AN ISOLATED INCIDENT

EMILY MAGUIRE

READING NOTES
Dear Reader,

A few years ago I began to be bothered by how many books, TV shows and films open with the death of a beautiful young woman.

We see her body or have it described to us in detail – all that smooth skin, all that firm flesh; all that blood and bruising and violation.

And then we see the face of the cop or detective and we know he (it’s almost always a he) is pained and will not rest until this wrong is righted. We’ve had a minute to consider the suffering of the young woman, now it’s time for the real story – the suffering of the man who must avenge her death.

I had enough. I started avoiding fiction – on screen or page – that promised a story about a man whose struggle begins when the life of a woman ends. But what I couldn’t avoid was the real world where every day women and girls are assaulted, brutalised and murdered. Watching the late news one night I counted four stories in a row in which women had been raped, assaulted or killed. Each was reported as if it had nothing to do with the others.

From time-to-time a murder would catch the public imagination and the victim became a symbol, a poster girl (sometimes literally) for various political and ideological causes. I started to wonder why some acts of violence become big stories, why some victims become public property, while the vast majority of abuses go unnoticed by all except those directly affected?

And then I started to think about those directly affected, those suffering the incredible, complicated grief of having someone they love taken from them in such a brutal way. How does it feel to have strangers use your loved one’s face and story to make their point or improve their ratings? Is it a comfort to know the nation is enraged even if none of them have the slightest clue about the actual woman they’re raging over?

I wanted to tell a story about how it feels to deal with terrible grief while blinded by the media spotlight, and about how the attention paid to that death obscures the everyday violence that gets 60 seconds on the late news if it gets any attention at all. I wanted to write a story that starts with a beautiful dead girl and then moves not to the grizzled detective who’ll make it all better but to a living woman who unlike her murdered sister cannot be idealised, mythologised or co-opted into a cause.

That living woman is Chris Rogers and the story that grew from my exploration of her grief and rage (of my grief and rage) is An Isolated Incident.

Emily Maguire
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When 25-year-old Bella Michaels is brutally murdered in the small town of Strathdee, the community is stunned and a media storm descends. Unwillingly thrust into the eye of that storm is Bella’s beloved older sister, Chris, a barmaid at the local pub, whose apparent easygoing nature conceals hard-won wisdom and the kind of street-smarts only experience can bring.

As Chris is plunged into despair and searches for answers, reasons, explanation – anything – that could make even the smallest sense of Bella’s death, her ex-husband, friends and neighbours do their best to support her. But as the days tick by with no arrest, Chris’s suspicion of those around her grows.

An Isolated Incident is a psychological thriller about everyday violence, the media’s obsession with pretty dead girls, the grip of grief and the myth of closure, and the difficulties of knowing the difference between a ghost and a memory, between a monster and a man.

The Author


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Thematic plot and summary

‘Bella liked everyone. It’s just that she didn’t trust men very much. They had to prove themselves first, you know.’

‘Why d’you reckon she didn’t trust them?’

‘Because she knew what they were capable of.’ (p 9)

An Isolated Incident is not your standard crime thriller. It is no ‘whodunnit’, nor is it a detective novel. As Linda Morris writes for the Sydney Morning Herald, this novel ‘flips the classic police murder mystery template on its head – the sort where the female victim meets a grisly end and the drama switches to the pursuit of the killer by the angst-ridden detectives’. Tracking down the criminals who committed the rape and murder of Bella Michaels is not the primary focus of the story, and ultimately becomes a sidenote to the novel’s central themes: gendered violence, media sensationalism, victim-blaming and moral integrity.

