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TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | textjournal.scholasticahq.com

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To cite this article: Padmore, C. & Gardiner, K. (2022). Doing justice: Gender, genre and crime in recent historical biofictions from Australia. In Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore (Eds.) *TEXT Special Issue 66: Historical biofictions from Australian and New Zealand*. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.37092>

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Doing justice: Gender, genre and crime in recent historical biofictions from Australia

Abstract:

In this essay we analyse three recent historical novels from Australia that take as their focus figures who transcend normative gender boundaries in some way, either through their possible criminal activity and/or their sexuality or gender identity: Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013), about Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman executed in Iceland; Sarah Schmidt's *See What I Have Done* (2017), about the infamous Lizzie Borden; and Pip Smith's *Half Wild* (2017), about the many identities of Harry Crawford. In tandem with the novels, we examine interviews and other authorial paratexts to address a number of key questions: What drew the authors to render these historical figures in fiction? What ethical or creative challenges do such portrayals present for writers and readers? What cultural work is performed by each novel? We argue that the novels' use of indeterminacy and multiplicity as formal techniques demonstrates their authors' commitment to feminist and revisionist interventions. Interrogating the nexus of gender and criminality as portrayed in these novels sheds light on contemporary interests in characters whose lives seem to subvert the expectations of gender identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Biographical note:

Catherine Padmore's novel, *Sibyl's Cave* (Allen and Unwin, 2004) was shortlisted for *The Australian/Vogel Award* and commended in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her short creative works have been published in journals and anthologies. Catherine's scholarly work appears in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Writing in Practice*, *American Book Review*, *TEXT*, *Australian Literary Studies*, *JASAL*, *Life Writing* and *Lateral*, with chapters in edited collections. She is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at La Trobe University.

Kelly Gardiner's writing on biofiction has appeared in publications such as *The American Book Review*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, and Michael Lackey's collection, *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions Across the Globe*. *Goddess*, a novel based on the life of Mademoiselle de Maupin, was

published by HarperCollins in 2014. Kelly's historical novels include *The Firewatcher Chronicles*, *1917: Australia's Great War*, *Act of Faith*, *The Sultan's Eyes*, and the 'Swashbuckler' trilogy. She is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at La Trobe University.

Keywords:

biographical novels, biofiction, women's fiction, Australian fiction, crime fiction

Introduction

Historical biofiction, that is, biographical fiction set in the past, is often an exercise in – as Michael Lackey puts it – the novelist’s forgoing “the desire to get the biographical subject’s life ‘right’ and, rather, [using] the biographical subject in order to project the author’s own vision of life and the world” (Lackey, 2016, p. 7). The novels we discuss here all focus on real criminal cases that brought infamy to the accused and were widely discussed in contemporary accounts and in later fiction, folklore, and performance. The novels share a number of common features: a foregrounding of gender issues; the refusal of traditional crime fiction structures and plotting devices; multiple points of view, including first-person sections in a constructed voice of the accused; careful historical research, including the use of official documentation; and writing into the silences in the record. More generally, all demonstrate a commitment to a radical indeterminacy, a resistance to being easily defined in terms of form, voice, and imagined character motivation. What projections, then, of “the author’s own vision” (Lackey, 2016, p. 7) do these novels offer?

We argue that the works share revisionist and often avowedly feminist aims, as articulated by the authors in multiple paratexts, challenging binaries of criminality and justice, innocence and guilt, and masculine and feminine roles in 19th and early 20th century societies – recognising what Diana Wallace calls the “radical potential of the reconceptualisation of history as plural and subjective” (2005, p. 180). Furthermore, we suggest that the novelists’ close engagement with their subjects’ biographies (both the archival traces and the gaps or contradictions in that archive) suggests that they do this while indeed striving to get that life ‘right’ – the emphasis here is intentionally double, implying a desire for historical accuracy as well as a means of seeking justice for their protagonists. ‘Justice’ in these novels is not so much concerned with the legal system of the time and place in which the books are set, but rather revisiting and offering a revision of the ways in which these characters have been rendered and remembered. Careful use of form in these texts draws attention to historiographic questions that have arisen over past decades in the disciplines of history, biography, and fiction, providing a useful contribution to these broader, ongoing debates.

The three novels examined here were all published in Australia and internationally within the last decade. Each was popular and also critically acclaimed. Hannah Kent’s *Burial Rites* (2013) tells the story of the final months of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman executed in Iceland, accused of complicity in a double murder in 1828. The novel is largely set on a small farm on the Vatnsnes Peninsula in northern Iceland, where Agnes was sent to await execution. It is told in Agnes’s voice in first person, and in a third person narrative shifting between the women of her host family and Tóti, the young priest Agnes requested as spiritual advisor in her last weeks of life. The novel was a worldwide bestseller, shortlisted for the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction, the *Guardian* First Book Award, and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards (Pan Macmillan, 2019).

