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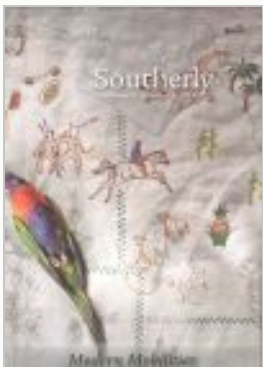
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The gender politics of underbelly razor

Southerly

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Williams, Marise

Abstract: In the 1990s I was spending a lot of time right smack in the middle of notorious Razorhurst, the area of Darlinghurst and East Sydney where, in the 1920s and 1930s, the razor gangs waged war, as the vice queens Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine vied for their share of the working man's earnings through sly grog, cocaine and prostitution. It was more of a triumvirate of crime bosses - Leigh, Devine and Phil "the Jew" Jeffs - but the women were the ones who ruled the Sydney underworld

roost. The Melbourne upstart Norman Bruhn who took on the triumvirate in 1927 didn't last long. At the time, I had no idea just how close I was to the history of the birth of organized crime in Australia. Larry Writer's book, *Razor*, about "this wild, romantic, dreadful period in Sydney's history" wasn't published until 2001 and Screentime's television adaptation of Writer's book, *Underbelly Razor*, aired in 2011. What I know now is: my office at 177 William Street was next door to the Chard Building (171 William Street) where Jeffs ran his Fifty-Fifty Club in the 1930s; a friend's house in Palmer Street, East Sydney, which I visited often, was a few doors away from one of Devine's brothels at 191 Palmer Street; the East Village pub where I met friends for drinks and dinner used to be the Trader's Arms where the Razorhurst gangster crew drank, met and shot each other menacing glances. Razors were the weapon of choice. The Pistol License Act introduced in February 1927 made carrying an unregistered firearm illegal, and murder was a hangable offence, but that didn't mean a gun wasn't used to wound or kill a man if need be. Bruhn was fatally shot in June 1927. Jeffs was shot in 1929 but survived. It was enough to scare him out of Sydney for a few years, though. Leigh shot two men in her time, both at her 104 Riley Street home - John "Snowy" Prendergast in 1930 and John McNamara in 1931. She killed Prendergast, pleaded self-defence in court and was acquitted by the jury.



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