My story

"How an injured dolphin helped me heal"

When **Melody Horrill** met damaged solitary dolphin Jock she formed a powerful bond, and in the months that followed they healed each other.

As he slides under my palm my fingers brush against his cool skin, which feels as soft as the finest mulberry silk. I'm weightless, suspended, my feet can't touch the ground. I tread water to keep afloat. As I awkwardly bob, the wild dolphin dives, surfaces and floats effortlessly before me. He is spraying me with his sonar, perhaps to ensure that I'm not some erratic mechanical marine object – I am flesh and blood – a mammal like him. The soundwaves from his echolocation permeate through me, I feel as if my insides are jingling and jangling. It's the strangest feeling. Foreign. This whole experience is weird yet so unbelievably wonderful. I think to myself, 'Shouldn't I be scared? This is a completely wild creature and I'm in his world … not mine.' I answer myself immediately: 'He won't hurt you Mel, he wants to understand what you are. Trust him'.

I allow myself to surrender and become immersed in the moment. The dolphin has moved away, eyeing me inquisitively. I reach out and a grossly disfigured dorsal fin slices through the water towards me. The dolphin pushes his snout into my hand. I run my fingers over it. It's rough like sandpaper. I'm shocked by the contrast. My hand traces his mouth. It feels lumpy, scarred. My heart aches, I feel compassion wash over me. What has this dolphin been through? Does he have emotional scars as well as physical ones? He gently nudges me. I felt completely accepted. The feeling is foreign yet liberating.

I feel the tendrils of a deep connection melding together. Like me, this dolphin whose name is Jock seems detached from his own kind. I wonder if he's been shunned by other dolphins, or perhaps he doesn't even know how to interact with other dolphins? Was he never taught? Did his mother abandon him? Is he an orphan? His life seems so different to those of the other dolphins, which seem to seek out and revel in each other's company. He also bears the marks of many wounds. I would later find out more.

Our story

I quickly learned that Jock's life was indeed solitary. He lived in a small part of the river, artificially heated by the nearby power station. He spent most of his life circling the same boat, anchored in a channel. His strange behaviour had captured the attention of Dr Mike Bossley, one of my lecturers at university. He'd been studying the resident dolphins of Adelaide's Port River for several years. I'd volunteered to help him, as others had.

Mike and his research team had gradually come to know Jock and eventually physically interact with him. That was when I came onto the scene and was allowed to meet this extraordinary dolphin. Mike wanted to keep his existence low-key, as it became clear that Jock enjoyed having human friends. But it also made him vulnerable.

Following my first swim with Jock, he quickly became an important part of my life. For almost three years I was lucky enough to play and swim with him in the quiet backwaters of the river. I grew to love his inquisitive, gentle nature and fondness for playing games. Although a stranger in his world he accepted me unconditionally. The bond I felt with him began to obliterate the walls I'd built around my heart and allowed me to experience trust.

My ongoing relationship with this scarred, lonely dolphin also helped me reflect on and heal from my own damaged past, pockmarked with violence and trauma.

During a childhood dominated by what seemed like an endless cycle of tension and violence, I often felt adrift and alone. It culminated in a terrible attack on my mother and my father sentenced to jail. It didn't end there. More heartache was to follow. At times I struggled to understand the darkness which become a frequent visitor in my life. As I grew older, I realised escaping through alcohol and parties was not the answer. I knew the only way I could change course was by completing my education. I did that and then started at university.

Melody's interactions with Jock helped her to overcome her past and carve out her future, protecting the Port River dolphins and their environment.

Through this, I met the love of my life – this Port River dolphin called Jock.

I also met dozens of other resident Port River dolphins. As I witnessed snippets of their lives, I experienced such joy and wonder. They lived in harmony with nature, they worked together, they also faced loss. Watching them helped me discover the importance of living in the moment. Their close, strong family relationships helped me reflect on the fragility of my own. The dolphins and in particular Jock, became the most important teachers I've ever had.

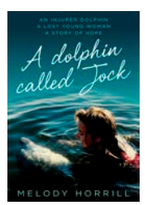
New horizons

My love of Jock and the dolphins eventually led me to help co-create an organisation to raise awareness about these special mammals and the ongoing threats to their environment. This inadvertently led to a career in environment and science reporting on TV news. It also allowed me the opportunity to produce a documentary about Jock and his world. The documentary was aired across the globe and helped with the push to declare the Port River as Australia's first dolphin sanctuary. This was one of my proudest moments.

Since my time with Jock, we have learnt so much more about marine mammals. People are now discouraged from swimming with wild dolphins, for their own good. Humans can be cruel, and dolphins can quickly become too dependent. However, they still hold a special place in the hearts of many around the world. Their grace, beauty and exuberance are captivating.

I decided to write a book – *A Dolphin Called Jock* – to explore our special bond and help throw a spotlight back onto the Port River dolphins and how important it is to connect with the natural world. In recent years dolphin numbers in the river have dropped and infant mortality has risen sharply. There have also been too many unexplained deaths and entanglements are depressingly common. But thankfully, recently, new calves are being born. I hold hope that the dolphins, which live so close to a capital city, can exist alongside people and those who use the river. I believe, with a united effort, they will continue to bring joy for generations to come.

I also hope to inspire young men and women trapped in the darkness of domestic violence to understand, as I had, that the future is theirs to navigate. All of us can find courage and take steps, however small, to change the course of our lives. I came to the realisation that I didn't have to fulfil the destiny my father had predicted for my life. For me, connecting with the dolphins and importantly to nature, taught me so much and helped fuel a passion which led me to focus on something bigger than my own sad past.



I will never forget Jock – the dolphin who saved me. **AWW**

A Dolphin Called Jock by Melody Horrill, Allen & Unwin, is on sale now.

PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION.