**Madonna**: Pip Williams is a famous author. The Dictionary of Lost Words, for example, sold hundreds and hundreds of thousands of copies of books. She's dyslexic. In grade 11 or 12, she was not doing well in English. In fact, she was doing appallingly, she says to us in the book. And she was very quick verbally, but when it came to putting it on paper, she would fail. And this lovely teacher asked her the questions instead of made them write them down. All of a sudden Pip went from a low mark to a really high mark and she said to me you know it made her want to write. If that teacher hadn't done that she wouldn't be shining now. She wouldn't be a well-known popular author, and she said often we get a birthday card and we correct the grammar or we correct the capitals into smaller letters. Let's stop doing that and look at the creativity. look at what this young mind is trying to do and explain and create and that will actually lift them because she said that was the thing that almost got her to stop that constant correction rather than building the idea and I think a podcast like yours can really help people understand the importance of science and the importance of growing great minds not attacking them with the sledgehammer.

**Bianca**: Welcome to the Science Write Now podcast. Science Write Now is an online journal of creative writing inspired by science, featuring essays, fiction, nonfiction, poetry and artwork. We're excited to be launching our 11th edition Synergy this month. And if you're listening to this episode in future, be sure to follow our sub stack and socials for updates. I'm Bianca Milroy, an emerging science writer, editor and PhD student based in Mianjin, Brisbane. and I'd like to acknowledge the Yagura and Turrbal people as the custodians and pay my respects to elders past and present. Today on the podcast, I'm joined by Madonna King for our next episode in the Cognitive Conversations series, Out of the Box, Navigating Neurodivergence. Madonna's work as a journalist, author and speaker spans politics, business and social policy. She has chaired panels around Australia, written 12 books and advises corporations and governments on understanding teenage girls, the subject of her most recent books, Being Fourteen, Fathers and Daughters, and Ten-ager. Out of the Box, A One-Stop Guide to Navigating Neurodivergence is Madonna's most recent book, co-authored by teen educator and host of ABC's Parental as Anything, Rebecca Sparrow. Out of the Box is the only Australian book that brings together expert advice, lived experience, interviews, and up-to-date resources to help neurodivergent children thrive. Welcome, Madonna. It's a pleasure to have you on the podcast today.

**Madonna**: Thanks, Bianca.

**Bianca**: And first of all, I'd like to say congratulations to you and Rebecca on this book. It is a remarkable achievement and really just such a timely and compelling insight into what it's like. navigating neurodivergence from different perspectives. So, first of all, could you tell us a bit about what the response has been like so far and what conversations this has sparked?

**Madonna**: Of course, the response has been massive. In fact, it's in its third reprint in less than a month. And I think that's on the back of the need for a public discourse around neurodivergence. And I think the two areas where it's really popped up strongly, I expected it with parents, I expected it with teachers. But the two other areas I think are the public discourse where people are now openly wanting to talk about it. And one example of that is in the employment area. Because we know neurodivergent employees can save millions of dollars in one example we give in the book, $40 million in one year for one company. All of a sudden employers are thinking, hold on, I need to understand the difference between my workers and what adjustments could be made to make this a better workplace. And I am so excited about that development.

**Bianca**: Yeah, it's really, really exciting and quite an incredible reaction. I didn't know that about the reprint. So, a further, yeah, congratulations as well on that basis, that's huge. And you've been working with the University of Queensland Press through that process as well of publication and a book tour. Where have you taken the book? So, you've had your sort of Brisbane launch so far.

**Madonna**: That's pretty much what we've done in a world of social media. We've done; we're doing lots of podcasts like your own. We have spoken at two schools, had two launches. The first one had 400 people, but we've also done things from commercial television to breakfast radio to a massive response around Facebook. And I think that is a community predominantly of mums and often mums who are seeking assistance in this area. We've also had real interest from GPs and allied health workers on how they can actually be part of this conversation more.

