Shifting senses of in/justice: The gothic detective in contemporary Australian film, television and true crime

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Abstract

The detective or private investigator of Gothic crime is a complex figure with his origins in nineteenth-century literature. Either bumbling and naïve, or uncannily insightful, these usually single men relentlessly pursue a mystery event or encounter until the crime is solved and narrative resolution is achieved. In doing so, the stolid pursuit of the independent sleuth, who is typically a socially isolated observer, reveals the Gothic's

twofold response to the law as both a set of rules to be enforced in the pursuit of justice and as a system to be criticized or mocked. This article explores the representation of the gothic detective in contemporary Australian film, television and true crime, and examines four archetypes of the detective as they appear in contemporary Australian media: the lone detective, the larrikin detective, the apathetic detective and the armchair detective.

Keywords Australian Gothic, crime fiction, crime podcasts, detective, true crime

The detective or private investigator of Gothic crime is a complex figure with his origins in nineteenth-century literature. Either bumbling and naïve, or uncannily insightful, these usually single men relentlessly pursue a mystery event or encounter until the crime is solved and narrative resolution is achieved (Riley 2009; Cawelti 1976). In doing so, the stolid pursuit of the independent sleuth, who is typically a socially isolated observer, reveals the Gothic's twofold response to the law as a set of rules to be enforced in the pursuit of justice and as a system to be criticized or mocked (Moran 2001). The lone detective is also a recurring figure in the contemporary Australian Gothic (Rayner 2022; Beasley 2015) where he often takes on qualities of the stereotypical larrikin, or the apathetic, reluctant participant. With reference to a range of contemporary Australian detective films, television series and podcasts, this article examines four archetypes of the Australian gothic detective: the lone detective, the larrikin detective, the apathetic detective and the armchair detective. In mapping these archetypes, this article demonstrates how the Australian gothic detective is representative of the racist violence of colonial history and the horrific legacies of Australia's colonial past.

Importantly, this article is primarily concerned with male detectives because in reading these archetypes as Gothic, we draw on the original formations of the detective, which were overwhelmingly male. Female forms of these archetypes vary because female investigators are often positioned as more intellectual, more domestic and at times more

domineering than their male colleagues. Female detectives also tend to be more traditionally educated than their male counterparts (forensic scientists Temperance Brennan and Kay Scarpetta are two prominent examples). Moreover, female detectives are positioned more firmly in the domestic sphere. Tess Gerritsen's *Rizzoli & Isles* (2001–present), for example, follows both the personal and professional lives of the titular female characters, while Patricia Cornwall's Scarpetta finds solace in cooking to the point where the series has two companion cookbooks. Indeed, when a woman assumes the role of the 'Sarge', such as DCI Jane Tennison in Lynda La Plante's *Prime Suspect* (1991–2006), her authority is often challenged by male subordinates, or she is positioned as a bureaucratic 'blocker' of justice who prefers to work within, rather than against, the system, as is the case in the recent television adaptation of James Patterson's Alex Cross novels (2024). The examples cited here are American or British because lead female detectives are far less common in Australian crime drama, and they do not comfortably 'fit' the traditional detective mould. That said, two recent Australian series, *Deadloch* (2023) and *High Country* (2024), offer differing constructions of Australian female detectives that warrant a separate discussion. The comedic lead of *Deadloch* and the female 'Sarge' of *High Country* are interlopers in traditionally male spaces, with both characters subverting gendered representations of the female detective as either an impediment to 'real' justice or as a character who struggles to balance her professional authority with her private life.

Detective archetypes: Male investigators in contemporary Australian media

In the neo-western crime thriller *Mystery Road* (2013), Detective Jay Swan (Aaron Pedersen) refuses to abandon his pursuit of those he believes to be guilty of the murder of a local Indigenous girl, while struggling to maintain a relationship with his ex-wife and

wayward daughter. Set in rural Queensland, in an unnamed country town, *Mystery Road* follows Swan's efforts to find the killer, despite both apathy and open resistance from his colleagues, some of whom are later revealed to be complicit in the local drug trade. Swan's attempts to enforce the law are impeded by his superior, 'Sarge' (Tony Barry), an archetype of Australian crime narrative and a stock character who tends to be either deliberately obstructionist or wildly incompetent. Swan, on the other hand, as both an Indigenous man and a detective in a White police force, is positioned as a bicultural mediator or negotiator who is simultaneously inside and outside the town's social structure (Rutherford 2015; Judd 2020). Ultimately, Swan is a laconic hero who is characterized by his domestic loneliness and vulnerability.

The 2017 television miniseries *Wake in Fright*, an adaptation of both Kenneth Cook's novel and Kotcheff's 1971 film, shares *Mystery Road*'s outback setting. However, the series' protagonist, John Grant (Sean Keenan), is a disgruntled teacher who becomes stranded after a car accident in the Yabba, and over the course of a weekend finds himself in debt to local loan sharks and pursued by the town's police sergeant (David Wenham). In John's desperate attempt to return to his life in Sydney, the miniseries juxtaposes his memories of a beachside romance with the heat and horror of the small mining town. In *Wake in Fright*, as in *Mystery Road*, the 'Sarge' is an apathetic, even sinister figure, a corrupt and corrupting force who is less interested in righting wrongs than maintaining the status quo. Indeed, the 'Sarge' in *Wake in Fright* – the malicious Jock Crawford – seeks to protect his own (often criminal) interests above all else and subsequently upholds the law only when it suits himself (Gildersleeve 2019).

