

Cathy-Talk mixdown

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Sarah: I too would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting today – the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. It's particularly important – the Library is built on Gadigal Land, the Library is housed within Gadigal land, and it's on their histories and their traditions of story telling that we build today. So I'd also like to extend that acknowledgement to any First Nations People that are here with us today.

To Cathy Perkins – it's an absolute pleasure to be here with you and to have the opportunity to talk to you about your book. I'd like to tell you a little bit about Cathy. Cathy's been here at the library for around 13 years as Sam said, and as an editor here at the Library. She's the editor of our award winning SL Magazine. But that's not all she edits here at the library – she edits everything. She works on our reports, our gallery guides, brochures, our advertisements. She's been known to edit signage for the toilets or the tearoom. There is no limit to what she does.

Cathy: – another editor.

Sarah: Edits other editors. But for me personally Cathy edits our – or works with us, to improve our exhibition text. And she is one of the most lovely editors to work with because she is so incredibly calm when we race with last minute changes to our captions or items that we're producing – we produce for SL mag. She just takes a deep breath, and she's so patient and so kind to work with. So from the curatorial team to you, thank you very much.

Cathy: Thank you Sarah.

Sarah: Now this wonderful book was published on the 1st of November it hit the shelves. It's a book about Zora Cross, and some of you will have heard of Zora, some you won't. But thanks to Cathy she's coming back through – and we all will know well and truly about Zora after the hour's up. Now a little bit about the book – who is Zora Cross? She was a mother, she was a vaudeville actress, she was an editor, she was a journalist. And more importantly or significantly she was the writer of an erotic book of poems which was enormous when it hit the shelves in 1917.

So I will get to Zora in a minute but I guess I would like to start by talking to Cathy about her working career. Now you started working in a bookshop, then you worked as a book editor and worked for the Australian Society of Authors, and you've ended up here at the Library. That's an interesting pathway – can you tell us a little bit about your pathway here?

Cathy: Thanks Sarah. Yeah I will. I think – well it was a long path to come here and I have been here a long time. So I think also that experience that I had before coming here really influenced, really led to my interest in Zora Cross and influence the approach I took to writing the book. So I did, about 25 years ago, I finished an Honours degree in English literature and I'd taken a long time to do that degree and didn't want to do any further study. So I applied for jobs and the job that I got was in a bookshop up the road from where I lived.

And working in that bookshop, I think I'd always been really interested – I always read a lot but I didn't know much about publishing and didn't really think about who had published the books that I read. And then working there I just became fascinated by all aspects of the book trade and why people bought particular books, to do with the production, the tactile qualities of them. And then the marketing as well, when people had come in that day having seen something on television and then asked if we had the book with the blue cover, and all of that.

So I thought maybe I could work in publishing and I applied for jobs and got a job for University Press and worked there with people who had lots of experience in publishing and got more interested in how all of that worked. And then after that I worked for a literary agent for a year and a half and it was just me with the agent who ran this agency that had some quite high profile writers. And we would just talk to authors all day and talk about them when they weren't there. And there were also all these files of the letters that had been part of the process of a book long before it hit the shelves.

And so I think that was my first working with archives really, looking at all those letters and thinking about projects that maybe hadn't become books and all the work and the excitement that went into producing a book. And after that – so I still really thought the main game was to work for a trade book publisher and to be an editor – to be really inside the book, involved in that craft of making it better and producing it.

So I got a job for a trade publisher as a book editor and I was working on books that would go on to sell lots of copies. And there I was really interested in the alchemy of producing the book, which sometimes came in as a quite incomplete manuscript from an author who had a really good idea and a strong voice. And then all the work through editorial production design and marketing that went into producing something that was really the book that people wanted to buy I was really fascinated by. And I thought I was just going to work there forever as a book editor, but then soon after I started I realised I was pregnant and that I'd only been there seven months

when I left to have my daughter. So yes, I moved on from book publishing at that moment.

Sarah: But it sounds like a lot of synergies there with Zora's world in some respects, but we'll come to that a little bit later. In the beginning of Cathy's book she talks about a serendipitous discovery down the stack because generally an editor here at the library doesn't work directly with the collection – it's the librarians downstairs. It's not really something that it's a day to day aspect of your work. So how does one get to be down in stack and then how does one evolve to then writing a book about a woman that not many people have heard of? Can you tell everybody about that discovery?

