JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 5, Issue 2, May 2022
ISSN 2472-0837

"Connections light up across time and space"—Detectives in the Magical Realist Web of Female Relationships in *Catching Teller Crow*

Lucas Mattila and Bettina Burger, Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf

Keywords: *Magical realism, detective fiction, YA, postcolonial, intergenerationality*

Abstract: The essay explores Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's *Catching Teller Crow* (2018), a magical realist and detective fiction narrative directed at a young adult audience. The text reveals the powerful potential for, not only young adult literature, but also detective and magical realist fiction, to challenge and resist traditional, imperial-rooted forms of family, (neo)colonial orders and damaging power hierarchies. The novel highlights Aboriginal strength instead of trauma and presents the act of adopting well-meaning and actively anti-racist white Australians into Aboriginal kinship structures as an effective countermeasure to the previous policies of separating Aboriginal children from their families. In doing so, *Catching Teller Crow* foregrounds both intra- and intergenerational webs of female intimacy and posits them as essential to a dismantling of pre-established (colonial and patriarchal) orders without leaving behind blank spaces. Instead, family bonds and female friendship open up ways of exploring futures unfettered by oppression and trauma.

"I use what has been, and what will be, to change what is." This paratextual quote from the Australian cover of Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's Young Adult (YA) novel *Catching Teller Crow* (2018) introduces the novel to great effect. Certainly, *Catching Teller Crow* combines 'what has been'—the genre of detective fiction and to some extent that of 'classic' speculative fiction—and 'what will be'—either a future in which justice has been restored to Australia's Aboriginal people or the Indigenous speculative fiction genre. It thus stages an intervention, both generic and for the Australian YA readership who gain insights into the darkest parts of Australian history and into the strength of Aboriginal people in general and Aboriginal women in particular. The novel, the 2018 winner of the Young Adult category of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, puts Aboriginal girls and, to a lesser extent, women center stage in two genres within which they are still considerably marginalized.

Detective fiction tends to reaffirm established orders (see e.g., Döring, 2006; Makinen, 2001). Speculative fiction, on the other hand, does the apparent opposite by routinely engaging with crucial and controversial questions, which may aim at triggering societal change, encourage self-expression and confidence, and/or allow young protagonists to take on agency and frequently use it in a justified rebellion against authority. However, both speculative and detective fiction belong to a shared history of supposed misogyny and racism due to their literary origins—and both are increasingly rewritten and reconstructed by marginalized writers not previously represented in mainstream popular fiction. For example, recent detective fiction has become more critical of policing strategies and regulatory institutions that maintain and reify order in direct contrast to previous iterations of the genre more loyal to "authority" and the status quo. Several recent examples warn of and problematize our reliance on such systems, which are often indebted to traditions and histories of violence.

As a genre-mixing novel, *Catching Teller Crow*, written by a brother-sister team of Palyku writers, might offer one such site for investigating the relationships between how contemporary speculative fiction, as well as detective fiction, are shifting, since it upends and explicitly rejects traditional structures of authority—here represented by a predominantly white supremacist, patriarchal police force and a social care system that does not treat all of its dependents equally. However, it does not do this by presenting a detective figure who is separate and superior to the police force, but rather by highlighting relationships between Aboriginal women as a necessary intervention in the eventual solution of the case at the heart of *Catching Teller Crow*. This intervention exceeds the limits of the novel and signals

a much-needed change in the genre.

It is our assertion that *Catching Teller Crow* rejects neocolonial authorities to strengthen both intra- and intergenerational relationships between women rooted in indigenous epistemologies. The novel thus radically challenges pre-established orders. Against oppressive forces, both literal and metaphysical, it uses the detective plot to establish female friendships that yield powerful transcultural resistance. In addition, those very relationships highlight a form of double colonization connected to Australia's "Stolen Generation(s)" and flip the gender script of the often male-imposed dominance common in detective fiction and broader patriarchal societies.

In this article, we set out to examine *Catching Teller Crow* as a magical realist detective novel, first by exploring its magical realist elements and the constellations of female relationships used to highlight the ongoing oppression faced by indigenous girls and women as well as their resistance against that oppression. We will also explore the novel as a postcolonial and feminist rewriting of detective fiction. Lastly, we will consider how *Catching Teller Crow* challenges the structures of patriarchy underlying not only western society as a whole but also speculative fiction and detective fiction in particular. The Great Detective, in *Catching Teller Crow*, becomes a detective duo made up of father and daughter, which highlights familial relationships of love and connection while at the same time subverting the power hierarchy usually inherent in parent-child relationships. Other relationships are equally crucial to the detective plot in C*atching Teller Crow*, not because they exploit love as a motive but because they show how love and connection can lead to an interruption of damaging practices such as the separation of Aboriginal families and the racist abuse Aboriginal people continue to suffer at the hands of white Australian police.

"All the strengths of the Catching women flow down the family line into you" - Intergenerational Intimacy and Magical Realist Strength

Catching Teller Crow, named for its three protagonists, is a work of speculative fiction, which is unsurprising, since Ambelin Kwaymullina (2014) considers herself a writer of the genre. She contributes her genre affiliation to her heritage citing how many of the ideas which populate speculative fiction books [...] are part of Indigenous cultures. One of the aspects of my own novels that is regularly interpreted as being pure fantasy [...] is for me simply part of my reality. (Kwaymullina 2014, para. 8). Kwaymullina sees an intimate connection between speculative fiction writing and indigeneity as both share some core concepts. Both the fantastic—from a western point of view—and the realist are on display in *Catching Teller Crow*, though its generic location—spanning diverse genres such as speculative fiction in general, magical realist fiction, and detective fiction—is certainly complex. As such, we do not claim that *Catching Teller Crow* is solely a magical realist text, but we do argue that it is worthwhile to read it as one.

