**Alice Pung in conversation with Bruno Lettieri**

**Recorded 26 May, 2021**

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

Kirsty: Good evening everybody. My name is Kirsty and I’m one of the librarians at Wyndham City Library. On behalf of Wyndham City Council, I’d like to recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the first custodians of the lands on which Australia was founded. Council acknowledges the Wathaurong, Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung Peoples of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the lands on which Wyndham City was built. Council pays respect to the wisdom and diversity of past and present Elders, with their commitment to nurturing future generations of Elders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

 Tonight we are joined by interviewer extraordinaire, Bruno Lettieri, who will be in conversation with award winning author Alice Pung, who’s newest novel *One Hundred Days* hits the shelves next week. I’ll leave you now in their very capable hands.

Bruno Lettieri: Thanks Kirsty. Hello Alice.

Alice Pung: Hi Bruno.

Bruno Lettieri: You got the kids all locked away in other rooms, have you?

Alice Pung: Yes, I have. Yes, safely tucked away.

Bruno Lettieri: How do you manage that, you just must go from chaos into this “I need to be serene”? How do you cross that bridge so –

Alice Pung: I can …

Bruno Lettieri: What’s that, sorry?

Alice Pung: You just do it, Bruno.

Bruno Lettieri: You just do it.

Alice Pung: You’ll hear them. I can still hear them in the other room.

Bruno Lettieri: They’ll be bursting in at any moment.

Alice Pung: Oh no. The door handle is too high for them to reach.

Bruno Lettieri: That’s a very good technique. Alice, congratulations. Your launch is next week. This is a sneak preview.

Alice Pung: Thanks.

Bruno Lettieri: I’ve read all of two chapters of your book, so congratulations. And I’ve loved the two chapters. I’m not going to try and give a review because I haven’t read all of it, and that’s for people like Maxine Beneba Clarke to do a wonderful job. What’s it like giving a sneak preview of a book that’s barely kind of been unwrapped, that you’ve just kind of more recently laid your lovely hands on it? Is there still an excitement about seeing this brand new artefact and going, “This is kind of my creation?”

Alice Pung: There’s full out excitement there, Bruno. But it’s not entirely my creation. It’s the designer who did the beautiful cover … can hear you properly?

Bruno Lettieri: It’s just breaking up a little bit.

Alice Pung: Yes. So it’s ... Yes.

[VIDEO FREEZES]

Bruno Lettieri: Can you hear me now? Can you hear me alright?

Alice Pung: I can hear you alright. Can you hear me alright?

Bruno Lettieri: I can now. You were talking about the collaborative nature of the book. But the story, the guts of it is yours. I really get the kind of what the designer does and what the editor does. Was it hard to bring this new book about, given that you’ve just had a baby eight months ago, you’ve got two other kids, you live a very busy life. You work as well. Where did you find time to even write a letter to me, let alone a 300 page book?

Alice Pung: It took four years, Bruno. So the book is called *One Hundred Days* because it’s about a young – sorry, there was a message – so it’s about a young 16 year old girl who gets locked up for 100 days because she falls pregnant, and her very heroic –

Bruno Lettieri: I don’t want you to give too much away, and I want to get to that a little bit later if you don’t mind OK. Is that alright – sorry, I ‑

Alice Pung: I’m just giving – but the thing is, we were locked down last year, so I’ve had people say, “Did you write this whole book last year because you were pregnant, and you were locked down, and it’s about a teenager?” No I didn’t. It took me four years to write. And it was an uncanny coincidence that the fiction mirrored the truth of our situation. So I had the idea a long time ago, and it was probably a book I really needed to write. John Marsden says that he never writes a book if he has the answers to things. He doesn’t think this great wisdom is handed down and, “Oh look I’m declaring it to the world.” It’s always because he has a question he’s trying to get at the truth of. So that’s sort of –

Bruno Lettieri: What’s the driving question then, in your book? What’s the fundamental discussion you’re having with the world, or the argument, as they say, that you’re having with the world that fuels this narrative?

Alice Pung: The argument that we’re having – you know, I like how you put it. That’s very like that biblical story of Job, where everything went terrible for this good man and he has an argument with God, and all the wise priests come and say, “Why are you having this argument with God. It’s God’s will.” The argument I’m having in this book, or the truth I’m trying to get at is, we think that love is the be all and end all. And we think that if we are controlling in a romantic relationship, that is an unhealthy relationship. And yet when we’re controlling as parents, that’s just being protective, that’s just knowing what’s best for your child, that’s just part and parcel of having children.

 So I wanted to really interrogate this idea of at what stage does love – that the control that you exert over a complete human being – at what stage does that love inadvertently tip into something closer to abuse, you know. Yes, so that was the question I was trying to answer.

Bruno Lettieri: Wow, that’s a really big one. Alice, if I could be so cheeky as to say – as I said, I’ve only read two chapters because we wanted to make this a lovely build-up to the big launch which is next week, and has been delayed a little bit. But nevertheless, it’s still coming, and we didn’t want to give too much away. And I had to stop myself from going into chapter 3, to stick to the rules of engagement. Imagine, Alice, that your book has already been claimed by a filmmaker, and he or she wants to make the film, could you introduce us to the very opening scenes of your film, in a kind of cinematic way? Could you give us the establishing shots, and show us what the camera’s looking at, and who our protagonists are, and what are they doing at this moment that your story kind of opens?

Alice Pung: Oh wow – what a question, Bruno. I’m not a filmmaker myself, so I don’t have that cinematic eye. But I guess our opening shot would probably be of a 16 year old girl, in bed, with her mother, in an unusual situation – they both share a double bed. So there’d be – and then the camera would pan away from the bed to what she stares at most of the day, which is the stippled cement on the ceiling that looks like a galaxy above. And then it would pan down 14 floors down, outside the window – because she’s 14 floors up – onto the cement that is also reflected from the moonlight. So the ceiling in her room looks similar. Looks like a photo negative of the asphalt on the floor, 14 floors down. And that would probably give you some context as to where most of the book is set.

