

BAD: AAC "Take a Life to Save a Life" with Jane Caro and Debra Oswald Transcript

SPEAKERS

Debra Oswald, Suzanne Leal, Jane Caro, 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

Welcome to Bad: All About Crime, a podcast brought to you by the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. Today, I'm so delighted to have two guests in the studio with me Jane Caro and Debra Oswald. Jane Caro AM, is a Walkley Award winning Australian writer, author, novelist, broadcaster, advertiser, documentary maker, feminist and social commentator. She has published 12 books including her young adult trilogy about the life of Elizabeth Tudor, and her memoir, Plain Speaking, Jane. The Mother is her first adult novel. Welcome to you, Jane.

Jane Caro 01:04

Thank you, Suzanne. It's lovely to be here.

Suzanne Leal 01:06

Debra Oswald is many things too. She's a playwright, a screenwriter and a novelist, with books written for both children and adults. She's probably best known as a creator and writer of the much loved TV series Offspring. The Family Doctor is Debra's new novel. Welcome to you, Debra.

Debra Oswald 01:22

Thanks for having me, Suzanne.

Suzanne Leal 01:23

Jane, today we're celebrating the release of your novel The Mother, it's been out almost two weeks, it's your first adult novel, did that make it easier or harder to write,

Jane Caro 01:33

It didn't really make that much difference because I always write what I want to write and I didn't begin writing the young adult fiction with the thought that it was young adult fiction. I just wrote what I wanted to write and then I tried to sell the novel to various publishers, and they all came back and said that they

really enjoyed it, but they couldn't see how to market it because now we're all in this era of genre and it's all about marketing, blah, blah, blah, says me the ex-advertising agency person. And so a friend said to me, who just published a young adult book, could it be young adults and I looked at it and I thought, oh, god, yes, it could. So I sent it off to her publisher, Christina Schultz at UQP, and she accepted it within two weeks. So I fell into young adult almost by accident because of the subject matter I'd chosen. So this the difference really is I think, in the subject matter, rather than the way I write, I just write as I write, and it comes out as it comes out. But this is, of course, about a very adult subject.

Suzanne Leal 02:39

So I'll just take you back to the young adult trilogy. So did you write one book to send to a publisher? And because it went well, you then wrote the trilogy? Or did you have in your head the trilogy all along?

Jane Caro 02:50

I always had in my head that trilogy, always. It was a big, hairy, audacious goal, dangerous goal, really, to write in the first person about Elizabeth Tudor. I mean, I don't know where I got the the arse, frankly, to do that. But yes, I always wanted to do her whole life and in the end, I managed to do it. So you know, moving from that, to writing this book was not actually a big jump at all. I mean, it's a very different era but in fact, there is some really profound similarity that I didn't realise until I well and truly finished this book, I suddenly thought, "Oh, my God, I'm writing about the same thing again." But well, you can ask me about that later. If you want to.

Suzanne Leal 03:34

We will find out what that same thing is. It's been a tricky couple of weeks for the world is an understatement. But it's actually been a good work, a good week for you and for the release of "The Mother." Tell me a bit about your news this week.

Jane Caro 03:48

Well, I got a text from my literary agent, and then from my publisher telling me that The Mother was the top selling adult fiction book in Australia last week, so I was thrilled to bits because now I can add best selling author to that bio you just read, even if I never sell another copy, even if everyone who's bought it hates it, and says so and we never see another copy sold, I've got a week under my belt. So that's very exciting.

Suzanne Leal 04:17

Congratulations to you. So let's find out a bit more about this book. In The Mother, you introduce us to Miriam Duffy, who is married when we meet her. Tell me a bit about Miriam and about Pete.

Jane Caro 04:28

Yeah, well, Miriam is a, you know, perfectly ordinary women woman in a lot of ways. She's a bit smug. I think she's a bit self satisfied. She feels that her life is going awfully well and she's really a bit chuffed about that and taking a lot of credit. She's got a terrific marriage, loves her husband very much, they get on well, they banter you know, they, they they don't always agree on everything, but it's a good marriage. She has two daughters, one of whom she's very comfortable with, has a very strong relationship with, the other one she worries about a bit more as they say, they're a bit scratchy with one another. But she loves both her children very much. She has a granddaughter who she adores, a lovely house, a nice garden, a successful business, you know, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. But it's been my experience that the minute you start to feel a little self satisfied is just when life is going to hit you on the

