

Project Proposal

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PROJECT PROPOSAL

The Hagley Wood Mystery

WHAT

I want to make a photobook which includes five fictional short stories (around 4000 - 5000 words each) which are all centred on the mysterious Hagley Murder case, better known as Bella In The Whych Elm. Aside from photos, the book consists of five short stories that are based on the real unsolved murder case from WWII. In 1943, four boys found a skeleton inside a hollow Whych Elm in Hagley forest, near Birmingham, United Kingdom.



1: A forensic image of the Hagley Murder case

The police failed to find the culprit, even though an unknown person chalked messages onto walls which nicknamed the victim as Bella. Till this day, the haunting murder remains unsolved and the true identity of Bella remains unclear. The compelling case sparked many theories, some rooted in evidence, while others are more imaginative. In the book, original forensic evidence and pictures of the Hagley forest are combined with five original short stories to create an engaging piece of art. These tragic tales are imaginative speculations on who the unidentified woman was, and what events led to her death. Through combining stories with the forensic photography¹, the book aims to give the tragic Bella an identity... while exploring themes like melancholy, the power of ambiguity and female victimhood.

¹ Unknown photographer, 1947. Marcia Police

HOW

I'll write five stories which each have a completely different protagonist as Bella and narrative structure, but all stories have the same ending. I'd like to do research on fiction writing and construct five engaging short stories of about that evoke feeling and are read like a page-turner thriller with a poetic undertone. References in terms of style are Stephen Kings' novels, Raymond Chandler's hardboiled detectives and Gillian Flynn's 'Gone Girl'. I feel that five stories form a nice collection which is manageable, not overwhelming or repetitive, but still gives me enough space to explore my most prominent imaginations. In all stories, the tales are (mostly) written from the perspective of 'Bella', who is a completely different character in each narrative. In each story I explore a different scenario.

1. A married woman falls in love with another woman when her husband leaves to fight in France. (manslaughter)
2. A female Nazi spy meets up with her assassination target, but after the killing, things quickly go haywire. (shootout/murder)
3. A young woman that lost everything finds comfort in the wise words of a priest, but is torn by guilt when they cross a line. (suicide)
4. When a woman is killed in a roadside accident, her killer hides her body in the woods. (accident)
5. During WW2, a desperate woman joins a cult, not aware of the fact that she will be their first human sacrifice. (ritual sacrifice/murder)

After I finish the stories, I'll construct a photobook in which I'll combine the photos I took at the Hagley Forest with the stories. This is a vital part of the process, since I can now construct a meaningful art piece which reflects on more than the historical event and itself. With the book I aim to take themes that interest me, such as melancholy, the power ambiguity and the interrelation between forensic evidence and fiction, and shape them into a personal but haunting artwork.

TIMETABLE

October

Working on the five stories; doing general research on the period

November

Working on the stories, reading others

December

Working on the stories, reading others

January

Working on the stories, reading others

February

Finishing the five stories. Checking them all for mistakes, illogical structures and so on.

March

Checking the five stories, see how they hold up while read aloud. See if they need trimming or changing by asking others to read them.

April

Final check of the grammar in the five short stories. Redacting > other people. Working on the layout. Working on the combination of imagery and text. See what works.

May

Printing a dummy version of the book. See what kind of paper works best and how I want to present it (does it come in a box? Gold lettering or not? So on).

June

Printing the draft version of the book; check the printed version for errors, think that still can be improved. Creating a cover for the book.

July

Printing the final version of the book.

WHY

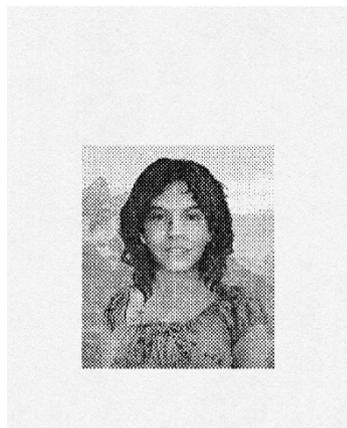
I want to explore the open ending of this unsolved crime and thus investigate my own stake in female victimhood. The suicide of my stepmom marked the beginning of my adolescence, a time when I consumed many horror films and thrillers. This troubling time stands at the root of my artistic practise, and had deeply influenced my work and the macabre topics I deal with.

I'm particularly fascinated by the fact that the story of Bella is not set in stone; I'm able to construct my own truth as to fill in the gaps, although the story remains rooted in reality through photographic evidence. The grainy pictures functioning as some sort of metaphorical skeleton. My words the flesh and skin I can drape over it. I've always been a dreamer and loved to project my fantasies upon others. I have a vivid imagination and a taste for telling stories, and I think with this project I could tell several, which together form a meaningful piece of art that reflects on more than the story itself; on my perception of historic violence, the charm of ambiguity in narrative structures and the weight of photographic evidence.

WHO

Steve Rushton and Simon can help me find viable research material and give feedback on the texts. Jacob could help me checking my writing, for he is a native English speaker and I want to write the stories in English. Marieke de Zwart wrote a thesis on the difference between violence in film and in surveillance videos. Many of the sources she used for her thesis are viable for my practice and thesis.

RELATION TO PREVIOUS PRACTISE



2: One of the pages of the photobook with an altered reconstruction photo

Last year I did a lot of research on what aesthetics are associated with true crime and how they are used in the realms of police investigation as well as entertainment. I made a photobook², centred on the reconstruction photo; a specific way of reconstructing images based on remains and technology, that aims to identify unidentified deceased. I used public domain reconstruction photos made of unidentified decedents found in the United States. The photos are very clearly photoshopped, so I applied a risograph print filter to create an association with cheap and outdated printing technologies. The dots of the printing technique symbolise the unknown identity of these unfortunate victims and the way law enforcement tries to give them an identity again. In another I explored the cinematic language of crime; how the aesthetics (grainy 35mm film, black & white and summon associations with forensic imagery and the media

² A page of an untitled photobook which uses a reconstructed photo created by forensic artist Carl Koppelman.

depiction of crime. Also, this new project correlates with the previous photo-series and a short film (for EYE) which reflected on my own youth, in which I consumed thrillers and horror movies as a way to cope with my dreadful home situation. The short functioned as an homage as well as an investigation into the cinematic language of the films I am so very fond of.



3: Still from an experimental film I made for the EYE research Labs 2019.

RELATION TO A LARGER CONTEXT

This project has relation to several topics on which the most predominant is the interrelation between real and fictionalised violence. In my thesis, I explore the LA crime genre, which laid at the root of many male fantasies that were and still are predominant in (mainstream) American cinema. This typical crime genre sparked the 'flawed male knight': a character trope that takes some form of stake in female victimhood. In my project, female victimhood, and my personal stake in it, takes centre stage. Through this project and my thesis, I am carefully establishing my position as a male art maker who works with delicate subject matter.

Furthermore this work will be further exploring themes I touched upon in earlier work, such as the perception of violence, violent history as shaped through lenses; the image functioning as evidence or proof in a society where the image itself is under scrutiny. My future project further flows into the fields of appropriation, experimental publishing and cross medial art.

³ A still from the experimental video I made for the EYE Research Labs. 2019.

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