

BAD: All About Crime "What Lies Below the Surface"

SPEAKERS

Wendy James, Suzanne Leal, Barry Maitland, Anna Downes, Andy Muir

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.

Suzanne Leal 00:29

So Andy, Helia, 2022 January already behind us in what has been I'm just thinking of a way to try and describe it. Really a bit of a roller coaster start to the year. On the upside. Andy, here we are together in the studio again.

Andy Muir 00:46

It's good to be back, isn't it? It sort of feels like it's been a strange Summer, a summer of mixed bags.

Suzanne Leal 00:52

Were there any highlights for you?

Andy Muir 00:53

Well, I think it's just you know, every Christmas, it's great to catch up with friends and family, even in this sort of crazy period that we're experiencing. And sort of even socially distanced it was good to see friends and sharing in the summer period. It was it was a lot of fun. But the year has started again with a vengeance, emails and bookings and everything have been flying in the last few weeks including the the plans for what we've got for the rest of the year with the podcast and I have other events.

Suzanne Leal 01:26

And the books have been coming in. I've I've been reading the mother by Jane Caro and I see if you've got your hands on it.

Andy Muir 01:33

i have started that I'm Yes, I'm looking forward to that. I don't know whether we should say anymore. But you know, it's a bit of a hint, isn't it? When we both say we both say we've both got a book that we're reading - one to keep on eye out for?

Suzanne Leal 01:44

And on the mother theme The Good Mother by Rae Cairns has also been on my radar about you and yes,

Andy Muir 01:51

yes. Ye's it's another one on my radar too, gee we're dropping hints a lot aren't we?

Suzanne Leal 01:56

Not on your radar might be The Covered Wife by Lisa Emanuel, less a crime book then a story about murky secrets.

Andy Muir 02:05

Yes, well murky secrets is quite a good crime topic, isn't it?

Suzanne Leal 02:08

It is. So as you know, Andy, today we've got a bit of a special surprise in store for our podcast listeners. And we're bringing to you one of the sessions from last year's Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival in particular, it's the session I chaired, called "What Lies Below the Surface". It was a live session on stage in the State Library of New South Wales. And it was so exciting to be in front of an actual audience. I spoke to crime writers Barry Maitland, Anna Downs and Wendy James, about the murky secrets that lie just below the surface in each of their novels. Look, I found it a really great session. And I particularly loved hearing Barry and Anor and Wendy describe the inspiration behind their writing. And it was very comforting and always gives me a smile to see you there in the audience. How did you enjoy the session?

Andy Muir 03:04

Yeah, I liked it a lot. I thought it was it was really interesting to hear three authors at very different stages of their career, but also talking sort of similar, similar problems and challenges with their writing and, you know, the sort of the perils of, of that process. Yeah, it was really good. I thought it was a really warm room, which also helps.

Suzanne Leal 03:28

I think what I found particularly interesting about that panel, was how warmly all the writers spoke about the world of crime writers and crime readers and just how welcome that felt. Did you get that vibe as well?

Andy Muir 03:42

Yeah, I did. And sort of it's really interesting as well that you've got, you know, authors that are, you know, English writing in Australia. You've got English writers writing about UK, you've got they're all from different places. Yeah, it was really fascinating. But they all were sort of on the same page. They're all kind of quite collaborative and, and collegiate in that conversation as well, which was great.

Suzanne Leal 04:07

Taking us back to the festival, it was great to pop in and see you each day of the festival. It was a four day festival. And there were so many events on what were the highlights for you, Andy?

Andy Muir 04:19

Oh, look, I um I actually spent most of the festival in the green room. I, I kind of seem to be on that roster a few times when people were sort of in between things. And I found it just, it was so much fun, as you said earlier to just be in the same room with people and to be sort of meeting people, you know, in real life and just chatting. And the festival had just such a fantastic energy about it. I think everyone was kind of excited to be talking about crime and sharing books and just sort of hanging out. So even if you kind of didn't get to a lot of sessions and which was sort of my fault It was just sort of great to kind of be in that space and to kind of be around that energy. And I just came away so energised and excited about the crime writing about being part of the crime community that, yeah, I'm really, really excited and looking forward to the festival this year.

Suzanne Leal 05:17

Me too. And I must say, I agree with your sense of the buzz that surrounded the green room. But even more than that, beyond the green room, where the cafe was and the bookshop was readers and writers were mingling really happily, the book signings were going really well. And I really did feel a buzz of energy, perhaps more even than the years before, given, we'd all been so alone, and we're suddenly back in company.

Andy Muir 05:45

Yeah, that's right. That's and, and that was, you know, something that, you know, you can only get at a festival it's those kind of random conversations where, you know, members of the audience can just have a chat as you're standing around the book signing table, as we both said, it was really exciting.

Suzanne Leal 06:02

And so now without further ado, let's listen once more to the session I chaired What Lies Below the Surface with crime writers very Barry Maitland, Anna Downes and Wendy James. Hello, and welcome to the 2021 Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. Welcome here and it's it's lovely to have you. For those who don't know me. I'm the author of three novels, most recently The Deceptions and The Teacher's Secret. And I'm so delighted to be here with Barry Maitland, Anna Downes, who's beside me and Wendy James who is on the other side of the room, and our session is "What Lies Below the Surface" which gives us an awful lot to talk about at a Crime Writers Festival. We are of course on Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation and I pay my respects to elders past and present now to my guests. Let me introduce you. Anna Downes was born and raised in the UK, but she now lives in the Central Coast of New South Wales. That's good enough for us to all claim her as ours. She trained as an actor, appearing in BBC shows including EastEnders. Casualty, and De and Pascal, Pascoe. Anna's first novel The Safe Place, was inspired by her experiences working as a living housekeeper on a remote French estate, which for those who have read The Safe Place, I'm told was a pleasant experience. But in fact, the setting was inspired by the remote estate where she worked as it also now The Safe Place has become an international best seller. And The Shadow House, which you'll see in front of you, is Anna's second book. Welcome to you Anna.

