

The Shape of Sound: Fiona Murphy in conversation with Caroline Baum

Caroline Baum: Hello and welcome to this special podcast for the Byron Writers Festival. I'm Caroline Baum, and firstly, I'd like to pay my respects to the elders of where I'm speaking to you from, which is Dharawal Country, the traditional lands of the Wodiwodi people on the south coast of New South Wales. For over 25 years, Fiona Murphy kept a secret about herself. That secret was that she was deaf. In her remarkable memoir, *The Shape of Sound*, Fiona shares the experience of her shame as she navigates the world of her disability, trying hearing glasses, hearing aids and eventually learning sign language and finding a sense of belonging in the Deaf community while pursuing a career as a physiotherapist. Her insights brought me a sharp new awareness of sound, silence, noise and of how poorly we acknowledge and understand the experience of deaf people, even while we are all mesmerised by the signers who accompany every press conference on bushfires and COVID. Fiona, welcome to this special podcast for the Byron Writers Festival.

Fiona Murphy: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really looking forward to chatting.

Caroline Baum: Now I mentioned those Auslan signers that we're all watching at the moment at press conferences. It seems to me that we only ever see them on our screens when there is a disaster in play. And so, I think that means that we associate signing with negative things. Would you agree with that?

Fiona Murphy: Absolutely, absolutely. So it is quite exciting to see that there are many more interpreters on screen, but we rarely see deaf people on screen, let alone Auslan in its full natural, cultural form of two Deaf people or fluent signers conversing with one another on screen. So we're only really accessing a very pared back version of Auslan, which is very much bureaucratic language from press conferences. So unfortunately, the general public, whilst they may be excited by what they're seeing, they really haven't been given access to the full scope and poetics of sign language, which there is in the art sector, a push towards having more accessibility. So prior to COVID, there was more Auslan interpreters present for live performances. Unfortunately, in a show's run, that might be one night out of, say, 50 shows or however many shows. So access is still

extremely limited for d/Deaf and hard of hearing people. But I think it's also a real shame that the general public don't have access as well to a language and culture that is not only beautiful, because a lot of people describe it as beautiful, but intellectual. It is so intellectually rigorous and has a complex grammar system, and it is a language. It's not just a piece of performance art. It is really exciting to see in America where Deaf culture is... there's a larger Deaf community, so it's slightly different to Australia. So there's a larger sense of advocacy because there's more people kind of agitating for equal rights. But they quite routinely have interpreters present at rock concerts and jazz concerts and just any sort of live music event. Whether it is just music with lyrics or without lyrics, they have people interpreting the music experience itself. Whilst it was happening a little bit prior to COVID, I kind of really hope that the interest the general public have had in Deaf culture just continues to grow and grow and grow into the future.

Caroline Baum: Yeah, I hope so, too. I have to ask you. I was thinking about lockdown and what the experience might mean for you, particularly to do with masks. What does that mean for you in terms of communicating with people?

Fiona Murphy: It's been... every day feels like running a marathon, to be honest, because I rely so much on facial expressions, not only... Lip reading isn't an exact science by any stretch of the imagination, so when I'm hearing, I'm hearing words that aren't in their full form, so letters drop out because of the way my hearing is. So I'm very much guessing word for word as a conversation goes on. I really rely on someone's facial expressions to either kind of give a tonal cue as to whether it's a positive or a negative word or kind of a flick of the eyebrows if it's sarcasm or the kind of the weight of their voice, it's almost quite a physical sort of interaction. So conversations over Zoom and Skype are almost two dimensional in that I'm not getting the full sort of unintentional cues that people would have when they were face to face. So how somebody holds themselves with their postures and their body language, how they shift their weight and move around just gives all this kind of contextual information. So when I'm being a detective and problem solving, I'm going, OK, so this person is obviously agitated and they've mentioned this word and that word, OK, this is what they're talking about, and I can manoeuvre myself in conversations to gather more and more information.

