**Ideas and Society**

**13 August 2013**

**Sex, Desire and Nature in Australian Fiction**

**Dr Sue Martin**

Okay, I'd like to welcome everybody to this event, in the Ideas and Society Program calendar. I'm very pleased today to welcome Kerryn Goldsworthy and Carrie Tiffany who are going to have a conversation across me. Kerryn Goldsworthy I think will be known to many of you. She’s a South Australian re-visiting Melbourne. She was long resident here but is coming back just for the day, on this occasion I'm pleased to say. An academic, writer, critic, editor – a very esteemed editor – and as I found on the web today, an independent scholar, which is a term I particularly liked. Her books include fiction, *North of the Moonlight Sonata*, a critical work on Helen Garner and most recently the book on Adelaide that many of you will have enjoyed. And as I said she’s a well-known editor of Australian love stories, Australian short stories, one of the editors of the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature, a former editor of ABR, and she’s a judge of a number of Australian literary prizes, including the Miles Franklin, briefly and perhaps controversially. And most recently and most interestingly for this occasion, chair of the inaugural Stella Prize, which I think you’ll be talking about today.

Carrie Tiffany, on my right, also an editor, author, and scholar. Amongst other things, she is, when time permits, I think I'm allowed to say that, a post-graduate student at La Trobe and her most recent novel was part of her post-graduate project. Her novels, her first novel, *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*, was short-listed for the Orange Prize, the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and won, amongst other things, the Western Australian Premier’s Award for fiction. Her most recent novel, *Mateship with Birds*, was short-listed for the Western Australian Premier’s Award, the Prime Minister’s Literary Award for fiction and has won so far, the Miles Franklin Award and the Stella Prize.

So welcome, Kerryn and Carrie. And we look forward to some reading and some conversation. Carrie, I think you can start by reading from *Mateship with Birds*.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Okay, I will. I work as a farming journalist and one of the things that I notice when I go out to see farmers is they often have very unsuitable farm dogs. And I was recently in the Mallee last year when a crop was quite high, just near the break, and I was following a man – he was driving his ute in front of me, and he went through a gate and we got into this paddock that we wanted to look at and he got out and he had a pug on his hip. And the whole time we were talking about the crop and we were taking photographs and I was interviewing him, and he had the dog on his hip and it was clear that if he’d put it on the ground it would have immediately been lost in the crop. But he said to me, “Good farm dog. Good farm dog”.

So the farmer in *Mateship with Birds* Harry has a whippet and this is just a little bit from the beginning about his relationship with his whippet.

She’s an antler covered in warm velvet. Her legs are sticks; her yolky heart hangs in its brittle cage of ribs. She can’t walk in a straight line. When Harry holds the gate open for her she slinks through it. She doesn’t stand next to him like you might see a dog in a photograph, but with her back snaked around so it touches his leg. She’s useless with the cows. She spends the winter curled up like a cat, she yelps at thunder, she’s afraid of heights, she hates the rain. There’s something obscene, dick-like, about the way her tail curves between her hind legs. She looks wounded when they go to town and he makes her jump down from the Dodge because he always lifts her when they are at home. Her whole existence, every sinewy fibre of her, is tuned to the feel of Harry’s hand across the smooth cockpit of her skull.

The beloved have many names. Harry calls her sweetie, luvvie, goose and bag-o-bones. Mues calls her a dog-shaped ­object or rat-on-stilts. He says, ‘What’s its shit like, Harry? Does it shit like a pencil?’

That first day when he collected her, and in the Dodge on the way home took off his coat and tucked it around her shoulders … it went along the usual way after that. An alteration in the focal length – each fixed for the gaze of the other. The imbibing of odours. The warm soil of her head, the bread and vinegar of his crotch. A babble language followed quickly by regret for the first hard words. Physical changes. The sharing of personality and mannerisms.

All her expressions are known to him. Her squinted blink, the thwop of ropey tail against the lino, the shame-clamped jaw. Then familiarity. Indifference. Forgetfully, he sometimes runs his hands across her ribs. If it’s early on in the week, a Monday or a Tuesday, he’ll say, ‘That’s enough then. That’ll do you for the rest of the week,’ and she’ll lean into his knees, blissful at the sound of his voice.

[applause]

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I was reading that bit on the plane on the way over and it occurred to me for the first time actually that one of the many things Carrie’s doing in this novel is writing in a great Australian tradition, which is a tradition of ... a long tradition in Australian fiction writing and writing about animals, and writing about people’s relationship with animals, and I ... one of the things that those writers – I'm thinking of the realists of the 1950s, but also further back, people like Lawson, and one of the things that those writers do which I think Carrie also does is find a way of writing about animals that observes them closely, observes closely their relationship with people, but manages not to sentimentalise and not to anthropomorphise. How much conscious thought do you give to that, you know, when you’re writing about animals? Do you think, I mustn’t get soppy, I mustn’t pretend they’re people, or does it just come naturally?

**Carrie Tiffany**

Gosh, it’s nice you say that, because I think it is soppy and in fact when I read it I think, oh, it’s so twee and I feel a bit sort of embarrassed by it. I feel that when I'm sort of writing that, I'm still sort of eleven or something. I am still sort of eleven actually of course. But ... and a lot of it sort of comes from remembering being that age and being in a sort of unhappy, disaffected family and even children I think who are not in unhappy, disaffected families, but feeling that connection with animals, and feeling the way that animals substitute in families, and hold things within a family, within those kind of dynamics, which was always the case in my family, that particularly the dog might be who you actually communicate through and we would make the dogs speak. And the dog was able to speak things that nobody else could quite speak in the family. And I think this is not uncommon.

So I'm really ... I'm not thinking about how I'm doing it really, I'm more linking it into those feelings about what those relationships might mean. And in *Mateship with Birds* I was really interested in the idea of instinct and our instincts towards animals because I think that this is kind of on the cusp of some sort of change which interests me. One of the things I do with my work is very much to do with science, so a few years ago I had to write a big report for the state government which was about biodiversity. It’s a White Paper about biodiversity. It nearly killed me. But in this report I was required by the state government to talk about landscapes as being valuable because they had amenity value, to use that kind of language – amenity value. So I wasn’t able to use the kind of language that I use in my fiction. I wasn’t able to use beautiful language to talk about something that is beautiful because it’s considered to be unscientific. And even things that also seem important to do with the landscape, anecdotal information, which is what a lot of my writing is about, kind of honouring that anecdotal information, was considered that it couldn’t be included in this report because it didn’t have correct scientific validity. So a farmer who’d lived on a landscape, in a landscape, you know, for several generations and watched, say, changes in bird life in that area, wasn’t ... that data wasn’t allowed to come into this biodiversity paper that I wrote.

So in some ways the *Mateship with Birds* is a bit of a push against that and it’s wanting to allow that anecdotal in, but it’s also wanting to say, well, what’s wrong with this instinct that we have towards animals? What’s wrong with extending ideas that animals might be part of the human family in some ways and that we might respond to them in the same way. And I think this is kind of current as well, when we see what’s happening in Indonesia, and we’re all kind of appalled at what’s happening in abattoirs. Those things happen in areas where the killing of animals is kind of industrialised and is not sort of part of the family, where there’s no relationships any more. So those relationships I think are really important.

And a lot of it really comes from just being ... you know, remembering being eleven and one of the very embarrassing things I did when I was eleven, I lived in Perth and I was very worried about the birds in winter, even though it’s not even cold in Perth, but I didn’t know that. And I would cut up the blanket on my bed into squares and climb trees and put little bits of this blanket in these birds’ nests in the winter. And I remember my mother holding up this blanket. So some of it is sort of remembering that. It’s just those feelings of concern that perhaps are not flowing well in families, can flow somewhere else, and can be positive in that way.

