

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Loretta Smith, author of *A Spanner in the Works: The extraordinary story of Alice Anderson and Australia's First All-Girl Garage*. And I think that title gives us a pretty good idea of what we're going to be talking about today, but can you give us a bit more of an introduction to Alice?

LS: Well, Allison, as I say to people, she's the most interesting person I've never met. She was extraordinary. She was born in 1897. She died at the tender age of 29, but in that time, she achieved so much. To become a mechanic in the early 20th century as a woman was incredibly incredible, particularly in Australia, and to actually design and build your own motor garage and be running your own business out of the garage that you designed at age 22, lends itself to the extraordinary story that is Alice Anderson that I was so captivated by.

AT: That sounds like something that would be impressive even today, to be running your own successful business at 22, but for a woman of that time, and particularly in that field, because I feel like there were some fields, like if she wanted to run a hat shop, she probably would have been more accepted, but as a woman in the automotive field in particular, and especially once it got around that she was only employing women, I imagine there would have been a few obstacles in her path on that front.

LS: There absolutely were, and I guess it was that really interesting window for women between the two World Wars. So this is just coming out of World War I, and there were opportunities there for women that weren't there before the war or after the war, particularly once we hit the depression after the 1929 crash, so she was kind of ahead of her time and of her time. And you know we're talking about the roaring 20s when she was at her height, where women were running around cutting their hair short, and smoking and drinking and wearing diaphanous frocks and all sorts of outrageous things that was quite outlandish, and it was obviously a reaction to coming out of the horrors of World War I, and there was money being thrown around. But also Melbourne was the capitalist of Australia back then, and it was very conservative, so there was a social backlash as well. And so Alice was kind of centered in amongst all of that, so women had opportunities, but then no woman other than Alice, I suspect, in the whole of the country, was asking to be trained as a mechanic. Women were certainly learning how to drive from men, and some of them advertised as you know teaching women a specialty, but of course it was still a very misogynist society, and women weren't seen as capable as men, particularly behind the wheel of a motor car. And of course a lot of the motor cars were designed and built for men, so they didn't even lend themselves to the smaller size of a woman until a bit later on, and Alice did buy in 1926, a 1926 Baby Austin, that was designed particularly and promoted for women. But when it came to her studying to become a mechanic, she found it awfully, awfully difficult, but she didn't give up. She had to find a man clearly, that would run a garage that would apprentice her, and so she was kicked out of a lot of her garages because she was young, she was easily mistaken for a boy or a young man, and she was tiny. She was, you know maybe 155 centimetres tall, and around 50 kilos, and so a man wouldn't expect that she was capable back in the day. But she finally found someone that did apprentice her, and decades later he said she was the best student he'd ever had.

So she came to the very smart family, her father was an engineer, he specialised in civil and mechanical engineering, and all the family was very smart and quite eccentric.

AT: Okay you can't just say they were eccentric and then not explain - you can't just leave that dangling!

LS: Well they were kind of brilliant, possibly verging on madness for some of them, and I'm particularly thinking of her father, Joshua Thomas Noble Anderson, known as JT, who ran an engineering company with John Monash, the John Monash, whom he taught at Melbourne University. So he helped John pass his engineering exams, and they went into business together, a company called, strangely, Monash and Anderson, and the year that Alice was born, they won the contract to use the Monash concreteing process in Victoria, and that is basically the new technology that was reinforced concrete, which was basically iron rods inside of concrete, which sounds very basic today, and it was actually designed in the production of flower pots, believe it or not, but obviously it had an enormous application that was kind of the material of the burgeoning 20th century. And as John Monash said, it meant that you could build strong structures that you could mold into any form of beauty, and so they ended up building most of the concrete, reinforced concrete bridges in Victoria. In fact the Morel Bridge over the Yarra, which is a very familiar tri-arch bridge, beautiful bridge, it's now just a foot bridge, but it did hold traffic back in the day, and that was designed by Alice's father, and built by Monash and Anderson. And so that's kind of where Alice got her smarts, if you like, but as John Monash said that he thought that, JT as the family knew him, was even more intelligent than his intelligent self, but he was a very poor money manager. He was a big picture person, he was full of amazing ideas, but quite erratic, and the family, even though Alice's parents were Irish Protestant upper middle class, and they were of a certain class. And when he had contract jobs, he earned a lot of money, but they went from rags to riches to rags to riches constantly throughout Alice's life because of his poor money management skills. He would invest in gold mines that fall apart, he had these great business ideas that just never quite succeeded, and so he was a brilliant man, but quite flawed, and he didn't suffer fools gladly, and so he had a falling out with a lot of his peers a lot of the time. He spoke his mind, and if he thought someone was a fool, he'd tell them to their face, so that made things quite complex, but a very, very, very brilliant man, as was Alice's mother, who was a very intelligent and educated woman in her own right, but of course, women didn't get the kind of accolades that men did back then - even so today, to a degree still. So that's the whole reason I had to write Alice's story, the more I found out - the more I realized there wasn't a lot of information out there about her, and no one had told her full story, and the more I dug, the more I saw, apart from being an amazing woman, it was like, my god, the the narrative arc in this is just like, truth is stranger than fiction almost, and so I was hooked.

