

Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival - "Fresh Blood" Transcript

SPEAKERS

Andy Muir, Peter Papathanasiou, Loraine Peck, Suzanne Leal, Lyn Yeowart, Sarah Thornton

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. Here we are with another session from the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival 2021. This was a live session on stage in the State Library of New South Wales. And it was on the last day of the festival. So you'd expect everyone to be feeling maybe a little tired. But that wasn't the case it was still exciting. And it was fantastic to be once again in front of a live actual audience and to have those audience in questions at the end. The session, as I said was called Fresh Blood, it was with a group of debut Crime Writers Lyn Yeowart, Sarah Thornton, Peter Papathanasiou, and Loraine Peck. Talking to these writers was a lot of fun and they made the session so easy for me, especially when they took over towards the end, it just became an extended chat between themselves. Suzanne facilitating a panel is not always that easy, is it?

Suzanne Leal 01:20

No, no, it's it, the art of the facilitation is to make everything look easy even when you're paddling hard and even when things might well be exploding around you whether or not the audience realises it.

Andy Muir 01:36

I think we both had panels, where it's sort of not quite gone so, so well. And you sort of have to do the quick double take on your questions and try and work out a reframing, don't you?

Suzanne Leal 01:48

I had one that I remember in particular, it wasn't a panel it was an in conversation with a pretty eminent international writer. And I'd got pretty smart that year because I wanted my notes down to a page. And I thought, the smaller I print them out, the more questions will fit in the page. And it'll look if I slip it onto the table like I have no questions at all. Because I think the facilitators I most admire are those who just go with nothing. I think Richard Glover's someone like that he has almost has no notes and I don't know whether there's a he has a logic within his mind that has the questions in some sort of order, or whether he has a photographic memory. Anyway, the closest I could come to was one page. I get on stage, this superstar and sit down, the lights go on. And it's the Roslyn Packer theater, so the lights are really harsh. And I couldn't read a thing. It was in eighth font and I could read nothing. And my guest had quite

a presence and he just gave me a slight look like "are you going to be able to manage this?" It was all I needed. I thought write eight font, I can't read a thing, on with the show, on we go.

Andy Muir 03:08

Yeah, it's always it's tricky, isn't it? When you just kind of, you just have to sort of trust that you've done the research and that you've kind of got enough of all that sort of background material stashed in your head, that you can just sort of whip out when you need it. Because sometimes even if with the best prepared panels, people might be a bit nervous, they might be a bit anxious, might be their first time they'd been on a panel and you just got to sort of manage it.

Suzanne Leal 03:33

Yeah, I think that's right. And I do think that the notes are often more for confidence than anything else. I think if you've prepared enough, you really could just improvise, given that you've done the preparation you need beforehand. I've just never quite got there. I mean, do you ever go on stage without without any notes at all?

Andy Muir 03:53

Oh, no, I'd be too terrified. I've gone and done things where I've prepared. And then by the time I'm sort of into the interview, I don't look at the notes at all. That's that's happened a few times, that's probably the mark of a good session really, when you sort of at that point, but I'd sort of, there's times when you really sort of scramble and the worst feeling is when you kind of get to that point and you go, "I've only got one more question. And this panel is only halfway through!" And you have to kind of really try that thinking of what else can you ask that isn't going to be problematic. But thankfully, haven't had any of those problems with the Bad Festivals, certainly not last year. And I have to say that, you know, this session is um, the Fresh Blood session, which I have that I've done a couple of times, I really like doing them because it is authors that have, it's their first book as their debut crime book. It might be sometimes it's the first festival as well. And so it's, there's this energy about it. It's really exciting to kind of be a part of that. And that was certainly the case with with this panel. Where, as you'll see, it was it was a lot of fun. Everyone was sort of quite chatty and Lorraine Peck in particular has quite an admission towards the start of the session relating to what happened the night before. But she went on and kept on going like a trooper. So yeah, stay tuned, we've got this, the Fresh Blood session within Lyn Yeowart, Sarah Thornton, Peter Papathanasiou and Loraine Peck, so keep listening. Welcome to Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival 2021. We'd like to start things off at Bad with an acknowledgement of country where we acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation as the traditional owners of this land and pay respect to the elders past, present and emerging. For those of you who don't know, my name is Andy Muir and I'm delighted to welcome you to the Dixon room today for this interview and discussion with Loraine, Sarah, Lyn, and Peter. I wasn't gonna go with surnames because I didn't test it out first. So there you go. As you know, we're doing this is the Fresh Blood session so let's get started because we're all here to hear from our authors, not me. I thought because this is a, a session on fresh blood and being a new author and those sorts of things now that you guys are all published, is it as you expected it to be?

Lorraine Peck 06:31

Yeah, firstly, I just wanted to tell everyone I'm really hungover. So please be kind to me. I went to the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival Danger Awards last night, because I found out yesterday I was shortlisted which was like woah! And Chris Hammer, the man in the back with the camera one along

with Gary Jubaland, so, Yay! And in his namesake I got hammered. Sooooo...sorry what was the question?

Andy Muir 07:09

Well, look, it was just a question of, you know, now that you've published how is it? is it as you expected it to be?

Loraine Peck 07:15

It was really weird because I was published in the middle of COVID, as some of the other writers in this room were as well and so that's tricky. And it's hard to break, break out as a debutante in a very difficult market. But everyone in the crime community has been incredibly welcoming. I'm always just amazed by the people in this industry, and how warm and welcoming everyone is, and how wonderful my readers are reaching out to me and saying they love the book. So, you know, it's been really weird, but fun.