I'm rambling.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

So Harry, who lives alone, is inevitably going to be ... you know, who’s a warm-hearted character, is inevitably going to be lavishing some of those feelings on the creatures he has around him.

But there’s also a terrific scene, early in the book, where Harry’s a dairy farmer, and he goes out to do the milking and there’s a wonderful scene where Carrie writes about the cows, the herd, all of whom have individual names, individual traits, Harry knows them all extremely well. But one of them is spooked by something quite little and inconsequential and that feeling communicates itself to the rest of the herd. It reminded me ... I don’t know how many of you know Les Murray’s poetry, specifically a book called *Translations from the Natural World* which is the most wonderful attempt to get inside the mind of creatures, various different creatures, and there’s this ... it reminded me of that. The same kind of herd stuff communicating itself to each other.

So Carrie writes about the way animals communicate with each other as well as about the way they communicate with human beings.

The writer and critic Gerard Windsor once said something about Helen Garner’s fiction that struck me as absolutely true. He said the characters in Garner’s fiction are judged by their attitude to children. And it strikes me that in *Mateship with Birds*, the characters are judged by their attitude to animals. There’s one character that turns out to be quite a warped sort of a dude, who we first see shooting a galah, or a sulphur crest, for no apparent reason. Were you thinking of ... his name is Mues, and he seems to me to be a kind of lightning rod. Were you thinking of him as someone who is an illustration of what happens when those feelings go awry, or ...

**Carrie Tiffany**

Not in such kind of concrete ways. Sometimes something occurred to me or I would read something and I wanted to give it life and in fact there’s the scene where Mues shoots the cockatoos, they pair for life, these cockatoos. And he shoots one of them in a kind of haphazard way. It’s just cleaning up some grain around his fence posts and he’s sitting with his 22 and he shoots it. It’s the 1950s. We shot things. We still ... people shoot things on farms today. Those kind of attitudes are normal for the time.

But he notices that the other bird, the female bird, doesn’t leave the male for some time. But she actually walks on top of it and claws it and then she flies away, and she flies back again, and she has some wallaby grass in her beak and she tries to feed the male bird. I saw this happen with road kill, and I saw a bird, and the female wouldn’t leave. She wouldn’t leave the bird. So there’s the event in and of itself which says something about relationships in the natural world. And for some reason I've clearly given that to a character.

Even though people think it’s an act of cruelty, in some ways it’s also an act of kindness, you know, in terms of he could see the grief, anyway, there’s some sort of acknowledgment of the grief, when he shoots the female bird.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

That actually, when you said you’ve seen it happen, leads me to another thing I was going to ask about something that you have said – I think it’s on your website somewhere. Art begins with noticing. And I was thinking about that, reading your book again. The book’s made up of different documents, or you know, partly made up of different documents. There’s a set of letters that one of the characters writes to another. There’s a child character called Little Hazel, who keeps a nature diary. And even Betty, the children’s mother, keeps notes and lists of the children’s ailments from year to year. Is it, among many other things, is it a book about noticing? About the act of noticing and recording what you notice.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Oh gosh.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Because everyone seems very observant. In their different ways. Harry watches the birds, Betty watches the kids. Hazel does her homework.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, I think that probably to write and to want to write is one of the reasons why things like this are quite contrary, is that you’re someone who prefers to look than be looked at, and that’s I'm sure true for me, and it’s also, there’s some things that flow too with rural life and farming. I think farming is an act of noticing really, and to me there seems some kind of way of honouring that in the fiction too, that sort of close attention to the landscape that seems important.

But in terms of the construction of the book, of the different elements, that’s really just because I don’t know how else to do it and I sort of wish I did. Like, when I hear writers talk and they say, well, I got this idea and I had these characters and they were sort of talking to me in my dreams. I hate that – I'm so jealous of that. And so I started at the beginning and then I wrote and I got to the end. You know, I think, yes, I would love to be able to do that. But I don’t seem to be able to do that at all. And the only way I seem to be able to do it, is this sort of piecing things together. So I don’t feel like I'm making something as in creating narrative, but I'm more sort of piecing things together – I'm more ... it’s more like collage or more like cut and paste in some ways. And I know those things are ... you know, there’s a process of choosing. Yes, this, and not this. And I know something’s kind of happening in my head, probably subconsciously when I'm doing that choosing. But a lot of the time I don’t really know what it is until I've sort of amassed this sort of material.

And it’s quite physical, so I amass the material in an extremely haphazard way. A lot of the time when I sit down to write, I just feel sort of empty. I don’t’ have an idea, or I don’t think I need to write the next bit. I clearly do need to write the next bit, that’s kind of terrifying. But it’s not sort of immediately obvious to me. So I'll look at things. I'll look at paintings, a lot of Sidney Nolan’s paintings have been important in my writing. I'll look at you know, copies of *Women and Home* from the 1950s, I'll read every issue of the *Victorian Diary Farmer* from 1945 to 1955 in the State Library. And I'm taking notes as I'm doing this. And then when I have this material, I then actually ... I print it out and I move the furniture out of the house and I physically put it on the ground and then I walk around and I look at it, and try and sort of work out which bits talk to each other bits, and then I put it back together again and start sort of drafting and going through that sort of process of finding where the gaps are and where the kind of flow is and those sorts of things.

So, I'm not sure if any of that is intentional. It’s just I don’t’ know how else to do it.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t do it any other way when this way is clearly so successful.

Sidney Nolan?

**Carrie Tiffany**

Yeah, I really ... for my first book, *Everyman’s Rules* which is set in the 1930s in the Mallee, the Mallee and the Wimmera, I came across these series of Sidney Nolan paintings that he did because he didn’t go ... wouldn’t go to the war. He was a pacifist and he wouldn’t go to the war. So for the first time in his life, he got sent out into the bush and he got sent to little towns like Nhill and his job was to guard these tin sheds that were full of Spam, in case the Japanese invaded Australia. So we had enough Spam on hand. So for the first time Nolan was actually in the landscape though, and he spent ages just kind of smoking and he had a rifle over his shoulder, walking around guarding these sheds. But he got to see things and he painted this series of paintings, just before the Kelly series, called the Wimmera series. And some of ... there’s a few in there, in Ian Potter, in Melbourne. There’s a few in the gallery in Ballarat. I sort of hunted these out and looked at them and they’re remarkable paintings, they’re really remarkable. I don’t think the Kelly paintings could have happened if he hadn’t painted these paintings first. He didn’t know how to kind of look out, until he painted these paintings. And he’s trying to deal with something in these paintings about this really flat landscape. So unlike European paintings where the horizon is kind of low and you have a kind of ... some trees in the corner which are sort of statuesque and whatever. In these Wimmera paintings there’s no horizon. It’s really high. There’s a sort of flatness. And often there’s a train moving through the landscape as well, and the smoke sort of sitting on top of it. They’re really striking.

There’s one of a farmer’s face, a close-up of a farm woman’s face and her eyes are, you know, like dams and she’s sort of ploughed across the cheeks. They’re really amazing. I was really struck by them. And I thought, in the paintings, he was trying to get at this idea about whether something was *in* that landscape or *on* the landscape, as in sitting on the landscape. And that had interested me because when I you know, go out and talk to cockies and stuff, there’s this term, it’s not around so much any more but it used to be a lot – on the land – we use this term, we’re on the land. And particularly the time I spent in Central Australia working with Aboriginal people, there was this thing of being in the land and learning a bit of Pitjantjatjaralanguage and understanding that there’s no way of describing someone in Pitjantjatjara which is not in relation to where they are in the landscape.

