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Keywords

job, drama, suitable, women, crime, television, woman, work

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‘A Suitable Job For a Woman’: Women, Work and the Television Crime Drama¹

Sue Turnbull

Abstract

The first series of the Channel Nine crime drama series, *Underbelly*, is the starting point for a reflection on the relationship between women, work, crime and feminism. Following a brief description of the episode ‘Wise Monkeys’ written by Felicity Packard which features three of the ‘real’ women involved in Melbourne’s gangland murders, the essay considers the significant role women have played in the depiction of crime on television as creators, writers, and actors. In the end, it all comes down to power and control, who wins and who loses in what Gregg and Wilson (2010) have identified as the ‘cultural economy of infamy’ where the playing field is still far from level, either in the television industry or on the ‘mean streets’ of crime.

Keywords

Underbelly, television crime drama, feminism, postfeminism.

Episode 7 of the first *Underbelly* crime drama series, based on the ‘real’ people and events involved in Melbourne’s notorious gangland wars (1993-2004) opens with a pregnant Roberta Williams (Kat Stewart) giving her husband Carl Williams (Gyton Grantley) a blow job outside the court where he is about to appear on a charge of drug trafficking. As we observe this scene, a female voice-over announces, somewhat archly, given the nature of Roberta’s simultaneous servicing of Carl, ‘Women don’t seem to play much of a role in the underworld: the extortion, the drug-dealing, violence, they’re bloke things’. The narrator of this quasi-hard-boiled commentary is the female detective, Jacqui James (Caroline Craig), who is also present outside the court and whose narratorial role in the series as a whole was clearly intended to counter accusations of the Channel Nine show’s macho posturing and ‘criminal hyper-masculinity’ (Gregg and Wilson 2010, 413).

Watching the earlier episodes from the first series of what has now become an internationally successful Australian franchise, it was hard not to conclude that *Underbelly* was the kind of post-feminist television crime show that had ‘just about forgotten feminism’ (Negra 2009, 2). Made for Channel Nine at a time when the

station was desperate to claw back some of its lost ground in the Australian television ratings, *Underbelly* arrived in a flurry of publicity that could not be ignored. Based on a book by the *Age* newspaper crime beat reporters, Andrew Rule and John Sylvester, the show's claim to authenticity rested on its portrayal of Melbourne's gangland wars in the period from 1995-2004, events recent enough for some of the cases to be still going through the courts when the first series premiered in 2008. Indeed, one trial being heard by Justice Betty King led to the 'banning' of *Underbelly* in the state of Victoria after Justice King had requested and viewed an advance copy of the series. Realising that the series depicted the commission of a murder relevant to the case before her, Justice King argued that she had no option but to call for a suppression order. As publicists know only too well, there is nothing quite like controversy to boost viewer interest and an illegal trade in downloads was immediately launched. As the then television crime reviewer for ABC Radio National with an advance copy in my possession, I was ordered to return this forthwith to Channel Nine and to sign a document stating I had made no additional copies while the incriminating evidence had been in my possession.

Return my preview discs I did, but not before watching the first four episodes featuring actor Vince Colosimo as the charismatic, sociopathic, gangster Alphonse Gangitano, who in real life lived an apparently quiet life in the same street as one of my then colleagues working at La Trobe university: quiet, that is, until he was shot in the laundry of his home. Indeed, it seemed as though everyone in Melbourne knew someone who had met or had dealings with at least one of the people involved in this saga, making the first series even more of a must-see event for those Melburnians who weren't allowed to watch it. When we did see it, what we saw was familiar Australian actors playing real life figures such as Mick Gatto and Tony Mokbel who were themselves familiar from the pages of local newspapers and television reports, not to mention the local pizza shop and primary school playground. As such, the pleasure of recognition in watching *Underbelly* was not unlike the experience of watching the first episode of the first Australian crime drama, *Homicide* in 1967 which incidentally opened with a sequence filmed on the campus of Melbourne University located in Carlton, the inner city suburb which also featured prominently in *Underbelly*. Sadly, the recognition factor was not enough to win me over.

