**(Job 95863) C&A S01E08 MASTERED**

(I: Interviewer, P: Participant)

R: Before we begin we’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we’re recording on. The Wurundjeri Woiworung Clan and Tatungalung people and give our respects to their elders, past present and emerging. We encourage everyone listening to consider the traditional owners of the land that they’re living and thriving on and consider the benefits that may come from a treaty with the first peoples. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

[Music]

I: Jessica Knight is a writer, performer and theme maker based in Melbourne. She grew up on a dairy farm in rural Victoria in a loving Mormon household. She has participated in the National Young Writers Festival, Emerging Writers Festival and Red Dirt Poetry Festival. She performed a one-woman show entitled “Mormon Girl” in 2019 at the Melbourne Fringe Festival and her memoir “Strange Little Girl” published by Ultimo Press, is out right now. Hi Jess.

P: Hi.

I: I finished your book, and I was taken with an immediate need to get into punk rock music. So, I wanted to start by asking you who your favourite bands are or is it like picking your favourite sibling.

P: So, the thing is that is a childhood memoir and I kind of have fallen in love with Punk and kind of out of love with punk in the way that you do with certain problematic times. So, the reason is that a lot of the punk I was into at the time was put upon me by boys. It was stuff that I was liking because a boy was telling me it’s cool. Those bands, at the time, were things like Dropkick Murphys, No Effects, Bad Religion, Bouncing Souls, things like that. Mojo Nickson is an absolutely banging band if you want to get into a little bit more left of centre stuff. So, fell in love and then out of love with punk music, but only from like a feminist perspective is that I was only ever being fed bands by white guys.

 Then I grew up a little and realised that there was a whole bunch of female punk rock bands that I’d never even, would have discovered if I hadn't gone and sorted out myself. Because the boys in my life were not giving me those kind of bands as an option. They were giving me all of the boys stuff because they identified with that.

I: I wanted to say that I had a very, very visceral response reading your book where I felt your isolation and I felt your love for your family, and I felt your frustration and your embarrassment on a very visceral level, and I was wondering what it was like writing the book. Whether it was like you had to go back and whether there were things that were so emotional that you ended up taking them out or how that process went.

P: No, I wanted to put heaps more in. It was my editor that was like, this is a great story, but it’s got nothing to do with the plot. It was the opposite, I really wrote a bunch of stuff that came from a sense of injustice and rage, when looking back. There was a lot of stuff that I didn’t put in that I could have. It was actually kind of the opposite, like when I first did it I was writing away and it was like my rage and my anger was fuelling it and that was great, but I don’t think it would have made as beautiful a novel. I guess what I’m trying to say is that, now that I’ve written a memoir, I now realise that memoirs are just as full of lies as a work of fiction is because no one’s life is that linear. In fact, my life was a lot more haphazard than that book would have you believe. But yeah, like, can I tell you a story that got taken out.

I: Please do, please do.

P: Okay, so there was a story that I wanted to put in that I was really pissed about and it’s about a male relative, they are not going to listen to this podcast, so I can tell you this story and it didn’t make it into the book, and it was just something that, on looking back it really pisses me off. So, I left home to go and do Year 11 and 12 and I lived with an aunt and uncle who I loved very much, and they did love me very much, but at the point of me studying psychology, my psychology class in Year 11, my uncle had re-entered the educational sector and was doing a degree in like business. I was doing a psychology assignment, and because their computer, this was like back in the day when every child did not have an iPad.

 If I was doing an assignment, I was doing it on the computer in my aunt and uncle’s bedroom. So, they could read over my shoulder and do all this kind of stuff. So, I was doing an assignment for psychology and my uncle read through it and was like, “This isn’t right.” I was like, “But my teacher told me how to do this assignment, I’ve pretty much followed the specifications from my teacher, the educator to whom I was doing this class with.” My uncle was like, “No, this isn’t right.” Redid it and because he was doing business, he was like, “No, in business you do the assignment, this certain kind of assignment, this way.” He redid my assignment and because he was my uncle and because of the church and stuff, I was like, “Oh well he must know more than me”, and I got a bad mark for it because I hadn't done it the way that my teacher had told me to do it and she had explained it to me.

 So, I came back, redid the assignment and it went from a D to an A. So, when I did it myself I did it properly. Now you think that my uncle would be like, “Oh yeah, fair enough, that’s the class, I’m not doing psychology, that should be fine.” No, he got pissed off, took the assignment and then on my parent/teacher night, went and talked to that teacher about this assignment. I didn’t go because I was so embarrassed, I was like, this is the embarrassing part. So I was humiliated that he was making such a big deal about this because in my mind I was like, I didn’t know what to do. It’s like there was my teacher, who I respected, and my uncle who, until that point, I thought knew what he was talking about.

