

**Briony Stewart - at her home at 152 Forrest St, Fremantle, 20 April 2017**

**[0.00] Know Your Nation:** Okay cool, let's just start off, if you would say your full name and your date of birth.

**Briony Stewart:** My name is Briony Stewart and I was born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1984.

**KYN:** Cool, first of January, hey?

**Briony Stewart:** Yep, new year's baby.

**KYN:** Very nice. And where were you born?

**Briony Stewart:** In Perth, In King Eddy's, so yeah, quite local.

**KYN:** And where were you living ...where were your parents living at the time?

**Briony Stewart:** At that time they were living in South Perth, I think, yeah, but then not long after that, a couple of years after that we moved to North Perth and that's where I spent my childhood.

**KYN:** Okay, and what street in North Perth?

**Briony Stewart:** Marmion Street. Just runs off Fitzgerald, so just around the corner from the Rosemount and a very easy bike ride to North Perth Primary.

**KYN:** Okay, cool, so is the house still there?

**Briony Stewart:** It is, yep.

**KYN:** What's it like?

**Briony Stewart:** It's ...what was it like or what's it like now?

**KYN:** What is it like?

**Briony Stewart:** When I lived there, I mean, North Perth had a sort of ...you know, it was sort of just out of the city, it wasn't Mount Lawley, which had a lot more fancy houses there, a lot of old Italian families and Vietnamese families and...Yeah, a really nice street but ours was a sort of a federation house that had been very Italianised so when we moved in there it was all black sand and cactuses and my dad slowly kind of brought it back to the sort of federation style which is now I guess quite popular. So the street's a lot fancier now than it used be. But I kind of liked it when it was a little bit higgledy piggledy and yeah. But the house now is, the front all looks the same but, yeah, I think the back is much different. The whole time I was growing up, you know, I think my dad didn't actually finish the renovation so we had sort of floor to ceiling crazy tiles in our toilet and in our kitchen - just massive to fit like a whole Italian family, it was all tiled and yeah, so that's ...none of that is there anymore, it's quite posh inside now, I think my dad went back once to visit but yeah sometime I drive passed. The street seems so much smaller and shorter than it used to be - when you would ride your bike down the hill there, it seemed like such a long street but it's tiny now.

**KYN:** Why did your parents move to North Perth?

**Briony Stewart:** I don't really know, I think, I think it was affordable in the 80's and they wanted to be close to the city and I think they felt that it had a nice family vibe and yeah, I'm not really sure, I mean neither of them grew up there, neither of them were born in Australia. But yeah, I think there was something about the area that they felt was nice, I

think my dad felt that it was sort of an up and coming area and - but he could still buy a house relatively cheaply and yeah, so that's where we moved.

**KYN:** Cool, so where are your parents from?

**[3.22] Briony Stewart:** Well, my mum's from Scotland, moved here as a teenager and my dad, he was actually born in Japan, he's half Japanese but he grew up in Bunbury, so he is more of a country boy really. Both of them really only sort of came to Perth as teenagers for university and that's where they met.

**KYN:** Awesome. So do you have any brothers or sisters yourself?

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah, I have a sister and we were sort of one of those crazy families after my parent separated, we've got a half-brother, I've got three step brothers and at one point I had six grandmothers. But luckily, in amongst that craziness we all really love each other and it's actually been a really happy life with our ever growing rambling family.

**KYN:** Awesome, so did you know how old you were when you moved to North Perth?

**Briony Stewart:** I was about three almost four I think.

**KYN:** Have you got memories of moving day?

**Briony Stewart:** I do actually, not a lot but mostly just being in the empty house and, you know, I'd run into one room and say "This is gonna be my room" and my little sister would run after me and say "This is gonna be my room" and I just got so cross at her for copying me. She was always trying to copy me and follow me and I just ...I hated it and I thought I was going to get my own room but I didn't, we had to share.

**KYN:** Nice, so ...and you said at the time, the area was quite Italianate and Vietnamese?

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah.

**KYN:** Were there lots of Australian people there as well or were you kind of/ you know, a minority?

**Briony Stewart:** /Oh yeah. No, I think it was just really, really mixed, it was just a really mixed community, just really all kinds. You had a lot of ...you know, you still had wealthy people that sort of sprawled out of Mount Lawley and things and yeah, you know, it was quite a middle class working sort of area but with people from all backgrounds I'd say and, you know, and I quite liked that, you know, it was reflected in the school, the primary school. And you know, even the shops, like, I was quite sad to go past Di Chiera's the other day on Fitzgerald Street, it's closed down but, you know, it was sort of the North Perth's version of the Re: Store I guess and yeah, we had sort of a Greek veggie shop and my dad generally liked to kind of shop independent if possible so yeah. And you know, our next door neighbours were an elderly Italian couple and we were always playing with all their grand kids, they had so many grandkids that were always coming over and eating piles of pasta and they'd make us call them like "Nona" and "Nonno" and stuff, and yeah, it was nice.

**KYN:** Did your parents give a strong message of "Everyone's equal and you should spend lots of time with lots of different cultures" or was it implied or?

**Briony Stewart:** Not really, it was just sort of in there in the background. Yeah, no, it wasn't, multi-culturalism I don't think was something that was really being pushed at all by my parents but certainly I think in the primary school and I think it was a big sort of thing in the sort of 80's and early 90's, was the idea of inclusiveness and sort of celebrating all of Australia, sort of started to become more prominent. Sometimes I feel like it's less now but

yeah, it wasn't ever a message, it was just there in the background, it was just part of the area that I grew up in.

**KYN:** Okay, cool. So tell me more about that main strip in North Perth, like what was it like when you were there? You don't have to remember every shop or anything, but what kinds of amenities were there? Who used to go there? When did you use it? Etc. etc.

