Rosalie Ham in conversation with Bruno Lettieri

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Kirsty: Hello, My name is Kirsty and I’m one of the librarians here at Wyndham City Libraries. I’d like to thank you all for joining us this evening and we’re just going to start with an acknowledgement of country. Wyndham City Council recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Custodians of the lands on which Australia was founded. Council acknowledges the Wathaurong, Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Wyndham City is being built. Council pays respect to the wisdom and diversity of past and present Elders. We share commitment to nurturing future generations of Elders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It gives me great pleasure to introduce our guests tonight: interviewer and man about the ‘locked down’ town, Bruno Lettieri; and bestselling Australian author and teacher Rosalie Ham. So, I’ll hand it over to you…

Bruno: Rosalie! Bonasera! Good evening! Selamat Malam! How are you?

Rosalie: I'm well, thank you. I can't –

Bruno: Where are you?

Rosalie: – I can’t speak any other languages, sorry, so I'll just have to say good evening.

Bruno: Well you toured South America on a motorcycle, I’m told, but we'll talk about that later. But where are you exactly? What suburb are you in? What room are you in?

Rosalie: I'm in beautiful downtown, actually not downtown, but I’m in beautiful Brunswick, not far from the zoo or the golf course.

Bruno: And is this your special writing room that we can see behind you, or?

Rosalie: No, it's the only room in the house where there wasn't other people [unintelligible] watching television, so it's the spare room and I apologise for doing it [unintelligible] interesting to look at.

Bruno: I thought we were going to be in your studio and I was going to say, “Show us your studio?” Here's the writer in her natural habitat.

Rosalie: Oh my gosh! If only I –

Bruno: – No, that's OK. No, no, I understand. I’m in Clifton Hill, I could almost open my balcony, Rosalie and bellow, wouldn't that be great?

Rosalie: Oh, with Clifton Hills that way, yeah.

Bruno: [Laughs] Don't ask me. Tell me, tell me, are writers – and you’re probably going to say, “Well writers are a very diverse bunch” – but are writers more temperamentally suited to this crazy period of lockdown? Are writers able to sometimes, somehow go, “I'm used to going within, I'm used to being in solitude, I'm used to being in my little tower, this doesn't disturb me too badly.”

Rosalie: That's completely accurate. But we’re a little bit cautious, it was a secret up until you’ve just mentioned it, but there's a few writers I know and we’re all looking at each other going, “What a wonderful thing!” Even book shop owners, people who own bookshops, I’ve walked in to collect books and they're saying, “Aren’t we having a lovely time?” And I’ve said, “Yes, we are.” But we're still very much aware that the rest of the world's having a terrible time, but for us, it's a bit of a gift, I have to say.

Bruno: You're waiting for your new book to come, ’The Writer’s’ – ‘The Dressmaker’s Secret,’ not the Writer’s Secret. Is that a time of great anxiety? Is it a time of great relief? Is a time of going, “I can just now wait for it to come. Other people who are fashioning the book, who have to publicise it, it's now over to them, but I've done my bit.”

Rosalie: All of the above. It's a little bit nerve-wracking, there was an article in the paper the other day and it was talking about the fact that this year 20% – there's a 20% increase in the amount of books that have been published in the four weeks before Christmas. During that period, that's when all the sales happened and so I was, I felt quite content up until that point, and then I went, “Oh, I’ve got an extra 20% of people to cope with.” But those things are momentary, the sense for me is one of relief, and I’m really happy that I’ve finally got the book out there. So I swing between being anxious about it and being elated that it’s not there. And in the meantime, I’ve cleaned the shed and I’m just about to turn my attention to the attic. Every drawer and cupboard in my house is completely organised and I’m sure I’m not the only person that’s doing that at this time.

Bruno: Helen Garner tells me that she just goes demented when she has just finished a book and sometimes she’s spent seven years on it, and the first question people ask her is, “Are you working on another one?” And she says, “No, I just want to go lie down and not move for a year.” Do you feel a bit like that after you've completed a work? Did you feel something has been sort of taken out of you and you really do just need to recover and rest and not write a line at all?

Rosalie: For this one, yes. I do feel that because there was a bit of a rush to get it all done on time over the last year. So I've been working fairly solidly, so I haven't really thought about anything else. But normally, by the time I start talking about my book, it's already been completed a year and is waiting its turn, and so I’ve usually – creativity’s kind of dropped into my mind and I’ve often got another idea. But now I have no idea, I'm panicking a little bit. Hence the cleaning of the shed and the rest of it.

Bruno: The other sense I get from Sofie Laguna is when I’ve met her and I'm excited about the book and of course she's already gone, “But I've moved on already in some sense too.” And she's not being disrespectful to the excitement of the audience, it’s because we're just meeting it and we're just coming into that world that she’s just created for us. So there's that bit of a disconnect, I suspect. Is that true?

Rosalie: Absolutely, that's been the case in my previous four novels that I've completed, there’s been that gap of a year before I have to start talking about it again. And I have actually moved on. But there's this lovely thing and I did it just this afternoon, I suddenly thought, “Oh my gosh, I've got to talk to Bruno and the world tonight about this.” I forgot what it's actually about, what did I write, what am I going to say? How am I going to explain it? So I went back and revisited a few pages of it and read it through, and I thought, “Actually, this is not too bad.” This’ll be [unintelligible] –

Bruno: Is that right?