backside of the head and that's exactly what's happened to Miriam. And it's, you know, it's a really awful blow her beloved husband, just after the youngest daughter gets married and Miriam is actually extremely pleased when Alison gets married, because, first of all, she really likes the guy who's come along, you know, he's a vet, he's handsome, what's not to like, but she was, she would be relieved, in a way if Alison married anyone, because there's a bit of her that thinks, "Well, thank God. Now it's somebody else's worry, you know, I can relax. She's got someone else who can worry about her, all her little quirks and irritable bits." And so she's, you know, thinking "well, it's our time now." And then out of the blue Pete goes to work one morning, has a really severe aneurysm and basically drops dead on the spot. And she is devastated. But she's also incredibly angry. She's so angry with him for leaving her that way and she knows that's completely irrational as her friend and colleague Prisha points out to her, "well, I'm sure he'd still prefer to be alive." And she knows that doesn't make any difference, he's left her and with no notice, and she's got to manage somehow. And she doesn't manage as it turns out, for quite a long time.

Suzanne Leal 06:48

One of the characters I find particularly interesting is Nick, and he's the son in law. So he when we meet him, he's marrying Alison and he seems just a bit too good to be true. When does Miriam start to have her doubts about him,

Jane Caro 07:04

It takes her quite a long time, she, at first really is more likely to blame her daughter, for keeping her at arm's length, for her not being able to sort of visit as often as she would like, or even get her to pick up the phone when she rings. And this isn't necessarily uncommon behavior for Alison, and they've had a kind of distant, you know, push/pull relationship for quite a long time. But Marian feels particularly resentful from it, about it, after her husband dies, because she's, she feels that she's deserving of support, and she's needing, needy, she needs Alison. And yet she still can't reach her. But she blames Alison, not Nick and that continues but I think she starts to get a clue when she finally does get to visit her daughter, interestingly enough, at her son in law's request. And she goes out for a drink with her daughter, the baby, because by this time Alison's had a little boy, and the only friend Alison has managed to make when they move away to the country, so that Nick can do his work as a country vet, to Dungog. And that's when Miriam starts, I think, to understand that this may not be all about Alison and in fact, it might be slightly frightening. And in fact, there's something very sinister going on.

Suzanne Leal 08:27

And I must say, from this point on, I had to hold my breath, and read very quickly to work out what was happening.

Jane Caro 08:34

Yes, a lot of people have said that they, actually one one woman who actually advised me on the book, ah Anabelle Daniel, who is the CEO of Women's Community Shelters, a wonderful woman doing incredible work in the domestic violence sector, said that even though she knows this, you know, way of what happens so well, it's so very much her day to day work, and that, even though she did advise me on the book, and helped me with it, so it wasn't completely new to her, that she had to actually stop reading a number of times and get up and walk around and shake her hands, you know, to sort of get through it, which is, I'm sorry to say this everybody, a deeply satisfying response when you are the author of the book. But I am also aware that this subject is real and horrible, in reality for so many people, but I wanted people to feel, to some extent, what people actually living through this situation

might feel, a little bit of that, because I feel that that is necessary for us to drop the judgmentalism that so often accompanies our view of people who find themselves in abusive relationships and moves us, and I think this is what fiction does so well, moves us into actually, compassion, where we, in our imagination can actually feel what someone might feel in that situation, it changes our way of looking at it.

Suzanne Leal 10:04

What Jane's just said about her book would equally apply, I think to *The Family, Doctor*, Debra, the idea that you write in such a way that is so graphic and so visual, that you can't help but have compassion for each character that you bring to life in *The Family Doctor*.

Debra Oswald 10:24

I hope so.

Suzanne Leal 10:25

And look, maybe that comes not only from being a novelist, but also from working on screen and on stage. Do you think the idea of being very visual in the way you write has that as its genesis? Or is it something else?

Debra Oswald 10:37

I don't know? That's a good question. Because I've always written both prose and screen and stage since my 20s. So my brain is now wired in such a way that I can't separate out what version I'm I'm operating in. To me, it's just about storytelling and I see the scenes in my head and so I have to put on the page, what might allow a reader to see and feel the same thing, or what might be a blueprint for a director and actors to put on screen what I'm seeing. And of course, there's always a gap when you write screenplays. Actually, there it is, there's a gap between what I imagined and what's there and I suppose as a novelist, I never quite know what response and what visual images I'm generating, in a reader, I just have to hope it's more or less on track.

