RECENTLY RETURNED:

Biography and Memoir

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Kirsty: Hello and welcome to ‘Recently Returned.’ I’m one of your regular hosts, Kirsty, and I’m joined by my colleagues, Paulina –

Paulina: Hi.

Kirsty: – and Riki.

Riki: Hello.

Kirsty: Today we’re discussing biographies and memoirs. This topic is in honour of the National Biography Awards and I’ll share the shortlist with you at the end of the episode.

So, let’s just jump into our recommendations. Paulina, if you could start us off with your first pick?

Paulina: Yes, thanks Kirsty. I read ‘I Want You to Know We’re Still Here,’ a post-Holocaust memoir by Esther Safran Foer. It was really interesting to read; I have read a few things about that time in World War II. And a lot of them say similar things, same as this, that the children grow up knowing there is some big secret in the house; the children of survivors, and often the parents don’t talk about things. And this girl didn’t find out until she was grown up and married herself until that her father had had another family, a wife and daughter that were killed in the Holocaust.

So, she wants to find out all about them and goes back to the Ukraine to discover what happened with her family and how her parents survived the War as well.

It was really interesting and very moving because it was difficult times to go through. And this is from a Jewish perspective, but I know even with my parents-in-law who came from Poland they went through the same thing, the nightly bombings; they got locked in a Soviet Camp. And it’s very interesting from that point of view seeing things that would have happened in their life. I’ve heard bits and pieces but the same thing, the children were never told anything. So, I found it very absorbing and a really worthwhile read with her coming to terms with things.

Kirsty: Yeah, it’s always a difficult topic to cover but it’s very important and especially with that kind of inherited trauma.

Paulina: Mmhmm. And just so many things that he kept secret. I know with my mother-in-law half her hand is missing, it had to get amputated during the War; it was just hit by shrapnel. And they were hiding in the forest at the time and she found someone to fix it. But I’d mentioned something to my husband and “Oh, isn’t that terrible about your mother’s hand” and he said, “Yeah, a spider bit her.”

Kirsty: Oh.

Paulina: Yeah. And he asked and she just said, “Oh, a spider bit me, so be careful with the spiders” and it never got mentioned again.

Kirsty: Wow.

Paulina: Yeah.

Kirsty: So, it sounds like this was quite a personal book for you as well.

Paulina: It was because there were so many things that I could relate to things that she said, and they were in similar areas, and the hunger and their being scared all the time. And to think that she came through that – on a personal thing – well, for the people in the book and my mother-in-law, and come through it and could still carry on living. And I really have a great deal respect for people that have gone through that.

And even like now we’re going through hard times but people have gone through a lot worse and it’s good to remember that I think that you can survive this and we’ll get through it.

Kirsty: Well, thanks for sharing that one; it sounds like a powerful book.

Paulina: It was.

Kirsty: Riki, what have you got for us?

Riki: So, I think given the nature of the world at the moment and biographies as our genre we might be having quite a few like pretty intense stories happening, I think.

So, my first one is going to be ‘100 Years of Dirt’ by Rick Morton. So, this was Rick’s own story. So, he is a journalist, and I really find it interesting when journalists write their own memoirs or biographies and things because they’re writers and they’re used to writing other people’s stories. So, I find that the different things that they bring into their own stories really interesting.

So, in ‘100 Years of Dirt’ he talks about his upbringing and there’s a lot of trauma and like intergenerational violence and intergenerational trauma and stuff like that that he talks about. But he frames it in like under the research around it and it adds a wider issue; it’s not just his personal story. He talks about his personal story in the framework of the research that’s been done into these things. So, that kind of way of telling a personal story I think is really interesting, like it shows how widespread some of these things are in different ways.

And he also talks about the kind of myth of social mobility, which I find really interesting that we don’t really talk about too much. Like the Australian dream of working hard and you can achieve is not really real for a lot of people or it’s much harder if you’re in a situation where you just have to work three jobs to be able to pay rent, you know kind of thing.

Kirsty: Yeah, everyone’s starting from a different level and really –

Riki: And that really makes a difference to where you end up. So, yeah, he really highlights that in the book as well, so I thought that was really interesting.