Rosalie: – yeah, well that was only those pages, if I’d read on I might have started doubting, so I read a few pages. So I’m kind of a little bit back with the story now. I also just got the proof, just this week and so that's what I've been reading. And that's not how the book will look but I’ve got the proof cover of it. So it's a solid, like it's a thing now and I'm feeling quite smug.

Bruno: Does the physicality of the book, the arrival of the book, and it's got your name and I don't see you as being a person full of hubris and arrogance at all, Rosalie, from the few times we’ve met, but there must be a child-like excitement of going, “This is something I've crafted.” Obviously it's an ensemble performance because others have also been part of it too. Is that joy still there? As my glasses fall apart. [Laughs]

Rosalie: Yeah, as your glasses fall apart. It is, there's nothing better than seeing that and I'm quite impressed because it's actually quite fat. I didn't think it was going to be that fat. It arrived in the post and I looked at it and I went, “Oh, how marvellous,” and got on with it and today when I went back to it and picked it up, I just went, “Oh my gosh, how fantastic is that! Look at that! That's amazing.” And I'm feeling, as I say, I'm feeling quite smug at this precise moment now that you mention it.

Bruno: We don't get too used to that feeling, it's not like going, “Well, I've done this before, and this is a bit ho-hum.”

Rosalie: If it happened every week we would, but given it only happens every four or five years, we're allowed to allow ourselves a little bit of joy. Because you do, you're so often finished the book, or the play, or the film, or whatever it is, the painting, whatever you're working on, you kind of go, “Alright, now I’m finished now,” and you go away and do something else for a month. And then you come back and face the piece of art again and think, “This is not what I meant, this is not actually what I wanted to say, or this is not right, or I've done it wrong, or whatever.” So then you start again. So each draft there's an end and you think, “Oh well, I finished now,” and you say to people, “Oh, I’ve finished,” and then but you haven't, you’ve still got four or five more drafts to go of the whole thing. So there's a bit of that goes on.

Bruno: Once it's out in the world, Rosalie, it's kind of out, isn't it? And irrespective of whether you go back and you go, “There are bits there that I would love to refashion, or bits that I'd love to do again,” that's not possible. Is it difficult to release the thing into the world knowing that it might have imperfections in your mind? And are you better at being at peace with that and going, “There's not a lot I can do about that.”

Rosalie: Again, it depends on your mood and occasionally when you do have to pick up a book that you wrote 10 years ago, because someone's asked a question or you've got to talk to somebody about it and you read it and you think, “That could have been much better. I’ve ruined that, I could’ve done that much better.” And so you live with this whole thing of, “It could have been better. And if you’d just let me have my time again, I will change that and make it better.” Because that’s the whole object is to, to my mind anyway, when you write something, you write it and then you go back to it and make it better and you can do that endlessly. I could do that with all of my books until I'm 98. But you can't, you've just got to let it go. And the other thing is that you can spend a lot of time on your story and say exactly what you want to say and it goes out there and people will read something else entirely, entirely different. Which is always lovely, it's a nice surprise.

Bruno: Is the idea of accompanying your book out into the world and having to speak to it, is that something that you go, “It should just be now between the reader and the book, and it shouldn't need my kind of commentary, and it shouldn't need my explanation.” But we understand the role that you have to play in terms of keeping that kind of alive in the public imagination too. Do you feel ambivalent about that role, or do you go, “No, this is just another part of it and I can enjoy that for what it is, and meeting my readership and seeing how they’ve reacted to my book.”

Rosalie: Look, for me, I don't know if this is true of all writers, but for me the opportunity to talk about something that's taken five long years to write is a wonderful thing. So when people ask me, or when I go and do library talks or school talks and people discuss things with me, particularly if they bring up things that I didn't notice, I'm thrilled to bits. And there's a lot of writers, I'm so fortunate because ‘The Dressmaker’ is on the English list and it’s on the V.C.E Lit list now, and so, I get asked a lot of questions about it, and that to me is very fortunate. But a lot of books go out into the world and they're brilliant books, and they’re great books, and thousands of people read them, if not more, or four people read them, either way the author isn't asked to speak about it.

And I sometimes feel that that's kind of not fair, you know? Because it's something, it’s a creative, wonderful thing that you've spent years doing and you want some sort of acknowledgement for it. And so I'm very fortunate that I do get that acknowledgement, but there's a lot of writers that don't. I feel sorry for people that write films and plays and do paintings, and all those sort of things and nobody sees them.

Bruno: Is writing more of an ensemble performance than we give it credit for? But you mentioned film, of course in film the credits go up and the credits last for minutes, don't they? I'm thinking about you and your editors, I'm thinking about you and your publishers, and the way they are able to maybe zoom in on something and go, “This isn't working,” or, “You need to cut lots of this,” and all that, they're all creative involvements as well, aren’t they, Rosalie?

Rosalie: They are, they are. And a good editor will make your book better. And they do. And they slice things out and it hurts a little bit. I used to write plays many years ago and I wasn't comfortable with the collaboration all that much. I felt, I used to keep having to make far too many compromises along the way and I personally wasn't comfortable with that. I probably would be now, because I know that it is an ensemble cast that requires getting a good piece of work out there. But one of the reasons I've turned to writing novels was because I wasn't at that point in my life accustomed to people contributing and I wasn't comfortable with it.

But as I say now, I am. And I'm grateful because the editors – when I sent the manuscript to this one off, ‘The Dressmaker’s Secret,’ they wrote back and said, “This is fine, we’d like to publish it, that’s OK.” And then I went, “Oh, good.” Knowing full well that I was going to have to cut probably 10–20 thousand words, possibly shift things around and I was prepared for that now. And grateful, because they do, they make it better, they make it tighter and they pick up all the mistakes. And when you're blabbing on for too long, it's not necessary, cut it, for [reason of the story?].

