

Dark Places: True Crime Writing in Australia

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In studies of crime fiction, it is orthodox to note that crime has a particular significance in historical and contemporary constructions of Australian nationalism (Knight, *Case* 243; Bird 5). The settlement of Australia as a penal colony, the violent and unresolved history of relations between settler and Indigenous cultures, and a tradition of national mythmaking surrounding criminal figures, also indicate the centrality of true crime and its narration to formations of Australian national identity. In her novel, *A Child's Book of True Crime*, Chloe Hooper suggests that the entire narrative of colonisation in Australia is a suppressed 'Ur-true-crime-story' (97):

Between each line in these books there must be another story, which has to be imagined, written in blood. Always true, this blood story will haunt you and keep you awake, and the grown-ups should never know of it. (Hooper 237)

The duality identified here, between the lines in the book and the blood story, parallels a tension that Walter Benjamin perceives between history and story telling (87-90). In Benjamin's terms, history's ways of describing and recording experience in the age of mass media—whether in the form of the novel, the short story, written history or the news—focus upon individualistic explanations of events, upon the communication of information, verifiable, plausible and expendable. In contrast, the story functions as a form of epic memory, connected to community, repeated and built up through layers of oral circulation, and incrementally incorporated into the experience of storyteller and listener (87-93). True crime narratives, defined by a set of truth claims coupled with the detailed recreation of lived experiences of crime, simultaneously perpetuate both modes of describing the past. Beneath their detailed, singular histories of a specific set of events—the lines in the book—they are haunted by a diffuse, unresolved and suppressed set of stories that generate their cultural capital. Contemporary Australian true crime texts typically concentrate upon particular events and figures—Ned Kelly, the disappearance of the Beaumont children, Azaria Chamberlain, the Peter Falconio murder—as cultural flashpoints, returned to, repeatedly, across

a range of media and narrative forms. However, the genre also includes a longer history: from colonial true crime narratives to mid twentieth-century pulp fiction. Yet despite the genre's complexity and breadth, its Australian forms have received only sporadic critical attention. This article outlines a brief textual and critical history of true crime writing in Australia, before addressing some of the methodological problems attached to a genre that relies simultaneously upon a rhetoric of truth claims and the activation of myth, superstition, gossip and story as its narrative strategies. It concludes by examining John Bryson's *Evil Angels*, a seminal text in the history of Australian true crime, as an exemplar of the genre's dual investment in history and storytelling, information and imagination.

A history of true crime writing in Australia might begin with some of the first accounts of colonial life, in the official records, letters and diaries of the convicts, military and free settlers who formed the first populations of colonies intimately connected with crime. From the early nineteenth century, almanacs, broadsheets and ballads containing accounts of sensational cases emerged from Australian presses, and from the early 1860s onwards examples of early true crime reportage can be found in weekly papers, as well as detective fiction masquerading as police memoir, such as the *Australian Journal's* 'Memoirs of an Australian Police Officer' and 'The Detective's Album'. True crime accounts of bushranging formed an early subgenre of nineteenth-century true crime writing. As early as 1818, Michael Howe published *The Last and Worst of the Bushrangers of Van Diemen's Land* 'from Authentic Sources of Information' and instituted, as Brian McDonald has shown, a number of accounts of bushrangers and histories of bushranging (1-3). The activities of the Kelly Gang generated their own industry of publication in the nineteenth century, from the 1879 *The Kelly Gang, or, Outlaws of the Wombat Ranges*, probably by George Wilson Hall, to a children's 'Penny Blood': *Ned Kelly: The Ironclad Australian Bushranger/by One of his Captors*. The focus of true crime shifted from the bush to the city with the case of the metropolitan bigamist and murderer Frederick Bailey Deeming, the 'Demon'. After killing two of his wives and his four children, Deeming was executed in 1892, and his case began to attract multiple pamphlet accounts from the early 1890s. His story still recurs as a kind of Australian Jack the Ripper narrative in current accounts of sensational Australian crimes, as does that of Colin Campbell Ross, accused of the 1921 murder of 12-year-old Alma Tirtschke in Melbourne's Gun Alley and posthumously pardoned this year. The local pulp fiction presses of the 1940s recycled these stories repeatedly, together with the Gatton murders, the Pyjama Girl murder, the Shark Arm case, the Murchison murders of Snowy Rowles and the 'Brown Out' serial murders.

