

Whose archive is it? Confession, class, and the collapse of narrative control in Bella Mackie's *How to Kill Your Family*

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Abstract: Crime fiction, particularly contemporary crime fiction, has seen a notable increase in revenge stories told from the perspective of female perpetrators. While Bella Mackie's *How to Kill Your Family* (2021) is often read as a satirical commentary on class with a feminist-anger component, the book's prison-confession format has received little academic attention. This article examines the novel's first-person reflective manuscript using the intersecting theories of narrative archaeology and the implicated subject. It argues that the text consciously stages the collapse of the confessional form rather than achieving restorative closure. Drawing on the theories of the implicated subject and narrative archaeology, the analysis demonstrates how the text initially recruits the reader as a willing co-excavator of the protagonist's repressed history. However, opportunistic characters systematically dismantle this illusion of narrative mastery when they photograph and seize the confessional manuscript, transforming a private tool of intended vindication into a mechanism of ongoing blackmail. By tracing this trajectory from seductive confession to weaponized text, the article highlights the profound limits of authorial power in contemporary crime fiction. Ultimately, this formal subversion challenges the restorative fantasies of both feminist revenge narratives and the broader true crime genre, revealing how archival authority is easily co-opted by the very structures of class privilege it originally sought to expose. The archive the protagonist constructs to justify her retribution and secure her legacy is intercepted and weaponized by external agents. This structural reversal denies the narrator authorial control, leaving both protagonist and reader entangled in an unresolved field of class-based complicity.

Keywords: *crime fiction; confession framework; narrative archaeology; class satire; revenge fiction; restorative closure; Bella Mackie, How to Kill Your Family.*



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Introduction

Recent years have seen a marked rise in crime narratives centred on female perpetrators who enact calculated revenge. These works have drawn attention from scholars and readers alike because they can challenge traditionally gendered expectations of violence and victimhood (Anjaria 155; Jacques 34; Reitz 3). The interest in such stories is reflected in the reception of works by writers such as Sara Brent and Asuka Yuzuki, as well as the popularity of TV shows like *Killing Eve*. Grounding this shift in contemporary literature, Keya Anjaria offers a key analytical lens by framing these texts as part of a global subgenre that mobilizes “new conventions and aesthetics to establish a feminist perspective” (155) through female-led murder narratives. Within this expanding corpus, Bella Mackie’s *How to Kill Your Family* (2021) is widely considered one of the genre’s most paradigmatic examples.

Bella Mackie’s *How to Kill Your Family* (2021) follows Grace Bernard, a young woman who systematically kills off her estranged, but ultra-wealthy, biological family, the Artemises, to avenge the poverty and early death of her mother, Marie. Most of the narrative is a retrospective prison confession by Grace, who is imprisoned in Limehouse for a crime she did not commit. The narrative is built as a detailed account by Grace of each individual act of retribution she carried out against her grandparents Jeremy and Kathleen, her uncle Lee, her stepmother Janine, and her half-sister Bryony. Throughout this process, Grace attempts to create a legacy of justified vengeance. However, her attempt to build a narrative legacy is undermined by her previously unknown half-brother Harry, who discovers Grace’s manuscript through her cellmate, Kelly, and uses it to strengthen his claim to his grandmother’s estate. Harry uses the manuscript to silence Grace while also revealing the pervasiveness of class-based privilege and informal social coercion as part of a larger reversal, anchored in two separate relationships. Harry is not one of the Artemis relatives Grace targets, but Simon’s son by a different mother, making the two half-siblings through their shared father; his leverage over Grace stems from his own quiet advancement within the family’s wealth after Simon’s death. Jeremy, whose death opens Grace’s cycle of killings, is himself a study in manufactured pedigree: born into poverty in Bethnal Green, he purchases the trappings of old money, the Regency Club tie Grace later takes from his wrecked car, that the text treats not as evidence of inherited privilege but of its performance.

Existing discussions of the text have primarily centred on its function as an exercise in class satire, an outlet for unchecked female rage, and a form of black humour (Arlidge n.pg; McDonald n.pg). Grace Bernard, the protagonist, has generally been viewed as an anti-heroine whose systematic killing of her ultra-wealthy family members serves as a cathartic destruction of their entitlements based on birthright. However, scholars have placed far less focus on the formal nature of the prison-confession framework in which the narrative is grounded.

