

## Suzie Miller Prima Facie

**Maria Takolander**  
is a poet and critic.

Suzie Miller is a multi-award-winning playwright, whose one-woman play *Prima Facie* – after earning plaudits for Sydney’s Griffin Theatre Company – was staged in the West End, starring Jodie Comer, and won a Best New Play Olivier Award. *Prima Facie* is currently on Broadway and Miller is adapting it into a film, but it has also found its way into the form of this novel.

If the story seems eminently adaptable, it is partly because it is so resiliently familiar. The protagonist of *Prima Facie*, Tessa Ensler, is a young working-class woman who is raped while drunk and who subsequently attempts to pursue justice against seemingly inevitable odds. While she might call to mind Jodie Foster’s character in *The Accused* (1988), Tessa has more in common with Michelle Dockery’s character in the Netflix series *Anatomy of a Scandal* (2022), as she has worked her way into a position of power. After winning a scholarship to Cambridge, she has established a successful career as a criminal defence barrister.

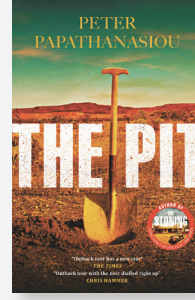
When we first meet Tessa she is exercising her power in the courtroom, which is depicted as a performative but also highly competitive environment. The aim is to win and the courtroom and its players are described in sporting terms. The barristers are “thoroughbreds”, and when it comes to the witness she is interrogating, Tessa waits for a “break in his serve”. Finally, she revels in the “moment where I have won the game and he is forced to look at me, and to realise that he

had completely underestimated who he was dealing with.” After she is raped, however, she needs the system to be more than a game: she needs it to be about actual justice.

The first-person present-tense narration is effective at establishing intimacy and Tessa is rendered even more sympathetic by her working-class background and the other adversities she has overcome, including a childhood history of family violence. She is certainly more likeable – though also more vulnerable – than most of her entitled Oxbridge-educated colleagues. The writing is sharp and authoritative, with the narrative providing a kind of legal procedural, showing us what Tessa must endure in seeking justice and why the conviction rate for sexual assault – at least in Britain, where the book is set – is 1.3 per cent. Notably, the novel is dedicated to the one in three women who are said to have suffered sexual abuse.

Australian readers will have a hard time reading this story without thinking about what happened to Brittany Higgins – and without joining Suzie Miller in advocating for long-overdue change. ●

*Picador, 352pp, \$34.99*



## Peter Papathanasiou The Pit

**Stephen Romei**  
is an editor and critic.

Outback noir is a star of Australian literature. New novels from Jane Harper and Chris Hammer – to name just two – are seen as publishing events. Harper’s 2016 debut, *The Dry*, and its 2017 sequel, *Force of Nature*, have been made into films. Hammer’s 2018 debut, *Scrublands*, is in production as a television series.

Hammer’s blurb for Peter Papathanasiou’s third novel, *The Pit*, says it is “outback noir with the noir dialled right up”. I agree – and it’s not only dialling up the noir. This ambitious, well-written page-turner travels to destinations that television’s 1970s outback explorers, the Leyland Brothers, never visited.

It opens with 65-year-old Bob Cooper confessing to a murder. The police officer who takes his call is Senior Constable Andrew Smith. They are in Perth and Bob is calling from a nursing home.

Smith returns from the author’s first two novels, *The Stoning* (2021) and *The Invisible* (2022). He is an Indigenous Australian, gay and has a question mark on his policing record. He’s known as “Sparrow”, an avian nickname that’s a respectful nod to Peter Temple’s Indigenous police detective Paul Dove. He hopes that solving a cold case – Bob tells him the murder happened 30 years ago – will restore his reputation. So he, Bob and another nursing home resident, Lukas Harper – who is 32 and in a wheelchair – rent a van and head for the scene of the crime: the Pilbara mining region in the north of Western Australia.

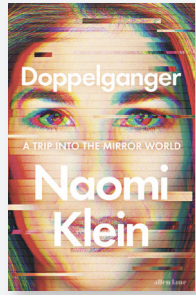
Sparrow knows it’s a rash decision but tells himself he’s armed and travelling with a pensioner and a paraplegic, so what could go wrong? A lot, as it turns out, and that’s before they fall in with a highwaywoman known as Mouse, whose nickname has nothing to do with timidity. She’s a “modern-day siren” on a personal crusade.

The time line alternates between this 2017 road trip on “the highway to hell” and 1969-1979, when the young, fit, handsome Bob, working as dump truck driver in the Pilbara, becomes close to a geologist known only as “Stretch”. There is a third time frame late in the novel – the late 1990s – that takes an unexpected geographical and emotional shift.

Greek-born, Canberra-based Papathanasiou explores themes such as Australia’s reliance on mining companies, the fly-in fly-out culture of that industry, its misogynistic world view and its treatment of Indigenous Australians and their land.