Invincible Press published a *True Australian Crime* series from 1947 which again revisited these stories, as well as hangman's tales; other pulp titles from this period include the collections *Hugh Buggy's Murder Book* and *Dr Watson's Case Book*. The same stories reappear in Australian pulp magazines of the period, a local publishing phenomenon generated in Australia and Canada in the postwar period by restrictions upon foreign imports, including American magazines (Strange and Loo 11). In 1946, a monthly magazine appeared devoted to true crime from Australia and New Zealand, *Famous Detective Stories*. It combined the usual suspects—Deeming, the Gun Alley tragedy, the Gatton murders, the Pyjama Girl murders—with less well-known contemporary and historical crimes, criminal biographies, and tales from the casebooks of star detectives. Other pulp magazines of the 1940s and 50s, particularly men's magazines such as *Man* and *Peep*, regularly featured true crime stories and photo essays.

One of the startling features of these nineteenth and early twentieth-century true crime narratives is their familiarity with some of the popular forms of contemporary true crime writing. The popular media, such as magazines and pulp fiction, in which many early true crime stories were published, and even the stories themselves in their concentration upon murder, serial killers and a criminal underworld, have parallels in the current industry of true crime publishing. One of the major differences, however, is scale, linked to changes in the industry of true crime writing in the late 1960s in both England and America. In America, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* were among the first examples of a new genre, which dovetailed with experiments in new journalism to produce new forms of non-fiction writing. In England, trial accounts already existed, such as Sybille Bedford's 1958 *The Best That We Can Do*, but with the 1966 trial of the Moors murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the direction of true crime publishing changed (Biressi 67-71). This case was the first example of a sensational crime in England to generate a continuing industry of true crime writing, capturing the public imagination partly because of the scale of its depravity. Of the couple's multiple murders, that of ten-year old Lesley Ann Downey involved photographing the naked victim, and recording her screams and pleading with music superimposed by Hindley. Alongside daily media attention and contemporary feature articles surrounding the case, two separate accounts of the 1966 trial were published within a year. Together with short stories, poems and songs, the case has generated at least three other book-length accounts, together with a memoir by Downey's mother and Ian Brady's first-person analysis of the phenomenon of serial killing. True crime publishing in the 1960s in Australia, however, tended more

to generic pulp collections, such as James Holledge's *Crimes of Passion* and his *Australia's Wicked Women*. The crossover into the multiple non-fiction accounts surrounding a single sensational crime that characterised English and American true crime writing of the 1960s did not occur in Australia until the watershed case of the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in 1980. The daily media reports surrounding this case, together with feature articles in newspaper supplements and monthly magazines, were quickly followed by eight 'instant' books between 1980 and 1984 and produced one of Australia's first examples of the new journalism, John Bryson's *Evil Angels*. Multiple accounts of the Chamberlain story continue to be generated, in a now well-developed true crime market. According to Nielsen Bookscan figures for October 2005 to October 2006, over half the value of all titles sold in Australia were non-fiction, and true crime occupied around 1.7% of that value. The genre is growing significantly: in the period January to October 2003, 192 749 true crime volumes were sold and in the same period in 2006, 264 000 volumes were sold. While crimes from the early twentieth century still appear, these accounts return again and again to a later set of stories: the Beaumont children's disappearance, the crimes of the Nedlands 'monster' Eric Cooke, tales of Sydney police corruption of the 1970s, the Anita Cobby murder, the backpacker murders, the Falconio case. Supplemented by the biographies and autobiographies of criminals and detectives, collections by journalists such as the *Underbelly* series, analyses of the legal system, and texts such as Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* and Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, these stories form the diverse and growing genre of Australian true crime.

