

BAD Sydney Festival 2021 - Close Encounters with a Murderer

SPEAKERS

Nicole Abadee, Suzanne Leal, Robert Drew, Andy Muir

Suzanne Leal 00:05

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 00:13

And I'm Andy Muir. And each month we'll be exploring the big questions in crime and crime writing, subscribe to our podcast, then jump onto the Bad: All About Crime book club page on Facebook, to be part of the conversation. And thanks for listening. Welcome to the Bad: All About Crime Podcast. I'm Andy Muir. The episode you're about to hear is a presentation from 2021 Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. It was titled close encounters with a murderer and in this session facilitator Nicole Abadee talks to crime writer Robert Drew about his personal experiences with a serial killer Robert Cook. The Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival is on again soon from the eighth to the 10th of September in Sydney. Go to www.dotbad.com To find out more.

Nicole Abadee 00:59

My name is Nicole Abadee. I'm delighted to welcome you here to the Metcalf auditorium for this conversation with much loved Australian writer Robert Drew about Close Encounters with a Murderer, fascinating title. And it's going to be a really fascinating discussion with Robert, I absolutely know. Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to the elders past and present. Let me then introduce you to Robert Drew the oldest cliché in the book, he doesn't need an introduction at all. But let me tell you a little bit about him to refresh your memories. Robert started his working life as a cub reporter at the age of 18 for the West Australian newspaper. In his late 20s, he left full time journalism to write and his first book The Savage Prose was published in 1976. He has continued to work as a journalist whilst writing full time writing for many publications including The Australian where he was literary editor, The Bulletin and The Sydney Morning Herald. He's written seven novels, including The Drowner, which won the Premier's Literary Prize in every state, and was voted one of the 10 Best International novels of the decade. He's also written short stories, memoirs and plays, and has won numerous literary awards and received many many accolades here and abroad. His recent short story collection The True Colour of the Sea, won the 2019 Collin Roderick Literary Award. And this year he won the very prestigious copyright agency's cultural funds authors fellowship. Our conversation today about Close Encounters with a Murderer will draw on his award winning memoir, The Shark Net, which was published by Penguin in 2000. Let me tell you a bit about The Shark Net. It won the 2000 Western Australian Premier's Prize for nonfiction and the 2000 Brisbane Courier Mail award of the year book of the year award. And it was adapted for an ABC and BBC TV miniseries. Robert is going to tell us a little bit about

that later, and a BBC radio drama. Welcome, Robert to the Bad Crime Writers Festival. Robert, I'm gonna ask you to start by telling us what is The Shark Net about?

Robert Drew 03:13

The Shark Net is, in one sense a memoir of growing up at a particular time in suburban Western Australia. But it's a time that also coincides with the evil reign of a man who I knew who killed a boy I knew and at least another seven people over a period of about seven, six or seven years. He killed them by so many different means that the police were stymied and thought they were looking for for different perpetrators.

Nicole Abadee 03:49

Let's start we're not going to go through all of them. There were, as you say, eight murders that he was ultimately committed, and I think there were 14 murder attempts. Let's start by talking a little bit about the first two murders which took place I think in 1959. When you, I imagine, were a fairly impressionable 16 year old, tell us a bit about those first two.

Robert Drew 04:10

Everyone he killed was a stranger. And most of them are asleep. So he was a prowler, who who began he was he was a classic small time criminal, the sort of guy who stole women's underwear from clotheslines and rifled through dressing tables, that sort of thing. But the first woman he first personally killed was a woman, Patricia Berkman, who work while he was rifling through her belongings, and so he said he had a fisherman's knife on him. And so he stabbed her to death. Now from that moment on his forays and prowling, obviously sparked something different in him and then on, he usually killed the people he was prowling the people's homes who he prowled, he genuinely went that step further.

Nicole Abadee 05:01

And that woman, the way it was reported was quite sensational, wasn't it? She was described as the naked divorcee.

Robert Drew 05:08

Yes, she was she was a divorcee, which in those days was like saying, especially in the tabloid press, was like saying, this woman is a prostitute basically. And she worked as a sales assistant to David Jones in Perth, which you know, that's a bit dodgy too. And she had and she had a Greek boyfriend, but really it was the triumvirate. So the papers went to town on her, as well as the unknown killer.

Nicole Abadee 05:34

And then the next person murdered was Gillian Brewer, 22 year old heiress, do you wan to tell us a little bit about that?

Robert Drew 05:40

Yes, she was the heiress. I don't know whether any of you remember Nick Robertson's chocolates, which were very big. They made the snack bar and various other things. Anyway, she was the heiress to that Nick Robertson fortune, living in an apartment in Cottesloe in WA. And she was asleep. Her boyfriend had just left. They'd been the maid love and been together all evening, he'd left. Cook had watched them through a window. The boyfriend left he then went in there when she was asleep, and he hit her with a hatchet hitter with a tomahawk, and a pair and stabbed with a pair of scissors. And there

wasn't much left of her when he finished. And I don't know if this is jumping into your into one of your one of your questions. But in terms of my sort of connection with this, that the

Nicole Abadee 06:35

That was my next question tell us.

Robert Drew 06:36

The tomahawk was owned by the family of a friend of mine, my best friend at the time, who had been using the tomahawk to trim the edges of the path of grass and weeds and things that afternoon and hadn't put it off. Being a teenage boy hadn't put it away.

