

**Stella Budrikis, *The Edward Street Baby Farm*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2020; pp. 256; RRP \$32.99 paperback.**

True crime books report on crimes from the beginning of their investigation to their legal proceedings. These books not only restore the lived experiences of the perpetrators and their victims, but also reconstruct the complex circumstances in which the crimes were committed.

True crime books help readers see all the parties involved as genuine people. Instead of mere statistics and sensationalised media coverage, we follow the behind-the-scene stories of how crimes were initiated, conducted, scrutinised and solved. We experience the considerable impact of these events on individuals and communities.

In writing *The Edward Street Baby Farm*, Western Australian author Stella Budrikis confesses: 'I've always been fascinated by the way people's lives interact, bringing all their past experiences and personalities crashing together at a single place and time, before diverging again like billiard balls on a table.'

One of the three people featured in the book is Alice Mitchell, the notorious 'baby farmer' who was arrested in Perth in 1907 for the murder of a five-month-old girl. During the inquest and subsequent trial, the public was shocked to learn that 37 out of 43 infants in her care had died.

Questions were asked: How could so many babies have died when Mitchell's house was visited regularly by Perth's first female health inspector, Harriet Lenihan? And how could 25 of the death certificates have been signed by the same children's specialist, Dr Edward Officer, without him raising any concern about such a high mortality rate?

Through meticulous research on court records, state archives and newspaper reports from the time, Budrikis examines the events leading up to and beyond this tragedy. Her expertise as a general practitioner, pastoral carer and addictions clinic doctor helps shaping a highly intelligent narrative that is both informative and empathetic.

Budrikis further reveals the social history of Perth in the early 20th century, explaining how prominent criminal cases like Mitchell's can lead to essential changes in law. She pays specific attention to society's attitude towards protection of children of single mothers and other 'unfortunate' women back then.

Budrikis details how 'illegitimate' babies were often shunned by their families and society due to the lack of a parental marriage certificate. In her words, the 'illegal' status of these babies 'meant that no one felt responsible for seeing that they were well treated'.

Worse, the practice of 'baby farming' – private, for-profit foster care arrangements where the carers were purely interested in making money out of taking in children – was well known, but few seemed to care or offered any solution.

As Budrikis points out, at the time, whoever suggested these 'illegitimate' babies and their mothers should be better protected and provided with humane care

would meet the response that 'that would just encourage other women to act immorally and take advantage of the system'.

The key phrase here is 'at the time', as Budrikis maintains a highly objective tone throughout the book, paying attention to detail while being mindful of her subjects as men and women of their time. It is only in her 'Afterword' that she evaluates the Mitchell case in accordance with today's medical standards and social norms.

For example, Budrikis acknowledges 'I became quite fond of Harriet Lenihan as I wrote about her, for all her quirks'. She further admits 'as I was writing, I had to keep reminding myself that Alice Mitchell had experienced the death of three of her children from common childhood illness', citing Freud's psychoanalytical theory that 'subconscious motive and repressed emotions could influence a person's actions'.

In light of such professional detachment – which is critically necessary in true crime books – Budrikis' decision to include what is known about each of the dead infants 'portrayed largely as mere exhibits in the investigation' of the Mitchell case is highly significant, if not unprecedented. It gives agency to the unrepresented.

Budrikis' desire to ensure the hidden is seen is also evident in her selection of quotations from media coverage on the Mitchell case. While the research of the book clearly benefits from the 'almost verbatim' reporting style of the newspapers in the 1900s, the editorials and letters to the editors often quoted in length throughout the book help highlight the extent to which the murder trial had gripped Perth as a community.

Particularly in the fifteenth chapter 'Weekend Papers', considerable light is shed on the agenda of *Truth*, a weekly newspaper solely owned by John Norton since 1896 and published in Perth from 1903 to 1931. That Dr Officer was 'the chief target of Norton's editorial diatribe' is a reminder of the fairness and balance required in contemporary reading and representation of historical criminal cases.

Overall, Budrikis should be congratulated for having produced a well-researched and engaging book that is full of compassion and empathy. Compared to other true crime accounts, such as that of Louisa Collins by Caroline Overington (2014) and Carol Baxter (2015) and that of Martha Needle by Brian Williams (2018) and Samantha Battams (2019), the aim of *The Edward Street Baby Farm* is purely to present 'the story of how three people and a community became entangled in a tragic situation and its aftermath' – no more and no less.

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