As interesting and timely as these are, it’s just the surface. Dig a little deeper and there’s Bob, in a tent at a Pilbara worksite in 1979. “The nightly mayhem of the camp reigned, the world coming to an end,” he reflects. “Inside, all I could hear was waves lapping against a shore, an orchestra playing a symphony.” ●

*MacLehose Press, 297pp, \$32.95*



## Naomi Klein Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World

**Antony Loewenstein**  
is the author of *The Palestine Laboratory*.

# Books

We all know people who have vanished into a world of conspiracy and disinformation. This is more extreme than believing, for example, that the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing was faked or that the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and Washington, DC, were committed by United States government insiders.

These lies almost seem quaint in the modern world. It's a mistake to romanticise the pre-internet era – far fewer voices were heard in the mainstream media and people of colour were often rendered invisible – but the 21st century has radically unsettled how we access information. Social media polarisation, right-wing populism and tabloid hackery inflame their publics and real, communal consensus is often impossible to obtain. Simply agreeing on the facts around Covid-19, vaccines, Palestine, neoliberalism, transgenderism or colonialism is now a herculean task as toxic untruths are mixed with verifiable details across our Balkanised media landscape.

But what if the Left is partly to blame for this precarious moment? Has smugness cost us potential allies in the fight for climate, pandemic and economic justice?

Canadian writer Naomi Klein – author of *No Logo*, *The Shock Doctrine*, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* and many other books – attempts to address these questions in a fascinating examination of the “mirror world” where truth and lies are interchangeable.

Her entry point at first seems trivial

and surprisingly personal. Many people have confused Klein with feminist activist and writer Naomi Wolf, praising and abusing Klein for Wolf's writings and tweets. The confusion runs deep: when I recently told a friend about Klein's new book, he said she'd “gone down the rabbit hole” – but he thought I was talking about the “Other Naomi”.

Wolf was once nominally on the centre left but today is embraced by far-right former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, and is a regular guest on his *War Room: Pandemic* podcast. For years, Klein explains, the “Other Naomi” has become “one of the most effective creators and disseminators of misinformation and disinformation about many of our most urgent crises”. She says Wolf has inspired many people to take to the streets to protest an almost wholly imaginary “tyranny”.

“The confusion they sow and the oxygen they absorb increasingly stand in the way of pretty much anything helpful or healthful that humans might, at some point, decide to accomplish together.”

What unfolds is a refreshingly honest and at times critical appraisal of the anti-corporate message espoused by Klein and the left and how it's been thoroughly co-opted by Wolf and others in the 2020s. When Wolf condemned the power of Big Tech, Klein writes, “she began tapping into deep and latent cultural fears about the many ways that previously private parts of our lives have become profit centres for all-seeing Silicon Valley giants”.

Klein finds it distinctly uncomfortable that many of her arguments against the insidious power of corporations and Big Tech – research that she's used to great effect over the decades to skewer rapacious companies for exploiting fear in times of crisis – are being distorted and amplified by the right to attract huge numbers of followers. Wolf has jumped on this profitable bandwagon. Klein cautions against abuse of the “Other Naomi” because in the end the real threat isn't Wolf but the alliances that she's courting. Avoid smugness.

Although Wolf's proposals and theses are “essentially fantasy” – she's said the Covid-19 vaccine and its alleged connections to mass murder are comparable with the actions of “doctors in pre-Nazi Germany” – “emotionally, to the many people now listening to her, they clearly felt true”. Feelings over reason. Call it truthiness, the idea that something feels true even if it's definitely not.

What Wolf has become spectacularly good at is chasing clout. She embraces it – especially if it's from previous “enemies” on the right such as Tucker Carlson – and always searches for more. “Clout is the values-free currency of the always-online age,” says Klein. “Both a substitute for hard cash as well as a conduit to it.” Clout is a never-ending renewable resource and the more people exist on multiple online platforms, the more it grows.

The strength of *Doppelgänger* is that it leaves us uncomfortable. Klein is correct when she writes that the millions of people who

embrace “fantasy” view the rest of us as living in a “clown world”, stuck in “groupthink”. There's little middle ground between the two warring parties. But – and this is just one example among many – it's reasonable to ask why there was so much pushback on the left to the idea that Covid-19 was born in a Wuhan lab and not a wet market. To this day, we still don't know with certainty if the “lab leak” theory is completely bogus or has a skerrick of truth. Banning discussion on social media pushed many sceptics into the arms of Wolf, Bannon and the many others selling their illusion of challenging “tyranny”.

The challenge for those who don't subscribe to these wild messages is that, as Klein powerfully details, “however untethered from reality, [Wolf's ideas] tap into something true”. Klein issues a call to arms in this book, a brilliantly incisive and unsettling work that reflects the urgency that our times demand. With far-right populism on the march, from Israel to India to Hungary to the United States, it's clear that the left needs new tools to fight and resist. This is an essential guide. ●

*Allen Lane, pp352, \$36.99*