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In 1961, an Australian woman named Nell Law snuck onto a Danish ship that was heading to Antarctica.

Nell's husband was a polar explorer and scientist and she wanted the chance to see the place he'd been telling her about for so many years.

Nell was herself a painter and she also knew that there'd be sights and colours to paint in that vast icy wilderness that were unlike anything else she'd ever seen.

So she became a stowaway and ended up as the first Australian woman to set foot on Antarctica.

Rachel Mead has had her own adventures in Antarctica

but she was astonished to discover this forgotten predecessor.

So Rachel has turned Nell's story into a novel called The Art of Breaking Ice.

Hi Rachel. Hi Sarah.

So tell me how on earth did you first hear about this amazing story of Nell the Stowaway artist?

Well I just came across it by complete accident in a book that I happened to be reading on Antarctic art and artists that have been trying to put Antarctica onto the page.

And there was a gorgeous colour plate of a painting that had a huge iceberg and it was emerald green with these little tiny penguins dotted along it like Morse code and I was struck by the painting and then looked down at the caption and in a footnote at the bottom of the page it just said that this was a painting by Nell Law, the first Australian woman to go to Antarctica.

And I was just completely floored because I had never heard her name before and as somebody, I've considered myself a bit of an Antarctic tragic, I've done a lot of reading and research on Antarctica and as a feminist I had never heard her name.

How did you begin to try to find something out about her?

Where did you go first off?

Well I immediately just googled her and at that point there was just a very, very brief few lines on Wikipedia and it just listed her as the wife of Dr Phillip Law and gave a little bit about the fact that he'd been the director of ANARI from 1948 to 1966 and then right at the bottom it said that she was the first Australian woman to go to Antarctica and that she'd stowed away to get there and immediately my writer's antenna started to tingle.

Well before we get to Nell and her extraordinary story tell me a little bit about the man who was the focus of that Wikipedia entry, husband Dr Phillip Law, why is he important?

Well I find it really surprising that he's not more famous

because immediately when you think of Australian explorers in Antarctica we think of Sir Douglas Mawson but Phil Law was actually responsible for Australia's permanent presence down there.

He was a physicist and so he went down just as a general expeditioner in 1947 and then within 12 months he was the director of ANARI and he led about 18 years worth of expeditions.

Some years he went down there a couple of times.

Rachel what does the acronym ANARI stand for?

So today we have the Australian Antarctic Division but before it became the AAD it was ANARI which is the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition.

And what sort of director was Phil Law?

Basically his vision was responsible for moving Australia's presence in Antarctica from one of just sort of territorial claims and exploration into Australia establishing and maintaining a permanent presence down there in terms of the three stations Mawson, Casey and Davis and he oversaw Australia move into the situation with the Antarctic Treaty.

So when the Antarctic Treaty came into force in late 1961 Antarctica became for all of the 12 signatory nations a place of peace and the free access and trading of scientific information so basically it became a land of science rather than of sort of territorial claims by the various nations.

And when you say Rachel that he's not as well known as some of those other explorers is it because there were no disasters?

Is that the folder thing that went too well?

If people had died on his watch he would be very famous but no under his leadership all of the expeditions were incredibly successful and he was responsible for exploring and mapping a really significant stretch of Antarctic coastline and also exploring into the interior.

So he's won basically every polar award that is on offer he's been recognised in Commonwealth Honours lists and just remarkably well appreciated but only amongst people who really know about Australian Antarctic history.

So what do you know about Nell and Phil's story?

I mean do you know how they met or when they were married?

They were engaged before the war.

Nell was at university.

She'd won a scholarship to study at Melbourne Uni and she'd previously been trained and worked as a teacher.