Cathy: I'd love to. So I think I was thinking that maybe was interested in writing biography. I think partly I read a lot of biography and I loved biographies where the author's involved in a quest to find out about a writer. So Janet Malcolm's biographies of Chekhov and Plath and I loved Hazel Rowley's biography of Christina Stead – and any memoirs about the publishing industry, I was interested in that. But you're right Sarah, it is my job to edit other peoples' words about the collection, but back in 2008 I had the opportunity to create a small display related to Australian book publishing and for that – I don't any longer have access to the layers of stack below this building, but in those days I was allowed, I had swipe access.

And so I went down in the old wooden lift with the brass buttons to check a reference and the display concerned George Robertson, the publisher who founded Angus & Robertson Publishing that was really the major publisher in the late 19th century, and early 20th. And so I looked at a book of letters to and from Robertson and I was looking up something completely different but in the centre of that book there were letters about Zora Cross's publishing – about this book, Songs of Love and Life and about Zora Cross.

So it was 1917 – at this time we were already beginning to think about the centenary of World War I so I thought that was an interesting First World War story that I hadn't heard before. And just the whole publishing drama around that book. So George Robertson at first rejected it without reading it. It was the war and he was cranky about the Great Strike and he just didn't want to even think about publishing it.

So she took it to her former employee James Tyrrell who published – and also Zora's mother had offered to pay part of the print run, for the printing, and Robertson said that was always a bad sign, if the mother's involved. So yes – but Robertson saw this self funded edition that was just very plain in a brown paper cover and he thought it was amazing. So he opened it and thought the poetry was incredible. And then he worked with her – so he just bought her

from Tyrrell really without telling her and Tyrrell knew she'd be quite happy to be taken on by Angus & Robertson.

And then he worked with her to publish this new and enlarged edition, and one of the first things he did was send that earlier edition off to Norman Lindsay the artist, in the Blue Mountains. So Norman Lindsay picked it up and started reading it and really scoffed that he couldn't possibly illustrate it because women can't write love poetry because their spinal column isn't connected to the productive apparatus. And so in that book I was reading there was Lindsay's letter and he actually drew a cartoon sending up one of her sonnets. So that drew me in as well because it did say that the book had been really successful, so I thought she'd overcome that criticism from Lindsay. And he did do a cover design though, because he was going to be paid £22 and he wasn't going to turn down that commission.

Sarah: Good. So I know that as part of your promotion of the book there's been a bit of social media and you told a bit of a story on Twitter I think it was about Lindsay and just that little anecdote there. And two people that responded, one said: "what an idiot Lindsay was", and another said: "what a tosser". Do you think Lindsay was a tosser?

Cathy: I don't think I would really say that, and when I saw those comments I thought: "oh, what will the Lindsay family think?". But I guess Lindsay for me, I feel like he's an amusing an interesting character, and he gave me the story in a way. Through him there was that narrative of her overcoming the misogyny of that time. And really he was a colourful proponent of that. He was really colourfully voicing that belief at that time, that women didn't really have authentic expression about sexual passion or about anything really. And so I thought –

Sarah: I don't know, I thought he was a little bit more free thinking so I was a bit shocked to hear that anecdote. I was a little surprised. So obviously he was operating at that time which – you can't take that out of that time. But I was surprised.

Cathy: That's right. I think it doesn't necessarily fit how people think about Lindsay, but then he really did believe in the male artist as the centre of everything and that women needed to be the muse and the material to be worked with. So at that point, he might've changed a little bit later on, but that was really what he believed about creativity and about women's expression and experience. And then also I guess Lindsay, you know he's endured – a lot of us have still heard of him, so I was interested in how that had happened. How he'd managed to last through the years in the way that Zora Cross had faded from consciousness.

Sarah: Yeah. Do you think we could listen to some Zora Cross right now and hear what all the fuss is about? One of the more erotic poems perhaps – is that?

Cathy: If you insist.

Sarah: I insist.

Cathy: The sonnets actually – a lot of them I do really love, but there are poems in there I find stronger. There's one about her experience of giving birth alone in a hospital in Brisbane and it's called "Pain", and I really recommend that one to you to read. And the one "Books" as well that I put in the prologue of the book. But I thought today, it's good to see what Robertson and what the readers were dealing with in 1917, so I will read this even though I read it to my children last night and they said, "aren't you going to be embarrassed reading that in front – so it's "Sonnet Number V".

