ABC Listen. Podcasts, radio, news, music and more.
Today it's my conversation with Geraldine Brooks. Geraldine is an Australian-born journalist who became an international foreign correspondent who then reinvented herself as a best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novelist who books are sold all over the world.
And historical novelists will often look for a single artefact, a key that will open a door to the world of the past. And in the case of Geraldine's most recent novel, the artefact was a skeleton of a horse, a skeleton of a horse that was locked away in the attic of a museum in Washington,
and not just any horse. As one of her characters says, this is the horse.
Lexington was the fastest thoroughbred of his time, which was the middle of the 19th century, just before the American Civil War, which is when part of Geraldine's novel is set, when dark clouds are looming over America. Geraldine's novel is called Horse.
Hi Geraldine. G'day. G'day. Nice to hear you say that too. I see, I still read, you've been living in the United States for some years now, but I still hear real affection for Australia in your novels. It's still there, isn't it? Absolutely. You know, I love this country and I, it really gave me everything and I think all of my novels might be set in various places in the world, but I think the heart of them is an Australian heart. There's a picture of you on your website, standing in front of a horse. Who is this horse? Tell me about this horse. That's my pony Valentine for my 60th birthday. I got the little girl's dream, it only took a while. I started riding when I was 53. That's a big step, isn't it? I mean, you could get thrown and all of that, couldn't you? You can and I did. Yeah, I just, I became horse crazy at 53 and I don't recommend it. I think it's much better to start when you're five or even earlier when you fall off and you bounce, but anyway, it happened and I was in a place where it was possible to have a horse and unfortunately, you know, they're kind of expensive and also when you get horse crazy, you get obsessed with them and so I wasn't getting any actual writing done on the project at hand and so it was really lucky when I happened upon this story of Lexington because I was able to combine my working life and my newfound obsession before the red ink overtook the family finances.
There's a moment when you talk about your character, Jared, who and a woman, they take some comfort in leaning into the warm mass of the horse. Ah, it's just the best thing. Just the best thing. I don't know what that's like. I'm not a horsey person. I've never had a pony and never asked for one either for that matter. Why is there comfort in that?
They're incredibly sensitive animals. You know, I've always loved animals. It's always been all about dogs for me, but I think humans and dogs look out at the world in the same way. Our eyes are looking straight ahead because we're predators and we're looking, you know, for our next meal, whereas for a horse, their eyes are looking all around, you know, 180 degrees because they're looking for the thing that's coming to make them the next meal. So if you can have a relationship with a horse and cross that into species barrier, it's very powerful if you earn their trust.
And when they reciprocate affection, just talking about it now, I'm thinking about my mare and how, if I go out to her in the paddock and she's warmed by the sun, and she'll lean back against me and I'll lean against her. And it just slows down everything. It slows you breathing down. It's just, you know, I was never very good in yoga. I was always lying in Savasna thinking of all the things I could be doing if I wasn't lying in Savasna. So you need a horse to lean on you to get some mindfulness then, do you? Is that what you need? Yeah, I mean, it's true when you're on a

horse, you know, it's be here now or be on the ground really soon thereafter. So you really have
to just focus on that and be in that moment. Your novel is called Horse. It's not called Lexington.
Why is it called horse instead of Lexington? When I heard about this skeleton, it was just over
a lunch by chance and it was a gentleman from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington who had
just delivered this skeleton to the International Museum of the Horse in Kentucky. And he was
telling the story about how this celebrated horse who was an absolute celebrity in his day,
you know, presidents and general Custer and all these historical figures would come to
look at this horse and pay tribute to this horse. But the skeleton had passed out of fashion, you
know, the Smithsonian's more about science now than it is about cabinet of curiosities and had been
just used as an example of equus cabalus labeled horse and stuck in the hall of mammals for many
didn't have Lexington on as its name on the case. That wasn't the purpose of it being there. It was
just there. It did originally, but then the story of the horse as an individual famous race horse
became less important in the science of what does a horse look like compared to a rabbit
skeleton compared to a rat skeleton. Don't you think though, when you see that come on science,
come on, spark up a bit, put the name Lexington on it. It's got a story. There's the story and
the science. They're not mutually exclusive. That's why it's down in the International Museum of
the Horse. Now it's got a whole room to itself with paintings and story of, you know, the significance
of this horse went beyond the racetrack to the breeding of thoroughbreds because this horse
sired more champions than any other horse. Looking at the photo of the skeleton of Lexington,
I don't think I've ever seen a horse skeleton before. It looks like a dinosaur. It looks amazing.
