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*Subverting the Serial Gaze:  
Reimagining the Serial Killer in Australian Fiction*

Justin Kurzel's 2011 film *Snowtown* opens with a shot of the flat, South Australian countryside from a moving car window. A pulse-like soundtrack scores the scene. After a moment a monotone voice-over begins: a character based on convicted serial killer James Vlassakis narrates a dream he had, which climaxes with the sparse description of a Chihuahua yapping out of a gash from a man's neck that looks like a 'big fucking mouth'. This chilling opening sets the tone for the rest of the film: a relentless, suffocating, deeply unsettling fictionalisation of the infamous 'bodies in the barrels' serial murders that took place in the northern suburbs of Adelaide between 1992 and 1999, and which culminated in the discovery of eight dismembered bodies submerged in drums of hydrochloric acid, concealed in a disused bank vault in Snowtown, a small town 145 kilometres north of Adelaide.

Upon its release, *Snowtown* received critical acclaim. It was awarded a special mention at the Cannes film festival, and praised by journalist Jim Schembri as being one of the most unnerving serial killer films ever made, as well as one of the best Australian films of all time. Kurzel's directorial debut tells the story of the circumstances that led to Australia's most prolific serial killer John Bunting and his small group of loyal accomplices, Vlassakis included, murdering at least eleven people—all of whom were acquaintances, friends or relatives—over a seven-year period. Grimly realistic, with sporadic scenes of explicit torture and violence imbued with the familiar banality of outer-suburban Australia—think church hall dances, shopping trolley races, pokie machines—*Snowtown* emphasises the poor socioeconomic conditions operating in the bleak, working class calm where the murders took place. Rather than situating the crimes as an act of pure evil that existed in a vacuum, the film advocates that it was the cultural

disintegration operating in the disenfranchised black spot that allowed for Bunting to gain the trust of the community and for the atrocities to go undetected by authorities for almost a decade. Serial homicide is not depicted as an isolated, unexplainable, and sensationalised phenomenon, but rather, a horrific and wretched product of social and cultural dysfunction.

I have always had a keen fascination with narratives of serial crime, from thriller films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Se7en* (1995), to the slasher-genre progenitor *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and the true-crime biographies American serial killers by Ann Rule. I was disturbed by the macabre and inventive methods of torture, terrified by the construction of the serial killer as a horror villain, and feverishly entertained all the while. This interest was mindless, and went largely unchecked until *Snowtown* was released. Beyond the outback-horror romp of *Wolf Creek* (2005) very rarely had I seen Australian serial crime depicted in film. Seeing these Australian idiosyncrasies reflected back at me within the context of brutal violence was jolting; however, more remarkable was the film's startling distance from the mechanical iterations of how we usually speak about, and narrativise serial crime.

*Snowtown* is an anomaly when viewed in context of other serial killer films, as it cannot be easily categorised as a horror, thriller, or detective procedural. There is a stark absence of police presence, and though details of the offender's prosecution are displayed before the end credits, there is no police intervention in the film. Instead, it is Jamie's perspective the film adopts. A vulnerable and traumatised victim of abuse, Jamie is taken under the wing of Bunting and a father/son dynamic between the two rapidly develops. *Snowtown* offers no respite from the brutal subject matter through familiar genre tropes, and as Jamie is pulled into Bunting's charismatic orbit he gradually shifts from innocent victim thriving off the attention and guidance of a male role model, to a corrupted participant in the murders. Though Jamie is drawn as a sympathetic character, the boundary between victim and perpetrator becomes blurred as the film progresses. It is through Jamie's eyes that the film highlights the banality of violence, and its shocking realism stands in stark contrast to the sanitised or glamorised way that serial murder is usually presented in both film and fiction.

Thematically, the film charts confronting territory, as the emphasis is placed on the character dynamics between the killers, and their families and community, and serial crime is not relegated to realm of uncomplicated, barbaric monstrosity. As Kurzel states in *Interview* magazine:

It's almost like a love story, really, between father and son. It's definitely not a horror film. The violence doesn't lead the film like violence usually does in a horror film. I think you spent the most time in the film with John and Jamie, and the building of that relationship and the dismantling of it. To me, it's a love story between a father and a son.

This ambiguous rendering of the crimes leaves the viewer with a sense of unease that is far more realistic and familiar than what occurs with the systematic Othering of the serial killer that viewers generally witness when encountering fictionalised accounts of serial homicide. The draw of the film—and what also makes it difficult to stomach—is its utterly human and utterly Australian portrayal of serial murder. As a writer, and as an avid consumer of the serial killer genre, *Snowtown* was revelatory.

