The Roots of the Sweetpea Killer: Cultivating a Furious Fictional Female for the 21st Century

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Author Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas. Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

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ABSTRACT

This PhD by Publication consists of two parts: a quintology of published novels and an accompanying exegesis. The creative part of my thesis comprises my crime novel series, *Sweetpea* and its sequels *In Bloom*, *Dead Head*, *Thorn in my Side* and *The Bad Seeds* published between 2017 and 2024 by HQ.

In Section 1 'From Grief to Creativity,' I use autoethnography to examine my experiences with grief and to research my storification of my parents into Rhiannon's parents. I analyse Rhiannon's redemption arc and investigate its importance to her character development and the crime genre. I argue that Rhiannon is unique in the genre as a fictional female serial killer and that my use of the epistolary form as the main narrative mode is central to my work's originality.

In Section 2 'From Savagery to Satire' I examine *Sweetpea* as crime fiction, defining my poetics of transgression in relation to the genre. I reflect on Rhiannon's unlikeable likeability as a female protagonist and analyse the role of humour in the *Sweetpea* series, drawing on feminist theories of humour and transgression. As a demonstration of my work's originality, I furthermore devise and define the term 'sassy noir' to demonstrate that the *Sweetpea* series is a new subgenre characterised by subversion through humorous narration.

In Section Three, 'From Page to Screen,' I argue that acclaim in academic scholarship and critical reviews provides evidence of my work's originality. I analyse the popular and academic reception of *Sweetpea* which recognises the series' innovation. I also discuss the series' departure from page to screen as a Sky TV adaptation and the implications of this for the reception and dissemination of my work.

My exegesis thus demonstrates that the *Sweetpea* corpus offers a pioneering contribution to crime fiction which challenges established generic, gender, and thematic conventions.

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INTRODUCTION

You are angry and anxious
because you never agreed
to live in a burning home
while the people who should care
pretend the fire doesn't exist.

Distress
is a valid emotional response
to injustice.[1]

This 2024 poem by Nikita Gill encapsulates my emotional state as I watched my mother's final fight against cancer in 2015. It was a grief that was to transform into rage and a rage that translated into the creation of a new female murderer for the crime fiction genre: Rhiannon Lewis, aka 'Sweetpea.' This exegesis is a critically and theoretically informed investigation into the emotional complexities of my own grief and my creative response to it, which has resulted in the literary corpus of female rage henceforth known as The *Sweetpea* Quintology, published by HQ between 2017 and 2024. The opening stanza of Gill's poem evokes the emotional impact of my parents' hesitancy to address their respective health struggles; my father's progressive heart disease and my mother's breast cancer. Their silence, seemingly protective, cultivated a pervasive sense of fear in me, rooted in an early awareness of their mortality and this awareness was first triggered when I witnessed my father having a heart attack when I was nine. A premature confrontation with impending loss was to colour my childhood in both anxiety and fear and after observing his third heart attack when I was fourteen, I sought

[1]Gill, N., 'For When You Need Validation For Your Anger' via Instagram, posted 25 January 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2hymeOMbFB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==> [Accessed: 10 April 2024]

counselling to help process my emotions. Despite this, I, much like my parents, predominantly internalised any ongoing anxieties about their health to shield them from additional distress.

This PhD addresses my fear head on for the first time and comprises two main components. The first is the series of five crime fiction novels collectively titled *The Sweetpea Quintology*, while the second consists of a contextualizing exegesis examining the inspiration behind the novels, their development, execution, and their significant contribution to crime fiction. Aside from the *Sweetpea* series, I am a published novelist of five young adult novels[2] and one stand-alone adult crime thriller,[3] and at the time of writing, I hold the position of Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, a role I have occupied since 2016. Prior to this appointment, I served as an Associate Lecturer at the same institution from 2011. In March 2017, I completed training to achieve Fellowship status with the Higher Education Academy and in September 2021, I was appointed a Royal Literary Fund Fellow in collaboration with Exeter University, where I worked for a year one-on-one with students to enhance their essay writing skills.

Writing *Sweetpea* served as a cathartic outlet for my grief, particularly during my mother's final battle with cancer in 2015. I was in a state of anticipatory grief for the majority of that year from the moment I received news of her diagnosis to the moment I heard the doctor's grim warning: "it has metastasised to her brain." Following her death that same December, my writings captured my escalating anger, ultimately manifesting in the creation of Rhiannon Lewis, a fictional female murderer, and the protagonist of *Sweetpea.* The series, which consists of the novels *Sweetpea* (2017), *In Bloom* (2018), *Dead Head* (2021), *Thorn in My Side* (2023),

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[2]Skuse, C.J., *Pretty Bad Things* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2010)
- — *Rockoholic* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2011)
- — *Dead Romantic* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2013)
- — *Monster* (London: Mira Ink, 2015)
- — *The Deviants* (London: Mira Ink, 2016)

[3]Skuse, C.J., *The Alibi Girl*, (London: HQ, 2020)

and *The Bad Seeds* (2024), traces the psychological evolution of an ostensibly unremarkable 27-year-old woman who leads a double life as a serial killer. The first novel introduces Rhiannon, an editorial assistant at *The Gazette*, her local newspaper. She is failing in each aspect of her life – overlooked at work, spurned in love, and ignored by her friends, but she has a killing urge that permits her a sense of control that her daily life does not. Her malfeasance is rooted in The Priory Gardens Attack, a traumatic event she survived at age six where a hammer-wielding man stormed her crèche and murdered all her peers but left Rhiannon with brain damage which temporarily affected her speech and mobility during her formative years. It was this which underpinned her adult killing urge with a particular brutality for abusers of children. When unable to kill, Rhiannon copes by using dark humour, collecting whimsical childhood toys like Sylvanian Families, and documenting her murderous thoughts in a diary.

The accompanying exegesis is divided into three sections. Section 1, 'From Grief to Creativity,' Section 2: 'From Savagery to Satire,' and Section 3: 'From Page to Screen.' In the first section I investigate the relationships between writing, grief, redemption, and the creative intentions behind my use of the epistolary form for the *Sweetpea* quintology. Through autoethnographic exploration, I draw on personal experiences to reflect on how I integrated aspects of my parents' deaths into Rhiannon's. I employ James Pennebaker's 'expressive writing paradigm'[4] and similar studies by scholars Adi Barak and Ronit D. Leichtentritt[5] and Angela Matthews to explore how autoethnographic writing helped me to reframe my loss. In writing out Rhiannon's rage, I was writing out my own, taking out my frustrations on fictional wrongdoers who, in my view, were deserving of retribution. Similarly, as Catherine Deveney and Patrick Lawson's 2021 study found, writing creatively allows a writer to 'go through the safe process of

[4] Pennebaker, J., 'Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process' *Psychological Science*, May 1997, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 162-166 (Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the Association for Psychological Science, May 1997) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40063169> [Accessed: 6 February 2025]

[5] Barak, A., Leichtentritt, R.D., 'Creative writing after traumatic loss: Towards a generative writing approach.' *British Journal of Social Work* 47, no. 3 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw030>

analysing their experiences at a distance.'[6] It is my hope that my reflections contribute to a wider framework for writers wishing to employ their fiction as a way of processing grief, of presenting women's rage on the page, and of understanding one's creative methodologies within a corpus of existing works.

In Section 2, I examine whether the *Sweetpea* series has carved out a unique space in crime fiction; a space for which I have coined the term 'sassy noir.' I explore the series' transgressive elements, the role of humour, and how Rhiannon's distinct comedic style differentiates it from existing works in crime fiction. I analyse Rhiannon's rejection of traditional feminine roles as an act of self-empowerment, and how her unconventional violence challenges patriarchal norms, embodying the 'monstrous feminine' - a female figure who uses violence to assert dominance over patriarchy. I also consider my intention to provide readers, particularly women, with a fictionalised sense of justice, offering a resolution we are frequently denied in real life as we continue to face male violence on an unprecedented scale. Finally, I discuss the use of profanity in the novels and its role in shaping Rhiannon's 'unlikeable likeability.'

In Section 3, I analyse the reception of the *Sweetpea* series within the publishing industry, focusing on its critical and academic acclaim, ratings, and sales performance. This section also explores the opportunities and challenges arising from the first book's television adaptation with Sky TV, assessing the impact of adapting the story for a televisual audience, including the dilution of its narrative and themes, and my role as the author in that adaptation. Furthermore, I consider how Rhiannon's character has been interpreted and, at times, potentially *mis*interpreted through the visual medium. Finally, I reflect on the future of the *Sweetpea* universe, discussing the 'seeds' left to sow, including a companion novel currently in progress, written from the perspective of Rhiannon's daughter, Ivy.

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[6] Deveney, C., & Lawson, P. (2022). 'Writing your way to well-being: An IPA analysis of the therapeutic effects of creative writing on mental health and the processing of emotional difficulties.' *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 22, p296. <DOI:10.1002/capr.12435 >

With a background in both creative writing and academia, I bring an academic depth to my *Sweetpea* novels that stems from my ongoing role as a lecturer. My experience in teaching and guiding students in their own writings informs not only my approach to storytelling but also my understanding of narrative structure, character development, and the importance of voice. This academic grounding allows me to approach the *Sweetpea* series with a blend of creativity and critical thought, ensuring the novels maintain a literary quality while engaging with their wider societal themes. Furthermore, my work as an RLF Fellow enables me to craft accessible, entertaining prose which is intellectually stimulating, bridging the gap between creative expression and analytical rigour.

My *Sweetpea* quintology represents a significant contribution to the evolution of crime fiction, particularly the emerging 'sassy noir' subgenre. In my exegesis, I consider the creation of a modern, complex heroine whose actions, and the way the narrative frames them, break new ground for modern literature. The series challenges traditional crime fiction conventions by presenting a protagonist who is both morally ambiguous and unapologetically vicious, offering a fresh take on the 'femme fatale' archetype. By blending sharp wit, dark humour, and a psychological exploration of her character, I endeavour to reshape the expectations of who and what a crime fiction heroine can be and offer readers a distinctive new lens through which to engage with themes of crime and justice.

SECTION 1: FROM GRIEF TO CREATIVITY

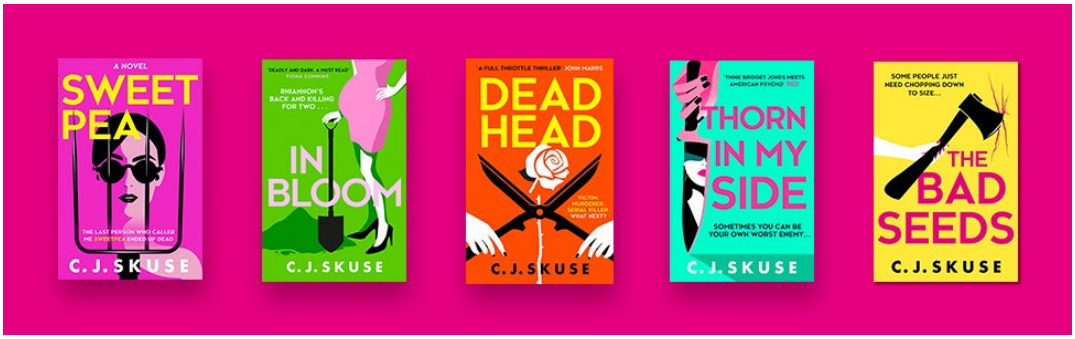


FIG 1: The *Sweetpea* quintology (London: HQ, 2017-2024)

This section explores the catharsis I have found through writing the *Sweetpea* series. I link the idea that the creation of my protagonist, Rhiannon Lewis, a female serial killer, served as a means for me to process my anger and grief while my mother faced her final battle with cancer. I reflect on how writing Rhiannon helped me reclaim my voice, confront injustices, and provide a relatable, empowering experience for readers facing similar struggles. I explore the concept of creative bibliotherapy, which uses literature to help individuals process trauma, particularly through fiction, and investigate themes like humour, transgression, and the concept of redemption and why this is important to the series' originality. I examine the narrative style of the books, particularly the use of the epistolary form (diary entries), and how this allows readers to intimately connect with Rhiannon's thoughts and actions. This marks her growth from reckless violence to a more purposeful existence, duplicating my own emotional evolution.

Throughout 2015, I often voiced the sentiment, "I am so tired of being afraid," both aloud and during sleepless nights spent worrying about my mother's declining health. This fear stemmed from her third diagnosis of breast cancer at the start of the year, with her eventual passing that December. I feared not only her death but the toll her treatments were having on her knowing I could not help. In her final days at home, I could only provide meals she couldn't eat and painkillers offering little relief. The sudden death of my uncle the previous year, along with the earlier

losses of my father in 2005 and grandmother in 2009, had already left our family reeling and these compounded tragedies instilled in me a sense of fear and uncertainty. As my mother's death approached, I reached a sobering realisation: I was not afraid of her dying, but of the *idea* of her death. It was the powerlessness, the "what ifs," and the certainty of life without the one constant I had known for thirty-five years that frightened me. The practicalities of life without her became surprisingly manageable, each imbued with a hint of her legacy, but although the fear of her death had gone, in its place was a ferocious new anger. My new protagonist, Rhiannon Lewis, emerged as the rage-fuelled expression of my grief. By this stage in my writing career, I had established myself as a published author of five young adult novels.[7] Writing had long served as a medium through which I sought to make sense of aspects of myself and the world that eluded my understanding and once again, it became my refuge. I raged at the cancer that afflicted my mother, at the medical professionals who quietly discontinued the medication that had managed the illness for a decade, at myself for my powerlessness, and even at my mother for, as it were, abandoning me. Rhiannon, as she materialised, signified a bold aspect of my writing identity; one characterised by unrestrained fearlessness. Previously, I had been limited by the conventions of the young adult genre and my own concerns about how my personal voice might be perceived, but in this new creative space, fuelled by grief and its accompanying fury, those constraints fell away, enabling me to write with a newfound disregard for those limitations.

Rhiannon, as she appears in *Sweetpea*, displays an unwavering audacity. This quality is partly a consequence of a childhood brain injury, which left her with a sociopathic detachment from people and an incendiary anger when provoked. In the absence of my mother, I found that the fury I had previously suppressed in

[7]Skuse, C.J., *Pretty Bad Things* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2010)
- — *Rockoholic* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2011)
- — *Dead Romantic* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2013)
- — *Monster* (London: Mira Ink, 2015)
- — *The Deviants* (London: Mira Ink, 2016)

order to avoid adding to her stress began to emerge. At first it was unnerving to discover this suddenly infiltered part of myself, but in her 1981 essay 'The Uses of Anger,' Audre Lorde expounds the virtues of a woman's anger; an emotion, she stated, that we should not fear but rather embrace. She expressed how she had tried to access the usefulness of her own rages, particularly as a black woman and a lesbian raised to be fearful and she speaks of an anger that has 'eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone.'[8] Lorde's study celebrates the power of listening to its 'rhythms' and tapping into it 'as an important source of empowerment.'[9] Unlike Lorde, I do not myself experience racial discrimination and I acknowledge the privilege of my whiteness, but I do experience anger and access it regularly as a means of confronting the injustices I experience in life. I live in a patriarchal society as a woman, I have lived as a daughter compelled to subdue her own suffering, and I am a writer striving to maintain a career in an industry from which I feel increasingly alienated. I have every right to be angry sometimes.

In writing *Sweetpea*, I did not do what I was always encouraged to - keep my emotions hidden. I, for once, let it out of its cage and found I was able to create from it. As author and journalist Rebecca Traister writes, women's anger continues to be 'written off as loudmouthed hysteria, or the dubious ravings of pussy-hatted suburbanites with itchy Etsy trigger fingers,'[10] rather than the valid cries of fury they often are, as registered by Lorde. In reality, anger can be revolutionary. Traister's 2019 book *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of*

[8] Lorde, A., 'The Uses of Anger' (1981), reprinted in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, (Feminist Press at the City University of New York), Spring - Summer, 1997, Vol. 25, No. 1/2, Looking Back, Moving Forward: 25 Years of Women's Studies History, pp 283-284. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005441> [Accessed: 6 January 2025], p283

[9] Ibid., p.282

[10] Traister, R., 'And You Thought Trump Voters Were Mad American women are furious — and our politics and culture will never be the same' *The Cut* Sept. 17, 2018, <https://shorturl.at/3QMMa> [Accessed: 6 January 2025]

Women's Anger[11] focuses on the value of expressing rage, especially at injustice and inequality:

> Women [...] are told that their anger is disqualifying, infantilising, makes them look crazy [...] so the anger and fury is kept in [...] because it's not practical to let it out. The result is isolation [...] when you express it and make your fury audible [...] other people who are furious about the same or related things hear it and say, "Oh my god, I feel that way too."[12]

Traister's study comments on the relatability of anger for audiences, a topic I will return to in more detail later in this exegesis in Section Two. Here, I relate an audience's vicarious desire for characters like Rhiannon, who embody a transgressive violent agency, to real-life statistics on violence against females. I argue that a violent fantasy figure like her serves as a powerful focal point for our responses to oppression. As such, *Sweetpea* lends itself to the crime fiction genre as it chimes with a modern, female-led trend for seeking out stories to 'tap into [our] own 'indecorous feelings of rage, aggression and vengefulness,'[13] as asserted by Melanie McGrath, co-founder of the Killer Women collective, cited in Carla Gonzalez and Esther Lopez's 2022 study on crime fiction. The genre's focus on complex morality and revenge makes it a fitting place to craft a story of empowerment.

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[11] Traister, R., 'Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger' (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).
[12] Traister, R., 'Rebecca Traister: Good and Mad at The Strand Bookstore' 6 September 2019 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=40x9ArG24Wo> [Accessed: 8 January 2025], 10:10-10:52
[13] McGrath, M., 'Women's Appetite for Explicit Crime Fiction is No Mystery.' *The Guardian*, 30 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jun/30/ women-crime-fiction-real-anxieties-metaphorical.> [Accessed: 8 January 2025] cited in González, C.R., Álvarez López, E., 'Strangers and Trespassers in Contemporary Women's Crime Fiction' (Free Library Southern Illinois University, 2020) <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Strangers+and+Trespassers+in+Contemporary+Women%27s+Crime+Fiction...-a0699258968> [Accessed: 9 January 2025], p6-7.

Readers clearly covet those stories too, as crime fiction author Megan Abbott attests: 'Women read crime fiction because, in many cases, they're reading themselves.'[14] In writing for adults for the first time, I felt I was doing just that: reading myself in order to write myself a new narrative, one in which I could raise my own voice now that neither of my parents were around to raise it for me.

'Co-creation'[15] plays a significant role when a reader accesses a crime fiction text, a theory posited in a 2024 study by Dr Jacqueline Burgess and Dr Paul Williams who explored how emotionally attached readers are to this genre. They found that the 'puzzle-solving' element of reading a traditional crime novel may not be as crucial as emotional engagement or catharsis for the reader.[16] It was a deliberate creative decision to make my *Sweetpea* series explicitly character-driven as this is the style of writing I enjoy the most, and it has paid off in the form of a popular novel series – my most successful to date. It has also provided a great deal of personal catharsis for me and consequently, my readers as noted in several reviews (which I explore more in Section 3). In further analysing Rhiannon's conception and the purposes she has served for me emotionally and creatively, I find it helpful to consider George Kelly's fixed-role therapy.[17] According to Kelly's work with traumatised patients, before assuming a role, a patient creates a character 'sketch' using third-person descriptors, to which the therapist then assigns a role. The patient role plays that character and lives life as them for a set period of time – e.g., a person grieving the death of someone with cancer could pretend to see it as a release instead of a loss. In embodying Rhiannon as a

[14] Abbott, M., 'Why Women Love to Read about Crime.' *The Cut*, 14 Sep. 2015 <https://www.thecut.com/2015/09/why-women-love-crime.html.> [Accessed: 8 January 2025] cited in González, C.R., and Álvarez López, E., 'Strangers and Trespassers in Contemporary Women's Crime Fiction (2000-2020)' The Free Library. 2022 Southern Illinois University <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Strangers+and+Trespassers+in+Contemporary+Women%27s+Crime+Fiction...-a0699258968> [Accessed: 9 January 2025], p7.
[15]Burgess, J., Williams, P., 'Rethinking crime fiction readers,' *Creative Industries Journal*, 17:1, 45-59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2022.2057063>, p45.
[16] Ibid., p56.
[17] Kelly, G., 'The Psychology of Personal Constructs' (USA: Routledge, 1955)

character, I was attempting to ameliorate my own loss, 'sketching' a new focus for myself and reframing my parents' deaths in my mind.

Kelly's argument for the importance of creative intervention puts the 'patient' in charge of their bereavement and allows them to adopt a character and build a new reality. For me, this manifested in 'becoming' Rhiannon in my daily life which translated as becoming bolder with my assertations and more unapologetic about stating my needs. In terms of *Sweetpea* and my quintology, Rhiannon herself plays a role within her narrative which is imperative if she is to remain hidden from capture. She is 'Sweetpea' – the diligent and quiet office assistant and unassuming girlfriend, but she is also 'The Sweetpea Killer' in private. There is also an irony here in how Rhiannon emboldened me while having to mute herself. The duality of her nature adds realism to Rhiannon as a fictional character, as in all likelihood her temper *would* occasionally manifest itself publicly as it does in a character like R.L. Stevenson's Dr Jekyll in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.[18] The duality motif explores the contrast between Dr. Jekyll's respectable daily persona and his uncontrollable alter-ago. This idea, where one person embodies two starkly different identities, can be effectively related to Rhiannon throughout the *Sweetpea* series, especially in scenes where she confronts a predator. Although she does not have an alter ego like Hyde to blame her actions on, nor a 'Dark Passenger' like serial killer Dexter Morgan in Jeff Lindsay's *Dexter* novels (a corpus I return to later), Rhiannon still acts out of character when she has to. Much like Jekyll's struggle with his darker side, her volatility represents a rejection of the constraints of her everyday role, revealing her complexity as a protagonist.