This article argues that the novel’s first-person prison confession consciously excavates a private, class-specific past and draws the reader into complicity through its wit and control. Ultimately, however, the text represents the failure of this very confession. It does not restore moral order or grant the narrator long-term control over her

own story. The document Grace writes to secure her legacy becomes the precise instrument used against her when her half-brother Harry intercepts the manuscript via her cellmate, Kelly. This structural reversal undermines both the traditional restorative aspects of crime fiction and the empowerment fantasies that define much of the feminist revenge narrative. The result is a profoundly unsettling exploration of readerly implication, and the ultimate limits of authorial power.

In pursuing this reading, the article builds upon and extends several intersecting areas of contemporary literary scholarship. It draws on Michael Rothberg's concept of the implicated subject to analyze how Grace's narrative positions Grace and the reader within structures of class violence and the erasure of historical memory. Additionally, the article utilizes Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narrative archaeology to view the confession as an act of uncovering a family's repressed history. The article combines these concepts with broader critiques of restorative closure in crime fiction to show that the novel's real innovation lies not in the presence of a female perpetrator, but in how it formally represents the collapse of the confessional form. The article proceeds in three stages. The first section establishes the theoretical framework. The second examines the seductive, archaeological work of the confessional voice. The third analyses how that same confession is intercepted and turned against its author, exposing the limits of both revenge and narrative control.

Implicated subjects, narrative archaeology, and confessional narrative

Michael Rothberg outlines the concept of the implicated subject to describe forms of historical and structural accountability that fall outside the binary categories of victim and perpetrator. Rothberg refers to implicated subjects as individuals who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator" (Rothberg, "The Implicated Subject" 1). In the context of contemporary critical debates surrounding responsibility and affect, Rothberg et al. extend this idea and observe that attending to what it means to feel implicated is thus a "necessary component of understanding the political debates of the present and of forging new visions of solidarity" ("Feeling implicated" 266).

Rothberg's model has expanded significantly across cultural studies, psychology, and media studies to examine how individuals become complex, indirect participants in structural harm (Bellin 406; McKiernan 74; Oumalal 792). This concept has been applied particularly in literary criticism and popular fiction to explore how class violence and structural privilege exist outside personal guilt (Noji 21; Prade-Weiss 42). In Mackie's novel, this dynamic takes a specific form: the reader is placed in the position of both receiving information and participating in the text's retaliation, based on the privilege inherent in Grace's narrative voice.

This affective recruitment operates through what Tzvetan Todorov calls the dual architecture of detective fiction. As Todorov explains, every traditional whodunit

contains two narratives: one about committing the crime, and the other about investigating it (44). The classic investigation functions as an excavation, a narrative archaeology wherein the detective uncovers a pre-narrated, hidden past to reconstruct the primary crime (Leitch 157). Scholars tracing the genre's evolution note that this archaeological structure often establishes spatial, temporal, and social coherence from initial disorder (Segal 153; Brooks 5). In recent reconfigurations of crime narrative, this archaeological impulse inverts: the traditional external investigator is replaced by the perpetrator, who writes her own retrospective archive (Anjaria 156; Scaggs 55). The textual space of the investigation becomes an act of self-excavation, transforming the confession into a deliberate archive of private, class-inflected retribution (Pepper 402).

The psychological instability of this self-archiving perpetrator links the narrative to Catherine Spooner's work on Gothic crime fiction and unstable protagonists (38). Here, Gothic is invoked in a formal rather than iconographic sense, not through the genre's traditional apparatus of ruined estates or the supernatural, but through its structuring logic: a narrator who writes to master a traumatic past and finds that mastery permanently out of reach. Spooner argues that the contemporary Gothic crime narrative frequently features traumatized, morally fragmented "unreliable or inarticulate" (38) figures whose attempts to master their past through narrative control remain perpetually unstable.

