

NARC Magazine's My Writing Life podcast: Matt Wesolowski (April 2025)

TICKETS for the launch event for Matt's new book Don't (Call Mum) are available now. The Centurion,
Newcastle Central Station, 8 May, 7pm:

<https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/optindiebooks/an-evening-with-matt-wesolowski/2025-05-08/19:00/t-qinyxpk>

Fran Harvey

Hi, I'm Fran Harvey, and I'm a writer and musician who likes talking to other writers about their writing life. Welcome back to this, the fourth episode of our second series. Today I'm with Newcastle horror author Matt Wesolowski. He has had short stories published across the world, but he's probably best known for his Six Stories series - that is a tongue twister, if ever there was one - which is published by Orenda Books. All the books in the series take the format of transcripts and behind-the-scenes notes of six episodes of a podcast hosted by the enigmatic Scott King as he rakes over the graves of cold cases. King interviews six different witnesses who knew or were involved with the missing or the dead to uncover truths previously missed. It is a great mixture of crime podcast and folk horror, and also urban horror. I wrote folk, but there's urban in there as well. It's a properly addictive series. I kind of recommend reading it in order, because there is an arc going throughout them. But also, if you can't get them in order, that's not a big problem either. Basically, just read them, you will get hooked. I waited to invite Matt onto the podcast, though, till he had a new book to promote as well. So coming up, he has an excellent slice of folk horror creepiness called Don't (Call Mum), which is part of Wild Hunt Books' Northern Weird series. That one is more situational horror. It's strangers trapped on a rickety train in the middle of the wilds of Northumberland while there's something waiting outside in the dark to join them. So we're going to talk about that a bit later. But first, Matt, thank you for joining me.

Matt Wesolowski

Thank you for having me. Fran, it's an honor to be on your podcast.

Fran Harvey

We're on Zoom. So whereabouts are you calling from?

Matt Wesolowski

I'm in the heights of High Heaton in my attic, where all the frustration and writing and cups of coffee happen.

Fran Harvey

So is that your preferred place to write, or do you take it out sometimes?

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, I mean, I like the idea of going out and sitting in cafes and that sort of thing, but essentially, it's too expensive and so also lazy and unsociable.

Fran Harvey

So the refrain in six stories is that the series rakes over old graves. So I'm going to ask you to rake over the grave of your innocent pre-writing times and tell us what your first memory of writing is, and what, if anything, prompted you to do it.

Matt Wesolowski

Oh, well, I used to really be obsessed with Famous Five books when I was really young. And I was voracious reader. It was kind of the only thing I've ever been good at or enjoyed, really, in school, things like that. And I remember my mum had this sort of this old typewriter which had like a black ink and a red ink. And I remember getting this sort of rush of inspiration to write my own sort of mystery story, and I was going to write a note, like a ransom note, but it was written in blood, and so I used the red ink. I think I was about eight or something, but like that was the first time I got that absolute rush of inspiration, of like, creating a story. And it's such a vivid memory, I wonder if she still has that typewriter?

Fran Harvey

Do you still have the story?

Matt Wesolowski

Oh no, I think, I think it was just kind of a - I think that was it. It was much like my ideas now. It's like one good thing, and then I've got to build a novel around it.

Fran Harvey

That was your first inspiration. Can you remember what your first piece of writing was that you sat down and wrote in more of an 'I want to be a writer' frame of mind? And how old were you?

Matt Wesolowski

Well, we got assigned - we had Terry Deary come into our school when I was in primary school, which was amazing. And I remember him being, he was sort of very anti-school and anti sort of educational establishment, and he was so inspirational. And then we sort of all had to write a book. And it must have been Year Five, something like that. And my book, I mean, I remember being very serious about

it. I was like, 'This is it. This is where my life changes.' And I wrote this book called Attack of the Killer Flytraps.

