**Author Talk: Darry Fraser**

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

Kirsty: Good evening everyone. My name’s Kirsty, and I’m one of the librarians at Wyndham City and Libraries. I’d like to begin tonight, by acknowledging the Bunurong and Wadawurrung peoples, of The Kulin Nation, as the traditional custodians of the land, on which Wyndham is being built. On behalf of our guest, I’d also like to acknowledge the Kaurna, Ramindjeri and Namindjeri peoples, as the traditional custodians of the lands they’re joining us from. We pay our respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging.

Tonight, we are joined by author Darry Fraser. Her popular, Australian historical fiction books, include *The Murray Series*, *The Good Woman of Renmark*, and *The Last Truehart*. Her newest novel, *The Prodigal Sister*, is an enthralling, historical mystery, filled with intrigue, romance, and the new field of criminal forensics. I’m excited to hear what she has to say, and I’m sure you are, as well. Welcome, Darry.

Darry: Hello Kirsty! And thank you, Tim, for your intro. Hello, welcome everybody. I can see so many people have joined us on our guest list here, so, thank you very much for coming along tonight. I guess, I’ll start off with a little bit about me, and I would welcome your questions, as we go through; don’t save them all until the end. I need to know that I’m not going to bore you to death, while I’m having a chat.

The first thing, I guess, is that, a lot of people ask me “when did I start writing?” Well, when did I start breathing? I mean, you know, as a five-year-old, I learned to actually, physically handwrite, but probably a little bit before that, I was always telling stories – or, a “story-teller,” as my mum and dad would say. And, I’ve never lost the magic of creating a story, and telling a story. So, it started very, very early for me. And, during my early years, in a primary school – in Victoria, I was born and bred in Melbourne – so, my primary years at school, in Victoria, are – I used to love the opportunity to read quietly, if the lesson required that, or, write a story, if the lesson required that. And often, I would just start with a thought, or a couple of words, and away I’d go.

But, my earliest memory of wanting to put together a story that meant something to me, was when the family went to live at Swan Hill, and that was in the mid-to-late 60s. And, The Gem – the paddle steamer, Gem – had just been put in-situ there, in readiness for the pioneer settlement at Swan Hill. So, once that was up and running, I had a portal – or, I didn’t even know it was a portal – but, I believed that I was walking across the deck of The Gem, in to the pioneer settlement, and I believed that I was time-travelling, and going back in time. So, I still time-travel, I time-travel every day. And, my beloved decade of the nineteenth century – as some of you might be aware – is the 1890s. I do dip a little bit, back further, but I don’t like to go anywhere near – or beyond, or earlier, than about the 1850s.

So, my writing history has been an interesting one, in that, when I first started what became my first published novel with Harper Collins – and that was *Daughter of the Murray*, published in 2016 – I actually, started writing it in 1982. And, I’ll just hold up a book here for you – I can’t see anybody there, so I hope you can see what I’m about to show you. I thought, at the ripe old age of something-something, mumble-mumble, in my 20-something-something – that my life was getting on, and I needed to do the thing that I wanted to do. And, what I wanted to do, was desperately write a novel that would be published. So, I bought this book, I bought a pencil and a rubber, and while I was living in Alice Springs, I decided I would pen the greatest novel known to man. And, of course, it is! And, I’ve still got it, and here it is; all in pencil, in this notebook. God forbid the house burns down.

So, that novel was ready to be transcribed to a typewriter, and back in the day, we still had to use carbon copies. And, I thought, “I’m going to have to hire a typist,” because I didn’t know how to type. So, I’d just got that manuscript finished, and I was ready to send it off to publishers – as I said before, the greatest manuscript ever written. And, Alice Springs, had the opportunity – finally – of having TV, and we were very excited to see a new series come to the television. And, I couldn’t wait to see it, Sigrid Thornton was in it, John Waters was in it – oh my Lord, it was on my beloved River Murray. And, when I finally saw the series, All the Rivers Run, my heart dropped, my life left me, I had to shelve my most wonderful novel, that the world had ever seen, into the bottom drawer, for a long time; because All the Rivers Run, was pretty much, [laughs] exactly what I’d written in this, most marvellous novel. So, that book had to go into the bottom drawer, for quite a number of years. It did come out, from time-to-time, to be revisited, and re-loved, and added to, and amended, and edited, and so-on-and-so-forth. And then, with the advent of computers, I was able to put it onto the word processor, and see whether or not, I could still make a go of this.

So, from 1982, to about 2012, I had this idea that the world was going to be ready, again, for an Australian historical fiction novel. And, again, long story short, with my writing career up to that time, I re-joined a writers association, and decided that I would pitch my novel to Harlequin Mirror –which has now been taken up by Harper Collins – and, I was lucky enough, in 2015, to be offered a contract for that book – this one, right here. Which has now, become *Daughter of the Murray*, the first book published, in 2016. Which, of course, I am wildly excited about, and still wildly excited about.