Suzanne Leal 11:28

So are you saying that when you write a new story, you see the reel in your head, and it's simply a measure, matter of getting it onto paper in a different form?

Debra Oswald 11:36

Yes, but I also go in for sort of a kind of method writing where I, I put myself in the position of the character in a scene, and I will wind myself up to feel what they're feeling to feel afraid, or angry, or, or joyful, and I will speak out loud, and I will walk up and down the hall, winding that emotion up in myself, like an actor about to do a take. It is quite insane. I wouldn't do that every single moment in a book but for big moments where I think, what would it really feel like to be picking up that gun or having someone crush my larynx with their hands? I have to kind of put myself into that situation. And then stuff sometimes comes out of your of your mind that you wouldn't have guessed if you're planning it.

Suzanne Leal 12:23

So I'm presuming you're not writing in the cafe very often.

Debra Oswald 12:28

No, I just have a very confused dog. Yes, it's something that and some days, it can be quite exhausting but but but exhilarating to it's a very strange way to make a living.

Suzanne Leal 12:38

So does that mean that you know where you're going when you're writing? You just don't, you need to get the emotions on the page but you know where the scene's going? Or do you not know where the scene's going?

Debra Oswald 12:49

I, look maybe and maybe this comes from from from running television where you have to plan out but I, I always attempt to plan out like I do file cards on the table, the whole, the whole stationary catastrophe. And so I always tell myself, I know where I'm going. But once you're in the meat of a scene, exactly how it goes can be not what you expected, that when you start you write your way into a scene and you think, Oh, actually, in that moment, before you do that, you will try this. Or whatever it might be, I can't think of a good example to give you but and that's part of, that's the fun. I don't necessarily hold with this idea that you know, the story surprises me because it's actually my subconscious creating it. But when you put yourself into the into the situation like, like improvisation alone, how sad is that improvisation alone? I, yeah, great stuff comes out that you might not have expected. Look, it's like, when you're researching something, one of my favorite things is all the book research and talking to experts. There's also the research that I that I do, where I'll go and talk to my friends and say, if you were in this situation, and I did this, would you do on me? Or would you be angry with me? Or what would you say? And people that you think you know, really well will say all kinds of fabulous stuff, like my advice to writers would be interview your friends about what they think and feel and the wording they would use about something. It's really amazing.

Suzanne Leal 14:23

Jane, you've been nodding, which has given you the most furious nod of all that conversation.

Jane Caro 14:27

I think it was that you see the scenes in your head, and then you translate them onto the page. That's exactly how it is for me too, I actually can watch it happening. And then I describe what I'm seeing. And one thing I realised a long time ago is that a book, a successful novel particularly, but all books are always a dialog. They're not a monologue, but they just delayed conversation. Because you're I think you're absolutely right, what I see is one thing, what the reader sees is probably another thing I'm guiding them, but they'll be using their life experience. They're places they've been. And I often think about my daughters, for example, they were lucky enough to read the Harry Potter books before they were movies. So they cast the characters, designed Hogwarts, made Quidditch what it was. Now every child who reads them, sees what the directors and the, so the great thing about novels, and if anyone wants to make a film or series of my novel, please forget I ever said this, but the great thing about them is that they are about you and the reader are colluding together to create the story anew with every single reader who reads it. And I've always loved that thing about the printed word. So that was what you said about you describing it, and then the reader imagining it in their own way, just absolutely resonates with everything. I've believed about fiction,

Suzanne Leal 15:55

What that makes me think of is also setting, so in in my novel, The Teacher Secret, it's set in a seaside town, which is a fictional seaside town called Brindle. And people have come up to me and said, "Oh,

that's the Northern Beaches, isn't it?" Or "that's down the south coast, isn't it?" Or "that's where I live, isn't it?" And of course, it's none of those things. Tell me about setting. I'll start with you, Deb. How do you find, how did you find your setting in *The Family Doctor*, and what's the reaction been from readers?