Spooner's narrative mastery refers to exactly what Gothic crime narratives using the confessional mode offer and withhold. The confessing subject writes to establish the past as a fixed, retrospectively ordered series of events, turning random, unstructured experience into a recorded, organized archive over which the subject has ultimate authority. Spooner's subjects create their own forms of control by using writing to capture their experiences, making writing a type of control analogous to, or supplementary to, control obtained through violence. However, the genre offers no closure to the closure it sets up: the written documentation that would ultimately resolve issues from the past only highlights how little any one person could resolve, no matter how detailed their documentation. The structure of Grace's notebook demonstrates this very clearly. When Grace's notebook is read, the reader views it as a confession of actions she took prior to completing them, but it can also be seen as an obvious attempt at creating future authority, a document that Grace hopes someone will discover sometime in the future, read it on her terms, and accept. The novel's continued focus on this potential future moment, when reading will vindicate Grace, is itself unstable because it defers the hope for mastery to an unknown moment of discovery that the plot will never allow to occur. Instead, that moment of discovery happens for Harry and Kelly, not for Grace.

This instability intersects directly with critical inquiries into whether engagement with a violent past yields restorative resolution or radical confrontation (Plain 6; Rzepka and Horsley 192). As studies in Gothic crime demonstrate, the return of the repressed past consistently undermines the protagonist's illusion of narrative mastery (Ascari 62; Giza 123; Laredo 5). The formal conflict between these two patterns reflects the broader moral ambiguity of reading crime fiction. In this regard, W.H. Auden also argues that detective fiction readers seek a fantasy of guilt relieved and order restored (406).

This study uses the three frameworks to demonstrate that *How to Kill Your Family* uses the confessional format not to provide restorative justice or ideological closure, but rather to show its complete breakdown. External actors intercept and use the written archive the perpetrator constructed to assert absolute control over her past, revealing the limits of narratorial control and placing both the protagonist and reader in an unstable state of structural implication. Rather than existing as separate lenses applied sequentially, the three frameworks converge on a singular formal issue. Rothberg offers a structural account of why the reader remains bound to Grace's project despite its violence, positioning the reader as a beneficiary of the same class antagonism the confession exposes. Todorov supplies the architecture that makes the confession legible as an investigation in the first place, one narrated by the perpetrator rather than reconstructed after her. Spooner supplies the account of why that architecture cannot deliver the mastery it promises, since the Gothic confessional mode installs its own instability into any narrator who writes to fix the past into permanent form. The three positions outline a single course: recruitment into complicity, the creation of an archive that claims authority over suppressed history, and the collapse of that authority once the archive escapes its creator's control. The analysis below traces this course through the novel's two movements.

The seductive archive: confession as narrative archaeology and readerly implication

Bella Mackie's *How to Kill Your Family* (2021) opens with a formal provocation that reorients the reader's relationship to the crime fiction genre. In the prologue of the novel, the author employs a double-narrative structure, where Grace Bernard, the protagonist, documents the murders she has committed from a cell at Limehouse Prison. Grace states at the beginning of the text that she has "killed several people (some brutally, others calmly)" (9) and proceeds to inform the reader that she is imprisoned for a murder that she did not commit. Grace, however, uses her imprisonment to document the crimes she actually committed. While Grace creates these documents to provide evidence of her crimes, she also intends to establish a historical record of them. She notes that, if known, the crimes she orchestrated "if known about, would ensure that I was remembered for decades" (9). Therefore, Grace's documentation serves as an archaeological recovery of the ultra-wealthy Artemis family's systemically violent practices, intentionally omitted from both legal and social archives. By placing the reader in a position to collaborate with a perpetrator who regards her acts of violence as a moral duty, Mackie disrupts the traditional restorative function of crime fiction. It invites the reader into a complicit relationship with a perpetrator who views her violence as a moral imperative.

The seductive quality of this confessional voice is central to its ability to recruit the reader into Grace's moral framework. Grace writes with sharp, cynical wit to convey her profound disdain for the upper classes. This rhetorical strategy aligns the reader's perspective with her class resentment. She recruits readers through a shared loathing of the "diamanté class" (19). She describes Kathleen's beauty treatments as producing "a slightly startled look which [...] makes her look demented," and she also describes

Kathleen's stiff hairdo and "obscenely large Chanel bag" (18). When the table orders steak and French fries without looking at the menu, Grace has no doubt this shows a class that is "never straying into foreign territory, never doing anything different, being small, turning nasty" (19). These elements do not decorate the scene; they provide the materials for the archive Grace is building. The reader is invited to assist in the forensic detail and therefore participate in this labour.