 There’s a great writer, Murakami, when you read his books you feel an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. And that’s – afterwards you only realise that he’s only set his book in institutions, in schools, hospitals, places like that. So there’s a sense of claustrophobia because this book is set in a flat, a Housing Commission flat.

Bruno Lettieri: And did you set out to say, “I want to mimic that sense of claustrophobia, and I want to put it into this bedroom, because this is the kind of storytelling I’ve never done before. And I’m not even sure of what demands it’s going to make on me, and how I’m going to keep producing the momentum for the story, given the confines?”

Alice Pung: Oh yes. Because not much happens when you’re locked up. And it’s a real chamber piece. There’s only – at the most – five main characters in this book. But it’s not an experimental book. So you’re not going to leave it feeling like there are things unresolved, it was too abstract to make sense – hopefully – because I start from a place of character, not from an idea or a political stance, or anything like that. Yes, so it’s a character –

Bruno Lettieri: Because a book that starts from an idea is doomed to fail, isn’t it really, because it’s not going to – it’s too hard to pull off isn’t it? Les Murray talks about starting poetry from an idea, and invariably they always die he reckons. They’ve got to start from somewhere else. Where is that somewhere else for you? That scene that you’ve just kind of drawn for us, is that the opening scene in the genesis of your story, or does that come much later? Where’s the beginning moment, the beginning “what if”, the beginning question? And when did it dawn on you that you had a novel that wanted to answer some questions?

Alice Pung: I don’t know, Bruno. I had a couple of threads that seem not connected at all, just I was doing some mentoring with the social worker Les Twentyman’s youth here, his group of young people. And a young Sudanese girl came up to me after I gave a short talk, and she said, “I know – you know exactly how I feel. My mother doesn’t trust me so she locks me up. And my brothers can go out loose, but I get locked up, and I have to wash the dishes and look after younger siblings. What’s with that?” And it …

Bruno Lettieri: We’ve just lost you again, Alice. … Sorry, Alice, are you there?

[VIDEO FREEZES]

Alice Pung: No, I’m sorry everyone. My computer completely restarted on me for some reason.

Bruno Lettieri: These things are sent to try me, I think.

Alice Pung: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: You were talking about the young Sudanese girl who you met, where you mentor. Pick the story up from there – she was saying that her mother doesn’t trust her.

Alice Pung: Yes, because she – and she couldn’t understand for the life of her why. She hadn’t done anything bad. And she was the oldest, of course, so she stayed at home and her mother said, “Be a good girl, stay at home, and look after your siblings and do the housework.” But there wasn’t the same rule for her brothers. One of my best friends who was brought up by a single mum, shared the same bed as her single mum, up until she was 20. And so I realised there could be no secrets there. She couldn’t hide anything. And I wanted to explore this idea of how far does love cross over into control.

 When I had my own child, my mother tried to enforce these rules of things I could and couldn’t do, based on her understanding of Chinese confinement practices, you know, where you stay indoors for a whole month, you don’t take showers, that kind of thing. So, yes –

Bruno Lettieri: How did you escape that kind of tension, Alice?

Alice Pung: I was – it was a blessing in disguise. My first son, Leo – who’s six now – was born premature, which meant that I got to go home from the hospital, and then I had to go back to the hospital every single day to visit him, which meant I had to leave the house. So already on day one, I broke the cardinal rule of confinement – never leave the house. And so there was – my mother couldn’t enforce very much then. But she did the great things of confinement. She made all the foods that warm the blood, like the ginger chicken, and the foods that replenish your energy. So, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Wonderful. Alice, you start your book with a prologue, and you’ve got an epilogue, and you’ve got chapters – tell me about the purpose of a prologue, and why you started in this particular way. And of course it starts with the lines, “Ever since your Grand Par left, your Grand Mar and I share the double bed. She says she can’t sleep by herself, that it’s too dark, even though the hallway light shines on the stippled cement dots on our ceiling. It’s like an asphalt galaxy up there, like the road is above us instead of 14 floors below.”

 What a perfect beginning. Do you know when you have the perfect beginning?

Alice Pung: No.

Bruno Lettieri: No?

Alice Pung: I don’t. I don’t have the perfect beginning initially. So the story starts from the character and then you build – so you’ve got the bare bones of the character, and then you build the nerves and the organs around the character. And you don’t know where the beginning is. But I knew the ending quite early on, actually. So it’s a book that I knew the ending of.

Bruno Lettieri: You grab the snake wherever you can get it and –

Alice Pung: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: ‑ build which way. Is that right?

Alice Pung: Yes, exactly. Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: In the beautiful beginning, Alice, you use the words “stippled” that I’d never encountered before. Tell us about the rich galaxy of words that must be floating around inside the galaxy that is your mind, to be able to reach for that and go, “That’s the perfect word.” And the second part to the question is, it’s kind of telling us so much so quickly, isn’t it, the compactness, the compressedness, so much detail already is there in those four or five lines. How does a storyteller learn that kind of compactness?

Alice Pung: I don’t know, Bruno, but one thing I did when I was younger, my father had a dictionary called *The Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English*, which is the first dictionary he got. And this is embarrassing, but not quite, so I used to read that dictionary because I thought that if I knew all the words in the dictionary, I would know everything in the world, because the world was made of words. So every word that I knew was highlighted in different coloured highlighters. And I started this project when I was about 13 or 14. I never quite finished it. But I never got out of the habit of learning new words.

