**Between our pages**

Episode 6 with Craig Silvey

[0:00] Music.

[0:11] Fiona: You're listening to Between our pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

This episode was recorded on Whadjuk Noongar land. We acknowledge the traditional custodians and pay respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Fiona Bartholomaeus and together we'll be diving into the wonderful world of books and reading right here in WA.

Today we're chatting with Craig Silvey, the award-winning author of the behind Australian classic Jasper Jones.

Let's go!

[0:36] Music.

[0:45] Fiona: Runt is a heart-warming story about friendship, hurdles and being yourself, as it follows Annie Shearer and her adopted stray dog called Runt.

It's the latest publication from acclaimed WA writer, Craig Silvey.

Craig, thanks so much for joining me.

Craig: Thanks for having me.

Fiona: Tell us about Runt and where you got the inspiration from?

Craig: I'm a big believer that the right books find us at the right time and I think this is as true for writers as it is for readers.

And the truth is that I was in the mood for an uplifting story and one that would maybe feel, make me feel hopeful and inspired, I suppose.

I just finished writing a book called Honeybee, which was quite an emotionally arduous book for me to write, and I wanted a creative departure. And I'd had this idea in my back pocket for a few years. A little girl and her dog had emerged in my thoughts, and they seemed to me like they had a really interesting story to tell. And I knew that Annie was a relentlessly optimistic character who was ably supported by a very quirky but wonderful family, and I just wanted to spend my days in her very admirable company. And so that's really what inspired me to tell the story, and I'm very glad that I did.

Fiona: I always love hearing from authors, just the ideas just coming from anywhere but also nowhere.

[2:10] Craig: Right, well you need to leave yourself open for the possibility of an idea. It requires a degree of openness and patience, you know. Ideas typically present as a character for me, I'm always interested in people and I'm often visited by these characters who feel to me as though they have a story to tell and when I can position them in a place inside a certain predicament that leads me to believe that their story has a profundity and a sense of portent and meaning, that's when I feel a sense of urgency and I need to tell their story.

And so I tend to spend a lot of time with them, allowing them to come to me and to trust me as the curator of their story. And you go on the adventure together and discover.

[3:05] Fiona: I love as well that illustrations dotted throughout the book. How do you approach writing when there's illustrations accompanied? Do you have to tackle it any differently?

[3:16] Craig: Not the first draft of a manuscript. Really, all you're trying to manage in that moment is understanding your story and its moving parts and trying to balance all the elements and ingredients and make it to the end, basically.

[3:31] You're not necessarily thinking about publishing or how it might look, the design of the book, ultimately. I'm singularly focused on the creation of the manuscript itself.

Then once it's edited and ready, you can start to think about how art might correspond to the pages and how it might help the reader as well, and so and so the process really was finding the right illustrator, and we were very, very lucky to find Sarah Acton, who is just an extraordinary artist. She has a very deceptively simple style.

Fiona: Yeah, it's quite lovely, the little drawings in there, and a little bit of shading, but not too much detail.

Craig: That's right, yeah, I wanted a kind of Quentin Blake style, but a bit warmer and a bit rounder and a bit softer, because, you know, Quentin Blake often captures characters who can be a bit wicked or a bit cruel sometimes, and the style necessitates that but Runt is a very lovely, sweet-natured book, and so we needed illustrations that could convey that.

So really my job was just to identify where in the text, I wanted the illustrations and to provide a very modest brief and then Sarah took it from there.

Fiona: So for those listening, why should they pick up your book and give it a read?

[4:56] Craig: Well I think there's great appetite at the moment for really uplifting, hopeful narratives.

We've endured a lot over the last few years and we have contended with a lot of uncertainty and difficulty, and Runt is a big warm hug of a book. It'll take you on a really moving journey and hopefully it will challenge you in all the right ways. But there's something about Annie Shearer, I think, which is really inspiring.

She's very content to live her own truth you know, she's considered quite odd in the town of Ups and Downs. She very much marches to the beat of her own drum, but she does so in a really unabashed way. And just by being herself, Annie inspires the other people in her life to be themselves and to celebrate those aspects of themselves, which might be considered a little bit different. And I think that is a really great lesson for younger readers, but also a really timely reminder for those of us who are a bit older.

Fiona: It's definitely such an important message. And of course, who wouldn't want to read a book about a young girl and her dog helping out the townspeople?

[6:08] Craig: Totally, yeah. I mean Annie quite literally has an affinity for fixing things, she wears an old leather tool belt with her everywhere that she goes and she's a very perceptive character. She is very optimistic. She's a solutions-based character. She's always looking to resolve a problem. She's also not looking to rewrite reality you know, she's a bit of a worrier and she worries about the immediate people in her life and her chief concern is how to save their family farm from being swept up and sold by a greedy local landowner. But it's a problem that's a bit too big for her tool belt to accommodate and so she needs to enlist the help of her dear friend, Runt, the stray dog that she rescued and the two of them to resolve to enter the Crumpets Dog Show in the Agility Course Grand Championships which offers a cash prize which would more than capably solve their financial woes.

Fiona: Now, your novels Jasper Jones and Honeybee tackle some challenging themes. Runt seems quite a change of pace in comparison.

Craig: Yeah, you get the story that you're given as a novelist and if you're open enough to inviting different characters into your creative life, then you get blessed by diverse stories, I suppose.

[7:27] Occasionally, it really does feel as though they find you at the right time and I do feel that way about Runt.

Fiona: As a proud West Aussie, how much have you enjoyed being able to bring places you love into your books?

