



Ghost Child

Caroline Overington

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In 1982 Victorian police were called to a home on a housing estate an hour west of Melbourne. There, they found a five-year-old boy lying on the carpet. There were no obvious signs of trauma, but the child, Jacob, died the next day.

The story made the headlines and hundreds attended the funeral. Few people were surprised when the boy's mother and her boyfriend went to prison for the crime. Police declared themselves satisfied with the result, saying there was no doubt that justice had been done.

And yet, for years rumours swept the estate and clung like cobwebs to the long-vacant house: there had been a cover-up. The real perpetrator, at least according to local gossip, was the boy's six-year-old sister, Lauren...

Twenty years on, Lauren has created a new life for herself, but details of Jacob's death begin to resurface and the story again makes the newspapers. As Lauren struggles with the ghosts of her childhood, it seems only a matter of time before the past catches up with her.

Ghost Child Details

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Author : Caroline Overington

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Suzanne says

Caroline Overington's writing style is really easy to read. Again she's written chapter by chapter from different characters' perspectives. She nails the voices of various Aussies - the cop, the foster carer, the underprivileged and abused. I enjoyed the voice of the police officer, very salt of the earth, and also I think she captures the essence of the 1980's as well. It just all sounds real. The way she writes makes you seem to just fall into the peoples minds and I think it really works. I do recommend this, and am looking forward to another. As always, quite dark themes though. I get the feeling she's seen a lot of this stuff in her career as a journo. Again a lot of issues relating to DOCS and as a mum to four young kids, wow there's a lot of this stuff in real life too, but thankful I am that I live a good life.

Michelle McCartney says

This is the very first book I have read since I was in school (a very long time ago) its story kept me interested all the way through, and has started me on a new journey. Relax and read.

Kath says

Disappointing read as I loved her second book. Interesting subject matter and plot, but it took too long to get to the point and then it was rushed. Spent far too much time devoted to irrelevant details of minor characters' lives.

Karen says

Short commentary as this was read for our face to face bookclub meeting yesterday. Lovers of this book will be pleased to know I was very much in the minority because I really did not like this book. Partially that's because of some stereotypical coincidences between the characters in this and the last book by the same author read - damaged / fragile women and more balanced / carefree despite trials blokes. Partially it's because there was so much telling it felt like there'd be an exam to pass at the end. Mostly it was because I read the prologue, you've pretty much read the whole book.

Jess says

I absolutely loved this book. This is the second time I have read it but I was still guessing throughout the whole book what happened to Jacob Cashman? Like other reviews I've read, I had to keep reminding myself that this book was fiction. Caroline Overington has done so well with this book that I'm looking forward to reading many more of her novels.

Deborah Biancotti says

This is a smart, suspenseful story, plainly told.

When a young boy is found dead, his family is split up: the mother is sent to prison for murder & his three siblings wind up in various homes, private & state. For one of them, this is a kind of salvation, though he later takes to drinking. His sisters fare worse, falling into unhappy & early sexual relations with a variety of ill-suited suitors. I could draw conclusions about safety & hope & the tragedy that is family life for so many young people. I'm aware, though, that I may be travelling outside the auspices of the book, which sticks diligently to realism - & not philosophy. And oddly, the sister without any parental love fares better than her younger counterpart, which I guess goes towards the idea that some people are born with it, that survival instinct, and some aren't.

The format of the book is intriguing: each chapter is told from a different point of view, from the grown-up children, to the arresting officer, to the foster parents, etc. Some of these narratives add to the throughput of the story - particularly the early ones, which detail the immediate after-effects of the crime. Some of the narratives feel like they drift too far from the spine of the story, & could be shortened. (And okay, by the time I started Part Two, I was growing just a little bored.)

The voices do often lack individuality, IMHO, sounding like one of two types of characters, a) a reasonably educated person, & b) someone not so reasonably educated. The chapters, collected together, seem sometimes to miss the narrative or travel tangentially to it. There's no word on the trial itself, for example. The mother eventually dies 'off camera' without ever earning her own narrative. (I would've been very interested to hear her side of the story.) Large events happen in the lives of the survivors which seem to have little impact (though this could be the point). And, most notably, of course, the use of first-person past tense does occasionally make the novel feel more like a summary than a story. When one character comments that 'this next bit will be hard to read', I wondered who the audience was, in the minds of the characters. Who did *they* think they were talking to? Was the novel meant to be a historical record, had they all been called into a Royal Commission, were they putting together their memoirs? Or was it something else again?

I guess, now that I think about it, I didn't really care about any of the living characters. They're ciphers, really, vehicles for expressing pain. I was more interested in the poor kid who died ('the ghost child' that haunts their lives & this book), & this is what kept me reading. The Big Reveal at the end didn't work for me, I admit. But I got the idea of what the author wanted from her ending. It's sad & horrible & goes part way towards an explanation of the outcomes for the surviving siblings.