This labour also digs up the family's systematic efforts to rewrite history. Through Helene's memory, we see that Jeremy and Kathleen knew of Grace's existence from birth. They receive Simon's confession, spend hours persuading Simon that Marie had acted solely because she wanted money, and subsequently force Helene away with threats of lawyers and becoming homeless. Jeremy tells Simon that his relationship with Marie is just a "foolish mistake, as many young men do" (16), while Kathleen accuses Marie of attempting to ruin her son for money. The violence's structural basis lies in this active enforcement of erasure. The family does not simply refuse to support her; instead, it employs both legal threats and social dominance to demand non-existence. Jeremy warns Helene that they would have "lawyers on you so fast you'll be fucking homeless before you've seen us in court" (16-17).

Grace's planning stage represents a deliberate counter-narrowing of her life space. All aspects of her life (agency, capital and focus) are channelled into executing one single plan. Once she arrives in Spain, she deliberately utilizes the unwanted interest of Amir, a nightclub owner whose aesthetic of stretched shirts, Gucci pool shoes, and raw excess epitomises a particular vulgarity of new money, to obtain access to a vehicle suitable for intentionally forcing the car off the side of the road. The accident on the winding Spanish road marks the first point in which confession operates as narrative archaeology. Following the crash, Grace crawls down the embankment to find Kathleen dead and then climbs inside the mangled vehicle to speak directly to Jeremy. She says:

Kathleen is dead, Jeremy, I'm so sorry. I don't think you're going to make it either, but you're not alone. Do you recognise me? I'm Grace, your granddaughter. Simon's daughter [...] You didn't want me anywhere near your family [...] And so now you have to go, I'm afraid. Not for me, you see, but for my mother. Family first, I know you understand that. Oh, and it's not just you and your wife, Jeremy. That's the really good bit [...] I'm going to kill your whole family. (24)

Before setting fire to their car, she picks up Jeremy's Regency Club tie, something she bought to give the illusion that Jeremy was born into upper-class status when he was not. This becomes an item included in the archive she is creating of her family history and serves as a tangible representation of the social performance the family maintains at the expense of her mother's life and her own. The narrative repeatedly jumps between these completed acts of violence and the childhood archive that predated them. In a small studio flat in Holloway, directly above a chicken shop, Grace's early years with Marie are shaped by extreme hardship. At thirteen, Grace begins searching Helene's apartment and finds a box labeled "Grace/Simon." Inside the box are newspaper clippings documenting Simon's growing business empire, alongside photographs in which women appear

increasingly marginalized as Simon continues to smile for the camera. The majority of the archive consists of letters written to one another. Marie writes to Simon from a hospital bed, detailing how she is going to die due to untreated cancer and asks him to please care for their daughter. She further assures him that she does not expect or want anything financially. Simon responds with a typed letter including a cold check for five thousand dollars and makes clear the absolute logic behind the family's self-preservation:

Marie, thank you for your letter. I am sorry to hear that you are ill, but what you suggest is impossible. As I have told you many times before, your decision to have your child was yours alone. You had no right to imagine that I'd risk my family and reputation for the product of a six-week fling ... Your daughter is not, nor ever will be, a part of my family. (45)

Reading this rejection transforms Grace's childhood grief into an enduring structural project. Sitting on a park bench at thirteen, feeling the physical burn of rage in her neck, she recognises that her mother's warmth had previously shielded her from the full force of the family's decision. She realizes her mother's warmth had protected her from the full force of the family's decision. Once that shield is gone, she fully claims responsibility for the debt owed. Grace's subsequent actions are depicted as a rational response to a family that used its power to deny her existence.

Through this highly structured confession, the reader is drawn into the position of fellow excavator. The prologue establishes Grace's wrongful conviction and her need to set the record straight, framing her manuscript as an alternative archive to the official one. Later episodes (her reconnaissance in Marbella, her address to the dying Jeremy on the cliffside, her childhood discovery of the family's letters) each add further documentary material to this archive of class complicity. By continuing to read, the audience becomes an active participant in the archaeological process the novel stages.