They met at a dance and apparently they were very swiftly within a few months really they were engaged but then with the onset of World War II they decided to wait

but then it became clear as the war dragged on
they were going to be waiting a very long time
so they decided not to wait until the war had ended
and Phil was teaching at Melbourne University
and was offered a position going down to do some work
I think he was looking at magnetism and auroras down there
and then very swiftly discovered that that was the career for him
and he moved up the ranks very swiftly.
Well you say that they didn't want to have to wait too much longer to get married
but there was a lot of waiting from Nell's point of view in their relationship
given the amount of time he would spend down in Antarctica each year
I mean how often was he away from home?
How much time did he spend away from their home together in Antarctica?
Well even though he went down there every year from 1947 to 66
I believe he didn't overwinter
he only stayed down there for the summer months
but over that summer season that would be from basically October to March each year
and when he was often in the Antarctic what was Nell up to?
I like to think of her as reveling in her freedom
but I think that might be a little bit presumptuous
but yeah they didn't have children
but she was a very gifted painter
so in those months of the year she would start to take her painting a bit more seriously
And was she written about in newspapers at the time, Rachel?
It's a bit sad really
she was called Australia's longest suffering Antarctic widow
Oh gosh, I know!
So by the time she went down there
Phil had been down in Antarctica working for 12 summer seasons
so for 12 years, 5 months of the year she was on her own
and that was because back then no women were allowed to work in Antarctica
all of the expeditioners were men
and the ones who would overwinter
they were down there for up to 15 months at a stretch
Phil would return with interesting things from his time spent in Antarctica
What were our Nell and Phil's dinner parties famous for?
Before the mid 90s when the Madrid protocol came in
which was the piece of legislation about the protection of Antarctica
it was really common for expeditioners to sort of supplement their meals
with a bit of Antarctic wildlife
so every year Phil would come back with cuts of meat that were quite astounding
so he would bring bits of seal and penguin back
and then Nell would stage these elaborate Antarctic feasts
So you saw this footnote about this woman

and all of your senses was interested in her and her story
once you'd exhausted what was available in Wikipedia
how did you set out to find out more?
Well I started internet research to begin with
and there wasn't that much
but the few leads that I was able to tease out
led me to the National Library in Canberra
where they have in their special collections
Australian Antarctic history is one of their major categories of interest
so when Phil died in 2010
he acquiesced all of his papers to the National Library
and it turned out that because of his incredible career
there were 100 archive boxes of material
Phil Law's segment of the Australian Antarctic history collection is the largest
so I went to the National Library
and it turned out that one of those 100 archive boxes
contained material on Nell Law
What was it like to come upon that box?
How did you know?
Was it straight away?
Was it labelled?
This is Nell's box or how did you discover it?
No, no, no it was just labelled with this archive category
but I lifted the lid off
and there are these beautiful sort of very clean pristine envelopes in there
sliding them out
it was a very visceral experience
and inside one of those envelopes was Nell's diary
from her Macquarie Island and Antarctic journeys
and it was beautiful
it had this marbled cover
and I flipped it open
and she'd written it all in green biro
and there was her handwriting
and it was a very special experience
Jackbot, did you let out a little squeal?
Did the librarians come running?
Did you react?
Well, there was definite racing heart situation
You never know, really
you read the list of what's meant to be there
and just hope and pray that when you slide everything open
that what you hope is there
is actually there and that it contains

the material that you want to be reading
So you just mentioned Rachel
her trips to Antarctica and to Macquarie Island
tell me about that
She made two journeys as a stowaway
so the very first one was at the end of 1960
and she went to Macquarie Island
which is a really significant time to have gone
because it was only the year before
that Australia had changed its policy
on allowing female scientists to go to Macquarie Island
up until the end of 1959
the only women employed by Inari were secretaries
and administrators at the headquarters
so the policy had changed the previous year
and four female scientists had gone down
Macquarie Island is this remote island
about halfway between New Zealand and Antarctica
So how did she stowaway?
Well apparently Phil had sort of raised the question
of taking Nell down as an official passenger
in the past and had been told no
and he was basically thinking
not only is it really unfair that Nell
year after year is left at home
and at that point no one had been down
for as many years in a row as Phil Law
so she really was at that stage
the longest suffering Antarctic widow
but because Phil was the expedition leader
he had a cabin that had two bunks
but he was in there on his own
so he knew that she wasn't going to be taking space
that would otherwise go to an expeditioner
and so he was very keen for Nell to go down
and just see what it was that kept him going back
year after year so that first time
basically he snuck her on board
but because there were other women already going down there
it didn't leak to the papers or anything
they managed to keep it completely on the down low
and Nell absolutely reveled in it
she didn't suffer from a scaric of seasickness or anything
she did lots of work down there