Debra Oswald 16:25

Oh people love when there's books set, roughly in the city, so I tend to set my, my urban my urban novels in the inner west of Sydney, because that's where I live. And I take them later in the book down the south coast, which is a town, the geography of the town is a town that I know, but it's a fictional town. And also, the geography of the town can be altered to my convenience. So the distance from a house to the hospital can be exactly as long as I need it to be. So that sort of manipulation of reality is handy. I just have to picture it in my head. And it's funny, I really, I really needed the geography of a house to make sense to me. Because you know, you need to know exactly what somebody could see from that point in the house. And, and this may be, this also may be a hangover from writing for television. But But I love what I love about novels, is is the ability to control point of view that that, *The Family Doctor* was written sometimes in Anita's head, it's written in the third person, but from, with a strong point of view, sometimes Paul, or The Doctor, and sometimes her best friend, and Anita. And I love the way that can control what you understand about the world, so that almost like when somebody is sitting in a restaurant, and the other character walks in, with a new switch point of view, I think that almost gives you a 360 view of where you are, in terms of geography, but also in terms of emotion, and who knows what about what is going on. And that's something you can't do on stage. And it's like this fabulous toy they get to play with.

Suzanne Leal 18:04

Let's go back a little bit, Deb. And let's hear a little bit more about *The Family Doctor*. We open in the GP practice of Porla Kasmarick. Tell me a bit about Paula Who is she?

Debra Oswald 18:16

So Paula is the kind of suburban GP who is dedicated and beloved and, and she's a very deeply kind, good person. She's, six months before the book begins, lost her husband. And it's interesting that both Jane and I have our central characters losing their husbands and I don't think that's just for convenience of clearing a character out. It's also that when a character is suddenly thrown off the rails of their life, they're more likely to do something they would never expect to do. But for the last six months, Paula has, Paula has had her best friend Stacey and Stacey's children living with her, having escaped a violent husband. So she's had the joy of, I mean, the anxiety about her friends situation, but also the joy of living with these little kids and, and the kind of special gift of getting to love a child who isn't your child. One day Paula comes home from work, this is a bit of a spoiler but it's in the first few pages so I think that's permitted under the act, she comes home from work to find the two children shot dead, Stacey shot dead, and the estranged husband shoots himself in front of her. So, I hasten to add that is the absolutely worst scene in the book, so if that seems a bit too much for you, don't worry it gets better after that. So the book is really about the urge, the guilt Paula feels that she didn't keep her friend safe. And about the the urge that she has to protect people. So a patient who comes in, you know, doctors, they dedicate their lives to looking after the bodies and the welfare of their patients and little children they've looked after for decades. So that urge It's intensified and twisted slightly by what's happened by the trauma. And she, when a woman comes in who is clearly in danger, Paula is tempted to use her medical skills to solve the problem.

Suzanne Leal 20:14

I do think it is very interesting that both of you choose widows as your main characters. And when I was thinking about that, and I'll start with you, Jane, I was thinking, when someone's in a couple, there is someone to talk over at night, in bed, over dinner, so when ideas are fermenting and perhaps getting rising, there's someone there if the relationship is a close one, almost all the time. When that goes, does that change the psyche? Jane?

Jane Caro 20:49

Yeah, I think it does. And I knew she had to face the dilemma she faces alone because also, it's about it's oddly enough slightly about sexism too that she has to lose her husband. Because when she realises that her daughter and her grandchildren are in deadly danger in the same way, as Deborah is, Dr. Paula realises that some of her patients are, still in this society had she still had a husband, had he, the father, still been around, there would have been an expectation not just from the society, but from Miriam's point of view, as well that he would solve the problem. And I needed it to be her who has to solve the problem, to be in a position where there is literally no one else. She tries everybody, she and Alison go out and seek help. They go to the police, they go to the law, they do everything in their power to use, what mechanisms there are to protect Alison and the children from Nick. It is only when she finally realises that no one can protect them, that she is faced with making decision. And she says all the way through, If Pete was still here, maybe I would never have done what I, what she does. Maybe he would have found a better way. And she really beats herself up about that, you know - I, that was the only solution I could think of, he might have come up with a better one. I doubt that he would have. But I understand that feeling that you know, and she actually fantasises at one point that when she's in front of a court that he is the judge, looking down and judging whether she's done the right thing or the wrong thing. So she still has an almost emotional reliance on his opinion even long after he's dead. She's still thinking about what would he think of what I'm what I've done? And there's no answer to that. He's not there. He can't tell her. But I think that's what we do. And I think when you lose a long term partner, and both Debra and I have been in very long and successful marriages. I've been married to Ralph for 46 years and he in fact, is still getting laughs when he says "yes, but she killed me off in the third chapter" when we talk about the book with friends and things, but I think there is this sense in which if they go, you're still going to be asking them what they think, long, long after they've gone. And why wouldn't you? They're only gone physically, not in your guts and mind and heart.