Similarly, in the popular Australian telemovie, *Jack Irish: Bad Debts* (2012), the private investigator and debt collector, Jack Irish (Guy Pearce), is pitted against several 'Sarge' archetypes. In Jack's quest to unravel a murder that has been made to look like

an accident, he uncovers a web of corruption in the police force, the church and the state government. Like Swan, Irish is constantly blocked by a coalition of bad cops and criminals, with both law enforcement and administrators of justice imbricated with the criminal underworld, and with both worlds part of 'a damaged and damaging structure' (Knight 2011: 75). In *Mystery Road*, this structure is the criminal underbelly of the small and isolated country town; in *Bad Debts*, this structure is the shadowy city of Melbourne, as a centre of urban trauma. Indeed, Irish himself is deeply damaged by his wife's murder and often resorts to illegal action in the pursuit of justice. As a larrikin, however, and as a detective with working-class origins, Irish is an anti-authoritarian figure whose story plays out as a tragicomedy rather than a procedural drama or urban noir.

Thus, despite the texts' differences in genre, and despite their contrast in rural and urban settings, *Mystery Road*, *Wake in Fright* and *Jack Irish* all evoke a gothic sensibility in their landscapes. The bleak and empty deserts of both *Mystery Road* and *Wake in Fright* highlight the isolation and uncanniness of the small, remote Australian town and its strange inhabitants, while Irish is at home in the back streets and alleyways of Melbourne. Interestingly, Irish finds himself starkly out of place in spaces of social or cultural regulation, with the urban landscape privileging his position as both an outsider and outlaw. To be sure, as far back as 1988, Stephen Knight observed that 'Australia has not been fertile ground for positively presented police stories' (245). While this observation has remained generally true, the contemporary Australian gothic detectives under discussion here complicate the idea of a 'positive' police presence. Instead, the male detective embodies a dual identity that is comprised of elements of both the gothic detective, whose quest for the truth is all-consuming, and the gothic villain, who is inevitably punished for his transgressions of both the natural and social order. Jay, for example, is a First Nations Australian man who is tasked with policing First Nations

Australians; however, he also challenges the hierarchical order and authority of the settler–state police force. Jack, on the other hand, leaves a respectable position in the legal profession to work on the periphery of social and spatial disadvantage. In *Wake in Fright*, John Grant, while not an official detective, must work to discover the truth, while at the same time confronting the power of the local Sarge, who has created a personal fiefdom.

Interestingly, this stereotypical representation of the Australian gothic detective as both a heroic pursuer of justice and an antagonistic force not only appears in contemporary works of Australian film and television. Several popular true crime podcasts recently produced in Australia also cast the male detective – the podcast host – as a brooding gothic outsider. In these audio narratives, the gothic landscape is cleverly replaced with a gothic soundscape. *Blood on the Tracks* (2018), narrated by award-winning journalist Allan Clarke, investigates the unsolved murder of Mark Haines, a young First Nations man whose body was found on the train tracks in Tamworth in 1988. The podcast's soundscape evokes the barren emptiness of the rural landscape, with the train whistle in the distance a recurring motif. *The Teacher's Pet* (2018), a podcast set in inner Sydney, examines the murder of missing mother, Lynette Dawson, who mysteriously disappeared from the northern beaches of Sydney in 1982. The podcast's gothic sound effects, combined with the sensationalist narration, cast the podcast host, Hedley Thomas, as a journalist turned private investigator (Pâquet 2021). In this respect, both Thomas and Clarke are tenuous guests in their investigations as they narrate and record their interviews and observations, as well as the reactions of those they make contact with – or who refuse contact altogether. Indeed, the gravelly voices of both hosts mimic the low tones of the noir detective who compulsively records evidence on his tape recorder and later exposes the horrific secrets of a seemingly quaint and idyllic town in a seedy midtown bar.

Thus, while the investigators under discussion here reinforce the archetypal representation of Gothic protagonists like Walpole's Manfred or William Godwin's Falkner in *Caleb Williams* (1794) – troubled, isolated and damaged – this archetype is also adapted in the Australian context, so that in the case of Jack Irish, for example, the Aussie larrikin replaces the figure of the naive investigator, most famously Holmes's Watson. As Clem Gorman explains, the larrikin is

> too smart for his own good, witty rather than humorous, exceeding limits, bending rules, and sailing close to the wind, avoiding rather than evading responsibility, […] mocking pomposity and smugness, taking the piss out of people, cutting down tall poppies, […] insouciant and, above all, defiant.
>
> (1990: x)

The Australian gothic detective retains these characteristics, so that the male detective, as a larrikin hero, is 'both independent and disdainful of authority, while also being resilient enough to cope with the demands of an isolating and unforgiving landscape' (Shaw 2020: 35). In other words, the gothic detective is not afraid to break the rules in the pursuit of justice, demonstrating how it is the (colonial) system itself that is wrong – as personified by the deliberately obstructionist Sarge – rather than the investigator who is forced to circumvent the system's rules and requirements. Thus, by considering a range of ways in which the gothic detective is recast in Australian media, it is possible to see how the work of law enforcement operates outside of traditional hierarchical constructs in the contemporary Australia context. Indeed, Knight has argued that

> crime fiction is a genre strongly in tune with the origins of white Australia, a genre very close in its own development to the growth of Australian society, including the growth of corruption and the perceptions of corruption, social and personal. As a result, crime fiction in Australia may be a valuable prism through which to refract Australian culture for analysis.
>
> (1988: 247)

More than this, Australian crime media continues to draw on a gothic response to the law as both deeply serious and yet somehow naïve, a tension that enables the emergence of the lone detective's partner: the armchair detective. Importantly, all of these archetypal constructions of the male detective play out within (and at times against) Australia's settler–colonial context.