The hollow victory and the weaponised text

In the later stages of her confinement, Grace begins to recognize that the completed cycle of killings has failed to supply the restoration she once anticipated. The life she has constructed around the project is described as deliberately small, a narrowed existence organised solely around research, waiting, and execution. On her release, she writes, "the past fourteen months are about to become a strange footnote in my life story" (263). There is no feeling of triumphant closure. Rather, the narrative shows that the violence has delivered her little more than the same hollowed-out sense of loss that originally caused it. The energy that previously sustained her obsessive planning for each individual death now seems to have nowhere to go. With the project complete, a curious hollowness replaces the sense of fulfilment that the early parts of this book seemed to suggest was available.

This mid-to-late stage acknowledgement sets up the context for the formal collapse that follows. Grace's release is portrayed calmly and measuredly. As she watches the video link that reverses her conviction, her lawyer gives her a strained hug, and when she

returns to a flat cleaned while she was imprisoned, a bottle of Brunello and tiramisu await on the table. She spends two hours soaking in the bathtub and claims that, at long last, life is finally unfolding. The writing is deliberately restrained, but an obvious anticlimax surrounds this moment. While legally correct, Grace has been acquitted of a crime she didn't commit, while the six crimes she committed have gone unnoticed by the state. The asymmetry present in the Prologue is even more pronounced here. The justice system has corrected one error while ignoring the broader history she spent the entire narrative constructing.

A structural reversal occurs when Grace receives a letter from Harry detailing how he completed the last task she could not. He kills Simon Artemis on his yacht off the French coast. Harry details the events leading to Simon's death in a detached manner. After spending a day drinking cocaine, whiskey, and growing increasingly paranoid, Simon insists on taking the speedboat out into the dark. Harry smashes a bottle of Chablis over his father's head. His dad struggles in the water, and Harry tears his dad's fingers loose from the side of the boat. Harry states, "I bent down towards him and pried his fingers off the side of the boat, before giving him a tiny push so that he bobbed away a few inches" (266). He waits three minutes, and Simon eventually sinks below the surface. The action feels both impulsive and predictable, shaped by years of anger and the immediate awareness that pulling Simon back onto the boat would forever tie Harry to him. Harry portrays the killing as completing Grace's unfinished business. He says, "I thought it might help you feel less of a failure to know that I took on the mantle and finished off what you started. In a funny old way, we were a team" (267).

Crucially, Harry reveals that he has intercepted the confession itself. While Grace is still at Limehouse prison, he identifies her cellmate, Kelly, to take pictures of each page of the notebook. Harry also arranges to have the notebook scanned and to take fingerprints. The document Grace frames as a private archive and potential future bestseller is thereby converted into blackmail material. Harry writes a letter to Grace, and at the end of the letter Harry writes that Kelly has been well paid and will not bother Grace again. However, Kelly's note undermines that promise: "Hey roomie! It's Kel. Hope the outside world is treating you well. Call me, there's things we need to discuss. Don't even think about ignoring this, I know where u live, LOL" (270).

Kelly's involvement in the loop does more than serve as a plot device. For nearly the first half of the confession, Grace describes her cellmate as socially and economically beneath her, a woman who spends most of her time whispering on the phone and tapping her fingernails. Just like the two-bit psychologists and Twitter trolls Grace writes off as people outside the prison walls, Grace reduces Kelly to the same type of mindless background characters. That portrayal represents a quieter form of class dismissal that Grace directs at the Artemis family while claiming solidarity with the marginalized and silenced. Kelly's actions demonstrate the limits of that claimed solidarity. By working for Harry to photograph the notebook, Kelly doesn't merely turn Grace in to a wealthier employer; instead, she exploits her subordinate status as Grace's cellmate to gain power over the account, reducing Grace to background static. As per Rothberg's model, Kelly occupies a position similar to Grace's: she benefits from a system of confinement and surveillance designed by others, but asserts agency within that system that Grace's

narrative denied her. This article contends that the confession, which recruits the reader as a fellow excavator of Grace's suffering, does not extend the same narrative generosity to the woman in the next bunk, and that this unexamined asymmetry returns, in the novel's final movement, as the instrument of Grace's containment.

