

Extreme result in a pattern of violence - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - May 28, 2016 - page 21

May 28, 2016 | Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) | Suzanne Leal | Page 21

An Isolated Incident By Emily Maguire Picador, 316pp, \$32.99

Emily Maguire's novel **An Isolated Incident** opens with the discovery of the body of Bella Michaels, the 25-year-old sister of barmaid and accidental prostitute Chris Rogers. Bella's body has been badly mutilated. The details, however, are denied us. This is a clever move by Maguire, who uses the story to explore society's fascination with murder. To my dismay, I discovered myself in this group of the ghoulishly curious: I wanted the details.

Although the book, Maguire's fifth, has been described as a "psychological thriller", I would be less inclined to call it that. Yes, there is intrigue, but not in a whodunit sort of way. Indeed, Maguire seems less interested in the identity of the perpetrator than in the community's reaction to the death, and by the difficulties in finding a private space to mourn what the media ensures becomes a very public matter.

The book is set in Strathdee, a fictional rural town on the road from Sydney to Melbourne, and a regular overnight stopover for the truck drivers who pass through it. In many ways it is a man's town, filled with hard-drinking, taciturn locals who may or may not be decent blokes. Maguire is an evocative writer and, with deft strokes, she paints a vivid picture of the town:

At school we had an expression: Strathdee-good. It meant that something was tops by Strathdee standards but not much chop compared to anything you'd get outside of here. So if you have a particularly good pie or whatever, you'd say, Man, this is good. Strathdee-good, obviously, but yeah. We did the same thing for people. None of the blokes at our school could compete with boys from Sydney or Melbourne, obviously, but there were a few who were definitely Strathdee-hot and so they were the ones we'd go for.

As a narrator, Chris Rogers is a triumph. She's an attractive character: outwardly tough, but still reeling from the breakdown of her marriage to the love of her life, Nate, the subsequent death of her mother, and now the murder of her little sister. She is a woman who struggles with alcohol and whose ample cleavage has made her the subject of interest from men since she was less than a teenager.

I tried to keep them covered, but, you know, a mountain range covered in snow is still a mountain range. Then I gave in. Not to the men who tried to cover me, but to the name-callers and whisperers. I pretended to be the thing they all thought I was. And now, well, now, I wear low-cut tops and bend forward more than I need to if it's been a slow night for tips and I barely notice when men speak to my chest, women shoot death-stares at it and people of both sexes treat me like I have brain damage.

Chris Rogers shares the narration with May Norman, a reporter with online publication AustraliaToday.com. May's story is told in the third person, which is a jolt after the immediacy of Chris's first-person narrative. As it transpires, it was a wise decision to break up the narrative in this way: Chris's descent into grief is so raw and powerful that May's voice provides some much-needed relief from the anguish of it.

May has been having an affair with a married man whose wife has just fallen pregnant with their fourth child. In spite of this, May struggles to let him go, just as Chris struggles with her continuing love for her ex-husband, who has taken leave of his new partner to support Chris in the wake of the tragedy.

Maguire's examination of the "other woman" is skilful, as is her examination of the double standards of a society that is as accepting of married men who have affairs as it is disapproving of the women with whom they become involved. Indeed, how women are judged for their sexual behaviour is a continuing theme of the book. Where, for example, money is exchanged for sex, disdain is reserved for the woman who receives the money rather than the man who hands it over. Similarly, women who walk alone at night are seen to be asking for trouble whereas the men who leer and stalk them are dismissed as being harmless.

And it is in her commentary of violence against women that Maguire's writing becomes most passionate, most confronting, most forebodingly rhythmic:

But Bella had to have known. The question is how much and how soon ... When a man approached her and asked for directions? ... Or was it when a car pulled up beside her and she heard a voice say — what — what might they have said? Or finding herself, waking maybe, beside the highway, a man looming over her, her skin screaming, and she remembers the shiver when leaving work, remembers and remembers and rehearses in her head how she would advise other women, advise her sister, to always pay attention to that shiver, because look because look because look.

This is a harrowing, fascinating, compelling work from an accomplished and thoughtful Australian writer who uses the vehicle of a young woman's death to question and explore society's treatment of women, the everyday violence it condones and its intrusive fascination with the murder of pretty young women. **Suzanne Leal's** new novel, *The Teacher's Secret*, is published next month.