**Bianca**: Fantastic to hear. So, the book is a one-stop guide covering preschool to early adulthood from classroom to workplace, yet it is compact and uses concise, accessible language. Could you tell us what incited those initial conversations? This is between Rebecca and yourself, about this book. What gaps in awareness were you aware of or did you identify through the process?

**Madonna**: None really that we're aware of other than we were both getting emails from parents. But Beck along the lines of my child doesn't seem to fit in or is not doing as well as I thought at school or maybe a bit different from siblings. As a journalist, I can't understand how we keep reviewing our education system and every review comes up with bad behaviour. It can't be that. It can't be bad behaviour for every review to signal that and for us to not move forward. So, I guess I was looking from the outside in. Beck, who has a neurodivergent child from the inside out, and we decided to sit down and work out, well, what do people know and what they don't know? And I think there are so many learnings. Let me just mention three and there's probably a hundred. But one is that so many other people are in the same boat. And this book, in a sense, gave parents and teachers permission to put their hand up and say, I need help. I need a guide. I need, I need, um, evidence, I guess. The second thing is around diagnosis, which breaks my heart because it can take three years for a diagnosis. It has to be accessible. It can be expensive. And if you're in country Queensland or country Victoria or God forbid country Western Australia, it can be really hard because you've got appointments that are hours away with waiting lists that can span in some areas three years and that just makes me think we've got to have a conversation around at the moment diagnosis principally there are exceptions but principally needs to be done by a paediatrician if a child is under 18 and a psychiatrist if they're over 18. We have to embrace GPs in this process. because they know our families, we go to them, they see changes in children, they know backgrounds. So diagnosis was one thing that broke my heart and I think we have to address. The other, just because I have 10 girls, was similarly heartbreaking in that a really common age for diagnosis, particularly of ADHD and autism, for a girl comes with the year after school. And that's because in a world of social media where we all are desperate to fit in, particularly our teenagers, we've learned that girls mimic, they camouflage, they mask and what that means is they learn to laugh when they're supposed to learn laugh. They learn to dress in what others are dressing. They mimic that of their classmates so that they fit in, so that they don't stand out and they have beautiful schools, beautiful family structures that kind of then protect them then the moment they move out often to a university college or out with a friend, their world implodes. Often they are diagnosed with depression or anxiety when in many, many, many cases, it may be ADHD and the right diagnosis can actually open up their world. And so that had a good and a bad thing. Now there's heaps of others around friendship, around driving, dating, but they were things that really stood out to me.

**Bianca**: That really shone through for me as well, that the first point you made about how time-consuming and complex the diagnostic process is currently and what needs to be done in that area, but then also this disparity between girls and boys being diagnosed. A number of middle-aged women who are now being diagnosed, and I want to cry saying this, including doctors, including a psychiatrist, including psychologists in this area. And they've felt as though they couldn't say that because they thought that would bring judgment. And I think if anything, this book has given people the permission to say, this is not a disorder, this is a difference. And in a community where we should value difference, a rising tide lifts all boats. So let's actually aim for that.

**Madonna**: Absolutely. And it's about shifting that language. Like in the book, there was a point where it just clicked for me, where it's going shifting away using terms I guess in that social model of disability which we'll talk about soon around shifting from something like diagnosis to explanation like just the power of that language shift was really resounding to me. So there was a survey as well that you did, a huge survey, how long did that take? Can you sort of give us a few, a bit of an insight to how that came together as a platform for the book? So we've been working on it nonstop. I reckon I've worked seven days a week for about a year. And what we did is we threw Beck's massive Facebook footprint, we sent a message out. And out of that, we came to 1200 neurodivergent families who then filled out a lengthy form. And then one question was, would you be happy to be interviewed by Madonna? So I then set about interviewing dozens and dozens and dozens. We then did the same with teachers and 600 teachers responded within about 24 hours about the number of neurodivergent kids they believe they have in their class. They're training the professional development, which is almost non-existent and what they need to lift everyone in their class. And so we spoke to neurodivergent families, carers, kids. teachers and then with all that information we sought the world's experts, many of them neurodivergent from scientists to psychiatrists, GPs, allied health workers, school principals and the like and said this is what we've found, help us. And that came together in the book. And while I did all the interviews, Beck continually said, where are the tips? Where are the tips? And she's such a clever, gorgeous human being. And she's so right because this is the thing, the ingredient I think this book brings that is so needed. What do you need to do? So even in picking a school, which we go through, is this is what you should look for. If you're advocating for your child to a school teacher, these are the steps you should do. And I think that has, I think it's actually an invaluable resource in this space as a result of that.