Kirsty: Excellent. Yeah, what you were saying about journalists writing their own memoirs or books, one of the non-fiction books that really stuck with me was ‘Any Ordinary Day’ by Leigh Sales, and she’s a journalist. And she does a lot of speaking about journalism and the kind of emotion behind interviewing people as well, which is quite interesting because usually journalists are removing themselves by one or two steps from the content that they’re writing about. And in something like that or something like the biography you’ve just mentioned it’s almost the opposite way of writing that they would be used to.

Riki: Yeah, absolutely. I really want to read the Leigh Sales’ book. I haven’t got around to it yet but that’s kind of on my list.

Kirsty: It made me cry twice.

Riki: Isn’t that the kind of like mark of a good book, how many times you cry?

Kirsty: Oh, yeah, definitely. But also it was an audio book and I was listening while driving, so potentially not the –

Riki: Not the safest, but that’s OK. Content warnings.

Kirsty: No. No. So, I guess I’ll take that as a sign to share the biography I’ve recently read, or memoir really. And I’ll bring the tone up a bit I guess because this is a celebrity memoir, ‘Talking as Fast as I Can’ from ‘Gilmore Girls to Gilmore Girls’ by Lauren Graham.

I actually purchased this one for my dad who is not a huge reader and I snuck in and stole it for myself to read it for that Gilmore Girls nostalgia, because we watched that show as a family every week while it was airing and I knew at least part of the book would be discussing the filming of the original series and the reboot from 2016.

A few mixed feelings about this book. So, Lauren Graham is a writer as well as an actress and I found she was insightful and conversational when she was on a roll in her story but especially at the beginning like she was trying too hard to make a joke and it kept pulling me out of the narrative, but once that kind of settled down I quite enjoyed her stories. And I did enjoy the discussion of the filming and especially the filming of the reboot which after I read the book I went back and re-watched the whole thing and it’s really interesting to watch a scene and then pick out the moment from the memoir that you’d just read about what was going on behind that.

But what surprised me was I actually got a lot out of her talking about writing and her talking about how writing started as a fun activity she was just doing for herself and then when it became something, when she got a book deal and suddenly there were deadlines and people needing things from her that it became hard work and she was struggling with procrastination which is something I also struggle with a lot. And she shared something called ‘The Don Roos Kitchen Timer Method’ for writing and it’s much like a lot of other methods – you could probably look it up. But I’m giving it a try just to set aside some writing time each day and it’s working so far for me. So, yeah, I was surprised to get something useful out of the book. But it’s quite enjoyable and if you want something light give it a go.

Riki: Can I ask, so which character was she in Gilmore Girls?

Kirsty: She was the mother, Lorelai Gilmore.

Riki: OK, right. Sorry, I’m trying to imagine because I have watched Gilmore Girls but I don’t know the actors’ names and things like that. Does she give any insight into who her favourite Rory boyfriend was?

Kirsty: No.

Riki: Because there’s a lot of discussion on the internet about this.

Kirsty: Yeah. She was very diplomatic about that I think because she was working with all the young actors.

Riki: I don’t have a favourite; a lot of them were not very nice to Rory though.

Kirsty: Yeah. And in different parts; they all had their good and bad moments. Yeah, so that was a good one. I’m not sure if the rest of the books we’re about to talk about are also going to be light-hearted but I’ll move along to Paulina’s second book and see how that goes.

Paulina: Well, the second book, I’ve only just started it, so it’s going well. So, Clare Bowditch ‘Your Own Kind of Girl.’ Now, a lot of people would know Clare Bowditch. She’s a singer and a beautiful singer and she’s also on the radio on 774; I love to listen to her in the afternoon. And I really enjoy listening to her doing interviews and things like that so I thought I’d like the book because she’s a really interesting person, very warm-hearted, and I am enjoying the book but it is a bit hard to read because she’s very open and her childhood wasn’t … she had a lot of anxiety and grief and things like that and it’s very hard to sort of go through that. And I was a child that always worried as well, so I can empathise a lot with her. And she had a lot of problems with eating and feeling like she was the fat kid and things like that, which I can also relate to.

But it’s very interesting and I’m looking forward to the end because it really shaped her as a person all she went through and I often think that struggles that you go through, even though other people mightn’t know about them or mightn’t think about them, they can really shape who you become. And I’m finding it really interesting.

