Patsy Hallen interviewing Julia Bell

Patsy Hallen: You have quite an extraordinary life because you live in the company of animals and I would just like you to describe where you live and who you live with.

Julia Bell: Thanks Patsy. I live in a little place called Ravensthorpe which is about two hours drive from Esperence and three hours from Albany in Western Australia. It is very, very dry and it is an old farming and mining community. There are about two hundred people in the town. It's very parochial, very sexist, very racist and very speciesist. I have lived there for three years with many companions: seven camels, five dogs, numerous joeys who unfortunately have died in various accidents, and a very spectacular carpet snake who lives in my bedroom with me. I have two old galahs who I rehabilitated many years ago. They have been with me for about fifteen years and I have numerous chickens, geese, turkeys, three very sweet pet pigs, a goat called Cindy who I milk and a ram called Minstrel because he is black and white and he still has his tail. My son, Byron who is 23 now, comes and goes.

Patsy Hallen: It would be interesting for readers to hear why you choose this companionship and what you learn from these animal people with whom you live?

Julia Bell: To answer that I will have to give some background of my life and how I have come to be in Ravensthorpe. I studied philosophy for many years completing an honours degree in moral philosophy with Freya Mathews at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Then I took off up to the Pilbura and spent some time with the Anunga Marda people in the Great Sandy Desert. I still had a hankering to get back to philosophy. I joined the bioethics program at Monash University working with Peter Singer and Justin Oakley. This greatly inspired me as I had read about Peter Singer for years and wanted to meet him and to spend time working with him. I completed my course work and came to Perth to complete my thesis as an external student. I returned to Perth and worked with my camels while continuing with my thesis. It was on vulnerability and what it means to be human. It concerned psychological
vulnerability as well as physical vulnerability. I was fortunate to have Justin Oakley as my supervisor who encouraged me in this area. When I came back I realized I couldn't really contemplate the vastness of what the thesis meant without putting myself in a physical position of doing it. So I thought that I would start a camel trek. I started walking from Spencer's Brook and ended up out on the Nullarbor Plain about five months later. I was walking through very cold weather to start with and rain and hail and then as the months wore on, I ended up in a very warm climate, too warm in fact, and I had to come back. I came back to Perth and felt claustrophobic and I related to a comment on the radio 'I'm laying on my bed about to turn 40 and I'm going mad'. I was about a week off turning 40. I suddenly realized what this meant, jumped up, found the house for sale in Ravensthorpe and approached my neighbour to buy my property. It literally happened overnight. He bought my property and I headed off to Ravensthorpe and got my camels back. My main reason was that I had to get back to space. I had to get back with my camels after spending five months with them. I guess it did change my life in very profound ways which I cannot even express at this stage.

I bought an old property in Ravensthorpe which was very dilapidated. In fact it was a rubbish tip. The thing that inspired me was that there was a small part of the property which was the only piece of land in Ravensthorpe that aboriginals had lived on for many years. They had left fifteen years ago. That is where I built my camel yards, in that very spot. The property is sixty three acres and for last three years I have tried to rebuild it making fences, planting trees and making the house decent. As you can imagine the rainfall here is very low, so to keep things is alive is difficult. I live there with my companions in a very small house. I have encouraged the local frog population by creating two ponds. I have a whole variety of different frogs there now. I have also encouraged the reptile population which includes tiger snakes. I am trying to work out a way for us to live comfortably together without having to kill every second tiger snake I see which has been very difficult.

That was the reason I had to get back to that gold fields country. But when I arrived there I realized it was probably a foolish thing as there was no university and I had separated myself from my close circle of
female friends who I lived with very closely in Perth. To get to university was a six hour drive. I felt very isolated. I felt very much a minority. I felt I was fighting for my self preservation and identity because of battles with shire officials, e.g. to get camel signs on my road, to stop them using herbicides around my property. It was incredibly tough but I managed to do it.