Could you look at that kind of thing forever? I think I could. It's just fascinating.
I find bones fascinating. I mean, you know, I collect them and I try and figure out what the
creature was when it was alive. You know, when I'm walking in the woods or the bush or on the
beach
and, you know, back in the Sydney suburbs, I got a fruit bat that had been electrocuted
and loved that thing. What do you mean, that thing? The skeleton itself, right?
The way the wings unfolded like an accordion bellows and the way
fruit bats have little hands, you know, at the end of their wings that they've got the
same bones that we have on the lighter. Tiny, tiny bones. So they're quite delicate. These little
hands at the end of the bat wings. Lexington, as I said, is not just a horse. It's seen as
the horse. Why is its history so powerful? What's the thing that made it so extraordinary?
First of all, the thrill around the races. They were very different to the way we do
horse racing now. We think a mile and a quarter is a long race. They used to race for four miles
three times in the one day. It was heats. So it was a real test of the speed, strength and
endurance as well as the courage and the character of the horse and the tactics of the jockeys.
It was a much more interesting sort of a deal. And it was taking place in the culture where
the horse was a much more familiar creature to humans in those days. Absolutely. Everybody,
you know, it was an agrarian society. So everybody knew horses, had horses, loved to race their own
horses. It was a national obsession in the United States. 30, 40,000 people would turn up at the
track. It was a very big deal. Just like here with FALAP and the early days of the Melbourne Cup.
So what was it made that made Lexington particularly extraordinary? Like in terms of
Lexington's ability to run and win these extraordinarily long races by our standards?
Record breaking speeds. That was the first thing. The horse was so fast they invented the mass
produced stopwatch so that people could clock the the times. But after the racing career,

it was the incredible success of this horse as a stud sire and the number of champions
that he fathered that cemented his place. Can it be said that he enjoyed racing or does no horse
enjoy this horse? I think you can say probably did because even when he was racing without any
horse anywhere near him because he was so much faster than they were. So he had no pacemaker
and he would just continue to sprint. You know, he just seemed to really want to go.
As I said, he was, his skeleton was mounted and put into a case after he died. You write in your
knowledge to decide thing that even today, like scientists today, you have them using beetles
to clean the flesh from the bones of animal skeletons. Can that possibly be true?
It is so extraordinary. So the Smithsonian Institution is called the Attic of America.
But the Attic's Attic is this enormous establishment called Museum Support Center,
and it's out in the Washington, the Maryland suburbs, a long way from anywhere the normal
punter goes to sea museums. And in this place, which goes for literally miles of labs and storage
pods, they have every kind of modern scientific research going on, the best equipment, the most
high tech stuff, but you go to the osteoprep lab and there's the bug room. The bug room.
In the bug room. They call it the environmental suite, but everybody
refers to it as the bug room. Domested beetles because they can clean bones without damaging
the underlying tissue and they've never found a better way to do it.
I just imagine there'd be a big jar of bone cleaning fluid or something like that, but no,
it's not. That would destroy information. That's the thing. Going back to the major
thread of the novel, the major strand of the novel, which takes place in the 1850s,
there's his groom. It's a story of his groom who's introduced by the name of Warfields Jarrett.
That's a very interesting name. How does he get a name like Warfields Jarrett, this groom?