But with a mask, it essentially erases so much information because suddenly people's nostrils are gone and you wouldn't believe how much information comes from whether someone's nostrils are flaring or not. Or just this kind of scrunching up around the eyes, because people, whether they have hearing loss or not, will start to notice that our eyes are so expressive you can tell when someone's smiling under a mask because our eyes change completely, so you can start to see how a face is extremely important for a d/Deaf or hard of hearing person. So to not have access to that or not to have access to face to face communication to get a full sweep of the body is exhausting. And unfortunately, it's just having to kind of cope with that exhaustion and advocate for access on an ongoing basis, whereas previously I might have been able to conceal my deafness, but I am having to on a more regular basis, remind people or speak up about it, which is... I'm thankful that I'm proud to be Deaf now, whereas if this was five or 10 years ago, I'm not even sure how I would have coped.

Caroline Baum: Well, it's lovely to hear you say that word about, you know, proud to be to be Deaf now because of course, your book starts in a very different place and it starts with shame. And I'm just wondering whether you now can say where you think the shame and the desire to hide your deafness originated? Do you think that it came from your family, from your family's desire for you to not be deaf?

Fiona Murphy: No, not at all. I think it's more from... I think it very much came from my difficulties with learning how to read or write. So that was quite clearly articulated as being a problem or an issue, which obviously illiteracy is a massive barrier and needs to be overcome through strategies and resources. So it was very much... I come from a very pragmatic family, a family of farmers and builders and nurses, so very working class, very pragmatic, very practical, and it was very much like, All right, we need to solve this problem with literacy. But obviously, as a child, being so young, I think that gave me the impression, an idea that this was something that I had to overcome. And being in a classroom where you are very aware that you are not only at the bottom of the class, but you're at risk of being removed from the class to be put into a special unit, would definitely have played into my sense of self. Of knowing that special wasn't a positive word, but it was very much being kind of ostracised away from all my friends. So I was... I think a lot of it came from a good place, the kind of support and encouragement, but there wasn't those necessarily positive Deaf role models around

me to kind of get a sense of ‘this is normal’ - to have difficulty with language if you have hearing loss, this isn’t because of you not trying, it’s because of a lack of access.

Caroline Baum: Just on that point, I've just watched and I'm sure everybody asks you this all the time... I've just watched the film, *Coda*, which has had such a success at Sundance and around the world, been praised as this wonderfully sensitive remake, in fact, of a French film with the same idea about a girl who has a talent for singing and she's the daughter of Deaf parents. I wondered whether in your journey at any point, Fiona, did you wish that your parents were deaf?

Fiona Murphy: That's such an interesting question. No, no, I've never really thought about that, actually. I think possibly I had always considered myself to be half deaf, so I didn't, even for most of my life, I didn't really even acknowledge that part of myself so that my sense of shame was so immense that I got into this sense of magical thinking of ‘If I didn't think about my deafness, it didn't exist’ and I was just hearing. It took me years to kind of untangle all these odd little habits and thoughts that I had about it. And I was so disinterested and afraid of thinking about my deafness. I really pushed it out of my experience of the world, which obviously it was impacting me day to day, but I just wouldn't acknowledge it. And I very much presented myself as a hearing individual, and I had a great love of music and other hearing culture pursuits and that was my identity, and I was very much able to assimilate into the hearing world so well that I wasn't even aware of a deaf world at all or Deaf culture until my mid to late 20s. So, no, I never wished other people were deaf because I didn't even kind of think about myself as being deaf.

Caroline Baum: That's right, I mean, there was a quite complex sort of dance of denial going on there, which you explore, I think, in great depth and with great poetry as well. Now I said in my introduction that you kept a secret for a long time, but you put it much, much better. The secret kept you. What do you mean by that?

