

What To Expect When You're Immigrating
NASH in conversation with Bruno

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

Kirsty: Good evening, and welcome to our program tonight. To begin with, on behalf of Wyndham City Council, I would like to acknowledge the Woi Wurrung, Boon Wurrung, and Wathaurong Peoples of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners on which the land of Wyndham City is being built. I pay my respects to the wisdom and diversity of past and present Elders and their commitment, along with the council, to nurturing future generations of our elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our guests tonight. NASH is a Sri Lankan-born multidisciplinary designer-artist based in Melbourne, where he has lived since 2012. His work is both cynical social commentary and an account of his personal experience as an immigrant. *What To Expect When You're Immigrating* is his first book. Bruno Lettieri has interviewed Helen Garner, Arnold Zable, Michael Leunig, and many more. He taught at Victoria University for many years and particularly loved teaching at the Sunbury campus. Bruno founded the Rotunda in the West series of conversations. He now freelances at festivals and libraries, as Bruno Goes Everywhere. I'll leave you now in their capable hands.

Bruno Lettieri: Good evening, Avinash. Hello from Clifton Hill. Where are you?

NASH: Good evening, Bruno. I'm currently in Brunswick.

Bruno Lettieri: Isn't it funny? We modern people, we don't ask "how are you" anymore. We ask "where are you," don't we, so it's a very strange kind of phenomenon. Welcome to all the –

NASH: I mean if they're doing it in person. Normally, just a message sent over text, isn't it?

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. It'd be lovely to be in a room with you, and I really long for the day when we can do that again and I look forward to maybe having a conversation again.

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: I'd like you to – I'd like you to know, NASH – Avinash, that I've been living in your book for the past day or so, and there's little bits of paper coming out of every page. I think I could have asked a question about every page, about every drawing. Avinash, thank you for your book and thank you for the consideredness that it draws out in me, in the reader. NASH, I meet you in the lift. I've never met you before. You're carrying your book, and I say to you, "What's that? Is that a memoir? Is that a novel? Is that a collection of your short stories?" What would be your

answer to me in 20 seconds as we ride to the 20th floor together and we're not going to see each other much longer after that? What is your book about, in essence?

NASH: In essence. OK. Well, first of all, if a stranger did ask me what my – what I'm holding in the alley, I would take about 20 seconds to figure out whether I should answer, but, hypothetically, let's say that I do answer, the book is, I mean, a bit of every one of those things that you mentioned, isn't it? It is a memoir of sorts, seeing that I am an immigrant, and most of the – I would 99 percent of the illustrations and experiences demonstrated in the book have been my own, as well as, I guess, short stories, because without using myself as the protagonist – not that there is a protagonist or story of – that anyone could follow like a novel in the book there's trying to speak from different perspectives, so I do try to put myself into the shoes of other people so you – multiple protagonists with smaller stories, smaller storylines, but the book is a –

Bruno Lettieri: And yet...

NASH: Sorry. Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: No. No. Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

NASH: Not at all.

Bruno Lettieri: And yet if we counted the words in the book, NASH, there'd be lucky to be 300, 400 words. I didn't actually do that. So it's a surprising book in that way isn't it? It's not linear. It doesn't reach to some climax. It's not you, you know, pontificating about the migrant experience. You are not saying this is the way to do it. It's a very unusual book in that way isn't it? It's drawings and text, kind of, dancing around each other a little bit.

NASH: Yeah. It was, I think, one of the reasons my publisher, Martin, actually was drawn to the book, because he told me that he hasn't come across this format before, and I think it helps that I didn't necessarily go into this project with the idea of writing a book, and, obviously, what came out, even though it looks like a book and, you know, people call it a book and, apparently, call me an author as well it's not necessarily a book. I would describe it as maybe a New Yorker-style cartoon collection.

Bruno Lettieri: OK.

NASH: With a tagline and image and the – yeah. And I made it have as few words as possible on purpose because I – yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Can you trace it back to – I'm always interested when I meet someone or when I sit next to people who know each other, I'm always fascinated with the question of how did you meet. Can I ask you how did you first go, there is this book that has got the possibility of me bringing my drawings, my art, and the experience of who I am and be able to speak at these

multiple levels to people about all sorts of things? When did the idea first come to mind that this could be the book that you just described?

NASH: Well, I was grappling with two different ideas, the first one of which is that I'm entering the last stage of my residency; of visa process currently, and I was looking back at the last nine years that I've been here going from one visa to the other, because I started off as an international student, then applied for temporary graduate – yeah. So there was a whole list of bureaucratic hurdles that I had to jump through to get to this stage, and the other was in the last couple of years, I think, race has been pushed into the – pushed into focus, not just in Australia but around the world. I wanted to explore exactly how much of an impact race would have with migration, not just in the process of being able to migrate to a country, but what happens post-migration, the first few months, the first couple of years, and what do you expect as a person when you migrate to a country.

Bruno Lettieri: And you feel that the intentions you started with and the hopes that you had for what this might do and the way you might think your way through all of that – do you think what you ended up kind of producing somehow answers some of that, or are they still questions which are swishing around and swirling around in your imagination?