The formal consequences of this revelation are critical. The first-person narrative that has provided the reader access to events is revealed to have been breached from inside. What appeared to be authorial mastery, the careful construction of an alternative archive that would outlast the official record, appears to have already been captured and used by a third party as a tool of coercion. Kelly's note further diminishes narrative authority. The confessional document that recruited the reader into co-excavation of Grace's experiences is now used for ongoing blackmail. Harry controls the text and, therefore, the story of the violence. The notebook, which began as an exercise in narrative archaeology, ends as physical evidence held by another entity.

Harry's letter also alters the social dynamics of the classes that had governed the previous sections. While Grace's killings were primarily fuelled by an extensive history of being erased and having her inheritance refused, Harry's actions are predicated upon both personal safety and opportunistic benefit. He has already received a large sum of money from Simon, and Lara has appointed him CFO of a new foundation to oversee the family wealth. The letter clearly indicates that Harry will do his best to preserve his recently acquired status. Harry's language is cordial to the point of brotherly; however, the framework of the letter is one of control. Grace is allowed to pursue her own existence as long as she recognizes that the archive she created has been used against her. The past has been uncovered, but only through another person's tool (the excavator). Therefore, the novel's final section represents a second type of implication. The reader, encouraged to join Grace in her forensic examination of events and to help recover Grace's letters, photographs, and documented histories of violence perpetrated by those in positions of power, now witnesses how these historical artifacts are being dominated.

Conclusion

How to Kill Your Family derives its critical power from the collapse of the confessional format. Grace Bernard creates her notebook as a new form of narrative archaeology, seeking an alternate historical record that challenges official silence and creates posthumous space. That record is photographed, fingerprinted, and used as leverage. The archive's authors turn against its creators. Because a confession intended for discovery can be obtained and then redeployed, the typical narrative format that uses confession as a means toward some kind of agency or moral redemption is removed from its traditional context. The same format traditionally used to master the past can also be used by the very informal economic and opportunity systems it was originally developed to document.

The two parts of the novel function as one continuous process. An early part of the book trains readers' eyes on class details: Kathleen's Chanel handbag; the steak-and-fries meal that signals they belong to a socially closed community; the Regency club tie ripped from the mangled wreckage of Harry's car. Those details enlist the reader as a co-

excavator of the destruction the Artemis family inflicted on Marie and her daughter. Harry would use the exact same materials as evidence. Letters contained in a box labelled “Grace/Simon”; memories of the Holloway flat; and the catalogue of all killings would be the images Kelly photographs. The forensic attention (which initially placed the reader as a privileged witness) is transformed into constraint. What began as complicity, based on the joint examination of systemic violence, becomes constrained by the seizure of the resulting archive.

This process speaks to broader concerns about representations of crime, the return of the past, and the limits of ordering narratives. The reader who follows Grace’s excavation is caught between structural and emotional entrapment. While the reader is attracted to the novel due to its humour and moral clarity, they remain embedded in the attention that generates the document that is later used against Grace. The past comes back. It produces neither restorative justice nor a stable source of empowerment. Control remains in place because the class structures the novel has dissected throughout maintain it.

The final pages leave the notebook and its copies in motion. Kelly’s note, which reads, “Don’t even think about ignoring this, I know where u live”, extends surveillance past the prison and into the present tense of reading. In a culture saturated with true crime recovery, where confessions and recovered documents continually reframe violence for public use, the novel asks what occurs when the anti-heroine’s voice slips from her grasp. Grace’s narration is shadowed throughout by the conventions it disdains, the Channel 5 documentary that gets her star sign wrong, the imagined future reader who discovers her notebook in an old safe, the assumption that a sufficiently compelling first-person account can outrun official misrecognition. These are the familiar props of true crime consumption, the recovered diary, the leaked confession, the posthumous manuscript positioned as more truthful than any courtroom record, and Grace deploys them knowingly, confident that authorship of her own story guarantees authority over how it circulates. The novel withholds that guarantee. Where true crime narrative typically resolves the tension between private confession and public consumption by granting the confessor eventual vindication, however belated, *How to Kill Your Family* lets the document escape its author entirely, photographed, fingerprinted, and repurposed by exactly the informal, opportunistic networks the novel has spent its length exposing. The answer lies in the photographed pages, where an archive once meant for recognition ultimately enforces silence.

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