and it was the first time she'd ever left the country
so this was her first sort of overseas trip
and she absolutely adored it
so when they got back
she got back I think in December 1960
and basically said right
I really want to go on the next one
and so together she and Phil sort of hatched the plot
for her to do exactly the same thing
but go to Antarctica
which was a bigger deal because
there was a very strict at that stage
no women allowed policy
Why was that Rachel? Why was there such a strict
no women policy in Antarctica?
What threat did we pose?
It was all of those terrible old assumptions
about not being strong enough
being too emotional
not being able to handle it
and also being too much of a distraction for the men
that there were no facilities down there
they just basically didn't feel that women
were sort of up to the task of being
equal partners in expedition work
and that really didn't change in Australia
Australia didn't amend its policy until 1973
So as you're reading her diaries
of this first voyage to the Southern Ocean
and the plans for this next feat
where she wanted to go all the way to Antarctica
what's the tone like?
What kind of person emerges from her diaries?
Well she was actually quite nervous about it
she wasn't afraid of the journey
she was afraid of heights
and she was a bit nervous I think
about the impact of it on Phil's career as well
she realised that this time
there probably would be ramifications
on his career for going down there
whereas I think Phil by that stage in his career
he had spent so many years
desperately fighting for funding

to bring his vision of Australia
to this world-class scientific facility
into being
and having to justify every decision
and being told that he couldn't have as much money
as he potentially wanted
I think there was a little bit of
rebellion in him that he sort of wanted to
if you won't give me the money
that I really need
then I'm just going to bring Nell
Yeah exactly
so it was a bit of a rebel in him as well
As they're planning or she's thinking through
this attempt to go all the way to Antarctica
what sort of lists is she making in her diaries
about the things that she'll need to bring
what was she packing for such an adventure?
The lists were, yeah
they brought me so much joy
she was really taken with this new fangled
fabric called nylon
and she was very excited about the fact that
it was going to be so quick dry
so she could just do her washing
in the basin and hang it out to dry
she was also banging up against
the fact that the clothes
and provisions that she needed
were not made
there was no such thing as a female
expedition wear back then
so she was having to either wear men's clothes
for the big insulated jackets
and pants and things or sort of make do
there are the photos that I have of her
on the ice, it looks like she's wearing
little sort of Dunlop sneakers
but I do know that she took
golf shoes down there
he was having to advise the
female scientists that were going to
Macquarie Island about there
the gear that they needed to take as well

and so there were no boots
for women for those sorts of extreme
environments so he recommended golf shoes
because they had the little bubbly cleats
on the bottom for a little bit more traction
honestly as somebody who's tried to walk on ice
I cannot imagine trying to make that work
with golf shoes on, oh my goodness
when voyages into the southern oceans
were being made back then in the 1960s
were they on Australian ships Rachel?
No, the Anari basically
chartered Danish ships
and what was Nellan and Phil's plan
I mean were they going to have to let this Danish crew know
that she was coming on board or were they going to try to keep it secret from everybody
Well Phil did leak it to the captain
the captain was in on the plot
and also was open to it
he didn't have any arguments with it
and I'm pretty sure he probably let the crew know
just so that when they're sneaking
all of Nell's baggage on board
in the dead of night that there are no
eyebrows being raised there with the crew
but the expeditioners were certainly in the dark about it
and the other people that they were keen wouldn't find out
were the press and politicians
but how did that go wrong?
How was this secret plan to be a stowaway
discovered before she took off?
She knew that she wanted to use the opportunity
for art so she went around
and she was collecting all of her art supplies
and this is the height of summer
so she was having to ask for
for winter clothes and art supplies
that wouldn't freeze in the height of summer
and it started to raise eyebrows
and apparently very swiftly
got back to a journalist
that oh Phil Law's wife
is shopping for thermal underwear
you know what's going on here

