[Transcript] Conversations / Maggie Mackellar on farming, motherhood, and catching sheep

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Maggie McKellar is a sheep farmer in northeastern Tasmania and a writer.
She grew up in the suburbs of Sydney,
but her happiest times as a kid
were spent on her grandparents' farm in western New South Wales.
In fact, Maggie loved being there so much
that when she was 10 and had to leave the farm
to face a new term of school in the city,
her mum found her sobbing in bed the night before school started.
To try and comfort her,
Maggie's mum went and fetched a pen and paper
and drew a graph of Maggie's life.
She wrote down all the things that Maggie loved,
riding, working with sheep and dogs,
raising chooks, gardening, watching birds
and showed with her pen how over the long span
of Maggie's time on earth,
she'd be able to devote herself to all those things.
Maggie has certainly done that over the years,
but she's also had to face a lot that neither she
nor her mum imagined would be in her future.
Maggie's new book is called Grafft,
Motherhood, Family and a Year on the Land.
Hi, Maggie.
Hello, Sarah.
It is really such a lovely and, I think,
a wise thing for your mum to have done
when she found you all upset about having to face
another term of school in the city.
Was it a comfort, do you remember?
Oh, such a comfort.
My mum was an incredibly wise,
deep, funny, insightful, creative woman
and the fact that she even had time to gift me that
and to take my emotions seriously
after she would have driven the three of us back
from the farm that day,
which involved my older brother who is autistic,
profoundly autistic, he has no spoken language
and she would have had three of us in the car
for five hours, no air conditioning and a dog in the back
and she would have packed us up
and then unpacked us when we got home

and so to have the energy to take a small person's grief,
really, at how impossible life felt at that moment
is utterly typical or was utterly typical of her.
And it really speaks to how well she knew you
and knew what you loved,
that she could write that list
about the things that were important to you.
Yes, I feel very privileged to have been well-mothered.
Tell me about this place that you loved so much,
this first farm in your life.
Whereabouts was it and what did it look like?
It's in the centre of the universe.
At Kidal, which is about 45 kilometres outside of Orange
in the centre of West New South Wales.
Yeah, it's the country of my heart.
I think I loved that place with an innocence and a fervour
that you really only get to do once as a child, I think.
Yeah, so rolling hills, beautiful big box trees,
incredible Mount Canobalus always on the horizon,
sort of a climate of four distinct seasons.
Yeah, and I just know that, still know that country,
I could describe it, the rocks that sit outside
the back of the homestead, the line of the creek,
all of those things really deep in me.
What are your memories of the old wool shed on the farm?
There's two wool sheds on that farm
and the old one was converted into a ram shed
and I have very strong memories of working with my grandfather,
working in quotation marks.
I must have been about five or six
as he was looking after the stud rams
and so I would go with him every day,
the two of us out into that place
and mix up the feed in the big bin
and the small responsibilities that farm children are gifted.
They feel so enormous that you're put in charge of opening the gate
or banging the feed out into the troughs
or counting the sheep in or whatever small task I was given
felt like gave me an importance in the world
that I didn't have in the city.
Do you think your grandad liked having you around
or were you a nuisance?
I think I was probably both,

but I also think I caught him as sometimes happens in families.
I was the right age and he was the right age.
He'd slowed down an enormous amount
and was in the process of a very difficult process
of handing the reins over to my aunt and uncle
and I think he was finding it difficult to let go.
So I was possibly a job for him to look after,
but he also gifted me his
love of birds, love of sheep
and the art of noticing, I guess,
the idea that you can stand still and watch a mob of sheep
and pick out who the leaders are and the hierarchy.
You mentioned that your older brother is profoundly autistic.
How young were you when you realised he was different?
Do you think what are the early memories you have of how he was in the home?
He was never different in our family.
It was the shock of shame being out in public with him
that I first realised he was different.
We couldn't go to the supermarket, for instance.
We had our food delivered because he found being in a shopping centre
too overwhelming, so he never felt different to me
until I saw him through other people's eyes
that were outside the family.
He doesn't have any real language.
He's my older brother, my younger brother,
and I are both reasonably skilled in understanding what he is saying.
And he was at that age in our childhood, very frustrated, of course.
So he was set off by things that other children would not even notice.
So we became very skilled at walking into a situation
and understanding that a police siren going past would upset him
or a loud noise outside of it, or some music,
or lots of people talking, or too many things being on.
And we also knew what soothed him.
He was obsessed with running water.
Did that mean at home, Maggie,
that it kind of felt a bit like walking on eggshells for you and your brother?
Were you conscious of trying not to distress him?
Oh, I think we were completely selfish
and probably drove our mother absolutely mad
in that we just continued on around it.
I mean, my mum used to... I have memories of my mum.
She just became... She could do anything in the household.
She used to... Our brother used to block the toilet.