Sarah Schmidt’s *See What I Have Done* (2017) is a re-telling of the infamous Borden axe murders in Massachusetts, for which Lizzie Borden was charged and acquitted. Again, it is told in multiple voices, including that of the strange, selfish, younger daughter Lizzie, two surviving women in the household (the older sister, Emma and servant/witness, Bridget) and an invented

malevolent presence, Benjamin. The novel was published in Australia, the US, the UK, and Holland (Austlit, 2019), and won the ABIA Literary Fiction book of the year (2018) and the MUD Literary award (2018), as well as being long- or short-listed for other national and international prizes (Hachette).

Pip Smith's *Half Wild* (2017a) explores the many identities of the person born as Eugenia Falleni, part of a recently arrived Italian migrant family in Wellington, New Zealand; through an adult life lived as Scotsman Harry Crawford, eventually charged over the 1917 murder of their wife in Sydney; to prison life and ill-health as a frail older woman, Jean Ford. The protagonist's voice and persona change back and forth through time and memory, and fragments of Harry's story are told by others, including their stepson, landlady, and second wife. Smith's novel won *The Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Australian Novelists Award (2018), and it was long-and short-listed for a number of other national prizes (Allen & Unwin).

Given these novels' focus on an historic crime, it is impossible to consider them without evoking the ghost of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (2001). Grace says: "The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down. ... Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor" (2001, p. 25). In what follows, Grace Marks is never far from our thoughts. We proceed, however, with caution, noting Ariella Van Luyn's observations that historical biofictions about women who have committed crimes, or have been entangled in justice systems of the past, can restore a sense of voice and agency to the vulnerable subject while potentially reinscribing repressive systems and appealing to voyeuristic tendencies (Van Luyn, 2019, pp. 67-76). The three novels analysed here comprise a tiny fraction of the recent wave of novels (and true crime books) about women affected by crime and justice: the annual Davitt Awards for Australian women's crime writing, presented by Sisters in Crime Australia since 2001, began with only seven novels. In 2020, 124 books across six categories were on the longlist, including 85 novels – although not all these books are about women (Sisters in Crime Australia, 2020). This timely review of these novels and their authors' creative and ethical decisions will illuminate issues to be considered by writers planning similar projects in future.

On gender

As Diana Wallace has noted, historical fiction by and about women has long been concerned with the possible interconnections between gender and ways of understanding and representing the past, through the lens of the present:

the woman's historical novel of the 1990s looks less like a nostalgic retreat into the past than a complex engagement with the ways in which representations of history change over time and their relation to structures of power, not least those of gender. (2005, p. 204)

We argue the same can be said of these novelistic offspring of *Alias Grace*, born two decades later. Their authors see gender issues at play in the way the crimes were treated at the time as

well as the complex events leading to the crimes and subsequent legal proceedings, the responses of those accused, and their portrayals since. Their own projects are means of redressing or reassessing those issues; their main characters exert pressure on the boundaries of conventional gender identity, and their treatment by the justice system and in the public responses to their trials is also portrayed as gendered. Meda Chesney-Lind recognises this as a feature of many such cases, when young women were viewed as more morally suspect and indicted for behaviours or the appearance of behaviours rather than actual crimes:

In Chicago between 1899 and 1909, one-half of the women but only a fifth of the young men who came before that city's juvenile court were institutionalized. It has gradually become clear that because court officials have participated in the double standard of juvenile justice, girls charged with status offenses [eg immoral conduct] were often more harshly treated than their male or female counterparts charged with crimes. They were certainly more likely to be held for long periods of time in often brutal detention centers, and until recently, they were overrepresented, compared to their percentage of arrests, in both training-school and detention-center population. (1986, p. 89)

Julianne Lamond has noted of *See What I Have Done* that the novel can be grouped with other works written by women and set in the same period with “a feminist imperative to re-evaluate women's roles in the nineteenth century, or to tell submerged stories of women's lives” (2017). Such authors, like Atwood, seek to cast new light on those submerged, reviled, and sometimes transgressive lives. At the same time, the novels reach forward to their authors' own times. The impact of gender on criminal proceedings remains significant for many other girls, women and trans people who find themselves more likely to be institutionalised by the criminal justice system (Smart, 2012) – a charge also levelled at police and courts by the recent Black Lives Matter movement and Stop Deaths in Custody activists in Australia. Women's treatment before the law, then, is an issue both urgent and historically and creatively compelling.