So that idea of in or on, was kind of very central for *Everyman’s Rules*.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

You mentioned Central Australia so let’s go down that track for a minute.

Carrie was a park ranger in Central Australia when she was 20. And she tells a wonderful story of her reading experiences during that time. Could you tell people that story? Because it’s a great story. About the things you were reading. And how you came to be reading them.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, there’s not much to do in the evenings when you’re a park ranger in Central Australia. I lived in a caravan and the nearest library was at Alice Springs and I was at the Rock, so it’s 400 kilometres away, a four hours’ drive away. And this was before computers and before the internet. So I had a librarian at the library in Alice Springs who chose books for me, and he would send them down on the Greyhound buses, full of tourists, and I would meet the bus on the side of the road and I would get on the bus I remember in my ranger uniform and the tourists would all be really excited thinking I was going to talk to them or show them something, but I would just get my books and leave. They thought it was a very disappointing interlude, but ... he just sent me what he thought I would like. So initially he sent me things like ... he sent me *Ask the Leyland Brothers* and sort of *Turtles of the Top End* or things like that. But then one day he sent me Thea Astley’s *The Well Dressed Explorer* and I, you know, was really struck by it. I thought it was remarkable. And I wrote back to him and said, you know, send me more books like this.

So in the Territory I read, you know, Eleanor Dark and Christina Stead and Xavier Herbert and Randolph Stow and all these fantastic writers that he sent me, and in fact later on as well he went on some librarian’s tour of Europe, so he then started sending me ... he sent me Flaubert when he got back from Paris and yeah, some amazing books. I'd always been interested, because I was born in the UK. So when I was quite young I'd read some Dickens and also I really loved Hardy and I read a lot of those Hardy landscape novels as well, in Central Australia too.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Well. You said something very interesting the night of the Stella Prize presentation. Carrie, in her acceptance speech, talked a bit about Australian women, you know, the tradition of Australian women writers. Is that where you first developed your sense of, you know, who those writers were? And do you think of yourself as part of that tradition, or think of your work as part of that tradition?

**Carrie Tiffany**

Oh, I don’t know. That sounds a bit grandiose. I do think, you know, you do the act itself in isolation. You have to sit in a room by yourself. But you can’t ... I don’t think I could have written what I've written without having read those books. I think that’s absolutely essential. And for anybody that wants to write, there’s nothing without reading. It’s almost physiological. You have to put in so many books I reckon before you get out a sentence. I don’t think it’s possible without that. And they kind of seep into you in particular ways.

There were some writers particularly who were interested in, particularly women in the landscape. So Thea Astley, very strongly. So I was really interested in her work. And Elizabeth Jolley as well. A lot of the work is urban but some of it she actually had a little plot of land in sort of semi-rural WA, not far from where I grew up and I remember reading *Palomino*, I read *Palomino* when I was about 16 and I got it from the local library in Mundaring and I thought it was going to be this book about pretty horses and it scared the pants off me. Wow.

So I don’t see myself as part of anything really, but yeah, I don’t think I could have written without that. And also the books that are around now and more recently, too. But I do go back and re-read a lot. I've been re-reading Christina Stead recently and ... yeah.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I was thinking of Jolley actually, when you were talking about the Wimmera, because it’s that same flat endless landscape and there’s something about wheat. I don’t know how many of you have actually just stood and looked at a paddock of wheat and then gotten up and close and personal with the wheat. I think you write about that in *Everyman’s Rules*. Tell us about wheat, because there’s just these amazing scenes in some of Elizabeth Jolley’s novels, where people are driving through the wheat, and they become hypnotised, they become completely mesmerised and hypnotised by this wheat-riddled landscape.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, I think ... there’s a few things about wheat. There’s a ... and I'm very sad when I do a lot of driving still through that Wimmera and so much of it has now gone to blue gums, or canola. So the colour of the landscape’s really changed and I miss some of that wheat. It’s really quite a visceral change. It must be quite remarkable for people who live amongst it. Particularly the blue gums, because it changes your horizon, it changes the light, it changes everything, the whole sense of the place around you.

A few things are interesting about the wheat. The first time I read about the break, I was fascinated by that, so at a particular time of the year when the wheat is ... to work out if the wheat is dry enough to harvest, the farmer will go out into the crop and snap the head of the wheat and the sound that the head of the wheat makes, the particular dryness of it, indicates whether it’s ready to harvest or not. That seemed to me something that was linking back through kind of history – this is something that people have been doing for sort of so long in different landscapes. It was kind of fascinating. And there’s a smell, a really distinct sort of smell, a mealy smell of the wheat at that time.

But also if you go through it, it’s really good on a train. If you can be on a train that’s moving through the wheat. It has its own climate, sort of thing. So you think you’re just going through something that’s still and that you don’t need to look at very closely, but when you start looking at it, it has all these kind of eddies and pools and it moves kind of like water or something. It’s very sensual and the whole kind of noise and feel and colour of it. It’s really, it’s kind of ethereal. It’s strange.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

You’re not allowed to put this in any White Papers either, I'm sure.

**Carrie Tiffany**

No.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Speaking of trains and wheat, maybe we’ll have another reading. I understand this event was publicised as being about sex, desire and nature in Australian fiction, so we’re about to hear some sex, desire and nature in Australian fiction I think.

This is from *Everyman’s Rules* *for Scientific Living* which was published in 2005.

**Carrie Tiffany**

This is about a young couple. An agronomist and his wife, very early on in their marriage. Early marital lust. And his wife was a sewing instructress who went to the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Science, which is connected to RMIT.

After lunch each day when I sit facing Robert at the kitchen table, instead of familiarising myself with the electric proving cabinet, something else happens. I can’t describe how it starts. Maybe our breathing lengthens or shortens slightly so it falls together. Or maybe one of us might move a little so that the angles of our bodies somehow shifted. I might be looking out of the window, showing the side of my neck, some collarbone, when he places his hand heavily on my shoulder. The feeling, when it rises, is so intense, the need for each other so urgent, nothing is fast enough. The table is pushed out of the way, clothes shed, sometimes ripped, bodies held with force. And then we are coupling hurriedly wherever we might fall, in front of the pantry, against the sink, even on the table, my hair in a puddle of lukewarm tea. On days when Robert is clearly tired from carting water and we have barely even talked, I always think it might not happen, but it is enough for me just to brush my hand against his wrist as I remove his plate. Then he stands abruptly and grips my waist, his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard, and I am still standing, still holding the plate, when he pushes my dress aside and takes my nipple into his mouth.

Odd thoughts break through during the lovemaking. I think it is because it’s the kitchen. A small part of my mind can’t let go of the fact that we are in the kitchen. One day as we are coupled together in front of the oven, moving rhythmically, sinuously together, I am suddenly back in Elementary Housewifery with Mrs Vera Cornthwaite introducing a lesson on ‘Removal of Loose Dirt’.

‘What about fixed dirt, Mrs Cornthwaite?’ a girl asked enthusiastically from the back of the class.

‘One must learn to crawl before one can walk, dear,’ Mrs Cornthwaite replied. ‘Fixed dirt is covered in advanced housewifery. You’ll have to wait until second year’.

Another time when we are joined side by side, my head jammed underneath his chin, his hand gripping my buttocks, drawing out their rise and fall, I notice the sharp red-white divide of his forearm where he folds his shirt sleeve, in the sun, out of the sun. In. Out. And I'm thinking of a lecture on homemaking and how to welcome a guest.