**[6.57] Briony Stewart:** All the time, we'd walk down there, it actually looks pretty similar; the Rosemount pub, it's had so many incarnations over the years but certainly when I was a kid it was a bit more of a family pub and my parents would meet friends there and they had sort of a beer garden at the back, and you know, we'd be allowed to have our one soft drink and packet of Samboys chips or something. And sometimes there would be a band and my sister and I would ask when they had their break if we could use their microphones and sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." I don't know where confidence came from because it would have been really embarrassing for my parents I think. Yeah but you know all the little shops and things that they had along there pretty similar, there was a really cute little toy store that was there for a long time but a lot of the shops are still there and it still has that sort of little feeling. There were less cafés and restaurants that I remember but yeah.

**KYN:** Awesome. So primary school, North Perth Primary School?

**Briony Stewart:** Mmhmm.

**KYN:** And what percentage would you say of your class were, like, of a similar-ish background to you versus other backgrounds?

**Briony Stewart:** I mean I'd say it was, at least in my class, I don't know, I didn't really keep monitor on where everybody was from. Maybe almost 50-50, but you know, a lot of the kids, and I felt this growing up certainly in and around where I grew up, I mean I think I have two friends that had both parents that were actually born in Australia ...I mean a lot of them, you know, their parents were from the UK or whatever, but yeah, you know, you have kids with the Macedonian background or a Greek background or ...yeah, everywhere. Actually the school song, which I doubt they sing anymore actually had, it actually started off "There is a school called North Perth, we come from every nation, Italy, Greece and Vietnam too, Macedonia, Holland, Laos and Thailand marching together as friends through and through." That was, like, literally the start of the song, we'd have to sing all of that to sing the school song. I don't think they sing that anymore.

**KYN:** That's amazing.

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah.

**KYN:** So, what, like, Briony the Student, what were you like?

**Briony Stewart:** I was very confident and outgoing as a primary school student. North Perth Primary was a small school, I think there was maybe 250 kids there when I was there. So there was sort of one class of every group and more than half of my primary school classes there from pre-primary to year 7 so, you know, you felt very comfortable and you knew your school community really well. So I was pretty outgoing, confident, but quite a bright kid, but actually our class was very bright, about half the kids were doing PEAC which was like the Primary Extension and Challenge sort of thing for bright kids so something I learnt later by the time I got to high school was that it's not actually cool to be smart. But in my primary school it was, we were all pretty nerdy but we liked that, yeah.

**KYN:** Awesome, so did the whole story telling and drawing aspect of who you are come out in primary school? Or was that a bit later?

**[10.25] Briony Stewart:** Yeah, it was always there, I mean I had a lot of interest, my mum was a graphic designer, my dad was a scientist and I was really interested in the natural world and science and drawing and recording, you know, plants and insects especially. I was really obsessed with insects. But yeah, I was always drawing and writing and I loved books, I love stories and they had a really fantastic library at the school. It was upstairs; they had this big sort of loft space and yeah I read a lot. Yeah, and then storytelling was definitely always there. There's actually a playground at the school that's actually officially now got a plaque and it's called The Secret Playground. And there's a teacher there that can corroborate this, but it was actually named by my class and it was named by my best friend and I, more her than me I will admit, 'cos we ...the pre-primary were separate from the school and then to come to year one you'd have to do a tour of the school and we went to this playground and it's sort of at the back of the school kind of really out of sight of the teachers which was always brilliant. And when we saw it, it was empty and so we were like "This is a secret playground" and we always ...it just was called the secret playground by our class and a lot of us had younger siblings, and they just referred to it as that and because all the kids in the school started referring to it as a secret playground, the teachers referred to it as that and it just sort of stuck. So that's the name of the playground now. But yeah, my best friend and I were really into telling stories and making up stories about the school and names of various parts of the school and, you know, "The principal that was buried under the steps at the front" and you know, things like that. Yeah we loved going around and making up stories.

**KYN:** Did you ever write them down?

**Briony Stewart:** Not a lot of those ones. That was more of an oral story telling sort of thing at lunch time to see who you could scare or what mystery you could kind of create or rumour about the school that you could sort of create. But yeah my friend and I, my best friend Gemma, who is still my friend today, yeah, we made up lots of stories that we did write down. Most of them were about us of course, we were the main characters. And we also had this game for years, it went from year one to year three, almost every launch time that we played called Fairy Land, in the Secret Garden of course. And our whole class played it and some of the other year groups got involved as well and there was this whole sort of hierarchy, people had jobs, there were like soldiers, and there were princesses and there were ...one girl always wanted to be the castle horse for some reason. Yeah so it was a really imaginative play time, an imaginative school and lots of kids were just really into stories and yeah. It really ...my whole childhood in North Perth and at that school really, really stuck with me for a long time and it's something I've since talked about with lots of other children's authors and illustrators is that something we all have in common is this really kind of vivid, almost sensual sometimes, memory of our childhoods and really small aspects, you know, certain games or certain days or things like that, that we can recall. And I always thought for a long time that everybody had that but I was lecturing at Curtin recently and I asked the students to, you know, write about a fight you had with a brother or a sister or things like that, and I was so surprised at how many of them had forgotten what it was like to be a child. But yeah, I really, really, probably remember that time of my life better than any other.

**KYN:** So does, to what extent has all of your childhood experiences penetrated the work that you do now?

**Briony Stewart:** Just in every way, you know, I think to be able to go back to any experience that you had as a child influences the way you write about children and the characters that you create and certainly all of the stories that I've written have all been in some way nostalgic and remembering certain aspects of my life. Even if it's just ideas that I

had as a kid, to get to actually flesh them out and make them become more, and to actually re-ponder them as an adult and kind of add a complexity to them, yeah I really love that.

**KYN:** And what - do you think that your experiences of being actually in North Perth have penetrated ...like in other words if you had grown up somewhere else but you were still you and your friends were still your friends, but you were in a different location, do you think that would have changed the way that you do things now?

