

THE AGE

FILM

OFF THE SHELF

OWEN RICHARDSON

WOLF CREEK

Sonya Hartnett

Currency Press, \$16.95

AFTER a short but highly pertinent autobiographical preamble, Sonya Hartnett provides a detailed, sequence-by-sequence description of Greg McLean's extraordinary film, one of the best Australian films in recent years, about two English women backpackers and their male Australian friend who fall into the hands of outback Mick, the sniggering ocker psychopath. Interspersed with Hartnett's account are passages about the crimes that inspired it: the Peter Falconio murder and the Belanglo State Forest serial killings.

Hartnett's close-up treatment has to leave out some of the usual film-critical context-laying but this is more than made up for by her powerful and sensitive response and the way her gifts as a prose writer recall the experience of seeing the film: it's as if you were watching it with her. She is strong on the gender politics of the film (nice but weak and ultimately useless Ben compared with powerful, vicious Mick) and good at noting the fault lines of how what often seems like a naturalistic film based on real-life horrors turns at key points into a genre piece.

The two forms don't sit together easily: these credibly drawn and — alas — likeable characters suddenly have to start behaving like people in a horror movie and the distasteful way the film's pretence that it deals with real events can only trivialise the sufferings of the victims of Bradley John Murdoch and Ivan Milat. (No one would accuse *Snowtown* of being mere entertainment.) But in the end Hartnett comes out for the propriety of using these stories: they have become part of the Australian legend of the lost children.