Anna Downes 07:49

Thank you. Really happy to be here.

Suzanne Leal 07:53

Born in Scotland, Barry Maitland came to Australia to head up the School of Architecture at the University of Newcastle. So really he's ours as well too. The Marx Sisters, the first and he's London based Brock and Kolla crime novels, was published in 1994 and 13 more have followed in that series.

He's also written the Australian based trilogy, Crucifixion Creek, Ash Island and Slaughter Park, featuring Sydney homicide detective Harry Belltree. He won the Ned Kelly Award for Best Novel in 1996 and has been regularly shortlisted for the award ever since. The Russian Wife which you'll also see in front of you, is his latest Brock and Lokka novel. Welcome to your Barry.

Barry Maitland 08:36

thank you very much. Hello, everybody.

Suzanne Leal 08:39

Wendy James is the author of eight novels including the mistake and the golden child, which was shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Award for Best Novel, her debut book "Out of the Silence" won the 2006 Ned Kelly award for first crime novel and was shortlisted for the Dobby award for women's writing. Wendy works as an editor at the Australian Institute of Health Innovation. Her novel The Golden Child is in development as a TV series but today we're going to be talking about A Little Bird which is Wendy's ah most recent book. So Barry, I'm gonna start with you. Barry The Russian Wife is the 14th book in your Brock and Kolla series. Now many in the audience will be familiar with David Brock, we got a show of hands who knows about David Brock and Cathy Kolla, but there will be some who aren't. So could you introduce them to us, please?

Barry Maitland 09:27

Yes. The reason why I started writing crime fiction was because in 1989, we were living in Newcastle and Margaret, my wife there, was in the house in central Newcastle when the chimneys fell down, and the house shook and the television flew across the room in the earthquake, and it was such a strange time after that. So much destruction, the army took over the center of the city. that I was looking for some sort of outlet, something different to take my mind off all this. And I thought, I've always wanted to write a crime novel. Now, I hadn't been in Australia at that time for very long and I didn't have any contacts or insights about what the Australian situation was like. But I had a nephew and niece in London who were both with the Metropolitan Police. And she was also had access to the latest DNA information, which was just starting at that time. So I thought they would, you know, they took me on the beat in London and, and gave me lots of information. But it seemed to me what was interesting about it was that the Metropolitan Police, like the police force here, I think, was very heavily male dominated at that time, but it was in a process of change and women were coming into more senior positions. And with my nephew and niece, both together in the force, I thought I might have a couple, a male and a female. Brock, who's an old established detective, Chief Inspector, very experienced, and Cathy Kolla, just starting out as a as a Morse and Louis, you know, and Morse talks to Louis and says "not now Louis", you know, it's a sort of servant, Lord relationship, almost. I wanted them to be equal but at the same time, their experience is different and so I wrote that story, and finally got it published in 1994. And the publishers said they would like, they like the characters, and they would like a couple more maybe. And so I started out on a journey that I hadn't anticipated. And really those 14 books that have been their journey through aging in Scotland Yard, I mean, one of the problems we can talk about, if you like, if you have serial characters, what do you do about aging? You know, do you do like Sherlock Holmes, who for 40 years stays the same age, or do age them. And of course, if you're writing crime now, the times are changing so rapidly and technology is changing. The whole process is the legal systems changing, so they have to change too. So for me, it's been a sort of life's journey, which has been finally got to this point that I have tried to make a more realistic aging, particularly of Brock. And of Kathy who has now reached Detective Chief Inspector herself. She has her own, Scotland Yard has 24 murder investigation teams, and she heads one of these teams. So she is at the top level in terms of

homicide. And in this book, Brock is sidelined. He's still a Detective Chief Inspector, but the relationship between them is different now.

Suzanne Leal 13:29

I'm hoping you might start us off with a quick reading as well, Barry, from the front of the book.

Barry Maitland 13:34

Okay, well, this is how the book starts. It's like finding yourself dropped on another planet. Brock was out of sorts, uncharacteristically grumpy, Cathy thought they were three old colleagues, all of them Detective Chief inspectors in the met; David Brock, Bren gurney and herself Cathy Kolla, veterans of Brock's former homicide squad. Though they now worked in different Scotland Yard departments, they tried to lunch together at least once a month if their schedules allowed, which was why they were now sitting in the two chairmen pub in Westminster on a Monday in November, eating pot pies. "They don't interview suspects" Brock continued. "They never see them. They just sit at their screens all day following money trails around the globe. I asked one of them. Where are they? Where are the crooks? And he just pointed out the window at the towers of the city and Canary Wharf, then turned back to his computer." Bren laughed but Cathy could see that Brock was genuinely disconcerted. His hair and beard, silvery white now and cropped short, looked bit Shaggy and neglected. A big steady figure in her life. It was unsettling to see him like this. After the debacle of his arrest during the Hampstead murders, the men had reluctantly agreed to let him come back from retirement and take cap his old rank, but not in homicide. There were no vacancies in the 24 murder investigation teams they told him and posted him to fraud, where he was clearly a fish out of water. It made Cathy feel sad, especially because the Hampstead murders had been the making of her in her new role as head of one of those teams. Since then she had a series of successes all cleared up in rapid time. Her team was working well, and she had been featured in an article in one of the Sunday supplements about the new breed of women detectives of the Metropolitan Police. Even her boss commander Torrens, head of homicide and Serious Crime Command, had given her a rare pat on the back, expressing his satisfaction with her performance since she'd stepped out of the shadow of the old guard. He'd meant Brock of course, for whom she'd worked all those years, and her pleasure at the compliment was tinged with regret, as she saw him struggling now. "What's so embarrassing is I'm about 50 years older and outrank them all" Brock was saying, "I'm sitting there like a useless appendage, a waste of space with nothing to contribute." Bren trying to be supportive, said, "but they must be able to use your experience Brock. Remember that bloke with a Ponzi scheme and started to murder his victims? What was his name? There must be villains like that in the city." "No Bren. Fraud is abstract, digital and bloodless. You have no idea. It's another world." He sighed, then roused himself. "Anyway, enough of that. What about you, Cathy? What have you been up to?" "Well, I've got a locked room mystery". "Ah, that's more like it go on." So she told them the story of Ahmed Majeed. Thanks so much Barry. The interesting thing is that's the 14th book in a series but because of that, those opening pages it can be stand alone. So it whilst it flows beautifully, and it seems like a very easy story, I imagine there's a whole lot of working to get it to the stage where the reader can pick it up, not knowing Brock or Kolla. Is that right? Yes. I mean, that's one of the problems of writing a series I get set up with describing, you know, the fact that, you know, Cathy's got pale blonde hair, I mean, I said it in the first few books, and then I stopped saying it. And then I got readers complaining that they didn't know what colour her hair was. So somehow, you've got to sort of bring them into the story, and then gradually bring them up to date sort of thing. Yeah,

