



So...podcast – Episode #28 Trace Balla

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Trace: I barely notice time slipping by 'til the day starts to cool. "Where are you going, kid?" "Nowhere, just here, you know, rambling around, rock hopping." That's just it, I'm not going anywhere or trying to find anything. I'm just being here, just being me. No shoes, no socks, a boy with a beating heart hopping among the rocks."

Hi. So my name's Trace Balla. I work as a children's author and illustrator and I'm here in Australia, in central Victoria in Dja Dja Wurrung country. I just want to acknowledge that they've been Dja Dja Wurrung people taking care of this beautiful country for thousands and thousands of years. I just want to acknowledge the elders that are here now and the young ones that are coming up after them and stepping up in the roles of continuing with their culture and caring for country.

So it's really great to be here on the So...podcast with you, John. Thank you.

John: Trace Balla. Wow, I loved how you started this episode. Reading a paragraph out of the book. What was the name of that book?

Trace: That book's name is *Rockhopping*.

John: Wow. And *Rockhopping* is basically as it sounds. When I hear the word 'rock hop' I'm thinking of in a river, but it doesn't have to be a river. It can be sometimes you get pieces of granite just on the ground.





- Trace: Well this story's actually about finding the source of a river that was in the previous book, *River Time*. So it's about just rambling along where you are as such a special thing.
- John: And don't you – isn't it interesting when you, just going back to the words 'rock hopping'. You see it all the time. It seems to be a natural thing for children. With their legs they can skip, or they can spin around but quite often they're going to hop. And hop could be through a puddle of water, hop you to a bunch of leaves. I like that word. Is it a kangaroo thing when we talk about hop?
- Trace: Well it could be. Yeah, I think it's about just being present and exploring and marvelling right where you are.
- John: Exactly. We're going to talk about lots of great stuff today. Obviously you're an illustrator and publisher of a book and we'll talk of that later, about all the books that you have done. I want to dig a bit more – I've got to keep saying that word 'dig' but whenever I talk to people who are connected to the earth the word 'dig' comes up. I've seen your Facebook and I've seen a couple of videos on things like Gardening Australia. I congratulate you for what you've done. Let's get to the earth of the heart. You've got a great fascination with trees and nature and it's helped you on your own journey. I want to explore that more please.
- Trace: I think as a child I was probably a bit lonely, although I wasn't because I had a tree in my garden and I spent a lot of time up that tree. So the tree was a bit of a friend for me and I still have tree friends. I have names for certain trees. Like there's a certain tea-tree down by the coast that I just love to go and visit that specific tree. I've got a boomerang tree in a park in the city where I've actually lost a boomerang up the tree, that's where it got its name.





John: Hang on, I've got to – just trying to visualise this. So I've heard of people losing kites and cats, but you lost a boomerang in a tree. Let's go through that.

Trace: You know us Aussies. Well I was with my son and we were having a practice, trying to get the boomerang to come back but of course this time it didn't come back it went up and stuck up. So it took a while to retrieve but ever since we've called that the boomerang tree and he knows where that tree is. I guess I map out trees in my life. If you had a map of where you've been in your life I would definitely have a map of certain trees that I've had a fondness for.

John: Sure. I was actually talking to a friend of mine the other day who was talking about moving from one location to another and the other location he's moving to is going to be quite new. Obviously you need to get to know the neighbourhood and the people. But my friend actually pointed out the importance of going to connect with the trees that have been there for a lot longer than people and you get to learn a lot about the area just from connecting with that tree. And to many people that might sound really weird and whacky but if you think about it, if you could just shut out the noise and say "this tree has been here for a really long time, it does know the hood".

Trace: Oh yeah. They've seen a lot or they felt a lot. And they're living beings so for me, I like to get in physical contact with trees. Over the coronavirus I've been quite physically isolated and so I have done a lot more tree connecting and sort of leaning in, surrendering my body into trees that are on a particular angle where I can really lean into them. That's actually kept me quite steady during the time where I could have been a lot more mentally shaky I suppose. It's just helped me feel really grounded. And I think at the same time it's also reminded me of this thing of us as humans in a really deep time way that we've come from the trees. Like we are related to the monkeys and we've got these limbs that can hang off trees. So yeah, it gives me a really deep grounded feeling to be able to do that.





John: Trace, it's not all about living in the country, living in the push. We have trees in Melbourne CBD that are on the footpath and a lot of concrete around them and obviously they've got watering going in, so they've been designed well. Let's not lose value in those people who are stuck in cities and you've got the traffic and the trucks and the police cars and all that sort of thing going on. But you know, it's about having that moment and looking at that tree isn't it.