AT: So it sounds like she probably, I guess, learned the hard way from her father's experiences that, what she had to do in business to make it a stable situation for herself, and she was also a hard worker, I mean, before she had the garage, she was, she built sort of a gig business, if you will, out of being a chauffeur, and as a female chauffeur, she was particularly in demand.

LS: Yes, she was, and the way that that came about is that her father had set up this transport cooperative in Hillsville, and there's the very dangerous black spur that was an unmade road, hairpin bends in the Yarra Valley, and they'd have at least one fatality a year, horse and cart going over the edge. And so in 1915, the technology was available with the pneumatic tyres to actually take the weight of the charabanc, which was the big wide open buses, and so he set up a transport cooperative for these buses to carry more people and be safer, but typical him, he set it up as a cooperative and had the locals invest. He was a bit of a Fabian socialist, and that was all very well and good, but then he found this shiny Hupnabil tour of very expensive English showroom, car showroom in Melbourne, and thought, oh, for the wealthier gentleman and his family, they might prefer to travel this way, so he put a deposit on the car that was virtually almost the cost of a T-model Ford. So it was a very expensive car, he could barely afford the deposit, and he hadn't consulted the board, and when he went to do that, they said, well, this goes against the whole principle of what you've set up here, we're not going to take that car on, and so Alice got that car along with its debt for 18th birthday, so she was kind of pushed into, as much as she loved cars and couldn't wait to learn how to drive, this was the incentive for her to create this incredible business.

AT: I have it down as 350 pounds that she had to pay off at the ripe old age of 18 because of her father's mismanagement.

LS: Yes, at least that amount, yes.

AT: Yeah, parents particularly liked having her drive their daughters home from dances or, you know, country women wanted her to take them on shopping excursions, expectant mothers, you know, had her taking them to the hospital.

LS: Yes, well, particularly the mothers of girls and young women from the country, they saw Alice as the perfect chaperone to keep their daughters in line and not to be in any danger with a potential male driver. But the interesting thing was that Alice was sometimes younger if not that much older than her charges, her female charges, and I suspect they all got off to a bit of mischief really, but yeah, that was a good start to her business and particularly promoting and supporting women and girls.

AT: I know we've mentioned, you know, World War I - she was one of the volunteer motorists who would transport wounded soldiers from troop ships to the hospital or home to their families, and it's very interesting, this period between the World Wars because during both World Wars, we saw this pattern of women being given opportunities that they'd never had before because the men were gone and so the women had to step up, but then when the men came home, suddenly they were expected to just go back to life the way it was before, and it's obviously a lot harder to give up, you know, opportunities that you've had to know for a fact that you could do this job as well or better than a man.

LS: Genie was out of the bottle.

AT: Yeah, exactly. And also that degree of independence that they didn't necessarily have before. And I feel like there is a big connection between being able to drive and being free. I think Alice saw that.

LS: Yeah, absolutely. And I have some wonderful photos somewhere in the book, of course, but not as many as I'd like. And it certainly was a freedom machine for all young people, but particularly women, that we're talking at a time where women would live with their families until they got married and then they would live with their husband. And the concept of teenager hadn't quite been cemented into the culture, but I suspect the 1920s and the freedoms and the new technologies was the beginning of that concept of actually having a freedom between when you finish school and when you, you know, expected to get married. And so I think that was very much part of the period as well, the sense of freedom and to, for young couples, for young women to get away from their families by going on little car trips. It's the only way you got some privacy and were able to escape from prying eyes in a way.

AT: Especially if your chauffeur slash chaperone happens to be about your own age.

LS: Yes, exactly.

AT: From that perspective, it's not at all surprising that Alice did a lot to encourage and teach other women, not just obviously her own employees had to be trained as mechanics, but also she was a huge advocate for women learning to drive. And she said at one point, her vision was, quote, "to turn a trade into a profession for women." But also just that freedom that we're talking about, of just having access to the road.