**[15.33] Briony Stewart:** It's really hard to say. But you know, I think the fact that it was, for me, a really happy childhood, a very safe community, you know, I could ride my bike to my friend's house, ride to the school, the school was ...yeah, it had a very interesting mix of teachers and students. There were actually a lot of gay teachers at the school that were openly gay and I think ...it always had a kind of a creative vibe to it and I think it had that balance of people that made it...yeah, I guess it wasn't any kind of "This is what you need to be" or "This is how you need to be" and so it always felt like you could be anything or anyone. And, you know, I didn't know when I was a kid that I wanted to be a writer or an illustrator, I had no idea what I wanted to be, but I certainly felt this energy of the possibility of being anything or doing anything. And I think you need that as a writer 'cos you can't sort of grow an imagination if you don't feel like anything might be possible.

**KYN:** Okay, so two more questions about your childhood that I can think of right now. The first is, where did you, like, where was your favourite haunt when you weren't at school?

**Briony Stewart:** Possibly back at the school. Often we'd go back after school or on the weekends and hangout on the oval there or around the school. Or my friend's house, she was just right next to the school, or the North Perth plaza, of course, you know that's where you go, you buy your lollies and chips and things like that. Beatty Park was another one, it was sort of like a place you'd go, obviously for a swim but you'd be sure to probably bump into some other kids that you knew there, that you could hang out with or gossip about or something. They were probably the key places I'd say that I remember - and Hyde Park a little bit as well was a bit like that.

**KYN:** And this is before teenage hood or is this kind of all the way through to uni?

**Briony Stewart:** No, we left when I was 15 so, I kind of really consider it, pretty much my childhood was in North Perth, and then I went to high school in Subiaco at Perth Modern. But yeah my family moved to Fremantle when I was 15 so I'd have to catch the train and commute back to Subi for school.

**KYN:** Okay, So, and my other question is, if you've got so many vivid memories from your childhood can you give me a few? Like what's the funniest one, what's your favourite one? Like what's the strongest one that always is the first thing that comes to your mind?

**Briony Stewart:** Honestly, there is too many. There was this one time when our class, I don't know why, we decided that we had to explore underneath the school because there was this ramp and you could see the, you know, with a lot of federation buildings there is like an underneath to the school. And I don't know whether we decided they was treasure or just ...there was going to be something under there worth investigating. So we had this really elaborate plan, everyone would bring a certain item early and we'd all get to school really early so we had backpacks and ropes and torches and walkie-talkies. And two kids who volunteered to be the explorers, mostly for the glory and mostly because they always got in trouble anyway so it wouldn't matter if they did, and so they sort of tied themselves together. And it was like this real operation and you know, we had coordinators and we sent them under the school and someone had this walkie-talkie. But of course, you know, as

things do, they go wrong. And they went under the school, one of them got scared and untied himself to go back but it was too dark and the walkie-talkie stopped working and the bell rang and we all had to go to class and these two boys, who were underneath the school and the teacher said, you know, "Where is Mario, where is Tony". Nobody said anything and then you hear this "Mario, Tony" and she just ...the look on her face she was just like, she knew that we all knew, she knew that we all knew. So yeah eventually she said "Who is involved in this?" and everyone stood up and there was always one kid, the teacher's pet, who was reluctant, it was like "You were involved", so he stood up too. And yeah, we all had to go out and try and get them back from under the school. And they were fine and then they had stories of course of seeing like radioactive spiders and stuff like that they milked for days afterwards. But yeah we always had little plots and plans and things like that, that happened, that were quite fun.

**KYN:** That's really cool, I feel jealous. Okay, cool, so what was your parents' response to, like, your really vivid imagination and like the fact that you were so into creating things?

**[20.44] Briony Stewart:** I think they just let me run with it. My dad said ...and this is a story he told at my wedding, I actually didn't remember it, but when I was four at the house on Marmion Street, he was doing some work in the garden and I was sort of alongside him with a little spade. And I dug up this thing and I said "Oh, Dad!!! I found a dinosaur bone". And he knew it was just some buried old like T-bone or chops or some kind of rubbish that somebody had buried in the garden and he was like "Oh yeah". And apparently I spent like hours just digging up more little bones and trying to actually lay them out to piece together and imagine what this "dinosaur" was like. I found this miniature dinosaur and then I start drawing pictures of what it must have been like. And yeah they just let me run with that, I think, I was quite happy to entertain myself with things like that and they found it quite novel I guess.

**KYN:** And did ...like moving on say 15 years or whatever, did their enthusiasm continue at the same level when you were like "Actually this is going to be my profession now"?

**Briony Stewart:** Interesting you said that 'cos, no. So yeah by the time I was in high school, I was quite a high achiever, I was sort of an A student and obviously art and writing were really big for me and I also was on a music scholarship to the school so I was doing music but I really did love science and I did well in science and had expressed an interest in maybe doing medicine or something science related after school. But I did always say or maybe an artist, but I think they didn't think I would really choose that 'cos they thought "You'll pick a serious career". And I guess a lot of kind of middle class sort of families, you know, they want a child that has a university education but that's something they can fall back on, you know, if I was going to do arts at least "Please do a Dip Ed, it's a safety net". Yeah my dad was not ...he was not convinced and not too happy when at 16 I really decided that I wanted to pursue writing as a career and we had a bit of a ...it was a bit of a tense moment but he accepted it. And yeah, luckily university went really well and I was quite lucky that sort of the last assignment that I did at university actually became my first book quite quickly after and so I think he breathed a sigh of relief. He was like "Okay, alright, she's doing her own thing, I have to just let her do that and it will be okay".

**KYN:** So, you kind of proved their disturbance wrong quite quickly.

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah, my mum wasn't like that, she was always ...I guess being an artistic person herself she was always kind of happy for me to go in that direction, whatever made me happy I guess she didn't ever have a sort of mindset on what it was that I would do. And I was always a very determined kind of person and quite personally competitive, so I think she didn't worry so much as my dad.

**KYN:** Okay, so quickly let's just touch on Perth Modern, like, what ...if you could say that there was one thing that they wanted to be known as, that Perth Modern wanted to be known as "The school that...": what is that, how do you finish that sentence?