Suzanne Leal 23:41

There's so much to ask you about that. Debra, I'll start with the idea of Paula coming to us in The Family Doctor as a widow. So Remi is dead, so we never meet Remi. Whereas we do meet Pete in The Mother. Why was it important for Paula to be a widow in The Family Doctor?

Debra Oswald 23:59

Well, it was important to me that that she that what she chooses to do she does is what she chooses to do with a kind of sacrifice because that's going to destroy her life and she knows it's going to. So it was important to me that she not be cost, that it not cost anybody else close to her. And every choice she makes about what she does and who she chooses to tell is about making sure that the damage to people is as limited as possible. I think she's been, my sister's a GP and I'm expected to say to every public forum that she's never killed anybody, and I do think there's a kind of mindset for a lot of GPs where they're fixers, and they don't necessarily accept help very easily. So part of the sort of emotional bedrock at the start of the book is that Paula is someone who has a lot of unresolved grief. She's she's invested in the image of herself as somebody who does things well who handle things well, who looks

after other people, doesn't need looking after. So I think that means that she's kind of ripe when the book starts to cope badly with trauma, to be, thinks she can cope well, but actually be coping quite badly. But the other big component in the book is, and was part of the reason I felt I could write it without it being too unbearable, is that female friendship, longtime female friendship is absolutely in the, in the sort of flesh of the book. So there are three female friends, Paula, Stacey who's died, and their other close friend, and Anita, who's a journalist who covers the court system, and comes up against the kind of stories every, every day in her job. And I love looking at longtime female friendship, you know, the kind of restrictions that we feel the way we cast each other in certain roles, you know, you're the impulsive, one, you're the sensible one and the ways that can be limiting and irritating. But also, there's great, you know, fundamental power and love in it. So that part of the book is about the way those two women shift in their roles. And at first of all, they miss, they misunderstand what's going on, because they assume the other woman is not capable of what she does. But fundamentally, they know each other so well, that that's how they save each other in the end. So I loved playing with that. And and it's an it's, there is a love story in the book, because it's very important to me that there be good, sexy, respectful men. But in a way, that the the equivalent of the love story in the book is the female friendship, all that, all sort of shifts in that and the idea of women banding together to save each other.

Suzanne Leal 26:44

And the idea of banding together to save each other also comes up for Paula, when her patient or new patient, I think, Rochelle, comes into the practice. Tell me just a little bit about Rochelle and then also about the concerns that Paula has about her husband, Ian, just to set the scene for that.

Debra Oswald 27:03

So Rochelle is a patient who normally, who's brought in her son with with an ear infection. So she's she's the kind of woman who goes to a whole lot of different doctors so that nobody has her whole history and it becomes clear to Paula, that the little boy is really frayed. And first of all, she thinks he's got the problem. But in fact, it's the other way around the child is trying to protect his mother, who has big throttle marks, which is one of the huge, the biggest red flags that someone may be killed. And but Rochelle is not Rochelle is a veteran, she has been with a very controlling violent man for a long time. She's got various old old injuries that Paula discovers. One of the the impulses for this book was the idea of a doctor examining a body tenderly trying to protect somebody and seeing you know, the marks of a previous broken collarbone or a previous burn. And Michelle refuses all Paula's attempts to use the normal systems, the normal, avos and refuges and you know, the sort of magic spells to keep people safe, which sometimes work but often don't. And Michelle's husband, Ian, runs a security investigations business, so he has the resources to track her. And there's myriad stories out there about men putting trackers on on cars on their children's toys, to find women. I mean, obviously, that's the outlying extreme, but this is fiction, and I'm trying to, you know, push it to the edge. So, Rochelle refuses Paula's help. So, a few days later, when Rochelle's husband comes in with a minor injury, and Paula was looking after him. And this was actually the genesis of the book, in my mind was putting a blood pressure cuff around the arm of a man that you know, might use that arm to murder a woman and a child that you saw a few days before. He says such awful things and boasts about his ability to find people that the and it's it's like, it's sort of a perfect storm, if any of these events had not happened when they happened. And she hadn't found out some information about her friend an hour before. Like there's a kind of, you know, confluence of events that pushes her to cross a line she never thought she'd cross. She thinks about how she could do it. She's got the butterfly catheter in his arm, she could pump two samples of adrenaline, it would look like a heart attack. He's 62. He's got a history of heart

disease. She could do it. And I'm not asking readers to endorse what she does. I'm not advocating murder as a solution, although sometimes it would be handy but I hope the readers are with her in the moment and understand why she does what she does, even if they condemn it.