Such scenes where the mask slips and the indecorous or dangerous Rhiannon emerges allowed me to role play as Rhiannon; to explore a personal catharsis through her, especially in the first novel. She enabled me to reflect on my own experiences of workplace inequities, like being bypassed for promotions,

[18] Stevenson, R.L., *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. (London: Longmans, 1886)

undermined, and made redundant despite trying so hard to impress or achieve standing within the company. I have never been brave enough to request validation in the moment but I made sure Rhiannon could:

> 'EVEN SO NOTHING,' I shouted... 'That was my scoop, Ron [...] I took that photo. I'm the one who sits in on all the court hearings, I type up all the golden weddings, I'm the one who had to run alongside Will.I.Am when he turned up to do the half-marathon for the hospital scanner. Me, not Linus or Claudia or Daisy. *Me*.' [19]

Rhiannon's frequent lack of empathy is another deliberate narrative choice that reflects a crucial aspect of the series. It speaks directly to the sentiment I expressed during the period surrounding my mother's passing: "I am so tired of being afraid." In crafting Rhiannon, I intentionally avoided fear as a defining trait, aiming to create a protagonist who embodied *fearlessness* instead. In my writing, I am free to be what I am not; to enter into worlds fictionally which I personally cannot access. I chose to partially cut myself free of empathy as respite from real life but also in order to relate better to Rhiannon, for example when she makes light of serious news stories. 'MasterChef's been cancelled AGAIN, thanks to a bloody uprising in Kenya. British people were killed so, of course, it mattered enough for a Panorama special.'[20] Rhiannon allows me, just for a while, to have no filter and no fear of consequences, just as she does not. This type of transgression is imperative for modern literature because it embodies the raw, unrestrained truth – particularly as we are now living in a 'post-truth era.'[21] We need to keep

[19] Skuse, C.J., *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017) p98-99.
[20] Ibid., p380
[21] Calcutt, A., 'The surprising origins of 'post-truth' – and how it was spawned by the liberal left' *The Conversation* 18 November 2016 <https://theconversation.com/the-surprising-origins-of-post-truth-and-how-it-was-spawned-by-the-liberal-left-68929> [Accessed: 19 February 2025] In this 2016 article, Calcutt expresses that '"Post-truth" is widely associated with US president-elect Donald Trump's extravagantly untruthful assertions and the working-class people who voted for him nonetheless [...]Oxford Dictionaries defines "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."'

accessing the moral complexities of human behaviour and questioning our perceptions of right and wrong, as this encourages deeper reflection on aspects of society like justice, empathy, and what we perceive as the norm. Author Ottessa Moshfegh, known for her dark, satirical books featuring socially alienated characters living at one removed from the mainstream, has argued that the purpose of a novel is to expand the consciousness, first and foremost:

> We need novels that live in an amoral universe, past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason. Novels like *American Psycho* and *Lolita* did not poison culture. Murderous corporations and exploitive industries did. We need characters in novels to be free to range into the dark and wrong. How else will we understand ourselves?[22]

I developed the character of Rhiannon as a means of self-exploration, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of my own identity. Through this process, I was able to reflect on various aspects of life without parents, including the benefits of living independently. I did not have to censor myself anymore, I could leave things untidy without reproach, and I could make spaces my own. The series has given me permission to be the freest I have ever been, not least creatively, showing there *is* hope after grief.

To access Rhiannon's honest and uninhibited voice, I employed a variety of techniques from creating mood boards and music playlists mirroring her moods, and automatic writing; a technique previously used in the creation of my Young Adult novels. This method, which I also encourage my creative writing students to experiment with in their own writing, nurtures a continuous flow of thought by allowing a writer to keep their pen (or keys) moving; uncensored, unedited, and unrestricted. In Rhiannon's case, automatic writing enabled her to guide the

[22] Moshfegh, O., quoted in Chu, A.L., 'Ottessa Moshfegh Is Praying for Us: The author has been hailed as a high priestess of filth. Really, she wants to purify her readers.' *Vulture 16 June* 2022 <www.vulture.com/article/ottessa-moshfegh-lapvona-review.html> [Accessed: 19 February 2025].

narrative, rather than having me, as the author, impose a rigid plot structure upon her. I used a spider diagram to map out the four core aspects of her life - work, relationships, friends, and family - and allowed her to explore each within her diary entries, drawing from my own fractures and frustrations in these areas as a guide. I consciously minimised censorship while writing in her perspective, focusing instead on immediate emotional responses. This process enabled me to bypass the conventional limitations imposed by fear and societal expectations of my own femininity, in order to promote a more visceral and unfiltered exploration of my grief through Rhiannon's identity.

The autoethnographic approach has been examined by scholars like Angela Matthews in her 2019 study on autoethnography after the death of her son, as the journals she wrote during the aftermath allowed her to reflect and better understand her loss because of it. 'I tried to show future readers what it felt like to be me during those difficult times, make my pain visible to strangers,'[23] she states. This is what I attempted to do with Rhiannon – her rage was my pain, and I wanted the world to notice it. *Sweetpea* was my 'barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world,'[24] and the critical and popular reception of the novel's release was immediate. Within a year I had several foreign book deals and a film deal already brokered, and reviews for the novel all testified to Rhiannon's strength and originality as a protagonist. It appeared to be a transactional experience for many readers with Rhiannon's defiance being a true source of empowerment for them. Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory[25] attests to this type of reaction in her work on the transactional nature of reading. The relationship between the reader and story is naturally coloured by their own personal views and experiences. I

[23]Matthews, A., 'Writing through grief: Using autoethnography to help process grief after the death of a loved one' *Methodological Innovations* Volume 12, Issue 3 (September-December 2019) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799119889569>, p2

[24] Whitman, W., 'Song of Myself,' in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (New York: The New York University Press, 1955), p. 45. Also available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version> [Accessed: 8 January 2025]

[25]Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978. [Accessed: 8 January 2025]

knew the more ordinary I could make Rhiannon, the more the audience would be able to relate to her. She has a mundane office job, a dull, blue-collar boyfriend, a dog, a social group consisting of women she went to college with, and she is perennially frustrated by the commonplace irritations of everyday life.[26] The more relatable I could make her, the more she could serve as a catalyst for readers to challenge their own oppressions and champion her as a character. By reflecting on personal experiences, a reader can connect with how individuals like Rhiannon express deep emotional pain in destructive, and indeed *self*-destructive, ways. Her pain stems from her unresolved traumas; the exposure to the childhood abuse of her sister, her own emotional abuse, her brain injury, and the bullying she experienced by a school peer.

My intention has always been for my books to allow readers to understand the ways in which society fails to address trauma while also entertaining them through humour and the use of dynamic plotting. *Sweetpea* breaks new literary ground inasmuch as it presents a criminal character who is processing complex emotions on the page, while dispensing with her more taboo and transgressive tendencies in a darkly humorous way. Readers may be able to reframe their own traumas through this type of fiction, using a technique called 'creative bibliotherapy.' This relatively new type of treatment is proven to assist people with issues like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,[27] and although results are minimal currently, processing trauma this way is possible, and I believe I have processed mine through writing Rhiannon's story. Scholars Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley in their 2008 article 'The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience,[28] suggest that reading is far more than the sum

[26] Such irritations form the content of the 'kill lists' Rhiannon writes at the opening of most of her diary entries in all five novels. The lists include entries as humdrum as people clearing their throat or drivers who pull out of roundabouts without indicating, to people she would actually like to kill, such as local predators.
[27]Calla E. Y. Glavin & Montgomery, P., (2017) 'Creative bibliotherapy for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): a systematic review,' *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 30:2, 95-107, <DOI:10.1080/08893675.2017.1266190> p98.
[28] Mar, R.A., Oatley, K., 'The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience' *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Volume 3, Issue 3, May 2008, Pages 173-192 (Association for Psychological Science, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00073.x>

of its entertainment value, rather it helps us fundamentally understand how we relate to others and how we see ourselves. Writing *Sweetpea*, for me, was a cathartic undertaking because the story is so imbued with my personal experiences and lingering grief for my parents. Mar and Oatley's work emphasises the usefulness of fiction in assisting us in our understanding of the future and what has happened to us in the past.[29] Catharsis, as a concept, originates from Aristotle's idea that strong emotions can be released through an alternate medium, like fiction,[30] and the experience of writing *Sweetpea* allowed me to confront deep-rooted feelings in an indirect manner, resulting in a cathartic purge and a creative rebirth. I have observed the profound impact of Rhiannon on readers too, particularly female ones, online and at personal appearances. Many readers approach me to share how she has empowered them or echoed their own sentiments. They have found strength and courage in her, much as I have, and this is deeply fulfilling for me as an author. Alternatively, Emy Koopman's 2011 study on catharsis among readers who use literature as a coping strategy concluded that while catharsis is a factor, so too is distraction. This means that far from processing ones' emotions, some readers are being side-tracked away from them. Koopman attests that 'it is not so much reading about one's own emotions that reduces the intensity [...] but precisely being distracted[31] from [them] through reading.'[32] The intensity of a character like Rhiannon can serve as an entertaining form of distraction, drawing the reader away from real-life concerns. It is my belief she can be read as both – a catharsis or a distraction – as this is the dual purpose she served for me while writing her.

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[29] Ibid., p184

[30] Cambridge Dictionary, 'Catharsis', in *Cambridge Dictionary.org*, (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, Cambridge University Press, 2025) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/catharsis> [Accessed: 7 February 2025]

[31] James Pennebaker on 'writing to heal' and the part distraction plays: 'The average person, when they've had something really bad happen, in the first hours and days afterwards, they tend to do things to distract themselves. They start cleaning obsessively, they pay bills [...] I had a horrible thing happen with me and [...] I played Pac Man probably 10 hours a day for a week [but] I was able to process a lot of this stuff [...] letting some of it in at a time. And I think that's where distraction can be really healthy in the early days of a traumatic experience.' Nelda Live, *Dr. James Pennebaker: Writing to heal* (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTf80ouv5MQ> [Accessed: 6 February 2025], 13:28

[32] Koopman, E., (2011) 'Predictors of insight and catharsis among readers who use literature as a coping strategy *Scientific Study of Literature* 1(2), p. 241 – 259 <https://doi.org/10.1075/ssol.1.2.04koo>

Finding release in literature form is what Catherine Deveney and Patrick Lawson's 2021 study calls 'the catharsis of fantasy.'[33] They took a focus group from the creative industries and investigated the effects of writing on the participants. The group concluded that it had a marked improvement on their psychological wellbeing, in the same way that planning, writing and immersing myself in the *Sweetpea* world had on mine. Freud, Deveney states, likened writers to 'children at play who re-arrange things in the world in the way which pleases them'[34] and this is what I did with *Sweetpea.* I was rearranging my world and my emotions through Rhiannon's story. Similarly, social psychologist James Pennebaker has written extensively on the healing power of writing after trauma and his expressive writing paradigm tested participants' writing on traumatic subjects; an exercise which often produced negative short-term effects like distress, but beneficial long-term ones, like greater psychological well-being.[35] The healing process of this creative act, be it just after a traumatic event, during it (as in my case) or a long time after it, is well documented. Michael Brennan's 2015 article 'Loss, Bereavement and Creativity: Meanings and Uses' also examines the ways in which the bereaved are naturally drawn to create after loss, just as I was following my mother's passing. He cites the 'inextinguishable human impulse to [...] create something beautiful from the ugly detritus of pain and suffering[...][36] Writing *Sweetpea* became my 'something beautiful;' somewhere I could plant the pain where it would bloom into something other than sadness. It could contain a violent reckoning for old enemies, for real-life predators I would read about and be disgusted by in the news, but it could also contain laughter and prove something of an enjoyable undertaking to create. As has transpired for both me and for Rhiannon, it could also contain hope.

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[33]Deveney, C., Lawson, P. (2022). 'Writing your way to well-being: An IPA analysis of the therapeutic effects of creative writing on mental health and the processing of emotional difficulties.' *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 22, p293 <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12435> p293

[34]Ibid., p293

[35] Pennebaker, J., 'Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process' *Psychological Science*, May 1997, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 162-166 (Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the Association for Psychological Science, May 1997) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40063169> [Accessed: 6 February 2025]

[36]Brennan, M., 'Loss, Bereavement and Creativity: Meanings and Uses,' *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, Vol. 23(4) p293 (2015), p291-309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1054137315590958>

As Deveney and Lawson's study denotes, writing creatively allows a writer to 'go through the safe process of analysing their experiences at a distance.'[37] Although Rhiannon's killing urge is not my direct experience, through her narrative, I was afforded the opportunity to reflect, albeit from a distance, on my own emotional responses to these themes. This idea is evidenced by the Friday, 2 February entry in *Sweetpea* where she bemoans her lack of pay rise but notes the company's office refurbishment including a '£500 potted palm tree.'[38] This fictional incident mirrors similar frustrations in my own life when asking for the bare minimum. Here again, I could fight and win the battles I lost in life, set boundaries, and win arguments. I could even write my parents back to life and fictionally 'kill' them once more, through a new perspective; one in which I am more able to cope with their loss.

Storifying my deceased parents

Rhiannon's complex relationship with her father Tommy highlights the profound impact of parents in shaping one's identity, as well as the ways in which we idealise their memories after their deaths. My *Sweetpea* series demonstrates how such complex psychological topics can play a significant part of crime fiction narratives and also contribute to generic innovation. This element of my exegesis focuses on how I partially used the memories of losing my parents to inform Rhiannon's attitude to her own.

Tommy Lewis, deceased before *Sweetpea* begins, was a former boxer who became a vigilante after the Priory Gardens massacre which injured Rhiannon. He became hell bent on avenging her trauma by dispatching child predators and he is an important character in the story, even deceased, because of the extent to which

[37]Ibid., p296
[38]Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017) p69

he contributed to the formation of Rhiannon's personality. Tommy taught her how to fight, to protect herself - 'Daddy made a soldier out of me'[39] as Rhiannon's favourite artist Beyonce sings. Rhiannon often remembers Tommy fondly in flashbacks, showcasing his strength. e.g., 'The trees were like Dad – strong and tall. The beds are all empty now, but the trees remain.'[40] Conversely, I do not remember a time when my own father was strong. He suffered three separate heart attacks when I was between the ages of nine and fifteen and I was always cautious not to cause him stress, fearing another episode. I created Tommy as a character with a virtually invincible strength, intentionally juxtaposing him with my own father, whose health issues I had witnessed firsthand on multiple occasions. This contrast allowed me to explore the differing perceptions of power and vulnerability through the lens of personal experience. In a 2023 study on grief, Rebecca Arnold examined how eight recently bereaved professional artists storified their own experiences of loss through their creations. Arnold explored the intersection of fine art and grief, concluding that 'the grief experience, when utilised as a catalyst for art making, may bring about both clarity and meaning regarding an individual's personal loss while simultaneously conveying universal human truths.'[41] This exegesis has provided me with a similar sense of clarity about my writing and, in particular, how *Sweetpea* had allowed me to storify aspects of both my parents. Storifying Tommy into a warrior; tall, muscular, bellicose by nature, and unyielding in his pursuit to avenge his daughter, helped heal that part of me which remembered my own father as weak. I could give Rhiannon what I do not remember having – a father's strength and protection. However, by the final book, *The Bad Seeds*, Rhiannon's once unwavering admiration for Tommy is diminishing, symbolised by her rejection of the pig dad toy she has always carried with her. Writing this final chapter made me realise that I, too, had let go of my father emotionally. *Sweetpea* allowed me to remember him fondly and accept both

[39] Beyoncé, 'Daddy Lessons,' from *Lemonade*, (Columbia, 2016).
[36] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p62.

[41]Arnold, R., 'Grieving artists: Influences of loss and bereavement on visual art making' *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Volume 82, 2023, 102001, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2023.102001> p1.

his weaknesses, those he could control and those he could not, and his death. Rhiannon's reveal of one of Tommy's deposition sites[42] to her detective companion signifies a deeper shift in her relationship with her father; it is an unthinkable act of betrayal but in doing this, she is similarly letting go of his influence on her. Rafael, her eventual partner, embodies the father figure she once idealised. Unlike Tommy, Rafael understands her dark urges but does not encourage them; he loves her unconditionally but sees himself as her protector, rather than her enabler. This stark contrast with Tommy's failure to provide the same protective role for her, mirrors the kind of relationship I long for myself.

Rhiannon's mother Joedi is an enigmatic figure in the *Sweetpea* quintology, and at the time of writing the first novel was quite absent in my mind due to the recency of my own mother's passing. I could not storify Joedi as I wanted because she would not 'speak' to me, evidently because I would need to use my own mother as a base from which to start building her. The complex figure of the mother in crime fiction, and in women's writing generally, is an important character to mine because so much of who we become as adults is rooted in that maternal bond. If that early bond is broken or compromised, as it is in *Sweetpea*, then the results can be devastating and even prompt criminal behaviour. As a child, Rhiannon experienced emotional neglect from her mother and studies have confirmed that this type of early childhood maltreatment can result in a whole host of detrimental outcomes in adult life, as Professor Veena Kumari attests in her 2020 article on emotional abuse. Such outcomes range from poor self-esteem to feelings of hopelessness, 'neurobiological changes in stress response systems and structural and functional brain deficits [...] and psychosis.'[43] Until the 'domestic noir' subgenre of crime fiction was born – a subgenre I will discuss more in Section 2 - mothers in crime fiction were typically overlooked or stereotyped, rarely featuring as the focus of the plot as scholar Charlotte Beyer attests in her 2020

[42] Skuse, C.J., *The Bad* Seeds (London: HQ, 2024), p151
[43] Kumari, V., 'Emotional abuse and neglect: time to focus on prevention and mental health consequences' *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2020) 217, 597–599. < DOI:10.1192/bjp.2020.154> p597-598

article[44] on maternal representation in the genre. The more I explored the character of Joedi and her impact on Rhiannon, the more I could unravel Rhiannon's psyche. In focusing on this relationship, I unearthed small resentments for my own mother, namely her intense privacy in keeping the severity of her cancer from me. I could employ this in my narrative as part of the emotional distancing aspect, recalling how being, as I saw it, excluded left me paranoid and desperate for answers. While mine and my mother's bond never truly became strained, in writing *Sweetpea*, I found that the mother-daughter relationship became defined by alienation, particularly after the Priory Gardens massacre altered Rhiannon's personality; she was not Joedi's cuddly little girl anymore and she took this personally. Crime fiction is an important conduit for representations of motherhood in all its forms, both positive and negative, as crime fiction author Sarah Vaughan attests:

> After all, it [motherhood] begins with blood, pain and terror before ricocheting violently from joy to panic, self-doubt, and [...] exhaustion [...] And perhaps, in a world where the picturesque posts of a mommy blogger are still an aspiration, this harsh reality check is very much needed.[45]

Vaughan's assertion echoes Moshfegh's view on the importance of presenting characters that are free to range into the dark and wrong[46] so that we may understand ourselves more fully as a result when consuming this kind of literature. The crime genre is the lens through which *Sweetpea* explores the psychological impact of such trauma, allowing Rhiannon to confront and reclaim her power through her violent and twisted form of justice. Rhiannon recalls an

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[44] Beyer, C., 'Resisting Invisibility: Mothers and Human Trafficking in Ruth Dugdall's *Nowhere Girl* and Susanne Staun's *Skadestuen*.' *Clues*: A *Journal of Detection* Vol 38, no. 1 (McFarland & Company, 2020): p37-38

[45] Vaughan, S., 'Why Motherhood Is a Fertile Subject For Crime Fiction' *CrimeReads.com* 21 August 2020 <https:// crimereads.com/why-motherhood-is-a-fertile-subject-for-crime-fiction/> [Accessed: 19 February 2025]

[46] Moshfegh, O., quoted in Chu, A.L., 'Ottessa Moshfegh Is Praying for Us: The author has been hailed as a high priestess of filth. Really, she wants to purify her readers.' *Vulture 16 June* 2022 <*www.vulture.com/article/ottessa-moshfegh-lapvona-review.html*> [Accessed: 19 February 2025].

early memory of allowing her grandfather to drown in a river without calling for help. In a later novel, it is revealed he had sexually abused her older sister, Seren and while I did not explicitly state as much, there is a strong implication he had also abused Joedi, his daughter, as a child. Neither Joedi nor Seren ever publicly disclose their experiences in the series, but Rhiannon witnessed an incident involving Seren that triggered her anger, leading her to oversee her grandfather's death. This prompts one of the series' many moral questions: was Rhiannon's response to her sister's trauma valid? Crime fiction critics have analysed the role and representation of trauma in ways which are helpful in illuminating my own narrative strategies in the Sweetpea series. In Leanne Dodd's 2015 study 'The crime novel as trauma fiction,' she champions the genre as the 'ideal vehicle' for addressing such events and processing them:

> A key feature of crime fiction's appeal is the predictable and comforting way in which the world is restored to order [...] While the traumatic event initiates the trauma novel, the novel is at pains to re-memory that event to bring about recovery from the symptomatic response. In this way, the narrative structures of both genres can be seen to be aligned, which places crime fiction in a perfect starting position to be hybridised with the genre of trauma fiction.[47]

To Rhiannon's way of thinking, her actions around her grandfather's death are perfectly valid because of his molestation of her sister, so in her own way she is restoring her world to order, as Dodd highlights, thus aligning the two genres. As scholar Maysaa Husam Jaber attests in their 2022 research on trauma and crime fiction, the genre 'becomes a means for reenactment, and the narrative is a vehicle for processing and addressing the effects and consequences of the traumatic

[47] Dodd, L (2018) 'The crime novel as trauma fiction: Representing traumatic experience and post-traumatic growth in crime fiction, comprising: Ebb and Flow: A novel and exegesis.' (CQUniversity, 2015) <https://doi.org/10.25946/13447871> p. 5-7.

experience'[48] just as Rhiannon processes her traumatic experiences through her offending. The *Sweetpea* quintology began life with the traumatic experience of death and establishes a narrative rooted in the subject. The first diary entry takes place as one year ends and another begins, heralds the end of Rhiannon's relationship with her adulterous ex, and her murder of a man who harasses her by a canal. By the final book, *The Bad Seeds*, the narrative shifts and she is embracing new beginnings, ringing in a new year with a new baby in a new country, and there is a bunch of fresh flowers in a vase on the window. Both Rhiannon and I have tried to extinguish the fires of our past struggles and are beginning anew, and I truly believe that writing the series has allowed me to storify my own trauma and move on from it. I also think that in ending the series with *The Bad Seeds*, I have relinquished myself of Rhiannon as well. In Amber D. Flippo's 2018 study on autoethnography and loss,[49] the author recognises the importance of letting go and trusting the reader to 'construe and appraise the text from their own positioning.'[50] That is part of the importance of autoethnography; that one can learn from others' experiences. In storifying my parents into Rhiannon's, I was processing my own grief and anger, but also the stress and insomnia that had plagued me leading up to their deaths. In writing *Sweetpea*, I reinvented the concept of 'parents' without shying away from the truths of these relationships, both for myself and Rhiannon, and it is my hope that others can learn from this strategy of processing grief. *Sweetpea* has broken new ground for trauma writing and crime fiction and, and for me personally as its author. Where once I dreaded a life without parents, I now face that reality with resilience, bolstered by both Rhiannon's influence and legacy.

