

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

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Susie Miller has always had a boldness about her.

She had it as a little kid tearing around St Kilda on her bike,

working a bunch of part-time jobs,

including a groundbreaking stint as a paper girl,

and she brought that boldness to her work as a lawyer

advocating for homeless teenagers in King's Cross.

When Susie took the risk of leaving her legal career to write plays,

it was because she wanted to show the lives she'd encountered as a lawyer,

to as big an audience as possible.

Susie believed that these kinds of stories might help change the world,

and the world has sat up and listened.

Susie's play, Primer Facy, became a huge hit,

playing in Sydney, then in London's West End,

and then on Broadway in New York.

It tells the story of Tessa, a young barrister who is brilliant

at defending men accused of sexual assault,

until she herself becomes a victim.

Primer Facy won a swag of awards.

There's a movie adaptation in the works,

and Susie has now turned Primer Facy into a novel.

Hi, Susie. Hi, Sarah.

So as I say, you started life in St Kilda.

What are your memories of the area in the 60s and 70s?

I feel like I was totally raised in St Kilda.

I mean, St Kilda is the most vivid place in my memory.

So I started very young in a cul-de-sac that was in the same cul-de-sac

that my cousins and my auntie June lived in.

So that was my mother's sister.

So we all kind of grew up as one big gaggle of Catholic kids

at the local Catholic school,

and we'd walk to the local park together in the local milk bar together

as a bit of a gang.

There were four girls in the other family,

and there was myself, my brother, and my sister in our family.

You know, we climbed trees, and we just were everywhere at once.

You know, in those days where there was very little vigilance

about where you were.

How did your mum and dad meet?

My parents met ice skating at St Merritt's Ice Skating Rink,

which is right on the Esplanade of St Kilda across from Luna Park,

where they'd go after ice skating.

But my mum was a lousy ice skater.

She wasn't very coordinated, my mum,

but my dad was a brilliant ice skater.
He was one of those speed skaters, and he played ice hockey.
So my mother would say she would cling to the edges of the skate rink
and look over and go, look at that Rob Miller.
Imagine being able to skate with someone like him,
and then eventually he saw her,
and they kind of had a bit of a conversation.
But that wasn't the beginning.
Then my mother left school after year nine,
and she went and worked in a whole variety of jobs,
including for the Department of Meteorology.
And she saved all this money,
and there was a car that they had that they shared amongst a whole lot of families,
you know, like families that they were related to.
And my mother was driving that little car down the street,
and my dad pulled up next to her in his car in St Kilda,
and there was a red light, and he said,
Oh, it's nice to see you, what are you up to?
And she said, Well, actually,
I'm catching the boat to London tomorrow at 19.
What was she doing?
She decided she was going to have an adventure.
She was going to go around the world.
I mean, all she did was go to Europe and London,
but I have the diary of that,
which is the most extraordinary entry of entering on the ship,
and then going into a smaller boat down the Thames.
So this kind of been a usual thing for girls in her world to take off at 19.
And the excitement of her going, Oh, there's Big Ben.
Oh, my goodness, there's the houses of parliament,
and there's Westminster Abbey.
And I'm reading it, and I can hear her voice as a 19-year-old,
so thrilled and excited,
and she'd had an affair on the boat and all sorts of things.
I mean, she was much cuttier than I was, actually.
So she'd met your dad ice skating, run into him again,
literally at the lights in this little car,
and then when she came back to Australia,
they followed up after that meeting at the lights,
because he actually put in his diary when she was coming back
and called up her family home in Barkley Street, St Kilda,
where my pop and Nan lived until they died virtually,
and they started dating from then on.
I think she was dating somebody else,

and then there was this, you know,
he was dating someone else as well,
and it was all a big swirl,
and before you knew it, they were together, so.
How did their families react to them getting together?
Terribly.

Well, actually, my mum's family were pretty fine about it,
but my dad's family were Protestant,
and my mum's family were Catholic,
and my mum was very upset about the fact that at their wedding,
she walked into the bathroom to see her future mother-in-law
and sister-in-law weeping in the bathroom,
because she was Catholic and her brother-in-law.

He never came to the wedding,
and my dad never spoke to his brother again,
so there was a sort of mini Protestant Catholic divide
in my family from then on.

But your dad had had a lot to do with Catholics
when he was growing up, where was his house?

Oh, yes, of course.

So there was a school called St. Colman's in Carlisle Street,
which is no longer there, actually.

I think it's now a different denominational school,
but it was a very disadvantaged Catholic school,
and in the playground of that school,
which is actually the school myself and my cousins went to,
and my brother and sister,
in the playground of that school,
my dad had a little house that he lived with his mother and father
and his three younger siblings,
and it was basically he would have to walk to the Presbytery
and pay the rent each week, and he got treated terribly.

Why were they living there on school grounds?

Very, very poor family, struggling.

My grandfather was a forklift driver,
but also had an injury of some sort.

I mean, he died under the train, actually,
on the Bella, you know, in Bella Clara Station.

So that was a really tragic ending,
and my dad was only 19 at the time
and had to go and identify his body.

But, you know, and from then,
my grandmother worked all her life as a machinist,
like my paternal grandmother.

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So she was, you know, very actively trying to sort of support the family, but they didn't like the Catholics because they looked down on them because they were so poor, which is ironic, because the Catholics were pretty poor, too. Poorer than you. Who's poorer than who?

Yeah, I know.

So there was this religious divide in your family.

How did that play out for you? Were you religious as a kid?

Well, yes. I mean, you know, you go to a Catholic school, and before you know it, but by the time I was in year two, I realised that if you told the nuns you wanted to be a nun, you got special treatment, didn't you?

But yeah, I was probably religious till about year two, and then changed schools and was still Catholicism was all I knew, but I did think it was quite odd for a long time, and I'm certainly not religious now.

How did it play out in your imagination, Susie, like your early writing experiments as a kid?

I used to write the nativity play every single Christmas and make my poor younger brother play every other character.

Is there much scope for inventiveness in the nativity play?

It seems to me a fairly pre-planned story.

Totally. I mean, it was the most unexciting thing you can imagine.

But I did bring other characters in and gave the innkeepers whole backstories, and I remember the little drummer boy always had a role because he was something I was quite interested in, even though he wasn't really part of the TVC.

And my little sister always played Mary, and she just told a doll.

So, yeah, the neighbours would come, and half of most of those weren't Catholics, so it wasn't interesting.

They have to pay their two cents at the door or something, but I have to say that I think Catholicism and Judaism are two religions or two ethnicity religions that are predominantly within theatre.

I think a lot of Catholicism is the magic realism and the way that you're taught to believe in certain things and sort of have very physicalisations of ashes and incense. And it's very sensory, and it's very theatrical in a way, as a way of bringing you into a sort of system to believe in a certain way.

What story did your mum tell you about your arrival in the world?

Oh, my poor mother and father,

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they had two children that died before myself,
before I was born, and they were two boys.
And my mother had only wanted boys, actually.
And then I was born
because they realised what was wrong and they fixed the issue.
And when I was born, my mum said,
you were the ugliest child anyone had ever seen.
You were yellow skinned because I had jaundice,
and you had a flock of red hair,
and I wished I looked back and realised I hadn't married one man
because he had very, very strong red hair,
and he'd had red hair anyway.
And your eyes hardly opened and you were really fat.
And she said, you were very unattractive,
but everyone just loved you because you were alive.
And I went, stop telling me how ugly I was.
It's a really horrible experience.
But she said, I thought maybe it's because you're a girl.
Like, maybe I stopped wanting boys after that
because the girl survived.
What were your parents doing for work when you came along?
Well, my mum was home duties as it was called then,
and my dad was working at the Heinz tomato soup factory at night
and trying to study during the day.
And then for some reason, he went skiing with my mum,
and he broke his leg and then everything went to shit,
apparently, at that point.
But, you know, my dad was incredibly handy,
and so they lived in this tiny weatherboard house in St Kilda.
And he made the letterbox.
He made the cupboards.
He made the coffee table.
He made the lampshades.
He made everything.
So he would make those things.
He would go to college in the afternoons to study drafting,
and then he'd work at night all night at the tomato soup factory.
And then on the weekends, poor man,
my grandfather, who was the most charismatic,
like amazing human being in so many ways,
he had fought in the First World War.
He was very involved in the RSL.
He was a plumber, but he was useless at being a plumber,
and he didn't drive.

So he would make my dad pick him up
and drive him around to all these women's houses
to fix the plumbing for them over the weekend
and charge them.
But my dad would do all the work,
and he'd sit and have cups of tea in the kitchen
and charm them with his stories.
And his beautiful smile, he was incredibly good-looking.
And my dad would be like with the plunger in the loo.
So he certainly married into the Catholic tribe,
which so it was my mum's family
that we're very much bonded with and we're very connected to.
So Muddy was tied at home.
How good was your mum at hunting down a bargain?
Oh, a bargain was her source of joy
in life, to be honest.
And look, I mean, at the time I just assumed,
because my cousins lived in a similar way,
although probably not as bargain-oriented
as my mother actually.
But my mother had this dream
that if we could save enough money
that they could put that aside
and things that children needed weren't relevant.
But I always remember that in Richmond, in Victoria,
because we lived in Melbourne, obviously,
there was a shop called Dimmy's,
which I don't know if it's still there or not,
but there was, Dimmy's would have a shoe sale every January
where they would just throw out hundreds of pairs
of revolting shoes.
I remember my poor brother once had to wear
these clod hoppers that had a heel
and mum said, well, that's good because he's a bit short.
And I thought, oh, it's social death.
But then I remember another time she found a shoe
that she thought, this is perfect for one of us kids.
And she said to me, you have to find the other one.
So I was scrunging around in the bin
with about a million other women.
And I found the other one and I was pulling like crazy
because someone else had it as well.
So I was doing a tug of war and pulling like crazy
and then looked up and my mother was the person

at the other end.
And we often laughed about that for years to come
because that was a very symbolic thing
of my mother's desire to get what she wanted in life.
There's going to be one of those miller women
who got their hands on that shoe.
And then she would buy all my clothes at Fosse's,
which was just a disaster because first of all,
I was terribly thin.
So she then sew up the back of it
so that it was that would fit me around the waist.
But I always was out of fashion.
And so if they ever had at the Mufti day
or a casual day at school,
I would live in dread because I just knew it was going to be
in one time at Fosse's,
she bought me a pair of jeans with a zip up the bottom,
you know, at the back, a very, very thick zip.
Never heard of such an item.
The worst thing you could ever wear.
And before that year seven day of casual day,
I was doing so well socially.
And then I walked in with these jeans
with the zip up the bottom,
with my mum telling me that they're very glamorous
and you're very lucky to have such cool jeans.
You won't look like everybody else.
You're a head of the pat.
A head of the pat.
And when I arrived at school,
I thought, I know that I'm right.
She's so wrong.
Doesn't sound like disaster.
She had much sympathy for your wishes
when it came to fitting in or clothing.
Not at all.
In fact, you know, I'd be lucky
if I could get something from Cole's Varagey.
She was very, very, she just didn't have,
I mean, it actually taught me a lot of grit.
And she used to say it's character building
to wear something that other people don't wear.
But it was mortifying, I can't tell you.
Who lived across the road from your place as a kid, Susie?

The first place we lived in was the weatherboard house
where we had umpteen cubby houses
and a million giddy pigs out behind the garage
until my father found them and got rid of them all.
But like directly across from our street was a house that was
similar house to ours, but beautiful garden filled
with camellias and lemon trees.
And there was a woman called Anne Brown who lived there
who was there with her two older siblings
and she was one of 10.
So I don't know what the other seven were doing.
I think they'd all come from Kyneton.
And it was Uncle Charlie and Auntie Queenie
and Aunt Anne and they were the people
that lived across the street.
But she was an ex-school teacher
and she'd worked in the bush all her life
or sort of in the regions.
She talked about snakes in the classroom and so forth.
But she utterly adored me.
And as a very small child, I was over at her house
every single day before I even went to school.
What sort of things would you do with her?
She would give me book after book.
I've still got so many of the books
because she'd do this beautiful calligraphy
and a beautiful dedication in the front of all of them.
I think I have one that says,
for dear Susie, when she had the measles
and was so good, lots of love from Aunt Anne and Auntie Queenie.
So I still have that one.
So I know I've had the measles.
But she just was an imaginative genius
and she sat me down and I wanted to write.
So she gave me pencils and paper.
I wanted to draw and paint.
She'd provide all of that.
She had Maori biscuits and lemonade after school
which she had little glasses
that the Maori biscuit fitted exactly over the top of it
so you could take a bite and just sip out
of the Maori biscuit.
I mean, she just thought of everything
and she told me stories about her childhood