Fiona Murphy: Oh, this is, I think, what gave me the sort of endurance to not speak up about my hearing loss because it didn't feel like a choice to advocate and own that identity. So even if I was having trouble in a conversation, I didn't feel like it was safe to reveal my deafness. And it became a tricky situation where if I had been friends with someone for a long time, months or even years, it became even harder to suddenly

reveal, Well, I'm actually deaf because that would undermine the integrity of the friendship, I believed, because I would be a fraud and a liar. And it became this tricky scenario where I felt like I had pushed myself into a corner that I couldn't get out of. So it was only much later again in my sort of mid-20s that I realized, this isn't a choice, this is a secret, and once I had that idea that, oh my goodness, I'm concealing so much of myself, it made me realise that there was so much that I hadn't actually explored, so it was almost like a door opening. And I had that door shut for so long, which was a little bit terrifying stepping into this unknown world of Deafness.

Caroline Baum: So I'm going to ask you a very cheeky question, given that we've known each other for about ten minutes now, and you can just bat it away as being far too intrusive. But you're very funny and very perceptive about dating and the difficulties of dating and getting rid of dating apps. As soon as you've uploaded them, you get rid of them. You don't talk to us about sex. There's a kind of boundary of privacy that you've put around yourself in this book where you take us to the door, but you don't take us through that door. Was that a very deliberate, very conscious decision?

Fiona Murphy: Yeah, absolutely. But there's a lot of deliberate decisions throughout the book, which some readers have noticed, where I step away from personal information or I step into personal information. And that was more of... not necessarily about sex because I don't mind talking about sex, but my sort of modus operandi for this book was really a quest of scientific journeying through trying to really grapple with understanding what is deafness on a fundamental level. And more interestingly, which I didn't think was going to be such a question, was what is hearing and what does it mean to hear? I thought I understood what it meant to hear, but I didn't actually understand it completely at all in terms of how my body is missing certain abilities because of my deafness, such as locating sound or understanding the very shape and depth of the world around me. So that was my natural inclination is to be very scientific, to kind of almost feed my own knowledge about this, my own innate curiosity. And I wasn't particularly curious about my own life experiences because I had lived them. So I had almost taken myself out of the narrative in the first iteration of the manuscript, and it was very kind of almost an academic approach to deafness, which I adored. I just really learnt so much, and I'm just such a nerd for reading random journal articles and studies from 40 or 50 years ago where you can see the progression of scientific thought. But that doesn't make for a

very vivid and interesting read for the general reader or audience. So it was a very slow process of inserting myself into the manuscript over many, many drafts.

Caroline Baum: I wanted to ask you in terms of your own profession, your career as a physiotherapist, and you also explore the sense of touch in this book. So, you know, when we're talking about people who are blind, we believe, I don't know whether this is old science, that other senses are enhanced. So that if you're blind, you may have a more acute sense of hearing. I wondered whether you thought and whether there was any research to support the idea that being deaf, you might have an enhanced sense of touch.

Fiona Murphy: There is a lot of research into that, and it is a bit of a misnomer that there's an enhancement of senses. It's more of an alteration in the mapping of the brain. So take, for example, my brain. I've never been able to hear through my left ear so that area of the brain doesn't shrivel up and die, but rather other sections start to creeping, taking up that real estate, if you like, for what would have been dedicated to the left ear. So there is almost kind of a synesthesia that occurs. So an alteration of how someone experiences sound. My experience of sound is more through taste and touch. It doesn't mean I'm any better at those things than other people. It's just a completely different way of experiencing the world because of that, those changes at a neuroplastic level. But at the same time, because I give so much attention to certain things to help navigate the world, such as body language, behaviours, expressions, I do have a vast array of experiences in my life that I can call upon and read bodies with a little bit more nuance than somebody who doesn't need to use that information necessarily. So I think it comes down to a change in the neuroplasticity versus the real lived experience of how you practically navigate the world, gives almost a seemingly enhanced ability to do things. But fundamentally, at the scientific level, there's not a real enhancement if it's just a person without that ability versus another person, side by side controlled and not doing certain kinds of scientific tests, if that makes sense.

