

BAD: AAC An Unusual Pathway to Publication – Rae Cairns debut ‘The Good Mother’

SPEAKERS

Suzanne Leal, Catherine Du Peloux Menage, Rae Cairns, Andy Muir, Sue Turnbull

Suzanne Leal 00:05

Welcome to our podcast Bad: All About Crime brought to you by Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. I'm Suzanne Leal.

Andy Muir 00:13

And I'm Andy Muir. And each month we'll be exploring the big questions in crime and crime writing, subscribe to our podcast, then jump onto the Bad: All About Crime book club page on Facebook, to be part of the conversation. And thanks for listening. And welcome to the Bad: All About Crime podcast brought to you by the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. My name is Andy Muir. And joining me later in the episode talking about today's book are Suzanne Leal, Dr. Sue Turnbull, and Catherine du Peloux Menage. But today's episode, we're talking about the new debut "The Good Mother" written by Rae Cairns. The novel is set in Northern Ireland, where an Australian mother finds herself fighting with her past to save her family. But that's not the only story we'll be talking about, because the book has had possibly one of the most curious pathways to publication I've heard about. So to get things started, welcome, Rae.

Rae Cairns 01:04

Thanks for having me along.

Andy Muir 01:05

Now, the book is about to come out. It's getting some incredible sort of feedback on social media, you've got a pretty active Instagram following. How hard have you worked to kind of build that?

Rae Cairns 01:17

I think I've done it kind of organically but it was important to me to connect with people in the industry and connect with readers. And yeah, it's just kind of happened over the last three, four years I guess.

Andy Muir 01:33

Because it's sort of the crime writing community is quite supportive. Isn't it?

Rae Cairns 01:37

Amazing, the crime writing community have really taken me under their wing and had my back from the very beginning actually. I've been really lucky. It's been, I think I figured it out the other day, it's been eight years in total from the very beginning and I've been incredibly fortunate,

Andy Muir 01:56

Which is kind of that's the really interesting part about this story. I mean, we will talk about the book itself. But you know, getting it published, is really fascinating because you were nominated for Best Debut at the Ned Kelly awards in 2021 but the book wasn't traditionally published.

Rae Cairns 02:15

No, no, I didn't even know that could happen, a self published book could get to the shortlist of those awards.

Andy Muir 02:23

So let's talk about that. So how did that happen?

Rae Cairns 02:25

Okay. The Ned Kelly or going way back?

Andy Muir 02:29

Going way back, when was the first idea of I want to write a book, I want to write a crime book and this is going to be the story.

Rae Cairns 02:36

Okay. Well, the idea for the book was sparked way back when I worked in Northern Ireland during the troubles, I was mentoring disadvantaged youth there, and they were kind of kids of the paramilitaries, the IRA, the UVF, and stuff. And I was dating a guy, and I found out totally by accident one night that he himself was a paramilitary, the very people I was working against. So of course, I broke it off and cut all ties and moved forward in my work and stayed another year. That kind of stayed with me, particularly when I got home and was processing all that had happened. That kind of what if? what, he hadn't told me someone else had mentioned it in passing, assuming I knew, I thought when would he have told me? when would I have found this out? And then there was also that was it a real relationship? Because I was dealing with both sides in the conflict I started to wonder whether he, there was an ulterior motive? I just couldn't make sense of the whole thing. So that idea stayed with me for many years, and I've always been a creative, I've got a degree in performing arts, storytelling has always been important to me. And then when my daughter went off to high school, I decided that I wanted to have a go at putting this idea on the page. And it kind of merged with the idea, that thing, being a mother and saying, you know, I'll do anything to protect my children. And those two ideas came together. And I went along to the Sydney Writers Festival and I did a one day course with Mark Lamprell. And in the in that course, I got to pitch my story idea. And he just said he loved it. Go away write it. I'd love to read it when you're finished. So I did. I spent eight months writing it giving it a go doing your first draft, I can't believe I handed him that draft at the end of 8 months now! What I didn't know back then. And he said to me, you've nailed the story. You've got the characters, your dialogues pretty solid. But you need craft, you need more craft. So I did a year long mentorship with Katherine Heyman. And she put me through my paces and it was an incredible experience and I'm very grateful to her, I learned a lot from her. She taught me about place and setting and digging in and being brave with my choices about character and plot and really exploring options. So we did 10,000 words at a time.