Suzanne Leal 17:36

Very deftly done. Thank you, Anna. In the Shadow House, we open with young mum, Alex, is in the car with her two kids. I must say I really, I really felt a lot for that scene, the squabbling kids, one teenager, one baby. Before I get you to read from that scene. Can you tell me a bit about Alex? And what has brought her to where she is?

Anna Downes 18:00

Yeah. So Alex, when you see her in the first scene, she's driving her car into this new home. This new town, it's actually an eco Village. And in the back, she has her seven month old baby. And in the passenger's seat beside her, she has her 14 year old son Ali. And you very quickly find out that she's fleeing from an abusive relationship. But she's basically kind of had to wait till he's gone out to work - this, this isn't in the book this is how we imagined it - she's waited till he's gone out to work and then she's just grabbed whatever she can chucked it in the you know, the Kmart Flexi tubs and the storage boxes, and she's just got the hell out. And she has had this plan of going to this eco village, which is kind of an hour north of Sydney, and very tucked away. And kind of exactly what she needs at this time in her life.

Suzanne Leal 18:56

And just before I ask Anna to read, I've listened to this book on audiobook which I, which I do frequently and Anna, having been an actor, also does the audio book. So when you hear her read, you're also getting an insight into the print book, but also the audio book. Over to you Anna.

Wendy James 19:16

I just want to say I listened to it too and it's really, really, it's terrific. But also what Anna does really well is an Australian accent. It's fabulous!

Anna Downes 19:27

Which I kind of decided I wasn't going to do today because I feel self conscious enough anyway without a bunch of Aussies staring at me and I'm just not going to try and approximate the accent today.

Suzanne Leal 19:36

But you can do it.

Anna Downes 19:38

I can do it. Hopefully. Yeah, Wendy says I can so... alright. "Okay, kids." I brought the car to a stop and peered out the windscreen. "I think this is it, we're here" neither child replied. Gazing at each of their sleeping faces in turn, Ollie beside me in the front, Cara in the back I felt a pang of anticlimax. The first time I'd seen Pine Ridge it had taken my breath away and I've been looking forward to seeing their expressions as we drove in. Well, Ollie's expression anyway, at eight months old, Kara couldn't yet tell animal from vegetables, so I wasn't likely to get a reaction from her. But I'd been certain my 14 year old son would be impressed. Instead, he was snoring, headphones on, head lolling awkwardly to one side, drool glistening in the corner of his mouth. "Kids," I said again, a little louder, as if in response, Ollie's phone lit up in his lap buzzing softly with a notification. I glared at it tempted to pick it up and hurl it straight into the nearest bin. Instead, I check the house number and street name again. Definitely the right address and the description matched - a split level at the far end of the village, the last in a row of four. White walls, blue roof, two balconies, and a timber staircase at the side. No one was waiting to greet us though, which seems strange until I remembered that I hadn't given an arrival time when I'd emailed a few days earlier. I'd had no idea when or even if we'd be able to get away. So I told them I'd

have to play it by ear. No problem had been the cheerful reply. Just pop into the office when you get here and we'll show you around. But the office had been empty when I passed. So I carried on driving along the narrow main road to our allocative unit following the directions I'd been given. There was no rush. Eventually either someone would find us or we would find them. I took a breath. The car was cramped and had that family road trip smell feet and Happy Meals. Our belongings were packed around us so tightly I'd have expected the windows to burst storage cartons, loose shoes and books, jumbo Flexi tubs bought in a hurry from Kmart and stuffed with our dirty laundry. I've crammed them Tetris style into every inch of available space. An expert job if I did say so myself, but if there was anything I did well, it was packing up and moving on. I rolled my window down and a fresh breeze pushed its way into the car muscling my hair like a drunk uncle and bringing with it the sweet earthy scent of resin. A tingle of excitement skipped across my skin. I live here now. I looked over at Ollie again ducking my head a little to see under the peak of his cap. It was one of those gorgeous Australian November days not too hot or sticky, just perfectly pleasant. But my son was bundled up in his usual sloppy green hoodie. It needed a wash, the orange circle on the front bore a tomato sauce stain the size of a 50 cent piece. "What's wrong with you?" He said suddenly opening one eye. "Why do you keep staring at me?" "Oh, sorry, you're awake." "What?" My son held one of his headphones away from his ear and tinny Music Music escaped from the padded speakers, a thrum of bass overlaid by a single screeching note like an air raid siren. "I said you're awake." "Obviously," he pushed his cap back and tugged his headphones down around his neck. "Why we stopped?" "Because we're here. We've arrived."

Suzanne Leal 23:18

With we've arrived. Where exactly are they arrived? If I were to drive there now, what would I see in terms of the grand plan?

