

## Speaker Series: *Symphony for the Man* with Sarah Brill

**Interviewer** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speakers series, we would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation on which this podcast is produced. Today we welcome author and fellow Inner West employee Sarah Brill to discuss her new book *Symphony for the Man*, which is Sarah's second novel. Sarah is Inner West Councils Recovery Officer Organics with the Resource Recovery Planning Team. And while that all sounds fantastic, the topic we'll be discussing today is Sarah's new novel, *Sympathy for the Man* was released in March. It tells the story of a homeless man living in Bondi and a young woman with absolutely no musical knowledge who decides to write a symphony for him.

00:00:35 Welcome, Sarah.

**Sarah Brill** [00:00:36] Thanks Sophia. Thanks for having me.

**Interviewer** [00:00:37] *Symphony for the Man*. Sounds like it's been a labour of love 18 years in the making. Can you please speak a little about your writing process over the years and if the plot evolved over this time?

**Sarah Brill** [00:00:47] So I started writing from a really young age. I started playwriting originally and then I became interested in all sorts of forms of writing. So, I had the first novel is quite short, maybe a novella published in 2002. And I thought, well, if I'm getting one published, better write another one. So that's when I started thinking and constructing the story. I had pieces already in place from a Kate Grenville writing workshop I'd done a few years earlier. So, I got those out and I started to write the story. I wrote the first draft in 2002. We were living in the Netherlands and I was pregnant with my first child and I think I thought, I'll be able to finish this book pretty quickly. I'm not working. I'm just at home with the baby. And that didn't happen, at all. I had two more babies and they completely absorbed me and I just kind of got lost in their world. And I did keep coming back to this novel, but it obviously took me a long time to get it to the point where I was ready to start showing it to publishers. So, the story actually didn't change over the editing process. Once the publishers got involved, they asked me to change some structural elements of the book and some character specifics about the female character, which I was happy to do, those suggestions felt right for the book, but the actual story remained fairly consistent. I think in the editing I drew out the the ghosts

a little more, just pulled them more into the story, which then gave me the ending or I think improved the ending. The ending was always the same, but I think having the ghost of Beethoven present at the ending helped.

**Interviewer** [00:02:27] I found it interesting how you don't name the female character, which is an interesting narrative device. Is it so that we can really focus on Harry and the issue of homelessness? Harry, such originally developed detailed character was research a large step in the writing process?

**Sarah Brill** [00:02:42] Actually, the most research I did was around symphonies and symphonic music and composers. so, we decided to keep her nameless. I think because I was writing this back, I was only 30 when I started writing this book. That was kind of my writing style at the time. I often didn't name characters. And so that's just how she evolved not to have a name. And then the editing process, we did try to give her a name.

We tried a version where she was named and we all agreed to remove it, that we liked her better nameless because it does really hone in then on Harry. He's very named in the story. And I think in our society, homeless people are often not named.

**Interviewer** [00:03:21] You name all the homeless people. They have a name. You have given each one of them a persona, and yet the woman remains nameless.

**Sarah Brill** [00:03:29] Yeah, I mean, that was a fairly unconscious choice in the beginning. And then in the editing, we decided to keep it as a conscious choice to do that.

**Interviewer** [00:03:37] I'm glad you did.

**Sarah Brill** [00:03:39] Yeah,

**Interviewer** [00:03:40] I believe the sympathy for the man has been an option for a film. What does this mean and how involved will you be with the film process?

**Sarah Brill** [00:03:45] So what that means is that a production company that based in Melbourne Sparkplug Films, have the right to develop the story into a feature

film. They're currently at first draft, so that had a writer on board and they've been developing a script based on the book. Last time I spoke to the producer, he was starting to look around at directors and they were hoping to get a draft good enough to start applying for development funding to keep that writing process. I'm not very involved. I'm involved when they need some help. So, the producer, after reading the first draft, had a list of questions for me around back story of characters and how I saw different elements of the book. I will at some point get to read a script and offer my views, but the film will be quite separate from the book. I see my book as a very finished solid piece and I'll then take from that to hopefully make a film. But it will be more their film, I suspect, than than my book.

