

# Katherine FirkinFinal1.mp3

## Speaker Series 'Sticks and stones' by Katherine Firkin

[00:00:00] Interviewer:

Welcome to the inner west. Library Speaker series. Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Today, we'll be talking to Katherine Firkin about what it's like to be a debut author and journalist in the time of Covid-19 and how she is navigating this difficult time, as well as her new publication. Sticks and Stones. Katherine Firkin is a Melbourne journalist currently with CBS New York. She has over a decade of experience and has worked across every medium print, online, television and radio. Sticks and Stones is a gritty and thrilling read set amidst Sydney's inner city Melbourne and is inspired by the countless criminal trials she has covered as a crime and court reporter and the unbelievably graphic details that often went unreported outside of the courtroom. Welcome, Katherine.

[00:00:59] Katherine

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Interviewer:

My first question, Katherine, congratulations on your debut novel, Sticks and Stones. Australian Crime at its best. Katherine, you have a remarkable way of writing. I can visualize everything as I read a bit like watching a television show with so many interesting narratives and multiple plot threads. Can you explain your style?

[00:01:24] Katherine

Yeah, well, I must admit, I've chosen a slightly different style, for Sticks and Stones, and a lot of people have described it the way you have that it almost reads a little bit like a TV series. I must admit, I didn't deliberately intend to make it that way, but I certainly did want to write from multiple perspectives and to have really quite short, sharp changes of scene really as a way to keep people engaged and to keep people turning the page, but also as a way to really get inside the heads of my different characters. There are quite a few different characters in this book, and it really was important to me that people would

become very invested in them and that they would also feel like they really got to know these people through the book.

[00:02:07] interviewer

I was surely invested, I can tell you that now.

[00:02:11] Katherine

Well, that's great feedback. Yes. So far, people seem to really love this style, even though, as you mentioned, it is a little bit different and perhaps it might take people sort of a page or two to sort of understand how it's going to read.

[00:02:23] Interviewer

You had so many characters and they were all so so interesting, as an author, do you find one that becomes your favourite? If yes, who was it and why?

[00:02:34] Katherine

Well, I must admit, I become I must I become really invested in all my characters as I get writing. One of the characters I was particularly invested was actually one of the less prominent characters to start with, and that was a teenage boy named Samir. Who lived in the Flemington Commission flats and I guess I just felt sort of this mixture of empathy and also like I wanted to help this kid out a bit because he's a little bit on the wrong path. But he's not necessarily a bad person at heart, when you first meet him so, I did certainly become extremely attached to him, and I also, surprisingly, really enjoyed writing from the perspective of the offender himself. Obviously, I can't say too much. I don't want to give anything away. But I really enjoyed having that liberty and that freedom to really push the boundaries of human behaviour and human motivation in a way that really you only can do when you're dealing with a character is as evil as a killer.

[00:03:37] Interviewer

Yes, the ending did get me by surprise. I can tell you that now, but we're not about to say, our little secret that happens at the end are we?

[00:03:46] Katherine

No, let's let's not ruin it for everyone. But I'm so glad to hear that it was a bit of a twist at the end that's good.

[00:03:52] Interviewer

Detective Emmett Corbin. Very, very interesting, Detective. Will he be back. Do you have any plans for a series?

[00:04:02] Katherine

Yeah, I'm I'm glad you described him as interesting. It's funny, I made a little bit of a different choice with my detective quite often at the moment in crime novels, the lead protagonist is a little bit damaged or they have a bit of a you know, traumatized backstory or they're venging something that's happened in the past. And I went a little bit different with my lead detective. He's actually quite a straight laced, hard working, genuinely, seriously invested in his job. Kind of a policeman. And I'm really glad that people so far do seem to be loving him, because I wanted to have someone that reflected the sort of detectives I see out on the road as a reporter. Day after day. And certainly my intention when I wrote Sticks and Stones was that this would be a series. And in fact, I have almost finished what I believe will be the second book in this series, and I'm pretty excited about that.

[00:04:57] Oh, that's interesting. Can you reveal the title at least, or you're not about to?

[00:05:01] I probably can't tell you the title, but I can tell you that it will be Detective Emmett Corban back and he'll be investigating a cold case back from nineteen ninety one, which involves three teenage girls who go out one evening and only two of them return.