Bruno: Rosalie, I felt really naughty about this interview in some ways in that, one, I felt that it was your first and the book hasn't even come out, and it's not due out for a while, and you had to almost smuggle me a draft of the first two chapters and we're kind of working off that. And part of me felt like saying, “Rosalie, I’ve just photocopied 100,000 and sent it out, and I'm going to totally bring your book – I haven't done that at all.

Rosalie: No but [unintelligible]

Bruno: Tell me about the firstness of it, the fact that this is your first time talking about it and as yet we haven't really gone through all the protocols normally we would have gone through; the book’d be ready, I would have read it all. But we have to work off me having only read snippets of it. Does that make this whole exchange, this conversation between us a little bit strange, or do you go, “What the heck, let's just do it and see where it goes.”

Rosalie: Yeah, no, I'm a, “What the heck, let’s just see it and see where it goes,” thing. Because of the nature of the book and because of the content of the story, I'm a bit loath to put it out there too soon. So I only sent you a couple of chapters because the third chapter is where you find out what the secret is, the dressmaker’s secret. So, because Tilly Dunnage has got secrets from her past that she's hiding from her present and her future, and she's got secrets from her present that she's hiding from her past, the people of Dungatar. So, you've got to find out what those secrets are, and I have to, I've steeled myself to be able to say now, if I ever get to do anymore author events, I have to say to people, “If you know what happens, can you not ask me about it in front of 400 people who haven't read it yet.” So I have to, it's a bit like that.

Bruno: But I like that, in fact. When I've interviewed you before, I've not actually read the last third of your book deliberately. And I've done that as a kind of a rule. Here I don't know 90% of your book, which I thought it might add to a certain crypticness and a little bit of secrecy that we could share with the audience, which is kind of a theme of your book as well, so I thought that we could play very naughtily, you know? So you're going to remember this interview in years to come, you're going to go, “Well, there's only two chapters out and this is the first of.” The first of things, is that still an important aspect of your life? Do you still thrill to the first time doing this, or reading that, or experiencing this, are you still up for the first-time events?

Rosalie: Absolutely, because by the time you get to my age –

Bruno: You're not gonna tell us how old you are, of course. [laughs].

Rosalie: – but I've done a lot of things, so the first time for things is quite a special thing. Are they going to work, your glasses?

Bruno: That’s OK. [laughs] We’re doing OK.

Rosalie: Yeah, no, I'm perfectly happy to do the first time of anything. I think that's the way to progress and grow and live, and move through life. New chapter, new things.

Bruno: Yev Yevtushenko, one of my favourite poets says in one of his poems, he says “When a person dies, a whole world dies.” And he goes, “Their first kiss, their first snow, their first experience of snow.” I've always loved that immensely. So I got a really big thrill out of getting your manuscript. Mostly was this book always going to be? Or was it something that your publishers have gone, “There is such momentum in the book and the film, ‘The Dressmaker,’ that we can still, we’ve still got a massive audience for this? Or did you always write the first one going, “There's going to be another book.”

Rosalie: No, not at all. In fact it wasn't until I started doing talks in schools, when ‘The Dressmaker’ was on the literature list. And one of the tasks that the kids had to do, was they had to write a brand new scene that spoke of scenes that already existed in the book, but weren’t in the book. And so I would hear some of these, the kids would read them out to me and they had some fantastic ideas. But then what they would also say was, “We think we know where Tilly went, we think we know where she is now.” And they had all these endings that they’d created for Tilly Dunnage. And for a long, long time I didn't want to mess with that. I thought, “Well I'll just leave that.” But then, equally, there was a whole lot of people saying, “Will there be a sequel? Can you tell us what happens next? Is she alright? Does she find love again?” All that kind of stuff. And so, and it's been 20 years almost exactly –

Bruno: We forget that, don't we?

Rosalie: – yeah, that ‘The Dressmaker’ came out. So probably about, I don't know, 12 years ago, I started just making notes. And then it became a bit of an obsession. And so whenever I could, I would write a little bit here and there, and whenever your head isn’t bothered by anything else, you're on a long car journey, or bored to tears somewhere. You know, it's like the creative muse just drops in and things that have been sitting at the back, somehow inveigle their way to the front, and new thoughts come. So those sort of things started happening and they would kind of mushroom for a while and then they would subside, and I’d get on with something else. All that kind of stuff, so eventually, I just thought, “Alright, I will write this book now, because I figured out what's going to happen, and I'm going to do it,” But the problem with the sequel is that the story has to have progressed a great deal.

The characters have to develop, the situation has to be new, but not, but familiar, but not repeated. And there’s huge expectation, of course, especially after the film. Yeah, it was a little bit daunting to be so audacious as to kill one of the people thought happened in their own dreams, and try and come out with something that was never going to deliver the first emotional impact in the way that ‘The Dressmaker’ did. It was never going to meet that emotional love or hatred or whatever it is that people responded to. So it was a little bit dodgy. So I finished it and I finished a couple of drafts, it was in very rough condition. And to find out whether or not it was going to work, the idea was going to be alright and if it was going to be a sellable thing, if it was going to be a product. I just sent it off to the publishers, and they wrote back and said, “Yes, it's good. It's fine.” And from that moment, when you're given affirmation when somebody — even if they tell you there's something wrong with it — at least they’ve read it, and they've got through it, and they've responded to it. So once I had the affirmation, then I just went with it and re-wrote like a mad woman.