So as I started to explore this story, which I thought was about a horse, I realized that it
was about a lot more than that because the entire thoroughbred industry was built on the skills
and expertise of black horsemen, most of whom were enslaved or formerly enslaved,
and Lexington had a black groom named Jarrett who had been enslaved for most of his life until
the Emancipation Proclamation. I tried to find out about the real Jarrett, but there wasn't
anything on the historical record beyond a name. The records at the farm when it showed,
when he started to be paid and how much he earned, I couldn't find out anything about what it was
like to be him. So that's where the novelist's imagination comes into play. So Warfields Jarrett,
that's his owner? That was the first, yeah, it's just hard to cough out the word owner in context
of a human being, but this is a book that looks at the reality of enslavement and what a brutal
system it was. And the horsemen had an unusual position within it, because what they did was
so valuable to these thoroughbred owners, and so much prestige and wealth flowed from this,
that these guys actually were able to exercise a little bit more agency over their own lives
than other enslaved people, but even so they could be ripped away from their families at any
moment. In your book, I just was mentioning then the whole idea of leaning into the huge,
massive horse, the warmth of that, it seems that the presence of a horse
around two people from different social standing seems to be able, has the possibility at least
of humanizing both of them and sort of pulling them away from their ideas of what their social
standing might be and maybe offer the opportunity to make people offer a different kind of an
intimacy. Is that the case? Do you think? I think also there's a respect for the expertise if somebody
is a better horseman than you are. You can't help but want to learn from them, so it does upend
the usual structures quite a bit. Yeah, in fact, the portrait artist you've got there gets a bit

wrong-footed, actually. It's kind of fun to watch him get wrong-footed because he doesn't know
as much about horses as Warfield's Jared does. Yeah, I mean, he did know quite a bit about
their anatomy. This is a real painter. He was an itinerant painter who traveled around and
painted the portrait of Lexington many times in the course of the horse's career. But he
does defer and you get this too. This is from the research that I did and you're reading the
letters that are passed between the thoroughbred owners and they really do defer to the black
horsemen and the skills that these men had. And then you realize that they're plundering these
skills. This labor is being stolen. There's another strand in your novel which is set in 2019
and the character there is a woman, young woman, a young Australian woman called Jess,
who grew up on Burwood Road in Croydon and who- Concord. Concord, I beg your pardon, sorry,
who accidentally ends up having a life in the United States. That's you, isn't it? I'm afraid so,
yes. And she's just as weird and awkward as I am. So, yes. I decided I'd give myself one character.
I didn't have to research. What was Ashfield like and Concord like when you were growing up?
That whole part of- I had a dream childhood because our parents were fantastic. My mother
particularly just was full of imagination and she gave me the greatest gift that you can get,
which is time. So, she always had time to make up games and our little
fenced backyard was like a universe. So, I had an incredibly great childhood there.
How would she use her imagination to entertain you?
She would, you know, we had all these different games that we would play, shop, you know. So,
we'd take the off cuts from the vegetable peelings and I would wrap them up and she would buy
them
and then we had Hatshop with the camphor laurel leaves and, you know, she would play. She had
been
a radio actress and so she could do different voices and, you know, she loved books as well.
So, she was always putting me onto great books and reading. My father also loved books and would
read at night when he would come home from work. So, unlike these days when kids can amuse
themselves
with their X-boxes and iPads and what have you, you just, you had vegetables for toys, did you?
Is that what you had? That is exactly right. Everything, you know, a stick.
Stick. Luxury. Right, luxury. There was a good stick over there. That was the good stick.
So, what was your domain in the house? Did you have your own little places around that house,
that little little building? I had a pretty, I had a pretty dingy dark bedroom on the wrong side of
the house but I lived in the yard, you know, so the front yard was my mum's flower garden and it
was just wonderful full of roses and all kinds of English flowers because that was what we did in
those days. And then the backyard, I thought it was huge and there was a swing and there was a
great
big willow tree that you could climb and an apricot tree and I've never tasted apricots since then
that there are anything like those warm off the tree, juicy, spilling down the front of you.
Gorgeous. Your parents sent you to be educated at one of the most subversive institutions in
Australia at the time which was a convent school. So many Australian feminists came out of those
convent schools. Was that you? Was that your your your education? Yeah, particularly my high
school
Bethlehem. At the time I was there we had a very radical head nun. She was terrific. She had gone
off to work in Harlem and got caught up in the civil rights movement and came back and full of,

you know, wonderful revolutionary ideas and of course the church male hierarchy came in and put their boot on the whole thing and but our minds had been opened by then and there was no going back. It was really quite fantastic and the teachers there were exceptionally good.