LS: Exactly, exactly. Yeah, she was very, very clear about that. And she took a huge risk surrounding herself with women employees only. And, you know, as she said, that any man could be a client, that just couldn't be on the payroll. And she certainly had male clients, but obviously women flocked to Alice to be apprenticed to her, to learn how to drive, and more importantly, to learn how to maintain their own cars, which is why she, you know, she was an incredible inventor as well, which as the more I found out about it, the more I thought, my goodness, this woman, should be a household name. And if she were a man, she certainly would have because she invented what we now understand as the creeper, which is, you know, just a trolley that rolls under cars, a very simple thing. But, you know, why didn't I come up with the idea of white out or stick-it notes? Very simple once you've come up with the idea, but no one had thought of it before. And she called it the get out and get under. And it was just a wooden board on four casters with a little padded headrest. But she had it fold in the middle because her idea was to not only use it for herself in the garage, but particularly for women, once they were out on a country road, which is probably five minutes out of Melbourne at that time in history, if they needed to, their car broke down and they needed to get out and get under the car to fix it, they wouldn't dirty their clothes because she was very, very, very stringent that women that owned and drive cars could know how to fix them because that was about, part of the independence because you didn't have the garage on every corner. You didn't have

someone, the RACV in those early days, weren't around to come and pick you up and tow you back somewhere. So the more you understood the mechanics of your car and could fix basic problems on the road, the more independent you could be.

AT: I would also imagine that depending on the specific outfit that a woman would have been wearing at the time, they wouldn't necessarily have had a lot of maneuverability to wiggle under a car depending on, you know, the dress and the shoes and if they've got stockings that might tear. Just from a practical aspect, things are always harder if you're not wearing pants in my experience.

LS: Exactly, exactly. And that's probably why men fought so long for women not to wear pants because the equals independence, movement, mobility, ability. And so Alice and her garage girls, of course, wore the appropriate gear to chauffeur and to work in the garage. And so they were in overalls or chauffeur uniforms that were basically jumpers, breeches and boots with gaiters and shirts and ties. And, you know, they were often mistaken for boys or men on the road, like Alice was. And Alice, more than likely, was lesbian, although I can't absolutely prove that. And a lot of her garage girls were too, not all of them. But I tracked down enough relatives of garage girls to have proof of that because, of course, back in the day, it wasn't something that was discussed and certainly wasn't anything that was presented in a public way. And I think one of the one of the magical aspects of Alice and her garage was that was women behaving unwomanly in the public sphere, which I think was very brave and quite dangerous in the day. And it could have gone either way for Alice, but fortunately for her, for the most part, they were seen as a very interesting novelty. And they were very well supported, but there was a lot of pushback from the male garages, of course, particularly the ones close by. They would try to undermine her business in all sorts of nefarious ways. But she she held on. And she just basically assumed that feminism existed. She just ignored the things that tried to hold her back.

AT: It's interesting that you brought up her sexuality because I don't think I was aware of that aspect because it is one of those things where, you know, even today, you'll see bios where it's like, and she lived with her good friend for 20 years.

LS: "A companion."

AT: And it's like, we can say that, you know, there's a good chance we can't definitively say, this is what was going on, but we can infer and guess and say, this was a strong possibility. But it's interesting how we're coming back to that topic of freedom, because if you were a woman who did not want to marry a man for whatever reason, now we're getting into the issue of financial independence.

LS: Exactly, exactly. And even those that ended up marrying later on, they had that independence in those quote, unquote, "years between" leaving the family home or earning their own money and marrying. So whatever the trajectory, it was a fabulous opportunity. And it did attract the more butch woman, if you like, that was more than likely lesbian, though not always,

of course, because it was the kind of work that they loved. It was practical, hands-on, involved in mechanics and machinery, which was never the wholly domain of the man, except for the man saying thus. And it was a wonderful opportunity for those that were gender non-conforming, they wouldn't necessarily get away with being a secretary or a nurse or those sorts of careers that were very, very limited back then for women.

AT: Yeah, and it's always interesting when men try to say that women aren't suited to something, or they aren't interested in something, and then you look at how much effort those men have to put into keeping women out. And it definitely, from my perspective, undermines their point, but they never seem to make that connection.

LS: No, and in the day, the sort of slurs that male garages would put on to the young women, they couldn't win. They were either incompetent because they were women, or they were women, but they were unnatural. And so it didn't matter which way it went. They would always kind of fail in men's eyes, but I think it just speaks to the threat that women's capabilities can have in terms of, that they've created a domain for men and really don't want women breaking into that sphere and we're still today, of course.