From the very first episode I found myself objecting to the ways in which the series portrayed the women involved in the underworld action in what I can only describe as a spasm of pre-post-feminist disapproval. I expected the sex, I just didn't expect quite so many gratuitous boobs and bums jiggling and bobbing up front and centre so obviously and so often. It was, I argued in a radio review, an exercise in very carefully considered and provocative bad taste calculated to capture the ratings by pandering to the voyeurism of a projected blokey Channel Nine viewer as envisaged by journalist Michael Bodey (2011) in his account of the 'broadcast wars,' which involved the major Australian television networks between 2003 and 2011. And then came 'Wise Monkeys', the second of a number of episodes in the first series written by experienced Australian screenwriter, Felicity Packard which also put the women in the gangland wars up front and centre, but in a rather different way. In the process, this episode opened up a welter of issues involving the relationship between television crime, women's work and feminism which I want to rehearse here. To borrow the very useful concept coined by Jason Wilson and Melissa Gregg in their essay on the series (2010), I became more than a little interested in what I perceived as 'the cultural economy of infamy' which the series represented.

In terms of the representation of crime and women's work, the first scene of 'Wise Monkeys' captured my attention because it nicely juxtaposed the familiar, and indeed clichéd, figure of the straight-laced policewoman James with the vivid and sexually active Roberta, in an episode focussed on the women involved in the gangland wars. What, Detective James wonders as she watches a tearful Roberta trying to hang onto Carl as he is bundled into a police car, is in it for the women who get involved with criminals? 'Why are they attracted to guys who are bound to end up in jail or worse? What goes on in their minds, in their secret hearts? I don't know' she adds, 'I suppose every woman's prepared to pay her own price for love' These, it appears, were the kinds of questions and issues this episode would explore on the audience's behalf, offering us the promise of insight and knowledge rather than simply the kinds of spectacular sex and violence which had characterised the earlier episodes.

Taken in context, 'Wise Monkeys' stood out from the first series of *Underbelly* because of its close attention to the experiences of the three women who, the title of the episode suggests, may be synonymous with Three Wise Monkeys of the Japanese

proverb who could neither see evil, hear evil or speak evil. This is a proverb which roughly translated suggests a capacity and a willingness to ignore the obvious, in this case, the evil that their menfolk do. In an episode which went some way to counter the masculine bias of the series as a whole, screenwriter Felicity Packard endeavours to make what is known about the actions of these women in real life explicable in the construction of scenes and dialogue which are largely fictional within a series which for the most part focussed on the activities of the male gangsters and police.

In the limited space of the forty-four minute television hour, 'Wise Monkeys' rehearses the possible motives of the women involved including the aforementioned Roberta, hairdresser Danielle McGuire (Madeleine West) and lawyer Zarah Garde Wilson (Kestie Morassi) as they negotiated their relationships with bad guys Carl, Tony Mokbel (Robert Mammone) and Lewis Caine (Marcus Graham) respectively. However, rather than supposing that these women caught up in the web of crime were in it 'for love', an honourable and suitably 'feminine' motive which this screenplay certainly suggested, the episode also left open the possibility that the women were motivated as much by the financial rewards of crime as by anything else. Carl made a lot of money as a drug-dealer from which Roberta also profited, Danielle appeared to do very well out of her relationship with Tony Mokbel who showered her with expensive gifts, and Zara certainly earned her money as a solicitor defending underworld figures whilst no doubt tucking away something in her superannuation fund. But at what cost and to whom? And who really benefited in the rehearsing of these women's stories? These are the questions that prompted my reflections on the relationship between women and crime.

The first series of *Underbelly* rated extremely well for Channel Nine, coming second in the ratings for an Australian drama in 2008 largely because of Justice Betty King's intervention which meant that it was not shown in the state of Victoria where it has still to be shown in its entirety and where sales of the DVD uncut version are still (at time of writing) banned.² The series was also a critical success, winning eight Australian Film Institute Awards. These included Best Drama series and Best Actor and Actress for Gyton Grantley and Kat Stewart as Roberta and Carl Williams. 'Wise Monkeys' won three (the most awarded episode) including Best Director (Peter Andikidis), and Best Guest or Supporting Actor and Actress for Damian Walshe

Howling as underworld figure Benji Venjamin and Madeleine West as hairdresser Danielle. As the screenwriter who gave them the raw material with which to work, Felicity Packard missed out although the show capped off a successful night with the award for Best Drama series of the year.