Caroline Baum: So one of the things that you taught me, one of the many things that you taught me in this book is about the sensory overload that can occur when you try hearing aids. So I know a lot of people who put off getting hearing aids, and it's a kind of denial of various, you know, it's a denialism of age. They're worried about them looking ugly. They're not they're not a sexy thing. I mean, no one has managed yet to make

hearing aids sexy. But what I didn't understand was how unpleasant the sound that you hear when you first experience hearing aids can be. Can you just talk a little bit about what happens when you use hearing aids, why you delayed that for so long and about that sensory noise?

Fiona Murphy: Yeah. So two parts to that question. The reason why I delayed it is because it wasn't an option in terms of technology when I was a child. So to give context, I'm profoundly deaf in my left ear. And at that stage when I was a child, I had complete intact hearing in my right ear. The kind of methodology and thinking at the time was, Well, you can get by with one ear. She'll be right, you'll be fine. And they weren't doing cochlear implants for unilateral deafness at that stage. They are offering that to people now, and it's seen as the kind of gold standard best practice. So if I was diagnosed today as a six-year-old, more than likely I would be implanted because I don't have any functional hearing in that ear, I would require an implant to bypass the ear to create that hearing experience. But one change of technology that has happened is a hearing aid that is called a CROS. So it is a contralateral routing hearing aids. So it mimics the idea that you have two functioning ears, so you pop it on both ears. The left ear, in my case, would pick up the sound, so there would be a microphone to pick up the sound from the left side of my body, and that information is fed through to my right ear. And then my brain is tricked into thinking She has two functioning ears. How wonderful. That technology wasn't available when I was a child, so in my mid-20s, when I tried it, I'd never experienced bi-neural hearing. So I'd never experienced having two ears before. I popped them on and it was like an explosion in my head. It was so... violent is the closest word to describe the experience, which, I don't want to put anyone off hearing aids, but I think it wasn't framed up in a way that I completely understood what was going to happen to my brain. Areas of my brain were suddenly exposed to sound that had never been exposed to sound before. On a fundamental level, both hemispheres in my brain had now sound to deal with and on a kind of a cognitive processing level I was completely overwhelmed. So my ability to think and understand where my body was in space, how to talk to someone, how to modulate my voice, how to move, how to react to a car or somebody skateboarding, to gates slamming and closing. It was just an overwhelming sense of sound, and it wasn't so much a volume of sound, but an opening up of my entire left body, which I just had never had access to before because I never heard it. My centre of gravity shifted suddenly and when I was moving and walking, it was very much like I was drunk because I didn't have a sense of

balance within myself. That experience doesn't happen for somebody who has acquired hearing loss, say, age-related hearing loss. And that's very fundamentally different, because they their brains will have accessed sound at some point and generally people gradually lose their hearing over many, many years, so it's almost a perception difference to kind of sound itself. The longer somebody goes without augmenting that and getting hearing aids, it does become a harsher, more difficult process to readjust to full hearing. And unfortunately, with the technology, whilst it is improving, it still simply an amplification of the world. It's not selective hearing, which our brains are just so exquisitely clever at literally tuning in to what we want to hear. So if you and I were on a busy street and talking and there are other people around us, but I give my attention to you, my brain will acknowledge that, tune down everything else around us and amplify your voice. That's our brain doing incredible things. Well, I should say my brain doesn't do that, but most people in the world, their brains are able to do that, selectively amplify voices in a crowd or if there's multiple people speaking. Unfortunately, hearing aids can't do that, but what they will do is amplify all surrounding noises.

So a really common experience is cafes or restaurants, all the cutlery is suddenly as loud as every other voice, and it is a cacophony of absolute noise. And the fatigue that comes with that is immense because that individual is literally having to problem-solve and give their attention with all that background noise. The general information that's given to people is persevere, it will get better or get easier, but there's little acknowledgement of fatigue and the effort that is required. Often people give up and withdraw. They say It's too much, I won't persist. So I think it's often not framed up in a way that is practical. And often the responsibility is given to the individual, as in These are your hearing aids, put on your hearing aids and you will hear. Whereas there isn't that education about how to facilitate good communication on a family level or a social level, of getting someone's attention, ensuring there's minimal background noise, good lighting to illuminate faces, ensuring that you don't speak too slowly, too quickly, over articulating is very difficult to understand. Whereas talking at a moderate speed, ensuring that you're giving the person pauses so they can rest and recover between conversations. All these are tips and tricks that are just not taught to people.

