

EXTRA EPISODE: My Writing Life interview with Jessica Andrews

– NARC July 2022

Fran Harvey

Hi, my name is Fran Harvey and I'm a writer and musician who enjoys talking to other writers about their writing life. Today I'm chatting with Jessica Andrews for a special extra podcast episode ahead of the release of her book *Milk Teeth*, on the 21st of July. Jessica grew up in Sunderland, and though she now lives in Bristol, she's headed back to the North East for events in Newcastle and Sunderland at the end of this month. More details on those are in July's NARC Magazine. *Milk Teeth* is her second book. It's a lush and beautifully written tale of desire and deprivation, and it explores hunger in all its forms. I loved it. But her first novel was the 2020 Portico Prize-winning *Saltwater*. And she also writes for *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Radio 4*, *Stylist* and a lot of other publications. And she teaches creative writing at Roehampton Uni. She also co-runs *The Grapevine*, which is a magazine that aims to give a platform to underrepresented writers. And she co-presents literary podcast *Tender Buttons*. And Jessica, thank you for chatting to me today.

Jessica Andrews

Thanks very much for having me.

Fran Harvey

So we're talking on Zoom. So the first question is, whereabouts are you calling from?

Jessica Andrews

I am at my house in Bristol right now.

Fran Harvey

Are you in your writing room at the moment or a more comfortable spot?

Jessica Andrews

Well, I have a couple of writing spaces. I have -- I write at my, like, kitchen table. But I also have a little studio space that I go to sometimes, which I kind of got off the back of the pandemic. I was like, I cannot work in my house anymore. I need to see people sometimes. Yeah. But today I'm at my kitchen table.

Fran Harvey

Brilliant. Thank you. And then the first question I always ask everyone is, what was the first thing you read or possibly saw that made you want to write? And, following on from that, can you remember the first thing you wrote as a 'I want to be a writer'? Like, your first writerly thing?

Jessica Andrews

Um, yeah. I mean, I've always loved reading and writing, and my background as like a child and a teenager was more in, like, theatre. I went to a theatre in Washington in Sunderland. But probably the book that, like, set me on my path was a book called *Once In a House on Fire* by Andrea Ashworth.

Jessica Andrews

Oh, that's an amazing book.

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, yeah, it's a memoir that was written in the 90s, I think, about like, kind of like her working-class upbringing in Manchester, and kind of like these abusive relationships that her mum was in. But I think, I think the thing I loved about it -- but at the time, you know, I was about 12, so I couldn't have articulated it like this -- was that it was an environment like a working-class city, northern city, that was similar to the world that I'd grown up in. But the way she uses language, her use of language is very lyrical and beautiful. And I love the way she sort of, like, elevated some of the dark or traumatic experiences with the language that she was using. And I would say that's been a hugely formative influence on my work now, even though I read the book, like so young. So that's probably like, yeah, a really important book for

me. And the first thing I wrote, I think, when I was quite young, like when I was a child, I used to write plays, and [laughs] I used to, um-- films that I loved, I would sit down and copy the script out by hand. So I used to drive my mum mad, like I would have the video, and I would stop the video every two minutes to write down what the characters were saying.

Fran Harvey

Oh, that's committed! Yeah.

Jessica Andrews

I did that until I think, eventually, I got banned, because my mom was like, I can't. [laughter]. And then I would take my play to school and make, like, people act it out. And when I look back now, it was quite like extreme behaviour. But I think it was, it was probably the beginning of me developing these skills and this kind of love, I think.

Fran Harvey

Oh, that's brilliant. What was your - can you remember what your favourite film was to do that with?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, it was Annie, the musical.

Fran Harvey

Oh, I love it. I did have the question here, 'did someone particularly inspire you or encourage you to write', and I love that Andrea Ashworth's book has come up. Because now that you've said that I can, I can see that in your work, like that sort of lyrical elevation of the events that you're recounting. But on that note, was there any one sort of like teacher-wise or just around your, sort of, writing world that encouraged you to write early on, that really helped you scratch that itch?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, I did have some really encouraging teachers at school: a teacher at primary school and a teacher at secondary school both kind of like took me under their wing, I think, and would sort of keep me behind after class and be like, you seem like you have a real interest in this, and they would kind of push me a little bit. But I also, as I mentioned before, like I went to the local youth theatre at Washington Art Centre, and the woman who ran that group, Sarah, she -- I would say she was really the person who introduced me to art as something that anyone could just do. Like, she was just very inspiring. And she would just like lend us like her Samuel Beckett DVDs, when we were just like kids really. Or like, the kind of world that she talked about felt kind of like far away from Washington, but at the same time, she was like living and breathing it there. And I have a group of friends who I'm still, I'm still close friends with, you know, one of them is now an actor, the other is a dancer, I'm a writer, and I think we all attribute our path like to starting there.