[00:05:17] Interviewer

Well, I'll be looking forward for that book. I can tell you that now you've got me. That's for sure.

[00:05:525] Katherine:

That's great feedback

[00:05:26] Interviewer

Katherine, how have you been coping during self isolation? I assume you've been working from home?

[00:05:32] Katherine

Most of my work has been from home, yes. I have been doing a little bit of reporting, which still involves me getting out of the house and actually having to do some TV work and things. But they are all the media organizations are trying to get people to work from home as much as possible. Obviously, I'm used to sort of being alone and sitting on a computer by myself with my writing anyway, so I haven't found it too difficult. But, you know, it's more just that uncertainty that I'm sure a lot of people are dealing with and that sort of general anxiety that surrounded the moment that we just really don't know when all this is going to end and how it's going to play out and how we're going to be affected at the end of it all.

[00:06:12] Interviewer

Yes, I agree with you there. I really do. I really do. Katherine, you've covered some of Victoria's biggest criminal trials. Are there any that particularly motivated you to write sticks and stones?

[00:06:24] Katherine

Yes, certainly. I mean, I'll start by saying, obviously, my book is fiction, so it's not directly related to any one case that I've covered. But there certainly are a few cases that really stood out in my mind when I was reflecting on what I've done so far in my career as a journalist. One of those was the 2014 murder of Rene Lough. And in my mind, this is still one of the most horrific murders that Melbourne has ever seen. And it was a case that really, I don't think got enough attention or enough notoriety. At the time. Rene was a pastry chef who had come over from Hong Kong and was living in Melbourne. And from all accounts, she was effectively living the life of her dreams. She'd been volunteering at an aged care home and she'd been singing in a local choir. And she'd just met this great guy. And a man quite literally grabbed her and dragged her off the street as she was walking to work one morning and brutally raped and murdered her in

an attack that lasted over 80 minutes. And she was conscious for most of that attack. And I will never forget sitting in the courtroom and hearing the details of what happened to her and looking across at the offender who showed absolutely no remorse and had absolutely no motivation for doing it. It was completely random and it was so brutal. And it made me start to really question how does someone end up at that point where they're able to do something like that? And in this particular case, what was also extremely striking about it was that this man had almost no history of prior offending.

And so I really did start to look back into who this person was and how did they get to this point. And what I discovered was that he had a fairly unstable, if not traumatised childhood. And this is something that I found repeated itself almost continuously when I started looking at offenders. And that is a theme that's in sticks and stones that you do see a back story of the offender and you do get a much larger picture of who they are and where they've come from. And I think you do in many crime books.

[00:08:35] Interviewer

It's quite scary, actually, isn't it?

[00:08:37] Katherine

Yeah. It is scary. And it's it bothers me that these people probably, you know, are not necessarily born evil. I mean, perhaps they are. There's always that nature versus nurture debate. But I really don't think there are many people, if there are any at all, who are purely born evil. And I just sort of destined to do evil things. I think there are a lot of people who do fall through the cracks and who make terrible personal choices and decisions and who probably are let down by society in one way or another and don't perhaps have the skills to get themselves back on the right track.

[00:09:17] Interviewer

Oh Dear, Katherine, one of the central themes in the book is the back story of the offender. Why did you choose to focus on this? Is this something you've experienced in the courtroom?

[00:09:29] Katherine

Yeah, absolutely. As as I was just talking about it. It really is something that I find repeats itself over and over again that when you get to the sentencing part of almost any trial, even not the most serious trials that you find that the offender has had some

sort of neglect or damage or unstable childhood or has really fallen in with the wrong crowd and not being able to get out of that situation. And I even see it with offenders who maybe have stolen cars or who have been or robbed places we're not even talking about in the absolute most extreme cases of offending. And so it was something for me that was important. I would never, ever obviously sympathize with offenders or condone what they are doing. But I think it's an important part of the conversation that we don't perhaps have often enough is that these people are still whole people. They're not just evil offenders and it's an interesting sort of thought to look back at how they got to this point. And of course, in the real world, I ideally would be able to actually intervene and recognize when people are really going off the path in this way.

