

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Cathy Perkins. Cathy is the author of *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*, published in 2019, as well as an editor at the State Library of New South Wales. So Cathy, having written an entire book about Zora, how would you describe her relevance to Australian literary history?

CP: She had so much to do with not only different kinds of writing, with poetry, with journalism, with fiction writing at that time. That she was doing it in the early 20th century, but also that she had all these struggles to get published and to write the kind of work she wanted to write as a woman, as an Australian. And so her experience really says a lot about the literary scene and the pressures on writers, the life of a writer at that time, but also in the shifts in taste, in the types of writing that she was writing, originally at a time when poetry was a really mainstream form. And you could see by the responses to her poetry, how excited people got about her poetry, so it really captures that moment when, when poetry was so central to the culture.

AT: You mentioned that she had some struggles getting published. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what was going on there?

CP: And so that's how I kind of came across her. I was working at the State Library as an editor. And I was putting together this small display on Australian publishing. And I went down to the stack here at the library where I am now and checked a reference in this book of letters to and from the big publisher, George Robertson, who really dominated the Australian literary scene from the late 19th and through the first decades of the 20th century, and it was this episode about Zora across trying to get *Songs of Love and Life* published by Angus and Robertson, that company he ran, and she'd so she'd sort of sent it to him and actually someone, a literary critic, who was friends with George Robertson, Bertrand Stevens, had presented it to him. And it was the First World War and Robertson, you know, had his whims about what he wanted to publish and just sort of brushed it off. He said he didn't read it because he was in a bad mood. But then his former colleague, James Tyrrell, who ran a bookshop next to George Robertson's bookshop - they were a publisher and a bookshop - brought it out in this small, you know, little edition with a brown paper cover. And George Robertson got an advance copy of that edition and started opening it and just was blown away by Zora Cross's poetry, just thought it was incredible, and that she was the, you know, the Elizabeth Barrett Browning of Australia and that it was just a travesty that this book was being published in such a shabby kind of edition. So he called Tyrrell in and said, How much do you want for this woman and just offered 20 pounds, no discussion with Zora herself, but she was kind of cattle-traded between these two publishers, and Tyrrell, I guess, Zora would be pretty happy to have a more beautiful edition of this book of poetry come out with Angus and Robertson. So that was the deal done, that really drew me in, that it was such an interesting publishing story from that time. Because George Robertson sent the manuscript off to the artist, Norman Lindsay, who was quite, you know, a notorious figure living in the Blue Mountains, asking for some illustrations. And Lindsey wrote back saying he couldn't possibly illustrate these poems because women can't write love poetry because their brain isn't connected to the productive apparatus. So somehow, you know, women couldn't connect, thinking and feeling in the way that was necessary, and passion I suppose, in the way that was necessary to write poetry, according to Lindsey, although then he got a little bit more taken with the poems, I think. He did produce a cover illustration that was used on the book, so it has got a Lindsay cover illustration, but I think it was those tensions that drew my interest. So the fact that she'd been written off by Norman Lindsay, but then the book had sold really well, she triumphed and it got all these incredible reviews and a lot of responses from readers. And so that was her publishing story that I found, that hooked me.

AT: I'm actually a bit surprised because I think I had assumed that part of her difficulty getting this volume published, because she had *A Song of Mother Love*, another volume of poetry published in 1916. So I had thought that maybe the erotic content was the issue, but if he didn't even read it, clearly, that's not the problem.

CP: Yeah, I think that's right. I think he sort of thought, she's got to be pretending because he actually didn't think women were capable of genuine sexual passion. So he thought that women could only, and this comes through from a lot of other sources I looked at at the time, there was this belief that women could only be animated by a contact with a man, and so how could then a woman be able to write poetry about love if all women were somehow like robots in these interactions? And I think maybe they're a little bit worried about the erotic content, but then she veiled a lot of it in classical references, and they got all these endorsements from key literary figures at the time that said, No, this is literature. You know, Shakespeare wrote some sonnets that were quite erotic as well. And you know, and they've endures and so I think they kind of headed that, any qualms about that, off at the pass. I also think like what interested me a lot too was that was the First World War and when I became interested in her, it was that time when we were working out the commemoration of 100 years since the Great War. And so it seems like a First World War story that had a homefront perspective and a female perspective, this idea that people were buying this book of erotic poetry at this time that all these people were dying in the war. So that sense of maybe people's relationships, you know, changed, but there was something heightened going on that was reflected in literature and in people's experience of being in that literary world that wasn't separate, and I think people had seen her poetry as sort of separate to the war. So that was the something that really alerted me to it at that time.

