a classic noir. For the purposes of this article, the story is also Australian noir, the author's national lens revealing, via the storytelling device of referred location, a foreign setting that is also very much a carrier of Australian motifs.

Agnes, a servant, has been convicted, along with a young couple Fridrik and Sigga, of murdering her employer Natan and his friend. As Agnes awaits her execution a past/present narrative gradually reveals what led to the killings and it is the characteristic noir femme-fatale narrative, with the sexes reversed. Agnes is in her thirties; she is intelligent, attractive, and can read and write – unusual for an illegitimate woman of her class in the period in which the events take place. The parochial country folk do not approve of a servant getting ideas above her station and as Agnes explains, 'thinking women are not to be trusted' (Kent 2013: 132). She is lived a life of poverty and hard work, sexual assault and near starvation, but she is tough and capable, and can assist in the delivery of babies, slaughter animals and till a field.

Agnes' problems begin when she falls for Natan. They begin a physical and intellectual affair, and he invites her to come and work as head servant at Illugastaðir, his isolated farm by the sea. However, *homme fatal* Natan already has a head servant, 16-year-old Sigga, who he is sleeping with as well. Natan and Agnes' relationship quickly descends into one of cruelty and emotional abuse, with Natan hitting Agnes on one occasion. When Agnes confronts him over his affair with Sigga, he turns her out, but it is winter and she has nowhere to go. The unfamiliar landscape literally traps her:

> Illugastaðir was different. I had no friends. I didn't understand the landscape. Only the outlying tongues of rock scarred the perfect kiss of sea and sky – there was no one and nothing else. There was nowhere else to go (265).

Agnes is now in the same situation as John Grant in *Wake in Fright* and Lee in *The Low Road*: trapped by the landscape with 'nowhere to go' (Cook 2013: 187; Womersley 2007: 277).

When Natan refuses to let farmhand Fridrik marry Sigga, Fridrik decides to kill him. Agnes is sleeping in the barn when Fridrik shows up with a hammer and a knife, telling her what he is going to do. Agnes does not think he will go through with it, so goes straight back to sleep, which makes the reader suspect a noirish moral ambivalence is at play – especially since we have already read a scene where Fridrik has killed Natan's sheep for sport, kicking them and ruining the meat. When she does wake she enters the house to find Natan close to death, his skull staved in and his arm broken. Much like the kangaroo in *Wake in Fright*, and the horse in *The Low* Road, the now abject figure of Natan tries to get up but his broken limb collapses under him. He is gurgling, bleeding and suffering and Agnes cradles him and puts him out of his misery in a line straight out of a 40s noir text: 'The knife went in easily, it pierced his shirt with neat rips, sounding like an ill-practised kiss' (302).

Both the present and past narratives in *Burial Rites* move from an idyllic summer of green grass, blue sky and rosy sunlight to a climax of snow, freezing winds and grey, oppressive skies which effectively render the landscape empty and dry. Although set in Iceland, Australian anxieties are implicit in Agnes' description of place: emptiness, isolation and aridity. As her execution draws near the character describes the blankness of the land and sky, and how she, too, is becoming like the landscape:

> I am barren; nothing will grow from me anymore. I am the dead fish drying in the cold air. I am the dead bird on the shore. I am dry, I am not certain I will bleed when they drag me out to meet the axe … soon your bones, now hot with blood and thick-juicy with

> marrow, will be dry and brittle and flake and freeze and thaw with the weight of the dirt upon you, and the last moisture of your body will be drawn up to the surface by the grass, and the wind will come and knock it down (317-319).

Again, the noir protagonist is consumed by the landscape, and it has contributed to her downfall, along with her class, gender and inevitable bad decisions.

'The Falls' – writing an Australia rural noir

My novel, 'The Falls', is set in a mountain forest in country New South Wales, in an alternative community created by a group of like-minded people: artists, musicians, communists, environmentalists, astrologers and Sannyasins, who all apparently share similar values and who are working to create a place where they can reconnect with nature and each other. Most people in the community grow a small amount of marijuana, and when the price of dope skyrockets during the 1980s, the money comes pouring in and their utopian ideals are shattered. The community ends up mirroring the corrupt society they escaped from and ultimately becomes much worse, descending into paranoia, violence, drug abuse, sexual exploitation and murder.