 So when the internet was a big deal – back in the early 90s – there was this website – which still exists – called dictionary.com – which I all encourage you to log on, and they’ll send you a word of the day. And sometimes some words are too perfect, so you remember them. I guess that’s where I get my words from.

Bruno Lettieri: And I guess is there ever a fearfulness when you start a new book? That, “Here I go again. I’m laying myself open to deep questions that obviously are of fundamental importance to me” – because you’re grappling with things. That, in come the people who are going to trawl their way through your book, who are going to shine their light on every bit of it, like I’m doing now. Is that overwhelming, or is that exhilarating, or is it both of those? And why do you keep going? What’s the fundamental kind of importance to doing that, when most of us would run for cover?

Alice Pung: Well, Bruno, I’ve been lucky enough to really write each book for one particular person – not a real life person, but I have a particular one person in mind. And in this book it was probably to a 16 year old girl with adult responsibilities. It’s a very – it’s a book with adult sensibilities. It’s about pregnancy. It’s about very adult topics. And I wrote it for this 16 year old girl, just because we have this paradoxical way of looking at young people. So at school, you force them to study Hamlet, and Macbeth, and Charles Dickens, and all the great literature that covers love, loss, religion, sex and death, and then we infantilise our kids, if they’re lucky enough to be in very safe suburbs. Or we give them responsibilities that they’re not yet ready for. So that was the audience of my book.

 I don’t think in general, “Oh what’s the wider audience going to think? What is that lovely book club that I spoke to in that conservative suburb four years ago going to think? Will they read this book?” I don’t think about these things. And in fact this book is not directed at a wider audience. It’s a book written from a 16 year old mother’s perspective to her unborn child. So, it’s not about me.

Bruno Lettieri: Tell me about that choice of that narrator’s voice. Because, as I said, she starts off going, “Ever since your Grandpa left” and it’s referring to the grandparents of this unborn child, in the prologue. Why did you choose that kind of talking to narrative, and what does that allow you to do that other forms of narration don’t allow you to do?

Alice Pung: I think it allowed me to get up close and personal, and also it gave me the freedom to be honest with this character. She’s really pissed off with her mum. Her mum’s her great oppressor in life. And her mum is called GrandMA, M-A – great mistake. So she’s 16 years old. Everything is – she’s at loggerheads with this mother who controls every aspect of her life. And you see things entirely through the main character, Karuna’s, lens. And she’s frustrated. And she is writing in this journal, to her unborn child, like, “I’ll never be like your Grandma. Your grandmother is so oppressive. She’s doing everything wrong.” And during the book you can see things slightly shift, you know, not entirely – no character undergoes a complete transformation – but something close to a sense of wisdom happens.

 When you live so close to someone, sometimes it’s really hard to develop empathy for the character that’s oppressing you. But a sense of wisdom does develop quite fully. The readers sees that as well.

Bruno Lettieri: I haven’t got that far, so I haven’t experienced that yet, Alice. Maxine Beneba Clarke – who is your dear friend, and is going to launch the book for you – wrote in her glowing tribute, “Pung’s characters are so real, I could feel them in the room.” I can imagine – and I’m not a writer, Alice – that that’s almost the most – that’s almost the ultimate compliment, isn’t it? To feel the characters in the room?

Alice Pung: Oh that was – yes, such a lovely thing Maxine wrote. Because she’s a poet herself, and I know you buy the Saturday paper just to read her poems, because you’ve told me that – that’s how good she is. A whole newspaper to read one column.

Bruno Lettieri: Tell us about this paradox of being a fiction writer, but we create these extraordinary realities which are almost more real than our day to day existence? If I walk down the street I’ll say hello to [Sandra? 00:21:18] who sells me my Tattslotto ticket and we’ll have a lovely flippant – we’ll sledge each other. But I don’t sit with him and kind of investigate deeply his life. In a novel we get that close investigation, the reality is very real isn’t it. Tell me how that’s achieved.

Alice Pung: For me it’s always achieved through character. And emotionally, rather than anything else. So some people write – and these are the books that kind of fall flat – they have a real issue, you know, drugs, divorce, whatever that they want to explore. For me that’s not that interesting. Character always comes first. And these emotions that these characters feel. The most interesting emotions are the ones that are irrational, completely irrational, make no sense whatsoever. Of course if your mother dies, you grieve. Of course if your father yells at you, you feel angry.

 But I just remember this is from real life actually – last year when I went for a walk after I had my baby, Celeste. I went out for a walk and came back and my mother was livid with me. She was so angry she stopped talking to me for half a day. I’m like, “What? I just went out to get fresh air.” And she was so angry. And then I realised why. She called up my aunts and she said, “She went for a walk and she didn’t even tell me, and the baby’s too young. I can’t control her anymore.” I’m like 40 years old, what’s this thing with controlling. But I wasn’t so chilled, Bruno, because I was 40 years old, and I was living at my parents’ house because of COVID. And I felt 16 again. And I felt irrationally angry.

 So I went on my phone and texted one of my good friends in Victoria and said, “My mum is so unreasonable. She’s giving me the silent treatment because I went on a walk.” It’s these petty things, these really trigger pulling amounts of pettiness in a family that really get to character, and what I find fascinating to explore.

Bruno Lettieri: So Karuna – your main protagonist, who’s the narrator – in part, is a little bit of you too, Alice?

Alice Pung: In part, a little bit of me. And a little bit of friends I know, and students I’ve met. So an amalgamation of a lot of people.

Bruno Lettieri: At the beginning of chapter 1 you say, “They all think that things changed for me when I got knocked up. But they don’t know that it started much earlier.” And I loved it, because it’s not about an event that you then refer to. It’s not about the “knocked up”. It’s not the event which kind of triggers this kind of “whatever”. But you go, “It used to be I thought one thing at a time, but that summer, the hottest we’d had in a while, my thoughts became scattered. Instead of marching in military formation through my mind, they dithered, and loitered, and looked in different windows.”