From there I started thinking how could I constructively create a philosophical life using my background and living with animals as I had chosen to live and working with the earth. I created a very viable vegetable garden which I basically live out of. I have tried killing my chickens for meat with no success. I really found it difficult wringing the chickens necks or chopping their heads off, so I stopped that. What I am trying to do now is to set up some ecological niche whereby I can live with the introduced animals which I have for educational purposes. I have children coming out from the schools and families bring their children. What I am trying to do in a very basic way is talk to the children, read them a narrative such as 'Charlotte's Web' and express to them very simply the ideas of intrinsic and instrumental value. I use that philosophical narrative in a simple way hopefully to show the children that there are other ways of looking at sheep and pigs than purely as a resource for either meat or whatever. That seems to have been quite successful.

The other thing which I am aiming at is to get a sanctuary going for the wildlife endemic to the area. I have had no success with all the avenues I've tapped into: conservation-wise, government departments and departments which are meant to be helping women in rural communities. I've just come up against a brick wall and the story that I've been told runs: you can set it all up, but there is no funding. So to keep the place sustained I've had to go back nursing part-time. The other thing I thought of doing is running philosophy groups for children, which I have done elsewhere. I have approached the local schools but the principals are not familiar with philosophy and they tell me that there is no funding even though I've offered my services on a voluntary basis. I hope this answers why I am here.
Patsy Hallen: So Julia, it was really camels that galvanized you back into a rural setting because you couldn't keep your camels where you were living in Perth. Can you tell us something about sharing your life with camels? What are camels like and what do you like about them?

Julia Bell: Camels are really quite remarkable creatures. They deserve a lot of respect. They are incredibly intelligent, very, very resourceful and very functional. When I was on my trek I used to think about Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle as well as the modern commentator Martha Nussbaum talk about what it means to be human, the primary thing is being functional and I think about the connection with this and how the camel of all animals is such a functional animal in so far as it is incredible in any situation. It adapts so amazingly to the heat and to the cold. It can recycle its urine. It is the only mammal with oval blood corpuscles. Other mammals have round ones and this is the reason that it doesn't hydrate like other mammals. So there are all these wonderful functions which it has. It can slow down its whole metabolism. It can go up to three weeks with no water and it can go up to two months with very little food. So the connection between philosophy and camels is very clear to me using an Aristotelian framework. Sometimes I find that difficult to explain, especially talking to other cameleers. Talking to other philosophers I feel quite comfortable. So for those reasons and I also think they are very sensual sorts of animals. I love stroking them and spending time with them. I've attended the three female camels (cows) births and I have been very close right through the deliveries. I've trained all my camels myself which has taken a lot because I've been kicked and had my eyes slashed, and been bitten and spat on. They are very big animals as you can imagine. I've never hit them with polypipe which is very common amongst cameleers. The majority of male cameleers laugh and say you have got to give the animal a good hiding. I always reflect when they talk about camels in this way about the close connection with the feminine: 'You have got to break her in. You have got to hobble her'. I'm always making these connections with my life with camels.

Patsy Hallen: Yes. So the distinction which you are using is that you refuse to break your camels in. You really want to encourage them to follow you. So you want to train them rather than to break them.
Julia Bell: Yes. I actually talk about working with my camels, with all of my animals, rather than breaking them in. You can never break a camel in.

Patsy Hallen: Julia, Camels are feral but they are much less harmful on the natural world because they don't have hard hoofs. Would that be right? Compare them say to horses. How are camels in relation to horses?

Julia Bell: Camels are very low maintenance compared to a horse. You don't have to shoe them. They have very soft pads so they don't take dieback into areas which are prone to dieback. Compared to a horse, a cow or a sheep, they don't just strip anything. They are top graziers. They are very selective with their eating. So even though they are feral they do belong to Australia. They are very well adapted to the Australian climate.

Patsy Hallen: So when they take a bush, they just basically prune it. They don't destroy the bush?

Julia Bell: Yes.

Patsy Hallen: It has been said that Australia has the largest population of wild camels left in the world and that they are very healthy as well.