 So, I got an A for the assignment, he got pissed off and went and probably, I’m assuming argued with the teacher about why his version of the assignment should have been the one that got the A. Do, you understand how ridiculous and embarrassing that is.

I: My head is screaming boundaries, boundaries, boundaries, where are the boundaries.

P: There was none. This fucking man was like to a 16-year-old girl and a teacher who had gone to university to teach psychology, to Year 11 and 12 students, was like, “No, no this can’t be right.” Instead, when it was proven that I had done it the right way, he doubled down and still decided to just amplify the situation to a really weird degree. So I wrote that in the book, and it didn’t make it because it was just an anecdote that pissed me off and it would have been for them.

I: I feel like it has a deeper lesson. Like if you do things independently sometimes they work out better.

P: Yes, exactly, and the thing is, looking back that is exactly it. That was the lesson. Of course at the time, I didn’t know that that was the lesson, but actually that proved that if I trusted my inner compass instead of the moral compasses of the people around me, who did love me and probably in their mind thought they were doing the best for me, but that whole situation didn’t look like it was about me, it was about him. It was entirely about him. I was just merely a pawn that was just his way of like moving across a chessboard that he’d created in his own mind.

I: Or his own ego, yeah.

P: Yeah, his own ego and mine didn’t matter and the fact that I was a teenager and learning and stuff and made no difference to him, also I wasn’t his fucking kid. So like, it was just all very strange. That is one of the stories and I’m glad to get it off my chest because I’ve been drying to tell someone and Nick, I got to tell you, thank you.

I: You are very welcome, that was an exclusive.

P: That one is actually an exclusive and if this goes viral and they end up hearing about it, that’s fine, I only ever say what I’m willing to stand firmly behind, so don’t you worry my friend.

I: That really leads me onto some things that I wanted to talk about with you because I have always had a fear of keeping a diary because when I was younger, my friend passed away and one of the first things that her family did when they were packing up her room, was go through her dairy. So, from that early age I’ve had a fear of keeping a diary and then I learned through the book that you had people read your diary and then it surprised me to learn that you were still willing to keep a diary, so could you talk a bit about that?

P: It’s shocking isn’t it but I guess now that I’ve told you my uncle’s story you are probably not surprised that I would have had family members, that just had absolutely no qualms, qualmless I think is the term you could use, about reading the inner workings of my books. So, they did and of course I still did it because all I wanted was to be a writer and I had no idea about how to do that, except by the doing. Do you know what I mean? Like how else was I going to attain the dream that I had of being a writer as a young girl if I didn’t fucking do it, regardless of what the consequences were. It could get me into trouble, and it did numerous times, and I still do it.

 I don’t do it as well as I used to, which is a thing that saddens me. I am trying to get back into it because now that I’ve written a book, I am actually a bit more like you now, because I’m like this could bite me in the arse one day. Then I ignore that voice and go, no remember tally forth, you are fine. So, that’s what I do. But I can and would love to tell you a story about journal reading when I am older, if you would like to hear one that goes after the memoir, Strange Little Girl, when I’m becoming a Strange Young Woman.

I: Please do.

P: So, I had a journal when I had my first boyfriend, and I lived with my first boyfriend. We were together for two intense years that were very fraught as first loves often are, and I kept a journal, or I went back into keeping a journal because when I first met him and lived with him. Having a boyfriend takes up a lot of your time when you aren’t concerned with your own feelings. So, once I started to try and retain parts of myself that I’d lost while still in the relationship, I started writing a journal again. At the time this was troubling to the boy that I loved because when you do things on your own to someone who doesn’t have a lot going on except you, they get upset.

 So, he decided to start keeping a journal himself, trying to like bond with me in a way. So, anyway, he kept a journal for maybe two or three weeks and then when we broke up, very exciting, I came to get a box of stuff that I’d forgotten and he had already gotten a new girlfriend, he gave me that journal because he didn’t want it anymore. To him it didn’t matter, whereas I thought this was like an absolute brilliant thing. I went, oh my God, I have a few handwritten pages of my first ever boyfriend telling me about some of the inner workings of his mind. I knew that that would come in handy one day when I wrote a novel about our love or when I referenced it in some beautiful, Jane Austin type way.

 So, I had it and it was very exciting and then years went by, and I was living with another boyfriend I have now, hey Leon, and it was like my parents were cleaning out, because they were moving and I had a box of my journals and so mum brought them back. So, I was like okay, the Josh journal is probably going to be in that box. Now this I need to stress to you was a very big deal. I was very excited to get that journal because I needed it. I was working on Mormon Girl and whatever, so I really wanted to have that to just jog my memory. Because to me journals, especially handwritten things are super important for memory and story building and world building and things like that.