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[48] Jaber, M.H 'The "Unclaimed Experience": Trauma and Crime Fiction' *Arab World English Journal* (AWEJ) Proceedings of KUST, Iraq Conference (2022) pp 114-125 <DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/KUST.9> p121.

[49] Flippo, A. D., 'Ocean of Tears: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Cumulative Grief and Loss' (doctoral thesis, University of Nevada, 2018), pp. 63-64 <http://hdl.handle.net/11714/4542> [Accessed: 13 September 2024].

[50] Ibid., p63.

The rainbow after the rain: Rhiannon's redemption arc

The creation of a redemption arc for Rhiannon was integral to her character development and serves as a defining feature of her originality within the crime fiction genre. This arc enables her transformation from a character initially driven by her violent tendencies into one capable of introspection and a more purposeful existence. For me, as a creative practitioner, crafting this arc was essential, for Rhiannon's growth and as a means to process my own grief and anger, allowing these emotions to be channelled through her journey. The series frames Rhiannon as a byproduct of the Priory Gardens tragedy and suggests that she deserves some recompense for her suffering. In the first novel, she was bad, bold, and brazen and lived her life similarly uninhibited by anyone or anything, least of all the law. However, I envisioned early on that her journey, signalled by her discovery of her pregnancy, would lead to a hopeful resolution. In the genre of crime fiction, closure typically means the discovery of the truth or the 'murderer', usually by a detective or similar investigating force. A riddle has been solved and law and order have been restored. As Eyal Segal attests, crime fiction novels where the detective solves the mystery are 'generally recognised to be a paradigm of strong closure'[51] characterised by a reluctance for a reader to revisit the story because the core riddle has been solved. There is nothing to be gained by reading the same story again, in most cases. However, even though I allow Rhiannon's story to reach closure, it defies the laws of the typical crime fiction novel; it *can* be read again for its entertainment value with Rhiannon herself featuring as the captivating 'riddler.' She also breaks with the key crime fiction premise that the perpetrator/murderer must be punished in order for justice to be done. Defying this principle, she symbolises an alternative view of justice as an act accomplished outside the remit of the law.

[51] Segal, E., 'Closure in Detective Fiction' *Poetics Today* 31:2 (Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 2010) <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2009-018> p154.

The penultimate book in the *Sweetpea* series, *Thorn in My Side* concludes with Rhiannon's beloved husband, Rafael, being shot by a woman Rhiannon had previously angered, leaving readers fearing his death. Although I initially intended Rafael to die, by the time I started the final book, hope had become a crucial theme. Despite her past misdemeanours, I wanted Rhiannon to embody hope because the hinterland she grew from is hope*less*, and that was not her fault. At six, she survived a traumatic attack by a predatory abuser. Her subsequent violent tendencies were worsened by her vigilante father's failure to address them, her mother's emotional abandonment of her, her sister's violation by their grandfather and subsequent involvement with a dangerous miscreant. It was this man, Pete McMahon, who, while Seren lay unconscious, attempted to rape her which led Rhiannon, only a teenager at the time, to intervene and kill him; an event she recalls in the first novel.[52] The emergence of Rafael's faint pulse in the opening chapter of *The Bad Seeds* symbolises the hope I believe six-year-old Rhiannon, now 33, deserves. Her intense cathexis with her childhood traumas shapes her entire blackly comedic worldview and this, to an extent, endears her to the reader. Her violent acts as an adult serve as a heuristic for her understanding of the world, where each brutal event deepens her detachment from social norms. Her kills are part of her survival mechanism, much like Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series.[53] However, unlike Salander, Rhiannon is strikingly ordinary, as previously stated, and it is her everywoman status that sets her apart emphasising the tragedy of her transformation from meek to murderous. In writing a series of five crime fiction novels narrated through her frank and funny perspective, and in giving her a five-book arc in which to evolve, I have intentionally eschewed the formulaic characters and common plot structures, as outlined in Liz Brewster's 2017 study, 'Murder by the Book: Using Crime Fiction as a Bibliotherapeutic Resource.'[54] Each novel in my series is set in a distinct environment from the

[52] Skuse, C.J., *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p294-298
[53] Larsson, S. *The Millennium Series* (Sweden: Norstedts Förlag, 2005)
[54] Brewster L. 'Murder by the book: using crime fiction as a bibliotherapeutic resource.' *Med Humanit*. 2017 Mar; 43(1):62-67. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2016-011069> Epub 2016 Oct 31. PMID: 27799411.

previous one, introducing new challenges and characters to facilitate Rhiannon's growth and complete her redemptive arc. I think it is possible, and furthermore necessary, to forgive her for her malfeasance, for the most part, because the roots of it lie buried in soil too deep for her to dig. My creative approach further enhances the originality of the *Sweetpea* series and adds greater nuance to Rhiannon as a protagonist.

Turning over a new leaf: Rhiannon and the epistolary form

I situate my *Sweetpea* novels within the rich tradition of epistolary texts, a genre whose origins can be traced back to the rise of personal diary writing in the 17th century. Works such as Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela*[55] examined the private lives of people marginalised in society through their private correspondence or diaries. *Pamela* was one of the first novels to use the tool of epistolarity to explore gender inequality and the power dynamics[56] between the elite and working classes from a maidservant's point of view – traditionally a view not shared or 'voiced.' While Rhiannon Lewis could not be considered entirely voiceless, she does experience a sense of powerlessness in her work and her inter-personal relationships. The epistolary format plays a pivotal role in allowing Rhiannon's voice to be heard, if only by herself initially, and through this literary technique, I have innovated upon the tradition. Conventionally, serial killers in crime fiction are portrayed in omniscient or third-person viewpoints, often male, as in Jo Nesbo's *The Snowman*,[57] Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*[58] or Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*[59]. Both Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming*

[55] *Pamela novel by Richardson Britannica.com* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pamela-novel-by-Richardson> [Accessed: 3 February 2025]
[56] Rishit, M., 'Pamela by Samuel Richardson: Virtue, Class, and the Birth of the Modern Novel' *Litgram* [online] <https://litgram.in/pamela-by-samuel-richardson/> [Accessed: 2 February 2025]
[57] Nesbo, J., *The Snowman* (London: Vintage, 2014)
[58] Highsmith, P., *The Talented Mr Ripley* (London: Virago, 2015)
[59] Easton Ellis, B., *American Psycho* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991)

Dexter[60] and *You*[61] by Caroline Kepnes are narrated by the male killers themselves but while neither series is epistolary, they do share elements of the form.[62] Other serial murderers in crime fiction are viewed through the lens of a detective, as in Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*[63], Mo Hayder's *Birdman*,[64] or Boris Starling's *Messiah.*[65] Here the narrative distance maintains suspense, with the reader having to guess the killer's next move alongside the investigating officer. In my case, I have used the diary format to shift suspense, first positioning the reader alongside Rhiannon's wit and honesty, encouraging them to care about her, and later fearing for her capture or death as the police close in.

Alexander, Brien and McAllister's 2015 study on epistolary novels provides the following definition for this type of literary work: 'a personal record of various and selective aspects of the diarist's daily life, with each entry self-contained and usually written during or soon after the event.'[66] This structure, the scholars attest, allows for a sense of immediacy that a crime novel written in any other way does not. Such a text 'derives a measure of its impact from its observational immediacy, and in this it differs from the memoir, which may provide a reflective account of a diary's contents but seen from a distance.'[67] Rhiannon's accounts are characterised by an absence of emotional distance; she presents her life with unflinching directness, often in stark, sometimes horrifying detail, but usually just proceeding the event. The format serves as a raw, direct window into her inner world, and provides a contrast with the type of information one might receive in

[60] Lindsay, J., *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (London: Orion, 2005)
[61] Kepnes, C., *You* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015)
[62] Both narrators directly engage the reader: Dexter using a first-person monologue with a confessional tone, while Joe in *You* employs a second person point-of-view, addressing the reader (or victim) directly, and creating an unsettling, voyeuristic effect. These narrative choices heighten the threat of their unfiltered thoughts, allowing privileged access to truths not shared with any other characters. Even if the format of both novels is not strictly epistolary, the chronological sequencing of events certainly is.
[63] Harris, T., *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: William Heinemann, 1989)
[64] Hayder, M., *Birdman* (London: Bantam, 2008)
[65] Starling, B., *Messiah* (London: HarperCollins, 2010)
[66] Alexander, J., Brien, D.L., McAllister, M., 'Diaries are 'better than novels, more accurate than histories, and even at times more dramatic than plays': Revisiting the diary for creative writers' *TEXT* Vol 19 No 1 (2005) <DOI:10.52086/001c.25335>
[67] Ibid., p1.

an autobiography or a memoir, both of which are typically shaped by hindsight. The graphic nature of Rhiannon's diary entries intensifies the sense of urgency and unpredictability of her character, and her stark confessions defy traditional portrayals of women in literature, challenging expectations. Some of the detail she provides is designed to be shocking, such as her private views on her boyfriend's friends when they come over to watch the football in *Sweetpea*,[68] or on her colleagues as she observes them at work,[69] and the diary gives her a place to vent her sometimes entirely understandable opinions. In her 1995 study on epistolarity, Elizabeth Campbell highlights the importance of this kind of writing, especially for women writers. She notes that the form's 'distancing yet mediatory nature, frees the writer to say what she cannot say in the presence of the addressee.'[70] Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾*[71] is another such example of diarising where true opinions need to be confided privately, rather than broadcast. Having been introduced to this novel as a teenager, it gave me everything I wanted from a reading experience: comedy, a strong voice, a relatable character, and a form not reliant on heavy descriptions or much scene setting. Despite the fact the book is narrated by a teenage boy, I as a teenage girl obtained much from its honest narrative, not least the relatability of adolescence but also that humour could be used as a valuable coping mechanism for a character.

Like Adrian Mole, Rhiannon offers readers intimate access to her private thoughts and world; her interpersonal struggles, disappointments, and her sarcastic humour, often hidden from those around her in order to blend in. She can also hide her trauma. In Stephen Chbosky's 1999 coming-of-age epistolary novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*[72], the protagonist Charlie also confesses his inner struggles, writing 'letters' to an unknown entity he calls 'Dear Friend.' The letters

[68] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p91-93
[69] Ibid., p52-55
[70] Campbell, R., 'Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women' *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Duke University Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.2307/441856> p336.
[71] Townsend, S., *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾* (London: Methuen, 1982).
[72] Chbosky, S., *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (USA: MTV Books, 1999)

are never sent so the novel reads like Charlie's diary; a place where the shy, introspective freshman can express his innermost angst. He has repressed his trauma, which is slowly uncovered as the novel progresses, and the title itself refers to Charlie's role as a 'wallflower'; voiceless, but quietly watching life unfold around him as he manages this. In essence, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is concerned with both the literal inability to speak and the metaphorical silencing caused by trauma or fear. Charlie's journey is one of learning to find a voice of his own, just as my journey was in writing *Sweetpea* after my mother's death. Rhiannon's journey in the *Sweetpea* novels embodies both a literal and metaphorical voicelessness. As a child, she became mute[73] after the Priory Gardens attack, and later, she chooses silence to protect her true identity as a killer. However, in her diary she can 'voice' her frustrations and search for redemption. Fundamentally, that is what makes diarising the right vehicle for Rhiannon to tell her story. In recent times, diary novels have diversified in style and content as they have adapted to the demands of contemporary audiences. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*[74] incorporates diary-like letters to convey the growth of its female protagonist set against the backdrop of early twentieth-century racial tensions and abuse, while Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*[75] brings humour and relatability to the commercial women's fiction genre, appealing to modern female readers with its candid account of singlehood. Both stories in their own ways celebrate women learning to embrace themselves and their power in a world that underestimates or oppresses them. They are the heroes of their own tales; Rhiannon, conversely, could be described as an 'anti-

[73] Her powerlessness is compounded by her inability to confront her struggles leading to the intensifying of her rage. Rage is an emotion often found in children with selective mutism as several studies attest, such as the following: Monzo, M.P., Micotti, S., Rashid, S., 'The mutism of the mind: child and family therapists at work with children and families suffering with selective mutism' *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 41:1, 22-40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2015.1005385> See also Melfsen, S., Jans, T., Romanos, M., Walitza, S., 'Emotion regulation in selective mutism: A comparison group study in children and adolescents with selective mutism' *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Volume 151, July 2022, pp 710-715 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2022.05.040>

[74] Walker, A., *The Color Purple* (USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982)

[75] Fielding, H., *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996)

hero' – flawed, selfish, unethical but ultimately, through the insights she shares, showing signs of growth.

Rhiannon has more in common with the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*[76] than with epistolary characters like Bridget or Celie Johnson. The Creature is often considered to be the ultimate literary 'monster' inasmuch as he kills several people, namely his creator's brother, best friend, and fiancée. However, his killing urge is borne out of rejection and isolation, as is Rhiannon's. This does not validate the brutal acts either of them commit, but it does help to explain them as manifestations of their trauma. The Creature becomes violent and vengeful *because* of the abandonment of his creator, which brings into question the nature of monstrosity itself: is the creature truly monstrous, or is the abandonment it suffered to blame for its desire to commit monstrous acts? That is one of the central themes of the novel and, indeed, one of *Sweetpea*'s too. The question arises: would Rhiannon have grown up to be an honest, law-abiding citizen if her mother had not rejected her after the events at Priory Gardens, or if her father had not encouraged her to become a 'monstrous' vigilante like him? Rhiannon has a longing for human connection in each book in the series, from Craig her cheating boyfriend in the first novel, to Marnie the fellow pregnant mother in *In Bloom* to Rafael, her husband-to-be whom she meets in *Dead Head*, and, subsequently, his family. Shelley's poignant descriptions of the Creature's longing for human connection in *Frankenstein* make it a deeply humanised figure, which was precisely the intention behind my approach to Rhiannon. As the Creature recounts his tale, the reader observes his growth from newborn entity to vicious beast, condemned to a life of cruel abandonment due to his form, over which he has no power. At one point he says: "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I

[76] In the climactic penultimate scenes of *Dead Head*, Rhiannon is forced to cut off her own hand with a machete in order to save three children whom her captor, Paco, is going to kill. This gives her an ugly stitched-together limb (later scarred) which is recollective of the Creature's traditional stitched-together limbs in many film representations of the novel over the years. Such films include *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, dir. by Kenneth Branagh (TriStar, 1994) and *The Curse of Frankenstein*, dir. by Terence Fisher (Warner Bros., 1957).

knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept."[77] Both the Creature and Rhiannon are marked by rejection which fuels their rages, and by granting access to the Creature's inner thoughts in epistolary form, Shelley allows the reader to build their own judgments about what it means to be 'evil,' in the same way I have with Rhiannon. As Caroline Benedetti's research attests, *Frankenstein* highlights 'how boldly we assign the label 'monster' - condemning anything we view as *unnatural* or *other* before we even begin to seek their story.'[78] These texts share a commonality in their challenge to the expected moral boundaries and their explorations of rebellion, and in *Sweetpea* I offer a new kind of crime fiction innovation where the "monster" is not inherently evil but a product of rejection. This aligns with my poetics of female transgression, which seeks to reclaim space for women to express their full range of emotions, unfiltered by the constraints of femininity.

In the quintology as a whole, I have made the reader privy to any and all of Rhiannon's weaknesses as they emerge in the five books. For instance, in the second novel, *In Bloom*, Rhiannon briefly returns to a documentary about the Priory Gardens attack to relive the experience, and again the reader is introduced to one of the reasons why she may have turned to violence:

> [...] Priory Gardens was the spark in my powder keg. The reason Mum got sick. The reason Dad gave up. The reason I have little emotional reaction to anything except Death. I can't feel unless I'm killing. Then I feel everything.[79]

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[77] Shelley, M., *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (Project Gutenberg, 2008) eBook 84, Chapter 11. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/84> [accessed 19 February 2025]
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/84/84-h/84-h.htm> [Accessed: 18 December 2024]
[78] Benedetti, C., (2020) 'The Misunderstood Monstrous: An Analysis of the Word "Monster" in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,' *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 15.
<https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/15> [Accessed: 5 February 2025], p6
[79] Skuse, C.J. *In Bloom* (London: HQ, 2018), p69

There is also evidence of Rhiannon's tenderness in the third novel *Dead Head* as she evades justice to flee the UK. Her departure follows a particularly brutal killing of a female paedophile at the end of *In Bloom*, which also features her abandoning of her baby; an act of which she herself underestimated the painfulness. However, while her sensitivity is there, her humour remains prominent:

> The baby blues kicked in the moment the ship left Southampton. And those fuckers kick *hard*, lemme tell you. I became a smelly, sobbing zombie who stayed in her cabin for the most part, eating junk, bleeding from my loosy goosey and watching re-reruns of *Friends* – the older episodes before Phoebe's wig, Chandler's weight fluctuations and Rachel's constant nipples.[80]

I will explore Rhiannon's 'unlikeable likeability' further in Section 2 where I argue that this is further evidence of my creative strategy in trying to cultivate tenderness for a supposedly monstrous character. I wanted readers to judge her, to be appalled by her sometimes but ultimately to understand her, and providing a reminder of her childhood trauma was another way to achieve that. Her diaries reveal her love for Sylvanian Families, for instance, which reminds the reader of what happened to her as a child at Priory Gardens, and underlines the strange paradox at work in her psyche. Her more sensitive, youthful naivety features again later in *Dead Head* following her arrival in Mexico during her second meeting with Rafael, the man who becomes her husband.[81] These insights may have been possible to achieve in an omniscient viewpoint, but the reader would lose out on Rhiannon's voice and humour – all the more reason for her to relay the information directly through her own diary entries.

[80] Skuse, C.J. *Dead Head* (London: HQ, 2020), p30.
[81] Skuse, C.J. *Dead Head* (London: HQ, 2020), p341.

There are limitations to using the epistolary form in *Sweetpea*, as one only has access to Rhiannon's thoughts, whereas in *Frankenstein* one can compare Walton's, Victor's, and the Creature's viewpoints. This too was intentional. In only having access to Rhiannon, it promotes her strength as a narrator, whether reliable or unreliable. She has so little say in the four core aspects of her life - her friendship dynamics, job, relationship and familial abandonments – that I wanted her to have total agency in this one place. The epistolary form, in both *Frankenstein* and *Sweetpea*, blurs the line between victim and perpetrator, forcing readers to confront the nature of what it means to be monstrous and allowing a so-called 'monstrosity' to explain themselves. Ofelia Ribeiro similarly champions the use of the diary form to provide a voice for those who lack agency in her study from 1990:

> The diary form is a... very flexible structure that is instrumental for the expression of those who would otherwise be unable to express themselves ... [for a woman] writing a personal diary is one important way to ensure her concerns as a female self.[82]

Ribeiro cites Furman's work on the same subject, who adds how a woman's use of the diary form 'serves to validate woman's perceptions by restoring their writing to public view.[83] In *Sweetpea*, although silenced by society and legality, due to the fear of being arrested, Rhiannon uses her diary to exist as she wants to. By allowing her to speak directly in her unfiltered voice, I could both create a sense of closeness and keep the portrayal grounded in her reality. The beauty of the epistolary approach is that it allows readers to witness the evolution of Rhiannon's thoughts, and the fluctuating nature of her emotions. Her vulnerability is laid bare,

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[82] Furman, N., 'The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?' Eds Green, G,. Kahn, C., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism.* (London: Methuen, 1985), p59-79. Cited in Ribeiro, O., 'A different thread: an analysis of the diary form in the representation of the female self' *PhD diss.*, (Concordia University, 1990)<https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/5890/1/MM64712.pdf> [Accessed: 19 December 2024], p40.
[83] Ibid., p43.

but it also allows room for moments of brutality or brutality of opinion which challenge our sympathy as readers. I wanted readers to understand a 'monster' like Rhiannon in a fully rounded sense; to see all sides of her, and in writing five novels detailing her journey from abandonment to power and finally to acceptance, I have gone as far as a writer can in order to do just that.

SECTION 2: FROM SAVAGERY TO SATIRE

This section analyses my original conception of 'sassy noir,' a new crime fiction subgenre spearheaded by and embodied by the *Sweetpea* series and discusses its poetics. I situate *Sweetpea* within crime fiction, examining its similarities to novels in existing subgenres, such as 'chick noir'. I argue that a key element of my unique crime fiction poetics is dark humour and that my transgressive main character, Rhiannon Lewis, uses this to satirise her life and defy expectations of her gender. This is evident in her attitude, profanity, and vigilantism, making her both unique within contemporary crime fiction and an embodiment of my own poetics as a creative scholar.

