

BAD SCWF 2021 - Australia as a Crime Scene Transcript

SPEAKERS

Kodie Bedford, Julie Jansen, Daniel Browning, Andy Muir, Suzanne Leal, Melissa Lucashenko

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. Welcome to the Bad: All About Crime Podcast. I'm Andy Muir. The episode you're about to hear is a presentation from 2021 Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. The Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival is on again soon from the 8th to the 10th of September in Sydney. Go to www.badsydney.com to find out more.

Daniel Browning 00:49

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this session of the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. The premise of today's talk the proposition that we're putting is that Australia is a crime scene. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are on Gadigal land always was always will be Gadigal country and I pay my respects to the elders past present and their emerging leaders as well. My name is Daniel Browning, I'm the presenter of The Art Show on ABC Radio National and editor Indigenous Radio at the ABC. Please I want to introduce now the panel Melissa Lucashenko joins us from Brisbane via zoom, very wet Brisbane. Melissa Lucashenko if you didn't know is an acclaimed and award winning Aboriginal writer of Greek and European heritage, widely published as an award winning novelist, essayist and short story writer. Some recent work has appeared in The Moth, 50 True Stories, Meanjin, Griffith Review, The Saturday Paper and Melissa's Griffith Review essay "Sinking Below Sight: Down and Out in Brisbane and Logan" won the 2013 Walkley award for long form journalism, "Too Much Lip" the most recent novel, won Australia's foremost literary prize the Miles Franklin in 2019. Please welcome Melissa Lucashenko, Burruberongal woman of the Darug Nation, Julie Jansen is a novelist, playwright, artist and poet. She was co recipient of the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Poetry Prize in 2016, and the Judith Wright Poetry Prize in 2019. Her novels are "The Crocodile Hotel," "Cyclops, 2015, and "Benevolence," long listed for the Nib award in 2021. Her plays have been produced at Belvoir Street at the Sydney Opera House Studio at the Phoenix Theatre in Arizona, in Macassar, in Indonesia, at the Adelaide Festival centre. "Ganges" her play was nominated for an Auggie Award and received a highly commended award from the Human Rights Commission. Julie lived in the Northern Territory in remote Aboriginal communities in her early years as a teacher, where she began writing plays and making giant puppets, masks and costumes she now lives, still living in Moruya, Julie lives in Moruya on the south coast, far south coast of New South Wales, please welcome Julie Jansen. Kodie Bedford started as a cadet journalist Kodie's going to hand sub or give me signals when when when it whenever

anything in this in his biography doesn't make sense or isn't true. Kodie Bedford started as a cadet journalist for SBS in 2008. Tick. And then move to the ABC as a research of a documentary series Message Stick, since leaving the ABC Kodie's co founded the indigenous arts group "Cope Street Collective." Her credits include a short film "Last Drink at Frieda's", a short horror film called "Scout' and also writing for the critically acclaimed ABC drama series "Mystery Road" and for "Grace Beside Me". Kodie is currently working on a feature film with funding from Screen Australia about the Yarrabah Brass Band. She received the Balnaise fellowship in 2019 for the development of her play "Cursed," which was staged at Belvoir Street in the 2020 season, a great challenge during the pandemic. Please welcome Kodie Bedford. I guess the province the provocation proposition, the historical truth, the hypothesis that we're testing today is that Australia is a crime scene. And what I want to kind of enlarge or amplify is how First Nations writers prosecute the great crime. The lies, the whitewashing, the cover up in the way we tell our stories, how do we avenge the crime in fiction and on screen? Julie, we were talking in the greenroom about this whole idea of and I have to thank Robbie Thorpe the the Aboriginal activist from from Melbourne for this provocation Australia as a crime scene. If you are interested in this concept of Australia as a crime scene, I urge you to go to YouTube and look at the two videos that Robbie has made about this. This this proposition. But surely we're talking in the green room about how perhaps this idea of Australia as the scene of many crimes, prosecuted crimes underpins everything we do. How does it underpin your writing and perhaps most recently, the novel benevolence?

Julie Jansen 05:08

Okay, just before I start, I'd say welcome to the land here in the Dara country. Okay, um, that's a really interesting question. I think it's a truth that the land was invaded that Australia was settled through a massacre and, and the taking of land and the dispossession of First Nations people, and I think it underpins nearly every First Nations, writer, whether they're, whatever they're writing, there's that underpinning that truth and wanting to write back against the colonial story, the great avalanche of, of whitewashing of Australian history, that of leaving indigenous people out of the story. And I think the needs for me also is to put some women, indigenous women in the center of the response to those stories. And that drives, you know, the place that I write, and also the, the novels that I write, and, and I'm finding as I'm getting older, that the my, my indigenous protagonist, women are getting older. And the novel that I've just completed his, as an auntie, who's that, you know, 50s, and the idea of her claiming back the story and the rights to tell a story about a dying River and, and the history that she comes from, of dispossession. And and, and families massacred and land lost. Yeah. So it underpins most indigenous writing.

Daniel Browning 06:36

And Melissa, in relation to your novel, Too Much Lip, here's a backpack full of cash in that very first chapter. And this one is one of very many red herrings in the novel. But there's always a sense in your novels to have not even a subtext, there is a crime to be confronted. And you talked about not one crime, not a great crime, but many great crimes.