Each of these novels works as an interrogation of the spectres of the nineteenth-century character archetypes historically permitted to (or allocated to) women which may have influenced their trials, and many others, such as those analysed by Chesney-Lind (1986). Two key figures are the angel in the house and the madwoman in the attic, as analysed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their early and influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (1979). Subverting these two simple stereotypes – angelic or monstrous – was an integral part of Kent's project in *Burial Rites*: “This novel has been written to supply a more ambiguous portrayal of this woman”, compared to the “common view of Agnes as ‘an inhumane witch, stirring up murder’” (Kent, 2013, p. 335). She says of the recent biofictions of women such as Edith Thompson (charged with murder and executed in 1923):

I didn't want to just encounter another story of a woman as an angel or as the devil. I wanted complexity and ambiguity. ... That's something that I thought Atwood did so beautifully in *Alias Grace*. But I also think that a lot of these books, in providing a slightly more multi-dimensional representation, also take up that categorical understanding of woman as devil or angel and dismantle it within the text. (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, p. 112)

As Virginia Woolf outlined in a 1931 speech, the angel in the house could do no wrong, as she was purity itself (1931, p. 3). In Victorian fiction, the angel appears as Laura Farlie in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and as Dickens's Amy in *Little Dorrit* (1857). So, women who committed crimes in fiction or in life must, it was thought, be the very opposite of angels – they must instead be evil, like the characters Madame Fosco in *The Woman in White* or Mother Guttersnipe in Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886). Feminist biofiction set around the same era often takes the opportunity to confront and subvert these character roles, and their relationships with one another. Returning to Atwood for a moment, Grace Marks says: "I think of all the things that have been written about me – ... And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (1996, p. 25); the same is true for the characters of these novels. Kent's character Agnes discusses this issue, and the silencing of women's experiences, overtly in the novel:

They will not let me keep my words for myself. They will see the whore, the madwoman, the murderess, the female dripping blood into the grass and laughing with her mouth choked with dirt. They will say 'Agnes' and see the spider, the witch caught in the webbing of her own fateful weaving ... But they will not see me. I will not be there. (Kent, 2013, pp. 29-30)

Later, Kent has Agnes directly address this dissonance between the official language of authority and the voice of the accused:

Criminal. The word hangs in the air. Heavy, unmoved by the bluster of the wind. I want to shake my head. That word does not belong to me, I want to say ... But what is the use of protesting against language? (2013, p. 62)

This echoes criticism of the central figure in one of Australia's most sensational criminal trials – that of Lindy Chamberlain, charged with murder after the 1980 death of her baby daughter, Azaria. Chamberlain's ordeal in media, public opinion, courtroom, and prison was famously represented onscreen by Meryl Streep (*Evil Angels*, 1988, based on the 1985 book of the same name by John Bryson), and in a 2002 biofictional opera by poet Judith Rodriguez and composer Moya Henderson, *Lindy* (Opera Australia, 2005). Kent is sensitive to discrepancies of power attached to these gendered identity positions. Most of the people around Agnes do at first see her as monstrous – as a murderess placed among them against their will and generating strong reactions. The young priest Tóti describes "the *horror* this woman inspires" in him (Kent, 2013, p. 50; original italics). Before Agnes's arrival, her host, Margrét Jonsson, argues with the priest about her placement with the family: "I do not like to share my home with the Devil's children" (Kent, 2013, p. 39). Over the course of *Burial Rites*, however, the relationships between the characters change; although Agnes keeps her distance, most of the others eventually come to see her as more complex and less monstrous than they had assumed or had specifically been told to assume. Through the work of Kent's novel, Margrét learns that such simplistic classifications are not adequate. Partway through the novel she states that Agnes is "nothing like how [she] imagined a murderess" (Kent, 2013, p. 116). After spending weeks with Agnes, as both women approach death, she tells her: "You are not a monster" (Kent, 2013, p. 323).

Kent switches points of view frequently within the novel, "to allow space within this representation of Agnes as something other than a demon (largely done via first-person

narration), to nonetheless show that that is the way that she's regarded by those around her (illustrated in the sections of third-person)" (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, pp. 112-113). Kent acknowledges the power and purpose of such multiplicity:

You're trying to interrogate the idea of a single truth. You're trying to interrogate even the idea of authenticity. ... you're trying to alert people to the impossibility of ever having a singular kind of story – that from various points of view history looks very, very different. (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, p. 108)

She also introduces with great poignancy multiple possible lives for Agnes – the different person she might have been if she had taken her biological father's name: "Agnes Jónsdóttir. She sounds like the kind of woman I should have been" (Kent, 2013, p. 232). Through these techniques, then, pressure is exerted on historical representations of women's crimes and characters. As Ingibjörg Ágútsdóttir has noted, "This multi-layered narrative, with its different perspectives on Agnes and her actions, works to challenge and subvert the stereotype of the evil and murderous woman often seen in historical and fictional treatments of Agnes's case" (2020, p. 388).

In Schmidt's novel, part of the struggle is reconciling female identity with the act of murder. Lizzie Borden is one of the most infamous women in criminal history, accused of murdering her parents with an axe, but acquitted after a sensational trial: "a spectacle unparalleled by any previous American murder case ... emblematic of the perils of ... feminine transgression" (Robertson, 1996, pp. 351-2). In the trial itself and newspaper coverage of the day (see Robertson, 2020; Library of Congress), and the many portrayals since, that same tension is present. How could a seemingly angelic daughter and secretary of the Christian Endeavour Society become a monster? Indeed, how could any woman transgress so violently? As Cara W. Robertson notes, commentators throughout the decades struggle with "reconciling the public image of the exemplary Miss Lizzie with their vision of a murderess" (1996, p. 355). Schmidt takes another approach, never portraying Lizzie as angelic, but instead fractious and uncanny, so that other characters never quite know how to be around her – she has described her protagonist as "a horrible character ... She was very much half-child, she never grew up. And yet she was a woman of 32" (Sullivan, 2017a). The invented character of Benjamin in *See What I Have Done* believes, furthermore, that a failing of female behaviour is part of Lizzie's problem, as the police investigation plods on: "she wouldn't have been in this situation if she'd just showed emotion, gave them what they wanted to see" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 259), a criticism familiar to Australian readers who followed the Chamberlain case. Towards the novel's end, Lizzie is released from jail after the jury's finding that "women just don't do this type of crime" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 267); however, the text's ambiguities leave Lizzie's involvement a very real possibility.

