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Pip Williams' first novel, The Dictionary of Lost Words,
came out just as COVID was hitting.
And to the surprise of Pip and her publisher,
it became an international bestseller.
Pip's new novel, The Bookbinder of Jericho,
is a companion to that book.
It tells the story of women working in the bindery
of the Oxford University Press during the First World War.
Pip's love of stories and of books goes way back to her childhood,
where if she wasn't reading, she was watching her Welsh dad
reveling in the surf at Manly Beach.
But Pip's path to becoming a writer was not straightforward.
Along the way, there was a diagnosis of dyslexia,
two wooly alpacas, and a honey farm in Tuscany.
Hi, Pip.
Hello, Sarah. It's just a delight to be here.
The Dictionary of Lost Words was your first novel, as I say.
But tell me about the first poem of yours that was published.
The first thing I ever had published was a poem in Dolly magazine.
I didn't even know Dolly had...
I mean, as a Dolly reader, I can't recall the poetry section of Dolly.
Oh, my goodness, Sarah. I'm shocked.
I'm a straight-to-Dolly doctor.
I was missing a lot of this literary greatness that was there at the same time.
Yeah, well, I would also go straight to Dolly Doctor,
and then I'd go straight to Poets Corner.
And Poets Corner was...
I think it was part of Dolly magazine right from the start.
And I used to read it,
and I remember when I was 15, having an argument with my parents
who wouldn't let me go out,
or they were going to let me out, but I had to come home earlier than all my friends,
because there's something...
Some outrage.
Some outrage.
And my way of dealing with outrage,
right from when I was quite small, was to write poetry about it.
And so I did. I wrote a poem called 15.
Very imaginative, I know, and it rhymed as well.
Can you remember any of it?
I'm ashamed to say I can.
Can you please share it?
OK, I'm so glad no one can see me blushing.

So it starts, 15 is an age of just in between.
No immature habits should ever be seen.
No alcohol served at your table at night don't act like a child.
You're in people's sight, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.
I think it stands up, Pip Williams.
Well done.
Yeah, I'm not sure it's going to win any awards.
But it was published,
which, you know, it was the first time I'd ever sent anything off to be published,
because honestly, who does that when they're 15?
And the idea of being a writer
isn't actually something your vocational guidance teacher ever talks to you about.
But it was one of those kind of just passionate, you know,
reactive things that I did.
And the fact it got published was extraordinary and amazing.
Even heard from a friend who'd moved to Victoria
and they studied it in class.
Oh, my gosh.
I know. All those years ago.
Wow, you were on a syllabus with Dolly's 15.
I'm not sure this...
Yeah, I was on one classroom syllabus.
How did your family react?
I suspect they were really proud,
but it's one of those things that I don't recall.
I don't recall any big fuss being made about it.
I almost don't recall me being excited about it.
I was talking to a friend about this
who reminded me that I've always wanted to be a writer
and that I used to talk about it all the time
and that I was thrilled when the poem got in Dolly magazine.
And it's so interesting,
because for me, when I was a child, writing was really
just kind of like breathing in a way.
I didn't do it for public consumption.
I just did it for myself,
which I think is what a lot of children do
with any creativity.
They just do it as a form of expression.
I can't even remember sending this poem off to Dolly magazine
with any great ambitions of becoming a writer.
I just did it because I enjoyed reading Poets Corner.
So you were always reading and writing,
but were these things that came easily to you as a kid?

No. It's one of those ironies.
I have dyslexia, and so reading and writing
were always something that were difficult in that
they were slow.
I was a very messy, untidy writer.
I couldn't read very fast at all.
But when you're a child,
you're not comparing yourself to anybody.
And so that slowness wasn't really apparent until I was older.
And, you know, because it didn't matter that it took me a week
to read a book that it might take someone else a day and a half,
because I was just enjoying it.
I read every single word.
I still do.
I cannot read any faster silently than I do aloud.
In fact, I probably read a little faster if I read aloud
than I do reading silently.
And in terms of that diagnosis,
at what stage of your schooling did you get that diagnosis of dyslexia?
Yeah, so it wasn't until I was 15 or 16.
And so I had this conundrum at school, really, that I was quite verbal.
And so...
And I did relatively well at school, relatively.
I wasn't at the top of the class by any stretch,
but I was very verbal.
And it was my parents constantly had the same discussion with teachers
at parent-teacher nights that, you know, she seems to understand,
but then she doesn't apply herself in writing.
And it wasn't until I was about 15 and in year 11
and my English teacher said to my parents,
I think she's dyslexic.
And it's not a term my parents had ever heard.
This is the 19...early 1980s.
It's not a term that was really used very often.
They had only just introduced a kind of remedial reading and spelling program
at the school, and they put me into that.
But it was full of year seven kids, and I was in year 11.
And it just didn't work because they were working with the curriculum.
And, of course, I was beyond the year seven curriculum.
And so my year 11 teacher decided that the best option would be
to combine oral and written tests in class.
And it was just kind of fantastic.
And so she would sit me...
When the rest of the class were doing a written test,

