



VINTAGE

A CHILD'S BOOK OF
TRUE CRIME
CHLOE HOOPER

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About the Author

Chloe Hooper was born in 1973 and educated at the University of Melbourne and Columbia University, New York. *A Child's Book of True Crime* is her first novel and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction.

For J & T

A CHILD'S BOOK OF TRUE CRIME

A Novel

Chloe Hooper

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MURDER AT BLACK SWAN POINT



A whimpering echoed underground.

Along the cliff the duo travelled, the wind in their fur. Kitty Koala held her breath as she snuggled against Terence Tiger's soft coat. Each giant boulder vibrated with alarm. Each tiny pebble quivered underfoot. Kangaroos bounding to the crime scene covered the eyes of their curious joeys, while overhead a flock of galahs streaked the sky a wild pink. When there was trouble at Black Swan Point, the bushland creatures were the first to know.

A crowd of animals had gathered in the driveway of the Siddells' ramshackle cottage. No sooner had Terence arrived than the tiger pricked his sharp ears. From underground a whimpering echoed: "Boo-hoo-hoo!" Then, goodness! A little furry nose popped out of a burrow. "Why" Kitty exclaimed, "it's Wally Wombat!"

"Wally," said Terence breathlessly. "Whatever has happened?"

"Oh dear!" sobbed the usually gruff wombat. "Poor Ellie Siddel . . ."

Terence raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” Wally murmured, slightly shamefaced, “I guess you’ve heard about her torrid personal life?”

Kitty blushed, wringing her paws. Ellie was a nurse at the local veterinary clinic, a fun-loving girl and strikingly pretty. But every local pet, recently vaccinated, had a story to tell about Ellie and the debonair vet. No matter that Graeme Harvey was married with three children—half the dogs in town returned from being fixed with some humiliating anecdote involving the couple’s lunch-hour exploits.

A tear rolled down Wally Wombat’s fur. “She was still a lovely girl, a lovely, gentle girl!”

Terence and Kitty glanced at each other. Rushing to the Siddells’ window, they peeked inside. “Turn away, Kitty!” implored the tiger. “Please don’t look!” Ellie’s room, with its blue rosebud wallpaper, bore evidence of a deadly struggle. The cosmetics covering her dressing table had been strewn sideways; an evening dress hung on the wardrobe door, horribly slashed. Why, even some small china ornaments on the windowsill—a turtle, a bunny, a kitten—were cracked, or shattered to dust.

Terence Tiger covered Kitty Koala’s eyes. He could hardly bear to look himself, yet somehow he managed. It was as if a wild—well, frankly—a wild animal had been at work here, the tiger thought. “Who could have done such a thing?” He stared across the horizon. At the bottom of the cliffs, black swans sang mournfully. The stately birds dipped their long necks in and out of the water, arching, straining: an ocean of question marks.

THE ROAD ALONG which Thomas and I were travelling was cut clear into a cliff face. Rude shadows of electricity poles and gum trees flashed across the windscreen. I lifted my skirt. Peeling off my panty hose, I examined new luminous veins running along the insides of my thighs. Thomas liked the way that primary-school teachers dress. Each morning, he claimed, teachers imagine what the children would like them to wear. "I have seen grown women in party frocks with ribbons in their hair." A posse of Alices who took a wrong turn. As my hand crept higher, Thomas's driving deteriorated. I concentrated on the scenery: the boulders could be tiny or like the buttressed walls of a cathedral. Some were very curvaceous, almost bulbous. "I spy a granite elephant complete with a trunk." I giggled. With my little eye, rocks also formed shapes like mouths, like tongues, like pornographic things.

Opposite these Rorschach cliffs, a huge sign, the shape of a fat court jester, appeared in the driver-side window. The jester, in medieval dress and dark sunglasses, trumpeted cheap deals on colour TVs and jacuzzis two kilometres up the road. As it happened, Thomas was also wearing sunglasses and as he turned, smiling at me, a picture of the duo lined up. Thomas, so handsome in his finely cut suit, was the first person you'd expect to be doing this. He was middle-aged, for a start, with his every feature perfectly symmetrical. He looked like a lawyer, and in fact he *was* a lawyer. And from his office he'd called the staff room during recess, confirming room service for lunch. "I'm going to rent a bed by the half hour," he'd promised. "There'll be peepholes in every wall, and a scoreboard outside the door."