**[24.29] Briony Stewart:** Turns out bright successful students I guess. It's one of the oldest public schools in the state, interestingly the timing from sort of the ...when North Perth primary was built and Perth Modern sort of corresponds; they needed a high school in the area and a public high school in the area and back ...you know it's a very historical school we've heard Bob Hawke went there, Kim Beesley, and so it's had a lot of history and it used to be I guess a little bit more elitist in that it was a scholarship-only school and then it wasn't, then it was sort of just a regular "in the catchment area" public school but with a couple of specialist programs and now, it's gone back to being academic selection only. And I think probably every phase of the school has changed the school community somewhat ... but yeah, it's always, it's always had a proud history of having students that go on to do, you know, interesting things in the public life and they are very proud of that and it's something that I think the school's always wanted to continue.

**KYN:** And what phase was it in when you went there? Was it scholarships only or?

**Briony Stewart:** No, so, yeah, it was, again, kind of like North Perth Primary, it was a very mixed school. It had a very amazing music program that brought in kids from all over the Perth area to do the music scholarship program. It also had, of course, to let in kids just in the general catchment area as well and it also had an intensive language centre, so there were a lot of refugee kids who were learning English that were then introduced into the main stream school once their English was good enough. And so yeah, it did create a very, very diverse kind of structure to the school.

**KYN:** Did you find that people who already spoke English as a first language, or very well, were very welcoming of people who had only just learned English, or was it more like "Go at it yourself"?

**Briony Stewart:** Yes and no, I mean am sure there were tensions between different groups. But it also just depended on the kids for whom English was a second language. You know, some of them, I think felt more comfortable to be with kids that spoke their primary language, but then there were lots of kids that integrated really well. Our Head Boy was one of them. He came through the ILC and yeah, he spoke fantastic English and he was a really bright guy. And yeah, he became our Head Boy in our year, he was very popular. So yeah I think it just ...I mean high school, I think it's a terrible time for all teenagers. It's just such a weird, such a weird time and so you're always going to get kids that need to just stay to themselves in a small kind of close group, and then you have your popular kids that just need the popularity, that need to know everybody. So yeah, I think, yeah, you get all kinds of people and different levels of acceptance and in any school and certainly at that school.

**KYN:** And did you feel that being in the new environment and also being a bit older and having all the pressures of being a teenager etcetera, etcetera did that stifle your creativity or excel it or how did that work?

**Briony Stewart:** For a short period of time, I think going to high school was a really dramatic change for me because as I said in primary school I was quite outgoing and popular and could be myself and that was great. And then I got to high school and suddenly boys and girls don't hang out together, gotta separate, and, oh yeah, being a nerd that's not really cool. And yeah, it was just very different, I wasn't in my comfort zone but you know, that's a pretty universal experience I think. And so you take a few years to sort of find where you fit and decide who you want to be in that and to sort of become okay with "Okay, this is

where I'm at and that's fine" so you know, I think year 8 and 9 are those really difficult years and then after that everything starts to sort of come together. And, you know, I really loved my high school especially sort of year 10, 11 and 12. But yeah, the first couple of years were tricky and I was always doing a lot of art because that was sort of a sheltered little annex on its own. People didn't really bother art students, if you were an art nerd, you weren't like a total nerd because you were sort of creative, but you were just in this sort of weird bunch of people. And the other subjects, yeah, I just sort of kept my head down. And English, in particular, I just read a lot, I think, between 12 and 13, that year I don't think I've ever read as much as I have in my whole entire life as I did in that year. I guess when you are sort of not sure about making friends and yeah, you can retreat into a world. You've got all these worlds to escape into and characters you can look at and think "Oh, maybe I could be this person". So I read a lot and I think that was a really formative time for me as a writer even though I wasn't actually making as much, 'cos I guess you don't do quite as much art and craft and story writing as you do in primary school when you're in high school.

But yeah, it was something I think ended up really helping me by the time I was a little bit older, I think year 9 or 10, I really had a thirst to prove myself as a writer. I wasn't the top English student mostly because my spelling and grammar was really terrible and it took me a while to figure out what an essay was actually supposed to be. I liked writing stories but, you know, to actually stay on topic and write an essay, I struggled with that a bit so I had this thirst to prove that I could actually write. And I think it was that thirst to prove, actually, I know it was, that actually got me writing creatively on my own. And yeah, I started keeping journals sort of from year 9 or 10 especially because I had that train trip from Fremantle to Subiaco every day and, you know, back then we didn't have smart phones or anything and I wasn't cool enough to have even a mobile phone. So it was either read something or write something and I'd sort of gone past that "always reading" phase and I just decided I wanted to write.

And our English teacher sort of thrown out these journals and said "Keep a journal" in hopes that people would, but nobody did. But I did because I thought it's something to do, but also I thought "I can show him I can write, you know, I'm going to show him that I can write". And yeah, so I started writing and he started reading my journals and yeah, it was really nice over the years we'd develop this thing I'd sort of, at the end of each term, hand in my journal that I had just been writing in just outside of school hours and he'd tell me what he thought about things I that wrote in there. And I was very determined it wasn't a diary, I didn't want to keep a diary, so it was really mixed collection of poems or just observations on the train, or sometimes stories. Just anything really and yeah, so I think that period of not being creative in early high school really made a big creative push a bit later on. And I, yeah, I decided that I wasn't going to be popular in that kind of sense of going to parties and wearing the coolest thing or having the latest thing, but I was going to, I was going to be good at writing, and I was going to be good at art and if I was, you know, a nerd, so be it.

**KYN:** Nice. So would you say that this person who read your journals was like a major influence on you?

**[33.02] Briony Stewart:** Yeah, yeah, his name Mr. Williams and, yeah, we've kept in touch over the years. Yeah, he was, actually and Miss Jones, my English teacher for year 11 and 12, they were both friends and now both really, really supportive and my art teacher as well had some really good teachers that were really happy to sort of take the extra time to, I guess, mentor or coach you. I remember when Mr. Williams like ...when I first handed in my journal and then I was the only person who did at the end of term and after school he like ran across the car park to me and he said "I really like your writing and I think you should be a writer". And it was just a really big thing for me because I just thought "Wow", you know.