So what the church came in and pulled these nuns out did they input? Well no they didn't have to they didn't have to pull them out because they're all living in droves.
Right and so you got more, did you get a more conservative education after that?
They tried. They tried and how did you respond to that?
We were very rebellious. How were you rebellious Geraldine? Oh we just we weren't buying it you know so they came in and told us you know it was back into that you know you had to wear your blazer over your jumper because boys would see the shape of your breasts and we'd go bullshit.
So you took off your blazer. I was imagining you were like smoking or something or wearing makeup or uh or drinking out a little little uh little flags or something, no? We didn't. There wasn't a lot of drug abuse but I'll tell you what we used to hike up that lilac uniform to ridiculous heights and uh. So were you seriously told you must wear a blazer otherwise boys will see the shape of your breasts? Exactly and we all thought that was hilarious you know and there's poor this poor sister I mean she tried but she wasn't working and none of us would go and see the pope when he came and we all got read the riot act. Why aren't any of you going to see the pope?
Interestingly too it seems you became interested in Judaism as as a teenage young woman. I was I was very interested in the history of the Jews I just got obsessed with the Holocaust. Why is that? It's the the Holocaust is like such a signal event in human history it's hard not to become a I was it I had an obsessive personality so it would be you know. Was it the vast antiquity of Jewish history too like the fact that goes back thousands not 10 000 years ago? It was just the the whipsaw of suffering so you go from you know King David got it all together briefly and then it all falls apart and they're in exile and you know and then the pogroms in Russia and you know the inquisition in Spain it's just the suffering I guess and the drama of it and then you get up to the Nazis and I was I was writing plays about the Warsaw ghetto and making my poor Lithuanian immigrant friends play the Nazis.
Did you sort of kind of present your identification with Jewishness in any kind of visible way? Oh yes I was wearing a star of David with my school uniform. Right was that controversial? No these nuns were just like explore do your intellectual explorations all you want and they were really good at you know you'd make your rant and then they would make their points and it was it was a it was encouraged to be curious. What do you think about this fascination years later when you converted to Judaism after you married Judaism? Well you know so it it kind of had waned by then but then I found that I was going to marry a man named Horwitz and I knew enough about Judaism to know that the religion is passed through the mother and I wasn't
going to be the end of the line for a lineage that had survived pogrom and Shoah and so when we decided to get married it just seemed like a very obvious thing to do. Was it just the tradition or the faith as well? Oh look I'm not religious in that way I'm I'm probably an atheist yeah I'm an atheist but I'm I'm interested in the search I'm interested in the human need to explain the inexplicable fact of our own death and the struggle that's gone on to do that and so when you go to the little shoal that I attend we try and take that old text and those poor old Hebrews windswept in the desert trying struggling to make sense of it and we take the

old text and we turn it in the light of our own lived experiences and try and squeeze some juice out of it and see if there you know are any answers I haven't found any yet. So after you left school you became a cadet and a journalist and interested in exploring some of the greater reaches of the wilderness of human experience which included the newsroom of the Sydney Morning Herald. This is the 70s isn't it? 79. 79 huh? How blokey was the SMH? No there were some fantastic women journalists who you know really blazed trails um but there were very blokey enclaves of it. Fair bit of bum pinching went on in those days? Well I was assigned my first job in journalism was the sports department so yes had to had to master a sideways scuttle to avoid the gropers. So you were assigned to the race courses and was that just the gallipers or was it the trots and the dish liquors as well? The whole thing absolutely. Right and did you have any expertise and was that