Anna Downes 23:26

Alright, so in the book, in the front of the book, there is a map, which I drew, by the way on the front cover. It's not credited to me, which I'm frankly a little annoyed about. But I did draw it. And so it's kind of based on a real eco village that I spent some time at. But it's also a fictional amalgamation of a lot of different eco villages that you know, that I found through my research. And what, they tend to be in kind of rural surrounds, but that they're not often completely off grid, you know, the one that I spent time at was quite close to Gosford train station, Gosford hospital, so it's kind of edge of the suburbs. But when you drive in, you're struck by, you know, the sense of isolation, it feels like you're really tucked away in this. And Pine Ridge, the fictional eco village is in kind of a bowl, it's like in a valley and so you come you drive around the ridge, and then the road kind of winds down into the valley. And when you get to the bottom, there's a dam right at the bottom and all the houses are kind of built around the shore of one side of the dam. So if you were to stand among the houses, looking over the dam, what you actually see across the valley, is what the land used to be, which is farmland And what's very important to the storyline is that there is a single building on the other side. There's kind of paddocks. And there's this single building, which is the farmhouse that belonged to the farmers who own the land on which the Eco village was built, if that makes sense.

Suzanne Leal 25:17

And of course, almost immediately, we want to know what's inside. What's happened. What is this house all about? Thank you, Anna. Wendy, in A Little Bird, we meet journalist Jo sharp, who's come back to the small town where she grew up. Can you tell me a bit about Jo and her family.

Wendy James 25:36

So Jo grew up in the small country town and left as fast as she could. Soon as she left school, and her story, and the reason she wanted to get away was her mother and baby sister, infant sister disappeared, about 20 years before the story starts when she was only eight. And so her life has been changed immeasurably by that she's never heard from again, doesn't know why she went, doesn't know where she went. There are, it was a police case for a little while. And then a letter arrived saying I've gone, don't look for me, basically. And so she's grown up being brought up by her father, who has been very angry and become an alcoholic. And she's come back to the town because she's lost her job. In Sydney, she's a journalist for a newspaper there, lost that job and has found out too that her father, though he hasn't told her, has a cancer. So she's come up both to look after her father. And she gets a job at the town paper, which is not an ordinary paper, because the real paper has gone, as so many country newspapers have. Instead, there's a newspaper run by somebody, somebody has donated money to run this newspaper but all it's allowed to be is good news. So they, they're not allowed to talk about the crimes that happen in this small town, which has become a very difficult town, where most people, a lot of people have left. A lot of people are poor. It's a lot of drugs and alcohol. And you know, it's a sad town. But she's not allowed to write about any of that. She's only allowed to write about all the fun things that happen like grandparents day at the school and cricket matches and dances and Eisteddfods and the agricultural show and things like that. So yeah, she's come back with her tail between the legs, basically, wondering what the hell she's doing.

Suzanne Leal 27:32

And I'd like you to show us how you open the book in the prologue. It's a great prologue.

Wendy James 27:38

Arthurville 1994. My mother took the mini a 74 model with squeaky brakes, balding tires, and 120,000 miles on the odometer. Our good car a 15 year old Falcon stationwagon was out of action. The lights had been left on overnight, the battery was dead and there was no spare cash to replace it. Dad was on an out of town shift and didn't like to leave mum without a car. So he cycled to the station on his dodgy old bike. I left for school just before 8:30, I was running late. I was always running late and was glad to escape the noise and the mess and my mother's irritability. Amy was crying. Amy was always crying. She needed feeding she always needed feeding. And my mother's goodbye had been perfunctory as her interactions always were since Amy had arrived. A distracted wave. See you later. Have a nice day. According to the initial police report, Bev Ryan, who lived across the road was walking into town for a cut and color at 9:30 and had passed by just in time to see Mum close the front door, carry the car seat to the rear of the little pale blue car and clip it in. Bev had said hello, peered at the sleeping baby through the window. What a sweet little thing all that gorgeous hair and walked on. Lionel Perkins, who had the garage on the corner had seen her drive past not long after he'd admired her private profile. She was still a looker despite the two kids as well as her smooth, smooth gear change. You could always tell a Farm Girl. She'd waved to Val Darrow who was sweeping the pavement outside Martin's Newsagency, Val had seen the greeting but ignored it for reasons even she couldn't fathom. Ray Yee stacking apples out in the front of Yee's old fruit shop, had seen her turn left onto the main road heading towards the highway. He'd waved the too late for her to wave back. She'd stopped at the BP on the outskirts of town were moving Ebsworth filled the tank for her. He'd offered to check the oil, the tires, but she'd already checked them herself. Mervin a shy man, especially when it came to women hadn't said much. But he'd noticed the baby, still Rosalie asleep in her capsule and told her that he and his wife had just had their fourth, about the same age. A boy. Timothy, She'd asked him to pass on her regards to Shirley. She passed Errol Simmons and his wife Wendy on the highway. They were coming

in from Harringay to take Wendy's mother to the hospital. It was the fourth emergency trip they'd made in the last two months. The other three it turned out to be indigestion but better safe than sorry. Erroll recognised the mini immediately. He'd sold it to my father five years before for a bit too much, it had been his kids run around, was well past its use by date and had always felt vaguely guilty about it. Phil Coombs, local stock and station agent had been heading to town on the background from Delahunty, he'd seen mum waving at the intersection, when he turned back onto the highway. He'd flashed his lights and grinned. He'd known as since they were kids, had worked as a Jackaroo for her all men, but she hadn't returned, his smile just lifted two fingers off the steering wheel in acknowledgment. He'd watched in his rearview mirror, as she put the little car into gear and turned left on the Oxley road. She was heading east following the path of the river back towards its source. How was Phill to know that he would be the last person to see her that day, that he would be the last person to see her at all before she became a headline. There'd be no signs, no coordinates, or none that any of us had seen, at least not even me. Not even in retrospect.