NASH: I think it helped me go through and think about the experience that I've had in the last nine years, almost a decade, and analyse them to an extent that it helped me grapple with certain things. But I think the intention of the book itself, for me, was not as a book of answers but as a conversation starter, a stepping-off point for much more difficult conversations that might be taboo in society, because I wanted to get all the, quote-unquote, microaggressions that people speak about and have become so much more prominent in this day and age, out of the way and really going to what life might be like for you, because everyone's got an idea of what the place you're moving into might be. But most of it might be different. Some if it could be worse. Some of it could be better. I tried to give a little bit more of a grounded view of what the experience might be and not another book about the hardships of being an immigrant. Like, there is people with much larger vocabulary and much better understanding of language might have written that already.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. Did – tell us about the interrelationship between all the different artistic aspects of yourself because you're a multidisciplinary artist. Before I formulate that question, could you just very briefly tell us what that involves? Does that mean you paint, you sketch, you do charcoal, you – can you give us a sense of that range?

NASH: Yeah. So I started off as a street artist back in Sri Lanka. From there, I moved on towards, I guess, a fine art practice, which I still carry on to this day. Along with that, I started doing illustrations, like, commercial illustration. I'm currently represented by Jacky Winter, which is, like, international illustration agency. So I guess those are the three disciplines, and I've also studied architecture at RMIT, so my –

- Bruno Lettieri: OK.
- NASH: – yeah. I’ve got a Bachelor of Architecture, so I guess those are the multi-disciplines that people refer to as –
- Bruno Lettieri: And as we open your book and flick through it, NASH, can we see evidence of all of those disciplines subtly, kind of, suffused through the book, do you think?
- NASH: Definitely my illustrative practice and a bit of my street art practice, because most of my street art practice revolves around characters and faces of people, normally in bad mood or grumpy, so you would see that definitely in the book. Not much of my architectural influence, I suppose.
- Bruno Lettieri: Sure.
- NASH: Yeah.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. Now, your book, kind of – the front cover, of course – the front cover, of course, with the typing, your name, and, of course, there’s our character with the big bug eyes, and, of course, on his t-shirt it’s got “insert your own flag here”. Is that invitation to say, “I’m not trying to represent you, Mr Everyone, Mrs Everyone, whoever you are, but there is the possibility of you being the central person in this story.”
- NASH: Yeah. I think I’ve wanted – definitely have wanted the book to be relatable to almost anyone, and I think if you go to the penultimate page of the book, the page about “the pigeons still walk funny here”, so what I wanted – what I wanted from that page was even if – you might not have migrated to a different country. You might have not been able to relate to anything on the – in the rest of the pages of the book, but I think we can still all agree that the pigeons walk funny. So I did want that relatability to be there, because everyone’s experience, obviously, is going to be different, and –
- Bruno Lettieri: Absolutely. Yeah.
- NASH: Yeah. Creating, like, an everyman character, I suppose.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. So given the enormous challenge of that everyman, everywoman, how do you decide on that, and tell me about the importance of the kind of – the eyes in the design of that and setting the whole tone for the book. What are the eyes saying, and what were you hoping they might say?
- NASH: I tried to capture the kind of feeling I had when I boarded the plane from Colombo to come over here to Australia, which was, I guess - nervous excitement would be the way to describe it. I was really looking forward to what lied ahead. At the same time, I was, I guess, fearful – not fearful, but anxious of what I might be leaving behind and what I might be getting

myself into. Funny little story about that, actually, the first day I landed was in December, I think, and it was 45 degrees on that day.

Bruno Lettieri: You're kidding.

NASH: And coming from Sri Lanka, I was used to heat, and I got off the plane, and I kept thinking to myself, what have I gotten myself into?

Bruno Lettieri: It was brutal. And you make reference to weather a few times. It's actually one of the few themes where you keep dancing with it again, and it keeps coming up again too.

NASH: It is. It is.

Bruno Lettieri: Were you almost ready to go back on the basis of that heat on that day?

NASH: Not at all. Not at all. I think I've been through a lot to get over here. I don't think a few degrees more in temperature was going to stop me from, I guess, pursuing my life here.

Bruno Lettieri: Just going back to the artistic notion and trying to use a photograph or a drawing to convey so much. What are the things that drawing something like that can say more powerfully than if you had have tried to write a, you know, few-hundred-word explanation of that feeling or that invitation to the reader?

NASH: I think there's a form of finiteness with words. Obviously, they could be interpreted in a million different ways, but I think the – as many ways as you could interpret words, I think there are still more ways that a picture could be interpreted, and there's an ability to put yourself into the face or the – into the body of the person that's been illustrated that I find most attractive about a piece of art compared to writing, and I guess I'm not as good a writer, so I guess I stick to what I know to some extent.

Bruno Lettieri: And have people reacted in that way, NASH? Have they gone, "That face – I connected with that face. That face opened something out in me. It stopped me, kind of, formulating all my intellectual, kind of, preoccupations, and it just, kind of, got me into a more open, non-judgmental space." Does that work?

NASH: I mean, I don't think – I'm not sure if the cover page itself did it, but I definitely know and think that the humour that I brought – tried to inject into the book definitely cut through, we'll say, the ice, or cut through the social anxiety people might feel towards addressing certain topics. I've found that humour, in general, has that effect, and I try to insert humour into, I guess, all my disciplines, except for maybe architecture, I don't think.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure.