 One, it’s exquisite writing. Tell us about the different windows, and tell us about why you decided to talk about this momentous thing happening in terms of the change of thinking.

Alice Pung: Just because that is how I felt adolescence happen to me, and for a lot of people. As a child, inside your mind you thought one thing at a time, and your desires were – you might have had many desires. Children have desires. But it was usually one thing, you know, you need food, you want Pokémon cards. You’re pretty clear in your desire, your intents, your emotions correlate to your desires often. And then suddenly something happens beyond your control. Suddenly these hormones affect the way you think. Suddenly you’re no longer so sure of yourself. Suddenly your mind wanders when you’re 12, 13. You look out windows. You have strange feelings towards members of the opposite sex, or same sex. It’s a confusing time. You’re a window loiterer instead of a straight line marcher now.

Bruno Lettieri: And, in a sense, is the 40 year old Alice still a loiterer, and a ditherer, and – is it the job of a novelist perhaps also to be continually looking through different windows in the way you describe of your 16 year old character?

Alice Pung: I think it is, Bruno. But I think the reality is I write differently now, because I did the foolish thing – the foolish and wonderful thing of having three kids in five years. So life is pretty busy. And I – it’s so interesting, I had – I met up – I was invited to lunch with a bunch of other writer people. A very small group. And most of them were men. And they were talking about the time they had to write, and what they were thinking. And I was – I had this baby with me, and I had to pick up a kid from school – and I thought, “Well, I don’t have the luxury of daydreaming in such a way anymore, except maybe late at night.”

 So this book reflects a change even in the way I think, from *Laurinda*, which looked in windows. I wrote it before I had my first son. Every single word in this book had to have its place. My sentences were shorter. But a poet friend once said to me, because I didn’t understand poetry 10 years ago – I’m always an amateur at these things, even though poetry features a lot in *One Hundred Days* – is that thing about it – and he was an older gentleman who lectured in this – is to think about poetry as a shelf, so each word is a single item on that display shelf, and you don’t want an item on that shelf that shouldn’t be there. And I thought that is exactly how I’ll go about it. Because I don’t have much time to fill the shelf up with crap and then take the crap off, you know. So I had to get it right, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. Is that voice, that advice of that writer, is that sitting on your shoulder nearly all the time? Or it gets into you and then it becomes a kind of a natural selecting, a paring down kind of process that happens of itself?

Alice Pung: I think it’s both. I think when you’re younger – especially when I was younger – especially in my teens, you know – I spoke about using the dictionary before, I used the dictionary as a crutch to support bad writing, which I thought if I use the dictionary and put in words it will make me sound intelligent. All it was, was a bunch of feelingless adjectives. And I know this because I read students’ works. Young people write like that. They try and sound like 40 year old men or women. And now at the age of 40, I’m trying to pare everything back. So even though I have a much wider vocab, because – thanks to the dictionary reading – I know exactly when to hold back on the words.

Bruno Lettieri: It’s the whole less is more kind of philosophy, isn’t it?

Alice Pung: Yes. I think so.

Bruno Lettieri: I reckon that applies to just general living. I was talking to my friend, Suzanna, and I happened to be in her car and I said to her, “Less is more has become a really important principle to me as a 67 year old.” And she thought I was being flippant, and poking fun at her because she taught professional writing. And I said, “I hold back a lot more than I used to. I care about” – as you said – “only having a few pictures on the wall. I would have crammed the walls silly once upon a time.” I think it’s something that comes with maturity.

 Alice, can you tell us about your main character, Karuna, and her mother. Describe both of them. Paint pictures of them a little bit. And paint some of the interactions they have, and the tension that’s there in their relationship, please.

Alice Pung: OK, so Karuna’s mother is Chinese from the Philippines. The Philippines has a history – a very special history. In 1987 it was the only Asian country that had two beauty queens. Two Miss Universes, or two Miss Worlds. I can’t remember what, it’s in my book. And they have an obsession with beauty and basketball. And I completely understand that. And Karuna’s mother is – Karuna obviously doesn’t play basketball because her mother doesn’t think it’s a ladylike thing – has this obsession with Karuna, because that was the way – one of the beauty queens, Margarita Moran, said on national television – I think it was when she got crowned Miss World – she said, “That’s great. Now I can buy a house for my family.” Which was something she could never do before.

 So Karuna’s mother, who lives in a Commission flat, thinks that her daughter is her ticket out to a far greater existence. And what’s so interesting is the parents are separated – you know this quite early in the book – but Karuna’s father isn’t Filipino Chinese, he’s white Australian. And so she exists as a person that is both loved and loathed. Her mother will say, when they go to work, her mother will and her Turkish friend will praise Karuna, “Oh look at her beautiful white skin. Look at her lion coloured eyes. Oh too bad she’s lazy like her dad. They’re all lazy.” So that’s the tension that exists within Karuna.

Bruno Lettieri: And between Karuna’s parents too. Because as I said, Karuna goes into her father’s workshop and she’ll get under the car, and he has a different way with her doesn’t he. And he loves seeing her smeared with the grease of the workshop. And he doesn’t care about those kinds of things. And there’s a far more natural kind of relationship there, isn’t there?

Alice Pung: Yes. At the beginning there is. There’s a great – Karuna feels a great affection from her dad, and a greater sense of acceptance I think. Because her mother’s trying to mould her into something that she’s not quite ready for. No child is ready for pierced ears at the age of six or seven, that kind of thing. But, from her mother’s perspective, if her father had let her do it earlier, then there’d be no pain, because all children in the Philippines get their ears pierced before they’re one, you know that kind of logic. That kind of clash.