And each 10,000 words, I had to apply what she taught me the last time. And a year later, I had the manuscript, and that I pitched to an agent, and she took me on. And it was all very exciting and amazing. And she put it out to publishers, and there was crickets. And that was my first real reality check. You know, it was, everything had been positive to that point. And she wasn't sure what to do with the manuscript. At that point, I was pretty confident that it needed more work. And so we amicably parted ways. I took the manuscript back, and I put it in for manuscript appraisal, and apply the changes that were suggested there. And from that, I got a new agent. And she then pitched it to publishers. And this time, there was some bites and some interest, but it didn't get over the line. And then I got sick. So I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and I was really ill for two years they, I was in and out of doctors and specialists and hospitals, and my hair fell out. I was wearing a wig and I couldn't string a sentence together to speak, let alone write one. So for two years, writing went on the backburner. Then I found the right medication and came good, and was ready to jump back in. And then my agent said, I'm closing my agency for personal reasons. And at that point, I went, wow, is the universe trying to tell me something here? And I spoke to my writing group, who are an incredible supportive group of women, and a couple of other professionals that I'd met throughout the years, again, in the crime writing community, very supportive. And I made the decision to back myself, and to, I wanted of the story out there, I wanted to draw a line under it, I felt like so much had gone into the story. I wanted to put it out, so I can move on to my next one. So then I set off on the path learning about publishing. Wow, there's a lot involved. So I had kind of two hats. I had my writing hat. And then I had my publisher hat. And I had to learn everything from the ground up, I found a professional editor to edit the book, I found a professional cover designer, but obviously, I had to do the briefing, I had to learn about formatting and bisat codes and categories, and publicity and marketing and everything. So I spent that was, I started in February, and I published the book in December, and was very fortunate to get the backing of Melissa Doyle, who sent it to a couple of people. And from that I got a Sunday Telegraph interview, which for self published author was amazing.

Andy Muir 08:20

It's really interesting, because people don't realise, you know, the amount of work that actually goes into not only writing a book, but then actually getting it to market. So when you're self publishing, you don't actually have the publisher, doing all that work for you. You are actually doing every single bit you are and there's only 24 hours in a day, right? And you've got everything else that you got in life.

08:40

And I only have like it's not it's a such specialist knowledge and even loading files up and yeah, so each day was a huge learning curve. But I do love that, that's something I thrive on. I like to learn, I like to improve so that that was enjoyable at a level for me. In the January, so I released it in December and then in the February, Bolinda publishing Bolinda audio publishing, reached out to me, read the book and offered me an audio book contract, which was incredible. A sight impaired woman had contacted them and said she really wanted to hear it to listen to the book. She was trying to read on braille and she just wanted to listen. So yeah, that was amazing because then all of a sudden, I was a hybrid author. I had the ebook and print rights and was dealing with those but Bolinda, were doing the audio book rights and that came out in June. And it did really well. I was really pleased with that. And then in July out of well, it was a real surprise to me, in fact, a friend rang me and said "congratulations, it's amazing. You've been shortlisted for the best debut Ned Kelly" and I went, "no I haven't. You might have it wrong." And I brought up social media and found it. My life changed in three weeks. So I went from being on my own, essentially managing a company, you know, all the different aspects of it and different hat wearing different hats to having a team behind me. I think I've got the two weeks after the

Ned Kelly's I got an agent. Jeanne Ryckmans at Cameron's management and she was incredible. And then a week later I had was offered the two book contract with HarperCollins. And all of a sudden, I had a team of these amazing industry professionals behind me. I had an editorial team, I had a design team, you know, they ran with a cover. And yeah, it's been an extraordinary experience, kind of doing it again. The editing process was really in depth, you know, we finished the novel, I had my acquiring editor, do an edit with me. And then I had an in house editor, do an edit and I had the proofreader to do an edit. So I have no idea what version we're up to with this book. But each time it's improved, and the people that have added to it have definitely improved the book along the way.

Andy Muir 11:15

Do you think that having gone through the the self publishing process, and then the traditional publishing, do you think that you learnt more going that way than the traditional path where it's all sort of you had the team from day one,

Rae Cairns 11:28

I think I learned to respect each element of, of the process. And therefore in dealing with say, my publicity rep at at HarperCollins, I understand that I have to contribute to that. And I, it's as much what I'm prepared to put in. And it was the same with the cover design or the blurb like I've just kind of kept saying to them, tell me what you want. I'll do it. I'm there. I want to make this a success. I want to get it out to as broad a readership as possible. And, and I do, I, it's always been about making the book better. From the very beginning, from eight years ago, every step of the process has been about learning and getting better.

Andy Muir 12:10

So in that process, I'm guessing that when the new publisher came on board, as you said, you had a couple more edits that you went through? Was that tightening the manuscript? Was it expanding certain parts? What were they?

Rae Cairns 12:29

I cut 5000 words,

Andy Muir 12:32

What was the original max?

Rae Cairns 12:34

Ah 84000. And then I added 10,000. After that, and there are new scenes, I really expanded on a couple of the characters drawing the minor characters drawing them out. In fact, that's happened throughout the process, like I started off very much with the main characters. And each step of the way, like Max, the father, Max has really come along a lot more. He's got a lot more scenes and, and exploring that relationship has deepened the novel a bit, I think. But so yeah, it was finessing the writing. But it was also just adding more scenes. I was surprised at the depth of the edit that I did with Harper Collins. But I'm really pleased with it. Yeah.

Andy Muir 13:16

Is there anything that you had to lose that you kind of go? Oh, I really wish that was still in there?

Rae Cairns 13:22

No, but I think part of that is respecting the expertise of the people I was dealing with. Ultimately, I'm a debut novelist. I'm still learning. I'm still growing. And I trust the people that are around me.

Andy Muir 13:40

Yeah. So just in terms of editing, it's sometimes it's really hard to self edit. And so when you're kind of publishing yourself, like how different was the process, from doing it on your own, to then having an editor kind of giving you your notes, expecting you to contribute? What was that engagement like?