Kirsty: Are you reading it or are you listening to it? I’m just curious because she’s on the radio.

Paulina: I’m reading it. I think it would be harder to listen to it. I have listened to some of Bill Bryson’s books and his are travel things and they’re nice and they’re funny, and listening to him read them I really enjoy. But I think this one and like a previous one that are a bit deeper – not deeper – a bit sadder and getting through personal traumas and problems I would find that hard to listen to the actual person reading what had happened to them. So, I think at least with a book I feel like I can put it down easier and just think “OK, that’s a bit too much for me” and I’ll come back to it, whereas the audio I’d find it hard to turn off; I’d feel like I was in a conversation that I had to sort of keep listening.

Kirsty: Yeah. Like you owe them to continue listening because they’re being vulnerable with you?

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: Yeah, I can relate to that.

Paulina: Yes. And they’re sharing so much of a personal nature that yeah, you would; you’d feel obligated to keep reading and it’s harder to step back rather than a book you can close and think “OK, I need a break.”

Kirsty: Definitely. Riki, did you say you’d finished this one?

Riki: Yeah, I’ve read this one and I really enjoyed it. I think she has a really great sense of humour that’s kind of through the book in really sometimes subtle ways even though you can tell that she’s built up like humour as a little bit of that coping strategy for some of the things. And I guess I can kind of relate to that and I appreciate it when other people kind of do it as well. But yeah, I thought it was really beautiful and such a challenging book – it would have been challenging to write. And I really respect people that are willing to just like bare it all in book form especially when it’s a little bit directed inward as well. Like I think there’s a bit of a difference between talking about “Oh, this thing happened to me” versus “This is what was happening on the inside. This is what I have done” and all of that stuff.

Paulina: Yeah. And the feelings.

Riki: To be that vulnerable for the world is a really brave act. So, yeah.

Paulina: And that’s how come I felt that I couldn’t read it as in have it as an audio book in her voice, I think it would be just too much. But it really gives you a whole lot more respect and that for her too. I mean I think she’s lovely on the radio but you think she just sounds like such a cheerful person that’s never really had any sort of worries, and you just don’t know, do you, what’s behind someone?

Like Riki said, with the bits of sort of underlying humour with these very serious things, and it’s so personal.

Kirsty: Riki, what’s your next pick?

Riki: So, my second one is ‘The Prettiest Horse in the Glue Factory’ by Corey White. So, this is another kind of memoir of trauma and you know pretty challenging childhood and different things. Corey is a comedian, a stand-up comedian, so there’s a lot of humour. He’s obviously developed a really high level sense of humour to cope with a lot of his tragedy and uses it in his stand-up.

Before I’d read the book I saw one of his stand-up bits and it’s really confronting what he talks about because he was in the foster care system for a really long time. A lot of really bad placements there and a lot of abuse and different things that happened. He was a really smart kid though and got a scholarship to like a high-regarded boarding school, so that was like his ticket out; it was like education was going to be his way out of that situation.

Kirsty: Education and somewhere to live while being educated as well.

Riki: Yeah. But then you know things don’t always go as planned and he ended up becoming addicted to meth as an adult and went through a really tough time later on and then eventually became like a comedian and so now I think he’s sober and he’s been doing that stuff. But just the way that you know it’s not always a linear road to escaping certain things or if you’re not dealing with a lot of that traumatic stuff they come back in different ways or all sorts of things. And you know success looks different for different people as well, I think. That’s always a good thing to remind ourselves that a little bit of this trauma porn type of stuff that we look at people that have had a tough time “But look how successful they are now” so, it’s OK.

Kirsty: Yeah, the ‘inspirational machine’.

Riki: Yeah. Yeah. So, it’s kind of a good reminder that that doesn’t always happen and it’s also not just like a linear road there; like there’s a lot of ups and down and a really hard travel road to get to any form of success. And success can be so different than – like you know just having a comfortable life where you’re safe is success for some people. But yeah, really, really funny though. He talks about some really challenging things with a lot of humour and it was really enjoyable to read in that way. Even though there was a lot of really difficult stuff it wasn’t something that I felt like I was wading through to get to the end, you know.

Kirsty: That’s good.

Riki: So, yeah, like it’s good to be able to think about these challenging things without necessarily living in the emotion of it the whole time because that can be really tough.