Fran Harvey

Oh, that's brilliant.

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, it just shows you how important like those kinds of groups are as well, for young people.

Fran Harvey

There's a mention, in *Saltwater*, of having that artistic crowd in Newcastle, and sort of around the North East. And, I mean, I found that living up here as well as that it is, it's quite a small scene and everyone knows each other. But because of that, the influence of a group like that, or a teacher like that can sort of spiral out like a little, I want to say like a blooming flower. That seems like overly flowery way to describe it almost. But it does, it sort of spreads. And I think that's, that's so important, wonderful. I'm interested in the theatre background, because I've interviewed a couple of people who also started out more theatrically. And at least one of them has said that that's affected the way she writes, to the point that before she even writes anything down, she's running the words over in her head and speaking them out loud. And she records them and then writes them down. Does it affect the way you write your novels?

Jessica Andrews

I mean, yeah, maybe it has. I've never really -- like my background in theatre was like very amateur, you know, I wasn't like, hugely amazing at it. And I didn't go that far. But having said that, I do actually read all of my writing aloud. And I think the way that it sounds when it's spoken is kind of really important to me. So maybe that does come from having that background, I think as well, you know, like, we used to do our own adaptations of like Shakespeare plays when we were really young. And I think like learning a text in that way, rather than like studying at school, it makes it so alive. And I feel like those stories are like, very ingrained in my mind, because I actually played the parts. And I felt like we understood the characters really well. And maybe to feel like, I don't know, maybe sometimes if you read something in an English lesson, it doesn't feel like it's yours. But if you're actually physically acting it out, and you're seeing the words, and you're playing the part, maybe it feels like it belongs to you more. So in that way, maybe it was quite formative as well.

Fran Harvey

I suppose, as well, when you're studying it in class, it's already taken some of the fun out of it, because it's a study. So you're not going into it, reading it for fun. And I suppose you go in almost straightaway, looking under the surface before you just get to enjoy the surface level of what it is, as a story. A lot of writers I speak to are aware of the, obviously of the importance of the flow of the words and the reading it out loud. But the people who have even a small background in theatre seem to be more aware of that. And I do notice it in their writing as well, that it just - it flows differently, like, you can hear the characters more. And it's not, I mean, I think it's important to say it is **different**, there's not a better or a worse way about it. It's just, it is just a slightly different flow to the text, which I think is something that jumped out at me in *Saltwater* that I'd forgotten about. There's a moment where two of the characters are talking and one says he wants to travel everywhere. And then he's careful to point out [other places aren't] better. They're just different. Yeah, sorry. I think that connection's there in my head at the moment as well. And sorry, what were you going to say?

Jessica Andrews

I was just agreeing with you.

Jessica Andrews

I was gonna ask as well, I remember reading an interview with you back when Saltwater came out -- and I couldn't find the interview, so I couldn't doublecheck this -- but I have a memory that you said, when you were working on Saltwater, you had all these scenes and these timelines and things happening, and you ended up basically chopping them into their parts and laying them out on the floor and reordering them. And I wondered, is that something you still do? Did you do that with Milk Teeth as well?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, I did. I think - I think cause my work is often holding like multiple timelines or disparate timelines at once. And I don't, I don't necessarily write chronologically. I don't sit down and start at the beginning and write towards the end. I'm often like writing in fragments or often because I'm because I'm sort of writing from memory or like fictionalising memories as well, the process of writing is kind of as the memory comes. So then I find it really useful to see, physically, the body of work that I've got, and I know you can get like computer programmes that can do that for you. But for me, just to see it physically, it really helps like my brain finds it harder to visualise it on the screen. So yeah, I did. I did. Saltwater has three separate storylines, and I kind of cut everything up to work out where to place it. And I did do a similar thing with Milk Teeth at the beginning, not all the way through. Because it's got two separate storylines like a past tense storyline and a present tense storyline. And when I had a substantial amount of each, I did print them out. And I guess because the editing process is about placing things together so that they make sense chronologically, but also so that they make sense thematically, when I used to describe Saltwater, it was like the structure of it is more like a piece of music. It's like you're looking for the emotional chord progression, kind of.

Jessica Andrews

Like, the pieces have to harmonise. Even if it's not obvious to the reader, what the connection is, there has to be something that they feel, I think, even something very small, like two extracts are thematically about loss, even if it's two very different kinds of losses. So then I think the reader feels like they're being guided by something, rather than it just feeling random.

