

BAD AAC Episode 2: “Crime Fiction and True Crime”

(with Caroline Overington and Katherine Kovacic)

SPEAKERS

Katherine Kovacic, Suzanne Leal, Andy Muir, Caroline Overington

Suzanne Leal

This podcast episode may contain themes and content that could offend trigger or alarm some people. The details for Lifeline and 1800 Respect can be found in the show notes for this episode. Welcome to our podcast. BAD all about crime brought to you by BAD Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. I'm Suzanne Leal.

Andy Muir

And I'm Andy Muir and each month we'll be exploring the big questions in crime and crime writing. Subscribe to our podcasts, then jump on to the BAD All About Crime Book Club page on Facebook to be part of the conversation and thanks for listening.

Suzanne Leal

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our festival takes place and pay our respects to Aboriginal elders past and present. Welcome to BAD All About Crime. I'm Suzanne Leal, before I turned to writing, I was a criminal lawyer, so perhaps it's no coincidence that my novels, *The Deceptions* and *The Teachers Secret*, explore crime and allegations of criminal behavior.

Andy Muir

And I'm Andy Muir, I'm a screenwriter and novelist. Crime got under my skin writing and researching the *Underbelly* series before I turned to crime fiction in my novels, *Something for Nothing* and *Hiding to Nothing*.

Suzanne Leal

Today we're joined by writers Caroline Overington and Katherine Kovacic. Caroline Overington is one of Australia's most successful writers and journalists. She has written 14 books, both crime fiction and true crime, and both historical and contemporary amongst the awards she's won are the Walkley award for Investigative Journalism and a Davitt Award for crime writing. Today, we'll be talking to her about her novel, *The Ones You Trust*, and her true crime book, *Missing William Tyrrell*.

Andy Muir

Katherine Kovacic is a former Veterinarian turned Art Historian who works in a wide variety of museums, galleries and historic houses. She is the author of three novels in the Alex Clayton art mystery series, *The Portrait of Molly Dean*, *Painting in the Shadows* and *The Shifting Landscape*. Recently, she's

turned to True Crime with the book *The Schoolgirl Strangler*, in which she investigates the murder of four young girls in Victoria in the 1930s.

Suzanne Leal

Welcome to you both. Caroline, let's talk about your book *Missing William Tyrrell*. William Tyrrell, of course, is that little boy made famous by the fact that when he was three years old, he went missing, dressed in a Spider Man suit. Carolyn, how did you come to be the one reporting on the case?

Caroline Overington

Well, you're quite right to say that I started out reporting it. That's true. I was working for the Australian newspaper and Williams story, perplexed me because how does a three year old boy disappear? I mean, I'm a parent and I know you're a parent and many of our listeners will be parents and we all know that children can go missing briefly, we know that. We know that we can be at the supermarket and they're in the aisle with you one minute, then you turn around and they're gone. Or you're on the beach and suddenly you look where they were building a sandcastle and and they're not there and you run around and you're frantic, and you start yelling, and you call for help, and people come and then you search around until you find them. And then that's the moment isn't it, you find them. And in this particular case, William had been running around a garden of a house that he was visiting. And then he was gone. And it wasn't one of those situations where people were able to say what had happened, there was no witnesses to say I saw a car there. Nobody said for example, I heard I heard a strange scream. There was absolutely nothing. It was like he had disappeared into thin air. And I thought to myself that well, firstly, that how does that happen? Because if that can happen to him, then it can happen to anyone, and to anyone's child. And I also thought, we can't stop looking because if somebody has taken him, and that seems to be what the police think, then that person is still in our community. He may still have William. William may it be alive? In which case we have no business stopping the search for him? And if he's not alive, if he's dead, is it still as important to find that?

Then that person is emboldened isn't he? I've been out to the scene where William disappeared from and I went with a criminal psychologist because I wanted to find out what kind of person might take William and she gave me a very chilling description of somebody who just happened to be in that street for some other reason. He didn't go there to take William because nobody knew that William would be there. He was just visiting. He didn't live there. He saw William playing around in the garden. And although he was there for another reason, maybe to go bushwhacking because it's a very bush area, maybe to steal something from someone's backyard, maybe to collect scrap metal for sale. He was able to change gears in his mind in an instant and think I am going to take that child and then to do it, to bundle William into the car, to drive off without even squealing the wheels, without even making a sound no hurry at all. Well you're talking about somebody who has done it before, and therefore you're talking about somebody who will do it again.

Suzanne Leal

And you're convinced that someone unknown has taken...

Caroline Overington

No, I'm not convinced but if that is the story, if that is what happened, and none of us know, if that is the story, then we all need to be very wary of the community we live in, because that kind of thing is possible. If that isn't what happened, then we need to know the truth because we can't allow parents to go

around thinking a) that such things are possible, easy to pull off, not likely to be solved. And at some point, we'll stop looking for the perpetrator. That's a really dangerous message for Australian parents.

Suzanne Leal

You've said we need to be mindful because there may be such a perpetrator in our society. Now the town we're talking about is Kendall. Why would that person be in Kendall? Do you have any views?

