



Speaker Series: The Wattle Island Book Club with Sandie Docker

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library's online speaker series, I would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation on which this podcast is being recorded and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging from across the lands. Sandie Docker grew up in Coffs Harbour and first fell in love with reading when her father introduced her to fantasy books as a teenager. Her love of fiction began when she first read Jane Austen for HSC, but it wasn't until she was taking a translation course at university that a Mandarin lecturer suggested she might have a knack for writing a seed of an idea that sat quietly in the back of her mind while she lived and travelled the world. Today, I'm lucky to be speaking with the author of The Wattle Island Book Club. Sandie Docker welcome Sandie. Can I start by saying that I love this book? It even made me cry. Spoiler alert, everyone, can you give our listeners an introduction to the story?

Sandie Docker: [00:00:49] Sure before I do that, I want to say sorry for the tears, but I'm not actually sorry for the tears because, you know, as an author, our job is to make our readers feel some sort of emotion, whether that's joy or sorrow or humor. So, the fact that you've had a reaction makes me, as an author, extremely happy, so thank you for that. The Wattle Island

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Book Club is the story of Grace, who is a young librarian battling some personal issues, and she's contacted by Anne, who's the octogenarian matriarch of Wattle Island, to help her restart The Wattle Island Book Club. It's been going for about 60 years, the book club, but seven years ago it stopped suddenly. And as Grace gets to know Anne, she discovers that there's something big the island inhabitants just don't speak about, and she's determined to uncover that mystery and help the book club reignite, so she travels to Wattle Island to try to uncover the story. Together in what is a fairly unlikely friendship Anne and Grace have to work together to secure the book club's future and move past their own traumas. And I hope that it's a story that celebrates new beginnings and the power of literature and community, and the fact that it's never too late to rewrite your story.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:02:02] The Wattle Island Book Club is your fourth book how did it come about?

Sandie Docker: [00:02:06] Yeah, so I was actually on tour with my first book, The Kookaburra Creek Café, back when we were allowed to go on tour to libraries before the pandemic hit and I was in Port Macquarie Library and I had just finished my event there and I was chatting to the librarian after the event, and she was talking about her own personal story and she was the inspiration for Grace, the character in the novel. And she was also

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talking about book clubs and how they'd really taken off in the area, and that they even had a book club on Lord Howe Island, which she sent the box of books over to via the supply ship. And then I was driving to Coffs Harbour to my next event and the whole way in the car, my brain was just going ping, ping, ping, an island, a book club, there's got to be a story in that, so I contacted the librarian afterwards and I said, look, I think there's a story here is it okay if I write it? And she gave me her blessing, and that's where the book came from.

Sophia Tsougli: [00:03:01] I love the characters of both Grace and Anne. They are strong women, but also displayed great vulnerability and have experienced loss and hardship. These are such world rounded characters, but it's almost as if to be strong you need to have experienced pain and adversity. Do you believe this to be true?

Sandie Docker: [00:03:17] I don't know if you need to experience pain and adversity in order to be strong, but I think it definitely adds layers of strength to you and I mean, we've all had things in our lives once you've passed the age of 20, I think there's always something in your life that has made you dig in deep to a strength that you maybe you didn't know that you had. And so, I think that's where the adversity and the pain helps you build your strength. You know, when you have to dig deep to get through

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those tough times helps build who you are. And you know, at the time, we may not appreciate that and we certainly don't enjoy it. But once you've moved through it, you know, you can look back at those moments and go, right, that's what helped me get through.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:03:58] I agree that both Grace and Anne had trauma that they needed to work through, and it was buried quite deep. So, they definitely needed to draw on their strength before they could move on and get on with their rest of their lives. Sandie as Grace heads off to Wattle Island for an adventure, she manages to cross off some things from her bucket lists. Do you have a bucket list that you are currently working your way through?

Sandie Docker: [00:04:21] I don't have a physical bucket list written down that I'm ticking off like Grace does, she keeps an entire journal of her bucket lists in there, but I've got plenty of things that I want to achieve, you know, before it's too late. And it's, you know, some of it's to do with travel, which obviously we can't do at the moment, you know, like cross Canada via train, that sort of thing, go on safari in Africa. I want to learn another language. I want to learn the cello, which I'm trying to convince my husband to let me do at the moment. But well, I'm still I'm still working on that one.



Sophia Tsouglis: [00:04:53] I'm not sure if taking up cello during a pandemic where you're locked in is a good idea or not, but I'll leave that up to you. Maybe when you have a bit of separation between the two of you might be a better chance to start something like the cello.

