

Ngaio Marsh's New Zealand Gothic

Gail Pittaway

While well established as a crime writer in her native country New Zealand and abroad, in the Golden Age of crime writing, between the two World Wars, Ngaio Marsh also explored more than the simple whodunit genre. Along with mysterious and sudden deaths and the investigations by her professional police investigator, Roderick Alleyn, whose intelligence is matched by his intuition, Marsh also revels in the uncanny and supernatural, several spectacular and innovative means of murder (involving wool presses in one and a boiling mud pool in another), the impact of locale, especially isolation, on the actions of criminals and victims, and the workings, in a couple of her New Zealand based stories, of Makutu or Maori magic.

In an attempt to further the debate concerning New Zealand writing and the nature of a New Zealand Gothic, first identified by William Shafer in his 1998 work *Mapping the Godzone*, this paper will consider the Gothic elements of Marsh's four detective novels set in New Zealand, *A Vintage Murder*, 1937, *Colour Scheme*, 1943, *Died in the Wool*, 1945 and *Photo Finish*, 1980.

Biographical note:

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Ngaio Marsh's New Zealand Gothic- 1,000 word summary

Critical background

In his documentary film *Cinema of unease*, (1995), actor and director Sam Neill presents a case for New Zealand's short film history as exemplifying themes that were already accepted as being embedded into the literature, through such novels as *Man Alone* (Mulgan, 1939) and the novels and short stories of Sargeson and Frame—the solitude or isolation of individuals or communities, empty landscapes with threats, seen and unseen, and extreme or eccentric characters. Recent critics (Schafer, 1998; Kava, Lawn, Paul, 2006) have identified a trans-media movement in art, photography, film and literature, as embodying a New Zealand Gothic aesthetic, while Belich and Weavers (2008) point out that most texts identified as “Kiwi Gothic” such as by Ronald Hugh Morrieson, and some of James K. Baxter and Maurice Gee, tend to focus upon small-town grotesquery or provincialism, but also that they tend to concentrate upon the Pakeha experience, as ‘prisoners in paradise’ (9).

In his Ph. D thesis for Victoria University, *The Gothic as Practice*, Timothy Jones (2010) singles out the writing of Ngaio Marsh as having been ignored in critical treatment because of its popular association as crime fiction.

Marsh must be one of the most-read New Zealand writers in an international context, but her popular detective fictions have had difficulty maintaining any kind of stature in New Zealand (210).

His point is that the exclusion of popular fiction has impeded the discussion of New Zealand literary identity, as the literature is so young and relatively small in extent but the discussions have tended to only concentrate upon critical realism. He goes on to explain that there are elements of Gothicism in most of the canonical New Zealand writers, from Katherine Mansfield to Elizabeth Knox (211).

Finally, William Schafer's view from the outside, as an American commenting upon New Zealand literature and culture, (*Mapping the Godzone*,1998), stresses the significance of Maori culture and beliefs in the development of a unique ‘Aotearoa Gothic’ where

A common cultural link between Pakeha and Maori is a belief in the hauntedness of the landscape, the sense that Aotearoa New Zealand is a land of sinister and unseen forces, of imminent (and immanent) threat, of the undead or revenant spirits. (137)

Schafer further identifies ‘chthonic experience’, (p143) or closeness to the earth, even the underworld, as being a significant factor in the Gothic of ‘down under’, along with a ‘sexualised landscape’ (144) arising out of the Maori myth of creation, which like that of the Greeks, is generated out of the procreation of father sky and mother earth, but also influences, he suggests, the sexuality of those who tread upon it.

This paper considers the four detective novels set in New Zealand, by Ngaio Marsh, one of New Zealand's most prolific and internationally lauded popular writers, in the light of this critical background, to look for the Gothic elements that they reveal. While crime fiction, with its interest in unsolved mysteries, sudden death and deviant characters, has a natural affinity with the Gothic and is associated with such Gothic writers as Poe, du Maurier and Conan Doyle, there are few contemporary discussions or analyses of this ongoing influence on a wider range of writers, despite the epithet of ‘Gothic’ being widely attributed in passing to any crime writing from Scandinavia, or

Scotland today. It will be shown that Marsh's novels, considered in chronological order of publication, *A Vintage Murder* (1937), *Colour Scheme* (1943), *Died in the Wool* (1945) and *Photo Finish* (1980) each contain some or all of the gothic tropes mentioned above, with her own version of an 'Aotearoa Gothic' lurking in their shadows and murky pools.

Summary of four novels

The earliest of the four, *Vintage murder*, (1937) is perhaps the weakest link in this argument, coming earlier in Marsh's career, as her fifth novel featuring her well-read and subtle Scotland Yard detective, Roderick Alleyn. On a holiday in New Zealand, Alleyn becomes caught up with a travelling theatre troupe on a train and befriends several of the cast, joining them in a remote city in the centre of the North Island as they prepare and rehearse their repertoire. When he is invited to an on stage cast party, he becomes witness to a murder, when the ingenious surprise of lowering a celebratory jeroboam of champagne with the curtain pulley system is sabotaged and the huge bottle lands on the head of the leading ladies' husband, in a mess of froth and blood. 'Vintage' murder, indeed, although here Marsh also introduces elements of Maori custom and local colour including greenstone artefacts which may bring bad luck.

The second novel, *Colour Scheme*, 1943 however, is rich with extreme characters, uncanny coincidences, hot springs, Nazi spies, Maori myths and breaches of tapu, and a gory death by mud pool. Alleyn goes underground as a nervy academic requiring rest and treatment at a hot springs hotel in Northland, but is in fact on the trail of a German spy who is believed to be signalling out to sea from the nearby headland. His chief suspect is pushed into a boiling mud pool the night after an off shore ship is torpedoed and sunk and Alley needs to rethink his suspicions while also investigating a murder.

Died in the Wool, 1945, follows on with a remote South Island high country setting, with Roderick Alleyn this time solving a crime that had occurred eighteen months earlier- the disappearance of a local member of parliament and, with her husband, co-owner of the sheep station- and the subsequent appearance of her bloodied body three stinking weeks later, in a bale of wool from her own station.

Photo Finish, (1980) is the penultimate Alleyn novel and Marsh's thirty-first book in this series and it features the murder of an opera singer on a remote island within a lake, that is privately owned by a millionaire. This death is by stiletto, with the added feature of including an unflattering photo of the diva on the blade stabbed through her heart.

Throughout all books Marsh celebrates the grotesque, revels in the unique landscapes and invests supernatural touches through Maori belief and *Makutu* or magic, as well as theatrical and popular superstitions.

This paper will now look in more details at the above named elements of Gothic influence which occur in these four novels and which Marsh uses to further suspense, mystery and psychological ambiguity.

Gothic elements in Marsh's four novels that were set in New Zealand