He would try and flood the toilet.
That was one of his things that he loved to do,
or he would tip a whole container of washing powder into a washing machine
and then turn it on.
So my mum became this expert plumber.
She bought herself an electric eel, so she stopped having to call a plumber,
and she would go and unblock the drains.
And I still have memories of her coming back in
and just asking for dinner and her just being exhausted
by the daily grind of parenting such a child.
Just thinking of Surridge and just sort of saying,
you know, just let me...
Could I just have a shower or at least wash my hair?
Did she get any support from external helpers in caring?
Oh, she had a wonderful support system through her church,
not as sort of an institutional support.
She had no institutional support.
She was also basically a single mother
because my father was absent in a very demanding job.
So, yeah, she was an incredible woman.
And I guess to get back to your question
about how my brother and I were affected by this,
I think one of the things that I didn't really realise
until I started writing about the experience of being the sibling
of a person who didn't have any spoken language
was he taught me to see the world in different layers.
So the spoken word wasn't the primary way
that he experienced the world.
So he taught me to read body language.
He taught me to read intention rather than what people said.
And I feel like those are very...
Well, they're wonderful gifts for a writer, aren't they?
So your dad was away from home a lot
because he was a politician, a minister, actually,
in the Fraser government.
How did he explain his work to you?
We were always a little confused about what he did.
I don't really remember him explaining,
mum was the interpreter of our worlds.
But our father would arrive home in a Commonwealth car
with another car behind him filled with green plastic folders
that would be unloaded onto his desk
and he would have to work through.

We were actually more used to seeing him on television
than we were to seeing him in person.
There's a lovely family story of mum yelling
to my younger brother and I who were playing down
in this very long and deep garden.
We had that, quick, come and see your dad,
to which we ran up the garden shouting,
what channel is he on?
Oh, wow.
So it was a family of two halves in some way.
It felt strange when dad was home.
So you'd grown up living in the city
but with this great love of the farm
and a real first-hand experience of what life on a farm could be like.
Is that what you imagined you'd do as you became a young adult?
I always imagined that that was where I would end up
but I think that changed kind of dramatically as I got older
and realised that nobody else saw that for me.
And school and university and love kind of took me away
from that real core sense of self.
And I think it was a time where both my parents grew up in the country
and they told a story of escaping that to the city
and to have a child that wanted to return,
I think was almost, you know, they wanted to talk me out of that constantly.
They were like, you've got a good brain.
And I think agriculture has seen very differently now
than it was sort of 40 years ago.
It wasn't open to me in the same way.
So what adventures did you set off on as a young woman?
I guess one adventure was getting married very young,
which possibly in hindsight was a way out of the chaos of our family life
to a certain extent.
And anyway, I did meet this wonderful man and we set off for Alaska and...
Alaska. Alaska. Why Alaska?
I don't know, it felt like the most extreme place you could go
and that sort of feeling of going to a place that had a frontier
that was still this sort of frontier mentality and a landscape
that was so extremely different to anything that we had ever experienced.
Together, we did an outdoor guiding course.
We spent three months in the Alaskan wilderness.
It wasn't so much outward bound, which is what people think about it.
It was called the National Outdoor Leadership School
and it was very much a course to teach you how to be a guide for my husband.

He was wanting to sort of go into that as a career.
So we did it together and we spent a month kayaking on Prince William Sound.
It was stepping into a world that I didn't know could exist.
It was like stepping into a fairy tale, though with real life dangers.
It rained for 13 days in a row without ceasing,
like not sort of soft rain, but I've never been so wet in my life.
I used to try and keep one pair of socks dry,
which I kept in my sleeping bag, which was in two garbage bags inside a wet bag.
If I could keep that dry, I could stay sane.
You could go on.
Yes, so that landscape was just incredible.
And then again, we'd spent another month in the Talkeetner Range,
so that was sort of this wide open,
you're walking on caribou trails that were literally thousands of years old.
And then in the mountains of Denali, we climbed a couple of mountains, Silver Throne.
Yeah, so that was amazing.
As you say, you married young.
Were kids always part of the plan for you as well, early on?
I think I was married so young that I hadn't occurred to me think about that.
So no, they weren't.
And when I discovered I was pregnant in Alaska at the age of 24, I was I was shocked.
Yeah, all that rain, I guess you had to do something because we were in a blizzard for some days.
So it was it and it meant that the year that we had planned to be away,
I came we came back to Australia.
I think I was I hadn't even seen a doctor.
I was nearly six months pregnant by the time I saw a doctor,
but also so healthy and, you know, your 24 year old body is actually pretty geared up to have a baby.
So instead of this adventure, we came back to Australia and I picked up doing a PhD
because that offered me the chance to it was I had a scholarship to do that.
So it was something I'd planned to do in the future,
but it seemed naively to fit really well with having a baby PhD newborn.
I was imagining myself breastfeeding and reading at the same time.
Things were very different, Maggie, for the birth of your son five years later.
What had happened when you were pregnant with him?
We actually decided to get pregnant with with my son.
But while I was very in the very early stages of pregnancy,
my husband came down with a severe case of chickenpox, actually.
And this set off a psychotic episode of depression,
rolling depression and anxiety that we never really got on top of.
It just it hit him hard.
I didn't really know what I was dealing with.
He was in and out of psych wards.
I was pregnant. It was a really traumatic time.