Given the rise in popularity of true crime writing over the past decades in Australia, the critical neglect of the genre is surprising. There has been significant recent work on Australian crime fiction, following Stephen Knight's seminal article exposing crime as the hidden underside of Australian fiction and his 1997 thematic overview of the field. Yet true crime texts are rarely considered in these overviews and apart from some isolated articles on individual texts, the genre in Australia is almost critically invisible. True crime has been excluded from significant recent work on Australian crime fiction largely because of its non-fiction status. Its truth claims and its tendency to irresolution are two of a number of generic markers that make reading true crime very different from reading crime fiction, although, as Mark Seltzer has recently noted, crime fiction and crime fact exist on a continuum in which both genres reflexively borrow from each other (*True Crime* 17). The critical neglect of true crime writing is partly attributable to the genre's characteristic hybridity—there is often another generic frame

through which a text may be critically examined, such as history, memoir or biography. In addition, true crime writing crosses boundaries other than those of genre. It traverses popular and elite, canonical and non-canonical cultural forms and disciplinary borders, and perceptions of true crime writing as cult fiction or genre fiction have limited its appeal for some forms of traditional literary criticism. Perceptions of the genre's ephemerality, its reliance upon formula and its associations with voyeurism and prurience also contribute to its critical neglect. In cultural studies, however, true crime has been the subject of some critical examination: analyses of the Chamberlain case in the mid 1980s were followed by a dedicated issue of *Australian Cultural History* in 1993, Noel Sanders's 1995 monograph *The Thallium Enthusiasms*, and most recently, Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, a dazzling fictocritical account of a Central Queensland hinterland haunted by crime. Its privileging of myth and story over history—'History is stories making facts happen' (50)—and reliance on anecdote and memoir make this text a compelling but very personal history: it engages with the past and with the genre through a subjective lens that is both illuminating and limiting. Neither Sanders nor Gibson reference any other work in the field of true crime studies, nor each other. Both monographs seem to be simultaneously incursions into and retreats from the field, self-enclosed, with the texts upon which they rely springboards rather than topics for analysis. It seems to me that there is a space here for a different form of literary history, one focused on the true crime texts themselves within local historical and political contexts.

In England and America, true crime as a genre has fared marginally better: Mark Seltzer's *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*, Anita Biressi's *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories* and Steve Haste's *Criminal Sentences: True Crime in Fiction and Drama* are supplemented by work on true crime within the growing field of murder studies, and by scattered books and articles on true crime writing in particular historical contexts. Both Biressi's monograph and most analyses of the representation of sensational murders in America examine the ways in which true crime texts intersect with their political and cultural contexts at particular historical moments: Britain under Margaret Thatcher, American society in nineteenth-century New England, America before the Civil War. They use Foucauldian discourse analysis to show how true crime writing produces readers both fearful of and intrigued by crime, locating true crime texts within wider cultural debates about crime, punishment, deviance and civil subjectivity. I am interested in a methodological approach that speaks to both national and international critical fields: one that keeps alive some of the elements

of myth and story emphasised by Australian cultural studies, but which also examines in detail the conflicting discourses at work in true crime texts at particular historical moments. This hybrid methodology relates to a narrative tension in the genre itself. True crime paradoxically relies upon a rhetoric of truth claims and an immersion in the quotidian detail of experience to activate powerful mythical subtexts, subtexts that invest certain crimes with cultural significance. In *Evil Angels*, when a witness, Joy Kuhl, recounts of Lindy Chamberlain that 'She just stares . . . I could feel her eyes burning holes through my back' (432), a single sentence calls up the powerful subtext associating women, infanticide and malevolent maternity with witchcraft that generates this case's cultural significance. This generic marker of everyday detail both masking and triggering suppressed stories is a hyperbolic form of the tension between story and discourse, event and meaning in all texts: the double logic of narrative existing in unresolved and productive tension.

