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CHERYL AKLE: Do you dream of writing a novel? Or do you just like listening to authors this talk. I'm Cheryl Akle from the Better reading *Stories Behind the Story* podcast.

This new podcast springs from many requests we've had from listeners to do more episodes on how to write. We've produced a six-part series where we discuss the craft of writing with some of Australia's top authors and industry professionals. Welcome to *Better Reading On Writing*.

## Christos Tsiolkas

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CHRISTOS: I guess for me it's voice. I actually have to hear the voice.

CHERYL: And I hear the voice.

CHRISTOS: And with Barracuda it was like I could start writing once I knew Danny's voice.

## Melina Marchetta

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CHERYL: That was the Slap and Barracuda author, Christos Tsiolkas talking to me about once he has a character's voice, then he can begin a book. It's the starting point for him. So how important is good dialogue to a story? Do some authors have a natural ear for it? Can it be developed? Well, today we're talking to writer extraordinaire Melina Marchetta, author of *Looking for Alibrandi*, and most recently *The Place on Dalhousie*. You really are an expert when it comes to dialogue. Molina, welcome.

MELINA : Thank you.

CHERYL: So Melina is going to talk to us about the voices she has in her head and driving the story forward using dialogue. Does she talk out loud as she writes, and who has been her loudest character?

MELINA: Wow, I haven't thought about who has been my loudest character. I'll start from where it started, it always starts with a character. And I'm a bit cruel, because I won't put pen to paper unless they prove themselves in my head. So I listened to them for quite a while. And I think of one particular novel, the Piper son, because he was such a male character coming to me and I, and I was so surprised that the deal was not, I'm just going to listen to what you've got to say. So I was listening to a lot of dialogue. In my head between these characters, sometimes I would write that dialogue down. And all of that dialogue did not go in the novel, but I had to hear it to understand what sort of a character he was, and where the others were in their lives. So it really, I feel as if I write a novel in my head first and then I write a novel on paper, and I can't write it on paper until I've got that voice right. And I feel as if they're worthy of owning a book.

CHERYL: So you have all those people running around in your head, and pretty much that storyline before you sit down to start writing.

MELINA: Well, I always say that I know how it begins, and I know how it ends. And I sort of know how I get there. And that seems so simple, you actually think it's going to be as simple as writing that down. And then you don't know how to you don't know what that first line is. You, you just don't know how to get it going. And that's probably the difficult part because you think, but I know it all I know exactly what's going to how it's going to end. But it's really filling up those pages. I'm not one of those people who write down a list of things that are going to happen, it mostly stays in my head. And I always say this, that I think it's why writers or people who want to write, talk about it a lot. Rather than sitting down and writing it because you think you'll never get it as right as it is in your head.

CHERYL: I want to go back because you're one of those unusual writers, when you write like a lot of the writers that we talked to a better reading have been to creative courses or right good creative writing courses, writing courses, they belong to writing groups. But when you wrote *Looking for Alibrandi*, it was so unique in that you just came to it as a person, not as a writer.

MELINA: Yes. And I actually saw myself as just the writer of that novel, not only when it came out, but even after it came out. I just thought I wanted to write that novel, I wanted to see that novel published. I never found myself saying to people, I want to be a writer, or I'm a writer. And it's taken quite a long time for me to be able to own that title. And it's not because I didn't think I was worthy. But I didn't grow up saying I want to be a writer one day, but I did grow up with movies and stories in my head. So I just felt that it was that storytelling. It's almost like I didn't know that there was another side to it, like making a living out of it. But it just, I'm not at all dismissive of courses. I think in a way I would love to have really been part of that. I think the network, you know, your lecturers, most of them, you know, when I speak to someone, they are writers as well. But for me, I just didn't have that world available to me. And so I just got on with telling stories.

CHERYL : I think it's so good. So you had an idea you were, how old were you when you put pen to paper for *Looking for Alibrandi*?

MELINA: Probably 19 when I started it.

CHERYL: Yeah. And then you thought, Well, that's it. I'm going to do it like, I mean, did you even think you're going to write a book? I mean, you just decided I'm going to tell the story?

MELINA: I did think that and it was just more of, you know, it's very different to today, because I find that a lot of people when I'm speaking to an audience, once upon a time, I was speaking to an audience of readers. Right now I'm speaking to an audience, half of them are writers, and not published writers, but people who want to be writers. Whereas when I was 19, they weren't. People who are writers did go to university, they belonged to families of writers. So for me, it was, I want to tell this story. And I was almost telling it to myself, even if I was going to be the only reader. I just got on and wrote it. And I didn't think of audience at all.

