Gail Jones. *The Name of the Sister*. Text Publishing, 2025.
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Ethical Lessons in Gail Jones's Latest Novel

In a *Books + Publishing* article online, Danielle Bagnato calls *The Name of the Sister* (2025) a "literary whodunnit" but this latest fiction, by multi-award winning Western Australian author and academic, Gail Jones, is not a crime novel. Neither is it purely a literary take on the crime genre in any of its iterations. *The Name of the Sister* is a mystery, about the appearance of an emaciated, naked woman on a NSW outback road somewhere near Broken Hill; it invites critical thinking about the potential of crime fiction to impact socially in a negative way. In this regard, the narrative takes on an almost fictocritical quality in its philosophical questioning of the crime genre, along with the deeply disturbing depersonalisation of its effects on the victims. The idea of fictocriticism is postmodern by nature and engages "in genre-bending as a literary and theoretical engagement with existence and selfhood" (Rhodes 290). I say *The Name of the Sister* has an "almost" fictocritical quality because it is not an examination of the author's self-identity, but rather explores the protagonist Angie's selfhood, and her need to find meaning in the stories she writes as a freelance journalist. In this regard, Angie becomes the Gonzo journalist, highlighting the subjective, truth-seeking nature of her interviewing style, along with recurring themes of identity, belonging, grief and loss, all the while holding the crime genre to account.

To call the novel a "whodunnit" is also to miss the essential crime genre formula that this narrative rejects. The popular crime genre requires generally accepted plot beats: clues, red herrings, methods of problem solving, and a cerebral reasoning process, along with the physical pursuit required to move a crime story towards its conclusion. It is true that in the vein of the crime thriller, most chapters in *The Name of the Sister* end on cliffhangers, yet these cliffhangers do not relate to solving the crime, but rather to Angie's growing sense of failure as her career falters, and her marriage disintegrates. Solving the crime in this novel is less the main plot than something to occupy Angie, while she struggles to come to terms with a growing sense of displacement, alienation, and incorporeality that drives the narrative to a final mood of resignation. I use the term resignation with intent as the narrative, after its climax, trails away to Angie's acceptance and mourning for her lost marriage to husband Sam.

The undertone throughout this narrative indicates that the crime novel as entertainment is problematic when faced with so much human misery. The trauma of crime has a deep and widespread impact on its victims and, vicariously, on a wider audience. Crimes such as the 2020 murder of Hannah Clark, and her children, by her estranged husband not only horrified the nation and people abroad, but also had widespread impacts on family, friends, neighbours, communities and, most especially, on first responders, and the brave witnesses to the crime, who tried to help Hannah. Real crime not only impacts its victims but ripples out through direct, indirect, vicarious, and epigenetic trauma, and this novel explores the ethics of storytelling's contribution to such widespread impact. These impacts are revealed in *The Name of the Sister* through the insights of the protagonist. As problems mount in her marriage, Angie begins to make comparisons with fans of the crime genre, represented by her husband Sam. Sam is a teacher leading his adolescent pupils through a stage production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Sam's choice of play is no accident in this narrative; *Hamlet* is a play about power and criminal violence. One evening, Angie arrives home to find Sam reading a political thriller; "Almost everything he did these days annoyed her" (73). Angie is appalled by what she sees as her husband's callous indifference to the emotional upheaval crime creates. The crime genre

contains not merely a problem to be solved but requires contemplation of the ethical issues arising from any story about violence.

