



WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
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Strategies for Storying the Terrible Truth in John Estacio's and John Murrell's *Filumena* and Betty Jane Hegerat's *the Boy*

Tamara Palmer Seiler

Most people are shocked and repelled by horrific crimes such as murder. Many are also attracted to accounts of such events: various genres of crime fiction and drama, for example, are perennial favorites, and information about actual crimes is a valuable commodity for news media. However, writing about violent crime, whether fictional or actual, poses a number of challenges such as finding the right balance between circumspection and sensationalism. Moreover, chronicling actual crimes can lead both writers and readers into dark and complex places where determining and then telling “the truth” can be daunting. Two such events in Alberta’s social/legal history have garnered particular attention: the murder in the Crow’s-nest Pass, in September 1922, of Alberta Provincial Police Constable, Steve Lawson, and the subsequent trial, conviction, and execution of Emilio Picariello and Florence (Filumena) Lassandro; and the murder in Stettler in June 1959 of seven members of the Cook family and the subsequent trials, convictions, and execution of Robert Raymond Cook, son, stepson, and half-brother of the respective victims.

My purpose here is to discuss the narrative strategies employed in recent representations of each of these events—the opera *Filumena* (2003) by John Estacio and John Murrell, and the creative non-fiction book *the Boy* (2011) by Betty Jane Hegerat. Because *Filumena* is a grand opera, while *the*

Boy is a work of creative non-fiction, they are quite different artistic forms; however, I believe these two genres (and the particular texts I consider here) are sufficiently similar as verbal expressions to warrant comparison. After all, hybridity is a defining feature of both grand opera and creative non-fiction. As well, since these particular texts are based on actual events, their authors faced a number of similar challenges in constructing them and arguably employed some similar strategies in doing so. Since the authors in both cases live in Calgary, there is the added feature of Albertans commenting on Alberta stories. My modest goal here is neither to be exhaustive nor definitive with regard to either of these works or the events they chronicle; rather, I hope to highlight some of the challenges involved in writing about such charged historical events and thus the similarities between seemingly dissimilar works that take on this task, while illuminating, however dimly and briefly, some dark corners of Alberta's past.

Who, What, When, and Where

Aside from being crimes that happened in Alberta, the Lawson murder and the Cook murders would seem at first glance to have little in common; they took place almost forty years apart in very different regions and circumstances. However, in both cases, the "truth" about what actually happened was, and has remained, to varying degrees, contested (Lee 48; Pecover xxi; Hegerat, *the Boy* 76). Moreover, it is this element of uncertainty that fascinates and creates points of entry for revisiting each story while, at the same time, creating particular challenges and pitfalls for those who take up the task of doing so.

As mentioned, these crimes took place in very different settings. The Crowsnest Pass, in the southwestern corner of Alberta, was one of the province's major mining areas, consisting of a series of small towns. Like other mining communities in the province, "The Pass" attracted immigrant workers from central, eastern, and southern Europe, as well as Great Britain, and it was characterized by a marked degree of social stratification, with an ethnic pecking order that mirrored the one enshrined in Canada's immigration policy of the period (Palmer and Palmer, *Peoples* 250; Wood 24, 39). The social cleavages and tensions following the First World War, together with the existence at the time of prohibition (enacted in Alberta in

1916 partly in response to fears among the Protestant elite about the negative social impact of immigrants), were fundamental aspects of the context in which the Lawson murder and the subsequent trial and conviction of Picariello and Lassandro took place. So too were jurisdictional conflicts among various provincial governments and the federal government. These conflicts complicated law enforcement, leading the RCMP to cancel their police contract with the Alberta government, which was then forced to create the Alberta Provincial Police. This organization had limited resources, and business for rum-runners flourished. Unsurprisingly, then, when the new UFA government (United Farmers of Alberta) came to power in 1921, one of the thorniest issues it faced was prohibition—a situation that very likely contributed to the fate of Picariello and Lassandro (Palmer and Palmer, *Alberta* 176, 213).¹

In contrast, the Cook murders occurred in a less turbulent time and place. Stettler was a community much more congruent with Alberta's dominant image at the time as a "breadbasket to the nation."² Stettler had been settled primarily by people from western and northern Europe, and while there was considerable ethnic diversity in the area, for the majority of the region's residents, the forces of assimilation had been at work for decades. This, along with the expanding economy and the popularity of the Social Credit government of the day, made the setting for the Cook family murders a much less tense and divided community than the Crowsnest Pass had been in the early 1920s. While ethnicity was apparently not a factor in the trials and subsequent conviction of Robert Raymond Cook, as it almost certainly was in those of Picariello and Lassandro, Cook's fate, like theirs, was affected by politics: Cook's effort to have his sentence commuted was ill-timed since it came in the wake of considerable furor over a recent and very controversial commutation. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, usually sympathetic to avoiding the death penalty, likely felt it was politically impossible to commute Cook's sentence at this particular time (Pecover 425-29).

The accused in these two cases had little in common. Born in Capriglia (Avellino) Italy in 1879, Emilio Picariello had immigrated to Canada in the late nineteenth century. He married Marianna Maria Marrucci (also an Italian immigrant) in 1904, and the couple eventually had seven children (Lee 56; Floren 40). They moved to Fernie BC in 1911, where Emilio worked for (and eventually managed) a number of enterprises catering primarily

to the Italian community in the area. Over the years, he became "... the Padrino of the Pass and as the 'Padrino' character, he had all the good as well as the bad traits: liberally open handed, highly enterprising, daringly adventurous, and disrespectful of the law" (Lee 48). Known as "Emperor Pick," he was powerful and well liked within the local immigrant community. Prohibition provided new business opportunities, and Picariello was able to make substantial profits running liquor from British Columbia into Alberta and Montana, which was also "dry." Less is known about Filumena Costanzo. She was born in Italy in 1900 and immigrated with her family to Fernie BC when she was nine, marrying Italian immigrant Carlo Sanfidele/Charles Lassandro in an arranged marriage when she was only fifteen. Charles, twenty years her senior, was recruited to run booze by Picariello, who regarded the couple as useful cover for his smuggling operations; however, Filumena soon became estranged from Charles, and just where her true affections lay has been a matter for much speculation (Lee 49). What is certain is that both Emilio Picariello and Filumena Lassandro stood trial in Calgary in the late Fall of 1922 for Constable Lawson's murder, a crime they allegedly committed on 21 September 1922. They were found guilty, despite scanty evidence, and they were both hanged on 2 May 1923 for first-degree murder at the Alberta Provincial Jail in Fort Saskatchewan, northeast of Edmonton.