- NASH: Humour as architecture isn't necessarily something anyone wants to see.
- Bruno Lettieri: I like the sound of it. Can you point to a bit of an example in your book of where you think that humour comes through in the picture in a really disarming kind of way and gets people to engage critically with your book, which is the invitation you put out? Is there a particular one that you have in mind, and if you could, kind of, just describe it for us?
- NASH: Do I have – I guess the thing that does spring to mind is there's an image – the image in the book about a person who has taken the stairs and a person who has come out of an elevator. And the tagline for that is, "Some people may never understand what it took you to get there."
- Bruno Lettieri: Yes.
- NASH: I think that's what it said, but I think the image in and of itself has a humorous quality to it that people could relate to without having to read the tagline, which I tried to have with each one of the illustrations. Like, they could sit by themselves as pieces of art and –
- Bruno Lettieri: Could they? Yeah.
- NASH: Yeah. And I think that was something I strived towards when I was going about putting this together.
- Bruno Lettieri: Which came first? The words, the text, and then you drew to the text, or did the painting, kind of, form itself and was, kind of, from your own subconscious almost telling you something?
- NASH: I would say a combination of the – of all three, I suppose. I mean, I would credit most of the inspiration to the one and a half of a – well, [unintelligible 0:17:36] tram ride I had from La Trobe Uni to the city where I was working while I was coming up with this book, and I had not much to do besides listen to music and jot down ideas for drawings, I suppose, so I came up with the idea for the drawing, and then I figured out the tagline for it after. Again, the words come a little bit more difficult – little easy to me than the pictures do, so I guess the pictures always came first.
- Bruno Lettieri: Michael Leunig, the cartoonist, often would say in conversations that I've had with him that he didn't kind of know. There was something in that process of the pen, the ink, and something there that transferred through the arm that meant it, kind of, had a will and an animation of its own, that it was almost led by the drawing rather than him conceptually overlaying his thought onto the drawing. Does it work some way like that for all visual artists, or do you think – does it work in a particular way for you?
- NASH: I think it depends on which discipline. I've definitely found that experience coming through with my fine art practice, not as much with my illustrative practice, I suppose, because when I've got a paintbrush and

paint and, I guess, a piece of board or a canvas, it does come – you almost feel possessed to create something in a certain way, whereas with illustration, because of the finite lines, there is a sense of finiteness to them. There – you – there’s a decisiveness that you’ve got to make with each with each pen stroke, I suppose.

Bruno Lettieri: And were you essentially happy when you came up with those or was there always a sense in which you’re going, “This is not able to be quite put down as perfectly as one wants, but this will have to do,” or did you go, “That picture has nailed it.”

NASH: There were a couple of that I’m very big fans of. I think there was – that I think did come out well and had that kind of subtlety that I enjoy in pieces of art. I think the example – a couple of examples. One was a father and a son seated with their backs towards each other.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. Yeah.

NASH: And the father had vertical lines, and the son had horizontal -

Bruno Lettieri: Yes.

NASH: Yeah. So I really liked that picture. I think that one definitely captured what I wanted to say. I’m not sure if it did for the people looking at the book or reading the book, but for me, it felt like it captured what I was trying to say. There were some that I felt were a little bit on the nose that I’m not big fans of. I’m not a big fan of artwork that, you know, is a little bit too blatant.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes.

NASH: And I thought that –

Bruno Lettieri: Because your book isn’t blatant, isn’t it, because we go back to that point that this is not you, NASH, trying to say, “This is the how-to,” is it? You were – you’re speaking to sometimes an audience of people who you’re hoping will be sympathetic to – you’re hoping to speak to some people who are in the experience of immigrating, and then sometimes it’s – you’re speaking to someone who you’re going, “I’m trying to challenge you to maybe move out of your go-back-home kind of mentality into maybe a space where you think about this differently.” How difficult is it to combine all those different kinds of layers or different voices into the one work?

NASH: I think everyone needs to be able to put themselves in the shoes of others and – what’s the word? Empathetic, being, I think, empathetic, or emotional intelligence, I suppose.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure.

NASH: Yeah. A couple of things I tried to have in my own life, I suppose, outside of my art, any sort of artistic practice. I think it's easier when you've lived it, you've lived the experience yourself, but there are certain moments that someone might have lived a similar experience but to varying degrees. For example, there was one page there with "the presence of overbearing parents is a bit further away" or something like that.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes.

NASH: And I chose to use a lady or a woman as the figure in that because I felt that pressure of either getting married or something like that, it felt more, to a larger degree, by, we'll say, a woman than me.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure.

NASH: So I'm not sure if I answered your question or I just –

Bruno Lettieri: No. I think you have, indeed.

NASH: – talk around it in circles.

Bruno Lettieri: No. No. They're very difficult questions. Is an artist continually trying to figure things out or are you trying to say, "Here is something that I think is worth considering, and if we consider this, maybe we become better versions of ourselves."

NASH: I think a little bit of both. I think artists fluctuate between a certain level of narcissism, which is probably not healthy, and, I guess, crippling self-doubt. Once you create a work, I think there's a brief time window where you feel on top of the world for creating something before you start critiquing your own work, and that's when the doubt starts creeping in. So when I do put – when I put out the book or when I finished the book which, you know, happened maybe two years ago, it just – one a half years, we just took a much longer time from the time at which I finished the book to when it actually came out as a result of COVID and the pandemic everywhere. But now, when I look at the book, there are definitely places that I felt like I could have done a much better job, but I guess that will never really go away, will it? So ...