 Anyway, the journal wasn’t in there and I didn’t realise until my mum and dad had left, mum and dad live four hours a way. So, it’s not like they could just like come back the next day with the journal if they had it. But no, so Nick, I need to express to you how much I wanted that journal and how much the next part of this story is very harrowing to me. So, I messaged my mother, who is a hoarder and my nan, so when I asked, “Oh mum, where is that journal, it was one that Josh had written a few pages and you probably didn’t see it, but it’s not there, could you please find it.” She messaged back just a very quick and blasé, “Oh I didn’t think you’d want that, I threw it away.”

I: Oh no, I knew it was coming, but I’m still shocked for you.

P: Well, why the fuck did she read it, because it should have just been one of the ten journals, notebooks that were there. So, the fact is, that she probably read a few pages of all of them, do you know what I mean?”

I: Yeah. It’s a reminder to take photos of things that you read, just in case you need it later on.

P: I had it before camera phones were a thing, you have to understand the technology was not at my disposal.

I: Oh no.

P: If I’d have known that my mother was going to read that journal and throw the fucking thing away I would have taken photos. I mean do that now.

I: She doesn’t realise what a treasure trove she got rid of.

P: She does, my mother has always known I’m a writer, she’s always known I’ve kept journals. She knows how important writing has been to me throughout my childhood. It’s not a surprise that I keep journals, I’ve done it my whole life. It just makes me realise she doesn’t know me. Like many mothers, I think I’m still a little girl to her and I probably always will be, especially being the one of the five who is disabled, there is a certain amount of infantilisation that comes from it. I feel like I’m fucking preaching to the choir I’m sure.

I: The lack of control and the lack of privacy probably too.

P: Oh yeah, it’s like we don’t deserve it, or we don’t need it, you know what I mean. Like it’s like, we don’t need that, what have we got to hide. We should be able to share what we want, when we want and our bodies should be our own and our minds should be our own and journals written by ex-boyfriends should only be the property of the person in question.

I: It’s ironic to me that your first boyfriend’s name was Josh, because I remember reading the book and seeing that you used Josh as the example of a cool boy, or a cool man that you’d like to get to go.

P: That was probably me probably trying to foreshadow the names of the boys and just giving a little bit of props to the floppy headstoner that would steal my heart for the first time.

I: I wanted to ask what your family think of the book, because I think they come across as lovely people and you can tell that there is a lot of love and affection there, but there is also, it exposes some of them. So, I wanted to know what their reaction was.

P: I don’t actually know because like I think they’ve all, they’ve all read it, all my siblings have read it except my brother I think, unless he has now. My youngest sister was the most vocal and the most supportive about it and the most excited. Then there was my other two sisters, I know they’ve read it and then I asked them about it and they were like, “Yeah, it’s fine, yeah you did it, cool”, and my mum read it and she was, I thought she would be more excited, you know. I thought she’d be a bit more into it, but she was just like, “You did it, you always wanted to write a book”.

 When I was working on the book, we had a little bit of an argument, obviously she had spoken to relatives, because she’s like, “I don’t want it to hurt anyone”. But not, my feelings didn’t matter as much as the feelings of the people that she had to interact with. Like people at church, relatives and things like that, and I was like, you don’t want it to hurt anybody. That was her biggest concern and that really annoyed me, and it made me sad.

I: What is your relationship with Mormonism, and I guess wider religion at the moment?

P: Not great. I mean I think that people should be able to practice their religion if they want to, but I think especially in the climate now I think we need to be less obsessed with Heaven and religion and things like that and try, I think it’s a distraction. It makes you less keen to create a nice existence in the hear and now. It’s like people who are obsessed with like going to space. It’s like we need to use the money to maybe solve a few problems here. It’s like why don’t we try and do some stuff here to make it nicer here for people.

I: So, how did the memoir come about?

P: I have been an enthusiastic and hopeful entrant into the Wheeler Centre’s, Next Chapter Program. So I applied for the first time, and I got into the top 10% but no cigar, but I got a lovely email from the judges of that time telling me to keep writing, blah, blah, blah. Then the second year I applied again, and I got into the top 5% which again really close but didn’t get me through the threshold. So, anyway, The Next Chapter is a program that if you win it you get $1,500 and you get a mentor helping you work on your first novel, which is very exciting. So, you would enter by giving them 10,000 words and a synopsis of your novel and then you’d like hope for the best.