**Bianca**: I can certainly attest to that, it really is. And bringing those multiple perspectives in, the Q&A moments, the quotes throughout the book that are drawn in, just really make it such a robust resource that is accessible. And I found it so just easy to read. It's a testament to the work in that area that you and Rebecca have been doing and the time you've spent. So we started talking a little bit before around... things like who you've spoken to as part of the survey, talking about parents and teachers and different caregivers, bringing in first-hand accounts. There's been, as well as the difficulties and challenges in this area, what was highlighted to me in the book towards the end was this through line of why neurodiversity should be supported and embraced in society rather than seen as a disorder to fix or change. I wondered if you had any further comments on that. This is not a disorder. This can be a disability for many, but it is a difference. And I think the onus is on neurotypical parents to understand the value of difference, to teach their children to actually embrace others in their class who may be a different colour, a different religion, a different learning ability. Doesn't matter what the difference is, we are all different. And this is just one of those differences. But if your child is neurodivergent, if you are neurodivergent, I think there is so much that can be done to help in a world that is not fair. And we should all be fighting for it to be a level playing field. And that's what Bec and I are trying to do. But let's take ADHD. If you are diagnosed with ADHD and you accept medication, It only works if you're meant to have it. So all these people are saying, you know, everyone's ADHD now, that is just rubbish. We all remember someone in our class who was a little bit different and perhaps often tormented. Those who have had medication for ADHD find their world just different. So in a case in my own family, someone's GPA, grade point average, went from 58% to 94%. The impact parents see on a child's driving, their ability to focus, their willingness to actually like themselves because one girl said to me, she's 17, and she said, I always thought I was weird. I was a bit of a freak, but now I know who I'm supposed to be. That makes me really happy. If it is autism, then there is not a medication, but there are learning, ability to learn things that make life easier, whether it is about, let's take friendship in how to actually have those conversations, in dating, in driving. And it's no different from if our child, maybe let's say our child is really clever, or our child is from a non-English speaking background or our child is from the country and comes into boarding school. They're all different environments. So we sit down and we give them the tools to rise. This is absolutely no different. And I think the impact in classes where teachers make minor, minor adjustments, like just giving children a movement break for the whole class, it benefits the whole class. How do we actually advance the world of those who are neurodivergent? And mostly that science and that research is

being led by those with lived experience. And that is terrific. It's hard to do a science project now that doesn't have a neurodivergent important team member. And I think we all actually learn and grow through that. And that's another really good thing, I think that we're seeing change in the community and it's being led in the science area.

**Bianca**: Yeah its wonderful, really wonderful. So just taking a step back for a moment, I wanted to, I guess for any listeners of the podcast who may not be as aware of language and terminology, I guess autism and ADHD, understanding neurodivergence as more of a umbrella term like encompassing a lot of different neurological or neurodiverse behaviours and traits. There was a couple of words that we've covered already such as masking and I don't think we've spoken about stimming. These are words that have really entered our vocabulary with the huge upswell of things like social media and being online. I wonder if you could sort of just unpack this a little bit and what parents or teachers who might be listening in might notice if a child is neurodivergent but... hasn't been able to reach an assessment. What are sort of some key indicators?