Melissa Lucashenko 07:02

Yeah, well, for Aboriginal people, I think it's probably true to say that it's not a provocation at all. It's just a simple fact of our lives that we don't inhabit our countries in the way that we historically have. And I also think it's as accurate to say Australia is a crime is to say that Australia is a crime scene, crime scene says that something has happened, you know, it's past tense, more or less, whereas if you say Australia is a crime, Australia is a, it has all sorts of implications for literature. And it has all sorts of implications for the idea of the dying race trope. You know, this idea that all we are as victims of a crime

or we are survivors of the genocide, and we are victims of crimes, ongoing crimes, and we are victims of ongoing genocides. But I think, as I mature as a writer, while I'm going to keep that truth, very much central to my work, I also want to flesh it out and most of my work is about illuminating our lives and our possibilities. So for instance, in my forthcoming novel, it's very much about the truth of colonial history and southeast Queensland, you know, the, the terrible truths, but it's also about potential and ambition and entrepreneurship and love of Aboriginal people, both in the current era and back in, even in the colonial era. So I think we were shifting from a we're shifting from a historical silence to a historical half truths maybe. And I think truth heals, but partial truths don't. So it's important to not limit ourselves to a doom and gloom and dying race narrative. That's a fairly waffly answer.

Daniel Browning 09:07

No love it. Australia is a crime. So Kodie, in terms of writing for screen, which is what you do, for the most part, but also the play cursed. Was there a great crime you were trying to unravel? Or unpick or unpack? In cursed?

Kodie Bedford 09:26

Um, that's a very good question. I come from Western Australia, and our sort of view of on history like, I'll be completely honest, black fellas over there celebrate Australia Day because we don't know what the origins of that were East Coast black fellas are completely different to us. It's like comparing Russia with France. So we just in terms of his history, and history that the in terms of white people getting there first, The Dutch got their first and shipwrecked and just murdered the hell out of each other. And I wanted to explore that, because that was kind of the first contact of contact with black fellows over there in Geraldton, Yamaji Country. So the Batavia that's that story.

Daniel Browning 10:19

It's so dark, dark

Kodie Bedford 10:22

Dark and violent, and like, probably the biggest massacre on this in in this country and no one really knows about it. So I wanted to tell that story through the sort of the view of just an a family, well, my family, which was very multicultural, and sort of, yeah, getting sort of relating history with mental illness as well. And what Australia does is like, not tell the truth, as Melissa says, but in any work I do on the screen screen is very, I think we're coming into such a wonderful age of storytelling in terms of indigenous filmmakers, really taking ownership of Australian history and truth telling, and I've just come off a show with Warwick Thornton, we're telling the story of on the show, colonisation, through vampires, as you do. It's amazing. It's quite amazing. And I think it has the potential to reach more people because it is sort of set in this genre world. So we're, we're making comments through genre through characters. And hopefully, I've always been passionate that art can can sort of reach people that you never thought could happen before.

Daniel Browning 10:49

Julie, any vampires in your novel?

Julie Jansen 11:50

No.

Daniel Browning 11:50

Why not?

Julie Jansen 11:51

But opening up that that idea of going to different genres, and I'm sure Melissa will be the same. It's a really interesting challenge to take on these stories you want to tell about what happened to this country, but to do it in a different genre form. And the the idea of Warwick Thornton doing the vampire film, or you know, was the hairy man also was on TV. Well, that's fine, I decided to do the genre of crime, I decided, look will I write another kind of worthy kind of, you know, novel about what happened to Aboriginal people, whether it was a contemporary or historical novel, or will I actually kind of grabbed the genre of crime in order to bring in a bigger audience to actually want to engage in that story. And also, as writers, you know, you get bored to death if you keep writing the same thing again, and again and again. So the idea of challenging yourself with a different genre is, is a great challenge. Really, it's quite enjoyable, actually, even though you're writing things that are often extremely grim. But often with indigenous writers, there's a good dose of, of dark humor there, which is at the, you know, underlines a lot of the writing that it's done.

Kodie Bedford 12:56

Oh, absolutely. I mean, with this vampire show, Warwick's concept was when Captain Cook came over, or the First Fleet came over, there were 11 vials of smallpox on the ships, which I don't know why that's not taught. Why would they have the smallpox? We've turned that into 11 Vampires on the ships. And I completely constructed this show around that concept. And I just think that is such an amazing comment on history and the true history of Australia. Even though it does feature vampires. We are making a huge comment on colonisation. And I think people recognize that.

Daniel Browning 13:38

When Catherine approached me to present this or to kind of helped curate the First Nations program here at the Crime Writers Festival, I came up with this idea Melissa of Australia as a crime scene because I felt that this needed this could be a context in which other conversations might happen with First Nations writers about this idea of crime as a genre, such as dealing with the past and a reckoning with the past. In all your novels, there is a reckoning, particularly in Too Much Lip. And this story of, you know, the theft of land, but always, always written locally from a local perspective. And those animates things in the sky, the birds, the country is alive with story. And the landscape is haunted. So that's always been, I think, an important part of part of the storytelling, the stories that you tell, which come from where I come from. The landscape being haunted.