Sandie Docker: [00:05:06] Yeah. Maybe not the best timing. Yeah, well, hopefully that won't be too much further away. But yeah, I'll keep that in mind.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:05:11] Sandie when I was preparing for this interview, I came across some interesting information about your writing process. You have a bit of an old school approach to your writing style. Can you tell us a little bit about your process?

Sandie Docker: [00:05:23] Yeah, so when I wrote my first two novels, *The Kookaburra Creek Cafe* and *The Cottage at Rosella Cove*, I actually wrote those pen and paper longhand the old-fashioned way destroyed I don't know how many trees in the process to do that, and I love writing by hand. There's something about that process that I think just takes you to a different place in your mind. Since I've been under contract with Penguin,



though, my deadlines are a lot shorter, and I have to go straight into the computer now. I still edit via hand, though, because again, I just there's something different about holding that pen in your hand, I think.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:06:02] Sandie, when you have finished writing pen to paper and it comes time for you to go online, do you type exactly what you've written, or do you change the story as you're typing?

Sandie Docker: [00:06:11] Yeah, so at every stage, whether I'm writing it first by hand or typing it first and then editing by hand, every chance that I'm going back into that manuscript, I'm editing absolutely. And you know, I've never actually counted how many different drafts I've done for each of my books. But you know, I'm editing things probably 10, 15, 20 times before the final product goes to shelf.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:06:37] How much research do you need to do when you're referencing real events and trying to convey the mood of a time, for example, how people treated Tadashi as that happened in the 1940s and 50s after World War Two, also referencing Japanese cultural ways. For example, kintsugi, cooking and eating skittles?

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Sandie Docker: [00:06:56] Yeah, I always end up doing more research than I think I have to do. And you know, when we're talking about things like WW2, which is the historical part of the story that we go back into. You know, we're taught about these things at school, but we're only taught the big picture stuff. We're not taught those finer details and those personal experiences. So yeah, I had to do a fair bit of research on that and what I found was really interesting, about Tadashi's story is that not a lot of Australians realise that we interned foreign civilians during WW2. They went into concentration camps, essentially. And there was, you know, I think, 2000 Japanese Australians that were interned during the war, and the majority of them were then sent back to Japan, and so I had to research what that was like, why they all got sent back the ones that were allowed to stay, why were they allowed to stay? So, I had to contact a museum and they put me through to a professor up in Queensland who definitely help with all of that. And that's, that's the hard slog research, you know, particularly when you can't find what you're looking for on the internet. But then there's the fun side of research, and you mentioned kintsugi Sophia, and that's the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold. I actually did a course in it, too, so that, you know, I explained it to my husband and I have to do it for research, but I just want to do it for fun and I have actually got a piece of pottery now that I have mended with gold and going through that process of how Sam would do it in the story was a really therapeutic way for me to get inside his head, I guess.

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Sophia Tsouglis: [00:08:33] That's beautiful that you were able to do the kintsugi workshop and you made you feel closer to Sam. I also appreciate that even though this book is a book of fiction, it is based on history and I actually got to learn a bit of history myself, I wasn't aware of how the Japanese people were treated it after World War Two here in Australia. The characters in this book are so vibrant I honestly couldn't pick a favourite. It was a bit like trying to choose a favourite child. As an author Sandie, do you develop favourites as you're writing, and the characters have revealed themselves to you? And are you ever tempted to give your favourites the best storylines and better dialogue than the other characters?

Sandie Docker: [00:09:07] Thankfully, my characters can't hear me when I answered this question, because you kind of do get favourites as you go along and they'll never know that. Of course, in my head, I treat them all equally. But I loved Anne in this story. Anne is our octogenarian matriarch of the island, and she's got such a rich history and she's such a beautiful personality. I really, really enjoyed her as to whether I give them the best storylines or dialogue, I'm not actually in control of that, and I know that sounds really crazy, but the characters are in control of that. You know, in the writing process, they tell me what they want their story to be and what their interactions are going to be. And I think one of really a good example



of that, particularly in The Wattle Island Book Club, is the character of Hamish when, when Hamish was first on the page, he was just going to be the old dude on the island who plays the bagpipes at sunset, and that was pretty much his role at the very beginning. And then as I was writing the story and developing it, I realised that he had a bit more to say, and he was far more important to Anne than I realised that he was going to be. And he has one of my favourite lines in the whole book where he's talking about setting your pain free and giving it wings. And I didn't see that coming. So, you know, somebody who was supposed to be just a very, very minor character ended up playing a really huge role in the story.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:10:33] Sandie, as you're writing your manuscript, do you know where your characters are going and how the story will end? Or do you just let it write itself?