**Madonna**: Well, stimming, just because you said that word, is like an involuntary or a repetitive action. Masking, we did mention in passing, but I think is a huge one, because many of our children are masking or camouflaging their neurodivergence at school until they get into that car at the end of the day and they explode or they get home. In the cases of teen girls, Often they're able to do that right through adolescence until they lose support structures like families or schools because in schools a teacher might be saying look you know that draft is really good but I think if you address this will actually advance your case. Once you get to university or you're working in a retail outlet or wherever that kind of support can fall off. But I also think there are much more subtle signs that are really difficult to find. Like we asked 1200 families what was the first sign and it was so varied it's like normal milestones. And I hate that word normal too but it's like the milestones of any child. So you can't be taking a child off for a diagnosis and often parents have and a specialist said that's just what they should be doing. One thing that really stood out to me was when parents volunteered in class in prep or kindie or year one and they saw their child acting differently to other children. They might be, we often hear, marching to the tune of their own drum or liking being confident to like having time to themselves or she's strawberry shortcake off with the fairies in a world of creativity. Those kind of comments were really, really common and sometimes can be a pointer because neurodivergent children don't always need other children. So that was really strong. A delayed speech can be an inability to sleep when you're tiny can

be but I think the most stand out signs for me in our research was when parents saw their child around others their age and noticed a difference and that difference could be really wide. I mean there can be temper tantrums but who hasn't had a two year old with temper tantrums? So I would ignore those signs um well not ignore them but I would be look twice at those signs but if there's the chance to volunteer or talk to your no teacher is going to raise with a parent that they think their child is neurodivergent unless they care for them. They're not doing it to be mean. And teachers, I think, find this really difficult. And they're not going to say your child is neurodivergent, but if they suggest your child may not be doing the same as other children, take that for what it is. And that is a caring comment for you to go and explore for yourself what it might mean. And... because our teachers see our children for eight hours a day and they can often pick up things that we might in busy households. Professor Tony Atwood, who has probably diagnosed more children with autism than anyone else in Australia, didn't pick up his own son's autism till he was a young adult. And when I kept saying, why, why didn't you? You're an expert, why? He said three words, Bianca, he said, love is blind. And I think... That is so true and you can be as scientific as you like but when love comes into it, it changes. It changes the balance. So work with your teacher, your preschool teacher, your kindie teacher and I think that's probably a good start.

**Bianca**: And I think Madonna, like what you were saying in the example you gave about Pip Williams, sometimes it only takes one teacher, one sort of mentor figure in a child's life to really recognise something in that child, a potential or just sort of shifting things, doing things a bit differently and making adjustments and on what a difference that can make.

**Madonna**: Yeah and Bianca that is such an important point because every single person listening to us now has a teacher who did that, neurodivergent or neurotypical. And I grew up in a little country school in Queensland where women didn't go on to the big city and university and it was one teacher in grade 11, who opened my mind, who convinced me I could go to university, then went and knocked on the door of my family home and convinced my parents, who then helped get me to university via a scholarship. I owe my entire career to one teacher who thought, I'm going to give this a chance. And here I go wanting to cry again. Every neurotypical and every neurodivergent child every child in every class going to school on any day has that opportunity to have their mind opened by that adult standing in front of them. So if you are a teacher listening to this, what a wonderful opportunity to have someone in 30 years say what you delivered for them. And it's not difficult, it's tiny minor adjustments.

**Bianca**: I wish, yeah, if I had the opportunity to thank my year three teacher for taking me under her wing and giving me a love of stories and storytelling, introducing me face to face to the librarian at the school and that sort of thing. That is where I can pinpoint finding my place in a very complex and confusing school system. And you know, everyone listening will have a story like that. So if we've all thought of that teacher for any teacher listening to understand... the power they have, the unrivalled power to change the trajectory of a child, they may be teaching the person who ends up winning a Nobel Prize for science or a Peace Prize or becomes Prime Minister or CEO of a top ASX company. What a wonderful opportunity.