Bruno: And if your publisher had’ve gone, “This is not gonna fly, this is not gonna work,” would you have been crushed by that assessment? Or would you have taken it on the chin and gone, “I'm prepared to go and do the work and do what I have to do,”?

Rosalie: I would have been crushed initially. I probably would have drunk too much wine and then I would have been indignant. And then I would have been defiant and thought, “Well, blow you. I'm going to make it better.” Because I find that that's the way I respond.

Bruno: But you trust implicitly the judgement of your editors and your publishers on this? They don't mess you around. I've lost your sound. It's OK, I've got you back.

Rosalie: OK, yeah. I do trust my editors on this because they're the ones that, they're a business and they've got to sell the book.

Bruno: They’re not going to just suck up to you, or pander to your vanity, or whatever, are they?

Rosalie: There’s a little bit of, “I wonder if they’re just saying that because of ‘The Dressmaker’ and they just want to sell it. But then when I got into the process with the editors, I understood that they were taking it quite seriously. And that they were involved in the story and they actually knew more about how the story was going to work and how it should be in this square thing with all these pages. How it was going to read. They know more about that then I do, so it's a matter of coaxing me into a place where I can make it. And then after a while you can see what they're doing and you go, “Oh, OK, I'm with it.” And then you’re kind of working in collaboration with you and then you feel like the entire universe is on your side so, it's a lovely process.

Bruno: Rosalie, I'm going to do something very cruel to you, I'm going to say let's assume that your book is already out. And let’s assume that someone has decided to even make a film of it. Can you, for our audience, could you describe the way the opening scene of ‘The Dressmaker’s Secret’ would be? How the film would open up? Who would be in the scene? And what would we see and how would you establish that beginning?

Rosalie: Practically, I don't think you would ever get Kate Winslet back again. You would have to offer her a huge amount of money to schlepp all the way out here. But given that we have done that and it is successful, she's arrived and so has Hugo Weaving and Judy Davis and that they're all back there again, although, Judy Davis not necessarily, she's there in flashbacks but not so much. It would open, I imagine in Collins –

Bruno: Set the scene.

Rosalie: – yeah, it would open in Collins Street in 1953. And that's coronation –

Bruno: Coronation year, isn’t it?

Rosalie: – yeah, and so there was a great deal of excitement in some quarters of Melbourne, apparently not all of Melbourne, my research tells me they weren’t that fussed about the Queen getting crowned and they didn't care. But for the sake of fiction and for the sake of our movie, the fact that we've got Kate here and we need to do something special for her, it would be 1953, it would be the Paris-end of Collins Street, and there would be bunting and there would be Union Jacks, and there would be shop girls wearing plastic tiaras, and there would be advertisements for balls, and there would be great deal of excitement. And then the camera would move down the hill to the not-quite-so Paris-end, just down to towards Flinders Street, out Swanson Street, a little bit, not far –

Bruno: I know exactly where you are, and we’re across the road from the Regent, kind of there, is that where we are?

Rosalie: – there, we’re exactly there –

Bruno: [And go?] the Regent.

Rosalie: – across from the Regent, and not far from Flinders Lane, which was the [schmacker ?] area. And then you would probably, in my mind, now you’ve got me very excited about this. And then they camera would focus on the back of someone's head.

Bruno: Whose head?

Rosalie: Well it would look like a boy. Because it would have short hair and dungarees. And when that person turned around, you would see that it's the beautiful, and lovely, Tilly Dunnage. You would go into the shop and go upstairs to the atelier or the workshop and start making gowns. That would be the opening scene.

Bruno: I thought as I was rehearsing that question — it was about the only question I rehearsed — I had visions of you going, “Bruno, that's a shocking thing to ask me.” But you look like you relish actually doing that.

Rosalie: And you know, I’ve got a vivid –

Bruno: Do you fancy yourself as a kind of screenwriter, as a filmmaker? Do you actually write in a filmic way?

Rosalie: – no, not in a filmic way, in a visual way. I tend to see what's going on in my head and I try to describe it and I have to admit that I've been a little bit influenced by the film. And so, this time I find myself having to go back and fill in and add description and add a little bit of introspection, and a little bit of point of view from Tilly's mind, and things like that. And the editors also picked up things like that because I was a little bit influenced by the whole screen thing. But I was an extra on the film, so –

Bruno: I remember you said that, yes.

Rosalie: – I'm forever –

Bruno: I don't remember seeing you. [laughs] I'm sorry, I'm going to go and watch it again.

Rosalie: – I’m on the cutting room floor, I had a stupid grin on my face the whole time, it looked silly, so they cut me on one of the – but I had a lovely time. And the thing about that was that I could see the transformation, which is the theme of The Dressmaker and The Dressmaker's Secret. But I could see how that story was transformed for a screen. So I've kinda got a handle on it now and it's a bit of a sad thing. I've got a feeling I should have possibly been a famous actress, rather than – no, I’m joking.

Bruno: There’s still time, and I could star in it with you. Rosalie, so we're in this kind of Salon Mystique in Collins Street, the coronation is coming, there are balls happening all over Melbourne, according to the vibe we get in your book. There's the Moomba Queen thing, there's all of these things, there's kind of designs coming from England, and people are un-making them, and stealing the designs. Tell us about that world a little bit, and how that worked, and what was the go in terms of what people wanted to wear at that time?