And seeing it physically, just like really helps me to do that. I mean, it's very, like rash, I'll have like an extract, and then I'll just write on it. Desire. And then I can like, begin to piece it together.

Fran Harvey

Yeah.

Fran Harvey

So that actually that takes me on to another question I had. Because I have to say like, that, to me as a reader, that is a very successful approach, because you can see the threads of the themes coming through and then playing back on each other, and even just actions of the characters sometimes echoing. When you start writing, do you go in knowing which themes you want to explore, or are they something that just appear as soon as you start writing, and then you kind of hone in on them later?

Jessica Andrews

I think at the very beginning, I start with a feeling and it sounds very abstract. But I like know, the kind of like texture of the novel. So I know. So like with Milk Teeth, I had a very specific feeling of kind of like, it's very hot and sticky and visceral. And that feeling came to me first. I knew that was how the book had to feel. And then I guess I sort of have a question that I want to unravel. So I knew that I was very drawn to the idea of wanting, and the kind of like push and pull between desire and denial, and that also very much linked to the body. So they start off as like very vague themes, in a way. And then because a lot of the time I am writing from real life, I sort of like just follow the train of thought that feels like it's linked to the question I'm trying to answer. So it's quite intuitive, really. And then it's not until I've got quite a large body of work, that I can step back, and I can be like, Oh my god, the thing that's really coming now is like, how do you know what you want? Or, I don't know, something that came out of Milk Teeth that I hadn't maybe known was part of the question was like, how do you name what you are? And what does it mean to name things? And is it important to name things for yourself? And that's something that very much emerged through the writing, I think, rather than -- I didn't set out necessarily with that in my mind.

Fran Harvey

But I find it interesting rereading salt water after Milk Teeth as well, you can see that the themes of Milk Teeth, they are in Saltwater, but they're, they're not, to use the music analogy, they're not the main melody, and they're not even really the main chords, but they're kind of a sort of bass note that's in there, sort of quietly in the background, that bass that you don't even realise is playing until you take it out, that part.

Fran Harvey

Mmm.

Jessica Andrews

Yeah. So it's, it was really good to then go to Milk Teeth and see it further explored, if that makes sense? I keep saying if that makes sense. Hopefully it does. You were saying that you're often writing from real life as well. You're actually, you're the first person I've spoken to for this podcast who is writing from life. I mean, everyone's obviously pulling their characters from people they know like bits and pieces and everything impacts everything. But yours is a lot more... what's the word I'm looking for? I want to say memorial. That's not right. That's not the right word at all. is it? Which word am I after?

Jessica Andrews

Autobiographical?

Fran Harvey

That's the term I'm looking for. Thank you! Yes, I think a lot more autobiographical, like a lot more openly autobiographical. Does that affect how you write? Does it make it harder or easier? Because I always think writing autobiographically there's a part of me that's tried it in the past, and my chest just kind of goes *gasps*, my parents might read this, or my sisters might read this, and they might never speak to me again. So I never kind of try to expand on it or get it published. Do you have that? Or have you got, you've arranged a sort of sense of freedom and a balance with family over what goes in the stories?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, well, so for this book, I had to think a lot about like, what my relationship to truth and fiction is because with, like *Saltwater*, you know, is a novel and there are elements of fiction in it, but it also quite closely follows the story of my own life. You know, like it borrows a lot from autobiography. And with my second book, I had to decide whether I was going to continue in that vein or whether I was going to completely step away from it. And I was asking myself lots of questions about like, why? Why did I feel compelled to write from like "the truth" in quotation marks. And I think it's to do with like, the notion of emotional truth. And I think sometimes you can get like to the, to the emotional heart of something by writing something that sticks closely to the truth. And sometimes you can get to the emotional heart of something more easily by fictionalising things. It's kind of like whatever form gives you more freedom. So *Milk Teeth*, it like, it does lean on autobiography, but it is probably a lot more fictional than *Saltwater*. Like a lot more of the scenes, characters are made up. But then the book, it feels true to me, because the emotional truth of it is real. So like, to me, it feels like it's a true story, or a story that's very closely linked to me, even though if someone sat me down and was like, Okay, can you verify that this this and this happened? I'd be like, Well, no. But yeah, it's like crushingly embarrassing writing from your own life, it sometimes [laughs] I don't know why I do it. And yeah, it's horrible thinking about, like, what other people that you know well are going to think about it and your family. With *Saltwater* my family were, like, very understanding about it. So I, like I spoke to my mum, because the book's about a mother--daughter relationship, I spoke to my mum, like throughout the writing process, and I sent her early drafts. And I was like, you know, if you want me to take anything out, then I will. And she was like, no, no, no, it's all great. But then she did say, kind of like, the day after it was published, that she felt that she would have sort of liked to have a chance to tell her side of the story. And at the time, I was kind of upset because I was like, How can you not see that, like, I understand. And I've crafted this thing, so, so hard, and I've talked to you so much, but like, now I kind of get it. And it's like, even if you -- there's like many different versions of the same story, right? And even if you think you're writing a truth, you're only ever writing your own truth, really. But that's also kind of like useful to think about when you're writing semi-autobiographically, because it's like, you know, you're not writing like a scientific report, or -- like memory and truth, the boundaries of those