Bad roots: The gothic in the postcolonial context

Any understanding of the Australian Gothic must attend to its colonial lens. Australia remains a part of the British Commonwealth, and the political, legal and social inheritance of Australia's colonial past is characterized by continued racism towards, and inequity for, First Nations people. The Gothic is frequently adopted as a means of critiquing that injustice. Indeed, Jessica Gildersleeve and Kate Cantrell argue that the contemporary Australian Gothic demonstrates 'a readiness for dealing with historical complexity and the haunting legacy of colonial violence' (2022: 13), making the Gothic an ideal site for explorations of social and cultural disruption, and shifting senses of in/justice. Misha Kavka, too, observes that 'the tropes of the European Gothic can be commandeered by postcolonial writers as a means of "writing back" to the centre about the horrors committed in the name of expanding British civilisation' (2014: 228). This 'dialogue' between the colonized and the colonizer creates a tension that causes the colonizing reader or viewer to become, as Kristy Butler argues, 'torn between their view of themselves as colonial interlopers and imperial heroes' (2014: 35). This tension is particularly evident in Australian crime drama, where the 'heroic' yet colonially imposed structures of law enforcement are often exposed precisely as the site of corruption and discomfit at the heart of the nation, to the extent that the national culture incorporates a 'process of enshrining criminal figures into a national mythology' (2014: 35–36). Certainly, this practice is evident in a number of Australian productions, including those

examined here. In *Mystery Road*, for example, Jay is reviled by his own community for becoming a police officer who belongs to the very system imposed by colonizers to enforce their own laws. Yet, Jay is also regarded as an outsider by his colleagues, who work to serve their own ends. *Blood on the Tracks* shines a light on the reality of *Mystery Road*'s fictionalized tensions, as the podcast reveals that the murder of Mark Haines was handled differently because of the victim's Indigeneity, with the less affluent parts of town (the 'wrong side of the tracks') are home to the programme's First Nations characters.

Mystery Road: The lone detective

Mystery Road is set in an unnamed country town with a large First Nations population and a settler–state police force that is primarily White. Thus, as both an Indigenous man and a member of the White police force, the film's protagonist Detective Jay Swan exists at 'the Black–White interface' between the Aboriginal community and law enforcement (Rutherford 2015: 313). With his deep, gravelly voice and cowboy hat and boots, Jay embodies the role of the laconic hero who is firmly engaged in a struggle for justice. As a lone law enforcer, he is the epitome of his domestic loneliness, despite his cool tone and swagger. Indeed, the press kit for *Mystery Road* describes Jay as an 'Indigenous cowboy detective'[1] (Kirkpatrick 2016: 144). According to Rutherford (2015) and Judd (2020), Jay is ultimately a deeply ambivalent character who is caught 'in-between' Aboriginal and settler–colonial Australia, and who must thus navigate a 'range of positions from inside to outside to in-between' (Rutherford 2015: 315). Indeed, the trope of the Indigenous character 'caught between' two cultures is made explicit when Sarge, who is White, advises Jay to stop his investigation into the murders of Indigenous women: 'Come on, Jay', Sarge warns, 'Your hands are gonna get a bit grubby from time to time.

[…] Make sure you don't get caught in the middle'. Accurately, Jay responds, 'I've been there [in the middle] all my life'.

This archetype of the lone Indigenous character as a figure who mediates between settlers and Indigenous peoples, while explored in several Australian films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and *The Tracker* (2002), first emerged in foundational myths of Australian nationhood (Langton 2006) and in early works of Australian crime fiction, such as Arthur Upfield's 'Bony' novels (1929–66), which problematized the figure of the 'black tracker' (Kirkpatrick 2016; Langton 2006). Upfield's novels, based on the nomadic wanderings of the 'half-caste' detective Napoleon Bonaparte, or 'Bony', popularized outback crime for early Australians but at the same time perpetuated the myth of the tracker as a character with both uncanny powers of observation and insight, and the reason and rationality of the modern (White) detective (Kirkpatrick 2016; Langton 2006). Thus, as Peter Kirkpatrick observes, in Bony's swift promotion from tracker to Detective Inspector, he represents the 'romantic vision of the mystical Aborigine toned-down and co-opted as a white law-enforcer' and 'serves at once to express and contain early twentieth-century fears of miscegenation' (2016: 150). Indeed, in *Winds of Evil*, Bony confides in the local police chief that 'although some people sneer at me on account of my mid-race, I am superior to the blacks because I can reason, and superior to many white people because I can both reason well and see better than they' (Upfield 1937: 65). For Glen Ross (2013), the threat that Bony poses as a biracial Australian is neutralized by both his desire to be White and his extraordinary – almost supernatural – powers as a detective, as 'a sort of bush Sherlock Holmes' (Upfield 1937: 48). As such, Bony is an ambivalent figure who is 'caught perilously between two positions' (Ross 2013: 157), and it is precisely this tension that allows Bony, like Swan, to effectively mediate between the local townsfolk and the local police, and to ultimately solve the crime. However, it is

also the historical burden of the black tracker that Swan both inherits and grapples with as an Indigenous detective hero. As Kirkpatrick confirms, 'Jay Swan radically reimagines the Aboriginal detective as hero but, as much as Bony, he achieves heroic status within the narrative as a function of the racial tensions in his background' (2016: 150).