According to Bowers (2004), magical realism tries "to bring together the aspects of the real and the magical" (p. 22). The term magical, heavily undertheorized (p. 19) can have many meanings: it "refers to the mystery of life" and to "any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (p. 19). The magical thus does not necessarily defer to the prescriptive fantastic—the unequivocally nonexistent—but rather refers to the fantastic as an extraordinary element in everyday life. It may describe spiritual or religious beliefs without appraising their truth value, which certainly applies to *Catching Teller Crow*, as it contains several ideas from the Kwaymullinas' epistemology and events that are "out of the ordinary." In fact, "ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres" (p. 19) are regular magical realist elements that can be found in the novel. *Catching Teller Crow*'s postcolonial agenda is also conducive to reading it as magical realist since "[m]agical realism has been commonly theorized in terms of a postcolonial strategy of cultural renewal, according to which such

Catching Teller Crow, continued

fiction is understood as embodying a racialized epistemology allegedly inclusive of magic". (Takolander, 2016, p. 95)[1]

Such a comingling of the magical and real within fiction can be understood discursively as a form of postcolonial juxtaposition (see Boehmer, 2018), where two supposedly "oppositional systems" come into contact and produce "disjunction" rendering narrative "gaps, absences, and silences" (Slemon, 1995, p. 10). In our view, magical realism promotes engagement with supposed conflicts, staged and framed by neocolonial discourse, between differing epistemologies. A magical realist approach can thus be interpreted as conducive or detrimental to modeling forms of transcultural entanglement. In contrast to Takolander (2016), we hold the position that trauma readings with an eye to magical realism might be productive and claim authenticity without a decrease in "interest [...] in authenticating magic" (p. 95).

It is immediately apparent that *Catching Teller Crow*'s ghosts correspond to hauntings of magical realism, but so too do the "extraordinary talents" the Catching family displays and which allow them to forge relationships between ancestors and descendants regardless of western-centric temporalities. The novel's plot as well as its intense focus on female and familial relationships would not even be possible if it were not as much a magical realist text as it is a detective novel. After all, we learn within the first few pages that Beth Teller, one of the novel's protagonists, is no longer "a living, breathing girl" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 4). Equally soon, however, the reader also learns that, without Beth's ghostly presence and her father Michael's ability to see her, the investigation central to the novel would likely never progress. While Michael, the story's main detective, is aware of the power structures that can dominate small communities like the one at the core of the investigation, he quickly concludes that there is no crime to investigate (p. 6). It is Beth who insists that they question the only witness, even though Michael does not expect the testimony to be particularly reliable. Beth frequently chimes in to assist his deductions (see e.g., pp. 90, 125, 136), in some cases leading Michael toward important evidence and persons of interest that result in the various resolutions of the central crimes—her ability to outperform her professionally trained father may indeed be a further magical realist consequence at work. It is not much of a leap then, to conclude that female and familial relationships are center stage in *Catching Teller Crow,* if only by Beth's relation to her father and her hand in their shared work.

However, the novel does not stop there. It is structured by a dual-narrative, not the typical detective dual-narrative of crime and investigation (although that is also present), but rather two different narrative perspectives, which, taken together, accentuate the magical realist dimension of *Catching Teller Crow* perhaps more than the detective one. The first and arguably central narrative perspective follows Beth and is primarily expounded in an autodiegetic prose form. The other narrative follows Isobel Catching and is written in a deeply personal, autodiegetic poetic form. Taken together, the narratives synthesize to produce a third narrative, which revolves around Crow, the first victim of the novel's perpetrators. Crow's narrative highlights the ongoing abusive power local authorities can wield over female Aboriginal lives. Isobel's narrative goes even further, linking the present-day to the history and continued legacy of the Stolen Generations. Thereby, the polyphonic structure reveals the gaps and latent presences embedded within any singular narrative, voice or history. *Catching Teller Crow* thus joins other postcolonial voices in resisting master narratives by revealing their reductive limits, most deftly demonstrated by Crow's presence. The three narratives also foreground the three main female voices, which form a part of the Kwaymullinas' attempt to highlight female connections–both intra- and intergenerationally.

While the Aboriginal girls at the center of the novel emphasize intragenerational relationships, inter-generational female intimacy is at the heart of Isobel's poetic narrative. Her free-verse poetry is mainly used

Catching Teller Crow, continued

to describe her traumatic experiences in a magical realist manner, but there are several interruptions in near-prose, which point away from Isobel's own narrative toward those of her female ancestors. Their link is immediately set up to be "magical," which reconfirms that the speculative fiction narrative accentuates female relationships and strengths across generations. Isobel first brings up her ancestors as a kind of charm, "words that / control fire" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 28) to help Isobel deal with her anger. She recites the names often, almost as a refrain:

> *Granny Trudy Catching…*
> *Nanna Sadie Catching…*
> *Grandma Leslie Catching…*
> *Mum…*
> *Me.* (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina 2018, p. 28)

These recitations resemble words of summoning that remind Isobel that "all the strength of the Catching women flow down the family line and into" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 28) her. Isobel remains deeply respectful of her own culture, as she does not voice her ancestors' names because her "family don't speak the names of the dead" (p. 28). Approaching death in this way may be unfamiliar to non-Aboriginal readers. However, the novel provides enough cultural context surrounding death and grief for the reader to understand that the tradition of not naming dead loved ones does not imply an absence of emotion or repression of sorrow[2]. Instead, Isobel's internal evocation of her ancestors produces intimacy with the deceased and enables "[c]onnections [to] light up across time and space" (p. 155), ultimately unshackling them from the imperialistic temporalities that they were subjected to.

