

Comfort in the Cosmic with Alicia Sometimes

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SPEAKERS

Alicia Sometimes, Krystle Marie

K Krystle Marie 00:00
...now that I know this is audio only, so -

A Alicia Sometimes 00:04
Is it - so you're at Uni Queensland? The University of Queensland?

K Krystle Marie 00:07
Yeah. So, I'm using the podcast room because my house tends to be surrounded by gardeners for some reason (smiling) So -

A Alicia Sometimes 00:14
Yeah.

K Krystle Marie 00:15
- just trying to avoid the whippersnippers... and, yeah.

A Alicia Sometimes 00:19
I never got to use the podcast rooms, but I did a lot of recording at UQ and every one of them has crows in the background (laughing)

—

K

Krystle Marie 00:30

(laughing) Oh, really?

A

Alicia Sometimes 00:30

There's so many crows near the Physics Building.

K

Krystle Marie 00:36

I'd first like to acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal people as the traditional custodians of Meanjin, the land from which we record today. I pay my respects to Jagera and Turrbal elders past, present and emerging. Today, we're speaking with Alicia Sometimes: writer, award-winning poet and broadcaster. She's given a TED talk, edited a national literary journal, done breakfast radio with the ABC. She's performed her spoken word all over Australia and internationally. Meanwhile, you can find her poems in many respected publications, including Best Australian Poems, Best Australian Science Writing, Overland, The Age, Griffith Review - to name only a few. So Alicia Sometimes, thank you for joining us today on Science Write Now.

A

Alicia Sometimes 01:33

Pleasure. And I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land I'm on today, the Boolarong people of the East Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. And yes, I did a TEDx talk at University of Queensland where you're talking to me from today, not a TED talk, because they're very different things. Yeah, just wanted to make sure I mentioned that.

K

Krystle Marie 01:56

Oh, yeah, of course! The TEDxUQ that was... in here. So, 'Honouring your wonder: observing the world through art and science'. And something I really did want to note about that is just how much your poetry comes through in your body. I think it is important to note that you are a performer of your words. Whereas I think poetry or at least you know, I'm, I'm fairly ignorant, in some ways to the poetry scene here in, in Brisbane, and Australia, largely, it's a very much a published... it seems like very much a published culture, but the... you know, you've said yourself, you're a lover of words. And that so comes through in the physicality, and even just the, the lyricism of your poems as well. It's so musical, I have a musical background and even, even reading it, it's hard to, you know, if you've ever been a singer, or even, you know, a guitarist or something, you find that it's very hard to remove yourself from the musicality of those words when you're reading them. So, in 'Stellar Atmospheres', one of the poems that you actually touch on in that TED Talk, there's an excerpt from it. It is... 'First Three Minutes'. I absolutely... you've no doubt received a lot of recognition and praise for that for that piece, and I absolutely love it. Could you tell us a bit about that poem?

A

Alicia Sometimes 03:50

I am so glad you resonated with that. And it's the oldest poem in the book. And it's one that I wrote quite a few years ago. And it's so fascinating that you talk about performance, because yes, I have a performance background and, and have been a musician - or I am a musician - I just don't play as often as I'd like. But yeah, musicality and language is so important. And yeah, there's so many incredible poets who are performers, and then ones who have that, who do both who have that safety of page as well. And I just love writing for the page and playing with the words and playing with the alliteration and the musicality. And that to me is so important, not at the expense of the meaning or the symbolism or anything like that, but I love the way something sounds and I read something out over and over and over and over again. But sometimes I just write purely for the visual aspect and and play around with the language. So sometimes that doesn't translate to performance and 'First Three Minutes' is one of those ones that just... for me, had that beauty of both. And it was inspired by Steven Weinberg, who wrote a book called 'The First Three Minutes'. And you know, just about those moments, you know, after the Big Bang, you know, in the beginning of the universe, as scientists aren't quite sure what happened in those microseconds, there's still debate about that. There's still what was, you know, was there another universe before? Did we come out of nothing? There is a million questions. And really smart people are working on that. And I find that fascinating. But the fact that in those first three minutes, we all started warming and little bits of atoms and protons and neutrons and electrons, and so forth. And in different steps. I just fell in love with that. And I was about 10, or 11. And it's really interesting, because I've spoken to scientists who have said, a couple of scientists who have said that book inspired them to become scientists, and it inspired me to become a poet. So (laughs)

K

Krystle Marie 06:09

That's something I did want to ask you about, actually, because I remember you, you saying that it did, it did inspire you to become a poet. And I just thought, you know, you're obviously so knowledgeable about, you know, astrophysics. And, and these types of cosmic... so much. What I did want to say about that poem just before, before we move on to that, it was kind of like, it was like, you took a two jigsaw puzzles, one that was, you know, on the cosmic and one that was on humanity. And they were both whole, but somehow, when you put them together, they still became a perfect picture. And that's what blew my mind about the piece is that you took these two things that people might didn't ordinarily marry together. Well, and think of in terms of particularly that personal human experience. And I just love that about the whole collection that you so skillfully, sort of give... it's like you give humanity to the stars, and you give, you know, this cosmic element to human connection. And it's such a beautiful collection of poems not... not all - we will get to that -they're not all on the stars and that sort of thing. But do tell us about why was it poetry and not science that became your path?