AT: As we're talking about the women being able to find a profession that they could support themselves, this was also particularly important after each World War because we lost a lot of men. I mean, there was a huge gender imbalance that resulted from the death toll of each World War that left a lot of women unable to find men to marry, even if that is what they wanted.

LS: Yes, yes, and some of Alice's relatives that aren't comfortable with the idea that she could possibly be lesbian say that. And I think in a way, that's how she partly got away with what she did too. The fact that she had maybe two dresses in her wardrobe, and I jokingly say one for weddings, one for funerals, and yes, she had to dress in the sort of clothing that she wore, although you didn't have to wear pants to be a chauffeur. In fact, one of the daughters of a garage girl that I ended up meeting and speaking with said that she thought that they possibly wore those outfits to protect them from being raped, which hadn't occurred to me, but there's very much a possibility. But it was also very fashionable and daring as well. And Alice would get away with wearing pants most of the time when it really wasn't accepted, generally in society. But because of the work she did, she could get away with it, as the other women could.

AT: And from what I know of the period, it is possible that a woman going out in pants could face assault, whether sexual or just being beaten for stepping outside of those gender boundaries. If she happened across the wrong man, she could end up in the hospital.

LS: Well, yeah, yeah. And as far as am I aware, nothing like that happened, certainly nothing I came across in my research. And maybe that, I mean, it was naturally her personality, but maybe that's why Alice was so charming and could win people over so easily. And you only had to meet her once. And you never forgot her. In fact, her older sister, who was a little bit more introverted, I suppose, said, how come you're so popular? And she said, well, I never get to

speak with anyone for more than 10 minutes at a time. So she was very popular. And I think the fact that they drove cars, too, gave them maybe some degree of protection. But yes, there was always a risk. And in fact, those risks came out more particularly in the media after Alice had died into the 1930s and early '40s, when the garage was still going, it pretty much went up to 1942, well into World War II, before it kind of morphed into just a couple of women teaching other women how to drive. There were articles written by men about the garage. Things became more sexist in the media, in the press afterwards, particularly if a male was writing about the garage. And there were lots of sexist comments, even into the '60s, with a woman being a mechanic, as if Alice had never existed. It was just incredible. And they'd say, aren't you afraid that someone might break in and steal money from the place or whatever? And it hadn't even occurred to the women there at the time. And apparently there was one break-in once, but there was all that concept of these women being vulnerable, whereas they were young and energetic and fresh and different and interesting and trained to the nth degree, because Alice knew, like every woman up against it, that they had to outdo the men to achieve. So they always were very neatly dressed, very professional, and no matter what training they came with, they had to be trained Alice's way before they were allowed out to the public.

AT: I would imagine it would also help in terms of not being perceived as a potential threat, that as you said, she was very small. Physically, she looked quite young. And I mean, she was quite young, but she looked even younger.

LS: She looked like a teenager.

AT: And so it's sort of hard to justify even for someone who would assault a woman for wearing pants. I think it's probably a little bit harder to justify when the person is both so small and so young looking.

LS: Yes. And if you're in the public eye, you're more visible. And so you've got those protections as well. Having said that, I mean, she was just fearless naturally. She was fearless. She grew up in relative isolation on their property in Narbethong, which went through, you know, that was their summer cottage. That was really where they ended up living when they didn't have much money. And they were living like pioneers. And she learned how to ride a horse world, to shoot well, to fish, to hunt. She could do anything. And she just had that natural fearlessness about her. And she she lived 24/7 on site in that garage. And she was young and energetic. She only had maybe three or four hours sleep a night. And she would actually be rung for people that had break downs not that far from the garage. And she would she would get up in the middle of the night and tow them in. So she really, yeah, potentially all sorts of dreadful things could have happened to her, but they just didn't.

AT: Well, and as we're talking about her being fearless, she was also a traveler. And her last road trip, you mentioned the Baby Austin that she had bought in 1926. And she took a 1500-mile journey from Melbourne to Alice Springs, which I wouldn't want to do in a modern car.