The Catching women are mentioned frequently, often preceded by references to Isobel's mother as the words "speak in Mum's voice" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 30) or "Mum's voice speaks" (pp. 111, 155). Thus, another Catching woman is woven into this web of female relationships spanning vast distances and times. The short tales from the Catching family history disrupt the poetry-narrative through their near-prose form, as previously mentioned, and, therefore, draw special attention to their content. Each individual mini-narrative refers to a point in the life of a Catching woman when she faced oppression due to her Aboriginal identity. However, rather than dwell on the obvious negative consequences, the narrative reframes these incidents as moments in which the women displayed tenacity and from which their descendants can draw strength. The first tale brings the issue of the Stolen Generations to the fore by referring to the laws that enabled it directly (p. 31)—Nanna Catching manages to escape the law because of her "strength with water" (p. 31), which can be seen as an "extraordinary talent" and thus a magical realist element. By spotlighting water as a fantastic element, Nanna Catching's narrative reconfirms its fundamental nature which sustains life, not just for humans but all earthly life. In this way, still deeper connections are articulated by the Catching women. They conjure up relations between human and non-human, living and dead, past and present.

In a later tale, the laws that enforced the legal abduction of Aboriginal children are referenced again and stated to have "lasted for generations" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 111). Consequently, Isobel's Grandma Leslie Catching is also taken away from her family but, unlike her mother, she is unable to escape and is instead brought to "[o]ne of the worst places" (p. 111), likely one of the mission stations where Aboriginal children were brought to in order to be educated according to white Australian values. Once again, the focus is on the Catching women's strength in connection to the natural world. When Grandma Leslie Catching is faced with a harsh life ahead of her, she draws power from her memories of "the rocks of her homeland. [...] Rocks that had lived for millions of years" (p. 112).This reference speaks to a strong connection between Aboriginal people and their traditional homeland that skirts imperialist constructions of Aboriginal people as 'closer to nature' and therefore 'savage' but instead highlights the Aboriginal concept of country[3].

Catching Teller Crow, continued

> Grandma Leslie
> [...] *made herself strong like rock. She survived hard times.*
> [...] *She got through until she was grown up. Then she went looking for her mum, who'd never stopped looking for her.*
> *Your grandmother knew how to endure.* (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 112)

Female resistance against oppression is highlighted here instead of trauma, a theme that extends back to the earliest Catching ancestor's tale recited by Isobel, that of Granny Trudy Catching. As Isobel's mother tells her,

> *Your old Granny was born into the frontier times when white men first came to our homeland. Terrible things happened to her. There was nothing she could do about it. All her choices got taken away. But she drew strength from her homeland. Her family. Her people. She never forgot how to laugh. She never forgot how to love.*
>
> *Your Granny knew how to hold on to who she was.* (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 155)

Once again, it is not the oppression and the ensuing lack of agency that is the focus, but rather the fortitude Granny Trudy Catching displays despite it. Her resistance does not feature direct opposition toward the intruding white men, since it consists of drawing strength from connections rather than disruptions.

The presences of the two Stolen Generations narratives in Isobel's magical realist poetry allows the reader to connect the Stolen Generations and the children's home at the heart of *Catching Teller Crow*'s detective plot. The home was built in an isolated location to "help" troubled children (p. 13). Its young occupants are racially diverse (p. 14), but the Stolen Generations are still an easy tie-in, since, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2020), "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in child protection and out-of-home care services compared to non-Indigenous children" (para. 1). As the detective story unfolds, it also becomes increasingly clear that Isobel has been abducted by the same people responsible for running the children's home. Furthermore, they are likely sexually abusing young girls in their care, predominantly those of Aboriginal descent since—as the case of the missing girl Sarah Blue shows—their disappearances are easier to cover up than those of white girls. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes evident that the abuse and disappearances should be the crimes under investigation, not the arson and murders, for which the detective duo initially seeks an explanation.

"Dead girl, dead girl"—Postcolonial (Feminist) Detective Fiction

Victim. Motive. Suspect. The popular genre of detective fiction carries certain traditional markers and motifs, a dual narrative structure (Todorov, 1977, p. 44; Barzun, 1980, p. 148, Malmgren, 2001, pp. 21-22), the crime and the investigation among them. In most cases, the narrative is spent gazing with or at the Great Detective (see Reilly, 1999b, pp. 191-2) and upon the puzzle of the crime (see Grella, 1970; Rzepka 2005, p. 10). As a kind of readerly game, in much of the genre, the outcome sought is never to prevent future criminal acts but rather to restore existing orders[4] by substituting the crime's absence with its own master narrative (see Döring, 2006, pp. 60-1). As clues are gathered by intelligent wielders of empirical (and often imperial) science (see Rzepka 2005, pp. 32-48), suspects are interrogated, and the mystery is solved. How could such an innately conservative genre offer meaningful resistance against hegemonic power?

As Nalo Hopkinson (2010) wrote in *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, "massa's tools don't dismantle massa's house—and in fact, I don't want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations—they build me a house of my own" (p. 8). Although referring to the realm of speculative fiction, her claim is just as relevant when considering how to answer the above question.

Catching Teller Crow, Continued

Detective fiction, so consumed with maintaining civility and non-criminality, is a perfect site for postcolonial critique of the very institutions and authorities that are normally upheld by the genre. A positive appropriation of detective fiction to enact change paves a possible avenue for postcolonial resistance and even renovation. By making use of such appropriation, postcolonial authors of detective fiction might model epistemologies, dismantle institutional authority and even produce forms that challenge or reframe the genre to not simply maintain existing orders, generic or otherwise.