Taking root: Humour and planting *Sweetpea* in the right bed

Generically, my *Sweetpea* series offers a bold approach to crime writing. The ability of these novels to cross traditional boundaries and merge forms led me to devise a new term to describe them: sassy noir. In this section, I will explain how and why I devised this term. When I initially pitched the first novel in 2015 as *Bridget Jones's Diary* meets *Dexter*,' the publisher was confused as to how it should be marketed to crime readers. One said, "It's unlike anything we've ever read." Another asked, "Is it crime or comedy? It's not *Gone Girl*, but it's not *Bridget Jones* either." I said: "It's both." For marketing purposes, the editors pitched *Sweetpea* as generic crime fiction and the initial cover, flowers on a black background, emphasised its sinister undertones but gave no hint of humour. Early reviews echoed this confusion: readers expected a typical crime novel and were surprised by the comedy. *Sweetpea* did not fit neatly into a genre, which is why I have coined a neologism for the subgenre in which I believe it resides: sassy noir. This is my definition of sassy noir: a subgenre of crime fiction narrated by confident and darkly complex female criminals, often serial killers, in a consistently sardonic or

sarcastic tone which satirises their daily life. It is important to note the word 'criminal' here, rather than any other type of narrator like a detective or bystander, because this is what makes sassy noir unique: the transgressions, alongside humour, are key.

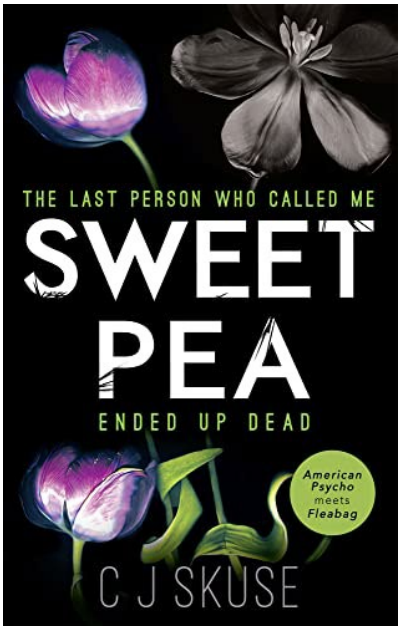


FIG 2. Original cover of *Sweetpea* by C.J. Skuse (London: HQ, 2017)

Rhiannon's demeanour often surpasses mere 'sassiness' in her interactions, suggesting that the term 'sassy' could be just as reductive in a literary context as the term 'chick.' It is still important to define what the word means and why I chose it for my new terminology. In her 2014 article 'How 'Sassy' Came To Mean Something Both Sweet And Sour,' editor Tanya Ballard-Brown examined the etymology of the word 'sassy' and found definitions ranging from 'impudent, saucy, cheeky' to 'outspoken, provocative [and] conceited.'[84] The term has its roots in the West African word *sasi*, meaning 'prideful' or 'to ridicule contemptuously' and historically, the term has been used pejoratively, particularly towards Black women who "sass" authority figures. In recent times, however, its meaning has evolved to denote disrespect in a lively, confident way, which compares more

[84] Ballard-Brown, T., 'How 'Sassy' Came To Mean Something Both Sweet And Sour' (NPR, 2014) <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/08/31/344039582/how-sassy-came-to-mean-something-both-sweet-and-sour> [Accessed: 16 September 2024]

closely with *Sweetpea*'s tone. Nevertheless, I would argue describing Rhiannon as "lively" is an understatement. She demonstrates 'sassy' in its most potent form, and it is this, coupled with her profanity and killing urge, that makes her unique. As Helga Kotthoff asserts in her 2005 study on gender and humour, 'Traditionally, women were supposed to be demure and ladylike, whereas comedy and satire are based on aggressiveness and not being nice.'[85] Writer Soraya Chemaly talks about this extensively in her work on women's anger. She states that:

> Mainly as a girl, I learnt, that anger is an emotion better left entirely unvoiced [...] We teach children to disdain anger in girls and women and we grow up to be adults that penalise it. What if we didn't sever anger from femininity? [...] Because severing anger from femininity means we sever girls and women from the emotion that best protects us from injustice.[86]

My effort to challenge this boundary of femininity and create a powerfully angry woman in *Sweetpea* becomes an act of resistance, contributing to a broader reassessment of societal expectations around gender and humour. The existing crime fiction subgenre categories to which *Sweetpea* could belong – 'chick noir' and 'domestic noir' – do not fully serve the nuances of Rhiannon's character, so consequently I strove to coin a new term. As scholar Victoria Kennedy explains in her 2017 evaluation of chick noir, the genre emerged where 'chick lit' novels had blended with crime thrillers. Chick lit itself grew from a cross-pollination with crime, also written by women, as the following dictionary definition attests:

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[85] Kotthoff, H., 'Gender and humour: The state of the art' *Journal of Pragmatics* 38 (2005) 4–25 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.003> [Accessed: 13 December 2024]
[86] Chemaly, S., 'The Power of Women's Anger' *TedWomen*, 2018, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMt0K-AbpCU> [Accessed: 10 February 2025], 0:39-2:42

> a kind of light commercial fiction [...] written by women about the misadventures of contemporary unmarried working women in their 20s or 30s who struggle with multiple pressures from reproachful mothers, inadequate boyfriends, and tyrannical bosses [...] told in the first person in tones of humorous self-deprecation.[87]

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* novels forged the original 'chick lit' model. They feature an 'identifiable, young heroine facing a series of romantic, professional, and cultural hurdles specific to [her] generation.'[88] Blended with noir, Kennedy suggests that 'chick noir may be read as a manifestation of feminist anger and anxiety – responses to the contemporary pressure to be "wonder women,"'[89] and this is one reason I *would* advocate for *Sweetpea*'s inclusion within this subgenre. According to Kennedy, the 'settings and protagonists *are* predominantly metropolitan,' as is Rhiannon, she *does* work in the media, she *is* 'mistreated' by her romantic partner, and as a result, 'chaos and crime soon overtake(s)' [90] her life. However, Rhiannon is not motivated by conventional domestic pressures but by an intrinsic longing for stability. There's a stark vulnerability present within her that isn't there in other chick noir works, not least because over five books the reader gets to know Rhiannon more completely than other types of heroine. Also, despite the fact she is employed in the media, her position as an administrative assistant at a local newspaper with no prospects for progression places her near the bottom of the media hierarchy.

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[87] 'chick lit' definition, *Oxford Reference.com*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095606915> [Accessed: 6 November 2024]

[88] Ferriss, S., and Young, M., eds. 'Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction.' (New York: Routledge, 2006), quoted by Barklamb, S., 'Chick Lit and Why We Should Study It' *Literature Today MA Thesis*, 2019 <http://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/34200/Sophie%20Barklamb%20Thesis%20Final%206471692.pdf?sequence=2> [Accessed: 9 January 2025], p3.

[89] Kennedy, V., 'Chick Noir': Shopaholic Meets Double Indemnity, *American British and Canadian Studies* 28, (2017), p19 <https://doi.org/10.1515/abcsj-2017-0002> p35

[90] Ibid., p26.

Rhiannon is intelligent, and deeply self-aware, as is Amy Dunne from Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*[91] whom Kennedy identifies as chick noir's "poster child". She attests that Dunne 'is proof positive that women, even homemakers, do and think about a great deal more than advertisers and the mainstream media suggest.'[92] She cites Dunne's comment on the reductive nature of TV commercials all aimed at women who appear to do nothing more than 'clean and bleed.'[93] Dunne's stark observation on the stereotypical representations of women supports Rhiannon's commentary on the perception people have of her. She will 'smile sweetly, like a sweetpea would'[94] and nod demurely at being told by a male colleague to look after herself while walking at night. 'No... you never know what you're gonna find in them shadows. Chihuahuas, savage 27-year-old women carrying wallpaper scissors. All sorts. All sorts.'[95] In many ways, the two protagonists are similar so it could be argued that *Sweetpea* belongs in this category. They are both conscious of how patriarchy shapes the perception of women and understand the pressures placed on women to be feminine and nurturing. They rebel against this and reject the 'victim' position and their extreme actions - Amy's manipulation and Rhiannon's murderous rampages - act as exaggerated comments on how women internalise and externalise these types of pressures. However, one of the key distinctions between *Gone Girl* and *Sweetpea*, and consequently chick noir and sassy noir, lies in the use of humour as a means of representing transgression. While *Gone Girl* cannot be characterised as a comedy, *Sweetpea* can, and its humour not only distinguishes the work from other novels in the genre but enriches it by providing a dynamic lens through which a reader may observe a transgressive woman. There is some evidence of humour in *Gone Girl*, but it is often dark and ironic, reflecting plot tensions rather than the narrator's character. Amy Dunne's cynical "Cool Girl" monologue[96] about how women compromise

[91]Ibid., p20.
[92] Kennedy, V., 'Chick Noir': Shopaholic Meets Double Indemnity, *American British and Canadian Studies* 28, (2017), p19 <https://doi.org/10.1515/abcsj-2017-0002> [Accessed: 10 January 2025], p36.
[93] Flynn, Gillian *Gone Girl* (W&N, 2012), p275
[94] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (HQ, 2017), p47
[95] Ibid., p142
[96]Flynn, G., *Gone Girl* (W&N, 2021), P250-254

themselves to meet unrealistic societal expectations is one such example. Similarly, her honest asides thwart her parents' idealised version of her as 'Amazing Amy' the character from their bestselling children's books. In contrast, Rhiannon in *Sweetpea* deliberately employs a consistent, sarcastic and often vulgar type of humour, exemplified in the 'Kill Lists' at the start of her diary entries. The lists blend tongue-in-cheek expressions of irritation with real targets of murderous intent, creating a comedic tension that further illustrates her unique worldview:

1. Linus 'Smack my face hard, preferably with a breeze block' Sixgill
2. Lana Rowntree – sales assistant and Spunkbucket Extraordinaire
3. AJ – I now know what it stands for too. Absolute Judas.[97]

In examining *Gone Girl* it becomes clear that Amy Dunne often manipulates her own victimhood for shock value and/or plot development. Rhiannon, like Amy, has experienced trauma, but *unlike* Amy, Rhiannon's victimhood is not one arising from manipulation or deceit; it is honest and unforgiving and its roots lie in sympathetic soil. The violence she experienced as a child, the subsequent emotional abandonment by one parent and the encouragement to partake in violent acts herself by the other, are central to Rhiannon's motivations. Her struggle is a genuine exploration of how victimhood shapes one's identity and drives the desire for control in a world that denies her any. Her violence, in part, stems from the way she is dismissed by society. Dunne's manipulation tactics may offer a cynical commentary on societal perceptions of women, but Rhiannon's journey represents a more nuanced engagement with what it truly means to be a victim, and how such an experience can so profoundly impact one's perspective.

Like *Gone Girl*, Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* offers a crime novel centred on a female protagonist whose victimhood also resists easy sympathy. Rachel's

[97]Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p161

descent into alcoholism following the collapse of her marriage, along with her resulting bitterness, compromises the reader's ability to empathise with her. This portrayal subtly engages with the Just World hypothesis, where she might be judged more responsible for her own misfortunes, even when they are the result of external factors like trauma or manipulation. This kind of reasoning blames the victim, especially in such tales where addiction is so visible. Hawkins uses this to good effect in the novel where Rachel's credibility and pain are often dismissed *because* she drinks. I will return to the Just World hypothesis later in this section.

The Girl on the Train has been described as 'chick noir,' by both Kennedy[98] and Alison Taft in her 2025 study on female-led contemporary noir fiction.'[99] In this novel again the humour is much more subtle and inconsistent than *Sweetpea* and intertwined with resentment and longing at how the protagonist, Rachel's, life has unravelled since her marital breakdown. Rachel's humour is scant and self-deprecating, often arising in comments about her own alcoholism. Her reflections while being a passenger on the train, where she imagines the life she should be living, carry a dark irony. Exchanges with her ex-husband, Tom, and his new wife, Anna, are fraught, with Rachel's internal monologue frequently exposing her bitterness for their seemingly perfect marriage:

> Fucking bitch. She's a cuckoo, laying her egg in my nest. She has taken everything from me. She has taken everything and now she calls me to tell me that my distress is inconvenient for her?[100]

This sardonic humour subtly reveals Rachel's inner turmoil in a way that renders her observations more poignant than comedic:

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[98] Kennedy, V., 'Chick Noir': Shopaholic Meets Double Indemnity, *American British and Canadian Studies* 28, (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1515/abcsj-2017-0002> [Accessed: 8 January 2025], p21
[99] Taft, A., 'Feminist Noir or Chick Noir? – Protagonist, Voice, Tone and Sexuality in Female-Led Contemporary Noir Fiction.' University of Huddersfield. <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/34729/> [Accessed: 8 January 2025], p4.
[100] Hawkins, P., *The Girl on the Train* (London: Doubleday, 2015), p41

> I once read a book by a former alcoholic where she described giving oral sex to two different men, men she'd just met in a restaurant on a busy London high street. I read it and I thought *I'm not that bad*. This is where the bar is set.[101]

Alternatively, in *Sweetpea* Rhiannon prefers a more attacking stance[102] with her humour, particularly when communicating with colleague Lana, her boyfriend's mistress:

> I am the nicest version of Lovely Girlfriend I can be when I'm talking to her. I complimented her on her strobed cheeks today. She's going to give me a lesson after work one night. I've a feeling if I bring wine into the equation, she'll tell me all her secrets [...][103]

Rhiannon's humour is far more assertive than a character like Rachel's because it establishes dominance rather than vulnerability. Another way in which Rhiannon's account and Rachel's differ is that *The Girl on the Train* offers three separate narrators – Rachel, Anna and Megan Hipwell, Anna and Tom's former nanny - whereas *Sweetpea* only allows for Rhiannon's viewpoint. This choice in sole narrative perspective in *Sweetpea* reinforces the argument that Rhiannon is the more dominant and influential narrator with ultimate power over what detail her reader receives. Scholar Caroline Reitz attests that *The Girl on the Train* is 'much more an exploration of the messy feelings of three women whose self-worth relies on male validation. There is anger, but it lurks beneath angsty self-hate and shameful self-doubt. This is the genre of "ugly feelings."'[104] It could be argued that

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[101] Ibid., p23
[102] Another example of her attacking humour is found in Book 4 *Thorn in my Side* when Rhiannon, under her pseudonym Ophelia, defends herself from her much-despised sister-in-law's barbs about her behaviour. See Skuse, C.J., *Thorn in my Side* (London: HQ, 2024), p290
[103] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p324
[104] Reitz, C., *Female Anger in Crime Fiction*, (Cambridge Elements, 2024), p49, <DOI:10.1017/9781009358699>

Rhiannon's self-worth is contingent upon Rafael by the end of the series but I counter this by affirming that her ultimate aspiration is to find true human connection; it does not have to be a man providing this. She requires someone, of *any* gender, who validates both sides of her character: her Rhiannon side and her 'Sweetpea' side - but who does not abandon her. This desire for acceptance *could* have been realised through her friendship with Marnie in *In Bloom*, or Tenoch the ex-cartel hitman in *Dead Head*, but by ultimately abandoning Rhiannon to face her fate alone, both of these characters prevents the process of full acceptance from completion, leaving Rhiannon without the continued support she needs. Rafael does not and would never leave her and that is the difference. This links directly back to my own feelings of abandonment proceeding the deaths of my parents. In my creative practice, the intention was for Rhiannon to regain the power she lost as a child when she suffered the brain injury, as I have previously intimated. It was my belief that she personally had suffered enough, and it was time to unleash it onto others, for right or for wrong. Rhiannon wields her dark, sarcastic wit to cope with life as well as to assert her agency. While the primary aim of chick noir is to engage readers with suspense, mystery, and psychological complexity, the primary objective of sassy noir novels like *Sweetpea* is to make readers laugh but then shock them into questioning why they found it funny and what that reveals about them.

Rhiannon's startling honesty is a key factor in making her a sassy noir anti-hero. Some of her remarks are deeply offensive, for example her wry observations about cancer and quips about her victims (e.g., Dan Dan the Dickless Man), but it is this boldness that makes her compelling. In *Sweetpea*[105] in the Monday 5 February entry[106], she has to recount a story she has told often: how she was attacked by a hammer-wielding intruder at her creche when she was six. Rhiannon is bored of this story, but readers hitherto had not heard it, so I needed to dispense the

[105] Ibid., p71-80
[106]Ibid., p71-80.

information in a way that was different for her but entertaining for them. Humour was imperative, from the satirising of the breakfast TV interview experience - e.g., 'I was to be on air between a segment about a botched hysterectomy and a recipe for a three-cheese quiche' - to Rhiannon noticing the bulge in the co-host's trousers – 'Apparently, Tony is shagging everyone. Well, when you've got that much hot dog it is silly to put it in just the one roll.'[107] I wanted readers to gauge the awfulness of the scene without losing the tone, so I employed juxtaposition to draw comedy from horror. Aram Kim, Rosie Luo, and Lillian Ng's research on black humour in mental health services theorises that using black comedy in real life traumatic situations while working in mental healthcare acts as 'essentially a shift in cognitive perspective, which may allow distance from the immediate threat and reduce feelings of anxiety and helplessness.'[108] That is not to say the horrific events at Priory Gardens are parodied in this scene; it is more the faux sympathy for Rhiannon from the co-hosts that she takes aim at here.

Jane McAuliffe's work on feminist comedy enables this scene to be read in another way: that it is bringing catharsis to Rhiannon as well. McAuliffe states: 'Comedic catharsis offers a model for surviving a confrontation with oppressive power in a way that does not hold the self apart from what is critiqued but also does not leave one beholden to it.'[109] The "oppressive power" in the daytime TV scene in *Sweetpea* is the TV show's presenters, who Rhiannon dismantles with her sharp retorts, her refusal to cry on demand, and sarcastic rebranding of their programme. While parodying daytime television is hardly a novel comedic approach, *Sweetpea* aims to expose the superficiality of the medium while delivering important detail. As McAuliffe states, 'Humour can be a vital part of a feminist survival kit,'[110] and the type of macabre humour Rhiannon deploys achieves precisely this effect. It

[107] Ibid., p86
[108] Kim, A., Luo, R., Ng, L., 'A bite of dark chocolate? Black humour in mental health services' *Australasian Psychiatry* 2024, Vol. 32(1) 68–73 <https://doi.org/10.1177/10398562231222815> p68
[109] McAuliffe, J. 'How to feminist affect: Feminist comedy and post-truth politics' *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 49(2) (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221147846> p234
[110] Ibid., p239

humanises her and highlights the absurdity of contemporary culture, including the disingenuousness of daytime television. For instance, in the first *Sweetpea* book, Rhiannon self-diagnoses as a psychopath using a Buzzfeed quiz,[111] reflecting the modern trivialisation of serious topics in the online space. This self-aware use of language is not just comedic but also subversive: it is a form of resistance, used to navigate a world that often reduces complex human experience to oversimplified clickbait. The transgressive humour prevalent in *Sweetpea* allows it to stand out in what is a now crowded literary genre. It was the first of its kind and set the precedent for similar works all featuring funny female serial killers, and all marketed with macabre, slightly cartoonish covers using striking colour palettes.[112] I would categorise all of these works specifically within the framework of sassy noir but all of which were published after *Sweetpea*. *How to Kill Your Family* by Bella Mackie is one such subsequent work, published in 2021, which although it might be filed under 'chick noir' I would attest belongs to sassy noir. Mackie's protagonist, Grace, is singularly focused on getting revenge on her own family and dismantling their legacy. *Sweetpea*'s antiheroine pursues a more chaotic quest for contentment, with the murder of targeted strangers temporarily filling an emotional void. Despite these differing motivations, both characters share a sardonic sense of humour and a tendency to manipulate others to achieve their ends. Grace's mockery of those who 'seem not to possess the ability to use basic English, even in text' [113] echoes Rhiannon's sharp wit and biting observations about people she considers educationally beneath her, such as in her text

[111] Skuse, C.J., *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p16

[112] Such titles include Braithwaite, O., *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (London: Atlantic, 2019); Raybourn, D., *Killers of a Certain Age* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022); Wallace, J., *You'd Look Better as a Ghost* (London: Viper, 2023); Cohen, J.M *Bad Men* (London: Zaffre, 2023); Kellman, E., *How to Kill a Guy in Ten Ways* (London: Avon Books, 2024); and Bonner, S., *How to Slay at Work* (London: Boldwood, 2024). Female serial killers also feature in both the Maestra trilogy by L.S. Hilton (London: Zaffre, 2016) and Chloe Esposito's *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* trilogy (London: Penguin, 2017-2020). While it is important to note that *Maestra* was published a year prior to my novel, and *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* released shortly after *Sweetpea* in June 2017, I argue that both series align more closely with the eroto-thriller genre rather than Sassy Noir. In contrast, *Sweetpea* is more accurately situated within a subgenre that blends psychological thriller elements with a focus on humour and absurdity. Although I acknowledge that the marketing strategies surrounding the former series may influence my perspective, I maintain that this distinction holds.

[113]Mackie, B., *How to Kill Your Family* (London: The Borough Press, 2021), p23-24

exchanges with Brad Pfister, a man she has caught upskirting her in a bridal cubicle and whom she is blackmailing:

I did the cutting thing you psycho.

I want my phone. You said I could have it now. Your a thief.

It's YOU ARE *a thief.* Y O U *apostrophe* R E.
If you're going to threaten me, at least get it right.

Fuck you. Where's my phone?

I'm texting you on it, Numbfucks.