Suzanne Leal 30:49

Thanks very much, Wendy, a little bit like Barry's book, that prologue is very important, because we're dealing with a small town, it's difficult to work out to introduce the field of characters to your readers, and then to move on. So within that prologue, what I liked was that we get an introduction to where we are and to the end of the mystery. Was it a difficult piece to write? And did you write it at the beginning or at the end of the book?

Wendy James 31:17

I wrote it. I wrote it first. But interestingly enough, I had a section that was in there that, that's why I actually forgot I had the prologue until you asked me to read it, because I split it in two and now the second part of that is now in the middle of the book. So yeah, yeah so it was written first, but it's also somewhere else.

Barry Maitland 31:35

It's a great hook at the start of the book. Yeah,

Suzanne Leal 31:39

Yeah. Yeah. Because it sort of sets up the scene, but also the mystery. And so we have that question propels us further,

Anna Downes 31:46

I think it's really cool as well as hearing it after you've read it. Because there's so many things in there that are important. And that, you know, they're threads that you tie up later. Very cool to hear that.

Wendy James 32:00

Yeah. It's also it's, it's the town, but it's the town in the 90s. So the idea was to that you got a sense of the town before it became as difficult as it is now. So that that's a town that's more lively, where people are doing things now, people are sweeping the street and there's a what I liked about it, just rereading it was, you know, there was some there was a fruit shop, there's, you know, in 2018, there's no longer a fruit shop, there's no, there's nothing, there's no news at all, you know, all of that stuff is gone.

Suzanne Leal 32:29

So Wendy the topic what lies below the surface is a very broad one, particularly when we're talking about mystery and crime. But my question for you is, what's the lure of the protagonist returning to the small town where he or she has grown up? Why is that such a device that is of interest to many writers, including yourself?

Wendy James 32:47

Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's age? Well, well, specifically, I think it was a bit of a lockdown book, to be honest. And it is a lure in general. But I think I wrote this when we're all in lockdown and children were separated from families, and we weren't able to get out west to see our family. And I did, I did think a lot about you know what it means to leave a place, and then to never go back, which is what we did, my husband and I left a small town like that and moved to the city and never went back. And I wanted to, I wanted to I wanted my 30 year old to come back. So I wrote a novel about a 30 year old coming back.

Barry Maitland 33:28

Yeah. But it's, it's also a really interesting variation on the classic, you know, murder mystery type of story, which has two timelines in it, you know, the, the event happens, the detectives come along. And there's the story of how they proceed, and how, what they're guessing and what they're trying to find out. And so, and that moves forward in time, but at the same time to understand what happened, then they've got to move back in time, they've got to look at what happened an hour before, the day before, a month, and it may well be a whole generation before. It's key to the murder. So you've got these two timelines, and you've brought them together in a very interesting way.

Wendy James 34:17

I ah I actually started this novel, wanting not to do that. So I've never written a novel from a singular standpoint where it just happens in one time and I thought this time that I would, and then Mary appeared the second character from the past and yeah, exactly what you were just saying happened this, I couldn't sort out the present crime without going, I mean, I couldn't work, I couldn't write about what was happening in the present without bringing somebody in from the past. And yeah, which I really admire. So the your two books where you've just you do have things that happened in the past, but the action happens in the present, and that's what I was determined to do and I couldn't.

Suzanne Leal 34:57

And Barry not only does the action happen in In the present, but it happens in a completely different world to the world that that Wendy and indeed Anna described. It's the world of art. Can you tell me about the place of art in The Russian Wife?

Barry Maitland 35:13

I've always been, I loved art, fascinated by it. And I'm not sure, I think it might have been the Leonardo portrayed Savior of the world. Some guys found it in America, I think, and paid about \$1,100 for it, and then managed to persuade these top experts that it is actually a Leonardo. And until then, it had been written off as one of his apprentices who've done it. And by the time they'd finished, they ramped it up, that the crown prince of Saudi Arabia paid almost half a billion American dollars for this painting. And I, you know, the, the top end of the art market is so crazy. And, of course, where there's big money like that there's there's crime and forgery. One expert said that Picasso during his lifetime, painted, drew 24,000 artworks, of which 60,000 are in the United States. And so I thought, you know, it'd be a wonderful, wonderful subject for fraud you see. Get Brock, out of the, away from the screens and out into the real world again, also, it means, because it's international forgery and fraud, it would mean that

he could go to some interesting places, which for the last couple of years, we haven't been able to go to. So he goes to Miami, for instance, where there's an annual art fair, which brings together all the aspiring artists and dealers around the world. And I have been to one of those, and, you know, I thought it was a crazy thing, and, and then he goes to New York as well. And then he comes back to London, so, so there's more travel than he usually does in his books. It's not just confined to London,

Suzanne Leal 37:40

As well as being an architect, you also paint, do you think the eye that you need as an architect, and also a painter, pervades your writing at all?

Barry Maitland 37:52

Well, in the sense that I think, both architecture for me, both architecture and painting are about place. You know, buildings are different from motorcars, because they're locked in one place and, and they have to respond to that place. And, and so landscape painting, which is what I was most interested in is very much an expression of place. And in terms of how I write crime fiction, I always begin with the place until I can imagine the place the setting for the story. I can't imagine the characters and the and what's going to happen. So usually, after, when the publishers asked for some more, with these two characters, I thought, well, how do you do that? And I thought, well, London, like any big city is a series of villages or small places, and with our own individual characters, and different types of people are living there. So that in each book, I can just go to a different part of London. Look at its history, look at you know, the kind of people who have settled there, the migrants who have come to that place. And so, you know, the characters grow out of the place, and then the crimes grow out of the characters, you know, what kind of murder would they commit?