even required? No it was it wasn't I wasn't reporting anything I was there to support the racing reporters which meant taking the details and there were a lot of them so you had to you had a card for every horse in every race in Sydney which is a lot of nags I can tell you and I had to say everything about that horse on any given race where it was at the turn where it was at the finish weights odds um and I had to get it all at speed and then the worst thing was at the trots after you'd been at the gallops all day long you went off to the trots and I had to call in all these details to a copy taker over the phone in between the races so it was really stressful because I'm not very good with numbers. It was like a different Australia in those days wasn't it the racing was a much bigger thing than it is today was it like being in that atmosphere of people hanging around the the tracks betting heavily living from race to race? To be honest my head was so down working the whole time and and and I was also somewhat traumatised because if you go to every race you're going to see some accidents and they're very very traumatic for the animals and you know to me as an animal lover seeing these beautiful creatures you know dying in that way was very hard so I didn't really I was like a horse with blinkers on I would go there I would do my work and I would leave you know. So escape for you for you down the track was to get a scholarship to Columbia University? Oh before that I did manage to get sprung out of it. I'm sort of fast forwarding here a bit. Yeah I went I went to that that paradise of the young reporter the futures department so and then I got a scholarship Greg Shackleton Memorial Scholarship named for the wonderful foreign correspondent who is killed in East Timor. And this was at the University's Columbia University School of Journalism in 1983. How did you meet Tony Horvitz? Tony was a fellow student and I we we both decided that we separately that we were going to bring down capitalism so we thought we'd study business reporting in order to do that. From the inside right just handle it from the inside okay. He had he had been a union organizer with black woodcutters in Mississippi and realized that that was going to be a very slow way to affect social change so he'd come to Columbia from that direction and um. What did you like about him was it his mind or was he beautiful too? Well it was his politics probably first but his incredibly beautiful muscly tanned forearm said something to do with it. What is it with muscly tanned forearms? That's a thing isn't it? Isn't that a thing? It's certainly a thing for me. So did he get those like from reporting out in the stick study? Um he he had gone back in spring break to Mississippi to make a little film about the woodcutters that he'd worked with so yeah and he came back to New York where most of us were pretty pasty still because the spring comes slowly and he was really tanned. Was it hard to float with him? No no it was very easy to float with him. Right so it was a thing really quickly then the two of you how did you know

things had turned serious with you? I don't know but we were married within a year and a half so
you know it wasn't wasn't a long courtship. Yeah you got married somewhere in the south of France.
We did my sister had a beautiful house there and I'd gone there with her when I was only 19
and just fallen in love with this perched village in the out marry team and so it seemed like a
great idea and then it turned out to be quite complicated actually. Oh well you you're not
supposed to get married in France unless you're French so we had to wrangle that and then trying
to get a rabbi who'd marry a recent reform convert to an actual Jew was really also quite tricky but
we pulled it off. Podcast. Broadcast. This is Conversations with Charlie King.
So we were speaking before about you your fabulous career as a journalist.
You went off to the Middle East or West Asia as it's called these days I think
as a correspondent for the Wall Street Journal reporting from the Middle East.
This was at a kind of volatile time because it's always a volatile time. It's always a
volatile time. Yeah and this was you were reporting on the the funeral of the Ayatollah
Khomeini in Iran in 1989. What do you remember of that day? Where were you watching that from?