Rosalie: In my research there was, I came across a whole lot of evidence about people who do that, that people, of course in the 1950s, they would take photographs or do sketches, or if it was a pre-show, before the premiere of a collection, there were people that were hastily drawing pictures. And they were expelled and the picture they’d drawn confiscated, because then they would go away and have someone make that up. And they would sell rip-offs on the street. And that went on quite a lot. But at Salon Mystique in Collins Street, Madam Flock goes to Europe every year and buys up either the rip-offs or what people tell her is couture, but they’re not really. Or she buys almost-couture or not quite and brings it back in huge steamer trunks and has her outworkers unpick it and turn it into fashions that are sold in the boutiques out at [Laen ?] and places like that. But they’re done by, those things are made by outworkers, and the outworkers are supplied with the fabric to do it.

And the outworkers actually, because they’re so poorly paid, they skimp on the patterns and they make the seams smaller, and the hems shorter, and things like that so they can save a yard, here or a metre there, and they make their own, and sell to their neighbours and so they make money. So there’s this whole chain that comes from the couture houses in Europe and goes on a ship all the way to Australia, or wherever else it's going to. And is reproduced as knock-ups in all sorts of places. And they’re not, they don't fit properly, and they're kind of mass-produced to fit everyone and they don't suit everyone. So it's a bit of a tragedy.

Bruno: And Tilly, Tilly who is an artist, isn’t she? She's not just the cutter, she understands fabric, she can make fabric do things that the others in her workshop can't. How does she come to be there? And what's her predicament at this stage of the story, when we find her at Mrs Flock’s?

Rosalie: She's actually hiding in plain sight. It's an obvious place, yet it's not. Because it's a second-rate salon, but she needs to earn a living. She has very good reasons why she needs to make money and she needs to establish a home, and she needs to set herself up for a future. She wants to start again and erase everything, well not erase, but escape everything from her past. Yet, she knows that they will find her. Eventually they will find her. And so she spends her life looking over shoulder wondering who it's going to be. It’s no secret because it's in the publicity, but the first person to show up, of course is Sergeant Farrat.

And he arrives and he wants a frock. And he doesn't want to confront her and just show up, so he devises a means by which she is forced to come down from her workshop above the salon, and confront this somewhat awkward client, who's ordered a dress that doesn't suit them. And he demands, he says, “I know you've got someone here who will make this dress look lovely on me”. And Tilly knows that it's him, and he knows, that she knows that it’s him. But she's put in a position where she has to go down and confront him, and this is where the story starts. And then the story kind of swaps between Melbourne and Dungatar, and Melbourne and Dungatar, and it goes back and forth.

Bruno: Sergeant Farrat takes her to this place in South Yarra at one stage in the two chapters, because I've only read the two chapters, so I don't know about how it goes in Dungatar and that. Tell us about that world, the exoticness of that world, because in the Melbourne that I grew up in, of course, this is the time that I grew up too. I had no sense of any of these kinds of places in Melbourne, it’s an exotic place, isn't it? It's a place where people are artists, and they discuss poetry, and it's vibrant, and it's out there, and all of that, isn't it? They go there, why do they go there?

Rosalie: Well, they go for a drink. And because Sergeant Farrat feels comfortable with Tilly and he wants her to see that there is another life that she could be part of. She could make costumes for these people because it was a club called The Hippocampus Club, and it was a club for –

Bruno: Does that really exist? Or is this your name for it?

Rosalie: It didn’t really exist, there was a club much later on called The Seahorse Club. And it’s because seahorses, the males care for the children and there's a bit of a gender obscurity in all of that. So Sergeant Farrat’s found his community and he’s found these like-minded people and they’re people from all walks of life and they live a very secret life socially. And it's a very cultured life, as you mentioned. But they're always in fear of the repercussions because it wasn't until 1949 that homosexuality was no longer an offence that you could be hung for. And anybody that was slightly different, unlike today as we know, was branded homosexual. And if you were branded that, then you were set to be hung, drawn, and quartered. It was a hugely terrible thing. So the people at The Hippocampus Club, all of course live in fear that they will be found out but that gets into the topic of wearing costumes sometimes makes you who you really are. Whereas, wearing couture, turns you into someone that you are not. And that’s one of the central ideas in the story. And the people who would go to The Hippocampus Club, come from all walks of life, a huge cross-section of life.

Bruno: And you’re suggesting that in their out-there-ness in terms of what they’re wearing, that is not a hiding of something, that is not trying to, but they’re actually finding an expression of their truer selves, is that the kind of idea?

Rosalie: Yeah, it is. And so that means that what they do in the day, what they wear to go to work, or a judge, or a lawyer, or a doctor or, surgeon, or truck driver, whatever it is, the clothes that they wear for that, the costume, is actually –

Bruno: That’s the lie.

Rosalie: - painting them as, a lie, to make them socially acceptable. So there’s a question in there about what is socially acceptable. And again as in ‘The Dressmaker’ what's acceptable and what's not acceptable, and it plays around with those ideas of disguise, and how disguise –

Bruno: What's got you interested in that idea of how we can be most authentically ourselves? And the whole role of what we wear in that saga. I love wearing Indonesian shirts, is that my little schtick about saying, “Look at me, I have part of my world in Indonesia. Is that a disguise, is that a little bit of a frocking up so that I come out into the world in something that makes me feel a little bit out-there, or whatever? Is there some of that in all of us, do you think, Rosalie?