While this critical success may have been justified, it did not take away from my own perception that the representation of the women in the series as a whole was problematic. In the process of Googling information on actress Madeleine West, I discovered a video clip of her in character as Danielle on a soft porn site jointly sponsored by Nine's online site *Ninemsn* and *Zoo Weekly* 'lads' magazine. The site included a whole range of selected raunchy clips from *Underbelly* which revealed rather less flesh than the televised version but which nevertheless lent some credence to my initial suspicion that Channel Nine envisaged *Underbelly* as an opportunity to present images which in a different context might be labelled pornographic as mainstream drama.³ As such, *Underbelly* enabled the kind of move which Diane Negra finds typical of a regrettable postfeminist backlash in which sex work and pornography are normalised as legitimate forms of female labour (Negra 2009, 100).

At which point I might add, that as a feminist I am in principle neither opposed to sex work nor pornography. Following Linda Williams in her outstanding work of feminist scholarship, *Hard Core: The Frenzy of the Visible* (1989), I have continued to be interested in the ways in which the human sexuality has been represented in texts which are deemed (for whatever reason) to be pornographic and consider sex-work to be a legitimate form of endeavour for those who choose to engage in it. I am, however, also well aware that the terms and conditions under which pornography is produced or sex work is undertaken are more often exploitative than not. In the business of pornography and sex work, as in the business of television and crime, the key issue is power, who has it and who doesn't and who stands to benefit in the end, as was vividly demonstrated in series four of the *Underbelly* Franchise, *Underbelly – Razer* (2011)

Set in the period of the razor-gang wars in Sydney during the period 1927-36, *Underbelly-Razor* was based on the careers of two of Sydney's most infamous

criminal figures, Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine. Like the three earlier *Underbelly* series, *Razor* was based on a 'true-crime' book, in this case *Razor: A True Story of Slashers, Gangsters, Prostitutes and Sly Grog* by Larry Writer, once again adapted for television by the Screentime production team in collaboration with Channel Nine. Given that Kate Leigh (Danielle Cormack) ran a bar and illegal gambling joint while Tilly (Chelsea Preston Crayford) ran a brothel, this series found ample opportunity for presenting women in various stages of undress while engaging in the business of sex in ways which could hardly be challenged since these were, of course, 'true' to the historical record and context. Except, of course, there really was no real need to first introduce us to Kate Leigh in her bath, or to show her standing naked in order to make the point that she was a fearless and 'brazen' woman. And yet this is how we meet Kate, the camera lingering over her naked torso as her lover looks on.

While the 'real' Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine, bore little resemblance to their more glamorous, slim and attractive TV incarnations,⁴ the 'true' story of Kate and Tilly provided the producers with a legitimate reason for putting attractive women and sex on screen in ways which, while they might have been true to the historical record in terms of the subject matter, were also clearly intended to attract and hold viewers attention in the interests of entertainment and ratings, a strategy which appeared to succeed. As Claire Harvey noted in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*, 'the gorgeous actors in *Underbelly Razor* make prostitution look a lot of fun' while the 'silk-satin dressing gowns, rosebud lips... and the elegant little kitten heeled bedroom slippers' clearly provided fashion interest for the viewer interested in a retro-bordello style.⁵ The ratings for the first episode set a new record for television drama in Australia attracting almost 2.8 million viewers⁶, the series dipped to 1.28 million for episode 9, recovering slightly for the finale on November 6 with an audience of 1.449 making it still the most popular show on the night.⁷ The portrayal of women and crime therefore proved once again to be a profitable venture for Screentime and Channel Nine, not to mention all those who worked on the show, including the one woman employed as a writer on this series about women, Felicity Packard.

The production of a television series is, of course, a collaborative effort and the issue of 'authorship' a vexed one. Working in a team, writing scripts based on real life

events and a true-crime book, would appear to offer little in the way of authorial control to a screenwriter. As Packard herself has noted, the task of shaping the often messy chaos of real life into a television episode involving a 'three act structure and a consistent, realistic protagonist' while satisfying the expectations of the audience in terms of the genre of the television crime drama and what this might deliver is a tricky one (Packard 2012). To complicate the picture even further, we might add in the expectations of Screentime and Channel Nine for the show to deliver the ratings without which the commercial television industry cannot survive. Following this logic, it would appear that the production team was entirely justified in its representation of women in the *Underbelly* series and it would be a very grumpy and old-fashioned feminist who might suggest otherwise given the work this provided for all concerned. However, when it comes the distribution of labour, it might be noted that this was hardly equal. Packard was the only woman on the writing team of four, and of the five directors employed on the series, only one was a woman, a major imbalance for a series that was, in the end, all about the women.