Sarah Thornton 07:56

I don't think I actually had too many expectations, I was so excited just to be getting published. And, but to speak about the things that did surprise me, even though the, you know, my expectations were quite limited. I was really surprised by the amount of editing that goes on, after you think you've finished. You know, books is so collaborative, when you get to that part of the story, or the process. Prior to that it's quite quite a solo sort of effort as you maybe know, some of you are aspiring writers or writers as well. The other thing that was really unexpected was the length of time between actually signing a contract and seeing the thing in print, you know that that can be and you know, that time you're getting slotted into us publishers, shedule. You're also, so you've got to wait, there's plenty of other people in ahead and oher books ahead. And then there's other things like COVID that might delay things or whatever. So yeah, they're probably two of the most surprising things I've encountered.

Lyn Yeowart 09:10

Well, I'm going to say I'm living the dream. My book came out in February this year, and yeah, a very long period of time between signing the contract and publication. And I was lucky enough that in so I'm from Melbourne, so I'm sure you will know we just have lived locked down endlessly for the last two years or it seems that way. But I managed to have a launch where we all had, we weren't wearing masks. I think we meant to when we weren't eating or drinking but everyone was eating and drinking and talking the whole time. So I had a really fantastic launch. I think there were about 150 people there. It was just incredible. And if it had been the following week, we would have been cancelled because a friend of mine was launching the following Saturday or having her launched the following Saturday, and it was cancelled. So I was really lucky. And then I've just, I've been to a few other writers festivals interstate and in Victoria, and some have been cancelled. But I've been to a few and it's just been fantastic. People, the organisers, the other fellow writers, and so on have been absolutely fantastic. And I've been on several podcasts or a couple of podcasts this year and YouTube channels and radio shows and I have a friend who writes some YA fiction and she said to me a few years ago, she said, you know, "you think your life is going to change after you get published" and she said, "but it doesn't." But I'm here to report to Marian, that my life has changed. The people that I've met and become friends with the experiences, I've had, the from, you know, conversations with readers, and so on, I am, you know, I am living the dream. I'm not wealthy, I'll just, we don't do this for money believe me. But yeah, it's been fantastic. So I kind of didn't expect quite that, you know, people talk about it being a roller coaster, it's actually for me, it's just been up like that. So maybe I'm about to hit the top and it's going to,

I'm going to plummet down. I don't know. But it's just been fantastic. So thank you very much to my fellow writers and readers and podcasters and all those people who've supported me, it's been absolutely great.

Andy Muir 09:39

What about you Peter? your book's, probably the freshest here it's only sort of two months?

Peter Papathanasiou 11:40

Yeah, October. But I'd already published a book in 2019, which is a nonfiction story about my family. So I had that experience, then of, you know, the ride that you kind of go on. And not to downplay it or anything but yeah, it's an industry and you just sort of slot in. And it's a big thing for you, but you sort of just walk into a bookshop and potentially overseas book shops, you just, the shelves are just covered, so you go, where am I? There I am, or you have to ask where your book is sometimes. The community is very welcoming, and supportive and warm. And part of that is because it is a real challenge to get a book out there. So people have you know, they don't they don't forget about that, which is something I felt for both my books. And, you know, I guess for many years, we wonder if our work is going to get shared with with readers. So the thought of having it out there and making connections with people that is off your hard drive, and in people's hands and in their heads is it's just a warm feeling. And then readers give you feedback. And that's just icing on the cake.

Andy Muir 12:58

Has the um, how's the experience been different? Because you had the memoir first, which is obviously very personal and then you have a piece of fiction now. Has it been different? Is it?

Peter Papathanasiou 13:10

Oh, yeah, with the memoir about both books got have gotten great publicity, the memoir, people wanted to talk to you about your personal story. And it's more about you, and the book is kind of something you've done, as well. Whereas now, there is a sense that maybe I'm a real writer, that I'm a novelist that I've created characters, scenes tension. And there is a sense of achievement that I didn't have that first time, although a friend read my memoir, and you know, he said, Look what you've actually done, you've executed it, you know, so don't downplay what you've done here. A lot of people wouldn't, wouldn't be able to do that. But it is a it is a feeling of being almost more of a writer.

Andy Muir 13:55

Well, you're a professional writer and copy editor as well, aren't you? Yeah, not so much a copy editor, but I edit but not so much copy I do other things. Like I'll just put in plugs, like government reports and captions for artwork and all kinds of things. So what's the question? After I unplug myself? It's the, you know, there's you have the day to day, you know, writing job and then you have the creative?

Lyn Yeowart 14:20

Yeah.

Andy Muir 14:21

They are quite different.

Lyn Yeowart 14:22

Yeah, so my day job, I don't know whether if you've heard this, but but sometimes it's called grey literature. So I've had this thing hanging over me that for, you know, 25 years or something I've been writing and editing grey literature. And that just sounds awful. Who wants to say yeah, I write grey literature. So for me writing this was an effort and an accomplishment, you know, a massive accomplishment, when you begin to understand what other novelists have gone through to create something. And both the work as Sarah said that people put in in solitary time thinking, "Am I, Am I a fool for trying to write something that anyone might want to publish?" And then the collaborative process of editing, which I found terrific because I edit other people's work, it was lovely for someone to edit mine. And to get such great input into making it a far better story and have a richer, more complex novel. The editing process was terrific. So yes, as I said it was nice to be on the other side of the desk.