Nicole Abadee 06:53

So he lived right near the one behind that block of flats. You said the murderer had picked that up on the way through?

Robert Drew 06:58

Yeah, and then killed Julian Bird with it and Simon my friend's fingerprints were on it as well. So how did he feel about that? Well, like everyone else even more so he was, he was devastated like a lot of people. But they were, Perth being a small community at the time and the western suburbs being intensely involved in each other's lives in middle class, reasonably well off way. Everyone had some sort of connection with a victim really.

Nicole Abadee 07:32

The next three murders, so this was 1959, those two and then the next three murders all took place around the same time at 2am in the morning on a Sunday after Australia Day. 1963. You are 20 by this stage, I'm going to just before we get to those, just tell us what you what was your job at this stage? Where were you working?

Robert Drew 07:51

I was a cadet reporter on the West Australian covering just about everything but mostly the minor courts, the Perth police guard, which was the Magistrates Court, where you the courts dealt with with small offenses. And it was also where you were committed to the larger courts if you had if you're accused of a serious crime.

Nicole Abadee 08:14

So with this one, it started out with him spying on a couple of basically who were parked in the car and he was spying on them and sort of generally disturbing and then I think some, one of them threw a bottle at him and that provoked him. And then what happened?

Robert Drew 08:29

The man in the car, who was sort of canoodling with a barmaid in the car. And they didn't like the idea of a peeping Tom looking at them annoyed the man. He threw a beer bottle at the the Prowler who then had a rifle on him and shot them, but he really only wounded hem and they drove off at speed to Fremantle hospital. But the Prowler was then enraged enough to sort of keep going with the mood he was in. And he climbed into a block of flats and shot a young lifesaver.

Nicole Abadee 09:04

He was asleep in his bed in his bed, yeah. And shot him in the...

Robert Drew 09:09

Shot him in the head and then traveled in a car to Nedlands about three kilometers away. Where he prowled around the back of several houses and shot again a sleeping boy who who was a friend of mine, who was a uni student living in the house of a a sort of semi boarding house for students near the University of WA And he happened to be sleeping on the veranda outside and... there was a heatwave and he and he and another friend of mine, Scott MacWilliam had tossed a coin to see who got the advantage of sleeping on the back veranda in the cool and John my friend won and was asleep as the killer came through. In a very close quarters shot him in the head.

Nicole Abadee 09:59

And they just, Scott and John hadn't they had had like, and it was just so poignant the way you described this in your book, that they, they'd had a little chat shortly before. Like, I think someone got up in the night to go to the bathroom, they found out they were both awake so that Scott had been out there with him. They'd been chatting, Scott had gone back to bed, and then how did he learn about the murder?

Robert Drew 10:18

On the next morning, they found out about it. But after, the after shooting John the killer then went, walked to the next street with a rifle, rang the doorbell of a middle aged couple called Wamsley. And when the sleepy house owner came to the door, he shot him in the head, and he died too. So that was three in that night. And that was that's his bit, from that moment on, Perth was alert and worried. And the whole the whole atmosphere of the town changed.

Nicole Abadee 10:55

I want to ask you and I probably should have started with this, you'd lived in Perth from when you were six, you'd moved as a child, your family had moved from Melbourne to Perth, and you'd live there from the age of six and lived a pretty happy, carefree kind of life there. From your observations, what was, what was Perth like, up until these murders? What kind of city was it? what kind of a lifestyle was it?

Robert Drew 11:16

Sleepy. It was it was a sleepy conservative, Huckleberry Finnish sort of childhood. People because it was hard to, people, there was a habit of people would sleep on the front verandah. They'd pull the mattress out onto the front verandah or the back verandah or onto the lawn.

Nicole Abadee 11:36

You said people didn't lock doors?

Robert Drew 11:38

Oh, no, no, no, no, they didn't. And it was regarded as a sign of suspicion and mistrust. If you didn't leave your keys in the ignition of the car, too. So when when when the killer was wandering around in other people's cars, he never had to hotwire them or anything like that. He just would find one with a key still in the ignition

Nicole Abadee 11:59

And back doors were open? front doors are open? windows weren't locked?

Robert Drew 12:02

Blocks of, he'd come in through bathroom windows in blocks of flats or he didn't he never had to actually break and enter. He just entered.

Nicole Abadee 12:12

And then how did after the this terrible, particularly these three Australia Day murders, how did that change? People were really terrified weren't they. And how did that how did Perth change? How did the way people behave change?

Robert Drew 12:27

Well, no one knew what was going on. Everyone mistrusted everyone else really, in a way. The police were of no help whatsoever. They were looking, as I said, at, different people and the police commissioner himself said this isn't the same person.

Nicole Abadee 12:41

Yeah, that's because his modus, their modus operandi was different than that. And then we won't go through all of them. But after these, there are a couple more murders. Somebody, a woman, was run down in the street, somebody else is strangled. So is because his modus operandi in each case was different. Police didn't think they were looking for a serial killer. They thought they were looking for a bunch of killers.

Robert Drew 12:59

Yeah, yeah, that's right.