A

Alicia Sometimes 07:48

Yeah, bless you for all those very, very kind words. I'd like to hire you as my publicist. Very kind. And I'm always glad when someone resonates with that, that humanity, because that's really important to me. And why poetry, not science? Simply because I was told very early on that there was not many famous astronomers or astrophysicists who were women. And then it was just one teacher that did that. And it just really put me off. And then I had some other great ones. But I just thought, okay, my art is where I'm at, because I paint and play music and do, I just can't not create, like many, many artists. So I always went down that path. But what

kept pulling me was science. And whenever I did those, you know, whether it was personality tests, or career days, or whatever it came out, you should be a scientist. And so it was like, Oh, I don't know. Because of course, scientists are incredibly smart and incredibly good at what they do. And I think now knowing the realm of science, perhaps I could have gotten into something but at the time, I thought, I am no good with data sets, I am no good with patients, I am no good with those - that incredible analytical ability that scientists have. But they are also very, very creative as well and obviously very, very passionate about what they do. So I'd... by my bed is genuinely, always a book on science. And it's something that I am completely immersed in and have written about many things over the years. But always going back to that, that moment of where did we come from? Where are we going? And what are we made of? And mortality is something that I've thought about forever, about what's left of us when we leave, and when I was younger, I thought it might be a body of work that I make or it might be some art piece or something but now I, I don't know, maybe it is just age. I just think it's, it's our humanity that we leave that, that we can only hope to make a difference with is something akin to connection and understanding. And but the truth is truly I'm just a science nut. And I'm so fascinated with how things work. And I know that astrophysicists are doing it. Well, they don't need me on that. But I love chatting to them. And I found them just incredibly amazing.

K

Krystle Marie 10:35

Yeah. And how, you know, how did they receive you too? Because, I mean, I'm sure they would have been somewhat familiar with you, as a public figure, but in terms of, you know, scientists receiving a creative person. It, you know, it might be easy to assume that they might either be confused, or maybe they're kind of like, 'Why are you so curious about what we do?' And you know, maybe not see the the common ground there?

A

Alicia Sometimes 11:07

I'm certainly... Thank you very much. I don't think that I'm a public figure as in, poets aren't famous - I wish they had groupies or T-shirts or something (smiles) I found that most scientists, if not all, that I've encountered are incredibly curious, incredibly passionate about science, communication, and getting other people to understand their work. So they, they can underestimate themselves in the way that they talk, they might be shy, or they might not have public speaking experience. But when you sit down and you say, Okay, tell me about how this works. They are articulate, poetic, full of imagery, full of metaphor full of - they're trying to grapple with it as well, you know, otherwise, they wouldn't be studying it. So there's some aspects that they're kind of unsure about, but there's very, you know, many aspects they are sure about. So they've... they're very welcoming. And I ask a lot of questions, but I also love listening. So I love just letting someone tell me what they want to tell me as well. And I was very lucky to be where you are at The University of Queensland last year with Tamara Davis and the school, her team at the School of Physics. And, you know, she is one of the kindest people ever, and her team was so welcoming. And it was great to talk to PhD students and, and professors, and, you know, people studying all sorts of fields. And that's the thing when I got there, I knew that Tamara was focusing on dark energy, and she certainly has other you know, you should see her body of work, she has been involved in so many papers, and she's constantly creating, you know, working hard on what she does, and her team work incredibly hard. And they were just so welcoming, and so interesting. And to sit, it was a privilege to sit in and listen to their weekly discussions on cosmology on astrophysics, and the sort of really

democratic process of how they thought, and the creativity and just the interest, and then these side conversations and even lunchtime, when we're sitting there having a sandwich, they would go and get out the whiteboard, and write something down. And even to the point of if you we were speaking about languages, and sure, there's about five of them who speak you know, three different languages, they're, they're just so well read, it's just so, it's just, um, it's amazing. Just, you know? And you know what, I think it comes down to? Just curiosity about life. And so I, again, to use that word for the third time, just resonated with the curiosity and but it's always a thing of, 'Can I do them justice?' Not the other way around - they will never disappoint me, there is never one moment in any science hub that I've ever been to where they're going to bore me or, sure, they're going to talk about concepts that go way over my head, and I have to go back and back and back and back to understand some things. And I'm not a mathematician, so I'm not doing the math proofs. So I can only understand it on a certain level. And so when you have abstraction of difficult concepts and abstractions of poetry, sometimes you can make that too... Well, for poets perhaps I do, I'm too flowery or I'm too full of hyperbole or I'm too, you know - I'm not going to get the concept exactly right - I've missed something. But at the same time, I just want, I just want people to enter into the poem and think, oh, okay, I resonate with that, and maybe come out with understanding something about the science and... And also, I think -

K

Krystle Marie 15:18

Yeah... Oh, I was just gonna say that really does speak to the curiosity. So, so many of these poems, they, they do arouse curiosity, and it's kind of up to the reader to, you know... you can appreciate something, just... just the musicality of it, you can appreciate it as, you know, purely a creative thing. But then there's also your, sort of... it's almost like info dropping, you know, it's... and I loved that about it. Because I'm a very, I'm always caught between... I love learning, I'm always trying to learn about something, almost to the detriment of my, sort of, fiction reading and seeking out more creative... You know, so, which is, which is why I probably haven't read as much poetry as, as I would like. And so your poetry excited me so much, because I felt like I was, it was sort of a twofer. I was getting both I was getting I was being informed and enlightened. But at the same time, you know, I was sort of being it was a meditative experience as well. There was one poem, I'm trying to recall the name of it, but it was. I hope I don't butcher this idea, because I'm definitely not a scientist. But it was the idea that energy.... it can't be destroyed. It's, oh...

