



CROSSING
THE LINES

 **Pantera Press**
great storytelling

A NOVEL BY
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Sulari Gentill

WHEN THE MAN WAS murdered, the gallery was full of voyeurs. They'd come to see and be seen, to admire and be admired. In their finery they'd postured and praised the artist, considering each canvas, looking carefully at every mark of the brush, discerning nuance and tone and meaning. They eyed each other as rivals in fashion and wit, in the sycophantic ability to recognise artistic genius. The show belonged to art and artists and art lovers. And so no one noticed the writer.

When the body was discovered, there were screams of horror. Some sobbed on seeing the corpse; others could barely contain their glee. The gallery staff soothed and apologised, management called insurers, the authorities barked orders and asked questions. They listened for guilt, for motive and lies. And no one heard the writer.

When the dead man was identified, many claimed intimacy. Some had worked with him, others had danced in his arms. Several people purported friendship, a few admitted to a mutual loathing. They offered opinions and insights, analyses of character. And yet no one knew the writer.

ON INTRODUCTIONS

*What if you wrote of someone writing of you?
In the end, which of you would be real?*

IN THE BEGINNING SHE was a thought so unformed that he was aware only of something which once was not.

And there was the idea. The embryonic notions of story. Fragile swirling mists that struggled to find patterns; sense that was made and unmade and made yet again. In time there were shapes in the clouds and there was her.

They were shy with each other at first. Stiff.

It took the longest time to exchange names. Many were considered and discarded until, finally, one was familiar. One rang true.

SHE WROTE BOOKS—QUIRKY whimsical mysteries with an eye for the absurd. Her pen was light and her voice assured. Even so, she had not been born with the knowledge that she would write, but happened upon storytelling accidentally whilst seeking some unknown

distraction. In writing she found meaning and purpose and a kind of spiritual joy. And like many who come late to religion, her devotion to the craft was absolute, her conviction in its power unshakeable.

Yet she hesitated before calling herself a writer lest it seem presumptuous, or affected, or just plain silly. Some small part of her recoiled from claiming her place aloud too absolutely.

Her work had achieved a modicum of success, though she was by no means a household name.

He called her Madeleine d'Leon. Her husband would call her Maddie.

She was thirty and, when they first came to know of one another, happy.

Madeleine was a lawyer... she'd been a lawyer first. She practised in the corporate sector, but she didn't like to talk of work or even think about work when her time was her own.

"My concern is billable," she'd proclaim when asked about some matter she'd left at the office. "If I'm not being paid, I just don't care."

But she'd married a man who cared all the time. Hugh Lamond was the doctor. Not just a doctor, but *the* doctor. Ashwood was not large enough or gentrified enough to have more than "the doctor" and Hugh Lamond was it. Every man, woman and child in Ashwood knew who he was and assumed he cared about each small twinge or ache or concern, regardless of whether it was his anniversary or his wife's birthday. They were right.

In the beginning Madeleine had thought it funny: the god-like status of the country doctor. And Hugh was after all charming and committed. If anyone deserved to be a small-town god, it was him. Now it niggled just a little that she had been lost in his divine glory, a handmaiden to his social deity. But still, she was proud of him.

So Madeleine worked, commuting when she had to and advising from home when she could. In her non-billable hours she painted and sewed and built a garden which would grow to be worthy of the grand home they would have... when they got round to renovating.

And then one day, whilst sitting in a particularly tedious meeting on some technical matter for which a lawyer's presence was merely decorative, Madeleine d'Leon had an idea for a story, and the very first thought of him.

The moment of genesis was strong, a cell of creativity that divided and multiplied until there was life. He had barely any substance at all... just a space in the narrative for a protagonist of some sort.

She began writing then and there, raising her head occasionally to nod so her colleagues would think she was taking notes about the meeting itself. Every now and then she would arch a brow and shake her head or rub her chin whilst frowning, or tap the table with her lips pressed tightly together. She called it her boardroom technique—the kind of lawyerly intimations of consideration that made people feel better regardless. It was Madeleine's conviction that her clients demanded the presence of their lawyers at these meetings, not because they needed them, or even planned to listen to them, but because the legal profession was a kind of security blanket. She was paid for what she called corporate hand holding, and the nature of Madeleine was such that she was not too proud to admit it.

In that meeting she discovered just one thing about him, but oh, what a thing! What a perfect link! He was a writer. It was their connection. He would see the world as she did: in stories, or potential stories, in vignettes and themes. He would judge people as characters, each with their own story. They would look upon his world together.

