**Recently Returned**

**Biography & memoir 2.0**

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Kirsty: Hello everyone, and welcome to Recently Returned. I’m one of your regular hosts, Kirsty, and I’m joined today by Emily.

Emily: Hello.

Kirsty: And Paulina, welcome back to the podcast.

Paulina: Hello.

Kirsty: Hi. So today we’re doing another biography and memoir episode, because we got so many great entries last time. And we’re just really keen to share some more with you. So let’s get straight into it. Very excited to find out what Emily and Paulina are recommending. So I’m just going to start off with Emily, what’s the first memoir or biography you’ve got for us today?

Emily: Yes, so my first one is a biography, and it’s called “Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior” and it’s by Catherine Hanley. It was published in 2019. And I actually came across this book while I was working at the library. I was shelving some books and found this book on the shelf and thought, “Ooh, I’ve heard of Matilda, but I don’t know her full story. I think I’d like to borrow this and find out exactly what her story is.”

And so for those who aren’t really sure who Matilda was – but some people might have a basic general knowledge of the English monarchy back in the middle ages – so most people have heard of William the Conqueror. So he’s known as the first English King. So he conquered England and Normandy, and then basically established the lines – the English monarchy as we know it, basically.

Matilda was his granddaughter, and she became the first woman to be heir to the English throne. But of course no one’s heard of Queen Matilda. And this is because she was never actually crowned Queen of England, but she had the right to be. And, yes, so it’s this intriguing part of English history that I find really fascinating. And it’s told – it’s written really, really well.

So Catherine Hanley, who’s written this biography, has done a lot of really interesting research into Matilda, because Matilda – of course being a female figure in history – we’ve kind of lost lots of information about her, because most chroniclers of the time were men, and didn’t think that women’s stories were really worth writing down. But, luckily, we have her story out there now.

And it’s a very dramatic story. There are so many fascinating, and exciting, and brutal stories of battle. And how she became so close to being crowned, and then wasn’t. And there was a civil war between her and Stephen, who became king. And Stephen, basically, kind of swooped in and took the crown when he wasn’t entirely entitled to it. And that’s how this civil war began.

Kirsty: Sounds like this book has everything, really.

Emily: It does, yes. And I’m hoping that someone adapts this story for the screen. Because it’s really worthy of – I think it could be a really fantastic TV miniseries or film. Yes, so it’s a really good read. I’m reading it for the second time. And it’s a real page-turner. Even though I know already what’s going to happen, it’s still really exciting and it’s a really good read the second time around. So, I highly recommend this to anyone who’s interested in English history, or medieval history, or just anyone – like me – who’s fascinated by stories of great women through history.

Paulina: I remember when that book came in, and I put it on the shelf for the first time. And I went, “Ooh” and nearly hugged it. I was so excited to see it. I used to read the Cadfael books – about the monk in the time of Stephen and Matilda – and it’s interesting reading those and just seeing how it affected the people, and how towns changed hands. So I’d really love to read that biography of hers. She was very badly done by, wasn’t she?

Emily: Yes. And especially because – so her father was King Henry I, and he named her as his heir, and he actually got all of the nobles, and all of the clergy to come and pledge their allegiance to her. And they did this very publicly, and very officially. And then at King Henry’s death, because she was – Matilda was overseas at the time – I think she was closer to Normandy – and Stephen happened to be closer to England and heard the news of the king’s death first, and kind of went over to London and essentially, yes, declared himself king.

Paulina: Yes. He was her cousin, wasn’t he?

Emily: Yes. He was her first cousin, yes. I could go on for hours telling this story, but I think people should read the book if they’re interested, and then we can have a full discussion.

Kirsty: Definitely. It sounds really great.

Paulina: Yes, it’s a fascinating tale, especially as she was quite a strong woman, wasn’t she?

Emily: Yes. And very intelligent, and very well suited to the throne. She was crowned – she married the King of Germany, who was also Emperor of Rome. So she was Queen of Germany, Queen of the Romans, Empress of Rome. She had all of this – she had a full and complete understanding of political strategy, war strategy, and even though she couldn’t ride into battle herself – being a woman of the time – she could still plan and be that figurehead of authority behind battlelines, so to speak.