Andy Muir 15:30

Yeah, yeah. And what? how? What was the process that you went through to get your book published Sarah? Was it a long, a long path?

Sarah Thornton 15:40

Well, it started with a moment of enlightenment at a Writers Festival where I was sitting there as a corporate lawyer, thinking I might write a novel and I just had this light bulb moment where I thought I need to live a creative life. I also need to live on a boat and write novels. And that might sound weird, but my husband is a really experienced sailor. So that was kind of step one, was that really compelling moment where I thought, I need to do something about this and do it now. And we did indeed get a boat within six months, we didn't move on board for four years, because that's life, we have setbacks. So that was kind of the start. But in that four years, I started writing my first novel, on my weekends. You know, my, my job was probably a 10 hour day, most days or more, and on the weekend, but I managed to squeeze in some time on the, on the weekends to write a first draft. And it was the first thing I'd ever written other than about 10 Chapter ones of different books that I started and never progressed. I don't even know where they are, which is shame, because some of them weren't bad. But, so that was kind of step one. I then had a really great mentor, who I met at a masterclass at a Writers Festival, a fellow by the name of Michael Collins, an Irish writer who was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and now has a humdinger of a book out now. But he actually read my third draft, and really helped me through it. And I learned so much. And the fourth draft then went out to actually, I think it might have been a fifth and last count, that went out to agents. And I have to say, my lovely agent, Gabby Neha is sitting here in the front row, and she wrote me an email that I'll never forget, it was two lines in typical Gabby, succinct fashion, and it was "Sarah, I'm loving this, but I haven't finished it yet. Do let me know if you hear from any other agents." And I almost fell over. I was just delighted. I mean, I had Michael Collins' kind of endorsement, that what I was doing was worthwhile and had had merit. He loved it loved the pace and so forth. But to have Gabby, an industry professional, actually say it was, it was good, that was kind of my highlight, really, in the whole journey. And from there, I don't know about everybody else. But once you have an agent, things become quite a lot easier in terms of, you know, it's out of your hands about whether you how you get a publisher and, and how that all pans out. So Gabby managed to get me signed up for a two book deal. I had a it's funny, you know, your first book, you've written the whole manuscript, many drafts. The second book, I had written a one page synopsis that didn't even have an ending, because with my writing, I don't even know who the villain is. I'm very much a pantsers. So as they call it, not a plotter or planner. But Gabby, you know, God bless her managed to sell that second one page synopsis and get me a two book deal. So that was kind of my writing journey into the publishing world.

Andy Muir 19:24

What about you, Loraine, were you plotting as you were being sawn in half by magicians?

Loraine Peck 19:30

Yeah, my first job was as magicians' assistant and my last job before this one was as a marketing director. So I think both of those jobs and all the jobs and many, many, many jobs in between, have in common smoke and mirrors, which is, of course what writing is all about. Writing crime thrillers, it's all about smoke and mirrors. And I always wanted to write the kind of book I loved to read but I didn't know how to do that. And I was, I didn't even know it was possible. And I was very lucky to read *The Dry* by Jane Harper, an incredible debut when it first came out, and in the the acknowledgement section, she mentioned doing an online creative writing course with Curtis Brown in London. And I thought I didn't know you could do a creative writing course online. Right? I'm going to do that. So I googled it and found out it was a bit too advanced for me because I was just such a novice. So for every aspiring writer here, I can highly recommend the Writers Studio here in Sydney, do an online writing course called the first draft. And that's how this was written. And from there, I got into the Curtis Brown course in London online, the same one Jane Harper got into and that gives you access to agents like Gabby, and all the agents at Curtis Brown in London. And one of those agents, Jane Harper's agent, Alice Lutcheons, read the book, and loved it and said, "I want to represent you." And then she got Pippa Mason from Curtis Brown here in Sydney involved. And then she was suddenly sitting in the boardroom of the Curtis Brown agency, across the table from publishers and they're pitching to me about why I should go with them. It was just such a pinch me moment, like, incredibly surreal. And I went with text publishing and got a two book deal. And this is the first one and, you know, from go to whoa, from first draft. Oh, by the way, little aside, the first draft coincided with me getting ovarian cancer. And the last draft coincided with me getting breast cancer. And I slayed both of those cancers, so by the way, and then then you go through this process, it's five years from go to whoa for this book and the sequel will take me two years to write. So I'm getting quicker. But I'm still not as quick as some of the audience here like Anna Downs, for instance, who can just crack the second book out, it's so good *The Shadow House*. So yeah, and for me, I guess career highlights so far is winning the Ned Kelly Prize for best debut, which just was such a surreal moment too, I didn't expect it, I was amazed to be shortlisted. So to win that just makes me feel really validated that maybe I'm on the right track and writing is supposed to be my career. Because, you know, it's it's, it's not something we know that we're in the right space or not but apparently I am.

Andy Muir 23:09

It's it's an interesting point, though, isn't it? Because, as you say, like being on the right path, and sometimes when we kind of look back at our lives, we sort of see that we have been on some sort of trajectory that we weren't aware of. I mean, do you think that, I mean, all of you have very, very different backgrounds, before you sort of became writers, or became published? And do you think that, that has informed your writing is, is a part of your writing.