**Bianca**: that will definitely resonate I'm sure with a lot of listeners who are in the education space or whether that's preschool, primary school or beyond into university. I just wanted to change gears a little bit and talk about the on the ground work that a lot of teachers and caregivers are doing in working alongside health and medical practitioners in trying to debunk some of the myths and misconceptions around neurodivergence. Despite increasing awareness and improvements to access and inclusion, there are still some prevailing myths and stigma around labels, around diagnoses. Again, you've done a lot of research in this space and I'm wondering what stands out to you. Not only are some of the systems falling short, we're seeing a lot of evidence around like the NDIS and you touch on that, well, not just touch on but you go into depth in that in the later chapters in the book. But I guess what are... For you, what are those priority areas? What are some of the prevailing stigmas that we really need to change?

**Madonna**: Think if we all remember, if you've met one neurodivergent child or person, you've met one neurodivergent child or person. No one is the same. We are all different and we need to understand that. I think the three areas where real change could be made are firstly parents. Often parents said they didn't get their child diagnosed because they would then wear a label. And I think in decades past, maybe they did, but the world has changed. And I can't help thinking as a mother that if your child doesn't wear a label of neurodivergence, they may wear a label of being naughty or bold or inattentive or disruptive or even weird. And I think we learn to lean into the labels we are given, and we should remember that. There is no shame in any of this, only support. So I would love parents, all of us to open our mind, neurodivergent and neurotypical about how our neurodivergent community can actually lead us in all sorts of areas. The second is schools. And while most teachers are just wonderful, our schools brand themselves with these banners of inclusivity. But are they Bianca? You

know, I wonder, because when you go into a class and where children are being suspended, in some cases up to 27 times in primary school, where one boy has now been suspended so long, he hasn't been to school for 18 months. where children in prep are repeatedly suspended, which means a parent then has to leave work. Two questions, what does a suspension do? Because it obviously doesn't fix any perceived problem. And secondly, how does that help families who are dealing with this? So I think our schools, and we spoke to a wonderful man called Professor Andrew Whitehouse, and he said, you know, probably I'm not sure he said words to this effect, but I interpreted them as, you know, schools might be the low hanging fruit in terms of how we actually address education and our classes. I think that is number one. And the difference, and I did this, I sat at a school that caters for autistic children and it was week before Easter. And someone came in and said, you all get to go home early on Thursday, be picked up at midday instead of 3.30. It was the only time I saw disruption. Why? Because they are so engaged. They didn't want to go home at 3.30. One said, that's unfair. I have a contract till three o'clock. The other said, I'd prefer to be here than at home. If we could have that across our education system, how fantastic would it be? And those adjustments that our classes, our teachers, our schools and our education system have to make are not big. But I would say that tone comes from the top. And whether you are Education Minister Jason Claire, the principal of a school, or a teacher standing in front of the class, you can make that difference. And in the third systemic area, I would say to employers, you wanna make money, you wanna make a difference to the community, whether you are looking for profit, looking to care and not for profit at charity, there is a massive untapped source in the neurodivergent community. Tap it. You know, minor adjustments, giving the questions to an interview to an applicant before the interview, allowing a worker to use headphones, putting a cover on an air conditioning machine so it's not really noisy, allowing the bit and you know what? You will see it in the bottom line. You will see it in the impact in the community. You will see it in your brand. And we tracked some employers who are now employing up to 85% of neurodivergent workers and it is just terrific. And just like we have had affirmative action for women for example and for others who have not had a fair go. It is time we looked at an affirmative action for neurodivergent workers, so that we bring that expertise into our workplaces for everyone.

**Bianca**: Absolutely. And certainly, even the shift to the working from home model and having just that flexibility as well. I think even your typical people will feel, we all feel different day to day. We all, many people experience. chronic anxiety and other sort of mental

health conditions, but even just adjusting working modes as well and being flexible and how we approach that can make a huge difference. So I can only imagine what that research has been illuminating in terms of neurodivergent population too.