The detective story in *Catching Teller Crow* initially revolves around a fire in a children's home and the burned body found inside. At first, there seems to be no great mystery and the most plausible explanation is faulty wiring. When Michael and Beth interview the supposed witness, Isobel Catching, the detective plot starts to unveil. Her entire narrative is wrapped in magical realist metaphors that seemingly hide the crimes committed against her, yet her testimony is crucial in solving the case and showcases the intricate entanglement between magical realism and detective fiction. She describes the "Fetchers" as winged creatures clad in robes that hide their forms (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 41). "Their faces are covered by white masks with human features" (p. 41), which hint at the Fetchers' human identities, whose monstrous sides remain hidden. The two Fetchers take Isobel to a place where "[the] earth opens like a mouth" (45), later revealed to be a bunker, and they are "swallowed" (p. 45). Numerous female victims have already been held captive and died there. The Fetchers are, however, only lesser monsters, mere assistants to the terrifying 'Feed'. They only 'fetch' victims for the perpetrators because they have "[n]o heart, no guts, no core of self" (p. 103)—an accusation which enables Beth to connect her father's assessment of Cavanagh and Flint as "people with no moral core" (p. 177) to the Fetchers. The Feed is described as "large. White. Thin." (p. 106) with "mirror-eyes" (p. 106), and as Beth later realizes, the mirror-eyes actually represent a pair of glasses, allowing Beth and the reader to identify "[o]ne of the Feeds [as] Alexander Sholt" (p. 175). The merging of the two narrative forms—both contain elements of detective fiction and magical realism—is described in striking terms as "Catching's story and [Beth's] experiences [...] suddenly slammed together" (p. 174). The solution of the crime Beth and her father are investigating thus only becomes possible once detective and magical realist story are intertwined.

It is also within Isobel's narrative that Crow is introduced to the reader as a mysterious being huddling in the "[c]orner of the room. Too dark to see into" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 101), though it is quickly revealed that the creature is a girl, albeit entirely grey– "Grey skin. Grey hair
[...] / Grey dress" (p. 102). She is "a dead girl" (p. 103) who has been in the bunker "[s]ince the Feed began" (p. 103), indicating that she is the criminals' first victim. This information also enables the reader to identify Crow as the missing girl Sarah Blue, who disappeared twenty years prior and was written off as a runaway (p. 78). Crow, a young, vulnerable girl, is an almost stereotypical victim for a detective story (see Makinen, 2001) but her situation is more dire—as an Aboriginal girl, she is twice endangered, not only because of her gender but also her ethnicity. It is, after all, not coincidental that she went missing instead of her white best friend. While one of the reasons why her disappearance was not properly investigated was undoubtedly that the son of the local chief of police was involved, the crime could only be covered up so completely because she was Aboriginal.

> If a white girl had gone missing like that, [...] 'there'd have been an outcry. It would have been on the news, in the papers, something everyone talked about in the street. [...] [P]eople didn't care enough. No one was paying attention. (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 128)

The fact that girls like Isobel and Sarah/Crow are victimized is thus not happenstance but systemic. Violence occurs to Aboriginal girls so frequently, often perpetrated by white men, that Isobel's first thought

Catching Teller Crow, continued

upon seeing Beth accompany her father is that she may be haunting her murderer (see Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 58). Although Australia is a colony no longer, colonial legacies remain relevant. As the Mabo decision and continued anxiety surrounding "culture wars" and much postcolonial scholarship have demonstrated, the after-effects of Australian colonialism continue to be profound. The form of systemic oppression that Isobel and Sarah experienced is a form of double colonization, a term coined to come to grips with the combination of colonial oppression and patriarchal oppression that colonized women frequently face (see Peterson & Rutherford, 1986). We understand double colonization as an effective term to reference the continued oppression of women from the former colonies who face continued systematic effects as a result of colonial occupation and the power imbalances it enforced and continues to support. In *Catching Teller Crow*, double colonization is staged heavily by the use and subversion of detective fiction tropes that traditionally seem to support misogynistic and/or racist readings.

In Isobel's narrative, Crow seems to remain in her role as the powerless victim, seeing no way out except death (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 103). She thus falls in line with the detective fiction canon, where women characters often "are relegated to victims" (Makinen, 2001, p. 92). Crow even sees herself as someone with "no claws or wings or bite" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 109), in stark contrast to her name and later appearance. It is only near the end and only through Beth's superior interpretation of the clues that Crow's role in the narrative is revealed. Flipping the traditional script of the detective novel, Crow becomes not only a victim but also a perpetrator of crimes of vengeance. Interestingly, even though a 'spectral crow' is not a stereotypical suspect in most detective novels, the clues that point toward Crow are scattered throughout the text according to the generic requirements. Once the solutions to the central crime are elaborated, Beth reflects on her previous experiences, wondering How many times had I seen crows around town and never noticed [...]? How often had there been mysterious gusts of wind at exactly the right moment? Crow had been there all along, trying to impart to me the gift of her hard-won knowledge [...]. (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 185)

Indeed, Crow *has* been there all along, and, as in most classical detective fiction, the reader may search within the narrative and identify all the clues available to them, even overtaking the detective in the investigation. For example, Beth encounters a crow at the site of the children's home that gives Beth the impression that it may have seen and reacted to her (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 12). Interestingly, she follows her observation by stating that, in a police investigation, and perhaps even more definitively in a detective novel, "if two things happened together, you'd suspect the first thing had caused the second until it could provide you with an alibi" (p. 13). Implicitly, the reader is thus encouraged to at least suspect that the crow may be aware of Beth.

More clues toward Crow's involvement accumulate as the novel proceeds. When the Tellers try to interview the only witness, "a gust of wind slammed the front door open and sent a cloud of dust whirling" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 21), thus distracting the nurse who was going to show Michael to the witness's room. They are then called by Isobel, who is not actually the witness Michael is supposed to interrogate, though she proves to be critical to the case. It can also be assumed that Crow was in contact with the care home children and most likely behind the wind that "told them to run" (p. 15) as well as the reason why the children seem "like they're *not* afraid, almost like they think everything's been taken care of" (p. 89). Additionally, the murder weapon in all the stabbings is "an unusual weapon—some kind of blade with a slight curve to it" (p. 67), or, rather, Crow's beak. The connection between Crow and Sarah Blue is also made early in the text, in the form of a rather subtle clue: Cavanagh and Flint, the two Fetchers, are found in "the last place she was seen" (p. 91) before she vanished. In presenting a variety of clues during the novel, *Catching Teller Crow* follows the most traditional detective story script, in which clues "function as signposts on the road to the explanation of the mystery" (Reilly, 1999a, p. 78). Indeed, according to Rzepka (2005), "the author [...] provides clues adequate to solve it, while the reader, [...] tries to solve

Catching Teller Crow, continued

the mystery within a predetermined time-limit (p. 14). This examination of "clue after clue, lead after lead" (Todorov, 1977, p. 45) is conceivable with *Catching Teller Crow* if the readers are familiar with speculative fiction and can recognize the possibility of sentient wind.