I give myself to you to do whatever you will with what is yours.
This little hand, this cheek, this breast, are but a flowery land
where your two lips may pluck a garland fair.
I'd have you take a rose from here, from there – a sprig of
jasmine, white and passioned fanned.
And drop the precious wreath where I demand, upon the stream
of my dark falling hair.
For I account you dearer than all men, and bring my beauty to
your waiting feet.
As a young virgin her demure desire, unto the white shrine of
her god again.
For well I know our two wild souls will meet in incense of rich
kisses, chaste as fire.

So that's one of sixty.

Sarah: And Cathy, this obviously ran off the shelves when it was published in 1917 – did everybody – was there an opposition to it, or was it generally, it was something fresh and new and unexpected? What are your impressions there?

Cathy: It was generally really well received and Angus & Robertson managed that quite well because they issued a press edition with quotes from respected critics who'd responded to the earlier edition. So it was very much put out there as: this is great literature, it's not modern smut. And there's a lot of classical references in the book as well that I think helped with that. And they reference back to Shakespeare and Rossetti as to show that it was an important part of a literary tradition. It was reviewed all over the country – they sent it out to local newspapers in small towns and lots of letters were received by the publisher. People really appreciated that it was possible to publish something like that and some of them put it down

to the fact that it was the First World War and it seemed silly to hold on to the prudish ideas that they'd had before when that horror was going on.

So it sold about 4,000 copies and when you think that there were only 5 million people in Australia then a book of poetry selling the equivalent 25,000 would be pretty amazing. Yeah, so I think there was a little bit of opposition but very, very tiny. And there wasn't censorship. There was one sonnet that George Robertson took out, the infamous Sonnet X that has the speaker Venus grabbing Adonis by the hair and draining his sweetness 'til he faint would die. So that one was too much. But otherwise it wasn't censored.

Sarah: And did that get included in a later edition, or that was just removed?

Cathy: It was in the original edition that was self published and then in England another edition was published in 1928 using the original edition, so it's in there.

Sarah: Right, so Robertson did fiddle with the very first edition that Tyrrell produced and he made a few changes.

Cathy: Yeah.

Sarah: Right. Now I guess we need to hear a little bit about Zora's life. She wrote from a very young age and was first published I think around the age of 9. She was corresponding with our very own Ethel Turner, author of Seven Little Australians, because she was editor of the Children's Corner in Australian Town and Country Journal. When she was writing to Ethel Turner do you think having that relationship, a direct line to such a significant person in the Australian literary world, do you think – how much did that influence her own writing, or her own – how much did that inspire her do you think?

Cathy: Yeah I think that was really important because she began writing to the Town and Country Journal where Ethel Turner edited the Children's Corner when she was only 9 years old, and she was living in rural Queensland, in Gympie. Her family did have literary interests but that was still – that kind of connection with a famous writer like Ethel Turner was a new thing. Ethel Turner was really encouraging of her partly because Zora living outside the main cities represented this real Australian child for Ethel Turner, something really fresh. And she did write in a very personal way. So Zora said that she learnt to write through writing letters to Ethel Turner. And she did it for years and years – most children I think write one or two letters and then move on with their lives. But that was a big part of Zora's life for ten years until she was 20. Turner even let her keep writing in the children's pages when she was not at all a child anymore.

So learning to write through letters was a particular advantage because she wrote and she perfected her voice or developed her voice and it's an amazing resource for me writing her biography because I can see her as the young school child and then that change that happens in her when she's 15. And around then she moved to Sydney, after some dramatic events in her family. So the fact that's captured in the newspaper that's now digitised is a really amazing thing.

Sarah: So she didn't only correspond with Ethel Turner, she was corresponding once she was trying to establish herself as a writer – she was writing to all of the Australian figureheads in Australian literature at that time. What sort of a resource were those letters once you found letters to George Robinson, Bertram Stevens, John Le Gay Brereton, Mary Gilmore – all of those people seemed to play quite a role in her life, in a sense.

Cathy: Yeah that's right. She was a really prolific and exuberant letter writer which was really amazing. So John Le Gay Brereton for example was a librarian at Sydney University and he was a poet and a friend of Mary Gilmore's and became the professor of literature there. So when I looked into Zora after becoming interested in the story I'd look up on the catalogue to see what else we had and in his collection – he wrote to everyone, or everyone wrote to him, but there'd be one or two letters from various people. And I think there was something like 500 pages from Zora, so that was quite amazing to see.