Caroline Overington

You know, I think that's an excellent question because Kendall is a tiny town, the population at the time that William went missing was just a touch over 1000 people, which makes me even more furious in a way about why the crime was not solved. Because there are two mobile phone towers in Kendall, you should be able to download the data from all of those towers, and you should therefore be able to tell who was in the town. And if they have a good reason to be in the town, you should be able to, to rule them out of the crime and if somebody is there who shouldn't be there, then what were they doing? And what is their alibi? that kind of thing. There isn't very much CCTV in Kendall. There was a little bit at the Tandel Tennis Club. There's a little bit but it was, you know, the disappearance of William Tyrrell took place in at a time, just moments before the widespread use of CCTV at things like ATMs, supermarkets, bicycle helmets, motorcycle helmets, people now have dashboard cams. You know, the idea that there is no CCTV of William being taken or riding along in a car is to me so frustrating, but there were other clues that were perhaps missed. Kendall is described by many people who live there is a beautiful country town, they have a music festival and they have a community center. They have an op shop they have, you know, they're wonderful people who have lived there for a very long time but in the surrounding area, there are a lot of known pedophiles, there are a lot of known sex offenders, there are a lot. It's a community where there's a lot of ice, a lot of a lot of drug abuse. So we're not necessarily dealing like in a lot of small country towns that are on the surface are very beautiful, but there is sometimes an underbelly.

Suzanne Leal

In these cases that make us frustrated, as you said, and make us worried about the answer. There is often a need to find a solution quickly. In this case, Bill Spedding was seen to be that solution. Can you tell me about how Bill Spedding came to be accused of this crime? And what happened?

Caroline Overington

Yes, I can. So we now know that he was not involved in the disappearance of William Tyrrell what William Spedding or Bill Spedding, was a local white goods repairman and he had been to the house that William disappeared from a couple of days before to try to fix the washing machine. And then on the morning that when he went missing about an hour before he went missing, his foster mom called Bill Spedding and said, "Hey, the washing machine is still broken here, when are you gonna come and fix it?" And so police thought, Okay, well, let's take a look at Bill Spedding. I mean, he drives a van because he's a white goods repairman. We know that he was in the street before so maybe he had come back to the street to fix the machine. That sounds like something that could be a lead and they chased that lead and they kept chasing it for years. They raided his house. They turned over a woodpile on his property. They did forensics on his car. They announced to the media really that he was a person of interest in the case and made people think this is the guy. Now that destroyed his life. It destroyed his life. He was no longer able to work in the community, nobody would have him come around to fix their fridge or their washing machine, you know? People abused him in the street, they abused his wife in the street, he lost the house that he was renting. He had some children living with him at the time that

he was taking care of and they were taken away. So the family was completely smashed. And I think in some ways, it's a good reminder that, of course police have to chase leads and this looked like a good one. A person who was visiting the street in a van maybe on the day, that looks like a lead that you would obviously follow. But you have to be very careful that you don't develop what's known as tunnel vision with a particular suspect and chase them because the real perpetrator is getting away.

Suzanne Leal

And of course, it's now gone from a police investigation to coronial inquest. And my understanding is the coroner Harriet Graham is in charge of it. What's happening with that and has anybody come out?

Caroline Overington

That's an interesting question isn't it? because the coronial inquest many people, most people think the Coroner "Oh, okay, someone's dead" Yeah, that's how we think of the Coroner right? they run autopsies, they're in charge of investigations into corpses that kinds of thing. There is no evidence that William Tyrrell is dead. We have never seen a hair or a shoe or a scrap of that Spider Man suit anywhere. There is no evidence that he's dead. But the coroner can also look at missing persons cases and try to make a reasonable conclusion that he may well be dead. So for example, he's never been to the dentist, he's never used his passport, a passport has never been issued in his name. He's never been to a doctor, used a Medicare card, he's never been enrolled in any school. They have run pictures of him as he might look now at the age of not three, but four, five, six, seven. No, no child has ever been enrolled in an Australian school who looked like that. So it seems likely to me that that the coroner will, at the end of her inquiry, declare that William is likely dead and that enables several things to happen a death certificate to be issued, for example, a grave perhaps, you could establish perhaps a grave. But to my mind, the more important role is to try to establish what went wrong in the investigation? Why didn't we find him? Why didn't we find out what happened? How can we make sure that that doesn't happen again? And also, is it still possible to solve this crime? I mean, there are still people out there who know something and sometimes their relationships with other people are breaking down. So is there somebody's wife knows something, somebody's girlfriend knows something? Maybe somebody's died and the widow is left carrying the secret and doesn't want to go to the grave with it on their own conscience? I don't think that the end of the coronial inquiry means that it's time to give up.

Suzanne Leal

Does the end of the coronial inquest or the coronial inquiry? signal a time for you to be able to leave the case? Or is this a case that will follow you?

Caroline Overington

Oh I will never ever give up wondering. Never. I will never give up wondering and I always want to know. And and I feel more importantly, that William wants us to know. William wants us to know. William is out there, I feel his presence very strongly and so do hundreds of people who are invested in this case, who never met him. I never got the chance to meet him, I've seen him running along in videos but I feel his presence around me all the time and 1000s of people do, because he waits for us to find him. A three year old boy does not belong in the ether, in nowhere, in some kind of limbo. He belongs with the people who loved him. He belongs with his families. He and and he calls for us to find an answer. It's not right to me that we simply say, William disappeared, we don't know what happened and that's the end of it. I mean, what if it was your child? And what if it was my child? What if it was anyone's child? We need an answer for ourselves, but also for William.

Suzanne Leal

That's a fascinating way to end this conversation about Missing William Tyrrell. Caroline also writes about a missing child in her novel, *The Ones You Trust*, and Andy will be talking to Caroline about this later but first, he's chatting with Katherine Kovacic about her novel, *The Shifting Landscape*...