that are still with me.
I mean, the most amazing childhood
with all these children and kinden
and her being a single woman out in the bush teaching
these naughty boys at school and so forth.
And she was really into gardening
and we'd get the lemons off the tree and make lemonade
and we would pick the chameleons
and arrange them around the house.
It was a big old grandfather clock in her hallway
that would chime every hour.
And I never wanted to go home.
I loved her so much
and she really made me feel so safe
and so cared about.
And it was a slightly chaotic home
where she was just this...
I mean, they often say there's one adult in your life
that actually changes the trajectory of your life
and she was the only person that ever gave me books.
My parents weren't into books.
In fact, I remember years later
someone I knew from university coming over
and saying, oh, where are your parents' books?
And I had to pretend they were upstairs or something.
In the library, upstairs.
Because we didn't have...
We had jaws, I think, on the bookshelf.
How did life change for your family when you were nine?
Well, my father worked with a mining company called Nibelco,
which obviously was the mining company
up in the Northern Territory in Nullamboy,
as it was called then Gove.
And so we all flew up to be with him
because he had to be there for a year or so.
And I think at the time, my biggest concern
was leaving my cousins behind
because I was joined at the hip with my cousin Jenny and Louise
and the two younger ones were very close to my younger sister.
So it was a big thing.
And I'd never been on a plane before.
So at nine, we all got sort of..
My father went ahead and the three of us with my mum flew there.
My sister was only two at the time and my brother was seven.

What do you remember about arriving?
So we arrived to this red, red earth
and this heat that was so oppressive.
It was a shock.
It was absolute shock.
And we didn't know we were even in the same country.
And we had to bunny hop there
because you couldn't just fly direct at the time.
And we got off the flight and we went to
what was going to be our new home,
which was basically a demountable,
like a tiny little demountable.
But actually it had, it must have had four bedrooms,
very small ones.
And it didn't have air conditioning,
one of those big old air conditions.
There was no television.
There was no reception.
There was no telephone.
There was nothing.
And there were frogs in the toilet,
which was horrific for me at the time.
I was a Melbourne girl.
I guess there's quite a contrast from St. Kilda.
How did you spend your free time?
Well, we were wild.
We were just feral children.
I don't know what my mother was doing, actually,
because she was at home with the kids,
but she was socializing a lot with other people
in the kind of community and collecting free fish
from anyone that used to go fishing
because there were amazing barramundis
that were being sort of hauled up
by various people in the street.
But my brother and I just ran wild, actually.
And there was a big, like we were across the road
from an open bushland that just went on forever and ever.
And we would just like wander around for hours on end.
And my sister was only two.
So she was probably with my mum.
That's probably what my mum was doing.
She was probably looking after the child.
I'm sure she was.

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Yeah, what am I saying?
How different was the school there
to what you were used to in St. Kilda?
So I was at a Catholic school in St. Kilda,
very multicultural.
And then I went to a school that went from year K,
which was PrEP, all the way through to year 12,
called Nullan Boy Area School.
At the time, it was rough as guts.
I mean, honestly, it was extreme.
And it was co-ed, and there were boys
all the way up to year 12.
And it was dangerous.
There were basketballs flying at you every five...
But you were these little kids.
But the thing is that the kids in my year were rough too,
and they were horrible.
Because my mum had this terrible idea
that because I had a blue and white uniform in Melbourne
for my Catholic school,
which was checks and little white collars and stuff,
cheap as anything,
but still looked a bit sort of like Victorian and a belt.
When we went up to NAS, they had a little dress
that was just basically a shift, a singlet dress
that was blue and white stripes with a big zip up the front
and a badge on it that said Nullan Boy Area School.
But my mum decided that the uniforms were so similar in colour
that I should just wear my old uniform
rather than buying a new one.
So I did, which actually just labelled me as a total outcast.
I know. What did that mean?
I never blamed her.
I don't know why I just accepted that.
So my mother's logic made sense.
I guess it was cheaper just to wear the old uniform.
What did that mean for fitting in?
Social utter death.
Let me tell you, I was bullied within an inch of my life.
There was a bus that would take you to and from school.
You used to start school at 8 and finish at 2.30
due to the heat factor, which was astonishing.
And I was, as you know, I'm very pale.
So I had a nose that was burnt within an inch of my life every day.

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So much so that at some stage someone suggested
I needed plastic surgery to put some more skin on it.
And so my brother and I would catch that bus to and from school.
And there were basically, there were boys that would throw
apple cores at us and sing songs about my mother farting or something.
They didn't even know who she was,
but I'd be crying feeling so sorry for my mother thinking,
oh, they're saying such mean things about mum.
Did you tell her about what life was like at school?
Who's going to say, oh, the boys on the bus think that you fart?
You know, it was terrible.
But then at school, I said next to a girl, a young girl called Ruth,
who just decided that I was an easy target and she had a protractor,
which we didn't yet have in St Mary's in St Kilda.
It was a bit of, it wasn't a school that was as academic advanced
as this particular school.
It was a much more advanced school being a state school.
And she decided that if I didn't bring her lollies every day,
she would totally stab me in the butt all day long, which she did.
And eventually I would just find a way to bring lollies
to sort of make sure I didn't get stabbed.
But who rescued you from this life of bullying?
Okay, so I was the outcast, but in my year and the year above,
there were four Aboriginal kids that came from what we called the mission,
which is now called Yicala in the Northern Territory.
It's past Nalamboy.
And there were four Aboriginal girls that were allowed to go to the school
because they were smart.
I'm saying that in inverted commas,
because I'm sure there were loads of smart kids
and why are they allowed to go to the white school because they're smart.
So they would be bussed in and out.
And eventually I sort of approached them,
thinking maybe I could make friends with them.
And they very reluctantly, I might add,
said that you're a bit of a dork.
And even my Melbourne accent was just shocking.
I mean, I got rid of that very quickly.
But they said that if I did their maths,
because I was very good at maths,
I was always very good at mathematics.
And they said, if you do our maths homework,
we'll let you be part of our friend group.
And that was great.

