A Mythic Murderess for the Modern Era: Review of Sarah Leavitt, *Agnes, Murderess*

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Sarah Leavitt, *Agnes, Murderess*. Alberta: Freehand Books, 2019.
ISBN: 9781988298474, C$29.95 (PB)

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Sarah Leavitt's graphic novel *Agnes*, *Murderess* (2019) is biofiction that does not recreate as much as create a personal history for a legendary figure, the nineteenth-century Canadian serial killer Agnes McVee. With the help of her husband and son-in-law, McVee is rumoured to have killed around fifty people while operating a brothel/boarding house at 108 Mile House in British Columbia between 1875 to 1885 at the time of the Cariboo Gold Rush. Author and artist Sarah Leavitt[1] spent ten years working on the graphic novel, committing herself to extensive research. Yet in her 'Afterword' to *Agnes, Murderess*, she finally admits that "there is no record of Agnes McVee anywhere, including the archives, despite the fact that she was supposedly caught and arrested, then hanged herself while awaiting trial" (p. 291). Although *Agnes, Murderess* received positive reviews, mainly in Canada (see, e.g., Derdyn 2019), and Leavitt's other creative work, specifically *Tangles* (2012),[2] has attracted fairly extensive academic interest, her neo-Victorian graphic novel has not as yet attracted critical attention from theorists working on either neo-Victorianism or biofiction. As such, this special issue on *Beyond Biofiction* seems an opportune moment to draw neo-Victorianists' attention to this intriguing visualisation-cum-life-writing on an eccentric subject of the Long Nineteenth Century.

When Leavitt discovered her subject was more myth than murderess, her research shifted to Victorian British Columbia.

Neo-Victorian Studies
15:1 (2023/2024)
pp. 311-329

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11276157

> Research not only helped me answer questions about the characters and world I was depicting, but it also influenced the shape of the story as I came across events or people or ideas that I wanted to include. This is particularly true of the reading I did about the history of BC [British Columbia]. I read a lot of settlers' accounts of coming to BC, as well as books and articles about the role of women and Indigenous people in the province's development, and about the impact of racism, sex work, and mining for gold. I wanted to understand how Agnes might have fitted into the newly-formed colony. (Leavitt 2021: n.p.)

The result is an informative and chilling exploration of life as a nineteenth-century working-class woman and recent immigrant (and murderess), balanced with thoughtful consideration for those McVee would have encountered (i.e., her victims): fur traders, gold miners, sex workers, Indigenous people, farmers, and other settlers. The graphic novel has the same gothic potency of another work of Canadian historical fiction about a 'celebrated murderess' – namely *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, reimagining Grace Marks.

If there were more or indeed any documentation on Agnes McVee, she would doubtless have featured on Lucy Worsley's *Lady Killers* podcast (2022-2023), as did Grace Marks among various other nineteenth-century female killers. McVee has a higher body count than Jane Toppan and Mary Ann Cotton combined (America and Britain's first female serial killers, respectively, committed for insanity in 1902 and executed by hanging in 1873). Yet McVee has the bloodlust of a Lizzie Borden, preferring knives to poison and adult victims to children. Due to current debates about portrayals of individuals with herostratic fame in biofiction, McVee is an intriguing addition as her life is more legend than fact. Marc Napolitano examines musical adaptations of Lizzie Borden's story and laments what he believes is a tendency in biofiction to make the (acquitted) murderess into a sympathetic figure, abused by her family and suffering from a psychological disorder, thus emphasising her personal life and not the society in which she lived. Napolitano claims that "Lizzie is presented as the victim of an aberrant household as opposed to a repressive social order" (Napolitano 2020: 357). Although Napolitano refers to musical representations, filmic depictions fall

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into this category as well. One might think, for example, of Chloë Sevigny as Lizzie Borden, hacking her father and stepmother to death in the nude with an axe in *Lizzie* (2018, dir. Craig William Macneill, writer Bryce Kass) or Christina Ricci stabbing an attorney with a hairpin in *The Lizzie Borden Chronicles* (2015, dir. Stephen Kay et al.). Joanne Froggatt as Mary Ann Cotton in *Dark Angel* (2016, dir. Brian Percival, writer Gwenyth Hughes), wielding her teapot of poison for yet another tiny victim, affords another pertinent case in point. In these adaptations, the murderesses come across as either love-starved victims or stone-cold killers, while the world that created them, or the nineteenth-century context, is largely ignored.

