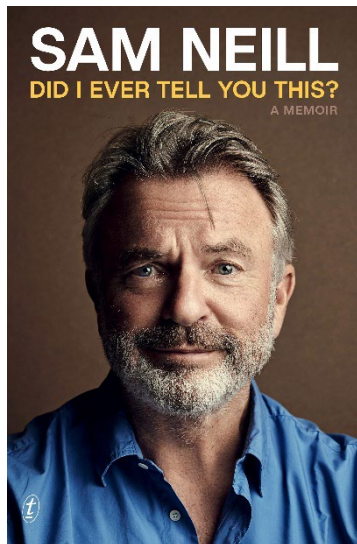


Book Reviews

- ***Broken Bay* / Margaret Hickey Fiction 2023**
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Book Review

***Did I Ever Tell You This?* / Sam Neill Non Fiction 2023**



<https://www.betterreading.com.au/>

In this unexpected memoir, written in a creative burst of just a few months in 2022, actor –and now author – Sam Neill tells the story of how he became one of the world's most celebrated actors, who has worked with everyone from Meryl Streep to Isabel Adjani, from Jeff Goldblum to Sean Connery, from Steven Spielberg to Jane Campion.

By his own account, his career has been a series of unpredictable turns of fortune. Born in 1947 in Northern Ireland, he emigrated to New Zealand at the age of seven. His family settled in Dunedin on the South Island, but young Sam was sent away to boarding school in Christchurch, where he was hopeless at sports and discovered he enjoyed acting.

But how did you become an actor in New Zealand in the 1960 and 1970s where there was no film industry? After university he made documentary films while also appearing in occasional amateur productions of Shakespeare. In 1977 he took the lead in *Sleeping Dogs*, the first feature made in New Zealand in more than a decade, a project that led to a major role in Gillian Armstrong's celebrated *My Brilliant Career*.

And after that Neill found his way, sometimes by accident, into his own brilliant career. He has worked around the world, an actor who has moved effortlessly from blockbuster to art house to TV, from Dr Alan Grant in the *Jurassic Park* movies to *The Piano* and *Peaky Blinders*.

Did I Ever Tell You This? is a joy to read, a marvellous and often very funny book, the work of a natural storyteller who is a superb observer of other people, and who writes with love and warmth about his family. It is also his account of his life outside film, especially in Central Otago where he established Two Paddocks, his vineyard famous for its pinot noir.

After being diagnosed with cancer, Neill's life had to go on hiatus for a while, and so began the inception of *Did I Ever Tell You This?*. It's a perceptive, funny and magnificently wise memoir. Whether or not you even know his work as an actor (and who doesn't?), it is enlightening to get a glimpse of his world beyond that.

Opening with an anecdote of his daughter, Elena, as a child explaining to teachers and peers that her dad 'sits in caravans' for a living, what follows is a brilliant and eye-opening look into Neill's life thus far, from childhood through to adulthood. Your heart will burst wide open as Neill experiences love, finding success in his career and building the life he has now; and it will break through his losses, griefs, (important) failures and lost love.

Through moving anecdotes both on screen and off screen, and personal photographs throughout, *Did I Ever Tell You This?* is deeply personal yet highly relatable. You'll both laugh and cry with Neill, feeling like you're on his journey with him at each turn of the page. This is a heart-warming, wise and highly recommended read.

27 Apr 2023

Madeleine Swain

<https://www.artshub.com.au/>

Look at the front cover up above. That picture of Sam Neill? It tells you all you need to know about his memoir. After all, a picture tells a thousand words, does it not? Well, there you go. That slightly worried expression, that tentative half smile? That's the book – a charming, seemingly honest and frequently self-deprecating trawl through the life and career of one of New Zealand's finest and certainly most popular acting exports.

Eschewing a strictly linear approach (there's a reason he plumped for 'memoir' rather than 'autobiography'), Neill introduces us to his family background and his Irish roots before meandering through his early years and move into the acting profession, stopping to offer comments on the many celebrated personalities he has met and/or worked with along the way.

To add some heft and emotional clout, though, threaded throughout the book are Neill's thoughts and feelings about the health crisis that bookends it. And on a lighter note, so is the odd sojourn into one of the greatest loves of his life – his vineyard.

If you're looking for gossip, you'll find plenty to enjoy. But this is hardly the scurrilous slander mongering and barbed brickbats of a Hedda Hopper skewering or an 'article' in the National Enquirer. In fact, most of the people Neill mentions he seems to rate pretty highly. But when he does come across a curmudgeon or someone who behaved less than favourably on set, he tells it as he sees it. Though, to be frank, there are few shocking revelations. He's certainly not the first person to remark upon Judy Davis' blunt demeanour, while still clearly in awe of her huge talent. The idea that William Hurt, newly sober according to Neill, remained 'angry about just about everything' also would possibly not be news to many.