‘Even if you have little space, no actual guest room, have a folding canvas cot ready for guests. Make a space for your guest’s things in the same place. He won’t feel comfortable using a few drawers in one room, a wardrobe in another, a mirror in a third. Make sure you can quickly and easily set up the bed. If you aren’t sure you can do it fast, have a cot drill once in a while.’

Perhaps it was drill. The word drill.

The odd thoughts go in both directions. When lovemaking, I often think about homemaking, and vice versa. One morning as I plot a time and motion study of the kitchen – I am considering moving the mixing centre to make it more efficient – I am suddenly thinking of Robert’s naked rutting back. How his tailbone dips and moves at such an angle his back looks double-jointed. Surely it must be free from the rest of his spine to thrust with such force. And then I'm thinking of my third year of the diploma when we made string studies of movement patterns around the college kitchens. One girl washed up or made a meal, while another followed her movements on a peg board, winding a ball of string from one place to another. The string picture showed how often she retraced her steps, how much energy she used. The aim was motion mindedness – becoming aware of your repetitive unnecessary or superfluous movements. There was a special unit of work on it in third year.

*Choose two subjects from*

*Making thrifty contrivances*

*Rich cake mixtures*

*Basic infant care*

*Simple butchery*

*Household mending*

*Motionmindedness.*

This is how I think of these early afternoons in the kitchen with Robert – that they are filled with a particular sort of motionmindedness. That we have slipped through the science to a place of pure and perfect motion.

[applause]

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Lovely stuff. Those two are passionately engaged with other in a way that, like the end of *Mateship with Birds* actually. Those two’s first encounter comes to the reader as a total surprise and yet it seems almost inevitable that this will happen. And those two first get together amazingly in a place called the honey car. Maybe could you tell people about the honey car, because that’s a wonderful notion. And about the train.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, the novel *Everyman’s Rules* begins on a train that did travel around Victoria in the ‘20s and ‘30s. It was called the Better Farming Train. And I found some photographs of this train just by accident when I was researching some journalism I was doing about the history of agricultural extension, so that’s how agricultural scientists get information across to farmers. And this train was remarkable. It had all of these demonstrators on it, these scientists, who wore these white coats, and it travelled around all these country towns in Victoria and it promoted a lot of knowledge that has created tremendous land degradation problems we now see, you know, it promoted super phosphate and mass clearing, all sorts of terrible things. It was really based on knowledge of European farming systems, rather than the long drought and flood cycles we have in the Mallee.

But thousands of farm families would flock in. You know, they would get in their horse and cart, and come and see this train when it came, and it had the best plants and the best animals. It had a wheat car with a glass roof, you know, like something out of Peter Carey, isn’t it? This train car which is made out of glass, so the wheat was growing. You could walk up and down the aisle. And on the end of it there was one car which was called the Women’s Car for the farm women to go to, and they would teach ... so there was a cooking instructor who would teach you terrible things to do with re-cooked meat and things like that. And an infant health nurse, who would weigh the babies, and a sewing instructor, who would teach you basic things.

And there were some very enigmatic photographs of the Better Farming Train, where sort of something always seemed to be happening always just out of sight of the frame. And I'd sort of got interested when I was actually working as a ranger in the Northern Territory, with these ideas about kind of science and landscape. And in fact the basis for *Everyman’s Rules* came from something that happened that happened to me in the Northern Territory, which was related to trying to manage the National Park with firestick farming, sort of the way the Aboriginal people managed it. So burning little areas of the landscape so it was fertile when you moved back through it. And we know now that not doing this, not burning the landscape, has caused massive recent problems that we had with bushfires, right across Australia.

So, we were trying to do this. This was in the mid ‘80s, so it was quite sort of unusual back then. And it was my job when I was a ranger to do this, and I loved it. It was very scientific, I had all these maps and coloured pencils and different bitts of the park all kind of drawn out as having different ages of vegetation. But I had one particular day, I went out with an elder to look at an area to see if it was ready for burning, and we drove across the sand dunes for a couple of hours and I got out one side of the vehicle and I was wearing my fancy hiking boots, and I had all my equipment for testing the spinifex. And he got out the other side and he was barefoot and he was smoking a rollie. And he went for a bit of a walk across the bush and he turned to me, and he said ‘She’s right love’, and he threw the rollie over his shoulder. And I had this kind of moment, which I very rarely ever had, but an actual kind of epiphany where I thought, do you know, how ever long I stay here, how ever much science I learn about this landscape, I am never going to experience it in the way he’s experienced it. So he can understand how dry this place is because he can feel it through the soles of his feet. I'm never going to know that, whatever I learn. However many more scientific names and processes and things I'd learn about the connections between different plants and animals, I'm never going to have that organic, or that kind of central understanding of it.

But I didn’t write then, and it was a very long time ago, but when I saw these photographs of the Better Farming Train, I thought, ooh, this is a way I can write about this stuff, about science and landscape, and I don’t want to write about some nerdy girl ranger in Central Australia and it’s not really my story anyway, but somehow putting it in the 1930s, using this train, and using what I knew about the Mallee and about the kind of dust storms of the Mallee and problems, the land degradation problems caused there, by this kind of pushing this kind of science on it, was a kind of way I was able to do that.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

This makes me think of something Carrie and I spoke about on the phone the other day. The idea that ... Carrie said, people always think she’s done the things in all her books. And we agreed, sagely, we agreed that there’s something actually very anti-literary about this literal minded notion that fiction is about, on a literal level, the truth of things you’ve really done, whereas I think and I'm pretty sure Carrie does too, that it’s much more about using experiences you’ve had in such a way as to tell a story at least, you know, on some kind of (word inaudible).. or metaphorical level. Do you ... I mean, how much of that kind of thing do you think goes into, maybe everybody’s writing, not just yours, but everybody’s and is it a rule really for the successful writing of fiction? That you have to learn how to transmute those sorts of experiences into a story?

**Carrie Tiffany**

There’s kind of mining of yourself that’s inevitable. There’s nothing ... you don’t have anything else but yourself in terms of your characters and what they might feel. But yeah, I don’t like the idea you have to know something to write about it, and I have never had sex in a honey car, I think you’re alluding to that, and I've never baked bread or I can’t sew, and there’s many many things I've written about that I can’t do. And I wasn’t alive in the 1930s or even the 1950s either. But it seems to me that’s one of the exciting things about fiction and one of the reasons you would do it. It’s not that you might give someone else that experience, which you do, as a reader, who creates the text in reading it. But you yourself, can have this kind of imaginative journey in making it. And it’s got to be exciting for you. It’s got to be ... what’s happening in the book has always got to be ... to keep you in the book has got to be better than what’s happening outside the window, you know. Yeah.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

People say ... you know, it’s a cliché the writing life, that people say, you write what you know. And that’s kind of true and not true. Like Carrie said, she didn’t know about the 1930s, she never had sex in the honey car, whatever. But what she did know was what she learned in Central Australia which was that you can wreck a landscape by mismanaging it with the best of intentions and that’s really the idea, isn’t it, the main idea behind *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* is what a terrible mess you can make with the absolute best of intentions, and absolute faith in science.