Leavitt's *Agnes, Murderess* proves that personal pain and social repression need not be mutually exclusive in the formation of a serial killer. This more inclusive view of the conjunction of personal history and time/place creating evil/morally complex individuals can be found in the growing canon of biofiction and true crime narratives featuring Victorian murderers. Margaret Atwood, for instance, uses historical records to create a narrative for Grace Marks – from her multiple confessions, notes by those who observed her in prison and in the asylum, to newspaper articles printed during the trial, the paraphernalia of her life serves as the 'bones' that Atwood uses to 'flesh out' a compelling portrait of a teenage girl, devastated by the loss of her mother and abused by her father, but who is also indisputably a product of her time and place, a female working-class Irish immigrant in nineteenth-century Toronto. The 2017 miniseries adaptation of *Alias Grace*, written by Sarah Polley and directed by Mary Harron, maintains that same balance between the personal and societal. Atwood and Polley, who worked together extensively on the adaptation, agreed not to overly focus on the personal morsels known about Grace's life, but to instead highlight the society in which she lived, the society that informed her choices or lack of choices as a young woman away from her family, working in the homes of strangers, which could become fraught if not downright dangerous. Regarding the tone of the series, Harron claims she wanted to create an "anti-Downton Abbey" (Harron qtd. in Ostad 2017: 1).

Other creators similarly strive to remove sentiment from portrayals of homicidal protagonists while still attempting to understand their motivations. Mary Kay McBrayer's *America's First Female Serial Killer: Jane Toppan and the Making of a Monster* (2020) dramatises the facts of Jane Toppan's life to create a chronological narrative that considers Toppan's childhood as

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an indentured servant in a household that adopted her only for the free labour she could provide, as well as her lowly status as an Irish working-class woman in nineteenth-century America. McBrayer writes that "it is my best approximation as to how her society – and by extension our society – might have made her" (Brayer 2020: 14). Like McBrayer, Sarah Schmidt's fictional novel *See What I Have Done* (2017) offers sympathetic factors regarding Lizzie Borden's life, such as her mother's death and her father's cruelty, which reaches an apex when he kills all of Lizzie's pet pigeons. However, the novel also addresses the more calculated reasons for which Lizzie might have committed the crime. For example, her father's purchase of property for their stepmother, Abby, angered Lizzie and her sister Emma, who were kept on a tight budget and very much looking forward to their inheritance.

Class issues are likewise highlighted in Schmidt's novel with the use of multiple points of view. Bridget Sullivan was an Irish immigrant who worked for the Bordens as a housemaid. In the novel, she becomes a major character. As a result, we get a different view not only of the Bordens but of the limited economic choices Bridget has in terms of employment, mirroring those of McVee and Marks. Likewise, Cara Robertson's *The Trial of Lizzie Borden: An Account* (2019), although true crime nonfiction, takes readers through a meticulous account of the Borden trial, including the arguments, the evidence, the jury, the press, and the audience, especially those who attended from the working classes, recent immigrants who never believed Lizzie Borden was innocent. This trend towards a deeper examination of social context in accounts of Victorian killers remains consistent in Leavitt's graphic novel about the mysterious Agnes McVee.

Agnes, Murderess certainly feels less scandalous than *The Lizzie Borden Chronicles* and less sappy than *Dark Angel*, mainly because Leavitt grants empathy to her protagonist *without* exonerating her violence. She does not make Agnes a likeable heroine or even a relatable villain. Heather Leighton describes Leavitt's Agnes as "[u]nforgiving and prone to lashing out, […] emotionally immature and devoid of compassion" (Leighton 2020; n.p.). It may come as an unpleasant shock for readers used to connecting with the protagonist on some level, yet it feels refreshingly honest. In *Lady Killers: Deadly Women Throughout History* (2017), Tori Telfer writes about the unwillingness of society to accept and face women's violence:

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> People have endless tricks up their sleeves for softening the violence of the female: dehumanizing female serial killers by comparing them to monsters, vampires, witches, and animals; erotizing them until they feel safe… […]. But at the end of the day, I believe there's something to be gained from acknowledging female aggression, even when it's sick and twisted. Otherwise, we're living in denial. (Telfer 2017: xiv, un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

There is no denial in Leavitt's text about Agnes's capacity for violence, nor her ability to compartmentalise that violence. Still, Leavitt makes McVee's past as influential to her aggressive behaviour as the society that continually attempts to define and limit her choices based on her gender, sexuality, and social class. In short, Agnes's actions are those of a monster, but one moulded by the family, community, country, and culture that produced her.

Agnes's story begins in the Inner Hebrides, Scotland in 1850, where she lives in a cottage with her mother and grandmother. Leavitt illustrates the bleak, windswept landscape in stark black and white, with shadings of grey, beginning with an image of waves. Leavitt's illustrations have a darkness reminiscent in style and subject matter to Eddie Campbell's illustrations for Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1989-98), a graphic novelised series about Jack the Ripper. Yet, in scope and setting, Leavitt's illustrations also evoke the graphic novels of another Canadian artist, Emily Carroll – gloomy, wild, and gothic – with undercurrents of dark fantasy. After the opening ocean view, Leavitt's next panel features a solitary, leafless tree. Moving closer to the tree over the course of six panels, Leavitt reveals what we have been trying to see: a headless chicken hanging from a branch, blood slowly dripping from its neck. In time, we will learn the significance of this unfortunate bird, both literally and metaphorically.

Agnes's childhood unspools like a terrifying Russian fairy tale mixed with a 1970s American gangster saga. Her mother, an upper-class Englishwoman from London, crafts Agnes a beloved doll, much like Vasilisa's doll in the Russian folktale 'Vasilisa the Beautiful', to protect her from harm. But when her mother dies, Agnes is left alone with her witchy grandmother, Gormul, a Gaelic-speaking Baba Yaga who wants her granddaughter to develop the same magical ability she possesses – a gift for finding 'treasure' and taking it by any means necessary. Gormul makes her

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living through protection racketeering, extorting goods from local villagers in exchange for not using her witchcraft to dry up their cows' milk or kybosh their crops. A crone-like Corleone, she inspires fear in the villagers, who clearly wish they could burn her at the stake instead of turning over a pitcher of milk.

Agnes does not want to become like her grandmother, yet we can see immediately that she is nothing like her fair and refined mother. Agnes may long for a life like her mother once had, a softer existence filled with books and tea cakes, but she knows she is not destined for an aristocratic fate. Yet unlike her mother, she does not flinch from the hard tasks Gormul gives her. In fact, she relishes the chance to use Gormul's shiny axe to cut off a chicken's head (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Agnes's first kill in *Agnes, Murderess* (Leavitt 2019: p. 26), published by Freehand Books. © Sarah Leavitt. Reprinted with kind permission from the author and publisher.

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In one panel, Agnes smiles like she's being handed a lollipop when handed the axe. In the following panel, after she's chopped off the chicken's head, she appears darkly satisfied and spattered with blood (see Leavitt 2019a: 26). There is no caption, but if there were, it might read: 'Agnes's first victim'. After the chicken-beheading initiation, Agnes realises she enjoys killing things and watching things get killed. She has a flair for murder that becomes a honed skill over the course of her very violent life.

Leavitt illustrates a childhood for Agnes filled with depravation in both material goods and affection. As a result, it makes her hard and cruel. The longest and arguably most significant relationship McVee has is with Seamus, a village boy who stands up for her against the other children, who call her a witch. Seamus has a soft heart and often works as a foil for Agnes. From the beginning, his kindness makes Agnes unable to respect him. When Seamus runs and hides after the rest of the villagers are forced to leave the land that belongs to Lord MacDonald, Seamus expects Agnes to help him survive. Instead, she steals his fishing knife, a shiny treasure she's had her eye on for a while. When he asks for it back, she informs him that she won't give it back because he doesn't deserve it, saying, "You are nothing but a frightened little boy" (p. 55). Sadly, Seamus proves her point when he runs away again.