Bruno Lettieri: There's an act of bravery in every kind of putting out whatever of ourselves for the world to, kind of, look at, isn't there? And –

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: – the other side of ourselves is that we don't, kind of, walk around with this, kind of, hard-line certainty about ourselves unless you tend to be maybe a politician of certain sorts. You know what I mean? So navigating that, "I want to communicate something. I want my art to say something, but also I feel racked with this kind of personal insecurity," what wins out there?

NASH: I think if you look at your art as being a statement or a sentence with a full stop, you're probably looking at it wrong. I try to look at my work as an exploration of what I might be thinking, or I try to understand or grapple with certain ideas through the work itself. It's like showing the – it's showing the process in a math problem.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes.

NASH: And the body of work at the end of your life might be – might not be complete, but that would be the point at which I'm like, "OK. This is my statement."

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.

NASH: I think there's a word for it, is it oeuvre? Oeuvre? I think I might be pronouncing it wrong, but -

Bruno Lettieri: That's okay. No. No.

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. I like the way you used the word grappling there, NASH, you know what I mean? Because I felt throughout your book there was a genuine sense of the grappling part of you, and I thought that was a lovely – because you were grappling and because you weren't full of this kind of definiteness, that that was the invitation into that space which you create between your pictures and the word. It's an unusual dance, isn't it, you know?

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: I like that a lot.

NASH: It's surprising that – and I'm very glad that sense of grappling and – or struggle with myself or my own thoughts came through because it's very easy when it's, I guess, a definite set of words next to a picture.

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.

NASH: You have a sense of finiteness to it, but I didn't want that to come through. I think the humour and the different perspectives might have helped with that. Actually, I was hoping that it did come through, so –

Bruno Lettieri: I think it did, as a reader who had no expectation in coming to it. Can I go to a particular page of your book?

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: It's the one in which you go, "In every social situation, you're representing

more than just yourself.” That really, kind of, hit me, and my parents migrated 60 years ago, and I’m not trying to write myself into your story, but I hadn’t thought about that as much, and your 10 words and your exquisite picture – and I’m hoping people might almost be able to see that. Can you talk to us about, from your own personal experience of that, that burden of having to represent your community? There was that Sudanese man running for Australia last night, and, you know – and he was carrying his Sudanese community and the whole expectation of the fanatical sporting Australian world.

NASH: Yeah. I think everyone has this feeling of representing more than just themselves quite often. I mean, it could be different in different ways. For example, when I was in Sri Lanka, society there is structured where your family name and the family that you come from is of the utmost importance, so –

Bruno Lettieri: Is that right?

NASH: – every time I left the house, I had to dress a certain way because my parents were like, “You’re representing your family.” But when you move abroad and you become, I guess, a minority, you become part of, like, an immigrant community, then you tend to – your family name and your family just grows bigger, grows larger with more people and with – and when you’re in public, the luxury of not feeling that pressure is not something I have experienced. I’ve never felt that luxury and I don’t think I ever will for the – I guess, for the rest of my life, because once you’re conscious of it, it’s difficult to turn that off. I mean, some would describe it as social pressure, and I’m sure there are both negative and positive aspects to it, but it is a burden that most immigrants do feel.

Bruno Lettieri: And do you think you captured that burden in your drawing there? Do you think –

NASH: I’m happy with it. What do you think?

Bruno Lettieri: I think it was one of the more affecting of your pictures, to me personally, you know what I mean?

NASH: Well, thank you.

Bruno Lettieri: Talk us through the picture a little bit and tell us about how you came to decide on the people, kind of, in that configuration and the idea of all those faces behind him and the eyes. The eyes are a very big feature of all your drawings, aren’t they?

NASH: Yeah. I mean, there’s a – I think there’s a certain level of surprise. I think the – all that gathering there was, I guess, drawn from personal experience of the first day that I went out for drinks with my uni friends. In Sri Lanka, you don’t really go out for drinks on, like, a more casual basis like that.

- Bruno Lettieri: Sure.
- NASH: And that's probably the first day you get to know your classmates outside of the university context, where they start asking you questions about your background.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.
- NASH: And, I guess, the pressure of, like, what would my parents think about me being in such a venue drinking alcohol. Like, those are the thoughts that, obviously, crossed my mind. That's what I tried to illustrate there, I suppose.
- Bruno Lettieri: And the enormity of the burden, too. There are so many faces, and they're all kind of, you know, with their alert eyes on you, and, of course, your eyes there.
- NASH: Yeah. You've got – I think my eyes are closed there.
- Bruno Lettieri: They are. Yeah.
- NASH: I look a bit relaxed there, don't I?
- Bruno Lettieri: Or they're certainly downcast, aren't they, you know?
- NASH: Yeah. Well, I think the – you, kind of – you come to terms with it at some point. You start realising that your family is further away and that you hope that whatever you learnt through your upbringing till you're 18 will hold you well in a social situation, and you learn to turn off the kind of Spidey sense that other people might be watching you or come from a similar background in a social setting.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.
- NASH: Because that pressure does not necessarily come from people outside of your community, but within your community itself.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.
- NASH: You feel like you let them down if you do something wrong, you spill a drink, or, you know, you make a fool of yourself, you're letting someone down. Yeah.
- Bruno Lettieri: And is that feeling starting to abate the longer you stay, NASH, or do you feel that that is your lot, that invariably within every situation, the myriad faces of all those people saying, "Don't let us down, NASH," is kind of there working on you?
- NASH: I think over time – OK. The feeling doesn't necessarily go away, and I think I address that in some of – a page later on, but what you come to

