

## 4.3 Interview with Kate Forsyth and Belinda Murrell

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to offer a content warning before starting this episode. In this interview we discuss the violent effects of colonisation on the Indigenous People of Australia. We also mention the name of an Indigenous person who has passed away.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

### Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

### Angourie [host]

Welcome back, everyone, so glad to have you here! This week I am bringing you an extra special episode: it is an interview with two Australian authors: Kate Forsyth and Belinda Murrell. I'm talking to these sisters about their biblio-memoir, *Searching for Charlotte*. Due to COVID, Kate and Belinda's book tour was unexpectedly changed into a virtual book tour, so they've come on The Community Library to talk about their book that tells the story of their five-times great-grandmother, writer and illustrator Charlotte Waring Atkinson. You all know I love stories that cover generations and transcend time, which is exactly what *Searching for Charlotte* is all about. So in this episode, Belinda, Kate and I talk about connecting to history, how exciting research can be, and the importance of storytelling. Without further ado, here's our conversation.

[fade in and out: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

### Angourie [host]

Thank you so much for joining me today, Kate and Belinda, it is a pleasure to have you both on the podcast.

### Kate [guest]

Thank you for having us.

### Belinda [guest]

Oh, thanks so much Angourie!

### Angourie [host]

So, first of all, how has it been releasing a book in the middle of a pandemic? I'm sure it's been very different to your other book releases! And, you know, this situation has been going on for a while, now, so, yeah, how's that been different?

**Belinda [guest]**

It's been absolutely amazing, actually! I feel like we were very, very lucky, because we just sort of launched the book in this little window where we couldn't actually do live events, but we could do so many other things, and it was just fantastic. We did lots of bookstore signings, lots of bookstore visits, we did so many interviews, lots of wonderful podcasts like this! Newspaper, magazine interviews, and we're actually really overwhelmed with the response, weren't we, Kate? It was just quite incredible, I don't think either of us expected such an enormously strong and positive response to the book, so I feel like we were very lucky to launch it when we did.

**Kate [guest]**

Yeah, I absolutely agree. It was as if everyone had had time to – you know, get used to doing online events. So, when COVID first happened, everyone was kind of bewildered and in a scramble, but by the time our book came out, everyone had set up these wonderful systems. So it wasn't as bad as we expected it to be. We were quite grateful, actually, to have that time at home, as well, with our families, and not be on tour for weeks and weeks and months and months, like we normally are.

**Angourie [host]**

Yeah, yeah! It's amazing how quickly everything, kind of, adapted, and that – yes, people will just find a way to share art in the same way that we did before. So that's good to hear that it's been such a great experience! And so I want to talk about your book, obviously, *Searching for Charlotte*. And, in your words, you say that it's a hybrid memoir about your great-great-great-great-grandmother, Charlotte Waring Atkinson. She's the author of Australia's first children's book, published 180 years ago. And in the book, you go on a journey of researching and piecing together her story. Something that really struck me was the chapter in which you spoke about how this book came to be. So, could you tell the audience a bit about that, please?

**Kate**

Absolutely. So, when we were little girls, we were brought up on stories of our intrepid and adventurous ancestor, who wrote Australia's first children's book. And as we became adults, we began to wonder how much truth there was in those stories. There is actually a literary award named after our ancestor, called the Charlotte Waring Award for unpublished authors with the Children's Book Council of Australia. And Belinda and I were asked to give a speech giving out this award, and everyone in the audience just came up to us afterwards and said; "What an extraordinary story, and what an amazing woman your ancestor was. Why is it that none of us know? You know, we are the people who love Australian children's literature! You know, we live for Australian children's literature, and her story was completely unknown to us. You must write a book about her." And you know, Belinda and I, we have extremely busy publishing schedules where, you know, we're contracted out several books in advance, we have families, we have busy lives. But we looked at each other and we thought, look, you know what, maybe we should do this, because in a couple of years it will be the 180<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, if we don't do it now, when should we do it? And so we just decided to set out on this journey together, and it was [an] extraordinary journey of discovery. We found out so much more than we could have ever expected.

**Angourie**

Yes – I'm really interested in how that, you know, this journey took you across the world. It took you to England, it took you to some interesting places here, in Australia. And it's so much about connecting to family. Can you talk more about, you know, that connection that you felt to your family and your ancestors following that journey, you know, while you were traveling and researching that story?