So, yes, she was – and she was a very strong woman, and of course the chroniclers of the time were shocked to see a woman act with authority, and basically act as a king, which is what she rightly should have been. And it seems the way that they described her was kind of ridiculous if you were to apply those terms to a man. To say that, “Oh, it’s so shocking for this man to be acting with authority, acting as a king.” That doesn’t – of course you wouldn’t say that about a man who was king. But, yes, because she was a woman, they found it hard to comprehend how she could speak with such strong opinions, and be offended when people showed her disrespect. It’s like, “Well, no, she’s just acting as a royal leader.”

Kirsty: Yes.

Paulina: Yes, nearly a thousand years later, you still see that sort of thing if a woman’s too strong and speaks out. Whereas, “Oh, what a commanding man.” And, “Oh, that woman doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

Kirsty: Men get to be leaders, and women get to be bossy is what tends to be the narrative.

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: But, I am sure I’m definitely not the only person who has just added this to their to be read list. So, thanks so much for bringing that one to our attention, Emily. And I’ll just move us on to Paulina. What’s your first book?

Paulina: My first book is Paul Jennings’s autobiography. Paul Jennings that wrote “Around the Twist” and many other great children’s books. It’s called “Untwisted: the story of my life”. And the [unintelligible 00:08:03] says, “Honest, funny and insightful reflections on writing, teaching, love and living, from the celebrated children’s author.” It’s a wonderful book. I really, really enjoyed it.

He writes very simply, very easily. I’m sure kids could read it. It’s not nasty or anything. And he talks about problems in his life that made him understand children more. You know, things like he was very close to his mother, who ended up dying quite young. And his father didn’t seem to like him. And he always had that feeling that even though he’d done nothing, his father would say things like, “Oh, you won’t amount to much. You’ll be a labourer.”

And it’s very interesting. I meant to mark the page where he’s talking about it. But he’s saying these quotes that his father had said to him. And he remembers them like 50 years later. It really makes you think – you’ve got to be careful what you say to your children. And yet he said – yet with his mother, they were together at the school one time and she said – when he was 15 – and she said, “Oh that girl in the library, she really liked you. She makes good choices.” So he said in one sentence, she told him about how someone liked him, and also given him a compliment. And he said that’s what his mother was like.

But his father’s, “Oh, you’ll never amount to much. It’s not worth putting effort in for you.” And it’s really sort of sad. But he said there were always little things like that. And I remember another bit, just talking about it, that he’s a very shy child and he remembers himself as being shy and scared of everything. And yet, he was also the leader of a gang when he was about seven, and they’d run around the streets doing all the naughty things they weren’t supposed to.

And putting, “Don’t go near the train tracks.” And they’d put a penny on these train tracks and get them squashed by the train. And they’d get lanterns and go in the drains, and just pop up in the middle of nowhere, and let all the neighbours’ chickens out, so they had to run around chasing them. And so he got into trouble quite often. And yet he was this quiet little shy boy, and he couldn’t marry the two.

And it gives him a lot of insights into things that he remembers. And he said on another occasion too, him and another celebrated author had to go to a function and you had to do things like you did at school. It was an exhibition in a museum of a school from years ago. And so they had to sit at the school desk and both of them said they felt really ill, because they were often scared in school that the teacher would go mad at them. And they often got picked on for no reason, but you weren’t doing the right thing at the right time. Even the way he’d draw a circle or something, “That’s wrong. What are you doing?”

And he said it was very odd being 40, you’re well-known, you’re successful, but still that same fear came back. And he said maybe having the memory of that – and being able to remember things like that – is what made them both good authors for children, because they could remember the problems they had when they were a child.

It was good. I finished it last night. I’d love to tell the ending. Yes, so I really recommend that, and I’m sure children 10 or over would like it as well. He hasn’t got anything that you might be concerned about kids getting. But just – and he said your kids are aware of relationships and what happens as well, you know on a certain level. Like, no matter what your parents are saying, you know if they’re not getting on well, or things like that.