Years later, as a young man, Seamus returns to Agnes's home, searching for the knife. By this point, Gormul has accumulated many more 'treasures', valuable objects stolen or scavenged. So, when she spots Seamus in her cottage rummaging around, she calls him a "thief" and demands Agnes "kill him" (pp. 80-81). When Agnes falters in her role as attack dog, Gormul reaches for the fishing knife to do it herself, but Agnes stops her. **SPOILER ALERT.** After Agnes announces, "This is my knife", she stabs Gormul to death instead (pp. 82-83). Seamus stares in horror at Agnes, who is once again splattered with blood, fervently believing that she killed Gormul to save him. However, Agnes and the reader know otherwise. She has longed to get out from under Gormul's thumb, longed to possess the 'treasures' that belong to her grandmother. Seamus simply provided an opportunity. However, Gormul's murder, unlike the ones that will follow, haunts Agnes until the end of her days. After Seamus helps her hide Gormul's body in a cave, the two head for London, travelling as brother and sister.

While the graphic novel is grounded in historical research, Leavitt adds a supernatural element that enhances the text's gothic tone. In London,

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Agnes searches for her mother's people, the wealthy Babingtons of Belgrave Square, and soon after she locates them, Gormul's spirit begins to haunt Agnes, hissing intrusive thoughts in her dreams and eventually in her waking life also. Ambiguity surrounds whether Gormul's voice indicates that Agnes suffers from psychosis or whether Gormul's spirit haunts and possibly even possesses Agnes (much as in the case of Atwood's Grace Marks and the spirit of Mary Whitney). In either case, the voice instructs Agnes to do terrible things. If Agnes had an affinity for 'treasures', as Gormul did, hoarding and counting them like Golem and his 'precious', then the voice confirms the women's affinity. Indeed, Agnes's avidity for treasure becomes pathological. As soon as she steps into her mother's childhood home, which now belongs to her mother's cousin since Agnes's mother was disowned, Agnes is overwhelmed by wealth. She is served tea in the drawing room where she eagerly takes in the "Turkey carpets" and "velvet sofa" and a gleaming chandelier, thinking "all this was… mine" (p. 98, original ellipses). Agnes covets everything but will receive nothing. Filled with tea cakes and a few kind words from servants who fondly remember her mother, Agnes heads back empty-handed to the boarding house in Spitalfields where she has been staying with Seamus.

During her time in London, Agnes has a second encounter with the beau monde. While walking in St. John's Wood, Agnes meets Ruth, a kept woman who befriends Agnes in what on the surface appears to be a friendship. The two women share a love of literature, with Ruth lending Agnes books to take back to Spitalfields, and Agnes enraptured by Turgenev, Dickens, Collins, and Darwin. Leavitt draws Agnes with her face buried in books, wholly absorbed and engaged with words and ideas. Later, she debates and discusses the readings with Ruth. By revealing Agnes's great love of scholarship, Leavitt shows readers the possible alternative futures for Agnes if she belonged to a different class and gender. Agnes is smart and focused, but with so many opportunities closed to her, she becomes increasingly resentful and dangerous.

The resentment reaches a crescendo when Agnes discovers that she is the subject of a study Ruth is conducting regarding the lower classes. While staying overnight at Ruth's posh home, Agnes snoops around and finds a file that Ruth has accumulated for *The Illustrated London News*. Inside, Ruth refers to Agnes as a "creature" and speculates as to whether someone of her ethnicity and class can ever become "truly civilized" (p. 140). Agnes is hurt

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and enraged to discover her 'friend' is only using her as a specimen and exploiting her for publication. Instead of an immediate confrontation, however, Agnes quickly hides her rage and crafts a plan to punish Ruth for her betrayal.

SECOND SPOILER ALERT. Agnes kills Ruth. Horribly. The murder is committed partially for material gain (Agnes robs Ruth), but the primary motive is revenge. Agnes lures Ruth to an abandoned warehouse, where she waits, with Gormul's voice hissing "SSSS" all around the room in snakelike sibilance (p. 149). Agnes grips her trusty fishing knife as Ruth quivers in a corner, too afraid to run. Agnes snarls, "I am uncivilized. I am strange" (p. 150). Over the course of several grisly panels, Leavitt uses chiaroscuro lighting to emphasise the knifing, illuminating the two women within a pool of blackness. (See **Figure 2** below.)

