

Book review

THE SEARCH FOR ANNE PERRY

Joanne Drayton

Auckland: HarperCollins, 2012; 352pp

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The search for Anne Perry is an erudite and engagingly written biography exploring the life and literary career of crime writer Anne Perry. The work encompasses Perry's infamous involvement in the murder of Honorah Parker in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1954, shedding light particularly on the decades that followed Perry's imprisonment, release, and change of identity. The title of Joanne Drayton's book speaks to Perry's search for her own identity following release from prison as much as it does to the media obsession with 'outing' Perry as New Zealand's Juliet Hulme. It is cleverly written and rich with information. It also left me feeling uncomfortable.

Aotearoa/New Zealand was shocked when two teenage girls conspired to commit murder in the South Island town of Christchurch in 1954. Educationalists, medical professionals, socialites, parents, and teenagers alike invested a significant degree of energy in following the proceedings because of the particularities of the case: this was not just murder, but matricide committed by juveniles. Newspapers were inclined to sensationalise accounts of the crime. The Parker–Hulme murder eventually became the warp and weft of Christchurch popular history. In *The search for Anne Perry*, Joanne Drayton sets out to tell a different, more balanced story, made possible by Perry's agreement to be interviewed. As Drayton notes in the concluding sections of her book, the intention was to revisit the Parker–Hulme narrative, moving away from an almost exclusive focus on the 'terrible mistake of a young teenager' as found in earlier texts to something more encompassing of Perry's adult life and literary achievements (Drayton, 2012, p. 314). We might then expect there to be a discrete handling of the murder, one that keeps it in proportion to the entirety of Perry's life. However, this is not entirely the case. *The search for Anne Perry* presents the writer's extensive range of crime novels as mirrors for Perry's soul. In turn, the biography reads as though Perry has never moved beyond her 'mistake' and is trapped forever within a world in which her protagonists recreate her crime in varyingly heinous ways. This not only keeps the crime to the fore in much of the biographical narrative but also works to sensationalise and glorify brutal violence in perpetuity. It is understandable that a biography such as this will necessarily reflect on Perry's chosen genre, and Drayton contemplates the moral quandaries presented in Perry's works alongside the methods and modes through which Perry sought to kill off her literary victims. However, the latter appears gratuitous. Occasional juxtapositions are also created between past events and Perry's current life that seem designed with this kind of sensationalism in mind.

Perry's writing is firmly at the crux of this biography. As such, *The search for Anne Perry*

offers a useful literary survey for the uninitiated (including numerous spoilers – beware!). In addition to this, Drayton also mines Perry’s novels for their autobiographical content, piecing together Perry’s persona through fragments reflected in her fiction. Feminist critics have long derided the proclivity for women’s fiction to be interpreted as relentlessly autobiographical in ways that men’s writing is often not. Nancy Cervetti’s (1996) critical commentary on interpretative approaches to *Orlando*, for example, or Paul Salzman and Marion Wynne-Davies’ (2015) edited collection concerning Mary Wroth and William Shakespeare, demonstrate the limitations of interpreting women’s fiction as primarily autobiographical. To interpret a woman’s writing as autobiography rather than, say, a radical commentary on sexual and gender relations in the case of Woolf’s *Orlando* reinforces the presumption that women are unable to offer robust contributions to literature. In Drayton’s biography, Perry is explicitly identified as a reflection of her characters: she is Monk making peace after the act of murder, she is Vespasia trying not to entertain regrets about relationship choices, she is the killer in *The Hyde Park headsman*, hitting a victim over the head while they are not looking (Drayton, 2012, pp. 103, 115, 128). From a feminist perspective, I am inclined to feel this approach not only preserves sensationalism but does Perry’s writing a disservice, downplaying her literary contribution considerably.

What did impress me about *The search for Anne Perry* was Drayton’s sophistication as a writer. Drayton structures the biography in a way that enables the reader to appreciate the tension between past and present for Perry. This effect is the result of Drayton’s use of flashbacks, creating a nonlinear structure that presents Perry’s dual identities concurrently. I found this to be a successful and nuanced representation of someone who has transitioned from one identity to another. What initially appear to the reader as flashbacks to Perry’s past increasingly feel like flashbacks to the life of an alternative protagonist altogether. Like all multi-character plots, there is a sophistication to this narrative structure, allowing the reader to experience the sense of dislocation between teenage Hulme and adult Perry for themselves, a dislocation that Perry herself arguably feels. This was not only clever but struck me as a uniquely appropriate means through which Drayton could sympathetically represent the subject of her biography.

For those more familiar with the Parker–Hulme case than with Perry’s novels, perhaps the most interesting historiographical contribution made by this biography lies in its coverage of Perry’s life immediately following the trial and also Perry’s reaction to eventually being outed as Hulme. Although it is a small point, I also appreciated Drayton’s handling of murdered mother Honorah Parker, who is presented here as a person in her own right, not just as the one-dimensional victim in a narrative of wayward teenage obsession. However, what I found a little more difficult to appreciate was Drayton’s free hand concerning characterisation, choosing, for example, to inform us that Honorah was contemplating her relationship with her daughter during the events leading up to the murder. Drayton also pauses in her discussion of events to demonstrate that bad parenting was the reason behind the crime. From a historiographical perspective, I found such levels of speculation to be problematic if not also in bad taste.

Essentially, Drayton’s *The search for Anne Perry* is a great book for people who have an interest in the Parker–Hulme murder but more so for fans of Perry’s literature. Much of the book focuses on the ups and downs of forging a literary career. Content covering Perry’s experiences following the Parker–Hulme trial are a valuable addition to what we know of the two women’s lives. Drayton also makes use of a nonlinear narrative structure to create a sympathetic depiction of the tensions within Perry’s lives. However, this book also proceeds as though the idea that women’s fiction is primarily autobiographical is not a contentious issue within feminist scholarship and sensationalises criminal violence in a way that I found unhelpful given the subject’s past. Was this a fair representation of Perry? While *The search for*

Anne Perry was a highly engaging read, I felt uncomfortable about it, in part due to Drayton's decision to read Perry's novels as autobiography. During the 1954 trial, Parker and Hulme were denied the right to speak. In their place, a string of professionals were brought into the courtroom with the purpose of establishing who Parker and Hulme really were, based variously on interviews, diary entries, and the pair's efforts at teenage fiction. It struck me that Drayton was here using Perry's novels in a similar way, an approach that left me uncomfortable in its echo of 1954. But I was also left unsure of how I felt about Perry herself. The biography provides the reader with an intersection of competing perspectives. On the one hand, Perry's works are posited as mirrors for Perry's soul so thoroughly by Drayton that it is hard not to see in Perry someone who remains a perpetrator capable of great, if subdued, violence. On the other hand, Drayton's narrative structure encourages the reader to see Hulme and Perry as distinct characters participating in an intersecting but not mutually determining narrative arc. Perhaps in this instance this is indicative of a successful biography, as my discomfort resides in Perry's relationship with Hulme, and it is Anne Perry's relationship with Juliet Hulme that will give this biography its appeal to many readers in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

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References

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