Sarah: Very telling, really.

Cathy: And then Bertram Stevens as well, the editor of the Lone Hand magazine that published her first – was her first professional publication in 1913. She wrote to him when she was up in Queensland, in Brisbane, working as an actress and teaching elocution and working as a journalist. It was 1916, it was the First World War, and she really sort of conveyed her personality in those letters and that experience. So that was an incredible resource to have.

Sarah: You say she was an exuberant letter writer, do you think that sometimes, or there was the potential for some things to be misinterpreted by men at that time?

Cathy: Yeah definitely. So she was writing at that time to Bertram Stevens and then also to David McKee Wright who later became her partner. And David McKee Wright cautioned her that Bertram Stevens was actually telling other people in the Bulletin Office about these letters and that she should be careful. So yeah, at the time – I think though someone like Bertram Stevens just thought: well she writes this amazing poetry and the letter writing is part of that character that

gives us the poetry. So I think they gave her quite a bit of leeway with expressing herself like that and the same with George Robertson.

So as soon as she signed the contract with George Robertson she was writing full on letters to him. But he was so interested in literary history and in capturing the personalities that had made it up – so people like Henry Lawson and another larger than life figure, the poet Christopher Brennan. In a way she was playing along with that and she was being the sort of author, crazy author character. So again they quite appreciated that.

Sarah: And she was sort of operating that bohemian circle as well, so it goes with that character, and I guess various life choices that you talk about in the book, that definitely fits that persona.

Cathy: A little bit, but then I think the life she was living was quite in contrast in a way, although she left her husband and there was all of that going on in her personal life, and she kind of joked to Bertram Stevens that when you mislay something for five years you should consider it lost, quite lost. So the idea of someone –

Sarah: Her husband, ladies and gentleman, her husband.

Cathy: That could've been thought of as something a bit shameful that obviously she didn't feel like that about it. But then she also had to transport herself as quite a proper person in some ways as well, and the picture that Angus & Robertson put in the front of the book really played up on the fact of her being a demure, respectable Sydney school teacher. That's actually a publicity shot later.

Sarah: Oh from later.

Cathy: Yeah – oh I don't have it in, sorry. But then I did have quite a bit of trouble with her handwriting too, so this just is an example of how people can read her letters in different ways, but I listed a volunteer here who'd been reading World War I diaries to help to decipher the letters. And so we were reading – I'd read them out and then he'd – and I'd stop where there was a word I didn't understand and he'd helped me with it. But there was a letter where she was talking about just being very grateful to Bertram Stevens and talking about how she was nobody and she didn't really – she was a porcupine without the spines or something like that. And he said, "oh she sounds like a bit of a psycho this woman". And I must've just – my face must've told him that, you know, I was completely –

Sarah: She's not a psycho, she's my hero!

Cathy: And then he said, "oh she sounds like a writer". That was just really telling, and I put that in the book.

Sarah: Look I guess you've mentioned all these – these several key players in the Australian literary society at that time, and that segues nicely to the structure of the book, because it's a little bit different in that respect. Can you tell us how you came to decide on how to structure the book and tell everyone a little bit about it?

Cathy: Yeah, so I've structured it through her relationships with some of those people who she wrote letters to, and I think I had the idea – I think just the scope of her life just sort of loomed in front of me and there was so much material. And I thought: I'm not so interested in just thinking here she is as a child, what was she doing and what's the historical context. I found that if I wrote it through the lens of Ethel Turner then I got to satisfy my curiosity about that relationship and present different views of her through how different people looked at her, and it also gave a kind of tension to the book. So that really kept me going with it a lot, to do it in that way.

And at first I thought: well I could just write the same kind of scenes through different perspectives – I think what they call a Rashomon narrative. But then I – so she had a falling out with Angus & Robertson later on and two of my chapters – one is George Robertson's relationship with her and another is George's assistant, Rebecca Wylie. So I thought I could tell that falling out through both of their perspectives.