In Smith's case, this troubling of gender expectations drew her to the story that became *Half Wild*. In the 'Author's note' of her novel, Smith describes first seeing the famous mug shot of Harry Crawford: "The portrait was of an indeterminate person: an unstable man and a reluctant woman at the same time. ... What would it be like to live your life oscillating between the different roles others expected to see?" (Smith, 2017a, p. 382). This gender indeterminacy is an illusion, however – it is clear in the text, in other portrayals, and in the archival materials,

that when Harry Crawford had any choice in the matter, they chose to live as a man. It was only the institutions of family, prison, the justice system, and finally hospital that forced Harry to conform to expectations of femininity. Growing up as Eugenia Falleni in New Zealand, they had been expected to conform to the ideal of the angel – to marry a man chosen by their parents, bear and raise children, and be, above all respectable. But Smith’s version of Eugenia is always a wayward child, rampaging around town, to eventually run away from marriage to a man, to live in another country and to marry a woman, raise a child (and secretly bear another), and live a respectable life as a man, Harry, until the murder charges and subsequent trial shatter that carefully constructed world.

In Smith’s ‘Author’s note’ (2017a, pp. 381-386) and interviews and essays (See Smith, 2017b and 2017c), she acknowledges the ethical issues involved in representing gender complexities in biographical fictions, especially questions of how what we now call trans and queer stories are told and by whom. In the text, Smith neither asks nor answers questions about whether Harry Crawford holds an identity as a butch lesbian, a crossdresser ‘passing’ as male, or transgender – or none of those later articulations of identity. Allison Gallagher, in a review of Smith’s engagement with the persona of Harry Crawford, emphasises the need to tread carefully when engaging with the histories of individuals from the past whose gender identities do not fit neatly into recently defined binaries and identities (Gallagher, 2017). They ask: “In serving the story, do we fail the character, and more specifically, the real life Crawford?” (Gallagher, 2017). Like Van Luyn, Gallagher raises questions of the ethics of engaging with such stories – in this case specifically about cis writers engaging with stories of trans experience: “Is the intention to shed light about a misunderstood historical figure, or to capitalise on our collectively ingrained fascination with the unknown?” (2017).

One of Smith’s responses to the ethical question of portraying the complex gender story of Harry Crawford is to create unique voices for Eugenia, Harry, and Jean, all of whom are seen by others and themselves as different people. Sections of *Half Wild* are written from each distinct point of view, but they rarely reflect on the past and there is no process of transition between them. They simply are. Smith acknowledges in her ‘Author’s Note’ that, “No one part is intended to be presented as ‘more accurate’ or even ‘more probable’ than the others, only more appropriate to the perspectives from which they’re told” (Smith, 2017a, p. 384). In *Half Wild* the same character has four different names, voices, and personae. These, along with accounts from the eyewitnesses, do not quite match up, resulting in “contradictory possibilities” (Smith, 2017a, p. 383). This narrative refusal of categorisation or to offer answers reflects Smith’s stated intention to:

oscillate between various versions of Falleni’s story in order to capture the feeling of motion sickness that might rumble at the core of an indeterminate life. For me, the contradictions, mysteries, and factual aberrations that colour the various ‘true’ accounts of Falleni’s story are intrinsic to how Falleni lived their lives, and how those lives have been played out in the media since the late nineteenth century. (Smith, 2017a, p. 385)

This is a powerful technique but one that has not gone unchallenged. We cannot help but notice that Smith does not use Crawford’s chosen name in the paratexts: she generally refers to them as Falleni. Further, Gallagher writes that:

The narrative that Smith creates is one of multiplicitious identity – the intrigue is created through the construction of Crawford’s multiple ‘lives’, as if each were a distinct and segregated identity rather than the non-linear life course that trans people experience. This perpetuates one of the more common misconceptions that cis people have about trans identity, which is that we ‘switch’ from one to another, when in fact people’s lived experience and gendered identity are intermeshed, not quarantined. (2017)

Smith describes continuing with the story despite her reservations, adapting her approach to include a range of voices, and recognising the important role that the spectators, witnesses, officials and media play in criminal trials and stories: “What kept drawing me back was not an urge to answer the questions of who Falleni was (which are not my questions to answer), but rather an urge to come to terms with how Sydney dealt with the uncertainties that Falleni’s various identities posed” (Smith, 2017b). To this end, Smith writes the trial section of the novel from the perspective of Sydney’s ‘Professional Men’ (2017a, pp. 300-324) and ‘Middle Class Women’ (pp. 325-334):