A

Alicia Sometimes 16:48

Emmy Noether in the last poem of the book. Yeah, it cannot be created or destroyed. And Emmy Noether was just such an incredibly, incredibly interesting scientist. And yeah, really changed the face of physics in some way, of understanding, so yeah, sort of, concepts like that, yeah, to drop in. And then hopefully, you might understand or go away and think about or learn about the poet or the concept.

K

Krystle Marie 17:27

Yeah. And that was, you know, what was so interesting about it is because it was an idea that I was familiar with, but I had never actually interrogated where it came from. And it was actually an idea that, you know - if I can just speak personally for a moment - it was an idea that gave

me a lot of comfort, when, a few years ago, my father, he was he was dying of cancer. And at the time, it's, you know, it's a... It gave me a lot of comfort that idea. And it's kind of cheesy, almost thinking back to it, because I was watching the movie, 'Dr. Strange' at the time, and a lot of those ideas are in that movie, you know, that, more than anything, it's, sort of, energy returned, or its energy rearranged or something. And that idea helped me so much, cope with, you know, sort of the confusion and anguish I was feeling at the time. And, you know, I do remember, too, I was watching a lot - the other thing that comforted me a lot is as I would go to sleep at night - and I did it for my mom as well - is I would put on the documentary series, 'The Universe'. And I would just have that playing as I went to sleep. And I would do the same for her because listening to those ideas of something so far outside of this planet, and things that are so, you know, so big, expansive, was so... It gave so much perspective, I think, on the human experience, and, I think, that is something that I remember reading in your blog for ANAT - the ANAT residency with Tamara - is you asked her the question: 'If you could tell anyone that's not too familiar with this work - what is something that you would want them to know?' And it was, if I can find the quote, it was that... where have I got it... It's essentially that, you know, it's just so amazing and vast - the universe is so amazing and vast outside of our little sphere. And that's what she would want to convey to people is just that it's all kind of we're all worrying about silly trivial things on the daily and that those things ultimately if you if you knew how silly and trivial those things were, they just don't matter. And I think your poetry speaks amazingly to that.

A

Alicia Sometimes 20:06

Oh the - and thanks so much for sharing, you know, your personal story there. And I agree that comfort of knowing that we're in a, you know, a vast cosmic stage or, you know, I remember being young and hearing Carl Sagan talking about, you know, we're all made of 'star stuff', that matter inside of us has come from the stars. And that, sort of, in a sense, 'recycling' of energy is quite interesting. But yes, what Tamara says is so true that, you know, we're on this tiny little blue planet, and we, we are miniscule. On the cosmic stage, we are miniscule, and there are so many unknowns and so many possibilities. And yeah, that... that curiosity about looking out is really about looking in as well. It kind of can, can define who we are by understanding physics. And so I find physics completely linked with humanities and with art and with big questions. And sometimes - you mentioned Dr. Strange, which I absolutely love - and, and with movies or whatever, they can play around with - and I certainly play around with concepts too - but there's always that, sort of, sometimes that misunderstanding, like quantum entanglement, that perhaps, you know, something vastly far away can affect us here, that we're sort of connected somehow. And we can simplify that and say, 'Well, that's just you and me, we kind of understand each other', or something. So, sometimes we take quantum physics, or big concepts and simplify them, but we are part of the stars, we are... You know, I love the fact that gold is on this earth because, you know, and platinum, because of two neutron stars crashing, and, and it being part of our makeup. It's just yeah, it's just so beautiful. And then, so for me, it began with the outer - the cosmic arena - and then, thinking about the particle physics - the tiny - and how they're interconnected. And I love that conversation.

K

Krystle Marie 22:26

Yeah, yeah. And to speak, just to touch on the science a little bit, you, you worked with the Australian Research Centres of Excellence in Particle Physics at the Terascale. Gravitation... Oh, Excellence for... OzGrav?

A Alicia Sometimes 22:43

Yeah.

K Krystle Marie 22:44

And... Dark Matter Particle Physics. So, just to touch on CoEPP, that one's in Melbourne?

A Alicia Sometimes 22:56

CoEPP, yeah, was in Melbourne, yep.

K Krystle Marie 22:59

So I had to do a little digging, because I didn't, you know, first of all, I wasn't too familiar with with this work in Australia anyway. And then having had a look at CoEPP, I was blown away, because a few years ago, many years ago now, I'd learned of this thing that was going to change, you know, the way we study particle physics - the Large Hadron Collider. And just as, sort of, you know, I've always ducked in and out of, you know, scientific interests. I've never delved down too many rabbit holes. It's more that if I hear something big, I'm like, 'Oh, what's that about?' And I remember learning about that. And I was like, wow, this is the place where Australia is linked to that Large Hadron Collider facility in CERN! And I also want to mention it as something that's quite pertinent, since Peter Higgs passed away.

A Alicia Sometimes 24:00

Yeah, yeah.

K Krystle Marie 24:01

Last... Monday, yeah, last week. And he was honoured for something called - that something probably everybody's heard of, but maybe don't fully understand (laughs) - I still don't fully understand it, but something that is quoted as having 'transformed what we know about the building blocks of the universe', the Higgs Boson Particle. And you actually have a poem about the Higgs field, in Stellar Atmospheres, the first line of which: 'Why we don't disappear into the noiseless frailty of existence...' which just, you know, that made so much more sense to me once I did actually go digging. And, you know, I think having read that line, I would have just thought, 'Oh, that's beautiful. That's...' you know. But yeah, I love that the curiosity about that, having to, sort of, you know, go away and find out a little more and then contextualise it - I could appreciate it in two ways. And whenabouts did that, that piece come about? Was that when you were speaking with scientists at CoEPP?