At the time, it was like, oh my God, this is amazing.
So I would go home on their bus with them.
After school and play at what was then the mission,
which was basically this area that was so alien from where I came from.
I mean, there was not another white face there.
And we would swim in the water,
and we would walk through the bush.
And there would be these massive ant hills and green ants and frogs.
And I'm sure there were snakes,
but at the time I didn't know about those, I don't think.
And I would get so sunburned.
But also, I mean, I would do everyone's maths homework.
And then we would play.
And then at some point I would go home.
I mean, someone would drive me or catch a bus or whatever.
I mean, I was only nine or 10.
And I don't think my parents even knew where I was.
You went back up to the territory much later.
You went with your son to try to connect
with some of those girls who'd saved your life.
Well, basically, when I was a children's lawyer
at the Shotfront Legal Centre,
I did a course on young Aboriginal people
and how to represent them in court
in a way that facilitated a safe way for them.
And I went to do a course at the Museum in Sydney,
which was to facilitate understanding
how language worked and so forth.
And one of the men who taught the course
spoke Yolngu and was from Yicala.
And I mentioned that I'd been there as a kid.
And he said, oh, who were the girls?
And I told him, and he said, oh, they've all passed away now.
I was like, really gutted.
I thought, God, you know, their life expectancy was low.
But all these terrible things that happened to them.
But he said, you should come up anyway.
And I'll introduce you to their children.
And that stuck with me.
And it was a beautiful invitation to come stay
in his community in Yicala.
And so at the time, my son was nine, Gabriel,
and we were about to move to London.
And I thought, this is a really great opportunity.

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Also, I was writing something that was particularly pertinent to that.

So we got on a plane and went up there and hired a ute.

When I think of it now, like a stick ute.

And we sort of drove to Yicala and stayed there.

And it was about the time that International Women's Day was on.

So the women invited us, me, not my son, to go be part of International Women's Day up there.

And Gabriel started playing football with all the kids.

I mean, I think the thing is that it's all, everything is owned communally.

So he takes his crocs off and someone else walks off with them.

And he's like, what do I do?

And I go, I think that's just how it works.

But, you know, we were both, you know, hats and sunscreen and shoes.

But by the end of the week, we were like, no hats, no sunscreen, no shoes, like running around and also eating mud crabs on the beach with everyone.

And Gabriel actually got adopted into a sort of family group. As did I, but they gave him a name connected to their family and two older brothers that Gabriel was so excited to have two big footballers.

After your time in the territory with your family, as a kid, you all came back to St Kilda and back into school, back into high school.

Yeah, yeah.

You mentioned you were good at maths.

So that was what gained you some social purchase.

Yeah.

In the territory, was your intelligence and ability something you remember being proud of at school?

Yeah, not really.

I think I was a bit hassled for it at times.

What do you remember about that?

Well, when I got to high school, I mean, I think at 12, I started getting like 100% in maths exams and so forth.

And I remember a group of friends who I was really close to, actually, really hassled, like, not saying they knew it was me, but talking about apparently some girl got 100%.

What a loser.

And as we walked home, I thought,

I'm not going to tell them it's me because we all know,

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we know it's me, but I'm just not going to admit to it.
And I'm not going to partake of the conversation.
And one of those people who's still a very close friend of mine,
she then felt really sorry for me the next day
and got to school and put on every blackboard.
I want to congratulate my best mate who got 100% in maths.
And I continued to get 100% in maths.
And to be honest, at a certain point, I got,
I realized that it's better not to think that I realized
that socially it wasn't so great to be so good at things,
to be honest.
I think Australia does have a real tall poppy syndrome
and it still does.
And it has it at every level of your education
and every level of your pursuits later in life as well.
What about at home, Susie?
Was it something you were praised for when you come home
and show your mum and dad this 100% in a maths test?
I can guarantee that something my parents never saw.
But my mother was joyful for anything I did.
She just was this cup of joy.
And she didn't really pay that much attention to it.
She just thought that I was brilliant and it was great.
And it was a good, it was a good expression of herself.
But my dad was very highly critical man,
incredibly critical.
He was also a bit of a maths genius,
but sort of, sort of on the spectrum a bit,
wasn't so good at emotional conversations and so forth.
But he was determined, he never,
he could never give praise for anything.
And so I remember thinking at a certain point,
well, I've finally done it.
I've got 100% in maths.
He can't at 12.
He can't possibly find fault with that.
And I remember showing him the maths exam
because, you know, maybe I got 97 for English
and 98 for science or something.
So I thought, well, here you go.
I'll show him this one because he'll be so happy.
And I remember he looked at it and he said,
but your writing's messy.
But it was a great moment for me, Sarah,

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because I went, oh, you're the one with the problem.
It's not me because 100% I'm good at math is 100%, right?
You can't get more even if your writing's great.
And also my writing wasn't even that bad.
But I remember thinking, you just cannot say well done.
And it was true.
He couldn't really.
But it liberated you because you totally liberated me.
It was well done.
I knew that and also I loved school
because the teachers were so full of praise.
And so in that regard, you know, I was one of those people
that loved school because I got that affirmation at school
that possibly didn't get quite the same at home.
But university, my father was like,
why would you go to university?
You're smart.
You could be a secretary to a great man.
And I remember saying to him, why can't I be the great man?
And he just was bewildered that I would possibly think that.
It was like, I think he, my dad wasn't terribly keen
to have children.
So I think he was like,
I just want to get you all off my hand.
Podcast.
Broadcast.
This is Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
Hear more conversations anytime on the ABC Listen app.
Or go to [abc.net.au slash conversations](http://abc.net.au/conversations).
And so Susie, were you earning your own money as a teenager?
Always, always.
Because as I said, my mum was driven by her budgeting.
And my dad was as well.
It was almost like it was a sport for them in a way.
So I started work at 11.
Basically, I walked into the news agents
underneath the Bella Clover station in Carlow streets in Kilner.
And there was a sign on the window that said, paper boy wanted.
And I thought, I could do that job.
So I walked in and said to the news agent guy, can I apply for the job?
And he said, oh, no, I want a boy.
And I said, well, can I have a trial run and see how good I am?
And if I'm not good enough, then you can, I won't come back.
And if I am good enough, you can keep me.

