

Urban Shocks and Local Scandals: *Blackrock* and the Problem of Australian True-crime Fiction

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Rachel: This is history. Our history. (*A Property of the Clan* 20)

In a 1999 praxis article in *Australian Feminist Law Journal* (Brien) I proposed that a hybrid genre 'true-crime fiction' could be, when based on rigorous research, both popular and particularly suited to writing a more discursive, more subjective, less linear criminal history – a criminal history which also focuses on ethics, emotions and human value. Such true-crime fiction utilises all the available evidence (and should be coupled with painstaking research about the crime), but allows crucial gaps in the historical record to be filled with creative reconstructions – fictionalisations – of what might have occurred. Such an approach is not, however, without dangers, and writing a fictionalised account of the infamous Dean case of 1895–6 has alerted me to the complexities of fictionalising history. Aside from doubts about the validity of the personalities fictional techniques create for historical figures, these concerns include questions regarding the ownership of the stories the author tells and other ethical issues which inevitably arise in creating fictional literature which the author intends, or the audience perceives, to document reality.

Three works by Sydney playwright Nick Enright, the plays *A Property of the Clan* (1992) and *Blackrock* (1995), and his screenplay adaptation of the latter also titled *Blackrock* (1997), point to some of the difficulties of working in this area. Most of the public controversy which these works have generated revolves around the question of whether Enright was representing actual events or, as he has repeatedly claimed, was writing fiction inspired by those events.

In the decade since Australian schoolgirl Leigh Leigh was raped and murdered on Stockton Beach near Newcastle, the story of her life and death have been written and rewritten many times. The media has generated a constant stream of sensational newspaper and television reports around the crime, etching the so-called 'Leigh Leigh case' into Australian public consciousness. This media chronicle, together with the police records, court transcripts, reports of the various inquiries into the police investigation, and a series of academic commentaries on the case, creates a

considerable, and contradictory, documentary record of what happened to Leigh.¹

While elements of the following are still unproven in law, it now seems almost certain that on 3 November 1989, during an unsupervised teenage birthday party at a Stockton surf club, 14-year-old Leigh Leigh was raped on the beach by a youth aged 15. When she returned to the party distressed and seeking assistance, Guy Wilson, 19, also demanded sex and, when Leigh refused, shouted obscenities, spat at her and pushed her to the ground. A group of up to ten males then stood in a semi-circle around Leigh as she lay in the gravel, yelling abuse, kicking and spitting on her, pouring beer on her face and throwing the bottles at her body. This assault continued inside the crowded clubhouse where she sought refuge, and then, some time later, on the beach, Leigh was gang-raped, beaten, strangled and struck on the head with a six kilogram block of concrete until she died. An 18-year-old local man, Matthew Webster, was jailed for her murder but, aside from charges against the 15-year-old for carnal knowledge (for the attack Leigh had claimed was rape) and Wilson for assault, the other perpetrators of these crimes have never been apprehended or charged.² This judicial resolution proved unsatisfactory for Leigh's family, and since Webster's sentencing, Leigh's mother, Robyn Leigh, has sought both the re-opening of the case and an examination of the police investigation, to obtain, as she has often said, justice for her daughter. Criminologist Kerry Carrington has worked in support of Mrs Leigh and has written extensively on the case, alleging poor and possibly corrupt policing, and stating as certainties that Leigh was raped more than once, and that there were more men implicated in the crimes than those arrested and tried (Carrington, 1994, 1998; Carrington and Johnson, 1994, 1995).