she would sit with me after we'd done it
and ask me to talk through what I'd...
You know, what I'd tried to write,
because often I was a very slow writer as well.
And so often I just wouldn't get down all the things in my head.
What a responsive choice from that teacher.
It was. And we all...
We all have stories of teachers that have recognised something in them.
In this case, she didn't recognise that one day I might be a writer,
nothing like that.
She just recognised that I was enthusiastic about what I was learning.
And she was my English teacher.
And that there was a disparity between my written work
and my verbal understanding.
And her name was Mrs Lawrence.
And, you know, I love mentioning her
because she died a few years later.
And so I was never able to, in a way, thank her
or let her know kind of how I turned out.
As you say, this term was newly being used.
And it did have stigma around it, I think, at that period.
Did it feel for you that this was a kind of a burden
to get this term applied to you?
Or how did you relate to it at that age?
The term itself didn't bother me in any way
because it was still a kind of unknown term.
The stigma I might have had with my dyslexia really came in class
when we would be doing, you know, spelling tests
or I would be held back at recess
because of the numerous spelling errors in my written work.
And then I'd have to write out every word I'd spelt wrong ten times
which would take up my entire recess.
And then, of course, I'd do my list of ten, you know, repetitive words
in three different ways within the list,
which my teachers would just tear their hair out.
They just couldn't understand how I couldn't even copy from the word.
Were you frustrated at yourself, do you remember?
It's interesting.
My parents were excellent.
They were so interested in the ideas
and the creativity behind whatever I did.
So whenever I wrote anything, when I wrote that poem, for instance,
even though I was still really angry with them,
of course, I showed it to them.

And they would read it and simply engage with the rhythm
and the rhyme and the creativity.
At that point, they wouldn't focus on the spelling
or the messy writing or anything like that.
And I think that that was key to me continuing to write
as a form of expression
because I was getting positive feedback whenever I gave something to my parents
and I had a number of teachers, particularly Mrs Lawrence,
who did the same thing.
They focused on what I was using the language for,
not the detail of the spelling and so on.
And I had a few teachers who did not do that.
I had a few teachers who would quite honestly just shame me
in front of the entire class.
So I have a really strong memory of doing a spelling test
and we all did the spelling test.
Then we had to pass our paper to someone else in the class
who marked it as she spelled the words for us
and then we would mark each other's.
And then she would ask us to call out the mark
that the person had got that we'd marked, that we'd ticked.
And the girl who had mine,
and she's still one of my closest friends, her name's Vanessa,
and she refused to call out my mark in public.
She wanted to go up to the teacher and just show her my humiliation
because I got minus 20 in a spelling test
because we got marks taken off for everything we got wrong.
So I was in the negative.
And she was, you know, even at that,
in year seven she had the presence of mind
not to humiliate me but the teacher didn't.
And it's such a strong memory
that I'm still really good friends with her
and she now works in literacy.
But even then she had the presence of mind
not to humiliate me and we weren't great friends then.
It was just a kindness.
It's interesting though, Pip,
I can imagine for someone else having those kinds of experiences
of feeling shame or just the slog of reading and writing.
You might have fallen out of love with books and writing.
Was there ever a moment where you teetered around
whether this was something you wanted to keep as closely
in your life as it was?