Indeed, in *Mystery Road*, Swan's superior officer, Sarge, refuses to investigate an underage prostitution ring involving Indigenous girls, arguing for inaction even after a second girl dies because an investigation would ignite racial tension. 'For some people', Sarge warns, the town is 'already a war zone'. Sarge's predilection for conflict-avoidance creates a permissive environment that allows Jay's colleagues, Johnno and Robbo, to run a drug ring, despite being members of the police narcotics team. Johnno makes several veiled threats in an attempt to scare Jay off the case, suggesting, 'you work too hard, Jay-Boy'. This criticism of Jay doing his job, coupled with the diminutive and potentially racist 'boy', serves to reinforce Jay's outsider status among his colleagues. 'From the perspective of the white authorities', Kirkpatrick points out, 'Jay is marginal and has to know his place and keep to it' (2016: 146). Jay's one ally is Jim, the local coroner, whose scientific and objective approach to the job aligns with Jay's work ethic and relentless search for the truth.[2] Such an emphasis on the Enlightenment principles of reason and rationality stands in stark opposition to the chaos of deliberate obfuscation and disinterest shown by Jay's police colleagues who, at a retirement dinner, salute the departing officer for doing the work to 'protect *our* way of life' (emphasis added), which seems to be one of inaction, corruption and White privilege. While the best the Sarge can do is to offer a reward for information, only Jay conducts active police investigative work.

This defence of the status quo by the White police officers reinforces the social and racial inequities that persist in Australian culture by maintaining an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in which *us* represents the White police, and *them* refers to the local

Indigenous population. Unsurprisingly, in this binary dynamic, it is the police, as representatives of the law, who hold the power. In fact, the force's unchecked and often unregulated harbouring of power means that officers can cast the Indigenous community members as criminal Others in order to justify their own position in a way similar to the criminalization of the foreign Other, which occurs in the early British Gothic. Indeed, at the end of the eighteenth century, as Radford argues, crime became a cultural and political obsession as 'British society attempted to consolidate its authority at home and abroad […] under the stresses of war, colonial expansion, and aggressive urbanisation' (2008: 1188). Jonathan Rayner reaffirms this assertion of authority as a mode of critique in the Australian context, drawing attention to 'the Australian Gothic's exploration of iniquitous authority and its repeated depiction of brutal and uncompromising masculinity' (2011: 92). According to Rayner, the Australian Gothic, like the literary Gothic, is 'ruled by ruthless and destructive patriarchal figures, whose preservation of peace and control is dependent upon violent, authoritarian subjugation' (2011: 93).

Thus, *Mystery Road* presents and critiques an assumption of Indigenous criminality, where it is the imported concept of the 'copper' who defines and polices (or turns a blind eye to) illicit activity. Under this model, the deaths of several local Indigenous girls are positioned as a result of their criminal engagement in drug-taking and prostitution, and thus their deaths are framed as 'their own fault', the inevitable outcome of self-sabotage. In *Mystery Road*, the difference between the value placed on Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives is starkly highlighted, and the violence of the perpetrators is implicitly condoned by the townsfolk. Indeed, the serialized adaptation of *Mystery Road* (2018) makes a similar point about the legacy of violence and injustice in this fraught community. While in this case, Jay's police colleague, Senior Sergeant Emma James (Judy Davis), is diligent and ethical, she is also a descendent of a prominent family

in the local region. Her discovery of the role that her great-grandfather played in the murder of several young Aboriginal men decades earlier provokes in her an awful sense of guilt and shame. Unlike Jay's other colleagues in the force, Emma accurately labels these murders as a crime and vows to obtain justice (Gildersleeve 2019). In the contrasting representations, then, of Emma and the other senior police officers, we see a progression towards the enactment of both responsible law enforcement and responsible citizenship.

However, Jay remains an outsider not only among his police colleagues but in the local Indigenous community, too. Jay's ex-wife, Mary (Tasma Walton), and his estranged daughter, Crystal (Madeleine Madden), want nothing to do with Jay, despite his frequent efforts to connect with them. For example, Crystal declines Jay's offer for her to move in with him, choosing instead to remain with her alcoholic mother and her mother's violent partner. Later, during Jay's interaction with a group of local Indigenous boys, the smallest of the group tells Jay that 'we kill coppers, brah' and proceeds to mime shooting Jay. Jay, however, greets the boy as 'Cuz' and has no trouble convicting the boy to hand over valuable evidence by allowing the boy, first of all, to hold his gun (a clear violation of his power as a police officer), and second, by giving the boy money, effectively allowing Jay to buy his way back into the community. Jay also has a warm relationship with an Indigenous elder, calling him by the honorific 'Uncle', yet like his relationship with the boy, Jay's relationship with the elder is transactional, with Jay paying for the information that Uncle provides.