Julia Bell: Yes. Australia is the only country left in the world with wild camels. Every other camel that you see is basically owned. The reason why Australian camels are in such high demand in the Middle East is that they are very low in diseases. They only thing that the camel has in Australia is mange or worms which are easily controlled. They are very healthy and very good stock.

Patsy Hallen: I've also heard you say that they are very resourceful in so far as they combine being a sheep, a cow and a horse. Do you want to explain that?

Julia Bell: What I mean by that is they have this amazing hair. It's not wool like a sheep. It has no lanolin and you can take the hair off in big sheets. You can skin it and make wonderful garments. You have
probably seen the '40's and '50's expensive camel hair coats. The other thing is that you don't have to shear them like you do a sheep. You don't have to do all the mulesing and all the horrible business which is really a necessity in the country with sheep. You get away from that. You can use their tail. Artists make paint brushes from their tails. It is very fine hair and you can make butter out of their humps. You can eat their lean meat which is very low in cholesterol and you can milk them. I was reading an article in the New Scientist recently said that the milk has properties in it which enhances the human immune system. Now their little pads are being exported to Asian countries for use as an aphrodisiac. That is just a side thing but overall what I mean by comparing them with a horse, a cow and a sheep is that they are far more functional. You can use the whole animal, more than any of those other animals, if you choose to but more than anything they make wonderful companions. They are very loyal, very faithful and once you make a friend with a camel, it is a bit like an elephant, they never forget.

**Patsy Hallen:** Yes. I guess that they are like a sheep in that you can use their fur or coat. They are like a horse in so far as they are a good pack animal.

**Julia Bell:** And you can also tan their leather, like a cow.

**Patsy Hallen:** Yes. And you can milk them like a cow but that is looking at them in a very utilitarian way. I suppose that we are talking about animals that have died naturally and the problem with something like using their pads as aphrodisiacs for an Asian market is that might then drive people to kill camels just for their pads rather than looking at illusions of human potency or rather than addressing the psychosexual problems of males. We take it out on animals and slaughter animals for that purpose in the hope that they will give us some kind of potency.

Would you Julia, being as close as you are to your camels, would you eat a camel?

**Julia Bell:** I have eaten camel meat but because I am a basically a vegetarian, I don't like any meat unless it is an absolute necessity. I have
shot a young goat when I was out on the Nullarbor and I have shot rabbits basically for survival and for survival, if I was in a desert, I would shoot a camel. I wouldn't eat one of mine unless I was starving. I would have to be sensible about it. I think that it is a matter of respect. It is like what Peter Singer is saying, 'If you can't kill it, you shouldn't eat it'. If you are going to kill an animal, if you use the whole animal that is better than just shooting them like a lot of station owners are doing in the desert at the moment. They claim that the camels are destroying the fences which is rubbish. There is no evidence to back that up but instead of just shooting them and leaving them to rot, they should be used constructively. That is what I am trying to get at, not that I would like to see that done but if the populations do grow as is happening then I think that they should be used constructively rather than just shot and left to rot. It is similar with the kangaroo population - you get the arguments that some have to be killed. If it has to be done then it should be done sensitively and in a constructive way.

**Patsy Hallen:** I always used to think that it was a waste to just shoot animals and let them rot until someone pointed out to me that the whole local natural environment might profit from them. Humans don't but all the worms, the grubs and the things that eat the carcass and the dingoes may profit.

**Julia Bell:** Yes. There are always so many ways of looking at it.

**Patsy Hallen:** I can remember once when I was back-packing and I was carrying little protein. There was a dolphin washed up on the beach which was clearly dead. I went over to look at it and give it my respect. I wondered whether I should eat it. In the end I couldn't bring myself to eat it even though it was dead. I guess it is a matter of respect. It was a bit degrading for the dolphin to have some part hacked out of it. I suppose eventually one of your camels will die of old age. Would you have the courage to eat it or would you just bury it?

