

OUT FROM UNDER THE SHADOWS

Review of *Honeymoon Dive*
by Victoria Kuttainen

In the 1930s when Sydney University lecturer RG Howarth began what was to be *Southerly*, Australia's first scholarly literary journal, he was in part responding to a proliferation of new magazines that had hit the commercial market in the 1920s and 30s. These he dubbed derisively, along with FR Leavis "the yellow press," with one brush tarring the middlebrow commercial literature these publications featured and reviewed and their purportedly shonky journalism. This boom in glossy commercial magazines benefited from changes in print technology that allowed splashy colour, American-style advertisements, and new formats. And as the new mags featured modern stories that were accessible as well as aspirational, it was clear that changes in the market

meant that reading tastes were in flux, too.

Like Leavis, Howarth and the *Southerly* crew felt it was their solemn duty to preserve the best and brightest of highbrow literature from the gnashing of lowbrow teeth that had beset the commercial press. They both stressed the importance of an informed, highly educated intellectual elite whose existence within university English departments would safeguard civilisation against this crass commercialisation and lowering of intellectual and cultural standards.

Reading through the commercial press of the interwar period shows just how much this period was a mirror of our own, and just why the likes of FR, his wife Queenie, and the *Southerly* gang may have felt threatened. These magazines were doing something new and different, with an edgy appeal to a wide swathe of the reading public. But as the war wore on and the market changed, reading culture changed yet again. After the war, these magazines settled on a more discernibly commercial market with a pulpy print-mill feel, just as the little magazines and scholarly literary journals began to emerge in the English departments of the time. The commercial magazines took the low and lucrative road, and the literary journals took the high road, the one with the edifying view. Now these literary journals are fighting to stay alive.

In the face of this, in the year 2010, we are looking forward toward a new set of 20s and 30s, and just as they say, the more things change the more they stay the same. The aspirational magazines that led the day in the older set of 20s and 30s are still very much the ones that are setting the agenda now, even in the midst of our new changes in printing, reading tastes, technology, and distribution: *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker* — glossy middlebrow aspirational mags, pretty to hold and fondle, now paired with an online format to quickly spread the word via viral media like Facebook.

These are not just survival stories, but stories of triumphant resilience and versatility in the face of market dynamics, and a lesson can be imparted from them to struggling literary journals. All of these magazines have long showcased their commitment to printing high quality writing in a commercial milieu, and they also reflect the changing reading tastes of the day. While many scholarly literary journals refuse to take their sights off the view from the highroad, these commercial magazines have not hesitated to review and feature books that suit public tastes, and in this day and age these books are increasingly non-fiction and middlebrow. A brief perusal of the book reviews over at *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* reveals that books of the ilk of Jason Vuic's *The Yugo: The Rise and Fall of the Worst Car in History* and Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The*

Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer jostle for space on the eclectic bookshelf next to Jonathan Franzen's new book *Freedom*.

But head over to the literary journals and there's often a gawping silence, particularly in Australia, accompanied by a reluctance to review certain kinds of books, most notably the ones thought to sit somewhere on the shelf beneath high literature: in this case, crime writing.

Which brings me to my review in this issue of Lindsay Simpson and Jennifer Cooke's *Honeymoon Dive: The Real Story Behind the Tragic Honeymoon Death of Tina Watson*. Here's my dilemma: I co-edit with one of the book's authors the literary journal in which I pen this review. Most reviewers and editors wouldn't touch that ethical quagmire with a ten-foot pole. But Lindsay knows that's just the kind of person I am: I find a quagmire, I Google the definition of it to make sure I'm using the word correctly, and then I poke and prod and swirl my little index finger in it until the cows come home. Back to their homely quagmire, that is.

I'm writing this review precisely because I know other literary journals probably will not, and that that's a terrible shame. Because despite the fact that I'm friends with the author, I can say with some authority that it's a very good and very well-written book, and certainly

one that should not be dispensed with simply because it might be considered a “lowbrow” crime book. True crime is one of those genres that defies categorisation: it has long held a wide appeal to both the highly educated and the barely literate reader, and while some true crime books do capitalise on scandal others reflect deep reflection and careful research. Even more reason to review it.

On the same shelf where I’ve put *Honeymoon Dive* after reading it sits a very celebrated crime book of a different kind, Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man* which most writing prizes could not fete enough when it came out last year. Hooper’s book bravely took on a topic that desperately needed public attention but which most writers were afraid to touch, as Rosemary Neill pointed out in an article in the *Australian* in 2009 that reviewed Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* (“Inconvenient Truths,” June 27).

In *Honeymoon Dive*, former *The Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Lindsay Simpson and Jennifer Cooke who is on leave from the paper, have similarly taken on a topic that cried out for attention: the unexplained suspicious death of young American bride Tina Watson while on a diving trip off the Great Barrier Reef near Townsville in 2003, for which the diver’s husband Gabe Watson has received mere 18-month sentence in a Queensland jail.