LS: No, and this was her idea of a holiday. After almost 10 years in the business. And she, in those days, we didn't have our own car industry yet. And in those days, you imported the engine and the chassis and you had the body built for you. And so because of her abilities and the fact that she had a garage, she built the body herself. And she decided that it was so small and they had so much to take with them on this trip that she did with Jessie Webb, who was a family friend and the first history professor at Melbourne University. And there was a building named after her. She was quite a bit older than Alice, but she had time off over those holidays as well. And so she decided not to put doors on the car. So and tiny car, hardly any protection from the weather. And they took the most difficult route down the Great Ocean Road because it was promoted, as I mentioned, as a woman's car. And I don't think the manufacturers had any concept of kind of doing a rally test with this car, but Alice being the entrepreneur that she was, decided that she would get sponsored to do this trip for Austin car company and an oil company in return for sending telegrams back to see how the car was faring in these very difficult conditions. And back then, we had a 40-year-old drought that was still happening in the desert, Central Australia, and there were no made roads as well. And there were no real garages if you broke down in the desert. I mean, they passed so many graves and so many bones of dead animals. And you know, all they could do was track their trip through, following the the overland telegraph that goes through the center of Australia up to Darwin. And so it was a tremendously risky trip, unbelievable. But Alice did it.

AT: I got to be honest, I don't think I'd want to go on vacation with her.

LS: Well, Jessie Wade was, she had some intrepid travel in her past, but perhaps being a middle-aged woman, she, she just had enough. By the time they were heading on their way back, she stopped off at Oodnadatta and jumped on the train and said, I've had enough.

AT: I would also imagine spending six weeks in a car with another person is really going to test your relationship.

LS: Particularly in a car of that size, because I, part of my research, I went on a little trip down a few Melbourne streets in a 1926 Baby Austin. And boy, there is very little room. There is barely room for anything between the two seats at the noise of the car, because there's no insulation whatsoever. And the heat coming out of that front engine onto your shins could virtually burn a hole. I mean, you're going into desert areas, driving a car that is so hot to drive with hardly any protection that was incredible.

AT: I'm also just thinking how much like dust and dirt and bugs and things must have been kicked up and like gotten into the car as they were driving all the time.

LS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I've got a photo of Jessie Webb wearing, a pith helmet with a mosquito net on it.

AT: Oh dear.

LS: Alice did return quite sunburnt yet happy. And she has a little chat with her older sister when she gets back. And she said she hadn't realized how living and growing up in the bush the way she did had prepared her for such things and that what she didn't find difficult other people did, even the likes of Jessie Webb, who'd done some pretty incredible travel in her younger days. And I mean, they ran out of food. They had to drink, you know, water from under the ground that was salty, that burnt and dried their lips. Alice had to shoot something in order for them to eat. You know, and if the car had broken down any more than they did, I mean, thanks to Alice, the only thing that went wrong with that car is they had one flat tire, believe it or not. So yeah, like I said, genius verging on madness, I'd suggest. She achieved it and got incredible popularity from it. But not something I'd be wanting to do in a hurry.

AT: Sounds like there could have perhaps been a bit more meticulous planning put into this idea.

LS: Well, I'm not sure how much planning she did, but hardly any motor cars had gone through that part of Australia. There were people, you know, Birtles had driven from Melbourne to Perth. And that was a big thing. And there were people circumnavigating and being promoted to, because it was part of protecting Australia from, you know, outside influences. And then of course, to actually go to the Never Never where you might be speared by an Aboriginal person, someone whom was still able to live traditionally was just, you know, there was fear within and fear without from the white settler population. But, you know, it was very unwise to go into the depths of the desert in a motor car in those days where you had very little backup or protection.

AT: Well, and just as a bit of automotive history trivia, the first road trip was actually done by a woman. So back in 1888, Bertha Benz packed up her sons and hopped in the car to drive 106 kilometers to go see her mother. And along the way, she invented brake pads. It's just funny because, you know, again, as we're going back to a women don't belong in this field, like women have been here the whole time.

LS: Absolutely! And they were driving the first electric cars, you know, but of course, they didn't hadn't developed the technology that we have now for electric cars to be more viable. But it was basically because petrol was cheap and the men needed the grunt. They needed that sound, you know, to feel manly behind the wheel. How different it would be if we had electric or even stand cars that were popular at some time back in the day, too.

AT: And unfortunately, now we have to talk about her mysterious death less than a week after she got back from this road trip. I'm guessing her sunburn hadn't even healed. Alice was fatally shot in the head in her garage. And do you want to tell us what you think happened? Because there are obviously a couple different ways that that could be interpreted.