Melissa Lucashenko 14:39

Yeah, well, you know, Australia is a constellation of crime scenes, and it hasn't even begun to really think about that seriously. I think there's an archaeologist in Queensland here, Lindley Wallace, who has an IRC grant for a large research project. I think focusing on native police, the death squads of colonial Queensland, it might might the research project may be a bit bigger than that, I'm not sure. And Lynley writes and argues that on the Queensland frontier, the number of people killed mostly Aboriginal, but also, I think, including white casualties is greater than the number of Australians who died in World War One. She has a figure of around 100,000 deaths, killings. And so I think another interesting question that leads on from the idea of Australia as a crime scene is, what does it mean to Australia to have covered that up? You know, for us as black fellas it's it's just sheer hypocrisy and opportunism and feeds into our understanding of the colony as a place of, you know, as an amoral place where we don't matter and our voices don't matter. And our trauma is, you know, pretty much ignored, overlooked and

ignored. But you know, if you think, if you imagine that modern Germany had completely ignored the Holocaust, and it wasn't taught in schools, except possibly around the margins a little bit, that there were virtually no memorials to the Holocaust, and that there was a substantial Jewish population still living in Germany today that had to accept that as the ground rock of their existence, then you're getting somewhere close to understanding what the Uluru statement calls the torment of our powerlessness. No, I don't feel powerless. I feel very powerful because I can tell the truth. But I think it's rather than look at us as the dispossessed which we know all about, what does it say about Australia? And what does it imply for Australia as a political entity and as a nation to have this huge lie at its heart? I think that's a really interesting question as well.

Daniel Browning 17:13

Now, Julie, you talked about your your own in terms of your own biography, your awakening to the to the great lie, or to the cover up. What happened when you were awakened?

Julie Jansen 17:24

When you went to bed when I was quite young, and I finished university I went to, I went to live out in Burke, I was only 22, I had a little child as a single mom. And I went to work on an Aboriginal Housing Project, I didn't know how much work I did, I had a little child for heaven's sakes. But when I went out there and started spending a lot of time on the Burke reserve, and there were 400 people living on the Burke reserve, under pieces of tin with one tap and three toilets. And I'd grown up in Boronia Park, just not far from the Lane Cove river. And even though our family hid their aboriginality, we'd grown up very much, you know, following dad, fishing, gathering oysters, you know, being a lot like that. But when I went out there, and I saw the grim truth of children with diarrhea, running down their legs, and the starvation and poverty and the shocking racism in the early 70s. And it was a huge wake up call for me. And I just kind of knew then that I couldn't ever do anything else for the rest of my life, but to call out this great crime in Australia, because I growing up in Sydney, you kind of didn't notice what was happening in the rest of the country. And after I spent time in Burke, I went out to live in the Northern Territory and I went to live in Minyerrie, which is a little cattle station, which is now an Aboriginal owned cattle station. Hodgson downs cattle station, and after less than a year living in that little tiny community where there's 400 people living on a cattle station, which was owned by a Hong Kong Consortium. I was told by one of the old elders that that there was a site of a 1929 massacre, and was told in detail about how the men had been rounded up and chained and made to chop wood, and then they were all shot and the wood was used to burn the men and the women were chased down on horseback and killed with sticks so as not to waste the bullets. And this story being told to a young teacher living in a little caravan teaching in a caravan school. It's kind of the wake up that you just kind of go well this for the rest of your life. These stories underpin the way you see this country. And even now when I'm writing a book about crime about the crime of the killing of the Darling River, it all interconnects because the the crimes of taking water adjust it's significant as the crimes of of shooting people are bashing them with sticks, because now in Mainieri they're about to be fracked. With with our man taxpayer money 50 What is it? \$500 million go going towards fracking all over the country. I mean here is that little tiny community of 400 people that I taught I see the faces of those elders have now those children on the internet begging for us to stand up and say no fracking in these little communities. They frack that billabong, that community is completely dead. It's gone. And so the crime just goes on and on and on. It's a wonder most indigenous people could even get up in the morning because it's so painful.

Daniel Browning 20:30

And you talk about the overriding burden in writing and we had a conversation outside about Benevolence, your novel, it's the central the great crime in Benevolence, what is that crime that underpins that whole story?

Julie Jansen 20:49

Well, I could say, the falsifying of that crime is a pretty bad crime as well. The crime is the taking of the land and dispossession of people. So So actually, that you know, I've got ancestors who lived along the south Creek. South Creek is a creek that runs out of Windsor Wilberforce. And it was the freshwater is called why Anna Mata It's the mother Creek so Mother Creek, you need fresh water to live if you don't have any fresh water to drink. Ask the people in Manindi or Wilcannia what happens when the Darling river no longer flows? If you have no water, you know you're going to die. And that river, that freshwater river that my ancestors lived on a 10 a man set up a tannery there and started turning the skins of cattle and poisoned the water. And then there was a typhoid plague that kind of went down the creek, and my great, great uncles and Auntie's died of typhoid along that along that creek. And so it's like, it's the ongoing waves of crime. It's not just one crime. Oh, it's over. Now, let's get over it. Lets not talk about that now. And it's, it's tragic, because it does underpin the writing that you do. But also you want people to read your books. And I'm sure Melissa and Kodie will agree with this too. There has to be a way of allowing people in you can't just constantly be saying, this is a crime and it's all terrible, and you're awful, and we're great. I mean, humanity is complex, whether people are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Heritage or they're French or Italian or German. We're all we're all human beings and all of us are capable of great crimes. So it's a real juggling act being a writer trying to be fair to humanity.