CHERYL: What I loved about that book, and I know we've spoken about this before, but I think this is really important to mention now. It had the most unique voice for me. It was the first time I had read about myself in a fiction novel. I could identify with the characters, it was people that I knew it was people that I grew up with. And I feel that you still have that, that you like, *The place on Dalhousie*, still has that. So even though you've grown and you've changed, and you've learnt along the way, you still have that unique voice, like *The place on Dalhousie*. It's just a group of likely people doing not very much, but it is the most compelling story, because it's about people. And it's about conversation.

MELINA: I know. But I think I always say this in a strange way. I wonder if it's because back then I didn't know what I was doing. And I'm not saying that I don't know what I'm doing now. But I think if you get into that mode of I want to construct this dialogue. That's when it doesn't lose the freshness and all of that. So I just think it's people that make dialogue interesting. And it's the conversations obviously you have. I constantly say this, and I stick by it, I have the most profound conversations in the aisles at Coles. Because I am bumping into people I haven't seen for a while and you are telling what's happened in the last year in five minutes. And so you're condensing everything down in a way and you do hear profound stories. I hear profound stories when I am watching my daughter train at netball someone will tell the story of their marriage breaking up and there'll be someone else there who is crying because they're hearing this story. So there you are cheering on kids and clapping and, you know, staying cheerful for them, but you're involved in someone's pain and drama in a way. And I'm not saying that I go home and, and steal that. But it's taught me that that's where our passions come from. That's where our drama comes from. And I tried to bottle that. But half the time, I don't know what I'm doing. And I've learned to be comfortable with that. Rather than, you know, try to fix yourself up first draft. And I think when it comes back to voice, I was always told this, even as a teacher, the kids would say to me, or an adult would say you don't speak any differently when you're speaking to the kids. You know, when you speak to an adult, you speak the same way as you do, you know, to the kids. And I don't put on a different voice for kids and adults.

CHERYL: But I think you speak like you write as well.

MELINA: And I suppose that all comes into it, I just maybe I just don't know any other way. And I have got a great ear for dialogue. So you know, that's one thing that I'm very grateful for.

CHERYL: Melina, I found this quote from an author called Jerome Stone that I'd like to share with you about dialogue. "Dialogue is not just a quotation, it is grimaces, pauses, adjustments of glass buttons, doodles on a napkin and crossing of legs." Man, I just love that, quote. It is the nuance, isn't it, of dialogue.

CHERYL: But I also think that every one of those things have got to do with character, they've got to do with personality. And for me, I've always said that dialogue should for me, should serve three purposes. One is pushing the plot forward, of course, finding something out. But the other thing is it tells us something about the person who is speaking about their personality, about a lot of things you know about them, but also about the relationship between them and the person they're speaking to. And you have to show that obviously, and not tell it. So all of those things, I think has so much to do with the character, and who the person is. You could almost kind of write a profile of who that person he's describing is.

CHERYL: That's really quite interesting. So show it and not tell it. Tell me what you mean by that?

MELINA: Well, I always give an example. If I'm teaching dialogue, in *The Finnikin of the Rock*, there's a scene where two young men, they're all they're 19 running through woodland, the woods at night. They're trying to save someone, and one of them just disappears, obviously in a hole and Finnikin says, "Lucian, are you down there?" And Lucian's response is, "Where else would I be?" And for me, that shows: A. He's down there so it tells us something about the plot. It tells us a lot about Lucian's personality, and it tells us a lot about the relationship between him and Finnikin. So I think in two lines, you can replace half a page of someone telling you something and that's, it's hard. You don't do that every single time of course you write dialogue, because you'd be writing the same novel for the next hundred years. But for me, I remember that rule, what is going to be the response. And it's fun when, once again, you're teaching writing, because I do this at home when I'm writing dialogue, that you give them one statement, and you ask them to respond to that statement as a character. And you'll find, of course, that there are 10 different responses in that room and those 10 responses to tell you something very different about a character in a relationship. So it's good for them to be able to see how I break it down. Because that's what I'm doing a lot of times, you know, when I'm, when I'm editing,

CHERYL: Tell me what it was like for you to take *Looking for Alibrandi* from a novel to a screenplay. I mean, how did that process work?

MELINA: Well, the one of the interesting things before will probably around the time that it was starting, is I had about maybe two months at the film school because they were giving out fellowships for prose writers for novelists. Because the big claim is novelists do not know how to write scripts. I do not believe that's true.