He'd then left work early. Dumping his briefcase in the backseat, he'd driven out of Hobart—a city that still looked, from the top of Mt. Wellington, like a nineteenth-century oil painting. Sunlight soaked the clouds and purple hills soared in every direction. Hobart still looked like a triumphant oasis. And with his wife away publicizing her book, Thomas had left the city and sped toward the savages.

Laundry drying on a balcony railing now introduced the Sand and Waves Tudor Motel: a two-story slab of asbestos with exposed black beams. As a means of jazzing up the Tudor theme, each door had once been painted a different pastel colour. Closing my eyes, I could almost smell the sheets. The pungency of fishermen's orgies and mermaids gone bad. "We'll rent a waterbed from some old seadog," Thomas had said. "We'll lock ourselves away, a musty Bible in the drawer in case it all goes horribly wrong." A lawyer is as interested as any criminal in how to sideswipe a rule: this affair was to be kept away from the sentimental. We only met like this, Thomas kept reminding me, to alleviate boredom. I hooked my fingers around the elastic of my underpants, and turning from him, started to slowly wriggle free. A philosopher he admired proposed that facing the finality of death helped people make something of their lives.

"Leave on your heels," Thomas suggested.

I took off one shoe and tried to slide the tiny underpants past my ankle. The trick was to act nonchalant, almost as if Thomas weren't there. He slowed, sensing I had some problem. Under scrutiny, I finished the manoeuvre and folded my hands in my lap.

"Bravo." Leaning over, laughing, Thomas kissed my neck. Another jester appeared, marking the driveway. Considering the motel's signage, it would be too much to wear sunglasses checking in. He kissed my neck and we drove straight past.

"Are we there yet?"

“Kate, don’t pout.” He leaned harder on the accelerator. “I’ve been thinking about this all morning. I know exactly what I’m going to do to you.”

“I don’t mind *that much* if we just go back there.”

He paused. “We can do slightly better.”

I stared at the tiny piece of black cotton now lying by my feet. I’d waited for Thomas in a back lane, eavesdropping as the little girls on the other side of the fence conducted wedding ceremonies: “Do you promise to love him for the whole of your life? Okay, then you can throw away your flowers . . . Kiss! Now, it’s nine months later in the hospital. You play peekaboo.” The boys were elsewhere, pretending they could fart dangerous nuclear weapons. One of my students had just been reported for pulling down his pants, trying to “bomb” an old woman walking past the school gates. The day before I’d accompanied him to the principal’s office, and it made me awfully sad to see this scrawny kid, with barely anything which gave him pride, enter her room a bright-eyed hero, and leave again chastised and vengeful.

I opened my handbag, depositing my own stray underpants. “Was Veronica excited to be getting away?”

“Yes,” Thomas answered. “Thank you for enquiring.” Clearing his throat he added coolly, “Of course Lucien will miss her. Although I guess you’d know that as well as I would.”

I ignored him. “How is your wife’s book being received?”

“It’s selling well.”

Glossy copies of *Murder at Black Swan Point*, which detailed Ellie Siddell’s bizarre 1983 murder, lined the windows of all Tasmania’s bookstores. On the cover a row of swans swam in formation; all black but for one, which was bloodred. Then there was the title in white scrawl—after you mutilate someone, apparently, your handwriting turns to shit. It was supposed to look as if a psychopath, holding a piece of chalk in his fist, suddenly decided to scrape the title along a prison wall.