This sad story was ancient history when Robert Raymond Cook was executed by hanging at the same Provincial Jail on 14 November 1960. However, as it turned out, Filumena Lassandro and Robert Raymond Cook would share the oddly parallel distinction of being the last woman and the last man to be hanged in Alberta, both in their early twenties at the time of their deaths. As with Lassandro, it is difficult if not impossible to be certain that Cook was guilty of the horrific crimes of which he was convicted; indeed, Jack Pecover's extensive research indicates that there were sufficient gaps and problems with the evidence presented at both of his trials to warrant a reasonable doubt. What is certain is that seven members of Cook's family were brutally murdered sometime on the night of 24-25 June 1959. Their bodies were discovered several days after the murders, concealed in a grease pit in the garage adjacent to the family's home. Cook, who had been apprehended earlier on a charge of false pretenses for using his father's identification to purchase a car in Edmonton, claimed complete surprise when the bodies—and the scene of horrendous violence in

the house—were discovered. He was tried twice (the second trial ordered because of an error on the part of the judge in the first) and convicted both times. He lost an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada and an eleventh hour attempt to have the sentence commuted, and went to his death still insisting that he was innocent.³

Filumena: Grand Opera as (Historical) Creative Non-fiction

Though some might regard opera as an unlikely vehicle for chronicling western Canadian history, both librettist John Murrell and composer John Estacio set out expressly to highlight this often overlooked region and its people (Calgary Opera 19). As well as being known for his plays about western Canadian history, Murrell is known for his plays about women and for bringing to his work a revisionist sensibility, including a desire to revisit the past with a view to offering a more inclusive version of the historical truth (Melnyk 228). One of his earliest works, *Power in the Blood* (1975), is about a woman evangelist and his well-known play *Memoir* (1978) explores the life of Sarah Bernhardt. Set in Calgary, *Waiting for the Parade* (1980) depicts the experiences of five women during the Second World War, and *The Faraway Nearby* (1995) focuses on American artist of the southwest, Georgia O'Keefe. As George Melnyk points out, Murrell has been particularly interested in the challenges faced by “women triumphant rather than women as victims” (101). In *Filumena*, however, he turns his attention to someone who was arguably the quintessential female victim. Murrell has explained in several contexts that he had always wanted to write a libretto, and the Picariello/Lassandro case seemed to provide the perfect material for such a project. When he approached Calgary Opera with the idea, John Estacio (composer in residence at the time) was “immediately transfixed,” seeing in this piece of southern Alberta history not only the very stuff of great opera, but also “a true Canadian story with immigrants as the central characters” (Calgary Opera 19). As a new Canadian whose parents had emigrated from Portugal, Estacio was particularly drawn to an opportunity to highlight immigrants, people whose stories are often forgotten.⁴

Thus in *Filumena*, Murrell and Estacio aimed to bring history to life in a way that seems wholly compatible with the definition of creative

non-fiction (CNF) offered recently by Charles Foran. Foran argues that “the emphasis in creative nonfiction is on the use of inventive and dramatic techniques to support fact-based narratives.” However, Foran cautions, this emphasis does not give writers of creative non-fiction *carte blanche* as if they were writing fiction. “Rather, it gives them a similar toolbox to enrich and enliven their presentation of the facts. Using such tools, the CNF writer seeks to achieve, in the words of author Tom Wolfe, ‘a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts or direct quotation.’” Drawing on such a “toolbox,” what strategies do Murrell and Estacio employ in their effort to turn the story of Filumena/Lassandro into compelling theatre while, at the same time, not violating the requirement for accuracy that necessarily accompanies the use of sensitive historical material?

Perhaps the most obvious strategy is their choice of genre: casting the story as an opera enables them to tap into the narrative conventions of the genre as well as the enormous emotive power of music. Clearly, drawing on historical material involving high profile and/or sensational personalities is an established operatic tradition, as exemplified by such works as Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* (1724), Mozart’s *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791), Donizetti’s *Maria Stuarda* (1835), and Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* (1857; revised 1881). The tradition continues in such contemporary works as *Nixon in China* (1987), by John Adams and Alice Goodman, and *Dead Man Walking* (2000), by Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally, to say nothing of such popular musicals as *Evita* (1978) by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Moreover, tragic death is often a central feature of these narratives, and the grand gestures of Grand Opera seem well-suited to capturing characters and events that are almost larger-than-life. According to Murrell, “one of the most difficult things in the world is to make the spoken word sing and soar. It tends to waddle, or at best, to strut.” Noting that while words are superb for capturing the struggles of daily life, Murrell insists that it is music, not words, that enables one to express “pure meaning,” and thus “to convey ... what is beyond words.” When they are attached to music, “words fly ... when they need to, they swoop, or they alight and grow still for a breath-taking pause, or they plunge from a great height, only to soar again” (Calgary Opera 19). Clearly, Murrell’s characterization of the key figures in this historical drama—Filumena Lassandro, Emilio Picariello, Charlie Lassandro, Stefano Picariello, Maria Picariello,

McAlpine, Constable Lawson, and Mamma Costanzo—is heavily dependent upon and enormously enriched by the musical score through which they, in large measure, make themselves known to the audience. Perhaps paradoxically, the musical dimension adds heft and weight—a kind of additional materiality—to these historical characters about whom so little is actually known. Estacio’s musical score is eclectic, drawing on the traditions of serious or tragic “grand” opera as well as on those of the lighter operetta, with its vernacular dialogue and elements of humour (DeLong, “Filumena’s Tragedy” C8). The spare, yet highly nuanced score, builds “on a pair of five-note motifs, which mutate in shape and purpose throughout,” as, for example, with the recurring waltz that evokes both tenderness and foreboding, depending on context and inflection, and the recurring “There will be a storm” motif (Everett-Green R3).