Catching Teller Crow ends, as detective fiction is wont to do, with the revelation of the murderer and the explanation of the sequence of events. However, unlike "traditional" detective fiction, the novel does not engage in reifying established conventions or orders (Döring, 2006, p. 61). According to Döring (2006), a detective "re-installs the missing links between the present and the past, between the story of the crime and the society living in its aftermath" (p. 61). Michael and Beth provide these links, but they certainly do not install a master narrative nor do they confirm an existing order. The existing order of the past made the crimes possible in the first place—and it is important here to recognize that the real crime at the center of *Catching Teller Crow* is not the deaths of the four male criminals, the Feed and the Fetchers, but the abuse of Aboriginal girls throughout the fraught history of Australia since its colonization. This colonial order is not reinstated but instead partially dismantled in the aftermath of the Tellers' investigation.

Just as the narrative undoes singularities by means of its polyphonic structure and the destabilizing of prose so too does the ending offer a multiple, rather than singular, close. Firstly, the detective story ends in a fairly conventional manner; Michael explains the recovered narrative of the crime and dictates a narrative to fill the absence left by the crime. He provides some of the criminal context factually but diverges with regard to magical involvement, instead spinning a story about how the perpetrators turned on each other and familial revenge followed by subsequent cover-ups left them all dead. Even the use of the same murder weapon is explained away as "an artistic touch" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 179). While Michael suggests that they may never know the truth (p.179), he produces a narrative that is convincing enough to be accepted by the local police officer Allie.

As Allie leaves, Michael breaks down, revealing his own feelings of guilt and remorse, having realized that Isobel Catching has been dead from the start and her narrative has been a ghost story (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, pp. 180-2). At a nearly metatextual level, Michael speaks out about the problem of the detective who always arrives "too late" to prevent society from falling into disorder. "[W]e didn't get here at the beginning. We got here when it was all over. We got here at the end" (p. 182). However, rather than undoing established orders that demonstrate the limits of police institutions and the powerful detective figure, the voice of Catching replies. "*Of course* you're here at the end. So what? It's the beginning that hasn't happened yet" (p. 182).

Not long after, Beth explains to her father that he has "missed all the clues" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 184) of Crow's involvement in the crime that initially drew Beth and her father to the town and the ensuing murders. While Michael has "solved" the case, believing Catching to be the murderer, it is up to Beth to take over the traditional role of the detective by explaining at least some of the clues that led to her reconstruction of the crime story (p. 185).

After learning of his continued failure to find the identity of the killer, Michael's first words to Crow, now a "thing of claw and wing and bite" (p. 185), are an apology, admitting that she was "failed by the police" (p. 185). Her actions are portrayed as justified and Michael seems to ask for her permission to let the police take over from that point onward and she affirms. Catching's call to turn to "the beginning" is a powerful rejection of the detective novel, but not a complete dismantling of the ending[5]. Instead, this second ending offers the possibility for resolution *beyond* merely reacting to crime. The magical realist voice of Catching gestures to the possibility for change—not an expectation to rewrite the past or fill criminal absences with explanations or 'master narratives'. Rather, the detective's failure to reconstitute and revitalize the

orders that caused the tragic imprisonment, abuse, and murders of the lost girls is marked as the "ending" of those orders instead of a reification of them. The second ending merges with the false narrative that Michael produced–and though it is more factual, magical and unbelievable, its outcomes appear, at their surface, to be similar. While the second ending offers reconciliation between victims and law enforcement, the scope of its resistant potential seems somewhat limited.

The final resolution offered in *Catching Teller Crow* is unavailable to all but the three "dead girls," and it may offer a path of resistance that is not given by the forced closure of endings. Death is not the end within the world and worldview the girls Catching, Teller, and Crow share–it is merely a different facet of existence (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 5), only accessible to the dead and certain people like Isobel who "can *walk all the sides of the world*" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina p. 18). Crucially, it is only after Beth, Isobel, and, especially, Crow have managed to defeat the oppressors and put new processes of justice into motion that the three girls fully embrace their new existence. The last scene contains the tearful, painful goodbye between father and daughter, but also reads as a kind of liberation and release–Catching and Crow successfully escape from their abusers and leave their trauma behind while Beth and her father finally move on from her tragic death. The final images of *Catching Teller Crow* once again accent the deep and intimate connections between the three girls as they hold hands and "ran as you only could when you weren't alive, or when you could walk between all the sides of the world" (p. 190). Instead of running away, the girls run toward the future, bearing an optimism that defies resolution to refract into possibilities outside of the narrative and ultimately demonstrate how the detective novel might offer a site of resistance, even renovation, against hegemonic power.