and so it was her shopping practices that really
unfortunately spilled the beans
and at the very last minute
a journalist contacted
the Department of External Affairs
which was the government department responsible for
Australia in Antarctica
and you know what is your comment on Phil Law's wife
going to Antarctica and they were
oh what that's so unfortunately
just it was hours
before they were due to set sail
now had already snuck
all of her gear on board
in the dead of night beforehand
and pulled all of his clothes
all of Phil's clothes to the front
so that if anyone looked in the
in the cabin that they wouldn't see
any of her underwear
or sort of brightly coloured scarves or anything
it was just by pure chance
that the Minister for External Affairs
happened to be on board the ship
having a tour of it
it was Senator Gorton
who later became Prime Minister
but Phil realised that the cat
was out of the bag
Phil just came to him and said
look this is what's happening
I really want Nell to come with me
she's either going to have to
be bundled off the ship
and it's going to look really bad
or you can give us
please can we have your permission
and he took pity on them
and said yep that's absolutely okay
if anyone asked you can say
that you have my official
approval for it
at the very last minute
they sailed

Senator Gorton gave his approval
and she was allowed to stay
how was that reported on in the press
at the time?
There was a huge controversy about it
she was in
to begin with in blissful ignorance
about all of it because
sailing away that was all
apparently Phil did
receive a few cables to say
there's going to be a bit of
a media storm
when you return
but there was a huge
controversy back home
while she was down on the ice
that and
there were questions to Parliament
and there were news stories
yeah it was
and basically
the people
were very concerned about
you know a woman
being alone on a ship with 70 men
it was all a bit shocking
so was there her safety
or the morality or just it was an improper
thing for a woman to do
was that the
atmosphere of those descriptions
they were quite reserved it was
you know much more conservative time
and even though she was a married woman
it certainly
raised a lot of eyebrows
I think they were concerned about
the impact for the men
like how were they going to cope
with having to with a woman
down there oh my goodness
as you say Nell was blissfully unaware of this
as she's just chugging southwards

on this on this Danish ship
how did she describe
that journey and her first impressions
of this extraordinary continent
she was completely
taken with the
just astounding beauty of the place
and because she was a visual artist
she was
just so aware
of the colours and the
her descriptions were
just delightful really
coming across icebergs
for the first time and her descriptions
of the different forms
that they talk and she was
sort of delighted and appalled
by the wildlife
I think she had a bit of a delicate nose
and felt that penguins and seals
were
they in her words
they reeked so
her journal was
really delightful in that way
and what sort of work did she create there
what sort of drawings or paintings
was she able to do while in Antarctica
oh she did
so much work while she was down there
in every form so there were
pen and ink sketches
and watercolours
and oil paintings
and in situations
where she wasn't able
to work in the
form that she wanted to
say because it is
getting set up
so with watercolours
it was very problematic because
the water freezes and the paint

sort of sticks
your paintbrush to the paper
and oil paints
it's not an easy thing
there's wind
rain and sleet and
so in situations
where the weather wasn't ideal
she would
sketch and then make extensive
notes on colour
and form and then she would work
on those when she got back
so by 1964
she had enough work
for a full solo
exhibition
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Conversations
Rachel I've never been
to Antarctica
but I imagine it as
a world of white
is that what it's like?
Yeah when you're down there
to begin with
it is very
there are only three colours in the world
there's blue and white and black
the black of the mountain
and rock but
after a few days
you start to get
acclimatised to the
strangeness of it all
in a way and then you're able
to see the
variations of shade
within the blue

and within the white
so yeah when you
think about ice it isn't just
white there's like an entire
spectrum of white in a way
that goes all the way from
sort of deep
purpley indigo sort of right through
to
sort of more warmer tones so
yeah it is really surprising
how much colour is down there
How long was
was Nell in Antarctica for?
Well she
stepped onto the Antarctic continent
on the 8th of February
in 1961
and they returned
in late March
What kind of interest was there in her once
she returned to Australia
after making this historic
and slightly forbidden trip?
Well they before
they got back to Melbourne
they were very very worried
about the reception
they thought that
the controversy would
keep raging and that
and I think Phil was
really ready to lose his
position as a result of it
but surprisingly
by the time
they'd returned there was
so much interest in
her being on the ship
and to the extent that
I think for the first time
ever it was Nell
who overshadowed Phil
there was