In addition to this rich musical vocabulary, the stark realism and elemental natural beauty of the sparse set—stylized (blue) Rocky Mountains in the background and plain wooden structures in the foreground, structures that at once evoke both an old-world village and a frontier mining town wordlessly—point to the sharp contrasts within the complex social world the historical figures/characters inhabit. In concert with these non-verbal modes of expression, Murrell’s libretto, which is one-third Italian and two-thirds English, further emphasizes the often-competing narratives that defined the world of the Italian immigrants living in “The Pass” in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁵ An amalgamation of several powerful modes of representation at once—drama, poetry, music, and visual art—the operatic genre enables a rich and nuanced yet economical treatment of setting, character, and theme. Thus aided by multi-dimensional modes of expression, Murrell as librettist is able to say a great deal about the Crowsnest community—about his characters and their relationship to each other—through a seemingly simple libretto. Moreover, while a grand opera traditionally contains five acts, *Filumena* contains only two—a compression that builds momentum and a relentless sense of inexorability. That Estacio’s score, which music critic Robert Everett-Green has referred to as at once “bold and ingratiating,” is highly melodic, in the tradition of Verdi and Puccini, lends even more emotive power to Murrell’s treatment of these characters, as of course, do the dramatic and musical skills of the various performers (R3).

The opera opens with townsfolk gathered outdoors to celebrate the wedding of Filumena to Charlie Lassandro. This scene introduces the main characters and forces that will collide to create the tragedy that unfolds in the scenes that follow.⁶ The deceptively simple, often repeated, phrase, “in English only,” symbolizes the efforts of Emilio Picariello to promote the acceptance of the Italian community he leads and the power-relations that define that community, pressured from without to assimilate and from within by divisive dynamics of generation and gender. Similarly, the dual names of key characters—Stefano/Steven and Filumena/Florence—embody the painful struggle over identity often central to immigrant experience. Charlie, already dissatisfied with his wife, berates her for speaking Italian with her mother, as well as for not seeming to be sufficiently happy on their wedding day. “You embarrass me and I don’t like to be shamed,” he tells her angrily. Foreshadowing her fate, Charlie, after handing her a bouquet of white lilies (flowers symbolic of innocence and purity and also associated with death), accuses her of looking “like an old lady at a funeral.”⁷ Filumena’s struggle to be true to herself within a straightened world is artfully expressed in a melodic aria where she promises “inside my heart ... I will keep my own name.” When an expansive Picariello arrives with his wife Maria and eldest son Stefano, he salutes the young couple, asking Stefano to sing an old-country love song in their honor. Reluctant, Stefano nevertheless complies, transfixing the assembly, particularly Filumena, with a delicate aria whose key motifs recur at crucial moments throughout the opera, capturing the tenderness of young love. However, the moment is soured by Charlie’s jealousy and the arrival of Constable Lawson. By the scene’s end, Filumena and Picariello have become sympathetic characters, misunderstood by smaller-minded people in the community.

Scene Two moves us ahead several years to Picariello’s Alberta Hotel in Blairmore, where Florence and Charlie have joined Picariello’s household. The growing affinity between “Emperor Pick” and Filumena is apparent in his sympathetic and protective responses to her disapproval of “the business,” and to Charlie’s attempts to control her. Picariello confides in her his dreams for the community’s future, dreams he believes she shares. In the meantime, she and Stefano are increasingly attracted to one another. Picariello asks Filumena to help in “the business” by acting as a decoy. She and Stefano are to pose as “a young couple in love” in order to convey liquor across the border, the idea being that as such a couple, they won’t

attract police attention. She agrees, though Constable Lawson's sudden arrival and his stern warning to "Pick" to "get out of the business" lend a note of foreboding.

Sharp, ironic contrasts between the characters' lived realities and their dreams also pervade scenes Three and Four. Scene Three takes place in early summer in an idyllic alpine meadow where Stefano and Filumena share a picnic as they wait to play their parts as decoys. Predictably, the pretense of being "a young couple in love" is too much for them; they kiss and acknowledge their feelings for one another. They are interrupted by the arrival of Pick and Charlie, who transfer the load of illegal liquor to their car. Scene Four returns us to Blairmore a few months later, and to Pick's campaign for election to the Town Council. Juxtaposed with the enthusiastic cheering of his supporters outside, the sharply contrasting scene inside the hotel kitchen is one of rising tension between Stefano, Filumena, and Charlie, since the latter has discovered the nature of the relationship between his wife and the boss's son. Later, Charlie confronts Picariello with "the truth." The scene ends ominously with Charlie meeting Constable Lawson surreptitiously in the hotel while the others are outside with the campaign crowd. The gulf between grim reality and the dream of a better life grows.

The Second Act begins on the fated 21 September 1922. Filumena, awaiting Stefano alone in the hotel kitchen, notes that a storm is approaching. Charlie arrives with news that Steve has gone on what Pick, having been elected to the Town Council, has termed a "last haul." Since Steve has not returned, a worried Maria immediately summons Picariello from a council meeting. When the straight-talking McAlpine arrives looking disheveled and upset and reveals that Constable Lawson pursued him and Steve, that shots were fired, and that "Steve was hit real bad," Picariello swears revenge. Grabbing Filumena, he heads for the police barracks. In the next scene, Picariello and Filumena arrive at Lawson's home. The homely set and the presence of Lawson's young family as he steps out onto a wooden porch suggest Lawson's vulnerability, evoking some sympathy for this public servant who, in his frequent "pestering" of Picariello, is merely doing his job.

Murrell's libretto does not offer a straightforward representation of the killing of Lawson. Picariello is armed and also thrusts a pistol into Filumena's hands as he accuses Lawson of murdering his son. The three

struggle, Filumena's efforts seemingly aimed at restraining the men. When a shot is fired, Lawson drops to the ground. Who fired the fatal shot is unclear. In Scene Three, the widow and children follow the coffin through the streets, trailed by the townspeople, who, as a traditional chorus, voice the concerns of the wider community as they speculate about what happened and vow revenge on the perpetrators.

