

HANNAH IANNIELLO

An Isolated Incident by Emily Maguire

Picador: Pan Macmillan, March 2016, 352 pp, \$32.99

I told him what the police had told me. I didn't spare him any details, because they had not spared me and I supposed I wanted to share the pain of it. But now, well, I am reluctant to repeat it, to tell you the truth. Bad enough to have heard it all from my own mouth that morning. Bad enough that I saw what they left behind, and heard what the coroner made of that mess... Bad enough to guess at what the blokes at the pub are whispering... And if it sounds good to you then go ahead and read the goddamn coroner's report and look up those obscene photos for yourself. I'm not your pornographer. (22)

Emily Maguire's *An Isolated Incident* hums with a constant layer of the unsaid: unspoken truths; unknown assailants; and unsayable violence. Shifting between a hostile first person perspective and an outsider's perspective, the writing is often crisp and economic and yet creates a palpable atmosphere of mistrust and silence. However, subtle flaws in the characterisation and the late introduction of a paranormal element unsettles what could have otherwise been a compelling and delicately drawn representation of violence, loss and obsession.

Set in the small town of Strathdee, the novel begins with the news of the death of a well-liked town beauty, Bella Michaels. Everyone in the narrative is coloured by the brutality of the murder, but the two primary voices – Bella's sister, Chris, and an inexperienced Sydney crime reporter, May – are completely consumed by it. Aside from flashbacks and reflections upon the time before Bella's death, every moment of the novel is a response to the death, as Chris acknowledges, "This is my life now" (12).

Strathdee is a long way from any major city, and the sense of isolation and the portrayal of Chris as trapped within the violence of Bella's death is reminiscent of Evie Wyld's *All the Birds Singing*. However, where Wyld captures the isolation of her protagonist Jake in the brutality of the landscape, Maguire instead uses the closeness of the town – and the people within it – to isolate her characters. Though visitors come to visit Chris in her sadness, she is aware of their "rubbernecking or trying to get in on the tragedy" (23). Similarly, when Chris

does go back to her job at the local pub, she feels her customer's silence (142) and the people of the town simply become an unspecified 'Everybody' on the day of the funeral (158). There are nearly always people commenting on or watching Chris, though any real contact or concern is rare and primarily comes from her ex-husband, Nate, who keeps his distance.

Chris and May are both constantly aware of the gaze of others – particularly men. Despite many differences between them, both women react in similar ways, using their attractive qualities to elicit favours, information or sex. On this front, however, May is more aggressive as she has a purpose to gather information about the murder, yet she finds out little more than any other reporter – despite befriending a policeman and a local man. While these men seem to help May with her enquiries, there is always something left unsaid in every conversation, creating a cycle of mistrust and fear.

Within this silence and through other stories from the town – including a husband shooting his wife, and another man beating his pregnant wife – there are underlying narratives of intimate violence. These narratives of people who hurt each other even though they are in love are recurrent enough to become the primary theme of the novel. As well as these physically violent events, Chris emotionally manipulates her ex-husband Nate, while he also cheats on his new wife. May has been betrayed by a man she loves. Chris' back story includes multiple violent men and an alcoholic mother. It is almost as though the town is so riddled with these types of intimate violences, that it is systemic and a part of the fabric of the town.

Interestingly, even three quarters of the way through the novel, there is not necessarily a sense that the big question – who killed Bella Michaels – will be resolved. This is in part due to the title of the novel, which suggests a randomness in the event that could not be predicted or perhaps solved, but also the tone throughout, and the constant reminder through the first half that there are no leads in the case.