So, that was my start, if you like. I did have a number of successors, with short stories, and the Woman’s Day, was very kind enough to publish my first short story, called *Clara Wells’ Patience* – you might be able to see it there, it might be back-to-front. But, *Clara Wells’ Patience*, was something that I wrote on a whim, sent it off, once again, and was lucky enough to have it accepted. So, I was reasonably sure, that what I wanted to do, I could achieve. However, from that mark in 2015, 2016, I had no clue how it was all going to go.

Anyway, Kirsty has kindly offered to host me tonight, for *The Prodigal Sister*. And, *The Prodigal Sister*, is book number seven, with Harlequin Mirror – that’s the imprint under which Harper Collins publishes the book. And, as some of you might know, if you’ve read my stories, I’m very much interested in women of the late nineteenth century, who were not ahead of their time, as a lot of people think these women in my stories, might be – they’re not ahead of their time at all – I believe that women were as vocal, and as opinionated, and as capable, and as career-minded, as we are today. Except the laws of the land, and sometimes, the familial restraints, were against them.

When I think about the people, or, the characters, I conjure up – I can’t separate them, from who I believe we are today. So, my personality, would have been mirrored in the nineteenth century – the same as yours would, Kirsty’s would, Tim’s would – behind the scenes there, Tim. Human nature doesn’t change so much, it’s just the laws under which we live our lives, might be more restricted, or – well, more restricted. So, we don’t tend to shine a light. And, because, in that era, of the nineteenth century, a woman was still deemed to be property, rather than person; if she was property, she didn’t have legal right. So, once – especially Australian women – began to gain legal right – and South Australian women were amongst the first to vote – and they were able to vote at the election, in 1896 – then, I think, we’re seeing an emergence of woman, as a power. And, once the crusty old white fellas got an idea that the vote might have been bolstered by women, once they got past that “women don’t know what they’re talking about” thing – then, the spotlight sort of, turned a little bit. It did take a century, or more, for them to understand that the female vote, is quite an important vote; so, most of my stories, are based around the emergence of women, as a voice, especially after federation, which was quite an important turning point for the nation – or, as the nation came to be.

So, I’ve done a little bit of talking now, about my journey; I can see we have a number of people on our list here, so, if anybody’s got any questions for me, please bob-up and let me know. I can see we’ve got Anne, and Brenda, and Debbie and Helen, and Jaz, and [Gindar? 00:10:55], and Kerry – Kerryn, Sarah, Vicki, and, another Vicki. So, hopefully, you’ve got some questions for me, that you’d be able to drop into the message there? Otherwise, I’ll just keep chatting. So, Kirsty, if you would like to drop in with anything, at any time, please go ahead. I would much rather I know what people are interested in hearing from me, than my just blathering on, as I tend to say.

So, once *Daughter of the Murray* was published – and, in publishing speak, your first book is only offered on a one-book contract, because they want to check that you’re not going to fall over, or you’re not going to disappear, or you’re not going to write something rubbish, the next time. So, once *Daughter of the Murray* did its thing – and, thankfully, it did its thing really well – my publisher came and said to me “we’d love to offer [unintelligible 00:11:57] book, Darry, what have you got for us now?” I think I’d spent 30 years writing this first novel, and, I actually didn’t have anything else in the mix. However, getting into the groove, of being able to deliver, and being able to embrace the thing that I had most wanted to do, in my life – well, I thought “well, I might run with a bit of a theme, here,” and my theme, was to remain the Murray River setting, for a start, for a couple of books, after that.

So, *Where the Murray River Runs*, came in the following year, from *Daughter of the Murray*. And, whilst it’s not a sequel, it is called a “companion book” in publisher speak. Some of you might have read those particular two. That book is really quite close to my heart, in that, I was able to track the families that I’d introduced in *Daughter of the Murray*, and take a little spin off those familial relations, and build a whole new group of characters there. Again, on The Murray River, in Victoria – which, of course, has really quite a special place in my heart – and, visiting the Port of Discovery at Echuca, was a highlight of those early years, when I was researching all of this sort of thing; a fascinating history there. So, *Where the Murray River Runs*, was accepted by the publisher, thankfully. So, they wanted another book in the Murray Series, and I thought “well, I’ve got a story churning,” but I wasn’t really, quite happy with it – excuse me a moment – so, I thought “well, how can a brand new author, not be happy with a story that – you know – and I’ve got to fulfil a contract, so, what can I do here?