Andy Muir

Katherine, *The Shifting Landscape*, it's the third book in your crime fiction series featuring Alex Clayton and I'm, I'm a huge fan of this series. I really love Alex and John and Hogarth but for people who haven't encountered the series yet, how would you kind of introduce them to it?

Katherine Kovacic

Alex is um, she's an art dealer but she's not sort of a South Yarra, or, you know, Woolahra pearls and black suit kind of art dealer. She's, she's sort of at the scraggy end of the, of the art industry. So what Alex does is basically she lives by her wits, she has to trust her gut instincts and trust her eye for art and go out and find what's called "the sleepers", the stuff that's basically really good quality art, but for reasons including damage, dirt, fake signatures, those sorts of things, are masquerading as something cheap. So Alex buys stuff cheap, and hopes to sell it up the line and that's how she she makes a living. So those qualities of, of trusting your gut and trusting what your eyes seeing are actually really good qualities to have in a sleuth. So she's the key protagonist, but she is ably assisted by her best friend John Porter, who is an art conservator. And at her side, is but not always, is her dog Hogarth, who is an Irish Wolfhound. Large and slightly ferocious looking but really quite friendly, which is perhaps a way of describing Alex herself too. So of course, the art world, being what it is, has lots of grubby little corners, where lots of crime can take place. So everything from fakes and forgeries to murder and art heists. Because you've got to have a heist at some point when you're talking about art.

Andy Muir

You certainly do. It's kind of like *Antiques Roadshow*, but with a bit of crime, isn't it?

Katherine Kovacic

Wow! Now there's a great setting for a crime book, isn't it? There's so many potential suspects at one of those things and all those people who you know, potentially got the family heirloom there, and who knows who could be lurking in that crowd.

Andy Muir

That's right. That's right. Which is kind of a nice little introduction to this story because it does center around a painting, a long lost painting, or an unknown painting talk to us about that one.

Katherine Kovacic

So in Alex's latest adventure, *The Shifting Landscape*, she travels to the Western District of Victoria, to value a collection for the McMillan family, and they're an old squattercratic family, you know, several generations of pastoralists. And they've just had stuff hanging on the walls for generations, you know, things that were collected at the height of the wool boom, and through the 50s and it's always been there, so they, they just think of it as the decoration on the walls, they don't really know what it's worth, but now they want to find out. So she and Hogarth head out there to have a look and they find a few valuable things. But one painting in particular, that speaks to the history of the family, and also the history of the Indigenous people dispossessed from that land. And she calls John out to join her to give his opinion on some conservation issues but before he can arrive, the patriarch of the family dies under

mysterious circumstances. And then that painting goes missing and Alex and John are about to leave and get back to Melbourne and basically leave this very dysfunctional family to their own devices. But then a toddler goes missing, the youngest member of the family, and Alex's dog also disappears. So they join searches, scouring the countryside and Alex knows that the answer to the mystery is somehow involved with the landscape but it's a matter of whether she can unravel all that before someone else dies.

Andy Muir

It's really interesting, because that landscape, that sort of Western District of Victoria, it's it is a bit of a hotbed for issues around colonialism. And this painting that's been found, it's by Von Guerard, who some people may or may not know, but very famous, kind of colonial painter of sort of bucolic scenes of Victoria and the very early days of Victoria and that, but in this painting, he has some Indigenous people, which sort of challenges some of the ideas that are held around that sort of period of Australia's history. Can you go into that at all?

Katherine Kovacic

Yeah, well, Von Guerard, he did travel through the Western District, and he painted, I guess we'd call them perhaps a way to describe them is house portraits, So house paintings, pictures of these, these squattercratic empires with you know, the house stuck in the vast landscape, speaking to the power of the owner or that land effectively. And he, while he was sympathetic to the Indigenous people, he didn't tend to include them in those sorts of paintings. Other artists did like Robert Downey, he has several paintings that include Indigenous people with the the white settlers effectively, but always painted in a way that sort of incorporated them into that that Western society. A very patriarchal sort of, "look how generous we've been allowing you to remain on the land" So in creating this painting, which is completely fictitious for the story, this this is just speaks to the dispossession. So in this painting, there is an Indigenous family, a group of people in the foreground, some of them looking towards the viewer, and some of them looking back at the land and the house that that is now on their country. And so it's a it's a comment by the artists because in effect, he would have been painting for a patron, for the owner of the house, but he's put in this this comment about what what this really means that this house is in this landscape now.

Andy Muir

So did you kind of find yourself having to do a lot of research around these these issues for the book or was it something that you're already well versed in?

Katherine Kovacic

No, I particularly wanted to research that for the Western District because as you said, that is a particular hotbed there were some some very violent conflicts there and the Indigenous people were, were persecuted quite mercilessly through that landscape. And they have an incredibly old and ancient aquaculture system there which was was part of what interested me there. So and this was put on the the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2019. And this this series of channels and weirs at Budgebin was carved by the Indigenous people out of the the larval landscape, the lava flow and effectively it's it's a system for trapping, growing and breeding the local eels and it's over 6000 years old. So it's literally the oldest existing aquaculture system in the world and there are also dwellings or the ruins of dwellings associated with it. So it speaks to the permanence of the indigenous people in that landscape and shows how invested they were in that countryside. And so for, you know, people who have been not just pushed off that, but but you're persecuted, killed, slaughtered in many instances. And yet this heritage

is still there and I think it speaks to this concept that we have with, you know, who, who owns this land and who belongs there. And these are issues that sort of come up, you know, generally in crime fiction thing, you know, there's something about possession or who's going to inherit, but we don't look at this sort of this larger continuum of inheritance and and who belongs there.