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

I don't know where I got the mouse for that.
I think it's my mother's influence, just the way she used to talk.
And he said, well, I'll give you a go.
But really, I don't think you're up for it.
And it was a really long paper round.
It was at night.
And it was two paper rounds actually joined together
because you couldn't get anyone to do there.
Were you doing it on a bike or walking?
On a bicycle.
Oh, God, on a bicycle.
With a big backpack, like on my pack wrap with papers.
And so you'd be cycling and you'd take one out
and you'd throw it to where it belonged.
But the thing is, because I was so studious and so careful,
if it didn't land perfectly on the mat under the sort of shelter,
I'd get off my bike and run and place it there very carefully.
But it was such a big paper round.
I had to go back in the middle of the paper round
and refill for papers and go back out again.
And I did that every night after school
and every Saturday when the double papers were there.
Can you imagine the age?
And the Herald at the time was big on a Saturday as well.
You went out on your trial run and how did he react
when you came back?
Well, the great thing was that a whole lot of people called up
and said, I don't know who you've got now, but they're fantastic.
I haven't got a wet paper for this week or whatever.
And so he was like, oh, you can stay until you muck up,
kind of thing.
And my brother had a morning paper round later on
after I'd been there for a while.
But my mother would often feel bad
because he wouldn't wake up in the morning.
So she'd come and wait me and say,
can you do your brother's paper round as well?
And I'd be on my bike at 6 a.m. on the way to the news age.
It's going, why did I agree to this?
How did this happen?
I never got the pay for it.
And I earned \$7 a week for that night paper round,
which was two hours each night.
And I saved up.

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

And by the time I was 12, I could buy a pair of boots
because my mother wasn't into winter shoes.
She thought we'd be fine.
We were tough enough to wear our sneakers or our school shoes.
And so I bought a pair of boots.
And I loved those boots so much.
And then eventually I bought a duffle coat,
a little duffle coat because I was so cold on the paper round.
But the funny thing, Sarah, is that a girlfriend of mine,
who's still one of my closest, closest friends, Helen,
on Saturdays and sometimes after school,
she would sit on the backpack
and I would dink her as well as the paper round.
And she would pass me the paper and I'd chuck it as we moved.
Did you give her, cut her any payment?
No, I didn't actually.
You're right.
I felt like I was taking an extra load.
But we would have a whole conversation on the run,
which was amazing there.
And there was one old lady who obviously lived alone
and got meals on wheels,
that when I delivered the paper,
she'd always want me to come in and have a cup of tea
because I was sort of young Catholic girl
and felt really sorry for her.
I remember going in and seeing,
they're thinking, I've just got to get home
and do my homework, you know.
But yeah, so how did your success at that job change the role?
Oh, I know.
This is a great story.
So when I finally resigned,
because I was in year seven,
I decided I was a grown-up enough
that I could quit the paper round
and work at the local milk bar, which I did.
So I did every job for a year and I quit
and I got another job.
Anyway, when I walked into quit,
he was devastated and he said,
no, you're my best paper person ever.
And then I remember that after I left
and then I walked down Carlisle Street,

because I was always up and down Carlisle Street.
And I remember seeing on the window,
wanted one paper boy or paper girl,
and I thought, yeah, I've changed the system.
I know.
Trailblazing everywhere.
Trailblazing, absolutely.
I know.
So as you were going from job to job,
what was going on with your mum and dad?
What community action had they got involved in?
Oh, that's right.
So my mum went actually very early on.
Like she was wheeling my little sister around in a push chair.
And she said a lot of the beautiful old buildings,
and they'd grown up in St. Kilda.
A lot of the beautiful old buildings were being ripped down.
And of course, it included my parent,
my grandparents' house in the Gables on Barkley Street.
I know that my mum was very upset about this.
She took it quite personally,
that these beautiful old buildings.
And I think they also, because they lived in the area,
just thought all these 70s, 60s and 70s buildings
were getting sort of built up very quickly, all around us.
I mean, I think every single house was bought,
knocked down and built up.
And they joined an organisation called Fag,
which was the flat action group at the time.
And I remember they were involved in the flat action group.
I mean, I couldn't have cared less at the time.
I didn't know what it was.
But I do remember that there would be these meetings of sort of,
I don't know, just a group of small, odd people
that would come to our house.
And at some stage, they came.
And for some reason, I think my mum had engineered that they joined.
But really, it was my dad they were interested in,
because it was a bit of a male run group.
And my mum was serving tea once, where they said to my dad,
we need someone to stand for the flat action group for council.
That's the only way it will affect change.
And my dad, very shy, very much not that person,
was like, no way, I can't do that.

And my mum was serving the tea at the time.
And she said, I will.
And I think they were a bit taken aback.
I mean, she was a woman.
There was actually, at the time,
there was two women on the council,
but they were very well educated.
They came from really good families,
and they knew what they were doing.
My mum had no skills at this at all, remember?
Except these amazing skills of being able to talk to anyone.
Yeah, she didn't have any education,
but she had the sort of hootspot and the skill set.
And so she basically put herself forward.
And the next thing we knew, the shock and horror of our family
that suddenly we're being photographed for a brochure
that was going to be put in every letterbox in our area,
which was, I think I was 12 or 13 at the time.
It was mortifying.
I was like, oh, I can't bear it.
This is so embarrassing.
How did your family look back then?
Well, pretty 70s, let me tell you.
I mean, I think my brother and I,
he had sort of that sort of shaggy hair,
and my dad had sideburns.
And my mum was very sort of like,
tried to look very wholesome.
You know, it was this sort of family values type
of craziness.
And my mother would never call herself a feminist,
even though I very early on did.
And that was a bit of a source of tension for us.
She's like, oh, I'm not one of those.
You know, another, what do you mean?
What's wrong with them?
Like it's just been she fighting for women.
But anyway, she got onto the council.
She got elected and it was a big fanfare
because she was this new sort of blood
from goodness knows where.
You know, it was a big deal in our family
and things really changed because she was out every night.
She was at meetings every night.