LS: Yeah, look, I did a lot of research and thinking about this because it was a mystery. And of course, they didn't have the sort of forensics they did in those days. Plus, it seemed to me like the police were fairly incompetent in that initial instance of discovering her fatally wounded in the

back of the garage. There were two young garage girls in the garage at the time. It was early evening. Alice was at the back of the garage ostensibly cleaning the rifle and the shotgun that had been lent to her for her trip to Alice Springs by a friend. And she was cleaning them because she was going to dinner to meet with these people and return the guns and ostensibly, tell them all about this fabulous adventure she'd been on. And there was an inquest, of course, into her death. And it was clear to me reading the inquest in detail that at least one person had lied at the inquest, which I thought was fascinating. But probably the biggest clue for me was that Alice's older sister, Frances, known as Frankie, before she died, she told her granddaughter, who then wrote in a book about her grandmother, that they had covered up, the family had covered up what had happened to protect a 16-year-old girl. And I thought, okay, this is as close as possible to the horses from the horse's mouth as possible. So I figured that was the key. I was also in touch with the son of one of the women who was one of the girls in the garage at the time. And I ran my theory by him with great trepidation because it involved his mother. And he said, "I can't help but come to the same conclusion with you," when I presented him with all the evidence that I had from the inquest, from interviews that were done at the time, and particularly from this bit in the book, and talking to the granddaughter about what her grandmother had said.

And so my conclusion was that there was a Colt revolver that had been handed down through the family, and she kept it in her office drawer. And it was an old revolver. And the sense was that she asked one of the garage girls to get that revolver for her while she was cleaning the other gun so she could happen to clean that as well. And I suspect as this young garage girl was handing the gun over and was not familiar with guns, didn't know, as Alice mustn't have known either, that there was still a bullet in the barrel. And because it was an old gun and the trigger was a bit loose on it, that ended up as she handed the gun over, she must have had the muzzle facing Alice and it went off. I can't prove that. But the fact that Alice, the wound was kind of grazed off her forehead and took some brain matter. She was never going to survive it, particularly in those days.

Now, there was the big rumor even up until me writing the book that particularly local people that had families that had lived in the area for generations. The presumption was that she'd suicided because she was in debt, because she was a lesbian and all the possibilities around that aspect of things. And Alice was not the type of personality you would think to suicide, although we can never predict that. But she had plans, you know, and she wasn't in that much debt. And I suspect she would have changed course and maybe not continued at the garage that was continued and just gradually went downhill over the time after Alice died. She really was the character that kept that garage together. But the fact that you don't, if you're going to be intent on suicide, you don't graze your forehead with a gun. You put it to your temple, you put it in your mouth, you know, which is awful to contemplate. But when you're thinking practically, if you wanted to kill yourself seriously, you'd do that. And why would you do it when there are two other young, impressionable garage girls around? Now, the young woman that ostensibly handed her that revolver was not 16, she was 18. And Alice's youngest apprentices, she started people at 16. She had eight or nine employees at any one time. But she probably trained 30 to 40 women at least over that time, because they went off and did other things with that knowledge and skills that they'd gained from Alice. And so my gut tells me that it was an

accident and looked at, the inquest came to the conclusion she was accidentally shot, but heavily implied by the wording that it was self-inflicted. But Alice was very familiar with guns, and she was very, very clever. And even though she was in a hurry, I suspect that it was an accident by the hand of someone else that knew nothing about guns.

The son I spoke to had no idea that, you know, he was not even thought of at that stage and knew that his mother worked at the garage, but had no idea that she was one of the girls present in the garage when this occurred. She wasn't 16, but she was very youthful looking and could easily have passed for 16. The other garage girl was a bit older, in her 20s, and was far more experienced. And I suspect that it really wasn't her.

And the sisters all lied in interviews and at the inquest. And the big rumor that stuck that Alice had suicided, it was very brave in a way for them to supposedly protect this young woman from going to prison or at least having a stigma around what had happened, because back in those days, it was actually a crime to kill yourself. So they carried that to protect this girl, that kind of sullied Alice's reputation in a way. So it was a big thing to do. But at the end of the day, we really don't know. But I'm 99% sure.

AT: As we're talking about, you know, that was a really brave thing for her family to do. But from what I know of her, I think that is what Alice would have wanted them to do, to protect her.

LS: I suspect you're absolutely right. And yeah, perhaps the family's discussed in that way as well. But whichever way it fell for the family that was obviously shame involved, I think. And you know, her body wasn't overly examined. You know, the coroner pronounced her dead when she was ironically taken to the hospital in the next street, Glen Ferry Road. That was a private hospital, no longer exists. But run by a friend of hers, who was a lesbian, who ran the hospital, was the matron, and her partner was the head nurse. And yeah, that's where she was taken. So it would have been shocking for those two who protected Alice somewhat in that they took her in occasionally so she had a break from the garage because she lived on site. She never had time out early. And she wasn't looking after herself that well, she wasn't feeding herself well. She was young and busy and caught up in things. And so they would often give her a spare bed and a nice hot meal every now and again. And she'd stay at the hospital.