The chapters alternate between Chris' voice and the narration of May's perspective of the town. The contrast between the voices is well crafted yet it is Chris' voice that carries the narrative and the emotional interest. It is strong and conversational and honest. The sentences often lack grammar and directly reflect her mood, and she speaks directly to the reader with the effect of bringing us into the narrative, but also making us complicit in her decisions:

Look, I'll say this much: my intuition is bloody unreal. If you ever see me about to go against it again, slap some sense into me, will ya? The sex was fine the first time. The problem was I'd planned for it to be the *only* time. (182)

Unfortunately there are times when Chris becomes too poetic in her intonation – such as when a reporter asks her how she felt about seeing her sister's body she replies:

You seem to be a human being. Try imagining what it would feel like for you. Then understand that this feeling will never go away. That moment when I saw her, it's forever. It's part of me now. (53)

Aside from the fact that this response is jarringly different to her expletive-laden conversation through the rest of the novel, for a highly distressed undereducated bar maid in a small town, raised by an alcoholic mother, this moment of clearly expressed emotional clarity snaps the reader out of her character. Yet this is by no means the only element of the novel that breaks the otherwise powerful tone.

The self-deprecating qualities of the principal characters, and their pessimistic perspectives of the world suggest that Maguire is trying to represent this world in a realist manner. There's an ugly brutality about the town and Maguire does not refrain from highlighting the unpleasant qualities of its residents. Even Chris, in her first-person perspective describes her moonlighting as a prostitute as a matter of fact, and May's intention to use both her body and the story to make her journalistic mark is never hidden.

However, Maguire makes the choice to introduce an element that defies this realism: Bella's ghost. Although there have been hints throughout, by the second half of the novel we are launched out of this very brutal realist realm into a world where ghosts cause chills and flickering lights.

First it was the cold. You'd think I'd have been used to it by now but it's not the kind of thing you can get used to. It's like someone's slit your skin at the top your spine and poured coldness in. 'I don't know what to do,' I said aloud and for a moment nothing happened. Then the smell of wet earth filled the kitchen. It was so strong and thick, I started to gag... I could hear a little girl's voice underneath, *I'm cold Chrissy, I'm cold I'm cold I'm so so cold* and the wet earth was in my mouth and throat again. (270)

Initially, Chris' violent visions and uncontrollable shivering – even the voices in her head – seem plausible reactions to trauma. However, Maguire pushed these further, inducing a mysterious blackout, the screaming of Bella in Chris' ear, and even images of blood on her hands that force her into isolation.

When Chris briefly raises the idea of ghosts with May, the concept is further supported by May's own memory of a ghostly sighting as a teenager. So instead of rationalising the ghost away, she trawls the internet and finds further validation for Chris' haunting by relating it to other brutal murders in years gone by.

After half an hour she came to the page of a 'spirit-whisperer' who had visited Old Government House after hearing that 'there were many tormented spirits in need of a sympathetic ear. Among them, May read with a rapidly increasing heart rate, was a fourteen-year-old Maisie Noakes...(278).

Finally Chris travels to see a psychic, and learns that her sister is trapped and she has to let her go and suddenly the whole novel takes on the tone of an urban myth. Chris is told that her mother and grandmother are distressed, waiting for Bella to "pass over" (320).

The unfortunate effect of the paranormal element is that it diminishes the power of the world Maguire has thus far created, and it comes creeping into the narrative like a *deus ex machina* to change Chris' wallowing grief-stricken isolation. Through the haunting, Chris' thus-far harsh honesty becomes unreliable, and May – at best – is transformed into a naive young woman trawling the internet for proof of ghosts.

Until the introduction of this element, the strength of the novel has come from the impression that this has the potential to be an 'Everywoman' narrative: this could be any woman in any town. The potential randomness of the event and its intimate violence is effective. I would go so far as to say that the imagined unspoken atrocities have the potential to induce real horror. However, the introduction of the paranormal element detracts from this power completely.

Interestingly, Evie Wyld also has the suggestion of other-worldliness in her aforementioned *All the Birds Singing*. However, where the tension of Wyld's beast provides an unresolved climax to a novel haunted by violent memories, Maguire's ghost dissipates the tensions created in the realism and diminishes her characters to the tabloid pages of the conclusion.