 Then the third time I applied, I didn’t think that I’d heard anything back and I forgot all about it. Then the day before the winners were announced and the winning event was on, I got a phone call from someone who was like, “Are you aware that you have been highly commended”, which comes with $500 and an invite to the announcement event where there is free booze and publishing people are there. I got super excited and checked my spam folder, sure enough there was an email telling me that I’d been highly commended. They were like, “The thing, the event is tomorrow, I know it’s very short notice for you, are you good to go?” I was like, “Of course.”

 I went to that event and in, so I met a publisher of Ultimo Press, Robert Watkins who was there from Sydney to meet and talk with people and young writers and I got talking to them about my memoir. I was a little bit drunk, and I was a bit excited, and I was talking to him about it. I told him I was raised a Mormon and then he got all excited because he’d been raised Jehovah Witness. So we both pondered over weird religious upbringings and how I hoped to write a book maybe about that and he gave me his card. Which, when I spoke to some other people, was a very big deal, because publishers don’t give their cards out to everyone. He was like, “Send me some stuff if you want to.” I was like, oh my God, when do I do that, and my friend was like, you do it a.s.a.p. Because as I’m sure you know these kind of things you’ve got to work on them quickly.

 So lucky for me, because I had written a bunch of stuff without getting permission first, thanks for my journal writing and everything like that, see it all comes together in the end, that’s why you keep a journal. So, I sent him 10,000 words of Strange Little Girl and he got back to me literally that day and he's like, “Do you have anything else about this, because this is pretty good, do you have any more?” So, I said, I do, but it’s just a big mess. Do you know about National Novel Writing Month?

I: Yeah, NaNoWriMo.

P: Yes, so I think in November, before this thing, I’d done that about Strange Little Girl or what would become Strange Little Girl, so I sent him that and then about a month or so after that I was offered a publishing contract. That was basically how it happened. Yeah, I got a highly commended and I went to the event, I met Robert Watkins, and the rest is history, and it was super exciting.

I: I’ve never been at the cold face of that, but that seems like it moved incredibly quickly.

P: Yeah, and I need to make it very clear that it seemed like it moved very quickly, but up to that point it was very slow going, if that makes sense. Like I was writing just for me for a very long time, a very long time. I think people don’t realise, there is a lot of obsession with making writing a career and that’s wonderful and writers should be paid. But I need to be clear that for me I never thought I was going to make my money from being a writer, I always kind of just thought that that was like a pipe dream and to even get people to read it would be exciting. Also I was so busy trying to make a living as a disabled girl and a chronically ill girl that I never even though that I could pursue writing until I got on the NDIS.

 It free up my time for me to pursue writing as a maybe more of a job than I did beforehand. Because before that, all of my tiny girl energy was in trying to make rent, so it wasn’t until someone was like, “You know that you are blind enough to get disability?” I was like, “Okay, no one had ever told me that.” My family had never told me that and that is the thing that annoys me the most is that the word “disability” was never ever mentioned as a girl. Then when I finally did mention to my mother, “I think Mum, you know, I am a disabled woman”, she looked so horrified, she said, “No, you are not.” I’m like, “Yes I am, and it’s okay.” Do you know what I mean, like I will never forget how horrified she looked. Like it was like I’d told her I’d murdered someone.

I: Whereas for me, saying that I have a disability, is like saying I have, I was going to say brown hair, I have red hair at the moment, it’s like saying the colour of my eyes, it just is. It’s not a good or a bad thing, it just is what it is.

P: Yeah, exactly, and the thing is though, I do get people doing, like just staring at me. My boyfriend says, “The a”, and because I’m blind, I don’t see that a lot of the time, they have to be pretty obvious for me to notice. But what’s great about that is I think some of my, some of my confidence and my free and easy way of moving through the world, I think does come from not being able to see how many people double take at me. Because it’s like, well fuck them, who cares. Like if they want to stare, fine, they can waste their time staring. I have purple hair right now, they are probably looking at that, my hair is beautiful at the moment, so yay for me. If it’s spreading the joy of staring to other people, that’s fine.

I: I’ve just seen your hair on Facebook and can confirm it’s amazing.

P: Thank you. Seven hours at the hairdressers, just to discombobulate you. I did this on a non-dialysis this day because I wanted to be pampered. It takes a long time, you’ve got to bleach it first to get this kind of colour.

I: This is an audio medium obviously, so for people that haven’t read your book and don’t know you can you describe what they would see if they were to meet you.

