Dear Rachelle: The Hunt for My Sister's Killer, a conversational review

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Abstract

Dear Rachelle: The Hunt For My Sister's Killer investigates the cold case murder of Rachelle Childs, whose body was found in beachside scrub in New South Wales, Australia, in 2001. In this conversational review, journalists and academics Caroline Graham and Kylie Stevenson reflect on the ways true crime podcasts have become a 'medium of last resort' for cold cases and the ethical complexities this creates for reporters. Through the lens of *Dear Rachelle* and their own podcast reporting practice, they discuss the subjective position of a true crime podcast reporter, intimacy in podcast reporting practice, the changing and sometimes blurred relationships between journalists and police in longform true crime and ethical challenges in structuring longform audio documentary.

Keywords

true crime, narrative podcast, documentary, ethics, subjectivity, justice

Recommended Citation

In 2001, 23-year-old Rachelle Childs was killed and her body dumped and set alight on the south coast of New South Wales in Australia. More than 20 years later, *Dear Rachelle: The Hunt for My Sister's Killer* re-investigates what has since become a cold case. The documentary podcast – which is a collaboration between investigative journalist Ashlea Hansen and retired Detective Sergeant Damian Loone, with extensive input from Rachelle's family – was released by News Corp Australia in 2025, alongside comprehensive editorial reporting in four mastheads and substantial multimedia and interactive content.

In this in-conversation review, Caroline Graham and Kylie Stevenson reflect on ethical and practical considerations within *Dear Rachelle*, partially through the lens of their own reporting practice. The pair collaborated on the true crime podcast series *Lost in Larrimah* (2018), which investigates the disappearance of Paddy Moriarty and his dog from the remote Australian town of Larrimah and subsequently wrote a book (Graham & Stevenson, 2024) about the case. In submitting this review, they note that they freelanced *Lost in Larrimah* to *The Australian*, which is part of the News Corp Australia stable. As such, a promo for *Dear Rachelle* has been syndicated in the *Lost in Larrimah* podcast feed, but the authors are not involved with the production in any way.

Initial [press](#) about *Dear Rachelle* indicated the podcast would have a ten-episode season. At point of recording, eight episodes of *Dear Rachelle* had been released to subscribers. The following transcript has been edited for clarity.

Caroline: There's something I keep thinking about, which might be a good place to start. At the beginning of Episode Two of *Dear Rachelle*, there's a moment that includes some audio from archival footage. In it, we hear the family of Rachelle Childs speaking at a press conference after her murder. At the time it was filmed, it was about a week after Rachelle's death, and when she finds it while producing the podcast more than 20 years later, journalist Ashlea Hansen admits it is difficult for her to watch because she's spent so much time with the family. She says, 'putting the family's grief on display' had been the police's best hope of encouraging people to come forward with evidence at the time. But there's another layer to this, because Hansen is putting the family's grief on display again, more than 20 years later – and she's also hoping to help progress a justice outcome.

I think in some ways this moment is a really interesting illustration of the intimacy and complexity of true crime podcasting. It's such a powerful medium, and in that moment you really feel the intimacy of grief. There is something confronting about having to hear Rachelle's family struggle through this awful public display of their own heartbreak. For listeners, I think there's a compelling ethical stake in having to hear, to be confronted with, the reality of crime. Of course, that intimacy, it's

complicated for reporters, too. As practitioners, we've been there in the centre of a story, so close that you have your own feelings about it.

Kylie: I think that at least in podcasts, as a reporter, you can be pretty upfront about your stakes and how involved you are, which is a bit more difficult in print when you're covering the same kind of story. Ashlea Hansen worked on this case for a year, so there's no way she hasn't formed relationships with sources, just because of the nature of what you're talking about. You're talking about such intimate and personal things, she's going to have a relationship that goes beyond the traditional subject-reporter role.

Caroline: And that can be a really important thing in terms of trust and access – for example, to conversations people haven't had before, even with police. Or, the series includes lots of audio and video footage of Rachelle, which really centres the victim in the story, and it takes a lot to build that level of trust and access with a family, and being able to include that primary material is a huge asset to the project.

Kylie: It's absolutely part of building rapport and building trust with people. But as you do that, you get pulled in even closer, and it's really difficult to separate yourself from the story. You kind of become part of the story. I think podcasts are a space where reporters can actually show that and make their position really clear to listeners. We obviously had this problem. We were investigating the disappearance of a man from a small town in the Northern Territory called Larrimah for four years. In the end, we made a podcast, we wrote a book, and there's no way that you can spend four years looking into something, talking to a person's friends and enemies, the people who knew him, the people who saw or believed they saw particular things around his disappearance – you just can't spend four years doing that and not become close to the people you're speaking with.

Caroline: We've written about this a little bit before[1], but I guess that closeness or subjectivity can actually make you more ethically conscious, or at least really acutely aware of the impact of what you're doing for the people who are inside the story.