Fran Harvey

[laughing]

Matt Wesolowski

It was about a boy who had a venus flytrap that got hit by lightning and inexplicably grew massive and ate everyone in the town. But, yeah, no, after that, I think it was, you know, I've always kind of written, it's always been a thing, and it's like always been a dream, just since whenever, but it was always put to the backburner when, you know, I had to get a proper job and that sort of thing, because it would have been in university. When I went to university, when I was about 21, I joined a society. It was called the Writers Guild, and we were all very earnest and very sort of serious about writing, but it was great. It was really that that got me back into writing, and I got really serious about writing, and it was a wonderful group full of wonderful people, and we all kind of shared writing with each other. I wanted to write like a historical fiction book based on the true story of Elizabeth Bathory, the prolific serial killer Countess of Hungary back in the medieval times. And I started writing this very serious book about it. Never finished it, sadly. But that was it. That was here I really wanted to start.

Fran Harvey

Does Elizabeth Bathory, was she sort of the inspiration for the sort of 'Beast' monster?

Matt Wesolowski

Oh, she gets locked in a tower, doesn't she?

Fran Harvey

Yeah.

Matt Wesolowski

Which is what happened to Elizabeth Bathory, and what is her name? Lizzie Barton. Maybe, maybe. I think, you know, you'd have to read between the lines. [laughing] She's always wanted to show up. I've always wanted her to be in things that I write.

Fran Harvey

So you used to tutor young people in care, and you've mentored young writers as well. You, were instrumental in helping Eliza Clark get into her writing career, basically, and now you're teaching at Faber. Have you ever been a mentee yourself? Did you ever sort of go through one of those programs?

Matt Wesolowski

No, I never have. Like, everything I've done, I've kind of just done myself. Like I've never been, it sounds dead pretentious, but I've never been, like, taught, if you know what I mean. I've kind of just done it. And then, yeah, I started working because I was a teacher. I was a school teacher in the PRU [pupil referral unit] system, and then I got into one-to-one tutoring with children in care and like, that was really my niche, sort of working with really disenfranchised people. And I started working part-time for New Writing North in their young people's writing groups. And I've learned a lot from - there's a poet based in the North East called John Challis, and I was kind of his assistant. Well, he, I remember him just being so, like, such a great tutor. He worked so well with people, and I really took a lot of inspiration from him, and thought, 'Well, I want to do that.' And then, yeah, New Writing North got in touch and said, Did I want to mentor? And Eliza was my first person, I think, I ever mentored. And she was, I mean, the talent was already there. You know, it was very easy for me, but we had a really nice time. We sat in coffee shops and we went through her short stories. And one of those short stories was a short story called, I forget what the original name was, but it became the novel Boy Parts, and we

worked on that together, and that was really fun. I remember saying to her, you know, just stick a murder in there, and it could be a book. [laughter] But it was really funny, because she was very much asking - we talked about comedy because it is quite like a darkly funny book, and I remember we talked a lot about, like, that balance of comedy, like, comedy makes the darkness darker, and, yeah, and then I applied for Faber. I never thought Faber would go for me, because they're like, this big, wonderful publishing behemoth, and I'm, like, just this weird little guy who sits in an attic, and I was like, 'Hey guys, I can do you a horror course. You know, just say no.' And weirdly, they said yes. And here we are. It's on, its going to be the seventh iteration of that course, coming up in April.

Fran Harvey

Wow.

Matt Wesolowski

Which is wild.

Fran Harvey

Do you think it would have made a difference to you to have been taught or to do any of the courses?

Fran Harvey

Um, I'm going to move on to just ask a few questions about SixStories now, because it's such a strong series, and like obviously, every book follows roughly the same structure, because it follows the structure of the podcast. So narrator, sorry, host, rather, because podcast host, and six different points of view of people being interviewed about the mystery that he's looking into. But I wondered, does your writing - when you're writing them, do you follow the same sort of process each time that you're writing? Because, you know, sometimes you read an author and you're kind of like, 'I can see that this story probably started with they went to this place and were inspired', or 'it's this character that's inspired

them'. But Six Stories is so strong on location and character and then the sort of uncanny story behind it that it's really difficult. Like, I can't tell which came first. Like, whether you went, 'Oh, I'm interested in this crime,' or 'I really like the voice of this character,' or, 'Oh, this monster is terrifying. I think I'm going to put that...' Like, which way round does it work for you?