the press were just fascinated
by how she coped
with being the only woman amongst
around 70 men on the ship
yeah so basically
she was the star of the show
and it seems like
she was sort of forgiven by officialdom
as well because they named a ship
an Antarctic ship after her
Yes that's right
another of the sister ships
in that Danish family of ships
the Nella Dan was named after her
So did she make any return visits
Rachel?
No no she didn't
I think they
Nell and Phil sort of decided
they'd pushed it far enough
with that one journey
but she continued to paint Antarctica
and she also
Australia didn't change its policy
on women going to Antarctica
you know for
another 12 years
she did have a legacy
in terms of helping
other women in her situation
so she started
the Antarctic Wives and Kinfolk Association
which was an organisation
that supported
the families of
expeditioners who were doing it
tough for months at a time at home
and that organisation
still exists today
You said that this was her first
trip out of Australia
I mean talk about doing things with a bang
Did she go elsewhere in her later years
her and Phil?

Yes she definitely got the
travel bug after Antarctica
She and Phil went to
places like Mexico
and Norway and while
her health held out
they travelled widely
And I think in a sense
she did return to Antarctica
because where are her ashes?
Yes Nell died
in 1990
and
Phil died in
2010 and together
their ashes have been
taken back down to Mawson Station
and they're
interred down there which is a huge
honour and I think
speaks to the
enormous and important
legacy the laws
have in terms of Australian
Antarctic history
It really is just such a wonderful story
and astonishing that although she was so well
known and celebrated at the time
that it kind of got lost
in the decade since
So I want to know Rachel
about your own experiences
of this wild
place. How did you first get the chance
to go to Antarctica?
I first went down there
Hots nearly 20 years ago
I was working
as an environmental
campaigner and I'd been
fascinated by Antarctica
ever since I was small and reading those
you know those adventure stories
of Scott and Shackleton and

Amidstson and I'd just been fascinated
with Antarctica for a very
long time and
I got the opportunity
to do a course
in Antarctic studies
at the University of Canterbury
in Christchurch
and I just
I'd just got my dream
job working as a climate
campaigner for Greenpeace and it was one
of those oh what do I do
and the
thing that swayed me
was that the course
involved a couple of weeks
going down
being on the ice in Antarctica
and camping on the ice
sheet for a couple of weeks
and so yes
I gave up the dream job and
made the decision to go
and study for
four months in New Zealand
and get the chance to go to Antarctica
So this invitation
to camp out on
the ice, what's
that feel like? What's the air like
in a freezing place like that?
It's very otherworldly
down there it's
so cold that the air
doesn't hold a great deal of moisture
so you can see
so far it's like you're
wearing the world's most incredible
glasses
everything is so bright and
in focus and the air
is very dry
it feels really

silly to way to describe it
but it really does feel like you are
on another planet, it's so different
And were you struck like now was
by the colours and
the intensity of colour?
Well, like I was saying
it took a couple of days
for my eyes to really
get past the
otherworldliness of it and start
to really see it clearly
and every day is a little
bit different as well
And hopefully you had better kit than golf shoes
Oh my goodness, we were so well
kitted out and looking back
now that I've had
both the experience of being in Antarctica
and doing the research about Nell
I cannot help but giggle
about the things that she thought
she would need like perfume
like Nell took a couple of bottles of perfume
and I was like no, deodorant
that's it
So one of the first tasks
that you were set on this course was to build
an emergency ice shelter
Please tell me how to do that
should I ever find myself in that situation
Rachel, what do I do?
Well, you need a bit of baggage
so Nell would have been fine
So what you do, you put
all of your baggage into a big pile
and try and
make it as dome shaped as possible
and then you get your shovel
and then you dig madly
furiously piling
ice on top of your
baggage until
you know, until it's a