terms with is that what you think about yourselves and the people around you who love you think about yourself is what matters, not the social pressure of what everyone else is thinking about you, so you – it's a part of growing up, isn't it. Like, when you grow up, you're constantly looking for your parental approval, and at some point, you make the transition from looking for parental approval to your own approval and, you know, going to bed with a good conscience, so to speak. So that transition does happen over time, so the voices get a little bit dimmer. Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: What are some of the aspects of our culture that may have been confronting at first or may have, you know, kind of put you into a kind of tailspin, but now you go, "I think I can feel the way it's changed me for something that I like about the changes in me."

NASH: Yeah. I think one of the reasons – one of the things that took me aback, I suppose – and I'll talk about a couple of things here, the first one of which is addressed in the book, but about how people are open and more honest about their feelings and they – that took me a while to get used to. I still struggle with – I guess I prescribe to a form of stoicism when it comes to dealing with emotions and such, but my partner, obviously – she's from here, and I think the first time I spent time with her and her friends, where they speak about, "I've been really – feeling really depressed this week, I've been finding it difficult to deal with this," I found that quite strange in the kind of – the way they talk about it. I mean, I'm sure there are healthy ways of talking about emotions, but it took me a while to get used to, because where – from where I'm from, you don't talk about anything negative. You only talk about the – I guess what you've done in school, academically, or in sports. You don't really talk about your feelings. That was something to get used to.

Bruno Lettieri: And so now do you think you are that kind of person that might be more inclined, and because our society does give permission to that, to say, "I'm not going so well at the moment."

NASH: To my partner, for sure, I've definitely opened up. It's why I'm still with her – she's still with me would be a better phrasing of that – for the last – for six years now. So I've definitely opened up to her, to some of my friends as well. I think there are still certain levels of the conservative background that I was brought up in still remnant, even though most of my ideals and, I guess, political leanings are quite liberal or classically liberal, at least. The – I think the other point that I will – the other thing that caught me back was in Sri Lanka, just like you don't talk about anything negative, there is not real space or room for dissent, we'll say, from the political norm, so to speak. The kind of freedom of expression, freedom of speech that's available here in the West is something I've idealised, especially while I was there, and definitely once I moved here. I mean, for me to be able to write a book like this, for me to, you know, stay on – like, on, well, a Zoom stage or in front of Teams page and talk about these things is not something that would be encouraged in Sri Lanka for sure, so – yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: And one of the things you do talk in your book is about pointing out some of what – the contradictions. You have that picture of the woman wearing her bag, announcing her feminism and being very proud of it, and of course in the background is the outworker sewing the bag, and we know the subtext of that is that she might be earning \$5.50 an hour.

NASH: Yeah. I'm – and I –

Bruno Lettieri: That's very –

NASH: There's no limit – sorry. It's not limited to feminism, I think. These contradictions happen in most societies, I think. Like, you see that with the kind of virtue signalling sort of stuff that happens. I think there is another illustration in the book about how some people might like you a bit too much. It addresses this pedestal that I guess people of colour are sometimes put up on with no real reason for being put up on that pedestal and people not really believing that they're anything special, but for the sake of signalling to the wider society that they might be saying the right things or having the right thoughts, they would continue to do this, and these – I mean, these contradictions are everywhere, and it's very difficult to navigate. I think there's a quote from someone I personally don't like, but the quote is significant or poignant regardless. It's George W. Bush. He says – he uses the phrase “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” and I found that to be quite powerful and influential in the way I live my life, at least, whether it be as an artist or just a man, not letting anyone patronise me, almost, and – yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Well, that – and that's an important element in your book, and I'm assuming that you, NASH, set out to say, “I want some of this to really kind of – really set the cat amongst the pigeons too,” you know what I mean?

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: That there was some piercing social commentary. That example that I just quoted, the line about equality looks different, and you got the people stacked on top of each other, and of course people put you into boxes, too.

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: You're really kind of – you know, kind of going for it in a very kind of front-on way there, and I applaud you for it, but have you – one, have you had some kick-back to that, and two, are you proud that you could do that, that art's role is to do the social commentary in that quite crisp, quite, you know, powerful way?

NASH: Yeah. I think I go back to the whole aspect of having the freedom to be able to do it. It's not something I take lightly at all. There was a time at which – in Sri Lanka where journalists and artists and professors were

disappearing, quote-unquote, because of their dissenting voices. So the ability to be able to do that here is, you know, a blessing, and the role that art plays or the role that I think my art plays with the humour and the simple illustrations, I wanted to be relatable, confronting in the – to the right extent, not confronting to the extent where it drives someone away, but makes you, I guess, engage with it, at least on some level.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure. OK. But it's hard to know at what level people will get offended or how angry they will be or how you will inflame certain prejudices and that. That's the risk, isn't it, the risky business of art and writing, isn't it?