[00:10:41] Interviewer

Yeah gee it's hard to reply back to that, what you just said. It really is. But I can understand

[00:10:45] Katherine

It's a bit confronting and it's certainly something that I find in court. It's a bit confronting and it's it's all so to be honest, it's a little bit almost depressing because you see this cycle of neglect to repeat itself over and over and over. And I really do find that damage in the past creates damage in the future. And it's like this domino effect. And I do hope from a you know, from a personal point of view, I hope that we can sort of find better ways to intervene earlier so that people are not falling through the gaps as often as they are. And, of course, a large part of that's going to be education and making sure that children particularly are kept in supportive, stable environments, which is not always possible. But I do think perhaps we're getting a little better, at least at identifying vulnerable people.

[00:11:39] Interviewer

I agree with you there. And it's also good that the media does cover it and journalists like you to do the stories because it just gets the word out there and people, you know, know what's going on, you know, rather than just keeping things hush hush.

[00:11:53] Katherine

Yeah, I think I think that transparency is really important. And I think that's what I really enjoyed about writing Sticks and Stones, was that I had so much more time and space in, you know, one hundred thousand words to actually really explore some of these things and also do it in a way that was still, you know, for want of a better word, still entertaining so that people will want to read and keep going and sort of know how things turn out.

[00:12:17] Interviewer

Well, it was entertaining. I mean, there is a difference between the true crime and, of course, fiction crime. But, you know, people enjoy true crime as well. And people in our Inner West Libraries, they absolutely love anything crime. They love the crime fiction, true stories, everything. So it's one of the most popular genres that we have here.

[00:12:38] Katherine

Yeah, it's a really I think it's a really exciting genre to write in, because, as I mentioned before, you do have so much freedom to really explore with human psychology and human motivation and behaviour. And I find those areas really fascinating. And I think for a lot of people, the reason we are so excited by crime is not because we're glorifying it or celebrating it by any means. But for most people, these behaviours so far outside of what they could do themselves, that there is this sort of almost like you get a bit of a peek behind the curtain at this other life that does go on all around us. And it does impact so many people in one way or another. And then, of course, there's also just the the actual fun of, you know, the mystery and trying to solve. Almost like solving a puzzle, really. And certainly my book I did try to keep it fun. And I also really did try to keep the suspense up so that hopefully people are attempting to solve it and they have all the clues to solve it. But perhaps, you know, it might be intricate enough that they don't quite get it.

[00:13:43] Interviewer

Well, it's it's funny that you say that because it was suspenseful suspenseful for me, too, because I had a PDF version of your book because we couldn't get a hold of the hard copy quick enough. And I had it on my laptop at home and I had it all nice and big. And I was just reading through it and, you know, I was just, just devouring it. So it was it

was great. You know, I have to say that I've enjoyed it before and I really did enjoy it immensely.

[00:14:10] Katherine

Oh that's great to hear. I love the fact that you've raced through it. That's good feedback.

[00:14:16] Interviewer

A bit too fast. I think they can wait for lunch. Lunch lunch Make yourself a sandwich. They can wait for lunch. Katherine, what does life look like while using new technology with the confines of your home?

[00:14:30] Katherine

Yeah, it's interesting. I really I must admit, I'm a little bit scared of technology generally, and people are often surprised by that because I do work in the media and I work in broadcast media. So I'm on TV all the time. But that doesn't mean that I'm actually the one, you know, pushing the buttons or fixing the cables or, you know, my job is quite simple. All I have to do is stand there and talk. And I'm I'm not very good, actually. And, you know, this sort of technological side of things myself. So this period has been really a little bit daunting for me, and particularly when I realized that my entire book launch. And my whole tour was going to be online. I had a little bit of a panic because I thought, I've never done that. I mean, I've never done podcasts before. I've never done blogs. I've never done live YouTube and Facebook streaming and everything else that I've suddenly done. So in a way, I've actually learnt a whole lot of new skills which I would not have otherwise learned because I try to avoid technology as much as possible because we just don't seem to get on. But it's been interesting. And one thing that has surprised me, because I really love face to face contact, I like to chat to people and hear their side of the story. I've been really impressed with how adaptable people are at, you know, still engaging through these different mediums and how you still can feel like you create a little community of around yourself, even if it can't actually be in person. It's actually been quite pleasing to see that



[00:16:07] Interviewer

I find that we are all in the same boat there because everything's so new to us as well. You know, it's been a learning curve for quite a lot of us, learning all new technologies. So you're not alone there. I can tell you that now.