Sandie Docker: [00:10:42] I have no idea when I'm going when I start Sophia, I wish I did, it would be a much easier process if I was somebody that meticulously planned out and knew where I was going right from the start. But I'm not. I usually have like one scene in my head in this particular story, it was, you know, the box of books on a boat heading over to an island. And I start writing and I feel my way through, and I'm always surprised where my characters end up taking me.

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Sophia Tsouglis: [00:11:09] But I think that works really well because it does take the readers along for the ride and it's not predictable. There were so many times that I thought I knew what was going to happen, and then I was pleasantly surprised. So, I think it's a really effective way of writing.

Sandie Docker: [00:11:22] Yeah, thank you, and look, every writer is different. There are some writers who thrive with meticulous plans and there are other writers like me. And then there's a whole bunch of writers in the middle as well, you've got to do what works for you as a writer. For me, that works. I love not knowing where I'm going in that, you know, the story is a surprise for me, and I think if I was to try to plan things, I'd kind of box myself into a corner and I wouldn't know how to get out. So, I like it that way. But yeah, every writer is different and you've got to do what works for you.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:11:54] There are many episodes of sadness in this book, but ultimately it is a book of hope. And whilst this works brilliantly as a standalone book, I was left wanting to know what happened to the characters after the story ended. Do you have any plans to write a sequel?

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Sandie Docker: [00:12:07] I love that you want to stay with the characters after that final page that that means I've done my job properly, so that's a huge compliment thank you so much, Sophia. As for a sequel, I've never planned to write a sequel, but I'm also a never say never kind of person. I think there's a bit of a danger, though, in sequels if you don't originally set out to do it that way. And that is, I can imagine that because you've connected so well to these characters, Sophia, you have an idea of what you want to happen next for them, right?

Sophia Tsougliis: [00:12:37] I do. But I'm also happy to be surprised.

Sandie Docker: [00:12:40] But what if I do something completely different and I take them in a direction that you hate? You're going to hate me after if I write a sequel.

Sophia Tsougliis: [00:12:48] No only for a minute, only for a minute, then I will realise that, you know, that's how they had to go. As you said, you know, your characters unwind in mysterious ways, and I think ultimately that's life. So, when you're reading, you do want to get lost in the book, you don't want to think you're reading, you want it to be just total escapism. So, I'd be happy with every which way you went. Put that in your little arsenal and

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just remember that if you want to do a sequel, you'll have at least one person going, yay.

Sandie Docker: [00:13:16] But I have had readers contacted me and asked for sequels on other books, this one's only just come out, so I haven't had that contact yet, but I can't remember which one it was. I think it was The Cottage at Rosella Cove. I had a reader contact me and say that she wanted a sequel, and this is exactly what she wanted to happen in the sequel, and I was going to go, yeah, but that's not what I'd do. And so, I just, I don't know, as I said, never say never. Maybe we'll leave that up to, you know, the movie rights. If somebody buys the movie rights to The Wattle Island Book Club, they could turn it into a series and take it beyond where the book finished. There's an idea.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:13:50] Here's to hoping. I must mention that it was lovely to see Grace the librarian featured as a main character. We don't often get a mention. What do libraries mean to you?

Sandie Docker: [00:14:00] Yeah, Grace is a wonderful main character, and as our librarian, she brings so much to the story. Libraries are, oh gosh, they're amazing places, aren't they? Cause it doesn't matter what your age,

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your gender, your socioeconomic status, your race or religion is, there's something for you in a library, in a really safe place and I love that. You know, it's not just about books, although as an author, I think that's a fabulous part of a library, but it's also it's also about community groups and study groups. And, and in Wattle Island, the library in Port Madison not only hosts writers' groups and book clubs and children's story time, which is what you would probably expect to see in a library. But they also have puzzle groups, and the historical society meets in there, and it's such a wonderful way to connect with the community in a way that goes beyond books. So, I just, you know, there's a beautiful relationship with a library and the community, and I think it's fantastic that I could highlight that in this book.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:15:04] I mean, currently we're in a horrible situation with COVID and yet here we are doing a podcast over the phone and you're able to share your new book with people who can't come into the library at the moment. But we'll be using our library services and our online services to listen to this podcast and connect with you. So, we do appreciate that you appreciate that libraries are a fantastic place.