P: So, if you were to meet me, you would see a tiny girl with a bob haircut that is bright purple, blue eyes, a face that, because of renal failure is a little bit, uh, I guess you could say, a little bit round, a little bit rotund, like big cheeks, like cute, like cute and chubby cheeks I guess and yeah, very fluid retained face. That makes me sound like my face is a balloon, it’s not, but I’m just trying to like paint you a valid picture. The outfit I’m wearing today, if you want a description, when my boyfriend saw it, he said, “You look”, he’s like, “That’s very cute, you look like a Muppet.” I could not be more pleased with that description. I’m wearing leggings that are black and white pinstriped and a crop, tight, ribbed long sleaved shirt that is brown, orange and pink striped. I got it in an op shop and I freaking love it, it fits me like a dream.

I: In your memoir you kept saying that you wanted to be cool like the other people, the other characters and knowing you now you are like one of the coolest people that I know, so that was strange for me to read how you felt when you were younger.

P: Oh yes, I mean, oh my God Nick, I don’t think I was very cool because I just think Mormonism is not cool. I don’t want to offend people. It’s not cool if you are always happy all the time and if you are always shoving your negative emotions, which are valid, I don’t think you can be truly happy unless you know what it’s like to be truly sad. I think we need both of those things. You need to be comfortable with the angel on your shoulder, and you need to be comfortable with the devil on your shoulder. I think that maybe more of a philosophical thing and because I’ve read too much and I’ve read maybe too much Edgar Alan Poe and [0:28:24 Sahtra] and things like that.

 I feel like you need to be able to see the beauty in the darkness and I think with a lot of my illnesses and stuff, it’s taught me to sit with uncomfortable feelings. We’re all going to die eventually, as scary as that is, especially if you have turned your back on a religion. So like I’m, I don’t know what is going to happen to me when I die, I may very well go to hell. I’ve pretty much broken all the rules that I was raised to keep. I’ve had sex before marriage, I’ve drunk alcohol, I’ve dabbled in a few recreational drugs, not regularly but I tried a couple, I’ve stopped going to church, I’m no sure if I believe in God, I don’t know if I’m a proper atheist, but I know that I’m certainly not a, certainly not as faithful as I have been in the past. I’m probably more agnostic.

I: The attitude to disability from your parents and your family, what is the Mormon attitude to disability.

P: When you get into heaven Nick you are going to have legs and you are going to be able to walk around and you are going to get a whole new proper body that works perfectly, because you’ve promised God that you are going to take what you get here and you are going to take it with good humour and you are not going to get angry, you are not going to get pissed off, even though I think that we’re allowed to get pissed off sometimes. It’s all well and good to have disability pride, but I think that disability anger is valid as well, if that makes sense. Like because the world is not really set up for us all the time and I think that we’re allowed to get pissed off about that, do you know what I mean.

I: I agree with you absolutely. From your memoir, one of the things that kept coming through to me was that you felt like you had to be happy all the time, not cause anybody any stress, not upset anybody, how have you gone from that to writing things about Mormonism that might upset people? Has that been a process for you?

P: Oh my gosh yes, thank you for asking. It’s been a huge process and a really scary one and one with a lot of steps forward, a few steps back, a lot of steps forward, lot of steps back. Writing a book, there was a lot of times when I would have panic attacks and anxiety attacks, so I would have to walk away from my desk because I would get heart palpitations and my vision would go even, would go blurry and I would just get very stressed about it. Yeah, it was a huge, a huge effort, an absolute huge effort. Which is why, now the book is out, so many lovely people have said that they thought I could have gone harder on my family. They are like, this book is so loving and so good and so unsentimental, which I’m very glad about.

 I think one of the things being raised Mormon is one of my concerns is being shmaltzy. I don’t want to be shmaltzy, Nick. I don’t want to do the whole, as you say, the whole everything is good, everything is great, tra-la-la-la thing. But I also want to have a good sense of humour because, as I’m sure you know, it’s important for me to be funny. So I don’t want to be over sentimental or shmaltzy and I also don’t want to make people too sad, I want to make them sad but then also make them laugh at the same time. So for me it was a real process of dealing with the anxiety of what people will think and moving forward and like, this is for me, it’s not for them.

 I don’t know there is a quote about being a writer is basically you need to write like your parents are dead, because you are, like if you are writing you are going to horrify your parents at some point unless you’re, I don’t know who is a writer you think would not upset their parents because they’re so shmaltzy? Oh, the girl who wrote the Babysitter’s Club, they are not going to upset their parents.

I: Perfect reference for me, I love it. I wanted to ask about disability and how you feel about it because I was reading your book, going like, in some ways I was expecting you, I think because I’ve written a lot of disability memoirs, where they will say something like, “I was born with in certain condition”, but it sounds like you don’t know what your condition is and it was a bit of a medical mystery. So, I was just wondering what your thoughts are about, would you prefer to have a label, do you think that would have made your life easier?