[00:16:19] Katherine

Well, that's good to hear. Yeah. I'm always a bit embarrassed to admit that I am terrible with technology because people just assume that I must know what I'm doing and I really don't.

[00:16:27] Interviewer

We can pretend and have gone this far. So we're doing all right aren't we

[00:16:32] Interviewer

Katherine, I'm aware that you've worked in a range of medium. How do you think media has been influenced by the pandemic?

[00:16:39] Katherine

Well, there is no doubt that media has been hit hard, but so so have a lot of industries from a financial point of view, of course. You know, there's not much advertising happening at the moment in any mediums. And so we have been seeing redundancies and unfortunately, job losses across the board in media and not just in Australia, right across the world. But I actually think media was quite unstable before this anyway, it's been a real challenge for media outlets to adapt to the new world and to technologies and to the fact that everyone now pretty much has a smartphone and they can, you know, live stream and they can take photos and they can blog and they can effectively be journalists themselves. And I really don't think the media has done enough to separate themselves as sort of being the experts as opposed to just sort of everyone else running around with their own gear. So I do think in a way, they probably need a bit of a wakeup call. And certainly, I mean, as far as, you know, job losses, there's been plenty of industries that have been hurt just as badly. And of course, as far as the actual day to day work goes, most of us are trying to work from home, although in this job it's

not always possible. You do have to actually go to some events to report on them. But we're doing what we can to keep socially distancing just like everyone else.

[00:18:04] Interviewer

Yes, I agree with you and I do hope it gets better for the people that have lost their jobs. So we'll look forward to the future, see what is going to happen. Might take a little while before we pick up again. I'm sure it will.

[00:18:18] Katherine

I mean, yeah, there's lots of industries and lots of different people who've been affected in in really different ways. So I certainly don't feel like we're any worse than anyone else. It's just a funny time because in some ways people need the media now more than ever, and yet that the revenue and the ability of us to function is lower than ever. It's an interesting sort of conflict that we're all trying to face.

[00:18:42] Interviewer

Yes. Yeah, I hear you. Will you continue writing fiction if. Yes. What other formats would you be using in the future when a new normal occurs?

[00:18:53] Katherine

Yes, I'll definitely keep writing, and as I said, my goal was always that this would be a series. So my hope is that my next book will be a continuation of Detective Emmett Corbin on his next adventure. And that's likely to be with Penguin again. As things stand right now, which will be fantastic as far as, you know, mediums and things go, I'm very traditional with my writing. I quite literally just have my laptop and I use my word document and that's it and that's all I do. I'm really not very brave when it comes to trying different programs and different technologies. I am still a bit of a pen and paper girl, too. I must say, like, I really love jotting my thoughts down to start in a diary or in a notepad as I walk around. And then later on putting it all down on the computer. So I don't think that's going to change for me too much. But certainly the ability to move around a bit more is going to be helpful because I do like actually going to the places that I write about and chatting to locals and going into the local stores just to really get a feel for the place. And that will obviously be a lot easier once all these restrictions ease.

[00:20:04] Interviewer

Some interesting stories, I bet, that you've heard when you go and talk to local people.

[00:20:10] Katherine

Yeah, absolutely, and I really enjoy that, and I do think that's one thing that journalism has taught me is that it's quite okay to walk up to strangers and just start having a chat. You know, I think sometimes people don't do that enough. And certainly I've had other writers ask me, you know, how do I go about asking police, you know, for information or how do I ask this? And I sort of say, look, there's no you know, we don't have any sort of special privileges as a reporter. We literally just walk up to people and start talking. And you can do that, too. And you learn so much when you talk to neighbours and witnesses and locals and you know, the person behind the milk bar counter. And I really liked doing that because you often find really fascinating stories about the area that you really wouldn't know if you just wandered around on your own.

[00:20:59] Interviewer

Ah true, very true, very true, Katherine do you think that crime and issues surrounding our criminal justice system have taken a backseat during the pandemic?

[00:21:11] Katherine

That's an interesting question. I mean, I was reading some data just just the other day that showed that crime generally has gone down, but of course, on the other hand, domestic violence has really gone up. So it's interesting. You know, I think the sort of what I guess what you would call petty crime or there's just less people out on the street. So you're not necessarily getting the fights and the brawls and the robberies that perhaps otherwise you might get because everyone is at home. But then the rise in domestic violence in these sort of crimes really bother me because, you know, it sort of signals perhaps a deeper issue that's been sitting there the entire time that's come to a bit of a head with everyone feeling a bit of anxiety and stress.