quite a thick layer of ice
completely covering your
dome of baggage and then you
compress it down
just whack it with the shovel
and stamp on it and
make sure that it's all
as compressed as possible
and then
you dig a little hole
well, a tunnel really
sort of like a very in a shallow
shape and you dig down
under and you come up
hopefully inside
the dome that you've
that you've compacted
and then you start pulling
your luggage
out through the tunnel that you've
just created and then
that hollows it out so you've got
what looks like a very sort of
like a ramshackle igloo
basically
What a great strategy though
I mean that just
seems a brilliant thing to do
a brilliant way to approach it
so you pull out your luggage
and then you've got your little hollow
and what was it like to sleep inside
your ice cave?
Well, that was one of the things
that I think was the
to make sure that we didn't do a half
ass job, part of the training
was that everybody had
to spend a night sleeping
inside their ice shelter
which is interesting because
with we're there in the
over the
not just in summer but we were there

over the longest day so in Antarctica
that means that the sun doesn't set
so you see
the sun sort of do this big lazy
loop in the sky
but that also means that
you've got to try and sleep
when there's light and the light
comes through the ice so you've got to
while you're lying in the ice
shelter you have got to pull
your
beanie down or I use
my neck gaiter
the tube of sort of polar
fleece that you wear around your neck
I put that on my head
pulled it down over my eyes to
try and create a bit of artificial
night so I could sleep
but I still had to use
sunscreen because
sleeping in sunscreen because it's still
so light. That's
extraordinary. What a different environment
to have to sleep in.
Tell me what were you eating while you were
out there on the ice?
Well we were eating
packets of dehydrated food
you know you put water in them
we were using those
old fashioned primus stoves
that they look like something out of the
out of the 1930s
they were sort of very
very old fashioned
made me feel like I was on Mawson's expedition
or something using those stoves
yeah so I think that
exactly the same sorts of dehydrated food
that you use when you're going on a long distance hike
and it was really funny
because you're just

you're so tired
by the end of the day
we were working really hard
expending lots of energy and so we would
make these
rehydrate our food
and I was eating it thinking this is
delicious who knew that this sort
of packet food could be
so
I'm going to tell my partner
about this when we get home
this is ridiculously delicious
and then when I got home
and tried it we're eating it
thinking oh this is disgusting
Why does it have an appetizer of
like slaving away and freezing temperatures
for hours beforehand?
Exactly I remember
reading that other expeditioners
who have done you know
trans-antarctic expeditions
would eat blocks of butter
and find them entirely delicious
so yeah
luckily I didn't get that hungry
One of the things you were expending energy on
was hand digging
a pit
why did you have to do that
and why did you have to do it by hand?
Well the course that we were doing
was basically
trying to give us like a taster
like to do field work in Antarctica
sort of either as scientists
or field assistants
so we were given
a whole
array of different
activities to do
so one of them was to
was to dig a pit

and it was maybe three meters deep
we had to use ladders to get in
and out of it
one of the walls was
a very smooth cross-section
of the ice and so
we were looking at the
stratigraphy sort of the layering
of the ice so
it was basically to give us an understanding
of how through time
the year after year
snow
deposition and compaction
sort of layers up so when you
slice down through it
you can see
there's a bit of evidence about
the different meteorological conditions
how much snow fell in each year
and some of the layers
you could see that there had been
that winds had blown
dirt and dust
over you know because there's
very little dirt or dust
in Antarctica so if you
if you saw a little layer there
that looked like a sort of a pencil line
of graphite you knew that
if you analysed it it could be ash
from fires in Australia
or yeah it was really
it was fascinating
and it was sort of
an analogous to
climatologists doing
ice coring
but those ice cores go down
kilometres
into the polar plateau
and each of those cores
yeah you could
slice them and see

the year after year
the ice and snow
were in a different position
but then the climatologists
also analysed
the air
to see the different percentages
of carbon dioxide and oxygen
and other gases in the
atmosphere so it gives
climate data into
deep time
so this pit was sort of to give us
an understanding of the layering
and stratigraphy
so you were getting up close to ice
the sort of amazing array
of animals and birds
that are there in Antarctica
which stole your heart?
We had to do some
wet or seal
censising so basically
just walking to the edge of the ice sheet
and looking for
wet or seals
Are they easy to spot?
Well they're pretty big yes
and when they're on
the ice it's because
they've just returned
from feeding
and often travelling
quite deep and great distances
to feed
so they're having a bit of a rest
and they're really not interested in humans
and they have
they're very very sweet
you've probably seen photographs of them
and they're the ones that
they have a sort of resting smile face
basically
their eyes are shut