Kirsty: Yeah. So, it sounds like some very, very challenging and difficult things to read about if it wasn’t for the humour balancing it.

Riki: Absolutely, yeah. And I think really important stuff to acknowledge and read about because again there’s a lot of systemic issues around the foster system and like drug and alcohol support and stuff like that that’s important to acknowledge but can be really difficult to be thinking about in really intense ways all the time.

And Corey is a really funny comedian. He’s still pretty young as well. I think when he wrote the book he was only in his 20s, so the life that he had led just to that point was like huge. And he’s still a pretty young guy. But I suggest to anyone … I think there’s some of his stuff on YouTube so if you like stand-up, Australian stand-up, have a look.

Paulina: I love stand-up but I can’t remember the name at the moment. I’m sure when I see a picture of him I’ll remember. I love stand-up. Like it’s the same as with Clare Bowditch and that, you just don’t know what’s gone on in people’s lives before.

Riki: Corey White is pretty upfront about it in his stand-up. That’s the whole basis of a lot of his things. But like there’s a difference between it being in a stand-up bit and it being in a full book form and the whole story being spoken about, I think. Yeah.

Kirsty: And I’ll keep an eye out for that one or YouTube. So, I don’t have a second book to talk about but I do have a recommendation that was sent in from one of our other co-workers, Ana-Maria. So, Ana-Maria recommends ‘Educated,’ a memoir by Tara Westover.

It tells the incredible story of her life from her extremist childhood upbringing to where she is now as an adult and how she came to be who she is today. It divulges the impact that her parents’ extremist anti-government, anti-education views and subsequent sheltered childhood had on her and how she went from having no education growing up to eventually attending Cambridge University and achieving a PhD. It’s an incredible story from start to finish and sparks questions and reflection on the importance of education and the power of one individual to completely reshape their life.

This is such an important book for teenagers and adults to read not only to learn about a completely different perspective on life and belief but also to realise how powerful they themselves can be and the potential that we all have to do amazing things.

So, that recommendation was from Ana-Maria and it definitely sounds like a really interesting book. I know I’ve heard of it and I’ve seen the cover before but I haven’t picked it up. Are either of you familiar with that one?

Riki: No, I’m not but I’m very interested now. That sounds amazing.

Paulina: I’ve seen the cover and read the back of it and it did look very interesting but I haven’t read it yet.

Kirsty: That’s a recommendation from Anna-Maria wanting us all to read that book now.

Paulina: Mmhmm, good.

Kirsty: So, I’ll just wrap up the episode. I mentioned earlier that we chose to do biographies and memoirs in this episode because the National Biography Awards were coming up. At the time of our recording now the shortlist has been nominated but the winners haven’t been announced, and there are some great looking titles on the shortlist. So, they are: ‘The Girls’ by Chloe Higgins; ‘Beyond Words: A Year with Kenneth Cook’ by Jacqueline Kent; ‘Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm’ by Russell Mcgregor; ‘Tiberius with a Telephone’ by Patrick Mullins; ‘Things Nobody Knows But Me’ by Amra Pajalic – I probably should have checked how to pronounce her name before I read that out – and ‘Hearing Maud’ by Jessica White.

I’m particularly interested in ‘Hearing Maud’ but I don’t think I’ll get a chance to read it before the winners are announced. I know it’s in our e-Collection though so I’ll probably borrow that at some stage.

Riki and Paulina, do any of those jump out at you?

Paulina: I think ‘The Girls’ looked really interesting. I can’t remember now but I was having a look before. There’s a car accident early on and some of her siblings are killed; her father was driving. And it’s about guilt and sorrow, resilience and people coming through things.

Kirsty: Yeah, that one sounds good.

Riki: Yeah, I agree. That was my pick as well, Paulina. It sounded really interesting the way that she was going to be writing about such a personal story, and it would be challenging, absolutely.

Kirsty: Yeah, that definitely looked like an interesting one to me as well. But we’ll see who the winner is later on. Thank you, Paulina and Riki for coming on the podcast. You’ve had some great recommendations and I’ve loved the conversation.

If at home you have any comments or recommendations of your own that you’d like us to share you can contact via our Facebook page at ‘Libraries in Wyndham.” And for now, happy reading.

[End of recorded material at 00:27:05]