A

Alicia Sometimes 25:23

Oh, they certainly gave me such an education on what the Higgs Boson was and the Higgs Field and... at the time, yeah, that was around 2016, 2017. And I was really lucky enough to travel to CERN and talk to scientists there. It wasn't part of an official residency or anything like that. It was me talking to people through CoEPP and going and they had a major, you know, stage there and a connection - as do many scientific hubs here - have a connection to CERN, as well. So because at CERN, they're studying everything, so many things. And of course, you know, 2012, the Higgs Boson was discovered, which was hypothesised by Peter Higgs and others much earlier on. And to have that come to fruition in your lifetime, imagine being Peter Higgs, and by all accounts, he seems very humble and, you know, didn't like so much fuss, but he was quite the celebrity, just because, to have that theory, and, and then that actually be proven - and that was proven very early on when the Large Hadron Collider was turned on. And, and so it's such a beautifully rich hub of scientists learning and going through everything. So it was really thought, you know, that when it was turned on that there'll be other particles that would be discovered as well. And it'd be proof of supersymmetry, and all these other things. And that hasn't come into fruition, but by no means does that mean that it's not rich with possible discoveries, small discoveries, all sorts of other things, and really important research. And I love those hubs in places like CoEPP, and the Centre for Dark Matter is so important. And, and that's on the frontier of international collaboration and international recognition, and it's really amazing. And OzGrav, you know, were part of in 2016, 15, when we discovered gravitational waves through LIGO and Virgo collaborations. And they were incredible to talk to, the scientists there and the hub there, were amazing. And I was very lucky to chat to them. And, you know, you'll have to ask them, but maybe you're bothering them a little bit, but very, very beautiful people who are really willing to share what they are learning and discovering.

K

Krystle Marie 25:38

Yeah, I think that in a way, they're probably also just responding to the authenticity of your curiosity, you know, that, that you actually want to know. There would be people, you know - which always surprises me - when there's, when they're these concepts that are just almost so far beyond our comprehension, that people, you know, can look up into the stars and go, 'Oh, yeah'. And it's just insane to me that you couldn't be more curious about all of this stuff that's happening out inside our, you know, as Tamara put it, our a 'little sphere' of, you know, it's, it's so strange. But if we could, maybe if we just change tack for a second, and talk - not all of the poems in Stellar Atmospheres are necessarily informed by science, some of them, sort of, speak to your experience in, uh... so you were a, you were the first virtual writer in residency for Manchester City of Literature?

A

Alicia Sometimes 29:23

Yes, along with another writer in America. Yeah, I was, yeah.

K

Krystle Marie 29:27

Yeah. So... So you said that you got to read a lot of old science books at the Portico Library?

A Alicia Sometimes 29:33

Oh, my God. Yes.

K Krystle Marie 29:34

And which, I just would find overwhelming, because I think you actually mentioned in an interview that you did for Manchester Literary Festival, that it was very hard not to, sort of, stay, you know, on one path, you know, you had so much open to you. It...

A Alicia Sometimes 29:53

Yeah.

K Krystle Marie 29:54

You know, it's, and you know, I can't imagine - it would - it's kind of like you... I can imagine only that you'd be like a kid in a candy store with that much knowledge open to you. And you did say that you much of what you read was from the 1800s.

A Alicia Sometimes 30:12

That's right. Because of the nature of - we were in lockdown here in Melbourne in '21, they had periods of lockdown at the same time as well, even in 21. So it was that, you know, very difficult going out and so forth. So, to have access to one another city, a library, a librarian, who was amazing. Dr. Tom Keith, he was amazing in showing me all this 19th Century literature on science, and I thought, 'Okay, this is what I want to look at: What were people in popular science books talking about in the day? What was the latest discovery? And, you know, that was Mary Somerville, and, you know, looking at Laplace, and lots of different books that had come out at that time. And it was amazing, so that, you know, often they talk about 'the ether' and, and these strange things that they didn't understand. And we can kind of have a, you know, we honestly giggle because it's understandable, but they think, they thought they're on the forefront of something. And what was really amazing, you know, one of my... the books is... you know, 'In a Series of Letters to a Lady.'

K Krystle Marie 31:37

(mock raunchy voice) 'to a lady...' (laughs)

A Alicia Sometimes 31:38

(smiling) And, you know, off the top of my head, I can't remember the writer, but let me see... They thought, that writer, which was JP Nickel, said, in an interview at the time, or in the paper at the time, that he wanted - the lady represented 'general public' - that, you know, that if he

at the time, that he wanted - the lady represented general public - that, you know, that if he could get a woman to understand science, then everyone could understand science, and I just found that -

K Krystle Marie 32:05

- oh, how kind of him to break that down (laughs)

A Alicia Sometimes 32:08

(laughs) Exactly. But you know, it was quite incredible that, that, especially, there was one - 'The Moon: Considered as a Planet, a World and a Satellite' -

K Krystle Marie 32:20

- it's one of my favourites. Yes.