'The Falls' has three narrators: Kyle, a 35-year-old marijuana grower; Debbie, a 32-year-old failed actress on the run from an abusive boyfriend, and Lily, Debbie's 14-year-old daughter. It was not until I had completed the first draft that I realised each character was a specific type of noir protagonist, playing out the particular storylines that generic conventions suggested for their characters. Kyle's narrative journey follows the typical 'everyman' noir plot as described by author Dave Zeltserman:

> Have your noir protagonist cross a moral line where there's no turning back from […] Keep putting your hero in increasingly more dire situations that he is barely able to escape from, and repeat this until the tension becomes unbearable. Give your noir hero a thin ray of hope of escaping his situation […] Just as it looks like he might escape his doom, pull the rug out from under your noir hero's feet and send him tumbling into the abyss (2014).

Kyle is a guitar player who has lived in the community for the last ten years with his partner Sharni and their two young children. He escaped the city after the demise of his moderately successful pub rock band (which went on to great success after he left) and now grows marijuana to sell. At the opening of the book, Kyle has just initiated a flirtation with a precocious 14-year-old named Ananda who is desperate to become a singer-songwriter and escape to the city. Kyle and Ananda start nurturing a secret relationship, which blossoms as he gives her guitar lessons and promises he will help her record a demo in the city. Kyle needs money fast. He has to send Sharni off on an expensive, week-long meditation retreat, so that he can book a recording studio, and a hotel room, and he and Ananda can finally consummate their relationship. A friend convinces him to sell dope to a new buyer who is willing to pay top dollar, but the deal goes horribly wrong. The gang-affiliated dealer winds up dead, his money and his cocaine go missing, and Kyle must figure out how to escape the attentions of both the police and the dealer's criminal associates. Not only that, but Sharni is becoming suspicious about him and Ananda.

Kyle morally transgresses by pursuing a relationship with a fourteen-year-old, killing a man, then lying and committing further violence in order to cover it up. All of his actions, while at the time giving him a 'thin ray of hope', end up trapping him further until eventually he ends up 'tumbling into the abyss'.

Debbie's plotline follows the narrative contours of much Domestic Noir, a term used to describe a literary subgenre that:

> takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, 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).

Domestic Noir has much in common with 'paranoid noir' in which the protagonist is 'typically a persecuted victim, caught up in a deterministic world in which the standard rules have suddenly changed for the worse' (Simpson 2010: 192). In 'The Falls', Debbie initially comes to the town to hide out from her violent, wealthy TV producer boyfriend. After developing a crush on a charismatic Northern Irish environmental activist named Brendan (who also happens to be Ananda's father) she decides to stick around for a while. Debbie finds out that Brendan has a partner and twin daughters, and initially backs off. However, when she and Brendan are arrested together at a forest action protest she is unable to resist embarking on a passionate affair. Debbie is shunned by the other women in the community when they find out about the affair, and by the time she discovers Brendan is a violent abuser with a dark secret, she is trapped in his house in a remote area with no telephone or transportation. Debbie's story takes place primarily in a dangerous domestic location, features an investigative subplot and concerns her experience of intimate partner violence which includes coercive control and the altered rules of 'Paranoid Noir'.

Lily is an unreliable narrator who is gradually revealed to be a sociopathic protagonist in the style of Highsmith's Ripley or Thompson's Lou Ford. According to Horsley, the plot of these 'psycho-noir' narratives revolve around a protagonist who becomes a murderer in order to advance socially and economically (2009: 113). These noir protagonists seek 'approval and integration' and 'bring the guilt of the community more sharply into satiric focus' (117). A morose, friendless teenager obsessed with reading a *Famous Five*-style children's series, Lily is horrified that their rural move has landed her in the Australian bush instead of the English countryside. Although rejected by them, she is fascinated by the small band of hippy kids also in their early teens, especially Ananda, whom Lily identifies as the leader. Lily decides she will do whatever it takes to befriend her. She stalks Ananda, trying to work out how to become close to her, until another teen discovers Lily breaking into Ananda's room, and uses the information to blackmail and manipulate her. Lily resolves to do whatever she can to free herself from her tormentor and become Ananda's best friend. Even if it demands spilling blood. Like Ripley, Lily will do anything to increase her social standing. Through the perverse logic of her first-person observations the greed, hypocrisy, sexism and violence of the community is satirised and exposed.