Nicole Abadee 13:00

And you write in the book just about little things that really struck me the details like people started buying guard dogs, locksmiths started to get busy. Would you like to talk a little bit about that about how people's own daily life habits changed? Did your family change their habits?

Robert Drew 13:16

Well, we changed the habits in all sorts of ways. One way was which we were like every other male over 14. We were we were suspects. So we, my father and I were fingerprinted twice. As were every other male over 14.

Nicole Abadee 13:31

How did that feel?

Robert Drew 13:33

Well as a 14 year old it was so exciting. But it was good. We knew we hadn't done it as well. So it was sort of it was interesting and bit a bit you know, creepy. But that that was the tenor of the times. You You just expected there to be more bizarre behavior really, on the part of the authorities. And all the while they had they felt they had found the hatchet. And I was still wondering who did that, whether it was my friend Simon or someone else. They found the scissors and they'd found the the fishing knife for the other murders. But they didn't have the rifle.

Nicole Abadee 14:21

They, let's just go back a step for that that second murder. They then did find didn't they and charge somebody with that murder and they think they thought they'd found the person?

Robert Drew 14:33

Yes, they, this is just as grotesque in a way but they were always looking for someone who wasn't quite right. And obviously the killer wasn't wasn't quite right. But there was a deaf mute called, Darrel Beamish who had had in the extreme way of these farcical coincidences had also prowled Julian Brewers house that night.

Nicole Abadee 15:00

So he was charged he was charged wasn't he?

Robert Drew 15:02

He was charged with murder and sentenced to death.

Nicole Abadee 15:05

And he did he did the sentence was commuted, wasn't it? But he did time.

Robert Drew 15:09

Eventually when the killer was, the killer was found, confessed. confessed,

Nicole Abadee 15:14

But the police didn't believe that he did that.

Robert Drew 15:17

No, no, no,

Nicole Abadee 15:17

They still thought that the young deaf mute boy had done it. And so he served a sentence.

Robert Drew 15:21

A lot, a lot of police, especially in those days, and especially in that place didn't want to admit they were wrong. So they would rather have someone been executed, than say they stuffed up.

Nicole Abadee 15:31

Robert I want to take you back to your personal experiences after these three, I'm calling the Australia Day murders, these three consecutive murders. You're saying in your book that for a week afterwards you just had this fascination, you were drawn to drive back past the victims houses every day. And you said "I knew it was macabre but I couldn't help it. I was compelled." Why do you think that was? What were your feelings? What was it that drove you to drive by?

Robert Drew 16:00

Because I was a young reporter and I was part of the time on police rounds, part out of the time doing courts, I would, and my girlfriend lived across the river, and I would borrow my mother's old Renault car. And on the way either to my girlfriend's house or home I would drive past the Berkman house which was in South Perth to just to see if there was anything that stood out in the place.

Nicole Abadee 16:29

Were you looking for clues? Was that part of it?

Robert Drew 16:31

I was just looking for some sort of atmosphere I suppose maybe this was just the very, very early signs of the novelist rather than the reporter. I don't know. But they were they were strange times. And it was only an accident that the police were able to find the killer in the end as well.

Nicole Abadee 16:54

We'll come to that in a moment. The other thing that you talked about was you said there was this very eerie feeling through the whole town on the beaches, in the pubs in the beer gardens. I mean, people must have been just terrified to go out.

Robert Drew 17:08

Exactly. And I was at that stage working in a very late shift at the newspaper starting starting midnight till 8am. So driving through town, in my mother's Renault, the buses, buses in Perth stopped at about 10pm, and the lights went off all over Perth at 1pm at 1am. So it was dark and creepy driving, driving to work or driving around on my rounds was a pretty eerie experience for a few months.

Nicole Abadee 17:44

And you write about in the book how the fact that one of the victims you actually knew it was a young man your own age. And for a lot of you, all of you realise that, it could have been any of you that you know sleeping on the verandah.

Robert Drew 17:56

Yes John was sleeping on the verandah.

Nicole Abadee 18:00

Yeah, and you say in the book that the more, that thinking about and your own personal feeling, it gave you a terrible, conflicted, guilty thrill. Tell us about that feeling.

Robert Drew 18:10

I was very, it was a mixture of all sorts of things. Sadness, and, of course and shock but also the feeling of him having one one there's a little personal lottery of winning the, the, the, the cooler bed on the on the verandah thing, was was really strong. And also the hand of fate. Yes. And also because he was only going to be there for another couple of weeks he had won a scholarship. You couldn't study agriculture in those days at the University of WA, he had to come East. And he was about to, he'd won a scholarship to a bigger, better, brighter, more sophisticated place, and he was about to leave on that bigger adventure.

Nicole Abadee 18:57

It was only a couple of weeks after those Australia Day murders that two more young women were violently killed. One was run down by a car, one was strangled. In September 1963 The police eventually captured the killer. Tell us about how that came about. How did they, how did they catch him eventually?