Sarah Thornton 23:34

I ended up writing a former corporate lawyers, my protagonists, largely because I needed to write someone I knew how they would think. I didn't trust my imagination. It was my first crack at it. So I picked someone who I knew I could inhabit that mind. So yeah, for sure. And then she does all sorts of crazy things that, you know, conservative corporate lawyers like me would never do. But, you know, once you're liberated with a new character, with this character, you know, they can, they can do everything, anything you want. As long as plausible, or even a slight stretch, most of our readers are

really lovely and kind and they will suspend belief for part of it. And you know, she's having action and thrills and, and whatnot. But, you know, I've always thought lawyers use words to disentangle society's most complex knots. So words, you're always building a narrative. You've got to build, you've got facts. You've got to build a narrative around those facts to fit what the lawyer is, and it is creative can be. So yeah, for sure, for sure. Definitely.

Andy Muir 24:52

Many lawyers become authors or comedians and need some sort of outlet I guess for me, it's a fairly obvious trajectory to have been writing and editing for other people to have a crack at doing it myself. And I had always wanted to be a writer from you know, for as long as I can remember, but I had to pay the bills. And so I kind of fell into the sort of corporate consulting writing. And I really, really enjoyed it, even though as I said, it's great literature, but there's something about it I really love. And I think it's that wrangling with words that I love, I love words, I love language. And so, I don't know, it was just the natural, but very, whatever is multiple reasons, very delayed process for me. I wish I'd been doing it in my 20s. But I wasn't. And yeah, I'd like to think that I've done my 10,000 hours, you know how they say you need 10,000 hours to become a master at something? Not claiming I'm a master but hopefully, I've sort of done some of the hard yards so that I kind of knew if I crafted a reasonable sentence or not. Okay, Peter, because you've got a, you've got a background in law, and biometrics. And then you have done the Masters in creative writing, as well...

Peter Papathanasiou 26:23

Yeah you know, just largely similar stories that what I'm hearing here, you know. I wrote this as part of a master's in London, and I was like, the only Australian on the course. So, you know, you walk in with a bit of a Yahoo, you know, this colonial, kind of don't really take you, maybe, you know, you're not a deep, sort of, from that literary heritage, and we have a rich one here, but it's not quite, you just we're a younger country. But it also was a bit of a strength, because I was writing things, I was writing things that were very different to them. So you stood out. And that's something that Australian literature Outback noir can offer. I did a law degree as in a honours in criminal law. So I was kind of inspired by. I didn't work as a lawyer, but, you know, you're reading about evidence and cases and, and motives. And it's really interesting stuff. And someone said to me, "if you want to make money, don't do criminal law," in that, you know, the clients, the clientele is very different to corporate law, or, or even family law from that respect. So I guess we're all we all have a desire to tell stories, you know, that we're, we're big readers. And at some point, you kind of go, your imagination starts to race and you think, Oh, I can I can do this. And you've got to hold down a day job, potentially, and pay the bills. So it usually begins on the fringes. I think most of the stoning I wrote after midnight and it usually was at the end of the day when things were quiet. And you know, my brain could settle and the words could finally come out onto the page. So it's just very similar stories that I hear from, especially debut authors, and many authors for how it begins. And then the trajectory and how it takes off.

Andy Muir 28:27

Have you got a an elevator pitch for your novel? A little sort of, can you sort of describe it succinctly?

Peter Papathanasiou 28:36

My book?

Andy Muir 28:37

Yeah.

Peter Papathanasiou 28:38

Didn't know it was selling it. Oh, my books about a small country town in outback Australia where a school teacher is found tied to a tree and stoned to death. So there's a cop that has to come and investigate. It is sort of a it was an idea that came to me when I was living in the UK and was just sort of blurted it out. Because I was talking with my wife and then a few days went by and I thought, I think there's something in that. So it just comes from throwing ideas around and seeing what sticks.

Andy Muir 29:16

Is there anyone else want to have a crack at pitching their, their novel.

Lorraine Peck 29:20

Okay. Sorry. The first son gets killed gunned down in the street of Western Sydney, putting out the bins, as you do in Western Sydney, when you're putting out the bins, you get gunned down, and the second son must step up. So I'm writing here about a Croatian crime family. And the question I asked myself about my protagonist, Johnny Novak, is if you're born into a crime family, can you get out and the story is also told from his wife's point of view, Amy Novak and she's a nice middle class Aussie chick who just happens to marry a gangster. And the question I asked her was, will you stay? Because Johnny is tasked with seeking revenge for his elder brother's death. So obviously the gang violence escalates because the Croatians blame the Serbians and and so it goes from here and underneath it all there is a murder mystery. Who killed Ivan Novak, Amy Novak provides the psychological thriller. Is she telling us everything she knows? And Johnny Novak is providing the action thriller as he decides to pull off the drug heist of his life. How's that? That's pretty good.

Sarah Thornton 30:50

That was excellent. I'll have a crack won't be as good as as Lorraine's will be much better than one that I've come up. Okay. So disgraced former lawyer, she's had a sliding doors moment. In her past, catastrophic, catastrophic incident that she caused. She's escaping that. She's a little bit of a Jack Reacher type character, she can turn up anywhere at in the second novel, she's she's house sitting in Queensland on the coast, tiny little retirement town when her a woman is violently murdered. But she thinks it's murder, but the police thinks suicide. And she's powerfully affected by this death. because this person was someone extremely close to her from her past as a child, somewhat of a mentor and auntie, a mother figure. And she tries her utmost to get the police to investigate. But there's nothing really that she can point to that this is a murder that the police can hang, they're hang their hooks on. So she she goes after it herself. She has her sidekick, who appears from the first book as well, Matthew Torrents, a former standover man, a gorgeous character that I love writing. He's helping or not helping, whichever way you want to look at it. She's trying to manipulate him. She's trying to be a friend, good friend. She does all sorts of the wrong things. And in the end, she's tracking down a number of suspects, all of whom had a motive to see the end of this wildlife warrior that she called her auntie.