Through the dual perspectives of Bella’s older sister Chris and a young female reporter covering the story named May Norman, the author explores the violence inherent in our society and how it both terrifies and fascinates us. The story begins with Chris, a local barmaid and occasional sex-worker, finding out that her beloved little sister has been found dead. From here, we follow Chris as she freefalls through her grief and struggles to fathom the unfathomable. We learn how easy it is to romanticise the dead, and how fierce we can be when it comes to protecting those we love. We understand how women can simultaneously fear and adore the opposite sex; condemning behaviour in one man and excusing it in another. Chris also shows us how we internalise the stories we hear about ourselves: ‘These giant tits that told everybody I was a scrubber and easy and trash… I gave in. Not to the men who tried to corner me, but to the name-callers and whispers. I pretended to be the thing they all thought I was.’ (p 5)

When May Norman is first introduced, it is through the byline of an article that she has written and published with AustraliaToday.com – a fictional online news outlet. These articles, documenting the case and community reaction to Bella’s death, continue to appear throughout the novel. But we also get to know May as a character in her own dedicated chapters. While Chris hides from the media to process her guilt and grief, May develops a compulsion to research and report the crime long after the news cycle has moved on. Through May we gain insight into the struggle to maintain journalistic integrity when editors and audiences demand more and more details, faster and faster. We also understand how profoundly we are shaken by seemingly random crimes that ‘could happen to anyone’ – how they both captivate and repel us, and how we try desperately to make sense of them as a form of self-preservation.

Ultimately, it is everything surrounding the crime that grips the reader, rather than the crime itself. We view this ‘isolated incident’ from the perspective of a loved one left behind, a community reeling with shock, a reporter documenting it and an audience reading about it. An Isolated Incident is a searing indictment of our society – one that strips away the myths and stories we tell ourselves about good and evil, and the nature of humanity.

‘People ask if what I’ve been through has made me afraid and of course it has. But not of monsters. Only of those who insist they exist.’ (p 343)
Questions for Discussion

1. Read Tom Meagher’s essay ‘The Danger of the Monster Myth’. Discuss in relation to *An Isolated Incident*, and to the public discourse about violence perpetrated by men against women in the real world.

2. ‘We encourage people to walk together, females to walk together, but if you’re by yourself you just need to be aware of your circumstances, take reasonable precautions.’
   –Detective Inspector Michael Hughes of Victoria Police, as quoted in news outlets.
   Mr Hughes drew substantial criticism for making these statements, among others, regarding women’s behaviour in the wake of the murder of a young woman in a Melbourne park. Do you think comments like his are helpful in the wake of a tragedy?

3. Emily Maguire is a successful writer for a number of magazines, newspapers and websites. Her articles and essays address many themes explored in this novel – particularly sex and feminism. Visit the ‘Other Writing’ page on her website and select an article to discuss in relation to *An Isolated Incident*.

4. ‘The local rumour mill churned with speculation that the killer or killers of Bella Michaels may have struck again, but all such talk stopped with the arrest of 24-year-old Bradley Miller.’ (p 113)
   Small towns are notorious for their overactive “rumour mills”, but are also considerably insular and private. How do you think community response to senseless crime or tragedy differs in a small town compared to a large city?

5. ‘The first time a man hit me I was fourteen.’ (p 151)
   ‘Someone who’s been hit as much as me should’ve known that seeing a blow coming, asking for it even, doesn’t make it hurt any less.’ (p 2)
   The insidiousness of domestic violence is threaded throughout this novel. Chris, in particular, has been the victim of domestic violence at the hands of a number of perpetrators throughout her life. How do you think this shapes her understanding of and relationship with men?

6. ‘Look, yes, two years before I met him, Nate spent a month in jail for breaking his girlfriend’s nose. He would have spent longer, but the fact she’d first slashed his chest with a broken bottle meant the judge went easier on him. Nate got sober right after it happened and stayed that way for almost six years.’ (pp 110-1)
   While condemning the violence and controlling behaviour of some men, Chris excuses and justifies her ex-husband’s behaviour. What does this tell us about internalised victim-blaming?
7. ‘You know, I’ve often been told I’m too trusting, too generous, too open. I used to think these were compliments, but recently I’ve come to realise that they are not. They say “trusting” and mean “stupid”, “generous” and mean “easy”, “open” and mean “shameless”.’ (p 9)
Discuss the euphemisms that people use to subtly disapprove of women’s behaviour.
What other seemingly positive attributes have you heard used in this way?