Yeah, I never really thought of actually being a writer before and then I think after that it sort of was a bit of a secret desire that I had. And yeah, Miss Jones, I remember I became a really big fan of Tim Winton and you know, I just remember one day, she'd just bought the latest book that he'd written, just, and gave it to me just 'cos she knew I was a fan.

So just little things like that, yeah, I had really great teachers and it were definitely a big influence and I think it was nice to be at a school where, you know, so much of the time the pressure is on the academic, especially if you are a bright kid and you can do well in maths and science and other things. I just felt there was enough freedom at the school where, you know, if you were a high achieving student they were just like "Whatever, I'm not going to pressure you to be a doctor or a lawyer, just, you're okay, we're going to go deal with these kids that really need some help over here".

**KYN:** That was going to be my next question, did you ...given you were an A student in general, how did your music and your science and your maths teachers respond to your fact that you choose to do quite a specific degree that's like nothing to do with them?

**[35.09] Briony Stewart:** There were all fine actually, I think they always kind of knew, I mean I remember my music teacher always went on about the front covers to, like, music assignments because I'd always illustrate, you know, the front cover to whatever the project was. And you know, my physics teachers would stop and, you know, they were always kind of in awe of art, of like the painting that I had done that was in the corridor or whatever. So I don't know, I think they liked it, there was never a sense of you must be this or you must be that, they would have been happy if I wanted to do science, they would have been happy if I wanted to do art and I think that was really lucky 'cos as I said my dad was a bit like "I don't know about this" and I think if the school had been that way and my parents, then I think I probably, I would have come to writing eventually, I'm sure I would have, but I think it would have been a much longer journey. I don't think I would have been a young writer or a young artist. I probably would have done some other degree first and found my way back there eventually. But yeah I think the school played a really big part in helping me to embrace that early, and actually go for what I decided was my dream, really.

**KYN:** Okay, so let's talk about uni. [Briony: Yeah] You did your creative writing at Curtin.

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah.

**KYN:** Was there an illustration aspect to that as well?

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah, well it was a double degree so I was doing fine arts and creative writing at the same time.

**KYN:** [side comments] My question is it sounds like you already had your start and you were already writing a lot and drawing a lot so did you find that the degree actually taught you stuff? Like, I know you have this amazing opportunity at the end but was it like "Wow, without those three years I couldn't be where I am now"?

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah, I definitely think it was helpful, for a lot of reasons. I actually ...I was actually written to by Professor Brian Dibble, who is someone I was fairly close to while I was at uni. He had read ...I had a couple of sonnets, like, published in the West Australian newspaper, there was like a teen competition for writing and so he'd actually written to me and said "I think you should come and do creative writing at Curtin". And there were few other things that influenced that but I thought "Yep that's what I'm going to do". And the reason why I decided to do art and writing at university was because I wanted first of all to see how I kind of compared to other people, who had chosen to do that as their degree as well. It's one thing to be the best at your subject in your school, but you want to kind of see

of all the people in the state, who were kind of doing that course, how do you compare. And I also decided that I needed the time and space to actually figure out what kind of writer or artist I could be. I mean you said I had a style but I didn't really, as a teenager I wrote all kind of things and I wasn't sure if I wanted to be an artistic director or a theatre director, if I wanted to write plays, if I wanted to write poetry, if I wanted to paint things that go in galleries. I really had no idea how it would work or what that career would look like. But you know I knew that as a student, and I very much wasn't the kind of 17 year old that was ready to go out into the world and have a gap year or anything, I needed the structure of sort of school so I knew I had to go to university. But yeah, you know, if I had done science for example or medicine, I knew that I would get so invested in that, because I, you know, I hate failure, I would just ...I'd hate to, like, fail the unit or whatever, I wouldn't leave enough time to write or do art in my own time. So I knew that if I did that as a degree, it would force me to spend time on my writing and force me to spend time making art. And I actually truly think that's the value of those degrees. I mean, I knew even then that an arts degree is just a bit of paper, it's not a guaranteed job, it's not a certain particular profession. But it's what you'd do with that time that you're at university, the portfolio you build, the work that you make that might lead somewhere. So I definitely saw it as a chance to figure out what kind of artist or writer I'd like to be, see how good I could get, what people, who were actual published writers, who were lecturing and teaching actually thought of what I was doing, and pretty much just figure out if it was something I could do or not. 'Cos I always figured if I sucked, if it was not good, I would just, I would just pick a different subject and I would just start again and do some other uni course. So yeah, I did get a lot out of the time there, I think, you know you've got great facilities, you've got lots of great mentors if you used the time, and I did, I found it quite useful.

**KYN:** So your last assignment where you ended up writing a children's book about the dragon. Can you talk me through how you ended up writing it, and what the process was like? Did you know from the outset that that was going to be the subject matter and the hero was going to be the hero, etcetera, etcetera, or, like, how did it work?

**[41.04] Briony Stewart:** Well, one of the final units that I was doing in creative writing, 'cos you have to do a bit of everything, was a unit called Writing for Children. And, you know, it really appealed to me because I thought this would be really fun, I like kids' stories and to be honest, you know, my late teens, early 20s I still really felt like a kid. I don't think I ever wanted to grow up and I don't think I ever really properly did, and you know I was still watching cartoons in my pyjamas in the morning 'cos of course arts courses usually start after lunch time so you know, I just felt like a big kid anyway. And you know, I had started to think, you know, I actually really liked illustrating, I was doing a lot of fine art stuff, this kind of conceptual kind of pieces and sculptures and things, but really what I most enjoyed was just doodling in the margins of my lecture notes. And so I thought "Great, you know, I'm going to do writing for children, and, you know, I'm going to just do some illustrations for this story that I'm doing anyway, 'cos that'll really impress my tutor."