Andy Muir 32:45

You left out the turtle.

Sarah Thornton 32:46

The turtle, there's a turtle. So the turtle is Yeah, so so the death is of the Helen the the leader of the wildlife movement in the town. She's trying to save the habitat for an endangered freshwater turtle

called the white throated snapping turtle. Hence, White Throat, don't be deceived, there's more to the title.

Andy Muir 33:16

Okay, I'm gonna go. Joy Henderson is a young girl living in a family that's drowning in lies and secrets. A little girl goes missing from a neighboring farm. And there's a secret in her, there's a few secrets in her family as well, dating back to before she was born. Lots of Secrets and Lies, which she sort of deals with while she's young. And then she comes back as an adult to nurse her dying father and decides, she and her sister decide to wreak revenge for what he did to them when they were young. But things don't go quite according to plan. Yeah, so we've got four very different novels. It's kind of interesting. You've kind of sat where you have, sort of have almost two, sort of, more traditional sort of crime stories. And then at the other end we have almost sort of crime literary fiction. What sort of was...what made you choose the stories that you've told?

Loraine Peck 34:27

The crack? Okay, so. It's about my husbands. I was married to a career criminal. He was my first husband, and towards the end of our marriage, although he was retired for the entirety of our marriage, he went back to his old gig at the end of our marriage, and he was busted in Louisville, Kentucky, with 100 kilos of marijuana. And so suddenly, I was the wife of the criminal and I had to go over there and try and get him out, spend our life savings, getting him out. And it was a really surreal experience for me as a nice, middle class Aussie chick. So I think that informed the character of Amy very much, and my current and hopefully last husband is Croatian, and he left school at 14, he was dyslexic, and he became a criminal. So obviously, I'm attracted to bad guys. But he he kind of pulled himself up before he hit 18 and realized this wasn't a great life to lead and decided to become a successful businessman even though he couldn't read. So that's what he ended up doing Bravo for him. And I wondered, I extrapolated he became he was the inspiration for Johnny Novak. But I thought, well, what if you're born into a crime family? You know, what if I put him into a crime family? Because Steads family by the way, we're not criminals. His Croatian family are not criminals. But Johnny's are so that was the inspiration behind it and why it all bubbled up in my head and had to be written

Andy Muir 36:18

There's the only important "what ifs?"

Loraine Peck 36:19

Yeah, exactly. How do you get how do you get out if you're born in a crime family, Michael Corleone certainly couldn't get out could he? But he kind of went from the darkness. Sorry, the light because he was a war hero. Remember, he went from the light into the darkness. And boy did he go into the darkness didn't he just got darker and darker. Whereas I wanted Johnny's character arc to hit in the other direction. He's always been a gangster with a conscience but as he's asked with, asked to do more and more terrible things, it becomes harder and harder for him to do that, and, and he wants to break free from his family but you know, he's under the thumb of Milan Novak, his father, who was a wonderful character to write, I love writing Milan, because he speaks like this. And he just wants everybody to do what he wants.

Andy Muir 37:22

The brutal patriarch,

Loraine Peck 37:23

He's absolutely the brutal patriarch, I love him.

Sarah Thornton 37:29

Well, for me, I definitely wanted to write crime fiction, I love the satisfying buzz at the end of a novel, a crime fiction novel. I was also pretty burdened by my current job at the time, and wanted to have a lot of fun, and wanted to be entertained, and entertain others. In terms of the character, I really wanted to explore a character who had had a like a sliding door moment, I didn't want to write cops, I wanted to write an ordinary person, a little bit like Harrison Ford in Frantic, you know? Where they get caught up in something that they can't let go and they must pursue. But it also wanted to, to have had this past incident that changed her life entirely. And the first book is called Lapse as in momentary lapse. So it's like a moment in time, where you do something, or you take an action or you make a decision, and your life is never the same again. And in her set case, in a bad way, a very bad way and I just and it's something that we could all do, I'm not going to give it away in case you haven't read the first book, but it's something that could happen to any any of us, including myself. And so that was kind of really motivating me, I wanted to explore also her shame and guilt about that. But that's all the thread that runs underneath the story. Again, it's ordinary people who who are doing things real. You know, the first book again, I can't let let it let it out but these are people who are highly motivated to do the bad things that they're doing. For reasons that would probably not surprise you. But they're doing some very bad things. In the second book, again, you have a host of ordinary people trying to get by, but where's that line? You know, have they crossed it? Have they are they someone who's involved with the with the death of this good woman, Helen Wesley. So these are kind of the ish the directions I like to take in my fiction. There are cops and the cops in book two are you know, I kind of like them. They're kind of under resourced, overworked, another reason why an ordinary citizen has to take up the cause. And they, they're good, they're bad they do mean things, they do great things. So so that's kind of the, the direction I'm taking, I guess. And what inspires me is, is ordinary folk, in ordinary situations, usually in some sort of social context that we all know about. There's a heap of characters in White Throat, that are devastated by a financial planning scandal, and they're financially up against the wall. They're highly motivated to do something about their situation. There's also mining developers and corporate executives, how far will they go? What about the mayor, he really needs jobs, jobs means votes for this mining proposal. So you know, these are all kind of motivations that that are out there every day in our everyday world. But of course, in crime fiction, we get to kind of take that little extra step forward, and, and really play with those ideas. That's so fun.