The psychiatric care is at a crisis level.
So you're either at a crisis or you're on your own and somewhere in between
those two places, we didn't I mean, he was in a secure psychiatric ward
and he scaled a brick wall that was meant to be unscalable.
And yeah, he died.
And you were then still pregnant with your son and had to go
through the experience of giving birth in this, you know, extraordinary grief.
I can't quite imagine, Maggie, how difficult that must have been.
What what do you remember about those moments of holding your newborn baby boy?
It's such a time of emotion at any point.
But given what was going on in your life over those last few months,
it must have been an incredibly loaded moment to meet this little baby.
It was, but he was such a gift, this small child, like he was so perfect.
And I was I found myself at one of those moments in your life where you think
all the things that you thought were really important suddenly ceased to be important.
I was quite ambitious as a university lecturer.
I had imagined myself moving up through the food chain.
And at that moment, I suddenly knew that the only real task I had was to be a mother
to these children, and that was the only thing I wanted to do also.
And it took a little while to marry that impulse with the reality of how to do that.
For a while, I kind of battled on with that, trying to be both a mother
and lecturing at uni.
And I used to often think I wish my job wasn't something where I had to stand up
and sound intelligent, because I'm suffering from sleep deprivation
juggling two small children.
And yeah, it was it was a lot.
And my mother was being a tremendous support to me during that time.
She would pick up my daughter from school or she would have a before school.
And she was kind of creating this really rich childhood for my daughter
that was outside of the grief.
And she was so helpful in helping my tiny daughter understand
where her father had gone and what what death was.
And she was so helpful to me, too, in not pathologising a child's grief,
like in allowing her to grieve and to ask questions
and to move in and out of sadness really fast in that way.
Kids do, you know, so so I had a lot of support there.
But this attempt to to juggle the academic world and being the parent
you wanted to be wasn't possible.
So what moment has changed?
Did you make about the way you were living, the three of you?
Well, just when you think things can't get much worse,
my mother was diagnosed with cancer with an unknown primary.
So she died very quickly.

She died in 10 weeks from diagnosis.
And that left my younger brother and I with our older brother
and the logistics of finding care around to find him in a safe situation
because he had been living with my mother.
My younger brother did the most amazing job during this time
because I was just barely coping with the demands of a small toddler
and a six year old.
And and so I took sabbatical.
I took a semester off and went home to my aunt and uncle.
How lucky was I?
I moved into the little flat in their garden with the kids and I didn't come back.
Did it feel right to be in the country immediately?
Was that part of it?
It felt so right.
And I had had a friend's dear mother, who's a very dear friend of mine,
say to me in helping me make this decision,
she said we were sitting in her backyard in Newtown over a pot of tea.
And she said, just could you just fantasize what that would look like?
Which would give you self permission to fantasize what life would look like,
not teaching at Sydney Uni.
And, you know, when you're caught in that that sandstone world of you think
that's the most important thing.
And I was thinking I have to create a strong career in order to support my kids
and having that fantasy.
Just I thought, I don't actually have to do that.
Like what what would life look like?
And suddenly I was instead of putting my dressing my son in the clothes,
he was going to go to childcare the night before.
So it was one less job to do in the morning and strapping him
in to the car seat at seven thirty in the morning and getting back home
at six thirty seven o'clock at night and just having enough money
to basically pay the rent and childcare.
I went to a place where the kids just met the school bus at the end of the ramp.
My kids just came out of themselves.
And yeah, it immediately felt the right thing to do.
And it immediately was apparent that I wasn't going back.
The ABC TV series, Australian Story, did a show about what had happened
to your husband and about your new life on the farm.
What happened out of that, Maggie, after it was screened on TV?
Well, we'd been there about seven years when Australian Story did that show.
And that was out of the back of my first memoir,
which I guess covered the ground that we've just talked about.
But that was an extremely challenging experience.

