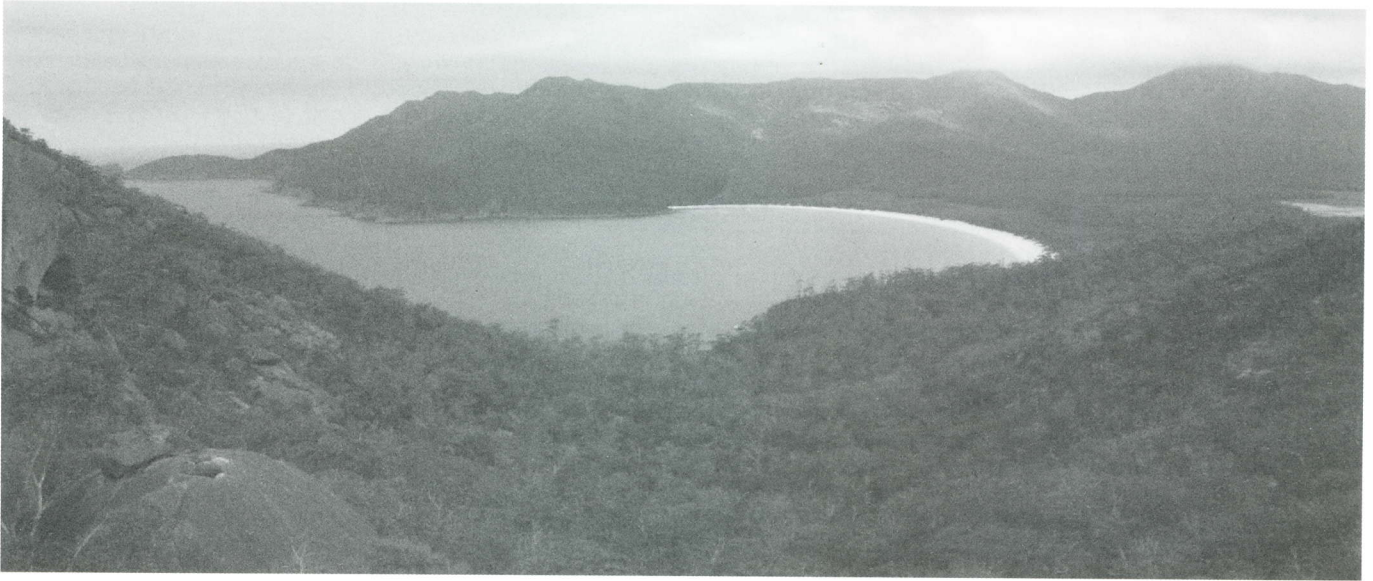


# Tasmanian Terroir: Creating Spirit of Place in *Freycinet*

By Melanie Calvert



They say truth is stranger than fiction. The events that happened in Tasmania, those that form the backdrop to my novel, *Freycinet*, border on the incomprehensible.

In one of this country's most baffling murder mysteries, almost two decades ago now, the disappearance of a tourist, and the murder of another, sparked two of the biggest and longest police investigations in Tasmania's history.

In March 1993, a German tourist wandered on to Beaumaris Beach in Tasmania. She had bought a can of soft drink from the nearby Motor Inn, and she sat for a while, no doubt enjoying the lonely, wild beach; beautiful and yet eerily bereft of people. 26-year-old Nancy Grunwaldt collected up her things, pulled back onto the road on the rented bicycle that she was riding from Launceston to Hobart, and was never seen again.

Two years later, another young tourist, a 20-year-old Italian girl this time, Victoria Cafasso, visited the same beach, entering the beach via the same track. Victoria was found, but she was found stabbed more than 40 times, her bikini bottoms missing, her body half in, half out of the water. It was an attack so frenzied the young woman was almost scalped. Senior police described the killing as one of the most violent they have seen.

The small town of Beaumaris went into meltdown. The local police stumbled; the body was first left too long in the water, and then moved and covered with a tarpaulin. A single boot print in the sand was lost.

'I still imagine Victoria's wet face  
peering from among the reeds,  
Nancy's bike wheel spinning.'

Because Victoria Cafasso's body had been exposed to the salt water, forensically and scientifically no evidence was obtained. If the sea had done its job, as the murderer no doubt intended, her body might never have been found at all.

The sheer frenzied violence of Victoria Cafasso's murder had no precedence in this area. The murder stunned the small community. The townsfolk retreated into a shell-shocked silence, in which they clung to

the belief that it could not possibly have been a local, all the while peering in fear and suspicion at their fellow townsfolk. Although evidence showed Victoria Cafasso had probably not been raped, police believed the motive was sexual. They hypothesised that the person responsible was a sexual psychopath and potential serial killer.

Bizarrely, the investigation returned too many suspects; at least three different men presented with a history of violence against women and extremely suspicious behaviour on the day of the murder.

I won't name these men here, because, although they could hardly be described as innocent, they have not been convicted of these particular crimes. It is enough to say that there was one particular suspect who was the focus of widespread community suspicion despite the lack of evidence. So the townsfolk must have been frustrated at the inability of police to find enough evidence to convict him.



Perhaps this is why someone decided to push along the hand of justice.

In 2003 a young couple were camping close to Beaumaris Beach at Diana's Basin, when the woman claimed she saw a young woman's face among the reeds; her shoulder-length, dark blonde hair hanging wet around her face. They left the area, but felt compelled to return. After digging in an area near one of the toilet blocks they discovered "a grave-shaped mound". Uncovered, it proved to be a piece of corrugated iron, wrapped around a red, hooded jacket. Forensic tests found long blonde hair, dark hair and male DNA. The jacket, that of a young girl, was labelled with the name of the main suspect's daughter.