AT: Okay, now I really want to read a book about the two lesbians who ran a hospital in 1920s Melbourne, because that also sounds really fascinating.

LS: It does. It does. And yeah, I don't know how much more information I could find out about the two of them. But I'd be certainly happy to look more deeply into that story and write that once I finished the next book, I'm finishing off. But yeah, there are just so many stories of women that are not in the public eye that should be. I mean, Alice was like she was an inventor, but she was also so entrepreneurial. I mean, she was the first person, let alone woman, to introduce the idea of taking your car in for a regular service and not just wait till something went wrong. So she, and she was very, very popular for this. And the men would've hated her for it. It's a bit like they get out and go under, why didn't I come up with this idea that every 500 miles you would take your car in for an all-round service? The garage would have it for eight hours.

They would check the oil and the tires and the working parts and let you know what needed fixing or fix it for you, whatever. And that's just a matter of course now with our cars.

AT: Well, just like the get out and get under.

LS: Get out and get under - which was based on a risqué song that was about a gentleman, you know, we're talking about, you know, the freedom of cars and people courting. And the gentleman would be taking his girlfriend out in the car and every time he went to make love to her, his car would break down and you'd have to get out and get under to fix the automobile. So she was very cheeky as well. It's entrepreneurial.

AT: I mean, it sounds like she had her father's creativity and drive, but also the follow-through that he perhaps lacked, shall we say?

LS: I suspect she learned what not to do.

AT: And it's always fascinating when I'm talking to someone who has delved so deeply into another person's life that they've written an entire book about this. So what spurred your interest in Alice?

LS: Well, first reading about her in the biography of Edna Walling, the landscape gardener, who was of the same era and the same class as Alice, and we're talking the 1920s. The white settler population in Australia was mainly on the eastern seaboard and was less than the population of Melbourne today. And so it was much more class-based society. So you knew who your peers were. And so I was reading this book on Edna Walling, fascinated by her. And there's a chapter in Sara Hardy's biography, which she's now become a good friend, where ladies who lunch and Alice turns up in her giant Hupmobile that she can barely, you know, fit into because she's so tiny and it's probably built for a six-foot male, which most cars these days are still, you know, you get into an average sedan and it's built for a six-foot executive. And women just have to adjust to that if we're not that size. And so, and it was talked about that she was this young woman that just opened a garage and gone into debt. And I thought, wow, I'm not, you know, a car freak or a fuel head by any means, but I just thought, well, have I not heard about this person? This was way back in 2008. And I immediately googled her and there was bits of information there, but not much. And so I just became obsessed, as you do. And just, I wanted to know this woman. And I did do a course, a writer's course that went for a year, which was the year of nonfiction writing. And we met once a month, which was fantastic, because really allowed you to explore what you were writing and how you were researching and writing it. And I started out writing this as a historical fiction because people said, "she was young, she died in 1926. You're not going to find out enough information to write a biography," but that was like a red rag to a bull. And it was a good 10 years before the book came out because I had to dig so deeply and go

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through unconventional, down unconventional rabbit holes, like just finding enough relatives of garage girls to fill out the book with the women that she employed was a huge task in itself, made much more easily today by social media, but still like trying to find needles in haystacks.

AT: Well, I saw a story that you were working with an older client who had Alzheimer's. And you mentioned Alice, and she said, "oh, my mother worked for her."

LS: Well, it was even more bizarre than that, Allison, because I was her case manager, assisting her to keep her at home as an elderly woman with supports and everything. And she had Alzheimer's. And I was just sitting in her kitchen one day and catching up with her and seeing how she was faring. And she just said to me, apropos of nothing, which can often happen with people with dementia that they kind of living more and more in the past. She said, oh, my mother was the driver and the mechanic of our family. She worked for Alice Anderson. And only three weeks before that, I'd read about Alice in this Walling biography. And I'm thinking, what the hell? And so I started asking her more questions. And of course, by this stage, she was quite advanced with her Alzheimer's. And it wasn't long before I had to organise her into care. But I would mention Alice Anderson. She wouldn't remember my name, but I'd mention Alice Anderson and her eyes would light up and I'd get another little nugget of information. And I got permission from the family to keep interviewing her virtually till the week she died, just shy of her 90th birthday. And she went to the garage with her mother because her mother didn't have a babysitter early on. And one of the reasons her mother had to work was was a fallout from World War I that her husband came back incredibly damaged. They ran an orchard in Glen Waverley. So that's another, it's a suburb of Melbourne now, but it was country then. And it didn't make much money. And so little Mary had to come with her mother for a little while until there were other arrangements made. And she would ask Alice questions. And her mother would say, "Alice is too busy, wait for it, she comes out from under the car to ask her questions." But Alice was marvellous with everybody. And little Mary ended up riding in the back of cars with Alice. And she told me a story one day that a man jumped into the passenger seat and took a double take at Alice and said, "oh, are you a man or a woman?" And Alice said, "I'm a woman sir and you best watch your step." Having met someone that actually had met Alice when she died that long ago, to me that was a message from Alice herself. To say, you know, she's found the right person to write her story. That's how I took it anyway.