True crime writing separates itself from crime fiction by its rhetorical claims to be 'based on fact', 'real' or 'true'. Following post-structuralism's insistence on the problematic relationship of language and reality, in which language is seen as constructing reality rather than offering a transparent representation of it, the importance of this self-proclaimed relationship to the real is open to question. A true crime text constructs one of a number of competing versions of a set of events that can claim to be no closer to an objective or a material reality than any other. True crimes can only be retrieved through unreliable memory or a range of textual sources such as photographs, interviews, police reports, court transcripts, and newspaper accounts, and the resulting narratives declare their dependency upon unstable textual interpretation at the same time as they claim to present the facts. This tension between the elusive nature of the truth and a desire to present a corrective account of a set of events, often for a political purpose, is constantly negotiated within the genre through a range of narrative strategies. These are either designed to create an illusion of objectivity—including the use of an omniscient narrator, exhaustive or selective research and the manipulation of evidence—or embrace the interpretative instability of postmodernism, seeking, as in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, to blur the boundaries between 'the' and 'a' true account of a set of events. Nonetheless, Carey's transparently metafictional strategies not only create a fiction of historical authenticity—the map, the bundles of documents, the borrowing of nineteenth-century language and punctuation from the Jerilderie letter—but also work to authorise the text's narrative of the Kelly history over others. This emphasises the constructed nature of all accounts of history at the same time that it presents one as more convincing. Carey puts metahistorical methods to the

political purpose of exposing the way history is constructed by the powerful while allowing the marginalised subject, the Irish Catholic criminal, to speak. As Andreas Gaile argues, the text's stress on the constructed, polyvocal and partial nature of history evokes a deeper argument about ways in which the past can only be imagined, favouring the story over any idea of attaining the 'truth' (38-9). The tension in Carey's text between the techniques of truth-telling and the impossibility of telling the truth is typical of the genre. The grounding of true crime in lived experience means that the neat resolutions of detective fiction are often unreachable; cases remain unsolved, motivations elusive. James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* centres around a search for his mother's murderer that degenerates into a series of increasingly remote dead ends, and even Truman Capote's 'immaculately factual' *In Cold Blood* resists the authorial omniscience and closure for which the text strives: the motivations of the main characters for murder are never fully resolved. Here, the inherent meaninglessness of the crime intrudes even as its meaning is explicated, and it is this epistemological tension that haunts the genre. By both retrieving a set of experiences and delineating the impossibility of that retrieval, the genre gestures beyond empirical history to a story that can only be imagined, a communal understanding both generated by and exceeding narrative strategies. If, as *A Child's Book of True Crime* asserts, 'we read true crime books to learn about ourselves' (105), this knowledge comes not in the sense of discovering the truth, but in a sense of our awareness of ways in which narratives, or stories, shape our individual and national subjectivity.

Beyond the genre's problematic but crucial relationship to truth, it matters that this writing is defined by grounding its narratives in material histories. As Biressi argues, it is a form which 'proffers the reader stories of *lived experiences* of crime, violence and murder' (16). As such, it has an immediacy and an intensity that separates it from fiction, and which lends it the illusion of proximity. This issue of proximity highlights, as Megan Sweeney has noted, a congruence between the representation of violence in film and in true crime (149). In Steven Shaviro's theories of the 'disturbing intimacy at the heart of terror' (146), the spectator's visceral responses to the depiction of violence reduce the reflective distance between the spectator and the text, destabilising the boundaries between its interior and its exterior. While Laura Browder's study of readership shows bodily responses to reading true crime are common (and I have found myself covering my eyes as I read), the intimacy generated by true crime writing is of a different order. It derives less from readers' immersion in film's sensory visual world, than from their connection and affective engagement with detailed recreations of the lived histories of others. True crime produces something more complex