In *Mystery Road*, Jay's outsider status is also conveyed visually, with his expensive police vehicle – the ultra-Australian Holden Commodore – a stark contrast to the dilapidated homes and older broken-down cars in Uncle's yard, even if the ubiquity of the vehicle makes it more invisible and harder to identify than the police four-wheel-

drive. Rayner argues that in Australian Gothic texts of the late twentieth century, such a bleak and dysfunctional domestic scene is 'the hunting ground for gothic/comic hyperboles and motifs: the mix master; the front yard; the car, and the car crash; and the other things that litter the landscape of contained insanity' (2011: 91). For Rayner, 'The normal is revealed as having a stubborn bias towards the perverse, the grotesque, the malevolent' (2011: 91). In a more recent study, Rayner also notes that these aspects of the film's setting 'become redolent of the other customs and fundamentals (of cultural history, social existence, and inescapable prejudice), which act as parameters of predictability for Jay and the town's inhabitants' (2021: 192). In other words, Jay traverses this troubled landscape, but he does not belong to it. Jay's colleague, Johnno, even pulls Jay over on the side of the road as if he is a criminal. To be sure, representatives of both the criminal and the law challenge Jay's liminal position. Sam Bailey, the father of the criminal, asks Jay if he is 'a real copper or a black tracker who turns on his own type?'. That Jay's daughter Crystal is ultimately shown to be mixed up in the criminal activity of the town further underscores her father's liminality with respect to the law.

However, it is precisely Jay's liminal positionality that enables him to oscillate between his personal, Indigenous contexts and his professional, settler–colonial contexts, and to ultimately solve the crime. Symbolically, Jay's status as an inter-cultural mediator (Rutherford 2015; Judd 2020) is established from the start. As the film opens, the transition from darkness to light in the early hours of the dawn reveals the first victim. A road sign reading 'Massacre Creek' alludes to the frontier violence that characterized the British colonization of Australia, the latest victim of which lies in the creek culvert. In his darkened bedroom, Jay is awoken to the news of the find, only to have the scene transition sharply to a fully sunlit roadside, with a number of officers, alongside an intrusive reporter, exploring what is revealed as a bleak desert landscape broken only by the ribbon

of highway. This landscape is haunted by the cries of wild dogs or dingoes, heard but unseen. These invisible but threatening creatures highlight the dangers inherent in the Australian outback, where all Australians are at risk, and where hidden secrets threaten to disrupt the surface of civility as Australia's violent colonial history continues to unfold.

Jack Irish: The larrikin detective

In stark contrast to the empty landscape of *Mystery Road*, *Jack Irish: Bad Debts* is set in urban Melbourne. Here, among the colonial red brick buildings and industrial structures, First Nations representation is minimal. Cam Delray (also played by Aaron Pedersen) is both the right-hand muscle to horse-racing racketeer, Harry, and the only First Nations character in the telefilm. Like Jay, Jack Irish is an outsider. Once a successful solicitor, he leaves the well-respected profession to become a debt collector and sometimes private detective after his fiancée Isabel is murdered by a former client. These 'law-adjacent' roles put Jack in closer contact with the harsh realities of the criminal underworld than the more distant, privileged position he held as a solicitor. Certainly, Jack's former career as a solicitor gestures towards his intelligence; though, in Gorman's framing of the larrikin figure, he points out that the larrikin is usually 'too smart for his own good' (1990: x). The larrikin, as Gorman explains, has a propensity for 'bending rules and sailing close to the wind […] cutting down tall poppies […] suffering fools badly […] and above all, [being] defiant' (1990: x).

Certainly, Jack is not afraid to break the rules or to ridicule those who rise above their station. In *Bad Debts*, Jack works to reveal corruption in the local police force, uncovering a plot involving two officers who years earlier killed a woman who could have prevented a major building development from going ahead. Jack's relentless defiance of authority, coupled with his egalitarian belief that all should be subject to justice (even if this is an extrajudicial action to make things morally if not legally right),

characterizes the larrikin spirit. As Shaw confirms, the anti-authoritarian figure of the larrikin, as an adaptation of the Australian bushranger, is fostered by the colonial memory and 'a postcolonial resentment of authority' (2020: 36), both of which implicate modern Australia in 'a cycle of crime and social inequality' (2020: 38). While Jack, as the larrikin hero, fights to ensure that those who abuse their power are brought to justice, he is also a gambling addict who regularly tampers with the odds at the local horse races. In this respect, Irish is both insider and outsider, willing participant and informed observer. He is not only connected, through his choice of profession, to the seedier side of city life, but through his illegal betting operation, he is also embedded within it. As Carolyn Beasley confirms, 'Irish spots the cultural and criminal undercurrents that run through Melbourne and can do so because he is an essential part of them' (2015: 204).