The narrative also presents the argument that what readers read affects their own lives. A few nights later, Angie arrives home late, and Sam accuses her of being AWOL, a word "taken perhaps from his thrillers" (Jones 85). Although she tries, Angie is not able to reconnect with Sam and wonders if he cares about her at all: "[P]erhaps he had enjoyed his thriller, and only when he was tired had she vaguely flitted into his head" (86). Sam's enjoyment of the political thriller is not linked to the mystery of the identity of the naked woman, at first called Jane and later known as Hannah Block, or what had happened to her. Yet juxtaposed as it is, to the story of Angie's role on the periphery of the police investigation, it does indicate that the crime novel, and its subgenres, is a distraction from the messy reality of human misery. As Tanya Dalziell notes, "Jones has had much to say about how and why imaginative writing might matter" (7). In this instance, violence begets violence when the leading boy in Sam's play dies by suicide. The narrative alludes to some unspecified connection between his own life and the play that causes him to kill himself. Angie blames Sam for not noticing. Sam falls apart, thinking about what he is expected to do. He says to Angie, "[I]t's just like a movie" (100). This description of how Sam feels in reaction to the pupil's death angers Angie, and she thinks, "There was no remorse here, but something else; regression to self-interest" (100). When she later tells her friend, Bev, the lead police investigator, about her husband's lack of emotional response, Bev replies, "Don't judge him" (101), which makes Angie certain that Bev doesn't understand either. She feels both her husband and her friend live in a superficial world, where emotions conjure trite responses, and the trauma of others' lives barely touches them.

As Danielle Bagnato points out, "In the end, it's Angie's literary and intellectual knowledge that saves the day—a resolution that feels a little elitist." Bagnato's observation regarding elitism may be a necessary part of the narrative criticism of the crime genre. Angie finds an old map of Indigenous places, with an obscure name, Pilgrim, written on it at a place called Apollyon, which she thinks might be a clue; "Apollyon was the devil-beast in *Pilgrim's Progress*" (133). Yet when Angie presents her idea to Bev, her friend dismisses this clue, saying, "Crime isn't like literature. It's not a system of tidy plots and neat correlations. Not like a teledrama, not like a novel" (157). Yet, the crime novel is exactly that, a system of tidy plots and neat correlations, with its conventions and plot beats driving the narrative forward towards solving the crime, and this problem solving is what many fans of the genre enjoy. While the name Apollyon is the first real clue in the narrative, it also provides a means of asking the devotees of the crime genre about the ethics of writing and reading about the nature of evil and its insidious effects.

In an echo of Jones's former novels, especially *A Guide to Berlin* (2015), *The Name of the Sister* reaches into European history and contemporary life in Berlin. In a book written by Sarah Bloch, Hannah's mother, Angie discovers that Hannah's grandmother was a survivor of the Holocaust. Hazel Smith explains that fictocriticism "will often juxtapose fictive narratives with theoretical interjections so that they reverberate with each other" (1002). Such juxtapositions are liberally scattered throughout Jones's narrative and while they are not overtly theoretical, ethical questions about the crime genre and its consequences are repeated throughout. One such juxtaposition occurs immediately after Rachael tells Angie that both her grandmother's sisters died in the war, and that Rachael and Hannah had been given the sisters' names, Rachael and Esther. Hannah did not like being called Esther, the name of the grandmother's dead sister, and took the new name by which she was subsequently called. Why this is important enough to become the title of the novel, *The Name of the Sister*, is not made clear although it seems to point to the human consequences of crimes, of such momentous trauma, continuing to reverberate through time. Another story echoing through time is the history of Australia's colonisation. In response to Rachael's story, Angie explains the historical

naming of Broken Hill by a German settler, who had referred to the land formation as a broken hill.

> Angie heard the banality of it, the lack of imagination. To the Indigenous locals it's not broken at all, but the mark of a wounded bird coming to rest and leaving its impression in the earth. (195)

This textual juxtaposition of two historical, and arguably genocidal, stories—the Holocaust and Australia's colonisation, represented by the historical naming of Broken Hill, alludes to the displacements and murders of Jewish and Indigenous Australian peoples. The juxtaposition here indicates that like the authors of Holocaust stories, or stories of Australian colonisation, authors in the contemporary crime genre, particularly true crime narratives, have an ethical responsibility to ensure that storytelling does not compound the trauma of its victims. *The Name of the Sister* is not a crime novel but a deeply considered questioning of the ethics of the genre, a lesson and call for all authors to consider their social responsibility for the impact of their narratives on the psyche of their readership.

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