His take on Bob Hawke, at a dinner party thrown by Meryl Streep if you please, is also less than cheering, but these are all fleeting references among the positive sea of 'greatest', 'loveliest' and 'most wonderful' people Neill has been fortunate enough to know, live with or work with over the years.

His reminiscences of the women in his life are recounted with tact and more self-deprecation, particularly his most recent wife, Noriko, from whom he split in 2017. And by all accounts his discretion was by far the most sensible approach.

Indeed, one of my favourite chapters is titled 'Women are Better' and it's simply a long list of 'some of the great women I have been lucky enough to work opposite, alongside, under... whatever'. He ends it with 'I'm stopping there. It sounds like I'm bragging.' See what I mean? Effortlessly debonair and if he overdoes the humility just a tad, really, it would be a hard-hearted sort to take umbrage. Especially when he doesn't provide a similar chapter for the chaps he has come across. In fact, my other favourite chapter head would have to be 'Bloody Bryan Brown'.

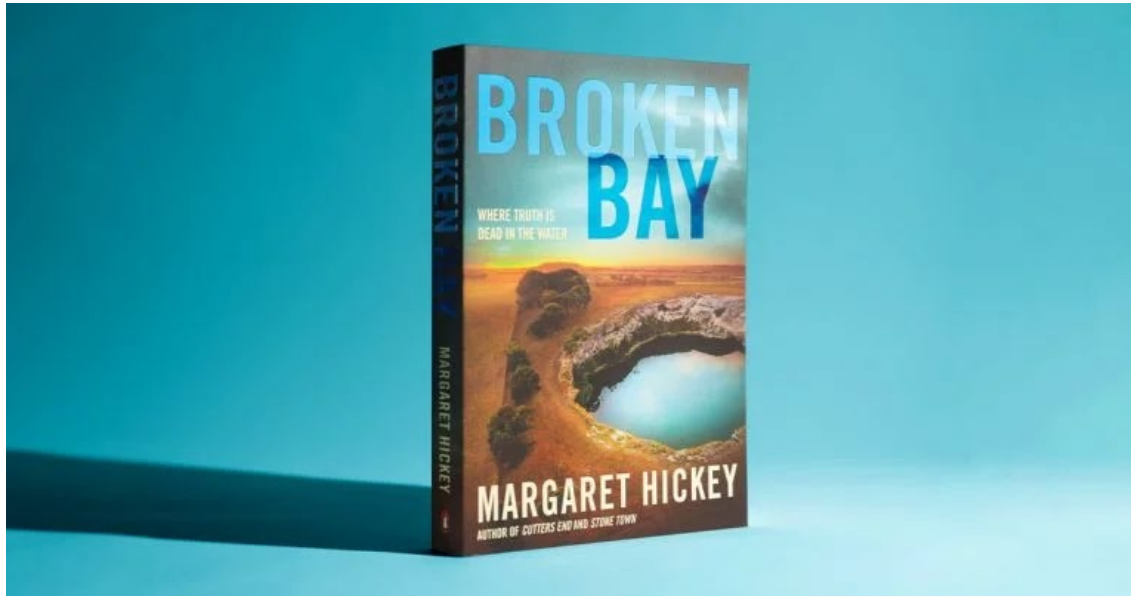
The various descriptions of their long friendship and rivalry culminate in a story about the battle of the hair loss. Chemotherapy or major burns? Only a couple of larrikins like Brown and Neill could be manage to be competitive in such a situation...

That self-deprecation extends to his pontifications on the art and craft of acting. He addresses the topic in the chapter, 'How to be a Good Actor' but then immediately hits the humbles again – 'Oh, for heaven's sake, why are you asking me... ask a good actor.' And if you think his beautifully understated performance opposite Julian Dennison and Rima Te Wiata in *Hunt for the Wilder People* was the last word in generous, it will come as no surprise to hear that he winds up deferring to a fellow thespian for the last word on this topic. 'I rather like Alan Cumming's definition: "Pretend to be someone else, but really, really, mean it"'

Book Review

***Broken Bay* / Margaret Hickey Fiction 2023**

<https://www.betterreading.com.au/>



Old loyalties and decades-long feuds rise to the surface in this stunning crime novel, set in a spectacular Australian landscape known for its jagged cliffs and hidden caves.