Bruno Lettieri: Absolutely. So tell us about Tweezer, who is a Greek girl who befriends Karuna at school in the early chapters. And I’ve got to reiterate that I don’t know much beyond those early chapters – well I don’t know anything beyond those early chapters. Tell us about how that friendship comes to be, and what’s the dynamic there. And Tweezer loves coming into Karuna’s house, doesn’t she? She’s fascinated by the mother, and the salon, and the applying of those very extravagant eyelashes and all of that. What’s their relationship like?

Alice Pung: So the mother – Karuna’s mother is – she operates her own home business. So she finds a sense of purpose through that. She’s turned the sun room in their Deer Park home into kind of a beauty salon where she does makeup for brides. And she’s very well sought after, because – this is based on an aunty of mine who did this in the 80s – today we have what’s called eyelash extensions where people glue individual eyelashes onto your own eyelashes. Well, my aunty was doing that back in the 80s. So she had customers queuing out the – had to book her months, and months in advance. That’s what Karuna’s mother does. As her own independent small business.

 Tweezer, on the other hand – is called Tweezer because Karuna’s mother can’t pronounce her name properly, so Tweezer liked the sound of Tweezer – comes from a very religious, Greek background. So her father would slap her silly if she so much as smeared lipstick on her face. So she’s fascinated by this life of Karuna’s. And that’s how they become friends.

Bruno Lettieri: And do they share that thing of the over-protective parents who are trying to mould them? Because, as I said, I don’t know beyond those early chapters. Is that going to be an important theme going into this [unintelligible 00:34:30].

Alice Pung: I think so, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes?

Alice Pung: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Tell us about, you use Walt Whitman’s quote at the start of the – the inscription. Can you remember the inscription?

Alice Pung: Yes. I celebrate myself because – something about every atom belonging to me, as good as belongs to you. And I came, as I said many times to you personally, Bruno, I’m an amateur at poetry. I never studied it in any real sense. Never studied it at university. But I’ve always appreciated it because it’s the distillation of words. And when I was younger – some of you would know I grew up in Braybrook – I came to poetry quite organically. Sometimes the school would have a pile of free books – as in my book *One Hundred*. So Karuna picks up a book from the free books pile and it’s – she’s given – it’s Walt Whitman. It’s a tattered edition. She’s like, “I don’t read poetry. What is this crap?”

 But when you start reading Whitman, even if you’re 13 years old, you understand him because his ideas are scattered, like the way your mind thinks. And they dive high, you know, low into the ocean, and high scramble up mountains – and I just thought this was very special when I discovered him as a younger person.

Bruno Lettieri: When does the decision to give a book a particular inscription come about? Or is there a more kind of sacred relationship between that inscription and the transcendent kind of nature of the book? Or am I pulling my [unintelligible 00:36:20] –

Alice Pung: Oh no you’re not, you haven’t read that far. But, yes, Walt Whitman is the first book of tattered poetry that Karuna discovers.

Bruno Lettieri: Is there something mystical in that too? I celebrate myself and what I assume you shall assume, and every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Alice Pung: Yes, there is. There’s something – it’s written by a man, an old man with a big beard that looks a little bit senile when you see pictures of him. But it could easily be a young mother talking about her child growing life in her, you know. Whitman is timeless and genderless. And that’s what really resonated with me when I was younger and discovered his poetry. I didn’t think of him as a man. I was shocked when I saw his picture.

Bruno Lettieri: And yet poetry sits in there at the beginning of big parts of your book *Her Father’s Daughter* – T S Eliot – don’t you. And he’s big for meditations about love and the family. So I get this sense, Alice, that although you claim to be a novelist, I think there’s a very special relationship between you and poetry. What is – apart from the importance of every word, every item on that shelf – to use the analogy you used before – what is it that poetry can do that prose can’t? And do you go to it when you’re in states of shock, or sadness, or when the world overwhelms you? Or when the world is looking for a way of bringing you back?

Alice Pung: Well, I inadvertently go to it, because you send me poems, during very important moments, weddings, funerals, you know, birth of children, that kind of thing. I remember you sent me Sylvia Plath’s *Love is Like a Fat Wide Watch* when I had my first son. And they’re things that stay with me, Bruno. And a beautiful poem you wrote when there was a bereavement in the family. It stays with me when it’s a gift I think. To be honest, no, I don’t go around speaking poetry when big things happen. I just let them happen.

Bruno Lettieri: I’m taking a bit of a punt here, Alice, but I sense two things. I sense in some of the conversations we had as we walked around the park, that this book was different for you. And I know you’ve touched on that already. And I think you were saying that maybe you were doing something that you maybe hadn’t tried before. And I also think about the fact that you’ve given a poem for a little website I run too. And I got the feeling that maybe you were taking your first – not baby steps, but your first tentative shy steps into the realm of poetry. Is that important to you as a 40 year old now, to be trying new things in your prose, and trying to enter a world of poetry and seeing what you might be able to do there?

Alice Pung: I don’t know, Bruno. I appreciate poetry. I wouldn’t call myself a poet, no.

Bruno Lettieri: But you like having a go, is my sense?

Alice Pung: Yes. Yes, it’s fun to have a go. And thank you for giving me that platform to do it.

Bruno Lettieri: Are we preoccupied in our literary western world of going, “There’s poetry, there’s journalism, there’s fiction, there’s non-fiction, there’s that, there’s that.” I get the feeling some other cultures, they’re not as anxious about the categories, but what it is that we’re trying to say and the way we’re trying to say it. Do you have a view on where we are in terms of our fascination, and can I be a memoirist, and a novelist, and a poet, and [unintelligible 00:40:27], because I think you sit comfortably in all of those kinds of roles, Alice.

