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University of Notre Dame

Camilla Nelson

What you don't know [extract]

Brief biography

Camilla Nelson lectures in Writing at The University of Notre Dame, Australia, and researches in the fields of creativity and creative practices, fiction and non-fiction writing, adaptation and history in popular culture. In addition to a range of scholarly and other essays, she is the author of two novels: *Perverse acts*, for which she was named as one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelists of the Year, and *Crooked*, which was shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Awards. Camilla has been a judge of the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Kathleen Mitchell Award, and the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelists of the Year award, and has served on the governing board of the NSW Writers' Centre. Her most recent book is a co-edited collection of essays, *On happiness: new ideas for the twenty-first century*, forthcoming from UWA Press in 2015.

Keywords

Creative writing – paranoid fiction

The death of Ned Chorley rated a paragraph on the front inside page of three of the metropolitan dailies, before it was consigned to oblivion with the help of a D-Notice and the unexpected return of the mysterious Mr Tirath Khemlani to Canberra. Farley was in the telex room when the telephone rang. He remembered it clearly because it was a Saturday, and he'd had to ring his wife Verity to collect the boys from school cricket, and the sky had been a clear summer blue.

Farley clearly remembered standing by the edge of his desk, having just finished adjusting the angle of the electric fan, which was burrowing ineffectually away through the stifling heat. It was a cranky day, another stuff-up with security clearances, which wasn't strictly unusual given a government of half-baked pinko socialists in which not even Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had permitted his staff to be security checked. Or perhaps he was cranky because the telex machine had been clattering all afternoon, because our American allies were having yet another one of their panic attacks, having long been persuaded that the country was driving itself to rack and ruin. Or perhaps he was cranky because three junior clerks had been passed over when he was hauled back to act as duty officer because young Oliver Combs had called in with a case of the flu. Either way, he was feeling petty and resentful, and had quite possibly been glaring at his secretary Leona Pemberton over the rim of his brown pottery mug.

'It's for you.' Leona mouthed the words in the theatrical style that she used to convey that the station manager, Bill Prentice, was working himself up into one of his states.

Farley took the call. 'Gerald here.'

'You did the security clearance on Ned Chorley, didn't you?' Prentice barked down the line.

Farley cleared his throat. 'I made some inquiries.'

'Find anything?'

'There was nothing to find.'

'It was a *prima facie* case for investigation.'

'I'm not sure that an undergraduate misadventure constitute a *prima facie* case of anything.'

'Insolence, Gerald. It was an early indication of his socialist leanings. Was it hostile? The interview, I mean.'

'No, he seemed an amiable chap. Shy, I think.'

'Is that all?'

'I checked the files for records of any kind of communist affiliation. There wasn't anything.'

'Are you sure?'

He'd never heard Prentice so worked up over nothing. 'Absolutely.'

'What was he like?'

'He appeared to be an intelligent boy, but nervy. I supposed that was only natural, given the circumstances. Why? Has something happened?

'He's dead.'

Farley took his time digesting the news. 'How?'

'Gunshot. At his home. I want you at the scene.'

'You want *me* to go there?'

'Well, somebody's got to.'

'What about Special Branch?'

'I've already spoken to them. They're expecting you.'

Farley put down the telephone, and stared at Leona's pinched face.

'What's the problem?' she asked.

'Truthfully?' He gave her a smile that was utterly devoid of good humour. 'I'm not sure.'

The ABC was making its final broadcast before the station shut down for the night. Farley tuned in as he drove through the night-blackened streets. Streetlights shone down through ghostly gums, onto wide-open spaces of bitumen. Eerily enough, the ABC news was also the first thing Farley heard when he walked into Chorley's suburban bungalow, encountering three uniformed constables standing guard by the door, ashing cigarettes on the orange cord carpet.

Angus McDonald, Superintendent of Special Branch, was standing in the open area under an aluminium-framed picture window that occupied the length of one wall.

'Finally,' he said.

'Superintendent?'

Chorley's study gave off from the rear of the room. From where Farley was standing, he could see an upturned office chair, with a pair of shiny black brogues jutting out at an unusual angle.

'Nasty,' he said, by way of conversation. 'Can I take a look?'

McDonald grunted, and gave him a nod. Perhaps grunts and nods were the only answers Farley was going to get.

He walked into Chorley's office, and looked around.

Chorley was young — for death, at least. He looked quite unlike the gangly young man who had walked around the National Gallery with him, talking excitedly about his future. He had a regulation bullet wound to the temple, with a revolver lying on the floor underneath, all neat and tidy. 'Suicide?'

'What do you think?'

'Looks like. But I'm hardly an expert,' said Farley.