Rae Cairns 14:01

I think Katherine Heyman really set me up well for that, because when we did the 10,000 words at a time, she gave me very extensive, very, very tough notes. And the first say, 20,000 was about me learning not to be resistant to the notes and resistant to the editing process and say, Okay, so there's a problem here. If you're raising a problem, I need to solve that. That's my job as the writer not to argue back with you all, "yes but so and so you know, did this in their past" but ig the reader doesn't know that, they don't know it. Yeah. So I think Katherine gave me that. That was um really taught me that and then I learned to really grab on to any editorial notes. My writing group's also quite tough. So they would pull me up, we read each other's work, and they would say, "Oh, I don't know what you're saying there or this character, I don't understand why they're doing that" or so there's that, again, I've had so many people generously contribute their knowledge to my growth that helped me grow as a writer, from Mark Lamprell, to Katherine, to my writing group to various people that have read it since crime writers and, and other authors. So when I came to Harper Collins, yes, it was hard but in a really good way, I don't know, I kind of learned to embrace that. I think as a writer, I think you have to embrace that otherwise, I suppose. I suppose it's the thing a lot of people think about self publishing is that it's about your ego, and you can go away and just you can put whatever you want out there and I'm sure there are people do that but there's a lot of people who work really, really hard at it. And for whatever reason don't initially get into traditional publishing, whether it's the quality of the work, which I think was definitely the case with me, certainly on my first go round, or whether it's just not the time for that novel, or Yeah. Well, we probably should talk more about the novel itself as we go, as much as I love talking about writing and the process, you know, the readers out there are interested more in the story, and the characters. So, you know, we have a kind of tradition with Australian crime writing of an investigative character, for whatever reason, going back to their, often a small country town that they grew up in, where there's a problem that they need to solve before they can move on with their lives. But this is kind of slightly different because it's the same pattern, same sort of story mechanics, but your character is going to Northern Ireland, and I wondered if you could just sort of maybe give us a small kind of overview of who your main character ,Sarah Calhoun, is? Okay. Well, Sarah is a divorced Australian soccer mom of three, but she's keeping secrets, serious, scary secrets, from everyone that she loves. She's an everyday person, she has no particular skills in fighting. Those that use guns or, you know, fighting paramilitaries or anything, what she has is her love and commitment to her family. And she will do anything to protect her family.

Andy Muir 17:32

And that's a really big part of this story isn't like this is a story about a mother. And I mean, as the kind of blurb says it's, you know, what would a mother do to protect her son? And that's a really strong point of difference between a lot of other sort of crime novel is that sort of family element, that sort of Mother...

17:49

I think, the idea of an everyday person being thrown into extraordinary circumstances. That's what I like to write, I really want to understand how and explore kind of how they will manage a situation that they're well in over their head. And how far will they go? And what will they do? And how will they draw on whatever skills they do have? It's that, it's that, that interests me, I'm interested in the character, the people and what they're going to have to face about themselves to succeed.

Andy Muir 18:25

Are you interested in exploring, you know, the motivations or pushing that character to the limit the extreme?

18:33

That was my whole thing with her, was throwing her in more and more difficult situations, make it worse, make it worse, make it worse, because ultimately, if you hit that, that bottom, that's when you face, I don't know, that's when she has to really find out what what's at her heart what what is what is the most important thing to her and I think she also has to face that she can't control everything. I think often is an I don't know, and this is this is speaking about me, as opposed to Sarah and we are different but you know, that idea of trying to control everything in your kids lives to keep them safe was a topic of conversation a lot amongst my friends. So I did want to explore that, you know.

Andy Muir 19:16

Because it's kind of like she could very early on in the novel, she could sort of say because the the catalyst for this story is that her eldest teenager is, wins a very prestigious placement in a soccer camp, which means that he has to go to Ireland. And she resists it. But her ex husband says, no, no, it's good for him, he should go, you know, this is such a great opportunity. The story would have ended if she said, No, I'm putting my foot down. He's not going to Ireland. But she relents. And so it's kind of, it's that sort of the start of this characters growth, isn't it? Letting go?

Rae Cairns 19:53

It is and that idea that I think throughout the novel, she often doubts her own judgment and I think as a, I don't know if it says a woman or whatever, but I'm often questioning my own judgment and my gut instincts and I really wanted to explore that, that her instincts, you know, are they Are they solid? Or is she an unreliable narrator? Or is she, you know, how is she going to make decisions when she doesn't fully trust them? Because she's made mistakes in the past when she thought she knew what was happening.

Andy Muir 20:27

Yeah, I mean, like Ireland, in the troubles, they're like, the scars that Sarah's dealing with, that they run deep, and they're all about trust, and, you know, allegiances. And you know when when you've been betrayed, it's very hard to sort of trust again, isn't it?

Rae Cairns 20:43

It is and the thing, certainly in my experience in Northern Ireland, while I am so very grateful to the people there who let me in their homes and in their children's lives, and, and what they shared with me, it was a place where there was an ambiguity to every person that I related to, everyone was always feeling each other out, deciding what you were, and I didn't fit when I was there. I wasn't Catholic, I wasn't Protestant. I was Australian. That was my nationality. You know, that's very, very much a part of how things work. So the ambiguities over there, do mess with you a bit. When I got home, I struggled a

little bit with that about, within relationships, and just trying to figure out what people's ultimate motives were behind things. And then obviously, there's also the generational trauma, trauma over there, over years, which I also wanted to explore in the book.