You can't do this! That's my property. You're a thief.

And you're a pervert, what's your point?[114]

Like Rhiannon, Grace is equally proficient at manipulating others to achieve her goals:

> Ugh. I resent having to rely on a man (and worse, a man who wears wrap-around shades) ... If it goes tits up, he'll be in a world of trouble. This cheers me up a little, and I drain my coffee.[115]

This directly correlates with Rhiannon's ability to contrast the hideous nature of her crimes with the mundanity of everyday life, such as the scene in *Sweetpea* where she visits her tortured hostage Julia, 'shoves in another round of Plug Ins' to deal with the smell,' and then contemplates going to Lidl for some corned beef.[116] Grace's shallow judgments of people also correlate with Rhiannon's.

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[114] Skuse, C.J., *Thorn in my Side* (London: HQ, 2024), p152.
[115] Mackie, B., *How to Kill Your Family* (London: The Borough Press, 2021), p23-24
[116] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p70-71.

> I remember once reading about a woman who married a man who convinced her that he was a spy. He persuaded her to sign over her life savings...Was I supposed to feel sorry for this person, a grown-up who dreamt of fairy-tale romance...a woman in her fifties (who looked every inch of it) ...?[117]

Rhiannon makes similar judgments about colleagues but with a nastier edge:

> [Lynette] would sit on the ends of desks, slurping tea [...] and moaning how she never had enough time to do anything, yet plenty of time to talk about her dull life on her canal boat [...] Middle age hit that woman's body like a truck.[118]

Domestic noir[119] is another subgenre which deals with the complexities of everyday life and the hidden tensions within seemingly normal households and in recent years, this subgenre has been favoured over chick noir as a descriptor. This less sexist and more home-based monicker was coined by author Julia Crouch in 2013 who, like me, felt the existing subcategories of crime fiction did not fit her specific type of fiction. In her blogpost 'Genre Bender', Crouch provides a definition of the term:

> Domestic noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely [...] with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants.[120]

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[117]Mackie, B., *How to Kill Your Family* (London: The Borough Press, 2021), p44
[118] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p120
[119] Crouch, J., 'Domestic Noir' coined in 2013 <http://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/writing-hub/the-origins-of-domestic-noir/> [Accessed: 02 August 2024]
[120] Crouch, J., 'Genre Bender' (2013) <http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender> [Accessed: 1 November 2024]

However, as with chick noir, I do not believe domestic noir as a genre descriptor fits *Sweetpea* either. The domestic sphere in my novels is *not* the dangerous place: *Rhiannon* is the dangerous place. Rhiannon embodies a unique form of jeopardy that originates from her own actions, positioning her as both the architect of her liberation *and* potential downfall. Unlike traditional crime protagonists, she possesses a heightened agency, shaping the narrative through her actions and humour. This is what makes her stand out from both the domestic and chick noir subgenres.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Freud's 1905 theory of humour as a 'relaxation of tension,' and 'release from constraint,'[121] also resonates within the crime fiction context. Humour acts as an outlet for characters and readers alike to cope with the grim realities of violence, death, and injustice. By deploying humour in *Sweetpea* I engage readers in a deeper exploration of the complexities of gender and language. Evidence of this can be found in the ludicrous ways in which some of Rhiannon's victims are murdered – they are mocked and/or dispatched in typical Sweetpea style. A typically 'Rhiannon-esque' dispatch in *In Bloom* sees her abandoning a man to die down the well feature at her father-in-law's holiday home and sitting on the side of the hole eating Pick 'n' Mix and swinging her legs childishly above him.[122] The outcome is a carnivalesque form of justice – a sassy form of noir - where laughing at life's taboos becomes an act of power reclamation. Ultimately, Rhiannon's humour serves as a medium for self-empowerment, not only for herself, but for the brain-injured six-year-old she once was. Another such scene, also in *In Bloom*, occurs where the body of paedophile Sandra Huggins becomes a macabre new Christmas decoration:

[121] Freud, S. (1905) 'Jokes and their relation to the unconscious: The standard edition of the complete psycho logical works of Sigmund Freud,' vol 8, p1–247 cited in Dauphin, B., and Christoff, M., 'Freud's theory of humour.' *Department of Psychology, University of Detroit* (May 2017) <DOI:10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_5881> p2.
[122] Skuse, C.J. *In Bloom* (London: HQ, 2018), p157.

> In my feverish trance, the sight of the sugarplum and gingerbread displays dripping with her innards was just so damn funny. *Deck the Halls with Sandra's insides, Fa la la la la la la la la.* One part of her was still throbbing. [...] The only thing I left intact was her head. [...] I removed the neon Santa head and replaced it with Huggins's. Sandra Claus is coming to town [...][123]

The *Sweetpea* quintology blends the traditionally dark and thrilling with a provocative, humorous take. Drawing inspiration from the grotesque, taboo, and absurd, my work does not merely present crime as a harrowing experience but layers it with wit, allowing readers to be entertained by Rhiannon's story. She operates outside the usual boundaries set for crime heroines and her almost farcical view of murder serves as an antidote to the tense seriousness typically associated with crime novels. Sassy noir is a new category of crime fiction that prioritises a darkly comedic world view as a means to explore aspects of human nature in a way that no previous iteration of the genre has attempted.

If humour is a central feature of sassy noir, and by extension, of *Sweetpea*, it is crucial to examine the rationale behind my choice of a comedic voice for the narrative. As noted in Section 1, grief initially served as the impetus for writing the novels, but I soon found my capacity for sorrow diminishing, prompting me to seek a different emotional outlet. The story continued to evolve, and I recognised that my natural inclination as a writer leaned towards comedy; an approach I refined while writing young adult novels. Over time, this approach has developed into a distinctive aspect of my style and adult literature provided a further advantage in that it allowed me the freedom to incorporate profanity freely for the first time; a liberty that young adult fiction typically restricts.

[123] Ibid., p412.

Blooming heck - profanity in *Sweetpea*

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping Rhiannon and her transgressive actions – her kills, her attitude and her profanity. These all serve as a defiant response to constraints imposed on her and the prominence of profanity in these books, namely the word "fuck," felt natural, given its personal resonance as the word I was most often chastised for using in childhood. In her June 2011 *New York Magazine* essay, 'Ode to a Four-Letter Word,' journalist Kathryn Schulz exalts in its usage, declaring that 'Writers don't use expletives out of laziness or the puerile desire to shock [...] We use them because, sometimes, the four-letter word *is* the [...] best one.'[124] Similarly, Mona Eltahawy cites profanity as an essential tool in disrupting patriarchy and its rules. She states that women should be disruptors and that *not* interrupting the expected behaviour imposed by patriarchal colonisers increases their power and oppression. 'I could say 'Dismantle the patriarchy.' Or 'Smash the patriarchy [...] I say 'Fuck the patriarchy' because I am a woman, a woman of colour, a Muslim woman. And I am not supposed to say 'fuck.'[125]

My response in the *Sweetpea* series echoes Eltahawy's assertion: 'I claim my vagina, my pussy, and my cunt. I am uncivil.'[126] In crafting a fierce, fictional female, I too engaged in rebellion, employing transgressive language, referencing sexual acts and pornography; topics considered socially inappropriate for women to discuss. Part of this is due to the fact my main censor – my mother – was no longer around the curtail me. In *Sweetpea*, there are 155 instances of the word "fuck," mostly expelled by Rhiannon to express frustration in situations beyond her control, such as her reluctant participation in a hen weekend. e.g., 'Fuck it. In a fairly large bucket.'[127] She vents her irritation at work over menial tasks and missed

[124] Schulz, K., 'Ode to a Four-Letter Word' *New York*, June 3 2011 <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/adam-mansbach-2011-6/> [Accessed: 5 December 2024]
[125]Eltahawy, M., *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (Poland: Beacon Press, 2020) p85-86
[126]Ibid., p103-104
[127]Skuse, C.J., *Sweetpea*, (London: HQ, 2017), p8

promotions too. e.g., 'Not to mention a billion other reasons for me to want to jump through the fucking window.'[128] She also expresses annoyance at her inability to lose weight – 'Fuck you, waistline.'[129]

The retention of profane language was important not just as a tool of rebellion, but also in my creative practice as a response to patriarchal norms. Although Rhiannon may not appear overtly feminist, her assertion of ownership over such language connects with the broader feminist movement in its challenge to restrictive gender expectations. *Sweetpea* features the word 'cunt' eleven times, emphasising Rhiannon's most extreme emotional outbursts. It is most frequently used in her workplace; she describes her manager, Claudia, as a 'pubic louse on the vaginal wall of the cunt witch from Hell,'[130] and refers to Lynette from accounting as 'Inept from the Cunts Department.' [131] Such language underlines Rhiannon's anger at her perceived mistreatment, including being overlooked as a team member. She also refers to her elderly kleptomaniac neighbour, Mrs. Whittaker, using the same term after discovering the theft of her cherished toy pig, Richard E. Grunt[132], and threatens to 'cunt-punch' colleague Lana due to her affair with her boyfriend. In an argument with her sister over the sale of their parents' home, she accuses Seren of being a 'cunting liar,'[133] which further escalates when her sister calls Rhiannon a 'psycho.' As well as underlining Rhiannon's violent tendencies away from her violent acts, these instances of profanity also highlight interpersonal tensions, stressing the conflict that can occur between women, and problematising the idea of an unproblematic sisterhood.

[128]Ibid., p21-22
[129]Ibid., p54
[130]Ibid., p22
[131]Ibid., 102
[132]Ibid., p233
[133]Ibid., p321

However, there are also moments where Rhiannon acts in defiance of societal norms, exhibiting feminist actions and beliefs, e.g., taking birth control,[134] understanding rape as being an instrument of patriarchal power,[135] and using the most profane of language to deliberately attack authority.[136] Profanity reveals Rhiannon's rebellion, defying expectations placed upon her by a society that calls her 'sweet pea' and regularly undermines her at every turn. It forces the reader to confront an uncomfortable truth: Rhiannon is not a stereotypically feminine woman and should not be treated as such. She subverts the typical portrayal of women in crime fiction as 'femme fatales' or helpless victims, adding further depth to her narrative. There is another important reason why Rhiannon uses profanity so prolifically: she is depressed, and this reinforces my point in Section 1 about catharsis. Her use of swearing acts as a form of release for her (and subsequently myself as I wrote her during bereavement). As Waqar Husain, Samia Wasif and Insha Fatima explored in their 2023 study on the use of profanity as an outlet for emotional catharsis, swearing is 'a natural response to release stress [...] avoid pain [express] power and control.' They attest that it 'can serve as an unconscious and mature self-defence mechanism to reduce the adverse effects of daily stressors.'[137] This complexity reinforces the notion that Rhiannon is not either entirely 'good' or 'bad,' feminist or misogynist, but rather represents a complex and distinctive new identity in the genre; one who espouses both likeable and unlikeable qualities, and therefore defies quick categorisation.

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[134] Johnson, R.C., 'Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill' *Pharmacy in History* Vol. 19, No. 2 (University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 63-78
[135] Ackerman, C., 'The Power of Patriarchy: its manifestation in rape' (Stellenbosch University. 1995), <https://ackerman_power_1995.pdf(11.6 MB)> [Accessed: 5 February 2025]
[136] Eltahawy, M., 'Essay: Fuck is a Feminist Word' *Feminist Giant* (October, 2020) <https://www.feministgiant.com/p/fuck-is-a-feminist-word> [Accessed: 5 February 2025]
[137]Husain W., Wasif S., Fatima I., 'Profanity as a Self-Defence Mechanism and an Outlet for Emotional Catharsis in Stress, Anxiety, and Depression.' *Depress Res Treat.* (May 2023) <https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/8821517> p2.

Every rose has its thorn – the likeable unlikability of Rhiannon

In my creative practice, I aimed to explore the complex relationship between language and identity in the *Sweetpea* quintology, using Rhiannon as a vehicle to challenge traditional expectations of female narrators. I wanted to convey that fictional women do not need to adhere to conventional notions of likability in order to be compelling. Through Rhiannon's unapologetic actions, I sought to highlight the 'tyranny of niceness'[138] that women are often expected to embody, as discussed by Evelyn Summers in her 2005 study. This societal pressure to be compliant and 'nice' is a powerful force that limits our autonomy and, as Summers argues, nurturing anger is a way to force accountability from patriarchal structures,[139] something I wanted to explore in Rhiannon. In agreement with journalist Helen Lewis's call for more transgressive female figures, I crafted Rhiannon as someone who resists such constraints, allowing her to symbolise a reckoning that pushes against the expectations of upon women and girls:

> Girls are instructed to be "ladylike" to keep them quiet and docile [...] God forbid our own emotions should impinge on anyone else's day [...] Our anger is portrayed as unnatural, horrifying, disfiguring [...][140]

Lewis echoes Summers' point, stating that feminism must put in place strategies to rebuff this as it has always been a key antagonist in shaping the role they carve out. 'Feminism is not a self-help movement, dedicated to making everyone feel better about their lives,' Lewis declares, but 'a radical demand to overturn the status quo.'[141] That is what I aimed for with *Sweetpea:* a challenge to the established order, in both feminist ideology and to the crime fiction genre as a whole. Rhiannon had to be unafraid; to do things that would shock the reader into

[138] Summers, E., 'Tyranny of Niceness: Unmasking the Need for Approval' (Dundurn, 2005).
[139]Eltahawy, M., 'The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls' (Poland: Beacon Press, 2020) p45
[140]Lewis, H., 'Fighting the tyranny of 'niceness': why we need difficult women' *The Guardian*, 15 February 2020 <https://shorturl.at/mWXPs> [Accessed: 29 November 2024]
[141] Ibid., para 16.

engaging. She had to behave outside the norm in order to stand out. One place where I could achieve this was in her use of profanity; another, in her profound selfishness. She kills without legitimate authority and is, initially at least, driven by the pursuit of a fleeting thrill in an otherwise unrewarding life. Her selfishness creates a compulsive dynamic, where readers are intrigued by her motives, even if they find some of her actions repugnant. Such actions include her harvesting of her boyfriend's sperm in *Sweetpea* in order to implicate him in her crimes; an entirely selfish act solely concerned with revenge. In another sense, Rhiannon's motives reflect self*lessness*, such as when she flees the UK at the end of *In Bloom* but ensures her diaries are sent to a journalist thus exonerating Craig for her crimes. She also regularly risks her freedom to exact revenge on those who would harm her, or those she cares about, often risking her life in the process.

Crime fiction often explores themes of justice, revenge, and moral ambiguity and Rhiannon embodies all of these traits herself. Her selflessness in the face of danger (e.g., when she stalks the man who intends to sexually assault her drunk friend Marnie in *In Bloom*[142]) evokes admiration, even if readers may morally question it. I explored Alison Graham-Bertolini's 2011 study 'Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction' and decided that Rhiannon fell into the category of 'female bandit or outlaw.'[143] This type of fictional female character, aside from committing potentially 'unlikeable' acts to defend others, has the additional motive of conquering their own demons using violent responses. A character like Rhiannon operating outside of the law in modern literature is an inspiring totem for female readers keen see themselves represented in every way a man is. She does not subscribe to restrictive social norms nor harmful self-sacrifice; the 'mothering morality'[144] as Graham-Bertolini attests. This purports to illustrate her as 'unlikeable' but such nuanced representation is an important step in provoking

[142] Skuse, C.J., *In Bloom* (London: HQ, 2018), p242-246.
[143] Graham-Bertolini, A., 'Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction' (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century* <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339309> p129.
[144] Ibid., p137.

societal change through fiction and 'correcting ideology that privileges men.'[145] As well as being an outlaw, Rhiannon is also an 'avenger,'[146] whose punishments fit the crimes (in most cases); a harbinger of retribution 'for a specific behaviour [or behaviours] that is not addressed by the justice system of the community in question.'[147] However, whether Rhiannon is a bandit, an avenger or something in between, she is a compellingly unpredictable character, embodying the tension between good and bad, right and wrong, likeable and unlikeable.

In transitioning from writing young adult fiction to adult crime, I recognised that the latter was an expansive genre, requiring a distinctive approach to stand out. While it was essential to imbue the first novel with a shock factor, I was also committed to avoiding gratuitous violence for its own sake while experimenting with the poetics of female transgression and humour. The latter increasingly became the more important aspects of my own creative practice. I also made an early decision not to include certain forms of harm, as they conflicted with my personal ethical boundaries. For instance, in reality, a character like Rhiannon would likely have begun her path of violence with acts of animal cruelty before progressing to human torture and murder. Such behaviour is well-documented in psychological studies of violent offenders, irrespective of their gender. In their 2007 study, Marie-Louise Petersen and David P. Farrington cite the cases of child killers Robert Thompson, John Venables and Mary Bell who all habitually tortured stray animals and other children before going on to murder young boys.[148] They furthermore examine the Boston Strangler, Ed Kemper and the Moors Murderers, all serial killers with a penchant for abusing or murdering animals before they went on to commit some of the worst atrocities in modern memory.[149] In one Australian study, Eleonora Gullone and John P., Clarke cite numerous empirical

[145] Ibid., p166.
[146] Graham-Bertolini, A., 'Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction' (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*, p17.
[147] Ibid., p17-18.
[148]Petersen, M.L., Farrington, D.P., 'Cruelty to Animals and Violence to People, Victims and Offenders,' (2007), *Victims and Offenders*, 2:21–43, <https://DOI: 10.1080/15564880600934187> p27.
[149] Ibid., p26-28.

and anecdotal evidence that suggests 'a strong association'[150] between the co-occurrence of human violence, criminal behaviour and animal abuse. One reason as to why this may happen is cited as being the perpetrator's 'reduced capacity to empathise with a potential victim [...] high callousness and low empathy [reveals] low levels of concern for others.'[151]

As I have stipulated previously, I wanted Rhiannon to be as realistic as possible; however, I made an early creative decision not to portray her as an animal killer or abuser, either for intimidation purposes or self-gratification. An image that had been vivid in my mind since the inception of the quintology, yet which only came to the forefront in the fourth novel, *Thorn in my Side*, is that of a brown cocker spaniel at the Priory Gardens murder scene. While the dog went unnoticed by the assailant during the attack, it entered the scene shortly after the massacre and positioned itself beside Rhiannon, the only child left alive:

> An old school 'friend' I'd completely forgotten about gets her fifteen minutes too – Stephanie Rouass... 'She never hurt animals,' said Stephanie. 'There was that spaniel at Priory Gardens who lay next to her as she lay dying. Maybe that was why she was kind to them.' ... I always wondered what happened to that dog. I hope they didn't kill it like they did with Dennis Nilsen's.[152]

This moment involving the spaniel marks a pivotal stage in Rhiannon's psychological development. Her bond with the dog becomes a symbol of unconditional companionship, one that directly reflects her deepest emotional need. In the aftermath of the traumatic event, the spaniel's presence not only

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[150] Gullone, E., Clarke, J.P., 'Animal Abuse, Cruelty and Welfare: An Australian Perspective' from *The International Handbook of Animal Abuse and Cruelty: Theory, Research and Application* (USA: Purdue University, 2008), p311.
[151]Ibid., p311-312.
[152] Skuse, C.J. *Thorn in my Side* (London: HQ, 2023), p210-211.

offered physical comfort but also planted the seeds of Rhiannon's enduring love for animals, taking root in the fractured terrain of her mind left by violence. This episode stands in stark contrast to her later acts of brutality, revealing her capacity to love vulnerable creatures and underscoring the complexity of her humanity. Later in the novel, when her new husband Rafael asks about her 'rosebud' moment, a reference to the film *Citizen Kane*, Rhiannon recalls the spaniel again. The memory unravels into a stark confession, exposing a deeper layer of her internal world:

> 'There was a dog there – a brown spaniel – he hid when the man broke in. But after, he came into the lounge and licked my face and it woke me up. And he stayed with me – his ear all soft on my hair. He stayed with me as I lay there waiting for help. No one ever asks me about him... So yeah, I guess that was my "rosebud moment". All innocence lost and I saw the world for what it was. Frightening. Uncontrollable... It's never left me – that need to save the babies at the crèche. I was happy before that. I'd been kept away from the horrors of this world before that moment – because it is, Raf; it is a horrible world. I think I've been trying to claw back that innocence ever since.'[153]

The reference to Rhiannon's desire to protect the babies at the crèche suggests that the traumatic event significantly shaped her deep-seated compulsion to safeguard others, potentially as a means of reclaiming the innocence she lost. In this context, Rhiannon articulates an enduring sense of trauma and the challenges inherent in reconciling the happiness she once experienced with the harsh realities of the world. Since that pivotal moment, she has struggled to recover the innocence lost in the wake of violence. The fact that the memory of the protective spaniel serves as a key trigger for this reflection is highly significant, as it emphasises the layered nature of Rhiannon's character.

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[153] Skuse, C.J. *Thorn in my Side* (London: HQ, 2023), p317-318

There are many more studies I could have cited in depth to support the strong link between killers and animal abuse, for example Heather Piper's 2003 study linking it with interpersonal violence,[154] Josephine Donovan's 2011 article[155] or Arnold Arluke, Adam Lankford and Eric Madfis's 2018 study on the link with culprits of mass shootings.[156] However, I for one would not continue engaging with a fictional character who habitually partook in such acts, no matter how entertaining her dialogue. In focusing Rhiannon's wrath on socially despised offenders instead, such as rapists or paedophiles, her violence retained a sense of cruelty and purpose, without making her actions feel irredeemable.