And then when I – I did that initially in a first draft but then when I looked back at it it was like: oh here they are falling out, oh gosh. And then: oh hey there are falling out again. And I could see that that wasn't going to work for a reader and it needed a chronological spine so then I worked on that afterwards. And it also helps I think to see – it contrasts her with some of those figures. So people like Mary Gilmore who went to a lot of trouble to consolidate her literary reputation and really thought a lot even about how her archive would come into this library and wrote to the library saying, "I want to catalogued with the best". And Zora wasn't doing that – she was still writing through her life. So that contrast I think helps you to think about why maybe we don't remember her in the way that we do someone like Gilmore.

Sarah: For me it worked so well because I think not only is Zora such an interesting character, but you weave in all these other fabulous interesting characters of that era which some you have heard of, some you won't have, but it really sets the scene for that era of literary Australia. And you mentioned having a little bit of a suspense there – it was very much that because I needed to know: well how did this woman's life end? How could we not know about her and yet she's achieved all of this. And how did she slip from consciousness? Can you shed light on that?

Cathy: I'll try to. I think I'll always be thinking about that because I think there are a lot of reasons why – I mean a lot of people probably have heard of her and people have told me who went to school in the 1960s that they memorised a couple of her poems and read them at Eisteddfods. But generally most people I talk to haven't heard of her at all. And I think partly that's down to the approach to literary history in the second half of the 20th century and the judgements of what was important literature and what we should know about, and really the dismissal of a lot of other literature and especially things that were popular and perhaps things that were written by woman as well, were just not held up as being worth our time. And modernism as well took over and we were just interested in different forms. And it wasn't such an age of poetry either that it had been. So in Zora's early time there was poetry in all the popular magazines and people must've read it out loud a lot, and they weren't so concerned with analysing it – they just loved it and it was good, if you wanted to read it over and over again.

And then in terms of literary history the story of that time I think is quite a blokey story of figures like Lawson and Brennan drinking, that idea of writing about the bush, which she didn't do – so there was a big interest in that. So then some of the women who have been remembered – I think people like Gilmore and Dorothea Mackellar wrote quite patriotic poetry. So they suited those later times when that was what people were looking for.

So I guess I think that the default really is forgetting that most people are forgotten unless there's some reason that they suit our times or someone comes along able to show that they're interesting. And that didn't really happen for Zora either with feminist literary criticism in the 80s and 90s. I guess that's a big –

Sarah: That's a whole other area for us to tackle.

Cathy: But yeah it is interesting because I think writing – she was best known for – even though she did lots of other things, she was best known for the erotic poetry and that at that time wasn't – women in popular culture had been really objectified and sexualised so someone writing about sex was seen as someone doing something that really was in the interest of the patriarchy. It wasn't something we should celebrate. And they didn't really look at it in the way I think she did, that she was defying those attitudes that really Norman Lindsay and other people had that women's experience was only contingent on men's and that what they could really express was limited and that their artistically they were second rate. So she was saying, "I'm going to write about this".

Sarah: Now obviously we've talked about the Songs of Love and Life. She wrote a lot more. She was writing for a living. Can you tell us a little bit about what else she wrote?

Cathy: Yeah, so she wrote another collection of poetry with Angus & Robertson because it was a two book contract, and she quite quickly dashed up a book of poetry that didn't really hit the mark as much as Songs of Love and Life had. And at that time she was still writing a lot of poetry for magazines and journals but she was really interested in writing novels. The 1920s was really her prolific decade. So she was doing lots of journalism, writing, short pieces for the Australian Worker, and some of those are quite autobiographical – so that was interesting.

She went on to write a couple of novels based a lot on her mother's memories of Queensland and on her travels in North Queensland as well, that were published in London. At that stage Angus & Robertson were doing very little local publishing and she had to go over to London to get published. And one of those novels "Daughters of the Seven Mile", because it was all being published at quite a distance they left off the last few chapters and that was quite devastating for her because she wondered why – what people thought of this unfinished book.

She also wrote lots of serial novels for newspapers, so it does show you really how at that time quite different to today, you could make a living as a freelance writer sending off poetry to The Bulletin, popping in to get your cheques and then writing these serial novels. And then you leave behind a bit of a mixed literary legacy though when you do that. But she also published an eulogy to her younger brother who died in the First World War is still put in anthologies and well thought of.