Andy Muir 21:53

It's, it's, it's a fascinating history. And you know, aside from the novel with it, sort of that inability for Ireland to sort of find peace, I mean, the troubles are sort of bubbling up again,

Rae Cairns 22:07

Something I really wanted to talk about in the book or explore because I think in 1998, it was like all this, there's a peace, and the rest of the world just kind of went okay, well, you're at peace now get on with it. And you had people whose only skills were kidnappings, bomb making, gunrunning, drug running, and they were just expected to move on, I'm not sure what skills, how they could transfer those skills to normal life. So I think that the idea that they're at peace, when there's, you've kind of got people who have been taught to hate each other, and to not trust each other, and they've actually dehumanised each other and then all of a sudden, are supposed to come together as a community and work together and strive towards peace. And there are so many people over there that are doing that, and doing incredible, incredible job of that. I am talking about those who are on the fringe who have been raised in paramilitary organisations. And that was part of what I wanted to do with the boys that I have in the novel that I worked with, that Sarah worked with, and then seeing them grown up and the impact of that process on them. It's such a complex...

Andy Muir 23:22

It is complex. And I mean, as your your novel sort of touches on this as well, but the idea of people disappearing, like we sort of know through true crime, that, you know, when someone's missing, that family is never able to grieve the it's just his absence. And you so talking about a whole society of disappeared people.

Rae Cairns 23:43

Yeah, it's I mean, you've, you've got Say Nothing by Patrick Radden Keefe, and it's, you know, it, it does explore that idea of the disappeared and the impact on the family and on the children. And it's just that idea that someone can be taken. And that's it. And it was part of the way they dealt with things.

Andy Muir 24:01

So sort of getting back to your novel, did you sort of have a favorite character that you're sort of writing about, apart from Sarah,

Rae Cairns 24:09

I liked exploring the relationship with Max because I think that that was, Max is Sarah's dad but also at the same time, Sarah's relationship with Riley and how that, as he grows up, kind of how that breaks down between them. And Riley Riley is the son, the 16 year old son, sorry, he goes over to Dublin obviously, when he goes there, he grows up a lot and he is out of his mother's fairly, she's quite a bit of a helicopter mum, and he manages to move out of that control. And then for me, the boys, Liam and Declan and seeing them.

Andy Muir 24:52

McNulty, are you a fan of the wire.

Rae Cairns 24:55

I didn't enjoy The Wire yeah.

Andy Muir 24:58

What about detective Alex stone

Rae Cairns 25:00

I loved writing him. Yeah. Because he's just so dogged and determined and and he's got his own history and his own baggage and damage and and he's, at first he comes across as being very, I think clear and with good motives and so then you, start to question those a bit. hat there is there's some personal biases and personal baggage.

Andy Muir 25:30

Do you find it easier to write male characters or female?

Rae Cairns 25:34

Female is a straight up answer. But male dialogue is very different. And so I spent a lot of time watching police shows and stuff and reading because I've got a degree in performing arts so many years ago, I was an actor. And so I read a lot of scripts and and went through and male dialogue is much more truncated.

Andy Muir 25:59

It's truncated.

Rae Cairns 26:00

Yeah.

Andy Muir 26:01

You know, we talk around the edges, sort of,

Rae Cairns 26:04

Yeah. But then other times, it's very, very direct. But I enjoy trying to really work on that. That was part of what my learning was, you know, really differentiating in the dialogue, the different voice of people and, and a teenage voice versus a, you know, a man in your 60s versus I love that. I just, it really interests me. I mean, I'm the kind of person that sits there in a restaurant or cafe and just listens to people I love it.

Andy Muir 26:30

Can you write in a cafe? I've never been able to do it. It's, I get distracted.

Rae Cairns 26:33

Yeah. So I listen in a cafe and get ideas and scribe down ideas and um for dialogue, or just just listening to voices and the atmosphere but I can't actually do the writing there. No,

Andy Muir 26:47

This is about an Australian going back to Belfast, the city as a location and a character, you'd already been there, you'd spent time there 20 odd years ago, did you go back? What was the, how did you kind of recapture that city?

Rae Cairns 27:05

So I went back in 2015, took my husband back, just to kind of walk the streets again, and get a feel for what it was now versus what my memories of it were then. And then I went back again, the following year, took my kids back, because I felt like I wanted to share with them, kind of, what that was, such a big part of my life. And it was when I was there that I realised I, the city was as much a character. And it was important to draw those, those out, the place and the sense of place. And and how Yeah, it's it's come alive a lot since when, since I was there in the 90s. It has a brighter energy, can't explain it any other way. But it's um, but it still has that undercurrent the whole time that you will, you are walking past quite violent murals that people don't even notice. And there's that great, humungous, peace wall, peace wall, through the communities that's been there longer than the Berlin Wall was there. And it's big, it's tall and thick, and they still close the gates at night and and that has an impact. It separates communities. And it's telling you you're not safe with the other community. If the wall, you know, that needs closing up at night. So all of that I have really wanted to put that into the novel as much as I could. But obviously, it's also an outsider's perspective on it. And I wanted to be respectful of that, because I haven't lived their experience there and it was very important to me to be respectful of the people who have lived that.

