

is a phantom. Hers is a haunted quest, full of foreboding. She recalls an incident from the summer of 1954 when two men set upon a dancer on stage during a performance, ‘peel[ing] his face like an orange’ in an unexplained attack: her first brush with violence. ‘From that point on... it was the sort of vile craziness I would suspect everybody of having the potential for.’ She stays with a creepy fan, Francis McLaren – ‘my taxonomist, my taxidermist... tireless tender of the flame’ – whose house is a living museum of Cogan memorabilia: we fear for her the minute she gets in his car. In the novel’s most go-for-broke contrivance, Cogan’s story is cross-cut with that of Myra Hindley, whose iconic mugshot appeared, and still appears, on the cover, generating controversy from the book’s inception and complaints from the real Cogan’s family. Hindley becomes Cogan’s psychic B-side, the darkest extreme of the celebrity continuum. The exact nature of their yoking-together, revealed in a transcript, continues to baffle and outrage but is a potent attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Burn cared deeply about style. The hallmarks of his narrative prose are fully formed by *Alma Cogan*. He loves a rabbit hole, burrowing away at this idea and that; he glides across moments, splicing together like a tribute clip show. A kind of documentary bricolage. His novels are simultaneously mobile and static: ideas dart around while the story stutters and poots. They are almost prose poems.

Burn takes experimentation to extremes in 2008’s *Born Yesterday*. Subtitled *The News as a Novel*, it takes the headlines of the summer of 2007 and seeks to impose a narrative order on them. It was an unusually newsy summer: the handover from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown; the flash floods; the Glasgow Airport terror attack and London car bombs; the disappearance of Madeleine McCann. Burn responds by going to town. He searches for form, pursuing ideas and coincidences: Paul McCartney’s 1968 trip to Praia da Luz, the same resort where Madeleine McCann disappeared; the collision of politics and showbiz in 1994 when *EastEnders*’ Susan Tully was having dinner at Granita the night Blair and Brown made their ‘deal’. He mines public figures for significance: Gordon Brown, with his ‘tombstone grin’, becomes a portent of doom, ‘something new and unwanted loosed to roam unchecked in the culture’. He reproduces chain emails, medical texts, online tributes to stabbed youths, a YouTube rap calling for Maddie’s safe return. He inserts himself into the text as he tries to make sense of it. What