AT: I read that it attracted a lot of attention, in part because of the erotic content. But as you said, you know, it's, I believe you previously phrased it as it's not just smut, it's literary. But it sold out in three days?

CP: Yeah, that was the original edition did. That was quite a small edition. And then they brought the (Robertson edition) - and that sold out and they kept reprinting it, you know, all through the end of 1917, early 1918, they were reprinting editions of it, and it was it was quite a lovely object as well, the book, and that's something that drew me to it, too. It was crafted in these green hardcover, with end papers by the artist Neil Smith and then it had the dust jacket and they printed this edition for the press, this limited edition that had all these over the top sort of endorsements from the earlier reviews of the first edition on it, you know saying Zora Cross doesn't just write an ode to her husband lovers eyebrows, she writes to all of him and that kind of like really just sort of alerting people to what it is. But the names that were on those endorsements really showed that it was elite culture. It wasn't sort of, like you say it wasn't modern smut, it was something classic and enduring.

AT: I wonder if it was also, like if there was a bit of longing, like assuming a lot of people were separated from their loved ones, and maybe, you know, this type of poetry sort of fed into that emotion that was, that a lot of people were feeling very strongly at the time.

CP: Yeah, I think there's a lot of things like that going on. And often when I was writing about her life, I wanted to leave it to the reader to also bring what they know about that time and their own experiences in the present as well, this sort of sense of there are certain things that just seem so of their time about someone's experience from 100 years ago. But there are also things we can relate to as well. So it just makes you, I think it's better sometimes if the reader is not told everything about, you know, this is what this woman experienced. And so I think, yeah, there's definitely a lot going on, a lot of sort of pressures. There's a very, everything, feeling and experience were heightened, but people still had their personal ambitions as well. And I think, you know, that was interesting how important it still was, for her to be published and to be read and all of that even when she was going through a lot of personal tragedies and it was such a time of upheaval globally.

AT: I know you've mentioned this, but in addition to, we've talked a lot about this one volume of poetry, but she was also a best-selling novelist. She wrote other volumes of poetry. She was a successful journalist. I mean, she was very prolific and she was respected enough that the Commonwealth literary fund actually granted her a pension. She was very prolific and very, you know, popular obviously, and well-respected.

CP: Yeah, I think she was during certain decades. So I think her poetry was quite well respected, a lot of critics who were her contemporaries really responded to it and respected it. I think some of the novels that she wrote, she was trying to write them for a mass market readership in England and so she wrote them in a way that was, they were based on her family's experiences in Queensland as sort of pioneer settlers there and they were, you know, not as interesting in literary terms as some of her earlier work. And then also some of the things she did that I find most interesting. So for example, in *Songs of Love and Life* that that had the passionate poetry, there are also poems that were quite modern in style, about subjects like her experience of giving birth to a stillborn child as a single mother, you know, alone in a hospital and, and she does it in a way that really communicates the sort of pain of that experience. And then she wrote this novel called *Rose Brown* as herself a couple of years after the poetry *Songs of Love and Life* and that was also quite modern and *Rose Brown*, in its style, it had several layers where the main character was telling a story about someone telling a story. So it had these kinds of interesting layers. But it was also the character, you know, was very outspoken on what we would now think of as feminist issues, and she had experiences that we can only guess perhaps, Zora did have those experiences as a young woman too, like, being raped on the banks of the Brisbane River and sort of, she'd been brought up to be really polite and her aggressor, who was someone who was out basically on a date with, she managed to push him over, but she was so polite, that she helped him up. And so it's sort of really a commentary, just very vividly put across of how this conditioning of women, you know, doesn't sort of help in these situations. And you know, that was never published because it was seen as, you know, unsavory in character. But I thought looking at it, that perhaps in a bigger publishing market, like the UK, something like that would have been published by a more cutting edge publisher, and then she could have been set more in that direction as a kind of writer who was pushing the boundaries of what could be depicted in print, rather than going back and trying to do much safer and not as interesting sort of literary work. So I think it was the market that kind of determined that trajectory a bit. And that was quite interesting to see, through looking at the work she didn't get published, as well as what she did, what you can see about the publishing scene at that time and the experience for women writers as well.