Daniel Browning 22:29

Kodie is that a challenge being fair to humanity I mean, we do tell we are dark humor is is our way of kind of navigating this terrain that we have to as black fellas. But you know, we tell we tell stories, we're funny people we have a we have a great sense of humour, and Melissa's novels are hilarious. Curse was pretty funny. Humour is a way of getting through and of kind of reinscribing our humanity,

Kodie Bedford 22:51

I, I absolutely won't do anything without writing comedy in it. Because that's just who we are as a people this is how it's comes down to how we've survived mentally, physically, emotionally bonding each other through well, yeah, let's make it funny, you know. So even when I'm writing something like Mystery Road, I try to look for those very lighter moments in sort of, as a way of truth because that's just how we are I'm a very character driven writer. And when I go into writer's rooms, of course, my strongest thing is commenting on the Aboriginal characters. But I always try and make them very depending, you know, I do a lot of character psychology work and sort of push those characters into also having those lighter moments because we're not all miserable people. Yeah, exactly. That's been a kind of big saying in our family, like it'd be if we don't laugh, we cry. And I was actually having that exact same conversation the other day with a Jewish writer who shares like he's like, well, yeah, we have the humour as well. So I love that it's a coping mechanism. It's very dark, though. It's very gallows humor.

Daniel Browning 24:20

And that that great crime the Batavia when the Dutch ship was wrecked, came ashore came a cropper just off the off Yamaji country well, in the in the 18th century.

Kodie Bedford 24:33

Yes.

Daniel Browning 24:34

17th century

Kodie Bedford 24:35

1600. Yeah.

Daniel Browning 24:38

And what happened there? I mean, just for some of us on the East Coast, you don't know what happened over there on the Batavia. I mean, it's a great story.

Kodie Bedford 24:45

Absolutely insane. White fellas just gone mad. That's what I call. They basically got cheeky and tried to drive the ship faster to Indonesia and wrecked off these these islands. And I don't know, I don't know if it was because it was a curse that I think that's the original curse of that land. But they basically a few people got greedy. It was like all the power capitalism getting I want this, No, make those survivors go, they get the strongest men off the land and divide and conquer it was total Lord of the Flies on 100 times 100. So it ended up I can't remember it

Daniel Browning 25:37

They cannibalised, the cannibalised each other?

Kodie Bedford 25:40

Yeah, women and children murdered, there was so many people that it was basically a blood Island. And when the captain because he so heroically went off to get help. When he came back, he just found everyone dead, basically, except the well, there had a couple of big guys that overcame the monsters. But one of what they did they punish them hung some of the like perpetrators. But another what they did to like some of the lieutenants is sent them off to Geraldton to go live on this island forever. That was their punishment, and they would have been the first white fellas in the country. And there's stories from around there about redheaded little black fellows running around there and being cited that after that event, so that it's just fascinating to me, I think it's a good film. I'll get Russell Crowe had the rights to it, so I'll get it off him.

Daniel Browning 26:44

If you're listening, Russell... I don't know whether I mentioned this. We're talking about it off air and that was off here before before we started, a quote from Thomas, Carlyle, which is outside outside the State Library of New South Wales here. And he says in this way, the Scottish historian, the guy who conceived of the great man theory I've just learned, thanks, Julie, thanks Melissa. So Thomas Carlyle said, in books lies the soul of the whole past time, the articulate audible voice of the past? How important is it to articulate the voice of the past? Melissa, I know we're talking about Australia in as a contemporary kind of crime scene, or a crime in and of itself, that I hear the articulate audible voice of the past in your novels. I mean, maybe that's my own bias.

Melissa Lucashenko 27:38

Well, thank you. And it would be nice to think so to think that sitting here, that I could tap into those past voices. But I think that might be a conceit from it as an author if I thought I could do that. And so with my novel that I've just written the first draft of as we were saying before, set in 1855, Brisbane, one of

the reasons I set in 1855, was because I thought it was beyond my scope as an author and as an Aboriginal person to reach back into any further back into history into pre contact time, I think it's important to know your limitations as a writer and, and to understand the way that Aboriginal texts are received here and overseas. As I was saying to you before, I've got 10,000 words of notes, to feed into and incorporate into my first draft of this novel. And that's because every single historical fact, is going to be gone over with a fine tooth comb by the enemies of truth telling, by the forces of conservatism. I won't name them, I don't need to name them. But even though it's a novel, we are doing some of the work of historians. And I don't pretend to be historian but it's, it's incredibly important to get those facts right, if we're going to try and bring the past to life for a mainstream audience. Yeah, I mean, you wrote you use the word revenge before Daniel, earlier in the conversation and, and that's an interesting thing, too. I mean, I had a strange experience about must be going on for three years ago now. I was in bed one morning, and I woke from a dream. And I'm not a particularly spiritual person. I've had a few little experiences like most of us have, but in the dream, it felt like a visitation. And I had thought that I was I was going to write this story talk about what happened in colonial Brisbane and say, you know, all these terrible things happen, but we've survived and we thrive and and life goes on. And this is a love story set in that era. And I had this dream and it really felt like a visitation from the ancestors who said, you have to write about love. That this has to be a story not just a romance between a man and a woman, but something that embodies and works towards love. And you know, my radical political friends will probably be wanting to have my guts for garters to hear me say this. And it really took me aback that I changed my focus. And so I thought what I have to do is to show it could have been different. Okay, to show me what happened, but also to point to the fact that it wasn't inevitable. There could have been a, there could have been a more just colonisation of Australia, if colonisation was inevitable. It could have been done on different terms. And that's part of what I'm writing about.