Enright's works have widely been understood by viewers and readers to be factual accounts of the crime, portraying actual events and the actions, thoughts and motivations of the individuals involved. This perception has endured despite repeated claims by the playwright that his works are entirely fictional. Enright's involvement dates to late 1991 when he was approached by Newcastle's Theatre-in-Education company, Freewheels, to write 'the Leigh Leigh story'. Enright, who had then recently completed the to-be-Academy Award nominated script for *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), had a reputation for tackling true stories,³ but refused, later telling interviewer Veronica Kelly that he said at the time, 'I couldn't take it on, it horrifies me too much . . . [and] what kind of response can you have to rape and

1. More than a hundred news and feature stories on the Leigh Leigh case have been published in the Newcastle and Sydney press to date, many in the *Newcastle Herald* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. For detailed bibliographies of much of this material see Carrington 1998; and Morrow.
2. In January 1990, Wilson received a six month gaol sentence for having assaulted, beaten and otherwise ill-treated Leigh. The next month, the 15-years-old boy (who was never named) was also sentenced to six months custody in a detention centre, although this was commuted on appeal to a sentence of 100 hours community service. In October 1990 Webster was sentenced to fourteen years in prison for Leigh's murder, with an additional six years to be served on parole.
3. After this nomination, Enright was deluged with offers to write other 'true-life' stories, especially medical ones, and gained a reputation for telling 'other people's stories rather than ones that ferment in his own mind' (Burchall).

murder but the conventional one?'(66). In this 1994 interview Enright described how Brian Joyce, Freewheels' director, eventually aroused his interest in the project by revealing that the event had become a 'taboo subject' for local teenagers who were unable to speak to anyone regarding the issues the crime had raised (66). Intrigued but still uncommitted about his approach, Enright travelled to Newcastle for a series of research interviews with a group of young people, their parents and other adults, and then started writing. By early 1992 he had completed a draft which was read in Newcastle and then rewritten taking this local response into account. To quote Enright (to Kelly) again on this working process: 'we kept on referring back to the community sources. I talked to counsellors and school teachers as well, but it was primarily those interviews with the kids and the mothers . . . which was the source of a lot of it' (67).

This contact with the community intimately involved with the Leigh Leigh crime encouraged, I believe, a set of local expectations for Enright's work, expectations which differed markedly from the playwright's. The local community was not unaccustomed to such research practice, for by the time Enright began his interviews, another play, *Aftershocks* – created in response to the Newcastle earthquake – had been much discussed and debated in the local press.⁴ *Aftershocks* is pure Verbatim Theatre, entirely composed of the personal testimonies of those affected by the disaster, and seeking 'to retain the authenticity and honest impact of the experiences of those whose stories were told' (*Aftershocks* [program] iii). Knowledge of the intent, process and outcome of *Aftershocks* gave many Novacastrians a false impression of Enright's project – which he began almost simultaneously with the play's November 1991 Newcastle premiere – that he would similarly seek to represent their truth of what happened to Leigh Leigh. It is also pertinent to note that alongside his international fame, Enright, having grown up in Maitland (only some thirty kilometres from Newcastle), was welcomed and trusted in a way that an outsider might not have been. Enright's motivations and working processes were, however, very different from those of Verbatim Theatre, the writer having described his creative process as one of discovering 'what it is that you're writing about' (Dunne), his ultimate aim always aesthetic before didactic or sociological.

Enright has often stated that the resulting work, *A Property of the Clan*, is not a play about Leigh Leigh and never refers directly to her, but the play was written for an audience that could, and would, make connections to the crime, and although much is dissimilar, there are numerous cognate details in the text. The distinctive title came from a much reported psychiatrist's court testimony on the group abuse Leigh suffered – that once she was raped she became the 'property of the clan'.⁵ Other similarities include the play's industrial surf-side city setting, the

4. Less than eight weeks after Leigh's murder, Australia's first fatal earthquake claimed thirteen lives, injured hundreds of others and caused thousands of millions of dollars' damage in the Newcastle area.