Sandie Docker: [00:15:26] And if you think about that, click and collect service and a lot of certainly the metro libraries are doing it. I know all of

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the libraries near me are as well. For a lot of people who are in lockdown, that might be their only way to connect to the outside world. So imagine if that wasn't there. It's just such a valuable service.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:15:44] Absolutely. The Wattle Island Book Club is a great book for those looking for a good holiday or beach read. Do you have any recommendations for our listeners?

Sandie Docker: [00:15:50] Yeah, so obviously, I read a fair bit, you know, because I enjoy it, but also for my job, I've just recently finished Maya Linnel's Magpies Bend, which is a rural romance and that was a real kind of a warm hug of a book that I really enjoyed. I read a lot of historical fiction as well, and Tania Farrelly's The Eighth Wonder is one of the best historical books I've read in a long time. That's a fantastic read, and I'm lucky enough that I actually get sent advanced copies now from other authors, and I have Joanna Nell's book that comes out, I think it's the end of this month it comes out, which is The Tea Ladies of St. Jude's Hospital, and I've just started reading that and it's a very typical Jo book, you know, that's got a lot of warmth and humor, and I'm loving it so far,

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Sophia Tsouglis: [00:16:40] Oh look, just from the title. I think it'll be something that I'll definitely read. Sandie, are you currently working on a new book?

Sandie Docker: [00:16:47] Yes, I just I'm on deadline now for my next year's book, which is going to be called the Red Gum River Retreat and there is a cellist in there, which is another reason why I want to learn the cello so I can speak with some authenticity about it.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:17:02] Sandie, how do you choose your titles? It's lovely to see a common theme connecting all your books.

Sandie Docker: [00:17:07] Yeah, that was actually a publishing decision. So, when I first signed with Penguin, The Kookaburra Creek Café and The Cottage at Rosella Cove were both finished manuscripts, but they had very different titles. And when I went in for my first meeting with Penguin and they said, Look, you know, we love your work, et cetera, et cetera, but we can see a different brand for you. How do you feel about these titles? So, they actually came up with those first two titles and then to stay on brand, which I hate using that term because I'm a writer I'm not, you know, a

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product, but that's the term we use on brand. Then I've fit to the titles, to my other books to fit that.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:17:45] Sandie. I think it's fantastic how your titles of your books have all a reference to an Australian theme. It's nice and easy for people to know that you're an Australian author. I think it was a fantastic idea by Penguin to come up with that theme.

Sandie Docker: [00:17:56 Oh, no, I love the titles and the covers that they've come up with that go with them as well, they're just such gorgeous striking covers. Again, that's completely the publisher I've got nothing to do with that, but I love it and you know, you walk into a library or a bookshop and you know that that's a Sandie Docker book.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:18:13] Absolutely. It's like you can actually pop it in a frame, and it'd be a nice photo.

Sandie Docker: [00:18:17] Yeah, it would.

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Sophia Tsouglis: [00:18:20] Sandie after reading your four novels, I'll be prepared when you release your next novel next year and have my tissue box ready to go. I'm pretty sure I'll need it.

Sandie Docker: [00:18:30] I can't promise anything. I'm not far enough into it yet to know how that's going to go but we'll see, I've been really conscious of trying to, you know, make sure there is some diversity there in in my books. And also, you know that the hero isn't always your six foot four tall, hunking six pack, you know, kind of guy. But because I mean, that's not real, right?

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:18:51] That is why I love the characters of both Grace and Anne. They're both so different. Different age groups, different experiences. Both ladies have a great strength Anne in marrying Tadashi, which was not the done thing in that era, and Grace having the strength to decide how she wants to live her life. Both great hero characters. Thank you for bringing them to life.

Sandie Docker: [00:19:10] Oh, thank you. That means a lot for you to say that. Thank you so much.

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Sophia Tsouglis: [00:19:13] Thank you for your time, Sandie. And it was a wonderful chat. We wish you all the best with your new book and look forward to all your future publications.

Sandie Docker: [00:19:21] Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Sophia Tsouglis: [00:19:23] If you would like to purchase any of Sandie's books, call on your favourite bookstore or go online. Look out for upcoming digital content through the Inner West Libraries, what's on and social media channels. Inner West Council Libraries have an extensive collection of Australian authors, both in physical and digital format. Thanks for listening, everyone. Take care. Bye.