Unlike Jay Swan, who struggles to maintain relationships, Jack develops a small group of allies and friends who contribute to his success as an investigator. In *Bad Debts*, Jack teams up with love interest and journalist, Linda Hillier (Marta Dusseldorp), to solve the case. Here, again, the narrative of the detective larrikin extends to the trope of the rough and ready man who is domesticated by a more sophisticated woman (Rickard 1998). As Rickard explains, 'The larrikin defies domesticity, even while surrendering to it. His is a masculinity whose strength and charisma mask a core of inner uncertainties' (1998: 84). To be sure, Jack is not always the lead detective; he often plays the dishevelled, well-meaning sidekick to the intelligent and insightful Linda, who, in *Bad Debts*, gathers evidence, gains the pair access to the charity gala, and makes key leaps of intuition to reveal critical clues. Yet despite these more self-deprecating moments, *Bad Debts* ends violently, making Jack a 'darker' larrikin than most and thus harkening back to the pre-Second World War conception of the larrikin as a brazen, heavy-drinking and violent young man (Rickard 1998). Perhaps surprisingly, then, given the above

discussion, the Australian gothic detective narrative is still characterized by humour and levity.

In *Mystery Road*, for example, Sarge is a caricature of the 'country copper', and a dark inversion of the cheerful Sarge in the classic Australian country drama, *Blue Heelers* (1994–2006). In *Blue Heelers*, Sergeant Tom Croyden (John Wood) is the affable, paternal leader of his close-knit station. Informed by the tropes of the 'cosy mystery', another descendent of the Gothic, the *Blue Heelers* team work together to help the locals of Mt Thomas deal with the surprisingly high rate of crime in their small and otherwise idyllic community. Not surprisingly, in *Blue Heelers*, most of the criminals are outsiders or interlopers who challenge the legitimacy and stability of the social order and subsequently threaten the town's underlying moral conservatism. Under the Sarge's patriarchal authority, however, it is not only the town's visitors who are subject to surveillance but the residents too; should a local be led astray, Sarge gently puts them back on the right path with a stern warning.

In *Mystery Road*, however, the Sarge's ineptitude and inaction align him more closely with the bumbling sidekicks of classic detective fiction, such as the unnamed, fawning narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin mysteries. This cultural self-deprecation, which is rendered through a fraught relationship with authority, not only enables a gothic critique of the legacy of colonialism but points to the critical function of humour in the Australian Gothic more broadly. As Rayner suggests, the characteristics of the Antipodean Gothic aesthetic include

> the variegated inception and execution of the Gothic; its derivation from a common frame of reference in popular, if not disreputable, cultural forms; its strong tendency, through hybridity and pastiche, towards exaggeration, comedy, and parody; and its abiding modernity (perhaps, in fact, an unnoticed, embryonic post-modernity) in its depiction of contemporary society.

(2011: 91)

In Australian crime, this turn to 'hybridity and pastiche' is regularly seen in the open satirization of the detective: we laugh at the stereotypes that policing creates, but at the same time, this laughter exposes our grave concerns about corruptibility and inertia when the status quo is challenged.

In *Jack Irish*, the inaction of those in power persists as a trope, with Jack's police friend, Barry, warning him off the case: 'Don't mess with it, mate. It's done'. When Jack enquires about a police shooting, he is told to 'file it under Best Forgotten'. However, as the telefilm progresses, the power of those in authority is in part undone by other fringe-dwellers. For example, at the gala event celebrating Joe Kwitny's support of the Good Hands Youth Charity, attended by government minister Lance Pittman, Jack questions the charity head Father Gorman, who denies any knowledge of criminal activity. However, Jack is later approached by one of the teens whom the charity has assisted. Despite being the beneficiary of this charity, the boy reveals that Gorman is lying to Jack about his dealings with Ronnie Bishop, a witness in the McKillop case. The unnamed teen does not belong in the world of charity galas; he is only there as an example of the programme's success, much like the result of a science experiment on display. This theme of police inaction or incompetence stands as a counterpoint to Miranda's observation of early detective fiction, in which 'the detective was able to rationalize the supernatural and objectify the terrifyingly subjective narratives. The end result was hope that law and order would emerge to improve society and attenuate that which was criminal and delinquent' (2017: 2). The Australian Gothic suggests that in a neo-colonial context, such hope must always be in vain because those foundational crimes are ongoing.

For this reason, in Australian television and media, liberal or progressive characters who seek to improve society often do so with strong opposition from the police or from other authoritarian forces who fear either the loss of their power or their being

held accountable for historical (and continuing) wrongdoing. It is thus the just detective who stands against the 'moral bankruptcy' of the Australian Gothic (Rayner 2011: 96), even as their own liminality underscores the perpetual haunting of past wrongs. Therefore, the detective himself, like the traditional gothic villain, often harbours dark secrets or regrets (Lacôte 2016), and is often simultaneously the perpetrator, victim and resolver of violence. Indeed, the detective's quest for justice is a frontier justice, where retribution is found not in the satisfaction of due process and law-abiding citizenship, but rather, in physical, often violent confrontation that is typically resolved through a shootout or standoff in which the wrongdoer often dies rather than being arrested or restrained. The dogged investigator commits a crime of his own in this extrajudicial killing of the criminal, yet at the same time he is read as heroic for assuming the collective burden of guilt for his violent act.

Wake in Fright: The apathetic detective

The apathetic police officer, more interested in protecting the community status quo than enforcing the law, is epitomized in *Wake in Fright*. Here, we focus on the television miniseries, based on Kenneth Cook's novel, rather than the 1971 film. The police officer is not the protagonist; instead, his apathetic inertia provides the narrative complications that the protagonist must work to overcome.