**Belinda**

I think we've always felt this very strong connection to our family, and also to our ancestors, because we come from a long line of writers, and also storytellers. And so, as we grew up, our grandparents would tell us these wonderful stories about Charlotte, and about her life. So we kind of grew up on these ... almost as fairy tales. And so I've told my children these stories, and Kate's told her children these stories. And so when Kate and I sat down, initially we thought we'd write a straight biography, but the National Library of Australia said to us, "Yes, we'd love a biography of Charlotte's life, but what we really want, actually, is the story of a family of writers, and we want to have this really strong sense of memoir, and about your search for her, and the discoveries that you make, and to really have a real insight into this journey and this process." And so I was a little bit cautious at first, because for me, I am so happy – I love writing about other people, but the thought of actually having this personal element to it was a bit frightening to me. And I don't really like to ... expose my vulnerabilities, I guess, but Kate and I talked to each other and we thought, the National Library says this is the deal, it has to be this personal memoir, it has to have this personal element, and so Kate [and I] said, okay, we'll do this. And immediately I thought, well we have to go back to where Charlotte was born. If we're going to really explore her life, we have to walk in her footsteps, we have to go to all the important places where she lived and worked and loved, and really experience what her world was like. And so we set off to England, we took our daughters with us to make it a really 'family' journey, and we went back to London, we went to Kent where Charlotte's family originally came from, we went to places where she worked as a governess when she was only fifteen. And really, visiting these places really brought her world and her life to life for us. And especially going to Gravesend, which is where she said goodbye to her family forever as she got on the ship *The Cumberland* to bring her to Australia in 1826, and this was also where she met the love of her life, James Atkinson. So all of those things really brought her life to such rich colour for us, and we felt like she was looking over our shoulder and guiding our footsteps, so it was extraordinary.

**Angourie**

Mm, yeah, that sounds amazing. And – you mentioned bringing your daughters on the trip with you. And that was an element to the book that I loved, was you exploring these parallels between your family and Charlotte's family, all the way back then. You know, there are some things that stay the same: a mother's love for her children, and all of that. So, yeah, do you want to talk more about those, kind of, strange parallels that you found?

**Kate**

It was really special having our daughters with us. Emily and Ella are six years apart in age, but you know, Belinda and I live so close to each other that our children have all grown up sort of in a big extended family. We see each other nearly every week, sometimes, you know, two, three times a week – you know, they've known each other all of their lives. Having the girls with us, it really made

it so much more poignant, because we were going back to Charlotte's early years, when she was a young woman, just like our daughters. I'd always known that Charlotte began work as a governess when she was only fifteen, but my daughter Ella was that same age when we were there, and I was imagining my little girl – she thinks she's a young woman, but to me she's still a little girl – I imagined her having to go and live in someone else's house, and live in that kind of shadowland area where you're not quite part of the family, and yet you're not a servant, either. It would have been so lonely, it would have been frightening. She was responsible for the education of young children, she was far from home. I just really felt how lonely and afraid and confronted she might have been, and that really made it all so much more poignant for me. It was also amazing seeing the girls, because they're at that time in their life when they're full of dreams and hopes for the future, and wanting to start living their life – particularly Emily who, you know, was twenty-one at the time. and that, too, really made Charlotte – we always saw Charlotte as being, I suppose, older, because the stories we know of where was when she was married and living in Australia and had children of her own. Suddenly she came to life for us as a young woman, as well.

**Angourie**

Yeah, that's something I really loved about the book, was talking about, you know, imagining how Charlotte might have been feeling in the moment, which is something you sometimes don't get in, you know, biographies. It really kind of brought her to life as a real person. But another thing I loved was you talked a bit about kind of the tension between the responsibilities of the storyteller, you know, telling this beautiful story with characters that make sense and has an arc, versus the responsibilities of a historian, you know, taking these facts and making sense of them. So, how did you work through that in telling her story?