AT: Yeah, she does seem to have been pushing the envelope in a lot of directions. So it's fascinating that there are subjects that some people still seem to find controversial, like, you know, realistic depictions of Indigenous Australian life, the impacts of war on women, you mentioned childbirth, so she certainly wasn't afraid to try to address controversial topics.

CP: Yeah, that's right. I think she really wanted to, like she was really driven to just express herself through writing and she just did it in all these different ways. And she was like that, you know, from from a child, really, from her early writing. She observed the dispossession or what she'd heard about the dispossession of the Aboriginal people from her mother's family, you know, from the the land in rural Queensland, sort of saw the the evil of colonization, I think, and of war, and had those responses that that she wanted to express through literature, so she wasn't afraid to do that. But there was a point to which she just wasn't able to keep doing it to, you know, to the level that we might have been left with more resolved work like that, that she might have produced.

AT: It's just interesting, because I wasn't aware of the sexual assault that you had mentioned. And so it kind of seems that really made her realize that these things that we don't talk about, not talking about them does hurt, like not acknowledging them, does have real impact and damage. And makes you wonder, you know, if she was deliberately saying no, we need to talk about all of these things. And obviously, not everyone wanted to talk about those things.

CP: Yeah, that's right. And I think, you know, she did get flack later for it as being seen as inappropriate that she didn't have those boundaries that were imposed on talking about those things and and she didn't want to pretend that that everything was wonderful in society. So I think that's why she was like that in her personal

*relationships to like in the letters that she wrote to people, she's very effusive. And I thought, in a way you want a subject like that for a biography because I felt like she was expressing things, because she was open that other people might have felt but you know, they were more restrained. And so I didn't get that on the archival record in the way that she did. So I feel like she did speak for other people who experienced and believed the things that that she believed, but that she really got it out there. Because you know, she was such a compulsive writer and communicator. So I think that that's something really admire that.*

*AT: Yeah, I remember reading that she was a prolific letter writer and like she corresponded with a lot of like major figures of the day.*

*CP: Yeah, she did with a lot of other writers and critics like George Robertson, she wrote him masses of letters, you know, way beyond what you would expect of a writer. And she actually started as a child writing to Ethel Turner, who was already a really famous children's author when Zora writes to her. Zora was nine years old, and she lived in near Gympie on a farm in Queensland, and her father brought home the Town and Country Journal which had a children's page where children could write in about their experiences and write little stories. And Ethel Turner was the editor of that that page and Zora just wrote a letter, and it was about I'm a little school girl from, you know, Pie Creek, and I've got this many cats and our family has a buggy, you know, bullock cart. And so it just really conveyed that sense that really appealed to Ethel Turner that here was an authentic Australian child out in the bush, even though at that time most people lived in the cities, but there was still in the culture an idea that that was the real Australian experience. And she just kept writing and so I think, looking back at those newspapers, a lot of other children might have written a couple of letters and then given up and got busy with other interests, but Zora just kept doing it really until she had to persuade Ethel Turner that she was actually still, you know, even though she wasn't a child anymore, you know, she was 19 and 20, she could write for children, so she'd write stories still for that page. She just had this burning desire to be published to express herself. And in those letters, you see her transformation from innocent child into a questioning teenager and it's quite interesting to have that play out in a national newspaper, quite a well read, newspaper and all of those letters, you can read them on Trove, which is quite incredible. So just, you know, something like 20,000 words, so just, you know, like a small novel that she wrote as a child that was published. So that's something that I think was was quite amazing about her, really unusual.*

*AT: And so you've talked about Zora's resourcefulness in the face of financial hardship and personal tragedies. So can you tell us a bit more about the difficulties that she faced on that side of life?*