Kirsty: Yes.

Paulina: So it’s OK for kids to be aware of those things. And that’s what the books are like too. Just nuances of relationships and maybe you feeling, “How do I cope with this?” And yet we’re all so different, yes.

Kirsty: He’s been writing so long as well. I remember reading his books as a child, and I think a lot of people would be in the same boat, and can now pick up this memoir and get to know him through an adult lens as well.

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: So that sounds very interesting.

Paulina: And he mentions things that happened in his life that he used for different books, and different stories.

Emily: I was going to ask about that.

Paulina: Yes, so it’s really great. He said, “I used this to great effect with blah, blah, blah.” Or, “This little boy” and, yes, really enjoyable. And makes me want to go back and look at some of his books. He is, he’s a great writer.

Kirsty: Fairly new as well, isn’t it?

Paulina: It is new, yes, it only came out last year I think.

Kirsty: Well, adding another one to my to be read list.

Paulina: This year. So it’s brand new.

Kirsty: Well, I also have a book. I’ll make this a quick recommendation because it’s been a while since I read it. And it’s also quite a short memoir really. I think it’s less than 250 pages. But it packs such a punch. “The Erratics” by Vicki Laveau-Harvey. It won the Stella Prize in 2019. And it’s well-deserved. It’s a beautiful little memoir.

The memoir centres around Vicki’s relationship with her parents and her sister. When her mother falls and breaks her hip, Vicki and her sister return to the family homestead in Canada, for the first time in about 18 years. They’d been practically disowned by her mother who suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness, was delusional, isolationist, wouldn’t let anyone onto the property, and was a compulsive liar. She was a very manipulative woman.

And the siblings go across to the homestead, partly to support her, but also to enact a plan to institutionalise their mother to stop her coming home, because their father has been practically wasted away under her care – under her malicious kind of starvation regime almost. And the book is just told in this very stark way that mirrors the landscape and the relationship between the mother and the two siblings.

They arrive in Canada and, from the get go, you see how manipulative the mother is, and the lies she’s told. They arrive at the hospital and the nurses and doctors don’t believe that they’re her children because she has told them that she only had one child, and that that one child was a famous author and is now deceased. And they have to jump through all these hoops, both to prove who they are, but to also get her assessed as being incapable of living on her own. Or even with the father, who is not in a position to take care of her because she has been taking advantage of him.

It sounds really, really bleak. But it’s also filled with this kind of wry, almost black humour as well. I listened to the audio and I highly recommend that, because Vicki narrates the book herself. And some of those little bits of humour, I think, come across mostly in her tone of voice as well. It’s a very kind of dry, deadpan delivery. And I’m not sure that I’m doing the book justice, but it – even though it’s very tough subject matter, it’s beautifully written. It’s a very quick read. And I just highly recommend it.

Paulina: Sounds very interesting. And especially, as you said, the author reading it and you get those nuances which can sometimes be hard to pick up.

Kirsty: Yes. And because it’s so short as well, she doesn’t go into very – like it doesn’t get really dark, it just glosses over some, and then focuses on small instances that build up the picture of the house with all the stuff that had been hoarded inside, and the way they’d been isolated in this community because the mother wouldn’t let anyone visit.

Paulina: It reminds me a little bit of Simone de Beauvoir’s biography of her mother, called “A Good Death”. And her and her sister come back to look after her mother who’s dying of bowel cancer and wanted to die at home. It’s short, but harrowing. And I remember at the end of it, she – I said, “A month. That was only a month?” You know, all the medical things, and how quickly she went downhill. I mean now there’s more treatment. It was like, “Go home and nurse her til she dies.” And it was like a year. And you were just drained reading it. It must have been awful going through, and made me think of that, that you were talking about.

Kirsty: Yes, it sounds similar.

Emily: Does it have a satisfying ending, or is it kind of open-ended, or – how does it leave you feeling at the end?

Kirsty: I think I was quite satisfied by the ending. I can’t remember exactly how it ends. But there was definitely a resolution to the relationships. I can’t say too much without giving away what happens.

Paulina: It’s hard.

Kirsty: But you’re not left feeling depressed, or worried for the people.