Andy Muir 28:48

But it's, that's coming back to that, that trope, like it's really handy to have a character going back somewhere because they're learning about it at the same time as the reader, they're able to kind of ask those dumb questions, they're able to kind of make mistakes, because it's not their home. So I mean, is that sort of? Was that part of your your thinking when you're kind of plotting the book? Was it sort of you wanted to have someone go back or?

Rae Cairns 29:13

Yeah, I just I really didn't feel that I could write from the perspective of somebody that grew up there and lived, lived that trauma and and had that history. But I believed I had enough that I could do a perspective from an outsider. So yeah, there was very much about about that. Going in and, and having an outsider perspective.

Andy Muir 29:38

This story had been sort of bubbling away for a long time with you. Had you attempted to tell it in other ways before?

Rae Cairns 29:48

Do you now the first time my mother heard any of my stories about Northern Ireland was the first, when I released the self published book, and I told the stories about things that I'd seen and dealt with over there and the various paramilitary organisations, I'd worked with them, she knew I'd worked with them but the being in a riot and helping kids who had been kneecapped, and having both sides drag me to meetings to tell me their side of the story and all of that, my mum had never heard any of that, because I just didn't talk about it when I got home. I think, you know, when, I now know, when I got home, I had some level of PTSD from dealing with things. Still hate helicopters, still really, really hate the sound of helicopters,

Andy Muir 30:42

They're so evocative as well. It's always that sort of Vietnam War thing of the helicopters

Rae Cairns 30:47

Yeah, over there, like if you, when I was walking home from work, that they just hover really low above you, and then they put a spotlight on you, and then just follow up the street. And it was really confronting, I'm not doing anything.

Andy Muir 30:59

Australian flag on your back

Rae Cairns 31:01

oh believe me I've never said G'day, so many times. I think it's the only time in my life I've ever used G'day everywhere in anywhere I went. Being I like in, when I was working in Cross McGlenn I'd have a group of young kids, you know, five to 10 year olds, and, and a British patrol would come through and they kneel and they train their sights on us, just so we knew that there was a, it was a power thing and it was, but at the same time, these are the same soldiers that had to fly in by helicopter into the base, because otherwise they'd get bombed on the road. So every side had fear and and driving them.

Andy Muir 31:40

Yeah, it's amazing. I remember I went to Belfast in 96 and got off the ferry and there was a patrol walking straight towards us. Well, they weren't in, in their armor, because it was the peace talks and start so it was kind of like all, but they still had guns, it was like seeing 12 machine guns walking towards you, which was incredibly confronting. I mean, it's sort of, we just don't really understand that world at all. And this is the world that Sarah's choosing to go back into.

Rae Cairns 32:12

Well, I don't know, if she's choosing to go back into it. I think she is forced to go back into it.

Andy Muir 32:17

I don't know, could she have left Riley onto his own?

Rae Cairns 32:20

No, I don't think so.

Andy Muir 32:23

What's really interesting, because Australia actually has like really strong connections to Ireland, we kind of a lot of our historical figures have come from Irish backgrounds,

Rae Cairns 32:33

I think maybe it's the underdog kind of history, that scrappy fighter kind of thing. And also and also there is the the English versus the Irish and the long tradition of that and holding up, maybe it depends on which which view you have of who's the hero, if that makes sense. So I think there's a lot to play with there. And there's a lot of, there's a lot of history going back that is easy to explore. And, and the people are just so much fun. It's the I mean, it's it's a place that's just brimming with life in many ways.

Andy Muir 33:18

Do you think that Sarah will appear in another novel?

Rae Cairns 33:23

Not at this stage. I think her story has been told. As much as they're, she's very dear to my heart. No, I don't not not at this point.

Andy Muir 33:35

So you're working on another one?

Rae Cairns 33:37

I am. It's a standalone set in Australia. Interestingly, it's dealing with a missing person again but this time, the novel opens with a sister receiving a call. A woman receiving a call from her sister from the boot of a car.

Andy Muir 33:55

That's a very dramatic start.

Rae Cairns 33:57

Yes. Yeah. But then it goes on to the repercussions of that on the family and and how they are dealing with it. And of course, there's crime and lots of pace - thriller. I can't seem to help but not right, something quite pacy.

Andy Muir 34:14

Which is actually like this book is is quite pacy it is quite the page turner. There's so much sort of going on. It's got quite an energy to it, like it did sort of remind me a little as sort of like Lee Child and that sort of very driven main character.

Rae Cairns 34:31

Yeah, the drive I suppose the differentiating, the different point would be that Lee Child has skills and Sarah doesn't have, you know, any military skills and I think I enjoy that idea of throwing somebody a normal person into a thriller that they they having to deal with those situations but they don't have that background.

Andy Muir 34:52

What sort of Chromebooks Do you like to read?

Rae Cairns 34:56

I love Michael Robotham. ah Sarah Bailey. Oh, all the Australians about the the Adrian Mckinty, Sean Duffy series I obviously really enjoyed, through do police procedural, Danuka Mackenzie's The Torrent, the recent one. I will read anything. I love Anna Downs like the kind of atmospheric kind of psychological thriller. Yeah, I, we are so blessed in Australia with some amazing, amazing crime writers. Yeah. And it's just getting better and better. I mean, I do I always come back to crime, always have ever since Nancy Drew.