*CP: She went to teachers college, so she had her qualification and she became a teacher for a few years, but then she, I think she was more interested in writing. And before that, she had been a professional actress as well. So she was used to earning a living, and it just became too, she had sort of expectations, I think, built up by how well Songs of Love and Life sold and the awards that she got for that, that I think she thought she could make a living as a writer, but then in the Depression, a lot of the outlets for freelance writing dried up and it became very difficult. So then she did get the Commonwealth Literary Fund pension. And so that wasn't really a fellowship. It was an amount of money that the government gave to people who'd contributed to Australian culture through literature and therefore deserved you know, just to be fed by the country and to be respected. But that was not very much money to live on. And so there was a lot of sort of writing pleading letters to Angus and Robertson until that relationship went sour and some really difficult times looking after her, she had a partner but then he died when their children were still young and she was living up in the lower Blue Mountains. And yeah, just really struggling but not giving up, so still selling poems to magazines and newspapers and just kind of getting by until her children were old enough to send out to work. So it was really quite hard.*

AT: And so given how popular she was, both with critics and with the public, she was a huge figure in her time, it seems like, so why don't people know about her today?

CP: Yeah, that's true. She was very well known, really a household name at that time in the '20s and the '30s. So I think since then, there were lots of different factors that led to her disappearance, really, from the culture. So there were different, part of it were literary reasons. So I think in the '60s and '70s, there was an advent of a different kind of poetry, of modernist poetry. And here was a lot of literary criticism that really elevated that new kind of poetry and said that all that poetry in the past, things like Zora Cross, they're really old fashioned and they weren't as good as people thought they were at the time. So there was some generational, which I think happens through all cultural forms. And that really happened very clearly then, so she wasn't given, and her contemporaries as well, weren't given that kind of space in literary history, because there was a sense of making way for the new kinds of writing. And then there was also I think, a sense that she could have been rediscovered in the '80s and '90s when there was a lot of feminist literary criticism, and a lot of recovery of other writers like Eleanor Dark and novelists particularly like Katharine Susannah Prichard and many, many others at that time. And I think she didn't kind of get rediscovered then partly because of the style of writing she'd done. So there was nothing that suited contemporary tastes that you could just republish and say in the Virago edition and say that everyone should read this novel. *Rose Brown*, for example, her unpublished novel, you might have been able to create an edited version of that but that was hidden away in the archives. And I think there was also a sense that, she was best known for this erotic poetry. And there was a sense that maybe that wasn't all that feminist to be writing erotic poetry that she was kind of there, doing what might please the men and I think people didn't really think she was writing about sexuality from a woman's point of view, there was a certain female power that she was claiming through doing that. So no one kind of put that spin on it at that time. So I think those are the main reasons. Also, there's a lot of things she did that just were a bit beneath the surface. And for example, she went and interviewed about 40 of her contemporary women writers, published profiles of them in a really popular magazine, the *Australian Women's Mirror* and she had this quite interesting style of journalism where she put herself into the story. And so she'd set the scene. It was almost Gonzo or New Journalism, where she's there in the interview, and you have her in Eleanor's garden and describing the scene. So that was a great contribution that she did through those interviews with women writers, a lot of whom, like her, didn't really make it into literary history in the way that they might have. So I think that wasn't valued because they were just in an ephemeral magazine and disappeared and it was under a pseudonym as well because she was just doing it to make money. That's something she really got by on as well, was journalism. That's one of the reasons as well, she just didn't have someone sort of championing her early, early on and looking at everything she did and saying, this was a really extraordinary writer in a really fascinating person.

AT: It seems a bit unfair that she got a hard time from the misogynists in the first place. And then feminists later on just that seems like the ultimate no-win situation.

CP: Yeah, that's right, she did get battered from all camps, really. But I think you know, I just really admired that she just did keep going, you know, that she was a lifelong writer and in some form or another, she was always writing and then when she was older, too, she was a volunteer at a local library in Glenbrook. And so she just had this dedication to writing and to books and in a way that was what kept her going. She had a lot of difficulties throughout her life, including in her early life. And so it was that dedication to writing that she couldn't help doing but it also left us with so much material in her letters and in all the different things she wrote that I think, really captured her personality and something distinctive about her experience of life at that time, across the breadth of her work. I did tell her story through her relationships. And I think you know, Norman Lindsay is a character in the book and George Robertson and Mary Gilmore as well. She was someone else that Zora both was friends with, but also had some clashes of temperament with so I think, yeah, I think that's what she

*really shed light on those people as well, that cast of characters who were part of her life and and then part of my take on her as well.*

*AT: Great. Well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.*

*CP: Thanks, Alison.*

*AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well behaved women rarely make history.*