

# FAMILY RELATIONSHIP IN GABRIELLE LORD'S *LETHAL FACTOR*

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## ABSTRACT

*Crime writing is not a new trend in Australian literature. One of the writers, Gabrielle Lord, has a new style on how she combines all aspects involved in crime stories and an issue, child abuse, that has been a secret for generations in Australia and probably in Indonesia. Her work covers both the hard edges of crime writing and forensic procedures together with exploration of family relationship and how these impact on people. She examines closely the family relationship and family in her work. Lethal Factor is a crime story with two cases-horrifying anthrax murder and ritualistic killing of a nun- which the forensic examiner Jack McCain has to face. He has to find out if this is a new wave of terrorism or the cryptic symbol gouged into a murdered nun's flesh. The family relationship is becoming important and interesting when his daughter is in danger and his ex-wife causes him trouble. So this danger moves close to his home and threat his life. He has to find the assassin before it is too late.*

**Keywords:** *family relationship, crime story, literature*

## ABSTRAK

*Jenis karya sastra cerita detektif bukan hal baru dalam kesusasteraan Australia. Salah satu penulis cerita detektif, Gabrielle Lord, menampilkan masalah yang tidak pernah diangkat oleh penulis lainnya, yaitu masalah hubungan keluarga. Novel yang akan dikaji dalam tulisan ini adalah Lethal Factor. Dalam karya ini masalah keluarga dan penyalahgunaan anak dibahas dan dilibatkan dalam kasus kriminal yang terjadi dalam kehidupan penyidik forensic, Jack McCain. Kasus kriminal terjadi dalam beberapa kasus yang menggunakan senjata tajam yang menimpa seorang biarawati dan senjata racun kimia yang menimpa teman McCain. Persoalan menjadi menarik dan penting ketika McCain juga harus menyelesaikan kasusnya dengan istri dan terancamnya jiwa anaknya.*

**Kata kunci:** *hubungan keluarga, cerita detektif, kesusasteraan*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since colonial era, crime fiction has had its tradition in Australia. The Australian writers have written books about Australian life in their own way. We can find the red line running through Australian fiction in its long tradition of its authors who have explored the shadow lands where crime and corruption meet conventional society<sup>3</sup>. At the beginning the writings were—some of them—about White Australian racism which exposed social issues about patronized Aborigines. Only until the first well-known Australian crime novelist, Fergus Hume, that we add quite good understanding of human nature and Australian society today (Delys, 1993:16).

The heading ‘crime writing’ covers so many different areas. Australian crime writing falls into ‘hard boiled’ where the investigating detective is a tough guy and the stories deal with the basic crime elements—murders, robbers etc-- that is generally quite violent. Then there are ‘police procedurals’ which follow the steps of the investigation as the police or detective gather evidence and other information needed and finally track down the offender. There are also feminist crime writers with a female lead whose writings involve the investigator’s private and family life and gender position in Australian literature. Another kind of crime writing in Australia is what we call ‘cosies’—smaller stories about crimes but written in such away that they do not deal about violent crimes. There are mysteries and ‘whodunits’, a vernacular rendition of ‘who did it?’. The investigators can be a professional or a detective or an amateur. There is also a popular Australian series with a lesbian investigator. So crime writing in Australia covers a wide field and with hundreds of writers.

One of the crime writers in Australia is Gabrielle Lord. Most of her writings deal with crime. She carefully conveys the story with necessary details. Though her former Australian writer has begun with a specific issue—child abuse—she explores and elaborates this issue in most of her novels with different angles. She realizes that conflicts become an important element in her novels. Her personal experiences in her life in family situations have played important role in narrating what situations she would like to tell the readers.

Like other writers in crime fiction, she has a professional ability to investigate and track down the offender with murder as the core issue. This also becomes the most important issue in *Lethal Factor* even she gives complicated situation and much for the investigator—Jack McCain. The situation McCain has to face is not enough for a crime story such as *Lethal Factor*. She always examines family issues in almost all her novels such as *Whipping Boy*, *Spanking Girl*, Gemma series and so is *Lethal Factor*.

## DISCUSSION

### Family Relationship

This subchapter will examine the family relationship among the member of Jack McCain family. He was living with his daughter after he got divorce with his wife. This family relationship will become an important and interesting part in the story.

### Father and Daughter

After the prologue telling about the murder of the nun, the novel continues with the investigator who tells the story. He begins with his introducing himself—his job, his capacity to handle the case--to the readers. So the novel is narrated using first person point of view.

In the following chapter he begins to tell about his family life. He lives with his daughter, Jacinta, and they look as though they can get along very well, love and care each other. He shows his good role now as a better father to Jacinta that once he often got drunk and left his family. It is the time for family recovery and to forget about what happened in the past. He feels it is his fault to have left and ignored her.