And I guess the result of that was something that I had never expected.
And that was that I met somebody who wrote to my literary agent
just a letter of he'd seen the show and and he was a farmer in Tasmania
and his mother and my father had worked together.
So I was able to say to dad, do you remember? Sure.
He said, oh, yes, I do.
So I felt confident writing back to him.
And we developed a email correspondence and a relationship out of that.
You kind of almost rolled your eyes when I asked you that question.
Maggie McKellar, is it not a great romantic part of your story?
What's your hesitation about this ultimate meat, cute
the Australian story as classifieds?
Yeah, my literary agent, she just was like, what has happened?
Because bizarrely, there was he was not alone, which is just what you have.
There were quite a few suitors.
Yes, there were had no idea.
Yeah. And they only supported me the most suitable ones.
But it was kind of like a the the the local swim club.
I would take them to swimming training in the afternoon
because everybody thought it was whatever my agent had afforded me.
I don't mean to make fun, but it was something that was so unexpected.
I just so when I you you're right to say I rolled my eyes.
I only roll my eyes because I think.
When tragedies occur in people's lives,
the people around them, the people that watch Australian story,
even who relate really strongly for that want a perfect outcome for it.
And despite the fact that.
People want to cast my partner as the knight in shining armour.
I've really resist that story that meeting someone
transforms your life and saves you from the tragedy that you've experienced.
And now everyone can take a deep sigh of relief and think of we don't.
I don't know. I don't know whether I'm expressing myself clearly there.
But it's. No, I think you are.
It's like the reality of what had happened to in your kids were still there.
The pain of that was still there.
And the rebuilding you'd done was still there.
And this sounds like a lovely other thing that happened.
But it wasn't like you were waiting.
I most definitely wasn't.
And I also like it was it was just like any other relationship.
It's a it's I just resist this idea of a happy ever after not
because it's not happy ever after like it has been an extremely rich
and wonderful up and down normal relationship.

You know, my my partner's been a wonderful father figure
and is given my kids a much bigger life.
But we were also warts and all like it hasn't hasn't always been great.
And everyone knows that working and living on with a farmer is not exactly
a bed of roses.
What was your first visit to his farm like?
It was it was really hard to understand what I was seeing
because he lives in a very old house on the east coast of Tasmania.
The house was built in 1825 by convicts.
It it kind of has a fort fortress type feel to it.
But it's a very beautiful and storied place.
So I I was unsure.
It was so different from the place that where I was.
I didn't really understand what I was doing.
I ended up I ended up down there.
I didn't really understand what that looked like.
I thought I was moving to a very similar rural community.
But Tasmania is really different to Central West, New South Wales.
The farming community is really different down there.
And I've made brilliant friends, but it's taken a while.
And you were having to also move your your kids who'd been through so much
disruption in their young life already.
What did your partner Jim build in the front paddock as a bit of a lure?
Everybody will know exactly where we are on the east coast.
When I say this, he built and this is very typical of him.
He my son was rugby obsessed.
And so he built out of irrigation pipes, a set of rugby posts in the front paddock
in deep Aussie Australian rules territory.
This is Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.
To find out more, just head to abc.net.au slash Conversations.
So this Tasmanian farm that you moved to a decade or so ago,
what does it look like, Maggie?
So the east coast is a really narrow strip of land between these beautiful
white sand pristine beaches and the eastern tiers.
And we have like a whole range of soil on our farm.
There's this incredible deep chocolate river flat where, I don't know,
it's the kind of soil that grows babies.
It's so beautiful.
And then we have very light, sandy country, which is great for sheep who like a view.
It's very different to the country that where I was in the Central West.
And the sheep are really different.
I grew up with the British breed sheep that bred for lamb chops.
And my partner, Jim's, got a great love for a fine, warm arena.