Daniel Browning 31:00

And yeah, that Julie, we were talking about that too, about, you know, this our story, our national story, if we are a representation of a national story, it's impossible without love. We're talking about crime and crimes against humanity, genocide, invasion, this position, but there is this other subtext, which is, this story is also underwritten by love.

Julie Jansen 31:22

Yes. Well, I mean, we were talking earlier and just saying, Well, you know, we are the colour we are, because this, there have been relationships in you know, it's complex, it's complex. Grandpa, grandma older, you know, you know that our families are complex, you know, my my mom's of English Heritage and constant struggle. As my mother says if I had known he was Aboriginal, I would never have married him. Just kind of just how do you think that makes me feel, you know, but you know, she's 94. Now it's too late to, to kind of undo that. Undo that. But I'm obviously interested in what Melissa was saying about the notion of taking a true history and historical facts, getting them absolutely correct, because there'll be, you know, under the lens, and I can agree with what she's saying, but I'm writing a sequel now to to Benevolence, called the compassion. And I've decided to just throw that history out the window. And it's kind of been extremely liberating for me to do that, while I have the bones of the history, it's almost like I want to rewrite the history in the way that that I want to see it. So it becomes a rather than historical fiction, it becomes a piece of fiction based vaguely on history, and it's much more freeing to write that kind of story with an Aboriginal heroine right in the middle of it, my very own female kind of, you know, Captain Thunderbolt or something in the middle of it. And, and it can be quite liberating sometimes to transgress the genre, the the kind of shackles of historical fiction, and to and to

let yourself free whether or not I'm successful with that. By the sound of it by doing the, you know, the smallpox as vampires is another way of of transgressing that genre.

Daniel Browning 33:09

Your Kodie speculative fiction, I mean, it's a way of kind of we want to talk in broad terms about like vampires, and, you know, that kind of fictional world. But speculative fiction, speculative fiction is a way of kind of dealing with confronting this question of Australia as a crime scene of not dealing with every single historical fact, but actually speculating about what could have happened what might have happened if things had been had been done differently.

Kodie Bedford 33:36

Oh, yeah, for sure. And I just love positioning. Like putting the black lens over and making like black fillers, vampire hunters, like I love that gives me strength as a person who grew up the reason I'm a screenwriter is because of Buffy. I wanted to be Buffy. And so it's a dream come true, not only to write a vampire genre series, but a vampire genre series with black fellas actually saying something and whenever I take a piece of work I want to make sure it says something even if it's in a big genres ridiculous world where I had to actually research do vampires drink beer, I'm just like, it's just yeah, it just insane. I've also wrote a play at a went to Melbourne Fringe Festival and had like two people in the audience every night it was amazingly packed out. But it was, The Coat Street collective it was about black fellas in space. We wrote a story about black fellas colonising space because why not? We and it was so much fun. It was a comedy and unfortunately like two people saw it and they loved it. The reviews were glowing. It was a lot of fun, but even just doing it through that, I just I want to see that on screen like black fellas in space because you know, we put our people front and center it says something automatically. Writing, even writing Mystery Road, which at its core is a mystery, crime drama and formulating that in a writers room, we always go, we want three crimes in this series to explore the historical crime, which in the first series was Judy Davis has found out, there was a massacre on her big rich station. And like then the crime from 10 years ago, and then the current crime which brings very handsome person into town on his couch with his cowboy hat. And iss tight jeans. So we were like, how do we? Yeah, we, we basically formulated or structured the series in that way. But what that does is like, shows that these effects of like that first crime, that massacre still affects people today. I recently saw one of my best friends, Alan Clark, he directed the Bowraville documentary, which recently filmed recently screened at the Sydney Film Festival. I don't think a white director would ever do this, but a black, hes a black, he's from Burke is a black fella. He started the documentary through the perspective of the kids in Bowraville, the current day kids who'd never met these Bowraville kids that went missing. And it showed like that crime that happened 10,20 years ago, I sorry, I forget the exact time still affects the generation today, that never ever. It never, they never met the people, but they still carry the scars. And I find that so fucking fascinating, sorry I swore. I find that fascinating, because it really shows that we really haven't dealt with Australia's original crime. And that's the kind of thing I want to explore and art in screen. I just love doing that. Because we're still trying to find our identity as Australians. And it's not just black fella history, it's our history. That's what's something I'm really passionate about that it's more of our history. It's, this is what brought us together. So let's deal with it.