Andy Muir 35:39

All right. Well, it's probably a good point to sort of wrap it up there with Nancy Drew, but we're gonna have a bit of a group discussion. But while we're sort of preparing for that, hopefully, you're all opening a tab and buying yourself a copy of The Good Mother, as we set ourselves up, and remember to buy your copy at booktopia through the link on our Facebook page, where you can also then join in our conversation with our online book club. All right, well, now we've got the team assembled to do our normal chat about the book. So I'm gonna open up to the table and sort of say, you know, what sort of reader would we sort of pitch this to? We're gonna say this is for the sort of typical crime reader of older female? Do you reckon that it's a sort of the energy that male readers would be interested in?

Sue Turnbull 36:26

I think I think it would appeal to the broad spectrum. I mean, we've, in fact, there are some lovely blurbs on the book. We've got, I think Michael Robotham has given it a good blurb "this story wouldn't let me go." So Michael was in there, which is lovely to get. But no, I think, I think because it's got that action element, it would work across readers. But it's kind of interesting when it comes to who reads crime fiction, because, you know, our audiences tend to be predominantly female. And I think it's because, or at least they come to our events, and they and they share, etc, I think men, and I'm looking at you right now, as the only male in the room, men don't share their reading and their experience of reading as much. So you don't actually know that men are reading crime written by women, as often as we know that women are reading it. But I would, I would have thought this, this would be picked up by anyone. And you mentioned Lee Child on the Jack Reacher, you know, type of character who takes action, who moves but hasn't got the experience or the military background. So you've got a driving character that takes it through. What do you think Catherine?

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 37:38

and when you were saying that I was actually looking at thinking about our online events, because we have, for example, had prizes people write in, we have couple of books to give away and there's always been, I try and get 2 books if I can, and it's usually been men and women. So maybe men listen more online and don't come to events as much. That's perhaps a difference. I don't know. Please tell us send us feedback. And but it's a good point. I think maybe men like more action packed, you know, the thriller, maybe the thriller genre is more masculine. And the psychological crime fiction is more traditionally feminine. Be nice to blur those, but this does have both. It does have that really strong mother and having a son living with me at the moment, I could relate to some. Yeah, Mum, you're older, no I won't let you do that. No, sorry. Leave those shoes right there. So that that's a very strong grounding and real element.

Sue Turnbull 38:40

Can I just come back to the discussion that you were having before because you were trying to find the word for male dialogue. And the word that popped into my head that stayed there, and it makes me think of my husband and his favorite crime novel and his favorite crime novel? Opening would be I dropped to one knee and fired twice. Right? Which is in complete absence of adjectives and adverbs and all the rest of it. And the word that popped into my head was terse, yeah, there's a terseness to the male dialogue and the male writing that I think appeals and the great Elmore Leonard would be one of those precisely who would leave out every adverb, every adjective, just drive it through, stick to the facts, you know, man, definitely.

Suzanne Leal 39:28

I think this book really is a book for women who are perhaps new to crime. And I think that's, often part of that is because of the title, so it's *The Good Mother*. Part of it is the way the cover has been designed. So for for listeners, it's very large, pink, bright pink lettering on a green background with a woman from the back who's running and I think Ray has been talking about what she likes to explore being the everyday woman thrown into extraordinary events. And I think that provides a segue for the general reader who's looking for perhaps even a new genre. So the reader who will read contemporary novel or domestic fiction, who's prepared for some more action, but without alienating the male reader, although I do see this as as being directed towards the female readership who, to be frank, are the ones who are reading most fiction anyway. But without losing men, so I think the men would get it more from word of mouth. Yeah.

Andy Muir 40:47

It's interesting, because, you know, the *Bolinda* audio book rights were sold quite quickly. That's a very big male demographic - truck drivers, apparently, are huge purchasers of audiobook, isn't it?

Rae Cairns 41:01

Yeah. I didn't know that. I was just surprised by how quickly it sold on *Bolinda*. Yeah. I don't know who's buying it. But and I did get when I self published, I was surprised by the men that I had reach out and who had read it that really, I thought it was going to be, it's called *The Good Mother*, I thought it would only appeal, yeah, more to that more to the female market. But I have had some men reach out and say, "Yeah, I really enjoyed it."

Suzanne Leal 41:31

And that would be the IRA.

Rae Cairns 41:33

Yeah. And you've got a male character within it. Well, a few of them yeah.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 41:37

are quite strong, strong, strong male characters. Yeah. And so can I just clarify this that you sold the *Bolinda* audio rights when it was still self published? Yes. And did you approach them or they approached you?

Rae Cairns 41:49

So a a sight impaired woman approached them and said, I'm trying to read this on Braille, but I'd really like to listen to it. Can you make it? And then they approached me and made it.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 41:50

I think that's, that's really interesting. Can I ask you how you did your Promote, how you promoted the book when it was self published, because I know a few people who have got recently published books, and have got quite good reviews but are struggling with getting the book out there. Because you know, you don't have you don't have anybody pushing it, and you don't have distribution. And so they're doing I'm thinking of one woman friend, in particular, she's doing a lot of events. She's a good speaker, so she just books events for herself. But it's hard going, what would? How did you do it? And what will your would your advice be?