Equality in the workforce, it might be recalled, was one of the central tenets of liberal feminism during the 1970s and 80s with regard to the television industry, which is perhaps best illustrated in relation to the production of television crime by the example of the American police procedural, *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-86). Created by two female screen writers about two female cops, the struggle to get this series onto screen, as documented by Julie D'Acci, is now a classic in the history of feminist media studies (D'Acci 1994). Inspired by their reading of film critic Molly Haskell's critique of the representation of women in film, *From Reverence to Rape*, Barbara Avedon and Barbara Corday initially created a 'spoof' of the male buddy-cop genre (e.g. *Starsky and Hutch*, *CHiPS*) which dominated television in the 1970s, before adapting their script into the pilot for the rather more serious police procedural which *Cagney and Lacey* became. One of the more intriguing moments in the saga of getting *Cagney and Lacey* onto the screen involves the battle with the network executives over the casting of the character of Christine Cagney. What the networks wanted was an attractive and feminine actress for the part in order to appeal to a heterosexual audience. What they got, after several false starts, was the attractive and feminine Sharon Gless who incidentally became something of a gay icon in the subversive fan readings of the show (D'Acci 1994, 41).

In terms of its representation of female police officers, *Cagney and Lacey* was significant because it reflected the increasing participation of women in law enforcement during the 1980s, as did several British crime drama series of the same era including *Juliet Bravo* (BBC1 1980-85) and *The Gentle Touch* (ITV 1980-84). The higher profile of women on screen in the television crime drama was therefore, as Helen Mirren suggested, a direct effect of women's increased participation in the labour market:

I think what's made a difference to women's roles, to be fuddy duddy about it, is feminism. It is women entering the workplace, women entering positions of power, and the knock on effect is reflected in the drama of the time [...] It's more to do with women in real life than anything else (Mirren cited in Brunsdon 2012, 1).

Mirren's position here is the notion that art imitates life, that the representation of women on screen mirrors that of women in the 'real world'. At which point it is important to note that the character of detective Jane Tennison as portrayed by Helen Mirren, was the creation of television actor and writer Lynda La Plante, who frustrated by the 'lack of intelligent or complex roles' available to her as an actor in the seventies, decided to create some (Jermyn 2010, 15).

Following the success of her series *Widows* (ITV 1983) about a group of women who carry out a robbery of their own after the botched attempt of their husbands end in failure, La Plante's next significant intervention in the world of television crime was the police drama. *Prime Suspect* (ITV 1991-2006). In the process of conducting her research for the first episode of what would become a long-running if intermittent series, La Plante asked to be put in touch with a senior female police officer (Jermyn 2010, 17). Her contact was DCI Jackie Malton who not only provided La Plante with access to the police work and activities in which she was involved, but also provided La Plante with plentiful evidence of the kinds of institutional misogyny she encountered in the conduct of her duties as a police officer; mysogyny which made its way vividly onto the screen during the first episode of *Prime Suspect* when Jane is not only up against a sadistic serial killer who tortures and kills women, but the hostility

of her male colleagues in the squad room (Jermyn 2010, 18). In the process of dealing with this blatant sexism, Jane Tennison became what Charlotte Brunsdon has described as an 'iconic representation of a female professional in a man's world' while *Prime Suspect*, the series, became 'a canonical text for feminist television studies' (Brunsdon 2012, 1).