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I recently completed the manuscript of my first novel. It took me four years to write and thankfully looks nothing like it did when I first started. When I began to make the leap from short stories to long form fiction, I had a very specific idea of what I was interested in writing: a literary novel set in semirural Queensland, told from the perspective of a young girl whose grandfather was revealed to be a serial killer after his death. At that point I was broadly interested in the legacies of serial crime; however, I did not consider it to be a 'serial killer novel', and in early drafts the serial killer was mostly peripheral to the story, acting almost as a subplot or device that heightened the sense of isolation and menace of the rural setting. Despite my enduring interest in serial crime, when the idea behind my novel was germinating, I did not view the subject of serial murder to be central to the narrative. It was tangential to the text; not what the story was *about*. Though I was interested in fictionalising such an anarchic and unstable character, I was not particularly concerned with dwelling on the salacious details of the crime and the identity of the murderer. Rather, it was the rippling effect of transgressive crime that piqued my interest.

As part of my preliminary research, I read a mountain of serial killer novels, from the seminal *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and its sequels and prequels, to Patricia Cornwall and Michael Connelly airport thrillers, as well as the more contemporary *The*

*Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) by Steig Larsson and *The Killing Lessons* (2015) by Saul Black. However, what surprised me in this initial survey was the seeming lack of novels that moved beyond genre and into literary fiction. The number of serial killer novels that have been published since *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1988 is vast, yet the subject matter has been predominantly constructed within the boundaries of genre fiction, which consistently propel the fictional serial killer into “mythic territory reserved for the most extreme taboo violators” (Simpson 11), and has for the most part, remained rigidly formulaic. Though there are significant examples of commercially and critically successful novels that move beyond the genre’s conventions and play with the tropes in subversive ways, such as Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) and Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (2002), none of these are constructed in a way similar to what I envisioned for my own work, and none of these deal with serial murder in an Australian context. I could not find any novels that resembled the serials murder I had grown up reading about in the newspapers and watching on television: the infamous photograph of Ivan Milat, rifle in hand, staring down the camera with the carpet of a moustache obscuring much of his face; the images of Leonard Fraser’s unimpressed gaze burned into my brain. These men were not criminal masterminds or anti-heroes. They were brutes and misogynists and irrevocably damaged humans.

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The contemporary, public fascination with serial murder emerged in response to a number of serial homicide cases that received a great deal of media attention in the United States in the 1970s and. It was the high profile trials of notorious American serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy in particular that sparked popular interest in the subject matter, and the widespread hysterical response to these crimes by the media—and in turn, the public—signalled the start of an ongoing fascination with serial homicide in popular culture and beyond. Despite the media situating serial murder as an American phenomenon and a “modern mythology” (Jenkins 101) given the apparent influx of serial homicide cases from the 1970s onwards, it is not a contemporary phenomenon and can be dated back centuries. Historic serial murderers exist from a range of periods: Vlad the Impalor (Romania, 1400s) Gilles de Rais (France, 1400s), Elizabeth Báthory (Hungary, 1500s/1600s), and serial killer prototype, Jack the

Ripper (England, 1800s). However, it was not until FBI agent Robert Ressler's coining of the term 'serial killer' in the 1970s that there were "systematic descriptions and analyses of a multiple-murder problem" (Jenkins, 8). Serial homicide was then intensively examined and defined in the criminological field, and in turn, it is only in the past few decades that the public has understood serial murder to be a distinctive category of homicide.

Since this rapid increase and sustained popular interest in serial killing developed in the last half-century, serial homicide has been extensively treated across a range of disciplines beyond criminology, including sociology, psychology, medical research, and the arts. As the fascination with serial murder emerged, popular media narrativising serial murder has been produced concurrently. There are endless examples of true-crime novels, television programs, films, graphic novels, and even musicals depicting serial homicide, all of which contribute to the ongoing and ever evolving construction of this cultural manifestation. These renderings are approached with varying degrees of complexity and many take steps to reveal something previously unconsidered about serial murder, including *The Fall*, the British crime drama which pays similar weight to the serial killer's family dynamic as it does to the police investigation; the graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf, a school mate of notorious serial criminal Jeffrey Dahmer who recounts his recollections of Dahmer as an alienated teenager at his high school in Milwaukee; and David Fincher's *Mindhunter*, a period crime series that explores the development of criminal profiling in the 1970s. However, in Australia, it is rare to find serial homicide interrogated with this same degree of innovation. Though there are numerous acclaimed crime novels by Australian writers that engage with the subject matter, the majority of these novels adhere to the conventions instilled by the archetypal American serial killer novel. *City of Light* by Dave Warner (1995), *Promise* by Tony Cavanagh (2012), *Hindsight* by Melanie Casey (2013), *Hades* by Candice Fox (2014), and Dorothy Porter's 2007 verse novel *El Dorado*, are all Australian serial killer novels published over the last few decades. Although Porter's verse novel is innovative in form, beyond the atypical setting, these Australian novels are classically generic in style and plot.