Alice Pung: Thank you, Bruno, that’s a lovely thing to say. I think we have very – our boundaries could be less rigid. Some cultures, poetry is storytelling and vice versa. That’s the only way you tell a story. And in fact, in many children’s books, they’re done completely by verse. The other thing that I find interesting is we like to cleave in half this distinction between young adult books and books entirely for adults. I don’t know why we do that. I’m not sure if it’s a marketing thing. I don’t blame marketing people because they try and sell your book as best as they can.

 But sometimes I don’t think there is that distinction. I’ve met very mature 14 year olds who have the weight of the world on their shoulders. And I’ve met very carefree 50 year olds who have had quite innocent lives. And you can tell by the look in their eyes. So I don’t see that distinction at all. One of the loveliest things – sorry, you go.

Bruno Lettieri: Is that what happened in the publishing world, Alice, for you?

Alice Pung: Sorry?

Bruno Lettieri: Maybe people want to kind of say, “Alice you belong in the young adult sphere.” And here you are popping into this *One Hundred Days* which is obviously, as you say, directed through this young person, but it sits very comfortably, doesn’t it, as an adult book?

Alice Pung: I don’t mind where I’m popped. It’s lovely to be read by both adults and young adults as well, and to have this book be considered as a serious adult fiction. But my editor of 20 years wrote me a very short – he’s a man of few words – but he said, “Well done. You’ve written a bildungsroman” – which is a word that I learnt means a coming of age book – “for a person for whom bildungsromans are usually not written.” You know, coming of age books aren’t written for pregnant teenage girls, unless they’re didactic books about don’t get pregnant or, you know, things like *Juno*, which no pregnant teenager says all these wise cracking things all the time. You know what I mean. So that was a big compliment.

 But I’m really pleased now – I don’t mind if I’m adult or young adult – I’m really pleased that I’m just not that Asian-Australian writer who writes stories about Asians. Because I was worried for a while that might be the case. But the way this book’s been marketed, and the way it’s been received, has been wonderful. It’s a humanist reception, rather than a political one, or a pigeonholing one.

Bruno Lettieri: Do you hold your breath as I asked at the very start, do you go, “What will they make of it?” At some level we are kind of frightened of having our performance, or our art or whatever we do, analysed. I mean if someone walked in and sat at the back of my classroom and then came out and gave me a review, I would be gulping. Do you still gulp, or is there something about being 40 and having three kids and going, “I’ve lived enough now. I kind of know myself pretty well. I don’t worry about it.”

Alice Pung: To be – it gets easier each time. And you have more distractions the more kids you have, you know. So I think, “Oh well if this book doesn’t too well, I’ve done pretty well. I’ve had three kids, and they’re quite happy, and they’re healthy.” But there is a bit of a gulp. Just because this book was written and published right after our lockdown, and a significant part of it is set in a Housing Commission flat 14 floors up. And a significant part of it is about a girl who’s locked up, has no freedom whatsoever.

 So I was worried that people would look at it and think, “Oh she wrote a Coronavirus book.” But of course I could not have written that book in one year. I’m not that talented. Yes. And I don’t write books about topical things, which is why my last two books were set in the past – 20 years ago, and what was it, almost 40 years ago.

Bruno Lettieri: Maxine Beneba Clarke, again in her praise of you, says, “This is truly fiction at its fiercest.” I like thinking of you as being fierce. Is that the fierceness that any writer has to have in terms of holding the lens up to the world so unmovingly, so unwaveringly, so without kind of trying to fudge it. Is that the fierceness that’s required in writing? Or is – what’s fierce?

Alice Pung: Only Maxine can use that word, because that’s a Beyoncé word. The rest of us using that word just sound like try-hards. We are – so –

Bruno Lettieri: But she wouldn’t – that’s [unintelligible 00:45:48], it’s big praise isn’t it?

Alice Pung: It is. It’s a wonderful word. You’re right it is – what’s so interesting is it’s what, something that the wonderful writer Christos Tsiolkas does. So for anyone who’s had the honour of meeting him in real life, or the pleasure of talking to him, you’ll find he’s a very jovial, very cheerful, very gentle and kind man. But when you read his books, especially the last one, Damascus, which is set after the death of Jesus. Lions are killing Christians. People are getting eviscerated. It’s brutal, and it’s ugly, and it’s visceral, and it’s compassionate too. You find that – I think, “Oh, I get you Christos. You exorcise all your demons through your writing, and that’s allowed you to be such a funny, mellow, wonderful, pleasant human being. And you don’t inflict your rage upon the world. It sits on the page.”

Bruno Lettieri: So you’re exorcising too, are you?

Alice Pung: Sorry?

Bruno Lettieri: You’re exorcising too, like –

Alice Pung: I guess so, yes. Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Viktor Shklovsky wrote, Alice, that, “Art exists, the one might recover the sensations of life. It exists to make one feel things, to make the stones stony.” We need that don’t we? We need poetry and novels to shake us up, to throw us into the unknown, to get us being not complacent, to get us understanding the predicament of others. It’s a big deal isn’t it? Do you feel like you fit into Viktor’s definition, that you’re hoping people might recover some of the sensations of living, that they might live a little bit more truthfully, more audaciously, more bravely?

Alice Pung: That’s a good question. I can’t tell people how to live, and I don’t hope to do so in my book –

Bruno Lettieri: No, but you’ll be the last person –

Alice Pung: ‑ but you remind me of something quite wonderful Arnold Zable said, he was talking about the men and women with whom he grew up, the older men and women who came out of those horrible concentration camps, when he said that they came out with a feral vitality. And I thought, “What perfect words to describe this urgency to live, and to be alive, and to suck in the world.” And that was when I decided that words could do something quite special. He was the first writer I ever met in real life. He came to our school when I was 16, the same as my narrator. So, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: And is that what you want for your kids, to have a feral vitality?