This incident was reported in the newspapers, but afterwards was never mentioned again, so presumably the jacket was considered a 'plant', an attempt to manufacture the much-needed evidence. And the story of the girl's face in the reeds was no doubt considered either a fabrication or a result of the woman's overactive imagination.

And so, to this day no one has been charged with Victoria Cafasso's murder, and Nancy Grunwaldt and her bicycle have never been located.

But I still imagine Victoria's wet face peering from among the reeds, Nancy's bike wheel spinning.

So this incident became the opening premise of my psychological murder mystery, Freycinet.

In *Freycinet* (pronounced Frey-sin-ay), Ginny O'Byrne is enchanted but also strangely horrified by the looming peaks of the Hazards mountains as she and her fiancé, Julian, arrive at Freycinet National Park. Ginny is even more frightened when she begins to experience visions of two murdered young women. The next morning two women have disappeared into the untamed Tasmanian wilds. Within 24 hours, Ginny is part of a massive Search and Rescue mission, surrounded by people who may in fact be responsible for the murder of the missing women, tormented by her gruesome visions, and embroiled in an eerie, and increasingly threatening, atmosphere.

'A few steps over the other  
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a strange, weirdly cold place.'

But the real stories behind the fiction are far and away more disturbing.

On one of my far-too-seldom trips home to Tasmania, I asked my Dad, a retired policeman, to take me to Beaumaris Beach. As we drove through from Scottsdale to St Helens, I studiously noted our surroundings:

"We drove in past trees malformed by fire, their twisted leaves the colour of dried blood and their trunks shrivelled black. Next to these were bushes frosted with snow white flowers. We drove under the shrieking arcs of black cockatoos, past bushland that looked from a distance velvety and cushiony, but close-up proved to be impenetrable and barbed, and past newly cleared land, the ancient, wild trees laid out in lines of skeletally neat match sticks."

I made sure to ask Dad all the tree and native plant names; my father has a great deal of local knowledge, and now some of it is in my book.

When we arrived at Beaumaris, we stood on the big, empty beach, the waves crashing, the wind stealing all sounds, and my father said, 'What a big, beautiful, lonely place to die.' He commented that the sand looked like ground flour, and that is in my novel too.

*'A body here might not be immediately discerned amongst the bulky clumps of jet-black seaweed. Splayed along the beach are several long, blackened hunks of wood. There are murderous weapons everywhere under this fairy floss, soft sky. Nor would the sound of screams be conspicuous here; snatched away by the stealing wind and camouflaged by cracking waves. The sound of the sea is disturbingly incessant.'*

I thought we would go to the police station, to see what they had to say about the Cafasso murder and Nancy Grunwaldt's disappearance; after all I've been in and out of police stations with my father all over the state all my life, but he seemed to deliberately avoid it.

Instead, we found a council worker who was driving around Diana's Basin inspecting the toilet facilities. While Dad spoke to him I wandered over a nearby rise. A few steps over the other side I came across a cold place; a strange, weirdly cold place. This is how I describe it in my novel:

*"...it's not the sudden cool kiss of sea-filled breeze that raises the hair on my arms and brings a stinging sensation to my eyes – it is a wave of all-encompassing sadness. A sadness so complete and strong and real that I feel it as a coldness flowing over me. It is abject terror and despair, and it is here, anchored to this spot. Here. The place where it happened."*

I'll never know whether that spot at Diana's Basin was really where something happened, but it certainly had a strange and wretched feel.

The council man showed us where the camping couple had found the grave-shaped mound; it wasn't far, a few metres, from where I had the eerie feeling. He pointed out where Victoria had entered the beach,

crossing a small bridge, in clear view of the Motor Inn where Nancy had bought her soft drink. Maybe the murderer was someone who worked there? He also showed us where Victoria's body was found, and it was a significant distance from where she entered the beach. Why would she have walked along so far? Just more questions and no more answers.

So these two young women, Victoria Cafasso and Nancy Grunwaldt, are in my novel. But not too much. Because they already have their own crazy, unfair stories. Stories with no real, useful endings.

Instead, their stories are one of several that weave through *Freycinet* as it explores Tasmania's nature; including Aboriginal myth, European fairy tales, and even ballet plots. In this melding of myth and history, Tasmania is a place of great beauty, but also one of mystery and murder; an enigmatic living museum with a history of harsh cruelty that has produced a strange Gothic potency.

The novel itself discusses this cultural potency, likening it to the French term *terroir*:

*"Loosely translated it means 'sense of place,' the sum of the effects of the surrounding environment ... a sense of the land itself; a combination of its weather, its terrain, its history, the things that have happened here, and of people's shared histories with that place, its particular resonances, the intersection of wilderness and myth and human culture and beliefs."*

For the main character of my novel, Ginny, this *terroir*, this 'spirit of place' at Freycinet is overwhelming, disorienting and horrifying. The reason for this is at the heart of solving the riddle of Freycinet.

But my novel will only ever be "the echoed sliver of a very real and unbearably callous murder" and its fictional events are "mere reverberations and splintered echoes of the madness of that abhorrent act."

Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction.

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*Freycinet is available from Paperchain Bookstore in Manuka and online, or as an ebook or paperback from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).*