Writing for me wasn't for public consumption.
If you put the Dolly magazine poem to one side,
that was really the only time I put it out there.
For me, writing was the sort of thing I did in a diary.
It's the sort of thing I might do in a birthday card.
And I'm an introvert.
I was a very quiet, shy child and books were an escape.
Throughout my primary school years,
in particular in early high school,
I had my best friend, Kelly Cochran.
She and I would go to each other's houses all the time
and take books and we would sit and read for hours on end
and then we'd go home. That's all we did.
That sounds like the best play date ever.
I wish I had known you and Kelly. That's great.
Most people are very glad they weren't part of that little group.
It's extremely boring.
But it was the thing that we loved doing most.
I don't know if we even talked about the books.
I think we did sometimes exchange them
so that we could share in each other's reading pleasure.
But yeah, I just adored reading.
It was an escape.
I think I was quite imaginative.
So I really loved escaping into an imagined world.
As an adult Pip, how do you see your dyslexic brain now
and the way that you think and read and write
as a consequence of the way your brain works with words?
I wouldn't swap it for anything.
There's a lot of frustrations with having a dyslexic brain
and I should say my dyslexia is probably mild to moderate
or the moderate to severe.
But whatever frustrations I have
and other people have with my dyslexia,
it is outweighed by what I think are the benefits
of having a dyslexic brain.
And some of those benefits that I can identify myself at least
are an ability to see the big picture
and to make connections between disparate bits of information
where other people might not see those connections.
So dyslexic brains, I think, are quite good problem-solving brains.
They're quite good at lateral thinking.
You know, whether that's because of the structure of the brain,
whether it's because of the thing that kind of creates the dyslexia,

also creates these, I think, strengths.
Whether it's that or whether it's a compensatory mechanism,
I'm not sure, but I find that in my professional life,
I was a social scientist,
so I have spent my whole professional life trying to solve problems.
You know, doing research is a actually highly creative pursuit
and you're constantly trying to see how different bits of information
work together and what they mean.
And it's not so different to writing novels, actually.
Putting a book together, you know,
requires a certain type of problem-solving capacity,
which I think my dyslexic brain benefits.
I think it helps in that exercise.
So yeah, I wouldn't swap it for anything.
Your mum had her own interesting experience with the English language.
What was her first language?
Yeah, my mum was born in Brazil,
and her first language is Portuguese.
Even though she was born to, I suppose, British parents,
her mother was also, I think, born in Brazil,
but from British parents.
They lived in Belém, which is near the mouth of the Amazon,
and in Brazil at that time, we're talking about the 1940s, 50s.
Really, society was divided into rich and poor.
There wasn't really a middle class.
And if you were wealthy,
it was beholden upon you, really,
to create as much employment for the local people as possible.
And so mum was surrounded by local Portuguese-speaking people.
They cooked, they cleaned.
Mum went to the local primary school,
where everyone spoke Portuguese,
and so her first language is Portuguese.
Even though her parents spoke English.
Would she have spoken Portuguese with them,
or what might that have meant for the way they communicated with one another?
Yes, and this sounds so strange,
and it's hard to believe it happens,
but I have spoken to other people who have had this experience as well.
So mum spoke Portuguese, and so did her sisters,
and her parents spoke English,
and they could understand each other,
but they couldn't speak each other's language.
It is so strange,

and I have questioned mum about it so much,
and for her it's just like,
well, yeah, no, that's just how it was.
And I remember doing a book club with a bunch of Indian women
talking about the dictionary of lost words, actually,
and talking about the relationship between two of the characters.
The main character, Esme, is often looked after by a servant, Lizzie.
And this was actually something that was familiar to these Indian women,
who had nannies that looked after their children,
and one of the women said to me,
I have a woman who looks after my son,
and I couldn't speak his language until he started school,
because he spoke the language of his nanny.
And it was the same situation that my mum had grown up in,
and I was dumbfounded because I didn't think that that still existed,
that that kind of relationship might still exist,
but of course it does in different parts of the world.
So does your mother still speak Portuguese?
What happened with her and language as she got older?
She doesn't, and, you know, it's the sort of thing
that as a child you don't think about,
but as an adult, I came to regret
that it just takes one generation for a language to be lost.
So mum doesn't speak Portuguese anymore,
because when she was nine years old,
she was sent to boarding school in the UK.
So she was put on a ship with her 11-year-old sister,
and they were sent to boarding school.
And when she arrived at boarding school,
she was separated from her sister,
the only other person who spoke Portuguese,
and just put in the dormitory with her age group.
She didn't speak any English, but she quickly learnt to,
and she remembers the moment, you know,
when she started dreaming in English,
and that's when, you know, the switch was complete, I think.
What about your father, Pip?
Did he have exotic childhood like that too?
I'm not sure.
Would you call living in a coal mining town in Wales exotic?
I wouldn't.
My dad was born during the Blitz, actually, in Portsmouth, England,
which just happens to be where his mother was at the time.
His father had already gone off to war.