Scene Four, set in a Calgary jail cell in November of 1922, reveals the full horror of Filumena's situation. She learns just how alone she is when Stefano and Maria visit and implore her to assume responsibility for Lawson's death. After all, they argue, since Pick is a man with a wife and children, his life must be spared, and besides, since she is a woman, she is unlikely to be hanged "by a jury of upstanding Canadians." He, on the other hand, surely will be if he is found responsible. "I know what the truth has to be," sings Stefano soulfully. As well as indicting Canadian justice, this scene serves to ennoble the character of Filumena. Although disappointed and saddened by Stefano's actions, she resists the temptations of righteous anger. Instead, she tells him sadly, "You are a son any father would be proud of." And, although she doesn't agree to do as Stefano and Maria have asked, neither does she refuse.

The final scene reveals that all of Stefano's entreaties and Filumena's anguish were ultimately for naught. Both Picariello and Filumena have been convicted and sentenced to hang. As they await execution, the bleakness of the setting contrasts poignantly with the liveliness of the opera's opening scene. This contrast and the arias that the doomed characters sing, revealing their innermost thoughts, combine to evoke empathy for both, but also deep admiration for Filumena. As guards prepare to escort him to the gallows, a distraught Picariello expresses horror at losing his family and his dreams for a better life. In contrast, Filumena, now a full-blown tragic heroine, is dignified and transcendent as she prepares calmly for her death.

In this scene, and throughout *Filumena*, Murrell and Estacio negotiate the complex conventions of grand opera to tap into the healing powers of tragedy. As Murrell notes, "the greatest artists of opera and theatre have relentlessly been drawn to the tragic ... because they know that suffering ... has the power ... not just to heal us of our pain at the fates of these ... characters but to heal us of the pain of our own fates." (Calgary Opera 19). As Murrell goes on to explain, the "gimmick" of tragedy is that it

transports us to heights of existence that enable us to put the inevitable depths into perspective, and then to persevere in the face of it. In turning the relatively scant facts about the lives of Emilio Picariello and Filumena Lassandro and their role in the murder of Constable Lawson into such a story—and one that aims to represent the experience of immigrants more generally—Murrell and Estacio have been able, indeed compelled, to move away from the dark moment of “truth.” Their telling does not linger on what happened on Lawson’s front porch on 21 September 1922, but rather on the hopes and dreams of the two principal characters, as revealed in memorable and expressive arias and duets. As Murrell explains, “Filumena soars upward, beyond blame and self-pity, up to a height where she can begin to perceive and to embrace a truth which is both bright and dark, both deep and high” (Calgary Opera 19). Thus one might say that while Murrell and Estacio have not in any way violated the “rules” of creative non-fiction that require an accurate rendering of known facts, they have succeeded in offering up a “larger truth” than would have been possible had they relied solely on the facts; moreover, they have done so by using the expansive, multi-faceted genre of grand opera to produce a representation of the “terrible truth” that deflects attention from the gritty, but elusive “facts” surrounding the murder of Constable Steve Lawson, focusing instead on the longings and redemptive powers of the human spirit in the face of insurmountable odds.⁸

the Boy: Metafiction as (Historical) Creative Non-fiction

A former social worker, Calgary writer Betty Jane Hegerat had written two novels—*Running Toward Home* (2006), which tells the story of a troubled foster child, and *Delivery* (2009), which explores a complicated mother-daughter relationship—and a book of short stories, *A Crack in the Wall* (2008), which examines the meaning of home through the experiences of a disparate group of characters, when she took on the complex writing project that ultimately became *the Boy* (2011). Although this hybridic work represents a departure for Hegerat in terms of its form, like her previous books, it is set in Alberta and reflects her continuing interest in families and the complex dynamics that hold them together and/or tear them apart.

In *the Boy*, Hegerat seemingly takes quite a different approach to “telling the terrible truth” than that taken by Murrell and Estacio in *Filumena*. While *the Boy* defies easy classification, it can be seen, at least in part, as a work of historiographic metafiction; however, since *the Boy* is quite clearly divided into two distinct narratives, one that is fictional and one that is not, less than half of the work (eleven of twenty-eight chapters) is unproblematically encompassed within a definition that sees historiographic metafiction as “*fiction* that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but also grounded in historical, social, and political realities” (Hutcheon 13). Nevertheless, the non-fictional half (all of the seventeen chapters entitled “Roads Back”) is so self-consciously intertwined with the fictional (the chapters entitled “The Boy”), that separating them is impossible. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these two narratives is the author’s fundamental strategy in her effort to make some sense of the Cook family murders. What she sees as the question at the core of that story, however, is not “who did it”—the question that Jack Pecover explores so thoroughly in *The Work of Justice*—but rather, “why?” As she explains, “. . . it wasn’t the details of the murder case or Cook’s trials and execution that I was examining, but what went before. It was the family I was interested in” (Hegerat, *the Boy* 108).

The other closely related question that draws Hegerat to the Cook family story is one that haunts her from the years she spent as a social worker, as well as from her experience as a mother: “How does someone learn to love someone else’s child?” (15). This question focuses attention on Robert Raymond Cook’s stepmother, Daisy: as Hegerat’s main fictional character, Louise, puts it in one of the conversations between her and the author that occur (usually at the ends of chapters) throughout the book, “We care about Daisy” (61). The affinities among these three women—the author, her fictional character Louise, and the long-deceased Daisy Cook—are central to the various linkages among the fictional and non-fictional narratives.