We all had our own reasons for attending the trial, and few of them were known to us. For some, the man-woman was a thing of wonder. ... We scrutinised the man-woman’s face to see if she looked guilty, but she looked only calm ... No, she had turned her face into an iron wall. (pp. 325-327)

Such a trial occurred at the nexus of what Wallace has called an “anxiety over women’s changing role [as] part of a wider sense of social transition and division, of class as well as gender” (2000, p. 11). Trial notes and reports are reproduced in Smith’s text, often reflecting attempts by the prosecution to paint Crawford as a sexual deviant – a “man-woman murderer” and a monster (Ford, 2000) – and functioning as what Gallagher calls “a metaphor of our human tendency to gawk” (2017).

In *See What I Have Done*, the newspaper reports and trial are seen through the character Benjamin’s eyes, describing the “devil daughter” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 257) who is, before any trial, found guilty by gossips engaged in “neighbourhood finger-pointing” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 258). Later he sees the jurors as pretending “they were investigating the facts when really they wanted to touch the spaces dead people had been” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 258). Kent includes archival perspectives on Agnes Magnúsdóttir’s character, some of which are reproduced in the text, without comment, as artefacts on the page and “absorbed into the tissue of the novel” (Etherington, 2013). Including such voices, details, and documents emphasises both the world’s fascination with the cases (in their own times and now), as well as the cacophony of gendered disapproval each character faces. This echoes Marie-Luise Kohlke’s claim that fiction engagements with this period often offer a “panoptic literary theatre ... which re-enacts the violating spectacle” (2013, p. 15). Through these multiple perspectives, these novels recognise the role of other people involved in each case: accomplices or culprits; family members and friends with their own perspectives, in some cases given their own voices; supporting characters including investigators, neighbours, or those providing pastoral care or acting as jailers, and the Greek chorus of newspapers, letter writers, later commentators, and gossips.

What is often silenced in this historical (hysterical?) cacophony around female crimes is the voice of the condemned subject. Kent's version of Agnes's life is reimagined as a conscious response to the exclusion of the woman's voice in the historical record. In an interview with Touitou, Kent states that: "As a woman who was largely silenced in her own lifetime, any work that sought to explore [Agnes's] private story (albeit through fiction) would necessarily need to create space for her voice, or an approximation of it" (Touitou, 2014). In another interview Kent elaborates on this point:

I was really interested ... in using language in new ways, particularly when representing women who were not allowed a voice or were not permitted to write or tell their own story in their own lifetime – to use language in ways that showed that they were outside language. I wanted Agnes's voice to be richly lyrical, to give her a voice that was highly poetic. To show not just how she saw herself, but also to indicate that that voice, that story, never had a place in the public rhetorical forms. (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, p. 113)

Schmidt's Lizzie Borden is also a new version of the character and voice: instead of the upright young Christian daughter, Lizzie here is a trickster, perhaps a narcissist, and certainly a possible if not probable murderer. The novel begins:

He was still bleeding. I yelled, 'Someone's killed Father.' I breathed in kerosene air, licked the thickness from my teeth. The clock on the mantel ticked ticked. I looked at Father, the way hands clutched to thighs, the way the little gold ring on his pinkie finger sat like a sun. I gave him that ring for his birthday when I no longer wanted it. (Schmidt, 2017, p. 1)

While Kent and Smith ask the reader to reconsider lives that have been treated unjustly, Schmidt brings us inside the untrustworthy and unemotional mind of the accused, with her clipped, unstable voice designed to provoke uncertainty. These authors' different approaches to voice and character reflect their ethical and creative decisions about how to think about and represent the pressures of gendered attitudes to criminality, purity, violence, poverty, and monstrosity, at the same time as bringing these overlooked or misunderstood figures to life on the page. The authors' deliberate use of multiplicity, ambiguity, and conflicting accounts interrogate assumptions about gender and ask compelling questions about how women who are accused of crimes have been and continue to be represented.

On genre

The genres of these novels likewise resist easy categorisation. Despite *Burial Rites*' historical setting, Kent has long disliked the term "historical fiction" (Cummins, 2013) and describes her novel as "speculative biography" (Kent, 2017). *See What I Have Done* and *Half Wild* were both defined as crime novels by Sisters in Crime, and both shortlisted for the Best Debut Crime Novel award in the 18th Davitt Awards (Sisters in Crime, 2018). *Burial Rites* has also been called crime fiction, winning the Readers' Choice and Best Debut Novel awards in the 2014 Sisters in Crime Davitt Awards (Sisters in Crime, 2014), and reviews mentioned inside the covers of later editions even refer to the work as Nordic Noir. Despite this, none of these texts

fit neatly into the crime fiction genre. Although concerned with murder, none of these novels commits to either the form or the intent of historical detective fiction. Kent explicitly states her intention not to work within this genre. Instead, what drives her is a:

desire for credibility, something within the realm of the likely. Not the absolute by any means, not the definitive, but the likely. ... [T]o write for the sake of exploring these characters or these people's humanity, not to write a thrilling crime story. (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, p. 111)