"A dad you can be proud of" —Upending Oppressive Racist and Sexist Hierarchies Through the Family

YA literature usually features parents who are in conflict with their teenaged children or, perhaps even more often, are completely absent. Whether plagued with, as Robinson (2009) puts it, "ineffectual or absentee fathers" (p. 216) or with parents who are "more likely to repress than to empower" (Trites, 2000, p. 56), fictional teenagers usually must navigate the storyworld without active support from their parental units. Additionally, *Catching Teller Crow* might be argued to fit the mold regarding Beth's deceased mother[6] (see Nadeau, 1995, para. 5) and even, to some extent, an unsupportive father, albeit due to grief. However, there is more to the relationship between Beth and Michael Teller than that. Their relationship is not nearly as hierarchical as traditional conventions of a patriarch-led family, rooted in older traditions of the "empire of the father" (see Broughton & Rogers, 2007, p. 8). Even though Michael is an obvious candidate for supporting conservative, colonial-born structures as a lawman, he does not dictate or attempt to control his daughter. He works against racist and sexist hierarchies, as do all three of the central girls. Yet, at the heart of this resistance is the family, often considered a limited relationship structure founded on blood-relations and the implied power relations of filiality. However, in *Catching Teller Crow*, familial relations are shown to harken to new concepts of affiliation that are no longer gated by the pre-given premise of concepts of birth or descent.

Michael, the primary patriarchal figure of the text, actively combats preconceived notions of patriarchy and masculinity as they relate to his career and fatherhood. Rather than press or forcefully interrogate witnesses and suspects, Michael allows Catching to express her poetic narrative at her own pace, returning to listen to her over several days. While Beth demands answers, Michael shows a caring patience atypical of the eccentric, near inhuman Great Detective or the rugged hard-boiled variety (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, pp. 53-4).

Catching Teller Crow, continued

For Michael, unlike the archetypal detective figure, broader structural problems are root causes for crimes. He rightly identifies the abuses of power that covered up Crow's disappearance and points out several times that those who enabled these abuses of power are also responsible for them (pp. 128, 185). In doing so, he charts unexplored pathways for the legacy of a troubled colonial ancestry and refuses to further bolster or profit from these legacies. Moreover, he does not accept or reproduce the dehumanizing and racist tendencies of his parents. Michael attempts to address the systemic problems of his society, even when grappling with his own grief. He comes closest to being somewhat patriarchal when he is lashing out at himself for failing Beth: "'I couldn't keep you safe. I couldn't take care of *my* child. I don't deserve to go to birthday parties, and watch the cousins grow up when you'll never…'" (p. 129). Here, Michael succumbs to the societal pressure that demands that he always protect his daughter even from situations that are impossible to prevent while ignoring his duties of emotional care and nurture toward Beth. However, even in this instance, he eventually reverses course, realizing that he has not "been acting like [a dad] for a while" (p. 188) since he kept Beth anchored to the "living" side of the world instead of encouraging her to move on. It is exactly this tension between Michael's duties as a father and his grief that determine the dynamic between Beth and him as well as his role in society.

Throughout *Catching Teller Crow*, but even at its outset, it is clear that Beth and Michael's relationship dynamic has been fundamentally altered by her death. In an almost parental tone, she chides him to get on with the investigation and to admit that her death was an accident, all in an effort to "keep him headed in the right direction" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p 11). Beth prods her father to take care of himself, to eat proper meals (p. 57), gets him out of bed to do his job (p. 66), and even sends him to take a shower (p. 68). Outside of more outward behaviors, she also internalizes her role and understands her responsibility to Michael in a reversal of parent-child hierarchies. She hides her tears from her father to protect him (pp. 64, 125), she takes pride in his accomplishments, like when he sets Bell at ease (p. 70), and even worries about his future and the person that he will become when she is no longer watching over him (pp. 63, 127). These conventional dynamics are turned on their head, but they are expressions that any child could have for their parents. *Catching Teller Crow* neither devalues children nor presumes them to be subjects incapable of complex relationships. In doing so, it works against western concepts of strict parent-child relations by emphasizing the limits of age-based hierarchies. When Routledge (2010) identifies that "[f]or many child detectives, [...] the pursuit of criminals also involves the exploration of their relationships with adults" (p. 330), he is certainly correct if we consider *Catching Teller Crow*, but, importantly, the novel exceeds this frame. Beth's exploration of her relationship with her father stands in for the deeper dynamic of the parent-child/father-daughter relation that serves as a site for investigating the broader structures of Australian, and perhaps western, society.

Touched on several times in this article is also the fact that Beth is as much a detective as her father. They work together as a detective duo. Unlike traditional detective stories that feature the dynamic of the detective and the competent but un-investigative sidekick, *Catching Teller Crow* does not imbue Michael with a sense of untouchable brilliance nor does it reduce Beth to only an observer. While neither detective is flawless and they both come to false conclusions at times, together, they solve the novel's crime and do not write it off as a mere accident. Not uncommon in modern or contemporary detective stories, detective duos with more or less equal roles in the investigation gesture away from the singular white, western, and male detective perspective toward the multiple. That is of course, not to say that children have been relegated to the sidelines in detective fiction. In contradistinction to a child detective that is different from the adult detective, whether in their process of detection or otherwise (Routledge, 2010), *Catching Teller Crow* provides a backdrop to consider their connections rather than divisions. Beth, "Ghost-detective" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 85) is able to "engage with the world in ways not usually possible for children and solve mysteries in ways not possible for adults" (Routledge, 2010, p. 331).