The evolution of *Prime Suspect* as a canonical text, however, takes an interesting turn after season three when La Plante relinquished control of the series under what Jermyn describes as 'difficult circumstances' after refusing the suggestion from the production company, Granada, that the series should focus more on Jane's private life rather than her career (Jermyn 2010, 13). La Plante, however, did not want *Prime Suspect* to travel down the same narrative path as *Cagney and Lacey*, which as the series progressed chose to focus as much if not more on the emotional lives of its central characters as it did on the cases with which they dealt (D'Acci 1994). In a move that underlines once again the importance of power and control to women in the workplace, La Plante's next move was to create her own production company. Meanwhile, exerting her own form of power as a star actress, Helen Mirren herself gained more control over the direction the show and the character would take. Indeed, Mirren herself was responsible for a shift in the format of *Prime Suspect* from a two by two-hour miniseries to three two-hour self contained episodes for the next three episodes.

While Mirren continued to garner increasing accolades and industry respect for her performance as Jane Tennison, winning six Best Actress Emmys in the process, the occasion of Tennison's last appearance in an episode appropriately entitled *The Final Act* in 2006 caused La Plante to break her silence. The portrayal of Jane as an alcoholic who has lost her edge prompted La Plante, during a radio interview with BBC Breakfast to discuss her latest crime novel, to express her disappointment in no uncertain terms: 'I just find it very sad that for the end of a great character, female, somebody has to say 'make her a drunk. Why?' (Hale, 2006). According to a *Daily Mail* interview with La Plante, the decision to make this 'Final Act' more about Jane, her problems with drink, depression and the impending death of her father was therefore that of actress Mirren who now had the power to determine the fate of Tennison having played her so successfully for so many years (Hale, 2006).

Therefore, while La Plante would have preferred Jane to go out on top, as a Commander or some other high level position signalling her triumph as a woman in a difficult profession, Mirren, on the other hand, imagined the future of Jane as bleak. Whatever the most likely outcome for the character and her real life counterparts in the world of law enforcement, what matters here is not so much the issue of representation, but the issue of *control* over the representation.

La Plante is not, of course, the first woman to lose control of her character as a result of the machinations of the television industry. Reading crime writer P.D James autobiography, *A Time to be Earnest* (2000) it's apparent that James would probably side with La Plante and her right to determine the fate of her character even though James herself might not consider herself a feminist. Provoked by a fellow dinner guest critical of the masculine dominance of the legal professions whilst on a book tour in Canada during November 1997, James responded somewhat 'tartly' that she 'was becoming tired of women presenting themselves as victims' going on to argue that once having achieved her senior post within the Civil Service, she did not ever experience 'real discrimination' (James 2000, 123). While James acknowledges that the career opportunities for bright grammar school girls like her were limited in the thirties, and that when she started work in the Health Service in 1949 she was paid less than a man in the same grade despite being the family breadwinner, in her opinion girls today (1997) have more privileges and opportunities than ever. But she adds 'I do not think that their lives are necessarily any easier and I do not envy them' (James 2000, 124).

James' character, Cordelia Grey, who first appeared in an *Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972) might well be one of those unenviable young women, a private investigator at a time when private investigation was still largely presumed to be the province of the American male. It's therefore interesting to note that Cordelia appeared in print some five years before Marcia Muller, then Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton gave us an updated version of the feminist PI with a bad haircut, a fraught love life and an empty fridge, all of which signalled her refusal to engage in the kinds of post-feminist pleasures which would characterise the heroines of popular culture in the 1990s as discussed by Diane Negra (2009). Cordelia Grey, true to her name, is a much more muted and misunderstood presence who was translated to the small screen

twice, once in a film directed by Chris Petit in 1982, and again loosely in a series of telemovies which appeared intermittently between 1997-2001 starring Helen Blaxendale.

The experience of the television adaptation was not a happy one for James, who objected strongly when the producers of the show decided to incorporate Blaxendale's pregnancy into the storyline of the last episode which screened in 2001. As James told an interviewer:

... one day I was at the hairdresser's and I read that the actor playing Cordelia was pregnant, but was going to carry on with the part and make her into an unmarried mother. I got on to one of the directors, and he said, we thought she could have an American lover who's deserted her, and she'll continue to do her job while she's pregnant. And I said, Cordelia was not the sort of girl to have an affair resulting in a pregnancy. If she'd had an affair she wouldn't have had a baby; if she did have a baby, she would take the view that the father had a right to know, and the child had the right to a father. I realised my character had gone. (Crown 2011).