Suzanne Leal 30:06

Jane, there's a similar dilemma in your book as well. And in each of these books, the main character is confronted with a decision as to whether or not to commit a crime. Hypothetically speaking, is that something that you could contemplate given the circumstances?

Jane Caro 30:25

Well, the genesis of the book was very much about that. Seeing a photograph of, you know, one of, there had been one of those horrible stories about a man who'd killed his wife and children, and then himself. And the pictures of them are all over the interwebs and newspapers for days, and there was a particular shot of the woman and her kids who everybody would recognise now and a pixelated face of an older woman, gray haired woman next to her, and it wasn't her mother, but I thought it must be her grandmother. And then that made me think, you know, I've got two daughters, I've got two grandchildren. How would I feel if that was one of my daughters, who was, you know, trying desperately to escape from someone who was so obsessed and so determined, and so impervious to any of, as Debra called them, the magic spells that we try to cast to keep people safe. And you know, you live in constant dread of something like this happening? What would I do? What, how would I feel and what would I do? And then I thought, well, I know what I'd want to do. And that's where basically the idea came from. And I think the great thing about stories in general and fiction is that we can play with these ideas, and see where they take us in a completely harmless way, which is, it's important for us to kind of examine those things. I always remember hearing a psychiatrist years ago, when asked on radio, why people slow down, when there's a car accident and want to gawk are they ghouls? And she said, No, it's play danger. It's safe danger, because danger is a part of life. And if you never ever see it, or come close to it anyway, then it will destroy you when it happens. So on some really deep level where we're aware, we have to take ourselves close to danger in a safe way to sort of prepare ourselves for the inevitability of the actuality of danger coming into our lives. And so these books, I think that's one of the things that crime fiction generally does. It's play danger. And these books are very much in that genre, though, they're very different because we've actually made the wrongdoers the heroes, which it's usually the other way around. So yes, it was. And I again, I'm not endorsing murder, either, but I am saying what happens in a situation where you are faced with, Kill or be killed. And like, Debra, I had to make Miriam, someone who when she looked at everyone around thought, the cost of this is least for me, I'm the the only person who will suffer from this action, apart from the person she's considering doing this to and of course, as she thinks a lot about his parents, is me. Pete's gone. There's no one. Really my daughter's or mind, you know, blah, blah, blah, but it's me, so there is that sense of, there are a whole lot of prices to be paid here. It looks like I'm the person who's best placed to pay it.

Suzanne Leal 33:51

Is that how you feel as well about Paula?

Debra Oswald 33:53

Yes, absolutely. And, and it's funny because I, I've killed a lot of people in my career, you know, I've killed many people. fictionally, but I never thought I would write a book with murder at the heart of it. And it was only because I thought, because I'm not interested in killing for money. And I'm not interested in particularly in psychopaths. So it was when my imagination took me down a line where I

thought I can imagine killing someone in that scenario that is a murder. I could commit that, I could imagine my way into it. But the end of the book was really threading a needle morally because I wanted her to pay and and arguably it's a tragedy from Paula's point of view because her life unravels. Other good things happen for other people, Anita falls in love, you know, there's a love story I hasten to add but but it was really important to me that she, the pain go in the right places. And I'm not suggesting Paula gets it absolutely right but she's trying her best to get it right. So she doesn't want the women whose husbands she's killed, to know that that's what's happened. She wants she works very hard to make them look like accidental deaths, so that the women whose lives she's actually really saved, don't have the burden of that. They get to be happy and have their children and be released and joyful and safe. So she can't tell even though it'd be a relief for her to tell, you know, that, like she wants to confess she She's full of remorse and wants to confess, but confessing would be selfish, in her mind. So it's a it was it was such fun, too, and to play with all the sort of moral, legal moral twists and turns for her.

Suzanne Leal 35:44

This is what was said in a recent review about *The Mother Jane*, "it's not often that an author can be politically topical without sacrificing a strong plot, and well drawn characters. But Cairo achieved this brilliantly. While it's a page turning thriller, it's also an important exploration of a social tragedy we're exposed to all too often." My question in the wake of that comment, is this, Jane, how do you avoid being didactic?