Catching Teller Crow, continued

Meanwhile, Michael can interact with the world, questioning witnesses and directing law enforcement to move against the perpetrators. As complementary detectives, they support each other's investigative practices, demonstrating the need for diverse epistemic approaches to locate the true crime of the novel, the oppressive force of local police and economic elites[7]. Even before the narrative, Michael went against the grain by rebelling against his family in various ways that resist oppressive, colonialist structures. His own father was a cop who mercilessly used "the law [...] to protect some people and punish others" (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 6), the others usually being Aboriginal people. As Beth explains, Michael "took all injustice personally, but especially anything to do with Aboriginal people not being treated right" (p. 128)—the reader never learns whether this particular interest in the well-being of Aboriginal people predated Michael's relationship with Beth's mother, but the fact that he has been so fully integrated and welcomed into Beth's maternal family suggests that he likely already "didn't want to be one of the people who didn't pay attention" (p. 128). His relationship to Beth's mother led to a final estrangement from his family who threw him out as soon as he started dating her and who had "never wanted anything to do with [...] their Aboriginal granddaughter" (p. 6). The reactions of Beth's maternal relatives to the relationship and to Michael are markedly different as he has been fully integrated into the family and remains an important part even long after his wife's death. Beth's grandfather is even explicitly stated to have been the "parent who'd always treated [her] Dad like one of his own sons" (p. 120), which reflects Aboriginal belief systems. According to Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina (2014), a complex network of relational patterns expands the concept of family to include "animals, plants, places in Country and elements or celestial phenomena" – effectively "[a]nything that exists can, and is, family to some degree" (p. 37) and so the adoption of another member into the family is a natural consequence. In a way, this may be seen as a complete reversal of the Stolen Generations, as it is the white man who is warmly welcomed into a big Aboriginal family as opposed to the many Aboriginal children forcibly taken away and isolated from their families to be raised within white society—in *Catching Teller Crow*, the spotlight is mostly on the female children as represented by the Catching women, which makes the contrast to Michael's story even more stark.

The loving Aboriginal family is a constant presence in *Catching Teller Crow*, even though they do not actually appear within the narrative except for a phone call. Numerous references showcase not only the close-knit nature of the family but also Michael's easy integration into it. When, during a flashback they all assemble at a hospital to await news on Uncle Mick's fate after a heart attack, Beth's dad is clearly included in the "*quite* so many family members" (p. 19), which seem strange to the likely Eurocentric doctor, and he is equally included in the following celebration, to which he also contributes. It is readily apparent from the intimate way in which he refers to family members as "Grandpa Jim" (p. 189), for example, that he loves his "adoptive" family deeply, but it is also explicitly stated, when Beth, aghast at Michael's reasons for not wanting to attend Grandpa Jim's birthday party, exclaims "But you love the cousins! *I* love the cousins!" (p. 129). After Beth's death, her aunts and uncles frequently call Michael to comfort and check up on him. They even try to prompt him to reconcile with Beth's Aunty Viv, who Michael places some blame on for his daughter's death (Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2018, p. 8). Ultimately, the novel's final ending closes with reuniting family, which is shown to have the powerful potential needed to bring people, even if unrelated by blood, together and allow them to choose "the opposite of grey" (p. 189). Michael calls Aunty Viv and reconciles, and the three girls transform into figurations of love. The hope of the future is not reduced to black and white, nor a mixture of them—the gray of deadness associated with Crow. Rather, the future is rendered colorful and multiple.

Catching Teller Crow, Continued

Conclusion

As David Kern (2020) writes in a review of *Catching Teller Crow*,

The deep roots of systematic abuses of power targeting Aboriginal children remain yet to be unearthed and a 'reconciliation' of the past, a potential beginning of a decolonized future, has yet to happen. The 'closure' of one particular story, the narrative suggests, is just the beginning of a much bigger project of healing and acknowledging the many other stories that are still hidden from view. (Kern 2020, p. 77)

The novel, as we have shown, does just that. Its polyphonic structure, interweaving of magical realist and detective elements, as well as its postcolonial strategies articulate a need for new beginnings in order to depart from the hegemonic status-quo. Its use of intra- and intergenerational relationships between women, most notably the Catching women, makes use of magical realism's tension between the real and magical to emphasize the strength that can be derived from epistemologies that draw upon the force of personal histories—those "lost voices and discarded fragments" that have been "pushed to the margins of consciousness by imperialism's centralizing cognitive structures" (Slemon, 1995, p. 16). *Catching Teller Crow* also makes use of its magical realist elements to rewrite the traditional detective story, de-centering the Great Detective and uprooting the restoration of order/master narrative schemata. As a resistant Young Adult fiction novel, *Catching Teller Crow* also ruptures the conventions of this rapidly growing genre as well. Instead of absentee or dead parents that represent the failures of their society, both dead and living parents are figured as transformative agents in their own right, capable of complementing their younger counterparts without subordinating them. Adult-child relationships are refigured as based on mutual support instead of perpetuating the usual power hierarchies. Only in cooperative practice do Michael, Beth, Catching and Crow succeed in resisting oppressive, and often sexist and racist hierarchies. Michael and Beth's roles as detectives, Catching's intergenerational relations to the Catching women, and Crow's serial killing all work against racist and sexist orders. Their relationships, but especially Catching and Crow's friendship as well as Beth and Michael's filial/co-detective relations, are sources of strength for their own acts of resistance, and even their personal development.

The family, and importantly, female friendships offer the possibility for healing, for new beginnings and perhaps even for the systematic renovation required to generate societies founded on difference. The use of detective and speculative fiction in the form of magical realism as a mode of writing to lay the foundation for such resistance and change is to demonstrate that, while the past does matter and can be a powerful source of strength, it can also be deviated from. Additionally, perhaps most importantly, it is the young adult audience that may profit from these new impulses the most. In terms of YA literature, *Catching Teller Crow* also does important work in suggesting alternative ways of coping with trauma, death, and grief, as well as highlighting non-western conceptions of kinship. Both topics have been alluded to within this article, but more work could certainly be done, concentrating on these themes in particular. A formal analysis, dedicated to exploring the novel's narrative innovations and its creative use of prose and verse, would also be a worthwhile endeavor. Certainly, the Kwaymullinas' novel, albeit short in length and belonging to a genre not always taken as seriously as it should be, deserves to be studied in much more depth and variety—it is a complex novel and an important addition to the Young Adult genre that, while introducing epistemologies new to many young readers, also resonates deeply in its intimate portrayal of love, grief, family and friendship and in its resolute resistance against oppressive systems of any sort. Paraphrasing that paratextual quote from *Catching Teller Crow's* Australian cover: What has been and what is to come; at the point of connection that spans great spaces and deep times, we might begin to change what is.