**Madonna**: Well, when one company can save $40 million in a year, that should get all employers to look at their bottom line and go, all right, what am I missing? One of the attributes of neurodivergent people, everyone says, is a loyalty. So, their determination to be loyal, to be hardworking, to want people to, not want accolades, but to want to be valued. And let me perhaps give this example. My husband used to run a big newspaper. And one of his first observations when he finished reading a draft was to say, Oh, I wish I knew that when I was running a newspaper because he thought if he could put people or pool employees into interest areas rather than just go through the ranks of you're more senior, you get to do this. If you could actually focus on your interest areas, the stories, the investigations, the results would have been so much better for his newspaper for his probably for how popular the newspaper was, but also for the community. And it's just by valuing difference in our workplaces. If you're on a board and you have everyone think the same, we've seen what happens. We need to have people think out of the box, which is why we called the book out of the box. And by doing that, I think 12 minds are better than one. So if we can have different ways of thinking, attacking different problems or issues or challenges in a workplace, we're going to get a better result.

**Bianca**: Something else that struck me was a sense of social justice. Being the partner of a neurodivergent person, I also very much know where I stand, which is always very helpful. And it just raised some lovely things. It is really helpful.

**Madonna**: Other people say, well, you know, she told me exactly what I thought. You know, and think, well, isn't that a good thing? And you said that sense of social justice, and that is such a good thing to raise because as adults, it's something we all value. But when you're in line in year six, and someone sees someone jump the line to tuck shop, and let's say a group of boys put you in front of a really quiet girl, and you go up and defend that peer, and you get in trouble. Maybe you're even bullied as a result of that. And this happens over and over again. That is a sense of social justice that we should be nurturing rather than actually targeting and picking on. And I think it was Tony Atwood, Professor Atwood, who said, you know, often a neurodivergent child will grow into an adult at a much faster pace than their neurotypical peers who have to then catch up and see that stems from a sense of social

justice. or a sense of loyalty or a sense of listening properly. And they're things that neurotypical parents, I think, we have to teach our children to actually value and to see that for what it is.

**Bianca**: Yeah, there's a lot to be said for being able to, I guess, speak in a more direct manner. The framework your book proposes, as stated in the introduction, is based on the social model of disability using neuroaffirming language to promote diversity and inclusivity. So rather than neurodivergence being labelled a diagnosis, it's reframed as an explanation, which we discussed a bit earlier. Madonna, could you tell us a bit more about, I guess, how you've brought into the book, the framework or model and how it differs from other perspectives in the medical model of disability?

**Madonna**: Yeah, it's a tricky area, Bianca, because what we tried to do was use the language, the person we were interviewing wanted us to use. And there is a growing view across the neurodivergent community of affirming language, neuroaffirming language. And that is replicated in academia. So for example, let's say we used to have autism level one, two and three, we used to have Aspergers. Some parents still want to use that, but the community itself does not want you're either autistic or you are not. And they feel as though by having levels, it can actually hurt the autistic community. And I really understand that. But there are also some other parents who railed against that. So, what we thought was important is to understand that we are in a process of transition here and it's going towards neuroaffirming language. And it is really important for all of us to adopt that. There's a real disassociation. between diagnosis and actually getting that support. And it's around language and how it is used and levels you have to actually meet to prompt those areas. The neurodivergent community wants to use neuroaffirming language. And so, we should, because this is a difference, not a disorder. But the irony exists in that the medical model demands different criteria to access support. So, we no longer use autism one two and three or Aspergers generally within the autism community. But to prompt NDIS support you do. And I think that makes it really difficult for parents to sit down and have to point out how bad their child is to open the gate to support and I think it will move. The medical model is old fashioned and it's moving it's got to move to the point where the question is what support does this person need to meet a level playing field with everyone else and let's forget the levels and the words and what it means and focus on how we can assist because as one specialist said to us if a child broke their leg and was walking into a classroom they can use a lift there'll be a ramp the