Figure 2: Agnes's revenge on Ruth in *Agnes, Murderess* (Leavitt 2019: pp. 152-153), published by Freehand Books. © Sarah Leavitt. Reprinted with kind permission from the author and publisher.

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Both women wear white, while Ruth's blood, pooled on the floor and dripping from the knife, remains as black as the night, as back as the deed itself. The play on light and shadow conjures German expressionist film, with jagged lines and unbalanced angles that cause further anxiety in the reader.

In order to escape the voice of Gormul, as well as possible arrest for Ruth's murder, Agnes devises a plan to leave London for the New World, using the money she stole from Ruth. Here, Leavitt utilises the graphic novel to address colonial issues in the nineteenth century from the perspective of immigrants. Later, once Agnes arrives in British Columbia, Leavitt will explore the perspective of Indigenous peoples, specifically the tribes mentioned in the land acknowledgement in Leavitt's postscript acknowledgements: "the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples" (p. 293). To prepare for the New World, Agnes reads *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) by Catherine Parr Traill, which provides her main motivation for emigrating to the British colonial territory: "As to ghosts and spirits, they appear totally banished from Canada" (Traill, qtd. in Leavitt 2019a: 111). This supposedly 'unhaunted' space promises Agnes escape from Gormul's voice, which urges her to commit further wicked deeds. Another alleged 'fact' Agnes takes to heart is that, except for "a few settlers and fur traders" British Columbia "is nearly empty – "wild and empty" (p. 124). Like many immigrants heading to Canada and America, Agnes believes the land of the 'new' world to be unpopulated and unclaimed.

So, Agnes buys two tickets for a steamship to Vancouver. Aware of the unsolicited attention a woman travelling alone might draw, she recognises Seamus's worth or, perhaps more accurately, his 'use value', for the first time, and Seamus, the perpetual lackey and codependent, is eager as a puppy to follow Agnes, who will never reciprocate his devotion. Throughout Leavitt's graphic novel, Seamus proves a convenient tool to Agnes time and again, though one could argue his knife proves even more useful. In London, he recedes into the background during her time with Ruth, yet he never strays far. And, eventually, once settled as proprietors of a boarding house in British Columbia, he will pretend to be her husband, though no marriage ever occurs in the text.

Travelling again under the guise of brother and sister on the way to British Columbia, they separate into the ship's men and women's quarters as soon they descend below deck. Leavitt designs a sizable middle panel to illustrate the claustrophobia of crossing the Atlantic in steerage. She writes,

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"the combination of sights and sounds and smells; it only grew worse as the voyage continued. Soup, dirty bedclothes, sour water, tea, the bucket that served as a privy. Laughter, weeping, moans" (p. 160). (See **Figure 3**.)

Figure 3: Agnes's journey to Canada in *Agnes, Murderess* (Leavitt 2019: p. 160), published by Freehand Books. © Sarah Leavitt. Reprinted with kind permission from the author and publisher.

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The panel shows some women trying to sleep while others cry, eat, bathe, or vomit. There is a pervasive sense of misery and lack of privacy. Agnes huddles beneath a blanket in the lower corner but soon succumbs to seasickness as well.

Once Agnes arrives in Canada, the landscape shifts dramatically from London's busy streets to forests, mountains, and lakes. This is familiar scenery for Leavitt, who studied the local landscape extensively for the text:

> I […] spent a lot of time in the Cariboo. I went to Ruth Lake in Forest Grove, about 20 minutes from the 108 Mile Heritage Site, every summer for seven years. I spent lots of time at the heritage site and drove up to the Barkerville heritage site as well. I also spent hours absorbing the beauty of the Cariboo landscape, sketching and making notes and taking thousands of photographs. (Leavitt 2021, n.p.)