Robert Drew 19:15

Well, he'd just shot a young babysitter, an 18 year old babysitter called Shirley McLeod, a block away from my parent's house. And this was another during the stage of second fingerprints, my father's and my second fingerprinting because the the man who owned the house was a neighbor of of dad's and dad's been at their place having beers on the Sunday before. And his finger prints were there, like, like my father's, actual fingerprints were in the house. So that that was another sort of personal confrontation, complication. But, and that was the same rifle that had been used to kill John and Wamsley and Brian Weir, so the police accidentally had, were, it was reported to them an old couple walking across the river in Mount Pleasant, going for a stroll, saw a rifle hidden in the bush and told the cops who who watched the rifle in the bush for two weeks. They camped nearby, they tied it, they tied it to the to the tree. And on the next full moon as it happened, I don't know whether people believe in that full moon theory of maniacs and vampires and things. But on the next full moon, the killer came to try and get the rifle and they pounced. And then he said, Yes, I did it.

Nicole Abadee 20:48

We're going to talk more about his response because it was very odd. And I want to just focus on you for the moment. The murderer turned out to be somebody you knew a man called Eric Cooke. How did you know him?

Robert Drew 21:00

He worked for my father. My father was the branch manager, the state manager of Dunlop in WA and Eric was one of his truck drivers. And he would come to our house about three times a week driving one of those big yellow and black Dunlop trucks, delivering things and taking them away and so forth. And when the first time I met him, I was I was 13 much earlier than this. And I was mending, mending a puncture in my bike tyre, in the days when people do things like that. And, and I was boredly waiting for the cement, rubber cement to set. And this guy came up behind me and said that you'll get, and I was pumping the, bike on my arm and made a farting sort of noise on skin just out of sheer teenage boredom. And and this small, dark haired guy with a speech impediment said to me "you'll get warts doing that." And I thought hm, but it sounded as if he said something, it sounded as if he said "there's a horse doing that." And I'm not mocking people with impairments but I thought what the crosscut what, what you're getting at? So I looked up and anyway, he then started chatting and things. And in those days, I was 13. And pink shirts were very popular and the tight jeans and desert boots were very popular in the scenes that I moved in. And and he said are you a commo or something? Because you're wearing a pink shirt? Yeah. And I thought what's a commo? No, not anyway, we started talking. And from then on as he would come to our house, he realised that I liked and played hockey. And he liked and played hockey and was actually very good at it. He played A grade hockey. And so we'd have a few hits, and he and he would run rings around the 13 year old boy. So and he'd come to our place about three times a week. And if I was out in the backyard, hitting a ball against the fence or something he would do it too.

Nicole Abadee 23:23

So that you were 13 then and these first murders occurred when you were 16. So overall that period would you see him that often that many times a week?

Robert Drew 23:34

I wouldn't always be there, but it would have been, he came three times a week. And perhaps one of those once a week. I probably saw him for three years, or once or twice.

Nicole Abadee 23:45

And he was a family man wasn't he Robert? Tell us about his family.

Robert Drew 23:48

He had seven kids. He was only in his 30s yeah and he had seven kids. And we've mentioned his name and things. And his name was Eric Cooke. And he was married to a woman called Sally. And they have the seven kids. And I'm, I would later meet and interview Sally and his second eldest son, Tony. They'd had a litany of genetic misfortune in their lives. One of the one of the children was a thalidomide child. And one the eldest one was badly mentally disturbed.

Nicole Abadee 24:36

The thalidomide one had no arm right?

Robert Drew 24:41

And a couple of others weren't in the best of shape and he himself had hair lip and cleft palette.

Nicole Abadee 24:54

So when you found out that it was him, and then there was somebody that you knew that had been a regular visitor to your house, you played sport with, worked for your dad. How did you how did you feel? And were you surprised?

Robert Drew 25:08

Well, I only knew about it but of course he was found and convicted and charged.

Nicole Abadee 25:12

Okay, so tell us about that. Then you are at the, so there's the committal proceedings, first of all to commit someone for trial and then he's tried for murder and you were at both the committal proceedings and the trial. Let's start with the committal proceedings. So tell us about those you were present at those.

Robert Drew 25:29

I'm outside the court on that asphalt area between the court the court and the, and the where the black mariahs would bring the prisoners in from Fremantle prison to the court. And the black mariahs doors opens and he, this little man, because he was small, is brought out with heavy detectives all around him and shuffled into the into the cells beneath the court, and then later is in the dock. Where over a period of days, they charged him while he was charged with all the with all the murders, but the one who was appearing in court what for was the charge of killing John Starkey, my friend. And seeing and I'm sitting in the press table, and seeing outlaid right in front of me is as close as I am to, you know, the steps there, are all the clinical very black and white 10 by eight police photographs of John's head and body and the surroundings in the bed and everything. And there's there's Eric in the in the in the court, and towards the afternoon, the sun's coming in through the High Court windows. And I'd been avoiding looking looking at him and was sort of able to just because of the way people were moving around the garden, where people were positioned and so forth. But there was a stage in the afternoon when the sun's rays were just so that when he looked towards me, I couldn't look away. And I looked at him. And he winked at me. And I and I winked back. And in that instance, I had that I was in strange felt that strange feeling of I felt like some sort of treacherous criminal. But I also thought, this is a split second decision, if I don't acknowledge someone that has shown, made a friendly gesture towards me,

what sort of a shithead am I? But then I feel guilty, but then I feel instantly, instantly guilty of being the worst sort of person possible.

Nicole Abadee 27:46

So were you surprised?

Robert Drew 27:47

All these complex thoughts happen much, much quicker than that.

Nicole Abadee 27:51

Yeah. Were you surprised that it was him? That he had been charged with the murders? He was committed for trial?