I hadn't been much of a husband or father in the first seven years we were together. But no matter how hard I'd tried to make amends in the final decade of the marriage, nothing was ever good enough. Then the kids both wanted to live with me and that cause a lot of mayhem.... (Lord, 2004:22)

McCain, as a father, always got home drunk when Jacinta was small. He neglected his family and as usually he put the blame of his unhappiness to his family, wife and children. He tells the readers what happened to Jacinta when he was bad. Jacinta felt nobody loved her and she needed something else to cure her hurt feeling. She walked in the mean streets and found a bad person, Marty Cash, who offered her a peaceful place where she could forget her sadness. That is drugs. McCain found her unconscious from an overdose on the floor in someone else's flat some years before.

Her life problem in the past when she was living in a drug community is explored and made complicated by Lord as one of the problems McCain to face. Marty Cash suddenly woke up from his coma and tries to find McCain to get the money that belongs to Jacinta. It is also one way to show how a good father he is now for his daughter.

'I didn't want to scare you until we'd worked something out. We're putting something into operation that should fix Marty Cash for good.

'Dad, she said, in the patient tone of a parent explaining something to a child, 'I've lived on the streets. Lived, survived, conned, done the works. No out-of-work, overweight ex-cop could outstreet me.

Her youthful bravado touched me. 'Of course he couldn't,' I said' (Lord, 2004: 130)

The above issue that happens to Jacinta is actually a serious and dangerous problem but it is so easy for McCain to beat Marty down when he tries to take revenge. And it shows he has done a lot and taken his life risk when he solves that problem and beats Marty. Now he really cares a lot about Jacinta. Jacinta herself respects her father and shows her love in a good communication with him. She also stops using drug and studies seriously.

### **Mother and Daughter**

Jacinta and her mother, Genevieve, are not having a good relationship. Though Jacinta still shows her respect for her but she always tries to be in her father's side. One thing she said that her mother is not kind to her,

'And I was sad about Livvy,' said Jacinta. 'I know she was fussy and everything but she was always kind to me. I wish mum could be different.' (Lord, 2004:197).

Livvy was McCain's boss' wife who died of Anthrax sent by her own husband.

Everything about Genevieve is known from McCain or from Jacinta herself as she never appears and is only talked about by her ex-husband and Jacinta. According to Jacinta, her mother was always angry with her father and she does not like it,

'I remember Mum always being angry with you. Then when you came home, I used to pray that she would just shut up. But she couldn't (Lord, 2004:198).

What Jacinta said reflects her wish that her mother could have done something else instead of getting angry every time McCain came home drunk. Even when her parents separated and now that her father has a complicated case of Anthrax, her mum continues making everything worse by accusing her father of sexual abuse to Jacinta.

Jacinta seems more mature than her mother who is always fussy and childish so Jacinta thinks she could have done more. She should have been more patient and strong to take care of her children. Her father understands why her mother always gets angry but Jacinta has her own thought:

‘She had good reason to be angry with me,’ I said. ‘It’s no picnic living with an alcoholic.’

‘Look, Dad,’ said Jacinta, ‘There were plenty of things she could have done. She wouldn’t look her part in it. She wouldn’t do anything except dump on you. You became like her drug. She wouldn’t leave you alone. She got addicted to trying to control you.’ (Lord, 2004:197)

From the beginning of the novel to the end when everything is solved, the readers will not find any conversation between Jacinta and her mother that shows she expresses her anger. At the end of the story Jacinta remains to be more mature than her mother when she tells about the truth of her mother and what her mother tells the police is fake. She realizes that her mother is ‘sick’. She asks Jacinta to stay with her but Jacinta refuses and this is what she tells her father,

Jacinta started wiping the sink down. ‘Mum wants me to move in with her. Doing that would start the healing process, she said,’

‘What did you say to that?’ I asked.

‘I told her she’d have to start the healing process without me.’ Jacinta flashed her wickedest grin, wringing out the sponge with a flourish and putting it to dry in the sunshine on the windowsill. ‘Poor Mum wouldn’t know the first thing about healing, she said. ‘And what is the first thing about healing?’ I couldn’t resist asking. Admitting you need healing,’ she said. ‘That you’re damaged. Mum wouldn’t ever admit that.’ (Lord, 2004:199)

Dealing with this family relationship, Lord shows that each member should admit and realize what he or she has done then it is easier to recover and make the relationship better.