And she was pretty much the soul of our family.
Did you see her like stepping into this new life?
Was she energized by it?
Did you see her in a new light?
Well, she was always very extrovert
and very able to hold conversations
and charm people in the life of a party.
But suddenly she was on the local newspaper,
the Southern Cross News.
And she was, I don't know, she was just prison.
People knew who she was.
It was really strange.
And I have to say that quite discombobulating in a way,
because also she was pro legalising prostitution.
And I was at a Catholic school that was very anti that
and very anti-abortion and so forth.
And I remember thinking,
oh, I better not talk too much about what my mum's up to at home.
And she didn't stop just at becoming a counsellor.
No, she didn't.
What happened next?
Well, first of all, as a counsellor,
there was a lot of abuse thrown around that council chamber.
I mean, I think her and the other women were called witches.
Witches on their broomsticks that should just disappear
and, you know, no one wants them.
And there was a lot of like verbal abuse.
They banded together the women.
There's another fabulous woman called Helen Halliday,
who's still in my life.
And a woman called Mary Lou Gelbert,
who runs 45 Downstairs,
which is a great theatre place in Melbourne.
And the three of them really banded together,
even though they came from very different backgrounds.
And probably the two other women had sort of
more distinct politics than my mum actually,
probably more aligned with mine now.
But there was just this great kind of camaraderie amongst them.
And they, you know,
they really changed the face of St Kilda.
And the phrase, Mayor of St Kilda.
Or you had a strange history in your family.
What was that? And then how did it become reality?

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

So my mum's dad, my pop, who was called Jack Barker,
and Vera Barker, who was his wife, who was my nan.
And my mum and her sister, June, and her brother, well,
they would be at home and they'd be waiting for their father
to come home because the meal would be on the table
and it would be hell to pay because it was getting cold
and their mother was getting upset.
And he would sort of wander in, you know,
six foot tall with his hat and his charming smile
and his white gorgeous flock of snowy hair
and very tall and slim and well put together.
And he'd say, don't, you know, a bit pissed
because he'd been at the RSL.
And he'd say, don't be mad, Vera.
I've been drinking with the Mayor of St Kilda.
And everyone at the table would be like, wow, that's amazing.
Like, he's been out with someone like really important.
And you know, the bizarre thing is that
when my mum became the Mayor of St Kilda,
she's the first ever female Mayor of St Kilda.
And she used to say, I just wish my dad was alive to see this
because it would just be the most bizarre thing, you know.
And she used to go to the RSL and do this sort of
the Anzac Day ceremony and always talk about her dad.
She was close to her dad.
And I think she really wanted his approval as well.
It's a really astonishing first for her
to have that kind of political clout.
Did it change her at all?
Yeah, it did a bit.
She became very sure of herself, which was great.
She quite liked the attention.
Oh, she loved all the sort of media.
And I remember once when I went over to London,
I had a leather jacket that an old boyfriend had given me
that I loved.
And I said, don't let anyone wear this while I'm away,
like not my brother or my sister.
And she said, no, no, of course not.
I'll keep it very safe.
And I remember someone sent me a cutout picture
of my mum from the local paper and she was wearing it.
I came home and I went, what happened to my jacket?
And she said, oh, no one wore it.

I said, I've got proof.

She was like, oh, of course you do.

How did you find that?

But yeah, she was an astonishing person in that role.

But she did, she was very full of herself in it as well.

All we ever talked about was St Kilda Council,
which was quite bizarre because at a certain stage
we'd moved to Brighton, but she was still on the council there.

So she felt that it was in her blood, St Kilda really.

You were on your own trajectory, Suzanne.

You started off by studying a science degree in Melbourne
and then switched to law.

Why?

So I was doing my honours year in microbiology and immunology
and Chernobyl happened and the radio was on in the lab.

And I was working really long hours in the laboratory,
working all weekends, doing lots of experiments.

And Chernobyl happened and everyone looked up
from their microscopes and went, oh, wow, that's terrible.

You know, it was a scientific thing.

So they talked about the science
and then they put their heads back down to their microscopes
and I went, what about the people?

What about the social ramifications?

What about the political ramifications?

What about the future?

And I thought, I can't do science for ever.

I need to have a conversation.

And at that stage, I thought, maybe I should go to law school
because I was offered a PhD in the lab.

So I thought I'll do a PhD or I'll do something else for three years.

And I thought I could go to law school for three years.

And if I do it in Sydney, it's three years,
not three and a half after you've done a degree.

And you only do half a year of College of Law
rather than a year of articles,
which is what they did in Melbourne at the time.

So I saved a year.

So I moved to Sydney to do law.

That's why.

Did you head off by yourself?

Did you know anyone?

Where did you live?

No, I didn't know anyone.

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

I actually, my mother had one friend
that she knew from our days in Nulland Boy.
He was quite a posh woman who lived on the North Shore in Sydney.
And I arrived in my little car off the train.
I drove it off the train and so I had a little map
and I found my way to her place.
And she was very, very not very excited that I was staying.
So she made it very clear that I had a night.
I was like, oh no, what am I going to do?
And because I transferred my part time job from David Jones,
Melbourne to David Jones, Sydney,
I had to go to work the next day.
So I went to work the next day a full day.
And while I was there, strangely enough,
just before I'd left my house in Melbourne,
a friend of my father's who he also knew from Nulland Boy
had come over and said, what do you mean you're going to Sydney
on your own?
Where are your parents?
Because my parents are away.
And he said, look, if you get stuck with somewhere to stay,
I've got this friend of mine who's a bit of a judge, right?
And I thought, yeah, I'll take the number,
but there's no way I'm ever going to call this guy.
I mean, you know, he's like really important.
But when I was at David Jones at day,
the woman had made it very clear that, you know,
she'd left out all these rentals on the breakfast table.
I thought, I'm not welcome here.
So I rang this man and I said, oh, hello, Justice Staples.
My name's Susie Miller and I'm the daughter
of a friend of a friend of yours or whatever.
And they said, if I got desperate and I'm a little bit desperate
and he went completely silent, then he said,
you've got so much guts calling me,
you can come and stay as long as you like.
And I stayed there for a month all up
because I started going to law school to and from his house
until I moved into a tiny little apartment
closer to university.
And once you started studying law, Susie,
did you fall in love with it?
Was it a wave looking at the world and justice
that made sense to you?