Andy Muir 41:14

Do you consider your book to be a crime fiction or psychological? Yes, and no, it's kind of been tagged more as a psychological thriller and I know this, because I signed a two book deal and the contract says, Book Two is another compelling psychological thriller. So that's what I've written, apparently. So now, I don't think it falls into the standard crime genre. There is a cop in it, and he, I'm going to say he does solve some of the crimes, mysteries that are that are from the past. And maybe there's that ...historic crime, which is kind of underneath? Yeah, the little girl who goes missing in the 1960s is never found. And the cop, a young cop, at the time, 20 years later, is still frustrated that he hasn't been able to solve that crime and, and then there's another crime or possible crime that occurs. And he starts to think that the two might be linked. So I do have a cop in that sort of sense. But it's not procedural in the normal way that a lot of crime novels are, which I love. But I kind of, I didn't want to write about that. And in fact, I never the cops name is shepherd. And I never envisaged writing a cop. And one day, he kind of popped up on the page and I thought, Oh, I don't really want you in this novel but you kind of

seem all right. And I thought, I'll just write a couple of chapters with him and see how I go. And I really liked him. And the dynamics he has was a local GP. And so he stayed. But he's not the hero as such, and there's some doubt as to what he actually knows, and the conclusions that he comes to so no, it's not quite, it's not a crime novel in the normal sense. No. And I, I will say, I didn't set out to write a crime novel and but someone said to me, you know, pretty much every book has, you know, if there's conflict or something like that, there's probably a crime. And so I'm going to start reading books to see whether every book has a crime of some kind in it, or what the source of the conflict is, or the culmination of the conflict, perhaps, Crime just could be bad grammar. True, absolutely true. As an editor, that is absolutely true.

Loraine Peck 43:46

wasn't some of it autobiographically based, oh, inspired?

Andy Muir 43:51

Yes. Sorry. Yes. So some of the events in this book are real. Not the death of the little girl, though, I was always quite macabrely sort of fascinated as a girl, when I heard that children are abducted and disappear, and nobody ever hears of them again. And you know, of course, it's ultimate tragedy for a family. But there are other elements in the book that are based on my, my childhood, predominantly the setting and the family dynamics. And a couple of other things like the, those of you who've read it, the story of the neighbors next door, the last one is actually true. That happened to next door neighbors. If you haven't read it, hopefully that's intrigued you enough to buy it. Read it. Thanks. Do you kind of consider your novel Peter to be procedural?

Peter Papathanasiou 44:51

Not really. Who told you that?

Andy Muir 44:54

It's just kind of it's just that kind of interesting thing of like, what the crime is so upfront. I mean, there's a young woman who's been stoned to death, not with a bong, but actually rocks. And, you know, this Greek detective comes to town to solve it. But he's also had a history in the town. So in a way, it's kind of almost a kind of exploration of his history, as well.

Peter Papathanasiou 45:19

Yeah, I've just noticed, I asked that, because I've heard it described as procedural story. And it's almost an anti procedural story, because there's almost no procedures are followed in this in this lawless town. Where the detective, and again, this was inspired by my own life and Greek Australian background. There's part of that in in every book that we hear about. I remember when I was living in the UK, I had a London agent who had read a book I'd written written before this. And she said, I like -she put it really simply agents are good at doing that. She said, "I like that you write about important things." And I kind of went, Oh, it's interesting that that's resonated with her. And I should keep going with that. So when I turned to write this book, I thought, what more important thing to write about than to write about my own country, and try to say something significant about Australia, where we're going right, where we're going wrong. And, you know, something that I feel a personal connection to, again. We all have a part of ourselves in these books, I come from a migrant background. My parents were immigrants to Australia, my grandparents were refugees who went to Greece, you see, where the country is heading now with treatment for new arrivals, asylum seekers, refugees. And I thought, there's something that I might be able to lend my voice to. So I set up this town, this lawless Outback town, where nothing works, and no

procedures are followed. And I had a very visceral death that is associated with the culture and religion. You bring in your migrant detective, there's an immigration detention center that exists in this town. And that's something that they do have in a number of Outback towns in Australia, it's often they're kind of out of the way, but also to stimulate the economy. And then you also have tensions with the local indigenous community, by virtue of the treatment that they've had over many years, displacement of lands, deaths in custody. So I had all these things I wanted to write about. And it was a matter of boiling them down to the individual level, creating characters, a township, and channeling these themes through through those particular characters in that story. So that's something I was really proud of doing, and which has resonated, at least in the reviews I've seen with publishers and media outlets in the UK, especially that here's a guy who's trying to say something about his country, what we're getting right, what we're getting wrong, you know, not every country is perfect, every country has its own issues. But this was something about Australia that I felt when we'd lost our way. Many people have talked about these topics, and I wanted to do it through literature, beauty of a crime, is that it starts that conversation and you know, things become unearthed, you know, secrets are found out about people, and questions get asked. So I thought that's a great prism through which to explore topics like that. Yeah.

Andy Muir 48:46

That's actually a really good point that I wanted to sort of talk about as well was the way that crime is really useful in dealing with issues. And I don't know whether it's because we're writers and interested or whether it's just crime is just a useful tool to sort of start that that conversation.