As soon as he was born, they were evacuated back to Wales,
which is where his family, extended family, were.
Yes, so not particularly exotic.
So as a young Welshman,
what was his obsession as a teenager and young man?
Dad has had a series of obsessions throughout his life.
He was obsessed with fishing,
and he used to fish at any opportunity.
He was actually a beautiful singer.
I mean, it's such a cliché, really.
But he was such a good singer.
When he was older, they moved to Bath,
and he became the head choir boy at Bath Abbey.
So a beautiful, beautiful, pre-adolescent voice.
I think today, Dad would have been diagnosed with ADHD.
He was constantly absconding from school
to the point where one school actually said to his mother,
we can't keep him here because we can't keep him in the grounds.
He wasn't naughty, but he was very kind of absent-minded
and a bit obsessed,
and apparently he had been found walking along a street
away from the school, reading a book while he walked.
It's beautiful.
Yeah, it is beautiful, isn't it?
But he was so absent-minded that he didn't realise he'd left the school.
How did he discover surfing?
If this is the part of the world that he's living in,
how does surfing come into the picture?
Honestly, I don't know how that started,
but yeah, so that was the next obsession.
As he grew older, he just sort of added obsessions.
He never gave up fishing.
That was something he always loved.
I think he must have just met some friends
who were also into surfing,
but it became an obsession.
And so he and his mates would go down to Cornwall
to surf on weekends or whenever it was possible.
So back then he used to surf on a longboard.
They're probably twice the height of the surfer.
And once he'd met my mum and once they were married,
they tell this story of Dad building a longboard in their bed-sits.
So they were quite poor,
and they lived in a tiny little bed-sit,

and the longboard took up most of the room.
And it took months, apparently, to make.
And then finally they took it with their best friends down to Cornwall,
and he went out into the surf
and caught a wave and immediately broke in half.
Oh, so nice!
So months and months of work and anticipation.
Yeah, and then finally the moment comes and, yeah, it crashed.
Oh, no.
Did you ever surf that lured your family to Australia then?
It was, yeah.
These friends that Mum and Dad had,
all four of them would talk about moving somewhere
where surfing was much more of a thing,
not quite so freezing cold to get in the water.
And his friends were dead set on moving to South Africa.
But, yeah, Dad couldn't abide with apartheid.
So they didn't follow their friends to South Africa.
Instead, they decided to move to Maruchidor in Queensland.
So how did that transition from England to the subtropics
go for your family?
Well, you've got to imagine a young family.
So my sister was just one year old, and I was three.
And Mum and Dad were in their 20s,
and they're moving from Wales.
So we lived in Aberdea, which is sort of South Wales,
not far from Cardiff.
And they're moving from this dreary, cold, coal mining town
to Maruchidor on the Sunshine Coast.
It felt like they stemmed into a postcard.
Yeah, a postcard and a sauna.
You know, when we landed in Maruchidor,
the first job Dad had was in the Cane Fields.
We were not designed for the Queensland heat.
We stayed there for, I think, about nine months
before the heat got too much.
And then I was only young,
but I remember being packed into the back of an old car
that Mum and Dad had bought.
And, you know, back in the 70s,
when basically seatbelts didn't exist.
And because we were moving our entire lives,
they'd packed the car with all the bedding.
And so the back of the car was just one big, huge platform of bedding.

And I remember just lying on it
and watching the world go by through the window, you know, upside down.
I remember the stars even.
It's a funny thing what you remember as a child.
But I do remember the trip from Maruchidor down to Sydney.
But Dad was in heaven.
How often was your Dad at the beach then
when you were growing up?
Dad spent every spare moment in the surf.
So we moved to a flat, right opposite Manly Beach.
It doesn't exist anymore.
It was derelict when we moved in
and has since been demolished.
But it was immediately across the road from Manly Beach.
And so he would surf before work.
He would surf after work.
He would surf when the beach was closed.
I remember standing on the beach with my mum and my sister crying one day
because the beach was closed because of dangerous surf.
And Dad decided that was perfect.
Perfect for him.
And I do remember being really frightened for him because it was wild.
And we'd stand there just waiting for him to come in.
On the weekends, you know,
mum always cleaned the house on a Saturday morning
and insisted that Dad deal with us no matter.
She didn't care what he did with us,
but we were his responsibility on Saturdays.
And he would take us down to the beach
and leave us on towels and then go into the surf.
And you just sit there.
Yeah, we were supposed to sit there.
We were supposed to just stay still and not go anywhere.
But we would, of course, pick the towel up
and wrap it around our shoulders
and run around the beach pretending we were superheroes
or whatever we did.
And then he'd come back and he wasn't one to get flustered.
Almost never.
He was a very Zen human being.
But occasionally he would get flustered
because he would have buried the keys under the towel
that we had then used as our superhero cape.
And so we might spend an hour digging around,