Rosalie: – I think so, and I think it's all of those things, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that in your case wearing the shirts that you like is a disguise, I would say that they’re everything else you said. They're a way of making you comfortable, they define you as who you are, they present to the world how you want to be seen. What you want other people to perceive of you, or maybe they don't, maybe you don't care, maybe you dress for yourself. So all those things are –

Bruno: Can we orchestrate that? Can we orchestrate the way we would like the world to see us, and are our clothes one of the dominant ways of doing that, do you think?

Rosalie: Absolutely, well it’s a visual thing. So when you, if you're going for a job interview, if you're going to the shop — well, not so much now, because there's a pandemic, so everybody’s in tracksuit pants, and it doesn't really matter, no one cares — but under normal circumstances, you would dress according to how you need to be perceived, or want to be perceived, or to make an impression, to make an entrance, to blend in, to make a statement, to give it to your mother-in-law, or your father-in-law, or whatever it is. You’d wear something that will say what you want to say that particular day, or not. And everybody does it, but we're just not, it's so obvious that we just kind of, we don't consider it. But most of the time we wear what we feel like wearing. But we don't acknowledge that behind what we feel like, there's a whole complex, from the moment you wake up, depending on the night’s sleep that you got, what you had for breakfast, where you are going, what you are doing, that determines everything. But you’re just not really conscious of it at all.

Bruno: Leunig says, and he’s having a big swipe at males and their suits and the constricted-ness of that garment. And he says, “The distance from the person and their true-selves is measured by the ties they have,” and if you lay them end to end. I was almost taken by that, that idea of the suited people and those who play that game of the veneer, being projecting of strength and that, is not really the reality, isn’t it? We know that that’s a big sham. Is your book a little bit about discovering the sham too, and discovering the vulnerability in people beneath the what they wear?

Rosalie: More so for the people of Dungatar. Like it’s quite an obvious, I suppose trope, if you will, that the people of Dungatar are wildly inadequate to the kind of clothes that they aspire to. That they think if they wear those clothes, they will be better because they look better, and they feel better. But also, it's not just the people of Dungatar, Tilly discovers that it's all people, no matter where she is –

Bruno: Yeah, that’s the impression I get, yeah.

Rosalie: – yeah, and so when she confronts this, well into the book, and makes a decision about how she will use her talent, because it’s been weaponised in the past, and it’s been used for people’s own selfish evil intentions, even all the way down to the brogue costumes, that the people of Dungatar are still wearing. She has a bit of a confrontation about what she is doing, what part she is playing, in these people being able to exploit her, and her talent. So she makes the decision, but it’s, I love what you were saying about the suit because do you know, sometimes I've watched chat shows from time to time and when the men, or even women, they walk in in the garment and they spend a lot of time adjusting it.

Like the men have to adjust the trousers and the thing and they’re always doing, the women are always tugging at their skirt, and I just go, “Either raise the coffee table up, so we cannot see their knees, it’s at waist length, or tell them all to wear a large skirt or tracksuit pants. Just so that they can just focus on what they're going to talk about, rather than me being distracted by the fact that they’re wearing something that’s annoying me. [Laughs].

Bruno: I watched the ASEAN leaders at their big conferences and they've all got those most beautiful batik shirts on, and I think of everyone kind of being in suits and that, and going, “Oh, that would just be hideous.” Take us back to Tilly, and she lives in Gertrude Street, near the exhibition building, she’s always imagining that there are people stalking her at that point. She’s unhappy, isn’t she, at that point?

Rosalie: She is.

Bruno: What’s the guts of her unhappiness?

Rosalie: Her, well, the tragedy of her past. The fact that even in escaping her past, she’s still got the burden of, she’s still carrying it around. She thought she, well, she didn’t really think, but she might have resolved it by burning down the town, the town of Dungatar. But that turns out to be not the case, it just turns out that she’s actually just created another past to flee from. And she comes to understand that, and because she has more things that she needs to hide, she’s not at all happy. But through the book, once she finds friends and a community, and a family, and feels loved and gets what she wanted, she gradually, gradually starts to lighten up and things start to get a bit terrific. But then of course tragedy does strike, but not in the way that it did in the first book. But it’s resolved a little bit more satisfactorily, I think this time. But you may not agree.

Bruno: [Laughs] I can't add anything to that because that's all a big unknown to me, isn't it? How important is Sergeant Farrat, in terms of Tilly finding her way to the life she yearns to lead?

Rosalie: He's instrumental. They make their peace, in very odd and very strange, yet entirely sensible way. And the McSwiney’s arrive in her life again, as well, and Beulah and Marigold, and a few of the others, Gertrude, there's a few of them. But it's Sergeant Farrat that becomes her –

Bruno: Some of them are in an asylum at the opening part of your book, aren’t they?

Rosalie: Oh yeah, they're still there, Marigold and Beulah. But they get out.

Bruno: I'm still waiting to get out of mine. I'm interested in your book too as a piece of social history, Rosalie. Again, in the couple of chapters that I had the good fortune to have smuggled towards me. You've got the Regent Theatre, paper boys, harem pants, bon-bon sleeves, espadrilles, the Kew Lunatic Asylum, pudding-bowl hats, Dorothy Lamour, [chelsom collars ?]. I needed to almost go to a dictionary of fashion for nearly every second word of that. Did you have fun immersing yourself in that history, and the history of couture at that time? And did you have to really learn it in a very diligent kind of way? Or were you almost playful with it?

Rosalie: Oh no, very playful with it. It's a fun thing to do, I mean there's nothing quite so glorious as a book full of those gorgeous couture creations from the 1950s. I mean they're just fabulous and so –

Bruno: In what way? What's fabulous about them?