So the story itself ...really I don't know sometimes you just get an introduction that just comes to you, and it didn't just come out of nowhere. I had probably just before, doing that travel to China with my boyfriend, now husband, and it was sort of my first international trip, sort of by myself and seeing Asia. It was just ...it was really exciting and I really got into all the dragons and things that they had in the temples there. And because my dad was half Japanese, my grandmother was Japanese, but she died when I was six so I never really got to know her. It kind of just opened up this little thing, this little interest that I had in knowing more about Japan and what I did know about it, what I did like about it. And, yeah, combined with that I also have a much younger brother, he is 12 years younger than me, so he was 9 and I was 21. And so ...yeah this story sort of just started happening that was set in Japan,

with a character called Kumiko who is named after my grandmother, and it had dragons in it mostly because dragons could be a bit menacing and giant and scary and they had sharp claws and sharp teeth to entertain my brother 'cos I thought if he liked it then it might be alright. So I guess the story just sort of started to come together with those things in mind.

When I read the first couple of chapters to my brother he feel asleep and he ...I don't know if he really liked them very much. But yeah, I finished the story and I took it in to my tutor anyway and he thought it was good. And, yeah, it was when I finished uni, my first year out I didn't really have any plans about approaching publishers or anything I thought "I'm just going to travel now", 'cos I was ready to see the world by then. So I was like working in an ice cream shop in Fremantle and saving all my money for this round the world trip I was going to do at the end of the year.

And I thought "Okay, I need money, I need money" and so I went on the Writing WA website and they had this competition for stories for children. I thought "I've got this story for children that I wrote" and so I entered it into that competition. It was for a festival in Queensland. And it won, which was really exciting, I was like "Yes, money!" but I thought, you know, it would be really cool to go over and actually receive the award in person and find out more about what this festival is. And I didn't really know much about it or have many expectations but I took myself over there and it was amazing. 'Cos I got there and Marcus Zusak was talking, all these amazing writers and illustrators that I had read as a kid growing up and they are all talking to kids and it was just this is really fun vibe and I just realised "This is what I want to do, I do want to write for children, I want to illustrate kids' books and this is really my scene as a writer because you don't have to be grown up, you can just continue to be a big kid and you don't have to pretend, this is what I want to do".

And really amazingly and I guess quite fortunately, while I was there, one of the judges came up to me and said "Look I really like this story and I'm actually a children's publisher and I'd really love to publish this". And so it was that kind of surreal kind of thing - coming together of all these things that you wanted, before you even sure you're ready for it. But yeah, it was really great and I will always be grateful to Leonie Tyle, who is the children's publisher of UKP, who I still work with today, for taking me on. And yeah, it took a while for me to catch up and figure out how to actually have a career as a children's author and illustrator, but yeah I got a really fortunate start and was able to kind of begin quite quickly.

**KYN:** And how do you have a career as a children's author and illustrator?

**[46.28] Briony Stewart:** Well, yeah, I guess once I finished that book, you know I was doing like the last scribbles of the illustrations while I was in Russia, I was on my round the world trip that I had planned on going on, I knew that I needed to learn more about what the industry was like so I got a DCA grant to do some things with the May Gibbs' Children's Literature Trust in Melbourne and I started learning about the Children's Book Council of Australia and meeting other writers and illustrators. And yeah, basically you have to keep writing books and illustrating and having a relationship with the publisher as I'd just started to develop was really great, because if they like your work then they are happy to look at other things. And yeah, so it all started happening, I decided to do a couple of sequels to the Kumiko books, and then some picture books. And you start to quickly learn that one of the things that you sort of end up having to do is a lot of speaking at festivals and workshops with kids, which I think is quite shocking to some writers, who generally like to be at home working. I mean, I certainly, even though I guess there is an outgoing aspect of my personality in terms of being a creative person, I didn't go into theatre, I didn't decide to do music 'cos I don't like being on stage and I don't like to be around for people to see what I'm making. You know, I prefer to, you know, make a book and have it on a shelf and I can run

away and someone can go discover it by themselves and maybe write to me in, you know, a letter. But I ...yeah I ...it was quite a surprise to me to then have to be on stage, entertaining hundreds of kids, talking to them about why you write, and how you write and getting them excited about stories and literature. So that was a bit of a learning curve but once you do that, you sort of ...yeah, it's a really fun job.

**KYN:** And your other two books, are they ...have they been, like, patronaged, or are they solely your idea, like, how has that worked?

**[49.00] Briony Stewart:** Yeah, so you just ...you have an idea, you write a story and you send it to your publisher, and if they like it they will take it to their, sort of, publishing meeting that they have. And if they decide to contract it then great, you get an advance and then you can talk about illustrating it. Illustrations always come second. So yeah, it's never a given. No publisher, even one who loves you and knows you forever, they aren't guaranteed to take whatever you've worked on. So it's always a little bit of a leap of faith when you create a new thing, because it's time that you don't know if you are actually going to end up getting paid for or not. But you know, you start to trust eventually that if you keep working and you keep working on numerous ideas, hopefully one of them will, sort of, stick and become something and grow in to something so, yeah.

**KYN:** Have you ever started a project thinking "Oh this is going to be a book" and then it's turned out to be an illustration or vice versa?

**Briony Stewart:** Actually once, and there is a book that I'm working on at the moment, probably maybe my most ambitious as a writer, 'cos it's a junior fiction novel, sort of Harry Potter length novel, and that actually started out as illustrations. Generally I don't work that way, usually I think the story comes first, whether I choose to illustrate it or write it, that comes later, but usually the narrative comes first. But yeah, I started doing these little drawings and thinking about this character and the more I drew, the more I thought about it and the bigger the story became until I realised "This is a novel and none of these pictures are going to make it into this book". But yeah, it actually did start that way but generally it doesn't start that way for me.

**KYN:** Awesome, that's really cool. [Side comments.] Tell me, what's been your experience with the WA writing fraternity as a whole or, like, you know, the authors' circuit around.

**Briony Stewart:** I've had really positive experiences. I think there is a sort of camaraderie when you are an artist in Perth, where other artists - I don't know if it's just because it's always tough to get things up and going historically, or whether it's because were the most isolated city in the world, but it's just not super competitive. It's a lot more inclusive. And people genuinely, like, want to help you, you know. I've reached out as a teenager to Tim Winton and he wrote back to me with heaps of advice. I sent an email out to Shaun Tan as a uni student and he wrote back with lots of advice. And, sort of, the people who were trail blazers in WA and the things that you're doing I feel like they have time for you because they feel like "I know you, I've been there".