Matt Wesolowski

I mean, it would probably make things easier for me. Everything takes so long because, because, yeah, I'm better at refining - I actually take my own advice now. So I sometimes go back to the things I've taught and actually try and do them myself. And I'm like, 'Well, this is actually kind of improving my process.' But no, I don't know. Maybe, yes, it probably would have done and I have done a couple of things. I was on a - there's a north-east writer called Peter Mortimer, publisher of Iron Press. And I went on a short story course, I got sort of picked to go on one of his short story courses. And I learned a lot from him. Actually, he was very like cut-throat in how he edited, and how and why and his feedback. And it was brilliant, not in a bad way at all, like it was - he showed me how to, when things weren't right, how to be a bit more harsh towards my own work. And that was brilliant. That was a really seminal experience. So Peter Mortimer was a huge influence, I think, as well.

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, it is a bit like that, scattergun. It's kind of, I'm really into sort of true crime, and I guess, like, urban horror, urban myths. I'm really interested in new horror, like, what are people frightened of? And, like, I recently, in the last few years, discovered the backrooms and all this sort of stuff. And it's fascinating. It's exciting. I love how horror is evolving. And I feel like, yeah, it's a bit like that. I mean, 'Hydra', the second book, I distinctly remember I was mopping my bathroom floor, and I'd been listening to a podcast about - it was a, I think she was Korean, I might be wrong, student who hired her boyfriend to kill her parents. It was quite an incredible case. But I'd also been reading about the Black-eyed Kids, so it's a bit like, how do I combine these two things together? And all a bit like that. They're all a bit - so

with Beast we just mentioned before, you know, I thought about the story of Elizabeth Bathory and how, and then I kind of liked the idea of influencers and someone dying in a tower, but also it's got a bit of West Memphis Three. I was listening to a series about the West Memphis Three and reading about them at the time. So it's basically whatever I'm into at the time, kind of combined. My partner says it's like, we roll a dice. It's we roll about a societal issue, a crime, and then a monster.

Fran Harvey

Your monsters that you end up [choosing] to go with. So some of them, I've gone away and I've Googled and been like, Ah, I see. And some of them like - where do they come from? This brings in 'Don't (Call Mum)' as well, because obviously the Black-eyed Kids, they're a thing. And then there was Elizabeth Bathory. But the frithghast in 'Deity', you've just made that up, haven't you? Have you? I'm not, I'm not entirely sure, because it's so convincing as sort of folk horror.

Matt Wesolowski

Who knows, Fran, who knows, who knows where these things come from, where...? [laughs] For me, I've always been really - one of the things, if we go back to my childhood, I was always really fascinated by folk tales and folk stories and that sort of thing, and that sort of oral storytelling is such a part of our society, and always has been. And what I really like to do is look at sort of areas of that sort of mythology and think about creating my own. In my Faber course, that's part of what we do. We create mythology using mythology that comes from, you know, societal influence and fears. And across the globe, you have really similar mythology. You know, you have the water spirit that pulls children in if they go too close. And you get that from Jamaica to the Inuit to Jenny Greenteeth in Shropshire.

Fran Harvey

We've got one in Teesside. We've got Peg Powler.

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, there you go, there you go. And it's the same thing. And what essentially that is, is stopping children going and playing near the dangerous water, but children are going to listen more to 'There's going to be a nasty monster that will pull you in' rather than 'Don't go near the water'. And that's where I think mythology comes from. So what I try and do is create something that feels like that; that feels real, because you said before, it feels convincing, and thank you. That's like, that's, that's the hugest compliment you can give me, because I want them to feel real. I want them to feel like something we might have heard like a whisper from childhood. Because if you think about back to your own childhood, and I think about back to my own childhood, I think of these stories, these folk tales, and these cautionary tales, they sort of, they're there in the background of our society. And I love that. And I love sort of reaching back into them and pulling them out.