NASH: It is definitely – see, I do prefer people actually engaging with me and trying to have a conversation on points of disagreement, because what I have noticed is because of, I guess, my skin colour and my name or the fact that I've written this book, people have a tendency of nodding and agreeing with me sometimes, which I'm not a fan of. Like, I would prefer people engaging in the conversation rather than agreeing with me to my face and might disagree with them in their heart of hearts, so to speak.

Bruno Lettieri: Why do they do that, do you think? What's that about? And you point that out in your book too, don't you?

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: "I think you like me too much. I think you" – and "don't talk on my behalf" is one of the elements of your book too, isn't it, you know what I mean?

NASH: Yeah. I mean, the "talk on my behalf thing" is – I guess it's much more complicated, but I guess the main thing that I was trying to point out there is the whole blanket term "people of colour" – there's another page about where I got the words in the wrong order, and I somehow had –

Bruno Lettieri: Coloured people.

NASH: Yeah. Coloured people and I had unrealised racism, apparently, inside me, according to the person I was talking to. But people of colour encompasses such a large swathe of people, so you could be Aboriginal people, you could be new immigrants, past immigrants, you know, second or third generation immigrants. The fact that we are put under this umbrella term and expected to think a certain way, I mean, the best example of this I think was – I think Joe Biden made this comment – I'm not going to take sides in that – the US politics. It's a quagmire of disaster there, but Joe Biden made this comment about, "If you don't vote for me, you ain't black." It's the kind of thinking of them as a monolithic herd of sheep just waiting for a shepherd with apparent good intentions to point them in the right direction. I hate the feeling.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. And, of course, as a young student at university, you know, 40 years ago when you'd have something called Asian Studies and, of course you

travel through Asia and there's Indonesians and there's Sri Lankans and there's Indians, and then you go, "What does it actually mean anymore?" You know, so it's a frustrating thing, isn't it, that all enveloping – but that's the purpose of your book, isn't it, to chip away and go, "How meaningful is that?" And even the way language changes and our awkwardness with, "Do I say you're a person of colour or do I say you're a coloured person," and we get tangled up in that a lot, don't we?

NASH: Yeah. You're walking on eggshells, aren't you?

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah.

NASH: And what's really missing in conversation is the lack of – I guess it's no longer about context and your intention when it comes to when you are trying to have a conversation. People are so afraid of, I guess, using the wrong terminology or using the wrong words in the wrong order that they don't – they just stay silent, and there are plenty of good people with good intentions that might work for the benefit of people of – quote-unquote people of colour who are silenced because they've said – people called them out for their – I guess not saying things properly, and that's not – yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: And you would rather someone make that mistake and maybe use the wrong terminology but try to get into something honest and direct with you; is that right?

NASH: Definitely. Definitely. Like – because once you make a mistake in front of me, or if you're comfortable enough to make a mistake in front of me, that allows me to be – the ability to make the same mistake when I'm conversing with the other person as well, and I think my – some of my best friends are people who I guess we trade insults with. It brings you closer together than I guess just exchanging pleasantries. That is the most superficial of all conversations.

Bruno Lettieri: Absolutely. Absolutely. You must get tired of people saying, as their opening gambit at a party or in a lift going, "And where do you come from?"

NASH: Yeah. It – yeah. It does get tiring, but I guess it's – it depends on how you approach it, I suppose. Initially, I was very angry and frustrated about it and, you know, had a chip on my shoulder about it, but over time I've learnt to be – OK, well, this is something that happens. I could either be annoyed at this person and not converse with them in any meaningful way as a result of that interaction, or I could try to look past it, and sure, I would prefer if that wasn't the case, but sometimes I do want to tell people that I'm from Sri Lanka.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure. Yeah.

NASH: So that – there are multiple ways a person can react. I think what I try to

do in the book is by showing these interactions it gets the person who might be a new immigrant ready for these interactions to happen. Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure. What do you prefer as the opening question at a moment of where you meet a stranger? What do you do? What do you –

NASH: I don't know. How's it going, I suppose, would be a –

Bruno Lettieri: How's it going?

NASH: That would be classically Australian way of greeting someone, isn't it?

Bruno Lettieri: Where are you talking from? That could be a –

NASH: Yeah. That would be interesting. I mean, how do you rank the different types of French fries in fast food restaurants? There's plenty of ways to go about it.

Bruno Lettieri: There are. Yeah. Absolutely. Can I take you to a part of your book that I think was probably the one that – when I sat with it, in terms of my own identity, my own background, I found myself going, “Wow, he's really put something genuinely puzzling before me, in the positive sense of that word,” you know what I mean? And the text reads, “It's easy to fall into the trap of nurturing things that aren't actually good for you, even if you think that they define you.”