8. ‘The more he acts like a goddamn macho bikie sergeant the more I worry about him being smashed up and broken.’ (p 35)
Discuss the societal pressures that men feel to hide emotion or vulnerability behind machismo. Is physical aggression the logical boiling point of this kind of pressure?

9. “Fuck off or I’ll call the cops, charge you with goddamn harassment.”
He let out a little laugh, said something about not being my enemy, but he turned and headed away from me.’ (p 110)
Chris is sceptical and suspicious of the media. Where do you draw the line between freedom of information and personal privacy? Between newsworthiness and sensationalism?

10. ‘Next day I was so hungover I could barely open my eyes, but when I did I saw in his face that he would never forgive me and he never really has.’ (p 111)
The correlation between alcoholism and a range of anti-social behaviour is addressed a number of times in An Isolated Incident. In Australia, politicians and media personalities frequently blame ‘alcohol-fuelled violence’ for late night fights, physical and sexual attacks and ‘coward punches’. To what extent do you feel alcohol (or other substances) can or should be blamed for the behaviour of those under its influence?

11. Chris performs sexual acts in exchange for money, but ‘it wasn’t until I was in bed that night that the word prostitute jumped into my mind.’ (p 38)
In what ways does An Isolated Incident change or challenge your perception of sex workers?

12. Infidelity is a significant theme in the novel. Chris, May and Bella have all had sexual relationships with men who are married or ‘taken’. Each of these characters have very different personalities and values; what commentary does this provide about the common trope of ‘the other woman’?

13. ‘Those things hadn’t just happened to Bella; someone had done them. Someones. Someones who were still walking, driving around free and easy as could be.’ (p 79)
Discuss this in relation to common catchphrases like ‘Violence against women’ and ‘No means no’. In what ways do they potentially absolve, or fail to properly address, perpetrators of violence? Are these phrases outdated?
14. “‘Hope I find those fuckers first,’” he said. “‘Gunna do worse to them than they did to her.’” (p 23)
Violence is often encouraged or accepted when it is used against violent offenders. Do you believe in retribution, or that ‘an eye for an eye leaves the world blind’? Discuss.

15. As Chris spirals to the depths of her despair, she begins to see and hear Bella around her home. Do you think these are hallucinations or visits by a ghost? Or perhaps something in between?

**Writing style**

1. The novel is punctuated with news articles and interview transcripts. What do these add to the story and your understanding of characters, events and plot developments?

2. The story alternates between the perspectives of Chris and May. Chris’s sections are told in first-person, while May’s sections are told in third-person. In what other ways are the narrative voices distinct from one another?

3. Typically Australian slang or colloquialisms are used throughout *An Isolated Incident* – ‘lotto’, ‘prozzy’, ‘dirty bugger’, ‘yonks’ etc. Find some other examples in the text and discuss how they lend authenticity to the characters and the setting.

4. While the catalyst for *An Isolated Incident* is a violent crime, it is not a standard crime novel. It is more of a character study and provides an allegory for our society’s obsession with sex and violence. Can you think of other books that defy easy categorisation in this way?
Q. An Isolated Incident flips the crime genre on its head. Why did you choose to de-emphasise the hunt for the killer?

A. I wanted to tell a story about the aftermath of a terrible crime, not the story of the crime itself, so my focus was always going to be on the victim’s sister, Chris, rather than on those conducting the investigation.

As I wrote and sank more deeply into Chris’s viewpoint, the hunt for the killer became even less important. I understood that finding the killer would be, at best, a brief moment of comfort. Chris will still have to go on living without Bella. She’ll also have to go on living with the bone deep understanding of what human beings are capable of. Capturing one killer won’t return her to the way she was before Bella’s murder.

Q. After Bella’s death, the media, the locals and the police, scrutinise Bella’s relationships and her reputation, looking for a reason why she was attacked. How do we change the focus from victim blaming (‘don’t get raped’) back to the perpetrator (‘don’t rape’)?