I also decided that Rhiannon's childhood brain injury could offer another way for readers to be able to engage with her on a realistic level. A child can transgress in ways adults would not be forgiven, and while this does not excuse her behaviour, it provides a context for a deeper understanding of her motivations. The injury allows us to explore her actions through a lens of altered neurological function, rather than just criminal intent, ensuring Rhiannon is perceived not as a one-dimensional villain but as a product of her environment. Another reason Rhiannon may be perceived as non-villainous in the traditional sense, is that she is entirely fictional, offering readers a degree of safety in their admiration. Mary K. Rothbart's theory of 'arousal-safety' attests to this, whereby a reader may judge the threat on the page as 'not dangerous' or 'inconsequential' to themselves in the first instance.[157] 'False-alarm theory'[158] also suggests humour can arise when people feel secure, even when confronted with threatening stimuli. Despite Rhiannon committing brutal acts, e.g., castrating a predatory rapist in *Sweetpea*, luring two

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[154] Piper, H., 'The Linkage of Animal Abuse with Interpersonal Violence: A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing?' *Journal of Social Work* 3 (2), p161-177, (London: Sage Publications, 2003) <https://doi.org/10.1177/146801730300320003>

[155] Donovan, J., 'Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty,' *College Literature* (John Hopkins University Press: 2011), Vol. 38, No. 4, General Issue pp 202. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41302895> [Accessed: 10 February 2025]

[156] Arluke, A., Lankford, A., Madfis, E., 'Harming animals and massacring humans: Characteristics of public mass and active shooters who abused animals' *Behav Sci Law.* (2018); 36:739–751 <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2385>

[157] Rothbart, M.K., 'Laughter in Young Children' *Psychological Bulletin* 1973, Vol. 80, No. 3, 247-256 <https://rothbart (1973) laughter in young children.pdf> [Accessed: 10 February 2025], p249.

[158] Ramachandran V.S., 'The neurology and evolution of humour, laughter, and smiling: the false alarm theory.' *Med Hypotheses*. 1998 Oct;51(4):351-4. PMID: 9824844. <https://doi: 10.1016/s0306-9877(98)90061-5> p53.

men into an oubliette, and hacking a convicted female paedophile to death in *In Bloom*, and slicing off her own hand to free herself from restraints in *Dead Head*, the reader remains suitably distanced from real danger. I would contend that her gender contributes to this distance, as real-life incidents of women inflicting such a high degree of violence are exceedingly rare. The intensity of her shocking language is also rare – rare to the point of making her unlikeable to weak sensibilities - but this is part of her power play. Profanity often shocks and Rhiannon demands to be heard, even if she is reviled for it.

Koa Beck, writing for *The Atlantic*, attests that these types of females 'defy likability in their outlandish occupation of the roles to which women are customarily relegated; mother – wife – daughter - resisting sexist mythologies and social pressures.'[159] Sarah Bott's 2020 study 'Pants, Not Petticoats: Transgressive Female Characters in Literature' makes a powerful case for writing female characters outside of the gender stereotype, stating that 'Every so often, a heroine appears that rocks the boat and upends a long-held understanding of femininity.'[160] In developing Rhiannon, my objective was to disrupt the norm within the crime fiction genre, introducing a figure who defies conventional expectations: an unassuming, 'girl-next-door' type who, despite an ordinary appearance, harbours a violently transgressive nature. These transgressions take place on multiple levels; illegally (through murder, kidnapping, necrophilia), immorally (through deceit, manipulation, betrayal), and asocially (by rejecting conventional gender roles, expressing violent fantasies, and embracing taboo desires). She operates in a space defying conventional categorisations of heroism and morality and is 'doubly deviant'[161] too as a *woman* who kills, rather than a man. In his 2016 study 'The feminist case for acknowledging women's acts of violence,'

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[159] Beck, K., 'Female Characters Don't Have to Be Likable' *The Atlantic* (2015). <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/in-praise-of-fictions-unlikable-women-in-2015/421698/> [Accessed: 22 September 2024]

[160]Bott, S., 'Pants, Not Petticoats: Transgressive Female Characters in Literature' (2020). *Literary and Intercultural Studies*, Senior Theses. 1. <https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2020.LCS.ST.01>

[161]Miller, A., Atherton, C., Hetherington, P., 'Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in Killing Eve,' (2023) *Feminist Media Studies*, 23:4, 1802-1818 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996423> p1803

Jamie R. Abrams attests that 'women's full agency includes the autonomy to make bad decisions, even criminal ones.'[162] Only by confronting this truth can we, as a society, begin dismantling stereotypes. *Sweetpea* enters this discourse with vigour; it is a work of fiction that unapologetically promotes the criminal female, and is crafted by a female writer. 'Not acknowledging and understanding women's violence,' Abrams states, 'further perpetuates the myth that women are inherently more peaceful than men' or that women who commit atrocities are merely 'masked victims of male violence and control.'[163] An increase in the agency afforded to women in crime fiction contributes to the elimination of stereotypes, which motivates my pursuit of realism in Rhiannon's portrayal. She *has* to be seen as real because violence against women and girls – another major point of vexation – is real. Real women are 'white hot' angry, as Soraya Chemaly attests:

> Women report being angrier, in more sustained ways and with more intensity than men do. Some of that comes from the fact that we're socialised to ruminate; to keep it to ourselves and mull it over. But we also have to find socially palatable ways to express the intensity of emotion that we have, and the awareness that it brings of our precarity [...][164]

I anticipated that the introduction of a female character who dispenses vigilante justice, particularly targeting men, who are statistically recognised as the primary perpetrators of crimes against women and girls,[165] would meet with widespread 'palatability.' The premise of the 'Female Avenger' in contemporary crime fiction often centres around a woman who, driven by personal trauma or a profound

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[162] Abrams, J. R., 'The Feminist Case For Acknowledging Women's Acts Of Violence' *Legal Studies Research Paper Series.* Paper No. 2016-5, (2016), p131 (para 2) <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2790940> [Accessed: 9 November 2024]
[163] Ibid., p135 (para 2)
[164] Chemaly, S., 'The Power of Women's Anger' *TedWomen*, 2018, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMt0K-AbpCU> [Accessed: 10 February 2025], 07:13-07:38
[165] Schmid, Dr C., Fearnside, H., Rohregger, N., 'Measuring gender equality in the UK: data on violence against women and girls: Findings from the UK Gender Equality Index' *Kings Global Institute for Women's Leadership* (London: Kings College, February 2024), <https://shorturl.at/ShG5A> [Accessed: 3 October 2024], p10-13

sense of justice, takes matters into her own hands, targeting male perpetrators in a society where men are statistically more likely to commit violent crimes against women and girls. Reitz verifies this, citing the importance that our fictional narratives provide a voice for victims who cannot always receive real-life justice. She states that 'female-centered crime narratives are largely sceptical of and increasingly disinterested in official justice, in ways that are both threatening and liberating.'[166] I will continue to address the perceived gap in traditional systems of law and order more in the 'Wallflowers' section but in writing *Sweetpea*, I very much wanted to address the inequality at play here. 'The source for women's criminal actions is a reaction and a revenge against different forms of sexual violence'[167] states Emma Dominguez-Rue in her 2019 article on patriarchy and poetic justice. As Beth Kalikoff contends in the same article, such avengers, killers or the righters of wrongs, 'are not 'friends' or 'monsters' but people whose crimes develop from a disturbing tension between individual characteristics and social ills.'[168] It is a moral form of justice that they serve – that *Rhiannon* serves - when legal justice can or does not, and we take pleasure, as consumers, in watching others commit terrible acts on those who we contend need justice because it acts as a catharsis in purging unwanted emotions, like fear. This reaction can be understood through the lens of the 'Just World Hypothesis,' first coined by Melvin J. Lerner and Carolyn H. Simmons in 1966[169]. The hypothesis suggests that we are driven by a deep-seated need to believe in a fair and predictable world, so when justice feels absent in real life, stories of vigilantes stepping in to balance the scales offers a satisfying simulation of justice or a 'just world.' It soothes our discomfort

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[166] Reitz, C., 'Female Anger in Crime Fiction,' *Cambridge Elements* (2024), pp1-78, <DOI:10.1017/9781009358699> p63

[167] Domínguez-Rué, E., 'Patriarchy and Poetic Justice: Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Crime in Donna Leon's Death at La Fenice, A Venetian Reckoning and About Face' (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2019). <https://repositori.udl.cat/server/api/core/bitstreams/d163cec1-3d09-4b31-bfa7-597f2d4792cc/content> [Accessed: 5 February 2025] p139.

[168] Kalikoff, B., *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986) cited in Domínguez-Rué, E., 'Patriarchy and Poetic Justice: Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Crime in Donna Leon's Death at La Fenice, A Venetian Reckoning and About Face' (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2019). <https://repositori.udl.cat/server/api/core/bitstreams/d163cec1-3d09-4b31-bfa7-597f2d4792cc/content> [Accessed: 5 February 2025] p140.

[169] Lerner, M. J., & Simmons, C. H. (1966). 'Observer's reaction to the "innocent victim": Compassion or rejection?' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4(2), p203–210. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023562>

with injustice by reinforcing the idea that wrongdoers ultimately face consequences. Rhiannon's acts of violence can be read as both literal and symbolic confrontations with patriarchal oppression. It follows that in the case of Rhiannon's victims, readers enjoy her crimes more because the victims are blameful, i.e. they 'deserved it.' These are people who have willingly abused, stalked, and/or murdered innocent others, such as children or vulnerable women, and therefore Rhiannon is reestablishing a 'just world' in which the reader is safe in the knowledge that justice has been done. Hein F. M. Lodewijkx, Tim Wildschut, Bernard A. Nijstad, Wim Savenije and Marieke Smit's 2001 empirical study on senseless violence and the Just World hypothesis[170] backs up this theory, as does A.P. MacDonald's 1972 study. Here, MacDonald proved that where a victim was considered more 'responsible' for their fate, the less likely for them to receive sympathy.[171] However, in her 2017 study on vigilante feminism in American fairy tales,' Laura Mattoon D'Amore attests that a vigilante feminist who goes up against a predator through violent means, 'might be criticised for using the 'master's tools,' (i.e., violence) which, as Audre Lorde wrote, 'will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.'[172] I agree to an extent – meeting violent acts with a violent retribution will never lead to anything other than war – but with regards to fictional representations of female vigilantes like Rhiannon, it is a necessary fantasy for us to see representations of our righteous anger. It is, D'Amore agrees, 'a corrective to a massive imbalance in power [...] a response to an overall pervasive rape culture that does not accommodate the needs of girls

[170] Lodewijkx, H. F. M., Wildschut, T., Nijstad, B.A., Smit, M., 'In a Violent World a Just World Makes Sense: The Case of "Senseless Violence" in The Netherlands' *Social Justice Research* (March 2001), 14(1):79-94, <https://10.1023/A:1012527808620> [Accessed: 12 January 2025]

[171] MacDonald, A. P. (1972). More on the Protestant Ethic. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 39(1), p116–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0033156>

[172] Lorde, A. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1979) cited in *The Essential Feminist Reader*. Ed. Estelle Freedman. (New York: Modern Library, 2007). 331–35. Quoted in Mattoon D'Amore, L., 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions' Marvels & Tales, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.31.2.0386> pp. 386-405 [Accessed: 13 January 2025]

and women.'[173] *Sweetpea* not only sees those needs and accommodates them, but also it seeks a poetic justice for fictional crimes against women which society often does not, or cannot, deliver.[174]

Women's use of violence may also be understood as an integral component of feminist strategy. Anita Harris and Diana Baker considered a standalone novel about a female spree killer in their 1995 study analysing Helen Zahavi's 1991 novel *Dirty Weekend*. In the story, we witness a female protagonist who, tired of the sexual advances of males, embarks on a two-day killing spree. The character, Bella, Harris and Baker claim, is a necessary representation of female emancipation from patriarchal norms. She 'alerts us to the state of emergency in which women live'[175] and they argue that the novel employs 'the figure of the serial killer which serves to provoke us' and remind us that patriarchal strategies *can* be undone.[176] Like my character Rhiannon, Bella is not apprehended by the end of her story; she is 'not contained by social laws nor by the conventions of narrative'[177] as the scholars state, and they view her as exemplifying an ongoing 'war' between the sexes. They note the pointed Latin meaning of her name – Bella as in 'bellum' or (feminised) war. The implication here is that the narrative remains unresolved, with the struggle for feminism, or even just safety, continuing. *Dirty Weekend* was written over thirty years ago, but it is just as relevant to modern readers, particularly females. Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill in their 2019 article 'Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #MeToo era' further embolden this statement,

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[173] Mattoon D'Amore, L., 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions' Marvels & Tales, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2017), <https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.31.2.0386> pp. 392

[174] BBC News, 'Women 'completely let down' in rape investigations' *BBC News.co.uk* 30 November 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55124701> [Accessed: 19 February 2025]. See also Criminal Justice Joint Inspection Report 'Criminal justice system continues to fail rape victims' *JusticeInspectorates.gov.uk* 24 February 2022 <https://shorturl.at/iPwcW> [Accessed: 19 February 2025] and also Newlove, Baroness H., 'Rape victims are having to wait 424 days – it's leaving them desperate' *Metro* 11 December 2024 <https://metro.co.uk/2024/12/11/rape-survivors-paying-high-a-price-justice-22160282/> [Accessed: 19 February 2025]

[175] Harris, A., & Baker, D., 'If I Had a Hammer: Violence as a Feminist Strategy in Helen *Zahavi's Dirty Weekend*.' *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Vol. 18 Nos 5/6*, 1995). <https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)80096-8> p 601.

[176] Ibid., p601

[177] Ibid., p598

affirming that 'More and more women are getting publicly and unapologetically angry, particularly in relation to sexual violence [...]'[178] As this article stipulates, as well as the writings of Chemaly or Traister, female anger on the page was not always as welcome as it is today. There is still a 'systematic denigration of female rage as inappropriate or disruptive, pathologised as hysteria or dismissed as paranoia.'[179] This type of language has been used for centuries to keep women compliant, but it is writers like me, and characters like Rhiannon, who refuse to see female disruption as anything other than entirely necessary.

Women as warriors, not wallflowers

In crime fiction, it is crucial to depict a sense of justice for women and girls, as it reflects the significant extent of their victimisation in society. Statistically, in England and Wales, a man kills a woman every three days.[180] In the year April 2020 to March 2021, 177 women were murdered – 106 of them by a man. In the year ending 2021, 40,472 women were victims of sexual assault - a 13% increase on the previous year - and the highest number of sexual offences recorded within a one-year period.[181] What is more upsetting is that Home Office data shows that for the same period, only 1.3% of rape offences with a recorded outcome have led to court proceedings.[182] Recent reports indicate that one rape is reported every hour in London alone, with nearly 9,000 incidents reported to the Metropolitan Police in 2023; an average of 24 per day.[183] Conversely, the statistics of violence or murder

[178]Orgad, S. & Gill, R. (2019). 'Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #MeToo era.' *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609198> p3.
[179] Ibid., p1.
[180] Phillips, J., 'Every three days a woman is killed by a man – I am terrified we have become used to the horror of that statistic' 2020 <https://shorturl.at/Zhu1Y> [Accessed: 10 April 2024]
[181]Clarke, J., and Gilder, L., 'How many violent attacks and sexual assaults on women are there?' 2022 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-56365412> [Accessed: March 12, 2024]
[182]Home Office Official Statistics, 'Crime outcomes in England and Wales, year to September 2021' 2022<http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/crime-outcomes-in-england-and-wales-year-to-september-2021-data-tables> [Accessed: March 12 2024]
[183]Evans, J, Ure, J., 'Rape reported every hour in London' *BBC News* (September 2024) <https://shorturl.at/LcvKD> [Accessed: 23 September 2024]

perpetrated by women on men are drastically lower. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics in 2023, 'of the 100 domestic murder victims in the year ending March 2023, 70 were women.'[184] This type of inequality is repeated internationally too. This is a time when women's rights in Afghanistan are so fiercely curtailed, they are prohibited from talking in public,[185] where American women are losing the right to bodily autonomy by the state,[186] where French housewife Gisele Pelicot was enforcedly chemically comatose for more than a decade by her own husband, and subjected to rape by more than seventy strangers.[187] It is a time when yet another woman in India, a 31-year-old female trainee doctor, has been gang-raped and slaughtered,[188] where the age of consent in Iran is being lowered to nine,[189] where a jailbreak at Munzenze prison in Goma saw over 100 women and children raped and burned alive,[190] and where in the UK the threat of violence against women and girls has been deemed by the National Police Chief's Council a 'national emergency.[191] This is a time when a fictional woman like Rhiannon, who fights back with real intensity, has rarely been more desired or relevant. The Graham-Bertolini study echoes the importance of such characters in our fiction:

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[184] Office for National Statistics, 'Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2023' (London: Office for National Statistics, 2023) <https://shorturl.at/FgFV1> [accessed 15 January 2025], p1, point 1.8.
[185]Warner, H., 'Women in Afghanistan are now 'banned from talking to each other' *Joe.co.uk*, (30 October 2024). <https://shorturl.at/vchrj> [Accessed: 8 November 2024]
[186] Kirkpatrick, N., 'Abortion access for 2 million women will be changing. Here's how.' *Washington Post* (November 7, 2024) <https://shorturl.at/C6XPK> [Accessed: 8 November 2024]
[187] Kirby, P., 'Here's what you need to know about the Pelicot trial' *BBC News* 19 December 2024 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c390d8nd4n4o> [Accessed: 7 February 2025]
[188]Dubey, K., 'She wanted to live a good life': Parents of Indian doctor raped and murdered on night shift' *BBC News*, 21 August 2024 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yl0799k1wo> [Accessed: 8 November 2024]
[189]Talal, M., and Abdullah, H., "The end of women and children's rights': outrage as Iraqi law allows child marriage' *The Guardian* (22 Jan 2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/globaldevelopment/2025/jan/22/women-children-rights-iraqi-law-allows-child-marriage> [Accessed: 23 January 2025]
[190] Chibelushi, W., 'More than 100 women raped and burned alive in DR Congo jailbreak, UN says' *BBC.co.uk* 5 February 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgyrxz4k6zo> [Accessed: 7 February 2025]
[191]National Police Chiefs Council, 'Call to action as VAWG epidemic deepens' 23 July, 2024 *NPCC*, <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/call-to-action-as-violence-against-women-and-girls-epidemic-deepens-1> [Accessed: 8 November 2024]

> Feminist attitudes in writing filter into the public awareness of everyday life; thus, whether explicitly or by implication, reading fiction that depicts women who reject oppression and tyranny, undermines the position of the dominant male and offers an antidote to the undue restrictions that lead to women's victimization.[192]

However, one of the most sobering statistics shows that women who *do* fight back or take a stand against abusers in real life are more likely to be killed themselves:

> 41% (37 of 91) of women killed by a male partner/former partner in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2018 had separated or taken steps to... Eleven of these 37 women were killed within the first month of separation and 24 were killed within the first year.[193]

As previously noted, Rhiannon provides us with a much-needed sense of fantasy retribution, but from a safe distance. A 2021 study by Timothy W. Broom, Robert S. Chavez, and Dylan D. Wagner[194] focusing on identification with fictional characters and the association with self–other neural overlap, found that 'the merging of self and other that identification with fictional characters entails can last beyond the confines of the narrative experience itself.'[195] They state that 'When individuals experience stories as if they were one of the characters, a connection with that character is formed and, as our findings suggest, that

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[192] Graham-Bertolini, A., 'Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction' (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*, p126.
[193]'Why don't women leave abusive relationships?' *Women's Aid Femicide Census*, 2024 <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/women-leave/> [Accessed: 10 October 2024]
[194] Broom, T., Chavez, R. S., Wagner., D 'Becoming the King in the North: identification with fictional characters is associated with greater self–other neural overlap' *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2021, 541–551 <DOI:10.1093/scan/nsab021> p549
[195] Broom, T., Chavez, R. S., Wagner., D 'Becoming the King in the North: identification with fictional characters is associated with greater self–other neural overlap' *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2021, 541–551 <DOI:10.1093/scan/nsab021> p549

character becomes intertwined with the self.'[196] While Rhiannon rejects her oppressions and provides that antidote to victimisation, she is also, at her core, still a victim herself. She finds that by embracing villainous acts, she gains a power that she, an 'ordinary' woman, would normally be denied. By the final novel, *The Bad Seeds*, she achieves this transformation. In this instalment, a pivotal scene unfolds where Rhiannon finds herself temporarily at the mercy of an attacker when she has not instigated the fight and has not brought a weapon. She is unafraid to challenge the predator, but on this one occasion, she is shown for what she is: just like any other woman. Alone, vulnerable, unready and scared of what he might do to her. This reaction adds depth to Rhiannon's uniqueness as a narrator and an antagoniser. This evolution in narrative approach coexists with a world where patriarchal forces continue to curtail women's rights, as Alison Miller, Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington explore in their 2020 study on the 'monstrous feminine'. They state that '#TimesUp, #MeToo and the Harvey Weinstein scandal galvanised a retributive energy insistent on justice and change' and identified that these types of movements are 'rooted largely in the resistance of [...] the patriarchal structures that disproportionately marginalise non-male identities.'[197] Indeed, women's rejection of patriarchal norms in general has grown increasingly vocal, amplified by social media algorithms, and the rise of bold, rebellious narratives, like *Sweetpea*, where women's rage takes the lead. It is portentous to note that the worldwide hashtag #MeToo re-emerged on social media in the same year as the first novel's release, eleven years after activist Tarana Burke first coined it.[198] This reemergence coincided with the wave of allegations against film mogul Weinstein[199] and has gathered pace internationally since. In fourth wave feminism, women became acutely conscious of their

[196] Ibid., p549
[197] Miller, A., Atherton, C., Hetherington, P., (2023) 'Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in Killing Eve,' *Feminist Media Studies*, 23:4, 1802-1818, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996423> p2
[198]Jefferson, J., 'A Long Road Ahead: #MeToo Founder Tarana Burke On Sexual Assault, Stigmas And Society' *VIBE.com* [3 April 2018] <https://www.vibe.com/features/editorial/tarana-burke-me-too-feature-576582/> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]
[199] BBC News, 'Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal has unfolded' *BBC News*, [24 February 2023] < https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-41594672> [Accessed: 11 January 2025]

oppressions on a global scale, thanks to social media, particularly Tik Tok. Digital feminism[200] maintains a strong presence amid a backlash bolstered by continued attacks by the Far Right, 'manosphere' and the 'tradwife movement'[201] which all seek to destroy feminism and all it stands for. The 'manosphere' does not want to see portrayals of confident, emboldened, violent women like Rhiannon Lewis in fiction or film, not when impressionable young women may still be open to the prospect of a patriarchy built on male dominance and female submission. Message boards in the manosphere – defined as 'a collection of digital spaces in which hegemonic and traditional masculinity are articulated bluntly and without artifice'[202] - attest to the damage empowered women have supposedly caused through decentring men from their lives. Such extreme exponents of the manosphere include 'Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and incels'[203] who unite behind extreme misogyny as a reactionary attempt to silence or shame online feminist activism and female empowerment.[204] Despite such backlash, the continued rise of digital feminism points to an unprecedented visibility of women's anger; enraged by the continued attacks on our emancipation and violence statistics like those previously shared. It is a force already influencing future cultural landscapes, particularly within crime fiction. It certainly influenced me when creating Rhiannon, and the reason for this is rooted in some unsettling experiences. There are myriad events in my own life where I wish I had been a disrupter like Rhiannon. One of the earliest incidents I can recall was when I was molested on a school trip to Italy. I do not judge ten-year-old me for her silence but looking back I am astounded that I did not make more of a fuss. However,

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[200] Jouët, J., 'Digital feminism: Questioning the renewal of activism' *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 8 (1), 2018pp. 133–157, ISSN 2164-0262, eISSN 2378-3524 <DOI:10.22381/JRGS8120187>

[201] Bower, L.J., 'The thorn in feminism's side: black feminist reconceptualization and defence of #tradwives and the #tradwife movement' *Journal of Gender Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2423198> (Informa UK Limited,2024).