Sarah Thornton 49:03

I'm hoping it's both Andy. Certainly, I think Peter put it really succinctly that, you know, this type of fiction is a fantastic way to focus the attention and highlight issues that we're all aware of. They're kind of they're are we engaged? are we involved? Maybe maybe not. You mentioned the turtle I one of my passions is species survival. As a Tasmanian we killed all the Tasmanian tigers. 1932, I think it was was the last one died in captivity. There's some absolutely horrific video footage. And I still feel the grief from that. So you know, I get to write an entertaining novel that puts a spotlight on a really important environmental theme that we grapple with, but not in a black and white sort of, I love the genre in that I don't think anyone's doing anything didactic or, or preachy. Our characters, like, you know, Ralph, the resident president in White Throat is he's, you know, completely anti saving a turtle. And even the the hero of the novel was ambivalent, but we get to just think about it and all the opposing issues, the complexity and the the intractable nature of some of these issues that we face, it's a great way to explore,

Andy Muir 50:38

is there a line that you won't cross? Is there an issue that's too big for crime to handle?

Sarah Thornton 50:43

I'd probably say No, there's certain issues, I wouldn't handle just lack of experience, lack of background, you know, very middle class background. Some things I probably wouldn't attempt that others are doing or let others speak on that though.

Loraine Peck 51:03

not supposed to kill any animals.

Andy Muir 51:07

I disagree because

Loraine Peck 51:10

I did kill an animal in my book? And I did. And I didn't know it was a really, really bad thing. I was trying to illustrate how very, very bad the villain was. And at that stage, we still don't really know who the villain is. We just it's a kind of lurking presence. That book did, I did get some feedback on that. And and I have since learned that you probably shouldn't kill a dog. And in the sequel, which I'm I'm writing right now, one very early draft I, Amy and Johnny have a 10 year old child named Sasha, he's 11 By the time the sequel comes out. And for one moment, I thought, well, what if you killed someone while he was sleepwalking? And I sent off, you know, a quick synopsis to my editor, which said, Are you mad? I mean, that's, that's definitely a line you shouldn't cross having a killer child is not a smart move. So back away from that, you know, so I think there are, especially when you are inexperienced as I am, you know, you do want to be careful that I am very much focused in and intrigued and, I'll go back to the word focused, on domestic violence in this country, and how incredibly prevalent it is, it doesn't seem to be stopping. And so that's a real focus for me, for the second book is in taking, taking a bit of ownership of that, as the population and what individuals are doing to help stop it.

Lyn Yeowart 52:57

Sorry, I interrupted Loraine, but we've we've emailed about this topic, actually, whether you kill the animal, pets or other animals or not, and I was just in the session with Mark Brandy. I don't know whether any of you've read The Others or not, but there are a few animals that get killed in that. And, and there are a few animals that get well, there are a lot of animals actually get killed in this, some in a very practical sense in terms for the family to survive and eat

Loraine Peck 53:25

But not gratuitously

Lyn Yeowart 53:28

No, no, hopefully not. No. I don't know. It's, it's an interesting topic and it's the topic of the debate later today. But I think it's about the relationship that you build up with your readers and the sort of contract you have with them. This is the type of book you're about to read. This is the kind of scenarios I'm presenting to you in terms of people and settings and errors and attitudes towards, for example, domestic violence, or the environment or, you know, cultural issues and refugees and so on. Which I think you know, it's wonderful, we will explore these ideas, both for ourselves and for our readers. But I think we do have a contract with readers. And yes, I think I've probably set up fairly early on in the year that some grim things are going to happen. So I don't know, we might have to continue to agree to disagree. But we've had a really great series of emails talking about different things about writing your first novel, and what do you do about things like the pet dog or whatever it might be? How far will we go? I don't I have to say I don't think there's anything that collectively writers can't tackle. But like Sarah, there are a lot of things I'm not going to go close to for very similar reasons.

Peter Papathanasiou 54:55

Yeah, I'll just say quickly. I think you know, as long as I'm in a contract with like the readers, you always have to have a contract with the subjects that you're writing about, and make sure that they're written about, respectively and accurately. So my own experiences in writing the stoning was that I was representing a number of different cross sections of the community, you know, vulnerable groups, new

arrivals, and First Australians. And I was worried about getting that, right, you know, in the current climate, it's a very hot button topic, you know. And that Australia, writers, and many countries have a history of misrepresentation and misappropriation, so, in, in portraying these individuals, I needed to conduct research. So I guess what I'm saying is, you can write about anything, provided it's researched. Something else that I had to avail myself, I was sensitivity readers who read the book to make sure that that they were that group was portrayed sensitively and accurately and that's something I was encouraged by both to make sure that I've done it properly, accurately and also sensitively. So I would encourage anyone who is writing to, there are some tricky topics, if you're going to write about child abuse, or domestic violence or treatment of new arrivals. These are meaty topics. Crime is the perfect vehicle in which to do them but there is a process that you almost have to follow. And when you get it, right, it's it's very sweet and very satisfying.

Andy Muir 56:42

It's probably a good point to open it up to questions. Alright, so this one is directed to Sarah, was it always your intention to write a series? And was Clementines nomadic existence as a strategy so you could explore different locations and settings? And will she be coming to Tasmania in book three?