I stared out the window. In the book's photos Ellie Siddell was a slightly awkward girl, always smiling. I'd grown up in Hobart with girls like Ellie. Girls hardwired to be sunny, even if they were cast out—at some crucial fourteen-year-old moment—for still being so immature. I imagined, later, when all the girls were seventeen and about to finish school, Ellie was mysteriously forgiven; and, more than that, deemed beloved by her former torturers for being so funny and dopey, for reacting to their teasing with a delayed, but full-blooming blush. Ellie, oddly drowsy, with a walk so languid, just before anyone realized a slow, sleepy walk might carry great appeal. She finished school badly and went to stay at her parents' country house, to look after their horses. The vet offered her a part-time job, and her parents gave their approval. The vet was upstanding. They knew him and his wife; she came from an old family. And Ellie had always loved animals. She'd brought countless baby birds home, feeding them honey with an eyedropper. She'd constructed leaf hospital wards for ill caterpillars. Her parents hoped this job would be good for her confidence. Their big girl. Their big, sweet girl—Dr Harvey would look after her. He would stand right behind her at the end of the day, taking her pretty hands in his and washing them carefully in the sink as Ellie giggled. Then he'd unbutton her blouse one button at a time, with wet fingers, before leading her into the reception area to lay her down on the couch.

"Put your shoes on, will you." The car slowed again, and we drove through a high wrought-iron gate into a circular driveway. White gravel crunched under the tires; a flurry of pebbles rose like sea spray. I caught my breath. In front of us loomed a white mansion with a wide veranda. It had been built for Tasmanian gentlefolk in the 1870s, then converted to a luxury bed-and-breakfast a century later. The building was brimming with pride: a gingerbread house, iced

lovingly, bordered by candy-boughed trees. If you tried to break off a little cornice to snack on you'd be scolded.

"It's lovely."

"Yes, it is," said Thomas. "This is probably the most beautiful house in southern Tasmania." He stared into the rearview mirror, clearly agitated. "We should hurry, there isn't much time."

While he parked the car around the back, I walked towards the reception area. Topiary love hearts may as well have grown by the door. Management may as well have hired a fiddler. Inside, the walls were painted a startling apricot. I cleared my throat. The receptionist, her blonde hair in a neat bun, was also in her early twenties; she stood behind a sort of lectern.

"Do you have a double bed?" I asked efficiently. Of course, I hadn't meant to ask that. I had meant to ask for a double room.

"Let me check." She didn't smile. "How long will you be wanting to stay?"

"We're not absolutely . . . we're just, just not absolutely sure."

The Persian rug gave a slight electric shock. I glanced at the potpourri arranged in crystal dishes; the lace doily and single rose on each of the dining room's tables. Then I turned. A three-legged cat was dragging itself sideways up the blackwood staircase. The receptionist tapped her fountain pen against the register: the cat lifted its two front legs up a step, then hauled up the third leg. I could hear Thomas cautioning, "This is just a fuck." But as the chandelier sent confetti light across the high-gloss walls, I wondered if his warnings were directed not to me, but to himself. The cat made its turnoff. And the receptionist, tapping her pen, noted that almost every room was vacant. She looked offended as she licked her finger, with its shiny buffed nail, and counted Thomas's cash. "If your stay is cut

short, if you don't stay the *night*," she enunciated carefully, "please leave the key on the desk."

It took me a moment adjusting to all the Victoriana. I'd been imagining a motel room: mirrors with 3 A.M. pores, a notepad by the phone full of strangers' doodles. Instead there was a spinning wheel in one corner and a four-poster bed. Whoever had decorated felt they understood wallpaper very intimately. Even the light switch was bordered with a lacy pattern, even the row of gilt picture frames. The frames, suspended with pink velvet ribbon, contained sepia photographs of children, all ringlets and rose-tinted cheeks, posing next to a penny-farthing bicycle, a rocking horse.

"Darling, it's perfect," Thomas said, grinning. He excused himself and disappeared through the door stenciled in sweeping cursive: *Lavatory*. When I was alone, I walked over to the dried flower arrangement. Above the brittle petals was a mirror, with a short young woman inside its frame. She looked like she'd broken into her mother's makeup case, trying to make her eyes more almond-shaped. Someone had shown her a curling wand and her dark hair was tousled expertly on one side, but the other—where she'd practised—lay flat. Behind the flowers, like the consolation prize, hid a plastic kettle, coffee sachets and a mini-packet of cookies. Opening up the cellophane wrapping, I stuffed both the cream-centred biscuits in my mouth. I could hear Thomas whistling. He whistled well.