The challenge of insider research

Greene describes qualitative insider research as 'that which is conducted within a social group, organisation or culture of which the researcher is also a member' (2014: 1). As a crime writer, noir fiction fan, former member of an alternative community and creative writing PhD candidate, I meet the definition of an insider researcher in regards to my doctoral study. The disadvantages of being a practitioner commenting on my own field, or being both the 'researcher and researched' (2014: 2) include difficulty in ensuring objective research when analysing my own work, and the possibility of bias. As Unluer posits, 'the stranger is more easily able to critically observe events and situations which the insiders may take for granted as unquestionable "truths"' (2012: 9).

A number of strategies have been utilised to provide the necessary distance when analysing my own work. One involved leaving drafts of the novel for a significant period of time before returning to the text and reading it 'cold', allowing me to analyse it more objectively. Another strategy was requesting other writers (both noir experts and those who have had no experience with noir fiction) to read the text and relay their impressions – of particular interest was whether the work was holding their attention with believable characterisation and a suspenseful and coherent plot. I also asked my supervisors, who were familiar with my research questions and creative intention, whether the noir sensibility and social critique I was aiming for were being attained in the novel.

The first step to counter insider-researcher bias was to identify it. I accomplished this via such methods as free writing and journaling in separate notebooks dedicated to my exegesis and creative practice and by talking to other crime writers, crime readers, postgraduate students and academics to discover what they thought noir was. Although I did not consider myself biased in any way at the start of my research, once I began to investigate, I was able to identify my partiality. It became apparent that I maintained a very strict classification of what noir is and is not, and had a tendency to dismiss any theories that did not agree with this definition. I realised that the authors and scholars I had planned to interview all concurred with my definition of noir, so subsequently took steps to expand my research group. Paradoxically, I had a more fluid definition of what a crime novel is, which did not correspond with the views of many authors, publishers and scholars, who reject this genre classification for various reasons, and were therefore more difficult to engage with. (For example, *Burial Rites* and *Wake in Fright* are rarely described as crime novels, let alone as noir novels).

Another challenge I was able to identify was the fact that although I was researching Australian Noir, most of the noir texts I had studied were from the USA. Although I wanted to be able to write an Australian Rural Noir, exploring specifically Australian anxieties and themes, there was the likelihood of my research material influencing me towards a prescriptive American noir paradigm to the detriment of local content and characterisation. However, by becoming aware of this possibility I was able to guard against it and employ techniques such as free writing and steam of consciousness writing in order to let my personal version of an Australian noir narrative emerge.

Rather than being a limitation, it has been my experience that the insider researcher

position can yield a deepening of both the creative and analytic processes through a self-conscious feedback loop. As Dwyer and Buckle point out:

> Being a member of the group under investigation does not unduly influence the process in a negative way. Disciplined bracketing and detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives, might well reduce the potential concerns associated with insider membership (2009: 59).

Being an insider researcher also has other positive aspects such as a firm knowledge of genre conventions (which then allows the writer to experiment with them in a fluid fashion), local and historical knowledge of the social milieu of the novel and access to crime writers and scholars who can assist with my research and who are more willing to engage with me as a published crime writer.

Noir setting

Reading other Australian noir novels made me think about setting. How was I going to represent a rural Australian landscape that was temperate and not as extreme as *Wake in Fright*'s scorching desert or *Burial Rites*' frozen plains? An answer came to me when I was reading a newspaper review of an art exhibition titled Australian Gothic, curated by Susan Wearne, who sensed 'anxiety, claustrophobia and fear' in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art (Power 2015: 26). Wearne talked about the way many Australian paintings do not celebrate nature, but instead 'invoke a sense of claustrophobia, as if there's no way out' (26), and she referenced Marcus Clarke, who wrote that 'Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair. No tender sentiment is nourished in their shade' (26). These quotes captured the essence of the noir aesthetic and triggered memories of my wandering alone in the bush as a young girl; where I often experienced a menacing sensation of being watched, as well as a guilty feeling for trespassing on Aboriginal land, which I did not feel I belonged to at all.

Elands, where I grew up, is near the Ellenborough Falls, a waterfall with one of the longest single drops in the Southern Hemisphere. A couple of people died at the falls while I was living there: a child with Down Syndrome, wandering too close to the edge; a suicidal young woman, whose clothes were found neatly folded at the top. As teens we used to dangle our feet over the drop, a thought which horrifies me now. Everyone used to tell us that the early colonisers had massacred the local Aboriginal people at the waterfall, so I used this in my novel.