**Carrie Tiffany**

It’s about kind of, for me, boundaries, like I think it’s similar with its boundary between kind of human animals, why there? Why do we draw this line there? You know, why couldn’t it be pushed out? Why couldn’t it be something else? That’s something I'm sort of interested in pushing against a bit I think in writing.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

The other thing is the history. I mean, looked at from one angle, *Everyman’s Rules* is both ... well, they’re both historical novels. *Everyman’s Rules* is set in the mid 1930s. *Mateship with Birds*  is set in 1953 and beyond I think. But when we talked about this, Carrie says that she lets the material ... she begins with the material and lets the material decide what year it’s going to be, rather than the other way round. Does the material ... you were saying before, you do things like read every issue of *Woman and Home* from 1947, and things arise from that. Is that how it works? That there just seems to be an appropriate year for this?

**Carrie Tiffany**

With *Mateship* I actually ... I wrote another book in between the two books, which was called *Freud in the Bush* which I really almost fully completed but decided to ditch and not publish. And that was set and had to be set because Freud was invited to Australia in 1910. He was invited to come to a congress of the Australian Psychoanalytical Association. And he didn’t come. He sent a paper. But in this novel that I wrote I imagined that he did come to Australia, so everything was constrained around that time. And when I decided to sort of ditch that, I had ... there’s one thing in it that I wanted to keep and it seemed to me that I could do something with in another way, and that was the character of Little Hazel. So in the book, *Freud in the Bush*, Freud comes to Australia in 1910, to give a paper at a conference and he’s written this paper which is called *On the Couch* and I wrote this paper in Freud’s voice which is in this dead manuscript. And he gets on a train at Spencer Street Station and he has this European gentleman’s idea that he can go to the inland and be home in time for tea. So he gets on this train at Spencer Street Station and it’s February and the train stops at Cohuna and he gets off and he meets a series of characters, who are ... I'd written as kind of inversions of his case studies, so Little Hazel is an inversion of Little Hans, who was phobic about horses and she loves horses. And various other people in this novel. For reasons I decided not to go ahead with this, but I still had this sort of nub of this character.

I knew that there would be a relationship in it between Harry and Betty and I knew that she would be as a single mother. I wanted to write about a woman on her own. And there was something about the fifties particularly that I thought was the right time. One of the reasons I think, was about the time I ditched *Freud* and I started writing *Mateship with Birds*, sort of in a proper way, it was just at the end of the Howard era, and there was a lot of talk you might remember about this return to 1950s values. It was kind of everywhere, particularly kind of women and hearth and women in the home, and I remember people bandying this about a lot, this weird ... Australia returning to this 1950s values. And I thought, what are they? What actually is this? What might it mean? So I wanted to use that as well. I wanted to use the fifties and learn something a bit more about the fifties. What it might have been like. And also, I knew in the relationship between Harry and Betty, that it would be traditional in that it was people who met because of proximity, which is how people did use to meet and get married and whatever, because she was down the road, and you were down the road, you know. And today I know that if I'd written about these people in contemporary times, somebody would have said, well, why didn’t they just get on RSVP? And I knew I did not want to deal with any of those sorts of issues. I wanted it to be ... I wanted them to be physical landscape, I wanted them to be some place and space that they walked across, to and from each other’s houses all of the time. And there’s a kind of patterning that happens, that’s important.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Someone in fact used that wonderful creation Facebook, to check out among some of my literary-minded Facebook friends what sorts of things they’d want me to ask Carrie if they were me, and one of them said that she thought Carrie wrote wonderful grown-up characters. She so loved the adult-ness of characters and said I should ask you whether you could imagine, and it’s what you said about RSVP that made me think of this – whether you could imagine writing those sorts of characters who inhabit most of those novels if you wrote a contemporary novel, set now.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, I am actually trying to write a contemporary novel set sort of in 2009, in the lead-up to the (word inaudible).. but I could well ditch it. I don’t know whether it’s got legs. But ...

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Because I was thinking, it’s the circumstances that all of the characters in those books are in, that makes them grow up pretty fast. One way or another, they’re all ... whatever their flaws may be, they’re all serious adult characters. You know, the idea of any of them on RSVP, or Facebook, is just kind of ludicrous. And I'm wondering whether or not you felt liberated in some way by setting it in an earlier time when you could have characters whose humanness was so much more to the fore, in their relations with each other.

**Carrie Tiffany**

The character of Harry, the lonely dairy farmer, started many years ago, probably about ten years ago ... have I told you this Kerryn, about the dairy farmer.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I remember one story about a lonely dairy farmer.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Should I say that?

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Oh carry on. Yes, absolutely.

**Carrie Tiffany**

So I was doing some work with some farmers in the Lodden-Murray, around Leitchville and Cohuna and Kerang, about ten years ago. They have really bad soils up there, really bad salinity problems, and I was writing some articles about that. And there was one particular farmer, and I'd been to and from his farm maybe four or five times over a period of a week, taken a lot of photographs, and interviewed him a number of times. It was a really fascinating farm – this is not uncommon in the country. There were three houses on this man’s farm. There was the house that he lived in currently, which was some ugly, new construction thing, and then there was this sort of fibro place from sort of the ‘30s or something, and then before that, there was an old stone place. And one day when I was there he said ... I asked him something about his parents and he said, I've got a photograph from when mum and dad were farming. So we went out of his house and they were just next door to each other. They weren’t as if ... there was a huge farm, somebody bothered to put them in different corners of the farm – they were just sort of plonked in a line. So we just went in next door and it was all sort of dusty and cobwebby but everything was pretty much still there, from mum and dad’s time. And he looked through their photo albums and he found me the photo of, this is what the creek looked like before I put the trees back, and whatever. And I said, and what’s next door? Grandma and granddad were next door. And still the furniture, the piano, all of these things still. So each family had built another house next door, so there was this sort of ghost houses next to it.

So I was sort of fascinated by that and this man, living there on his own, he was probably in his early 40s then. Anyway, after going backwards and forwards and visiting him a number of times, there was one morning, I went to see him do the milking and then we let the cows out and we were standing on the bank near the channel, and just talking, and then he said to me, oh, what I've got. I've got 180 cows, I've got a full rotary dairy, I've got a silage pit, I've got a header ... and he started going through all of the things that he had on the property. He started going through his assets. And this went on, and I thought, this is really odd. And he looked a bit shy, and he was sort of not really looking at me, and then I realised it was actually a proposal. And you know, someone he hardly knew, you know. Here’s a woman, I'm going to chance my arm, why not sort of thing. You know.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

How could she resist these cows?

**Carrie Tiffany**

But I thought, what is it ... who are you? What kind of person are you? That you think you are what you have around you. You know, that this is how you say ... that this is who I am. I am my 180 cows and I am my rotary dairy, and I am these things. And that kind of sat with me for a while and I thought, it’s really interesting that you think you are what these things are.

And I wanted to write about someone like that in some way, someone who was so connected with those cycles of the day that they become a pattern, they become kind of ... they imprison you in some ways as well. They make it difficult to swerve away and to get out and get something else.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I know. There’s a strain in Australian fiction about how awful dairy farming is. You know, what drudgery it is, what a trap, what a prison it is. So it was actually really lovely to read your book that represented it quite differently from that. As something enriching and fulfilling at least to some extent.

Harry’s first wife leaves, doesn’t she? Because ... what is it? She doesn’t mind the landscape, it was the shit she can’t stand. There was nothing but cow shit, when you open the windows.