A Alicia Sometimes 32:22

I'm so glad because J. Nasmyth and J. Carpenter, this is 1874. They got almost, like, plaster models, plaster casts of the moon after observations with telescopes, and they were so accurate. And if - I would encourage anyone listening - if they go and look at this book online, which is readily available and pictures are - it's almost as if we're looking at pictures from NASA. It's, yeah, it's so beautifully done. And it was done with this really new concept at the time called Woodburytypes, which was a type of photograph, and it looks amazing. And sure, they got some signs wrong, you know, there was active volcanoes on the moon and so forth. But because of their very meticulous drawings, these are just beautiful depictions. And it felt otherworldly. And to have, as you know, a librarian, how many of us would love just, 'Okay, tell me librarian, about everything.' You know, he was incredible. And it was one of the most precious times to just have a conversation with someone online, and have the, and then, all these books were readily available. That was the other thing about doing books in the 1800s. Otherwise, I couldn't look at modern collections online. Some I could, but I really wanted to look at what are these popular science books? How have they evolved? And I actually haven't stopped researching that. I just keep - I keep going on and on and on.

K Krystle Marie 33:56

Yeah. I mean, how could you - it'd be just such a fascinating contrast between... and particularly marrying up the language that was used then for what they perceived, and then what we know now would just be so fascinating. I really did love that poem. And you also, something that you spoke to, in that interview with the Manchester Literary Festival, you, you said that there was kind of a natural poetry with the way that some scientists spoke about their discoveries or their sort of... or at least what they perceived. A lot of found phrases and that sort of thing, acci... accidental poetry, and I quite love that. So there is a bit of that in that poem and a few of the other poems and the collection. I did want to talk a little bit about... so,

it's, Stellar Atmospheres is, sort of, a collection of the cosmic, the creative and the personal. So you do touch on, on a lot of personal - it's almost kind of like you're zooming in and zooming out in the, in the collection, you know, you, you sort of like, you know, 'Meanwhile, back at Earth...' and then you kind of take a little snippet from your, from your life. And I'm - if, if it's okay to touch on - you do include a poem... 'Constellation Rifts'? I did see that you actually posted a reading of this three weeks back, so we'll link that in the show notes because it's a it's a beautiful poem. It's very different from a lot of the other poems in the collection. But again, it's this really interesting, sort of, it's almost like a 'meta' moment where you're noticing yourself - and I'd be quite honoured if you could touch on that. I think it's, again, it comes back to that finding some solace in, you know, the metaphors provided by the universe.

A

Alicia Sometimes 36:03

Yeah, it was like, um, you know, we spoke at the start about your connection with your dad and thinking about the universe. And you know, him being right there with you, for sure. And so yeah, in 2022, I was very sick and tried every test under the world and nothing came up with anything. And then I swanned into a mammogram and thinking, 'Oh, this is fine'. And yeah, I had breast cancer. And so it was one of those things where, again, you know, at that time, every consultation was alone, every moment was alone, it was just me and the doctor, no one was allowed in - even after surgery. For radiation, no one, you know, I had one visitor when I was in hospital for five or six days. And it was such an alone moment, but I've never felt stronger. In that, I just - I'm not anti-religious by any means but I'm not religious - and I just had such comfort in the universe. And when I was getting a cinta mammogram, and for those who don't know, it's injecting nuclear medicine into you, so... sorry about that - my mail is going off, I'll turn that off (laughs) Yeah, it's about getting nuclear medicine injected into you so when they do the surgery, they know exactly where to go and what to avoid as well. So... and it's very, very painful. Maybe not for others, but it was for me - it felt like 1000 bees stinging me and yeah, was sitting on me. And I was in so much pain for such a short amount of time. But when I looked up, I'm looking at supernovas. I swear to God, because it's gamma, you know, I think it was gamma rays that were part of this as well. So I was just seeing these little dots on a screen just almost like fireworks, and moving, and, like, galaxies. And I was just like, 'Can I have the video of this?' And they were laughing, like, 'Are you are you into science?' I'm like, 'My god, this is the most amazing thing you've ever seen!' And then, you know, of course, in an MRI, I'm thinking about all the science that has gone into this and the progress of science, and nuclear medicine started really interesting me as well. And every test that I had, it was, was going further and further into this... keeping me 'company'. And so that poem, 'Constellation Rifts', I just wrote, you know, almost in just a couple of hours - I've certainly edited it - but I just sat down and it just all came out about how each step of the process, science has really been with me. And yeah, so that's how that one came about.

K

Krystle Marie 39:01

Yeah. It's yeah, I was really blown away by that poem also, because, you know, there's even sort of an element almost, or at least how I read it, there was almost an element of sort of absurd humour in the beginning to where you receive the call, and you're like, 'Aren't I supposed to be sitting down?' And I just, it's, it's sort of... I feel like, too, there's something to giving the meaning to your discomfort in that moment as well, that I think if other women, you know, were to read that... if you're able to, sort of, give a bit more meaning or context, I think,

to that kind of pain and discomfort. Certainly, it doesn't remove it, but it, sort of, I think it, it almost makes it sort of the tiniest bit easier to cope with it, I think, because it's not, it's not for nothing. And so I'm definitely going to link that reading in the, in the show notes. Because, you know, there really is no better way to hear it than that. And I, you know, your cadences and everything, that, you know, you can only... your poems, I appreciate hearing them in your own voice because I can read them in my own cadence in my head - but it's not the same thing.