Anyway, as I tend to do, I trawl through a lot of pictorial books, magazines, and, I’m a great one for taking inspiration from something visual. So, I was looking at a number of works by Fred McGovern, and Tom Roberts, a visual artist of the day. And, I came across a Tom Roberts bail-up, which was a – rather a large – oil painting of a stage coach, being bailed up by bushrangers, and I thought “a few stories in that painting.” Anyway, I’ve gone off to sleep – might have been two or three days later – but that sleep, I woke up with this dream, that I – it was so vivid for me, that I got up, turned the computer on, belted down this chapter, which I thought would be fantastic as an opening chapter, for book number three. Now, that chapter turns out to be Chapter Two, in book three, which is now *The Widow of Ballarat*. So, I took a little step aside from the 1890s, and from the Murray River, and I just had to put down this story, *The Widow of Ballarat*; and, that is set against the backdrop of the Eureka Stockade, and the research for that book, was absolutely fascinating. So, I’m still quite taken by that research, and by everything to do with Ballarat, around that particular era, and how important it was in shaping who, or what, our nation’s become, certainly towards federation, 50 years later. And so, the third book in the series – in the Murray series – *The Good Woman of Renmark*, became the fourth book – if you’re still with me there – but, the *Widow of Ballarat*, definitely pushed her way in, and, thankfully for me, it was accepted as my third book.

So, fourth book, is *The Good Woman of Renmark*, and we go back to the River Murray, but in South Australia. The fifth book was – what was the fifth book? … *Good Woman of Renmark*, it was, *Elsa Goody, Bushranger*. *Elsa Goody, Bushranger*, is set in South Australia, and goes into Victoria, so, from Robe in South Australia, into Casterton in Victoria, which follows the route that the Chinese people took, when they were here, coming for the gold, during the 1850s, but it is set in 1898. And, that story came about – I wanted more in South Australia, which is where I live – I live on Kangaroo Island, in South Australia – but, I wanted more of my stories to be set here. And, because the first vote for women, in Australia, was in South Australia – we got the vote passed in about 1894, 1895 – but, the first vote at the polls, was on the 25th of April 1896. Auspicious day, for two events that occurred 20-odd years apart.

So, I wanted to know, who was the first woman who voted in Robe, in 1896, because I was pretty sure it was going to be Elsa Goody; and, as it turned out, after all my research, nobody has the electoral rolls in that area, for that particular first vote for women. So, I was able to allow Elsa to be the first woman. And, I found a snippet in Trove – which is the facility of The National Library of Australia that digitises old newspapers – that, the first woman to vote in Robe, voted at 9:45 in the morning, but they didn’t record her name, and the electoral roll can’t be found. So, I was able to slip Elsa Goody in there, and that was a very important part of the story for me; that she was determined to have her vote. And so, because that lady wasn’t named historically, I was able to just shift Elsa, in there. So, Elsa, tries to save her family farm, chasing some money that she knows was in the family, and she goes into Victoria to Casterton, tracking that down. So, I had a lot of fun with that, a lot of history, and fact – all my stories have a lot of fact back-dropping the main story – the main theme. And so, from *Elsa Goody, Bushranger*, there was *The Last Truehart*, which is set in Victoria. And, those of you who come from Melbourne, and Williamstown – or, the Williamstown area – might be aware, that there was an American Civil War steam ship – war ship – that docked in Williamstown in 1865. And, I was so enthralled, by that snippet of history that I just had to write a story about it. So, *The Last* *Truehart* begins a chapter or two, in 1865, and then jumps to 1898. So, you can see, by my just talking about the books that have come out, since 2016, that Victoria and South Australia, The River, are my great loves, and I continue to find a number of stories in those two colonies. Ah! That’s me time-travelling again! In those two states [laughs] I talk about colonies, because that’s where my head really is.

So, the new book, number seven, *The Prodigal Sister*, starts in Melbourne, again, at the turn of the century, or, well, right on 1900, when women were being awarded their Bachelor of Arts – not that they hadn’t been, prior to 1900, 1896, 1898 – but they weren’t equal to the Bachelor of Arts that a man might study for. So, around about 1896, or 1898, in the United Kingdom, especially, women were afforded the same level of Bachelor of Arts, as a man. And, that opened a lot of doors of women – if they had money, of course, or if their fathers’ pushed them, or agreed to fund them to study further. The emergence of forensic science, in the colonies, in the Australian colonies, took a little while to take off, but it was available on the continent, in Europe, especially in France. And so, I wanted a heroine, who had studied in Scotland, in particular – my heroine, Prudence. And she was coming home because the family had a medical issue. And so, she was needed at home, which meant – in that day – that her aspirations had to go to one side. Prudence also carries the risk of an inherited illness, which has no cure – still has no cure – and by name, that’s Huntington’s disease. And, in the day, she and her father – who is a doctor – were very aware that Huntington’s comes down through the family line. So, she was determined that, whilst her sister and her mother suffered from this disease, she may suffer, eventually, from this disease – but, she would not marry and have children, whereby, risking her children to have this incurable disease, as well.