[202] Vallerga, M., Zurbriggen, E. L., 'Hegemonic masculinities in the 'Manosphere': A thematic analysis of beliefs about men and women on The Red Pill and Incel' *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (Wiley LLC, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12308> [Accessed: 10 February 2025], p604.

[203] Ibid., p604.

[204] Dickel, V., Evolvi, G., 'Victims of feminism": exploring networked misogyny and #MeToo in the manosphere' *Feminist Media Studies* (Informa UK Limited 2023), Vol. 23, no. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2029925> p1395

Rhiannon protests so loud we can hear it and, in some way, apply it to our own persecutions. Crime fiction, like *Sweetpea*, plays a crucial role in feminist discourse by addressing themes of power, victimisation, and justice. It challenges the traditional narrative of victimhood and encourages women to confront their issues more openly.

Similarly, the title *Sweetpea* holds deep significance in my creative practice, evoking a brief encounter with a manager who met my request for promotion with mockery. The word 'sweetpea' has, for me, come to represent being patronised or oppressed, encapsulating a moment where I was seen as someone too pathetic to take seriously. Jeanne Weiland Herrick attests to this in her 1999 study of office workplaces and the gender hierarchy:

> The female manager who exhibits caring behaviour toward her coworkers and subordinates runs the risk that, although she might be well liked, she is likely to be perceived as vulnerable, weak, ineffectual, and even incompetent [...] women cannot be both liked and powerful.[205]

Rhiannon can be liked at work but largely ignored and she can be powerful in her private, killing career but the two are mutually exclusive; she cannot enjoy respect in both. This is why she embraces the 'Sweetpea Killer' moniker in her criminality because it confounds expectations of her. Charlotte Beyer attests that contemporary crime fiction 'has a crucial role to play in exposing inequalities and participating in public debates to call out injustice and promote change.' Beyer argues for the importance of the #MeToo movement in calling out violence against women primarily, and that the modern genre 'demonstrates the vital function of both literature and feminism to social and cultural critique and

[205] Herrick, J.W., '"And Then She Said" Office Stories and What They Tell Us about Gender in the Workplace' *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, Vol. 13 Issue No. 3 (Sage Publications, 3 July 1999), p274-296 <https://doi.org/10.1177/105065199901300303> p278-9.

change.'[206] *Sweetpea* is meaningfully leading that change, and it feels all the more important in recent times in the UK with a relentless catalogue of murders where a woman walking home has been attacked and killed seemingly at random. Recent high-profile cases in the UK where a stranger has attacked and murdered women, such as the murders of Libby Squire,[207] Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry,[208] Sarah Everard,[209] Sabina Nessa,[210] and Zara Aleena,[211] have reignited national conversations about gendered violence. I could have cited several more victims in this category too. Disturbingly, domestic murders where the assailant is known to the victim, also make headlines with troubling regularity. Such cases include the murders of Holly Newton,[212] Lucy-Anne Rushton,[213] Emma Pattison[214] Fawziyah Javed,[215] Ellie Gould,[216] Louise, Hannah and Carol Hunt[217] and Claire Chick.[218] Again, I could have cited many more examples of these types of killings. The recurring phrases "she was just walking home" or "she had recently called time on the

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[206] Beyer, C., *Crime Fiction in the Age of #MeToo*' (London: Anthem Press, 2024), p186-189.
[207] BBC News, 'Libby Squire: Tributes to Hull student after body found' *BBC News*, [22 March 2019] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-humber-47667840> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]
[208] BBC News, 'Wembley park stabbings: Danyal Hussein guilty of murdering sisters' *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-57721663> [Accessed: 10 January 2024]
[209] BBC News, 'Sarah Everard: How Wayne Couzens planned her murder' *BBC News*, 30 September 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58746108> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]
[210] The Standard, 'Sabina Nessa: Timeline of key events in investigation into teacher's murder' *The Standard* 27 September 2021 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/sabina-nessa-murder-timeline-met-police-kidbrook-man-arrested-b957027.html> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]
[211] Sky News, 'Zara Aleena: Serial offender jailed for minimum of 38 years for 'brutal' murder of law graduate as she walked home' *Sky News* 14 December 2022, <https:// news.sky.com/story/zara-aleena-serial-offender-sentenced-to-minimum-of-38-years-for-brutal-murder-of-law-graduate-as-she-walked-home-12767756> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]
[212]Freeman, A., 'I instantly knew my daughter's ex had killed her' *BBC News* 9 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy0l90lvl0qo> [Accessed: 23 January 2025]
[213] Woodland, D., 'Mother-of-five made to swallow wedding ring before being brutally murdered by her husband was failed by police, inquest rules' *Daily Mail* 20 December 2024 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14213365/Mother-swallow-wedding-ring-murdered-husband-inquest.html> [Accessed: 23 January 2025]
[214] Luck, F., Brant, R., 'Epsom College head called relative before she was shot by husband' *BBC News* 7 February 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-surrey-64544884> [Accessed: 24 January 2025]
[215] Beever, S., 'Killer husband jailed for pushing pregnant wife 50ft to death from Arthur's Seat' *Daily Mirror*, 6 April 2023 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/breaking-man-found-guilty-murdering-29599644> [Accessed: 23 January 2025]
[216] BBC News, 'Ellie Gould: Teen subjected to coercive control before death, review finds' *BBC News* 21 November 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-wiltshire-59420588> [Accessed: 23 January 2025]
[217] Johnson, N., Fullbrook, D., 'Crossbow killer admits murdering mum and daughters' *BBC News* 22 January 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy8pd7dn8v6o> [Accessed: 29 January 2025]
[218] Jolly, B., 'Plymouth 'murder': First picture of 'lovely' uni lecturer stabbed to death as man arrested' *Daily Mirror* 24 Jan 2025 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/plymouth-murder-first-picture-lovely-34543093>

relationship" or "friends were worried about how controlling he was," emphasises the fundamental injustice that women remain terrifyingly unsafe in not only public spaces but in their own homes with the people they think they know. Every woman has a story of male oppression, unwanted attention, sexual molestation, and/or predatory behaviour and it was my intention to provide Rhiannon as one fictional response to that. My poetics of female transgression and stylistic innovation of sassy noir are my key vehicles for amplifying this response. It is, moreover, a response that I deem necessary and one I aspire to see resonate and gain prominence in contemporary literature aimed at women.

SECTION 3: FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

This section evaluates the critical reception of the *Sweetpea* series. I use its acclaim to demonstrate how the quintology has innovated the crime fiction genre, specifically with regards to its portrayal of gender, humour and originality. Readers, critics, film companies and foreign publishers alike have met *Sweetpea* with praise and admiration for the most part. This acclaim is important originally, as I attest in Section 2, it was a risk for me to release an adult crime novel after five young adult books. However, with translation rights now sold to multiple countries, including China, France, Italy, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and the USA, *Sweetpea* is considered a culturally significant piece of modern literature thereby validating that risk. Furthermore, in this section I argue that the critical acclaim my series enjoys presents significant evidence of my originality and the importance of my creative contribution to the genre. I consider Rhiannon's evolution and the innovation she has brought to her subgenre of crime fiction, particularly the representation of female serial killers in fiction. Finally, I reflect on which seeds there are left to sow in the *Sweetpea* universe, namely the television adaptations of the first two novels and a companion novel, written from the perspective of Rhiannon's daughter, Ivy.

Fertile ground for praise – critical acclaim for the *Sweetpea* series

Critics and reviewers highlighted the creative risks and originality which the *Sweetpea* quintology brought to the crime fiction genre. Upon the release of the first novel in 2017, *Daily Mail*'s fiction reviewer Geoffrey Wansell said, 'it has the potential to become a cult classic.'[219] Further to that, Natasha Harding reviewing for *The Sun* in the month of release, proclaimed it was 'unlike anything else out

[219] Wansell, G., 'Slaughter...spotted from the sky,' (Thrillers) *Daily Mail*, 21 April 2017, Book Reviews, p60.

this year.'[220] These types of evaluation demonstrate my book's new contribution to the genre and suggest the creative risk-taking I was employing in the series was starting to connect with people in the right way. Similarly, upon the book's release, the *Lancashire Evening Post* asserted that Rhiannon was 'unforgettable':

> Thrillers don't come much more adult than [my] dark, disturbing and full-on debut, a riotous, profanity-filled tale of psychopathic obsession, graphic violence and revenge killings, all delivered by a devilish sleight of hand and with a wicked brand of outrageous black humour.[221]

Lovereading's lead crime thriller critic Maxim Jakubowski reviewed the novel in highly favourable terms, which is especially significant when considering his work in the crime fiction genre. Formerly an editor who worked with William Golding, Peter Ustinov, and Oliver Stone amongst others, he is past Chairman of the Crime Writers' Association[222] and was also on the panel of judges for the Last Laugh Award[223] at the 2018 Crime Fest Awards, for which *Sweetpea* was shortlisted. Crime Fest is an internationally renowned crime fiction festival which runs annually in Bristol, UK, and features the very best of crime writing with names such as John Le Carré, Lynda La Plante, Lee Child and Ian Rankin amongst its regular luminaries. My nomination further demonstrates *Sweetpea*'s impact on the crime fiction genre on the world's stage and Jakubowski's review attests to the novel's originality and entertainment value:

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[220] Harding, N., (ed.) 'Sweetpea' (Books), *The Sun*, 24 November 2017, p72.
[221] 'Sweetpea review' *Lancashire Evening Post*, 2 May 2017 <http://www.lep.co.uk/arts-and-culture/books/book-review-sweetpea-by-c-j-skuse-655085> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]
[222] Jakubowski, M., 'About me page' <http://www.maximjakubowski.co.uk> [Accessed: 17 December 2024]
[223] Crime Fest Past Winners, Last Laugh Award 2018 <http://www.crimefest.com/awards-cf/awards-history/#award18> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]

> […] hits all the right buttons. A dark, twisted read about a female serial killer with dollops of humour, sarcasm and a lightweight approach to a serious subject that shouldn't work but does […] this one will be hard to beat![224]

The novel has made a portentous contribution to this area of literature according to these critics, and in her review for the well-regarded site Crime Review, Kati Barr-Taylor cited the story's uniqueness:

> It is rare a book sends tears rolling down my cheeks. Rarer still that those tears are from laughter…It is rare too that a protagonist leaps so convincingly off the page that I want to meet her in real life…but C.J. Skuse has managed all the above.[225]

Barr-Taylor goes on to state that the novel 'offers the ultimate in flawed characters' and that 'there is no smack of stereotype.' Barr-Taylor's evaluation echoes Jakubowski's, highlighting the key features in the series which, I argue, have modernised the genre and which are key to sassy noir. Mike Finn's review on the long-established blog site Mike Finn's Fiction, highlights the contrast between humour and transgression therein, central to the series:

> *Sweetpea* caught me by surprise, partly because the publisher's summary left me with the impression I was going to read something light, clever and playfully dark, and partly because I don't think I've ever read anything quite like it before.[226]

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[224] Jakubowski, M., 'Sweetpea review' *Lovereading.co.uk* (2017) <http://www.lovereading.co.uk/book/9780008620080/isbn/Sweetpea-by-C-J-Skuse.html> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]
[225] Barr-Taylor, K., 'Sweetpea review' *Crime Review.co.uk*, 2017 <http://www.crimereview.co.uk/page.php/review/4924> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]
[226] Finn, M., 'Sweetpea review' *Mike Finn's Fiction*, 3 October 2022 <http://mikefinnsfiction.com/2022/10/03/sweetpea-by-c-j-skuse-highly-recommended-if-you-have-a-strong-enough-stomach/> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]

Finn's observations home in on the genre-busting qualities of *Sweetpea*, a dimension which, I contend, is key to the series' originality. These boundary-pushing qualities were raised in my initial conversation with my publisher, HQ, as intimated in the 'Taking root' part of Section 2. The publisher struggled to categorise the book because it initially defied generic categorising. As Finn also attests, what was initially perceived as a challenge in marketing is now recognised as a key feature that sets the work apart. The full review can be read in Appendix A: Acclaim and Endorsements. Other books in the quintology have garnered similarly positive reviews among top critics. For *In Bloom*, Kati Barr-Taylor echoed her praise for the first novel by calling Rhiannon 'quite simply the most three-dimensional character I have come across in years.'[227] Jon Coates of *The Daily Express* called the sequel 'deliciously demented, with the perfect mix of dark humour and outrageous action to keep the reader enthralled until the satisfying finale.'[228] Christena Appleyard of *Daily Mail* called *In Bloom* 'one of the funniest and best written thrillers published this year'[229] and said *Dead Head* was '*Bridget* meets *Killing Eve* — only with better jokes.'[230] Being selected for review in the national press[231] is, in itself, a significant accomplishment, particularly considering the UK alone publishes between 180,000 and 200,000 titles annually. [232] However, the descriptions of my work, highlighting its three-dimensional character, enthralling plot and dark humour, prove that I have not only produced a body of work which is worthy of such exposure and that I am contributing to the genre's originality and quality, but also that I am also reaching a broader audience. I have incorporated some of the most notable critical and academic acclaim for *Sweetpea* and other books in the series in Appendices A and C. Lovereading called the fourth

[227] Barr-Taylor, K., 'In Bloom review' Crime Review.co.uk, 2018 <http://crimereview.co.uk/page.php/review/7342> [Accessed: 24 November 2024]
[228] Coates, J., 'It's the father of all nightmares' *Daily Express*, 31 August 2018, p38-39
[229] Appleyard, C., *The Daily Mail*. 'Books of the Year round up,' 17 December 2018.
[230] Appleyard, C., *The Daily Mail*. 'Psycho Thrillers,' 12 February 2021, p64.
[231] Scans of the key national press reviews the series has received can be found in Appendix C: Book reviews and endorsements (scans)
[232] 'Book Publishing Statistics', *The Circular Board* < https://thecircularboard.com/book-publishing-statistics/> [accessed 17 December 2024]

novel *Thorn in my Side* 'Another page-turning triumph with Rhiannon 4.0's game of brinkmanship taking us to new levels of [...] depravity and humour.'[233] The final book, *The Bad Seeds*, reaped praise in *The Times* and *The Telegraph*, in which it featured in their 'Best Crime Books of 2024, with Telegraph reviewer Jake Kerridge advising 'forget her toned-down incarnation in the recent television adaptation [...] and go for the cask-strength version on the page.'[234] *Times* reviewer, James Owen, acknowledged the change in Rhiannon by the last instalment:

> Devotees of the series may lament Rhiannon's efforts at reform, spurred by her love for her husband Raf. Much of its bleak humour remains, however, and Skuse has earned the right to let her heroine turn over a new leaf.[235]

When writing *The Bad Seeds*, I was acutely aware that not all readers would fully embrace Rhiannon's reformation, as Owen highlights in his review. However, this change was not only crucial for her development but also for my own growth as the writer of the series as I have attested to in my writings on *Sweetpea*'s redemption arc in Section 1. *Sweetpea* has not only garnered acclaim from readers and reviewers in the national press but also from the academic sphere who recognise its imaginative contribution to fiction. In her chapter 'Contemporary Serial Killers' in the 2020 study 'Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion,'[236] Professor Bernice M. Murphy examines a range of crime fiction texts and places her examination of *Sweetpea* in the context of the 21st century Gothic tradition where there is a fascination with serial killers as modern 'monsters.' Murphy situates this type of narrative within a broader cultural and literary framework that explores its resonance, highlighting how characters like

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[233] Maclaren, D., 'Thorn in my Side review' *Lovereading.co.uk*, 2023 <http://lovereading.co.uk/book/25794/Thorn-In-My-Side-by-C-J-Skuse.html> [Accessed: 24 November 2024]

[234] Kerridge, J., 'The best crime thrillers of 2024, from Richard Osman to John le Carré,' *Daily Telegraph*, 15 November 2024 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/crime-fiction-best-crime-books-2024/> [Accessed: 24 November 2024]

[235] Owen, J., *The Times*. Review of *The Bad Seeds*. 26 October 2024.

[236] Murphy, B. M., 'Contemporary Serial Killers' *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 21 May 2020)

Rhiannon draw on Gothic conventions like delusion, trauma, and transgression, while reflecting societal fears and obsessions, particularly in an era where human horrors (e.g., the modern fascination with true crime) are seen as more compelling than supernatural ones. Murphy explicitly singles out *Sweetpea* for its resolute defiance of gender stereotypes in the genre, commenting on how it has led the way in establishing a new and increasingly commonplace trope in the genre:

> Within recent popular fiction, female serial killers who also manipulate expectations regarding 'appropriate' behaviour can [...] be found in C. J. Skuse's *Sweetpea* (2017) [...] the increasing regularity with which female serial killers feature [...] popular fiction provides yet another indication of the by now entirely mainstream nature of this character type.[237]



FIG 3. TV tie-in cover. The series premiered on Oct 10, 2024 on Sky Atlantic (UK)/Starz (USA & Canada)

[237] Murphy, B. M., 'Chapter 8: Contemporary Serial Killers' *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 21 May 2020), pp 117-130 <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474440929.003.0009> p128.

The mainstream popularity of the *Sweetpea* series has led to increased exposure, and since the TV adaptation premiered in the UK, USA and Canada on October 10th, 2024, all five books in the quintology have experienced a surge in sales, as I will discuss in more detail later. This development is indicative of the series' appeal with readers keen to explore more empowering, violent, female-led fiction adaptations in the wake of successful shows like *Killing Eve*[238] and *The Handmaid's Tale*.[239] The increased popularity of such shows suggests that, through her articulation of rage, my character Rhiannon has captured a mood in the TV industry where female representation is not only necessary but popular. To further evaluate the originality of the books, it is crucial to consider their influence on the readership at large; book lovers who do not work for the national press or academia and who are not influential in the TV industry. Collectively, the series has accumulated over 10,000 global ratings on Amazon.co.uk[240], with a significant proportion receiving four-and-five-star evaluations. Similarly, on the literary social platform Goodreads,[241] the series has earned more than 20,000 reviews since 2017, with over 6,000 ratings in the five-star category. This extensive engagement highlights the profound impact Rhiannon is continuing to have on readers. These readers have highlighted the series' originality, 'sassiness,' humour, heart, Rhiannon's relatability, and how the plot twists 'keep you guessing.'

New shoots: the evolution of Rhiannon Lewis

Sweetpea has already proved itself to be an original contribution to the modern crime fiction corpus, but it also heralds a new era of female representation in popular culture, as mentioned in the previous section. The portrayal of female

[238] *Killing Eve*, Sid Gentle Films (BBC America, 2018–2022).
[239] *The Handmaid's Tale*, Daniel Wilson Productions, Inc. (Hulu: April 26, 2017–present)
[240] Skuse, C.J., 'C.J. Skuse Author Page' *Amazon.co.uk* <https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/C.J.-Skuse/author/B003LRP27U?ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true> [Accessed: 22 January 2025]
[241] Skuse, C.J., 'C.J. Skuse Author Page' *Goodreads.com* <https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3188620.C_J_Skuse> [Accessed: 22 January 2025]

serial killers in literature and film has undergone significant evolution, particularly with the emergence of characters like Rhiannon, who heralds a departure from the traditionally hyperbolic representations of women who engage in violence in crime and thriller narratives. Prior to this shift, female killers were often depicted through the lens of exaggerated archetypes. As Rene Ostberg states, femme fatales were often 'sexist figure[s] of male fantasy.' [242] My *Sweetpea* quintology specifically does not cater to male fantasy, but instead seeks to explore women and their rage on their own terms, in a way which is universally relatable. Rhiannon's complexity allows for a nuanced exploration of a female serial killer's mind, highlighting the multifaceted nature of human behaviour. Unlike Ellis' *American Psycho*, she is not sexualised either. While she could have used her sexuality like a traditional femme fatale, I chose to focus on her psychological depth to portray her as a fully realised person, not just an object of male desire. This choice aimed to create a deeper connection with readers and move the genre beyond tired stereotypes. Though she does occasionally use her sexuality to her gain, like in the Wednesday 15 May entry in *Sweetpea*[243] where her colleague AJ (whom she already knows desires her) catches her with a knife and she has to subdue him, it's all part of her flawed humanity, making her more relatable and realistic. Another example of her using her sexuality to lure her prey is while she is in a vulnerable situation, such as in *Thorn in my Side* when she is half-naked in a bridal boutique cubicle and being upskirted by the man in the next cubicle.[244] The man has invited himself into her happy moment, trying on a wedding dress for her special day. She is not trying to gain something from him – she is innocent – but now he must pay.