McDonald almost sneered. 'I didn't expect that you were. Is he one of yours?'

'Afraid not.'

'Was he under investigation?'

'Sorry. Couldn't say.'

McDonald's hackles went up. 'Well, it says so, in the note that he left.'

'Really? Would you mind if I had a look?'

McDonald appeared to think it over for several seconds then ventured back outside. Left alone, Farley spent a couple of minutes poking through the blood-soaked files stamped 'Minister's Eyes Only' that were strewn across the desk. Foreign Assets. Finance Regulation. Nugan Hand Bank.

He also began wondering why Chorley had shot himself in the corner of the room, as against standing by the window, for example, drinking in a final glimpse of the artificial lake that comprised much of the view. It seemed trite, but the bitter reality was that a goodish percentage of suicides actually do not leave notes. Farley wouldn't. He'd probably fake an accident. Swim out to sea. Too worried about leaving Verity and the kids to clean up the mess.

He also caught sight of an indentation on the notepad by the telephone. The top page had been ripped off, but the ghost of the handwriting remained.

'*Mr* Farley.'

Farley wondered if McDonald intended a reprimand, or if his emphasis on the word *mister* was merely intended to emphasise his irregular status. He turned round. Saw McDonald standing in the doorway holding Chorley's note in an evidence bag.

Farley read it through twice. It seemed uncharacteristically melodramatic. It protested that he was the victim of paid informers. It typed on a machine with a malfunctioning P.

He handed it back.

'Is that all?' said McDonald.

'No, I'd like to see the other side of his face.'

McDonald looked as if he was going to refuse, but seemed to think better of it. 'You.' He beckoned the three constables who were waiting by the door. 'Turn him over.'

The men bent down and gave Chorley a heave, but the body was more difficult to move than they had anticipated. Rigor had already set in. An arm jutted out. Congealed blood spilled out of the rear exit wound and onto the floor. Farley adeptly ripped the top sheet off the telephone pad as the corpse rolled over.

'Thank you.' Farley gave Chorley a cursory look, and walked out the door.

The thing that really surprised Farley, turning his petty resentment into something altogether different, was Prentice's appearance in the corridors of the Canberra station at three in the morning.

'Was it awful?' Prentice waved him in. 'Ghastly, I'm sure. Take a seat. Will you have tea?'

Almost on queue, Leona walked in with the tea tray.

Prentice poured.

Farley took the cup of milky water out of his hands and put it down on the edge of the desk, an enviable antique. The rest of the office was curiously furnished with oriental carpets, rattan chairs and a tiger skin rug. The walls were covered in mementos of Prentice's service in several South East Asian hotspots, and behind the desk, a picture of the young Queen. The only things missing were a bullwhip and a couple of horse pistols.

'How's Verity, by the way?'

'Fine,' said Farley. 'Bearing up well.'

'Studying hard?'

Verity was smart, smarter than Farley was. He had always been a little in awe of that. He had supported her decision to go back to university, but was secretly relieved when she decided to take out a master's degree in Old Icelandic and Early Norse. It was utterly non-functional and unlikely to lead to anything much. After two years and four months of Verity's Sunday night reading groups in his living room, he still couldn't remember the names of the skaldic poets (though he remembered the word skaldic, because he had been forced to look it up in the dictionary), he also couldn't remember the names of her tutors, and what was worse, couldn't summon up much of an interest in remembering any of them. He felt guilty about that. What he had inevitably noticed were the subtle alterations in Verity's style, the flow-y sorts of clothes in bright geometric patterns, the pirate-style headscarf, he ought to thank God that she hadn't descended to a velveteen jumpsuit. Prentice was worried that he'd find Verity's face in one of those photographs from Oliver's surveillance unit, protesting against white rule in Rhodesia, burning a flag at a CPA rally. Farley couldn't think of anything further from the truth, but he often wondered how Prentice would react if it was.

Then he felt guilty. Verity made him a kinder, braver person.

'Icelandic Literature,' answered Farley. 'No security threat.'

'Jolly good,' said Prentice, clearly uncomfortable. He broke into another one of his rare smiles and asked Farley about the events of the evening.

Farley shifted in his chair. Briefly, he went through the events of the evening, even going so far as to suggest that the death wasn't as straightforward as it might appear. He also noticed without particular anger that Prentice must have gone rummaging through the locked drawer in his desk, or maybe Leona had given him the key,

because he had obtained a copy of the background check that Farley had intended to sign off on this morning.

'I think suicide would be better,' said Prentice.

Farley now felt certain that there was something going on. 'They'll say that we pushed him too hard.'

'Did you?'