**Belinda**

I think we were very lucky, because not only we – Kate and I are both sisters, so we know each other very well – we also had very similar backgrounds. We both worked as journalists and editors, and so we've done so much research. We've also both worked as historical novelists. We had those two skillsets: that of a, you know, strong research skills of a journalist, researcher for historical novels, but also the skills of a fiction writer, where we could actually think about our characters feelings, emotions, motivations, and let our imaginations come to work to bring her story to life as a real person. And so I think we were really lucky that we both had those skillsets. But also, if we – being sisters, because we were so close, we could really, sort of, share the story equally, and we both had different opinions about some things. But yeah, I think that enriched the book, that we looked at things from slightly different angles, and had slightly different voices in the way we were telling the story. So, yes, it was – it was, I think – we're made to tell this story, I think.

**Angourie**

Well, it's in your DNA, isn't it!

**Belinda**

Absolutely!

**Angourie**

That's – yeah, that's another interesting thing! You know, what was it like writing a book together? Was this your first time writing something together?

**Kate**

It wasn't our first time writing together, because when we were little girls, we were always writing together. We wrote stories together, we used to put on plays, we wrote a couple of novels together. While we were cleaning out our mother's house in the last few weeks I actually found a book about witches that Belinda and I wrote together, and Emily could instantly recognise which parts were written by her mother, and which was written by her auntie! Her handwriting is so much neater than mine! So, when we were children, we were always writing together, and we were playing together and creating things together, but we'd never written as adults – we've always been really careful to be very respectful of each other's careers, and the fact that, you know, we write in different ways, and we write for different audiences. And so, you know, a lot of people find that fascinating, that's probably the most commonly asked question, you know: "What was it like writing a book with your sister? Did you fight? Are you still talking to each other?" But when we set out to write this book together, we set a couple of ground rules, which I think was, actually, in hindsight, wonderfully wise of us. So our ground rules were that our love for each other was more important than anything else. And if the book brought us to a point where we were angry and upset with each other, or that we were hurting each other, then we would just have to stop. You know, our living relationship was more important than the book. The second decision that we made was that we wouldn't try to combine our voices, we wouldn't write as "we". Worked out a general plan for the book, we divided who was going to write what chapter according to our own personal interests, or what we were most passionate about. We did that with great ease, there was no arguments at all, we just divided the book up between us. And then we said, that chapter belongs to that writer. The other sister could make suggestions, could pick up typos, or mistakes, but basically our chapters were our own, written in our voice, and we made all the creative decisions while we wrote that chapter. And then our third decision was, we wouldn't edit each other. We wouldn't read each other's works and make changes and suggestions, we would leave the National Library of Australia as a final arbitrator, and they would act as our editor. And so that meant that we weren't criticising each other, we weren't niggling at each other. We did have, you know, impassioned discussions about certain aspects of the book, but the final decision rested with the person who wrote that chapter. And that meant that we were – allowed each other to have our own natural voice, which, when you're writing a memoir, I think you really want, don't you? It's much more real, much more authentic, much more warm and intimate, if you're allowed to be yourself on the page.

**Belinda**

I remember there was one time when Kate and I did have one of these passionate discussions, and my daughter Emily was privy to some of it, and she said to me later, she said: "Mum, are you and Kate alright? Are you gonna – like, are you talking to each other?" And I said: "Well, of course, darling! We're sisters! Like, do you ever fight with your brother? Do you, like you're fine, aren't you?" And she said: "Oh, well that's good. Just a little bit worried that, you know, you were seeming to be on different pages, here." And I said: "No, we're all good, we just have to, you know, talk through these things and make sure that we come to a common agreement with various aspects of the book."

**Kate**

Yeah. It's part of the process. And because Belinda and I are both very experienced authors, you know, we both make our living from our writing, we've both made our living from our writing basically since we left school, we understand that it's part of the creative process. That, a first draft

is only ever a discovery draft, that you're playing with ideas, you're trying things out. That, to argue over something that might not end up in the book, is not really a good use of your energy. So we just trusted in the creative process to work through certain things, and to allow the book, I suppose, space and time to grow and blossom naturally, not trying to force it into a shape too early on.

**Angourie**

In itself, the book is kind of a coming together of family because it's acknowledging your differences and strengths as individual writers, but also, you know, telling a collective story together. I really love how you chose to divide the chapters like that, and I could recognise when one of you was writing a certain chapter, and when the other was. I think, yeah, it really added to the way that the story reads on the page.

**Kate**

[It reads] kind of like a conversation, doesn't it?