Jane Caro 36:11

Yeah, and it is, well, I think it is actually the essence of what Debra was just saying about the dilemma and that I don't have the answer to that dilemma. You can only be didactic, if you think you have the answer. I don't have the answer. Like Debra it's the only sort of murderer I can imagine doing. But my Miriam doesn't try to hide what she's done. In fact, it's almost part of her purpose, to do it, in full view of as many people as possible. So she is in a way, making a not a political point, I don't think but it is a feminist point that she's making. And she actually kind of knows that she calls herself an assassin at one point. And she, it is part of her purpose to say, we are being placed in this situation where we have to make these kinds of terrible decisions. Surely there must be a better way than this. And her action creates a conversation in the wider world, she pays the legal price for what she does. And she doesn't resist that, she doesn't resent it. In fact, I think, like Paula, it's a relief to her. And she is almost grateful that she has paid the price that society decides should be accepted for her crime. And she grows up, really, in a way, Miriam begins the book and it's partly being in that very close and protected relationship with her husband, that has kept her not quite a grown up. Because she's never really had to face, turns out, she has had to face some stuff that she's completely excised from her memory in her very early beginnings, but throughout her adult life, she has been cosseted, and she only grows up when she is actually thrown into real danger. And I think that is also a feminist point that I'm making in this book. And I don't know how I avoid being didactic. It just seems to me that I can't help writing from a feminist point of view, it is so much. That's what the trilogy about Elizabeth Tudor was about, that what I always end up writing, this is to refer back to what I said in the first, in the opening, I always end up writing about the same thing and it is women either holding on to their power, which Elizabeth Tudor does throughout her life, despite enormous attempts to take it from her, literally and metaphorically, or taking the power, which is actually what Miriam does. It's also what Paula does, they take the power, refuse to sit and wait and be victims, or to watch other women become victims. They take the power, whatever the cost of taking that power might be. And so I just think it's part of who I am. I do it unconsciously, I don't set out to write a book with a political message. But somehow, there it is.

Suzanne Leal 39:09

Debra, you've said, "I'm angry. I've had it, you know, so I'm going to rage in fiction, if I feel like it." Does that mean that writing is a political act for you?

Debra Oswald 39:19

Oh, I mean, if you live in the world, and you look around and you think and feel and and wish the best for other people, it has to be, doesn't it? I mean, every story, you can't write a sort of morally neutral story or politically neutral story, because by making a choice, you've not made other choices. So every story has a political edge to it, whether you're conscious of it as you're doing it or not. So, I mean, I mean, you have to try hard to tell the truth and you have to try hard to be kind. I mean, you know, I mean, my book is full of kindness not particularly to violent men, but you know, they they can look after themselves, well, they can't actually in my book can they (she gave she gave an evil cackle.) I don't, it's funny because I, I've written for so long and thinking in terms of story, and seeing the world in that way is part of, I don't even know another way for my brain to operate. So I'm passionate about certain issues in the world, feminism being one of them. And so that seeps into everything I write whether I plan, plan to or not

Suzanne Leal 40:33

Talking about sleeping, Jane, you've moved from nonfiction, to fiction, back to nonfiction, back to fiction, advertising and now, politics. Tell us about this political development?

Jane Caro 40:48

Well, I think it's almost coming from the same place, oddly enough, as this book does, which is a kind of rage, it is a kind of disgust, a feeling that we've let a particular group, almost a homogeneous group run the world for a very long time. And most of them are white, straight, private school educated blokes. And they've made, let's not put too fine a point on it, the most appalling hash of it, we are literally staring at the abyss of extinction. I mean, climate change, and we have a government that, if it's going to do anything, it's being forced against its will to do something. And I look at my grandchildren, it's very much a protective instinct, it is. I can't bear the thought that I'm going to leave you a planet in a much worse state than my grandparents left me. Therefore, I can't just sit here and snipe from the sidelines any longer. And I got rung by Reason Australia and asked if I would consider standing for them, for the Senate in New South Wales. And that made me have to face it. That was one of those moments where, you go, okay, what are you going to do? And I thought, well, I'm going to do it, because I need to. What is Reason Australia? tell me a bit about the party. Reason Australia is a relatively new minor party or small size, not minor, they're very major party, but they are a small size party. And it's been it's formed out of an amalgamation between Fiona Patton, the Victorian Opera House member and ex leader of the sex party, an amalgamation between the sex party and voluntary euthanasia party. So they've joined forces to form Reason Australia, and its basic premise is that it's about evidenced based policymaking informed by experts designed to minimize harm, reduce suffering, and maximize the benefit for the most people that it can with no reference to ideology, or particular belief, including religious belief, so that it is about what is the problem? What do the experts who understand the problem know? Would be the best answer and we have the answers to most of the problems that face us. There are answers to climate change, there are answers to inequality, there are answers to our increasingly divided and completely morally corrupt education system, there are answers to all of those things, we simply won't put them into practice because of vested interest, ideology, and I'm sorry, sometimes religious faith, we have to move to a world that looks at the evidence and acts on the