And you could almost call those two subsets of sheep to be a different species.
I have temperament.
Yeah, in the way they look, in the way they look, in their temperament,
in their desire to live, I'm sure there will be sheep farmers all over the country
who will know exactly what I'm talking about.
The marino is fickle.
It's either incredibly tough or just turns its toes up and dies.
And do you and Jim have different roles day to day on the farm?
Oh, definitely. Yeah, I am.
I'm just Girl Friday.
Like I am just there to, you know, at the end of the two way to
come and open a gate, hold a spanner, bring a vehicle up, pick somebody up.
But I, you know, it's it's work that I I love being involved in the farm,
the running of the farm, I help in the yards.
At shearing time, I'm a shearers cook, which was something that I had not
ever expected to do.
And, you know, when you're sitting down doing a PhD, you don't really
imagine that at some point in your future, you'll be cooking for shearers.
Having said that, our shearers are the best bunch of people and I'd love them dearly.
So, yeah, I am very hands on in the yards as well.
Laming time, I'm definitely there helping.
Why does autumn feel like the beginning of the year at your place?
Autumn is when the rams go out.
It's the start of the cycle.
It's waiting for that autumn break, waiting for the rain to come, hoping
that we'll get some rain in the last bit of the growing season before the winter starts.
And, you know, it's when the trees lose lose their leaves and it looks
like it's the end of something, but really it's the beginning of the next season.
What's this autumn break?
The autumn break is the last opportunity for a good rain before the winter.
So before the days are really short, where we are, the shortest in Australia
and the soil gets really cold and the grass stops growing.
So we need a rain to get pastures going that have been sown for a spring summer grazing.
Yeah. And how reliable are those rains in the years
you've been on the farm?
They're not reliable.
I'm not on the east coast of Tasmania, which is a little different to the rest of Tassie.
Yeah, my experience prior to this very wet season we're coming out of was
that we didn't get an autumn break.
We never seemed to get one.
Yeah, we had sort of a few years of not great seasons.
And then then we had a rolling drought that was just pretty devastating
as it was across a huge amount of the eastern seaboard.

How does the look of the farm change when those rains don't come?
It gets very bare in the drought.
It looks sick.
It just it looked like something that had a terminal disease.
So you lose all your ground cover, the waterholes dry up, the creeks dry up.
The trees start dying.
On the one hand, the scavengers on the place,
the eagles and the devils and the the crows.
They all do really well because, yeah, the grazing animals really suffer.
It just must take such a toll on the way you feel,
not just the practicalities of this financially is difficult for us,
but it just must be an incredibly bleak kind of time to be living
in the midst of a drought like that.
I think that it's really hard for people to explain how psychologically difficult
it is you're going deeper and deeper into debt,
you're having to make decisions over whether you continue buying feed
for animals that are worth very little.
But they're also that your foundation breed stock
that you've spent generations building up and to sell them.
I mean, when it's really bad, which it is just starting again,
people are talking about shooting stock because they're worth nothing
and they don't have the capacity to feed them.
So this is what we're facing again.
And I think it's very hard for people to talk about it when you're in it.
When it comes time for the use to have their their babies,
where on the farm does that happen?
We scan our use to work out whether they're having one lamb or two lambs
or three lambs and then they are divided into mobs according to age group
and how many lambs they're having and then they put in their lambing paddocks.
So a lambing run for us is going around and looking through
sitting up on the on a ridgeline and looking down on a paddock through binoculars.
And really, we're just looking for use that are in trouble.
Once the the lambs out, Maggie, once it's been born,
what happens next when things go well?
When things go well, you will
spin around and and leak a lamb.
You know, she will just it's I always I describe it as as coloring in the edges
of the lamb, you know, a lamb when it's born, it's hooves are really soft
and they harden over the next few hours.
And no matter how many times I watch it, it always gives me a thrill
to watch the instinct of a mother and a newborn lamb.
Connect and it's as she leaks her hormone surge.
The lambs can take they can be on their feet in in minutes

and looking that they're hunting for her other.
So always a wonderful thing to watch.
What about when things don't go wrong?
What can interrupt that moment of really deep bond between a mother and her baby lamb?
I think during the drought,
it's things going wrong is
the percentage of time that things don't go to plan is heightened
because we breed for a mother, a strong mothering instinct.
So we are breeding selectively for you's that will stay with their lambs.
And at the same time that you has a terribly basic instinct to survive.
So even though she is being looked after, she's being fed.
She's being handfed with pellets and hay.
She still knows somewhere in her body
that this is not a good season to raise a lamb and for herself to survive.
The best thing she can do is walk away from that lamb.
So when things don't go to plan, they can go
don't not go to plan a couple of ways, a lamb can get stuck in a you.
So you have to pull the lamb and often that's exaggerated during drought
in that the you will be she could be a gutsy eater.
So she's eating more pellets than her share.
She has a bigger lamb than normal than she would if she was foraging naturally.
So we might drive into the if that's the case,
you'll see a you with a lamb sticking out its butt to put it, frankly.
And you'll go and pull that lamb.
And hopefully best case scenario, both you and lamb survive.
Otherwise, you might.
You might see a you abandon a lamb, give birth and walk away.
So that's another situation.
And what do you do when that happens?
Well, often you don't see that happening.
So you'll just find an abandoned lamb.
We actually saw a you give birth to a lamb and literally walk away.
We were watching through the binoculars.
We were nowhere near her.
There was no pressure on her.
There was no reason that she should have walked away from that lamb,
except that deeper instinct of survival.
Or maybe she just didn't want to be a mother.
I don't know.
These particular yous who do this drive my partner absolutely nuts.
So to watch this, you do this.
She was in a position in the paddock where we could drive in and cut her out.
So we chased her down and and put her on the back of the you