Suzanne Leal 39:16

Thank you. Anna I would almost say the opposite for you. I think from previous conversations with had, that you've trained as an actor, and correct me if I'm wrong, but an actor is all about character. Is that where your work starts?

Anna Downes 39:30

Yeah, it is. I would say definitely for me story begins and ends with character but I really what you said Barry really resonates because until you can visually, for me until I can visually picture the place, I can't see or feel or hear what my characters are going to be doing, how they're going to be doing it, how they're going to be interacting with other people. So place is really important, and I think that setting in place really informs who the characters are as well. You know, how are they going to be interacting with their environment, is just as important as what's going on internally.

Suzanne Leal 40:06

And yet, is it true that an early draft of the book wasn't set in the Eco village? And did that change...when you found the Eco village? Did that change the way the characters interacted?

Anna Downes 40:15

I just changed it so much. Yeah, for anyone who doesn't know, and I've talked about this a fair bit on, you know, different things that I've done, because it was a really harrowing experience. I wrote a first draft of this novel that just did not work at all. And I was very keen, you know, I I'd only written one novel before. And I'd done that on my own terms my own time. And so I kind of thought, that's what you do for the second one. And I also heard a lot of writers saying, write the first draft with the door closed, you

know, it's for you. Once you've got your second draft underway, then you can open the doors up and let people in. So I was like, Okay, have the door closed, don't show anybody got to do it myself. And it was like, 90,000 words of something that just didn't work at all, because I hadn't checked. I hadn't. I just haven't bounced ideas around. I just done it all in here. And it didn't work anyway. So that draft, I had one timeline, one POV in Bristol, UK, one here in Sydney. And then the two of them were going to meet up in Guatemala. So yeah, no, it's really funny because it was never going to work. I don't think specifically, you know, not with the story that I had in mind anyway. And it was my publisher here in Australia said to me, one of the reasons why this draft doesn't work is because, you know, your story is not anchored to any one place. It feels very untethered, it's floating around all over the place, you've got nothing that's really anchoring the characters and the story together. So in that first failed draft, I had a character whose dream it was to build an eco village and that was all part of a sort of a subplot about a particular community of people that lived a certain way. So I thought, right, well, how can I make that place a reality, okay, let's research eco villages. Maybe there's something in that. And I discovered there was actually an eco village about 20 minutes down the road from me. On that day, when I found out that that place was real, it was, you know, I think the next day they were having an open day, because they were, you know, a demonstration eco village. So I booked my place on it. And as I drove through the gates on that open day, I was like, Yes, this is it. And then all of a sudden, this new story came to life, I could see my characters walking around, I could see what they were doing. And also that eco village that was that is near my house it had been built over a horticultural Research Station. So dotted amongst all these beautiful gleaming new eco houses, which you know, it's not all like Hobbit houses and stuff, they really gorgeous kind of architectural wonders. But in amongst all of this newness is all these old sheds, laboratories, like abandoned greenhouses with the kind of you know, that the plastic sheeting flapping in the wind and it was so interesting to me. And I said to the woman guiding us around, I say, what are all these things? What are all these places? And she said, Oh, yeah, you know, it's a horticultural Research Station. And when we arrived, it was a bit weird, because there were all these labs everywhere. And we were like, Well, what happened here once and I just went, I've got it. I've got the story. And that's all I don't need to be here anymore. I've gotta go.

Suzanne Leal 43:29

Wendy do you what most impressed me? Well, many things impressed me about A Little Bird but what I was particularly drawn to was the way that you told the story, almost like a collage. So you use newspaper articles, and you use different medium. So blogs websites, and and that's something that is not new to you, in in The Golden Child and I think your other work, you you mix mediums in order to tell the story, could you tell me a bit more about that?

Wendy James 43:57

I have a terrible messy writing process. So I might write the last chapter first, or part of a middle of the book chapter. And, and it's interesting that you use the word collage, because basically, that's what I ended up doing. And I keep writing and writing and hoping that all of these kind of disparate things will eventually add up into a story that fits together and somehow it does. It's kind of like magic, but it is, yeah, it's I do use a kind of collage system to write it. So yeah, and I think our stories all, when you think about your own life story, it always involves so many bits and pieces of other people's life stories and the past and the people you're with and your friends and the things that you read. And I think every novel I've done has had elements of that because I just, it always strikes me that your story can come from lots of directions as I'm writing and not just especially if you're writing a first person narrative. Sometimes it's good to get away from that, too, and bring in another perspective.

Suzanne Leal 45:04

Question for everybody, as we, as social media becomes more prevalent, does the way that you want to tell stories change in terms of using blogs using websites? Or does do you want to try and ignore it all? Barry?

Barry Maitland 45:23

I'm the last person to answer I think, I haven't been able to keep up I'm afraid.

Suzanne Leal 45:28

I think you have. I mean, that's, that's why I asked you because I think with David Brock and this, this, The Russian Wife, he is grappling with a new world, not only a new part of the police, but new ways to get information and obviously, when you're aging, your protagonists, they age with technology, so it was that an interesting...

Barry Maitland 45:51

Yeah I can understand the aging. It's better keeping him alive. I should say, that's only half the book. Because Cathy also has a story, which is completely different. It's not about art forgery and so she has to be alive in a different sort of way, she has to be much more sort of vigorous or active physically, in her story. Her story is about what they call noble cause corruption, where a police officer knows that somebody is guilty, but can't get the evidence to prove it knows that they'll act again, and innocent people will be heard, and takes the law into their own hands in order to prevent that from happening. So they do the wrong thing for the right reason. And she's faced with a case like that. And when she gets involved in it, it becomes very, very dangerous for her. And she then is at risk. So so that's a separate story. And in a way, a bit like, you're talking about a collage, I was collaging, these two stories together. And I found that a really interesting thing, because with most of the Brock and Kolla stories, they are on the same case, and they're just both working in different ways. But in this case, they're, there's a sort of juxtaposition to moving between the two stories, which which I enjoy doing.