When city boy John Grant tries to return to Sydney for the Christmas holidays, after a year teaching in a remote, dry (alcohol-free) community, he becomes stranded in the Yabba, a town seemingly out of place and time. The barren surrounds of the town, including a disused mine, echo the landscapes of *Mystery Road* and highlight the characters' isolation from civilization. Indeed, John quickly falls into a downward spiral, drinking and drug taking, and ends up in debt to a local loan shark. He has several drunken sexual encounters before attempting to escape the Yabba, only to be summoned back

when it is revealed that while intoxicated, John shot and killed Doc (Alex Dimitriades), the disgraced town doctor. As the second episode closes, the town's secrets are revealed: a drowned child, a drug ring and no shortage of family dysfunction. Here, John's own secret is also brought to light: the girlfriend he remembers in romantic flashbacks actually drowned shortly before he left for his remote teaching post. The story closes with John returning to his schoolroom, having been changed by his experiences in the Yabba.

The sense of the Yabba as an inescapable 'castle', haunted by the occupants' private ghosts, is introduced in the opening scenes, when the cab driver who drops John in the deserted town notes, 'once you've been to the Yabba, you never want to leave'. This ominous sentiment is reinforced by the repetition of the platitude that the Yabba is the 'best little town on Earth'. John's escape from the Yabba is stymied by the extensive damage to his car. The mechanic, having had a tracheotomy, rasps unintelligibly to a young girl, who translates for him. This play on the Victorian Gothic trope of the 'disfigured manservant', in which dirt and disfigurement are associated with deviance and transgression (Lynch 1996), further establishes the Yabba as a gothic space. When his bank cards are cancelled, John becomes reliant on the goodwill of the locals, which is in desperately short supply. As John's stay spirals out of control, the hard-drinking life of outback Australia becomes a monstrous force, with John quickly losing $4000 in the illegal game of Two-Up, culminating in his debt to a local thug and his inability to find accommodation. Even in the seeming cosmopolitan home of the local real estate agent, the kitchen light fittings are decanters, highlighting how alcohol pervades all aspects of Yabba life.

In this respect, the character of Sarge is akin to the sergeant in *Mystery Road*, more interested in protecting the locals than investigating the crime at hand. Certainly, Sarge never turns down a drink, and orders one whenever he visits the local pub, even

when on duty. While Sarge is never drunk, this expectation of sharing in a ritual with others cements the already-snobbish John as an outsider when he initially tries to refuse a drink. Yet, by the end of the series, John has, controversially, become part of this group: Sarge writes John's statement about Doc's death in a way which not only absolves John but protects the other locals who were involved. This bending of the law to achieve some sort of rough justice works in the protagonist's favour but at the same time calls both his own morality and that of the police further into question.

True crime podcasts: The armchair detective

It is not only on the screen and page that Australia is Gothicized as both a space of emptiness, haunting and hidden danger, and as a product of the colonial encounter and its continuing injustice, as figured through police inaction and racism. Recently, the podcast has become a popular medium for relaying true crime stories. The true crime podcast, in particular, adopts Gothic tropes to construct its aural discourse of crime and resolution, with the podcast host, frequently a journalist, playing the role of the gothic detective. Interestingly, the production of podcasts also harkens back to the publication of the first Gothic detective fiction as a serialized product, since *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* was initially serialized in *The Strand Magazine* in 1891. Today, podcasts tend to 'drop' on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This frequent-release schedule contributes to both a sense of anticipation and 'buzz' around the show, and provides a sense that the narrative is playing out in real time, even though the events might have taken place decades ago.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's true crime podcast, *Blood on the Tracks* (2018), recounts the investigation of the unsolved death of Mark Haines, an Indigenous teenager whose body was found on railway tracks outside Tamworth in 1988. The podcast evokes the barren landscape surrounding the tracks, and the sound engineering foregrounds the eerie, half-heard sounds as the investigative journalist visits

the scene of the crime at night, 25 years later. The host of *Blood on the Tracks*, Allan Clarke, is a Muruwari man who has won numerous awards for his reportage on Aboriginal interactions with the legal system. Like Jay Swan, Clarke operates in dual roles, both as an Indigenous man and an investigator for the national broadcaster.

Similarly, in the hugely popular podcast, *The Teacher's Pet*, journalist Hedley Thomas, another lone male investigator, revisits the cold-case disappearance of Lynette Dawson, a young Australian woman who vanished from the northern beaches of Sydney in 1982, amid a romantic affair between her husband, Chris Dawson, and his teenaged student. Once again, systemic police inaction is revealed to have allowed Dawson and others to prey upon young girls, reinforcing the deep systemic failures in protecting those most vulnerable. Dawson's apparent lechery echoes the gothic trope of the patriarchal villain in pursuit of the forbidden and helpless young woman, suggesting a highly traditional – even tired – narrative plot. The podcast's suburban setting, moreover, is made gothic in the suggestion that Lynette's body may lie beneath the swimming pool in the backyard of the family home. The podcast's explicit invitation to the public to become involved in the investigation resulted in calls for the pool to be excavated and justice served; however, Lynette's body was never found and Dawson was convicted despite a lack of forensic evidence (*R* v. *Dawson* 2022). *The Teacher's Pet* reveals the thin veneer of urban domestic normality in the Australian suburbs, where even in the so-called 'civilization', behind every neatly mown lawn and cheery wave, a monster lurks.