Caroline Baum: No, and it makes me realize that when my mother went to get fitted for her hearing aids, none of this was explained and she went into that meeting that appointment on her own. Whereas in fact, it would have been really beneficial if those

members of her family who are caring for her had been invited into the meeting so that we would have been made aware of everything that you've just said. That is a real failure, and I hope that that's something that we can change and address. I wanted to ask you, since you love research so much, when you were writing this book, did you discover anything about deafness and how indigenous culture approaches it?

Fiona Murphy: That's really interesting. I did find out little bits and pieces, but not enough to confidently include that information in the book, because the research I had found was very much done in the late 80s and 90s, and I was very cognisant of not wanting to be disrespectful to cultural protocol. But I made it my aim and goal, after the book, to start having conversations with other d/Deaf people, but from a more formalised journalistic perspective. I'm not a journalist, but this idea of having interviews and writing articles. So I've been very lucky to have a fellowship with the ABC, doing interviews with d/Deaf people and writing articles around it. And the first piece to come out of that series was interviewing Indigenous d/Deaf people about their cultural experiences with sign language. It's not widely known that in Australia that there are dozens and dozens and dozens of Indigenous sign languages which are still used today, and they're very much tied into culture and community practice. And there's a lot of cultural protocols to do with that as well of who can sign and when they can sign, signing on country versus signing off country. And it's been absolutely fascinating and incredible to have the privilege and opportunity to do that work of talking with different d/Deaf people to find out their experiences with culture. Because there isn't just one sign language in Australia, there's many, many, many sign languages. So hopefully more of that information becomes widely available.

Caroline Baum: Auslan is... a wonderful part of your book is your discovery and embracing of Auslan. And one of the things that I love so much about Auslan is as opposed to other signing languages is, I'm told, having done a term of it that it is one of the most physically expressive and one which gives them maximum scope for interpretation. So if you're a face puller like I am, you are encouraged to pull a lot of faces and you are encouraged to use your whole body. Apparently, that's not the case with all signing languages. So can you perhaps tell us something about how you finally made friends with Auslan?

Fiona Murphy: Oh yes. So I should say to kind of give background to that as a child when I was diagnosed with hearing loss, the question was asked whether or not I should learn sign language, and the audiologist and specialists were like, No, no, no, no, no, you're too good for that. That's the last resort. So it was very much, even from that young age, and it's so crystal clear in my mind, that Auslan was for the 'failed deaf people'. It wasn't for the good deaf people who are able to converse fluently with hearing people. So I honestly had no interest in sign language. I was proud not to know sign language because I felt like I had achieved something by being able to pass as hearing and to speak fluently. And that's a common experience around the world, actually, that a lot of deaf children are put into speech therapy, speech pathology to really learn how to articulate clearly and pass as hearing and sign language is still very much considered the last resort. In 2021, it's still considered the last resort. And there's this idea that still persists that if a child is exposed to sign, it will somehow stunt their brain development, which is infuriating and staggering that that belief exists because it does have an impact on education accessibility. But that's to say that I had a very limited understanding of sign language for a very long time and a very distanced relationship and relationship to it.