P: No. Yeah, no I don’t and also I think it’s my arrogance in the fact that I didn’t have a condition thrust upon me and being a puzzle was more interesting to me. I was kind of almost secretly proud of that. Or maybe I’m more proud of it now. As a kid maybe it would have made things easier, yeah, of course. Because as I said, if my family had maybe been told, your daughter, Jessica, is amazing and wonderful, but she has a condition called blah, blah, blah and these are the things in her life that may be a bit more difficult, and so just be mindful of that. Yeah, I think it probably would have. It would have made things easier for my family as well now that I think about it.

 You know, what I mean because they’d be like, oh, it would give them something to cling to and something to look to maybe make me easier to figure out. So, yeah, probably. But I mean they knew my eyes were bad, so why wasn’t that enough. Like the fact that I was blind was just like funny, just because of like humorous misunderstandings. Not an actual disability that maybe they needed to like try and get me funding for or something. I was just like thrust in the only country school that was available and was told to just like always sit at the front of the class. But that was it Nick, that was the only, yeah the only advice I was given trying to get through school without being able to see properly, just sit at the front. And you know what, that didn’t really always help.

I: I did develop a soft spot for your dad. He seemed to be the one, from how you wrote it and how I took it, that was just trying to make everything okay and just make a joke of everything and it made me think like is he actually, is he actually okay with experiencing negative emotions.

P: My darling, darling dad does very much struggle with negative emotions, of course. Especially I think being religious and everything like that, yeah it’s really, it’s a real struggle for him, but I’m also very glad to have that, to have had that influence around. But oh yeah, he wasn’t good with negative emotions, but neither of my parents were. They were good at expressing negative emotions, very good at expressing them. I think I got my hideous, hideous temper from my mum and dad, the only difference now that I’ve done some therapy to help deal with negative emotions and now I realise that you don’t actually have to be as reactive as I was raised to believe, if that makes sense.

I: Yeah definitely. I feel there would be some people who hear the title “Strange Little Girl” and want to come up to you and just say, “You are not strange, you are interesting”. So, I wondered, is Strange Little Girl a way of reclaiming the negative things that have been used against you?

P: Yes and I’ve also been told that I’m strange numerous times, by people in my life, who have come in and out of my life. But the Strange Little Girl is actually from one of my favourite songs which is a cover of a Strangler’s song called Strange Little Girl. But the version I like, I don’t like the Strangler’s version who wrote it first, it’s the Tori Amos cover, Strange Little Girl, is the one I would point you towards. She did an album that was a bunch of covers of songs from female perspectives, which is so great. So, Strange Little Girl is the one she did and it’s one of my favourite songs and that’s where the title came from. So, I sent my publisher, Robert, a list of possible titles for the book and that was one of them. It was the one that both he and I liked.

 So, that’s why Strange Little Girl became the title of my book. “A little note to the love of Tori Amos” who is also, Nick, a strange little girl who became a strange little woman and her dad was a pastor. So she also has the religious upbringing that made her really angry thing. Which is so great. So yeah, if you haven’t, everyone needs to go and listen to Tori Amos.

I: It all ties in together, that’s great.

P: Yeah.

I: What’s next for you? For example, I have a friend that all she wanted to do in her life, her big goal was to buy a house. She was then in a fortunate position that she was able to buy a house quite early. After she bought the house she had actually a few weeks of going, “What do I do now?” What does the rest of my life look like, now that I’ve already accomplished what I wanted to do. So, for you, wanting to be a writer, do you want to write more.

P: I would love to write more. My health has not been great at this point in time and unfortunately with that comes a very annoying thing called brain fog, I think it’s called and it’s because, as a doctor informed me, I’m not going crazy, but because I have renal failure and I’m on dialysis, dialysis is able to clean out a lot of the toxins of the blood, that doesn’t come out through urine, because I’m not making urine anymore. But because of that, some of the toxins can’t be taken out and it does cause, yes brain fog. So that has meant that my creative mind is not as florid and not as active as I would like it to be, as it was when my kidney was working. Also Strange Littel Girl was actually meant to come out in 2023, it came out in 2024 as you and I know. But it was meant to come out in 2023.

 But in 2023, I nearly died due to, I think it was a bout of very bad pneumonia, and I was in ICU for about five weeks and didn’t come out until February or something. I went in in January, early January and didn’t come out until February or something and I remember I couldn’t even email the publisher because I was still recuperating. My partner had to email Robert and everyone and say, “Jess is a little bit unwell, I’m not sure if she’s going to be able to make the deadline”, so yes, it was meant to come out in 2024. So, basically, I could write a book about what was happening before Strange Littel Girl got published. Or while Strange Littel Girl was still in creation, what was happening around it.