Andy Muir

Yeah you almost kind of, you're sort of starting a conversation about decolonization in some ways, which is kind of a big topic to put into a crime fiction work.

Katherine Kovacic

It's um, that is, that is not my story to tell but it is definitely an idea that I wanted to, I wanted to introduce because I think it's, it's something that we need to be considering. and I felt I couldn't set a story in that country, in that part of Australia, without considering those issues, because they're, they're central to that landscape.

Andy Muir

Very much so. And so was there anything in particular that you found most difficult or challenging about about this, this work.

Katherine Kovacic

I think will particularly for me the,, obviously, the research around this. Speaking to Indigenous people about what it feels like to be on country, and separated from that country, so that was something that that, obviously, I wanted to explore and make sure that I dealt with appropriately. And so I had people looking at my work for that. The art was easy for me. So obviously, as an art dealer, Alex always had to have some sort of arty reason to go where she's going and Von Guerard made the Western District the perfect fit. And also that that idea of family dynasties set really well in that part of the countryside. But traveling, so I like to, I like to know my locations, so this was all obviously pre COVID, so, um, lots of trips to that area, just to just to basically walk and be in that that landscape myself and to, to get a feel for what it feels like to be there. And all those little details, you know, what, what the air smells like and what you can hear if you're on a quiet country road, because it's never completely silent. So all those little bits that sort of make up the, I was going to say the canvas but that would be an art book pun. So for the background of the story, I find sort of getting into that country is really important for me.

Andy Muir

Yeah, that's right and that's a really important thing about crime fiction as well, where the landscape is a character all of its own. And that's kind of across many works.

Katherine Kovacic

Yeah. And I certainly felt that for for that area of the Western District, because it has that the volcanic landscape. So I think that, that sort of, to me, is really interesting, because that means, you know, vugs, and caves and holes, but just also that, that potential that they're hidden, what's hidden beneath the surface layer, it's just it's another sort of element to that sort of whole crime thing, isn't it? that, that there's the potential for violence beneath the surface.

Andy Muir

Well, that actually might be a nice little segue into into Caroline's book as well, because The Ones You Trust, this is, this is Caroline's ninth novel. It's about a another missing child, the daughter of the much

loved breakfast, host - television breakfast host, so we're thinking, you know, Sunrise and all those things - Emma Cardwell. And so this book really is about underlying tensions as well isn't it?

Caroline Overington

Well that's so interesting, because actually, the ones you trust was written before I wrote about William Tyrrell. So I must have had in mind somehow the idea of a missing child, even before I knew that I was going to write about William, which was really interesting, now that you've pointed it out. What I thought with, *The Ones You Trust*, is actually what is more usual and more common when a child goes missing, which is it is almost always somebody known to the family. In fact, they say that the random snatching of a child off the street is a once in a generation crime. They're not mucking around when they say that, you get one every 10 or 20 years, a child might be taken out of the bedroom window, or taken off a street corner. It almost never happens, which is why police don't assume that that's what's happened. And so what happened in Williams case, of course, was when he went missing from the front yard, they assumed "well, he's visiting here, he's probably lost, let's go and search in the bush, look in the drains, look in the dams, look around the cemetery where he might have run, maybe he chased a butterfly" because it doesn't cross their mind that it could be a random snatch. And that's exactly right in, *The Ones You Trust*. Of course, the first thing the police do when they turn up at the childcare center, and the little girl is not there. And so they immediately assume well, somebody else must have picked her up. Now hopefully that's an accident. Hopefully that's really rushed parents who are like "No I said you were going to get her, no weren't you going to get her? No I was going to get her, oh my goodness, ee've left her there!" Which is kind of how the book opens, both parents come home, and they realize no one's picked her up and so they think "Uh oh, better go and get her" And when they get to the childcare center, it's all locked up, the police come to open the door, they assume they'll find her asleep among the soft toys, or in a cot or something, but she's not there. Now, the first assumption that police will make if neither of the parents have her, it'll be someone known to them. Almost always 98% / 99% of the time. In fact, the Criminal Investigation Bureau in the United States has done a study on this on exactly where you find a child that has gone missing. And in somewhere between 95% and 98% of cases, somebody who knows the child is responsible, usually the closest adult, so either the mother or the father, depending on who was in charge at the time. And when you're looking for the body of a missing child, in something like 85% of cases, it's within 1000 meters of the last place they were seen. They don't get taken very far, they tend to get hidden in attics, roof spaces, boots of cars, almost always in an area, you could throw a rock, you'd find them, which is really interesting. When a child goes missing, you almost always know A) who it was, and B) where you're going to find them. And so what I wanted to do in this particular novel was create a situation where the reader can examine all of the suspects. Is the mother telling the truth? Is the father telling the truth? Is the nanny telling the truth? Are the other siblings telling the truth? What about other people who have babysat in the past? What about other mothers from the childcare center? It did seem like there were a lot of different possibilities.

Andy Muir

Yeah, it's it and it just kind of resonated so much with um with the William Tyrrell case, it's sort of, it really was just tapping into the sort of same almost Zeitgeist and the opening, you know, we often talk about Crime Books, you know, the opening is what grabs us, and I'm not a parent, but, *The Ones You Trust*, I thought, this is terrifying, this kind of idea of going to pick up your child, or your child is just not there and no one knows. It's not like they're under your care. They're under someone else's care.