and took her back with with her lamb.
And it was incredible.
If I hadn't seen her give birth to this lamb with my own eyes,
you would swear that these two did not go together.
So what happened once they were on the back of the you together?
We took them back to the yards
and then I went to work on convincing her to become a mother.
How do you do that?
You pin her to you force her to feed that lamb, basically.
And slowly, her hormones got going and over a couple of days
and she did mother that lamb.
But, you know, we would never breed from her again.
You often have to be in the position of catching sheep.
How do you go about catching a sheep, Maggie?
You wish you were younger.
So I don't know. It's a it's a it's a rough science.
Basically, Jim, he's a my partner is a rally driver
and we'll cut a you out and I leap from the moving vehicle and jump on it.
Sounds so elegant.
There's skin knees involved often.
And what, just grab it around its middle law?
Yeah, or crash tackle it.
You just grab anything you can.
One of the sheep that you you had to
wrestle in this way was named Doris by your partner.
Tell me about her and the role she had ended up having on the farm.
I just need to preface this by saying that she's the only sheep
that has a name on the farm.
It's not like they have individual names.
What makes Doris special?
Doris had this.
I don't know whether it was an injury or a congenital defect of some sort.
She was a cross bred, so we have two different mobs.
We have a mob of used second class use,
merino use that we put to a terminal size.
So the lambs they have are sold as fat lambs.
And then the beautiful merino's that are going to have beautiful lambs
with wool so fine that you could barely believe it.
They have put to a merino ram.
So Doris is in the fat mob, as we call it, the fat mob.
And she has a name simply because she is noticeable.
You know, she's one of those sheep that you always,
as you're looking over the mob, you're like, oh, there she is.

You can see her.
And yes, she had a lamb that didn't make it.
And she also had a beautiful udder.
And so this day we were checking.
We noticed that she got the lamb out, but it wasn't alive.
And my partner suggested I might like to catch her for a couple of orphan lambs
that we had, and I could.
Is that how he put it to you?
I suggest to you, Matthew, you might like to catch her.
Just like that.
Get out of the car.
They're out Doris.
And so I said I wasn't up to it, but he convinced me.
And I cornered her in the paddock.
And but she's not she's not a merino.
She's not a sort of a timid sort of something that will back off from you.
She just took one look at me and ran straight over the top of me.
So I didn't end up catching her.
He caught her with a crook, with a shepherd's crook.
We bundled her up on the back of the ute.
And it's funny, I find in this putting together of orphaned lambs
with youth that have lost their lambs, a process that's called grafting
to be just such a fascinating animal behavior,
chance to watch animal behavior, how some youth will be so accepting
of a new lamb and while and others will try and kill it.
And Doris was of the try and kill it variety.
And I put this beautiful merino lamb on her, which, you know, if she raised it,
that means we've got a weather, which is a castrated ram
that will live out its days on the farm, giving us a fleece every year
for seven seven years thereabouts.
And so I really wanted her to raise this lamb.
And we went into battle, I guess, me trying to convince her
that she would mother this lamb and she determined that she would not.
And it was at about day three when, just as I was on the point of giving up,
she started mothering the lamb and then became just as fiercely furious
that she was at being asked to mother it.
She then became a fierce mother.
And I just I love all those little moments that you get to waste.
There's so many failures that so many lambs
that don't make it or use that won't mother up that it's just a delight
to celebrate the stories that have the happy endings.
Where do you take off to some mornings for a break
from the heavy responsibilities of life on the farm?