But then when I was living in Melbourne and starting to see Auslan interpreters at theatre performances... your curiosity is just immediate because you're drawn to as an audience member, this person, who is so obviously skilled at expressing incredible concepts with their hands and their bodies and facial expressions that it's just anyone would be drawn to it. But I was still very much like, Oh, should I should I not? I had a lot of hesitancy around learning the language. I didn't think that it was for me because I was told it wasn't for me, and I didn't think that I was deaf enough to learn it, which again, is such an ingrained idea for many deaf people. They're told you're not deaf enough, you shouldn't learn this. But eventually I accidentally whilst singing in the shower, slipped and broke my wrist, and as a physiotherapist, I thought I needed to exercise my hands as much as possible to regain the strength and flexibility in them. And I happened at that stage to be living just around the corner from what is now known as Expression Australia, which used to be known as Vic Deaf. I had started to see a lot of sign language in the neighbourhood because a lot of Deaf people would go there and the idea just kept reoccurring in my head of They're really good at moving their hands. I wish my hand would move like that because it's so injured. So I went in. I eventually enrolled in sign language classes, and it was purely from a physiotherapy rehabilitation

perspective, is what I convinced myself of. I'm like, I'm here to get my hands strong, right? That's how I treated the classes. I was very much moving like a robot, just repetition. Repetition, sets, reps. It was ridiculous. I would have looked ridiculous, very stiff. But then I got the experience to sign. It was an inner city location and there could be traffic outside. There could be 10 conversations happening in the room, and it did not matter because I could fluently understand the person standing in front of me because we were both communicating through sign language. There was literally no barriers or disconnect, and I would leave the two-hour classes just elated and usually after a classroom experience I'd be so drained and small and almost scuttle out of a classroom was my usual experience of an education environment because in all of my experience, it would be a teacher talking and there would be conversation and I would have to listen so, so hard to follow. But I would leave these classes, go home to my housemates, and I would be like, Let me show you everything I've learnt, and eventually they would have to be like, You've been going for an hour. Just please stop. Because I was just filled with so much joy and energy and it was revelatory, absolutely revelatory.

Caroline Baum: Oh, that is just such a wonderful story. I mean, we began this conversation talking about how you've arrived at pride from a position, a starting point of shame. What has writing this book done for you, then, in terms of your sense of where you belong in the Deaf community?

Fiona Murphy: To be honest, the actual writing process of it, I was still unsure of my place in the Deaf community, and the actual writing of it really allowed some quite old thoughts to surface in my mind. Really those kind of strange, magical realism kind of... like if you don't think about deafness, you're not deaf. And I started to really map out and understand my relationship with deafness as a whole because I really held myself back from fully engaging with the Deaf community because I didn't think I belonged. But by the time I got to the end of the book, I felt comfortable within myself, and by the time the book came out, I started to get letters and emails and DMs and just almost daily messages from other people who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing saying, That is my experience. I didn't think I was allowed to learn sign language. I didn't think I could belong to the community. And I've been, through learning sign language as well, talking to more and more d/Deaf people who either grew up in the community or who were just discovering the community or who are questioning their identity as hearing or d/Deaf. And just having access to people with the same experiences or coming from the same

position in the world has not only given me comfort, it's given me fortitude to advocate for more access because I was very aware that we are lucky in Australia, there is a general understanding of disability, it's not great, but at least we've got resources and people can have access to education. Whereas compared to the deaf experience in many countries around the world, it's to be honest, it's quite difficult to talk about and read about because it's devastating. But I feel comfortable and confident to be a part of the Deaf community, I'm still very new, but I feel welcomed, which is just... I'm so, so happy to talk to d/Deaf people. So anytime people email me, I'm like, Oh, email back. Let's be friends.

Caroline Baum: Well, I have to say, Fiona, I think that you're welcome in the non-deaf community as well as the Deaf community. I think, you know, this book is absolutely revelatory, really taught me so much. But it was also such a pleasure to read because of your beautiful, poetic language. I understand that you are now writing a novel about secrets, and I believe also about cadavers, so can't wait for that. Thank you very much for talking to us today Fiona Murphy, and *The Shape of Sound* is published by Text.

Fiona Murphy: Thanks for having me.

Caroline Baum: You've been listening to a special podcast for the Byron Writers Festival with me. Caroline Baum, produced by David Roach for Two Heads Media and by Jennifer Macey.