But I was very interested as well in her journalism and one thing she did was, in the late 20s and early 30s, mainly to make money but also because she was interested in her fellow women writers – so she set off and interviewed about 40 of them. Some through letters, but she visited them at home and she wrote these pieces for the Australian Woman's Mirror that were really entertaining – they're still really entertaining now. She puts herself into them, I like to think of her as an early Hunter S. Thompson gonzo journalist. So I get a lot of information about her through those but also see – because people have said that women weren't doing all that much at that time, and so seeing Zora's work she's really captured the working lives of a lot of other writers. So I feel like that was a big achievement.

Sarah: From reading the book, one thing – a takeaway for me is what a resourceful woman Zora was. Now you've worked here at the Library for the ten years that you've been writing your book. Zora seemed to have such a personality that people were falling over themselves to help her. Do you want to tell everybody about – there's just a long list of financial assistance that just seemed to appear for her.

Cathy: There is quite a lot about money in the book and I was thinking that I remember the moment when I worked out the Mac shortcut for the pound symbol, which is option 3, and thought: this is going to save me so much time, because there's so many mentions of amounts of money that she got paid. So she did get a lot of financial assistance from George Robertson early on and I think he built her up, he really created the persona Zora Cross and created that expectation that she was always going to be showered with riches and have that success.

And he had this situation with a few other writers, with CJ Dennis and with Henry Lawson too, where they'd lots of money in the first few years and then they could see that the publisher was continuing to make lots of money. And Angus & Robertson had a bookshop as well but they were really suffering financially. So she was one of that group of authors who kept going back for money and eventually they decided, as they did with other authors that –

Sarah: George Robertson seemed to be quite philanthropic, he seemed to have – feel a real, not ownership, a responsibility to Australian literature. Would you agree with that?

Cathy: I think he did. I think he genuinely cared about the authors and felt grateful that they'd made that contribution that they had. I think also because he had such an eye to posterity he didn't want to be remembered as the person who'd benefited from someone's work and then left them to starve like Keats. So I think that there was that mixture of him as a businessman and as a person that I got a really big sense of through his relationship with Zora, and found really interesting.

And then after that – she was earning a lot of money writing as I've said, through the serial novels and other ways, but then that dried up partly just because the market changed and her focus was on writing novels in ancient Rome for quite a long part of the second half of her life. And she did get assistance from the Commonwealth Literary Fund that was set up to help people like her who the literary community felt had done important work for Australia that were hitting hard times.

Sarah: There's one anecdote where she decides late in life to go overseas and then – do you want to tell everyone about that? My jaw dropped, and I'm thinking: wow, I wish I could get that sort of support from –.

Cathy: So she did, she wrote to the Literary Fund and got her literary pension it was called, paid in advance so that should get a boat over to England and then go to Rome to research her novels. And she was in her 60s at this stage. And things didn't go that well and she ran out of money. So she ended up writing to the Prime Minister to get some

help. And they did come through for her, so she managed to get paid.

Sarah: They did, they came through.

Cathy: Yes. And I think that really shows a lot about the attitude to literature at that time as well, and people just thought it was so important that we had to support people who'd made this contribution right through literary history.

Sarah: So researching your book, a part of the way through you found that Zora's daughter April is still alive and often you hear writers talking about: oh it can be a help or a hindrance having family members still alive if you're wanting to write a warts and all biography. Did you find April supportive of your project?

Cathy: I did, absolutely. So it was really amazing to find out – I read a biography of David McKee Wright that was published in 2012 and it was written by Michael Sharkey. And Michael Sharkey had actually started writing about Zora Cross and then had changed his focus to David McKee Wright, so I was very interested to read his book *Apollo in George Street*. And I saw in that that their daughter, David and Zora's daughter April, was still alive and she was 88 at the time. And this was quite early on in my research, and I didn't even know that I would be able to come through with the goods and I thought declaring myself to the family seemed like a big step.

But I did write to April and she called me the next day – I put my phone number in the letter and she called. And then I went to meet her. And she was still living on the block of land that Zora and David had moved to in 1919. So that was an amazing thing to have that, to be in that place. And she was very encouraging. She felt that Zora hadn't got a very good run and was a misunderstood person and here I had been sent in a way to do something about this. So there was a pressure in that, but there was –

Sarah: No pressure there at all.