The Boy is, then, a work of creative non-fiction that draws heavily on metafictional strategies to bring the past to life as well as to illuminate what *might* happen in human relationships. For example, one of Hegerat’s main strategies is to create a complex symbiotic relationship between the book’s fictional and non-fictional elements, both of which are infused with her own story—as a writer/researcher struggling with her current project, and also as someone of a certain age who grew up in central Alberta and who

remembers the Cook murders from her childhood. Thus the book comprises three interrelated narratives, but their juxtaposition is often uneasy, as when the fictional Louise asks, “*And what about the Cooks?*,” Hegerat answers almost angrily that she is “not writing a story about bludgeoning and hanging” (38), and as early as the end of Chapter Four, the author insists that her research into the Cook murders (primarily reading) is now sufficient: “Surely I could leave the Cook family to their rest” (43). But this turns out not to be the case, and Hegerat takes her quest a step further by looking for individuals who might have known the family. When one of her interviewees is curious about her interest in the topic, Hegerat confides in her readers that she was “tempted” to say that she too was surprised by her interest, and that she even shares the revulsion of one of her friends who told her she would never buy the book when it’s finished. Somewhat defensively, Hegerat explains to the curious interviewee that her research into the murders is primarily in the service of her fiction:

I told Marion Anderson that my quest was really on behalf of a character in a story I was writing. I remembered the murders from my own eleven-year-old perspective, but another story, a piece of fiction seemed to be demanding that I try to find the family in this crime. (67)

Prior to articulating this strategy, however, Hegerat explains that she has actually tried to keep the two stories separate; however, the psychological impossibility of doing so and, indeed, the strategic utility of not doing so become increasingly apparent both to writer and reader as the seemingly bifurcated project evolves.

Of course to call the book bifurcated falls short of doing justice to its structure since, as noted above, as well as comprising fiction (the eleven chapters devoted to “The Boy”) and non-fiction (the seventeen chapters devoted to “Roads Back”), it also encompasses an ongoing conversation between the author and her main fictional character. This conversation (set off in the text by indentation and, for Louise’s voice, italics) is a kind of third section of the work. It is also a major metafictional tool for highlighting the complicated and sometimes troubled relationship between authors and their subjects, as well as the constructed and somewhat arbitrary nature of narrative. Perhaps most importantly, these conversations between the

author and her character (along with the ongoing resonances between the fictional and non-fictional narratives) blur the lines between fact and fiction, forcing readers to consider how difficult it is to be sure about what really happened in the past, to ascertain the whole truth. As Louise puts it, “Doesn’t *Daisy* feel like fiction too? All of this gets a little blurry sometimes doesn’t it?” (65).

Appropriately, then, the book begins with a fictional chapter, “The Boy (June 1994)”. The setting (Edmonton) and situation are presented via the point of view of Louise Kernan. That Louise is not an altogether reliable narrator is another important part of the author’s strategy of highlighting the difficulty of ascertaining the truth. An unmarried school teacher in her late thirties, Louise is at a bar with colleagues, supposedly celebrating the end of the school year, though she is not really having a good time, admitting (to readers) that she “hates” these events. However, it is here that she meets Jake Peters, “a man at the next table who seems as much an outlier to his party as she is to hers” (9). They eventually leave the party and over a snack at a nearby Tim Hortons, start to get acquainted. A car salesman who remembers selling a car to Louise several years before, Jake is a widower with a twelve-year-old son, Danny. Jake insists that Danny is “good at heart and smart too, just not real motivated when it comes to school, and . . . a bit rambunctious.” For her part, Louise knows “from that one sentence” that “Daniel is a problem at school” (12). Despite this potential “red flag,” Louise, who “imagines herself married, raising a family”(10) but who has had no luck with relationships, is pleasantly surprised when Jake asks to see her again, and the chapter ends with their making a date to see a movie together.

This first chapter, having set the stage for the fictional narrative, is followed by a non-fictional one in which the author confesses that she is frustrated with her work. She is struggling to envision the fiction she is trying to write with the clarity that will enable her to get on with the task. At first her problem seems to be a block in her usual creative process, whereby, if she listens carefully, her characters speak to her, enabling the story to “find its way onto the page.” This time, though, her main character is not cooperating: “Instead of telling me the story herself, she seemed to expect me to tell her what would happen next” (14). But as she contemplates this problem, Hegerat begins to realize that the situation is actually more complex, and that “behind the image of Louise in my mind, there was

sometimes a dark shadow, something she couldn't see, and I didn't want to illuminate" (14). Searching for, and yet at times trying to, escape from this dark shadow is yet another strategy Hegerat uses to link the fictional and non-fictional narratives, and in particular to insert her own story within both. Thus, in this second "Roads Back" chapter, not only do readers encounter for the first time the conversations between Hegerat and Louise that highlight the "constructedness" of the story, but they also begin to get to know the writer/narrator. Virtually a character in her own story, she is haunted by the tragedies of the human condition that she has witnessed as a social worker and, like any parent, worries about her own children. She is also currently feeling haunted by something horrific that happened in her childhood, something that seems to creep unbidden into her mind as she tries to write or go about her daily life.

For example, a trip from Calgary to Longview for dinner with friends evokes unpleasant memories for her. As she "stared across the street at a clapboard house," one that is eerily similar to the Cook house in Stettler, as per the photograph (Plate 6) and the written description in Pecover's book (103-04), she fantasizes about buying such a house in a small town and redecorating it in 1950s style as a weekend retreat. But her fantasy soon turns frightening as she begins to see ghosts: "a woman on the porch, children gambling across the patch of packed dirt at the side of the house. A man ... watching from a shadowy garage set diagonally on the end of the property" (17). Louise's question ("*Is it my house you're imagining?*") and her plea ("*Don't move me into that sad place*") leave the author shaken, and her fantasy about the garage and "the smell of grease" triggers an even more disturbing memory:

I closed my eyes and I was eleven years old, reading a copy of the *Edmonton Journal* my mother had hidden under a stack of *Star Weekly Weekend* magazines because she did not want me to know the gruesome details of a nearby crime. Reading about the bodies hidden under layers of greasy rags and cardboard. (18)

Asking her husband and friends if any of them remember the Cook murders from their childhood years, the story of a "whole family bludgeoned to death" conjures yet another dark memory for her, that of the impact

on her as a child of the word “bludgeoned,” a “word that was new to my vocabulary when I was eleven years old. I remembered sitting on the back step, my mouth full of that blunt, ugly word.” Pictures also flood her memory—images of “a small clapboard bungalow, a flashy convertible, a madman rampaging through the countryside. The eldest son of the murdered family” (18).