So, automatically, I had a woman who was going to put her eye on her career, she would not marry, she could not have any personal relationships with a man, she couldn’t risk pregnancy, because she felt she couldn’t risk passing this inherited gene along her family line. However, she is blackmailed, shall we say, into working for The Police, to spy on somebody else, and then, sparks fly, and all the plans just fly out the window. But, Melbourne, right on 1900, was a very interesting place, and I hope I’ve conveyed that without being too historically deep. And, of course, federation, and the celebration of federation, was only around the corner, in 1901. So, my main thrust, is about women moving through their lives, with the heavy restrictions they had, but without being superheros, without being superwomen, they were just ordinary people, doing their thing, like you and I might do, today. With as many personalities as we have around us, today; they had in their time. So, I might see if any of you have got questions for me now, before I keep going? I’ve been speaking for 30 minutes already, I think. So, I’ll take a sip of my tea, and maybe, Kirsty, you’ve got something you can help us out with here?

Kirsty: Sure. I think everyone has been listening rather intently, but, I was wondering if you would be able to speak about your research, since reading *The Prodigal Sister*, it really came alive to me, the history …

Darry: So, around about 1900 – if we’re talking forensics, for instance – in France, at the time, there was a fellow, who I’ve named in the book, Monsieur Lacassagne who, some academics call him, “The father of forensic science.” He started his work with The Police, shall we say, in the late nineteenth century, whereby, if people came across a terrible crime, it was “oh look! He’s been donged on the head with a heavy instrument – Oh well, gee, wonder where the murderer is?” So Monsieur Lacassagne and his team were able to say “well, OK, hang on, he was donged on the head with an instrument, where would that be? Was that a rock? Was that a hammer? What did that look like? Can we match the instrument to the wound? Or, perhaps, the deceased person might have had a hank of hair in his hands, and could we match that to somebody who might have been known, to consort with that person?” Or, so-on-and-so-forth.

The interesting thing about finger – what do we call it? Technology – fingerprint technology – sorry, I just lost my words there – was that, they were very aware, that the fingerprints were quite unique, but, how we can lift those prints off the crime scene, was something that they needed to work on. So, while we do know that they had certain technology, it wasn’t perfected enough, to be able to present to court, or whatever-not, without a really good team behind you. So, there was a lot of work going on in France, at the time, but it hadn’t actually skipped the strait, into the United Kingdom. And, of course, the United Kingdom, was our colonial bosses, if you like – so, it took, often, six to 12 months for any technology to reach the antipodes, at all. So, our police forces were a little bit clumpy, and a little bit ordinary, on taking up new practices and so-on-and-so-forth. So, Monsieur Lacassagne was one; the most famous, I think, of the forensic scientists, early, didn’t actually emerge, until around about 1920, which is Mr Locard. And, he is the principal scientist, who said “every perpetrator, every victim, leaves something of himself at the scene. Or, there is an exchange of evidence at the scenes.” So, the basis of all forensic science, is on that particular theory. So, whilst forensic science was around, early in the day, of course, in that early part – or late part of the 19th century, into early 20th century – it wasn’t a study open to women, at all. We were just being allowed to enter medical sciences, and have our bachelor degree in medical sciences around that time, but a lot of the doors were shut to ordinary women with intelligence; unless they had a lot of money, and their fathers were behind them, and they weren’t expected to marry, and so-on-and-so-forth.

I touched a little bit, on researching Huntington’s disease, earlier; and, in America, in the 1870s, there was grandpa, dad, and son, Huntingtons. So, Doctors’ Huntington, from three generations, had documented a particular family on Long Island, who had these strange symptoms. And, once the youngest of the Doctors’ Huntington, had collated this information from his father and his grandfather, he was able to see patterns by which Huntington’s came down through the generations. And so, he is the person who gave his name to the syndrome, or the illness; and, it’s one of the most fascinating illnesses – and, I apologise to anybody who might have family members, or might be suffering from Huntington’s themselves – but, having done a lot of research in the day, they understood it, to a certain degree. But then, it took another 100 years, into the 1970s, before anybody [unintelligible 00:29:37] to see, what might be the key, to Huntington’s. So, I did quite a bit of study on Huntington’s – and, I’m a total lay person when it comes to anything medical, or anything scientific. [Unintelligible 00:29:53] In the 70s, in America, they were able to identify the mutated gene that is carried from one person, to their children. What they did know, in 1890, which is – or, late 1890s, which is when *The Prodigal Sister* is set – is that, it was passed from mum and dad, to the children. And that, there was a risk of at least 50 percent, that those children of people carrying the mutated gene, would get Huntington’s disease. So, the whole premise of my story, was that Prudence didn’t know whether or not, she would be in the 50 percent that did carry the gene, or the 50 percent that didn’t. So, Huntington’s, by way of being a dreadful thing to have to inherit, was also, an illness that suited the purpose of my story; shall we put it like that?