Fran Harvey

You know, I did love, I was thinking, especially in the more folktale ones, because I feel like the Black-eyed Kids are more of an urban tale. I almost feel like the - I'm going to keep referring to them as monsters, that feels kind of reductive, but just for the sake of this podcast - the monsters in Six Stories and actually in 'Don't (Call Mum)', I feel like there's almost a divide. There's the urban legends, and they kind of, they're almost like internet spread and found by research, but then when it's the folk ones, there's almost always a moment where it's somebody's Gran told somebody the story, and that's how they have learned the tale. And I really love the crossover into like humanity as monsters, because I was thinking there's a lot of recognisable cultural horror, particularly, I think, for British people, in the stories. So I'm reading 'Deity' at the moment, obviously, and it's based around this reclusive rock star who lives in the woods in Scotland and has young girls being sent to visit him. And obviously I'm getting shades of Michael Jackson from that. But he also goes out and does good things at hospitals. So Jimmy Savile is kind of getting into there a little bit. And I haven't read 'Demon' yet. It is next. I'm not

stopping reading after I've interviewed you. I'm going to be carrying on with the series, obviously. And I know just kind of reading the blurb for that, that that seems to be sort of James Bulger case inspired, potentially.

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, most these are inspired by real people, but they're also because we have this strange culture of things being black and white. And if you look at, you know, recent events as well. Everything has to have, especially in the media, like a real cause and effect. Nothing can have nuance, you know, so if you - so, for example, in 'Demon' and we'll talk about 'Deity', because you haven't read 'Demon' yet. But 'Deity', you know, we have that duality of someone who does terrible things potentially, but also does nice things, and it's like, where do you draw the line? I took a lot that inspiration came from. I used to be a huge Michael Jackson fan. I was obsessed with Michael Jackson growing up, and then when the allegations came out, when I watched ;Leaving Neverland;, I couldn't I couldn't do it anymore. For me, I couldn't do - it wasn't for me anymore. It was all - I felt a betrayal, and it was the same for someone like Marilyn Manson, who there's a character throughout the Six Story series, who I feel is very influenced by Marilyn Manson, a guy called Skeksis and, and again, a similar sort of guy. He was a bit of a hero of mine when I was a teenager, you know, when I was a sort of outcast, you know, little guy as a teenager. And not just me: a lot of us looked up to someone like that, because they were almost like a guiding light, a voice for the outcast. And then, you know, it was a bit of the same. I watched the documentary, I heard the allegations, and I thought, you know, you can't do anything.

Fran Harvey

There's a lot of us going through that with Neil Gaiman at the moment as well.

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, the idea of, like, how do we separate art from the artist and that sort of thing, and again, there's no answer. There's no black and white answer. So for example, in *Demon* I wanted - it was that idea of children committing terrible crimes and I feel like rather than us as a society, going, okay, so what is it that's making children do this? I think that's really current now with things like *Adolescence*. Finally, something has made us look at ourselves and go, 'Okay, maybe we do have to look at nuance in society. You know, maybe things aren't just cause and effect.' And I wanted to do that in *Demon* where, because you hear of people being demonised, I mean that word is, was the influence on the title. You know, children will be called evil, and that's it. People will be called evil, and that's it. Rather than having a look at factors that have caused things, it's much easier for us to say that's evil. And that goes all the way back. We're talking about folklore - that goes all the way back to medieval times where we would, instead of trying to work out why someone had a birth defect or a deformity or a problem with their brain: changeling. Yeah, and it's exactly the same. So much has changed, yet so much has stayed the same.

Fran Harvey

When you're looking for the nuance in the stories, how do you go about deciding which voices are going to be included in the story? Like, do you ever end up with actually, it could have been 10 stories and you've had to cut some out. Or do you find it difficult to sort of jump between voices?