## **Husband and Wife**

The relationship between a husband and a wife in this novel is not much seen in the relationship between McCain and his wife as when McCain narrates the crime, they have separated. But it can be figured out what happened to each of them. As it was explained before that the main problem is McCain’s addiction to alcoholics. It is understandable when her ex-wife got angry every time she had that situation.

Good communication never happened to them. They did not have time to contemplate and fix their broken relationship. That she was unhappy in her marriage can be understood. But their children felt neglected and lost their parents’ love and care.

Each of them even does not have love anymore. McCain tries to mend and make his life with his children better but his ex-wife now only has hatred and wants to take revenge. McCain was very angry when she made false allegations. He thinks it is a revenge from his ex-wife.

McCain tries to explain what triggered the divorce. Without trying to blame his ex-wife, he tells the readers that it began from the situation at home where he could not find peace that made him keep busy doing something else outside. He tells that as a mother she still acted like a young little woman. It means she was not mature.

When the killer of the nun is found and the terrorist who sent Anthrax is arrested, McCain has to face and finish Jacinta's with Marty Cash. The investigator is a hero so he could knock him down although he gets wounds. The problem with his ex-wife is solved so easily even without any hard effort. Something is not expected when his ex-wife came to hospital to apologize for what he has done. The following quotation from the novel shows that McCain is right about his ex-wife.

Genevieve appeared and as soon as I saw her I knew something was different. It wasn't just that she'd lost weight and looked older—somehow, my ex-wife had managed to stay frozen at about thirty-seven. But today she was looking her age. And that was different. She stood near the doorway, unsure, and that, too, struck me as new. 'Jack,' she said. 'I'm here to apologize.' (Lord, 2004:421)

The McCain's does not seem to have good communication. This bad communication has brought many problems in their relationship. The parents, mother and father, should have played good role in maintaining the good relationship. McCain had realized his fault but his wife could not accept that and keep her anger.

### ***Lethal Factor* in Australian Crime Writing**

In this subchapter, it will be explored Lord's crime writings and her position in Australian crime writing.

#### **Exploring crimes**

As it was mentioned before that crime writing covers many kinds of this genre. All of them talk about and deal with death. This death may be a mystery and it's needed a hero to investigate the case and find the killer. The readers will be happy following the plot as long as there is suspense and many questions in his mind while reading until the case is closed and the investigator found the killer.

There are many ways to present the narration with any type of investigator the author prefers using. He or she can be a police officer, detective, laboratory analyst, forensic officer or an ordinary person with a keen sight and good logic as well as a wide outlook.

Gabrielle Lord in *Lethal Factor* chooses Jack McCain to be the hero who can solve the case and find the killer. He is not a police officer but a scientist who has to go through some procedures in a forensic laboratory to uncover and track down the killer. At the beginning of the novel after the prologue where we read the first murder in a convent outside Canberra that happened to a nun, the reader is introduced with the investigator, Jack McCain, his position, and what his job covers.

Some of my colleagues never attend crime scenes—its not their job. But my many years as a crime scene examiner with the New South Wales police before I joined the Federals as a scientist gives me an edge over bench scientist (Pollak and Macnab, 2002:18).

With that introduction, the reader will feel secure and sure that the case will be solved by a reliable investigator with such good knowledge.

*Lethal Factor* gives a lot of conflicts and killed people as well as victims. Jack McCain has so many cases to solve. There are deaths, betrayal, revenge, family conflicts, emotional and personal conflicts, and social problem.

The first death is the murder of a nun with a symbol carved near her ankle and followed by other deaths of McCain's boss' wife and colleague in forensic science department. He has to investigate these two different cases while other problems happened. They are a threat from Marty

Cash who recovers from his coma and will come back to ask for his money and also his ex-wife, Genevieve, who gives false allegation that Jack did sexual abuse to Jacinta, their daughter.

Lord seems very 'hungry' for including many kinds of problems and one death case is not enough for the investigator or too easy to solve so she think it is more amazing and confusing for the readers to know about the resolution of the problems. But at the end she is exhausted and ends every case hastily and simply. The death of the nun has historical motives behind it that happened long ago between Serbian and Croatian in Yugoslavia that it continues even when they move to Australia. The killer using Anthrax bacillus turned out to be his own boss who killed his wife as he thinks he would get a lot of money from the project that he will enjoy with his mistress, Alix.

Revenge is very common in crime fiction that can bring about death or murder. It is obviously seen that Lord tries to make a good thriller for the readers and she believes that a lot of conflicts may be more enjoyable for a good crime fiction.

### **Examining Family Relationship**

Family relationship could be found in Gabrielle Lord's novels. She is the first writer who talks about that issue in her writings though there are many other crime writers in Australia.