trying to figure out where the keys were.
And, you know, that was the way of him.
You know, I just...
I'm so grateful for both my parents.
And I'm so grateful to the kind of man my dad was.
He died recently.
And for whatever reason,
I've had occasion to talk about him.
It was only in August that he died.
And I've had many occasions where I've had the privilege
of remembering him and talking about him.
And it's so wonderful and comforting to remember him
because he was such a good man.
And I'm so grateful for...
You know, I'm so grateful for him taking me down to the beach
and just leaving me there and trusting I'll be okay.
I'm so grateful for him including us in everything
that he was interested in
and always being interested in what, you know,
made us excited.
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So, Pip, you grew up by the ocean at Manley.
And at first, that's where you lived with your partner,
Shannon, and your kids.
Why did you leave?
Yeah, so we...
My partner is from Klontaf in Sydney.
He grew up there.
And so he went to the brother's school, Balgala Boys,
and I went to McKellar Girls.
They were state schools.
And so we knew each other from about the age of 16, 17,
and ended up getting together and living together in Fairlight,
which is where we had our children.
They were both born in our house in Fairlight.
But Shannon, in particular,
had always dreamed of growing his own food.
So while we had this tiny little semi-detached place
in Fairlight with a backyard,
no bigger than someone's an ordinary lounge room,
it was quite relatively small.
And Shannon somehow managed to grow quite a lot of food
in that backyard,
but also in the tiny patch that we had in front of the house,

we had a lemon tree and a couple of basil bushes
and things like that.
But his dream really was to be able to grow farm or food than that
to have a kind of permaculture garden.
And so when the boys were quite young, Aidan was four, I think,
and Riley was less than 18 months.
We moved to the Adelaide Hills.
So we sold everything and moved to the Adelaide Hills.
How did your little boys take to this change in the environment
in swapping the sea for the farm?
Well, they were so young.
They loved it.
You know, we have five acres in the Adelaide Hills,
and it was pretty plain, you know, pretty at blank slate,
essentially, when we arrived.
And Shannon immediately, he did a permaculture course
and immediately started designing our garden.
And, you know, the boys were just always around us.
So as we're digging, they'd be digging.
When we started to plant things, they would help.
Riley, who was much smaller, was more likely to pull seedlings
out of the ground than put them in.
When they were little, they would eat food straight from the garden.
Dirt and all, in Riley's case, when he was little.
They could kick a ball around without it ever going
over someone else's fence.
So we were choosing between this sort of sea side existence
and a tree change.
But we were really determined to try and live a little bit
more gently on the earth and to grow our own food.
We got our packers so that I could...
OK, everyone's going to...
I feel so embarrassed saying this.
Why? Why?
So I could spin my own fleece.
And because I feel like having done it and moved on,
I know what it is I sound like.
So how far into the spinning your own fleece journey did you get, Pip?
So we got two our packers, Pie and Ravi.
I named them after characters from books, of course,
from the life of Pie.
So Pie and Ravi, beautiful our packers.
One was a white alpaca and the other was chocolate brown.
And we planted fruit trees.

We got chooks.
The spinning lasted for about three years.
So I had about three years worth of fleece
that I would card and I would spin
and then I would knit into dreadful garments
because as much as I wanted to do this,
I wasn't actually very good at any part of the process.
So the yarn was very wobbly and not very smooth
and the beanies and the jumpers were all a little misshapen.
Were your family wearing them?
Or who were the recipients of these items?
Well, this is the thing.
By the time I actually got around to knitting a beanie,
the kids had grown up a little bit
and they hadn't been enrolled in the local Steiner School,
which would have made it all okay
because they would have fitted right in.
They were just at the local public school
and they just wanted a port power beanie.
They did not want mums.
Homespun alpaca.
Homespun hand dyed wobbly little alpaca beanie
and so I gave them to friends with younger children
who didn't know better.
So the idea was to grow your own food,
perhaps live more simply,
which all sounds very delightful and kind of wonderful
and maybe that's what was happening for your partner for Shannon.
How was it for you?
How were you finding yourself in this new environment?
Were you the sort of woman that this was working well for?
I think I was a bit like the yarn that I was spinning.
I was a bit wobbly and misshapen
and didn't quite know how I fitted into this dream.
Though I have to say that understanding didn't come
until a little bit later.
I was initially well and truly a participant in this adventure.
I absolutely loved the idea of growing our own food,
spinning my own yarn, making my own clothes.
It was one of those dreams.
It's like a postcard of a beautiful place.
But once you arrive, occasionally, that beautiful place,
the weather isn't always as perfect as it is on the postcard.
If you know what I mean.