their sweet dreamy little grin
on their faces there
So how did that first trip
to Antarctica
change you do you think?
Well it was
while I was down there
that I met a writer
from New Zealand
a novelist Lawrence Fernley
she was down there as
an Antarctic Arts Fellow
and Australia has a similar
arts program
and over time
I'd started
writing a little bit of poetry
just as a hobby
and not taking it very seriously
at all
but it was Lawrence who
she gave me a book
by Stephen Fry
that owed less travelled
and because I had been wanting to try
and write about it
but finding it really challenging and difficult
so she gave me this book as a way
encouraged me to write a bit more poetry
and use poetry as a way
of turning
my experiences into
creativity
and I really just
took to it like a duck to water
and I kept writing once I was home
so yeah
that was a really potent connection
to make down there and eventually
sort of had
a big impact on changing
the trajectory of my career
really. You made a second trip
to Antarctica in 2013

this time on the Polar Pioneer
and this time you were
heading to western Antarctica
which means you had to go
across the infamous Drake Passage
what was that like?
I was so seasick
that this is so
embarrassing I had to be sedated
you poor thing
was that a surprise
or did you know that you you know
these are not your thing?
Well I knew that I had
a tendency to
seasickness. Our family
story is of my grandfather
who apparently could get seasick
standing on the end of a jetty
but I was a bit taken aback by
how
extreme my seasickness was
it was quite embarrassing
my husband cast
iron gut he did not have
so while I was just
out for the count on the bunk
he was enjoying
every moment of it so thankfully
I have photos of all the things
that he saw but I have
no memory of that crossing
whatsoever. Well you were
a hold up in your cabin so once you were
well enough to actually come outside
what do you remember seeing
what struck you about that part of the continent?
Oh well it was
the phenomenal
wildlife and the diversity
of wildlife so lots
of different species of whales
seals
leopard seals and

what else seals and crabby
seals and penguins
so many different species
of penguins. If you want to see
wildlife then going by sea
to the west Antarctic peninsula
is my recommendation.
And there's also this sort of incredible
human stories around this part
of Antarctica too isn't this
where Shackleton was stranded?
Yes well the journey
the voyage that I was
doing was meant to be
following in his footsteps.
So you'd made these
two mammoth journeys
really to Antarctica
but once you found out about Nell's
story Rachel did that give
you a different sense
of the place or a different sense
of human experience
of Antarctica how has her story
been knowing it shifted your views
of Antarctica?
Well it made me very appreciative
of the immense privilege
of going to Antarctica
considering that
in my mother's lifetime
Australian women
have been able to go there
and the vast
the vast changes
when you look at
the different stations
that are there now basically
within half a century
looking at the
world class facilities
that are down there now.
What do you think Nell and Phil Law
would make of the novel

that you've written about them?

Oh

Well I think Phil
appreciated how
trailblazing

his wife was
he was definitely proud of her
and the fact that she was the first Australian
woman there. He was very keen
for her diaries

to be published
was very proud of
the phenomenal artwork that she did
down there so I would hope
that they would
be pleased that

I was shedding a light
on the life of an
extraordinary and important woman
in our history.

Do you think you'll go back?

I would love to go back
without a question

in a heartbeat I would love to go back

I'm also very

aware that

it's a vulnerable place

it may not be for the best for Antarctica

if I go back

I would need a very good reason

to do so so I just need to

work on coming up with one.

I hope you get to bring a copy of your novel
and kind of show it to

the place that Nell and Phil's ashes are in turn

I think that would be only fitting

oh that would be lovely

It's been really fascinating to learn

about Nell and to hear your story too

Rachel thank you for being my guest
on Conversations

Oh thanks so much Sarah

it's been an honour

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