 I’m sure a lot of people could do that, but yes, there is a book that could be written just about writing Strange Little Girl. Not that I think I want to write that, I would much rather write a more fun book next actually. Maybe one about me being a little bit older or I don’t know maybe something completely different. Maybe I make one that takes place on the moon, who knows. I won’t do that though, I’m not really, I’m not a space girl, I don’t think that will happen.

I: One of the things that I loved about the book was that you left it open for more, you didn’t tie everything up and say everything is great now. It was just sort of in a better place than it had been, like it felt like you found your people. By all means it felt like there could be a second one if that were ever to happen.

P: Exactly and I loved the idea of like maybe young people, like teenagers reading Strange Littel Girl and then them growing up and maybe going into young adulthood and then having my sequel to like look to and read, if that makes sense. So, yeah, they grow up with me sort of, I love that idea. I love the idea of Strange Littel Girl maybe getting into the hands of more medical professionals and maybe more chronically ill kids. I would love Strange Littel Girl to be read by people, like kids in the Royal Children’s Hospital. I’m really trying to make that happen. I would even happily donate novels to, I don’t know, there is, I think there is a school room at the Royal Children’s Hospital that has maybe books and stuff that would be a great, I think a great place for Strange Littel Girl to live. So that other young chronically kids could maybe read it. Is that something you think would be a good idea? I think it’s a great idea.

I: Absolutely and I’m just hoping that you finally get to go there on the Good Friday appeal.

P: Yes, I know, I just filled out a Working With Children Check, so that I can volunteer, maybe next year and yeah, I’ve also emailed them about my book as well, so yeah, it would be so cool, it would be so exciting.

I: When I was reading that, that was one of the first things that I resonated with, was like deep desire to be there.

P: Were you ever there Nick?

I: No, I wasn’t, but I did meet Chris Hemsworth there and another time, before he was Thor of course.

P: Oh my gosh really, what he was just hanging out?

I: He was one of the Home and Away people.

P: (laugh) And he was there just like doing the famous person visiting sick kids thing?

I: Absolutely yeah. I just want to give a quite shout out to Leong, your partner, who has made you heaps of cups of tea during the writing process.

P: So many cups of tea.

I: Can you talk to me a bit about the support that you got while writing the book.

P: I was a fucking nightmare while I was working on the book quite honestly. Like I was just a tightly wound, tripwire of anxieties and misgivings and tantrums. Tantrums more like, why am I doing this, this is a waste of time, no one is going to give a flying fuck about anything I write because I was sick of my own head while doing it, so fed up with myself. There was so much anxiety about like no one cares, this is going to be boring to people, I don’t know how this is going to be anything. But also, I was thinking that way, but then I also had such high hopes. I had such high hopes for it, I was so excited about the possibility of what it could lead to, and I got really drunk on that as well. But unfortunately, no one has contacted me to make a movie out of it so that’s a little bit of a let down.

I: Now is your chance, who do you want to play you.

P: I’d want Wynona Ryder to play me even though she’s doing mum’s now. But Nick I’m a ‘90s kid, so in my head I just see like Wynona Ryder in Beetle Juice and like that’s what I would want. Wynona Ryder circa Beetle Juice playing me yes.

I: One of the things that I really appreciate as someone connected to you through social media as well, is that you see to get really, really excited when you see your book out inn the wild so to speak and I really appreciate just that there is like childlike excitement that it finally happened and it’s out there.

P: Yeah it’s a, that is a real trip, it’s a real trip, especially as I worked so hard on it and like I nearly died in the creation of it. So, yeah, I think that’s probably where the excitement comes from. It’s like Nick, it’s not just the fact that my book is on the shelf, but that I’m alive to point at it and then take a photo and share it on social media, there is just a whole lot of stuff that I’m very happy about. Being alive being one of them, I think that’s one of the biggest things. So, that excitement, I’m glad it inspires you because it’s very real, nothing makes you excited more than surviving a brush with death. I make it sound like it’s a funny little thing that happened, it is not very funny. At the time it wasn’t funny but it’s funny now because anything can be funny in hindsight.

I: I was just thinking that should be one of the quotes of the episode yeah.

P: Everything is funny in hindsight. Also, did you say that this is an audio thing, it’s not being videoed?

I: No.

P: I put makeup on.

I: Oh, thank you.

P: You are welcome, now I just wanted people to know, if they can’t see it I did, I put on some foundation because I was just like, oh no, I want to look good for my friend. So yeah I, don’t worry I’m going to a 12-year-old niece’s dinner this evening, so they’ll benefit from it, so that’s all very good.

I: Thank you I’m honoured.

P: You are welcome.

I: I wanted to ask how people can support you in terms of being a writer and a creative. Is it as simple as buying your book and reading your book?