Alice Pung: I do. And, you know, I wish my kids would love books as much as I do. But I don’t mind if they don’t, because there’s other ways to have that feral vitality. [Unintelligible 00:48:51] other things.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes, your mother has it, doesn’t she?

Alice Pung: Sorry?

Bruno Lettieri: Your mother has it, doesn’t she? And she’s a woman –

Alice Pung: She definitely does. She is like what they call a lioness mother. She’s fierce. She is Maxine’s definition of fierce. And I hope that this book honours her in some way. You see it entirely through the 16 year old’s perspective. And 16 year olds are selfish, and they’re disgruntled. But when you see the double shifts the mother does, the extreme tension she’s under, you understand a little bit of why she behaves the way she does.

Bruno Lettieri: I’m going to take that phrase to my death. Feral vitality. And here’s another woman of feral vitality who’s trying to get into the discussion. Kirsty, thank you for the opportunity. You have a few questions?

Kirsty: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Do you have a bit of feral vitality, Kirsty?

Kirsty: Sorry?

Bruno Lettieri: You have a bit of feral vitality?

Kirsty: I’d like to think so, thank you. Everyone seems to have been really enthralled with your discussion so far, so we’ve only had one question, but it’s a really good one. This is from someone who seems to have been lucky enough to get a hold of an advanced review copy of *One Hundred Days*. Tam says, she loved it, and she’s really hoping it gets – I’m assuming it’s a woman, sorry – really hopes that it’s a Stella Prize nomination. And is currently reading *Laurinda*. And where the protagonists are both teenage, high school girls, their interactions with the world are so vastly different, and Tam loves them both in different ways. So Tam wants to know what is it about girls of that age that are interesting to you as a writer?

Alice Pung: That’s a great question. I think at that age, I’m quite interested in the intellectual and emotional life of girls that age, where we treat girls more like women from a very young age, and boys can be boys – as that expression goes, and sometimes they’re men and they can be boys, you know – as recent events show – when they’re excused for their misdemeanours. But girls have to be women at a very young age. Sometimes at 14. Sometimes 15 or 16. And so I’m fascinated by the way we infantilise girls, “Oh you have to be protected at all costs,” as my characters are – in both *Laurinda* and this new book *One Hundred Days*. But also the fierce sort of independence, the intellectual independence that both young women have in my books. Their thoughts are entirely their own.

 And if you – you’ve read the book, so you’ll know, but even though she’s trapped 14 floors up, completely locked in, with a newborn baby, she finds ingenious ways to keep that baby safe and to attain a sort of economic independence. You know, to earn a living, 14 storeys up, completely isolated. And I don’t think that’s unrealistic. I don’t think that is an unachievable feat for a young girl. Greta, the young girl who did the climate change action, but also on a smaller scale, I just remember getting my first thing published when I was 14. It was a picture of Michael Jackson, because I was a huge fan, in a small magazine called Video Hits. And I remember getting $30 Brash’s gift voucher to get a CD and I thought, “Oh man, I’ve just won the lottery.” So, you can achieve victories in small and large ways, despite your circumstances. So I really admire the resilience of teenage girls.

Bruno Lettieri: Kirsty? Are you coming back, Kirsty, or …

Kirsty: Sorry, I thought you were about to speak.

Bruno Lettieri: No, I thought that was the signal to wind it all up, is that right?

Kirsty: Yes, you can chat for a little while longer if you want. I don’t think anyone would mind.

Bruno Lettieri: OK, Alice, we’re going to lighten this up a lot, OK. Alice, what’s his name – John Marsden’s book was called *Everything I know About Writing*.

Alice Pung: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: I want one line – and I mean one line – responses to all of these things.

Alice Pung: OK, OK.

Bruno Lettieri: Alice Pung telling us everything she knows about writing. Beginnings. Give us your advice on beginnings.

Alice Pung: Just do it.

Bruno Lettieri: Voice.

Alice Pung: Keep it real.

Bruno Lettieri: Dialogue.

Alice Pung: Don’t be afraid to use slang or swear words.

Bruno Lettieri: Plot.

Alice Pung: I don’t know. I’m not Matthew Reilly, so not so important if you’re writing character based books.

Bruno Lettieri: Tell us a bit more about the character based, because there’s that discussion isn’t there, character is plot I’ve heard say many times too. If the character is right, if the character is real, if the character is lifting off the page and has a vitality, and a fierce vitality of her own, you’re halfway there.

Alice Pung: You’re halfway there. The plot shapes itself sometimes. You’re guided by your characters.

Bruno Lettieri: Yes, OK. Denouement.

Alice Pung: Sorry, Bruno, that’s one word I didn’t highlight in my dictionary. What does it mean?

Bruno Lettieri: What they talk about that in the story arc, and the denouement is raised, yes.

Alice Pung: A couple of attempts, that’s my one word answer.

Bruno Lettieri: Fantastic. How – at what point do you say, “This book is finished. There is nothing more I want to do. It is time for it to go sauntering off into the world, and there’s no need for me to go beside it and commentate on it.” Like we’re doing now. Do you know when –

Alice Pung: I do. I do. When it’s pried from my cold dead hands from a wise editor.

Bruno Lettieri: Really.

Alice Pung: Yes, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: If the editor didn’t do that, you’d be clutching it back and going –

Alice Pung: I’d keep tinkering away I think, yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Maybe prepare another line, let me look – yes?

Alice Pung: Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: And when you look back on this book when you’re 60, Alice, will you go, “That’s held up pretty well.” Or will you do what a lot of us do to any of our previous work and just see monumental flaws in and go, “Oh did I really say that? Did I really think that? Did I really write like that?”