Robert Drew 27:58

Yes, of course, I was surprised because you don't expect anyone you know, to be charged with murder. With the murder of someone you also know. When they didn't know each other. I knew both of them. And they didn't know each other. They had no idea who each other were. But I must say that Eric, when you looked at him in a dispassionate way, he looked like a comic book criminal. He looked like the criminals in the Dick Tracy comics that I used to love as a kid. He was small and swarthy. And he frowned. And he had a misshapen face. And he had an old fashioned dark blue pinstripe suit with wide lapels. And when you're a teenager, your clothes are more important than when you're eight or nine. And he looked. He looked, he like a crook, then.

Nicole Abadee 28:50

And one of the amazing things that you write about, and I should say, if you're fascinated by these stories, as of course I became after reading this book, you can Google Eric Cooke and you can see photos of him and it gives you a real sense of it. And there's been quite a lot written about him. But one of the extraordinary things was, he confessed in such detail, didn't he? It was almost as if he was proud to tell the story. Tell us a bit about that.

Robert Drew 29:15

He was proud he was finally he finally felt he was someone. And when I delved into his family, his history later on, when writing a book, he'd had a terrible childhood. When he was born with an obvious deformity. His father said to his mother, don't think I'm going to have anything to do with bird mouth. He was expelled from his first school when he was five, a primary school. The kids teased him all his life. He was he was a loser right from the word go. And when I was writing about him, and having known him, there was no one could have been more committed more heinous crimes but there was a certain manic thing there. I thought as a layperson, there was nothing in it for him other than perhaps, thinking, as he said, as his lawyer, tried to say at his trial, thinking he was god.

Nicole Abadee 30:26

He talks about the power too didn't he did it for the power?

Robert Drew 30:29

Yeah.

Nicole Abadee 30:30

And he was obviously someone that hadn't had much power in his life.

Robert Drew 30:33

No. But he had been. I mean, he had been also, a some of that was also a little bit fishy that he had been a thief. He'd been he'd been a prowler. He'd hurt a lot of other people, committed arson at 14, set fire to a department store at 14. So he had, he had form.

Nicole Abadee 30:57

So you were present at the, so he's committed for trial? And then you are present at the trial. As you say he wasn't tried for all of the eight murders he was just tried for the one, John's Sturkey. What was it like? What happened at the trial?

Robert Drew 31:13

Well, the trial trial was fishy. And it was it was for all sorts of reasons. It didn't ring. really true. The whole state hated him and was scared of him for the you couldn't have found an impartial jury person in the whole state of Western Australia. In the in the dock, you had evil Eric cooke on the bench. You had the judge his name was Mr. Justice Virtue. You couldn't script that you couldn't. You couldn't make it up Yeah. So you have virtue against evil. When he when his when when Cooke's defence counsel tried to get an independent psychiatric appraisal of him, the crown would only give him the crown psychiatrist who was also giving evidence for the crown. Now, that's kangaroo court stuff. And surprisingly, the crown psychiatrists came down on the side of the crown's decision.

Nicole Abadee 32:22

He said he wasn't insane. He was sanr. That was his that was his only defense. He had confessed. So the only defense he could show. Yeah, so the jury only retired for a very short time, didn't they?

Robert Drew 32:35

And the door wasn't barely shut.

Nicole Abadee 32:36

Yeah, barely an hour, which I think you say in the book is like the minimum time for it to be respectable. And then they came back in and they delivered the guilty verdict. What did the judge do?

Robert Drew 32:47

Well, he put on, these were the days when they put on that little black crown, thing on the on the head and sentences him to death. And I was watching all this in agog. And but the expression on Eric's face as he was sentenced to death and he was found guilty was almost as if it was sort of beatific, as if as if, you know, I've made it.

Nicole Abadee 33:17

So it was almost like he was grateful.

Robert Drew 33:19

Yeah, it was very, very, very strange. And life then went on and he was in, in prison in in solitary then death row for quite a while, during which time his wife visited him every day while the kids played in the park nearby. And while he was in jail, his eldest son, the one who was mentally disturbed, who was in care, wandered into the Swan River and drowned. So you had his poor wife, she's got seven kids, her

husband's on death row, her eldest son's just wandered into the river and drowned. And there's only one other sorry two of the seven, who are the full quid. You know, my, it was almost too much as someone following them to bare.

Nicole Abadee 34:08

It was like a Greek tragedy or something and he ultimately was executed a year later in October 64. The last man in Perth person in Perth, to be executed, the second last in Australia. After the trial, you went and spoke to Sally, you found out a little bit of information. They'd married in 1953. She was 19. He was 22. When I did the math on that he committed his first murder six years later into the marriage. He's only been married for six years. He is 28. He commits the first of these horrendous murders. You went to speak to her, I was wondering why you did that? Was that for the purpose of writing this book? Was that was it when you decided to write the book that you then went to speak to her and also to one of his sons?