P: Buy my book, borrow my book from the library, that’s also totally valid. Buy it for a friend, buy it for your doctor, buy it for your child’s doctor, buy it for your child, use it as a placemat for your coffee cup, it’s totally fine, do whatever you want with it. I had a doctor come up to me when I was at dialysis the other day and tell me that she’d not only purchased it but read it and then told her ophthalmologist to also buy it and read it and they did, which his very exciting. Also what was great about the doctor reading it was that she told me quite candidly, she was like, “I kept having to put your book down and then think about it and then pick it up again.” Because it was so hard for her to read in it’s entirety all at once.

 Because it was so emotional to her to get a very intimate inside look into the mind of a patient and it made her think really hard about how she interacts with people, especially her patients. So, isn’t that beautiful, to know that my book made her, not that it made her uncomfortable, but it made her uncomfortable in such a useful and I think really valuable way.

I: You can’t ask for much more than that honestly.

P: Absolutely not, it was really heartening and possibly one of the best things I’d ever gotten as feedback from writing Strange Littel Girl. Yeah, it was really, really amazing.

I: This is a real sort of broad obvious question, but if someone is listening to this and you’ve achieved their dream and all they want to do is publish a memoir, what would be some advice for them?

P: Just keep at it because any work that you do now is going to lead you in the right direction. Don’t ask permission. Don’t ask for permission, just do it. Write your notebooks, write on the back of envelopes, on the back of bills, scribble on doctor’s letters, I have many of those. Do, whatever you can to keep that desire and that thirst alive. Stay thirsty because is the only advice I can give you. Write for yourself, because it’s the only way you are going to find your voice as well, is that you need to write for yourself and do your best but also yeah, just keep writing. Apply for things, it doesn’t matter if you don’t get it, every time you fill out an application, every time you write a few thousand words for this or a few thousand words for that, you are creating a body of work. That’s what you need to remember is that you are creating a body of work.

 It’s not about the accolades, it’s actually not about the pats on the back, even though when you get one it is fucking amazing, I’m not going to lie. But it’s all the stuff you need to do for yourself that is going to lead you in the right direction and then once you are there, you can never go back. So, like also enjoy the journey because it’s the only way forward.

I: What has been the thing that’s been the most surprising now that you’ve published a book? Somehow I feel that like if I publish a book and it is in a bookstore, that like the world’s going to stop and there’s going to be fireworks and I’m going to be on CNN and everything, what actually happened and what did it feel like?

P: Actually, not a lot happened Nick and it feels pretty depressing.

I: That’s what I was worried your answer might be.

P: I haven’t been on CNN, I have not been on any news things. I was on ABC radio which was nice.

I: That’s exciting.

P: That was exciting but that was pretty much the only interviews I got that were of any interest and that I haven’t been on any really festivals or anything since the book came out. Yeah, not a lot, the world has not stopped, there were no fireworks.

I: So, the work continues, it sounds like once you finished writing, another set of works starts because you’ve got to promote it.

P: Yeah, and then it’s like well at what point do you stop promotion and then start on the next thing, do you know what I mean, because there is only so much you can do for a project that is already off the ground and out there and done. You’ve got to like kind of put a little mental note on an arbitrary day, that you decide to put this project on the shelf and say, “With love and affection, I’ve done all I can with you my child, go forth and do what you are going to do. Mama needs to move on now with the next baby.” This one is done, you are an adult now, fly my pretty, fly and then go and do the other project. So, I guess that’s what I’m trying to say to you now is that I’m trying to think about my next project.

I: Amazing, well it sounds a bit weird because I would count you as a friend, so it sounds a bit weird to say that I’m a fan as well. No pressure, but I’ll be looking forward to the next book.

P: Thank you so much. I look forward to you holding it in your hands and being like “Look at this”.

I: Amazing, thanks so much for talking to me.

P: You are welcome, are we at the end now, oh no.

I: We are, thank you for putting the foundation on for me.

P: You are so welcome. I guess I’ll just have to go and look in the mirror a bit more and appreciate the effort that I’ve gone to for myself. See yet again, at the end of the day you’ve got to do things just for you because you just don’t know if you are going to be having an interview that turns out to only be audio.

I: See it all ties in together.

P: All ties in, it’s all a rich tapestry, everything connects eventually.

I: Amazing, thanks so much Jess.

P: Thank you Nick, love you, see you later.

I: Bye. I love Jess so much, thank you Jess so much for your openness. Great and Amplifier is assisted by the Australia Government through Creative Australia, it’s Principle Arts Investment And Advisory Group Body. Please share this episode widely. Until next time.

[END RECORDING]