NASH: Yeah. I'm actually pretty proud of the writing there. I'm not sure if the image does the little quote justice, but I mean it was –

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. I think it was the most complex piece of writing that I felt you did in the book, in terms of –

NASH: And that –

Bruno Lettieri: – really setting something big and going, “Have a think about this,” and wow – and –

NASH: I stuck it in the middle of the book as well, just so people – if I was going to explain it, I think we touched on it to some extent here in the previous part of the conversation about, you know, when you say some people might like you a bit too much, the kind of victimhood status, so like in my – the other in society sometimes is celebrated to such a large extent now that people tend to claim –their social hierarchy is based on their claim to this other identity or this identity of being a victim and how sometimes they let that be their defining characteristic and how that doesn't help in their progression as an individual, and definitely not if a whole community adopts that mentality to the – to what defines them. The progress is going to be stunted because you're always trying to prove to the world around you how you're affected by something, without showing how despite being affected by this, this is what I am able to do. Yeah. I'm not sure if I

explained that very well, but –

Bruno Lettieri: But isn't it interesting that with that explanation you've just given, and as elaborate as it is, you have to trust those four very kind of spare lines too, don't they, and the act of trust in which you say to the reader, "Delve into this very, very open space," and very – what do I know the writer is actually trying to definitely say. Do – will I never know that? Did you even fully know it when you wrote it, and yet out of the swimming around in that, something valuable comes for the person reading it, and delving into that. I felt your book generally was a lovely invitation to come dance in this very open space. I really liked that a lot and I think that was a really wonderful example of that too. So are you saying, NASH, that if you had your time again, you might actually draw a different picture for that, or –

NASH: I'm not sure actually, because I have thought about it, Bruno, since the book's come out, whether I would change that, and I can't come up with a better idea yet. Maybe one day I do, and I might – I'll send it over to you if I ever do get around to doing it.

Bruno Lettieri: Well, I hope I'm still alive at that point. Yeah.

NASH: Well, I better hurry then.

Bruno Lettieri: You don't have to hurry at all. You go at your pace. I really almost felt that your book was interesting if you took all the pictures out and put a blank page and invited young people in art class, in history classes and all of that to go, "Draw me what NASH has just written." And then the other part of that is I thought I wonder if we just put a whole series of your pictures around a classroom, around anywhere where people gather and go, "Talk to that. What words would you put to that?" And if you could only put five or six words. It would be an amazing....

NASH: It's something that – it's something we were going to do very – like a workshop like that was something we were going to do at the Footscray Arts Centre. It's just that with the pandemic going on, we didn't have the luxury of having too many people in person, and – yeah, but hopefully one day. I mean, maybe the Wyndham City Council might help me out with that if they want to organise something. I would definitely be on board to do a workshop of some sort like that.

Bruno Lettieri: So if someone comes to you and they go, "NASH, you're a multidisciplinary artist, and you've written this book about, you know, *What To Expect When You're Immigrating*, and I've got this concept, and I want to use a whole series of pictures, and I want to use this very minimalist text," what would be some of the great advice you would give to them about the pitfalls of that and what might be some of the unexpected kind of releases of unexpected things?

NASH: Well, the best advice I would give them is not being afraid to explore – I guess, like really question yourself, because if you go into it with, like, a

set idea of what you want it to be like, you're probably going to leave a lot of it on the drawing room table or the drawing room floor, to use that phrase – to butcher that phrase, better.

Bruno Lettieri: Sure. Butcher away.

NASH: Yeah. That would be the best advice I could give them. The things to look forward to that are unexpected, as someone who, I guess, writes and draws pictures – pretty pictures for a living, the fact that I'm – I end up having to speak about the pictures and words that I've written quite a bit, I guess that's a little bit unexpected, but hopefully I'm not rambling too much and people do understand incoherent streams that are coming out, but – yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: NASH, the thing is that, you know, we have the beautiful privilege of having you walk us through and add the extra layer of commentary, but your book just kind of goes out, doesn't it, and it can sit on a tram. It could sit in the hands of the most racist person. It could sit in the hands of the most enlightened person. It could sit in the hands of someone who doesn't have a clue about what they think about any of this, doesn't it? And –

NASH: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Is that part of the scary excitement of being a writer, is that you ultimately don't know and can't control a lot of that either, can you?

NASH: Not at all, and I think the main idea about writing the book for me was to start as a stepping off point for these conversations and, you know, the stranger the hands the book that the book lands in – the stranger – and when I say stranger, it could be the most different to me, the better the conversation we might have if we ever got around to discussing the book, and that to me is – I guess it's not necessarily scary, but beautiful, I suppose is how I would describe it.

Bruno Lettieri: If someone who was inclined to say to you, on one of the early days to you, "Go back to where you come from," if that kind of person picked up your book and went, "NASH, I've rethought that. I – that was a hideous thing to say," do you think any book, any poetry, any writing, any painting has the capacity to shift someone in such a dramatic way, away from something quite ugly into something quite beautiful?

NASH: I think a conversation can do that, Bruno, and I guess a conversation through a book or a piece of – through a painting, I suppose, is still a conversation, but I think having that kind of sentiment is very easy when you don't have a conversation and it's almost like a nameless face that you're projecting your, I guess, views or hate towards. I'm not sure if my book is going to save me from ever hearing that statement ever again, but maybe I should just carry a bunch of these books around with me and start handing them out to people.