Rae Cairns 42:35

It is hard going? I, nitty gritty, did a list of people and who were either people I knew well, and I approached them and said, Can I send you a book? and, you know, appear on your blog or on your podcast, or whatever be considered for those things. But what I did was I packaged the book, I wrapped it quite, I got a friend to help who is very good with this and wrapped it quite well. And we put barbed wire around it. And I included photos from my time in Northern Ireland. So it was kind of like a bit of a point of difference. And when they opened it up, which meant people wanted to put it on social media, because it was different. And yeah, then I just kept contacting people. It was about being brave as well. It's really hard to ask people to, you know...

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 42:39

...and social media was important, then.

Rae Cairns 42:55

I think so yeah, a lot of a lot of readers came on board who I didn't know through social media through other contacts. Did you have a proper plan when you started? Or did it evolve? It evolved, but the bait that the center of my plan was sending out? I think I sent out 30 I can't remember, out to various writers and targeted. Yeah, I did, and but you know very respectfully. And I was just lucky, a lot of people came on board. I think having the Sunday Telegraph article also made a big difference. And that was as much to do with again, just this it's a it was a different angle that they could write about, I guess,

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 44:21

And the production values of that original book. How did you feel about that? Because I've been a judge as has Sue for the Ned Kelly and you could always tell the self published books, you just look at them and think, Okay, I mean, everything's different about them. The format is different. The layout is different in a way that I think it doesn't need to be because all one needs to do is to go into a bookshop and make it look like that that size, look at the margins. I've never quite understood that. But how did you feel about the production values of that book compared to this book? The new one?

Rae Cairns 44:53

I tried very hard. I did exactly what you said, went into a bookshop got it got the site the dimensions, the font size, everything I tried as hard as I could to match what a traditionally published book looks like. It was important to me to put out as high a quality product as I was capable of.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 45:14

I'm sure that helped, you know, because seriously, go look at these books and you, obviously you read them because they're there, and that's your job. But it's, it's good to start on the front foot not on the back foot,

Rae Cairns 45:24

Like, like I said, I, I made the decision to self publish in February. And I didn't do it till December, I spent a lot of time and I had the novel, you know, I did put it through an editing process as well with a professional editor, editor who I paid. But all of that was as much about trying to create as professional a product as I could, which was a high, a big learning curve. And I still got some things wrong.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 45:47

But that's really good to hear. And I presumably, I mean, I may be wrong, but that I would imagine is part you have to have a good book to start with. But having it look good is not going to do any harm.

Rae Cairns 45:57

But I think it matters a lot. And I think if you're going to self publish, you need to understand that that's a commitment you're making. If you want it to work, if you want it to sell if you want readers to be interested in picking it up,

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 46:10

And have a plan even though it might not be 100% there, have a plan for exactly what you're going to do before you panic and have the book and think ahhh now what!

Andy Muir 46:13

That's actually a really interesting point of that because we all get sent so many books, I mean, Sue gets a library every week to review and it there is something about you know, what is it about that book in that pile that you're going to pick up? And for me, it was having the Ned Kelly award on the front. And kind of you know, I pay attention to long lists and shortlist and you kind of look at all that stuff. And I got really confused because I kind of knew that this book had come out last year, but then it was coming out again. And so there was kind of this intrigue and mystery about it.

Sue Turnbull 46:55

I'm absolutely with you, Andy. It's like when I go into Dan Murphy's, and I'm looking for a wine and there's a new one there and if there's a gold star on it, and I might go oh somebody liked it, I might give that a go, you know, you want some reassurance. So obviously having a sticker like, you know, shortlisted for Best Debut crime on the front, gives the prospective reader who's looking for something, oh, okay, it's got a seal of approval here. There's, there's going to be something of value, I'll take a chance I'll buy it, even though I haven't heard about it, etc. So I think, would you agree that the value of that sticker?

Rae Cairns 47:32

100% and, and the gift that they gave me in selecting my book was enormous. I really, I didn't know that a self published book would get that far. And I'm very grateful that they considered it and and put it up there because it changed my life and changed the trajectory of the book. And it did it made people sit up, and I will I'll give it a go, I'll have a look at it. From agents and publishers to you know, film and TV people kind of having a bit of a look at it.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 48:07

And it is an endorsement that books brand new. And it's already won a prize or nearly won a prize, you know, being shortlisted for a prize. So it's it's sort of, it has an element of intrigue to start with. Which is, which I think is really good. And we were talking in our latest online event was DeLuca, McKenzie, who, and that was confusing as well, who won a prize. But the book wasn't published yet. So it's won a manuscript prize. But again, so when was the book was published, it had prize winner on the front, which can't be bad thing, really, in terms of interesting people to pick it up.