So you know you get the call in the middle of the night and it's the foreign desk and it's
Khomeini's finally kicked it get up and go to Iran and so you know we flew to Tehran all the
journalists assembled and then they you know they knocked on the doors you know like you
five minutes later and get up and in the bus and then off to the airport where they put us in these
whole Huey helicopters. We were flying over the city of Tehran which is a big city and you look
down and every street and avenue is just crowded with black clad mourners converging on this
cemetery
at the south of the city. Had anyone put a number on that crowd? Well you know there were some
very
senior reporters there and they look you know they're like how many mill to mill three million big
biggest and so we believe that we may have been witnessing the biggest crowd of humans in history
probably and it was really it was extraordinary so they they landed us and you know I'm in a
door because you had to be and they sort of shepherded us to the front but I'm behind all these
tall black clad Iranian mourners who are beating themselves on the chest and it was incredibly
hot and you know so the blood and the sweat from this is flying everywhere and it's such an intense
scene and then the helicopter carrying Khomeini's coffin comes in and tries to land and the
mourners
so intense they're grabbing at the skids of the helicopter and as they bring out the coffin
they get it and it tips up and you see like I didn't see it because I was behind all these
I think I've seen news footage I've seen like his feet popped out yeah it was and then so the
helicopter takes off and they put oh shipping containers around the grave to you know contain
the site and finally get him in the ground and I didn't know what had happened till I went back
to the hotel and watched it on TV so just to me it was an example of how you can be a witness to
history and not see a thing. Your job I suppose is the Wall Street Journalist's correspondent is
trying to explain that to your readers why why a figure like that who was regarded as a monstrous
figure in the United States someone who instituted laws for women that were like worse than
medieval
in many ways why a figure like that could provoke such intense scenes of mourning were you able to
do it do you think and could you figure it out yourself? You know a lot of it was to do with the
foreign policy mistakes that the great powers have made in Iran over the years and continue to

make in my opinion but you know that this country had been kicked around by the British it kicked around by the Americans and Khomeini just gave them all the finger and even people who hated him appreciated that and also he was the rare uncorrupted leader he lived incredibly frugally
and he never profited you know he believed what he believed I think his worst crime was sending all those little boys to their deaths thinking they were going straight to heaven. You mean the minesweepers in the... Yeah yeah it was it was like Gettysburg you know just kids walking into cannon fire but you know it was it was Saddam Hussein who started that war it wasn't Khomeini and it was Saddam Hussein who was bombing the civilian areas in Tehran and the United States was abetting that so no wonder there's that bad blood literally between the two countries.
You went actually to his house to interview his his wife who hadn't been much of a public figure in Iran up until his death. What did she and her daughter want you to know about?
They wanted me to know what he was to them and it was an extraordinary afternoon really sitting in their courtyard having a cup of tea and pomegranate seeds and these three women were sitting there his daughter his daughter-in-law and his wife and they were just talking about what a great husband and father he was how you know he had uncharacteristically you know got up in the night to feed the babies when they were little and I told one of my Iranian friends this an Iranian feminist friend when I got back and she said oh he got up to feed the babies what did he feed them to
but you know he was he was a complicated much more complicated I think than we came to grips with
he used to write really good poetry Persian poetry which is something that's much admired
and and his wife was very influential people in the regime knew to go to her if they wanted to get anything done even though her name was never mentioned in public and yet for all that he's the kind of man who had novelists murdered and gay people killed and thank god Salman's going to die of an extreme old age I hope uh no he was uh but the complicated thing about Iran is it was a nightmare and a disaster for the women who had thrived in a more secular society but for the women of the conservative countryside which is the vast majority he did something that the Taliban will never do which is he made it possible for women to get educated because their families felt safe to send them to school in an Islamically run system I met this young medical student
in the city of Avaz once and she said you keep banging on about the chado you think I care about a piece of cloth when without this piece of cloth I would never have been allowed to come to university
to learn to be a doctor and because I'm here away from my family I've met the man I'm going to marry
and I'll be the first woman in my family ever to marry for love this is you who wanted to take your blazer off and I mean what did you make of all that well I made of it that we were very arrogant westerners we think we know everything but there's always a lot more to know and also as a reporter
I learned that the best entry into understanding the region was through women they have their own caricatured ideas about the west too though don't they oh they're all so sorry for me