CHERYL: Well it wasn't true for you.

MELINA: But I also think they're two different skills. I think what they've got right is they are two completely different ways of writing. I think there's a science and a structure to writing screenplays. It's why I have trouble with screenplays more than writing a novel. But one of the things, I'll never forget this exercise, because once again, it's less is more and a script is all about less writing, and more visuals. So I wrote an action piece would have just been she walks into the restaurant it's like, and it would have been half a page. And I read it out. And I was told, cut that in half. So take out half the words. And so I did that, I remember reading it to myself thinking wow, that worked. It was so succinct. And I read it out. And he said, that's great. Now cut it down in half again. And sometimes you're left with one line and you realize that one line can say it all. And once again, that's a skill that you that you learn, and you can't be indulgent about what you want to say. And the one thing I also talk about when I'm writing that sort of dialogue, is no one's going to let you unless you're being interviewed, no one's going to let you speak for one minute without being interrupted. So you have to really keep those responses pretty, I suppose, tight. But also they have to be saying a lot.

CHERYL: You said something to me when we spoke recently, On another podcast, you said to me with looking for Alibrandi, it was like, you had to get the novel and correct me if I'm wrong. And you had to really just, it was like throwing it on the floor and scattering it and then just picking the eyes out of it was that right?

MELINA: I use the word smashing it on the floor, totally smashing it because the novel is not the film. And the one thing that goes out the window with an adaptation it has to, is the narrative voice. And with a novel like *Alibrandi*, people loved that narrative voice. They loved her speaking to the reader. And you

think how am I going to replace that. And so what I had to do is smash it and then pick up the pieces and restructure it because the structure of a film is different to the structure of a novel.

CHERYL: I feel that with you, with your writing that I hear the accents. I hear the, you know, like talking like the adjustments of layers of buttons, but I hear that in sound. And you know, of course there's no accents in a sense in writing dialogue. It's, it's the sentence, isn't it?

MELINA: Well, it's the rhythm of the sentence.

CHERYL: Talk to me about that.

MELINA: Well, I think I heard this quite often. And people would comment quite often, that I taught for 10 years. So I must have been able to write teenagers because I was kind of copying what they were saying. And I wasn't because, you know, no offense to teenagers, they weren't saying anything profound. But what I noticed, and especially teaching boys is they had a rhythm. And that could be because they did have, you know, some of them I felt it was this singsong way of speaking. I think I comment about that in, in Francesca. But what I've noticed about young men is they remove personal pronouns.

CHERYL: Give me an example.

MELINA: It's not "I don't know", it's "don't know". So when I was writing a grief stricken character, young man like Tom Mackee, in *The Piper's Son*, I felt that I removed parts of the sentence. It's almost like he just was too angry and grief stricken to even complete a sentence in a way. So it was getting that right compared to I think when I was writing Georgie, his aunt, who's in her early 40s, I felt that she spoke a lot longer. It was that kind of monologue of what you say inside your head, you're just, you know, saying it in a state of grief. So I stereotyped but I think that women speak more when they're grief stricken and men speak less. And so that's what I tried to do with my characters. I have to accept that going beyond stereotypes, there is very much a difference between the way men and women speak, especially when it comes to emotion.

CHERYL: That's a life lesson right there. Melina, thank you.

## J.R. Lonie

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J.R. LONIE: When you're writing outside your own experience, you really have to do your homework. And if you're writing in a foreign country or a foreign culture... and I think you should be able to do it all writers are able to do that through their imagination, create characters that aren't them.

CHERYL: Because you have to don't you? Yeah, I mean, otherwise, you can't tell a story can't be that three people contribute to writing a book or depending on the number of characters.

J.R. LONIE: Exactly. How would, you know, how would the Bronte's write all those fantastic male characters for God sakes.

CHERYL: Yeah.

J.R. LONIE: it's Middlemarch. It's just you, but you really have to do your homework. And the problem is when that homework is not done, and it's just virtue signaling, or theft, you know, cultural theft.

# Melina Marchetta

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CHERYL: That was J.R. Lonie, the author of the *Woman from Saint Germain*, and he talked to me about how he feels it's okay to write outside your own location. It's okay to write outside your own cultural experience, perhaps even race. But you have to do the world work to walk in those characters shoes. And I think you do that remarkably well. Because, you know, we're talking about all these cultural appropriation now. But you have several characters in your book, you've got kids, you know, with an Aussie background, kids from an Italian background, kids from an Lebanese background. You have to have all those characters in a book to make a story, particularly your stories. How do you do it?