She called him Edward McGinnity. His friends would call him Ned.

He was twenty-eight when she found him, a young man with the world at his feet and no idea of how he should step into it.

Edward McGinnity had always known he would write. It was as natural to him as breathing and he suspected the consequences of stopping would be as dire. In his mind there had always been epics, tales which carried on the books he could not bear to end, and new stories with conglomerate characters and modified plots. Eventually he'd picked up a pen.

At first he'd written poetry, as adolescents do. Learned to weave words with angst and defiance and heartbreak. Those old verses embarrassed him now, melodramatic, flowery, pretentious, but every so often there was one line, one phrase which was clear and strong and perfect. As he grew into a man, Edward McGinnity learned to pull back, to leave the louder things unsaid, to call out to the whispers once drowned in waves of passionate literary excess. And he found new stories and a desire to be read.

Maintained by an inheritance, an income born of tragedy, Edward lived well. He did so quietly, aware that the ability to write unencumbered from the first was too enviable to be broadcast, too likely to invite failure as a karmic balancing of luck.

He was sitting on his deck, with a notebook and a glass of red when her story first struck him. He knocked over the glass in his haste to grab the pen beside it, allowing the wine to soak and stain the decking timbers as he tried to pin the thought onto his page with ink. In time he stood and paced as he wrote, stopping occasionally to

laugh, so giddy was he with the discovery of her. He knew she was a writer before he knew her name.

MADELEINE CALLED HUGH THAT evening, as she did every evening that work took her away. The custom was more utilitarian than romantic—should she pick up milk in Ashwood?—that sort of thing. But this night she was exhilarated and she loved Hugh Lamond more for the fact that she could share it with him. She knew she was babbling, but the idea was powerful now. It pulled new ideas towards it, building a world of characters and themes and events around itself. Hugh seemed a little bewildered at first; but perhaps whatever it was that possessed Madeleine was infectious, for soon he had suggestions and thoughts. She told him about Edward McGinnity, her well-heeled writer.

“But this is going to be a murder mystery isn’t it?” Hugh asked.

“Yes.”

“So he’s a crime writer?”

“No. Edward writes literary novels, the kind of worthy incomprehensible stuff that wins awards.” Madeleine paced with the phone, unable to physically contain her excitement. “That’s the irony, you see. The hero of my crime fiction wouldn’t lower himself to read, let alone write the stuff himself. He’s a serious artist.”

“But if he was a crime writer he’d know what to do to solve the crime.”

“That’s too predictable, Hugh. The fact that he is so out of place in a crime fiction will make it interesting.”

“Fair enough. Perhaps his family shouldn’t approve of his writing?” Hugh ventured.

Madeleine smiled, touched that he was so interested. “But why wouldn’t they approve?”

“They might want him to be a doctor. You know, there aren’t enough books about doctors.”

Madeleine laughed. “No, I think his family is dead,” she said. “An accident of some sort. The story will work better if he’s alone in the world.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know... there’s something alluring about the lonely hero.”

“He can’t be too lonely. He’ll need a love interest of some sort.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a man... it’s what we do.”

Madeleine groaned. “If he has a love interest, I’ll have to write a sex scene.”

“Well that’s to be avoided at all costs,” Hugh agreed. “She could be dead too—the love interest, I mean,” he said helpfully. “He could be a grieving husband.”

“Maybe...” Madeleine considered the idea. The death of Edward McGinnity’s family was probably grief enough. She didn’t want her hero to be completely withdrawn and bitter. “What if he loves someone who doesn’t love him back, but who might one day?” she said. “That way I won’t have to write a sex scene because she won’t have him. Perhaps Edward is so in love with her that he can’t move on.”

“Won’t that make him look pathetic?”

“It’ll make him look deep.”

“I don’t know, I’m thinking pathetic.”

“If I hadn’t married you, you would have pined forever.”

“Hmmm. Yes... forever. Or at least a week. What time will you get home?”

“Should be back before lunch tomorrow.”

“Grab some milk on the way in, will you?”

MADELEINE SPENT THE EVENING in the familiar, generic solitude of a hotel room. She discarded her board papers onto the small table by the window and heaved her bag onto one of the twin beds. Changing into pyjamas, she ordered room service and settled into the other bed to open her laptop.

The novel would begin with him... it had to. That was how crime fiction worked—subplots, clues, red herrings all channelled through a single literary device: the protagonist. The reader would have to know him and trust him for the story to work. So she would open with him, and worry about the murder later.