desks are moved, there are adjustments to help that child. What is the support that is required for another child in that classroom whose challenge is invisible in walking into the room? And our medical model has to match the heart and the head, the desires and the wishes of the neurodivergent community. And I think use the language, it. wants us to use. One tiny little rider on that is some parents picked me up and said, would you stop using autistic? My child is Aspergers . And so in some ways there are parents who are struggling with this too. And my suggestion is we're on the brink of something wonderful here. Let's work together and not judge people on the language they use, but the work they put in to help those who might need it.

**Bianca**: What really comes to mind here is certainly when you were beginning to explore the process of gaining support through the NDIS and going through that whole process, it was very much focused on listing the deficits rather than highlighting things like strengths and whatnot. So it is an entirely different way of approaching and not a good way and not a positive experience.

**Madonna**: And hard for parents to sit down and list everything is wrong with the person in their life they love more than anyone. You know I am going to cry. I mean that is just not right. It is not right on any level. If we actually put our arms more around GPs and worked with them on this it may actually work better because we see a GP more than we see other medicos probably. They know us better; they know family history better. And I think they're probably able to help this community narrative more than other sections of the medical community.

**Bianca**: Yeah, terrific. What's coming out of all of this at the moment is really a cascading effect sometimes with other family members. And if a child is being diagnosed, suddenly it's almost seen as a... point of reflection too for the parents or other siblings, other family members who were then going, well, okay, does this criteria or for lack of a better word also apply to me? So as I was reading, really I found that there is no one size fits all strategy when it comes to neurodivergence in that to imagine neurodivergence as a colour wheel rather than a linear spectrum. Spectrum is a term that’s been in use for a while now, but is that still applicable? Are we still using that term? Like you said, we've shifted away from things like in the neuro-affirming community, shifting away the spurges into using autism and ADHD. Things like high functioning, low functioning also have been removed or sort of discouraged in the discourse.

**Madonna**: I think the world of people is a colour wheel. We're from different countries, we're different ages, we're different genders, we have different challenges. Any parent who is listening to this who says, my child doesn't have a challenge, I would suggest he's lying. One principal once said to me, it's better to have a 14 year old teenager, this is when I was writing a book called Being 14, than a 28 year old teenager. We've got to stop wanting remarkable children and look to have remarkable adults. Part of that is understanding who we are. Who our children are and giving them the skills to make it in that big wide world. From being a good friend, they might have seen their parents' divorce and they're going into the world thinking that's what's going to happen to them. It might be someone whose dad has been in jail. It might be someone who's moved around the world lots of times and not being able to be in the one place. Neurodivergence and neurotypical. Children and adults live on that also and so you've met one neurotypical person. You've met one neurotypical person. You've met one neurodivergent person. You've met one neurodivergent person. How does it prevent you from living your life to the fullest? You look at that. Look at it for you. Look at it for your child and address and learn. Seek medication. Seek psychology. Seek your own reading. to become the person you want to be. Now that sounds like a bit of a millimole answer, but I really actually believe that. And if we look at neurodivergence, autism pure, as someone has referred to it, is only about 15% of the population. Often it comes with friends, as Professor Tony Atwood would say, and that may be high anxiety, it may be depression, it may be OCD, it may be anything. And so... It is such an individual thing that this idea that this is the neurodivergent community, this is the neurotypical community is to me wrong. Because you might have a very anxious 15 year old girl who is neurotypical. You might have a non-anxious autistic girl in the neurodivergent community. The challenges they have maybe no bigger than the other, they're just different. And I think the colour wheel rather than a spectrum actually paints a better, more understandable picture for people.

**Bianca**: Something that I guess I learned that stands out to me in the book is, I don't know if it's called an adjacent diagnosis, that sometimes when you are given an undergo on the assessment for neurodivergence and you might be diagnosed with ADHD and or autism. There're also traits like obsessive compulsive disorder. There's a prevalence as well of what's called PDA or pathological demand avoidance. I just wonder if you could spend a moment explaining what that is. That looks like.