Partly the genre resistances offered in these novels are due to how and where the details of the crime are placed in the narrative, and in the revelation (or refusal) of guilt or innocence. In a traditional murder mystery, the bodies pile up at the beginning and the narrative works to discover whodunnit and ensure justice is enacted at the end. While these novels begin after the deaths, the full details are not revealed until much later, if at all, and the sense of “justice in the eyes of their peers” (Kent, 2013, p. 172) is imbricated with clear gender injustices. The novels do not seek to offer clarity around the complicity of their protagonists – rather, they are interested in character, providing context and complexity to the compelling life stories of remarkable people, and reconsidering decisions made by authorities about those people. To Kent, this complexity is the point, especially when we consider the lives of marginalised women: “We, these days, recognize that most crimes eventuate through a whole series of events and choices which are largely shaped by the wider world and the external circumstances of anyone's life” (Kent & Gardiner, 2018, p. 112). The novels' impetus is not to ‘solve’ the mystery but instead to present (to re-present) it, and to leave readers with the irreconcilable differences and unsolved mysteries of lives in the past. They do not ask us, as readers, to decide guilt or innocence, but rather to reconsider past lives, and to connect with characters who may have committed unspeakable acts. The unresolved ambiguity lives within the reader as well as on the page.

But these are not redemption stories. As Kent explains: “The novel was never intended to offer Agnes absolution” (Foyles, 2013). The very structure of the novel and the way in which the crime is revealed to the reader reinforce these questions around complicity and conscience. Kent does not dwell on the murder, but it looms over the story until we finally see it through Agnes's eyes, late in the narrative. While we witness her with knife in hand, dealing the fatal blow, it is not as simple as finding her guilty. As Agnes says: “To know what a person has done, and to know who a person is, are very different things” (Kent, 2013, p. 107). The novel works to ensure readers understand the nuances of the scenario, if not the guilt ascribed to her by others.

For reviewer Greg Chase, Schmidt's Borden novel “succeeds largely by resisting tropes of the ‘whodunit’ thriller; rather than invent easy answers to unsolved mysteries, it probes the complex inner lives of its major figures” (2017). *See What I Have Done* begins moments after the killing of Mr Borden, and loops back to the moment just before the murders at its end, so that the crime is a narrative lacuna. Schmidt also created the fictional character, Benjamin, as an alternative but malevolent observer of the Borden household. Benjamin's presence has been criticised as an unnecessary narrative device (McGrath, 2017), but his presence allows for the possibility of reasonable doubt and the contemporary theory that some unknown person, rather

than Lizzie, committed the murders. For Chase: “Even as it represents her consciousness, the novel carefully establishes a sense of ambiguity as to whether or not Lizzie is actually the culprit” (2017). Readers of *See What I Have Done* come to the text with the title in mind, asking such questions as: is the ‘I’ a statement of guilt? If so, of whose? And in the early stages of the book, Lizzie uses the phrase “see what I had found” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 4), which complicates the title further. While the text itself does not settle on a single identifiable murderer, in the final few pages Lizzie recounts the memory of her father’s funeral: “Breaking bone is a terrible sound, the way it shrieks through your teeth landing on tongue” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 313). The final line of the book cements this chilling sense, although it might still be read in several ways: “I raised my arms above my head” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 319).

Smith’s narrative choices were not driven by the forward motion of crime fiction but by her experience writing other forms:

In a way, my book is quite skeptical of pre-conceived notions of ‘narrative arc’, because in the past these ‘arcs’ have wildly distorted the truth of Falleni’s story, in order to turn it into a ‘better’ or ‘more dramatic’ tale. I wanted to write a book that resisted those impulses, and thinking about prose as if it was poetry helped me achieve this – I had structuring principles other than ‘the narrative arc’ to work within and against. (2017c)

The crime for which Harry Crawford is convicted comes late in the narrative, and in ways that make it impossible to confirm their involvement. Often this is through careful phrasing and withholding. Their character as represented is slippery, but the lies and silences are logical: young Eugenia becomes Harry for safety’s sake while running away from home, and later chooses it as their identity and name. Of the initial arrest, Harry says: “I know as well as the next bloke how the cops work these days – they ask questions until a man doesn’t know what he’s answering, and next thing he knows they’ve put an entirely false story into his perfectly innocent mouth” (Smith, 2017a, p. 125). Harry’s experience of authority and the criminal justice system is echoed in *Burial Rites*, where Agnes says of her trial, “Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn’t my own” (Kent, 2013, p. 100). Such statements cast doubt on the guilt of the protagonist, at least in the reader’s mind. But Harry, in their later persona as the weakened, hospitalised woman known as Jean Ford, reflects on the day the police showed them the crime scene:

Who planned it all: the picnic, the fire, the direction of the wind?