**Carrie Tiffany**

I knew I wanted to set the book in Cohuna and that was the reason why, because every time I go back to Cohuna for work, it stinks. It’s just got these fetid cow shit, heavy smell. It’s really wet, it’s on an anabranch of the Murray, the Gunbower Creek, and there are times when there’s actually some dairy farms in the anabranch, in the middle, so you could be looking across the creek, and the cows on this sort of shimmering hot days, look like they’re walking on water, because they’re on the other side of the creek. And just this stink that gets everywhere. It gets in your hair, and it gets in your clothes, but after a couple of days, you just don’t smell it. Everybody smells like that, the whole town smells like that, all of the time. Yeah.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

I went to a conference at the National Library a couple of weekends ago. It was called Writing and the Australian Landscape. And the keynote paper was given by Murray Bail, who said some really interesting things but also talked very oddly, about the Australian landscape as though it were all the same. You know, as though ... he just kept talking about the hostility and the barrenness and blah blah. And a lot of us were sitting there thinking, just you know ... I drove through country Victoria from South Australia at the beginning of May, a drive I had done many times before, and I noticed as I always noticed before, how different the landscape is, even from just district to district. You know, you drive through the far Western District, just east of the South Australian border and then you drive through the Wimmera proper, and then if you’re going where I was going, which was Clunes, you kind of get to the southern end of the Alps and they’re all completely different landscapes, just in one little bit of Victoria. You must have such a strong sense of ... you know, given the work that you’ve done, and the travelling around that you’ve done, you must have a really strong sense of the differences of different bits of Victoria even, by now.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Perhaps. Yeah, I'm not sure. I do ... I have a bit of a physical picture of some ... I really like driving, I like driving and I like looking out the window and stopping and that kind of stuff. I like that. And I like trying to take back roads, and not taking the highway. So I have driven a lot. I've been down mainly in Gippsland recently in the last couple of months and looking at some landslips in some steep country down there. And I've seen just ... I've been working in this agricultural landcare area for about fifteen years and I've seen some massive changes in the landscape. Like, a place just on one side of Ballarat that was called Bald Hills. It was called Bald Hills for many many years and the local landcare group has completely revegetated this landscape and it’s the lushest, softest, greenest you know, fertile thing, which is still called Bald Hills. It’s fantastic.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

One thing I wanted to ask you about, I don’t know if any of you have gone to Carrie’s website and had a look, but she’s not just a writer. She also makes little sculptures. Can you tell us about those? You don’t have to if you don’t want to. One of them was the cover, wasn’t it, for the original ...

**Carrie Tiffany**

Yes, for one of the editions. I don’t have it here. This is a bit of road sign that I found, that one. Can I tell you about them? I don’t know. I think ... I do like making things and I think sometimes it’s a procrastination. There’s often to do with the writing and I'm not really sure what I'm doing, so I'll make something instead of writing something. They’re often to do with a kind of slightly kind of dyslexic literalness I think I have to do with sentences and landscapes. I think this is something to do with ... we came when I was six from Yorkshire and I remember things like having a colouring book, a colouring book for New Australians. And it said things like, use grey for the shark and black for the Aborigine and there was a gum tree, and it said green for the gum tree. But I was sure when I was six, when I was doing this before we arrived, you know, that the gum tree would be pink. And I was sure it would have leaves like teeth or something. So there’s something about such a drastic change in your environment at that age, when you have language, that you are then just aghast at everything, kind of horrified at everything, and trying to make sense of it through description with sentences in my case, trying to make sense of that. And I had even, I remember, when we came, so in Yorkshire we had a house where you opened the door and you were straight on the street. The post came through the slot in the door. And in Perth we just lived in the suburbs and there was a nature strip outside the house. And I remember being six and looking up and down through these nature strips on the street and thinking that they led somewhere, thinking that they led to the bush, and this idea of the bush was what we really were learning about in primary school, in the 1970s. Learning about, reading Banjo Patterson and singing *Click Go the Shears* and we had a Tom Roberts painting that we rolled down, of *Shearing the Rams*. So, all of that. You know, doing a project on the wheat industry and sticking a corn flake on your page. It’s probably still happening. I think it’s what primary education is like in Australia.

My kids did it. So even though we lived in sort of suburban situations and it was a long time before I actually went to the bush, but I did have this kind of notion that the bush was out there and it was kind of streaming into the city in some way. That’s me not talking about making things.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

No, that’s fine. Clearly. I asked because one of the collages in particular, the one that formed the cover of one edition of *Everyman’s Rules* is called Soil Box, and it’s exactly what it sounds like. It’s a sort of shadow box or series of shadow boxes in it with different soils from different places. Robert has a special talent, does he not? The hero. Could you tell them about Robert’s special talent? Because one of the things that’s so touching about Robert’s special talent – the hero of *Everyman’s Rules* or the anti-hero – is that indicates that he does have a real sense and feeling for landscape, so it’s doubly ironic that he should be wrecking it with the best of intentions. But Robert’s special talent.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Ah, well I do collect soil. I think soil’s quite remarkable and I've got a series of all these different coloured soils that I've collected. I'm often digging them up in little calico bags and doing things with them. But it is a soil test – it is a scientific soil test. There’s different ways of testing soil. You put a bit of water in it and you smooth it between your hands to make a bolus, and see how it sticks together. All these different soils. But one is actually to put it in your mouth because teeth are tremendously good at testing grit. You know when you go to the beach and you know instantly you have sand in your mouth, so we’re very very good at knowing that kind of grittiness. That feel. So there’s a way if you’re a soil scientist, of assessing that grittiness of the soil. So it’s not unusual that a soil scientist would taste the soil.

The rest is a bit fanciful that he might know where it came from, that’s me being kind of overly romantic, or dramatic, or whatever. But I've certainly seen people tasting soil and I've tasted it myself as well.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Robert’s almost infallible at telling you, even when drunk, at telling you, you know, if somebody gives him some soil, he can say where it’s from. I think someone loses quite a lot of money, at some point, about that.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Some soil wrapped in a fish that they try to trick him with, wrapped around a fish.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Of course, and he tells them which river it was from.

Well, I don’t know. We might go to questions.

Carrie has said that she’s happy to answer questions if people would like to ...

**Sue Martin**

I was going to ask Carrie if she wanted to ask you anything, to start with.

**Carrie Tiffany**

I'll think about that.

**Sue Martin**

In that case we might go to the audience. We’re being taped, so we have microphones, so if I can ask you to wait until you get a microphone if you have a question. And you don’t have to introduce yourselves but I do recall that I didn’t introduce myself so I will just tell you, my name is Sue Martin and I'm the Associate Dean of Research here at La Trobe. So does anyone have a question for either Kerryn or Carrie? I was inviting Carrie to ask a question, because I thought she might like to ask Kerryn about the Stella Prize for instance. So someone might have a question about the judging of the prize or something like that.

Oh well, Rob has a question.

**Robert Manne**

I would like to ask about, partly the reason that the Stella Prize ... not everyone here will even know about what it is. Why the Stella Prize was established last year and also, could you say why Carrie was the first winner of it?

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

Ah, I could. Well, the Stella Prize was established in the aftermath of ... it’s difficult to say this without saying that it was deliberately set up in opposition to the Miles Franklin because that’s really not what happened. It did however begin to be talked about in the wake of the 2009 Miles Franklin long list and eventual list. In 2009 the Miles Franklin Award shortlist was very short. I think there were only three titles on it. They were all books by male authors. The long list had had quite a few books on it, but I think there was still only two books by female authors, and not even the long list contained any one of the following five books, Amanda Lohrey’s *Vertigo*, Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room*, Kate Grenville’s *The Lieutenant*, Joan London’s *The Good Parents* and Debra Adelaide’s *Household Guide to Dying*. I've read them all and I can tell you they’re all terrific novels. They didn’t even make the long list. And it occurred to me at least that there was something kind of fundamentally askew with a judging process that didn’t take any of these books into account. I mean, one or the other, you might say, yes, I didn’t like it because blah, or that wasn’t really a novel but when you get a list of five like that, and none of them turn up on the long list, you think, there’s something wrong here.