Chloe Hooper’s writing has been lauded as brave and sensitive by the literati, while on the other hand Simpson and Cooke have been overlooked, or worse: derided as ambulance-chasing profiteers. Certainly the unjust and tragic deaths of Cameron Doomadgee in detention on Palm Island and Tina Watson on the bottom of the ocean off the dive wreck the *S.S. Yongala* are different kinds of deaths that signify different levels of injustice. But my question is this: why do they also deserve different levels of literary journals that will deign to review them?

I believe the answer has more to do with the origins of literary journals, taste, and reviewing in Australia than it does with the books themselves. As Simpson and Cooke point out in their forward, the genre of true crime has a long, reputable, and established history in the USA that traces its origins to Truman Capote, pioneer of “creative non-fiction”. The US gives prizes for crime writing—the Edgars, named for Edgar Allen Poe, are now 64 years old; in Australia, the Ned Kelly Awards are only 15 years young, and Lindsay Simpson has also been instrumental in starting her own, the SD Harvey Award for Short Fiction Crime Writing, in part to celebrate the legacy of her former co-conspirator in crime writing, the late Sandra Harvey. In Australia, “the Neds” have helped cross over Crime Writing to the higher end of

“acceptable” middlebrow with Simpson and Harvey winning the lifetime achievement award in 2007. Chloe Hooper’s *Tall Man* won in 2009. With Hooper’s book—because of the gravity of the social issues in Indigenous communities which it addressed—most people did not even realise they were reading true crime.

While fictional novels were once the bread and butter of the publishing industry, creative non-fiction now exceeds sales in bookstores to the extent that writers like David Sedaris—the bestselling American humorist whose devilishly funny tales satirise characters modelled closely on his family members—was urged by his publisher to change the classification of the books he writes from “short stories” to “non-fiction” for marketing purposes alone. Yet, despite growing study and enrolments in the field of autobiography, the literati in the university continue to cling to fiction, and the fiction sanctioned by literary awards at that. Why this is the case I can only impute to the legacy of FR Leavis and his crew, and also to the way in which the growing field of cultural studies in the 1990s evolved quite separately and distinctly away from English departments.

It’s their sad loss, in my view, if these departments, but more importantly their journals which have a role to play in connecting with the reading public, continue to overlook non-

fiction writing, particularly when writers are being urged to brand their literature as such because fiction is now perceived to have lost its caché. It’s also a sad loss, in my view, if serious literary journals write off whole genres of writing, like true crime, because of its perceived “lack of standards.” As most of its readers are only all too aware, the standards true crime writing must live up to are rigorously ethical, not least because not sticking to strict guidelines translates in this genre to massive legal repercussions.

In my view, the real art to *Honeymoon Dive*, and all true crime, then, is how its authors manage to tell such a compelling story when we as readers already know what really happened: that is, the results of a highly publicised case. In this case, the reading public already knows the irreversible fate of Tina Watson at the bottom of the ocean floor, and Gabe Watson then in a jail cell in Queensland. But what the readers don’t know is *what might have happened*, and it’s here Simpson and Cooke manage a compelling read without verging into speculation or libel. And there’s some real art to that.

And there’s the unavoidable question of ethics involved in that delicate dance, too. Immediately after the publication of *Honeymoon Dive* I congratulated my colleague Lindsay Simpson on her book (as you do), and then I left her a Facebook message (as you also do).

But the Facebook message I left was one that I couldn't bear to ask her about in person:

"Um, Lindsay—just saw the cover. Kind of surprised. And you TEACH journalism ethics? So, what's the ethics of this?"

To her great credit, Lindsay Simpson immediately came to see me, as she does. As a trained journalist, Simpson never dodges the hard questions, or flinches from asking the ones some of the more literarily trained academics might avoid due to taste. Lindsay Simpson does head the Journalism program at James Cook University, and she does teach ethics in reporting. She was unfazed by my question, and glad I had asked. Glad, I think, because it's a question on most people's minds when they see the lifeless body of Tina Watson on the cover of her book and they raise their eyebrows but dare not ask. For me there was an almost prurient reaction to this image of the dead woman's body: I viscerally recoiled from the image but also could not turn away. It spoke to me about all the anxieties I had as a reader approaching this book and indeed the whole genre of crime writing: the anxiety that I was rubber-necking, not reading; the anxiety that I was infringing on something private, not public; the anxiety that I did not know what to think of the whole genre of true crime.

But Lindsay's answer to my question of the ethics of using this photograph also answered some of my questions about the book as a whole. This image, as she explained, has already been circulated amongst the world press. It's been flashed on covers of newspapers worldwide: it's become the iconic image of the whole tragic and disastrous affair. Furthermore, Lindsay explained, it was this image that catalysed the entire book project. Simpson has repeatedly described the way the lifeless body of this woman with arms upstretched in this photograph seemed to be calling out to her to tell her story. Like Doomadgee's story, then, Watson's story is a story of injustice just as much as tragedy, and a story which needed to find a writer brave enough to tell it.