well that's right for you they they let on as how they thought I must have nobody in my family who loved me because they're letting me travel around the world unprotected like this I think one of the things I find many foreign correspondents having common is there's a feeling amongst them this is pure supposition on my part shortly but they want to see the dark heart of the world and see

if they can stand it and was that you and I'm asking you this because I know you went into Iraq at the end of the first Gulf War after Saddam Hussein had
performed a terrible terrible crime against humanity against the Kurdish people well this was before actually this was in the the brief interregnum when the Kurds for the first time
had the boot of Saddam lifted off their neck and so in this week that I traveled across Kurdistan after the Gulf War they were able to tell their own history and they're able to go back to Halabcha where Saddam had used poison gas against them and actually retrieved the bodies of their loved ones
so I went with them to excavate the mass grave that they hadn't been allowed to visit I went with them
to the immediate aftermath of having freed prisoners from the dungeons of Saddam's absolutely brutal torture regime and to their sort of impromptu conferences where they were actually sharing their stories with each other for the first time so it was very exhilarating
and then of course America made the fundamental terrible mistake of letting Saddam have the use of his helicopter gunships and the next thing you know I was on the run with about a million Kurds and we were just trying to get across the border we went towards Turkey and many people went towards Iran but it was just a flood like a biblical exodus from Kurdistan under fire
absolutely terrifying and I lost a colleague in the chaos and he was killed by the Iraqi troops
that came in and just brutalized everybody maybe it's a bit of a long bow to draw but
I wonder if there's a connection between that and your decision to become a novelist I mean apart from the creative pleasure it affords you but I mean you try and find out why the world is the way the world is and maybe sometimes you can't find answers in journalism and you might find better answers in fiction what do you think that's not why it's a very banal reason I made the switch is because I wanted to have a baby and I didn't think that the life that I'd been living for a decade at that point was compatible for me with the kind of childhood I wanted my kids to have and yet there's so much catastrophe in historical catastrophe in your books I know that's because it's so as interesting to write about no I wouldn't be able to write the novels if I hadn't had the 10 years of seeing the extremity of human experience I mean I'm still feeding off the experience I had as a journalist and I loved every step I took not I mean I didn't love the brutality but there was there was an intense sense of purpose in exposing the consequences of Western foreign policy in the lives of ordinary people and I felt it was really worthy work and I was really proud to do it and you know if I hadn't been about to turn 40 and realize that I had forgot to get pregnant I'd probably still be doing it your first novel year of wonders taken from the true story of a village in England the quarantine itself that made the decision to quarantine itself to prevent the plague the black death traveling any further beyond its borders that's a fascinating conceit research for that is that most of the pleasure or much of the pleasure of it I do love
the research the journalist in me loves the research trying to find out what really happened
as far as you can following the line of fact until it gets too faint to follow any further
and then having the freedom which you don't have as a journalist to make it up
your years later you did deep research again for your historical novel The Secret Chord
about King David now he's in the Torah the Old Testament if you like where else could you go for information about him I mean it's not even really a hundred percent certain that he was a genuine historical figure is it it's true there's not a lot of evidence you know so
I believe he was because as a historian pointed out who would make up such a flawed figure as a

national hero so I do believe he existed but it was it was tough and I would never go back beyond
the written record again that was an experiment I'm not eager to repeat how did you try and
acquaint yourself with life in that so I decided that the only way to I mean there's the archaeological
evidence so that's interesting to see you know you read in in the Tanaka the Jews call it or the
Old Testament that he lived in a palace and you're thinking oh you know second Iron Age
what kind of palace would that be and then you go and look at the archaeology and it was a palace
those palaces yeah it was it was nice um but uh then it's more about well what was it like
to be him and how can I how can I get in touch with that so what did he do it turns out herding
sheep is it seems like is a great entry-level job for future leaders of the Israelites because
they almost all start out as shepherds so I'm thinking well what do you learn as a shepherd
that could be useful and so we went to herd sheep my then 10-year-old son and I in the Shafala
the foothills between the coast and Jerusalem and are they still herding sheep much as they would
have
five six thousand years ago yes they are and and it was quite interesting so it was a mixed herd
it was sheep and goats and the real shepherd said now I want you to see if you can separate the
sheep from the goats which is something that it only existed as a metaphor to me um but
it turned out to be quite tricky and we couldn't really get it done and then my 10-year-old had
at the insight and because he had observed that when you put pressure on the sheep they
clustered together for safety and they put their necks over each other's backs so that the predator
could only get one or them whereas the goats who are more sure footed they just scatter to the
forewind
so that was how you separate them what's the work like is it pleasurable or frustrating and