than a straightforward psychoanalytic identification with the criminal or victim. The reader is brought into intimate contact with another set of lived experiences, an intimacy that generates a sense of permeability, a blurring of boundaries between the fictive and the real, the experiences of the self and others. The imaginative and affective alliances generated here effect the same crossing of boundaries between the interior and exterior of the text that are celebrated in theories of the masochistic, cinematic body. In this process the subject is not stabilised by means of its identifications, but is 'captivated and "distracted", made more fluid and indeterminate, in the process of sympathetic participation' (Shaviro 52). The potential proximity of crime, often violent crime, charges the genre's narratives in a way that not only defines the genre but generates some of its critical marginality: specifically, the uncomfortable pleasures derived from a vicarious engagement with others' lived experiences of transgression and violence. The issue here is not the dubious validity of the genre's truth claims after poststructuralism, but the impact of this rhetoric and this context of lived experience upon the narrative.

In suggesting that true crime texts operate in this way on the level of affect, I am following Shaviro in questioning forms of psychoanalytic theory that work from the assumptions that we are Oedipally fractured subjects whose originary desires for wholeness and plenitude are balanced by the experiences of lack, alienation and disjunction that mark entry into society. Both film and true crime, by means of its necessary association with lived experience, offer instead a 'Bataillean ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment—neither Imaginary plenitude nor Symbolic articulation, but the blinding intoxication of contact with the Real' (Shaviro 53). In true crime, it is lived experience of a particular kind, linked intrinsically with violence and transgression, which generates the genre's power. In crime fiction, aberration often evokes and polices the norm it seems to transgress; it rehearses and resolves cultural anxieties by closing the case and apprehending the criminal. But in true crime, the impulse towards finding definitive answers is frustrated by its intersection with a set of experiences that can only be retrieved partially, through the unreliable medium of visual or textual records and memories, and which often intervene to frustrate closure. As Sara Knox argues, the desired 'authoritative version must remain, mirage-like, in the horizon of the murder's telling' (9). The degree of this frustration of closure depends, of course, on the crime itself: there is a difference between cases that narrate ongoing mysteries and those in which the criminal is known. Nor is it to say that many forms of true crime writing dispel an impulse towards closure or detection: indeed, many narratives begin with an initial

crime and are concerned not so much with police attempts to identify and capture the criminal than with the psychology underlying that criminality and the 'ascription of an intelligible motive for the crime' (Knox 111). Yet at the same time as these texts seek to attribute psychological motivations to the criminal, to unpack an individual's character and influences, they demonstrate the impossibility of reaching such a definitive understanding of character. As only a partial understanding can be retrieved in true crime, the stories made from a series of differently recorded and recollected events offer, at best, hypotheses. The texts exploit both a desire for objective distance and control, and its failure: what remains is an intimate contact with lived experiences of violence or transgression that are unresolved, uncertain and exceed all attempts at containment within definitive boundaries. True crime as a genre activates a level of imaginative sympathy, then demonstrates that such an intimacy cannot be objectively distanced precisely through its attempts at narrative closure. It brings readers close to lives at moments of crisis, and leaves them in state of unresolved, uncomfortable proximity, haunted by a 'blood story' on a level of affect.

In this close embrace, where the boundaries between the real and the fictive dissolve, a space is opened up for the exploration of social and cultural anxieties, disturbances and crises that resist simple resolutions. The affective power of the genre is intensified by the kinds of crimes that become true crime narratives. One of the most important true crime texts for both its role in the development of the genre and its place in Australian cultural history is John Bryson's *Evil Angels*, an account of the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain and the legal process leading to the trial of Lindy and Michael Chamberlain. Published in 1985, it is, as Peter Pierce notes, 'the most ambitious Australian essay in the New Journalism' (174). Bryson's narrative relentlessly exposes the conventions of objectivity in journalism, focusing on the ways in which evidence presented in the inquest and trial surrounding Azaria's death was shaped by the media into stories damaging to the Chamberlains. One of the strongest subtexts of this work is a critique of the unregulated power of individual journalists to select and shape stories according to their perceived 'news value', and the text strongly suggests that such media bias indirectly affects the processes of the legal system in its influence upon police, the judiciary, witnesses and jury members. In one of multiple examples, Bryson represents the Macquarie news network's national coverage of key trial evidence finding that damage to the abducted baby's jumpsuit could not have been caused by a dingo. The passage shows the news media's investment in Lindy Chamberlain's guilt: a reporter hopefully tries to dispel disappointment at the new evidence with 'We've got the