Craig: It means everything to me. When I was a younger reader particularly, I really adored the stories that were set here and about us and I have such admiration for the authors who have come before me, who have, contributed to that grand tradition and it's particularly lovely for me to be a part of that now. And so I'm a very proud and parochial West Australian author.

I'm very privileged and honoured to write stories that are set here and about us., and it will always inform, you know, how I write and who I write about.

Fiona: I must admit, whenever I read books when I was younger, but also now whenever I see something relating to Western Australia, or even a place I know, I'm like, 'oh, I know that place'. It's great to actually see it in a book because often you don't hear the real places that we can visit.

Craig: That's right and it's also a lovely thing to offer readers elsewhere. One of the things I'm proudest of with Jasper Jones is how far that story's travelled and how far our West Australian story has drifted. It's been translated in over a dozen languages. It's a bestseller in places that I would never have imagined like Turkey, and so it's a real gift that stories that are set here and about us can move beyond our borders and its universality can attract readers from all over the planet.

Fiona: And speaking of Jasper Jones and some of your other titles, you've had a few publications become films and stage productions. What is that like for you, seeing the words that you've put on a page being acted out in real life?

Craig: It's extraordinary. It's really wonderful. I have to say, the theatre productions have been perhaps the most rewarding in the sense that it's the only time I've ever been able to, lose myself inside one of the stories that I've written.

When you're penning a manuscript, you're just too close to it and you're emotionally invested, but you're not lost in it the way that, a reader or an audience member might be. But I was so far removed from the stage production that there were times that I could just drift off and connect with it in a way that I'd never done so before and that was a real gift.

The film's a little bit different because I tend to write my adaptations and so I'm a little bit too close to it and I'm too aware of...

Fiona: All the ins and outs and everything that's happening.

Craig: Right, yes. You know, I want to edit my script, I see the adjustments that we had to make on any given shooting day, I see the arguments that I lost, I see the arguments that I won.

You know, I see how we've made adjustments in post-production, all that sort of thing, again, a little bit too close to how the sausage gets made to appreciate the taste.

Fiona: And I can imagine with a stage show, you're in the crowds, you can also feel how they're reacting to your, well, the performance that's based on your work.

Craig: Right. Good point. Yeah. I mean, when we read books, we do so typically in solitude and so I'm nowhere near my audience when they're absorbing my stories, because if I was there, it'll be a bit weird. And so to share it with people and particularly with Jasper Jones, to share it with people to whom the book has meant a lot and who came to see the show out of an affection for the narrative was something that's just unforgettable.

Fiona: And Jasper Jones has become one of the books that many students will read during their time at school. How do you feel about your book being used as a resource at school?

Craig: Resented by children all over the planet. Yeah, no, it's extraordinary, it's really lovely to conceive of a story that you've written being used as a tool for learning.

[11:35] Is one of the highest aspirations I think a novelist can have, and so I feel very, very grateful and appreciative of the fact that teachers have supported the book in the classroom, particularly with a book like Honeybee, I think I'm really invested in that story being taught and also used as a tool or a utility to better our understanding of each other. And so I just feel very blessed.

[12:02] Fiona: And the Premier's Reading Challenge is back for 2023. How much has reading helped you with your writing?

Craig: Reading has helped me with every aspect of my life, I have to say. I think readers are the best kinds of people because reading a book is an exercise in profound empathy. Reading, requires us to abandon our own identity and our own preconceptions in favour of many others.

When we open a book and give ourselves to it, we submit to a book and it leaves us vulnerable and open to change. And so the opportunity to experience what the world is like for other people is often an opportunity to alter our own vision and an opportunity to enrich our sense of our own perspective, where we sit in the world.

And so that has been a real blessing for me over the course of my life. But in terms of craftsmanship and how to write, reading is the best thing that any aspiring novelist can do. It's really the only way to learn, to see how the best do it, to kind of lift the hood on a story and to investigate the mechanics of it, is best done with the stories that have moved you the most to try to work out where the magic is and how it works.

[13:30] Fiona: With what you were saying before, it's like walking a mile in someone's shoes, but reading instead.

Craig: That's right, you don't have to walk anywhere.

Fiona: No, exactly.

Craig: You can sit down and walk. But that's precisely it, that's right. You know, it's impossible to open a book and not meet somebody new and what that offers us is an opportunity and the more books that you read, the more people you will meet and the richer your life will be.

Fiona: Now, before we let you go, I'm going to ask you a couple of rapid fire questions and I just want the first answer that pops into your head.

Craig: That's dangerous. Okay.

Fiona: What is your favourite book?

Craig: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee.

Fiona: What are you reading at the moment?

Craig: I am re-reading a book called True Grit by Charles Portis. It's one of my very favourites.

Fiona: Non-fiction or fiction?

Craig: I typically read fiction but I do love non-fiction.

Fiona: Favourite genre?

Craig: Literary fiction.

Fiona: And in the spirit of the Premier's Reading Challenge, how many books do you hope to read in 2023?

Craig: Probably a lot more than I'll have time to read, to be honest with you. I'd love to work my way through my current reading stack, which is about 20.

[14:42] Music.

[14:51] Fiona: You've been listening to Between our pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

Thanks to our guest Craig Silvey for joining me on this episode.

If you want to keep up to date about future podcast episodes, you can follow the Premier's Reading Challenge Facebook and Instagram pages at Premier's Reading Challenge WA.

Thank you for listening, happy reading, we'll see you next time.

[15:11] Music.