Wouldn’t I like to know.

Wouldn’t they just kill to know. (Smith, 2017a, p. 364)

Here, the author is not seeking to answer the question of whether or not Harry committed murder: Smith says, “I wanted the point of the book to be about not knowing” (Sullivan, 2017b).

With concepts of ‘guilt’ in these novels either not resolved or complicated by circumstances, the category of crime fiction is not a useful one in which to group them. Other elements of the texts beyond the central crime suggest different, more fruitful categorisations. Aspects of the

novels' time periods and settings place them within the long nineteenth century: *Burial Rites* is set around 1828 and *See What I Have Done* in 1892. *Half Wild* begins in the 1870s, and while some of the later action occurs after the First World War, we suggest it too can be considered in this light. Julieanne Lamond draws attention to the place of *See What I Have Done* within Neo-Victorian fiction in her review (2017), and Ágústs dóttir classifies Kent's work as Neo-Victorian biofiction: "a sub-genre of the historical novel" (2020, p. 391). Kohlke and Gutleben, among others, have made clear the interconnections between Neo-Victorian fiction set in this period and the Gothic; there is much in their analysis that rings true for these three texts, including the focus on intertextuality, "deconstructionist tendencies and [a] claim for political relevance as opposed to entertaining escapism" (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2012, p. 3). As they argue:

[N]eo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period's nightmares and traumas. At the same time, neo-Victorianism also tries to understand the nineteenth-century as the contemporary self's uncanny *Doppelgänger*. (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2012, p. 4, original italics)

More specifically, much Neo-Victorian fiction written by women borrows from the Female Gothic tradition (Wallace & Smith, 2009). As Margaret Ann Doody has suggested, "It is not surprising that the [early] English Gothic novel, with its roots in the dreams of women should become, along one line of its evolution, the novel of feminine radical protest" (Doody, 2014, p. 82). Neo-Victorian fiction, then, lends itself to the telling of women's stories from the past, and particularly to stories of horrific crimes, through the lens of the Gothic. Certainly, features of these three novels evoke the Gothic – stifling domestic interiors, female confinement, tyrannical male authority figures, fear, and 'haunting' by ghosts of the past, all acting as a metaphor for the experience of people rendered vulnerable by gender expectations. Schmidt makes much use of the uncanny in her portrayal of Lizzie Borden, and through the fictional Benjamin watching and haunting the household like a spectral presence. In Kent's novel, the supernatural appears as Natan's premonitory dreams (Kent, 2013, p. 262), and his mother's foresight (Kent, 2013, p. 183). Smith, on the other hand, subverts the Gothic's preoccupation with otherness as a source of fear, largely presenting the world from the point of view of the othered. Here, too, the multiple stories that do not fit neatly together force the reader to inhabit emotionally and intellectually confronting space where all might be true, or none. Forcing readers to dwell with indeterminacy is a powerful narrative gesture. As Dr Jordan notes in *Alias Grace* when Grace's storytelling evades him: "*Not to know* – to snatch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalizing whispers – it is as bad as being haunted" (Atwood, 2001, p. 490). He also notes that he considers this kind of withholding as a particularly female kind of power: "Grace's will is of the negative female variety ... she is all the while exerting her passive stubborn strength against him" (Atwood, 2001, p. 421).

Kohlke's related typology of Neo-Victorian biofiction is also useful here as a way to conceive of the genre of these works, as it includes categories we might borrow for all three works (2013, pp. 4-21). In one sense, they are works of celebrity biofiction, which Kohlke argues "speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures

... that may have been left out of surviving records” (Kohlke, 2013, p. 7). There is also some overlap with another of Kohlke’s sub-genres, the writing of marginalised subjects, which aims to recuperate the “untold stories of individuals [who have been] relegated to bit parts, adjuncts, or appendixes in the life-stories of subjects that mattered, while deemed of comparatively little or no matter in and of themselves” (Kohlke, 2013, p. 10). The subjects of these novels are celebrities in that their cases were extensively canvassed at the time, in media or in gossip, yet they were also marginalised: their voices were rarely heard or were distorted.

Further, the texts’ use of documents from the historical record, particularly from police or legal archives, or from contemporary media coverage, is also a common tendency in Neo-Victorian fiction. As Kym Brindle has noted: “Neo-Victorian fiction perpetuates the Victorian sensation novel’s parasitical relationship with crime reporting by re-employing and imagining documents that litigate with history” (2013, p. 91). This sets up the juxtaposition between the authorities and media attitudes towards the accused, and the protagonists’ experiences of the crime and the world. It also highlights the novels’ intentions of giving voice to the voiceless and questioning previous accounts. Yet these works do not deploy such texts innocently; they highlight their unreliability and potential for misuse: Kent and Schmidt use them as contrasts to their protagonist’s voice and interior life. Smith signifies inclusions from newspaper reports with a different font and footnotes (Smith, 2017a, pp. 303-324), but, intriguingly, states in her ‘Author’s note’ that one of the newspaper reports is invented, leaving it to readers to guess which one, to “niggle at the borders of truth and narrative flourish in fiction that presents itself as fact” (Smith, 2017a, p. 384). In all three, this intertextuality, alongside the multitude of voices, performs a role similar to that in *Alias Grace*, described by Brindle as a “patterned patchwork of voices that jostle discordantly side by side in search of narrative authority” (2013, p. 91).