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, that's a good question. What I kind of like to think about is, what voices would we hear around these kind of stories? And I think what I quite like to do is look at the obvious ones, the black and white ones. So there's usually someone who says, who's very like, 'It was this.' And then there's someone who says, 'It wasn't this.' So we have the two immediately we have the opposite, and then we have the little blurry bits in between. It's always about the smaller details. So, yeah, it's about looking what comes between the black and the white. And the sort of blurry grayness in between is where I get the voices

from, I think. And they kind of evolve naturally. I kind of think of what sort of person this would be and why would they think this? And I kind of almost want to give everyone, everyone a voice you know, when you're reading a story about, you know, children who kill children, or a rock star who's loved but has done terrible things, there are going to be those different opinions. And I, I kind of feel it's important to look at them. One of my favorite things to do is read comment sections, because it's just insane. I was looking at some yesterday for something I'm doing, and it was like, How many times can you get from like, potholes to blaming the immigrants, do you know what I mean, in like, four comments? And that's essentially it, isn't it? Microcosm of society.

Fran Harvey

Are you still writing much in the way of short stories at the moment?

Matt Wesolowski

Well, Don't (Call Mum) is like novella length, and it felt kind of liberating writing it, because it was all the word length, and that was kind of fun. I wrote one recently just to perform at the Live Theater who were doing run of Saint Maud, and they reached out to a few north-east novelists to write a short story for that. And I got told a really creepy thing by a work colleague who told me a creepy tale about her daughter, who was sat on her bed one time, looked at her and said, 'Pretendy mammy's sat behind you and she's got her mouth open.'

Fran Harvey

Oh god! [genuinely terrified laughter]

Matt Wesolowski

I found it on an app on my phone. So I look - I was thinking, because I have this Notes app, which, whenever I get inspiration, I'll put something like that into it, and then forget about it. And then they

asked me to write a story. So I was like, Okay, let's see what gold is in the Notes app. And it just said, 'Pretendy mammy's sat behind you with her mouth open.' I was like, there you go. Short story. And that was really fun. And the short story's such an art, it's such an art to write a short story, because it has to have so much impact and such a small word count, you know.

Fran Harvey

So did you already have the idea for Don't (Call Mum) hanging around? Were you commissioned for the Northern Weird project or did you approach them?

Matt Wesolowski

No, they, they came to my agent, I think because I'm, you know, Northern and write sort of weird stuff. So it kind of worked. And, no, I had the, weirdly, the idea for Don't (Call Mum) was originally a, sort of, like an espionage thriller about a bomb on a train. Because I remember, I think, I mean, my partner was sat on a train. I said, Well, imagine if you found a phone and you looked on it and the only contact was mum. You, if you found someone's phone, right, you would call, you would look in the contacts and you'd call mum, wouldn't you? Call mum and say, I found your child's phone, right? And I thought, what an amazing way to like - what if that was a bomb, you know what I mean? And the detonator was the mum contact, and that was the original story. And then it changed, because it wasn't weird enough.

Fran Harvey

So I googled 'Gangrel Northumberland', like those two phrases, and had the unprecedented thing of like, only two pages of results, and most of them were people reviewing Don't (Call Mum). And then there were two links that took me to an archive of Northumbrian language. So do you already sort of have knowledge of Northumbrian language, or did you go looking for a word to perfectly describe the sort of thing that might be wandering in the dark in Northumberland?

Matt Wesolowski

Well, I studied linguistics when I was at uni, I did like a degree and a master's in linguistics. And like language is something I'm utterly obsessed with, and the development of language and all language. So every place name or anything that I've made up in any of my books has been meticulously created using - it's usually like a mix of Old Norse and Old English, and looking at the common suffixes and prefixes that make the words in Northumberland. So a lot of the words in Northumberland come from Old Norse, Roman, Old Saxon, and it's fascinating to look at what they are and what they mean. So gangrel was just a, really, it's a word used in Tolkien to describe Gollum, at some point: 'a gangrel creature'. And yeah, I was looking at old Northumbrian words for the things, and gangrel popped up. And it sort of means, like, vagrant. And I thought, it's got a great sound to it, hasn't it, gangrel? And I just thought, what a great name for something. And then you think, like, if someone said, 'Beware of the Gangrel', that sounds pretty horrible.