And yeah, certainly I think that, you know, I've met some amazing writers and illustrators all around the world, some of the most famous ones, but the ones I respect and love and get the most from are, you know, WA locals or at least Australian locals. You know, we have such a wonderful children's book industry in Australia. We really do, sort of internationally have amazing quality of writing and amazing books being produced for kids. And you know, I feel like I was kind of the recipient of that. In the 90s, in children's literature in Australia, there was actually a golden age and the amount of books that started to be produced by Australians, for Australian kids was really quite phenomenal. And, you know, I feel like that

really influenced me. I mostly read books by Australians, you know, John Marsden, Paul Jennings and, you know, Terry Denton's illustrations. You know, I grew up on that and it's just nice that those people are all so happy to pass down the knowledge and sort of share the industry with whatever's sort of up and coming.

**KYN:** Awesome, that's really cool. So, like, describe a day ...like I know you have a family ... but family aside, how does it work? How do you choose, like, where to start your day, or where the pressures lie and that kind of thing?

**[53.36] Briony Stewart:** That's really hard, I think I'm still figuring that out, I think your life as a writer or an illustrator, it'd be nice to say "At 9am I get up and do this". And some writers kind of get into a bit of ritual and a routine but I think when you're a young writer and illustrator, your routine really ebbs and flows with life. You know, in the time that I've been writing, I've moved out of home, I've travelled the world, I've gotten married, I've had a baby, and all of those things, I guess, really affect how you run your days. And you are always doing different projects and so everything varies from project to project. So I don't really have a typical day, but I try to have my creative days and I try to make sure that I have creative time set outside, whether it's for a particular project or more of a struggle is when it's not for a particular project but you know you need to develop something new, interspersed with days where you have to do your admin, 'cos of course, you're an artist but you have to wear a lot of hats, because you're also a small business and you have to do your own accounts and you have to manage everything, you have to be your own manager.

And I've only finally just got an agent, which has been quite good but, yeah, so you have to keep on top of the emails and then there's always little interesting things that come up; people say "Hey would you like to be involved in this or that". And so it's a constant balance and you always, inevitably, will have weeks or months where you've taken on way too much and really all you're trying to do is get back to the nothing time where you can then just sit at your desk and write again or draw again. So yeah, it really changes week by week and month by month. And I don't really know how it works yet in terms of actually getting things done. I don't even know how I ever finish anything, but somehow it happens. And yeah, so I think it's just always going to be a constant figuring out of what your practice is and how to be a writer and illustrator. And I think that's what I really love about this job, is that there is no limit to where it can take you, how good you can be, you know, you can change your style or you can start working with new materials, you can start writing in a different genre. So there is always new challenges and kind of the fact that you can never actually master it or be on top of it, I don't know why because I'm a perfectionist and I would love to have some kind of stability, but I think searching for that is something that drives me in there, I guess I like the uncertainty and I like the possibility.

**KYN:** So you said before that you've got loads of projects on and sometimes that you feel like you need to create your own project. Is this because often people are approaching you with other projects and you're doing them because you are being contracted to do them but then you've got to drive to, like, do your own thing?

**Briony Stewart:** Yeah, it's a bit of a balance, I mean, the projects or things are always different. Sometimes it's a great money opportunity, sometimes it's a really great opportunity to contribute or give back, you know, perhaps to fly out to some really remote regional community to try and gain, you know, the interest of kids in books and reading and literature. Sometimes it's just something that's not in your general sphere of what you do, and that kind of seems interesting and you think, "Oh, that might push me to do something slightly different". So yeah, so I guess there is all different opportunities, but at the end of

the day, obviously as a creative, you want to be making your work for yourself as well, so you have to find that time to do that.

**KYN:** Okay, just a few more questions and we're going to be done. Like, how does your imagination manifest itself now, like, you've got your family and you are obviously super busy with your career but ...so, yeah, like where are you when you find yourself thinking about things, how do you get your child involved, are they involved, you know, etcetera, etcetera?

**[58.07] Briony Stewart:** I don't know, I think I can't really turn my imagination off, which sometimes is a curse when you're trying to go to sleep and you're one of these people that just keeps thinking things. But yeah, imagination, it just, it comes at all sorts of random times. Sometimes it doesn't come when you want it to come, you're sitting and you've made the time to do the work and just everything that comes out that you write is just boring rubbish and then when you have like the least amount of time, you have this brilliant idea and all you can do is try and just, like, scribble something down - hopefully you'll remember it for later on. But yeah I think, you know, I kind of got into the practice of ...I mean I guess I always liked using my imagination and trying to make things I was doing entertaining or try and ponder things further but, you know, I started writing on the train, on the way to school so I guess I'm good at just ...in moments like that where you'd otherwise just be sitting, playing Candy Crush Saga, which I have been known to do sometimes, you know, instead to actually just think about something, you know, or you heard somebody say this thing the other day and you think "You know that could be a really great title to a story, I wonder what the story would be about". Yeah, I don't know, I don't know how to explain how imagination works or where it comes from, it just sort of does, I guess.

And it's been interesting having a baby, this is the first time in my, you know, almost 10 years of working as a children's author and illustrator where I've actually been a parent and I've actually had a child in my life so it's not just me remembering being a child or hanging out with kids, I am responsible for a child. And it's actually been really great. I mean people always ask me, you know, "Are you just drawing her all the time, to get these characters" and so I'm like "I don't have time to draw my baby, when I'm with my baby!" you're like, "You've got your hands full". But, you know, I think all of it enriches your life experience of childhood and I know that, you know, in another 10 years' time, when she's at school, when she's big and I finally have more time, I'll probably be writing about a small child that was just like her, you know. And so you get all these sort of visual memories and memories of moments that I guess you build up inside and I think that's where stories often come from. Often little ideas that you've been harbouring for ...since you were six years old or whenever, suddenly they kind of clash with something else and then they become something meaningful and something more and are a really great idea that you can pursue.