And then, of course, police practice in the day, in the colonies, was a little bit dodgy. I did use a real person in the character, by the name of Mr Chomley, he was a real Police Commissioner in Victoria, of the day. And so, I was able to weave quite a lot of fact through the story. But ultimately, it was that Prudence was trying to find her feet, she’d already gained her Bachelor of Arts, at St Andrew’s in Scotland, before she came home to help look after family – which was expected of most women in the day. But, how she was able to navigate her way through the things that were thrown at her, and, had a little bit of luck on her side. So, hopefully, that’s covered a little bit there, Kirsty?

Kirsty: Yes, thank you very much. Tim has asked, “What, in particular, is it that draws you to the late nineteenth century as opposed to other eras?”

Darry: Good question Tim. I find that the 1890s is probably – if I could put it like this – during the goldfields, around about 1853, 1854, and those few years after Eureka Stockade, we do know, by research, that women in that time – in Australia, in Victoria – had the opportunity to vote, as early as 1860. So, without being too long-winded about that particular serendipitous moment in time; from the goldfields time, women – especially in Victoria, which is where I sort of, more focused – and South Australia, because they were the first ones to be allowed to vote, in the 1896 elections. The movement towards the franchise – the voting franchise for women – had already started around about that mid-1850s mark. So – and, I’m not a historian either, I’m just an observer – so, looking at different points in history, over that next 40 years, from 1854 to 1894, 50 years – there is a movement towards the women becoming more autonomous.

And so, by the 1890s, there’s quite a groundswell, and there’s a lot of societies and associations where women can join, looking for their right to vote. Now, a lot of people say “were they all suffragettes?” No, they weren’t. But, they might have been suffragists, which is the universal push towards democratic voting. So, men didn’t always have the vote, either, the working man – but, the moment he took out a Miners Right, in 1854, he had the right to vote. So, there was a bit of a hiccup – a clerical hiccup, in the writing of the laws, around about 1856, ’57 – which didn’t dictate that it was a man, the Miner’s Right could be awarded to – it was a person. So, some very smart, switched on woman, said “well, I’m a person, I’ve got a Miners Right, I can vote, then.” Well, we can probably still hear the boots scurrying backwards, as they went back to their legal papers, and crossed out “person” and put “male” back in there.

So, there was a window of space, where women could have made a push to vote. I think, a lot of the times, when I’m observing – and, again, I’ll just reiterate – I’m not a historian, and I’m certainly not a forensic historian – I observe, that women had the opportunity, but first of all, didn’t know about it; secondly, didn’t want to do anything about it; thirdly, didn’t know how to go about doing anything about it; and fourthly, weren’t probably allowed to. So, for a long time, the rumbles of the female vote, was sort of, toing and froing in that sort of, 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, and then, suddenly, a lot of women were starting to be very vocal. So, Tim, by the time I got to the 1890s, I’m hearing all this rumble, historically, where women are just starting to say “hey, we can do this, we’ve got a brain.”

One of the major arguments against the female vote, right before federation, was that “well what on Earth are we men, going to do, if the women have a brain, and go out and vote? Who’s going to look after the children?” Who still looks after the children? So, at the turn of the century, and in the conferences, to do with The Constitution, in 1901 – that we finally got in 1901 – the vote for South Australian women in 1896, was intrinsic in having it written into The Constitution, that anybody, despite race, gender, religion, had the right to vote. So, it was the vote for the South Australian women – and, it gets quite convoluted – that was able to push that through, to The Federal Constitution. Now, I do have to say, that when I was at school, I used to love history, but Australian history was so mindboggling boring, my eyes still cross; but since being able to write my stories, and to have the absolute luxury of research, I find it absolutely fascinating. And the argy-bargy that went on, the 10 years prior to our constitution finally being set, basically – not in concrete, because it can be changed – but, set down – has been absolutely fascinating. So, I saw Glenda popped up there, did she have a question?

Kirsty: No, I think that was her connection dropped out –

Darry: Just popping in, OK.

Kirsty: – and she’s popped back in, so, welcome back. So, Anne, has a question there, “You obviously do a lot of research; how much is fact, and how much is fiction, in each book?

Darry: OK, so, we’ve talked a little bit about, in *The Prodigal Sister*, there is the research for Huntington’s and Commissioner Chomley, and so on. What I try to do, is bring fact into my character’s day, because I’m setting my characters into a particular period of time that is quite real. And so, I want to know, what their political – what the political atmosphere was like, what their social atmosphere was like, what restrictions might have been, what laws were around then; so, I try to research that, as much as possible. In one of the stories – and, I’ve got to think – maybe it was *Where the Murray River Runs*, I had to learn what the trains looked like, in the day. You know, did we have carriages that each cabin opened up to the platform? Or, did we have a corridor that went through the carriage? Or, did we just have seats in the carriage? And, that was particularly hard to actually locate.