Though serial murder is statistically rare compared to other forms of homicide—in Australia and beyond—the sheer endurance of the myth of the murderous psychopath stalking the outback attests to the fact that it is a significant part of Australia's psyche nonetheless. A 2007 report by the Australian Institute of Criminology compiled and

analysed a comprehensive list of eleven different groupings of serial homicide that occurred between 1989 and 2006: a total of 52 murders committed by thirteen offenders over a seventeen year period (Mouzos and West 1), including ‘Rockhampton Rapist’ Leonard Fraser, ‘Frankston Killer’ Paul Denyer, ‘Backpacker Murderer’ Ivan Milat, and Bunting and his three accomplices. Moreover, well-known crimes committed preceding the cut-off date for this analysis include ‘Schoolgirl Stranger’ Arnold Sodeman, ‘Sydney Mutilator’ William MacDonald, ‘Brownout Stranger’ Edie Leonski, ‘Night Caller’ Eric Edgar Cooke, and ‘Granny Killer’ John Wayne Glover. Of all the notorious Australian serial killers, it is Milat in particular who looms large. When Milat was arrested for the murders of seven backpackers in the Belanglo State Forest in New South Wales in the 1990s, the case received an enormous amount of media attention in the 1990s. From this case the Australian serial killer archetype emerged: a patriarchal, white, violent drifter who lives outside the margins of society, both symbolically and geographically; a wanderer with knowledge of the land who terrorise females and asserts his masculine dominance in the process.

While researching these Australian criminals and their acts of depravity, it became apparent that the crimes and inner workings of the criminal mind are not all that interesting. In both fictional and true-crime accounts, we obsess over the killing methods and their schemas. We relentlessly privilege the grisly and salacious details of the crime over its aftermath and consequences, contributing to the glorification of the serial killer. While researching Australian serial killers at the early stage of the novel’s development, I came across a newspaper article from a high-profile murder trial. In 2010—a year prior to the release of *Snowtown*, and around the same time I began sketching out the plans for my manuscript—Ivan Milat’s grandnephew Matthew Milat brutally murdered his childhood friend David Auchterlonie in the Belanglo State Forest, the same area where his great-uncle committed seven murders decades before. With another friend, seventeen-year old Milat lured Auchterlonie into the national park and murdered the defenseless victim with a double-sided axe. The murder was recorded on Milat’s mobile phone, and in the court documents, it was revealed that Milat bragged to friends about the premeditated murder: “ you know me, you know my family. You know the last name Milat, I did what they do”.

Though the idea of trying to evoke sympathy for a callous murderer is abhorrent and offensive, the effect family history has on the ancestors of notorious criminals (and how knowledge of such traumas shapes identity) is a subject worthy of interrogation. I

became compelled by the inner-lives of the descendants of serial killers and how they cope in the aftermath of horrifying crime. Unlike generic serial killer texts, which reduce the serial killer to a simplistic ‘narrative of origin’ or propels them into mythic territory, my novel does not offer the reader this ease of identification where the actions of the killer is reduced to tidy explanations. I do not want to leave the reader with a sense of closure and explanation that is so common to the genre. I am not interested in writing a novel that focuses on the gruesomeness of the crime or the immorality of the killer. Like *Snowtown* director Justin Kurtzel, I am not interested in writing a horror or procedural novel; rather I aim to shift the focus away from the accumulation of dismembered and disfigured bodies, and interrogate the intergenerational traumas wrought by this accumulation of bodies.