Kylie: It's a really hard thing to balance because as you become more involved or invested, the sense of obligation to actually come through with something is heightened. I imagine that that would have been the case with *Dear Rachelle*, because from the outset, you're opening a cold case. You're saying, 'let's go look at this. Let's find out what happened.' So you're not promising something to the family, but in some ways, you are, and you're promising it to yourself. You can't guarantee a justice outcome, but that's what everyone's hoping for, and that's so much pressure for a journalist and the family.

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[1] In Graham, C. and Stevenson, K (2024) 'Through the Mirror: Proximity, Subjectivity and Emotion in Writing Larrimah', in L. Pâquet and R. Williamson, *True Crime and Women: Writers, Readers, and Representations*, Routledge: Oxfordshire.

Caroline: I was thinking about this a lot as I was listening to *Dear Rachelle* – there are so many challenges in navigating that responsibility and commitment, particularly in true crime and perhaps especially in cold cases. In Episode One, this concern actually comes to the surface in the narration, which says that the family has been let down so many times. Hansen actually says that this podcast could be their final shot at justice for Rachelle. We've seen true crime podcasting, in particular, evolve into a kind of medium of last resort for cold cases, in ways that I think do fundamentally change the role of a reporter. In many cases, they're not just objectively reporting on a story and perhaps hoping to generate some leads, but actually sort of actively pursuing a justice outcome, in ways that almost mimic or operate in the absence of a police response.

Kylie: And there are dangers in that. I have worked on a podcast[2] before where a family wanted a cold case revisited. I was working with another reporter, and he came to the conclusion that the person who had been convicted for that crime was the correct person. But that is not what the family believed, and it created such heartache, and that's not what it set out to do. It's such a morally fraught position to come from because you don't know where you're going to end up.

Caroline: The hope invested in solving these cases is quite specific to podcasting. We've certainly seen lots of examples of podcasts that have either generated new police leads or achieved justice outcomes – I'm thinking of *The Teacher's Pet*, or *Shandee's Story*, or *Serial*, *Proof*, *Up and Vanished*, *Bear Brook*[3]. There's certainly a strong track record, which speaks to the power of the medium to generate audience reach and emotional investment in cases. In this case, *Dear Rachelle* was almost guaranteed a huge audience in Australia, because the audio documentary is tied in with a really substantial cross-platform campaign, running in at least four major newspapers, with multimedia content, video, dedicated websites and interactive components. So the reach of this story is enormous and because of that, the chances of achieving a justice outcome are heightened, but they're not guaranteed.

Kylie: I sometimes wonder about how the pressure or desire to 'solve' a case changes the story that a reporter will select. If you've got no hope of solving or generating a lead, and you can see that from the beginning, perhaps you're not

[2] Whittaker, M. (2019). *Blood Territory* [Audio podcast]. Audible Original Podcast.

[3] For example, as a result of evidence unearthed by *The Teacher's Pet*, Chris Dawson was tried for and found guilty of the murder of his wife, Lynette Dawson; as a result of renewed interest in Shandee Blackburn's muder following the release of *Shandee's Story*, the coronial inquest was reopened and a Commission of Inquiry was opened into Queensland's forensic DNA lab; Adnan Syed had his murder conviction vacated in 2022, after 23 years in prison, after attention from the 2014 release of *Serial*; *Proof* uncovered wrongful convictions for Georgia men Darrell Lee Clark and Cain Joshua Storey, who were exonerated after 25 years in prison; *Up and Vanished* uncovered new leads in the 2005 cold case disappearance of Tara Grinstead, leading to two arrests (although an appeals court has since ruled that the statute of limitations has passed); *Bear Brook* (Season One) and its listeners helped solve a cold case and find a serial killer.

choosing that kind of case to cover. What do you think about how these cases get chosen, and which ones get to be a podcast?

Caroline: It's one of the criticisms of true crime podcasting, which is often narrow in the kind of cases chosen and the tendency to focus on so-called 'ideal victims'.[4] And you're right - that absolutely means that victims from marginalised backgrounds receive disproportionately low media coverage. This podcast could well be accused of being complicit in Missing White Woman Syndrome[5]. I'm always reluctant to criticise an individual podcast for its focus, because I think any grieving family deserves this level of attention and buy-in from the public, but on a structural level, I think that as reporters we have to be really careful of what kind of cases we're covering. One of the other criticisms of true crime is the potential for 'copaganda'[6], although there are also instances where the genre holds police or the justice system to account. One of the other things that's interesting and quite distinct about *Dear Rachelle* is that it is a collaboration between a journalist and a cold case specialist, retired detective sergeant Damian Loone. I was really interested in his role. I mean, he obviously comes in and gives his perspective on the evidence, and it's an informed and valuable perspective. But I found myself as a listener wondering, you know, is he here as a reporter? Is he a volunteer? Is he here as police? Is he donating his time or is he paid?

Kylie: I was really curious about that too. It is curious how reporters find these people and how they bring them in, and what exactly their role is. What are the stakes for them? Is it just a case that they couldn't let go of, that they couldn't forget? With Damian Loone, I don't think he had worked on this case…

Caroline: He had previously worked for *The Australian* on the podcast *The Teacher's Pet.* I'm sure the family were grateful to have his expertise, but coming from legacy media where your role as a reporter is really, you know, that watchdog role over the police, as well, podcasting, in particular, changes that dynamic between journalists and police. In one of the later episodes, one of the police who was involved in investigating the case speaks and she's quite emotional about the impact that the case has had on her; I think it's never sat well with her that the case hasn't been solved. And I think this podcast does a good job of showing the impact of crime

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[4] Christie, N. (1986), 'The ideal victim', in E. A. Fattah (ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08305-3_2.