Oh, we're very lucky to live very close to the coast.
So especially during the drought, where walking on the farm meant
being confronted with hungry animals and the desperate
unending nature of drought, I would go to the beach
and would take my dogs down there and sort of lovely three kilometre walk
to the end and I learned down there how to swim in the cold.
So you swim all year or year? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.
What's the what's your strategy?
My strategy is to walk run, depending on my fitness levels,
to the end of the beach.
And then I copied the dogs.
I just take my clothes off and jump in.
And then when I've had a swim, I get out and I just put my clothes back on.
Shake yourself pretty much.
OK, I suddenly learned that all that stuff around how we think about swimming.
We don't need it like I didn't need a towel.
Like they're all these things like I thought I want to swim,
but I don't want to have a wet costume on me.
I don't want to have to carry a towel, but I just quickly learned
that I didn't need any of those things and it just was.
It it was like some sort of elixir of renewal
every time I would dive into that crisp, cold water.
And it just filled me back up again, enough to go back to what we were doing.
You remember your your granddad
introducing you to birds and paying attention to birds.
And that's the love that you've definitely inherited.
What are your favourite birds on the farm?
Well, they're different.
That was the other thing I had to learn about Tasmania.
The birds are different down there.
So my favourite bird has always been the Willy Wagtail.
And there's no Willy Wagtails where we live.
And at the time, it felt like a great grief
that that my talisman bird wasn't there with me.
But I've learned to love the Grey Fantail, the Robins.
We have so many beautiful Robins.
So those little tiny birds I love.
But yeah, we have eagles and swans and the the grey-striked thrush.
Like that's just I could talk to you for ages about birds.
Well, one day when you were out walking on the farm,
you came across an injured wedge tail eagle.
What was it like?
Well, I should say that the wedge tails in Tassie are endangered

and they are a different subspecies to the ones on the mainland.
They're bigger.
They're so if you think a wedge wedge is big up on the mainland,
the Tassie eagles are bigger again.
And yeah, when I like, there's nothing more thrilling
to sort of crane your neck and watch an eagle soaring.
Something just about how effortless that is.
But when you see one on the ground, you realise just how huge they are.
How big those claws are.
Yeah. Yeah.
And, you know, the bird was above my waist when standing.
You know, it's just that the huge bird.
So I didn't really know what to do when I came across that bird.
Where did you turn for wisdom?
Well, I rang my partner and said I found an injured wedgie.
He was fixing a plough desperately trying to get a crop in.
So he wasn't that excited about that piece of news.
But he's very patient with me and he said he'd come and find me.
I was about 10 minutes away, 10 minutes drive from where he was.
And I sat down on a rock and googled how to catch an eagle.
What does it tell you?
Oh, YouTube tells you everything.
And how are you supposed to catch an eagle?
You surround it.
So the two of us surrounded it and sort of worked.
It could make these great leaping hops, but it couldn't get airborne.
So it'd sort of be airborne for a couple of metres.
So we sort of worked it from either side until it flipped itself over
and showed its claws at which point YouTube directed us to throw a coat over it,
which we did and, yeah, took it down to the raptor rescue,
the raptor rescue, which is a fantastic operation in Hobart.
But I think the thing about those moments on the farm for me as a writer,
they're an opportunity to understand the interconnections
between the domestic and the wild.
You know, I had I knew that we lose a proportion of I mean, people will say you don't,
but we do lose a proportion of lambs to eagles.
That's that's fine.
That's just the way it is.
But at the same time, it's sort of holding in balance
the rescue of this animal knowing that it will come back, hopefully,
and that it will possibly feed on a ninja sheep.
Yeah, it's just a really interesting moment to sort of tease out the connections
that we have in the world between the domestic and the wild.

The rain that had not come for so long in that terrible season of drought
did finally arrive.
Did you know it was coming?
We get all our big rains from an Easterly system,
and Easterly systems are really unpredictable.
And so we knew it was coming and the predictions were fluctuating
between a good rain and a devastating rain.
So, you know, not all rains are equal.
So we were braced for it, but it came up out of the blue very quickly.
And yeah, it was really destructive for us, which was just destructive.
Yeah, we lost a lot of topsoil.
We lost a lot of fences.
We didn't lose any stock, but huge flood, huge flood.
And so the duality of being thrilled that the drought had broken
and the kind of holding on to the deficit, you know,
at the same time, there was this huge amount of work.
So to be done dragging flood debris, to be burned, rebuilding fences.
Yeah, it was a really interesting time,
and it was also just the beginning of the pandemic.
So the blessing of that was that my son, our son was home to
help from boarding school.
You know, thinking about your kids, who it was partly
in order to mother them the way that you wanted that prompted you
to leave Sydney for your family farm in Western New South Wales
and then also to move to this other farm in Tasmania with them
and give them a different kind of family life there.
They've both grown, left the nest as kids need to do.
And as we work as parents to getting them to do, what's that been like?
Does it still feel like a bit of a shock when it it finally happens
that moment when your parenting responsibilities change in that way?
Yeah, I often think that being a single mother for a period of time
and taking on that mantle of responsibility just on my own
sharpened the sense of both a rival as the kids left,
like an arrival at another place and also sharpened the sense of loss
at them going, you know, that that I really did lay down my identity
as an academic and and say, right, I am going to be a mother
to these children first and foremost.
And and I think any any mother has that experience.
Mothers come in all shapes and sizes
and all different ways.
Like I think we are mothered in so many different ways by different people.
You don't have to be a woman.
I don't think to mother necessarily.