These memories, and Louise’s question—“*The son? The son murdered the family?*”—propel the author forward in her effort to tell Louise’s (fictional) story and to re-visit the long-ago tragedy of the Cook family. Her fictional project and her personal quest to determine the “why” of the Cook tragedy, as well as to unmask the shadows in her own mind, become intertwined, providing the structural framework as well as the thematic heart of *the Boy*. Hegerat gives voice to the reader’s ambivalence about the book’s disturbing subject, and raises uncomfortable questions about how to deal, both individually and collectively, with real-life horror. Should we learn all we can about actual, horrific events, or avert our eyes?

Hegerat’s strategy of not only interweaving the fictional and the historical, but of also entangling her own story within both strands draws readers into a complex meta narrative that is not easily put aside and into a world of questions about what happened and why, what can happen and why, and the personal and collective relevance of raising and attempting to answer such questions. By the end of the second chapter, the author’s musings have brought her to where she needs to be to truly begin her quest for answers. While she feels emboldened, she knows it will not be easy:

Louise was right. When I sat at the computer that morning, I finally acknowledged that her story wasn’t just about family dynamics, a rebellious teenaged stepson, a crisis, a resolution. There was a reason for my recall of the Cook story. Write boldly. Hadn’t I given that advice to other writers? If the writing frightens you, you’re finally getting somewhere? (21)

Throughout *the Boy*, juxtaposing and interweaving the fictional, the non-fictional, and the personal continue to be the author’s primary strategy for attempting to answer the questions at the centre of each of the book’s narratives. She links the settings, characters, and plots in all three strands in inventive ways that enrich the book’s separate parts and their

interconnected sum. For example, the small and medium sized towns of central Alberta provide the backdrop to Louise's story, to the Cook story, and to the author's story and the similarities vis-à-vis the setting that reverberate across the narratives highlight the importance of place as a factor in the development of all three. All three narratives involve a move that impacts the "characters" profoundly. After Louise and Jake Peters marry, they move from Edmonton to his hometown of Valmer, since Jake is convinced that Danny's troubles are in large part a product of his not having the family and communal supports that a small town offers, though the move does not have the desired ameliorative effects on the increasingly alienated and troubled youngster. Similarly, as Hegerat tells us in "Roads Back," the Cook family moved from Hanna to Stettler after Ray Cook married Daisy Gasper, a move that his son Robert resented. The author also tells us that she experienced a move as a child, from New Serepta, where her parents ran a small café, to Camrose. The effect of this reiteration of place is to intensify the reader's awareness of the book's central Alberta setting. In transforming that setting from "prairie wholesome" to something closer to "prairie gothic," Hegerat creates the possibility of a compelling, if unsettling, answer to Northrop Frye's famous query: "Where is here?" In so doing, she transforms a landscape that for some may have barely registered as a place at all, real or imagined, into one that commands attention.

Certain other motifs reverberate through all three narratives, heightening suspense and intensifying the complexity of the quest for answers at the heart of each. Such motifs frequently serve as links between chapters, and thus between the fictional and non-fictional strands of the book, as when the author refers to Daisy Cook's teaching experience and her first pregnancy near the end of a "Roads Back" chapter, and begins the following "The Boy" chapter with a focus on Louise's teaching experience and pregnancy. The following fictional chapter begins with the birth of Louise and Jake's son Jonathon, clearly suggesting the possibility of parallel trajectories. As well, subtle similarities link the fictional characters to the historical ones: Ray Cook was reportedly very indulgent of Robert, as is Jake of Danny; Robert Cook was viewed by most who knew him as a skillful (and inveterate) liar, as is young Danny. Another pervasive motif is the car: automobiles figure prominently in all three narratives. In the fictional narrative, Jake Peters is a car salesman, and his son Danny not only burns down the neighbour's garage, but also has a penchant for stealing vehicles.

Ray Cook was a mechanic who passed on his passion for fixing, acquiring, and driving cars to his son Robert, whose main activity as a petty criminal was stealing cars. Researching the Cook murders requires Hegerat to make a number of road trips from her home in Calgary. Her car as well as the various others that appear in *the Boy*—perhaps none more than the Impala convertible that Robert Cook was driving when he was picked up for questioning on false pretense charges just prior to the discovery of the murders—not only links the fictional and non-fictional narratives, but also symbolizes the restless and ongoing quest for an elusive truth.

These interconnected metafictional strategies enable Hegerat to bring the Cook story to life to a degree that would be impossible had she limited her scope to offering a purely factual rendering of that story alone. For example, the details she provides from her own experiences growing up in the time and place of the Cook murders seep into the historical narrative indirectly. Memories of her mother mopping and waxing the floor of their family restaurant every Saturday night, “the smell of Johnson’s paste wax that clumped in our throats late into the evening,” and the sound of “the rustle of sheets of newspaper spread over the thick wax until it dried” (33) not only add the rich sensory details that draw readers into her personal story, but also lend a startling immediacy and poignancy to the Cook narrative. This is especially the case when she draws on these details to imagine the Cook’s home and the family’s interaction on the afternoon and evening of 24 June 1959, when all of the family members, except Robert who had only just returned after being released from the Prince Albert penitentiary the day before, were brutally murdered. She also remembers how, for much of that summer when she was eleven, she and a friend “trudged back and forth” between their two houses, “whispering about murder, about brothers and boys,” and how their “wandering” back and forth came to a quick end when Robert Raymond Cook broke out of Ponoka. “My mother didn’t need to place restrictions. Rose and I imagined a murderer, one with particular interest in children, hiding behind every tree. ... Even though he was captured three days later, ... it seemed as though our summer-time freedom was irrevocably lost” (37).