Rosalie: The fabric, the texture, the complete – the fashion, the cut, the photography. Oh my gosh! Helmut Newton and Athol Smith and all those gorgeous photographs. And the glamour, women were glamorous. They were constrained and constricted in corsets, of course, the poor things, but you never step out without your hat and gloves. And deportment and speech. Accessories – all those things were very important, so it was an entirely different way of living. And it was about presenting how you wanted to be seen and being respectable is being dressed in a certain way, or, it was just a lovely era. And I'm old enough to be able to hold on to some of those memories, I was born in 1955 and so I have memories from my grandmother and my aunts and my mum and conversations, there's an awful lot of stuff that you're not conscious of, that you have retained from your childhood. So I would find myself reading and looking at pictures, and then I would remember certain things, and think, “Oh, I’d better put that in,” and you have to check them of course, but yeah.

Bruno: Rosalie, do you think in a subliminal way, we're all interested in the world in which we were born into? And that world in your book, is the world that you and I were kind of born into, weren't we? Are we as, not just writers, but all of us, always yearning to understand that? And understand its secrets, because it's the one world where we kind of do know that there were secrets and –

Rosalie: Yeah, well there were, because it was the 1950s and the morals were fairly upright. And so, there were secrets and people knew those secrets, but nobody ever said anything about them, because you would upset the equilibrium. But I personally have an interest in my childhood and how it was in my childhood. Because I see the childhood, it's a natural thing as you get older, you start thinking about life, the universe and everything, and how it should be. And you start comparing your idyllic, wonderful childhood, if it was, with what the kids are experiencing now. And sometimes I feel like saying to people, “No, you've got it wrong.” But there's no point saying, “You've got it wrong,” because they have to grow through it and they have to come to terms with the whole thing. But it is fascinating to look back, and it's a nostalgic thing, it’s a lovely thing to remember back to your childhood and how things used to be.

And that brings back your grandma, and fishing and playing with the kids in the neighbourhood and all those sorts of things. And the cars, I have such vivid memory of piling into cars in the 1950s with all the kids from the entire neighbourhood, there must have been 15 or 16 of us, and just being driven for miles and miles and miles. No seatbelts, no nothing, but just in our bathers because we were kids and you could.

Bruno: Do people born into this world of the 2020s, will they look back and feel their world is as exotic as the way you’re portraying the world that you were born into?

Rosalie: I think so. I think they will. Because I see also with interest, the amount of affection and interest that my grandkids have for the things that create their world. That establish their comfort zone. And they will look back on them in the same way, I’m sure, so. If they read stories when they’re 80 about what happened in 2020, I’m sure they’ll be weeping with sentimentality and nostalgia.

Bruno: Well, Rosalie, I’d just like to read a little bit of David Malouf to you, he says, they — and he’s talking about writers and novelists, and you’re one of them — “They told you there was a life out there that was amazingly passionate. Nobody had ever told me that. If that's what was going on, it was a secret my parents and teachers had conspired to keep quiet about.” It's true, isn't it? Do you like that idea of yourself being the purveyor of an exotic kind of world and introducing people to an exoticness and a passionateness that maybe in the world we grew up in, we were kind of denied?

Rosalie: Yeah, we were. We were to a certain extent, but do you know when I was growing up there was a ball every Saturday night. It’s either the Catholic ball, or the footballers’ ball, or Rotary, or something. And my mum would appear, she would spend all day with her hair in rollers, and then she would emerge from her boudoir in the evening, dressed in satin and diamonds, and tiaras and fur, and golden shoes, and of course, I'm exaggerating, but that was that, and I remember riding our pushbikes when we shouldn't have around past the hall and looking in and seeing all the beautiful dresses, and they were all Princess Elizabeth’s, they were all seem to be wearing the same dress, all twirling around inside, so there was that, that was the spark of the imagination. Because when I was a kid, there wasn't really television or anything. And so we lived very much in our imaginations, we created all our own fun and all our stories. And then when we did get television it was black and white films from Hollywood. Every lunchtime I would watch Bette Davis or Lana –

Bruno: Esther Williams, or yeah. Doing the [bachelor?] and stuff like that –

Rosalie: – so there was, It was just getting to the time where all those things were becoming more on the surface. And being a small country town person, small community person, you kind of knew there was a few secrets about the place.

Bruno: Absolutely. Rosalie, as a writer, is your imagination, there are no boundaries are there, in a sense. There are no limits to what a writer can do. Is that both a kind of worrying freedom to have that? To almost be lost in that, or is that an exhilarating freedom, to go, “I can create any world, I can go to any subject matter, I can investigate nearly anything. Is that a liberating thing, or a daunting thing?

Rosalie: Ah look, it's wonderful. And sometimes I do that and I write marvellous, marvellous things and then you read them next day and they’re neither valid, sound, or lucid. And they’re entirely not what they’re looking for, and so you just go, “Well, no. If you're going to write a story that's going to be accessible, and people are going to relate to, you're going to have to work a whole lot harder than that, Rosalie. You can't just write that and expect people to believe it, you have to ground it in something that people can relate to.” And also I don't write those, that kind of book, I don't think. The kind of books I write, I could be entirely wrong, I have no idea, but they're not sort of fantastical or fancy. They’re just dark and nasty.