A

Alicia Sometimes 40:32

No, thank you. And I'm so glad you talked about the absurdity. Because when I was going through it, I read everything. I read others, so many great poets who've written about breast cancer, there's so many great writers that, so many, you know, just even blogs, personal anecdotes, I reached out to people who were going through the same thing. It was just that community again, and to me that, it's sort of a network and, and I see networks in, you know, whether it's dark matter or diseases, anything, you know, the human body, there's all these networks - brains - and just to talk to people was great. So yeah, I thought didn't, you know, don't you think that if you're getting told you have cancer that you're going to get, you know, 'come in and sit down with some tissues and, you know, here, I'm going to tell you very elegantly', and it was like, I was just ordering a muffin and answered the phone. And they said, 'Oh, yeah, you've got cancer. Can you come in?' It's, like, what? I had to take a moment. Yeah, just a breath. And also, post surgery. I literally was, because I'm very, have the lowest tolerance for any, you know, headache tablet, any drug whatsoever, alcohol, anything. And so I'm post surgery in so much pain and so high, that I can't even text my friends to say I'm okay. But an email came up or a text message. They were like, 'Buy these shoes!' And I went, 'Oh, my God!' And pressed twice. And -

K

Krystle Marie 42:06

(laughing) I do remember that - you could order two pairs of leopard print shoes, but you couldn't text your friends. It's such a memorable line.

A

Alicia Sometimes 42:12

(laughing) It's so true! So now I wear those shoes. I go two weeks, you know, after getting home, these shoes arrive, and I have zero recollection of doing it. And I was like, 'The're great!' And they were in the right size.

K

Krystle Marie 42:26

Amazing. Okay, well, thank you, 'High Alicia', for the shoes (laughing) ...actually, we were touching on gravitational waves before, and that is something that I don't want to miss the opportunity to talk about. Because I was kind of disappointed when I found out that it wasn't currently a thing, but you you helped create - I want to call it an 'experience' - 'Particle Wave' as a planetarium show - and you, you helped create this with other writers, artists, scientists. And as far as I recall, you did have that come to Brisbane?

A

Alicia Sometimes 42:32

Yes. Yeah. (laughing) Exactly.

K

Krystle Marie 42:40

For the World Science Festival, which is amazing - that was 2019 -the same year, New Scientist, London as well, which is a pretty big deal.

A

Alicia Sometimes 43:17

Yeah, it was amazing. Yeah.

K

Krystle Marie 43:21

New Scientist is, is one that I follow. So I was like, 'That's so exciting!' What was it like to translate your words? I don't want to say 'add' your words, but, you know, sort of, what was it like to try and use image and sound in addition to your words to create an experience - particularly as a collaborative project with...?

A

Alicia Sometimes 43:57

Yeah. Oh, I'm so glad you asked. Because at the moment, most of my work is in collaboration with visual artists and sound artists - and I create sound as well. But I love working with other artists. So in 2009, I was director and co-creator of a show called 'Elemental', which was about the beginning of the universe. And what I did there was spoke to other writers, artists, and spoke to scientists and got the funding and, you know, so it was definitely director-producer role of getting everyone together, and created this planetarium show, which was amazing and, and great. And from that, when there was the discovery of gravitational waves, I thought, 'Yes, this is perfect!' And was very lucky. Just everything sort of fell into place, where I spoke to OzGrav, they were really forthcoming with a couple of their artists, and as well as - because they have a couple of in-house creators who are incredible -and spoke to the scientists about the science. And then we reached out to other writers and visual makers and, you know, and sound artists, and created this show called 'Particle Wave', which was just, sort of, a love letter to gravitational waves. So I have four or five pieces in that, and I sort of top, 'top and tail' the show. But to have someone like Maxine Beneba Clarke, who's an incredible poet, Omar Musa, Lisa Gorton, Jordie Albiston - who passed away in '21 - she was amazing. And to have these writers, you know, I had to give them some information about gravitational waves, they do their own research, and then to have their interpretation. And then to have snippets of the scientists talking and one thing - I wanted to capture with the scientists talking was one - tell me about the science tell it, tell us about what it means how big is, you know, LIGO these four kilometre arms, you know, what are gravitational waves and so forth. But also to capture, 'What was the moment like when you knew that the world was going to get this information out?' And then they are like, (excitement) 'Oh, wow!' You know, and they giggle, and that laughter, and one of my favourite things is Dr. Katie Mack, who many people might know, she spoke about how, you

know, everything is passing through us at the moment, you know, gamma rays, and X rays, you know, and dark matter, dark energy - just everything is going through us and gravitational waves being one of them - is just, the way she kind of (mimics bold laughter) - she's giggling about it. And I think it is just capturing that, just, genuine love of science and absolute awe and curiosity about the universe. So to create a show like that, and it came together quite quickly. But again, as anyone who's ever put on a theatre show or a movie or anything, the behind the scenes of getting, you know, the funding and everything was - is hard. But yeah, once that came together, that was amazing. And that toured a lot of places around the world, and was booked for so many places in 2020 - and we all know what happened.

K

Krystle Marie 47:31

Yeah. Do you think we'll see it again?

A

Alicia Sometimes 47:34

Yes. Look, it plays in Melbourne quite a bit, and it has played around the world. And I definitely want to bring it back to Brisbane, so.

K

Krystle Marie 47:41

Yeah. Oh, I'd happily travel to - it'd be a good excuse for me to come down to Melbourne (laughs)

A

Alicia Sometimes 47:48

And Brisbane, again, I LOVE Queensland, by the way.

K

Krystle Marie 47:50

Yeah.