It was a language as well.
And it was a language that allowed you to talk about rights
and things that I was passionate about,
but didn't have the language for.
And I did a Socratic method version of law at UNSW,
which I loved.
It was very much about conversation and dialogue.
And I met amazing people who I'm still terribly close to now.
I also just had this really strong sense that, oh, wow,
there's a language for power.
That I didn't know and I had never had access to.
And I didn't even realize had little access.
I had two places of power until I did law.
And also just to people of power.
You married a fellow lawyer.
You and Robert had two kids together.
And you were working in the law when they were young.
How challenging was it to flip between the kinds of stories
and lives you were immersed in as a lawyer and life at home?
Yeah.
So by the time I was a parent, I was a children's lawyer
and a human rights lawyer.
I worked for a brief time at the Merrickville Legal Center
as their children's lawyer.
And then I moved to the Shotfront Legal Center,
which was setting King's Cross in Sydney.
And it worked with homeless young people.
And they had to have more than just homelessness.
Like we've diverted them from legal aid and we took on their case.
And they would have all sorts of issues, really.
They'd have sort of drug and alcohol problems,
mental health problems.
They'd be working in the sex industry.
They would have non-English speaking backgrounds
or sort of even we, I even did an immigration qualification
at one point so that we could work for young people
that were being sex trafficked in the cross.
So basically that job was really confronting
when you have small children because I worked for children
from the age of zero all the way up and actually up to 25.
So young adults and most of our clients were young adults.
But you'd read all the reports and you'd read things
that had happened to young children or young people.
And when you come home to your home

and you realise that your children are so vulnerable
and as a mother you just have that hypervigilance
about your babies, it was very, very hard to reconcile.
And I think also what happened after a while,
my kids would sometimes come to court with me
when they were young, like a day off school.
I mean, we didn't have parents.
My parents were in Melbourne, Roberts were in Perth.
So they would come to court with me, not with Robert, I might add.
He'd have his corporate cases and somehow they'd be attached to me
and I'd be dropping them at school and realise,
oh, no, they're not well enough, they'll have to come to court.
So, and I also always remember one day,
Gabriel was in court at about six.
You know, he'd vomited in the car on the way to school
and had to come to, and there was a, first of all,
there was a man in, at Bellman Court,
there was a man who was in custody
who wasn't doing very well at all.
He hadn't had his psych meds, who was my client.
He was a young man.
And I remember Gabriel sitting behind me
while I was sort of advocating strongly
for some sort of bail, so he'd get psych treatment.
It was being refused and I was coming up
with all sorts of excuses.
I remember Gabriel tapping me on the back
and I turned around in this really intense moment
with my client crying in custody, in court,
and he goes, I'm really hungry.
And then a minute later, I see him up with the associate
colouring in, you know, she'd obviously tried to save me
from the despair of being a mother and an advocate.
I also worked with another young mum at the time.
We're very close, Jane Irwin,
and the two of us worked with the same clients
and we would share stories about going home to our children
and just feeling this despair that all children
are on a trajectory towards this life that we were exposed to.
And then eventually, they had therapists come in
to talk to us because we needed to be debriefed.
And I remember someone said at something amazing,
and they said, even for your clients,
the day they're with you, despite all the hardship

of their life, this is the worst day of their life
because they're going to court and they're terrified.
And that actually helped me a bit.

I thought, oh, this is like the ER version of law.
And in a way, if they have other bits of their life
that are half decent, I felt a bit better,
but you know, because otherwise you just take on
this ridiculous responsibility.

So when you started writing plays and writing stories
out of those lives that you were encountering in that work,
was it, I don't know, was it kind of a way to exercise
some of those demons? Yeah, I think it was, yeah.

So the first play I wrote was called Cross Sections,
which went on at the Old Fitts, which is a sort of industry
sort of entry point in Sydney for theatre.

And it went so well that it got picked up by the Opera House,
which was astonishing.

But the great thing about it being on in the cross
was that people contacted me afterwards and said,
I saw the play in the cross and I walked through the cross
on the way home and I looked at the people around me
and I saw them differently.

And to me, that was everything.

I went and gave a lecture at Sydney University
and one woman put up a hand and said,
look, my sister died on the streets of Kings Cross
of a Hero and Overdose.

And I've always hated her for what she did to my family
because it destroyed our family.

And she said, when I saw your play at the Opera House,
she said, I actually thought, oh my God,
she was filled with despair.

I never saw that.

And she said, I suddenly can love my sister again
and forgive what I saw as an abuse of our family,
as seeing it was just an acting out of despair.

And to me, that was worth writing the whole play for.

So it was putting the messy human story
into what can be quite clinical headlines or legal cases
that motivated Primer Facy, which first premiered in 2019
and went on to become this huge success.

What was it like Susie to sit in the audience
and watch that story being performed on stage?

Well, the first time it was performed on stage

was at the Griffin Theatre.
And the very first preview was really interesting
because I was sitting with the director, Lee Lewis.
And she and I sat there and watched Sharon
and do the first preview where, of course,
lines were dropped and there were problems
with the lighting cues and everything.
But the audience, in one huge wave,
just stood and cheered and cheered the play.
And we'd never seen that before.
And it never stopped happening.
It happened at every single preview,
every single production, and then right round the world.
Like, the very first preview in London,
the same thing happened with a thousand people.
And to me, it's like it's outside of me, this experience,
because I wrote the play and then it became different things.
So Jodie Coma, who went on to perform it
on the West End and on Broadway,
what has she told you about the kind of audience response
that she's received?
Yeah, well, both Jodie and I had millions and millions
of cards and letters and DMs.
And I'm still getting them.
I mean, we just have this avalanche of people contacting us,
sending us presents to say thank you.
And is there a common thread through all of those responses?
Yeah, people give us their testimonies
and say, this is my experience and this is how I knew.
Like, I had one woman in New York,
and honestly, in New York, it had this incredible response
where people would queue up around the block
just to get my signature on their script and say,
and one woman said to me,
I've been in therapy for five years after a sexual assault,
but seeing this just made me feel like I have a voice
and I just stopped panicking.
Like, I saw it in London,
and I've come back to see it in New York.
But even aside from people that had the same experience,
we had so many people come to see it that,
I mean, Jodie and Sheridan do this incredible job
of the production, and now it's on all over the world.
So I don't even know half of the tests that have done it now.