[00:21:58] Interviewer

Yeah, I tend to agree there. It's another upsetting and disturbing thing to say, but it is true and I do hope that people get the help they need when they need it. So.

[00:22:10] Katherine

Yeah absolutely. That's a really difficult conversation. I mean, sorry, is the whole, you know, violence against women and all these sort of thing, it's a really tough conversation. But again, like we were saying earlier, it's something I think we we need to keep having because it clearly is prevalent in society and it does happen quite literally behind closed doors. So if we don't talk about it, people perhaps don't feel that they can reach out and get the help they need. And at a time like this, when we are all feeling a bit unsettled and uncertain and people have lost their jobs and all the rest of it, it's really important that people feel okay to reach out for help.

[00:22:48] Interviewer

I totally agree with you there. Katherine, what has it been like to have a debut novel come out in the midst of a pandemic? And how have you adapted to your expectations around this?

[00:23:00] Katherine

Well, of course, initially, I was a bit disappointed because I really was looking forward to getting around the country and meeting people and having a chat and going to all the bookstores and particularly having a real book launch. I was really looking forward to having, you know, these sort of group of people who've really helped me through this hallway in the same room and I could celebrate with them and also thank them in person. Of course, none of that has happened. So that's been a little bit disappointing. But at the same time, it's really put things in perspective for me, the pandemic. And I realise how lucky I am to not only still have my job, but to have a book out in the world which, you know, has been a goal and a dream of mine for so many years. And it does seem to be doing reasonably well. And what I'm really quite humbled by is that people seem very keen at the moment to support Australian products and Australian industry. And it's been wonderful that that seems to be extending to Australian authors, too. It's really been quite, quite humbling the amount of support I've got, particularly because I am a debut author and no one knows who I am. And I'm very new to it all that people are prepared to support me and take a chance and give the book a go. And yeah, the reviews and the feedback, it's been really wonderful so far.

[00:24:19] Interviewer

Well, hopefully when Detective Emmett Corbane comes back, we can do a book launch for you. So and people that missed out on reading Sticks and Stones will be able to read your first book and your second book at the same time. So that would be great. That's something to look forward to.

[00:24:36] Katherine

Yeah, that would be wonderful. And that's the other thing. You said it touched on it there. And you're right that the book doesn't fade away just because, you know, it didn't get the big launch. It might have had, you know, at the time in a year's time, if there's book number two. It might. You're right. It might actually spur people on. You haven't had a chance to go back and read book one. So books are wonderful things because they don't just disappear. So they do have a long shelf life. Quite legitimately

[00:25:00]. Interviewer

Absolutely. And me working in a library, they they do have a long shelf life. I can tell you that for sure. Katherine, one last question, because I work in a library, I'm curious and I'm sure listeners out there are curious, too. What are you reading at the moment? What are you listening to?

[00:25:18] Katherine

I've actually just started Gathering Dark by Candice Fox. I'm generally a really big Scandinavian crime lover and I read all the Scandi crime, but I'm a little bit the same at the moment that I really want to be supporting Australian writers and Australian publishers. So I've made a conscious decision to try and read Australian for the rest of the year as much as as I can. And I'm loving all the new then the new Candice Fox. I mean, I always loved her style of writing. She has a very distinct, quirky way of developing characters. And certainly it's not a traditional crime novel, this one. But I'm really, really enjoying it so far. And then I'm also looking forward to Benjamin Stevenson's new one, which I think comes out in September. So I'm I am certainly making a concerted effort to support Australian writers at the moment.

[00:26:10] Interviewer

That's great. That's great. That's been wonderful. Thank you, Katherine, for your time and for a wonderful chat. We do wish you all the best with your new book, Sticks and Stones and with all future publications. If you would like to purchase Katherine's book, please visit Booktopia online or call your favourite bookstore. And they should be able to order it in for you. Bye everyone. And thank you for listening. And look out for our upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library, What's on and social media channels Inner West Council Libraries have an extensive crime fiction and true crime collection. Be sure to check them out next time you visit. Bye. And thank you very much, Katherine.

[00:26:51] Thank you so much. And thanks to everyone for tuning in.