Caroline Overington

In some ways, I think that's why both Katherine, who we've we've been hearing from and myself have crossed that, that divide between fiction and nonfiction, because very often, things that happen in real life can become a fictional story. Yeah but also sometimes the true crime is just as interesting in some ways more so, and I know Katherine, you've written both, and I've written both because they both feel so real. I mean, this, this particular story, how many times have you read in the news about a child going missing from a childcare center? it happens way more often than we think. because the staff they're underpaid, everybody's rushed mum's rushing home to get home from work, Dad's not often in charge of the pickup, but sometimes might be in which case, he's more likely to forget. Childcare centers have got so many kids and not enough staff, and they get locked up without people properly checking children can be very quiet when they want to be. So it to me it read like the kind of situation that not only could happen, but in fact often happens.

Andy Muir

No, definitely it felt very, very real. And so because you have written true crime, and you've written fiction, one of the challenges with life is that it doesn't actually follow a plot. So how do you kind of, do you find? Which one do you prefer?

Caroline Overington

I don't know that I have a preference but I think you're right. Sometimes because I work as a journalist as well, sometimes I come across a story in real life and I think to myself, "if I wrote that, if I put that in a book, the editor would say, Oh, come on, Caroline, that that can't possibly happen" Sometimes I'm astounded by the details in real life crime. And so often the problem is with when you're writing fiction is to make it exciting enough, you know, make it exciting enough. One thing I've never really liked doing in fiction is kind of the grisly side, you know. There are some Australian writers who are really excellent at writing scenes, when which people are killed, often violently, in which corpses are uncovered. I mean, one of my favorite writers is Karen Slaughter and in the opening of her new book, a girl is jogging along a bush path, and somebody comes and lands a hammer in the back of her head all the way up to the, to the handle. And and she writes it in a way that you can you can read it without needing to reach for a bucket but I'm not very good at that, at that grisly side of thing. So in some ways, reporting is easier because you you do sanitize for the viewer, in fiction not you're not supposed to but I don't find it easy to do.

Andy Muir

What about plotting, though?

Caroline Overington

Well, the plotting is interesting. Sometimes you have the answer before you get to the end. Sometimes I write a book and I think I know how this is going to end. I just have to figure out how I'm going to get there. And of course, when you're writing non-fiction, you know the answer, but not in all its details. I mean writing William Tyrrell was really difficult because I'm thinking to myself, I don't know what happened. I don't know. I think. I have a theory. I know other people are very strong in their theories. There are some people who would you know put a gun to their head and they would tell you what they think happened but how do you write a book without telling the reader what happened? Letting the reader draw their own conclusions about a case that isn't solved?

Suzanne Leal

Of course, Katherine, that's not the case in, *The School Girl Strangler*, because you knew what happened. Before we talk more about the book itself can you give a little bit of a backdrop as to what interested you in this case, enough to write a whole book about it?

Katherine Kovacic

Sure. I first came across this case several years ago, when I was actually doing research for the first Alex Clayton, which has part of it sitting in 1930s Melbourne, and it's based on an unsolved true crime. And I was looking at crime in general in Melbourne, in that period and policing in Melbourne in that period, which is probably a book of it, into and of itself. And I came across these crimes and it was a series of murders and I think what intrigued me most, Caroline was just saying, you know that most children that disappear, aren't taken by a stranger and yet here in 1930s, Melbourne, we had four little girls aged six to 16, who all disappeared, and were all taken by this one person. And, of course, police did exactly what Caroline said they would do, they, they had, they didn't know they were dealing with a serial killer, they didn't really have a concept of serial killers in 1930s. That term was decades away from coming into practice and so they looked at families, they looked at acquaintances, they looked at the boy next door, all those really obvious sort of suspects because they really, they really were way out of their depth. And they couldn't, couldn't really conceive of how to approach this case. So the police interested me, the girls themselves interested me, and it was their names that really sort of stuck in my head, because of course, when I first saw that case, I was doing something completely different. And I just kind of followed it away. And it wasn't until several years later, that I realized I still had not only the names, but their dates of death, and their ages, and all these little details sitting in my head. And I thought, well, I have to look at this a bit more and see, see what I can do with it. And the more I looked at it, the more I found about these, you know, the the way the police that really bungled the investigation. And I think the really interesting thing for this, for me, was the way this person operated the way he could make these girls basically vanish from from really public places. And of course, there was no CCTV or anything like that. But he literally managed to abduct one of these little girls on public transport over about a 10 kilometer distance and there were really no decent witnesses to speak of, and, and that, that really intrigued me. This, this person that was behind this and then how the police ultimately came to capturing him.

Suzanne Leal

You've spoken a lot about the perpetrator who we don't, and we don't find out about who that perpetrator is until the second half of the book. There's many things that are successful about this really compelling book. One of them is the voice you give to the victims. Recently in the media, there's been a lot of criticism of the dead girl who doesn't speak or the victim that doesn't speak. And in this book, you've really given a life to these four girls, whose lives were all very short. Can you introduce us to Mina Griffiths?