But, you know, an amazing thing for me is the power of theatre.
It's like, and I think post COVID,
we learn that to assemble as a community
is this really profound experience
because we were denied that in COVID.
And we thought that maybe Netflix could take over from theatre,
but we now know because there's something
about being shoulder to shoulder,
even with a stranger that you turn to each other
while you're weeping at the end of a play and go,
that was incredible.
Or that was really shocked by that or whatever.
But there's something about human connection
that you can't replace.
And I think theatre does it,
and I'm very passionate about how theatre does that.
And I feel that watching something together
and being led somewhere by a play
and a set of actors and a director,
where the end you're quite united,
I don't know, something profound about it.
And I feel so, so humbled that I was able to make a play
that could do that and take the best from theatre
and actually bring out that element of theatre
that is about community.
Primer Facy is partly a challenge to the legal system
and how it fails victims of sexual assault.
How has the legal profession responded?
Amazing.
Like, you know, at first, the very first Q&A we did in Sydney
was all female lawyers, like only female lawyers,
which was just an experiment.
All female judges, solicitors, barristers,
defence barristers, everyone.
And in the front was a woman who's a QC
who only does defence law.
And she was amazing because I was scared to death
of what she would say.
Because, you know, I mean, I'm a defence lawyer,
I believe in innocence until proven guilty.
I don't want people convicted
if there's not overwhelming, you know, reasonable doubt
of what they're saying.
But I think the thing is with sexual assault

is that the way it's been described
and the way it's actually evolved
has not taken into account what it does
to the witnesses of sexual assault,
which is usually the victim,
and the demolishing of their kind of sense of self
in that process.
In order to find a reasonable doubt,
you have to demolish somebody.
And you don't even have to get on the stand yourself
as an accused, which is their right, totally.
And I completely agree with that.
But I think when it comes to sexual assault,
we've got it wrong because we haven't actually recognised
that we're re-traumatising someone who's a victim.
And we haven't actually understood what the kind of scope is.
And there's, you know, I mean,
it's a much more complex story than what I'm saying.
I guess you have to see the play
or read something about it to actually understand
how the feminist lens of sexual assault works.
Did your mum get to see the success?
No, she didn't.
And it was devastating for me, Sarah, because she died.
And she actually, I slept with, you know,
on a mattress beside her in hospital for 16 days.
And then she died and I went up the next day
and they had the first preview of prima facie.
And I remember there's a line in the play
where the young woman, Tessa,
who's the character, wants to go home
and says, all I want to do is be on the old floral sofa,
cuddled up to my mother, feeling the sort of rough heat of her.
And that's the time that I weep every time it plays
because that floral sofa is based on my mother's floral sofa
because that was the image I had in my head
of my mother's floral sofa.
And that she wasn't around for that was devastating
because she was such a supporter of my plays.
She was such a, she came to everything she could come to.
And the fact of it being on the West End
when she loved London so much, and she was so into that,
can imagine her really getting into the parties
in the champagne section.

Oh my gosh, she had no idea.
And in fact, I have a lovely friend, John Sheedy,
who's a director in Melbourne,
but he loves so much because he would have these,
my mum was very straightforward with him,
but how much she liked the party side of it
and how much she wanted to be glamorous with it all.
Got to sit through the play, but then we get the party.
And the champagne.
I know, which of course to me is the part that I go,
oh God, I just want to go home and debrief.
But she died just before the preview.
And then after the preview, I then had to go home
for her funeral, conduct her funeral,
then come back for the opening night
and then have all those reviews.
Well, thank God they were good.
But it was a time in my life that actually is quite blurry
in some ways because I, you know, people,
someone said to me, I heard your mother passed away
and I was just like, don't talk about it.
I can't actually consume that
while I'm in front of a camera all the time.
So it was really hard.
And then when I was in London, you know,
I wandered around London,
I think Mother's Day came and went
and I was in a blur of misery.
But that's what happens when you lose a parent.
You know, it lingers for such a long time
and I still, not a day goes by
where I don't think I'd love to tell her something
or I laugh about something that she'd,
you know, I just miss her terribly.
It sounds like there've been many points
in your life, Susie,
where you've kind of just kept going
when almost against the odds
or against other people's expectations,
you just kept pushing yourself to the next thing.
How do you make sense of that?
What's behind that, do you think?
You know, it's interesting, isn't it?
I sometimes put it down to having a less vigilant childhood

where I basically had parents
that were sort of not really involved
in what I was doing day to day.
So I was left to my own devices.
And if I was scared, I had to protect myself.
And if I was out at night on my bike,
I had to find my way home as a young person.
But, you know, I didn't expect my parents to step up
and look after me or provide for me, really.
I mean, wasn't just part of my expectation.
And I think you just develop a certain level of grit.
But also I look at my mum
and she was what I call the finder of ways.
She always had the way,
she had a conversation for everything
or a way around certain authority figures
and a way around how to get something in a way
that you didn't have to go through all the processes.
And I watched her deal with authority
and I guess it broke it down for me to say,
actually, you know,
like maybe you just do what you want to do anyway.
So, and you know, I am ambitious and I say that
because I think women are frightened to say they're ambitious.
And I think ambition is not a dirty word.
It's not a negative word.
It's actually what you have.
And you are ambitious for lots of reasons.
It's not all just about yourself.
And I think it also is great to have a drive in life
and a passion in life that you are still so excited by
and that you're still so,
you know, there's so much you want to do.
And I feel so lucky to have that
because, you know, I guess you can't be taken away.
So I feel very lucky that I stumbled across so many things
that made me so excited and happy.
And I'm very curious about the world
and particularly about people.
Susie, it's a delight to have you on conversations.
Thank you so much for being on this.
Oh, Sarah, it's so nice to talk to you.
It's just lovely.
I feel really, really lucky to be here.

[Transcript] Conversations / Suzie Miller: finder of ways

Thank you very much.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.

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