And it was clear, it’s a given in Feminist Theory 101 that the kinds of ... you know, people say, isn’t it about literary merit? And of course it is. But the kinds of cultural values that you bring to your idea of what literary merit is, are always going to be determined by the culture, and that’s going to be determined by whoever dominates the culture. So it’s not an objective measurement by any means.

So we began to talk about, I think it was actually Michael Williams from the Wheeler Centre, who, in a discussion on a blog post, first said casually, oh well, who’s for setting up an Australian Orange Prize? And so that was in 2009. So it was really in the wake of that that people started actually talking about the possibility of an Australian equivalent of the Orange Prize which, as I'm sure you all know, is the British ... I think it’s writing in English or ...

**Carrie Tiffany**

Published in the UK.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

It has to be published in the UK. A novel, published in the UK, by a woman. And it’s an all-female judging panel which we don’t have in the Stella Prize. I think it’s written into the rules that there will be five judges and up to two of them can be men, or not, depending on what year it is, or whatever.

I think ... I don’t know, I think it might be a bit excruciating for Carrie if we were to talk about why her book won the prize. It won the prize because it’s really good. We had ... it was a terrific ... we had I think originally there were about a hundred ... more than 150 entries. As I'm sure some of you know, it’s open to non-fiction as well, and also to genre fiction. We had a long list of twelve, and we had to get it down to a shortlist of six. And we struggled over the final two, you know, we got down to about eight without too much trouble, and the most of the day of the judges’ meeting was dedicated to, you know, coming up with getting it down to six for a shortlist.

So there was some terrific, some great books, but I think in the end, *Mateship with Birds* was the one that everybody just said, yes, that’s a wonderful book. There was no argument about *Mateship with Birds* and there probably was about almost all of the other books on the shortlist. But that was the one that everybody really liked. So, inevitably, as anybody who’s ever done this knows, when you’ve got five judges, there’s going to be quite a lot of difference in taste and opinion and there’s going to be quite a lot of lively discussion. But that was the book that everyone agreed on, basically, yeah.

So that was how that worked and it’s been a very successful prize and carrying on for 2014 and plans are in. It’s all going ahead.

**Q:**

I've got a query again about the Stella Prize in that it seemed to make a conscious effort to cover, be very inclusive, because you had a first novel, you had an indigenous novel, you had poetry, Lisa Jacobson’s *Sunlit Zone*, you had short stories, you had one, Margo Lanahan, which covered the young adult fantasy short story type area. So was this deliberately that you set out as many ... to give yourself as much work as possible?

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

We were not consciously ticking boxes. And certainly when it came to the shortlist, we really did think they were the six best books that had been put in and it was ... we were however trying to be consciously open-minded about this. So if anybody said, for example, with the Margo Lanahan, oh, that’s a young adult book, someone else would say, well, that’s what it’s being marketed as. But it’s a young adult book and so much more than that. And it’s really good. *The Sunlit Zone* was a real dark horse because for reasons that I think probably more technical ... technical’s the wrong word, in terms of practicality, the Board, and I wasn’t in on this decision so I don’t know what their reasoning was, collections of poetry are not eligible. But a verse novel is. That’s what the rules say. So *Sunlit Zone* ... and I thought it was extremely interesting that the people who really loved *The Sunlit Zone*, the first to read it and the people who insisted that we all read it immediately, were the two sort of non-literary specialists on the judging panel, which I thought was wonderful.

But no, that diversity really was more a product of just being open to everything and not taking anything for granted about what our tastes were, because that was the foundation on which the Stella Prize sort of grew up in the first place. It would have been a bit silly to establish a new prize because we thought other people were being a bit too iron-clad and close-minded about what constituted good literature and then simply replicating the choices they would have made.

So it was more a matter of being open-minded than of having boxes to tick. But we were really pleased when we saw what we’d done. Certainly, yes.

**Q:**

Carrie, you were talking to Kerryn about traditions of women novelists in Australia. And I was just wondering whether you read Kylie Tennant who is really interesting on kind of agriculture and landscape and desire and the fifties.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Yeah, I certainly did. She’s a fantastic writer and I've read her, not recently actually. It’s funny, some things you’re not sure if you’ve read them before or after. Kerryn made that reference to Les Murray’s wonderful poem about the cows and the movement of desire in the herd, and the movement of feeling in the herd. I hadn’t actually read that until after I'd written my work, and then I thought, I felt almost uncomfortable that I'd tried to do something sort of similar, in this all me that he talks about in that fantastic poem.

So sometimes in the actual ... in the period that I'm writing, I'd think, I'm not going to read that again now because it might be too close, but I'm going to go back and read that now that you’ve mentioned it.

**Q:**

Carrie can I ask about the title *Mateship with Birds*? I went to a literary event recently and they had a whole stack of Alec Chisholm ... and I think what they meant to have was your novel because Chisholm has been re-published but they’d got a stack of those instead, which was quite interesting. So I was interested, looking at that little mistake, and I thought, well, it’s interesting that you chose to re-use that title, consciously, and it’s a very interesting title in the first place, and then to re-use it. So could you talk about that?

**Carrie Tiffany**

Well, I found this book in a second-hand bookstore, Alice’s in Rathdowne Street in Carlton and I'd already started writing the book and I didn’t really have a title and I thought I might call it *The Birds* or something, and that was sort of ridiculously Hitchcock. I was interested in going back and reading Alec Chisholm again, I hadn’t read him for ages. He was born in Maryborough and was pretty unschooled. I think he left school when he was 14 and became a journalist and he wrote for the *Herald*. He was an editor of *The Emu*, the ornithological journal, for many years, and there’s something about the way that he writes – this is a book of nature notes, *Mateship with Birds*, bird notes. It’s got photographs in it. It’s utterly charming. He writes in a very unashamedly lyrical manner and one of the other things I loved, and I do in my book, is that he gives plants and animals, particularly animals, gender. So he’ll be talking about a little honey-eater and he’ll say, she’s a beautiful little honey-eater. And I was thinking about that as well because we don’t do that any more. That’s very unscientific, to do that. I think it probably died finally at the time when Les Hiddins went off the television screens. You’ll remember the Bush Tucker Man. And he used to be out there and he would always use gender, he would say, oh, she’s a lovely little snake.

There was something about him in it was kind of harking back to some of these kind of earlier naturists and nature writers which I thought was interesting. So when I saw this, and the title is right because of the word ‘mateship’ as well, because of the different kind of layers of the meaning of the word ‘mateship’ so it seemed to me it was utterly the right title for my novel. I didn’t see it as sort of stealing it. I wanted to honour this book and I did write something in my book, suggesting people find a second-hand copy of this book, and I had no idea that Scribe would re-publish the book. And a number of people have rung me, saying, they’ve tried to buy my book and they’ve bought this book instead, the nature notes.

There is no copyright on titles, so technically you could call your novel, you know, Harry Potter and the something something. You probably wouldn’t. But, so I didn’t expect that would happen and I thought I was just sort of drawing attention to Alec’s work in some ways.

I'm delighted that Scribe have re-published it and it’s actually selling quite well, and people are sort of interested in reading it again. So I think that’s really lovely.