Katherine Kovacic

Sure, Mina Griffiths was the first victim and she came from a large family. She was 12 years old at the time, and she'd gone to the park on a Saturday afternoon and November Saturday afternoon with some of his siblings, three younger sisters to play. And this was something that they do quite regularly, the park was the 10 minute walk away and that was that was a safe world then. So 10 minutes from home, four the siblings together playing with some other children and then a stranger approached Mina at one point and asked her if she would go a message, to run a message for him and she refused. And he asked again, and by this stage her sisters had come up and Joyce, the next oldest who was there asked if she could go to and the stranger said no two can't go. And for some reason Mina agreed to do

this errand and and I think that, again, probably speaks to society at the time that clearly this was a reasonably presentable adult and if an adult asked you to do something, generally as a child that was what you did, so she walked off with this man with her siblings also following along and and they walk from Faulkner park in South Yarra through down to Commercial road. So this is just sort of through the through the back streets, Commercial road's a fairly major road and at that point, the stranger gave each of Mina's sisters a penny each to go into the shop and buy some lollies, which they did. When they came out Mina and the stranger had disappeared, and that was really, while there were some sort of uncorroborated sightings of her along the way, that was really the last time she was seen alive. And her body was found the next day in an abandoned house nearly 10 kilometers away from where she vanished. I think one of the really interesting things about about Mina is the fact that Joyce, the second youngest sister was asked to give a description of this stranger and description she gave was really something out of childhood nightmares and proved to be quite inaccurate, but the police released it at the time and it speaks to the man who walks with a limp and who has sores and scars over his face and one black eye and blackened teeth, and teeth missing and a greasy hat and just this real sort of nightmare image and and this poor little girl, Joyce - we're talking about Mina, but I have to talk about Joyce too, because the trauma for her of being there and that happening to her sister - and then to be questioned by police because they, you know, they didn't sort of have the protections that we had for children in those sorts of situations these days. So she was questioned by police. She was ultimately asked to look at a lineup of men to say was one of these man that that took your sister away? But Joyce's description of this, this nightmare figure that that took her sister away. And yet of course, when police released this description, you would expect no one would have seen this man with a with a small girl in a green coat. And yet several witnesses did come forward. Of course, the description subsequently proved to be quite inaccurate. But that's that's really a much bigger part of the story.

Suzanne Leal

You've spoken about the horror of this young girl going missing in 1930s, at a time where rightly or wrongly, it was seen that society was safe for children. And obviously, there was a desire as in the case of missing of William Tyrrell to have this case solved. Sometimes, the haste in wanting to have a case solved leads to injustice. And we've seen that in the case of William Tyrell with Bill Spedding, there's another William who has a large role in your book called William McMahon.

Katherine Kovacic

Robert McMahon?

Suzanne Leal

Tell me about Robert McMahon

Katherine Kovacic

Robert McMahon, he, he was the suspect. So police did, obviously they looked at the family. The family had been out you know, all night once they'd realize that that Mina was missing. You know, she hadn't come home when she was supposed to, Joyce told her father about this errand. They waited a little bit longer, because sometimes, you know, she met friends in the park, she played a bit later, when that didn't happen, the family was out scouring the streets and they notified the police and they were phoning hospitals. Nothing. But when police started to cast a wider net, when Mina's body was found, and they were looking for their perpetrator, they came up with Robert McMahon, and there were suggestions that they'd been given a tip by an ex-con. But Robert McMahon had only recently been released from prison two weeks before Mina disappeared and he had been locked out for an assault on a

young girl, which I should say that he had always denied being responsible for but he just spent seven years in jail for that and he'd only just gotten out. So this was one of the things that police had done once they'd eliminated that immediate family and social circle. They started looking at potential perpetrators and so they looked at who was on their sex offenders list who was on their list for attacking women and children, and who had recently been released from prison. And they came up with the name Robert McMahon. Now, McMahon had actually left Melbourne within several days of being his release from prison, and he'd gone up into New South Wales up to Linton. And he had actually been there at the time that the crime was committed but initially, he didn't realize how much trouble he was in. When police first came looking for him, they put out a description to other police stations and let them know that they were looking for this man and he was arrested in Linton and held on a serious charge like camping in the wrong place or, you know, trapping on someone's property and Melbourne detectives rushed up and questioned him and brought him back to Melbourne and they put him in a lineup and asked some of these witnesses who said that they'd seen Mina with a man and also Joyce, the younger sister and they said Is this the man you saw? And every single witness said no. Police released Robert McMahon, and he returned to New South Wales he advised them that he would be going to stay with his family, his brother's family in Sydney. And so two weeks later, the police came and arrested him again and they brought him back to Melbourne and this time when they put him in front of the witnesses, all of them except for one man, said that that he was the person that they had seen with Mina. So Robert McMahon was charged with her murder and he conducted his own defense. He did ask for a lawyer, but the lawyer in question had just gone away for Christmas holidays and didn't get the letter. And Robert Mann was adamant that he had been in New South Wales and he gave the police a very detailed description of his movements. People he had seen, although he didn't have correct names, because he hadn't realized he'd need an alibi. But he said, You know, I was here, I did this, I spoke to this person. We had a conversation about that. There was an auction in progress. There was a you know, the Salvation Army was there, I rode in a truck with these young men. I rode with an insurance agent. The police some made a few phone calls and said, well we can't seem to speak to anyone who can say that they've seen you. The police actually made a bit of a pantomime out of it to mid questioning him, there'd be a knock on the door, and a sergeant would stick his head in and say, you know, call for your detective and the detective would step outside and have a very loud conversation about "Aha, I see what's that his alibi is completely fallen apart, right?" And then come back in and start the questioning again. Robert McMahon maintained his innocence. In the courtroom, he was allowed to question Joyce, this man who supposedly had abducted and murdered her sister was allowed to sit directly in front of her and asked her, you know, "am I the man you saw?" and Joyce said "Yes" And he said, "but last time you said I wasn't." And she said, "Well, last time you had to beard and this time you don't and now I'm sure." Robert McMahon was charged and it looked like he was going to basically be hanged for the crime but then because the case had had such wide coverage, it was an Australia wide thing, some of those people up in Linton actually saw Robert McMahon's photographs in the paper and one of them went to a local lawyer and said, "I saw him I spoke to him he was here." And the local lawyer actually also thought that he had seen this man and so he wrote an urgent letter to police ministers and the government of Victoria and said, "we've seen him he was here, his alibi's true." And it was really only through the diligence of the public prosecutor who was, you know, turned out to be a good guy, and said, we need to investigate this case a bit more, that McMahon's alibi was finally explored. And the prosecutor and McMahon and several detectives actually went up to Linton. And all these people, it's great line of at least a dozen people were brought out and told their stories one by one about I saw him here, I drove him there. And Robert McMahon broke down in tears. He'd been vindicated. And they were forced to drop all charges against him and they gave him a ticket, train ticket to get back to Sydney for his trouble.