When we first started trysting he played music that, he said, reminded him of me. He brought sweet things: chocolate mice and gingerbread men (waiting to see where I took the first bite). Once he gave me a box of perfect peaches. Then, handing over a knife, he requested that I let him watch. "Pretend you're alone," he said. And this seemed hilarious. I camped it up, eating peach straight off the knife; rubbing the fruit on my wrists like cologne. I

thought this was the game itself—and that by pretending to be sexy I was cancelling out any sexiness. Another theory proved wrong. After I dissected the peach he still wanted to undress me.

The toilet flushed. I crammed the cellophane behind the kettle, and Thomas reemerged, moving impatiently to draw the lace curtains. My heart was beating fast. I stood in the room, my mouth full of vanilla cookie crumbs, watching him. I needed to brush my teeth, but my thoughts were on loop; *it's too late to leave, to pretend to feel ill*. Downstairs I heard somebody laugh. Reticence had arrived to match the wallpaper. For a split second, my new modesty made me want to call my parents and ask them to come and pick me up.

“Aren’t these dried flowers pretty?”

“Yes.” Wet fingers started to unbutton my shirt. “They’re pretty.”

I wished I really were a little girl. Little children can transform themselves from magic birds into flying strongmen. At play, children wear intense expressions and make a range of hero noises; common is the windy *vroom-vroom* of their invisible jet plane’s ignition, the *neeeow* or *p-queeww* of lasers shooting from soft fingertips. Running with their arms stretched straight ahead, the children become the most powerful and beautiful—the most super—people in the universe. They believe the ordinary properties of objects irrelevant; for example, this Victorian four-poster, covered in cream lace, could have been a hospital bed. Typical social roles didn’t necessarily shape the imagined world either, so Thomas could have been a doctor who was giving me a checkup; and speaking out of turn when, reaching my black-and-pink bra, he said casually, “That’s a nice print.”

The bed was huge, pneumatic. A reproduction mahogany stepladder clung to its quilted flanks. Thomas held my hand and I walked up the steps. He then undressed himself, looking all the time so serious. He took off his business shirt;

he unzipped his trousers. Before we made love he would always hang his trousers, and then I had to close my eyes. It was too much seeing him standing there in high, black business socks. “Just smile a little”—he thought he had to be stern with me; he’d told me that. Otherwise I didn’t treat things with enough gravitas. We’d get into bed and I’d start to laugh. “Just smile a little because we are both about to be naked.”

Thomas had the tanned legs and white arse of a summer person. His body was not like the boys’ bodies with their easy muscles I’d seen before; but in the blue light, the lines on his face were almost smoothed away. As we kissed I tried to taste his age. His lips were unexpectedly soft. He smelled smoky although he did not smoke.

“How do I look?” I asked, teasing.

He shook his head. “Gorgeous.”

“Do I look *lush*?” Lush seemed like a better thing to look.

“No,” he said firmly, “you’re gorgeous.” He covered my eyes, his hand scented with almond soap. “What can you see?”

“Your palm. It smells of marzipan.”

I was supposed to whisper to him. He liked this. He liked this even though my story lines were simple: *We’re in a meadow surrounded by poppies*, I used to tell him in the beginning. *Can you feel the petals against your skin?* Or: *We’re on a train and the sun is coming up, flickering through the trees*. Now the content had changed. I said things he must have wanted to hear because these things shocked me. The Puritans, all busily fornicating through a hole in a white sheet, had the right aesthetic. If you acknowledged this enterprise was dirty and wicked from the start, no one had to try to be transgressive.

Thomas kissed my neck. “Where do you think we are?”

“I don’t know.”

He sounded impatient. “Do you think it’s *hot* . . . where we are?”