And we found ourselves, essentially,
we brought a lot of the things we thought we were leaving behind,
so big jobs, time pressure, stress.
We thought we might leave them in Sydney,
but in fact, we brought it all with us and then we added a farm.
And so the tree change wasn't as graceful
as it often looks in magazines, you know,
Saturday magazines and on television programs about the good life.
It was a lot more difficult than that.
And that's partly because we didn't know what we were doing.
We were, both of us had grown up on the beach.
I'd grown up in an apartment
and we didn't know what we were doing.
Shannon was very capable and he did his best,
but even so, we planted an orchard
and just didn't get around to bottling all the fruit,
so the fruit just falls from the tree and rots.
And that's, I suppose, a bit of a metaphor for what was going on.
We invested in chickens,
but we couldn't keep the foxes out of the chuck yard
and so so many chickens died because of fox raids,
which is, you know, really very distressing.
The first time you sort of think,
oh, wow, that's a lesson, but the second and third time,
you feel like you've, your duty of care,
you have a duty of care and you feel like you've failed
a living being when foxes get them
and you kind of know why they're getting the chickens
and you haven't managed to keep the foxes away.
It's devastating.
And so, you know, I was spinning the,
I was spinning some wool, but not all of it.
And so piles and piles of alpaca fleece started
to pile up in the garage and become the home for vermin.
It sounds great, doesn't it?
Love the good life, it's excellent.
And then, and also the other thing was, you know,
we started to accumulate basically all of the accoutrements
of the good life.
So the, the, the kettle that you preserve fruit in,
we had this beautiful, someone gave us this wonderful old
kettle that you can put, you know,
the glass jars that preserve fruit.
We had all of that, we had the fleece,

the spinning wheel, the carter, the, you know,
I had a loom, all of this stuff,
we'd use it for a little while and then run out of time,
it's like we did when we were in Sydney.
And that's partly because when we moved from Sydney,
I brought it, I was doing a degree,
I was in the middle of my PhD, actually.
Suddenly I was busier than I'd ever been.
And it just wasn't, it wasn't working.
Why did you take off to Italy, the four of you?
See above, see all of the above because it wasn't working,
because we realised we didn't know how to do this.
And so we decided what we needed was work experience.
We needed to live and work with people who had been doing this
for a while and see how they did it.
So I had actually finished my degree by then
and had been working for a while at the Centre for Work and Life
actually with now Senator Barbara Pocock.
So I worked there for a number of years,
ironically, studying work-life balance.
Case study number one.
Exactly.
So that's what we did.
We looked at different types of jobs, women's work,
low-paid work and how generally people can integrate work and life.
And the irony being that I was sort of collapsing
under the stress of trying to integrate my work and my life.
So we decided that it wasn't working
and that going to Italy would be a good idea.
So we joined willing workers on organic farms.
We became woofers, essentially.
And that's a program that's run all around the world
and essentially you can go and live on a farm
for whatever period of time
and you work with the family that run that farm
in exchange for food and board.
And we contacted farms that would accommodate an entire family,
which is quite an ask.
But there were a number of farms that would take whole families
because the children don't work,
but they still get fed and housed, obviously.
And so we found four different farms that we would visit
while we were in Italy.
And we were in Italy for about six months