Leavitt captures Agnes's majestic new surroundings: the vast sublime terrain Agnes has always longed for. As she travels deeper into gold rush territory, in the company of uncouth and dangerous men, the lack of city trappings, such as police officers, carriages, and crowds, becomes at once liberating but also more perilous for Agnes. When she and Seamus stop at a boarding house, the man who runs the establishment, Mr. Briggs, attempts to rape Agnes when she goes outside the use the privy (something that likewise occurs to Grace Marks with her employer's son, George Parkinson). In an effort to help, Seamus accidentally kills her assailant. He is horrified at his crime, devastated to have taken a life. Meanwhile, Agnes is nonplussed. She's confused at Seamus's emotional reaction, wondering why he is so upset when no one is around to catch them. For her, the absence of law enforcement works to her benefit on more occasions than it harms her. She tries to comfort Seamus, who is sobbing and holding his stomach like he might be sick, saying, "But you don't need to worry – no one knows about this" (p. 187). She cannot fathom his guilt; instead, Agnes spots an opportunity. When men arrive searching for Briggs, Agnes tells them she bought the place from its previous owner. In this new country, with very little regulation, law enforcement, or record keeping, no one asks to see the paperwork. Thus, 108 Mile House becomes her boarding house. Agnes rolls up her sleeves to clean and fix up the dirty old house. She scrapes together funds from lodgers and what's left

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of Ruth's money to add beds, provide better food, and eventually hire young women to offer sexual services for the male guests. No one misses Briggs. No one investigates.

During her time as a boarding house owner and madam, Agnes is visited by Gormul again, not by her hissing voice, but by her cloaked form in a dream. Gormul informs her, "You need some chickens, Agnes" (p. 197), referring back to Agnes's first childhood 'killing' as witnessed by the readers in the text's opening pages. Leavitt then creates one of the most arresting images in the entire graphic novel (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Gormul's haunting of Agnes in *Agnes, Murderess* (Leavitt 2019: p. 197), published by Freehand Books. © Sarah Leavitt. Reprinted with kind permission from the author and publisher.

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The caption above the illustration reads: "I turned back and there was a flock of chickens – with the faces of everyone at the roadhouse" (p. 197). Indeed, the faces of the patrons, sex workers, staff, and even Seamus, are now attached to the bodies of chickens that peck in the dirt near Agnes's feet as she feeds them. It is as though Doctor Moreau meets John Carpenter's *The Thing*, except the image is even more disturbing because we already know what Agnes likes to do to chickens. Sure enough, Agnes hatches a scheme for those chickens, in which her sex workers suss out which customers staying at the boarding house have gold, and then, when the customer leaves at the end of their stay, one of Agnes's goons will kill him, take his money, and bury the body. The loot is split (reluctantly on Agnes's part) between all involved parties. Agnes stares down at the gold in her hand, thinking, "The gold glittered and warmed me" (p. 217).

Ultimately, greed becomes the primary motive for the murders committed or orchestrated by Agnes: from stealing Seamus's knife to ogling family heirlooms to snatching Ruth's locket. She wants what others have; but more than that, she believes she *deserves* what other people have. Leavitt, whose intention as stated earlier in the review is to address colonialism in the text, perhaps comments on the mindset of settlers during the Gold Rush in British Columbia. They came to a new country to find gold; they wanted to be rich; they wanted to stake a claim and build a house; they wanted to own things that did not belong to them. Agnes does not consider the land or its natural 'treasures' as stolen from tribal peoples. Though never stated explicitly, her viewpoint becomes evident through her encounters with Indigenous characters.

When Agnes first arrives in the Cariboo, she initially lodges at a boarding house run by the first Indigene she has ever seen: Mrs. Bailey. While Mrs. Bailey is out shopping, Agnes steals her new beaded purse, hiding it in her travelling pack. Of course, this is not the first time Agnes has displayed kleptomaniacal tendencies, but typically she takes what she wants from someone directly, not behind their back. And unlike her other victims, Mrs. Bailey challenges Agnes about the theft, asking for her bag back even though she has no proof that Agnes stole it and even though she could not force a white woman to submit to having her pack searched. When confronted, Agnes is filled with "a blinding rage"; her cheeks darken, her fists clench, and Seamus's hand comes into the panel to hold her back (p. 178). Agnes insists that "Everything I carry with me is mine! I have nothing of yours!" (p. 178)

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Although enraged, Agnes is also defensive and later ashamed, forced to leave the boarding house to avoid confronting her feelings. Mrs. Bailey responds coolly to Agnes's departure: "I will be glad to see your back. We need no more thieves in Victoria" (p. 178). Mrs. Bailey's words silence Agnes for a long time. Agnes's entitlement stems from resentment that someone else has something she believes should belong to her; however, Agnes's justification for ownership falters during her encounter with Mrs. Bailey, who represents another group of dispossessed peoples.