Rather than focusing primarily on the killer and criminal investigation, the story is told by a young female observing the generational effects of transgressive and anarchic violence on her family. I always intended for a young girl to narrate the story, and for her point of view to constitute how the reader pieces together the family’s murky history. The defining convention of generic serial killer fiction is the presence of a detective-like figure whose perspective the reader encounters the fictional world through and whose logic of detection the reader adopts. It is the detective’s role to use rationality and logic to identify and apprehend the offender and return the fictional world to ordered safety—and, consequently, the reader’s adoption of their perspective makes the reader an active participant in the return to normalcy. Considering it is the predominating presence of the detective who investigates and makes sense of the crimes and relays this analysis to the reader, positioning this character as narrator in my novel disrupts the idea of a detective as plot logic. By shifting the traditional perspective of the detective to that of a young girl who is tied to the serial killer in a significant, familial way—and keeping any presence of the law enforcement to a minimum—this element of detection is completely removed from the novel and an unconventional telling of events can emerge.

This choice of narrator also challenges the uncomplicated structure of generic serial killer fiction. In these texts, the narrative is nearly always linear, and in line with the genre’s emphasis on logic and rationality triumphing, such texts are chronologically ordered and follow a predictable narrative arc. This always culminates in the apprehension of the killer after the detective pieces together the puzzle that leads to the killing pattern being stopped. However, as the serial killer in my novel was never captured and died before his crimes were discovered, the ‘cat and mouse’ appeal of the

detective procedural plot is dissipated, as is the tangible sense of threat that is typical within the genre. As a result, there is no murder to open the novel and entice the reader into the narrative. There is no predictability to the way the narrative progresses, and the reader cannot trust in the transparency of genre to follow ordered storyline conventions. Over the course of the novel the chaos of the anarchic serial killer figure is not controlled and the danger diffused; in fact, given that the serial killer is already dead at the commencement of the novel, he cannot be controlled or diffused, and still continues to operate as a free-floating disruptive figure by the novel's conclusion, continuing to haunt the lives of his descendants. Rather than the traditional threat—that is, that the serial killer will kill again and again over the course of the novel—it is the legacy left by the serial killer where the sense of horror and instability lies. This threat is elusive and lingering, rather than definable and easily contained through predictable genre conventions. As a result, this sense of danger and menace is not relieved by the novel's conclusion, thus dissolving the closure and clear resolution that is essential to generic serial killer narratives.

Through sustained empathic engagement, my novel aligns itself with a group of characters whose stories are rarely acknowledged. The impact that the serial killer's crimes have had on the family is immense, and the way the family deals with the crime is consistent with trauma scholar Cathy Caruth's claims that trauma is "amnesic and unspeakable" (334). The family do not discuss the past, yet the consequences of his actions have irreversibly infected the dynamics of the family. The "collective guilt and shame" (Schwab 180) that stems from descending from a violent and infamous perpetrator propels the narrative forward; the lingering effects of abject violence and serial crime are highlighted through the "psychic deformations" (181) caused to the far-reaching 'victims' of serial crime.

Alongside *Snowtown*, Australia has already seen some subversive, and even groundbreaking, representations of serial crime in recent years. 'Moorhouse Murderers' David and Catherine Birnie have entered back into the public's consciousness due to the release of *Hounds of Love* (2017), a psychological horror film loosely based on the murders the couple committed in Perth in 1986, and which explored the psychology behind the couple's dysfunctional relationship. More significant is the 2016 podcast *Bowraville*, produced by The Australian and acclaimed for its reinvestigation into a case that was largely ignored by the media. The five part series explores the unsolved murders of three aboriginal children—Colleen Walker, Evelyn Greenup and Clinton Speedy-Duroux—



killed within the span of five months in Bowraville, New South Wales. The Walkley Award-winning podcast is largely presented through interviews with the victim's family members, and highlights the systematic racism and subsequent failures of justice surrounding the investigation.

These examples of nuance are a rarity, and most encounters with serial killers relegate them to a mythological status. Because serial homicide is so far removed from what is considered normal behaviour, the excessive public and media interest in serial killers is logical. By encountering the serial killer within the boundaries of the genre, the dangers of the anarchic figure is diffused through genre conventions and the murderer is presented as an uncomplicated villain. Though these generic serial crime narratives have their purpose, the pleasure of the genre and the generic trappings creates a false narrative that sits at odds with real life experiences. Shifting these narratives towards realistic portrayals of abject and anarchic crimes can result in a far more accurate and far more human portrayal of the far-reaching consequence of serial homicide in Australia. By relocating the serial killer onto a spectrum of violence and as a product of culture, the under examined stories that stem from these horrific crimes can be examined.

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