Bruno Lettieri: Are you hearing it less, NASH? Are you hearing it less? I –

- NASH: Honestly –
- Bruno Lettieri: I know that’s a huge statement because it’s hard to look at a whole society and go – I’d like to think that maybe you are, but that’s me being –
- NASH: I think society, in general, has changed quite drastically in the last 10 years for sure. I think what I’m worried about, if there was something to be worried about, is that social pressure has stopped conversations happening, so people who might actually be thinking it just don’t say it out loud anymore, and that’s why I thought that blatant confrontation, almost, was something I welcomed compared to, I guess, a hidden view that they might hold. At least then I know I’m face to face with what I’ve got to experience.
- Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. No. I fully get that, and I fully applaud that too. I think Kirsty is here. I’m – from Wyndham.
- NASH: Yeah. She’s been here for a while.
- Bruno Lettieri: Sorry, Kirsty. I didn’t – I was so enthralled with that last kind of answer that you were giving, NASH. Kirsty, you have some questions? And thank you to Wyndham –
- Kirsty: Yeah.
- Bruno Lettieri: – for putting this on.
- Kirsty: Thank you for coming. We have some great comments here from people who are loving your conversation, but we’ve got a question from Suzy, who says, “I’m fascinated by the choice of name. My baby bible was called What To Expect When You’re Expecting. Was this an influence on your decision?”
- NASH: See, funnily enough, I was asked this question before, and it was only after I had pitched the book to my publisher, my publisher brought this – brought up this book to me. I obviously don’t have any children, so I’ve never really come across the book What To Expect When You’re Expecting, but I guess it’s a – you could look at it almost as like I’m a newborn person in this new society, so I guess it’s a clever riff if people want to read it that way.
- Kirsty: Excellent. It’s like cultural osmosis.
- NASH: Yeah. Almost.
- Kirsty: You’re finding that audience you didn’t even know you were looking for.
- NASH: The people who type “what to expect” and expect the first book to be that, and they accidentally order this one. Yes. Those could be stranger hands

that you were talking about, Bruno.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. Kirsty, you've got another question?

Kirsty: I don't have any other questions, unless someone will type while I share this other thing, but one of our guests – sorry. I'm scrolling back up the comments here. Rhonda was saying she often thinks of her father, who immigrated in 1950, came to Australia on a boat, and when he left Holland, he left all his family behind and wouldn't have known if he would ever see them again, and she imagines new residents who come to Australia now from war-torn countries don't know if they'll ever be able to return, and it's a different time but still a lot of unknowns, even today, about family reunion, so your story is definitely striking a chord with our audience tonight.

NASH: I'm glad. I mean, I haven't seen my – I haven't been back to my country in, I guess, nine years, almost 10 years now, so I do miss the beautiful country that I left behind to some extent, but, yeah, it is – especially with COVID, I suppose, it's very uncertain times, isn't it? Yeah.

Kirsty: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: And in terms –

Kirsty: And with us just going back into lockdown tonight as well.

NASH: Yeah. Yeah. I think we're technically in lockdown. Yes. It's 30 minutes past the curfew or lockdown time, which is – yeah.

Kirsty: Yes. So thank you, everyone, for joining us safely from your home. Some other comments were just saying that the book looks lovely with the cartoon style animation, and someone is quite keen to do that workshop event with the illustrating for your text or putting text to your words maybe with us in a future time. Thank you, Bruno, for sharing some of those lovely illustrations on camera. I'm just seeing someone typing so I'll just give them a moment.

NASH: Yeah.

Kirsty: And if not, then we'll wrap up, but I've really enjoyed your conversation tonight.

NASH: Thank you, Kirsty.

Bruno Lettieri: Perhaps just one last question from me.

Kirsty: Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: The desire to see that land that you love and that ability to love another land and – are they forever separate, or is there some place in your soul

that they merge?

NASH: It's funny, because when I was leaving Sri Lanka, I left it with the excitement of pursuing, I suppose, the rest of my life here, and I've come to look at Australia, I guess, more as, I guess, my formative years, from when I've been living by myself have been from the ages of 17 till now have been here, and my partner is here, so it is strange, because I would love to go back, I guess, for a holiday, but I think some of the things that I left behind, like the fact that there is no real art scene there to – that I was involved in, whereas I'm very much involved with it here, the things that, I guess, define me, so to speak, are here at this point.

Bruno Lettieri: Yeah. And that continual search – not search for a definition, because I don't – but that evolving into what I might be.

NASH: Of who – of the person. Yeah.

Bruno Lettieri: Absolutely. It's been an absolute pleasure, and I've never had the chance to talk to an artist who's done your kind of book, and it's the kind of book that you could open at any page, couldn't you, and then stimulate some kind of huge discussion, and as I said I like the space that you leave for us to bring our consideredness to it, so congratulations, NASH, and thank you for –

NASH: Thank you, Bruno. It's been lovely.

Bruno Lettieri: – doing these things. It's enormous. I think libraries do change lives.

NASH: They do, for sure.

Kirsty: Thank you, Bruno. Thank you, NASH. We don't have anymore questions, but I did want to thank you again for coming tonight and for having such an honest and insightful conversation. For everyone watching, I'm sure you also got a lot out of this talk. You can catch up with our previous online events through the library website, and since we're in lockdown I'll remind you that the e-library is open 24/7, so you can get your fix of books, audio books or streaming video content. So thank you very much and have a lovely night.

Bruno Lettieri: Goodnight. Thanks, NASH.

NASH: Thanks, guys. Bye.

Bruno Lettieri: See you. Thanks, Kirsty. Goodnight.

[End of recorded material at 01:01:34]