A

Alicia Sometimes 47:51

It's amazing.

K

Krystle Marie 47:52

We've had some lovely days recently. So, do you think this is something that's going to be, you know, sort of, a different avenue for you? Do you think you'll, you'll create a lot more, you know, immersive art? Or, you know, is there going to be a focus more on... because you did say

that many of the, many of the poems that have emerged from your time with Tamara in the the ANAT residency, 'Synapse' residency, that's - we're going to see a lot more of those coming. So, you know, what's, what are, you know, what are you thinking of next? Where are we going?

A

Alicia Sometimes 48:33

Yes, so I was really lucky - just to preface that saying - like, like the end of last year, I had an, an installation as part of the exhibition for 'Dark Matters' at the Science Gallery Melbourne with Andrew Watson. And he created this beautiful - these beautiful visuals and music - and it was a triptych. And it was a ten-part series on dark matter, but you could walk in and walk out or - they were really short little, little short films. And it was just a wonderful experience to create, kind of, longer narratives where you could sit there, and also abstract in a way that you could just hear a sentence and walk away. You didn't - you don't have to sit and watch the whole thing. And I love that immersive moment. I love taking poetry out of the page, off the stage, just somewhere... somewhere different. So I will always create that, and very inspired by what I did with Tamara, and the great thing about ANAT - and for those who don't know, the Australian Network of Art - Art and Technology. They were so supportive, and that moment with Tamara and her team was meant to be the creations, you know, the research, the nebulous, the start of things. And as an artist you come away, and I kind of felt guilty that, at that time, that maybe I've written a few poems, but I'm like, 'Okay - where's the big work?' But I can take months with pieces, and getting it right, and coming up with the right collaboration... And I got hundreds of hours of recordings. But yeah, so it's always that pressure to create something - which is a great pressure - but yes, more, more installation, more... I love writing for the page, and I love reading - I read really widely - but yeah, more, more... Music, and visuals, and words go together so well, don't they?

K

Krystle Marie 50:35

Yeah. Well, that's so wonderful! I mean, particularly because, you know, you mentioned 2020, and I think... Something that did happen amongst, you know, I have mainly musical friends, and then everything changed for them at the time. And, you know, live music, live performance, it, sort of, took such a dive. And I think it's really exciting to know that it's not just music coming alive again, that people are actually - I do think that there is more of a... people seem to be getting more creative in what they're putting out there in terms of entertainment now. People are sort of, you know, thinking a little more experimentally about, you know, what's the... w- and it's not so much 'sit-down' art necessarily, it can be, sort of, more immersive. And there's opportunities for a person to become, sort of, in their own way, a part of the art. And I think, you know, I was reading the, the introduction to your collection, and Andrea Russell - who's quite a fascinating personality - um, a media artist and interdisciplinary researcher in science-art. So there were, actually, so many, so many lines that, that in the introduction, where she really encapsulated your work in Stellar Atmospheres, but I had to pick one - just for brevity. And the one that I landed on was, 'It's a unique poetic linguistic translation of astronomical phenomena.' I thought, if I had to pick one, that is - that's going to be the one that captures it. And I really hope that, you know, science-lovers, and poetry-lovers alike, you know, come upon this work - mine's still in the mail, for some reason -

A

Alicia Sometimes 52:42

- I apologise for that.

K

Krystle Marie 52:43

- you have no control over that. I'm very excited. I mean, it might be one of those things where I get home, and I'd forgotten almost, that I'd had anything in the mail and, you know, be like, 'Yay, I've got a present!' But um, you know, I think, what I was thinking about reading it is that I have so many quite analytically-minded friends that are in things like engineering and mathematics and are 'sciency' people. And I feel, you know, whenever I've talked to them about writing or poetry, it's, it goes over their head quite a bit. But I feel, like, you know, what's cool about some of these poems is that they're, there are things in there for people to latch on to that is, that is going to connect with their... it's going to connect with something, you know? It's either going to connect with their humanity, it's going to connect with, you know, some personal experience, is going to connect with their curiosity about the world or the universe. So, you know, it might even just be someone who's going in there to fact check about, you know - - particular scientific discoveries and figures. And yeah, I think it's such an amazing collection of work, and I can't wait to read through it a, a third time. It's just, you know, admittedly, I find there's a lot of fiction - because I am such a nonfiction person, because I want to learn - I often find... I often find that I don't give fiction or poetry a lot of time. But I think, you know, maybe it is a lot of my personal experience informing it, and just my curiosity is, is, you know, I'm so keen to get back into it and I'm excited to see what other people say about it. And you're launching on Wednesday, yes? At Readings, Carlton.

A

Alicia Sometimes 53:51

(laughs) That's right. launching this week in Melbourne, which is great. And yeah, and with all, as with any poetry collection, sometimes it's not widely available, so go to Cordite Books and have a look if you, if you do want to get a copy and you can't get any. Or, although, of course, your local independent bookstore will get it in. I'm so sorry yours is in the mail!

K

Krystle Marie 55:06

Oh! Don't be sorry - I think it's also my timing. I imagined because, perhaps because it is launch week or bec... you know, I'm, I'm imagining it's a logistics thing. And, you know, and, and that's totally, that's totally fine. It just means, you know, I'm very much one for delaying gratification anyway, because it feels like more of a treat. So, either way, I'm gonna have, you know, a cup of tea, and a nice chair out on my balcony ready for when it comes. So the best place people can find you if they want to see more of your work - I'll definitely link a few of these in the show notes. So, you do have your own site, but you know, you're so prolific! I was even listening to one of your old podcasts - 'Science Friction'. Which was... Yeah. Which was, which is a fun listen. You're so good with metaphors with, with trying to explain these huge ideas in metaphors, so.