Cathy: There was definitely pressure to keep going, but that was motivation too. So each year I would think, "well I can't let down Zora's 89 year old daughter". And then next year, "I can't let down her 90 year old daughter". And as it went on I just kept going, so that did help. And April as well, as much as she wanted her mother redeemed, she still really left it to me to follow my own approach. And meeting and talking to three of her granddaughters later who are the daughters of Zora's son Ted, again I kind of thought, "what are they going to expect?". And anyone I've met who's met Zora, I can see they have – I can see them picturing her and I think: I don't have access to that real person.

But one of the granddaughters said that Zora was two people – she was the grandmother that they knew but then she was also this person they told stories about the person who'd been this bohemian poet and lived this interesting life. And in a way that was reassuring to me because I thought: well their grandmother can co-exist with this person that I've put together through her poetry and her letters and things people have said, and my own obsessions – what I thought would entertain someone reading it. And that that's ok.

Sarah: Absolutely. So hearing you speak about your experience and having read your book knowing so much more about Zora, there are some parallels with your life and hers – of being a working mother, juggling, both being editors, writers. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Cathy: Well I think in most ways I'm not – in a lot of ways I'm not like her. I wasn't precocious early on and I can't sing – she was a very good singer. I do wear cotton dresses like apparently she did, but I think that came later when I was writing the books. That's a bit of self styling. But yeah, it was interesting though to read about her experience of juggling life and all the messiness of life with a real commitment to write. So in some ways that spurred me on and it was – yeah I saw her confidence in just writing through her own voice and believing that she could keep going with it and her belief in her projects. And then also there's that element that it was a cautionary tale, that you couldn't get too bogged down in and immersed in the project because then other areas of life – you know the roof might fall in for example, and that kind of thing.

And there was quite a telling moment when I went to visit April – I had a lot of visits up there and chatting with her. And she also wrote a short memoir that was really helpful to me late in the writing of the book. So there are stories about – which there often are, about woman writers, about whether she was a good mother, and did she neglect her children in order to write? And so April and I were talking about that and April was saying that she was great – she was a very encouraging mother and she was always interested in everything you did. And then she said, "well she wasn't the kind of mother who turned up at your school sports day", and I had to tell her that it was actually my children's swimming carnival that day and I was there interviewing April.

Sarah: Focus, so focused.

Cathy: So that was one little synergy.

Sarah: That's great – that's perfect. Look we're running out of time I guess, but I'd like to give people an opportunity – are you ok to take some questions?

- Cathy: I'd love to.
- Sarah: Alright. Let's do that now. Does anybody have any questions that they'd like to ask Cathy?
- Audience 1: Can you still buy Songs of Love and Life? Has it been reprinted?
- Cathy: No it hasn't in recent years. So you can still buy a second hand copy. And someone actually in a bookshop said to me. "oh that would be a nice little reprinted issue of her poetry". So I think if that's possible that would be really good.
- Audience 1: I'd just like to thank you very much for writing the book because it really brought a figure to life that should've been well and truly alive, all this time –
- Cathy: Thank you.
- Audience 1: – and is now. Thank you.
- Sarah: I'll just add to that – although the book hasn't been published the library has digitised our copy. So you can read it, it's all fully online through our catalogue. So if that's an accessible option for you I recommend that. Now the other thing that we haven't managed to talk about today is a manuscript, it's an unpublished manuscript that we have. Did you want to quickly tell people about that, because that has been digitised, and if you want another challenge?
- Cathy: There is – that's one of my favourite things of hers, a manuscript called "Rose Brown By Herself", that was a novel that was rejected by Angus & Robertson in 1920, and it's really a feminist satire, I like to call it. I don't think she would've thought of it like that at the time. But about a woman who happened to have been a vaudeville actress and had children out of wedlock. But it was very – very lively and it's a send up of the popular novels of that time. And so it has lots of references that made a lot more sense then. But it's a very lively and interesting read now. And that has been digitised as Sarah said.
- Sarah: So that's through the Library's catalogue as well. We'll have another question there.
- Audience 2: Thanks Cathy, that was terrific. You obviously like her poetry, and that novel, but what about her other novels – what do you think of them?
- Cathy: I guess I've – I did find them a little bit disappointing in a way because they were written for a popular readership and I felt, having read Rose Brown, that those novels, she was really restraining herself. So she was trying to write something that she thought would get published and writing a kind of Australian too that would appeal

to an English readership, because that was where she was more likely to get them published. So I do think they're interesting for their glimpses of that world of Gympie, but I guess as literary works I don't love them as much the poetry, the journalism, Rose Brown. But another biographer could come along and love them and do different things.