Trace: Oh absolutely. Like it can just even be a little plant, a little flower. It doesn't matter, it's just to have connection with something that's connected to the earth. It's so deeply helpful. And I also love looking up through the light of the leaves. I call it 'leaf light' and I find lying under a tree, it could be just at your local park, it doesn't have to be out in the bush. If you're lucky enough to have your own garden. Even a pot plant in your window, you can still see some leaf light coming through. So yeah, absolutely. And probably much more so in the city, you really need that deep natural connection I reckon.

John: And I can also tell examples, a quick story about being in an office in Melbourne CBD and you've been at a presentation and it's just been "yeah, yeah, come on" and all of a sudden your mind just goes to that tree across the road that you can see and you're zooming into those leaves and the movement and you're totally zoning away from the poor person who's presenting. I think we've all got these ways of zoning out. Zoning out is good and bad. I think trees and nature is a lot better alternative to a piece of technology.

Trace: You just reminded me, John, of when my son, he had to have a very long surgery and it was a very hard thing for a mother to be outside of the room when that's going on and I just went and basically climbed under a little tree fern in the hospital car park area and just let that fern hold me emotionally while I was waiting. So I didn't care what anyone thought. I don't think anyone saw me but I didn't care. I needed that really safe holding container.





John: You've focused on books and I remember you saying before we came on air that you looked at children's books and they didn't really excite you. There was something really missing and that's why you possibly started your journey with regards to what you're doing now. Do you want to talk a while about that?

Trace: Well it was probably it was more that I hadn't found any books to illustrate myself about what I wanted to work on. So I started making my own. There's definitely a lot of great books out there, it was more that I wanted to be making them as well as part of that. And so I started making my own stories. The first one that was published was *River Time* and that was based on a 10 day canoe trip that I did along a very pristine river down in Gunditjmara and Boendik [00:09:38.4] country in Victoria, Australia. And it affected me so much, spending that much time away from the kind of modern industrial world that I just wanted to share that and so I changed my story to being that of a boy and his uncle. Just how it affected them.

John: With books of course, a quick declaration, I'm not a big reader. I do like pictures. As an adult I've even proud to say that I'm a visual person. With books there were two ways. Obviously the person self reads, self visualises what's going on and then you've got story tellers. What are you? You're a story chaser?

Trace: I call myself a story catcher.

John: Catcher, okay.

Trace: There's like so many interesting things everywhere and I just like gather and then after a while I guess it's like a big pot of soup. You've got all these things in the pot and they can just boil up and create something out of it. I'm actually in the middle of doing that at the moment for a graphic novel and it's on a nice, steady simmer at the moment.





John: Cool. For mums and dads listening to the podcast and saying “wow, I’ve seen the book”. What tips would you give the person who’s reading your stories to a child? Obviously they’re going to show the pictures but it’s a tough question because you and I were having a bit of a joke before about voice on a podcast and how you need to put excitement in your voice. If a parent was to grab one of your books and want to share it with their children or younger person, any tips that you would give that story teller?

Trace: Yeah. I hear from many, many people that my books are read over and over and over and they become like the tattered book in the house. Part of that is because in the pictures there’s so many hidden plants and creatures and just detail that you would see if you were out in the bush. And so to take your time when you’re looking at these books, as though you are out and about and marvel at the little things that you might find. Actually when I’m colouring in my books, which I do at the end, I’m surprised what I find that I’ve forgotten that I had in there. Like there might be a little lizard hiding in a tree hollow or something. So yeah, just taking your time and enjoying the little sound effects of the birds and the frogs that I scatter the books with.

John: Obviously no harm in any parent or story teller going through the book themselves, just between them and the book so they can do a bit of study. I know that sounds awful, study, because we want it to be natural but going back to what you said, there’s so much to discover in the illustrations. So readers then going to read it to a child, it’s going to keep the memory alive to remember to say this bit or even make little notes. It’s not wanting to make this too academic but I think what you’ve said is there’s so much detail and there’s no harm in repeating it.

Trace: It’s probably more that the parent could take on a beginner’s mind and just imagine that they are going there as well and just exploring as well. So at the time of reading just being present to what’s happening next I guess, yeah.





John: Can I suggest turning the television off while you're doing it. [laugh] I laugh but it does happen.

Your favourite book. You've done lots of books. What's your favourite and why?

Trace: Well I always think my favourite of my books is the last one I've done because I'm just always evolving. I'm really enjoying the book I'm working on now, which is a sequel to *Landing With Wings*, which came out earlier this year. So *Landing With Wings* was about arriving at a place and connecting with place and community. This one, the *Whistler's Path* that I'm working on, there's a little emu in it, a baby emu and I'm just loving getting to know the emu character and I'm actually going out and hanging out with a couple of young emus while I'm researching for the book. So yeah, it's the one I'm working on, always.