A

Alicia Sometimes 56:09

Bless your cotton socks. And to cite Science Friction, which was Natasha Mitchell's show on Radio National, which is highly recommend just going back and listening to old shows. She

radio national, which is - nighly recommend just going back and listening to old shows. She now does 'Big Ideas'. But she said to me, 'Beginning of the universe, end of the universe - let's go.' And she asked me that the day after I'd found out I had cancer. And I was about to say to her, 'Look, this is way too much work', you know, and she would have understood 100%. But I said, 'Yes, this is awesome!' And the night before I did surgery, I was up till 2am doing the first touch - um, the last touches of the 'Beginning of the Universe', and she was mortified, as you would be, but it but I would say 'No, no, no, no, you don't understand.' It was everything. It gave me a focus. It gave me a distraction. It was perfect. Because I didn't want to think about the surgery. So when I was tired, and I woke up, I'd not thought about it. And then I went 'Oh, okay.' Yep. So to for her, I will be forever grateful. And I just wanted to quickly - before I can't - you mentioned Andrea Russell, and she's one of the most beautiful, incredible, incredibly talented artists who's also a scientist. And there's so many, you know - I understand you completely talking about nonfiction - I'm a nonfiction nut. I read fiction. And, and I read, I read poetry widely. But I don't read as much fiction as I used to just because there's always something else to know - there's a book about worms, a book about numbers, and about quantum physics or something. So that yes, you can go to my website, and I'm not prolific. I'm a snail. It's just that sometimes things come at the same time. I'm really, really slow -

K

Krystle Marie 58:01

I should say widely... widely published. You've got -

A

Alicia Sometimes 58:05

Thank you, bless you. Yes. So, I guess I put some information on the website. So yeah, of the latest things. Yeah.

K

Krystle Marie 58:12

I think, actually, as you know, what you're saying about Andrea, and... Actually, what you were saying, what you were saying about the hustle for the Science Friction podcast, and how that, you know, you weren't thinking about your surgery. And you were, kind of, you were focused. I think, to bring it back to your poetry, and just about how we might want to think about the universe, is that it - there is a lot of comfort to be gained in looking outside of ourselves, and reconnecting with that wonder that we so often detach from, you know, worrying about tiny, tiny things. And I do it myself all the time. And then I think, how silly that I'm worrying about the fact that my tea wasn't made to the milkiness that I like, or, you know -

A

Alicia Sometimes 58:24

- that is a tragedy, though.

K

Krystle Marie 58:54

- it is a tragedy, it is, because I feel like it's a wasted tea bag. And I actually remember the moment that I've that I finished the last poem in stellar atmospheres and how I just felt really

silly, and small, and kind of absurd, because I'd read this thing, and I was sort of awash with inspiration. And then I, sort of, closed it and then I, you know, I was like, 'Oh, that's the finish.' And then, I was, kind of, back in my living room and my partner was next to me, you know, eating his breakfast and scrolling mindlessly on his phone, and I just squeezed his leg and then got up, and then - I think went to wash the dishes. And I just thought that, that was such an... you know, that's the exact type of experience where, you know, I was so connected with wonder, and then a minute later I was doing something so domestic. And the absurdity that we can - that we have access to both in some way - I think really comes through in, in the collection. And it's a good reminder for people to look outside themselves.

A

Alicia Sometimes 1:00:23

Thank you so much for your understanding and your kindness. And yeah, there's an old Zen proverb that I'm absolutely butchering, but it's something like, 'First meditation, then dishes.' You know, you weren't, you - you've just created a poem talking about that moment with your partner next to you. And, and it is that narrative, and I always say this - our lives aren't cliché, we can write in a cliché way, but our lives aren't. And you just wrote - said that in such beautiful detail - that we've got to notice things around us. And with war, and all these terrible things happening right now, we need to look outside of ourselves. And also, yeah, just understand that we are such a part of a fragile ecosystem and a fragile planet, and whether that's the environment or looking at the universe, that we're just so connected in ways that are unimaginable.

K

Krystle Marie 1:01:21

Yeah. And it's beautiful to remember that. It does give one the feeling of hope, when we're so overwhelmed, so -

A

Alicia Sometimes 1:01:31

- I like that, hope, yes. Yeah. So much. - they're doing incredible work and just touching upon it is amazing.

K

Krystle Marie 1:01:35

Ah, this has been such a pleasure, Alicia, I'm really excited to see more of your, your poetry come out, hopefully, in your own voice as well. And in various artistic forms. So I'll put in the show notes where you can find more of Alicia's poetry, more information on some of the other creations. A bit more about - I feel like I didn't do justice, speaking to some of the scientific institutions that you've had conversations with, but - Yeah, so I'll put more information in the show notes, for sure. And I think that's probably the best place to leave it on - a on a positive note.

A

Alicia Sometimes 1:02:28

Thank you so much. And how good is Science Write Now, like, an absolute gem and hub of brilliance. And it, you know, it's needed in the literary landscape, the scientific landscape, and the artistic landscape. It's so good. So, I'm so glad you're doing this podcast.



Krystle Marie 1:02:47

Me too. I mean, that's part of the reason why I wanted to intern with science write now. There were a few