Julie Jansen 37:32

And I just want to say something about that Bowraville situation, because I was up in Bowraville, soon after that crime happened, but and the people there of Bowraville, what was so what is still painful of the 30 years is that the man who did it used to go down to the reserve where people were living, and

hang out the window with a shotgun and swear at people and say, and I got away with it, you know, F the lot of you. Just this blatant racist cruelty that went on for so long, so it's a very complex story.

Daniel Browning 38:07

Yeah, well, the failure to investigate is a crime. You know, delayed, we talked about justice. delayed is justice denied. And this whole idea of justice to Melissa is a is a theme. The kind of always in the background, I wouldn't say subtext, but justice, this idea of what justice is, I'm not talking about a legal concept here. I'm talking about the idea of justice, as we might anticipate it. Do you think about that term? Justice, I'm removing all kinds of removing removing it from the statute books. The idea of a justice, does it play out, in your mind when you when you're writing, say your novels.

Melissa Lucashenko 38:49

Yeah, very much very much. And not just in writing novels, but in everyday life, Daniel, and, you know, anyone that's got even a basic grasp of Aboriginal law knows that it's founded in justice and, and compassion and everyone having a place and everyone having a role in society. You know, I always remember Aunt Mary Graham complimentary elder saying to me in 1998, around the time I first got to know her, and she's, I think I'd written, I'd just published my first book, I think, and she said, Melissa, what you need to understand is, when the colonists came, the worst thing they did wasn't stealing the land. And it wasn't the killings and the rapes. And it wasn't even the removal of our children. But worst thing they did is that they brought with them this idea that life is about competition and survival. And that has resonated with me really strongly over the years, that material things, not that land is just material, of course. But material loss is one thing. And the loss of family and the loss of life is one thing, but the loss of a, an understanding of the world, she was saying that that's one of the most powerful colonising tools. You know, this idea that life was about struggle and fighting the land and chaining people up and whipping people into submission, rather than living together as brothers and sisters in peace, you know, and creating the world's first democracy, and creating diplomacy between nations. So when I think about justice, I do actually think about laws, I think about the rule of law, but it's the rule of Aboriginal law, you know. And when people want to argue the toss with me about colonisation, I decided that you either believe in the rule of law, or you don't, you know, and if you believe in the rule of law, then there have been great wrongs, and those great wrongs have consequences, and we are all still living with them. As Kodie said, this isn't our history. This is Australia's history. And if you're talking about foundation myths, you know, what's more powerful than a white bloke, going back to the scene of his crime, hanging a shotgun out the side of his car, and telling the black fellas that they can get fucked because he got away with it, you know, how's that for a perfect foundation myth of Australia, or Kodie's, you know, Ireland, full of cannibals and murderers, turning on each other, off shore and not having set foot on Yamaji land yet. I mean, that's just the most perfect encapsulation of the colonial mindset that I've ever heard. But Australia doesn't know that these are their foundation myths, they think their foundation myth, you know, Ned Kelly, or the Anzacs, or something a little bit more palatable. And the job of all of us is to, is to make different and new foundation myths founded on actual justice.

Daniel Browning 42:08

And this whole concept to Julie of truth telling, and, you know, Melissa described how the increasingly the work of fiction is doing the work of history or maybe even politics. So, that idea of truth telling, when you sit down to write your novels, are you are you telling some kind of truth,

Julie Jansen 42:30

I also want to write back against all the whitewashing of indigenous history in this country. And the, the very fashionable recent kind of finding by a lot of mainstream non Aboriginal writers suddenly discovered Aboriginal people are part of Australian history. So we'd better throw in a couple of those characters and make them really vivid, steal a few stories. And you know, the book will sell a lot of copies and it's kind of now kind of fashionable. To even have Aboriginal people speak for God's sake, even in language my good God didn't know they could speak. Now look, I'm sounding really cynical, but I do get extremely annoyed at the sudden kind of discovery of, of Aboriginal characters when there are you know, sometimes people say "oh indigenous writers so easy for you to get published." Oh, God, I wish that was true. My poor husband has to listen to me whinge all the time. It is it's extremely difficult as it is for any any person any person starting out. But the idea of stories are taken and and used without permissions without respect without some kind of, of reaching out and following a protocol, which everyone thought was a done and dusted idea. years ago, it just seems to be washed away. And that brings tears to my eyes. So this modicum of respect and writing a story about the Darling river. I went on a long trip and spent quite a lot of time talking to elders along the Darling river because I haven't lived there for a very long time. And, and Auntie Evelyn Bates spent a lot of time with me at Menendez, talking about her stories in return for which she was paid for spending the time with me and, and I asked permissions of other elders from Mauree and and don't assume for a minute that I have a right as an indigenous person from Sydney to take anyone else's stories, but rather it has to be done in a spirit of of cooperation and respect and protocols. And I just despair that seems to be like you know, that was 10 years ago Julie, forget about that. Now we've moved on.

Daniel Browning 44:37

Kodie, this is happening increasingly in film in screen and film. You know, these all of a sudden black characters are appearing. And, you know, you're lucky enough to be in a writers room and then kind of animate black fella characters.