**Angourie**

Yeah!

**Kate**

And then, what we hope, is that the reader is part of that conversation – that they feel as if they're part of the whole journey of discovery. You know, some of the feedback I've been getting, is that what people find so fascinating is it's like we've lifted the veil and shown what goes on behind the scenes in writing a book. And that, to many people, is part of the most fascinating part of the book. Normally, when you read a book, it's all highly finished, and the author is invisible, and you can't see their struggles and their moments of despair and the challenges and how they, you know, rose to the challenges. And for many people, I think that has been a really enchanting experience, and it makes them feel more capable of writing a book themselves, knowing that everybody goes through these kind of challenges and troubles!

**Angourie**

Yes! I love that aspect of you kind of following two parallel storylines, and when Charlotte encounters struggles, or has a low point, you kind of match that with how you felt writing the book. Yeah, I found that fascinating, that was something that really connected with me, I think, because I love fiction books, also, about connecting to generations, and especially generations of women, I think that's such a powerful thing, I love to see it represented in that way. I also wanted to talk to you about, you know, reconciling the stories that you heard as children vs. finding these actual records and getting to, you know, leaf through journals and find pictures. I notice that both of you actually have some of the pictures that are in the book hanging up behind you?

**Belinda**

Oh, yes, we do! We love them. Cause that was one of the great joys of the research, was actually finding some of Charlotte's long lost work, and to actually authenticate some of the stories that we heard as children. So, one of my absolute favourites was that we were told by the great-aunts that Charlotte met the love of her life on board the ship, and that a handsome gentlemen walked up the gangway and tipped his hat to her and it was love at first sight. And then later on the journey, he wrapped her up in his plaid cloak when she was cold, and I thought that was such a romantic story,

but I thought, oh you know, that's probably – someone's made that up along the way, but then when I transcribed Charlotte's journal, I found her talking about – twice, she talked about James Atkinson wrapping her in his plaid cloak, and the second time was during a terrible storm where Charlotte nearly drowned, and Charlotte's life was saved by James who swooped in, dragged her out of the water and wrapped her in his plaid cloak, and the next day he proposed to her. Which is the most romantic story, of course, but it was authenticated by her journal, which was just amazing. And I checked back with the – with various members of the family, and none of them knew the journal was in the National Library, so it really was a perfect example of oral history, passing down this story. And the beautiful illustrations that we found, Kate and I discovered in the Mitchell Library, and we went in there right at the beginning of our research, and we pulled up a whole lot of things that the Mitchell Library had. And one of them, I just called up on a whim, it was a sketchbook that supposed to be attributed to Charlotte's son, who was about fourteen at the time, and I thought, well, this isn't going to be as good, but we might as well have a look at it. And then as we opened the page, we realised that we'd discovered this real treasure, which was a forgotten sketchbook that had been done by Charlotte herself in 1848, and in it we discovered all these beautiful self-portraits of Charlotte, plus also portraits of our great-great-great-grandmother and her sisters. And so we were in the Mitchell Library, every – all the HSC students were there, and everything's quiet, and I turn the page and I scream out: "Kate, oh my god, she's wearing a plaid cloak!" And everyone turns and glares at me! And then we discovered this self-portrait of Charlotte wrapped in the – in James' plaid cloak, so that was such a wonderful discovery.

### **Kate**

So, the extraordinary thing is that this is a story that was passed down through the generations, you know, parent to child. An oral story about a romantic meeting and love story from years ago. And growing up, we just loved this story, and then to find the physical evidence to support it was extraordinary. Because what we were expecting, was to find that all our family history, all the stories were romanticised and glamourised and had been kind of embellished over time, and we actually found the opposite. We actually found the evidence to show that oral history has an extraordinary way of surviving for generations.

### **Angourie**

What a magical thing to discover! The truth in these stories that had been passed down to you. Something I think that really stood out to me in the book was, halfway through, in your timeline of you writing the book, you speak about how your father reveals that you have a half-sister. That revelation seemed to influence the telling of the story of your ancestors and your family?