The turn of phrase here 'not the sort of girl' reveals not only James's class prejudices, but also casts a cloud over any claims which might be made for P.D. James' feminist credentials as a crime writer who gave us one of the first female private investigator. However, it is possible to argue that since James 'knows' her character better than anyone else having created her in the first place, she has a right to control how that character is portrayed. Unfortunately for James, the rights relating to the copyright of character are ambiguous. The advice given on a site such as that of *The World Intellectual Property Organisation* is that 'A character could be protected under copyright if it is an original expression of an author'.⁸ The 'could' here is all important since P.D. James 'couldn't' protect Cordelia once she had signed over the adaptation rights of her book to the television producers. Once again, we are confronted with the issue of power, control in relation to the portrayal of crime on television.

While it might well be the case that a female crime writer or screenwriter sitting alone at her desk has complete control over her characters, the moment she decides to ‘sell’ those characters to a publisher or television producer she had better be very careful to read the fine print. Meanwhile, the female screenwriter producing an episode of a long form crime drama based on true crime has not only limited power to change the ‘facts’ but also has to work within the ‘aesthetic’ of the series as a whole as determined by the production company. The power of the actor is also limited by what is on the page and the overall direction of the show, unless they are as successful as Helen Mirren. As for the ‘real’ women involved in crime, they would appear to have no control over their representation at all and whatever financial gains they may have made come at a cost most people would consider too high. Which brings me back to *Underbelly*, the episode “Three Monkeys’ and the final tally.

One of only seven female Supreme Court Judges in a cohort of twenty nine, Justice Betty King will no doubt retire with a comfortable superannuation package although as a woman she is still very much in the minority at her level of seniority at the Bar. Felicity Packard will have been reasonably well paid as a screen writer, although again as a woman she is in a minority as a television writer and subject to a high degree of uncertainty in an always uncertain television industry which also affects the future prospects of actors such as Kat Stewart and Madeleine West despite their AFI accolades. As for the ‘real’ women involved in the case, last heard of, Roberta Williams had remarried after the murder of Carl Williams in prison in 2010; Danielle McQuire, now described as ‘Tony Mokbel’s ‘ex’, was in the news in March 2012 because she had been attacked by a balaclava wearing man after leaving the Nursery Café which she part owns.⁹ Zara Garde-Wilson is still practising law although the father of her three children was charged with murder in 2011 suggesting that Zara has not as yet managed to disconnect from the underworld.¹⁰

Within the ‘cultural economy of infamy’ presented here, it would appear that for the ‘real’ women involved in the *Underbelly* saga, life continues to be difficult, while for those who are involved in judging, rewriting and performing them there are varying degrees of financial reward and kudos to be had. Any ‘real’ power in determining the direction the series might take is, however, still lacking for the women involved in an industry which is still dominated by men who make the final decisions most of the

time. The ultimate winners are Channel Nine and producers Screentime who signed deals with Fox International Channels and the UK based distributor, Portman Film and Television, for undisclosed amounts, ensuring that the series would be seen (and paid for) around the world.¹¹ While this may be a good thing for the Australian television industry as a whole, I'm not so sure it's such a good thing for women.

Although crime may indeed be a 'suitable job' for some women, it is clear that not all women are adequately rewarded for their efforts and there are many women who continue to be exploited in a playing field which has never really levelled out despite the fact the interventions of feminism. I now suspect that my initial distaste for the series *Underbelly* therefore rests on the fact that it presented me with a 'truth' which I would rather not accept, that in the 'real' world of crime and television, women may still come off second best and when it comes to a series like *Underbelly*, we are hardly past the first feminist post.

Notes on contributor

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¹ The title of this essay subverts that of the P.D James crime novel, *An Unsuitable Job For A Woman*. *A Suitable Job for a Woman* is also the title of a book by former journalist and now crime writer, Val McDermid, about the work of 'real' female private investigators.

² <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/tvratingdramafirst.asp>

³ <http://video.au.msn.com/search/Zoos%20Babes%20of%20Underbelly>

⁴ 'Underbelly Razor – The Razor Gang Girls soon on Channel 9' *Memorable TV*, 13 August 2011, <http://www.memorabletv.com/news/underbelly-razor-the-razor-gang-girls-soon-on-channel-9/> (last accessed 11 April 2013)..

⁵ Claire Harvey. 'Underbelly Razor myth hides the ugly truth, *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2011. <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/underbelly->

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