Kodie Bedford 44:51

And no, I mean, it's interesting because I as an indigenous woman, I I get often get caught into writers rooms, because there's an indigenous character. And I'm like, I'm a writer, I'm so much more than that. But at the same time, I'm pitching these Aboriginal characters because I want representation. So it was a, it's a very weird line that I walk. But at same time, I've had white writers say to me, like, in confidence "oh so easy for you to get work, isn't it?" And I'm like, "Well, you had your time." You had how many years in film and TV, just because we're taking ownership of our stories now, which I'm very proud of, for example, like this vampire show I keep banging on because I only just come off set as the last day of shoot today. So it's, and it's airing in 15 days. This vampire show, is made by an American network. And it was the first time I've been in an all black room. It was amazing. Like, they the Americans got it, they got it, that they let me as I became the head writer of that show, and Warwick, they just let us write authentic language. Chuck in slang, I tell you what, I've worked with the ABC on several projects, I always get told to take my black fella of slang out because they say white fellass will not get that you're writing for a white audience. The Americans got it. They're like, you can write whatever you want. And it just brings such an authenticity. And it brings such pride to me. And I know that black fellas are going to be really proud of that show. And if it doesn't go to second series, even if they probably won't see it, because it's on an American network. But what we're showcasing to the world is our history. And Australians have this funny thing where if you make it overseas, then they'll be proud of you, you know? So hopefully, that won't happen. But yeah, it's interesting, like pitching black shows to Australian networks is actually really hard. Work for me personally, I've been I've been in a riot screenwriter, or in this industry for a good 10 years now. And it's really hard because they're like, well, we can't sell this.

I've never got a I'm good at what I do. I'm always working. I've never got an offer from a channel seven or Channel Nine show. It's always ABC and SBS. And I'm very proud to work alongside ABC and SBS. Thank God we have them because they're the ones doing the Australian drama, but it's also hard because you know, at the end, there's more white executives or non Indigenous executives, sort of gatekeeping the stories and that for me, isn't is the next fight is getting better though. I'm, I'm pretty happy with the way things are going because we are taking ownership of the stories. And finally we're sort of shifting the sort of lens to the black lens. And like people like Sally Riley who's the head of fiction at ABC. She's a wiradjuri woman so she gets it she brought Redfern now to mainstream ABC that show was the first Aboriginal show, Written, directed produced by Aboriginal people. And it changed the game because it got us in the mainstream. So yeah, we're hot right now. And I'm taking the money. So thank you.

Julie Jansen 48:37

Well, this is going with Harper Harper via the same as I am just Harper Collins, Melissa.

Melissa Lucashenko 48:43

No, no.

Daniel Browning 48:46

You QP

Melissa Lucashenko 48:47

Yeah, I think it's I think the press release has gone out that I'm my novel is coming out with QP. Either next year or the year after. And yeah, I'm pretty proud of it. At first draft stage, Daniel, so I'm

Daniel Browning 49:08

1000 pages 10,000? How many? How many? How many pages of notes have you got?

Melissa Lucashenko 49:12

I've got 10,000 words of dot points to get. That's right. Yeah, so it's a big project. But you know, it's important culturally, it's important as an artist and just as a human being as a citizen of the world to, to try and to try and aim for something a bit transformative, and to try and tell the truth and to tell it in a way that's compelling and beautiful. And which helps.

Daniel Browning 49:46

By that, now, just harking back to what Kodie said about, you know, this kind of sense of, you know, black Americans know how to do it or black, you know, the international networks or how to do this. When you're writing for or, you know, that kind of having in your mind's eye, Melissa, that that audience that that reader, the general reader, whoever that is that person that you look to when you're writing or the person you think of when you're writing? How do you interpret, you know, what's happened here? The great crime, in essence that I've been talking about all the great crimes? How do you interpret that for international audiences, someone who doesn't know anything about Australian history or about us, as black fellas, you think about that?

Melissa Lucashenko 50:30

I don't think I've ever drawn much of a distinction, Daniel, because non Aboriginal people here do know so little about us and so little about our history and about our contemporary life as well, you know, the

crimes, the crimes didn't stop in 1788, you know, Oxley, John Oxley, first saw the Mailwasher, the Brisbane River in 1823. He named at the Brisbane River in 1824. And in 1825, is when the first Europeans came and started living on the Brisbane River. But the the impacts of that colonisation in my cousin's family today, you know, they're in their in her poverty, they're in her children being called niggers and boongs at school and not having any recourse except to ignore it and suffer, you know, that indignity or to lash out and get expelled and be set on a treadmill towards prison. All these things, all the all the homelessness, you know, the domestic violence, all these things can be traced back very clearly, to our dispossession. That's, that's no secret at all, to us. But I think it's, it's just one of those things that it's easier not to think about if you're a white Australian living in suburbia or living on the river, in an apartment looking out and not knowing what happened there. So no, I don't make a big distinction between writing for Australian audiences and overseas audience. All I say is, the audience has to care about my characters, the audience has to be completely engrossed in the story and his love Anita, who's working for the Patriot family, as a servant of a leading white family in Brisbane, they have to care, they have to know these people. And if they don't care about them and know them, then why would they care about the tragedies of their people.

Daniel Browning 50:30

So that's the love, the love at the core.