### **Kate**

Yes, it was a complete and utter surprise – a shock, really, cause we'd had no inkling, no clue. It was extraordinary, it was one of those kind of weird sort of serendipitous moments, because I was writing a chapter about family, about whether or not creativity is passed down in our DNA, whether or not we inherited our compulsion to write in our blood. Charlotte was not the only writer in our family, her daughter, Louisa Atkinson, is the first Australian-born female novelist and journalist. And in Charlotte's family heritage there are poets and hymn-writers and biographers and journalists and all sorts of different writers. I felt like I was born knowing I had to be a writer. And I've always wanted to know if that was true, or if that was just a childhood, you know, belief. So I spent weeks and months reading about DNA, and Charles Darwin, and whether or not creativity is inheritable. And writing a chapter about my father, who was a scientist, and who actually used to work in, you

know, how things are passed down – he was an endocrinologist. And I basically finished writing the chapter about him, and about family blood, and about how things are inherited and so forth, at about three o'clock in the morning. Went to sleep, got up, and then Belinda rang me and told me this news that we had a half-sister, that we had never –

**Belinda**

Well, I came over, remember? You were going to a meeting, I said, “You can't go! I'll be there, don't do – don't move!”

**Kate**

I know! I was going to lunch with my publisher, and Belinda made me very late because she had to come over and tell me! Our half-sister, interestingly, her name is my middle name and Belinda's middle name: Emma and Jane. It was just such a surprise. And then it really made me think – I think it made both of us think really carefully about how secrets can be hidden within a family, how you can discover something that changes everything that you know – that you thought you knew about your family, and about how incredibly important family is. You know, when we met Emma for the first time, it was if we had always known her – we talked for hours and hours and hours and hours. And it just seemed eerie. It really was eerie, that we should discover this at a time when we were writing a book about our family.

**Angourie**

A passage that really struck me was when you met her and you said: “Oh, I always thought that our family paralleled Charlotte's, except that we were missing a sister.” And then suddenly, that sister comes into your life, and then your family does immediately parallel Charlotte's family.

**Kate**

And just you saying that, I've actually got chills all over my body – I don't know if you can see the goosebumps coming up on my arm. Yeah, it was quite extraordinary. So, Charlotte had four children: three girls and a boy, and in exactly the same pattern, so, two girls were born, and then a boy, and then another little girl. When I realised that our family was in the exact same pattern, I don't know why I found it so powerful, but it really, really struck me.

**Angourie**

Yeah, I mean, think it really strikes the reader, as well. When I read it, I felt those same kind of chills and goosebumps, thinking, wow, it's just feeling that connection through time, and seeing that connection on the page, and it's almost like time travel. Storytelling is like time travel, that's how you connect to people hundreds of years ago, and I think that really comes through in your book.

**Belinda**

There were so many parallels, it's just quite extraordinary, really. I think that's why a lot of people have found this story so interesting, is that it's about a period of history that most people don't know very much about – particularly what life was like for colonial women, and there are many parallels and themes like domestic violence, you know, working hard to raise your children, trying to find the time and space to have a creative life, to follow your dreams as well as raising your children. All of these things are very true for women today as much as they were for women in Charlotte's day, but then Charlotte had to deal with so much more. Sometimes, when I'm thinking about my life, and I'm thinking, oh, I'm so – I've got so much on, and I'm so busy, and I've got so



much to do, and then I think, oh gosh, but back in Charlotte's day, life was so much tougher than it is now in terms of daily life. The danger, you know, bushrangers, the convicts, the domestic violence, all of those things were so much more dangerous than life is today. So it's kind of, I think, that's what's really interesting, is exploring these universal themes of life and history and women, and also the differences between life then and life now is what makes her story so fascinating.

**Angourie**

Mm, yes, I wanted to touch on that – the context that Charlotte was living in, and how that influences you telling her story. Um, you know, she was a colonial settler in the early days of the British colony in Australia, and she wrote in her diary about her encounters and her husband's friendships with the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation, specifically one man named Errombee. But I also found it interesting when you found her book that she wrote for her children, there are a few stories that represent Aboriginal people in a derogatory way. And that was, quite an interesting chapter, you know, trying to reconcile what you knew of her in her personal life with what she wrote in this book and understanding the context in which she lived, as well.