So yeah, I think you can't really make imagination happen but you can collect, I think, you have this like inner suitcase. And if you just keep collecting things, keep collecting things eventually they rumble around in there until they start to just, you know, clash together and things start to happen and then you open it and like "Oh what is this thing?" and take it out and it's something that could be something amazing. Or maybe not, maybe it's rubbish and you have to throw it out.

**KYN:** Awesome. So what is the first sentence in a book about you?

**[1.01.38] Briony Stewart:** That's really hard 'cos I don't think I'd write a book about me, so somebody else would have written it. First sentence in a book about me. I don't know, I don't know. I really don't know, it's too hard.

**KYN:** Is there anything you want to say before we turn this off?

**Briony Stewart:** Nope.

[Short break, then here follows Briony showing us some relevant items from her childhood, as described below.]

**Briony Stewart:** If you ever wanted to look at them, these are all the journals that I kept in high school. While I was writing on the train, I kept all these journals. And then by the time I was sort of in later high school, my notebooks for these subjects like human biology and physics and lit, you know, would be, you know, physics and maths and calculations on one side but then the other side they just became notebooks for writing, more writing. So yeah, I kept them all. And actually, sometimes I think I was a better writer in a sense when I was 16. Well, because I read these things and they are just so truthful and so honest. Obviously, it's only one voice and it's my voice and they were not really that many characters, but yeah when I write about some things I just think, "I'm just going to have to lift this whole thing when I create this teenage character" because I don't think I could write it better now than when I was that age.

This is my Fisher Price cassette tape player that I got when I was about four. And, yeah, it was like the most amazing thing ever because, you know, your parents get tired of reading the same stories to you night after night but the tape player never, ever got tired. They never rushed, they always had some amazing narrator telling the story that you loved and you could listen to it over and over again, all night if you wanted to. So yeah, it got a really good work out. And actually sometimes my sister and I would like record our own stories and songs and then I would put this out at the front of our house on Marmion Street and just press play and we'd, like, hide and watch if anyone passed by and if they'd stop and listen. I don't know weird stuff that kids do.

**KYN:** Did any one stop and listen?

**Briony Stewart:** Actually, yeah once, it was a bit scary, there was this ...she must have been a teenager but, you know, when you're seven, they seemed like adults. And we used to call her the Ghost Lady. She was just a goth really but I didn't know what a goth was then. She had this white makeup and dressed all like a witch and the ghost lady will always walk past our house to the bus and then back [whisper] "Oh, it's the Ghost Lady, it's the Ghost Lady!" And one time we were playing I don't know, some song out of the thing and we were also hiding in the bushes and she stopped and she just was, like, standing there listening for a while and then she like put a coin down like as though we were busking or something, oh it freaked us out so much. And she walked off and we were like "Oh". She was just being really nice but it was just really scary.

Yeah, and here is just a collection of things like, these are the year 7 assignments I used to always go really over the top with, decorating the front covers. One of my earliest drawings when I was two. But yeah I keep a lot of these things. This is - oh Commonwealth Dolerite - I must have been about seven or eight and I ...this is the kind of thing I'd just do at home, "Insect collecting and other things". This was not for school, I just decided to go out and, like, identify different names of bugs and draw, like, the different aspects of things; "How to make a worm farm", in case you want to know. I don't know what I thought this will be like some kind of handy guide for other kids how to identify ants or something like that. But yeah, learning about the world and nature and science went hand in hand with wanting to create and represent. And, you know, this drawing of these insects classified into different kinds, kind of gave way to drawings of fairies, I think I've got one actually, I saw in here, I hope so ...but you know I used to draw pictures of fairies, I think I've got one actually, here.

But yeah I used to draw pictures of fairies classified into type and habitat and write down the different things that they ate. Here we go, here's one, there is always a scientific kind of edge, so these are different styles of clothing for different fairies, there is a forest fairy, a moon fairy, a sun fairy, an underground fairy, apparently. And this is like a cross section of like different rooms for different fairies. I think this is a scene from Fairy Land, that game we used to play. Yeah so I'd kind of find interesting things about the natural world and then I'd want to make something more exciting about them, about the world.

**KYN:** That's awesome.

**[1.07.42] Briony Stewart:** Different fairies. Apparently, this was the bad fairy, his name was Jaqueline Firehead. I don't know why. And he had the head of a lion.

I've got these letters, this is one that I wrote to Tim Winton when I was about 16 and he replied. And it was just really exciting, he gave me all this advice but it was really the last bit that he wrote which was "No guts, no glory, eh" that really kind of made me think "Yeah, you know, if I grow up and I become a doctor or whatever, you know, I'll always go into a book shop or a gallery with this longing, wishing that I was doing that, but if I ever went into a hospital, I don't think I'd ever actually wish I was a doctor if I was an artist." And so I thought "Yeah, you've got to be brave, it seems like the scary choice but you've got to do it." And then more recently in 2014, I met up with him again because I was actually a judge for the same competition that I'd won back when I first met him. And it's sort of come full circle, and I was a writer and stuff, and so we had a chat and I gave him one of my books, and you know, he's just like a really nice guy. He didn't have to write back or take that time and he did, and so it's kind of a nice book ends, it's sort of the beginning and now as a established writer and just the fact that he's still being supportive and encouraging; I just think it's really nice.

**KYN:** Did he remember your first letter?

**Briony Stewart:** I don't think so, no. But I did mention it when I wrote to him. But yeah, it's just really nice. He said, well, amongst other things "I was very touched by your letter and heartened to know that my modest encouragements were some small help in stiffening your resolve all those years ago. The awards have been going (and he's talking about the Tim Winton awards at the Subiaco Library) have been going so long now, they are blur of names and faces and sometimes the figures that stick in memory are the pushy teachers and over ambitious parents. Sometimes I think the kids themselves sit a little buried in the process and I worry about that, so it's lovely to know your experience was a positive one and it's a little overwhelming to know you're part of the judges' panel all these years later." So yeah. [KYN: So nice.] It's just really nice.