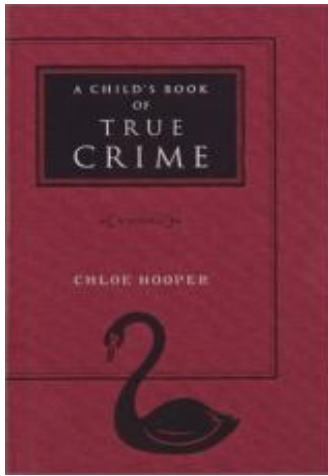

A Child's Book of True Crime: A Novel

by Chloe Hooper



About the Book

Kate Byrne is having an affair with the father of her most gifted fourth grader, Lucien. Her lover's wife has just published **Murder at Black Swan Point**, a true crime story about the brutal slaying of a young adulteress in a nearby town. When Lucien begins to display violent imagery in his crayon drawings, Kate wonders how well her pupil understands his mother's grisly work and why he's been exposed to it. Suspecting this account of Black Swan Point's murder to be inaccurate, Kate imagines another version of the story -- for children, and narrated by Australian animals. But will her fixation with the crime -- and Lucien's family -- align her fate with that of the murdered girl?

In **A Child's Book of True Crime**, Chloe Hooper brilliantly portrays a young woman reluctant to enter or conform to the world of adults. Kate Byrne is enthralled by the lives of her nine-year-old students, while remaining a misfit among their parents. And though Lucien's father brings her to life sexually in encounters of escalating eroticism, he cannot dull her obsession with the past. Fixated on the crime of passion that occurred years earlier, Kate is becoming less and less aware of her own reputation in the present, an unraveling that Hooper captures so chillingly in this intense, superbly crafted first novel.

Discussion Guide

1. As an elementary school teacher, Kate straddles the world of adults and the world of children. How do her personality and behavior reflect this split? How does her version of the Black Swan Point murder story mix the two worlds? Do other characters in the novel have elements of both maturity and childishness?

2. "I liked reading children their stories. And I liked the stories: dogs and cats had magic powers; nasty people suffered slapstick doom. The world seemed manageable, its scale of anarchy to my liking" (p.39). What does Kate's fondness for children's stories illustrate? How does the world within these stories differ from the world she encounters outside the classroom?
3. Compare Kate's version of the Black Swan Point story to what we know of Veronica's version. What are the key differences? What do these differences suggest about the two women? What might Kate's description of Veronica's book suggest about Kate?
4. "Everyone should have one great secret to carry around as a talisman. Then, when people look at you, thinking *she's like this*, or *she's only this*, they'll always be wrong" (p. 59). The quote above is from the passage in which Kate is exploring the psychology of Ellie, the young mistress in the *Murder at Black Swan Point* story. How does Kate's thinking differ from Ellie's? How is it similar?
5. "Children understand tragedy in a way adults are unable to: atom by atom. Untainted by a hundred other learnt horrors, they are haunted for the appropriate length of time. They ask a thousand unanswerable questions. The story stays with them; they dream of it." What does it mean to understand tragedy "atom by atom"? Why are adults unable to do so? Is there something cruel about telling children crime stories, which they will then vividly imagine? Are there elements of cruelty in Kate's nature?
6. "By 1839 most of the indigenous population had died or been driven away. Our local history is the Ur-true crime story, and in volume after volume the bodies pile up" (p. 85). Consider the ways in which the setting -- both geographical and natural -- contributes to the overall effect of the novel. How does the author use the surrounding of a particular scene to enhance the narrative?
7. Discuss the scene in which Kate drives off the road in the old Mercedes and has to seek help from a local man. What makes this scene so unsettling? How does the author achieve such tension? How does this scene relate to the rest of the novel?
8. Images and stories of sex permeate the novel, and so do images and tales of death. What does the author suggest about the relationship between sex -- especially illicit sex -- and violence or death?
9. "It was strange, but despite the Marnes's threats for the first time in a long while I felt totally alive....Fear, like guilt, must have a way of increasing the pixillation of every day life" (p.152). In what ways does Kate seem to cultivate fear and guilt in her own life? Is there an element of masochism in her character?
10. What are the parallels between the story in **Murder at Black Swan Point** and Kate's own story? Is she justified in her fear and suspicion of Veronica, or has she spooked herself by becoming too engrossed in the **Murder at Black Swan Point** story?
11. Discuss the scene at the end of the book when Kate visits the Marnes. What did Kate expect to accomplish by confronting Veronica and Thomas? How is she disappointed? How is Kate's view of the world and her own life different after the incident?

12. "And I'd decided, in another life, to write a book-length explanation for Lucien: a child's book of true crime. Apparently in Stalinist Russia, blacklisted writers and artists had embedded secret messages in children's literature...disguised as the naive, subversive content was unrecognizable" (p.202). In what ways does Kate disguise her own story by using "the naive"? Is there a sense in which the novel itself is "a child's book of true crime"?

13. "Close your eyes: listen to the sea. You're so near to it -- the cradle and the grave -- even if you never want to die." (p. 211). The ending of the novel encourages us to think about mortality, and about the relationship between the young and the old. What does the author suggest -- here and elsewhere -- about the relationship between youth and death?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Perhaps the greatest mystery about this dark, witty, deeply felt, suspenseful, and erotic tale is how someone as young as Chloe Hooper comes to know so much, to write so well, to show such command of prose, storytelling, and passion."

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