> 'You know what they reckon?' Dee said, pulling her pouch of tobacco out of her overalls, and beginning to roll a cigarette. 'Hundred years ago the white settlers rounded up the local Aborigines, stood them on the edge of the falls and gave 'em a choice. Jump or get shot.'
>
> 'Oh my god,' Debbie shuddered. 'That's atrocious.'
>
> Lily spoke for the first time in hours. 'What did they choose?' (Redhead, unpublished).

Wearne suggests that the sense of menace associated with the Australian bush emanates from 'A fear of retribution for the mistreatment of Aboriginal people … Where

Aboriginal presence is denied or repressed, the landscape is embedded with this trauma – the ghosts of the brutal colonial encounter' (26).

I concur with Wearne's statement and would argue that this traumatic landscape should be an integral part of any Australian Rural Noir. Therefore, I decided it was apt to use the apparently idyllic setting of Elands as a site of entrapment, guilt and fear. I decided to follow the *Burial Rites* model, and have the landscape suggest rural idyll at the start, before gradually revealing itself as a site of anxiety and isolation in which the characters ultimately feel displaced. While I may not have a burning desert or a frozen plain to work with, I do have dense, tangled bush to trap the characters and leave them with nothing, and nowhere to go. I also have a perilous waterfall, isolated valleys and steep gorges, and creeks and rivers which turn impassable and treacherous when in flood. I will not be able to use barrenness and dryness as motifs, with so much water around, so it will be interesting to see how this will affect the climax of the novel and whether the characters will become a part of the landscape, consumed by it, as they are in the other Australian Rural Noirs. I will also have to decide if I am going to include a scene of abjection in which an animal is cruelly killed, which appears to be a ubiquitous trope of the anti-idyll, and appears regularly in country noir novels.

Australian Rural Noir observes a pattern unique to Australian rural crime fiction, whereby locations are renamed and thus disguised (*Wake in Fright*), set overseas, (*Burial Rites*) or take place with no reference to any concrete locale, thus being rendered anonymous (*The Low Road*). While authors do not seem to have any problem setting crime novels in Australian cities, it is difficult to find a contemporary rural crime narrative which takes place in a real Australian town. Although this locational displacement may have to do with libel laws, avoiding offence to residents of the locales, or authors simply seeking creative licence and the freedom to make things up, Knight posits that obscuring the real locations 'mediate[s] the problem of violence and treachery (1997: 157) and 'conceals anxiety' (158). 'Losing the land' is such a distinctive feature of Australian rural crime writing that it seems like it may indeed have something to do with a postcolonial sense of 'unbelonging'. As a result of this research I have decided to use the name of the real town I grew up in, Elands, in 'The Falls'.

Conclusion

Australian rural noirs share similar themes. The protagonists suffer displacement and entrapment. They embody the colonial fear of being consumed and disappearing into the vast landscape. Pervasive Australian rural myths are challenged by a rural anti-idyll which is communicated via motifs such as rotting buildings, scarcity of food and water, extremes of heat and cold, barrenness and emptiness, and the brutal treatment of animals. Rural myths are also challenged by the protagonist's inability to master the landscape and a rural community which is either absent or hostile. The novels highlight an uncomfortable awareness of not belonging to the land, suggesting post-colonial guilt about the way the land was violently stolen from the Indigenous people.

Although noir was not my original milieu as an author, I am hoping that my research,

both scholarly and literary, has hardwired the conventions into my brain in the same way that years of reading about heroic detectives did. I also hope that by employing reflective strategies that allow my insider status to help my research, I will be able to objectively analyse and contribute new knowledge to the genre of Australian Noir. Although my creative artefact is not yet completed, it has been edifying to realise that the critical, in the form of research-led practice, can inform the creative and generate ideas for plot, character and setting.

Endnotes

1. Tart Noir novels include Stella Duffy's *Calendar Girl* (1994) and Lauren Henderson's *The Strawberry Tattoo* (1999). Tartan Noir refers to Scottish crime writers such as Val McDermid and Ian Rankin while Scandinavian crime fiction like Stieg Larsson's *Millenium Trilogy* (2005–2007) is labelled Nordic Noir. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2014) and Paula Hawkin's *The Girl on the Train* (2015) are examples of Domestic Noir.

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