Emily: Yes.

Kirsty: So we’ll move us back to Emily and ask for your second recommendation for us?

Emily: Yes, so my second recommendation is a wonderful book, that’s a favourite of mine. So it’s called “My Family and Other Animals” by Gerald Durrell. So I’m not sure if either of you have seen a recent TV series – a British series – called The Durrells.

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: Yes.

Emily: Yes, so the story takes place – so it’s written by Gerald and he – so it takes place during his childhood. And when he was about eight years old, his family – who lived in England – just kind of spontaneously decided, “Let’s move to Greece. Let’s go to Corfu and stay there for a little while and – yes, just for a change of scenery.” And so in Gerry’s family – so he’s the youngest sibling – but he has three older siblings. He has a sister, Margot, and two brothers, Lesley and Larry. And each of them have fantastic, unique, hilarious personalities, which is one of the greatest features of this book. And also his wonderful mother who is just referred to as “Mother” in the book.

And so this book – so it’s set in the 1930s, and it just takes place over about five years. And it’s filled with these beautiful descriptions of this Greek island. And Gerry, who is fascinated by animals and nature, you follow his little adventures throughout the island, and the creatures that he discovers. And so you have these beautiful descriptions of the nature there, and the environment. But also matched with these hilarious anecdotes of very, very funny – funny stories of – whether it’s just – it could just be a hilarious conversation between him and his siblings, or his siblings and their mother.

Or there are a lot of very funny mishaps that happen with the animals, which Gerry loves to collect and bring into the house. And you have all sorts of creatures from magpies and pigeons, to scorpions and geckos and all the hilarious things that ensue from bringing those creatures into the house.

So Gerald Durrell went on to become a famous conservationist.

Paulina: He set up the Jersey Zoo, didn’t he?

Emily: Yes he did. “He founded Jersey Zoo” – I’m just reading here in the front page – “in 1959, as a centre for the conservation of endangered species.” So, yes, you see his passion for animals grow in this book. From when he was just a child. So, yes, highly recommend it. It’s a really good read.

Paulina: It is a wonderful book. I remember reading it when I was young. And just even thinking of it makes me smile.

Emily: Yes.

Paulina: He’s such a gifted writer and family are quite eccentric.

Emily: Yes.

Paulina: And to carry on his childhood passion, for his whole life, is wonderful.

Emily: Yes.

Kirsty: I definitely enjoyed the TV series. And I was watching that with my family. So I’m thinking maybe this will be a book that I buy and pass around the lounge room.

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: And that’s a – is that a quartet? Is that what a – one, two …

Emily: So I think it’s – there is a trilogy – it’s referred to as the “Corfu Trilogy”. So “My Family and Other Animals” is the first. And then he went on to write two sequels, essentially. One’s called “Birds, Beasts, and Relatives”, and the third is “The Garden of the Gods”.

Kirsty: The title of that second one is just brilliant.

Emily: Yes.

Paulina: He wrote a lot of non-fiction later on too, didn’t he?

Emily: Yes, I believe he did. And he also wrote many other memoirs as well, that are all equally fascinating and full of funny stories. Some of which feature his family as well. Yes, all of his books are written with such great wit that they’re – all of them are really enjoyable.

Kirsty: Thanks so much for that. It’s definitely going on my list. And I wonder if Paulina’s next pick will make my list even longer again. We will see. What have you got for us?

Paulina: This is a really interesting book. I’m not quite sure if it’s biography or – it’s sort of a multi-biography. It’s brand new. I think it just came out – yes 2020 as well. Nigel Cawthorne “Assassinations that Changed the World”. It’s fascinating. So it starts – they’ve got them in all different order. It starts – well some are in 2020. And goes down to Julius Caesar. And so many people along the way that were assassinated. And most of them are given about six pages. So you’ve got a short biography of the person, the things that led to the assassination, and how it changed things afterwards.