I closed my eyes. Outside, cars were driving along the highway. There was a kind of roar every time they passed the house's force field, so constant it was like listening to the sea. "Pretend I'm holding a shell to your ear," I whispered. "Do you hear the static?"

"Yes," he moaned quietly.

I rolled on top of him. "What should I do with the shell?"

"Put it down. Dance for me."

I laughed.

"Dance, I would like that."

We were high off the ground. It wasn't dark enough, and the room smelled odd. I closed my eyes. Humming a line of music, I raised my hands above my head.

"Move your hips."

I hummed the music and rocked back and forward, dancing. If I had opened my eyes I might have seen him smiling. In this room, strangely blue, I was making him happy. I always wanted to make him happy, then some part of me rebelled. "There's a fringe of seaweed knotted round my waist." I rose a little and, arching my back, suggested slowly, "I'm very close. Each bauble brushes your face as I swivel my hips." I thought further; "There's a rainbow bird on my bare shoulder."

A moment of silence. Introducing the parrot, I realized, was the first mistake.

Thomas gazed at me with an intense, hungry look. He inhaled. "Little girl, I can smell your skirt."

I brushed hair from my eyes. "And does it smell of sea air?"

"Yes."

"Does it smell *salty*?"

"Aha"—he smiled—"a dusky scent."

I ran my hands along his chest. "Pretend you've captured me and taken me to your island of black swans . . ." I leaned down and whispered, so close my lips touched his earlobe: "And the sun is beating down on us. And no one can see us

lying here, only the animals and they're all fucking, too!" I giggled. "It's like a zoo of fornication!" I sat up again and raised my arms, like wings, above my head. "The black swans, their feathers are beating against the water—*beat, beat, beat*—and the girl swan is shrieking *No! No!* and the boy swan, his red eyes are so intense." I curved my arm, hiding behind it like a cape. "And when she folds her long neck under her grand wing"—I paused—"it looks like she's been beheaded . . ."

"That's not funny." He sighed and jerked slightly, forcing me to roll off him.

"It was a joke!" I clutched his arm, then lay still, annoyed. "A little joke." Light seeped in the curtains' edges. We lay next to each other in the half dark, listening to the cars passing by on the highway. Cicadas continued their slow drone, and I felt bad. Thomas looked like a young boy with skinny muscles on his arms and undeveloped pectorals. I was lying in bed with a little boy. In this game his age kept morphing: sometimes when he kissed me he looked ridiculously old. So old that he started to look young again; because he had the pleading expression, tinged with the beginnings of disappointment, that a child with ridiculous faith uses on an adult. The potpourri, all the floral wallpaper, was still Romance, wasn't it? Despite his high regard for amorality, he couldn't help being kind. Usually we trysted in the house where I was living; my family's old beach house. This was his attempt to make renting a room nicer for me.

"Are you angry?"

"No," he said, quietly.

"Thomas, seriously, can you smell something?"

"It's rising damp." He got out of bed, slowly, as if he had a sore rib. "This place was probably built on swampy land." He reached over for the complimentary bathrobe, a brown, terry-towelling model hanging from a hook on the lavatory door.

“You’re the man with the furry tan,” I told him as he slipped it on.

He smiled thinly and, walking into the bathroom, left me in the whirlpool of sheets. I lay completely still, listening to the water running. Had he been here with her? If I checked the guest book would Veronica have written some sappy note full of exclamation marks? *Olde worlde charm! This brought the magic back after 11 years of marriage! Thanks!* Or else something literary about rage and potpourri. Or else something completely self-serving:

*Female killers are more fascinating and more repulsive—
koob ym yub—even though you’d think women would
make better killers because they’re so used to blood.
They know what blood feels like on their skin or their
skirts, women know how quickly it spreads everywhere
and how to clean it out of clothes—KOOB YM YUB—
always use cold water; get to the stain quickly.*

A series of cracks, like tiny lightning, streaked across the ceiling from the plasterwork rose. What about a little drink? Why wasn’t there a heritage bar-fridge stocked with absinthe and gruel? The water was turned off abruptly. “I’d better check my messages,” a still-dry Thomas announced. His clothes were hanging neatly over the armchair, whereas mine had been bombed around the room. He knew exactly where his phone was, and picked it up to dial some numbers. I loved when he did his lawyer-talk, all stern, in a very nuts-and-bolts way. I loved this, when he called into the office and spoke to everyone like they were imbeciles.