While the fictional and personal strands of the book lend concreteness and immediacy to the historical Cook narrative, the fictional narrative draws emotional intensity and suspense from the author’s quest for answers about the Cook murders. What really happened and why? Was

Robert Raymond Cook guilty of the crimes for which he was twice tried and ultimately executed? As Hegerat shares stories about her various research trips to interview informants in central Alberta (e.g., the man who had been the best friend of the oldest of the murdered Cook children; the only one of the defense lawyers still alive; a woman who had worked in the Ponoka Mental hospital when Robert Raymond Cook had been incarcerated there briefly prior to escaping; Jack Pecover, author of *The Work of Justice*) and to visit salient sites (e.g., the Hanna graveyard where the murdered members of the Cook family are buried; the Stettler archives where the artifacts related to the two trials are stored; the Fort Saskatchewan Provincial Jail where Cook was hanged), not only does the landscape that Cook himself had traveled so many years before begin to emerge as a ghostly backdrop to the present, but also suspense grows as the case becomes ever more, not less, complicated—suspense that spills over into the book’s fictional stream as we wonder just how the historical and the fictional are related.

Thus, while the fiction creates an imaginative vehicle for getting inside the Cook household indirectly, the horrific facts of the Cook story—however much the guilt or innocence of Robert Cook is still a moot point—caste a dark shadow over the fiction. What is Danny really capable of? Will Louise’s story be similar to Daisy’s? Moreover, Hegerat intensifies this spillover effect in a number of ways, as, for example, when she alerts the reader that she has plans for Louise—plans that she has no intention of sharing with her character. “I had now decided on a twist of plot for her story that I did not want to divulge until the words were on the page. I wanted the reins in my own hands” (153).

Perhaps the most powerful tool Hegerat employs to connect the fictional and non-fictional narratives is intertextuality. Early on, she tells her readers about the three books that she discovered on the Cook case: Frank W. Anderson’s *The Robert Cook Murder Case*, 2008, Alan Hustak’s *They were Hanged*, 1987, and Jack Pecover’s *The Work of Justice*, 1996 (39). Hegerat refers to and quotes substantially from Pecover throughout *the Boy*, including lengthy quotes of letters (to his parents, his lawyers) written by Cook himself. Indeed, Pecover arguably becomes a character in *the Boy*, and Hegerat admits that his “exhaustive exploration of the Cook murders had become my textbook” (224). Hegerat even arranges to meet with the retired lawyer-turned-author, reporting on her impressions of him and

their conversation, the latter further confirming her sense that “he himself had considerable doubt” that Cook was guilty (225). Pecover extends Hegerat a vote of confidence via a letter to her several weeks later, after he has read one of her novels—a gift she gave to him at their meeting: “He had read my novel and said that he believed Cook had now ‘fallen into good and eminently competent hands,’ which I welcome.” However, her admission that his confidence feels “misplaced,” that she fears she will “end up with even more questions than Pecover” highlights, once again, the difficulty of determining the truth, even after doing exhaustive research (229). Similarly, Hegerat’s reference to Anne Marie McDonald’s *The Way the Crow Flies* (2003), a fictionalized version of the infamous Steven Truscott murder case, reinforces the notion that truth is difficult to determine, and that justice may well miscarry.⁹ This reference to the murder of a young girl also underscores the power of lingering childhood fears, intensifying the sense of foreboding that suffuses each of *the Boy’s* narrative strands: “Once again, I was eleven years old, imagining a girl just my age riding into a summer afternoon on her bike, and never coming home again” (42).

However, the author’s boldest, most powerful intertextual references weave the Cook murders directly into *the Boy’s* fictional narrative. Shortly after Jake, Louise, and Danny move to Valmer where they purchase a “charming” older home (once an Anglican parsonage), Louise, while unpacking an old box of Brenda’s things, discovers a “yellowed scrapbook” filled with newspaper clippings—a series of *Edmonton Sun* articles from 1984 revisiting the Cook murders.

What kind of morbid interest possessed Brenda to keep these clippings? People she knew? But 1959? The articles were written twenty-five years after the crime and must have been in Brenda’s keeping and then in Jake’s for the next ten years ... She will ask Jake about this. (70)

Louise later learns from her sister-in-law, Phyllis, that Brenda knew Robert Cook. According to Phyllis, Brenda “met him once at a party when she was in high school, and she never got over the whole bloody deal” (177). When Jake later tells Louise to throw out the scrapbook, she instead stores it (secretly) in the basement. While Louise understandably queries the author about her decision to place the Cook story so directly into

the fictional narrative (*Whoa! ... what are those newspaper clippings doing in my story?*) and the author replies that she too is “still amazed that I placed them there” (74), this strategy, like the other metafictional devices Hegerat employs, complicates and intensifies *the Boy’s* interrelated narrative strands and, of course, the underlying quest for “truth.” Clearly, the presence of the real story within the fictional one serves to foreground the role of the stepmother in both, as is particularly apparent when Louise returns to the scrapbook some time later and discovers the headline: “*Place Usurped by Hated Stepmother, Spoiled Son Turns to Crime*” (96). Hegerat’s question—“How does someone learn to love someone else’s child?”—has clearly become Louise’s question as she finds herself a loving mother to her own two children and increasingly alienated from and fearful of Danny.

While the dissenting opinions about Cook’s guilt leave her with some “doubts about the conviction” (171), Louise nevertheless lies awake at night, “thinking about Daisy Cook ...” (174), and admits to Phyllis that she is afraid of Daniel (177). Louise tries to resist her darkest fears about Danny, telling herself that he is, after all, her beloved husband’s son, “a boy she’s known since he was twelve years old, the brother of her own children,” and further insisting that Danny “is not Robert Raymond Cook” and “she is not Daisy Cook. There is no connection. None” (201). Nevertheless, that she keeps Brenda’s scrapbook, against Jake’s will, not only underscores Louise’s lingering doubts, but perhaps also the author’s own uncertainty about how the story/ies should/would/did end. This dramatic interpenetration of the two narratives not only builds suspense in both, but also, once again, foregrounds the difficulty of answering the fundamental questions (what happened and why) in either historical narratives or fictional ones.