evidence. And so I was very, I just thought, it's now or never, it is a kind of pulling off the trigger. Politically, I hope to be successful but even so I will have done all I can do to, to shake us out of this nonsensical direction, where everything is getting worse in front of our eyes. And we can't keep voting for the same people. We've got to stop electing governments that don't believe in government. It's a disaster.

Suzanne Leal 44:18

Deb you've heard about Jane talking about her political development, and what she is doing in the future. You've always called yourself a storyteller and you've just spoken about writing being also a political act. What's next for you, as a storyteller? Be it political or non political?

Debra Oswald 44:37

Well, apart from trying very hard to make a screen version of The Family Doctor, everyone please ring everyone you know at Netflix and HBO. I'm starting I'm in the early days of a novel about a woman born in 1928, who was writing her memoir in 2028. And I was drawn to that idea because I thought about how much the world has changed. That's That's my mother's generation. And I thought about how much the world has shifted underneath women in those 100 years, and about the kind of resilience and endurance and all the things that a woman would have had to deal with. And fabulous things she could have done in 100 years. There's a there's a style of book called the "whole of life novel," that people might have read examples of like Any Human Heart. And I think Isabelle Allende has just just published one, sadly, but anyway, I mean, I'm sure it's marvellous. So I'm digging into that. And it's kind of fascinating because I have to research each period. And think about what I want my 100 year old lady to have done in each decade. So that's what I'm doing now,

Suzanne Leal 45:41

Jane, in between politics and publicity and commentating, is there room for more writing?

Jane Caro 45:47

Not right now, I have to say, but I've only got another, like I've said, 12 weeks, 12 weeks, 12 weeks, keep running as fast as you can for 12 weeks because the election has to happen by the 21st of May. So you know, that's where that's where I'm looking at at the moment. Past that, I've got a few ideas swimming around in my head, there's a nonfiction idea I've had for quite a long time, which has to do with me discovering, quite surprisingly, that my Mitochondrial DNA is, most people's mutate has mutated in the last, you know, over the time, minus 100,000 years old unmutated, and it's 100% Black African, which is really interesting. It's now most commonly found amongst pygmies, which may explain why my entire family is so bloody short but anyway, I don't claim to be African as a result of having that mitochondrial DNA, that would be entirely presumptuous, but I'm very interested as to how it might have happened, because it's completely disappeared. So there was somebody, an ancestor of mine, it's passed down through the female line because mitochondrial, there's an ancestor of mine, who must have been the last to know we were passing. And I'm just and I'm not, I've thought about writing the novel. And I thought, No, I think that would be appropriating experiences I haven't had and have no experience of, but to write it as a nonfiction, and to actually investigate the number of ways that that could have happened. The and I would call it the working title is The Dilution because the boffin who told me about my results, they had to be checked a couple of times, because they were so unusual, said for you to look as you look, which is completely bloody white, is the dilution must have happened between 305 - 100 years ago, which is slavery, that period of time. So was it slavery? but I've discovered since there are other ways that it could have happened. So I'm kind of interested in a

personal journey, because it's my DNA, into how could this strange you know, we were always told we were Scott's descended from Catherine the Mingus, the Mingus of, the Mingus proudly stated, no, passing apparently. And so I'd love to, you know, explore that from a personal perspective, which I think might be a more interesting way in for the reader. But actually look at how it might happen. So that's something I've had in my head for a while.

Suzanne Leal 48:22

Fantastic. Well, we've come to the end of our time. Thank you so much, Jane Caro and Debra Oswald.

Jane Caro 48:27

Thank you, Suzanne.

Debra Oswald 48:28

Thanks, Suzanne.

Suzanne Leal 48:29

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Andy Muir 48:54

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Suzanne Leal 48:59

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Andy Muir 49:06

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Suzanne Leal 49:15

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Andy Muir 49:24

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Suzanne Leal 49:31

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