5. This evidence was given by Dr Strum at Webster's trial in October 1990 (R. vs Matthew Grant Webster 5).

ferry across from the city, various details about the party, the ages of the main characters – including the victim Tracy Warner who was 14, pretty and a virgin before the party (just like Leigh) – the violence committed against her (including being fatally bashed around the head with a rock), and much of the community response to the crime including the wild rumours that circulated after Leigh's death. It is true that neither the rape nor murder is shown on stage in *Property*, but the audience, knowing what happened to Leigh, readily fill in the details from dialogue, such as the description of a nightmare Jade (Tracy's friend) has: 'Faces. Full of hate. I was all wet. They were looking down at me, throwing things. Cigarette butts. Hate everywhere' (15). Members of Leigh's family, disturbed by these and other similarities (Leigh's cousin and close friend, for instance, was named Tracey) voiced their concerns to Freewheels. Sharon McMillan, the chairperson of the company, responded to the whole community in the *Newcastle Herald* with assurances that the play's subject was not Leigh Leigh, although she did acknowledge that the research for the play did include 'the murder of a young woman in Newcastle some three years ago'. The teachers of Newcastle High School, where Leigh and Webster had been students, found the connection too close and did not book the play, but *Property* was extremely successful in other schools and theatres in the Newcastle area and around Australia, and has won Enright a number of prestigious awards.⁶

In early 1994 the Sydney Theatre Company commissioned Enright to develop the 45-minute long *Property* into a full length mainstage production. The play *Blackrock* eventuated, premiering in Sydney in August 1995. This play is more fictionalised than *Property*, with the story revolving around Jared (a completely invented character) who witnesses – without intervening – the gang rape of Tracy. The play articulates Jared's moral dilemmas in facing the consequences of this inaction and the question of whether he should inform on his friends, and portrays his disintegrating relationships with his mother (who has breast cancer), his girlfriend (who finds Tracy's body), and his best friend (the murderer). Whereas *Property* depicts the possible motives underlying the act of rape – contextualising the crime against classroom discussions of the Holocaust, the forced servitude of Australian Aboriginal children, and the oppression of a gay student – *Blackrock* centres on the boys involved in a single crime and (however guilty they are) constructs them as victims of their society: 'kids trapped in a world they didn't make and violent in response to it' (McCallum). *Blackrock* is riveting and moving theatre, but public understanding and reception of this popular work continues to be both dependent upon, and complicated by, the connections viewers make to the Leigh Leigh case.

Enright and the Sydney Theatre Company have always maintained that while developed from *A Property of the Clan* which was inspired by the Leigh Leigh case, *Blackrock* is a completely fictional story. None of the company's promo-

6. Among other awards and nominations, *A Property of the Clan* won 1993 Australian Writers' Guild Gold AWGIFS for Best Theatre in Education Play and Best Script In Any Medium.

tional material mentioned Leigh Leigh, or anything to the effect that the play was based on a true story. However, every review, feature article, even most of the single sentence 'What's On' listings for the play made much of the connection, some ruminating at length on the Leigh Leigh case and many featuring photographs of Leigh.⁷

While the latter drafts of this second play were still being written, Enright took the unusual step of beginning to work with Australian actor-turned-director Steve Vidler on a screenplay for a film version, also to be titled *Blackrock*. In this third reworking Enright attempted to move further from Leigh Leigh's story by creating an even more fictionalised plot (focusing in more closely on Jared, his moral choices and the nature of male friendship) and claiming his research was 'generic . . . these characters are drawn on a much wider basis of experience than just the interviews that I did' (Full Script Treatment). The connection to reality was given new momentum, however, when the film was largely shot on location in the very places where Leigh had lived and died: Caves Beach, the Stockton ferry and Newcastle city.