The author admits defeat with regard to the historical narrative, confessing that she is not able to “imagine Daisy’s ending ... what happened in the white bungalow on 25 June 1959.” Louise, resentful, challenges her: “*Why don’t you just write the story and cut mine loose?*” When the author counters that she can’t because no one really knows what happened, Louise asserts: “*You’re a writer. Make it up.*” The author refuses, noting that anything less than the truth “dishonors these people” (202). Louise, then, takes up the challenge of entering the Cook home on that June evening, saying she has dreamed a number of details, which she skillfully provides. But she too must stop, unable or unwilling to take the narrative any further

than when Ray and Bobby enter the living room together. As Hegerat has confided, “The problem with the Cook Story was that the people in it were real. The ending was written, and there was no redemption” (188).

Conclusion

In both *Filumena* and *the Boy* it is not primarily the historical narrative that offers redemption, but the fictional one. Murrell makes little attempt to focus the audience’s attention on the facts of the Lawson murder case, to use their scantiness, or the clearly biased context in which the trial took place to redeem his central character; rather, it is a fictional strategy—the narrative arc of the tragic heroine of grand opera—that enables Murrell to end his story of the terrible truth on a high note, and his female heroine (like Verdi’s Violetta or Puccini’s Mimi) to triumph in spite of the forces of fate that would make her a helpless victim. Similarly, it is not in “The Roads Back” but in “The Boy” that Hegerat offers the reassurance that readers crave. Here the author is in control, and while cruelty, death, and sorrow inhabit the fictional world she creates, their order of magnitude is considerably less than the complex imperatives of fate and/or history that shaped the real-life Cook tragedy. In the fictional story, though his father dies, Daniel struggles toward a better life as he and Louise begin the process of reconciliation; here, in this fictional telling of the “truth,” readers can find the modicum of hope and happiness they long for.

And yet, the non-fictional narratives are nevertheless very important parts of both *Filumena* and *the Boy*; indeed, in each, the fictive elements in many ways serve the historical narrative, constituting (along with the strategies that link the two) the “inventive and dramatic techniques to support fact-based narratives” that Charles Foran pinpoints as the defining feature of creative non-fiction. Moreover, while history—the stories of the real *Filumena* and of the real Robert Raymond Cook—may offer precious little in the way of clarity, justice, or happy endings, they do serve as compelling cautionary tales. As historically-based narratives, both works offer readers a great deal to ponder about causes and effects, innocence and culpability, as they consider how the “real story” might have been different, better. Thus one might say that in skillfully wrought, historically based creative non-fiction about tragic events, narrative itself ultimately

triumphs, allowing readers the best of two quite palatable and more or less compatible stories: a fact-based story that enables them to look backward from a vantage point that offers the insights and self-satisfactions of hindsight, and a fictional one that enables them to look forward to a world where their best intentions define them and their finest dreams ultimately prevail.

One might say that each of these multi-faceted texts, in its own way, highlights the degree to which all writing, be it fiction or non-fiction (for example, journalism, history, autobiography, fiction, poetry, operatic libretti), is the construction of a particular, limited sensibility and further, a construction that is inseparable from the literary conventions that make expression and interpretation possible. In producing such works, these Alberta writers have illuminated the difficulty of the quest for truth; in drawing inspiration for their narratives from Alberta's history, enlarging and complicating the corpus of stories that construct Alberta in the minds of an increasing number of diverse readers, they might also be seen as bearing testimony to Robert Kroetsch's famous assertion that "the fiction makes us real," while artfully inviting us to appreciate the fineness of the line between what is real and what is imagined.

NOTES

- 1 John Brownlee, the Attorney General in the UFA government (and later Premier), attended the Picariello/Lassandro trial daily throughout its duration, providing concrete evidence of the UFA government's resolve to crush rum-running.
- 2 Interestingly, the heart-shaped logo on the Website maintained by the Town of Stettler (www.stettler.net/default.cfm) proclaims the city to be "the heart of Alberta." Currently boasting close to six thousand inhabitants, Stettler was home to approximately five thousand in 1959 when the Cook murders took place. Highlighting the theme that all is not always as it may seem on the surface, Jack Pecover, in *The Work of Justice: The Trials of Robert Raymond Cook: The Story of the Last Man Hanged in Alberta* (1996), points out that this logo carries an element of irony for those old enough to remember a time (now fading) when, due to its being the site of two mass murders in addition to those of the Cook family, Stettler "... had come as close as anything Alberta has to offer to being a heart of darkness" (102).
- 3 As Pecover points out in *The Work of Justice*, while Cook was actually charged and convicted of only his father's murder, "... in a loose and non-technical sense, he was convicted as well of the murder of all the remaining members of his family ..." (xx).
- 4 Estacio also discusses why being the son of immigrants drew him to this project in the third disc (Estacio and Murrell). John Murrell's comments on various aspects of the opera are also included on this disc. See also Hays.

- 5 According to Kelly Robinson, director and choreographer of the 2003 Calgary production (as well as several subsequent productions), this balance is meant to reflect Picariello's insistence that members of the Crowsnest Italian community use English as much as possible (qtd. in Remington A3).
- 6 Not surprisingly, soprano Laura Whalen felt a weight of responsibility in playing Filumena, the historical character so central to the opera, some of whose relatives were present on the opening night. As she put it, "I feel an enormous responsibility. It's really important to me that I play her honestly, that I remember that she was living here, in this province" (Remington A3).
- 7 All quotes from the opera's libretto are taken from a live recording of the Edmonton Opera Production of *Filumena* on 9 March 2006, which appears on Disc 1 of a three-disc set produced by Filu Productions in 2007.
- 8 It seems important to note that while Estacio and Murrell present Filumena Lassandro and Emilio Picariello—and the Crowsnest Italian community more generally—in a favorable light, in choosing this particular Italian immigrant story, they could be accused of pandering to stereotypes. Many Italians resent the way they are represented in popular culture, particularly the seemingly endless focus on an Italian as mobster, and many might well be less than pleased by yet another representation with such a focus. See, for example, L'Orfano (5-11); Scambray (2-13).
- 9 The intertextuality here, as elsewhere in the book, extends to the internet. In this instance, the author searches online for information to refresh her memory of the Truscott case, learning that the fourteen-year-old Truscott, who had been sentenced to hang just two days before Cook was sentenced, ultimately had his sentence commuted. Truscott, like Cook, always maintained his innocence, and in 2007, he was proved innocent and released.

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