**Julia Bell:** No. Only if I was starving. To me there is no difference in saying if my loved one, my child or a close friend dies I would bury out of respect. But I guess if I was in the middle of the Andes, as in the
stories of plane crashes, and my loved one died, then to eat a bit of that meat for my survival is almost sacred. However because I don't have to do that I wouldn't do it.

**Patsy Hallen:** We are participating in Earth Philosophies Australia Bush School and Julia is one of our honoured facilitators. This morning we met in a beautiful room called The Hexagon, an eight sided room built mostly of glass and recycled timber which sits under a canopy of very old kauri trees. It looks over a beautiful inlet called the Wilson Inlet which has got granite boulders which jut out into its basin and there are lots of spoon bills, pelicans, coots, ducks and swans. We were sitting there and Julia told us a very moving story about her lead female camel called Suzie and the death of Suzie's calf. Could you repeat that story for us Julia?

**Julie Bell:** Suzie has had two calves now since she has been with me. She is probably now twenty years old. Camels live up to sixty years. Camels are likened with the elephant. I have heard scientists discuss elephants and camels along with whales which is quite inspiring. She is not really an old cow. This was her second delivery. I had a dream weeks before that I had given birth to three children and the first one died. So I thought that something would happen to Suzie's calf. I have a close vet friend, who is recognized as the camel vet of Western Australia. He lives about three hours drive from me but on this occasion, I didn't contact him.

I sat in the paddock with Suzie all day and I camped by her that night in my sleeping bag. It was a very foolish thing because camels are very protective of their newborn. There could have been a disaster. She could have jumped on me and crushed me with a hard bony prominence under a camel's chest. That is how they can crush you to death. I trusted her. I've got this amazing sense of trust and I think that there is a sense of reciprocity. I slept with her through the night and she was bleeding. The thing that moved me was that I was also menstruating so I thought of this strong connection with the whole cycle of life and the movement of things, the passage of things. I was bleeding. She was bleeding. She was giving birth and the moon was coming up. So it was a very special night
for me. She delivered and it was a breach birth. When I helped pull the calf out, she was struggling. I tried to give it mouth to mouth resuscitation to get it breathing which I did do with Suzie's first calf and I got that one breathing. I tried with this one but it didn't work. It was obviously dead. She just let me do it which amazed me. She let me fondle the calf. Then she turned around and sniffed it, nudged it with her nose and bellowed. It sounded like that harrowing whale sound. It went on for three days. I left her in the paddock with the calf and the placenta, let her smell it, let her realize the calf was dead and do her own grieving. For me, there was a strong connection between both of us. After three days I picked the calf up and wheeled it in a wheel barrow a fair way to a grave yard that I had organised with the hole already dug. She was with me when I put the calf into the hole and buried the calf.

**Patsy Hallen:** And to this day you say, although there is good tucker, the camels won't go near.

**Julia Bell:** I have probably half an acre which I have set aside. I call it a sacred cove where I bury all of my companions. I let the camels out to graze on the blue bush nearby, but they never go near the cove area. Susie bellowed for three days and for a year after that she wouldn't let me near her. She had a change of personality. I feel that she blamed me or thought that I had done something to the calf. It is just recently that we have re-connected. I have let her go very gently after the last two years. The interesting thing now is that I have a new camel, Betsy, who is pregnant and about to deliver any day. Sinbad the bull has given her a hard time so I have had to separate him as it is not his calf. Even though he is gelded he is still quite fiery. The strange thing is that Luke, a friend who is looking after the camels, says that Suzie has become like a midwife to Betsy. She follows her around. She is out in the paddock keeping Sinbad away. It is quite a remarkable relationship. She has taken on the midwife role of watching to make sure that none of the other camels come and harass her while she is delivering. So they are quite remarkable animals.

**Patsy Hallen:** Thank you Julia for being a midwife to our understanding of how better to live with animals. I think that you are not only a
philosopher in the traditional sense of the word insofar as you are a lover of wisdom but I also think you know about the wisdom of loving.