Furthermore, in each of these books the accused is an unreliable witness to their own possible crimes, and the voices used by the authors intentionally convey this. As Kent notes:

The decision to place Agnes’s first person voice alongside third person narration was not only to draw attention to Agnes’s interiority and her poetic way of seeing the world, but also to examine her unreliability. ... I wanted – in these multiple voices – to suggest that Agnes is contradictory, manipulative and untrustworthy, but to also illustrate that she has ample reason for being that way. (Touitou, 2014)

In Kent’s work, Agnes is self-consciously alert to the relationship between how a story is told and how is received: “This is what I tell the Reverend. I try to tell the story in the best way I know how. I let the words come as I knit, and I snatch little looks at the Reverend’s face, to see if he is moved” (Kent, 2013, p. 149). She also questions notions of truth: “No such thing as truth”, Agnes says, “only ever a sense that what is real to me is not real to others” (Kent, 2013, pp. 110-111). Later, she wonders what the Reverend will read of her in books: “Only the things other men think important about me” (Kent, 2013, p. 110).

These techniques and dissonances dislodge readerly certainty – the reader is positioned and repositioned and never settled. Even by these novels’ ends, the identity or guilt of the murderer is not clear cut, and divisions between guilt and innocence are further muddled. What is true,

and what is assumed by the system or archives or the tabloids or the world around the protagonist? What is assumed by the reader? Are we reading about a crime or an injustice? Can we read while suspending the desire to solve, to deduct, to judge? In these ways, by incorporating the various and conflicting accounts of the murders, and by not solving the mystery of their inconsistencies, the works might arguably be described as within another genre category: as works of historiographic metafiction, defined by Linda Hutcheon (1989); that is, as novels that intentionally deconstruct or parody historiography. As Lamond notes of Schmidt's work: "To tell the Lizzie Borden story again is to enter into a conversation with history: not just the history of the murders themselves but ever since, as popular adaptations of the story respond to the concerns of their own times" (2017). These novels reach back into history to address the crimes at their heart, but they also reach out to other versions and adaptations of the story, and related ones, to interrogate whose stories are told, and how. We suggest that it is possible for novels such as these three to operate within these several genres at once: as historical biofiction, historical fiction, historiographic metafiction, Neo-Victorian Gothic, and a subversive form of crime novel, and that possibility underlines their metafictional nature.

Conclusion

What unites these recent Australian novels, then, is a sense of unresolved ambiguity, a refusal to be one thing or give one answer. To allow multiple voices to present multiple possibilities for the crime. To let uncertainty be. In this they resist the genre trajectory of the traditional 'crime' novel, opting instead for a radical indeterminacy. As these are biographical fictions, however, indeterminacy takes on further nuance. It highlights the (impossible) challenge of trying to render a life in fiction, truthfully, faithfully, completely. Given the enormous recent popularity of biofiction worldwide, this is important and timely cultural work, acknowledging the subjectivity of life writing more broadly, and the soft edges between fiction, speculation, history, and biography.

The indeterminacy demonstrated by these recent novels is not a new phenomenon. Formally, these novels are not radical. Wallace notes such elements as key features of women's historical novels from the 1980s and 1990s (Wallace, 2005, pp. 202-226). Yet in the two decades since Atwood's *Alias Grace*, the continued need for such interventions is clear. The conditions that spawned all the novels are much the same. Gender issues remain unresolved, as demonstrated by the #MeToo movement, and continued injustice within our justice systems prevails – issues highlighted not only in historical fictions but also in dystopian futures, indicated by the roaring success of Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* as conveyed on screen and her return to it in the 2019 sequel *The Testaments* (Allardice, 2019). In this context, the careful political intent of these novels – to splice open the master narrative, to let marginal voices be heard, and to draw attention to gendered injustices – means they remain radical.

Georg Lukács has described historical fictions as offering both a "prehistory of the present" (1983, p. 53), and "parables of the present" (1983, p. 338). These three novels provide both but also much more: what Wallace has called "the possibility of intervention in the future" (2003,

p. 84), and, in a related context, of using historical fictions as an “imaginative project of thinking back to the future” (Wallace, 2018, p. 229). In this, these novels are doing justice to past lives, rethinking the crimes and lives and their contexts, and highlighting how these questions remain relevant to debates around gender today and in times to come. For writers and readers, these novels illustrate possible ways to tell new stories of past crimes – without committing further injustices or creating new silences.

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Acknowledgements

An early draft of this essay was presented at the 2019 conference of the Historical Fiction Research Network (Manchester, UK). We are grateful to all those who offered suggestions and comments.