moving around the country, working on farms
and learning about how to live, essentially,
this life that we'd gone to Adelaide to live.
I love that.
You're doing the learning post the doing.
But, you know, a nice place to do learning, I'm imagining.
I mean, it sounds bucolic farming in Italy,
but what was the reality like?
Well, it often was, actually.
And also just in terms of learning after you've
given it a go.
I think, actually, that's how a lot of us move on.
We try something and fail.
And it's deciding that failure isn't an option
that makes you continue trying.
And so it was failing that probably was the best thing for us
because it meant that we went searching
for a way to do this thing that we were really invested in.
And when we went to Italy, we worked on four different farms
and they were so different from each other.
The first farm was, you know, their main product
was actually honey.
They produced honey.
They had a lot of beehives, not just on their farm,
but all around.
It was actually an abandoned village in the hills of Tuscany.
It was gorgeous.
And they were slowly restoring a lot of the buildings
in what was once, not even a village, a hamlet.
It was lovely, but incredibly basic.
We stayed in what was called the Woodhouse.
And there was no water.
There was, I think there was a light bulb.
There was no toilet.
It was very basic.
And yet it was just perfect.
The family were beautiful.
They worked so hard.
And we would work 10-hour days alongside them,
knowing that they were working another couple of hours
more than us.
The thing about being a woofer, a worker on organic farms
is that at the end of the day,
I don't have to do the paperwork or the admin.

At the end of the day, I don't have to clean the house.
I don't have to prepare meals for an entire family.
There's nothing else to do except work alongside this family.
They're the ones that carry all the stress.
And so even though we were working quite hard,
we really had left all the stress behind.
And we were with the kids so much of the time
at that farm in particular.
And we slept together, all four of us, every night.
It was really special to connect to each other.
We told the boys' stories about themselves
in the evening before bed.
And it was extremely special.
Other farms were more difficult for various reasons.
Sometimes it was because we were expected to go and work
kind of quite a long way from the kids.
And we found ourselves stressing about what the kids were up to
or whether they were lonely or whatever.
And so we had to make adjustments all the time,
which is what life is about and what travel is about.
And Pico Iyer, who is a travel writer I really admire,
he talks about travel.
You know, when you start traveling,
you travel to lose yourself.
And I think that's so true.
I think the thing about traveling when it really works
is it's when you lose yourself.
When you sort of lose your bearings,
you forget or have trouble remembering where you are
in time and space, but also in your mind and body.
You're taken somewhere else that's unfamiliar.
Then what happens with travel is you journey towards
an understanding of yourself.
You find yourself.
And I think that's what happened when we went to Italy.
We got lost.
Absolutely.
I got particularly lost in terms of,
did I actually want this thing?
We journeyed all the way to Italy, searching for.
But in searching for it,
I found something else that was more important.
Well, what was that, Pip?
What did that journey lead you to discover about yourself?

Yeah, so we had gone looking for the good life,
the typical good life,
the grow your own food kind of good life
that we'd gone to Adelaide for.
That's what we thought we'd find and come home with from Italy.
But in fact, the journey, staying on farms,
observing and working alongside the women in particular,
who lived on these farms,
gave me an understanding of what that kind of good life
really looks and feels like.
And it looks gorgeous.
It feels hard, very, very, very hard,
physically very hard, financially almost impossible.
And I realized that I didn't actually love digging in the dirt
as much as I thought I would.
I loved eating food that was homegrown.
I quite enjoyed cooking it.
I didn't mind preserving it.
But I realized it was actually Shannon's dream,
the whole growing your own food thing.
And I got closer and closer to understanding
that my dream was something different.
My dream actually was to write.
And the closer I came to understanding that,
I suppose the closer I also came to a sort of mini crisis
because writing is a very time consuming pursuit.
And I was watching all of the women at the farms
and realizing that they were working to grow food from dawn till dusk.
That's all they did.
And at the end of the day, they were exhausted.
And I couldn't imagine how I would fit writing into that kind of a life.
And so when we came back from Italy,
as incredible as that journey had been,
I didn't come home with what I thought I'd come home with.
I didn't come home with this new enthusiasm
for growing our own food and trying to make our five acres work.
I came home with a whole lot of doubts
about everything we had invested in in the Adelaide Hills.
And it took us some time to, I suppose,
talk about how Shannon's dream and my dream
could sit alongside each other.
Have you been able to do that?
Have you been able to find a way for that to work between you?
We have.