MELINA: Well, I do remember some of the, and they weren't sentences. They were the statements. My favorite statement when I was, well listening to the boys when I was teaching, for example, because I did teach in a very multicultural classroom. I taught at a school that was in the city. So we had a train line and it meant that we had kids from all over the Sydney but also there wasn't one dominant culture. And I love the Lebanese boys. Because if you said that's correct, they'd say "Yep cause Lebs rule." I knew I had to use that I had to use that line. So it was kind of these throwaway lines. I mean, that's a literal one, because they are mentioning a particular culture. But I do remember that they had this way of speaking or this way of expressing themselves that wasn't literal. And some of the boys, and I was saying this before, if they had in some way upset you, they would never come back and apologize. You'd never get an apology, but you would get another question like, you know, what's the homework this afternoon? And I thought, Oh, well, that's their way of saying I'm sorry. So I felt as if I had to find a completely different way of understanding what they had to say. But the one thing you can't do, and this is when you're speaking, when you're writing about a particular age or a particular culture, is you can't put in all the stereotypes because that's when it will come across stilted. And I sometimes think that the best thing to do is instead of mispronouncing what the words is to leave out words, because one of the things that I've discovered with Italians, for example, older Italians, is they leave out all the joining words, and it comes up cross abrupt to people who aren't used to it. But to me, it's not abrupt. It's just they are using the important words rather than, you know.

CHERYL: So talk to me about how you bring in different not accents, but different language into dialogue. So particularly with your stories, how do I identify that that person is you know, a Lebanese Australian and or great Australian, or, but you do it just through dialogue. I can hear it when I read it.

MELINA: I feel as if I try not to do an accent, I had a lot of trouble in first drafts. And when I say first drafts, first drafts with my publishers for Alibrandi, because we had the character of Katia and Katia speaks very, very broken English.

CHERYL: She's the grandmother?

MELINA: She's the grandmother. And so I tried very hard to get her accent not in the same way as my grandmother's accents. Because I knew that that would not make sense to the reader, and it wouldn't come through. So what I had to think of is, what do they do when they want to get a message across. And that was they use the words needed to get the message across, and they will leave out joining words. So if they have to go down to the supermarket, they don't say, I'm going down to the supermarket, they say I go to supermarket. And I think what we know, the communication is there. They've just kind of ripped into the language and got rid of all the insignificant words. So that's what I had to start doing for these

characters, making sure that we understand what they're saying. But you don't have a reader who does not have an ear for accents. Because if you have a reader who doesn't have an ear for accents, many people, then that sentence will make absolutely no sense.

CHERYL: But I'm still hearing that English isn't her first language.

MELINA: That couldn't that just be because of the fact that... it's also the words you choose. You don't, you don't kind of just say I'm going to take out the ins and the its and the thes. It's the words you choose. And once again, going back to writing young men, you get a rhythm. I like that idea of rhythm. And the interesting thing with rhythm is when I'm speaking when I have a non-English speaking character, I take out words in the same way as the young men, but I don't take out the same sort of words. So you've still got this rhythm. Whereas when I've had to write, I had to write a crazy character once her name was Quintana. She's in the fantasy novels. So what I did with hers is I wanted a lot of words because crazy people speak a lot. But I put a rhythm to it and I almost used you know, the same sort of rhythm as in a soliloquy. So I made sure that they were like 10 syllables per sentence and that was the hardest thing I ever wrote. It was a prologue, but it worked because it was still a ramble, but it had a music to it. Even if you don't have an ear for music, you could recognize that there were there were a particular amount of beats in the sentence. So I think it's about beats. It's about not trying too hard. Because if you do, you get really over the top stereotypes and I can't stand you know, listening or watching actually, watching something where you know, the character the actor is not from a non-English speaking background that they are. They can speak perfect English, but they're putting on this fake accent. I think they've gone, they've gone the wrong way. They should have just removed the less important words and got their message across.

CHERYL: I want to go back to Christos Tsiolkas quote that we heard earlier on in this podcast. Tim Winton starts with landscape. So he is he told me that he's not ready to write until he completely can feel where his book is set and where it's going to be. And Christos Tsiolkas said it was about character. Is yours a single character? Where does yours come from because they are snapshots of kind of community life or family life. So how does that come together for you?