infuriating no I liked it I like you know I like hanging out with animals and I kind of got the
feeling of what it would be like to be out there on a hot afternoon and just looking after this flock
and all the thoughts that would spool through your head but but but the lesson is you know to
lead you have to understand those that you're leading and you have to care about them and you
have to care for all of them and I think that's why it's a really good entry-level job for leaders
did you have a staff like Moses or a bit more of a bow peep crook it was it was uh it was a
starfy looking thing and being out there in the open was it a bit was it a bit Australian in some
ways it's a it's different I mean the trees are very different and the the sort of fragrance that
comes off the land is very different there's something about the Australian bush that that
incredible aroma that the essential oils in in our eucalyptus yeah and not just that all the
all the plants have an incredibly vivid smell it's very to me home different birdsong too yeah
birdsong absolutely yeah that they're a bit that you know except during the migration they're a bit
shorter birds out there in Israel and the day for someone who's a journalist who's used to having a
pretty hyperactive day trying to pack in too much into 24 hours was it much slower and did you like
that if it slowed down well it would have been slow but we had a lot to we had a lot to get done but
yeah no the sheep herding day was really that was nice and then the other day that was I thought
quite
telling was when uh you know David when he was he had a period when he was on the run from
King
Saul and he was an outlaw and he was uh in uh Iron Getty which is on the Dead Sea and it's
very rocky and steep around there and so um and I thought it'd be a good chance to take my son to
Masada so he scrambled up to Masada and my ten-year-old is way ahead of me and I'm like hot and

sweating and struggling to keep up and I thought this must be how King Saul felt chasing after David
when you came to Australia together with with Tony how did Tony like it here was he comfortable
he liked it too much here you know he said this is this is the most wonderful place to live
but I don't I can't work here because there's not enough bad stuff happening
then he he yeah I this is a massive simplification but he said there's no squalor
did you have any inkling that he was unwell he wasn't unwell he was as fit as a flea he was at
the gym six days a week he didn't have you know a gram of spare body fat on him and uh he had a
sudden heart attack and died the picture of health I don't know how I've got no idea how people get
over that I mean I don't do you did you you don't get over no you don't get over it I still
there's still a part of my mind that expects him to come you know because he was on book tour when
this happened and I still expecting to come through the door and throw his dirty laundry on the floor
and tell me some hilarious tale from the road you know how do you like to remember like that the
kind of guy who did the humor you know so we're very lucky the boys and I because all the memories
of him generally end with a big laugh because he was really he was the funniest guy and he was the
most open-hearted and good-humoured person and he was curious about absolutely everybody and he
would run towards the people most of us shy away from and so there's so much to be grateful for in
the time that we have and so that's our practice is to embrace radical gratitude for what we had
yeah is that was was that the advice you got no did you get much useful advice after he died
no I don't think anyone really knows what to say and the only thing I've learned is whatever you
just accept what people bring and how do you practice radical gratitude that's the best way of doing
just try and live in the good memories really and and luckily we've got his books which my
older son pointed out the distillation are the best of him because he worked so hard on those books
and they just epitomize all his best qualities and some of them are just I wateringly funny so
whenever we're getting a bit sad we pull out one of the books and I think one of our favorite
pieces is when he hitched a ride on a lobster boat off western Australia and with the most
profane crew you have ever met and got radically seasick champion swir is on a on a lobster boat
and and really really off-color jokes and they're telling off-color jokes as he's you know dying of
seasickness anyway it's very funny and so you know it never gets we never get tired of rereading his
work like I was saying the first part of your novel horse begins with it begins in 1850 and
that part and we know the benefit of hindsight that the civil wars coming coming not in 10 years
or so from the era your book is set in there's some dark clouds there sort of looming on the
horizon during the civil war there was a memoir written by a woman of the south called Mary
Chestnut and afterwards I think she wrote something like the the reason why we went to war she said
the north and south was because we hated each other so do you see those kind of intractable
hatreds in America today I think what I see is people in silos where they don't know each other
they just hear the echo against the tin walls of their own little chambers and they
mischaracterize each other and a lot of people believe things that are absolutely not true
and yet they're impervious to being informed of the truth and that is really scary when you've
got people who are unreachable with the truth with evidence to back it up I don't know how you
run a politics like that where people can lie without consequence

so you have your family you've also got a horse too I got a horse and a dog
it's been amazing speaking with you Geraldine thank you so much
lovely Richard thank you Geraldine Brooks's novel is called horse
you've been listening to a podcast of conversations with Richard Fidler
for more conversations interviews please go to the website abc.net.au