My first novel has got this terrible title, *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* which was never my title and when I was writing the book it was called *The Cultivator*, and the book actually sold in the UK before it sold in Australia and my UK agent rang me on a Friday and said, I'm sending it out on Monday, but I'm not sending it out as *The Cultivator* – it’s a terrible title. So you have to come up with another title, this weekend. And I thought, oh no. And I like that thing in novels very much where you find a title seeded in the text and I had very carefully seeded this little line in the text about the cultivator moving through and coming back the next year and of course again, it’s a layered title. But she told me just to look through the chapter titles in this book, and there are a lot of ... it’s 45 I think different chapter titles. And she said, they’re all terrific. Just choose one of those. And none of them were right. But one of them was *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* and I thought, that’s just so ridiculous, there’s no way she will choose that, and I will get to keep *The Cultivator*. It didn’t work. When I told her, she went yes*.* So I went no. And I remember the first time I had to do some press interview and this photographer took my picture and he said, is it a diet and exercise book? So, it’s been a bit of a nightmare, really.

So I was determined that I was going to have my own title the second time around, even though I did manage to sort of steal it from someone else.

**Q:**

A question for Carrie. Having won a prize for women’s writing, how do you think that might impact on your sense of self as a writer and the kind of work that you do? The kind of books that you produce?

**Carrie Tiffany**

I don’t want Kerryn to feel offended by this, but I would hope it wouldn’t, because all of this is kind of lovely and unexpected and remarkable, and when you give writers money, you know, they don’t buy sports cars. This will buy me time to write. It buys me time out of my other work, so I can write. So yes, give writers money. I'm very happy about that.

But, I think there is a kind of edge to it and the edge is that I reckon that if I think I know how to do it, I might not be able to do it any more. And so I think that if you started to really think you knew something, that could be dangerous, in terms of writing.

And there’s also a sense too, a tremendous sense of expectation which is a bit terrifying, because in fact even though you’ve been given the money for this book, you’ve already written that book and you can’t make it any better so what you’ve really been given money for is the next book. So it seems to me that there’s now an increased level of kind of expectation around that which is quite nerve-wracking and yeah, it’s a bit frightening. Yeah, sorry.

**Sue Martin**

Don’t apologise. It’s ... well, a couple of things. The first novel was shortlisted for a number of things and you won at least one ... so you’re already familiar with prizes, but I understand Laura’s question to be more about the specificity of a woman’s prize.

**Carrie Tiffany**

Oh okay. That’s interesting. It has been ... it’s been really eye-opening. I'd heard about the prize, you know, in the news and whatever, before this came around. As an author you don’t enter your book in prizes. Your publisher enters your book in prizes. And I assumed my publisher would probably have entered my book in this prize, was delighted when it was long listed and shortlisted. I hadn’t paid an enormous amount of attention to the prize. I'd had this sort of ... I was one of the first female park rangers in the Northern Territory – there were a hundred rangers in the Territory, and there were three female rangers when I was a ranger. So, I experienced some pretty active discrimination in my work life, back then, really active discrimination. So when I started writing and I met all these fantastic women, in writing and publishing, most publishers are women, it’s only the bosses who are men. The people who actually do the work are women. You know, academics, other writers, this fantastic community of kind of generous and clever and interesting women. And the idea that there was some discrimination, just never occurred to me that there was a thing, and it wasn’t until the Stella started putting out the figures about reviewing, and I think this started in the States. There was a group of women started to assess reviewing in newspapers. So I started to think about this and I started looking at the *Age* every week and I went, why have I never noticed this? You know, a man reviewing a book by a man. A man reviewing a book by a man, a man reviewing. It just seemed startling and there would be some issues where clearly women writers just weren’t getting attention. So I was really ... I was struck by that.

I'm not sure if I noticed in 2009 that male shortlist for the Miles Franklin particularly. I've been in the situation, this year, where there was an all-female shortlist for the Miles Franklin and I was on that shortlist. And I wasn’t actually delighted about that. I was delighted that I knew a woman would win the Miles Franklin this year, because we need more women to win the Miles Franklin, but I felt a little bit uncomfortable and I would have been more comfortable if there’d have been a man there as well. I think it’s the same thing, to have a shortlist of all men or all women.

And I do think that the reason that we had an all-female shortlist ... God, this is being taped isn’t it? Is, it’s probably to do with the Stella. I just can’t see that that happened without the Stella. I'm sure that there’s some influence, however much some of it is subconscious or whatever. I don’t think it happened for no reason. I think it happened for a reason.

And the other thing that I experienced being on that all-female shortlist, is that the issue around the shortlist was all about gender. So therefore, it wasn’t about the writing. So I was asked endless questions about how I felt to be on an all-female shortlist and about women’s writing. I don’t think there is such a thing as women’s writing. There is writing by women. It’s not women’s writing.

And I felt uncomfortable about that. And I was disappointed that these questions were not really being asked about the books themselves. They were just being asked about gender. So it’s had a number of different things. The prize ... once the prize was given and I was on this publicity amazing thing for a few days, with the prize, I started to realise how much it was needed. Because for instance a journalist rang me from a major Australian newspaper and his first question was to me, so, you’ve been ... you’ve been competing really well in these women’s writing prizes because it’s an easier arena for you? And the next day a headline came out in this major Australian newspaper and it was – Rural Romance Tale Wins Women’s Writing Prize – or something like that. Bush Romance Tale Wins Women’s Writing Prize.

Now, if my book had been by say, Murray Bail, or Peter Carey, similar concerns, similar concerns in my writing to some of those writers. It would have been Forensic Interrogation of Nature and Desire Wins Prize, or something like that. But it wouldn’t have been ... And then only about two months ago I won another prize. I won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, which is judged by Coetzee, which was just phenomenal. Anyway. And there were men on the shortlist, including Murray Bail. I had this dream the night before that they were going to stone me on the way to the podium. No, no, no.

Anyway, the next day in the newspaper ... I live in Mitcham, and the headline is Mitcham Mum Wins Writing Prize. Yeah. So and you know, if that had been Winton, would it have been Freo Dad Wins Writing Prize. I don’t think so. Somehow.

So the things that have happened around the prize have actually demonstrated to me, yeah, unfortunately we really need this prize. And it’s a pretty fantastic prize and all credit to the women that got the prize up and running.

**Kerryn Goldsworthy**

A lot of ... unfortunately what people get to read, or hear, is distorted by journalists who want to sell papers or do their job, which is to create headlines which will sell papers, and unfortunately most of them think Mitcham Mum wins Blah is the way to do it. There was a lot of fuss when the Stella shortlist came out, like the Stella long list had been announced a couple of months beforehand, and there were I think, twelve books on that list, maybe three or four ... three of which were non-fiction. So instead of saying, look at these books. We’ve got one about this and one about that, and this author is really interesting, and blah. It was Only Three Non-Fiction Books on the Long List. By journalists who hadn’t bothered to ask the Stella Award Prize what proportion of the books that had been entered for the prize were non fiction. Guess what? It was a quarter of them. You know, and we didn’t do that on purpose either.

That was fortuitous, that ratio, but what that suggested to me was that we were just being pretty careful and open-minded about what we chose, because the ratio of fiction to non-fiction on the long list reflected very faithfully what was entered for the prize. But again, you know, a thing was picked out that was considered to be the most interesting thing about the long list, and it really didn’t have anything to do with the books at all.

**Carrie Tiffany**

There is, being part of the process of winning a prize and talking about your books, is ultimately you end up diluting or reducing what your original aim was in some ways. So there’s a rub in it. Yeah.

**Sue Martin**

Okay. I'm not sure that’s the highest note to finish on. But we are out of time I think, so I want to get you to thank both ... [tape ends]