Leavitt also complicates the settler mentality when two sex workers at Agnes's boarding house discuss the "wild" country of British Columbia, and Annie, a white settler, opines that they are stuck in "the middle of nowhere" (p. 198). Meanwhile, Cora, who is Indigenous, listens until she is fed up, telling Annie, "Stop calling this place 'nowhere'! […] There are villages all around here – not as many since the smallpox came. But still" (p. 198). In the following panel, Cora's back is turned to the reader, and the white background has turned black. "It's not nowhere," she insists again (p. 198). The First Nation characters are not exoticised in Leavitt's illustrations, though Cora wears braids and a shawl, as would be accurate to time and place, while Annie wears a bun and buttoned collar. Both women are sex workers, catering to a clientele of mainly white men out for gold or land or both. However, Agnes's boarding house does not illustrate any clients or lodgers from the large population of Chinese immigrants in British Columbia at this time, most coming up from San Francisco for the Gold Rush. It remains unclear if these men are not allowed or (wisely) choose not to board there.

This scene, though short, addresses the devastating effects of smallpox epidemics on Native communities. In the mid-nineteenth century, the disease spread so quickly and extensively that over half of the Indigenous population in British Columbia died. While the disease was deliberately spread to indigenous populations by white settlers in the late eighteenth century, it appears that the epidemic in the mid-nineteenth century was due to infected passengers arriving in Victoria via steamship, though the mortality rate was most devastating to First Nation peoples. Contemporary readers may also be aware of recent events in Canada that attempt to atone for governmental actions against tribes in the nineteenth century. In 2021, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologised for the deaths of thousands of Indigenous children in Canada's Indian Residential Schools, as well as the widespread abuse of other First Nation children and cultural

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genocide. More recently, Pope Francis has apologised for abuses in church-run boarding schools. In a graphic novel about a woman haunted by the spirit of her evil grandmother, Leavitt also establishes a sort of palimpsest of haunting, drawing attention to events in Victorian British Columbia that continue to haunt the country well into the twenty-first century.

In addition to racial discrimination, Leavitt uses her neo-Victorian graphic novel to examine nineteenth-century gender issues without losing the thread of Agnes's narrative; instead, she weaves those issues into the fabric of Agnes's story by making her a lesbian. While some neo-Victorian texts tend to romanticise or promote nostalgia for the Victorian era, Leavitt's text rediscovers and reinterprets stories often left untold by addressing queerness in time and place where it would have been easier in some ways to live without society's judgement due to the isolation of the location. Nonetheless, the potential condemnation and shame are internalised for Agnes. Authors such as Sarah Waters and Laura Lam have already explored queer identities in compelling neo-Victorian novels. Similarly, Amy Chu and Soo Lee recently released a graphic novel retelling Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), titled *Carmilla: The First Vampire* (2023), which focuses heavily on the romantic relationship between Carmilla and Laura (or Athena in Chu and Lee's work). Leavitt's text offers a new interpretation of queerness in a colonial Canadian setting.

Agnes's sexuality is repressed or carefully hidden through most of the novel. At times, the protagonist comes across as almost asexual, growing frustrated when she cannot understand romance. However, Agnes does fall in love over the course of the novel as Leavitt explores queer and transgender issues for early settlers. Discussing Agnes's experiences, Leavitt claims that "[t]he most important one for me is the experience of loneliness, of feeling like you're unlike everyone else and therefore unable to make friendships or find romantic love" (Leavitt 2021: n.p.). Yet as in Waters's *Affinity* (2002), about colluding working-class lesbians defrauding the middle-class Margaret Prior of her inheritance, the risk is that lesbianism, aligned with Agnes's criminality, becomes implicated in deviance.