blood to come', and the narrator adds 'The plain fact was that nobody wanted a fizzer' (417-8). The text typifies the open-ended practices of new journalism in its use of many different narratives of the same event, Azaria's disappearance, through witness statements, interviews with police, and the contexts of the inquest and trial, and in its awareness of the media's role in mediating what becomes news. Yet in other ways the text resists these techniques. Behind the shifting narrative perspectives through which the story is pieced together is a controlling omniscient narrator, outside the media process and bias, implicitly laying claim to an authoritative narrative. This narrator observes the Alice Springs community, privy to their secrets yet outside their number: 'everyone in Alice Springs knows the fence has quite a different objective' (12). By the second chapter, the text's position on the dingo's ability to leave clothing relatively undisturbed is clear: 'What a dingo wanted with underclothes, Judy couldn't guess. She gathered them up. There wasn't a mark on anything' (21). It is the beginning of a case made by the text, aimed towards proving the Chamberlains' innocence. Bryson seeks to authorise his own version of the narrative of Azaria's disappearance over the partial and biased versions of other journalists, exploiting the strategies of new journalism to reinforce a more traditional journalistic stance in which a 'true' version of events, if not the truth, underwrites the project. There is an unresolved tension in the text, between the difficulty of retrieving the past, and a perception that justice was not done in this case: between the omissions, contradictions, personal and institutional biases in conflicting accounts surrounding Azaria's disappearance, and a sense that a true version of events has been obscured. That real lives were at stake here intensifies the authority of Bryson's narrative, further reinforced by the post-publication history of Lindy Chamberlain's eventual release from prison with the discovery of new evidence. In a stunning strategic move, *Evil Angels* harnesses true crime's interest in the malleability of past events to the new journalism's embrace of the inevitability of subjective bias and fiction in the media as a way of authorising its own, omniscient version of events. It seems to accept bias, imperfect recall and contradiction, but so arranges and selects its material as to attribute that bias exclusively to other accounts.

The stories that haunt this narrative are not those connected to the material detail of the Chamberlain case, but those that lead to the superstition and fear surrounding it. The blood stories told here depict sites of deep-seated cultural unease: towards unfamiliar religious and cultural practices, unfamiliar landscapes, and at an even deeper level, towards the spectre of the hostile mother. These stories remain outside the text's critiques of the media and the legal system, and at times are reinforced by the narrative itself.

The opening sequence of events represents nineteenth-century American Seventh Day Adventists as fanatics, describing the deaths of two children from exposure—‘dead from cold’ (6)—as their parents waited for the second coming of Christ. Introducing this detail so early in the narrative participates in the superstition and bias associated with Seventh-Day Adventism that the book as a whole condemns. There is a doubleness here: the text explicitly argues against unfounded superstition, but it also activates that subtext and it remains, unresolved, to haunt and destabilise its case. The same kind of ambiguity attaches to the text’s approach to landscape. It works hard to demystify the dingo’s capabilities and practices as part of its case for the innocence of the Chamberlains, and to expose the ways in which ignorance of the inland Australian landscape and its animal inhabitants contributed to the popular misconceptions generated by the trial and its media representations. At the same time, however, a seam of cultural ignorance and fear of the inland landscape, the desert, is called up in the text. As Peter Pierce suggests, the death of an infant in the outback activates a ‘deep reserve of Australian folk memory’ (175), linked to nineteenth-century lost child narratives and connected to larger national concerns of dispossession and displacement. The detailed evidence that Bryson supplies from dingo experts also resists any mystification of the interior and its fauna, but its result, a representation of the dingo as predator, is oddly congruent with mythical associations of an outback environment of danger and violence. The text repeatedly attempts to decry and control the forces of folk memory and superstition in its call for facts, for knowledge and for coherent narrative, but it demonstrates not the triumph of the rational but its opposite: the power of myth, superstition, irrationality and affect to derail such attempts at containment.