Sarah Thornton 57:02

Lovely question. Thank you. That was on Zoom. No, I didn't, I didn't set out to write a series. I didn't even know if I would be published. I mean, little you know. So I just set out to write something that I was really passionate about, or, or interested or curious about. I think what happened though, in the course of that book, writing that book, is that Clementine Jones' journey is such a miniscule sort of progression from the very damaged person, she is at the start with some really nasty flashbacks that seemed to interfere with her life, and so forth, to where she is at the end. And even in the final scene, where she's finally at a stage where she can actually open up to someone and actually allow herself to have a friend and speak to someone about what has happened. And that kind of arc was really compelling for me to take her to the next step. And you even as you're writing the end, I'm thinking, that is so not the end. And so I really wasn't long after that, I came up with the next idea. And I kind of thought, well, in book one, she takes up this leadership role of a community organisation. And that isn't her, she just gets really bored really quickly. And she can't just sit in the back back row and not do something. So she's finding herself engaged in whatever is going on. And of course, she, she's happy to flee wherever she feels uncomfortable. And she's become, you know, the fishbowl, the goldfish in a fishbowl in the little town that she's in. So she flees that as well. And in the second book, we find her elsewhere. But yeah, that nomadic thing. I didn't plan that originally. But I love it. And I yeah, I could pretty much see her going to Tasmania, I would love to write about my heart where my heart lies. Actually, that's why I didn't, because to close the second book, I just couldn't set it in Tasmania, it's just too dear to me. So I set it somewhere where we're going to sail to the very first place we sailed to. That was where I set my book, and I think, but But yeah, I'd love to put her in Tasmania.

Peter Papathanasiou 59:33

As a crime author, you you got it, you're realising and I'm becoming aware of it as well, you're not just building a world, you're building a universe that spans a number of books, potentially a series and and you're gonna get questions like that. And you don't necessarily have all the answers because you're not really sure where the, the rocket is gonna, it's gonna land.

Lyn Yeowart 59:57

And isn't that a part of the wonder and beauty of, for me, for writing. I don't know where, where it's going to end up. I don't know what's going to come out of my mind or why or when. And and I think that, hopefully, if I'm surprised and enjoy what I'm writing that other people will, but I don't know whether you guys are plotters or pantsers? plotter? pantsers?

Peter Papathanasiou 1:00:23

I'm becoming a plotter now.

Lyn Yeowart 1:00:24

Yeah, I'm a little bit for novel, the next novel, but I think there's just something absolutely beautiful about writing that just suddenly appears on the page that you weren't expecting for

Andy Muir 1:00:36

That surprise. Yeah. You go where did it come from? The question from the floor, an author down the back, I believe. I'll just repeat the question for those who were zooming and it was about second book syndrome and if any, on that panel was sort of dealing with that or had any thoughts about it.

Loraine Peck 1:00:55

I'm up to the fourth draft of the second book, which is called The Double Bind and it's, it's hard, it's been, it's actually been really hard. Because the first book, you've got no timeline, you know, you're free, you're free to write about anything you want. And in the second book, if it's part of a series, there's some things you can't do, again, I'm not killing a dog, that's for sure. I can't kidnap anyone. And I love kidnapping people. So that I can I can, I can wander around the park and decide who I want to murder. So that's always fun. But it is, it is much harder. And, and and I'm having to really draw on some hidden, hope not too hidden, strength, you need to get through it, it's tough.

Lyn Yeowart 1:01:54

I've had I have had to become a bit more of a plotter. And about I reckon about 75% of the way through writing this, I sort of think I need to have a spreadsheet that shows who's doing what when, because I've got these three time threads. And I have to had to arrange them. In each time thread had to be chronological, but I couldn't have certain things revealed in certain time threads before other things occurred in other time threads. So it was pretty complex, I kind of had to map it all out. And I did that about whether or not it's about 75% of the way through. Now with this, the second novel, I've done it 5% of the way through, and I keep building it. And I wish I could have a huge spreadsheet on a wall that was electronic, because you know, post its and stuff like that aren't going to quite work for me. So I've I've had to do that. very conscious of the time line, and the pressure that comes with that, but also quite pleased that what I you know, it's, well for me, I know it's going to be published unless I do a really crappy job, I suppose. Because of a two book deal. But also I have the support of an editor and a publisher. So I've got, you know, great relationships, same publisher, same editor for the second book, and, and that's kind of like a, you know, it's kind of like people holding you up, and they keep telling me that it's good and that it's going to be great. And so I'm not so sure that it is good at the moment, but hopefully enough rework and so on, but it's a different, you're in a different mindset. Both, its double edged, you have the pressure of having to produce another one, but you also have the other people's confidence, and they're backing you and saying we're going to do this because we liked we liked this one so much.

Andy Muir 1:03:56

We're gonna have to wrap it up. We'll just we'll back up these authors by a round of applause to say thank you. Thanks for spending that hour with us. Next episode, we'll be back with the whole team where we'll be talking and arguing about the latest crime book that we've read. So from all of us working to bring you the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival, and all of our year round events, we look forward to presenting you with what we have in store this year, as the sessions unfold, and hopefully meeting you in person soon. So Till then, keep listening. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The All About Crime podcast from Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival.

Suzanne Leal 1:04:41

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

Andy Muir 1:04:48

The books featured in this episode are available from our online bookseller partner Booktopia you can find a direct link to the Booktopia bad all about crime page on this episode's show notes.

Suzanne Leal 1:04:57

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Andy Muir 1:05:06

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Suzanne Leal 1:05:13

Until the next thrilling episode, keep reading and talking crime