Readers discern that, earlier in the novel, Agnes had fallen in love with Ruth, though Agnes herself does not realise this until much later. When she encounters Edward Eden, a guest at her boarding house on his way back to England, Agnes experiences romantic feelings towards a man for the first time. She describes Edward much like her other 'treasures': "His hair shone

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like gold" (p. 263), and he has a "face" that is "finely shaped, so golden in the sun" (p. 274). When Edward falls ill, he is nursed back to health by the women working at the boarding house rather than being ruthlessly dispatched for his gold. Afterwards, a romance blossoms between him and one of the hired women, Len Quey. While spying on Edward and Len making love in a meadow, Agnes discovers that Edward is actually a cross-dressing woman. Edward tells Len, "[i]t's the only way I could travel the goldfields in safety" (p. 264). The affair between Edward and Len dredges up conflicting feelings for Agnes: shame at her desire for Edward, acceptance of her previous desire for Ruth, and finally the awareness that she murdered the woman she loved. In the midst of Agnes's emotional turmoil, Gormul's voice reappears, mocking and shaming Agnes for her queer desire.

Finally, Leavitt's graphic novel tackles the topic of abortion in a time and place where it was both illegal and perilous to obtain. Agnes, ostensibly but not legally married to Seamus, has a brief sexual encounter with another man, Abraham, mainly because she is enchanted by his spyglass, which allows her to watch an eagle swoop from the sky and snatch up its prey. Perhaps it is the eagle's kill that gets her in the mood, but more likely it is Abraham's cabin on the shore of a glittering lake. All of this equates to booty for Agnes, who, in her postcoital afterglow, reaches for the fishing knife, kills Abraham, and takes over his cabin. The murder scene plays out like a slasher film, campy and satisfying, because we know what Agnes intends to do to Abraham while he is clueless. Misinterpreting Agnes's silence, he says, "I'll make you feel better" (p. 239). In the next panel, Agnes turns to him with a wicked grin, answering, "I have no doubt you will" (p. 239). After the grisly knifing and subsequent dumping of Abraham's body, things become more sombre as Agnes realises her experience with Abraham has left her "invaded" (p. 241) – and not by the spirit of Gormul. Now, she must figure out how to terminate the pregnancy, not an easy or safe quest in Victorian British Columbia or indeed most places in the nineteenth century, and even many nowadays, not least in parts of Canada's southern neighbour.

For a figure of legend, Agnes McVee's life as portrayed in Leavitt's *Agnes, Murderess* is filled with experiences that are both unique to her time and place but remain relevant today, resonating with our own era. Her violence is not empowering but selfish and ultimately destructive to everyone, including herself. She does not rise up against her oppressors as much as kill the people she might actually love, like Ruth and, finally, Seamus also.

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Agnes's other murders, those unfortunate lodgers at her roadhouse, may be dirty and uncouth, but they did not deserve to die either. Agnes is a woman who could have been something other than a serial killer given a better childhood, better circumstances, and a society that accepted a smart, ambitious, and generally unattractive and unappealing person.

In the end, Gormul returns for what belongs to her, namely Agnes herself. Though Leavitt illustrates Agnes hanged from the gallows, the final pages tell a different story, create a different death and legacy for the famed Canadian murderess. Agnes claims, "[t]here are ghosts in this New World after all. I am one of them" (p. 288). Agnes is a haunted character throughout the text, but in the end, she becomes the ghost. When Schmidt wrote *See What I have Done*, she experienced terrifying dreams about her protagonist Lizzie Borden after visiting the latter's Fall River home (see Schmidt in Shute 2017: n.p.). Leavitt had a similar experience after visiting 108 Mile House. She claims that "[w]ith this book, the images came to me first: Agnes's murderous face, the bodies of her victims. I had nightmares and drew them" (Leavitt 2021: n.p.). The violence and brutality of Agnes's life, of the places she lives, the people she encounters, and crimes she commits, may well haunt readers and give them nightmares too. As one of those readers, I can almost guarantee that.

Notes

1. Sarah Leavitt also teaches on comics on the University of British Columbia's Creative Writing Programme.
2. Another biograhicisation, *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* (2010) explores the author-artist's own life, specifically her experience of her mother's dementia.

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