The other thing was – just as a point – I had one of my characters stop at a little railway station in Victoria, called Rochester, and he needed something to eat, so, I only presumed, that the ladies of the town would bake up different bits and pieces, and try to sell things to travellers, because they would need income, and of course, every little bit helped. And, you know, there was terrible drought in the 1890s, and into at least 1903, so people were looking to supplement their income. Anyhow, I had my character – I do forget which one [laughs] – and he’d stepped off the train, and he was starving. So, there’s a pie vendor – a woman – and she says, “Here’s your pie, here’s a couple of boiled eggs, here’s a paper bag,” – now, this is a character saying “here’s a paper bag,” I mean, I know I write that, but, [unintelligible 00:41:00] the character saying – and I thought, “When did we did we get paper bags here?” It took me a week to find, that paper bags had been in Australia since about 1860, but I didn’t want to put paper bag in there, if we didn’t have paper bags in there, until after – you know, so – and the only way I found that we had – that I could tell you, with concrete evidence – that we had paper bags from 1860, was in a newspaper advert. And so, you might tend to think that some of the things authors will put in their stories, are just run-of-the-mill things, we don’t tend to think about – but that paper bag issue, sat with me, and that might be as boring as anything, to anybody else, but I had to know, for sure, that we had paper bags there.

And, there’s lots of those little bits and pieces in there. Even things we might use in everyday language, we might think “must have been around then,” but there’s a very loose, sort of, period of time, over around 20 years or so, when things are first seen to pop up, in written articles, or reports, or whatever – that might have been in the vernacular for 20 years, but we can’t actually pinpoint. So, I tend to, only pick things I know are based in fact. So, when you ask me how much is fact; as much as I can possibly determine, in my books. My characters – my main characters, are all fictional, but I do dot in, real characters around those main characters, yes. So, the answer is, as much fact, as I’m able to determine. How are we doing? Anyone asleep yet?

Kirsty: No, I think everyone’s still listening. Tim has another question, he’d like to know, “What was one of the most surprising, disturbing, or amazing things you found out, while researching for your books?”

Darry: I truly think the most amazing thing, was that reference I mentioned, about the Miners Right. Around 1856, into 1860, where some clerk had made a whoopsie on the Miner’s Right, and not inserted the word “Male,” he’d put the word “Person.” So, when you worked on the goldfields, you had to have a Miner’s licence, whether you were digging, or not. The only people that didn’t have to have a Miner’s licence, were women – so, wives, and children. But, if you were a laundress, or, if you were a shop keeper – and, a lot of women were shop keepers, a lot of women were publicans – and, that was another interesting thing that’s in my story for 2024 – and, I need to say that 2022 is done, and 2023, is done – release dates – I think, the biggest surprise I got, was that, because women weren’t ready to take up this idea of franchise, collectively, a huge opportunity slipped them by. And, it took a lot of poking and provoking, to organise women, to actually make a united front, and demand the vote.

And, throughout that particular period of time, there is still the pushback, from women, who didn’t want a vote, who didn’t want to usurp the family arrangement, who didn’t want to go against their dads, or their husbands, or their brothers, or whoever it was. And, whilst I’m not talking about total anarchy, or insurrection, the voices of the thinking women, were actually few and far between. So, whilst we accept that “we didn’t have a voice, we weren’t allowed to have a voice” – we didn’t use our voice, either; and that was very surprising to me, very.

Kirsty: Fantastic. I’m going to have to go away and do some research now, you’ve made me very interested in history. Because, as you said, a lot of the history that was being taught in schools, was very different –

Darry: [Mind-bending? 00:46:09] boring.

Kirsty: Anne has said she always likes your covers, and wonders if they’re all designed by the same team, or person?

Darry: Ah ha! Anne, good question. No, is the short answer, they’re not. But, the Harper Collins team – design team, are given a particular brief of the story, and from what I understand, once the story is accepted, it moves in – you know, everything goes into a line – because there’s lots of books being published at the same time – and so, the design team is given a brief of the story, and you might notice, that a lot of covers have certain themes for certain authors. So, at the moment, mine seem to be – of course, the woman in period costume – and I might say on that particular point, there, my characters are not 21st women in period costume, they are women of their day, in the costume they would have worn, in their day. So, the design team, are worded up on era, and most of my more recent covers – and, I mean, from about *The Widow of Ballarat* – have been to do with the image of a woman, generally from the back, or in profile, sometimes front-on – and she’s – she doesn’t engage with the reader; she’s very much her own person, but the backdrop is generally, with a water environment, or river.