Audience 3: Thank you so much for this great talk and I am so excited to read the book, which I haven't yet. I'm curious about – following up on this last question, how you deal as a writer with things that you think that the woman would have said or thought or did, but didn't say or think or write that we know of – things that are not in the archive but reading between the lines you feel must be there somewhere.

Cathy: I think I tend to show what she wrote in letters, so the letters are very helpful for that. But like you say, there are all these gaps and there are moments where she says to someone, "I'll tell you when I see you", and then you don't know what happens. So I guess – and I think as well those gaps are there for – hopefully it works for the reader to think about all the possibilities of what someone could've said or done where we don't know for sure. So I think I've left some of that open I think in the writing – I think I've had to do that. And so hopefully that works.

Audience 4: Hi. I've got two questions for you. One, as an editor, how did you find being on the receiving end of the editing process? And the other one is were their times when you were a little cranky, when you got close to Zora, and you had to sort of motivate yourself away from certain biases or be on her side in situations when you were that close to your subject matter?

Cathy: So for the first one being an editor – well the first thing was that I just really – I think I edited my own work so relentlessly because that's what I do normally, looking closely at sentences, it made it quite a slow process I think because I was there, never happy, going over and over it. And then I did – and then someone else did edit it. And I guess I think most people who work as editors just appreciate someone else looking at it and noticing things that we are too close to it to see. And when they make suggestions, I think the principle is you don't – they don't always know the solution but they are pointing out a problem, so they're giving you that opportunity possibly to find your own solution to it. So I really appreciated that – I loved being edited.

And the thing with being close to her, I don't know – I tried to write it in the way that it didn't matter that I was close to her. So I didn't do that traditional scientific style of biography. It is very much my impression of her and my creation of her. Yeah, if that answers that?

Audience 5: Thank you, this is a fascinating book. And just a quick look through it I've noticed that she has correspondence with Mary Gilmore – I think Mary Gilmore wrote to everybody in those days. But that period of time there were a lot of significant women – the early women's movement, and all that. Was Zora Cross considered to be a woman's writer and not in terms of the love poetry but as someone who was bringing women out of the traditional perception or was she seen as writing women's works?

Cathy: I think at that time – so you mean with Songs of Love and Life or with the later things? Because I think – she was valued for presenting a woman's perspective, but I think it wasn't necessarily seen as a feminist statement at the time. And even the later work that she did, I think she's never really been held up necessarily as a feminist writer and I think that's something that's easier for us to see now looking at all of her work. So I don't think it was seen then as part of a feminist project, no.

Audience 6: Thank you very much. With the Songs of Love and Life do you consider the poems in that publication around sexual experience to be Zora really talking about her relationship with David McKee Wright, or do you interpret that as a result of wider experience? What do you think she actually is responding to, to create such poems?

Cathy: I think there is a bit of a clue in the first sonnet where she talks about her life and her poetry being intertwined, and it was – she did write them at the time that – she probably started them when she was corresponding with David McKee Wright when she was in Queensland and he was in Sydney. And so I think the fact that they didn't meet for awhile, they got to know each other through writing. So I think she got used to expressing her feelings through writing. So I think they do have a lot to do with her feelings for him, but she's also – she did in letters say that she didn't feel like it was all about her passion, and that she didn't – she wasn't necessarily more passionate than other women, but she was trying to express something on behalf of other women too. And she was in a position, having already breached convention, that she felt she could get away with that. So I think it's both – yeah it is from her experience and feeling that something that needed to be said.

Sarah: Right, before we thank Cathy I'd just like to let you all know that up in our Maze Gallery Cathy has put together a selection of Zora material. We've got the original water colour drawing by Norman Lindsay that was produced for the dust jacket of Songs of Love and Life. We've got an original manuscript from Songs of Love and Life, and a copy of the book as well. And a portrait I think is up there.

Cathy: That's right. Yeah, it's beautiful.

Sarah: So don't leave the library today without going up and having a look at that. And the bookshop is ready and waiting. We have piles of Cathy's book – please go and buy a copy, and Cathy will be there ready to sign them. You all know how much better a book is when it's been signed by the author. So join with me and thank Cathy, and congratulations Cathy.

Cathy: Thank you Sarah, thank you everyone.

[End of recorded material 00:51:55]