**Interviewer** [00:04:46] So basically, you'll have no option if you're not happy.

**Sarah Brill** [00:04:49] No, I have some options in the contract. I think I have things like I can remove my name if I feel that it really isn't true to the book. And I'm certainly there involve in the development as required, but I'm not involved in the day to day writing of it, not very happy to do that this way and I have a lot of faith in the producer and his belief in the story and I think that if they're lucky enough to get it funded, they'll do a good job.

**Interviewer** [00:05:14] I'm sure that they choose books that they are happy with so, you have to have faith in the system that they will produce a great film to go with your great book.

**Sarah Brill** [00:05:23] Absolutely.

**Interviewer** [00:05:24] How disciplined do you need to be to write a novel whilst working full time and raising a family? Do you have a formula on how you write?

**Sarah Brill** [00:05:31] I think I have to be really disciplined and I go through phases where I'm writing every day and sometimes where I'm not writing at all, just depending on how busy work is and how busy the family is. So, I try to write as often as I can, and that might be finding just little gaps in my day where I can write. So, if I'm working on a first draft, I carry where I'm up to with me and for example, if I have a child at the moment, one of my kids is into ice skating. So, I take him to the ice rink so he can

do a lesson. And I sit there for an hour with my story and write. When I'm in the editing process, I make sure I've got at least 10 pages in my bag of the printed-out book. And if ever there is a moment where I'm sitting waiting or just, I have a pause, then I can whip that out and go through it. So that's kind of how I try and fit it in and then I also take time away. This is a new thing that a friend and I, we go away for a weekend, to write.

And that's just two days away from the family where I can focus on writing and I've found recently that means I get a lot of work done in a really short space of time.

**Interviewer** [00:06:36] Are you currently writing another book?

**Sarah Brill** [00:06:39] Yeah, I'm always writing about five.

**Interviewer** [00:06:42] I was going to ask you, do you write more than one book at a time?

**Sarah Brill** [00:06:44] I do one at a time, but I have a number in various stages, so I have one in first draft that I'm still thinking about how I'm going to develop further. I have one second draft that is my main focus that has some interest in me being turned into a visual medium as well. Probably not a film, probably. I think they will aim for a TV series with that one. So that's my focus. But I've just finished second draft of that, I'm having a little think about what I need to do for the third draft. And while I'm having that think, I think I'm working on a new first draft, which is a kid's book based on one of my children had this idea that I wanted to write out for him and have his input in

**Interviewer** [00:07:24] one of the characters that stood out to me is the friendly librarian who helps Harry listen to CD. It's nice to see that you've captured the essence of a local library and the fact that they are for everyone. As this is a library podcast we'd like to finish by asking for reading recommendations. What are you reading now? Any suggestions for our listeners?

**Sarah Brill** [00:07:44] Yes, I am reading *The Price of Salt*, which is a part of my work book club, which is interesting and probably not a book that I ever would have picked up.

**Interviewer** [00:07:53] That's the good thing about book clubs. They sent you to different genres that you normally wouldn't pick up and read yourself.

**Sarah Brill** [00:07:58] Yeah, it is. I've really enjoyed that aspect of it, the book that I love, love to recommend to people this book I read, I think last year, but it was still one of my favourites and that was *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kid and the book that I can't wait to read, but I still you know, like everyone else, I've got that little pile next to my bed of books to get through. I'm really hoping to get to Kate Grenville's new book soon *A Room Made of Leaves*.

[00:08:21] My mother read it and she says it's fabulous. So that's what I'm really looking forward to.

**Interviewer** [00:08:26] You write, you read, you're raising a family and working full time. You do quite a bit. You sound like a superwoman.

**Sarah Brill** [00:08:33] No, just just your average mum.

**Interviewer** [00:08:38] Average mum. There's no such thing as an average mum. Really appreciate you talking to us today, Sarah. Have a great day. Thank you.

**Sarah Brill** [00:08:43] Thanks, Sophia, and thanks for chatting.

**Interviewer** [00:08:46] Spinifex publishers of *Sympathy for the Man* will not charge a shipping fee if customers choose to buy the book through Spinifex. Just apply the code BRILL (spells out BRILL) in capitals and there'll be no shipping fee attached to your purchase. If you'd like to take advantage of some of Sarah's reading suggestions, you can find many of these titles available for reservation via our online catalogue. Thank you for listening and look out for more upcoming digital content through the library website, What's On and social media channels.