Robert Drew 34:55

Partly, partly obviously, but I was also very curious as someone who have been connected in a small way to him and to into to a larger way to John, the victim. But I want to find out what sort of really what sort of background he came from. And one of the things he used to do, he was always he was always a show off. He always wanted to big note himself in a way that was sort of crazy. He would try and there was a ballroom in Perth, called the embassy Ballroom in those days in William Street, Perth, and about 100 meters from the river. And he would try and he'd asked girls to dance and things, and they wouldn't. They wouldn't. He was short and not pleasant to look at. And they would laugh and titter and move doing girl things and not dancing. And at the end of the end of the dance, he would run out of the dance floor fully clothed in sports coat and clothes of the dancing clothes of the day and run down the hill down to the the William Street jetty and dive into the river. This is at midnight, fully clothed and swim swim out across the river, leaving people leaving the smart middle class girls behind to their gasps and surprise, surprise. And it was a form of extreme showing off.

Nicole Abadee 36:35

When you spoke to Sally, his wife, you asked her what kind of a husband he was. So they had seven young children. What did she tell you? What was he like as a husband and father?

Robert Drew 36:46

Not good. She always suspected him of infidelity. She didn't expect him of murder or anything. And she was a very honest, she was a 10 pound pom, who was very grateful to be networking at the Perth markets. And and she's had seven children quite quite quickly. She always suspected him of infidelity. But she also wondered why he wouldn't let them when he went to work each day and he had from job to job to job in the days of full employment, he'd get it get the sack from one job, like when my father sacked him for theft. He he would just move on and get another job straight away. She he would bring he would bring things home, like things, possessions that were obviously taken from women's dressing tables and that sort of stuff. But he'd keep them all in the sort of attic. So she wondered why there was all and she was pretty innocent, I must say.

Nicole Abadee 37:50

And she as you say she she certainly said that she thought he was unfaithful. And she seemed a pretty good reason for believing that. But she said it had never occurred to her that no one really knew news.

And what about you spoke to Tony, his second son who was eight when his dad was arrested and you talk to him? Do you want to tell us a little bit about that conversation?

Robert Drew 38:12

Yeah, Tony ended up being and he died only recently. But he ended up being the head of the West Australian Trades and Labor Council. He got, he had a university degree later became an economics teacher. He was a success story of it. I asked well, first of all, I asked Sally, how, because it was something that I've been very curious about, let me just explain something else. When when I used to be waiting for my bus to school in the morning, Western Australia used to hang people quite regularly on a Monday morning at 8am. The days of the, they were the last state to stop executions. And I'll be waiting for my bus and it'd be the the newspaper newspaper thing out the standards out the front saying, man to hang at 8am, or, you know, with a picture of a strange looking guy. And as the bus arrived, I'll be counting down the minutes like five to 8, six to 8 then I'd think bang! And as an eight year old that used to affect me. And so I was curious about what it would feel like and years later I'd asked these questions to Sally and the son, Tony, not shortly after years, years later. And I said what did it feel like about 10 to eight on that particular Monday morning when you know that Eric your husband is about to be hanged? What were you doing? You know what, how are you coping? She said "well, dear, it's funny what with" she had a lot of kids "what was getting the kids ready for school cutting the sandwiches and things, next time I looked at the clock it was 20 past eight"

Nicole Abadee 39:58

But what about the son? There's something that he said as well.

Robert Drew 40:03

Well I asked Tony, said Bobwha was it like? you know, this must have been terrible, Tony, you know, how did you do if you don't mind me asking the question, what was it like that morning when you ten to 8? And he said - sorry I shouldn't be laughing - the Tokyo Olympics are on and Dawn Fraser was wimming and the, there was a cop watching the house with with him because they'd been prowlers and things of them. And he said in "this young Constable, I were watching Dawn swim, and what with the excitement by the time we, you know, we noticed it was quite a quater past 8." So I was the only one watching really.

Nicole Abadee 40:46

But let's talk a bit about the sort of the long term impact on your life of all of these things. You know, this man, as I've now learned, I didn't really realise and we've, we've talked about this before, I didn't realise that he was one of Australia's worst ever serial killers, and to think that you knew him and as you say, you knew one of his victims, and you had involvement with others, you were at a pretty, you know, vulnerable stage in your life was 1959 to 1963, you were aged 16 to 20. And I wondered, what impact did all of that have on your life?

Robert Drew 41:19

It had an impact on the lives of hrousansds of others as, everywhere you're going to Perth now, people of my generation and even 10 or so years younger, have a Cook story. Everyone has a story about ruses their parents got up to so you know, they their houses were double locked or whatever. In fact, Cooke made a great fuss of locking his own house up for the, so his parents, so his kids would be saved from the murderer and made sure the house was double locked and all that sort of thing in case.

Nicole Abadee 41:58

And he said that to them, didn't he?

Robert Drew 42:00

Oh, yeah. They warned them against against the killer. Yeah. So it did affect everyone in the same way.

Nicole Abadee 42:07

So you wrote about this in The Shark Net which you you published in 2000. Had you always planned to write about these, these events? Is it something that you always planned to write about?

Robert Drew 42:20

No, I didn't always plan to but in thinking of writing, writing my memoir, it was so engrossing at a key period in my life and a key period of the in the in the states life that it was impossible to do not to not write about it. It was its effects are still there now. And in the recent cases, of the girls of district seven disappearing from Claremont nightclub. And a man and police hunting, who they didn't know, they were lost again, in trying to work out who had killed these three young women. It brought back memories to everyone in the state of a certain age of the Cooke years. Because it seemed like the same sort of thing in the same area with an unknown unknown perpetrator.