Yes, my children leaving has raised another set of
or sort of put a spotlight on what that identity shift means
than for the next stage of life.
And then, you know, I don't think you watch a dog have a litter of puppies
and she's such a good mother for for sort of three weeks.
And then suddenly they're just the last thing she wants to see.
And she is just she gets she goes she moves through the through mothering
so quickly. And I think sometimes I need to take
I could could take a little bit of that on board as well.
But how do you understand your responsibilities now?
What being a mother of young adults, what's your role to be on the end of the phone?
I guess to be available,
but also supportive of the the distance that's between us
to sort of be excited about that, about the post like I don't think there's
anything more thrilling than watching a child go out into the world
and feel that you've equipped them to navigate that.
I am so sad saying goodbye to my children,
but I'm also so excited and thrilled to see them gain independence.
So it's a sort of a double edged morning in some ways.
Yeah, has it brought you and you kind of freedom,
not just practically, but I don't know,
psychically, your sense of yourself?
Yeah, I think so.
But I also think it's bought before arriving at that place.
It's confusing because you're you are so given to being
the hands on, you know, juggler of all the things all the family's needs.
That when that ceases to be your role,
you suddenly wonder who on earth you are and how you would fill your time.
I filled it way too successfully, but.
But yeah, it's I think there is a, you know, taking off the cloak of motherhood
and wearing it more lightly in this next phase.
Yeah, it's an exciting time, but it's also disorientating.
When you first moved to Tasmania, Maggie,
you are unsure that it would ever feel like home.
Does it feel like home now?
Yeah, it does. It really does.
And I feel like the gift of observation,
of moving through the land, of learning the seasons,
of learning the birds, of learning the plants, of all of those things
has gifted me a real sense of belonging there.
You know, I've got a wonderful group of women that I walk with
who are all sort of sixth generation Tasmanians
and have had the wilderness of Tasmania gifted to them down

through the generations of knowing where to go on walks.
And they have shown me a part of Tasmania that, oh, my gosh,
I feel so privileged to have seen.
And yeah, that also made a really big difference.
That graph of your life that your mum made for you
when you attend to comfort you before you faced your term
at school in the city, where she listed all of the things
that mattered to you and were important to you.
What would you add to that now at this stage of your life?
I just want to underline all those things.
Yeah, I want the things.
I think I've realised that I want the things that I wanted
as a 10 year old now that that's what's so important.
Just I guess I would also add community.
I didn't realise I needed that, but I've been gifted
a writing community online, like I have a wonderful online
writers group and and also a community, a local community,
I think is really important.
So that's something I didn't see as a 10 year old
that I would add to that.
But yeah, please give me the horses, the dogs, the birds, the sheep.
Maggie, it's been a real pleasure to speak with you.
Thank you for being my guest on Conversations.
Thank you for having me, Sarah.
It feels like I've met a friend I've had for a very long time.
You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations
with Sarah Kanoski.
For more Conversations interviews, head to the website
abc.net.au slash conversations.
MUSIC
Good evening. I'm Helen Norville.
And I'm Dale Jennings.
And I'm Lee Sales.
And I'm Lisa Miller.
And we're so excited about the return of the newsreader on ABC TV.
But even more exciting is our new companion podcast to the show.
Season two of The Newsreader promises more of the same newsroom
and power plays, complicated romances and general 80s goodness
that made season one the ABC's biggest drama last year.
This is a bullshit story.
I feel like the way I love doesn't fit in anywhere.
I knew that you were low, but I didn't think even you would stoop this low.
If you're somebody who needs a debrief while you wait for the next episode,

this podcast is for you.
We'll talk about what's happening in the show,
but also give you some context around the real 80s news events.
We'll meet the creative minds behind the show and, of course, the stars.
The Newsreader season two starts Sunday, September 10,
with this podcast dropping straight after the episodes go to air.
Make sure you follow The Newsreader podcast on the ABC Listen-Up
or wherever you get your podcasts so you never miss a thing.
That's it from us.
Back to you in the studio, Dale.
I'm Dale Jennings.
This has been News at Six.
Good night, Australia.
And we're out.