

Reviews

***Crooks Like Us*, Peter Doyle, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney, 2009, 320 pages (heavily illustrated with black and white photographs) (ISBN 978-1-876-99134-0)**

In 2002–2003, the *Crimes of Passion* exhibition was displayed at Sydney’s Justice and Police Museum, followed in 2006 by *City of Shadows*. Both were curated by Peter Doyle, and were haunting, sensitive and exceptionally popular shows, based upon Doyle’s research among the photographic plates and negatives from New South Wales (NSW) Police archives. Covering the period from 1912 to 1948, most of the images had become separated from the documents that could have explained them, and Doyle’s exhibitions sought to retrieve a kind of history from these remnants. In Doyle’s voice-over commentary playing throughout the *City of Shadows* exhibition, it was evident that he had become fascinated by — and developed a halting affection towards — some of the lives and crimes he had uncovered.¹

The popularity of the exhibitions — and the book accompanying *City of Shadows* — reflected an emerging cultural engagement with the aesthetics of crime. *City of Shadows* and its follow-up book, *Crooks Like Us*, have both won awards for their physical presentation or production.² Doyle’s work, despite — or, perhaps, due to — its close attention to the details of transgressive lives, forces us to linger over crime’s images. Finding visual pleasure in crime photos is not new; Doyle’s acknowledged inspiration is Luc Sante, whose *Evidence* (1992) was the result of a similar project undertaken in the New York Municipal Archives, where a fragment of the Police Department photographic collection had been salvaged. Sante’s book inaugurated a now-burgeoning genre of ‘art’ books made from criminal photographs.³ *Crooks Like Us*, provides an opportunity for Doyle to share with us more of his archival treasures, and it also satiates our desire to pore over beautiful images of people we know — from the accompanying text — have been deceptive, dishonest, sometimes violent, and always criminal.

City of Shadows included a broader range of criminal photographic genres: mugshots, crime scene photographs, investigation photographs. But it was the mugshots that most compelled the viewing public, and *Crooks Like Us* is comprised entirely from them. During the period in which these photographs were taken, a transformation was taking place in the style and structure of mugshot photography. Photographers began asking subjects to pose in groups, taking whole-body images, often leaning on a chair, or sitting with their ankle across their knee and holding their hat, or clutching their pipe or their handbag, sometimes smiling, sometimes smirking, scowling, or staring with haunted eyes into the lens. It was these images that swiftly shifted into mass media: Karl Lagerfeld from the House of Chanel was enthusing about them to international fashion stylists; Scott Schuman was reproducing images on his influential fashion blog ‘The Sartorialist’. Doyle himself acknowledged: ‘The subjects are flash people in the old Australian sense. They are ostentatious. They consider

¹ Professor Ross Gibson, in collaboration with the artist Kate Richards, has produced a suite of installation artworks derived from the same archive, titled *Life After Wartime*.

² *City of Shadows* won the 2006 National Trust/Energy Australia Heritage Award in the ‘Interpretation and Presentation, Corporate and Government’ division. *Crooks Like Us* received the 2010 Australian Publishers Association design award in the category ‘Best Designed Specialist Illustrated Book’.

³ Other examples from this expanding genre include: Lesy (2000); Tejaratchi (2000); Sante (2003); Wride (2004); Jackson (2009).

themselves a cut above the rest. They're criminals; fast people. The pure visual and sartorial aesthetic is very arresting' (Maley 2007).

It is easy to see why. The images in *Crooks Like Us* are reproduced so as to draw us into the details. They invite us to notice the jaunty pose, the beautiful brooch, interesting gloves, an uncommonly handsome face. A young housebreaker wears hand-buttoned boots. A smiling vagrant has adjusted her veil. A sad-eyed cocaine dealer wears an intricately-beaded cloche hat. Doyle acknowledges that the circumstances surrounding the photograph of one subject are 'unknown', but we look at her anyway, and note her finely-pleated dress with lace insets, her high-heeled shoes and her flowing pose. Many of these images are reproduced here because they are implicitly fascinating; they are here to be looked at. And — disconcertingly — most of these subjects are looking, often intently, at us. What makes it difficult to look away from these photographs is that so many of these people seem to be staring, sometimes pleadingly, sometimes with distant curiosity, directly back at us.

It is important to remember that *Crooks Like Us* is not just a book of photographs. It also contains the often-exhaustive research Doyle has conducted, whether into the lives and crimes of the individuals photographed here, or into the practices of policing and the circumstances of criminal lives. Doyle's tone is light without being insincere, and never sardonic. He writes:

In this book we will meet many different types of rogues and vagabonds: breakers, heavies, rapists, drug fiends, murderers, petty thieves, hooligans – and a few plain unlucky souls. But it seems right that we should lead off with that most intrinsically Australian class of offender: the professional bullshit artist (Doyle 2009:23).

He recounts the stories behind some of these images; he has a novelist's turn of phrase, an ear for vernacular, an eye for detail. His writing is wry and humane, and these brief vignettes are rich and rewarding. He admits that there is often little we can know about these subjects, and also points out the errors and confusions that pepper the archive, replete with aliases, liars, and peripatetics. They are card sharps, wife deserters, cheque men, pickpockets and magmen, loiterers, false pretenders, house barbers, thieves and fences, felonious receivers, sly-groggers, safe-blowers, vagrants, park touts, sneak thieves, bludgers, and a 'man-woman'. They are also returned soldiers who, in the 1920s, began to crowd the criminal archive, as did family groups of criminals.

Doyle has also pieced together the extraordinary character of Frank Fahy, an undercover police officer who arrested several of the book's subjects. On one occasion, Fahy went so convincingly undercover that he was kept in police cells with his targets, later beaten by police during a raid, and covered in blood from a split lip. He was investigating a ring of bicycle and motorcycle thieves. Continuing to track them, he was attacked by dogs. He went first to CIB (the Criminal Investigations Branch in NSW Police) to file his report, and then to Sydney Hospital to have his wounds treated. He then went directly back to Surry Hills to resume his stake-out.

Whilst *Crooks Like Us* does not have a unifying narrative, nor does it advance a theoretical position, its title captures Doyle's ambition. Doyle has opened a kind of discursive dialogue between 'you' (the criminals in the images), and 'us' (their present-day viewers). Throughout the book are interspersed brief passages of creative non-fiction, or imaginative historiography. Here Doyle, writing in the second person, talks to the book's photographed subjects. Some are detailed and appear to reflect his research into a particular matter; some are brief composites, capturing the spirit — if not the unknowable truths — within these photos. On the book's final page, he reminds us of the breadth of humanity represented in its pages:

You were found floating in Sydney Harbour with four bullets inside you.
You were shot dead in broad daylight outside Warwick Farm racetrack.
You died of TB in Prince of Wales Hospital.
You died with delirium tremens in the House of Bricks.
You married an ex-convict and had three children.
You went to South Africa and no-one heard of you again.
You became a scoutmaster in New Zealand.
You became a spiritualist, who offered a cure for cancer.
You became an SP bookie at a pub in Auburn.
You became a railway fettler and never set foot in a big city again.
You had your chances but pissed them away.
You were a nice bloke who had a rough trot.
You were a mug and a no-hoper.
You were a prince of the underworld.
You pulled your socks up.
You mended your ways.
You made a good fist of it.
You let yourself go.
You slipped.
You strayed.
You grew up.
You moved away.
You shot through.
You changed your name.
You minded your business.
You covered your tracks.
You disappeared. (Doyle 2009:298)

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