Nicole Abadee 43:14

You were telling me before, I'd like you to share, The Shark Net, the book was made into an ABC, BBC miniseries and just just tell us that story about how the reception that that got from audiences?

Robert Drew 43:28

Well it was such a big story over there anyway, that the TV series did fabulously well. I was delighted to and in fact discarding people under 12 and in jail and mental homes everyone else watched it basically.

Nicole Abadee 43:46

Was it four parts did you say?

Robert Drew 43:48

Yeah, it was a miniseries and William McInnes played, William McInnes played my father. It had a good cast, you know, Aussie Aussie actors and things, and it looked set to break the record of ABC drama, TV drama, the Sunday night 8:30 slot, which used to be the big time for ABC drama. It looked set to break every every record for that. And for the last episode, the electricity grid, east of Adelaide, which is Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane went out. Just before it was it was going to air.

Nicole Abadee 44:26

Was that a coincidence? or was that because everybody was tuning in to watch it?

Robert Drew 44:28

It went out just before it was about to come on. So anyway, that record remains unbroken.

Nicole Abadee 44:38

Robert, you said this about The Shark Net "What I was really impelled to do after all these years, was to set down various tumultuous events in order to try to make sense of that period in my life in my family's life. And the community that I grew up in" Would you like to talk a little bit about that?

Robert Drew 44:55

It coincided with well, my father, father and I were big fingerprinted and dramas were going on, my girlfriend got got pregnant. And I was 18 and she was 19. And in the community in which we lived, this was tantamount to some sort of major episode. And when I told my mother she said this will kill me. This was it. Look what you've done, this will kill me. And I was I was in a fog she the my girlfriend was in a fog but we were determined to do the right thing. So it wasn't like a shotgun was, if it was a shotgun wedding, we were the ones holding the shotgun. And we said we'll get, that's what I thought I'd been brought up to do, to do the right thing, that and that was my school motto had been duty, which was only the year before anyway. So anyway, we got married. My mother left the next day to stay with her own mother in Melbourne, until the baby was born. And she came home saw the baby got a headache and died of a cerebral hemorrhage. The local doctor or GP, who was a friend of the family and very GPish GP, called me and said in that friendly avuncular way of Perth GPs of that era, said I suppose you want to know if you killed your mother? And I could smell, I could still see the surgery, which had a picture, very gloomy surgery which smelled of methylated spirits and there was silver things gleaming everywhere. And a picture on the wall the wall of Staggered Bay with wolves being at the at the stag as he's on the on the clifftop. And he said, I suppose you want to know, if you killed your mother, and I looked at him, he said, let's say it was a 60/40 thing.

Nicole Abadee 47:02

Thank you for sharing that with us. enough questions for me for now. We've now got time for you guys trust some questions it does anyone have any questions? Yes. So the question was, why was he only charged with one murder? And that seems unfair to the families of the other victims? You might not be able to answer that Robert, but

Robert Drew 47:18

He was charged with all of them. He was charged with all of them. But the one that he was sent to trial for was, was the was the Sturkey one. But there was no doubt if that had failed he would have been presumably, they would have brought one of the other ones. I think probably they looked at them all and thought this is the most clear cut one. Let's eliminate time and there was very much a feeling of haste, we finally got the bugger, let's get rid of him as soon as possible. There was you know, there's very much a community at last, you know, we'll, let's deal with it.

Nicole Abadee 47:55

Thank you. So the question was did you forensically go over your own encounters with Eric Cooke and and think back on those and and reflect on those and on what happened and I think you said did it disturb your sense of trust?

Robert Drew 48:10

Very much because other things happened too because he worked for my father. In those days the the one of Dad's jobs was to go up by coastal steamer all the way up the West Australian coast, selling tyres and tennis rackets and Dunlop golf clubs and all that sort of stuff. So the staff knew when he was away, and twice he prowled our house, and scared and scared my mother and fortunately she'd built up a relationship with with a, well the family had with a cop one of the cops and she rang the cops and they were there straightaway because they were prowling around looking for the the murderer and they arrived quickly. But there's all sorts of grisly things involved. One thing ever since he'd been found committing arson at 14 he'd realised fingerprints were a giveaway. So he wore kid gloves. And because

of his facial appearance, he wore he wore a mask. So she heard a noise and went to the went to the window and there is this masked figure with with the gloves. He did that at least twice. And then we heard him running down, who we now know was him running down the stairs and things but he's prowled so many houses. Police worked out he prowled about 350 houses without the occupants knowing that he had including the premiers, then how did they find that out? Well, he confessed to them. I mean, he was he was quite keen to tell them.

Nicole Abadee 49:47

Question up gosh, there's so many questions around I'll start with the one in the back row. How was he caught and what was the impact on the community?

Robert Drew 49:53

As I said he was caught because the rifle was found by the couple. Police then watched the rifle for two week's hidden, they hid away and then jumped on him. And the the relief when he was caught was was just extraordinary, just extraordinary. Now these days, of course, one thing about a small community, the newspapers did what the police said. Now, the rifle would have these days in Sydney, if the rifle had been found the story would be the next day rifle has been found, or in the media. And and the process would be not as efficient probably. But the police played ball, the press played ball.