The call for extras for the film was answered by many Newcastle teenagers but not everyone welcomed the production. When the film crew arrived in Stockton in late August 1996 they found previously arranged locations suddenly unavailable and the local media hostile. *Newcastle Herald* journalist Jane Worthington articulated local objections that 'the details of the script [are] . . . too close for comfort . . . Leigh Leigh is still fresh in the minds of many Novocastrians. The similarities are not by chance'. A local psychologist's suggestion, that individuals from the area identified personally with both the crime and the people involved because the killer was from within the community (Worthington), explains in part the heat of local anger – ire which was exacerbated by the film makers' repeated denial of any connection between their work and Leigh. Even Freewheel's Brian Joyce (who had initiated *Property*) was critical of the way the filming in Newcastle was handled, arguing that it was crucial for the film-makers 'to acknowledge that Leigh Leigh's tragedy had been the catalyst for the film's creation . . . They have come to Newcastle to film . . . and they need to acknowledge those choices' (Worthington). Various other individuals and community groups in Newcastle and Stockton voiced their disquiet and their exasperation over what they understood as the repeated raking over of a sad past that should have been laid to rest, the appropriation of stories which they felt were theirs to tell, and their negative portrayal in these literary/cinematic productions. The dead girl's family, who never wavered in their certainty that Enright's works were true-crime biographies of Leigh, themselves, and those involved in the crimes committed against her, objected vehemently to the film, believing the film makers were 'feasting on an unfortunate situation' (Rose), and that Leigh's tragedy was not only being insensitively and negatively portrayed, but trivialised and exploited as well. They were also outraged by what they (and many others) felt was a sympathetic por-

7. This is as true for the return STC season of the play in 1996 as for its premiere season in 1995, and continues to be so for the numerous Australian productions which have been mounted since 1995.

trayal of Leigh's rapists and killer in *Blackrock*.

By the time the film was released in 1997 Enright was telling reviewers, 'I've never researched the Leigh Leigh story. I [only] picked up the general outline of it and used its mythological shape as the starting point for the piece' (Rose). When interviewed in April that year the writer tried to distance himself further, stating that even when researching *Property* he 'deliberately stayed away from the actual case. I didn't talk to any of the participants. I didn't talk to anyone who was in any way involved in the investigation, that wasn't my interest' (Stewart). Newcastle has similarly separated itself from *Blackrock*. A recent comprehensive feature on the youth-led cultural renaissance of the city detailed cinematic production in the area from Mel Gibson's first film *Summer City* (1977) and parts of *Mad Max* (1979) to a short film festival, Shootout, held in July 1999 to raise the city's cinematic profile, but made no mention of *Blackrock* (Morgan).

Perhaps some of the condemnation *Blackrock* attracted reflected public frustration with the legal system. Would the response to Enright's works have been more benign if justice had been seen to be done in the Leigh Leigh case? The Australian film *The Boys* (1998) was also loosely based on a brutal and much reported local crime but attracted very little negative comment from the public.⁸ Unlike the Leigh Leigh case, however, the five men involved in Anita Cobby's kidnap, rape and murder were arrested and received lengthy jail sentences, with the main perpetrators never to be released. Is literature, in the Enright example, somehow left solely responsible for poor policing and the failings of the justice system?

The negativity expressed in response to Enright's work by Leigh's family and members of her community underscores how much care and sensitivity must be exercised when constructing narratives, fictionalised or not, around actual crimes. It must be noted that the conflation of Enright's work with reality was at times farcical. One radio review, for example, recorded that the film 'documented the murder of Leigh Warner on Blackrock Beach near Newcastle' (Davis). Such confusion reveals how completely the two narratives, the fictionalised works of Enright and the (complex and, at times, contradictory) factual record about Leigh Leigh, have become intermingled in public understanding. I believe any literary work which is based (however loosely) on real crimes, must take into account not only the facts of the case, but also the way these facts are generally understood. Crimes must never be seen as just raw data for the writer: the Enright example underscores how the greatest dangers are encountered in transforming what is understood as a private, tragic event into a public object of entertainment. As Robert Drewe commented about the film *Blackrock*, it was 'asking a lot of Australian audiences to expunge reality from their memories'.

8. Indeed, *The Boys* (based also on a play, *The Boys*, by Gordon Graham) attracted a great deal of critical acclaim, receiving the most feature film nominations (thirteen) for the 1998 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards and winning in four categories.]

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