AT: Yeah. And I mean, clearly you're not the only one who's fascinated with Alice because, you know, your book has sold quite well. Why do you think so many people love her story? Like, I know why you love her story. But what do you think is this broader appeal that just makes people go, "yes"?

LS: The way I approached this book, because I love nonfiction, but honestly, there are a lot of biographies out there that are quite dull. And I thought, I want to make this a page-turner. There's some great ones out there, but there's some, you know, the more academic the person, the drier it can be, because they're so hooked on everything being factual, that it's kind of quite possibly maybe, you know, sort of thing where, of course, I traced down every fact I could find.

But I set it up as a girl's own adventure and a woman against the odds. And I suspect it's those two things that trigger people to be, apart from her life being just amazing. And people are as shocked as I am that she wasn't a household name. She's becoming better known now. There's two women in Boroondara that are helping me to get historical markers up for Alice, including a statue. So we're being inspired by A Monument of One's Own. She's part of the Her Story Museum in East Melbourne now, which takes up women historically. There is a recreation of her garage at the Australian Motor Museum in Birdwood in South Australia. And I think whilst it's more women than men are interested in her story, the men are fascinated by the car side of things. A lot of engineers, male engineers, come up to me with tears in their eyes thinking how this woman survived against the odds. And they've got daughters that are interested in car racing or mechanics or their daughters are engineers. And they, you know, are really championing that young woman that had such guts to do what she did. And then there's the women that are coming out of the woodwork. I mean, this book was going to be called Australia's **Only** All-Girl Garage. But there's at least one woman-run garage in Victoria that was inspired by Alice's story and the book. And there's at least another one that's run by women, but they do have some male mechanics. So I think it's inspired a whole generation to think, compared to today to back then, and think we still haven't got what Alice was providing back then. So I think it just resonates on a whole lot of levels for people.

AT: I'm always interested, given that she was fairly well known when she was alive. Why do you think her story got lost in the first place?

LS: Because the majority of people that write history, the winners of history, and they're usually men. And so she was just ignored. And to the degree when I was starting out with my research, I went to the Kew library, which is literally across the road from where that garage was and still partly exists, I've found out since I've written the book. And they had a section on local history, Kew history, and there was not one word on Alice Anderson. And it just riles me really. And I think if you're not caught up in that initial, like, we've got it, this is important. I mean, she was on the front page of every newspaper in the country when she died. Ten years later, the locals had this rumor that she might have been a lesbian and killed herself in the back of the garage. And she just wasn't remembered, to the point where Dr Georgine Clarsen, who wrote her dissertation on early women motorists, was a mechanic herself in the 1970s and worked as a mechanist for Circus Oz, thought she was the first female mechanic until she took up academia and particularly history later in her career and discovered all this stuff, including Alice Anderson. So I think if you're not picked up early on, you're just buried. And more and more, we're discovering women that have achieved amazing things. But see, me take the credit as well. Who invented the get out and get under, the American man, businessman, who sold it as a creeper. This happens all the time. It still happens now. And so she wasn't even properly credited for the things she achieved. Who's jumping up and down and saying she invented the one-off regular service? Me. You know, her business promoted it. But when she wasn't there to promote her own business, goodwilled women took over, but they just didn't have the panache or the entrepreneurial spirit that Alice did. And the young women in the exciting Roaring '20s, they aged and they became outdated. And they were seen as ugly he women or she men. And

yeah, then once we're into the 1930s, it was firmly back in the male domain, the whole history of the car and motoring. It was particularly timely when I brought this story out too, that it's really fired the public imagination. And I hope it opens the doors for more women in history to be heard, written about, spoken about, because there is just as many women that achieved amazing things as men and often against more odds than men ever had. We know we have to work twice as hard to get there.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.