While the male hosts of these podcasts become deeply entwined in the respective case, their perspective is shaped in two important ways. First, they are not involved in the immediate investigation; rather, theirs is a retrospective, exploring not only the crime but the failures of the formal investigation. Second, the hosts are journalists and so bring a degree of objectivity absent from the deeply personal entanglements and motivations of

fictional characters like Jay Swan and Jack Irish. Yet at the same time, however, these journalists share the liminality of these characters, occupying the roles of both journalist and storyteller, and evoking the gothic sense of unbelonging in their work. In other words, they are strangers to the communities and the crimes they are investigating, yet they are tasked with portraying unfamiliar places and experiences not only realistically but also vividly in order to engage their audience.

Australian true crime podcasts, like their international counterparts, have also led to the emergence of a fourth type of investigator: the armchair detective. From the safety of their suburban homes, listeners invite these gothic visitors in, journeying with them to the desolate nightscapes of *Blood on the Tracks* or imagining the horrors that might be happening in the house next door. This true crime reportage is a new kind of 'personalized journalism' that challenges the assumption of journalistic objectivity and creates instead a more intimate listening experience (Lindgren 2023: 2). More than making the host a character, as Lindgren observes, the host replaces the objective journalist with the justice-driven purpose of the detective, thereby 'departing from journalistic norms of disembodied reporters and highlight[ing] self-reflexivity and transparency of the reporting process as "staple ingredients" of podcasting, especially in true crime reporting' (2023: 2).

In this way, the podcast host as gothic detective is joined by their sidekick – the audience – who is invited to pick up their metaphorical magnifying glass and join the host–detective in their pursuit of justice, sourcing information that has eluded police and journalists for decades, and seeking reparation for crimes that remain unsolved (McMurtry 2016; Pâquet 2021). The agency, then, that is afforded to listeners of true crime podcasts is remarkably different to the interpretive power of crime fiction readers. As consumers of crime fiction, readers are positioned as witnesses, with no ability to

intervene or alter the outcome. However, in recounts of unsolved true crime, the audience is both detective and juror, accumulating and assessing evidence to concur with the 'guilty' verdict. Indeed, Pâquet explains how the jurified audience, as in the case of *The Teacher's Pet*, can instigate change in the formal justice process, with listeners encouraged to 'make judgments about the cold cases as a jury would' (2021: 427). True crime reinvestigation of unsolved cases, as opposed to the more narrative recounts of unsolved cases such as *Casefile: True Crime Podcast* (2016–present), most often undertaken by journalists rather than lay podcasters, create a new role for listeners; ultimately, they become Watsons to the journalist's Sherlock. This shift from passive listener to active investigator has both positive and negative legal and cultural impacts. The concept of 'trial by social media', for example, poses a threat to the successful operation of the judicial system. As *The Teacher's Pet* gained traction, it was removed from podcasting apps to prevent a presupposition of guilt when Chris Dawson, the focus of the podcast's allegations, was arrested, tried and ultimately found guilty of his wife's murder (McPhee 2022).

Similarly, *Blood on the Tracks* included a link to an interactive video where listeners could view – and 'investigate' – the crime scene. This desire to don the detective hat in pursuit of justice speaks to the appeal of the detective role as a rejection of gothic horror. If the case can be solved – if good can overcome evil (or worse, apathy) – the light of justice wins out over the darkness of obfuscation, time and wrongdoing. The seemingly haunted castle is nothing more than a suburban home; the lonely moors are once again wheat fields or sheep paddocks. Perhaps the emergence of the armchair detective, then, reflects our desire to reassert normality when faced with the uncanny and horrifying events that occur in our collective backyards. Just as classic detective stories end with the villain unmasked, audiences want 'Justice for Lyn'; they want to know 'What Happened

to Mark Haines'. Simply put, listeners of true crime podcasts want a conclusion and resolution to the narrative arc, despite the fact that, sometimes, true crimes do not reach a satisfactory resolution.

The fictional Australian detective is professionally a stern loner, often at odds with his colleagues. Like his British and American counterparts, in his personal life he is a bumbling sidekick, making numerous missteps and blunders. But the world in which the Australian gothic detective lives and works is one that is inherently corrupt. However, he or his allies either find moments of levity, or they are satirized to do so. He roams either a barren outback landscape or a grimy urban underbelly in pursuit of truth and justice, although this justice is often found in a violent end, rather than through the colonially imposed courts of law, reiterating both the gothic detective's support for their undergirding morality and his rejection of their often-corrupt modes of operation. Thus, the gothic detective reveals Australia's recognition of the ongoing impacts of colonization, the imposition of British legal systems and our inherent suspicion of those in power. By deploying and adapting gothic tropes, the gothic detective pulls back the curtain of civility to reveal the domestic horror of Australian life.

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Notes

1. Judd, too, describes Swan as a 'detective–cowboy' (2020: 118).

2. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the figure of the coroner or the forensic pathologist. However, it is worth pointing out that these characters are often cast as allies of the lone detective. This alignment has its origin in early detective fiction, which 'capture[s] the integration of science, criminal investigation, and reasoning', and 'the importance of having an individual with the capability to apply scientific reasoning to an investigation, specifically at the crime scene' (Miranda 2017: 10).