Nicole Abadee 50:39

They didn't report it. Now the question how how receptive were Eric's wife, Sally and children to your approaches to speak to them?

Robert Drew 50:47

Surprisingly, surprisingly, very receptive. And Sally, she was wonderful. She was a really lovely woman who made a cake that when I made the appointment, and served me tea and cake she'd made, in her lounge room. And in fact, it was the the tick tock tick tock of the clock on the on the mantelpiece that made me ask her, what were you doing at 10 to eight on such and such. And interestingly, the cops of the time who were pretty, pretty brutal and not the most intelligent police around thereafter until she died a year or so ago, would call round every Christmas with with a couple of bottles of beer and how are you? How you going? How you going Sally? It was everyone, there was some really bad behavior but some people some people surprisingly behaved very well.

Nicole Abadee 51:43

Yes, here in the front. Question was did he always wear a mask?

Robert Drew 51:47

He was seen in the beginning he didn't. And if he was if he was planning on killing someone, he didn't bother wearing a mask. But when prowling later, well, I know that he wore a mask twice at our place. I don't know whether he whether he genuinely did then but he's but he seemed to be aware that the his appearance was a giveaway as were his fingers obviously.

Nicole Abadee 52:18

Right up the back this question question was about the role of the press that at first, the naked divorcee was, that was how the first murder victim was described in a sensationalist way. And then you made the point that later on, Robert has said that the press played ball with the police. The question was, what was the role of the police? The press? How did they behave at that time?

Robert Drew 52:39

Well, I'm talking about two sections of the press. The the the, the naked divorcee was then the Sunday Times and and The Mirror, which were tabloid crappy papers. And the West Australian, in those days, was very straight, very conservative. And wouldn't make didn't make anything of the I don't think they used the word naked that sort of thing. So it was there's a demarcation between the two.

Nicole Abadee 53:12

Yes, here at the front, this woman is saying that she lived in the house of one of the victims. She didn't know it at the time. And she actually slept in the bedroom that Constance was sleeping in. And you found out later that that is that one that was murdered in sorry, again, I'm just going to bring people up. So you are 19 to 20. When you lived there, you said the house had a sense of feeling haunted. You weren't told about what had happened there and the rent was low. Shoot, this is a story in itself. This this woman is a crime writer. She'd been writing about Eric Cooke, and then how did you find out? Okay, so after she moved out, she saw in this in the newspaper a picture of the house it was called State Sells the Crime House and you'd wondered why you'd always had such an uncomfortable feeling living there. You've got all got to hear this. So then a Burmese cat had come into the into your house when you were living there and at the time of the murder the victim had a Siamese cat which had scratched Eric Cooke. This just gets better by the minute more. Well, and one of the people who was living in the room that had the bad vibes. had a nervous breakdown. Yeah. Okay. Thank you for sharing that. Wow. Okay, so everybody this is Ruth McIver, who's a crime writer. Thank you so much for sharing. That's amazing, you need to talk to Robert afterwards. Okay. Thank you for sharing that with us. Does anyone else have any questions? Yes, near the back. Were all the killings random? Or did it come out at the trial that there were particular reasons for killing those victims?

Robert Drew 54:38

They were all, they're all completely random. They're all strangers. There was no connection between any of them, even ones in the case of John Sturkey and Wamsley, who lived a block away didn't, one was a teenager one was 56. No, no one knew each other.

Nicole Abadee 54:56

Yet, So was there any evidence I guess about that? Mental state of the murderer did he have a mental illness?

Robert Drew 55:02

There could have been if he'd been allowed to have his own psychiatric assessment, which I would have thought would have been a prerequisite and not be given the government psychiatrist who was working very earnestly for the other side.

Nicole Abadee 55:16

Catherine, you have a question Catherine's question and this is Catherine, the director of this fantastic festival asking this question. So did Perth revert to the innocence of its early days? Or was it forever changed as a result of these murders?

Robert Drew 55:29

It was forever changed even architecturally, in that, prior to that there was a Perth habit of not having front fences and growing your lawn right to the road. So the verge became yours. And there's a Perth

habit of the Sunday drive, where people would drive up and down admiring other people's verges, and houses and frontages and so forth. While people hid behind Venetians watching the cars go, but after that everyone built high limestone fences. Overnight. They built like six foot high limestone fences all over all over the western suburbs, which there is the the Eastern suburbs here on the North Shore here.

Nicole Abadee 56:22

I'm sorry, we don't have time for any more more questions, please, would you join me in thanking our wonderful guests Robert Drew for sharing these stories today.

Andy Muir 56:30

Thank you for listening. If you enjoyed that session from last year's Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival, then join us this September in person or online for what will be another huge weekend of crime writing and crime writers at the 2022 Festival. Go to the Bad Sydney website, sign up for the newsletter and follow us on social media to be informed as soon as the 2022 program and the tickets are released. We hope to see you there and make sure you come up and say hello We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the Bad: All About Crime podcast from Bad: Sydney Crime Writers Festival.

Suzanne Leal 57:06

If you'd like to be part of the crime conversation, head over to facebook and join our Bad: All About Crime Book Club.

Andy Muir 57:13

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Suzanne Leal 57:22

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Andy Muir 57:31

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Suzanne Leal 57:38

Until the next thrilling episode, keep reading and talking crime.