Suzanne Leal

And of course, it's back to basics for the investigation and meanwhile, more girls are being targeted. The book you've written, Katherine is so easy to read. It reads not like a novel, but it reads in a way that makes you not want to leave it alone and not rest until you're finished it. But I'm imagining that the research involves material that wasn't quite so easy to read, and didn't have quite so linear a attraction, what, what sort of research did you do? And how hard was it to muscle all that research into a book that is so accessible?

Katherine Kovacic

I um, I spent a lot of time in the public records office and it's interesting because sometimes it's an, it's an absolute goldmine, and everything just you know, falls into line. And sometimes you just can't find the information you want, you know, particularly with older files, things get muddled together, you know, cases that crossover and particularly this, the perpetrator had several alibis earlier on before he got to, before he got to murdering and was just, you know, on other crimes, so there was mixes in the files there. And some of the really old material, you know, hadn't, was just in boxes so you had to sort of wade through various other cases to hopefully find what you needed. But some of these files hadn't been opened, you know, there were looking looking at Robert McMahon's criminal history, things that were were knotted up and you know. I needed to get public record stuff to cut the knots for me and everything was everything was quite quite jumbled even in the main files because, of course, once police realized they were dealing with one killer and multiple murders, bits and pieces have kind of ended up everywhere, as they were sort of bringing these cases together. So it for me, I like to have research done before I really start writing even if it's just sort of having skimmed through things. So I had lots of digital files and mounds of paper everywhere by the time I'd sort of got to that stage, but I could see that see where the threads went through the case. And I always knew that I wanted to write this book with, with the girls with the victims as the focus. So that really, I already had that structure there and it was, it was teasing apart the elements of their cases, but then also going to other sources to find those other bits. So local historians, school historians, archives, Interstate, even births, deaths and marriages overseas to sort of track down some of those family histories and, and all those little bits and pieces that, that go to make up the story of those families and those girls all started to come into it as well. And of course, for me, tracing some of the descendants too. Big families in some cases, so it's never possible to get to everybody. But it was interesting, then to find how much the stories had been hidden away in these families. So, in one case, a you know, a memory and the story very closely protected and guarded, and rightly so, in another case, a family that, that all they knew was that they'd had an aunt who died when she was a young girl and didn't know until they were adults themselves, you know, well into sort of the, the 1970s that she had been murdered, and really knowing very little about the story itself. Even finding a descendant of one of the men who was falsely accused of one of these crimes and, and finding out the the wider impacts that it had had on on his life going forward, because he was only 18 at the time of that case. So finding the way to pull those threads together and keep the story moving but at the same time, not, over not overwhelm readers with with that mound of paper that I was sort of facing in public records and in my own study, because they were all those little extra bits and particularly once you get down to sort of the the legal side of things, arguments backwards and forwards and conversation that needed to, to be there to some extent, but perhaps not when you get right down to the nitpicking thing. So, so giving you that story without giving you the overwhelming detail that really, I think loses the girls in that, just that, that sort of mound of of legalese and paper.

Suzanne Leal

Thanks, Katherine. So Caroline, what Katherine said, is important in writing a book like this, is to tell the story without being lost in the amount of paperwork, did that strike a chord?

Caroline Overington

Absolutely. I absolutely know exactly what she means. I spend some time in the public records office here in New South Wales. I know, Katherine, I think is talking about Victoria and my understanding is that Victoria is really well organized and New South Wales, honestly, you can go out there and just as Catherine just described it, you open the files, and it's not like everything is just there waiting for you to discover it. It's a complete shambles. Everything is upside down and the wrong way around. And you can't find what you're looking for and you have too much of the other thing that you that you need. And this was particularly true when I was writing Last Woman Hanged, which was about a woman who was hanged for a crime of murder, the files but dated back to the 1900s. They were meticulous record keepers, they really were you have to admire them but it isn't like you go there and then you just find all of the material and slot it into your book. Not at all. Not at all.

Andy Muir

And there's always those wonderful sort of serendipitous discoveries that are really exciting, where you kind of find you know, someone's signature or you know, something that you completely weren't expecting to find, but suddenly it makes it just so much

Caroline Overington

Yes and you have to be careful to remember what belongs in your book and what is just delightful, because so for example, the the hangman at the time or the coroner at the time who declared that, that some of Louisa Collins's victims had been murdered, went a little nutty after she was hanged, because that was often the case you send someone to the gallows, it doesn't not affect you, of course, it affects you. And he died and he left a widow and she was left without support and so she wrote a letter to the governor saying this case really affected my husband, he's now dead, I have no way of supporting myself...Really delightful to find that and to and to get lodged in your brain, the idea that the people who are involved in a hanging are, are impacted by the hanging too. But does it belong in the book because if you do every single one of those tiny little things that you find, you do need to keep the reader, well you need to keep your, your story moving for the reader and that's a nice little alleyway that perhaps you're not going to be able to go down.