Detective Sergeant Mark Ariti has taken a few days' holiday in Broken Bay at precisely the wrong time. The small fishing town on South Australia's Limestone Coast is now the scene of a terrible tragedy. Renowned cave diver Mya Rennik has drowned while exploring a sinkhole on the land of wealthy farmer Frank Doyle.

As the press descends, Mark's boss orders him to stay put and assist the police operation. But when they retrieve Mya's body, a whole new mystery opens up, around the disappearance of a young local woman twenty years before...

Suddenly Mark is diving deep into the town's history – and in particular the simmering rivalry between its two most prominent families, the Doyles and Sinclairs. Then a murder takes place at the Sinclairs' old home – and Mark is left wondering which is more dangerous: Broken Bay's hidden subterranean world or the secretive town above it...

Margaret Hickey blazed onto the Australian crime writing scene in 2021 with *Cutters End*, that introduced readers to Detective Mark Ariti, a relatable, flawed protagonist. Her 2022 follow-up, *Stone Town*, was just as well received and had Mark, now a Senior Sergeant hoping for a quiet posting in his old hometown. That didn't go to plan, but nothing ever does for Mark.

This time, he is on holidays in the South Australian coastal town of Broken Bay, reflecting on his life, and once again embroiled in a murder.

'God I hate the ocean, Mark thought.'

The poor guy can't catch a break, but lucky for us because Hickey just gets better and better, delivering another nail-biting read to top off this three-year trifecta.

Once again Hickey uses the setting to add tension. Her past two novels have had a real outback noir feel, however this time, she uses the South Australian coast, along with its limestone coast and

underwater caves. It's a wonderfully fresh setting for a crime novel, and the underwater scenes are suffocatingly horrifying. I was riveted, although won't be taking up cave diving anytime soon.

The mystery is perfectly plotted, unfolding throughout with the use of flashbacks, community connections, secrets, Mark's investigative skills and some surprising twists. Hickey pares that with sparse prose, punchy dialogue, some laughs and a cracking pace, meaning this is easily a one-sitting read. Once started, you won't want to stop.

Q & A

What inspired the idea behind your book?

Everything I've ever written is inspired by a landscape I'm familiar with. For *Cutters End*, it was the Stuart highway, for *Stone Town* it was the old mining settlements around Burra, SA and for *Broken Bay*, it is the Limestone Coast of South Australia. My parents and other family live in South West Vic, so this is a place I know well. The cliffs, the stunning beaches, the moonah hugging the shore, and of course – those sinkholes. There are around 50 known sinkholes on the limestone coast, and probably more that most of us will never see. They are amazing, these brilliant pools of water, gateways to a subterranean world. The sinkholes of the Limestone Coast are well-known as some of the best cave diving sites in the world, but if you are driving past the paddocks of cows and farmhouses – you'd never know they exist. How could I resist? I love this area.

What's your daily writing routine like and what are you working on at the moment?

I'm a Year 12 English teacher and I work 3 days a week, so my writing routine can be a bit haphazard with the marking and so forth, however I do like a deadline. I find that when I need to crack down and get writing, I do it in big spurts. I'll do nothing for three weeks, and then I'll write like crazy every day and get 20,000 words written. One day, I would like to be in a position to be able to write full time, but I think that will be when my three sons are independent, so it's a few years off yet.

Basically, I try to write on my two days off – I get up early, go for a walk in the bush and then write. Often I have other things going on, like editing, or promoting my other books, or day to day stuff – but I have the deadline firmly in my head and I find I write well under pressure.

If you could give one piece of advice to aspiring authors, what would it be?

I know it's given to most writers – but the first thing I would advise is, to read. Read, read, read and in every genre, all the time. I don't know how anyone could be a good writer if they don't read. My second piece of advice would be to enter writing competitions. They force you to write to a deadline, to write to a wordcount and to be reminded of an audience. If you are long listed, shortlisted or win – then your confidence will be boosted in a massive way. You'll also have a back log of stories to draw from when you come to write other things.

Who are some of your favourite authors?

I have loads! Off the top of my head: Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, Sebastian Faulks, Donna Tartt, Tim Winton, Cate Kennedy, Barbara Baynton, Annie Proulx, Shirley Jackson, A.S. Byatt. I used to love Georgette Heyer and Victoria Holt novels. I picked up *The Black Moth* the other day and could not put it down. What a cracker!

Does the creative process get easier for you with each book?

Broken Bay is the third of the Mark Ariti novels. I don't think it gets any easier. I still have to work out the plot, the characters, the journey. I still throw thousands of words away, I'm always adding and discarding. However, I'm pleased to say that I still love writing. Everytime I sit at my dining room table to write I think how lucky I am. It may not get easier, but really, it's a joy.