She presents a lot of McCain's personal problem and family conflicts. It begins with the coming of Alix, a girl he had dated with a long time ago. The bad way she behaves and treats McCain is described consistently when she rudely yelled and did to Iona, a good girl McCain meets and has a date with. Alix is properly portrayed as a woman who deserves what she gets for what she has done that she has seduced McCain and disturbed his life.

In his family, he also has to cope with his ex-wife who drives him crazy with false allegation, accusing him sexually abuse Jacinta when they were married. She sees the children as the next generation who has to suffer and hurt due to their parents' broken relationship.

Lord also says she departs from the usual practice of Australian novels which, in her view, is to ignore children. 'When I read almost any novel these days I think—where are the children? They just aren't there. They're not seen as important or interesting or worth writing about at all. But children are important. What every individual child endures has echoes down through the generations (Pollak and Macnab, 2002:90).

When the family is broken, it is the children who suffer most and they will be trapped in mean streets which may give them comfort but lead to danger. This happened to Jacinta when she did not get attention, care and love from her parents.

With more than one personal problems coming to McCain, Lord tries to remind us that people have dark sides in their lives but they could mend and get that family recovery if each of the member of the family is willing to go through the process of having a good progress to construct a better family relationship for example in *Lethal Factor*. McCain stops drinking and reconcile with his daughter, Jacinta who used to live in streets using drug. Iona comes to his life though we do not where this relationship goes.

### **Reflecting the Author's Life**

The murder and death in *Lethal Factor* happened in Canberra. This crime scene and the surrounding setting are vividly described by the author. Lord knows a lot about this setting as she grew up there.

When she was six years old, she stayed in the school as a boarder at Sacre Coeur Convent at Sydney's elegant Rose Bay where she had to stay there through her school year. Staying there really hurt her as she felt she was neglected by her parents because her parents lived nearby. She could not understand this so when her friends asked her why she stayed as a boarder, she would make lies.

Her bad experience in childhood when she had to go through makes her believe that she was deserted and she saw her life story as part of a pattern of children in our society. Now in all her novels she tries to examine family relationship and show children problem in their life as the victims of the unhappiness of their parents.

During Lord's formative years she became aware of cruelties which were everywhere. She told Jane Wheatley that the immediate universe was made up of the 'injured souls' which populate her many bleak novels. 'It's the sad and really scary thing in her stories, the thing that lingers after you've forgotten the twists and turns of the plot,' Wheatley wrote in agreement, adding that Lord also believed that children were too often blamed for the unhappiness in their mother's life (.Pollak and Macnab, 2002:91)

The unhappy mother can also be found in this novel as the ex- wife of Jack McCain, the investigator. Though during her marriage it was Jack who drank and made her very angry, she was still blamed for the divorce and that's why she was 'punished'. Her two children chose to live with their father. Lord is a mother and a grandmother but when she was a young mother she treated her daughter with disrespect like what she said as follows,

'I am a child abuser', she said. 'I put my daughter down before I became enlightened. I used to criticize the way she dressed, insult her choice of music. I hit her once. I'm supposed to be the person who protects and sustains. 'I am the mother. I was the classic perpetrator, because it was done to me and I did it back' (Pollak and Macnab, 2002:92).

The death of a nun in a convent as the biggest issue in *Lethal Factor* is easily understood when we know that she spent some years in the convent and experienced a special yet hurting life in her childhood.

The family relationship and child abuse are two things she exposes in this novel as she believes a writer she can do something for her society that a happy and harmonious family is an important element to survive a healthy society.

## CONCLUSION

*Lethal Factor* begins with the death of a nun in a convent outside Canberra. On her ankle was pictured a cross symbol. This death dominated the whole novel while through this investigation, the professional forensic scientist, Jack McCain, were shocked by many cases happened to him and his family. It could be said it's too much for him.

The other death happened to his boss' wife and his colleague, Tony Bonning. He then felt threatened as he also the member of the Delmonte Dale project and the killer used Anthrax which was sent through a postal letter or package. The solution to find the killer seems very interesting after long investigation together with other investigation to track down the case of the nun's death. Through his heroic efforts the readers finally find out the killer. It's really an unexpected killer who did it and this makes the reader faithfully and impatiently looks forward to by having questions during his reading.

The setting of this crime scene reflects the author's childhood experience where she was living in a dormitory of the Catholic school and Canberra is vividly described. This shows the author's good research on the forensic science aspects.

Without the hero's personal problems and family relationship, this novel is already enjoyable to follow and perfect for crime story. In other words, this issue does not bother at all to the investigation and narration about the crime done by the killer. But the author has something to check and to convey to modern society that the child will always be the victim of a broken relationship of his parents. That fault, though painful for everybody in the family can be recovered and mended.

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