His brow furrowed. “There’s a message from Veronica.”

I made a face at him.

“Listen, I’m sorry, Kate, but it sounds like there’s been an emergency.” He went into the bathroom to speak with his wife. The door was open a few inches. “Sweetheart,” he

whispered loudly. "Sweetheart, what's happened?" A pause. "Hey? Is Lucien okay?"

I stretched. I arched my back and it was then I really noticed the sepia photograph above the bed. A small boy with a bowl haircut stood by a penny-farthing bicycle. The boy suddenly looked exactly as Lucien would, if he were wearing a lace collar and knickerbockers. Lucien was Thomas and Veronica's nine-year-old son, a sweet, complicated child. It was probably true he'd been my favourite before I'd even met his father. Listening to Thomas, I realized I was still slightly upset. That morning Lucien had come to school and all the other fourth-graders had laughed at him. He'd just had a growth spurt and, wearing short shorts and a blazer over his T-shirt, he'd looked like a visiting dignitary with very white thighs. "I like being different!" he'd called out theatrically. "Wearing clothes that don't match." It was staggering how clearly his character, including eccentricities, had been etched. I worried for him. He was very sensitive, and the sensitivity was intelligent: he had an excellent radar.

"Oh no!" Thomas groaned. "Oh no! They had no right. No right! . . . But you're in the hotel now? . . . Hey, hey, stop crying."

I tried to piece the conversation together: Veronica must have also been in a hotel room somewhere. And hopefully Lucien was safe; sitting, reading science fiction, in the half hour before class.

"Why don't you try to rest?" There was a pause. "All right, sweetheart, I'll call you later." Another pause. "Me too," he murmured.

Thomas waited a moment before walking back into the room. He sat roughly on the edge of the bed. "Veronica was speaking on a panel about her book. Someone stood up during question time and abused her."

"How awful."

“Some vigilante,” Thomas spat. “On about journalistic truth!”

Buoyed, I got out of bed. My clothes were in a flurry of rude postures all over the floor. Inside-out sleeves strangled each other; a skirt was hitched up, in flagrante delicto. I found my panty hose, and wriggled one straight leg in, then, rocking, the other straight leg.

Thomas watched me, sighing. “You look like Charlie Chaplin.” He reignited. “I don’t know what these arseholes want! The book is published with a disclaimer!” He put his head in his hands. “It is so damn controversial. Just yesterday journalists were around the peninsula muckraking, asking any old fuck for their opinion.”

“And what do the old fucks say?”

“They say: *we hate this!*” He waited a beat. “Et cetera.”

I knew how they felt. Thomas was sitting on the edge of the bed in the brown dressing gown, waiting for some response. I stayed silent, wondering how he’d feel if something happened to me. According to *Murder at Black Swan Point*, the morning after the girl was killed, Dr Graeme Harvey woke slowly and realized his wife was missing. His head ached. He’d arrived home the previous night, late, and they’d fought badly. Margot had pushed him into admitting the truth; then, rageful, she’d struck at him with a bottle. “Not everything has to be so momentous,” he’d told her stupidly, the blood streaming down his cheek. And she’d stood there weeping, harder, for seeing him bleed. The next morning, Dr Harvey, unaware of what he’d slept through, probably lay in bed angry. When his wife decided what was bad, when she decided *he* was bad, she claimed every inch of moral ground, and there was now not a balding shrub to cling to, not a single slapstick face-saver. He lay still, listening for his daughters, then listening for Margot in the kitchen. The television was on. His daughters were not supposed to watch television first thing, but as the cartoon’s tune rang through his bedroom, he realized they must have