Catching Teller Crow, Continued

Notes

[1]Takolander (e.g., 2010, 2016) addresses the problematic exoticism that implies that non-western cultures are inherently more magical and thus unreal, though we argue that non-western and Western speculative fiction texts are not inherently different in that regard. One need only consider J.R.R. Tolkien and
C.S. Lewis to see that religious and spiritual ideas in fantasy are frequent in western literature and neither exoticize the belief systems portrayed nor devalue any claims of spiritual truths.

[2]Discussions of death, grief, and sorrow in *Catching Teller Crow* would extend beyond the scope of this article but may provide fruitful ground for further research.

[3]Ambelin Kwaymullina (2008) describes country as "not simply a geographical space" but rather "the whole of reality, a living story that forms and informs all existence" (p. 9). Its importance for Aboriginal spirituality becomes apparent when she states that "[c]ountry is the source of all creation, all beauty, all wisdom. It sustains us, nourishes us, guides us. It gives us life, and teaches us how to live so that life [...] will always go on. Country is our joy, our love, our hope. Our country is our heart" (p. 10).

[4] In another context, Tobias Döring (2006) notes that "all genre fiction [...] is inherently conservative, reaffirming pre-existing formulas and so reassuring readers of an existing order. But this holds true with special force for the tradition of detective fiction" (p. 61).

[5]This is also mirrored by the novel's form, as the chapter "The End", which includes the expected closure for a detective novel, is followed by the chapter "The Beginning", which takes the three 'dead' girls toward new futures.

[6]Such a claim would be reductive in *Catching Teller Crow* since it would dismiss the fact that Beth's mother is relatively absent in the narrative as a sign of respect for the dead, rather than a reification of a western genre formula.

[7]Michael's and Beth's relationship is a nexus point when it comes to the novel's merging of various genres. As a dynamic detective duo, they fulfill an important role within the genre of detective fiction, but their parent-child dynamic also relates closely to central concerns of the YA genre. In addition, Beth's identity, as both the mixed-race child of a white/Aboriginal couple and as a ghost, ties in with a categorization of *Catching Teller Crow* as postcolonial magical realism.

Catching Teller Crow, Continued

References

Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2020, January). *Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*. https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-protection-and-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children

Barzun, J. (1980). Detection and the literary art. In *Detective fiction: A collection of critical essays*, (pp. 144-153). Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Boehmer, E. (2018). *Postcolonial poetics*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90341-5

Bowers, M. A. (2004). *Magic(al) realism*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203328088

Broughton, T. L. & Rogers, H. (2007). *Gender and fatherhood in the nineteenth century*. Macmillan Education UK.

Döring, T. (2006). Sherlock Holmes-he dead: Disenchanting the English detective in Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans. In C. Matzke & S. Muehleisen (Eds.), *Postcolonial postmortems: Crime fiction from a transcultural perspective*, (pp. 59-86). Rodopi.

Grella, G. (1970). Murder and manners: The formal detective novel. *NOVEL: A forum on fiction,* 4(1)*,* 30-48. https://doi.org/10.2307/1345250

Hopkinson, N., & Mehan, U. (2010). *So long been dreaming: Postcolonial science fiction & fantasy*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Kern, D. (2020). Catching teller crow. *Gender Forum*, (75), 76-78,80.

Kwaymullina, A. & Kwaymullina, B. (2014). Indigenous holistic logic: Aspects, consequences and applications. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*. 17(2), 34-42. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.230117213665222

Kwaymullina, A., & Kwaymullina, E. (2018). *Catching teller crow*. Penguin UK.

Kwaymullina, A. (2014). Edges, centres and futures: Reflections on being an Indigenous speculative-fiction writer. *Kill Your Darlings*, (18), 22-33.

Kwaymullina, A. (2008). Introduction: A land of Many countries. In S. Morgan, T. Mia & B. (Eds.), *Heartsick for country: stories of love, spirit and creation*, (pp. 5-20). Freemantle Press.

Makinen, M. (2001). Detective fiction. *Feminist popular fiction.* 92-128. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511781

Malmgren, C. D. (2001). *Anatomy of murder: Mystery, detective, and crime fiction*. Popular Press.

Nadeau, F. A. (1995). The mother/daughter relationships in young adult fiction. *The ALAN Review*, 22(2), n.p. https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v22i2.a.5

Reilly, J. M. (1999a) Clues. In R. Herbert (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to crime and mystery writing*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195072396.001.0001

Reilly, J. M. (1999b) The great detective. In R. Herbert (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to crime and mystery writing*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195072396.001.0001

Routledge, C. (2010). Crime and detective literature for young readers. In C. J. Rzepka & L. Horsley (Eds.), *A companion to crime fiction*, (pp. 321-331). Blackwell Publishing.

Rzepka, C. J. (2005). *Detective fiction* (Vol. 6). Polity.

Robinson, L. M. (2009). Girlness and guyness: Gender trouble in young adult literature. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures,* 1(1), 203-222. https://doi.org/10.1353/jeu.2010.0022

Peterson, K. H. & Rutherford, A. (Eds.). (1986). *A double colonization: Colonial and post-colonial women's writing*. Oxford: Dangaroo Press.

Slemon, S. (1995). Magic realism as postcolonial discourse. In *Magical realism*. (pp. 407-426). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822397212-022

Takolander, M. K. (2010). Magical realism and fakery: After Carpentier's' marvelous real 'and Mudroooroo's' Maban reality'. *Antipodes*, *24*(2),

Catching Teller Crow, Continued

165-171.

Takolander, M. K. (2016). Theorizing irony and trauma in magical realism: Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and Alexis Wright's The Swan Book. *ariel: a review of international english literature*, *47*(3), 95-122. https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2016.0026

Todorov, T. (1977). The typology of detective fiction. In *The poetics of prose* (pp. 42-52). Blackwell Publishing.

Trites, R. S. (2000). *Disturbing the universe: Power and repression in adolescent literature*. University of Iowa Press