MELINA: It's an interesting question, because forget Alibrandi because I didn't know what I was doing there. And also, Josie came on her own. She was a force on her own to a certain degree, so did Francesca but her mother came with her. But with every other novel, Taylor Markham's the same in *On the Jellicoe Road*, she came on her own, but I knew that world was coming with her. But with *Finnikin of the Rock* he gets the title of the novel, but there was never a Finnikin without Evanjaline, there were two important characters. They both own the book, but I could not have it from her point of view, because she had all the secrets and she'd tell the reader and I couldn't have that, so she stays mysterious to him. And when I think of *The Piper's Son*, Tom Mackee came at the exact, no he came a minute before his aunt Georgie came, they are both the narrators. So I feel much as it's the same as my novels are about communities, they do usually come together as characters. And I found that with *The Place of Dalhousie* that novel does not just belong to Jimmy or Martha or Rosie. The three of them they came to me together and I never took sides. I never loved writing one chapter or one voice over the other, I love them all.

CHERYL: You never took sides?

MELINA: I didn't.

CHERYL: You love the three characters?

MELINA: I did. And also you there's a chance of taking sides, because two of those characters, those women are fighting over that house. And you'd be able to see if I was taking sides, and sometimes you think I think she's on Martha's side. But then you read Rosie's chapter. It's like, no, she's actually not. She's on both their sides. And I couldn't have a favorite when I was right. When you write three characters, I don't think you can have a favorite unless you're trying to make a point at the end. And I try very hard not to have a favorite, although those characters come together.

CHERYL: You really are, just it's magic, how you then put community in a street, you know, *The Place on Dalhousie*. And the sense of place is, through the dialogue.

MELINA: Well I think it's getting back to I think it's interesting what Tim Winton said, because for me that setting, I'm not saying it's not important but I honestly believe I could take all these characters, and it could be a place in someplace in Queensland, and then I'd have to do more research. But it's those characters and where I place them rather than the setting and the characters that I gather into that setting. I say this because I think when I started wanting to write this novel, I thought it was going to be set around Roselle and Balmain. Because it was where I lived. Now, anyone who knows this area knows that they're probably two suburbs from Haberfield. But for me, two different worlds.

CHERYL: Oh, absolutely.

MELINA: So they would have been different characters, they would have had different people around them.

CHERYL: And the dialogue would have been different.

MELINA: And it would have, and that's what people don't understand that. It's where you end up placing the characters, that opens up what they're talking about how they're talking. But I have to start with those characters. And it comes down to you know, I've been asked so many times, and I got asked the other day, by Christos where home is, where I feel as if I belong. And I wouldn't have been able to answer this years ago. But for me, it's wherever my family is. So if my family and my friends, all decided to go and migrate to Hong Kong, I'd be there. And that's such a foreign place to me. But to me, it's about the people in my world rather than the physical, you know, what I love about the inner west. What I love about the inner west and my part of the inner west, are the people I'm interested in following.

CHERYL: Yeah, same.

CHERYL: Melina, what do you think are the three things you have done that have helped you carve out a successful career? Number one?

MELINA: I've written 10 novels now and I would say that I have been in love with the world of every one of those novels. It hasn't changed for me so for me, it's so important that I am in I am in a state of being in love with them. Because that means that I get to flesh out every one of those characters and give them a place in the story I want to tell. The second one is I try never to solve the problems of the characters, or the plot problems, or the structural problems in front of a computer, or in front of if someone's, you know, handwriting this story. For me, I want that time to be that I'm writing. Because I feel as if, if I'm trying to solve problems there, I'll give up and I won't be doing anything. So for me, I tend to... sometimes I write the novel, you know, doing the year before I put pen to paper, and it's fleshing out the characters and their problems. Other times when I've started writing it, you know, I will walk the dog, I will be driving, most of the time, you know, in the middle of the night, I'll wake up and I'm solving someone's problem, you know, in my novel, and, you know, I had read once that that period of time that you spend with your character, and your novel in your head is still part of the process of writing it. It's not, you know, this is when I started writing it when I put pen to paper, that that dream world that you had of your

characters is when you first start started writing it. So for me, I solve those problems ,or try to of course, before I sit down and start writing, you know, on a daily basis as well. And the third is I write every day, and sometimes I just write rubbish. And other times I just need, when I said before that I need to get from point, one to you from the beginning to the end, I'm writing every day and then the next day, I'll go back to what I've written. And I will get rid of 80% of it. But there's 20% that, for me is pure gold. Or it could be the sentence that starts off my writing day. So even though I don't want to write, I just sit down and think, how do you get to the next point?

CHERYL: Melina Marchetta, I'm in an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for being here today.

MELINA: Thank you.

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