**Kate**

Yes, absolutely. I can remember the first time that I ever read my ancestor's book. I was ... I was shocked because of the difference in the attitude to the Indigenous people. Charlotte was seeing the effects of colonisation on the local Indigenous people firsthand, and so in her books we actually see, you know, some of the early effects of the stolen children, and of the dreadful impact of colonisation. James Atkinson actually wrote to the government, protesting the state of the local Wodi Wodi people, and saying how many of them had died, and what a terrible state they were living in, and he was actually protesting against their treatment. You know, a hundred and eighty years since Charlotte wrote her book, *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, and she – she was so much a part of her time. She was expressing so much of what was the normal, kind of, attitude then. But now we realise, of course, that, you know, great harm was done. It was an incredible experience, you know, reading all that and understanding. It really brought, not only the life of the colonial settlers – it didn't just make their life so real, it also made us realise how much harm was done. And, you know, wanting to make sure that that sort of thing never happens again.

**Belinda**

I think it's also really important to understand the – her writing about the Indigenous people in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> Century society and culture, because actually, Charlotte was criticised at the time for her attitudes seen as being ridiculously positive, ridiculously –

**Kate**

Soft.

**Belinda**

Yes, absolutely. She was an early ethnographer who recorded the culture, the society and the beliefs of the local Indigenous people. And, in fact, they were one of the very few settlers who talked about the Indigenous settlers being their friends. They were always welcome at Oldbury, the Wodi Wodi people had many Corroborees on the banks of the creek at Oldbury and were always welcome, and they had large, large gatherings, but no other landowners in the area would tolerate having original owners on 'their' land. While it is quite shocking to us, you have to also understand that, at the time, they were considered to be very sympathetic to the Indigenous people, and they

considered themselves to be friends with the Wodi Wodi people. And in fact, Errombee was a very close friend of James Atkinson, and he used to go on exploring expeditions for weeks on end, down through the Shoalhaven gullies, and once they were lost down there, and Errombee starved himself and didn't eat for several days, but fed James Atkinson to keep him alive because felt he was much stronger and tougher than James, and then he got him home again and saved his life. And the Atkinson family were forever grateful to Errombee for his care of James and for saving James' life, so that happened in about 1821. A very fraught question, but you know, Kate and I are very, very, I guess aware of the fact that our ancestors settled and farmed land that was belonging to the Wodi Wodi people. So that's something that we, you know, that we talk about a lot, and that we have this great responsibility to acknowledge that and to be grateful to the Wodi Wodi people for their friendship with our ancestors.

### **Angourie**

Bringing this whole discussion back to the power of storytelling, because I think that's what everything comes back to, that's why I love books, why I love movies, why I started this podcast, and why I connected with your book, as well, because I think it's, you know, it's about turning to art and storytelling as a form of escape, sometimes, but also as a way to understand and process fear and grief. And Charlotte, too, in your book, used storytelling and education to help her family through hardships. How do you think that's continued? Especially now, in the time of COVID when we're dealing with hardships and turning to art.

### **Kate**

I'm just like you. You know I'm a passionate believer in the importance of and the power of storytelling to help us make sense of our world, to help us express our thoughts and our feelings. Storytelling connects us, it connects us to each other, you know, we are here, today, connected with you all, sharing our own story with you. It connects us to our ancestors, generation after generation after generation. It connects us across cultures and across geographies, and it connects us to those who will come after us, as well, who will read our stories and hear of our lives, and will feel a sense of kinship with us. Storytelling, I think, is what makes us human. Our book, *Searching for Charlotte*, is deeply concerned with this idea of the power of storytelling to illuminate our lives, to illuminate the past, and to connect us as humans across the great divides. You know, Charlotte wrote her book, *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, after an extraordinarily dark and difficult time in her life. She had lost the love of her life, she had been widowed. Her husband died when her youngest daughter, Louisa, was only a newborn baby. She had suffered danger and violence, she was attacked by bushrangers. Her second marriage was one of cruelty and fear – she fled that marriage with her children, she fled to Sydney and she had to build a new life for herself with nothing. They were desperately poor, the children were literally starving, which is a quote from her lawyer. And she fought [an] extraordinary battle to keep control of her life and to have custody of her own children, it's one of the great feminist legal battles of Australian history. You know, she would struggle and struggle and struggle all day, trying to live the very best life and to look after her children the very best way that she could, when she had nothing. And she could come home every night, and she would draw them close to her, and she would tell them these stories. And by that, she would create an enchanted circle for them, where they knew that they were safe, where they knew that they were loved, where they felt connected to the outer world, where she taught them everything she could about the world. But that enchanted circle, that is her book. The book is entitled *A Mother's Offering to her Children*, and by that she means: "By the stories that I tell you, I want to give you all that you need – all the wisdom, all the knowledge that you need to go on in