Like I said, a clever book, extremely easy to read, & it kept me up reading past my bed time. Not a lot of books can do that.

Disclaimer: I won this book in a comp!

#aww2013 no.6

Faye says

Great story, I had the who dunnit all wrong - which I think I am really good at - so this really tricked me. Love this author. A must read.

Rikke says

It actually took me a while to figure out this book was fiction. Find it brilliant to write a book like this - I wish I had thought of it.

I really liked this book - the characters are so interesting and the whole story could very well have been a true crime.

I think the semi bad reviews on this side about the book is mainly by people who began reading it, expecting the crime and Jacob to be the main focus. The book is more about what happens to the remaining members of the family and why. I loved it!

Kate and Carson Drew says

You could be forgiven for thinking this was a non fiction book instead of a fiction the way it's told. Through out the book the chapters are all told by different characters in the book. It has a very suprising ending.

Chloe says

Amazing story - I loved it. The different voices and different views are so well written. The author swaps seamlessly from voice to voice, like the harried social worker (DOCS), struggling to do the right thing while being tied by protocol, to a police officer who has seen it all before, to a foster mother who struggles with becoming too attached to her foster children, to reporters who see the shock factor in the story, to the {now grown up} children around whom the scandal is based. It's all so very Australian {which I LOVE}, and relevant.

In fact, you could be forgiven for mistaking this book as non-fiction instead of a work of fiction. It's so real and believable and no doubt, albeit unfortunately, echoes real life events. It's a story of the helpless and the hopeless and the struggle to leave a past behind that will forever haunt the future.

I couldn't put this book down!

Tara E says

A fairly readable book with an interesting and engaging premise: murder mystery of a five year old not twenty years ago. Who was responsible, the mother, boyfriend or six year old sister?

It's written in the form where each chapter is from a different perspective, from the sister Lauren, to the police Sargent, the brother, sister, various foster parents, reporters, coroners etc this is interesting approach and allows the whole multi faceted view of a single event.

Having said that I have to say my two main problems with this book were:

1. The writing style I noticed was a bit ordinary at times. He said, i said, she said- there was a lot of 'saying' in this book, for instance.
2. In looking at the different perspectives of people, there was just too much detail in how they did their jobs. Eg the history of welfare protocols, reporters procedures etc etc So much so that in my opinion (although at times interesting) it often detracted from the main narrative of the Cashman kids and the murder of Jacob.

In all it's a good easy read with an interesting storyline. It could have been improved somewhat and perhaps finessed but that's just my view.

Helen McKenna says

Back in 1982 a five year old boy dies after apparently being bashed by strangers on his way home from the shops. Immediate suspicion is cast on the story being told by his mother and her boyfriend and much speculation and scandal haunt the Barrett housing estate, west of Melbourne for years to come. Although the case is gradually forgotten, it is suddenly thrust back into the spotlight almost 30 years later when the sister of the victim faces court on an unrelated manner. Will the real story finally be revealed after all these years?

In some ways Ghost Child is almost like a non-fiction book, as it tells the story through the viewpoint of multiple witnesses - eg the investigating police officer, journalists, social workers etc. In saying that, it didn't detract from the story - in fact it worked quite well as you got a sense of the crime from many different perspectives. The writing itself is good - well paced and fairly tight.

Many themes are explored in the novel - the welfare 'sub-class', child abuse, fostering of children and the many shortcomings of the child protection system in Victoria (although it could be any Australian state) in the 1980s. You do get the sense that all these topics have been well researched and present a true account of what happened to many children. In terms of time and place, the author really gets the era and location spot on, with the many voices in the novel backing this up very well.

The suspense throughout is gradual, building towards the end when you know the real story is hopefully going to be revealed. By the time you reach the conclusion it is a real page turner.

Despite the sad (yet realistic) theme within the book, there is still a sense of hope that life can turn out OK (sometimes) with a bit of luck and a lot of determination, even if you've had an horrific childhood.

Jenny says

Although this is still a worthy read, I must admit that I was expecting to like it more than I did. I found the alternating narrator (something I usually like) to be a distraction from the story. I also thought that the original victim in this story quickly became a bit second hand to the stories of the other characters... and that is a shame. However at the end of the book it becomes evident that there are many "victims" in such situations.

Karen Elizabeth says

Enjoyed this book. A very simple clear writing style. The subject matter is a bit gruelling and for someone with no experience of dealing with these agencies, I found myself hoping this wasn't an accurate reflection. Coincidentally mentioned it to a student at work who said she had been a ward of the state for some years and described very similar experiences to those outlined in the book. Poor girl. Also interesting to get a feel for what life in Australia was like - then and now. Not highbrow, but an enjoyable read nonetheless and I would probably read another book of hers.

Bells says

I found this moderately engaging but off putting at the same time. Clunky at times; awkward and a bit too much telling rather than showing. But I stuck with it and found elements quite beautiful and sad.
