



BOOK DETAILS

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Broadcast journalist Rachael Brown is an RMIT graduate who began her career with the ABC in 2002 as its Melbourne cadet. In 2008, she won the Walkley Award for Best Radio Current Affairs Report. Rachael was the creator, investigator, and host of the ABC's first true-crime podcast, *Trace*, which reviewed the cold case of Melbourne mother Maria James. *Trace* won the 2017 Walkley Award for Innovation for the way the podcast tapped into broad community grapevines and attracted vital new leads from the public that were rolled into subsequent episodes, which allowed *Trace* to evolve as it went to air.

The riveting inside story of a journalist's cold-case investigation of a shocking murder

Every cop has a case that dug its claws in and would not let go. For veteran detective Ron Iddles, it was his very first homicide case — the 1980 murder of single mother Maria James in the back of her Melbourne bookshop. He never managed to solve it, and it still grates like hell.

Maria's two sons, Mark and Adam, have lived in a holding pattern longer than Rachael Brown has been alive. When the investigative journalist learned that a crucial witness's evidence had never seen daylight, the case would start to consume her — just as it had the detective nearly four decades prior — so she asked for his blessing, and that of the James brothers, to review Maria's case.

In her exhaustive and exhausting 16-month investigation for the ABC podcast *Trace*, Rachael reviewed initial suspects, found one of her own, and uncovered devastating revelations about a forensic bungle and possible conspiracies that have inspired the coroner to consider holding a new inquest.

This is a mesmerising account, as Rachael traces back through her investigation — one that blew the dust off a 38-year-old cold case, gave a voice to the forgotten and the abused, and could have serious implications for two of the state's most powerful institutions.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Who do you think killed Maria James? Why? Did your hypothesis change throughout the book?
2. *Trace* jumps from Iddles' investigation in 1980 and beyond, to Brown's in 2016–2018. How did this leapfrogging inform your reading of the novel and its protagonists?
3. Journalists are taught not to get too close to their subjects, to remain impartial. Brown openly admits she couldn't do so, in this case. Do you think it

REVIEWS

‘What grit, what faithfulness! It’s enthralling to track Brown’s stubborn little lantern as she forges into these dark forests.’

— HELEN GARNER

‘You may know her from the *Trace* podcast but the book is meritorious on its own — excellently written. Gripping but not exploitative or gratuitous like poorly handled true crime can be. I find myself taking notes of lines and expressions, and I definitely resent having to put it down!’

— BRI LEE

‘Compelling listening turned into compulsory reading.’

— ANDREW RULE

‘A standout among true-crime titles.’

— BOOKS+PUBLISHING

This is a special work, a cold case brought to life via the energy of enquiry and, extraordinarily, given its starting point, the redemptive warmth of humanity.’

— CHRIS MASTERS

hindered or helped her investigation? Did your perception of journalists shift throughout the book?

4. Many of the characters (the detectives, journalist, survivors, James brothers) shoulder trials for living up to their convictions in the face of adversity and rejection. Have you ever been in a similar situation? How did you stand up for what’s right?
5. The book tackles a raft of dark and taboo subjects. Which had the biggest emotional impact? Did you ever feel disbelief? Did this change?
6. People grow up assuming they can place their trust in institutions like the Church and the police force. Has this trust been abused? Do the book’s revelations show such trust is naive?
7. Sometimes the truth can never be fully told, because it breaks your heart forever. What does this novel say about the effect of childhood trauma? Can it be overcome? Or is the adage of time healing all wounds a fallacy?
8. Cock-up or conspiracy? What do you think? Do your thoughts/feelings about the police/legal system shift throughout the book? What causes you to gain/lose respect for these institutions?
9. The families of cold case victims acutely feel the weight of the wait. Have you had a time of weighty wait in your life? How did it affect you?
10. One podcast iTunes review reads, ‘deeply moving, you are left feeling the same need for closure as the children and the detective feel.’ Did you also feel a need for closure? Is there even such a thing as closure? How would it affect the James brothers and Iddles?



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