your life.” And they all did, they all grew up and they all flourished – not all of them, but most of them grew up and flourished and had extraordinary lives, and that was her gift to them. At the close of the book I say, and this is our gift, now. Our honouring to our ancestor is to tell her story, and to pass it on to other generations, so they, too, can learn from her.

**Angourie**

That is such a beautiful sentiment to leave the reader with, and to leave the listeners with, as well! My final question is, I like to ask all my guests who come on the podcast: what are you currently reading?

**Kate**

So I’m currently reading a book about Homer and the *Odyssey*. I often call our book, *Searching for Charlotte*, a biblio-memoir, because it’s a memoir about a book and the importance of books and storytelling, and so I’m reading another biblio-memoir, which is actually one of my favourite genres. It’s called *The Mighty Dead*, and it’s about one man’s experience of reading *Homer* in the modern time, and so the history of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* is interwoven with his own life and his own struggles and sorrows. It’s an absolutely fascinating book because it draws in everything poetry, myth, history and the personal story, which, you know, is what I love to read.

**Angourie**

Yeah! That sounds fantastic. And who’s that by?

**Kate**

Adam Nicholson.

**Belinda**

And I have just been on two weeks of lovely holidays, where I have just been at the beach, swimming, walking and reading lots of books, which has been absolutely wonderful. And two of the standout books I read in the last couple of weeks was *The Chanel Sisters*. It’s a fiction book based on the lives of Coco Chanel and her sister Antoinette, which I absolutely loved. I love, you know, the whole set in France, set in Paris, it’s all about fashion, but it’s about two extraordinary women who changed their lives. They were raised as orphans in an orphanage, and yet they started one of the most amazing companies in the world that changed the lives of women forever, so absolutely loved that book, *The Chanel Sisters* by Judith Little. And then the second book that I just finished for my book club is called *Danger Music* and it’s a memoir by Australian ABC journalist Eddie Ayres, and it’s the story of her life – his life, sorry, working as a teacher in Northern Afghanistan, which is quite extraordinary, but that’s woven together with [his] story of deciding to become Eddie Ayres, and so it was a fascinating story, I really loved it. It’s all about music, and children, the love of music, and how that changes lives, just like stories change lives. So that was a wonderful, wonderful book. So they’re the two latest that I’ve read and loved them both.

**Angourie**

Well, thank you so much for taking the time to chat to me today, Belinda and Kate, it was an absolute delight. I think it’s wonderful that you have shared Charlotte’s story with the world, and with our listeners here and The Community Library.

**Belinda**

Thank you so much, Angourie, it was wonderful.

**Kate**

Thank you, it was so lovely chatting with you.

[fade in and out: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

**Angourie**

Thank you very much to Belinda and Kate for coming on the podcast to discuss their book *Searching for Charlotte*, published by the National Library of Australia and available where all good books are sold. Of course, all the links to Kate and Belinda's websites and social media will be linked in the show notes below for you to check out, and also on my blog, Angourie's Library. If you are interested in reading *Searching for Charlotte*, please be mindful of the content warning for graphic descriptions and quotes about the violence inflicted upon the First Nations Peoples of Australia. The book includes personal writing from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that demonstrates Charlotte's friendship with the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation. It also includes evidence from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century time of unjust and harmful attitudes towards Indigenous people. This discussion of Australia's history is ongoing, and the effects of these attitudes and the colonialism are still very present today. So if you would like to read more, I will have links in the show notes to books by Indigenous Australian authors on this topic.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Thanks for listening, everyone, I hope you enjoyed this week's episode. Just a reminder that our February book club pick is *Grown* by Tiffany D. Jackson. This is a YA contemporary thriller about fame, power and music. I will be discussing this on the 28<sup>th</sup>, so make sure you read along and tune in! As always, you can find me on Instagram @the\_community\_library. I will chat to you next week, and until then, take care of yourselves. Bye.

[fade out: theme music]