Bruno: Rosalie, when we were doing our little tech preparation for this, you were there in your work room, there in your studio, and you looked very at ease in your own world and I think one of the librarians said, “Bruno, how do you pronounce your name?” and I went, “Oh, I'm Bruno Lettieri,” and then I said, “And you’re Rosalie,” and you said, “I had a South American man whose motorcycle I rode on.” Tell us about the freedom as a writer within your imagination compared to the exhilaration of being out in an exotic world, on the back of a motorcycle? Are they comparable, or are they vastly different? And do you still yearn to be on the back of a motorcycle sometimes?

Rosalie: Oh yeah, and it's not so much the motorcycle, because it was damned uncomfortable, and I’ve still got sciatica. It was the feeling, and it was the lack of responsibility. It was the lack of baggage, it was the freedom to be able to do what I wanted, when I wanted, how I wanted, with no supervision, or no one saying, “You shouldn’t be doing this.” I felt grown up and very, very daring. And I honestly think, that if you’re going to get yourself into a state of mind to write something, that’s the state of mind you need to be in. And that is why writers will go away for a week or three weeks, or whatever it is. Because there’s a certain point in the process where you need to be, you’ve got structure, and you’ve got the story and the people come in that door and go out that one, and that happens, and he does that, and all that stuff.

But there’s the other bit that is making, like infusing it with the kind of emotion and the nuances. Which is where the empathy with the reader is embedded. So I do anyway, I need to go away and spend a week or so and get into this sort of emotional oneness with my great work. And you kind of, it’s hard to explain and you don’t want to sound pretentious in any way. But I think most of us, us writers, need to tap into that that feeling of like, I remember being at the top of the Rockies and we're up so high that my boyfriend at the time’s motorcycle kept cutting out because it wasn't getting enough fuel. And I just remember standing and I couldn't make this up, but I just remember, because we rode through Death Valley, and you know that thing in all the westerns where they’ve got all those great stalactites.

Anyway, we rode through that and I remember standing there and looking at that and feeling the endless possibility, what awaited me when we finally got to the other side because we started on the west coast and we're riding across to the east coast. And then we went down to South America but we didn't take the bike, and so all of that was before me and the world with mine. I could have done anything I wanted.

Bruno: And Rosalie, if that hadn’t have happened, would there be something lacking in terms of you being able to do what you do now? Was that a necessary precursor to wander the world in that way?

Rosalie: I don't think it is, because — [laughs] I can see people, like there’s people there — I don't think it is, but I think that people — that's distracted me, that thing, but I’ll come back to — So, I think that if you're going to be a writer you will be a writer. Because there's only so much of that that you require, that freedom and that liberation, and all that kind of stuff. There's only so much of that, that you really require –

Bruno: But the going out and seeing the world first, I'm suggesting?

Rosalie: – you've gotta do that, you have to. You have to do that. You’ve got go out and find out, explore. And see and I'm feeling at the moment, and everybody is, I know they are, but I'm feeling like I've got nothing going in. I'm just so confined and nothing is going on in my brain, and I need to go forth into the world and encounter people. And I find myself dreaming about that, lying in bed thinking, “Where can I go?” And imagining all these things I'm going to do. Because I’ve planned Christmas and beyond and I've done all of that, and then there was nothing. So then I started dreaming about where I will go and what I will do, and who I will meet.

Bruno: And is there a book in Brunswick coming out at any stage? About Brunswick and the people in your street?

Rosalie: No. No. I think I’ll probably, the next one I will, I will travel Europe, overseas. I think that I will do that. Brazil, or somewhere like that.

Bruno: And do it as a travel book, I’m suggesting?

Rosalie: Yeah, no, I think I probably would, now that you’ve mentioned it. There’s certain things that you accumulate along the way, in life that you can use and you could put it into a story like that. So I just might do that one day. You never know.

Bruno: Are you a happy woman, Rosalie?

Rosalie: Yeah, no reason not to be. I try to be as happy as I can be. What about you, are you happy?

Bruno: I'm deliriously happy. I'm very lucky. I get to work with people like you, I get to wear batik shirts, I get to live in two worlds, yeah. Yeah, I'm very lucky. It's been a joy to talking to you again, Rosalie Ham.

Rosalie: Yes, thank you, Bruno –

Bruno: ‘The Dressmaker’s Secret,’ it’s going to be out soon, isn't it? And how do people buy it in advance? What do they do?

Rosalie: – oh, I think there might be something on the Wyndham Library website, but you can pre-order it, and it's out on the 27th of October. But you can pre-order, and get –

Bruno: We’ve jumped the gun, I feel so deliciously naughty having jumped the gun and been able to do this first, the first chat. Thank you so much, Rosalie Ham.

Rosalie: – thank you, thank you –

Bruno: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Kirsty: Thank you –

Bruno: Thank you to all the people at Wyndham –

Rosalie: – yes, thank you all the people –

Bruno: – our wonderful audience out in the west, I know you're doing it hard, but it's been a joy putting this on for you. Thank you so much.

Kirsty: Thank you so much Bruno and Rosalie for an absolutely illuminating discussion, and to everyone at home as well. The link to pre-order ‘The Dressmaker’s Secret’ has been posted in the meeting chat, and the recording for his session will be up on the library website and YouTube channel sometime next week, so if you missed anything and want to go back keep an eye out for that one. Thank you so much again and have a lovely evening everyone.

Bruno: Thanks.

Kirsty: I’m going to –

Bruno: Thanks Kirsty –

Kirsty: End this meeting, and you’ll all disappear –

Bruno: Thanks Rosalie, thanks Mica in the background.

All: Bye

[End of recorded material at 01:01:10]