Andy Muir

That's right, that actually raises a really interesting point as well, like do we do either of you sort of have to decompress after you've been dealing with this material for a long time? Is there some sort of way that you can, you know, put this aside because you are both sort of investigating some really horrific material.

Katherine Kovacic

I certainly had days in public records where I had to just put, put the files back on the shelf and say I'm coming back tomorrow because it's just, you've reached that point where you really just need to go out and walk in fresh air and just think about something else for a while. It's um, you can't not think about it because I think when when you're in the middle of a story like that, the girls, the victims are always with you. So you're trying to tell their story but yes, you need to sort of put aside the detail and put put that clinical hat on, I think. In many ways, sometimes it sort of reminds me of practicing veterinary medicine

or medicine that you have to be able to put that, that sort of divide in place and just deal with the material in front of you and then later on you can analyze your own feelings and thoughts about it.

Caroline Overington

I thought what Suzanne said before was very astute. The idea that we've had too much media over the past two centuries, in particular about women who are silent, who are voiceless, we don't often think about the victims, and in this case, their children, but they are often women. And that is true in sexual assault as well, not just in the case of murder. And I think what Katherine's done with this book is amazing, because you really do get the idea that these were for children, this is not just a great story to be told. This is not just a thrilling crime story for people to enjoy it is that, but they they were real, they were, they were girls who were full of potential and ripe with possibility who had lives and dreams and, and they were cut short. And that and that is true of William too. And, and I felt that very strongly when I was investigating Louise's hanging because she too had children and towards the very end, the two smallest of them were taken to the governor's mansion to play for their mother's life and and he wouldn't come out to see them. And I had it lodged in my brain an image of two little, little kids in their button up shoes and going to those big forboding set of gates and and knocking and not being allowed access and not being allowed to say, you know, don't, don't do this commute this sentence just leave her alive for us. In particular, because all of the evidence was circumstantial, and the case had not, in my view been proved. So I agree with Katherine and also with with what Suzanne said that yes, that you're very alive to the fact that you are dealing with real people, and they deserve our respect.

Suzanne Leal

What's interesting, in each of your books, at least Missing William Tyrrell, and The Schoolgirl Strangler, is they're almost mirror images in that one is about a case that was solved and solved to everyone's satisfaction, and one is about an ongoing case that's not solved. So my question first to you, Katherine, is, would you have written this book had the case has not been solved?

Katherine Kovacic

That's a really interesting question. I think, because of the policing aspects as well, I think it was a story that that was, should have been told, I think, again, the girls, it's not just about recognizing the girls, because I think, you know, they, there has to be a bigger reason to write the story. And I think looking at the policing aspect of that makes it a story that's worth telling, because it was, it was only after I think 1938 that police in Victoria actually started to get proper detective training. Until then, it was just a case of You rose through the ranks from uniform. And when you got to a certain point, that was the next promotion and a way you went. And it seemed to be very much a case of you know, perhaps knocking on a few doors, maybe knocking the occasional heads together. And that was you know, you, there was no real reason for these guys to be promoted, except that that was where they got to in their careers. And I think that was a really interesting element. And watching how that policing changed after that, and watching how the police changed during the course of this investigation. I think, at the third murder, you can see almost, I think, perhaps it's fair to say the fear in the police the way they suddenly amp up what they're doing, when they realize that this person is back again, and is still killing. So I think in many ways, it would have been a story worth telling, even if they hadn't stumbled on the answer in the end. And I think, again, just for those girls to to have their their names remembered and to have their lives short, though they were, remembered because as Caroline said, these were real girls with potential and they're they have families and they have descendants now who still feel that loss. And and that's that's a story worth knowing.

Suzanne Leal

And Caroline, for me, it seems that the momentum for your book, Missing William Tyrrell, really is that momentum of the child who is to be found but has not yet to be found. So my question is, had this case been solved before you came to write it? Would you still written this book?

Caroline Overington

You know, I don't know the answer to that question. I really don't. It's a such a good question because I wrote the book because I believe the case can be solved. And not only that, I believe the case will be solved. It just it to my mind. The university is tilted slightly in the wrong direction when something like this happens, and we don't find the answer. I feel like everything is slightly off kilter. And and that's and that's not good for the world. It needs to write itself. And so I believe that if we don't find out what happened to William, then William will make himself known to us in the same way, as happened with Azaria Chamberlain. Do you remember many years later, the matinee jacket just turned up? She made herself known to us. And in the case of Jaden leschi, in Victoria, too, he was missing and then his body floated to the surface of the dam. He had been put into a plastic bag way to down and buried and he, he float-ed himself to the surface of the dam. So I believe that William will make himself known to us that the crime will be solved and the importance of the book was to say, here is what we know. This is the evidence uncorrupted by mistakes made early on, not to lay blame, I was never interested in saying, well, the police muck this up, or they should have done this differently. If only we done this or that was simply to say, here is the evidence, let's look at it again because he definitely waits for us, he definitely waits to be found, and the crime is solvable.

Suzanne Leal

That's a very sobering and interesting note to end on. Can I thank our guests, Caroline Overington, and Catherine Kovacevich, for your time, for your energy and for your works. Thank you very much. And thanks, of course to Andy.

Katherine Kovacic

Thank you.

Caroline Overington

Thank you.

Andy Muir

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