John: Are all your books happy? Happy endings?

Trace: No.

John: There's some sadness in some of the books?

Trace: I've got a book called *Shine* and that's a very different book. I wrote that book for my sister's children. Her husband died very suddenly and I wrote a book for the children to just help them process their experience of a close death. And it's about a horse family and it does have a deeply beautiful side to it as well as being a sad, a deep sadness in there. So yeah, it's very different to the other stories, yeah. And the *Heart of the Bubble*, which is set this year in the time of corona, even though there's a lot of heartfelt joyful or kind moments there is an underlying theme that there is something else going on at the same time with a lot of suffering around.

John: I'll mention – and this is just my own take – even holding your book after you've connected with it and you talk about books being tattered and





being around in the house but where you get people who like to hold something or have something close by which is meaningful, I'm just sure there are people out there that have got your book that just keep it close by without even opening it. To know it's got all those lovely memories in it that they've been able to connect with.

Trace: Yeah, I've also sent quite a few people, well a lot of people have ended up going to that river and those rocks where *River Time* and *Rockhopping* are made and they take it with them and they take it on a boat and they take it up on a hiking trip. [laugh] Yeah, it's nice to know.

John: Have a book, will travel. This is always an interesting question but I always like to ask my guest, if you had your time again and you're looking through the lens of loving nature and connecting with plants and story telling, would you approach it a bit differently? Or what have you learnt? For other people who might like to be inspired by what you're doing.

Trace: Mm. Well I love getting up at dawn and it's just such a great way to start the day, just by being in that beautiful light out in the bush. I guess earlier on in my life I missed a lot of dawns and now if I sleep in to even 7 o'clock I'm like "oh no". So yeah, getting up early is a great life practice. That's one of them. More camping. As a child I didn't – I think we only went camping once. So a family that goes for holidays, I'd say ones where there's less stuff that you take with you and you just sit on the ground on a mat or just on a log and you leave all your deck chairs and radios at home.

John: Love it. Tell us where people can get the books. You've got a website of course and if you don't mind just going through some of the titles, just so we can all know what you've done and how they get them.

Trace: Yeah. So my website's traceballa.yolasite.com and that's got links to all my books. My publisher, Allen and Unwin, is easy to find on the internet. And Readings Bookstore has just bought a whole bunch of the





Heart of the Bubble. I had to do a reprint especially for them. You can also buy that on Amazon. You can get my books online very easily. So my books are *River Time*, which is set along the river; *Rockhopping*, as we know, up on the rocks. Then I've got *Landing With Wings*, that's about coming to place and they're graphic novels. And then I've got *The Thank You Dish*, which is for younger children. I've got the *Heart of the Bubble*, which is about now, the time of corona. And *Shine* is the book about processing the death of someone close. Yeah.

John: Audio books, Trace? Any of these books being produced in audio?

Trace: I don't think they're suitable for audio. They're very much, a lot of the images tell the story as well as the words, because they're graphic novels they're not really – they are e-books but they're not really able to be audio books I don't think.

John: I'm going to throw that to you as a challenge. You ready? 1-2-3, that's a challenge. You're talking to a podcaster where people who don't read, don't have vision and would like to connect to your book.

Trace: It would actually be great if I should just pass that on to my publisher because I'm so busy but it would be lovely because we could have the sound effects of the birds and the river, trickling water. It could be a lovely, lovely thing. I like your thinking, John, and I will ask them. Thank you for the challenge.

John: And you know what, if they don't do it or not interested, because obviously there's a cost involved and resource, why don't you and I talk one day about doing something for a book as a podcast. Because I think there's lots of things, even on television, for people who are blind where they describe what the scene is and what's going on. So thanks for accepting the challenge.

Trace: I love it. I actually feel quite, oh my gosh, I wish I hadn't overlooked that. Because I'm an illustrator primarily, yeah, I can see not being able to see





that it's so important for those people that can't to be able to still get those stories to their heart. So thank you for the challenge.

John: Thank you. Because it just goes back to what you're saying about connecting and touching trees, so for those people – I know I've got lots of mates and friends and colleagues who have lost sight and they're very tactile, so they are touching trees and smelling trees and the environment. Those people also have children of course and they want to be able to share those experiences with their own children.

Trace: And you asked me before if I've got anything I'd do over or regret, well now that you've said this I'm like, oh my gosh. Thank you.

John: All good, we've got some breaking news on So...podcast with John McKenna. [laugh] Trace, I've really enjoyed the conversation. Thank you so much for coming onto So...podcast. No doubt we'll keep in touch.

Trace: Thanks John, it's been lovely to have the chat.

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