Alice Pung: To be honest, Bruno, I haven’t read my previous books, you know, besides the – before you’re about to launch it, and when you have to do all the publicity, or when I’m talking to students about things, but no, I haven’t looked at *Unpolished Gem* for 10 years. And *Her Father’s Daughter* for seven. I have new stuff to make, so –

Bruno Lettieri: Yes. Absolutely, I get that. And going into schools and meeting your readership, and meeting the very kinds of girls how are going to face predicaments like Karuna, how much does that keep fuelling your desire to be a storyteller? Because that is your audience. They are the people who are reading your book. And they have their questions. And they have their things that they think. And they’re telling you that the book has done this, or done that. That must be a stunning kind of experience, Alice?

Alice Pung: It is stunning. But you know what, Bruno, what’s even more powerful and stunning is sometimes I – there’ll be one or two young women of every generation who become – they write to me and then we become really – we become friends. And then they get published and they become authors themselves. Like I think my friend Shu-Ling Chua is like a stunning example of that – who’s here today – and you think, “Oh this is a different voice. This is a voice that I could never do in a million years because I don’t have that courage.”

 And so one of the most beautiful things with this book, Bruno, is when my first book came out 15 years ago, I had mostly interviewers who were Anglo-Australian, quite a bit older, ask me a lot of cultural questions, because it was pertinent at that time, and I think now 80 percent of my interviews have been with young Asian-Australian Women, or Indian-Australian women, Pakistani women, who get the essence of the book. And so I don’t get that many cultural questions, we just delve right into the heartbeat. And I think, “Wow, what a change it’s been over 15 years. What a wonderful thing to have new voices out there.”

Bruno Lettieri: And do you see yourself as being a pioneer in that field?

Alice Pung: No.

Bruno Lettieri: No? I’m taking sort of –

Alice Pung: I’m not a pioneer, I’m a – like –

Bruno Lettieri: ‑ a lot of credit for –

Alice Pung: I feel like a dinosaur actually.

Bruno Lettieri: At the age of 40. It’s a very young dinosaur.

Alice Pung: Yes, well, and you know when I was even 25 I couldn’t write sex scenes, and I still don’t because I – it takes a rare gift to do them well, so these younger writers are brilliant. With the nuance, with the level of detail, yes, just things that I don’t dare not venture into, they plough straight in.

Bruno Lettieri: Helen Garner says that a writer can’t – like a singer or songwriter – keep playing their repertoire of songs. You’ve got to pull something out of thin air each time.

Alice Pung: Yes, you do. Yes.

Bruno Lettieri: Does that drive you bananas having to do that, or are you at peace with the thought that you’ve got to keep doing the pulling –

Alice Pung: Oh no, I’m excited by that thought, Bruno. I don’t have to – I’m so glad no one’s ever said, “Oh please write a sequel because *Laurinda* did so well,” or, you know. With the exception of *Unpolished Gem*, which did unexpectedly well as a first book, and they were all wanting me to write a second one soon before I lost momentum, I’ve had the wonderful embrace of my publishers letting me take as long as I want. Giving me four years to do this book. No deadline whatsoever. Because they know you can’t hurry something that’s quite different from the last thing.

Bruno Lettieri: And in Saturday’s Age, Alice, you were interviewed by Benjamin Law weren’t you? And it was called *Dicey Topics*. And you had to talk about death, religion, and sex. And I actually thought, “I’d like to run that part of the newspaper.” And of course I wouldn’t have asked you about death, sex, and religion, I would have asked you about gumption, tenderness, and Eros. But I’m going to keep that for another time. So we might do that. And I might push Benjamin Law off that page.

Alice Pung: Oh you might, but you know what, Bruno, it’s called *Dicey Topics* because he rolls a dice.

Bruno Lettieri: I know.

Alice Pung: He really does roll a dice.

Bruno Lettieri: I know. But I like the notion of that a lot. Alice, of all the writers I know – and I’m not trying to sound like I’m some kind of literary person at all, because I kind of feel like I’m a reader who’s accidentally strolled into this world and being given the lovely privilege – but I think you are the most down to earth of all the writers I know. And I feel you are the least self-absorbed of all the writers I know. And your first question is always out to the other person. And I think – I kind of see you fidget when people are kick to kick, want to ask you questions about your writing, and I get this feeling of, “I’m just here playing with my kids, and I’m a mum, and I just want to go and get a gelato.” I don’t think you make a big deal of it, which is – yes, great. Your humility and your great strength too.

 So it’s been a pleasure talking to you again, Alice. And this is the last interview I’m ever going to do. So …

Alice Pung: That’s not true, Bruno.

Bruno Lettieri: I have to be dramatic, OK. It’s been a great pleasure, and I’d like to hand you back to Kirsty. And I’d like to thank Wyndham Libraries for putting this on. And I’ve become a great friend of librarians, because they give me a lot of work. And I love strolling into libraries, and I feel very much at home there too. So, Kirsty – and to Timothy who’s doing the buttons in the background – thanks a lot. Libraries do, in fact, change lives. So thank you Alice Pung. Thank you Kirsty.

Alice Pung: Thank you Bruno. And before I go, I have to show everyone, I have a special Bruno Goes Everywhere T-shirt. I’m a great fan of Bruno’s. And he’s a great interviewer.

Bruno Lettieri: I didn’t wear it after that. Thanks, Alice Pung.

Alice Pung: Thank you, Bruno.

Bruno Lettieri: Thanks Kirsty.

Kirsty: Thank you.

Bruno Lettieri: Thanks Wyndham.

Kirsty: Thank you so much, Bruno and Alice. It’s been a brilliant talk. And thanks to everyone for attending. *One Hundred Days* comes out on the 1st of June. So not very far away. So you can pre-order that. Or, if we’re not in lockdown, you can stroll into the bookstore and pick that up. Or you can pop it on hold, we’ve ordered a couple of copies at the library as well. So thank you so much again, everyone. And enjoy the rest of your evening.

[End of recorded material at 01:03:11]