**Madonna**: It will be avoiding a task or a direction at any cost. And it's really, it's like this same language about school can't versus school refusal. And there is a debate within the

community. Is a child refusing to go to school because of the state they're in? can't they? And it's the same thing I think, and it goes back to that colour wheel. But what I would think is important to say is it's good for us all to know who we are and part of a job as a parent, part of a job of science, part of a job of teachers is to help us decide who we are and where we want to go in life. And I think everything from a diagnosis to understanding any challenge that might bring, whether it is a broken leg or autism, is really important. The journey then that you take individually for yourself or your children may be very different. But I think in a world of information, it's important for us to know or to want to know who we are for our children. In a world of social media to know who they want to be. And if we can help them be that person and a diagnosis helps, then I can't think it's anything but a good thing. It was important for us to provide tips at the end of each chapter. And at the end of the book, we have got, I don't know how many, hundreds perhaps of resources, but we've tried to break that up into everything from books for preschoolers to the science and research. to teaching your child to drive, teaching them to date. And we've, because resources and Australian resources here are few and far between. And we've put that in the book and next year, we hope to make that more widely available as well.

**Bianca**: So, Madonna, just reflecting on things like your long-term career in journalism and your experiences. on advice and policy, reflecting on our conversation that has incorporated areas of neurodivergence and creativity and celebrating that. Do you think there are aspects of artistic practice, whether visual art, writing or music and drama, that can play a part in educating neurodivergence to the broader public? Know sensibly we're talking about a book which is a work of art in itself but yeah if you could think of some examples or just some thoughts on the role of art and science more generally.

**Madonna**: Yeah, so let me give you just two unusual takes on that I guess. One is the number of experts who told us for a neurodivergent child drama can be really important. Theatre can be really important in them learning to speak up and to speak out. And at first, I thought that can't be true because in a world where too many children are masking their condition, aren't by acting you're teaching them to mask? And the answer is no. And so, I would say out of left field, but if you're having a neurodivergent child, that role that drama can play is widely considered good. The second thing, I'll say three things. The second thing would be that throughout history and in contemporary, in our contemporary world, The number of neurodivergent specialists in art and in music and in science is really quite strong. In fact, many experts would say they have led, the neurodivergent community has led the

way in terms of our development across art, theatre, music, writing, science. And so, we should respect that, and we should own it. And I'd love our neurodivergent community to be louder in owning those successes, whether it's in computer games or a piece of music. The last thing I would say is science. The opportunity for the neurodivergent community to lead us in research and where we go is phenomenal. All our universities understand this now, and we now... belatedly have neurodivergent leaders across my science projects in this area. What do we need in science? Where should we go? That's two questions I think for the neurodivergent community and the science community. And I think if we could hear that answer, if the government could hear that answer, if philanthropic interests and research grants could be tailored to what our scientific community believe would help the neurodivergent community and for us all to understand difference a bit better in three years' time we're really going to have another world a different world but a better world.

**Bianca**: I definitely like the sound of that. Well, it's been a really beautiful and expansive and neuroaffirming conversation today on the podcast Madonna. Thank you so much for your generosity and sharing your knowledge in this space it's really appreciated. I was really thrilled to be asked to do this interview with you. So yeah, it resonated with me more than I expected in reading the book. So, thank you.

**Madonna**: That's Great. That's fantastic. Thank you for your interest, Bianca. I really appreciate it.

**Bianca**: Thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, leave us a review and let others know about us. Science right now is dedicated to accessibility, connectivity, inspiration and collaboration across disciplines. Our content is free to access and we wanna keep it that way. So, if you're keen to be part of this growing community of creative writing inspired by science, hit subscribe. We'll be back with another episode soon and more cognitive conversations to come.