Matt Wesolowski

Oh, that's brilliant. I loved, I loved finding that out as well, because it's set up - it's one of those folklores where 'my Gran's told me about this', and then once you know the root of the word, you're like, oh, that makes sense, that it would have maybe spiraled into something, something that sounds now a lot worse for people and plays on the imagination. Yeah, it was brilliant. Yeah, I really enjoyed it. I don't want to talk too much about Don't (Call Mum), except to say that people should read it, because I feel like if we add any more information, it's going to slightly undermine the first experience of pure creepiness when you're reading that particular story. But I will ask, Did you - to just kind of really hammer home the air of what it's like when you're on a train in that region - did you get on the train and just make some notes?

Matt Wesolowski

I didn't, no. You know, where it came from - because I used to, when I was at university I was in Lancaster, which is over in the North West. So I used to get the Carlisle to Newcastle train, which is a tiny, little rickety thing that would take you over the Pennines at night. And it was always a bit old in there and a bit knackered, but the idea of like coming home was really dear to me, of coming across the Pennines, and as you get closer to Newcastle, so a lot of it has been influenced by that. The launch event for the book on the 8th May is going to be at the Centurion at Central Station.

Fran Harvey

We're starting to run a bit low on time, so I'm going to move on to the closing questions. It's always the same three. So the first one is a really basic one. When you're doing your first drafts, do you write by hand, or do you prefer a computer - or a typewriter?

Matt Wesolowski

Yeah, for red ink [laughs]. Actually, weirdly, I make notes by hand, but everything, like when I start the manuscript, is always on computer.

Fran Harvey

You're very much a horror writer. But is there another genre that you would try that you're kind of half interested in?

Matt Wesolowski

I get marketed as crime. Like I've done, I've been at, all the major crime festivals, which is strange, because I've never thought of myself as a crime writer. I don't know. I think genre is not really something I care about much. That's not for me. That's kind of - I write books that I like to read. So like, if there's a genre of, like, unending bleakness [laughs]. I mean, I think genre's for like, booksellers and publishers to care about. I think as writers, we just crack on.

Fran Harvey

Yeah, I was surprised when we got your books in for the library that I work at, they've been marked as crime. And I was kind of like, but, but they belong in the horror section, surely? Like, not for me to argue with our stock services department, but I was a bit surprised. And then the last question is, and I think you're a great person to ask this, because you teach writing: if you're talking to somebody who wants to start writing or wants to get back into it after a long time away, what is your top tip for them?

Matt Wesolowski

Um - gosh. Finish things. Finish things. If someone had told me - we go back to this idea of if I would have liked someone to mentor me: I never finished anything when I'd started out. When you've got a finished product, even if it's rubbish, and you have to rush the end, it's so much easier to work with a finished thing than an unfinished thing. So my advice: that's finish things and read your own stuff out loud to yourself, which is excruciating, but it is valuable in the long term.

Fran Harvey

Brilliant. Thank you very much, and thank you for chatting to me. I really appreciate it you taking time out of your day, and congratulations on the new book.

Matt Wesolowski

Thank you.

Fran Harvey

Listeners, Don't (Call Mum) comes out in May from Wild Hunt books, and the Six Stories series is available now. So please order your copies in from indie bookshops, or check your local library, and if they don't have it, request it, because libraries will take requests. Please don't forget, past episodes of

this podcast are available on Spotify. On this account, the new one, most recently, we had Adelle Stripe, Jill Halfpenny and Lucy Rose, and on the other one, there are loads more other episodes, including Eliza Clark, who we mentioned earlier. Please subscribe to this channel to get heads up when the new episodes come out, because I'm very hit and miss with the timing. And thank you, as always, for listening.