Suzanne Leal 47:28

And I think Anna, that's that probably strikes a chord with you as well, because you also have a dual narrative but a clear dual narrative in terms of point of view and chapter headings, can you talk about that?

Anna Downes 47:40

Yeah. I think it's a really, really interesting thing to talk about whether or not you know, the advancement of technology changes the way we want to tell stories, I don't think for me, it doesn't change the way I want to tell stories as in using mixed media and things like that. But it does change, I think the way that we consume stories, you know, our attention spans are shorter, for example, you know, we do want faster narratives. And so I'm quite aware of that. But I think if you're writing in the crime thriller genre, you are competing with streaming services and Netflix and the ways that people are, you know, you're competing with people who flick on their Instagram, they go bom, bom, bom, I've just consumed three different tiny mini narratives and now I'm, you know, I'm kind of fulfilled for the next five minutes, and then I'll go back and I'll look at another few mini narratives. And so it's quite, you know, you, I am quite aware that our brains are needing things to move a bit quicker. And my story, The Shadow House is largely about parental fear in an age of technology. And so one of the things that I wanted to explore in this is my fear as a parent, my kids are five and seven and I am kind of my mind is a bit blown by technology. These days, I, my son has gotten Nintendo, I don't know how to plug it into the screen to

make it work and he's endlessly frustrated with me. And I had a conversation with a friend who was raising, a single mother raising a 14 year old, and she was kind of being very emotionally open about how difficult it is. And I think that that parents of, you know, my slash our generation who grew up without the internet, it's a really hard wheel to navigate. And we're trying to advise and guide our children in a world that we don't fully understand we're not fully engaged with, it's like our children are living on a different planet, and we're on this other planet going, you just have to do this, you'd have to go over there, you'll be fine going, you know, like, we don't know, and they actually kind of speak a different language as well, in some ways. And so I think it's, it's definitely something that we're all exploring. I really want to explore it, I think that fear of technology, fear of the internet, fear of how that affects us, particularly with regards to our children is just fascinating at the moment.

Suzanne Leal 50:12

And Wendy that's something really that you've looked at previously? And for me, I would say The Golden Child, that was really one of your your interests. Can you talk to that a little?

Wendy James 50:22

Yeah. Well, I, I had children, I've got older children I've got 2 who are in their late 20s 30s and then we had some 10 years later and so when I wrote The Golden Child, that was five years ago, I guess now, we had a teenage daughter coming up. And, yeah, and that. So that novel was really about how, as Anna said, how crazy you feel with the kids who are just doing things that you've got no idea about. And what do you do about it? And what dangers there are out there for them? Because there are plenty and and also what evil children can do with this technology, that that's what The Golden Child was also about. Yeah.

Anna Downes 51:03

But also how, you know, because in The Shadow House, that there are a lot of parents who are terrified of those things. And they're constantly pointing out how much evil there is out there, how much awful stuff is on the internet, how accessible it is, it's terrible. But there are also these kids who are not scared of it, who are navigating it fine, because they speak that language. And it's actually oftentimes, our fear of it that is more harmful.

51:26

But we found it quite useful. For instance, when our daughter, at about 15 decided to disappear for a night to say, I'm going to stay at a friend's and we knew the friend and rang the friend because I needed I needed an internet code. So I rang up the friend's father who said no, we haven't seen Nell. And, and we had to backtrack all of her whereabouts for that day. But we used Facebook, of course, to do that our son, younger son, went and contacted all her friends on Facebook so that we could work out where she'd gone and sort of reverse engineered we did discover where she was, but she was out of out of radio range. So we couldn't get her back till the next day, by which time she'd had 3000 messages. And so yeah, it's there there there are benefits and yeah.

Suzanne Leal 52:17

I've just noticed the time and I'm mindful that there's going to be questions in the audience. I'm just gonna just going to repeat the question for the Zoom people. So um, the question is from Petronella McGovern who's also an author here, and is about the research. How did you research your work during a lockdown?

Wendy James 52:36

Well, I sort of based it on a town I grew up in, but what I'd also done over the years, and perhaps everyone's done this, Googling family on trove and finding part of the novel is about a gossip column. So I did a lot of looking at gossip columns in country town newspapers, that was my main research. And I love doing that, and finding just bizarre things, which is what gave me the idea. You know, like, my father's family lived in Burke in the 50s and there'd be things like, Mr. And Mrs. James have gone to Sydney for the weekend with their sons, Anthony and Perry, we hope they have a lovely time. And that's in the newspapers. So that's what I kind of filled this up with. So yeah, that was lovely research, actually.

Suzanne Leal 53:16

Barry, what sort of research most interested you in this last book? Oh, well, yes. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to go to the places that Brock went to but I mean, I, it's so wonderful. Now what you can find on the web. I mean, you know, in New York, I couldn't remember, you know, how you move about Penn Station, you know, so, you know, you just looked it up and work it out, you know, how you go to go to floors down to buy the ticket, and, and it sort of comes back to you. So I rely on that very, very heavily. But apart from that, it was it was it was more memories of places that I've been to that I've used. You Anna?

Anna Downes 53:58

Well, I mean, as Petronella said, I could actually go to the places because they were local to me, so that that was a huge help, particularly cuz I was on a deadline. So I was like, I don't have time to imagine these things. I gotta go find them. But interestingly, I've just started work on a new book, which will largely be about travel and itinerants, and van life and life on the road. And for several reasons, I'm looking at setting it in WA, I've never been to WA. I've never lived in a van. So it's like, it's I'm aware that I'm setting myself a real challenge in this climate because I cannot get to those places. And I know for a fact that it's heaps more helpful to me if I can see and feel and touch and smell these places. But as Barry said, you know, it's amazing what you can find. You can literally go on like Google Earth and drive the route. You can drive it, you know, blogs, there are countless YouTube blogs. You can YouTube, anything and there'll be someone with a camera showing you and telling you what it is, it's actually much easier than I thought, I probably will have to get over that at some point, if I do set it there, fingers crossed, I think there is a risk in this that you become so infatuated with your research that you want to tell the reader everything you discovered, you know, I, you really have to prune hard to remember that the important thing is the story.