And in fact, it was as so many things are,
all you have to do is talk about it
and sometimes the solutions just present themselves.
For Shannon, he's not at all interested
in fitting me into his, you know,
shoehorning me into something I'm not interested in.
He's very interested in my happiness
and my sense of pursuing something that's meaningful to me.
And he recognised that me not writing
was something that was actually becoming a problem for me.
And so he was the one that suggested I write about our trip to Italy,
that I didn't need to be out in the garden pulling weeds.
He could do that himself.
And I could be inside contemplating
what that journey to Italy had meant
and what, in fact, I had brought home from that journey.
And out of that came my first book,
which was a travel memoir called One Italian Summer.
And it was, a lot of people say you don't write for therapy,
but actually sometimes you do.
And writing One Italian Summer for me
was like taking the journey again
but paying far closer attention to my emotions,
my responses to particularly watching the women
on the farms that we were at.
And when I really dug deep into that,
the thing that was not attractive about that kind of life
was how much time it took up.
And I realised that that's because I wanted to spend my time dreaming upwards.
I wanted to spend that time writing.
And those two activities were completely incompatible.
So you discovered that and between you as a couple and as a family,
you fostered that and you had your first book.
And then now these two companion novels,
The Dictionary of Lost Words and The Bookbinder of Jericho,
what is it about that world of Oxford and of dictionaries
and of book creation that grabbed you, do you think, Pip?
Why have all the stories in the world that you could have dreamed up?
Why is that the world that took your imagination for your first novels?
It's such a good question and I don't know that I can pinpoint an answer,
but what I can say is I am a curious person
and if something piques my curiosity, I like to investigate.
And what happened in terms of me being interested in writing about Oxford?
I simply read a book and it all comes back to reading in the end.

I read a book by Simon Winchester called *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, a really interesting book about the relationship between the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary and one of the people who sent in slips of paper with examples of how words were used in text. By the end of that book, I had an understanding of how the dictionary had been put together and I suppose my social science brain was curious about how gendered the project must have been because for a word to be in the dictionary, it has to have been written down.

And the Oxford English Dictionary was a project that was begun in the 1850s and finished in 1928. It was a Victorian era project.

At that time, the majority of books that you might find on a library bookshelf were written by men. The majority of science texts were written by men. The majority of journals of any kind or instruction manuals of any kind were written by men. And the people deciding on the definitions of these words were all men. It had to be a gendered text and I was curious about whether that mattered or not. Do words mean different things to men and women?

And if they do, is it possible that some words might be missing or some meanings might be missing from that first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary? So that was my area of curiosity.

I first tried to sort of answer these questions just by Googling, just by sort of applying, I suppose, a little bit of my social science research skills to the question. I couldn't actually answer it that way and I decided that the best way to explore the question was actually through fiction by putting a little girl under the sorting table where all of the words of the English language are being defined and seeing how she responds to the words and how the words might respond to her. And yeah, and when I did that little bit of research, I kept coming across this one little anecdote in the history books and that one anecdote was about a missing word.

One word apparently, just one, had gone missing from the Oxford English Dictionary and that word was *bond made* and *bond made* means slave girl. You know, that word in itself is just so provocative because it's about women, girls, and it's about women who are enslaved or bonded or don't have any agency. So I suddenly realised that there was so much I could play with in terms of fiction and the fact that no one knows how the word *bond made* went missing meant that I had *carte blanche* to make that up.

Well, the story that you created out of that spark of curiosity has been embraced by people around the world.

Where are you and your family off to this Saturday night, Pip?

We're off to the opening night of the play of the *Dictionary of Lost Words* at the Opera House in Sydney.

How does that feel?

Honestly, my 15-year-old self would never have thought that a poem in *Dolly* magazine would eventually turn into me going to an opening night of a theatre production of a book I'd written. It feels extraordinary. It feels surreal.

It feels very humbling.

I've never felt more humbled than when I went to the rehearsal room a number of weeks ago now.

I went to the rehearsal room and Jonathan Oxlade, who has done the incredible set design, he took me on a tour, not just of the rehearsal room, but also of the room where they were building the set.

And then he took me in to meet the costume designers and the lighting designer.

And I realised suddenly how much was being invested in this story that I had written in private and almost in secret, actually, because I wasn't sure whether I was able to write the Dictionary of Lost Words.

I wasn't sure I was able to give that idea, give it everything it needed.

And so I wrote the story in a way in secret.

I didn't tell my publishers about it.

I just didn't know how it would turn out.

And it was really humbling to see that so many people were investing time and energy and love and creativity and money into this story.

I feel quite separate from it, though, as well.

I feel like this now is a created work that belongs to other creative people.

I often feel like I'm the parent of a talented child and the book is my talented child.

And my job really is to just make sure that people treat it kindly.

And once I find kind people, I'm very happy for them to take my book and care for it.

Pip, thank you. Thank you so much for being my guest on Conversations.

Oh, it's such a pleasure, Sarah. Thank you for having me.

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