

'KISS OF DEATH GIRL'



For her Honours and Masters at UTS, Amy Simpson Deeks delved into the world of underbelly figure Nellie Cameron, the notorious 'Kiss of Death Girl.' Here she talks with Alyssa Critchley on the process of discovering Nellie through fictional biography.

You completed your Honours and Masters at UTS, writing on Nellie Cameron, an elusive figure known as a notorious prostitute with links to the violent razor gangs of Sydney in the 1920s and 30s. Could you tell us a little more about the project/s and what you are working on currently?

The project, *Nellie*, ended up being a blend of fiction and nonfiction. I suppose I would call it a fictional biographical sketch of Nellie Cameron and the world she inhabited. The story was centered around real people – Nellie and her cronies – and real events, but it was narrated from the point of view of a fictional character, and aspects of the story were entirely constructed.

More recently, I continued to explore the same subject matter in my Master of Creative Arts thesis at UTS. This project was much bigger – it ended up being a novel – but it also had Nellie Cameron at the centre of the story. Once again, the project was a combination of fiction and nonfiction elements and techniques, but I would classify it as historical fiction.

One challenge of writing about Nelly Cameron was the incompleteness of the traditional archive. How did you work with/around this and what did this yield?

When I started writing about Nellie I went, first, to the historical record. I spent a lot of time in the initial research phase of the project at the NSW Records archives in Western Sydney, reading court transcripts, coroner's reports, police gazettes...and I nearly went blind trawling through old newspapers on microfilm at the State Library. I found out a lot about Nellie and her friends, but I also found that there were gaps in the record, areas of silence – if, for example, records had been lost or destroyed, or if Nellie had inexplicably vanished from the public eye for a period of time. I think it was when I began to be certain that I couldn't fill these gaps by more research that I started to think about fictionalising aspects of Nellie's story. It wasn't a decision I made lightly. In the end I felt that the fractured record of Nellie's life would not be able to be shaped into a narrative without taking this road – and I was ultimately interested in telling a story.

Did you come across anything in the archive that seemed at odds with your own sense of what was true about Nellie Cameron's life?

The archives tell a particular kind of story with a particular tone. I've never trusted the notion that original sources, such as court records, are some kind of simple lens through which to see the past "as it was" – anyone who has spent time doing this kind of research knows how unreliable and tricky sources can be. A simple example was Nellie's appearance: on different police arrest sheets, Nellie was described variously as having blue eyes, green eyes and brown eyes; she was fair skinned and tanned; she was beautiful and plain. In two reports, made less than a year apart, her height was listed as 5'2 and 5'11. Even the simplest details were never simple.

More importantly, I felt that the historical record would never tell me much about the inner life of Nellie – I could find out what she had done, but never why or how she had felt the morning after. After a great deal of research, Nellie still eluded me. "Finding" her was an exercise in imagination more than anything, but at the same time it was grounded in a lot of background knowledge. In one scene I described Nellie's torso as covered in scars. There was no record of this, but I felt sure – based on the violent world I knew Nellie to have inhabited – that there was some truth in what I wrote.

What is your approach to genre classification and how much bearing did this have on the idea of truth telling in your work?

I thought a lot about classification of fiction and history during both Nellie projects. It's a complex issue that has generated a lot of very heated debate for a long time – Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a recent example of a novel that has spurred an intense discussion around the truth-claims made by historians and novelists respectively, and about how reasonable these claims are with in contemporary writing.

Without going into too much detail, I've come around to thinking that although classification is not likely to be done away with (apart from anything else, it allows publishers to market their books), these boundaries can be quite arbitrary. My feeling is that history and fiction have a lot more in common than not; they are both concerned with human beings, human experience, time and temporality, and narrative. They both – though this is a contentious statement – are ultimately concerned with telling the truth. The difference might lie in what we imagine the truth to be made of.

Regarding truth telling, what kind of ethos did you devise for yourself to follow during the writing process?

As strange as it may sound, I felt a heavy responsibility to Nellie herself. The fact that she was dead and had no descendants might have let me off the hook, so to speak, in terms of fictionalising aspects of her story. But if anything, I felt more accountable because Nellie had no way to speak for herself and no one to defend her. I could do whatever I chose with her story, manipulate it in any way, and this made me determined to tread carefully.

Which writers and thinkers did you draw upon to inform your work?

I drew on a wide pool of writing for inspiration, but I was particularly interested in writers who worked around the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction and had somewhat blurred those boundaries: A.S. Byatt, Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, and Michael Ondaatje are among these.

What relationship do you feel you have to Nellie Cameron? Did it change during the writing process, and what did it mean for your fidelity to truth telling?

Nellie still eludes me in lots of ways – she never really felt like a “settled” character. But I wonder now if this is actually close to the truth of Nellie after all. It seems like she was always a tricky one to pin down, even to those who knew her for most of her short life. She may have been deliberately enigmatic and maybe this is why she was so fascinating to everyone who crossed her path; towards the end of her life she was certainly very unstable and may not have known herself. Hers was a very hard world, and in the end I felt a great deal of pity for her, for the high toll she paid for choosing to live on her own terms. On the other hand, Nellie was not one to mope, and I’m sure she would have shirked the pity of strangers. In the end, I tried to tell her story fairly and with sensitivity, because I believed that it truly deserved to be told.