A. Believing that we are able to prevent our own rape or murder by making certain decisions or behaving in certain ways can be comforting. It’s false comfort, of course, because the truth is that these crimes are perpetrated against all kinds of people, dressed in every possible way, acting in any imaginable manner. It’s a hard truth but an important one: the only way to avoid being a victim of violence is to never come across a person willing to commit violence, and given that such people rarely advertise that willingness, it’s impossible to avoid.

Q. Bella is seen as a plausible target by some, with her ‘blend of sexiness and innocence’. Are we as a society still caught in the Madonna/whore paradigm? Or are we breaking away from it?

A. It’s better than it once was for sure, but outbreaks are pretty common, still — particularly when it comes to female victims of violence. All of the quotes in May’s news articles in An Isolated Incident are paraphrases of those found in recent, real world reporting of crimes against women.

Q. Chris remembers her mother training her to hold a key between her knuckles whenever she walks alone. How do we reconcile empowering and protecting women with a rejection of victim blaming?

A. Taking precautions — or teaching your kids to take precautions — against random attackers is totally sensible and understandable. Everybody does this to a greater or lesser extent, I think. The problem is when people — especially those in authority — respond to either a specific attack on a woman, or to the larger problem of violence against women, by talking about victim behaviours. The societal problem of violence against women requires leaders who think about why men attack women and how they might be stopped, not how individual women might dodge one of those attackers.
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Q. Reporters flock to Strathdee after Bella’s murder – she’s young, pretty and white, so she will sell papers. As Chris observes, the media becomes our pornographer, satiating the public’s desire for brutal tragedy. Do you think the media seeks to perpetuate a particular narrative of violence against women?

A. I don’t believe it’s as conscious as that. Members of the media are members of the same society they’re reporting on and so it’s unsurprising that tropes and ideas that are prevalent in that society are reproduced in reporting. And the reporting then strengthens the idea, and on we go…

If you take a look at the statistics (or more horribly still, the details) of women murdered in Australia you’ll probably be shocked by how many there are and by the circumstances. More than one woman a week. The vast majority by someone she knew well. Compare with the cases that make the headlines — two or three a year, murdered in ways that conform more to the CSI or Law and Order narrative. I think it’s important to ask why the media — and its audience, that’s us — treat some victims as more worthy of our attention than others.

Q. Bella’s death ignites a furore from women’s rights groups, who treat Bella’s case as an example of why Australian attitudes must change. In a sense, these groups take ownership of Bella, without consideration for her family or community – what purpose can it serve when pretty dead girls become symbols to rally around?

A. This is an uncomfortable, complicated thing to talk about. Appropriating a woman’s death, without regard to the feelings of those who loved her and without honouring the individuality of that woman, is cynical and unethical. But violence against women is a national (indeed, international) crisis and each death is part of a pattern that must be understood and addressed if things are ever going to get better. So we have a situation in which linking the deaths to each other, and to larger questions of gender and violence, is necessary for change to happen, but doing so risks hurting those dealing with one death in particular in the most intense, private way. Also, as I’ve noted above, choosing some to elevate as symbols over others risks skewing the public understanding of violence against women, who the victims and perpetrators are, how it happens.

Q. A friend of a Strathdee local jailed for killing his wife tells reporters, ‘I never would have thought him capable of this.’ Do you think violence against women is not viewed as a serious problem, or perhaps that this is the lie we tell ourselves to excuse our inaction?

A. Again, it can be comforting to think that violence happens only to certain kinds of people and is therefore not your problem. And again, a look at the statistics and details of such crimes shatters that comfort: whatever demographic or social stratum you’re part of, violence is happening. It’s going to keep happening as long as we tell ourselves that only a certain kind of man does things like this, or only a certain kind of woman is a victim.
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Q. *An Isolated Incident* deals with serious themes and holds a mirror to Australian society. What are you hoping the readers will take away from the book?

A. My greatest hope with any of my books is that readers will be gripped by the story, but I also hope people come away thinking about the way events like those in the book play out in their own worlds. I don’t just mean events like nationally reported murders, but the everyday interactions between people that might foster or help conceal violence.