Lindsay Simpson, winner of a Ned Kelly Lifetime Achievement Award, has authored four other books of true crime, including (with Sandra Harvey) *Brothers in Arms* (about the Milperra Bikie Massacre) and (with Walter Mikac) *To Have and To Hold* (about the Port Arthur Massacre). In Lindsay, whose husband Grant is a certified commercial diver who lives with her on Magnetic Island just across the bay from the *Yongala* wreck, and in Jennifer Cooke, a long-time colleague of Simpson's at *The Sydney Morning Herald* who had just moved to the USA to play housewife and mother-of-the-children to her partner, who is the *Australian's* Washington correspondent, the story of the tragic death of Tina

Watson found its writers. Just as *The Tall Man* by Chloe Hooper has helped raise public attention about the injustice served in the aftermath of Cameron Doomadgee's death, *Honeymoon Dive* will surely raise the profile of this case and prevent it from coming to rest at the bottom of a murky sea. Just this month Gabe Watson has been formally charged in the US and a trial in Birmingham, Alabama is expected to go ahead as early as next year.

The other challenge and art of true crime is in telling a difficult and potentially scandalous story sensitively, with a view to the fact that the family members of the "characters" in these books are still very much alive, and still very much hurting. The reason, I believe, I had flinched from reading this compelling story was not only because of my literary sensibilities, but also because of my human sensibilities. Of the many lessons Chloe Hooper's desperately raw account of the horrors of Palm Island and the scandals of Indigenous deaths in custody taught me, though, at least one thing about reading has stuck: in fact the real inhumanity is in looking away in the face of such grave injustices on our doorstep.

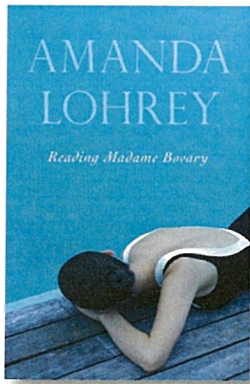
Nestled on the edge of the Great Barrier Reef, Townsville, Australia is one-part tropical idyll and one part frontier-town. And in the true spirit of tropical gothic, it shares more than its load of these

injustices that are often overlooked. On the edge of nowhere, tropical Queensland is the shadowland of "where it matters and where it's at" down south in Sydney, and for the rest of the U.S.-centred world, it's completely off the map, except to the off-the-beaten-path overseas tourists just like Gabe and Tina Watson attracted by the allure of the Reef. Lindsay Simpson and Jennifer Cooke's book *Honeymoon Dive*, reminds us, however, as we look through their eyes at the beseeching underwater gaze of Tina Watson, that out of sight is not, and should not be out of mind.

The story of Tina Watson is a story that needed to be told, just as all stories of injustice do. We who study literature have long maintained the connection between studying literature and making the world a better place, and often that means marching to a different drum than the establishment. Some checks and balances need to be put in place when we who have so long thought of ourselves as underdogs—of World Literature, of the University, Culture, Science, you name it—have become that establishment. In the world of Australian literature that wonderful journals like *Southerly* were set up to promulgate and defend, it's also incumbent on us to make sure we aren't being bullies in the playground. (Or, as the metaphor might better suit in this case—big fish in a small pond with a fairly large and magnificent world-class reef.) That is to say, we

as academics need to make sure that we're not being elitist Leavistes, but that we're actually doing something about stuff that matters. It's about time we put Crime Writing on the literary map in Australia, and woke up in the literary community to realise reading True Crime isn't merely done for titillation, but often as much to pursue truth. Its many readers already seem to know and understand that, and it's about time we in the literary world got down from our pedestals to listen to them. Lindsay Simpson and Jennifer Cooke's *Honeymoon Dive* is a good book: in all senses of the term.

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ISLANDS OF STORY

Review of *Reading Madame Bovary*
by Eileen Spencer

In her first collection of short fiction the Tasmanian writer,

Amanda Lohrey aims at capturing story and message in small packages. As she says, "If you can do it in ten thousand words, why take fifty?" (Blog "Readings" September 2010). In the same Blog she states her main purpose in writing short fiction: "you want to capture the simple reading pleasure of childhood, the hypnotic spell of it." For the most part, the author achieves this for me.

In these nine stories Lohrey touches on many modern everyday dilemmas and philosophical problems in an accessible and readerly style. She deals with subjects as varied as the stressed working mother, coping with illness, the thoughts of a brain surgeon, eating disorders, choosing a school for your child, achieving self-knowledge in a decrepit barge on a canal, and living in a commune. Through this maze of modern life she grapples with profound themes such as the quest for meaning in life, the fear of death, defining moments that move us forward, choosing between freedom and structure, and finding redemption in unlikely places. There is a surprising depth to these apparently simple and easily read stories.

I will admit that the first story in the collection, "Primates," did not grab me at first. I found the jerky stream-of-consciousness disturbing and the neurotic, compulsive protagonist, Isadora unlikeable. While the cover of this book evokes its generally