Melissa Lucashenko 52:37

That's the love story that I think in a might not have communicated properly what I meant about the dream I had and the kind of visitation what that was much more than it being a love story, that was, that was about our law, saying that every every living being matters, and that, if I'm not writing, to honor all life, then I'm doing damage to our culture and our law. That was what I took from the dream and to say that I have to make something more potent than just, just telling the truth of history. I had to do do more and go beyond that. And I hope I have.

Daniel Browning 53:23

Understood understood. Julie, just quickly, before we run out of time, I want to talk that we've talked about Melissa's forthcoming novel, this river of bones we talked, you mentioned it sit on the Darling river to do with invoke great environmental crimes.

Julie Jansen 53:43

Because I lived on the Darling river when I was young, I have a real kind of heart place for the Darling river. And I go up there quite often, Michael and I drive up there. And seeing the the crime of that river completely dry at one stage being able to just stand in the river and there was nothing but some dying kangaroos on it, you just think there's really something very, very wrong with this picture, the environmental degradation and the destruction and not the government not acknowledging climate change. And, and that was why I decided to set a novel in in that area, but also to honour all the Aunts. And when Melissa talks about writing a story where human beings love each other. And being creating characters that are interconnected and a true families that we can believe in is really, really important. Otherwise you haven't done your job as a novelist. And so creating a family that lives on the Darling River and cares about the river and political activists. But they've you know, they've got Uncle Jack living with them as who's who's got schizophrenia I had a brother who had schizophrenia so that the notion of mental health coming into into families, whether they're Aboriginal or non Aboriginal families, and investigating the love still that can be when a family even if somebody has an alcohol problem like my dad did or whatever, and and loving people despite their their faults and frailties, and it's, you know,

you could be writing about a Russian family. I mean, it's we're part of humanity. But for me to write a novel about climate change and political action became something that I, I just had to do. I had to write one book that it explained what I felt about what had happened to the Darling River. Yeah.

Daniel Browning 55:22

There's also a death in custody. Yeah, in the heart, at the heart of that story. And that's something Melissa, we could spend, spend a whole other session talking about. In terms of unprosecuted crimes, we talked about Bowraville. You know, I worked on a six part podcast with Alan Clark, who's made the Bowraville documentary about the death and custody of a young Aboriginal man in 1993. In Brisbane, a man called young man called Daniel York. These crimes, you know, need to be explored. And if there is a crime, what is that crime, and it's really explicating that most of you've done a lot of work with Sisters Inside and this idea of the prisons and abolition and all those crimes that, you know, that are present there, but we live we live with every day that big, great crime and those many great crimes. But talk about a little bit about the work with Sisters Inside. It's always fascinating to me to know, there's this there's this other side of you passionate about, about what happens to women in in prison.

Melissa Lucashenko 56:28

Yeah, well, how long have you got? Yeah, there was a death in custody this week in Townsville, another fatality not not an Aboriginal woman, but a Pacific a woman died in a cell in Townsville, and you know, prisons are places of great violence. And they're really the the places where government policies go to fail. It's the place where housing policy goes to die. Literally, it's the place where mental health policy goes to fail. It's the place where education policies go to fail and economic policies generally, because poverty, you know, crime is born of poverty and of our dispossession. So yeah, 25 odd years ago, I went to a meeting community meeting in West End in Brisbane. And a few of us sat around, and my interest came because, you know, because I'm Aboriginal and because I'm a feminist. And it was particularly because my brother spent, my oldest brother spent most of his life until the age of 50, in prison. And that was because of his victimization at the hands of my white father, who was extremely violent towards him. And that brother left the family at 15, in fear of his life. So sisters inside works with women in prison who have committed offenses against Australian law, and 99 times out of 100. Those people are also victims before they become offenders. Particularly in the case of Aboriginal women, you know, that it's easy to say that Aboriginal woman pinched a car or, you know, stole something or, you know, ran off and didn't pay fines for years, and so she has to go and sit in a cell to atone for that. And no one seems to think that it's important to atone for the fact that that woman's ancestors were murdered and that woman's parents or siblings or herself were taken by the Australian state in a genocidal policy of assimilation. You know, people stand on our stolen land and call us these that always makes me shake my head.

Daniel Browning 58:47

Indeed, fantastic. Well, can you please join me in thanking Julie Jansen, Melissa Lukashenko and Cody Bedford and Australia is a crime scene.

Julie Jansen 58:57

Thank you to Daniel fantastic work. Thank you.

Andy Muir 58:59

Thank you for listening. If you enjoyed that session from last year's Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival, then join us this September in person or online for what will be another huge weekend of crime writing

and crime writers at the 2022 Festival. Go to the Bad Sydney website, sign up for the newsletter and follow us on social media to be informed as soon as the 2022 program and the tickets are released. We hope to see you there and make sure you come up and say hello. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the Bad: All About Crime podcast from Bad: Sydney Crime Writers Festival.

Suzanne Leal 59:35

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 59:42

The books featured in this episode are available for 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 59:52

If you love listening to all about crime, please give us a rating and review in your favourite podcast app, so other people can discover us too.

Andy Muir 1:00:00

The views, opinions and attitudes expressed in this episode of All About Crime are those of the participants or not those of the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival

Suzanne Leal 1:00:07

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