I thought it was fascinating. Michael Collins in 1922, which further increased the IRA, and got more people to join that. Led to a bit of problems. Lord Darnley in 1567, which was the husband of Mary Queen of Scots – her second husband. Assassinated, probably, by her third husband, or on his orders. Which led to her getting locked up for 20 years. And Thomas Beckett in 1170, which was the murder in the Cathedral. Which – fascinating story, that’s the one with the king saying, “Oh, oh who will rid me of this turbulent priest?” And so his guards went off, “Great, we’ll go get him. The king wants him killed.” “Oh, no, I was just talking out loud. It wasn’t an order I was giving.” That’s a fascinating read.

And Julius Caesar, and the things that he’d done. And that was really interesting. Even though it’s only about six pages, there was so much history of his works, and what he’d done. And it was really interesting reading that. Because I knew when he died, on the Ides of March, but other than that I didn’t know too much. And both the Kennedys, Malcolm X. And really fascinating book.

Kirsty: It sounds like a good one to just pick up, read a bit, and then put down. But also to give you a bit of a taster of this person and then –

Paulina: You can follow it on.

Kirsty: ‑ you might go off and, yes, borrow a more complete history.

Paulina: And I’ve always loved short stories, because they can lead you on to a novel that you might like to continue, or introduce you to an author that you mightn’t have read before. And so similar with this, as you said, you can find out about someone that you might want to research further. Or even just improve your knowledge, you know, and your general knowledge. And there’s – how many have we got – 48 people. So this like dipping into history, and just having a little read.

And even with kids – older kids – there might be someone they’re interested in, so you can say, “Oh look, this one is about so and so. Or Gandhi” – there’s Gandhi in there of course – “and you can read that.” And then it might spark them onto something else. I think it’s a really good read. So even though it’s a bit heavy, because it’s a biography and non-fiction, they’re in small bites. And could lead to good discussions.

Emily: Yes.

Kirsty: Yes. OK, that has gone on my list. My list is now quite large. I’m sure everyone listening at home probably has the same problem. But we will keep enabling you to add more books. My second one isn’t actually a book I’ve read. It’s a recommendation from one of our other staff members, who sent this through to me. So Lisa gives this book five stars. Highly recommended. So I’m just going to read this out for you.

Lisa recommends “Travelling with Ghosts” by Shannon Leone Fowler. This book runs through many emotions, the first being shock, and then disbelief, as Shannon’s fiancé, Sean, is stung and killed by a box jellyfish in Thailand. What started as a carefree couple enjoying a tropical holiday, plunges Shannon into indescribable grief and disbelief, after authorities try to classify Sean’s death as a drunk drowning. Not wanting to scare tourists, there were no warnings of the dangers, and authorities will not admit the truth.

Shannon tries to deal with her grief, carrying on their travels solo to honour Sean. She learns about the devastating history of many similar deaths in Thailand, and the cover-ups, while learning that she is strong enough to find the truth and keep going. This heart-wrenching story also shows one person’s determination and resilience to uncover the truth.

Paulina: That’s very interesting. And when you said box jellyfish, I immediately thought Cairns. And I thought, tropical Queensland. And I haven’t heard of any in Thailand, so there must be quite a bit of a cover up.

Emily: Yes.

Kirsty: So that one was from Lisa, and it sounds like a quite emotional read.

Paulina: Yes.

Kirsty: So thanks so much to Lisa for submitting that. We love sharing everyone’s recommendations. And, of course, if anyone at home has a recommendation that you’d like us to share in an episode of Recently Returned, you can send it through to us by our Facebook page, or send us an email to recentlyreturned@wyndham.vic.gov.au.

Paulina: Well that’s a great idea, isn’t it. Because I’m sure some people have seen some books that we haven’t seen yet. Or even ones that are new out and the library would probably purchase them. If they like it, someone else might.

Kirsty: Yes, definitely. And we just love hearing from everyone at home. So please contact us. And, on that note, I just want to say a big thank you to Emily and Paulina for coming on this episode. You’ve talked about some great books, and I’m sure people at home, like me, have now added them to their reading list. So thank you very much.

Emily: Thank you. Thanks for having us.

Paulina: Yes, thank you. It’s been enjoyable.

Kirsty: So that’s it from us today. As always, thanks for listening, and happy reading.

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