So, that gives the reader my brand, if you like; so, I’m rural, I’m river, I’m 1890s, and so, from the first concept, the design team present three designs of cover to the big boss – not to me – to the big boss. And, he says “yay” or “nay” and then, it comes back to me, with the final cover. So, this is the only cover – or only concept, I have seen, for *The Prodigal Sister*. Now, their Prudence – and, she’s pretty much Prudence – this particular image – very straight back, she has clearly got a good dress on, so there’s money in the family. She is looking off to the left, so – well, I don’t know which way that’s going – but, she’s looking forward, as far as I can tell. Now, the backdrop, is the gardens around The Yarra, in Melbourne. So, they’ve again, brought in the river, as being the life-force around my heroine. So, I am presented with that cover, and my first and only response, must be “I love it.” So, once we have “I love it,” then we’re good to go. The story itself, takes a lot longer to get through the process, than the cover. But, the cover artists are pretty thorough, and it’s the sales and marketing team, that actually sign off on the cover. So, I hope that’s answered your question there.

Kirsty: Fantastic. I’ll just remind everyone – because we’re getting close to the end – if you’ve got any questions, pop them in the chat, and I’ll read them out. And, Anne’s wondering, “Which states are the ‘22 and ‘23 books, set in?”

Darry: OK. So, I got really excited about the next book that’s coming out this year. However, it was scheduled for next year, but I got so excited about it, that I asked to swap the two books. So, the book that’s coming out this year, it now has a title – once again, the author has little to do with the titles, but I’ve been lucky with this one – this one is called *The Forthright Woman,* and it is set in South Australia; all set in South Australia. Now, any of you who might know anything about South Australia, there is a fabulous region, called The Flinders Ranges – southern and northern, Flinders – and it was a very, very lucrative agricultural area in the mid-to-late – say, the mid-19th century. So, around the 1870s – now, if any of you are visiting here, first of all, get through your wineries, and get through the lovely stuff that we’ve got, and go north, people. The countryside, in the southern Flinders, and the northern Flinders, is absolutely spectacular. Now, there’s one particular point, between two small towns; one of which, is named Quorn, and the other is named Hawker. Now, in that area, was a very lucrative sheep grazing number of properties, and the railway was going to go through there to the mines – the copper mines, in the northern Flinders – which it did.

Now, some of you might have heard of the Goyder Line, which is a line that a surveyor drew for the people of that particular end of the century, to say that you won’t be able to grow crops, or graze sheep or cattle, past this line, because there’s only salt bush and drought. And they poo-poo’d him, but he was quite correct. So, for a few years, this area was absolutely lucrative, and there’s a marvellous set of ruins, over about a kilometre and half, called Kanyaka Ruins, and it’s one of the most magical places I’ve ever visited. And, that just fired my imagination. And so, I’ve written this story, drawing on some of my own family history from way back, which is, an arranged marriage between Italian people – the Italian people’s immigration to South Australia, and how lucrative an area this was, before terrible drought struck in the 1880s.

So, *The Forthright Woman* is set, totally, in South Australia, in this most beautiful area of the state. And, *The Milliner of Bendigo*, which is now coming out in 2023, is partly set in Bendigo, as the title would suggest, and I go back to the river at Echuca, for that, as well. And, that story, showcases how incredibly tough society was, when we’re talking about people being engaged, or being promised to marry. So, I look at the breach of contract of marriage situation – and, any of you who have watched Bridgerton, over the last couple of seasons, are aware how stringent the rules were, especially earlier in century, around people making a contract to enter into marriage and so-on-and-so-forth. Still fairly strong in the later period of the century and still, certainly, ruined your chances of a good marriage thereafter, if things went wrong. So, *The Milliner of Bendigo*,addresses those sorts of issues, as well as, things like the early professions – or, the early journalists, in Australia, who felt they need to be independent. And, that was quite a lot of fun, back on the river. And, just to top that off, story for 2024, is dipping back between Victoria, and the South Australian colonies, and, I can’t tell you too much, but I will say, that women are taking back some of their power. So, how’s that?

Kirsty: Fantastic. Well, I’m already looking forward to those books. It’s interesting, that you mentioned you don’t have much say in the title, because one of the questions I was going to ask, was going to be, “Why ‘*The Prodigal Sister*’?” because I have to confess, I have a couple of times, accidently called it, “The Prodigal Daughter,” and, I was wondering, whether that was due to the relationship between Prudence and Valerie? But, maybe you had no choice?

Darry: No, it’s an interesting thing, and thanks Kirsty, it’s a question that comes up, time, and time again. A lot of the time, because the title is so important marketing, as is, the cover – you know, that old thing we have, “We don’t judge a book by its cover” – we all do. So, the cover has to suit the market that the book is targeting. And, the same with the title. So, we had *Daughter of the Murray*, so, there she is, in her own entity, and she loves The Murray River, and away she goes. *Where the Murray River Runs*, has sort of, stepped a little outside of that, but another book by another Australian female author, was named *River Run*,at the time that came out, so they had to tweak that a little. *The Widow of Ballarat* gives her, her identity; she’s a widow and she lives in Ballarat. *The Good Woman of Renmark*, much the same thing. Much earlier days, wives were called “good women.” The “good woman of Joe Blogs,” or whatever – so again, she’s got her identity within the period constraints.