[5] Sommers, Z. (2016), 'Missing white woman syndrome: An empirical analysis of race and gender disparities in online news coverage of missing persons', *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 106 (2), pp. 275–314.

[6] Fictional and reality TV portrayals of police have sometimes been referred to as 'copaganda', because of the level of cooperation between police and producers, which has included exclusive access and sometimes veto rights over what is aired. More recently, public discourse has linked true crime podcasts to copaganda (eg In These Times, 2022) because it cultivates fear and presents policing as the solution; however, there is also an argument that true crime is 'trending towards anti-Copaganda', (VanArendonk, 2024) because it so often criticises police and justice systems.

on a whole range of different people, so not just the victim and their family, but, you know, witnesses and police officers and all sorts of people who were touched by this spider web of grief.

Kylie: That's really true. One of the early episodes, possibly even the first episode, had the man who found Rachelle's body on the side of the road. And I found that so powerful. He was crying all these years later, about this person he didn't know. He just stumbled across this fire, and then found a body there. That would impact any of us immensely, but it's probably not something that we think about terribly much. I found that really powerful. But one of the things that having the police on board within these projects to reinvestigate means that perhaps, in some cases – not this one specifically – there's not that room to be critical of the investigation if it warrants it. I'm not saying it warranted in this case, but it does become a bit murky again.

Caroline: I agree. To change focus slightly, we've been talking about sort of the intimacy of podcasting, and what that's like from inside of a podcast production. The other thing I found really interesting about this podcast is the structure. It's reinvestigating a case that happened 20 years ago and, as you said, Hansen worked on this for a year. The narrative structure of a podcast is really interesting in those circumstances, because you need to bring your readers along with you on that journey, and often that means the narrative follows the trajectory of your investigation. But that becomes morally complex when you might be scripting and editing towards the end of the research process and have perhaps come to conclusions or found evidence or answered some of those questions for yourself. In those circumstances, is it fair to take the audience on that journey, even if you're walking them down paths that you know are not necessarily going to be the correct direction?

Kylie: That's tricky, because that's what story is, right? It's expected that you're following the journalist's journey, I suppose. But I did feel in *Dear Rachelle*, when we got to Episode Five and the main person of interest in the case was finally revealed, I felt like that could have come sooner. I felt like that was really critical. It really gripped me. When all the information comes out about that person of interest, I did feel a bit … not deceived, because I do understand how story works, but I did feel like I wanted that information sooner. The other persons of interest, even though they were quickly debunked, I wondered, are you doing damage to those people who are out in the real world, living their life, who might have been a person of interest for a couple of days before they were completely cleared and no longer considered a suspect? I wonder about the fairness of that. In saying that, most of them were speaking to the journalist, so I'd be curious as to how they feel they were represented. And at the same time, the case is unsolved, right? So maybe it's not the

correct moral decision to exclude those people. They need inclusion. I guess it's just deciding how and when.

Caroline: The initial press around *Dear Rachelle* suggested there would be 10 episodes. We have listened to eight at this stage, but there may well be more released if new evidence arises.

Kylie: There was also a little bonus episode between Episodes Four and Five, a 13-minute investigation update, and it does say that police are taking some prints from Rachelle's car, which I thought was an interesting way to present that information. Obviously this is a live investigation, and I guess you kind of have to keep in mind as you're writing that anything could happen along the way.

Caroline: I think that's a hard balance for a reporter to strike between the spontaneity of responding to updates and scripted episodes. One of the things that really works about this series is that it has a high production ethic. It's well crafted, it's very narrative in its approach, so I found that there are moments that were really powerful because they'd taken the time to really think about how to present those to a listener. But that makes it hard to integrate updates.

Kylie: It will be interesting to see what happens with those final episodes, and what happens going forward as well. If police are actively working on the case again, as we've seen with cases like the disappearance of Lynette Dawson in *The Teacher's Pet*, this could go on for quite some time.

Caroline: I hope there will be an outcome for Rachelle's family. We have seen, particularly in Australia, so many instances where substantial change has come about as a result of this kind of reporting, and podcasting kind of uniquely invites an audience to come along for that journey. As we've said, there are lots of complexities and concerns about how to navigate that ethically, but you have to weigh that against the level of buy-in from an audience and how powerful that can be in convincing people to come forward and to share information and keeping pressure on law enforcement to make sure that those cold cases don't drop off the agenda.

Dear Rachelle: The Hunt for My Sister's Killer is hosted and investigated by Ashlea Hansen, with retired detective and cold case specialist Damian Loone. Executive Producer Rachel Fountain, Executive Editor Sarah Blake. It is available on podcast platforms and by subscription from
https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/truecrimeaustralia/dear-rachelle

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