Rhiannon shows the evolution of what a character like her can be and she is more relatable than one like Judith Rashleigh in *Maestra* by L.S. Hilton[245] from 2016; a

[242] Ostberg, R., 'femme fatale,' 11 October 2024 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/femme-fatale> [Accessed: 21 November 2024]
[243] Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p292-300
[244] Skuse, C.J. *Thorn in my Side* (London: HQ, 2024) p102
[245] Hilton, L.S. *Maestra* (London: Zaffre, 2016)

highly intelligent, beautiful, and manipulative socialite who uses her sexuality as a tool to ascend the social hierarchy and navigate the art world. Judith occupies a rarified social sphere that is far removed from the everyday reality of most crime fiction readers, making her more abstract and distant. Similarly in Chloe Esposito's *Mad* series[246] which follows Alvina, a wealthy, confident and stylish young woman who embarks on a reckless kill path after the sudden disappearance of her sister. Throughout the story, Alvina's sexual allure plays a crucial role in her interactions with the men she encounters. She uses her looks and sexuality to manipulate others, often without concern for the emotional consequences. Rhiannon, conversely, is not trying to fit into the mould of a 'desirable' woman, and her narrative does not invite the audience to see her as such. Instead, I position her as an ordinary woman with a boyfriend and a 9-5 job, but who acts outside the ordinary, conventional norms of femininity, even though sometimes she does crave normalcy.[247]

The majority of Rhiannon's power comes from her wit and her wickedness, her unrepentant attitude, and her control over the majority of the dangerous situations she places herself in. By not focusing on her sexual appeal, the novel brings her in line with a more unconventional form of empowerment, one based on autonomy. The TV adaptation version of Rhiannon ploughs a different furrow. Prior to its adaptation, *Sweetpea* had consistently established itself as 'sassy noir', an evolved subgenre of crime fiction previously described in Section 2. The TV series has built upon that legacy, gathering a host of positive reactions with the *Radio Times* calling it 'one of those rare limited series that leave you desperate for more'[248] and *The Standard* saying, 'there's nothing out there like Sweetpea [...]

[246] Esposito, C., *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* series (London: Penguin, 2017-2020)

[247] For instance in the aforementioned scene in the bridal boutique, or in *Sweetpea* when she tries to convince Craig to buy Honey Cottage, her childhood home. This scene can be found herein: Skuse, C.J. *Sweetpea* (London: HQ, 2017), p371.

[248]Pearce, T., 'Sweetpea review: Ella Purnell's killer wallflower is devilishly good fun' *Radio Times*, 7 October 2024 <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/sweetpea-ella-purnell-review/> [Accessed: 2 November 2024]

undefinable in genre, but simply brilliant TV.'[249] However, in order to achieve wider appeal, significant changes were made to the original narrative which involved *dis*empowering Rhiannon. Notably, while my readers welcome the book's content, humour, and gore, the TV company has considerably softened these aspects for the screen. This is not uncommon, as Lawrence Baines' study shows – aspects of a novel *can* often get lost between the mediums; aspects like 'lexical diversity [...] the complexity of dialogue, plot, character and theme.'[250] *The Guardian* review of the TV series criticised such changes. Columnist and author Lucy Mangan called the book version of Rhiannon "that rarest of creatures: an unapologetic female protagonist" but criticised the TV series as being "stripped of everything that makes the books great" with "every possible punch [...] pulled, every sting drawn, every joke cut [...] The series reeks of cowardly decision-making at every turn." [251]

Sky TV opted for what Hutcheon describes as the "safe bet"[252], prioritising a more straightforward narrative likely to appeal to a broader audience. The experience of seeing one of my books translated to screen helped me to realise that an inherent tension exists between commercial success and creative integrity - the pursuit of one often requires compromises in the other - but I accept this dynamic as the books remain in their original form. On TV, Rhiannon is no longer an established serial killer, but a quiet, unremarkable individual routinely overlooked. This and other significant changes made in the TV adaptation in fact serve to foreground what is unique and original about Rhiannon in the novels. While

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[249]Spencer, H., 'Sweetpea on Sky review: Ella Purnell wows in this dead-pan thriller,' *The Standard*, 7 October 2024 <http://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/sweetpea-sky-review-ella-purnell-b1184995.html> [Accessed: 2 November 2024]

[250]Baines, L., 'From Page to Screen: When a Novel is Interpreted for Film. What Gets Lost in Translation?' *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. (May 1996) Vol. 39. No 8 p614-618 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40015652> [Accessed: 7 November 2024]

[251]Mangan, L., 'Sweetpea review – Ella Purnell's deathly dull serial killer show reeks of cowardly decision-making' *The Guardian* 10 October 2024 <http://theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/oct/10/sweetpea-review-ella-purnells-deathly-dull-serial-killer-show-reeks-of-cowardly-decision-making> [Accessed: 2 November 2024]

[252]Hutcheon, L., 'A Theory of Adaptation' (Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), p5 <http://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203957721/theory-adaptation-linda-hutcheon> [Accessed: 7 November 2024]

adaptations may strive to capture the essence of their sources, they are inevitably shaped by cultural norms and economic pressures, resulting in 'palimpsestuous'[253] or sanitised versions. Some critics *did* receive the adaptation in the spirit with which the book was written. Angie Han of *The Hollywood Reporter* called the show's moral ambiguity 'part of the wicked thrill'.'[254] Judy Berman of *Time Magazine* stated that this 'dark, sneakily funny' show 'finds a bountiful source of suspense in the question of whether we're watching the blossoming of a wallflower or the making of a monster.'[255] Had the television series preserved Rhiannon's characterisation exactly as depicted in the novel, her defiant attitude, use of profanity, and specific focus on targeting sexual predators, it could have alienated mainstream audiences, potentially leading to viewer rejection. However, reviewer Joe Lipsett of Bloody Disgusting.com, echoed Mangan's view, stating it 'would be a stronger and more memorable series if it had a bit more bite.'[256] Ben Travers of *IndieWire* commented on the lack of nuance in the character in the TV version saying it is impossible to see Rhiannon as anything but 'unhinged'[257]. By transforming a niche 'cult' narrative into a widely appealing TV adaptation, Sky TV and See Saw Films have successfully tailored the material to appeal to their audience and I am thankful for the care and attention they have taken in their pursuit of this. The strategic softening of Rhiannon's story allows the story to reach a broader demographic and, in doing so, the novels have finally reached bestseller status, seven years after the first novel was released. The *Sweetpea* eBook with the TV tie-in cover experienced a remarkable ascent in the days

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[253]Ibid., p6

[254] Han, A., 'Sweetpea' Review: Ella Purnell Is in Full Control of Starz's Deliciously Queasy Serial Killer Thriller' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9 October 2024 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/sweetpea-review-starz-ella-purnell-1236023315/> [Accessed: 22 November 2024]

[255] Berman, J., 'Twisted Revenge Thriller *Sweetpea* Will Delight Fans of *Bad Sisters* and *Dead to Me*' Time Magazine, October 10 2024 <http://time.com/7085871/sweetpea-review-starz/> [Accessed: November 22 2024]

[256]Lipsett, J., 'Sweetpea offers a familiar but entertaining meek-to-murder plot' *Bloody Disgusting*, October 8 2024 <http://bloody-disgusting.com/reviews/3834739/sweetpea-offers-a-familiar-but-entertaining-meek-to-murder-plot-review/> [Accessed: November 22 2024]

[257]Travers, B., 'Sweetpea' Review: Ella Purnell's Revenge Drama Is a Sloppy, Shallow Fantasy' *IndieWire*, October 12 2024 <http://www.indiewire.com/criticism/shows/sweetpea-review-ella-purnell-series-1235054587/> [Accessed: 22 November 2024]

immediately following the series' transmission on Sky Atlantic, rising to the top of several Amazon Kindle charts. It also secured Number 1 on the overall Fiction list.

	PB TCM	ebook	audio
Sweetpea	26,040	56,298	26,389
In Bloom	7,554	15,637	8,747
Dead Head	2,507	8,701	4,036
Thorn in My Side	1,106	6,019	2,163
Bad Seeds	790	3,041	1,377

FIG 4: Sweetpea series sales across all formats as of 29 November 2024.
Total sales as of this date = 252,000 copies[258]

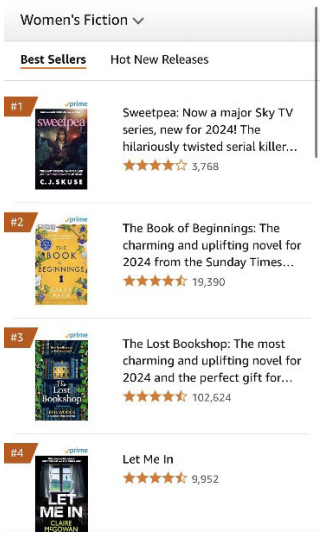


FIG 5: Amazon ranking – Women's Fiction, 19 Oct 2024

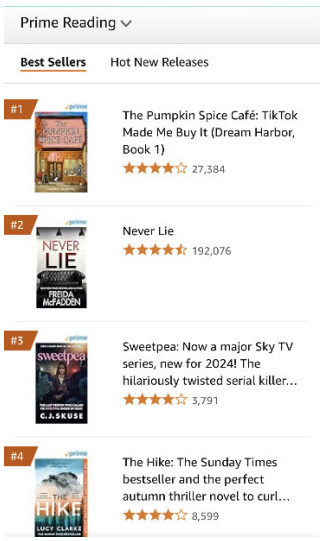


FIG 6: Amazon ranking – Prime Reading, 19 Oct

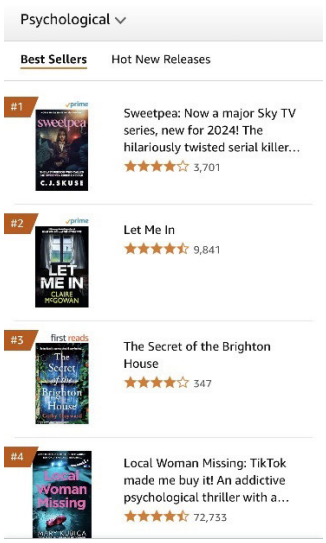


FIG 7: Amazing ranking – Psychological, 19 Oct 2024

[258]Sales figures courtesy of HQ PowerBi sales figures database, HQ, an imprint of HarperCollins (2024) Unpublished.

Being namechecked in *Time Magazine* and *The Hollywood Reporter* has introduced the *Sweetpea* novels to new readerships and with the announcement of a second season in the offing too[259], the *Sweetpea* franchise can only grow. Rhiannon's complex appeal, rooted in the interplay between relatability and her unique capacity for violence, satisfies readers' desires for multidimensional women in fiction and film but it also heralds a new era for the character; one in which I am not responsible for Rhiannon's actions, nor how she is perceived. In exploring both Rosenblatt's 'reader response theory' and Roland Barthes' concept of 'The Death of the Author,' I have come to understand how I am no longer the central figure in the creation and interpretation of my own text and that to survive, she must evolve and live outside of the pages I created for her. 'A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination[...]'[260] Barthes states, and this has become apparent throughout my journey of seeing how the books are reviewed, enjoyed, adored, criticised, and filmed.

Seeds left to sow in the *Sweetpea* garden

My *Sweetpea* quintology has carved out a distinctive niche within the modern contemporary crime fiction corpus, specifically at the vanguard of sassy noir. Through my analysis of its reception, I have identified the series as a leading force in its subversion of gender norms and exploration of a woman's psychological nuances. Its critical reception also reveals broader trends in how readers and critics respond to transgressive literature that defies generic conventions and challenges stereotypes. By synthesising these findings, my thesis positions the *Sweetpea* series within a broader literary framework and makes a fresh

[259] Al-Ghamdi, A., 'Ella Purnell's Murder Comedy Sweetpea Renewed For Season 2' *ScreenRant.com*, 3 December 2024 <https://screenrant.com/sweetpea-season-2-renewal-ella-purnell/> [Accessed: 22 January 2025]
[260]Barthes, R (trans. S Heath) 'The Death of the Author' (London: Fontana, 1977, p142-148), <http://sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf> [Accessed: 22 November 2024] p8

contribution to existing scholarly debates on the boundaries of genre, morality, and reader engagement in contemporary fiction.

The sole remaining story to tell in the Rhiannon Lewis universe, as I envision it, is that of her daughter, Ivy; the baby she conceives in *Sweetpea*, and gestates, gives birth to and abandons in *In Bloom*. Rhiannon's journey as a character reached its conclusion in *The Bad Seeds*, and in this culmination, she experiences a temporary sense of freedom, fully aware that her fate - a life sentence in prison - awaits. This conclusion effectively realises her character arc while simultaneously leaving space for Ivy's narrative to take on the complexities of living as the daughter of a serial killer. It also opens the door for an exploration of the intergenerational trauma that may have been instigated by having a serial killer for a mother, as well as the lingering emotional ramifications of such a link.

As for the genre that *Sweetpea* pioneered, it heralds a significant shift in the crime fiction landscape, allowing for more subversive, darkly comedic, and morally complex female-centred narratives to be introduced. Sassy noir has redefined the antihero, presenting a female protagonist who disobeys established tropes. Rhiannon blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator, allowing for more morally ambiguous protagonists and this is already inspiring future works to embrace complexity for female leads, moving beyond traditional roles of femme fatale, helpless victim, or cold, steely investigator. The series' irreverent humour subverts the typically hard-boiled tone of crime fiction and demonstrates how comedy can serve as a tool for psychological insight and challenging reader expectations. Rhiannon's legacy now endures in television, and it remains to be seen how her character will continue to evolve and influence the genre and broader media, but as her narrative transitions into this new phase, the potential for a more profound exploration of her complexities is substantial. It is my hope that she will continue to shock, challenge expectations, and, above all, empower

women, just as she has for me, contributing to my literary success, academic research, and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

This exegesis examined the intersections of writing, literary genre, transgression, and grief, using my published *Sweetpea* quintology as a case study. The analysis focused on the emotional development of the series' killer protagonist, Rhiannon Lewis, and the broader implications of her creation and character arc for contemporary crime fiction, particularly in relation to gender, anger, and humour.

One primary objective informing this research was to examine how Rhiannon's conception is rooted in my personal experience of grief, particularly after the death of my mother in 2015. My writing during this time functioned as a therapeutic mechanism to channel my anger, and loss and I found that by using Rhiannon as the conduit, I could create emotional distance for myself from the true events while storifying them into her fictitious experiences. This meant I could have a dialogue with my grief but at one removed from it, a strategy which tallied with cathartic studies in writing as therapy such as James Pennebaker's 'expressive writing paradigm,'[261] George Kelly's fixed-role therapy[262] and Adi Barak and Ronit D. Leichtentritt's work on creative writing following traumatic loss.[263] Herein, the studies found that a person may live vicariously through fictional representations of themselves while exploring their loss in more purposeful or creative ways.

[261] Pennebaker, J.W., 'Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process' *Psychological Science*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (May 1997), pp. 162-166 https://www.jstor.org/stable/40063169 [Accessed: 15 February 2025]
[262]Kelly, G. A. 'The Psychology of Personal Constructs.' *Vol. 1. A theory of personality. Vol. 2. Clinical diagnosis and psychotherapy.* (New York: Norton, 1955).
[263]Barak, A., and Leichtentritt, R.D., 'Creative writing after traumatic loss: Towards a generative writing approach.' *British Journal of Social Work* 47, no. 3 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw030>

I employed the epistolary structure in *Sweetpea* to create for Rhiannon an intimate and personal voice for self-expression. In this way, I subverted traditional crime fiction conventions by presenting the perpetrator's perspective close-up, rather than the investigator's or victim's. The immediacy of the form allowed me a deeper sense of reader engagement with Rhiannon's humanity despite her many transgressions. I wanted my readers to like her, connect with her and, above all, understand her, and in doing so I have created a truly original protagonist. Rhiannon's mindset is rare, embodying a complex duality, and so by giving readers unfiltered access to her thoughts, I have enriched the reading experience and opened up a new conversation about how 'monstrous' her actions are, in the same way novels like *Frankenstein*[264] *or Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*[265] have for centuries. The diary form also gives Rhiannon the agency and voice she lacks in her daily life, as the form does in novels like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*,[266] *The Color Purple*[267] and *The Diary of a Young Girl*[268] a sentiment echoed by scholars like Ofelia Ribeiro.[269]

Rhiannon represents a multifaceted feminist identity and can be read and understood using feminist concepts. Her use of violence disrupts traditional stereotypes that construct women as inherently peaceful[270], offering a pointed critique of gendered power dynamics and the gendered language at play in our workplaces and social groups. Although her actions may be unsettling, they can be understood as a wider form of resistance against oppression and systemic assumptions about women. Part of that resistance is her use of profanity – which

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[264] Shelley, M., *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (Project Gutenberg eBook 84, Chapter 11) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/84/84-h/84-h.htm> [Accessed: 10 February 2025]
[265] Stevenson, R.L., 'Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.' (London: Longmans, 1886).
[266] Chbosky, S., *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (USA: MTV Books, 1999)
[267] Walker, A., *The Color Purple* (USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982)
[268] Frank, A., *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Holland: Contact Publishing, 1947)
[269] Ribeiro, O., 'A different thread: an analysis of the diary form in the representation of the female self' *PhD diss.*, (Concordia University, 1990) <http://https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/5890/1/MM64712.pdf> [Accessed: 19 December 2024], p39-41
[270] Gordon, L., 'The Peaceful Sex? On Feminism and the Peace Movement' NWSA *Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 624-634 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press <https://https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316074> [Accessed: 15 February 2025]

journalist Mona Eltahawy affirms is an 'essential tool in the disruption of the patriarchy'[271] under which Rhiannon, and myself, are perennially held.

Drawing on Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory[272], I propose that Rhiannon can be read transactionally, wherein the interaction between text and reader creates new meaning. This approach allows for a dynamic relationship in which readers, particularly women and girls, can interpret Rhiannon's profanity, defiance and violence as a source of empowerment. In this way, Rhiannon serves not only as a narrative figure but also as a catalyst for readers to challenge and resist patriarchal structures within their own lives.

Sweetpea has made an innovative contribution to the modern crime fiction corpus, as quantified by the successful TV adaptation of the first novel in the series and acclaim from reviewers like Maxim Jakubowski and Geoffrey Wansell, authors Claire Allen and John Marrs, and prominent creative writing scholars such as Dr Joanna Nadin and Professor Bernice M. Murphy, with the latter using the first novel as a point of discussion in one of her English modules shortly after its release. I have incorporated a selection of the most positive reviews in both Appendix A and C, with reviews of the TV series featuring in Appendix B. While the in-depth focus on *Sweetpea* and its sequels enables a detailed exploration of the themes and narrative strategies within them, this approach necessarily limits the scope of broader analysis, precluding a more comprehensive assessment of how similar themes manifest across crime fiction and its subgenres. A wider comparative study could yield a broader understanding of the evolution of female protagonists in this genre, as well as the broader implications of 'sassy noir'. A more nuanced examination of the series' reception, which takes into account variations in age, gender, and cultural context, could also provide a more holistic

[271]Eltahawy, M., *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (Poland: Beacon Press, 2020) p85-86
[272]Davis, J.R., 'Reconsidering Readers: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Pedagogy' *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, Spring 1992, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 71-81 Published by: New York College Learning Skills Association <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42802433> [Accessed: 8 January 2025]

perspective on *Sweetpea*'s cultural impact. It would be interesting to explore audience perceptions of the *Sweetpea* quintology and its television adaptation, analysing viewer responses to Rhiannon as a character and reader responses to the character, narrative and tonal alterations in the adaptation.

This tension between creative integrity and commercial appeal in literary adaptations offers another area of study. In exploring Roland Barthes' concept of 'The Death of the Author'[273] I learned of the importance of allowing a creation space to exist away from my influence. 'A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination [...]'[274] states Barthes, and *Sweetpea*'s destination from page to screen accentuates the need for a character like Rhiannon to find new audiences she hitherto would not have had she existed only in book form. Future research could examine how publishers and authors navigate the adaptation process to balance artistic expression with market demands. Finally, the *Sweetpea* series offers a multidisciplinary foundation for research, bridging gender and media studies, literary theory, and crime fiction scholarship.

Ultimately, the *Sweetpea* quintology serves as a transformative and influential work within contemporary crime fiction, offering a unique and feminist perspective that challenges traditional conventions of the genre. Through its exploration of grief, gender, and transgression, the series similarly functions as a therapeutic and creative outlet for me as its author while also disrupting stereotypes of women in crime fiction, particularly through its complex and humorously subversive protagonist, Rhiannon Lewis. She is not only the heart of this series but also a deeply personal reflection of my own journey through grief towards empowerment. As a testament to the strength of women who defy societal expectations and to the therapeutic potential of storytelling, may she continue to sow seeds for new audiences everywhere.

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[273] Barthes, R (trans. S Heath) 'The Death of the Author' (London: Fontana, 1977, p142-148), <http://sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf> [Accessed: 10 February 2025]

[274] 'La mort de l'auteur', Mantéia, 5 (1968); published as 'The Death of the Author' in Barthes's Image Music Text, trans. Heath, S., (New York, 1977).

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/in-praise-of-fictions-unlikable-women-in-2015/421698/>

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