*Elsa Goody, Bushranger*, she stepped out of their perimeter, if you like, and that was one title that I came up with. But, she was supposed to be “Elsa Goody, Accidental Bushranger” but they dropped the “accidental.” So, Elsa is her own person. *The Last Truehart*, again, Stella Truehart, is actually the last of her bloodline, she had no brothers to carry her name through. And, where am I up to now? *The Prodigal Sister* – so, I wasn’t sure about “The Prodigal Sister,” but I didn’t actually have anything to offer, and the prodigal sister, brought up with the prodigal son, as the biblical story, you think “no, it doesn’t really sit,” but, as it was pointed out, most people assume that “prodigal” means “coming back to the family,” after some problem away. So, in that, it set well, and with Prudence’s, relationship to Valerie, I think Valerie – without giving anything away – Valerie showed herself to be quite a strong personality, in her own right. So, Prudence actually came back, in a bit of a spin, and so, I think “prodigal” not in the real term, but in the loose term that we’ve come to know, I think that suited her reasonably well. So, I hope that’s answered your question, there. And, for this year’s book, *The Forthright Woma*n *–* Yay! That was my title. So, I’ve had three out of seven, that’s not bad!

Kirsty: Yes, I’d take those odds. Now, I asked for some final questions, just in the chat there, because we’re just about out of time. And, Anne has asked, “Are you ever going to write a book set in Western Australia?”

Darry: Of course I will, Anne! [Laughs 00:59:28] I just have to get over there. I would love to, actually. There’s a number of really good Australian authors who come out of WA, as you might be aware. I’m not sure that there’s too many Australian historical fiction authors, in my sort of, genre. But, what I don’t want to do, is, to be one of those authors, who visits a place and says “yeah, I’ll tick all those boxes, and off I go.” I really want to be able to immerse myself, in a nugget of history, that I can say “yep, I have that.” So, it does need travel, which I’m not adverse to. And, I would love to spread my wings, but my own history is embedded in Victoria, and now, in South Australia. So, if I go to the west, or if I went to Queensland – I mean, I lived in Northern Territory for a long time, as well. New South Wales, I tend to dodge around; I haven’t lived there, so I haven’t actually immersed myself, but that’s not to say “never.” So, yes, give me a nugget, and I’ll work on it.

Kirsty: [Laughs] you’ll go down that research spiral.

Darry: I will.

Kirsty: So, we’ve got one more question –

Darry: Sure.

Kirsty: – and then we’ll wrap up. This is a great question; it’s one I always like to ask too, thanks Helen. So, Helen has asked, “Which writers to you enjoy reading?”

Darry: Lots. I enjoy lots. And, they’re probably not ones you would assume, I would enjoy. I love – I don’t love police procedurals, so much, as crime. But, having said that, I love Karin Slaughter, Lisa Gardner – these are American authors. There’s an emerging author now, Nina D. Campbell, I am enjoying her debut novel, *Daughters of Eve*, immensely. Sarah Barrie, is one of my Harlequin – or, Harper Collins – stable mates; she writes great crime; and her *Unforgiven*, was excellent. But, you know, I enjoy the classics, I enjoy *Where the Crawdads Sing.* That was a great book, I loved that. And, our own, Karen Manton, wrote *The Curlew’s Cry*, which was wonderful. There’s so many, I don’t have a particular genre that I stick to. I’m currently, in the middle of *A Gentleman of Moscow*, by Amor Towles. [Cross-talk 00:01:02:41] But I’m enjoying the ride.

Kirsty: Sorry, you cut out briefly there, just after *A Gentleman in Moscow.*

Darry: Yes, so, Amor Towles, he’s the author. So, I’m sort of, cruising through that lovely luscious read. Look, just lots of people; I revisit things like *Gone With the Wind*, I know that’s got a funny thing at the moment – I don’t care, the read is wonderful, the writing is wonderful. Lots and lots, but I don’t read prolifically, anymore, I can’t. The luxury of reading, is that half an hour before sleep, now. And, I find if I read too much in my own genre – which I don’t tend to do anyway – I worry, that my voice might accidentally pick up another voice that I don’t want in my own work. So, I’ll read anything, the story has to be good.

Kirsty: Well, I’m sure people have jotted down a few of those titles, so, thank you very much. And, thank you so much for coming tonight, it’s been so fantastic, and I’ve learnt so much, and I’m sure everybody else has, as well. We’ve got most of your books in the library collection, including *The Prodigal Sister*, which is in eBook, eAudio, which I recommend, the narrator is great; that’s how I read it. And then, we’ve got the print copy, as well, so you can pop a reserve on any of those, –

Darry: Wonderful.

Kirsty: – so, thanks once again, Darry, and good night, everybody.

Darry: Thank you. Thank you everybody, thanks Kirsty, thanks Tim, in the background there, good night.

[End of recorded material at 01:04:51]