Nowhere is this more demonstrable than the text’s construction of Lindy Chamberlain. The cogent case that Bryson makes for Lindy’s dedication as a mother, the reinforcement by credible independent witnesses of her version of events, and her emotion during the inquests and trials concerning her daughter’s death, counter her media representation as a ‘witch’ with its opposing archetype, the virtuous mother. Despite this, Lindy’s conviction for murder means that its conclusion is dominated by the spectre of a kind of monstrous femininity that must be locked away. At issue here is the question of women’s power: the absolute power of the mother over the survival of an infant in the early weeks of its life is represented as something to fear. This cultural unease surrounding the relationship between mother and infant has a long reach. Early modern witches were often associated with the care of young children, occupying an uncertain status in the household, such as wetnurse, which combined both responsibilities for the

infant's wellbeing with a limited access to power. The ambiguous period of lying-in following childbirth, where the housewife's confinement led to her temporary abandonment of household authority, led to the increased power and later condemnation of other women, often wetnurses, as witches, associated with the death of the mother or the child (Purkiss 100-7). Figured as kinds of anti-housewives and anti-mothers—they soured milk, rotted grain, and spread disease, dirt and pollution—witches were also accused of killing children. The narrative of *Evil Angels* demonstrates the construction of Lindy Chamberlain as witch, as 'strange': 'they ought to burn the bitch' (342). The unfamiliarity of her religion contributed to this construction, particularly the unfounded connection of the name Azaria with 'sacrifice in the wilderness'. But I would like to suggest that a deeper and older distrust of feminine power is also at work here, arising at a cultural moment in Australia in the mid-1980s when women's access to power and the public sphere was coming into question. As Briar Wood notes, for no demonstrable reason, the public hostility to the Chamberlains was directed at Lindy, not Michael; at issue here is women's agency and power within the household (72). Bryson's omniscient narrator attempts to order Lindy's femininity into the image of the devoted mother, and the jury attempts to contain her as an anti-mother in jail, but what remains with the verdict in the Chamberlain trial is the failure of objective distance and control, and the power of superstition and folk memory. The subtexts that the narrative activates exceed its self-imposed boundaries: despite her exoneration, the reader remains haunted by Joy Kuhl's Lindy: 'her eyes burning holes through my back' (432).

Evil Angels exemplifies how true crime as a genre depends upon a rhetoric of truth claims and the recreation of lived experience to release the power of such stories, myths and folk tales. The genre relies upon the operation of sympathetic participation, upon affect, in narratives driven towards answers, illuminations and closures that are never fully achieved. Behind its truth claims, it is the genre of supposition, of story, of imagination, and it is a central form in which rhetoric of nation and subject in terms of criminality and transgression are able to be rehearsed and, I think, left unresolved. For Ross Gibson, in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, the cultural historian tells these stories as small ceremonies of mourning, transaction and resolution; that one might 'live peaceably once the past has been acknowledged and made palpable in the public domain' (82), the badlands finally 'made redundant' (83). If this is the case for cultural history, I am not sure that this is the way the genre of true crime works. By harnessing the power of stories and myth in its peculiar mix of intimacy, horror and irresolution, it keeps them alive. True crime daily re-inscribes in our present

fictional forms what Mark Seltzer calls ‘the half-credences that make a public mind or a social bond possible’ (*Crime System* 564): the imperfectly acknowledged, shared beliefs of a colonial past imbued with hostility, loss, trauma and violence.

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