'Of course not.'

'Then there's nothing to worry about.' Prentice eyed him directly over the tips of his fingers, which were pressed together like a Church's steeple. 'Girlfriend. Failed marriage, something like that.'

'But if it isn't?'

'I don't think that would be a satisfactory outcome.'

'And if things get unpleasant?'

'Then I want you to take any necessary measures to make sure that they don't.'

Farley disliked the way in which Prentice chose to speak in riddles. He liked to make out that everything was more mysterious than it seemed.

'Whitlam won't last forever. At least, not if we can help it. And we can.'

Farley nodded, though he wasn't sure that whatever Prentice was doing was helping very much.

'Honestly, Gerald. I'm a bit worried about this Chorley fellow. It's come at a bad time. I realise you're not a field man. But with Oliver incapacitated you're the best that we've got. And you're always very thorough.'

An unfavourable comparison with Oliver Combs would have upset a lesser person, but Farley hadn't survived five long years under Prentice without a sense of irony. 'I'll give it my best shot.'

'No, Gerald, you'll give it everything.'

Farley picked up Chorley's file and left the room, feeling something rather like satisfaction on finding out that Prentice had proved himself to be every bit as awful as Farley so often imagined him to be.

Farley took the telephone off the hook as soon as he got back to his desk. He considered it unnatural for people to keep themselves in a constant state of communication. He had also been a deskman at ASIO for long enough to know that there were a surprisingly large number of people who were potentially listening in. And Verity didn't seem to mind. He imagined her turning over in their double bed and missing him, then again he had taken to working so many nights of late that he wondered if Verity would even notice he was gone.

He opened his report on Chorley. There was nothing in it, really. Just an anonymous letter they'd received denouncing him as an agent of influence, together with a dreadful poem from Chorley's university days calling for wholesale political revolution and Bentley's for everybody. Prentice had considered it a significant find, but in Farley's opinion the only terrifying thing was the prose. It was awful.

He kept leafing through the file. There were his university grades, which were surprisingly good for a minor public servant. He had also been a member of the book club, which Prentice had marked down as suspiciously left wing, and the drama society, against which Prentice had made a note asking Farley to check whether Chorley was sexually stable. He obviously had a taste for something more fanciful than was catered for in his university degree, which was in political economy. There were several copies of undergraduate exam papers, entitled mathematical methods of economic analysis, monetary history and theory, all of them remarkably orthodox.

His personnel file from Treasury was equally impeccable. He specialised in money flows, bureaucratic jargon for trade statistics, currency, foreign loans. He remembered Chorley's excited prattle as they walked around the gardens, they had made it all the way to the National Library, a blocky sort of building in which the nation's history was archived. He was childlike in his enthusiasms. He played competitive chess and was building a hobby computer from a science kit in his spare time. Farley soon realised that if he didn't put a stop to it that Chorley would go on like that all afternoon.

It was getting on to twelve when Leona walked in.

'Good grief, woman. Why aren't you at home?'

'I've been home and I'm back for the afternoon. You look like you need a shave.'

'Probably.'

Farley stroked his chin. The envelope was addressed to him. He slit it open and looked over the pictures from the crime scene. Almost immediately, he saw what was wrong. Twelve years in the army had taught him enough about boys and guns to know that this wasn't a suicide he was seeing.

Research statement

Research background

'Paranoid fiction' describes literary and popular fiction that explores the nature of subjective, social and political reality, and its manipulation. In paranoid fiction, reality is always doubled. The world may appear to be definite and real but, upon closer inspection, turns out to be misleading and deceptive. Boltanski (2014) examines detective and spy novels to interrogate this doubled or paranoid reality. He argues that these works, built around conspiracies and inquiries, developed as a way of organizing reality to explain the social and political lives of individuals and groups. This work is an extract from a novel that creatively explores the alleged role of the CIA in the downfall of the Whitlam Government. It gives fictional form to historical and apocryphal narratives about the operation of clandestine groups within ASIO, faked Loans Affair documents, and activities at the US spy base Pine Gap, and investigates tensions between agency, power and social reality in ways that are informed by research into the cultural and political significance of paranoid narratives.

Research contribution

The extract is taken from the work's beginning, in which the character only dimly suspects that the secret world that he inhabits is not fully transparent. His insights are limited to personal questions and questions of personality, and he is unable to make connections to wider social and political realities, except indirectly through reflections on his wife. Nevertheless, his emotional disaffection is the precondition for eventual questioning concerning the nature of reality and agency, and the exercise of power.

Research significance

This work extends the author's previous creative explorations of paranoid and dystopic fictions' function as social commentary within the Australian political context.

Works cited

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