Wendy James 55:26

And also readers read, read things into the book that might not be there when my last book The Accusation, I set somewhere similar to here, so outwest but then I had to change it and I was doing a tour and we were in Cessnock, I think and somebody says, "Oh, you set it here, didn't you?" I've never been here before but yes. Everywhere I went it was set there.

Barry Maitland 55:48

You capture the spirit of lots of places.

Suzanne Leal 55:52

We've got a second question at the back, please if you tell me the question, and then I'll say it. So it's a question about a point of view used in your books? How did you choose it? And does it change? Can I start with Wendy,

Wendy James 56:04

I've got a first person and a third person perspective in this. And I do that a lot. And sometimes I'll write something. And I'll just really like the narrative perspective that I've started in and other times I'll change, I'll start in first person not like it, see if it works in third, change back, sometimes I'll try second person. And there's just the one that clicks, eventually a voice works.

Suzanne Leal 56:30

Barry?

Barry Maitland 56:32

Yeah, I was interested actually thinking about - have you all used first person at some one of your books? I think. And I was really interested in that, because it is a very intimate form of narrative, it means that the character is talking directly to the reader. And I, I've only used it once in the book I wrote about Lord Howe Island and it is one of my favorite books. Actually, I, you know, I enjoyed writing in that way. But of course, the Brock and Kolla ones, I'm stuck with third person, yeah. Which is more remote, I think. Yeah.

Anna Downes 57:16

Yeah. Umm mine was a really deliberate decision. Much like Wendy, I have a POV in the past, a POV in the present. So it made sense for me to use third person for the past and first person in the present, but also the POV in the present, Alex and I, it's really important that the reader is in her head, because a lot of what goes on with Alex is about her not being able to trust her own thoughts. And so it's for me, it was really important that I convey that intimacy, which through of its own challenges, I have to say, because with *The Safe Place*, it was all third person, I had three different, oh it wasn't actually Nina was first person, but with this, I found it really difficult actually because I think, you know, description becomes a bit of a problem because everything has to be filtered through the first person gaze, it has to be everything that you write has to be true to that character. You can't be a kind of omniscient narrator hovering above, and you can't deliver this beautiful prose that describes a building, if that's not what your character would say. So that becomes a bit of a problem. And I actually found this person quite uncomfortable, which I was surprised that you know, being an actor, I thought, "Oh, this will be a breeze" but it wasn't, it was quite hard.

Suzanne Leal 58:34

We've got a question on Zoom, this is coming from Judith, and it's a question for you, Barry. Barry, do you have any specific thoughts about what lies below the surface in the mind and actions of the perpetrators? Big Question. Gosh, yes. Yes, it is a question about how you gradually reveal that how, through the imagination of the detectives, the inner mind of the perpetrator has to be gradually exposed, or they're being forced into a situation where they suddenly have to reveal themselves. Which is what happens with Cathy that where she, she thinks she's having a useful dialogue with the perpetrator and then suddenly discovers that the perpetrator is turning the tables on her. So you can exploit them that that insidious or unknown level that's going on. It's a difficult thing to discuss in a forum like this where people haven't necessarily read the books because what lies below the surface is

exactly what the reader wants to find out. Is that always the way Wendy is there always something in everything you write that lies below the surface isn't immediately apparent?

Wendy James 1:00:04

Yes, I hope so. Every now and then you get a review who says, "I guessed it in the first five pages," but generally they have to read on. There's something hidden or there's there's not much point in keeping on going. And sometimes, if it's hidden from you, that's what sometimes is really good when you're writing and you think you know, but then it turns and changes. And what you think was going to happen isn't what happened. Yeah.

Suzanne Leal 1:00:29

You're saying, yes, Barry, is that something that happens for you? in terms of when you write, you don't necessarily know what might come?

Barry Maitland 1:00:36

Yes, I do try to do the research and, and try to plan out what I'm going to do. But at a certain point, my, my head's full, and I just have to start writing and then I may well discover that actually what I thought was going to happen, isn't going to happen. It's too obvious, this, it doesn't doesn't satisfy and then you're in real trouble. But I have great faith in...there was a French mathematician called Pine Curry, who, who come up with the most amazing things but nobody could understand how he did it. And he couldn't understand how he did it either. And he believed that, you know, you get to a certain point you've worked, you've worked and worked and worked, and then just forget it, just put it away. And your mind will go on working. Even though you don't know that it's working. This is why he believes and there are many stories about and he'll be getting onto a tram with a friend and they're in the middle of the conversation and as his foot lands on the floor of the tram, he suddenly comes out with the answer to the formula for some extraordinary formula that nobody has been able to find a proof of or something. And it's something that he stopped working on several months before. And his mind just came out with it. And he thinks we have this capacity, if we just let it, if we just trust it, which I find rather comforting actually.

Suzanne Leal 1:02:10

I think that's a perfect note to end on. So trust and have comfort. Thank you so much to my guests, Barry and Wendy and Anna, and of course to our audience. That was fun. It's always nice re listening to events that have gone well. Thanks so much to our bad podcast listeners for spending the hour with us. We're very much looking forward to your company next episode, when we'll be surprising you with another session from the 2021 Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival.

Andy Muir 1:02:51

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

Suzanne Leal 1:02:56

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Andy Muir 1:03:02

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Suzanne Leal 1:03:12

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Andy Muir 1:03:20

The views, opinions and attitudes expressed in this episode of all about crime. Are those of the participants and not those of Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival

Suzanne Leal 1:03:28

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