Sue Turnbull 48:42

And in terms of reviews, I will get a nudge from my editor. If the author has won a manuscript prize and say, he will actually say I'm sending this one to you, it won, they also won the manuscript prize, etc, etc. So it actually alerts literary editors, it alerts the general community. So it is, it is how do you get noticed? And and what what lifts your book above? What's out there, you know, to to the top of the pile? And it's

true, you know, how many books oh 10? 20 a month? coming through. And how do you get to the top of my TBR pile? Without the nudge from my editor? Yes. You know, has it got the seal of? what do I know? has it won something overseas? you know, what's the appeal? and then and then, and then there's the first paragraph tennis, it's got to deliver, it's got to deliver and if that first paragraph that first page, those first few pages, and you pick so much from that in terms of style, and the way in which it's written that's, that's the ultimate test.

Suzanne Leal 49:51

I do also think the cover plays a big part and the blurb, the back blurb, I've seen some, some poorly written black bear blurbs and some really well written ones. So that will. And I think that's that that's what a writer does. A cover attracts, a title that's one that you can remember.

Rae Cairns 50:12

So Harper Collins essentially kept my blurb. I worked very, very, very hard at it and they essentially kept it and tweaked it a bit. But that that, for example, you know, if you just threw up any old blurb, you know, thinking that people would buy it, I spent weeks and weeks.

Suzanne Leal 50:30

It's very hard, isn't it? I mean, when I first had to assist publishers with blurbs for my books, you don't realize how hard it is to write something that is attractive, says what you wanted to say, but doesn't say too much. But what did you find that was the hardest about it?

Rae Cairns 50:50

just condensing the the information, and making it sound exciting or interesting enough that someone would take that next step and turn the book over and open that first page. You've got to entice them in but you've also got to give them a sense of voice and character and everything in such a small succinct way.

Suzanne Leal 51:11

Who did the by lines? The by lines are "She's protected them from the truth Can she save them from the past?" And then "show me a soldier who had fight harder than the mother to save her son."

Rae Cairns 51:20

... a line from the book. So they're both mine, but again, I worked a long time to do the byline. Yeah, I didn't, I didn't do "show me a soldier..." on the self published version, which I had, didn't even occur to me to bring that out of the books. But yeah, "she's protecting them from the truth is," I came up with that. What was the cover of your self published book? Like? Interesting enough It was blues and yellows, I think. And it had, like a site a gun side with a woman. But it was also like a tunnel with a woman running away in the morning. Yeah. And and then it had another character kind of running behind her. And then it had Bob wire kind of around it.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 52:09

This one doesn't. He has the running woman. It's interesting. That woman in the book is a runner. Yeah, I thought that was good. And also the whole thing about not being able to run away from your past, which she did for a long time. But now she can't. But it doesn't have anything that says war. Does it know

Suzanne Leal 52:23

That that's what I think it's probably deliberate, which is why I I said that it's for a more mainstream readership. So when Charlotte Wood's book *The Way of Natural, The Natural Way of Things* came out, it's a very violent, rage filled book and beautifully written, but the title of the cover was of flowers, and only if you will look very carefully to just say that things weren't quite as they seemed. And I suspect that was done so that was a book that you could gift and a book that you could pick up and

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 53:00

Without being shocked and put off?

Suzanne Leal 53:02

I think so I think so.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 53:04

That book is pretty strong.

Suzanne Leal 53:06

But but you can, it did so well, obviously and so you could gift it without someone knowing about the book but you knowing that they're the right person for it without the title being too, the cover being too shocking. And I would say similar to this. It's it's a book that you can give, that you can pick up and not be and the war comes second. So so the mother comes first and the war comes second.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 53:34

I'm trying to think of shocking book covers I can't actually think of any conclusive...

Suzanne Leal 53:38

The Devil's Work. I'm I'm interviewing Gary Linnell in a couple of weeks, and he's written this book about Frederick Deeming who might be, might have been Jack the Ripper, and there's a there's, the V for Devil is made from a switchblade like a bloody switchblade. Yeah, I was looking at it yesterday.

Catherine Du Peloux Menage 54:01

But do you think that would attract or attract a certain person?

Suzanne Leal 54:05

I think it would get your true crime reader and a male True Crime reader more. It's um it's black and white. It's got the bloody red. That's the devil's work. And it's a bloody, very well written story. So um, but that's not who you're looking for here?

Rae Cairns 54:26

No, no, no.

Andy Muir 54:28

I'm gonna be really interested to see the comments in the feedback on the Facebook page about this book, I think that people are going to be saying all sorts of things, which is going to be great, and there's going to be some lively discussion, because it's just because of the subject matter. There, it is sort of black and white. And you know, people will have opinions and discussion. So it's definitely one to look out for and follow. So I think we probably need to leave it there and sort of say, you know, thanks

Rae for coming in and sharing your book. and talking more about the process. It's been great. Great, so, so thank you.

Rae Cairns 55:05

Thanks so much for having me.

Andy Muir 55:13

We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The all about crime podcast from Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival.

Suzanne Leal 55:18

If you'd like to be part of the crime conversation, head over to Facebook, and join our Bad: All About Crime book club.

Andy Muir 55:25

The books featured in this episode are available from our online bookseller partner Booktopia. You can find a direct link to the Booktopia Bad: All About Crime page on this episode's show notes.

Suzanne Leal 55:35

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Andy Muir 55:43

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Suzanne Leal 55:50

Until the next thrilling episode, keep reading and talking crime.