Madeleine closed her eyes. She could see him: sitting on the open deck of his expensive beach house, oblivious to the ocean view as he worked on the great Australian novel. She smiled. Of course he would write longhand, every word chosen after consideration, deliberation and requisite suffering. The man she saw was handsome. For a moment she wondered when she’d decided that. His hair was dark, blown wild by the salt breeze against which his collar was turned up. The sky and the sea were both grey and turbulent. And yet he continued to write, muttering to himself as he tapped the pen against

his chin. It was not until the first fat drops fell that he seemed to notice. Cursing, he closed his notebook against the rain and stepped through the French doors into the house.

The house itself would be tastefully furnished. Modern designer pieces complemented by what might be called sentimental junk. A large basin made of kilned glass was filled with old matchbox cars in anything but collectible condition. An assortment of old cameras, Box Brownies, Vollandas, leather-cased Kodaks, took up several bookshelves. A professional quality digital SLR sat on the kitchen bench beside the wine rack.

There was no dust... because, of course, he would have a housekeeper. A quietly spoken, motherly woman called Mrs Jesmond. Madeleine paused, pleased by the detail. Jill Jesmond had worked with her at Morrison McArthur. She was anything but quietly spoken but she'd love being in Edward's story, even as his housekeeper.

There were several picture frames on the sideboard, an eclectic collection of the kind of beautiful frames bought as particular gifts: silver, etched glass, tooled leather. Only one contained a picture, a family photo from the decade before. That must have been his family—parents, brother, little sister—all now gone. Madeleine lingered over that photo... the anguish of losing everybody at once, the loneliness of it. The rest of the frames were empty, blank. He was a man... perhaps he had just not got around to filling them... perhaps it was something else.

The rain was heavy now. It curtained off the world around the house with a fall of water, blurring everything without. Edward checked his watch and cursed. It was a gentle, old-fashioned way of cursing that reminded Madeleine of her grandfather. Words not

even considered swearing in this age. It was interesting given the sleek modernity of the décor.

He ran up the iron staircase to the bedrooms on the floor above. Edward McGinnity's bedroom was neat, no random deposits of clothes, the bed made and taut, a dozen or so notebooks of various style and size were stacked in an orderly tower on the up-ended trunk beside his bed. It was a masculine room, functional and unadorned except for one painting. A nude in oil in an art deco frame. The composition was simple and the pose direct. The brushwork evoked a certain wistfulness. Somehow Madeleine knew the artist had loved his model... it was perfect.

Edward stripped as he walked into the ensuite to shower. The water did little to soothe the tension from his body. Every muscle was tight, wound, ready to begin. He loved this part. Discovery yawned before him and it was glorious. The sheer possibility, exhilarating beyond measure. How seductive the existential strain between writer and character—almost erotic. Edward was charged with the liminal intimacy of it. Not only would he know her, she would come to know him. And therein would be the danger and the essence of story.

She'd be a crime writer. Edward smiled. He'd always considered authors of detective fiction an interesting breed. They identified with their genre more than other novelists, inhabiting a definite subculture in the literary world. There was a naivety about crime writers that intrigued him... an underlying belief in heroes and justice despite the darkness of their work. And sometimes, just sometimes, a crime writer would be accepted into the literary elite, lauded for style despite a dogged commitment to plot and pace. It would allow him to test her sense of literary self as he intended.

Madeleine d'Leon would begin as a vignette of middle-class success. Professionally and personally contented. A lawyer, with a lawyer's detachment and dedication to reason, she would live in the country in fulfilment of the bourgeoisie yearning for views of trees and cows. But there was an honesty about Madeleine d'Leon, a humour that recognised absurdity. Hers was a mind he wanted to know, hers was a life suited to prose.

He'd been searching for her all afternoon. In the beginning she had been elusive, soft, but she was clear now. Small, not conventionally beautifully but with a smile that made her so. She possessed the kind of face that seemed always to be thinking. She laughed sometimes for no outwardly discernible reason, but because something in the perpetual movement of her mind had amused her.

Edward dressed quickly, knowing he was late. Shirt, cufflinks, watch, bowtie, dinner suit. He checked his breast pocket for the invitation, stopping to glance at the naked woman on his wall. He'd purchased her in a small gallery just out of Paris and she had owned him since then. His muse. Edward thanked her for Madeleine d'Leon.