things are very loose. And I think if you remember that, it kind of gives you a lot of freedom in your work. Yeah, but I mean, who knows what people will think about Milk Teeth.

Fran Harvey

They'll love it, it's fantastic. And yes, I've, I've got a little chapbook story coming out with Nightjar soon. And it started out based on a series of events that happened at a wedding we were going to and staying in a hotel and I wrote it and I like added characters who aren't real and like aren't based on people that we know, but I sort of felt compelled to explain to my partner that the guy in the book is not based on him, because he's an asshole, and you're not. I signed him a copy saying the asshole in the book is not based on you. [laughing] Just to make that clear, you have written evidence, in case people ask.

Jessica Andrews

I think there's something I've noticed is that people like always look for themselves in your work as well. Even if you're not writing about that, like friends have said to me like, oh, that character is me, isn't it? And I'm thinking, No [laughs]. But you know, I think people are scared of it, but they almost like are kind of flattered by it at the same time.

Fran Harvey

Yeah, as long as it's a nice character that they can see themselves in, then that's great. Do you ever named characters after friends?

Jessica Andrews

No, no, I'd find that quite weird. I think I always try -- I don't even really name characters after anyone in my life. I had a character and they had the same name as someone I knew, I think I would find it quite hard.

Fran Harvey

How do you -- I haven't asked anyone this question before. How do you pick names for your characters?

Jessica Andrews

Um, oh, I think it's kind of like an intuitive thing. It's, well, I guess it depends on kind of like, the culture that your character is within and like their class background and like their identity. Or sometimes if a character is based on someone, I'll try and find a name that has a similar feeling as their real name [laughs] but obviously that's completely subjective. It must just be a name that, in my head, feels similar. In Milk Teeth, actually, the two main characters, neither of them, you never find out their names. And that was partly because, partly because the book is so much about, like naming, like naming what you are and claiming what you are, but also because it's a love story, and I wanted it to have a sense of intimacy. Like I think often when you're very, very close to someone you actually don't really say their name that often.

Fran Harvey

Yeah, that's true. That's a good point.

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, and I think I wanted it. I did, I tried a version where the characters were named. And as soon as I gave them names, it distanced the reader from it, like they became too - they became too much of their own thing out in the world. And I wanted it, I wanted the reader to feel like really, really very close to them.

Fran Harvey

That those names stick in your head while you were writing them, though? So you knew what they were called, as you were writing?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, they have got names in my head. But no, no one--

Fran Harvey

No one will ever know them. We're not gonna get an exclusive of these are the names of the characters. [laughing] I think that's an interesting one. Because I find sometimes when I'm writing, I'll put a name of a character down and start writing and then realise the name is

wrong. And because the name is wrong, I can't form the character properly, and they're just not coming to life. And then I'm stuck until I can figure out what the name should be.

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, yeah,

Fran Harvey

So we're talking about writing autobiographically, and the carefulness that comes with that, but also the emotional truth that comes with that. And I was saying that I tried it and not managed it. Do you have a genre or a form that you would quite like to write? Or maybe you're not even that interested in? But that you don't think you could, for whatever reason, that it's just not your thing?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, I mean, I think people who write kind of fantasy and sci-fi novels and who, like construct this entire world -- I find that kind of fascinating, and I feel like, I just don't have that skill. It feels like a completely different form, almost, like people who are able to construct like, the rules of a -- like someone like Ursula Le Guin, or like Octavia Butler, how they can construct this entire world, that's completely different to our world. You know, my work is like, very much rooted in reality. And yeah, it seems wild to me that people can do that.

Fran Harvey

I think we're coming up on the end of the amount of time that we have. So I've got one last question for you. And thank you so much for chatting to me about your writing and your work and your background. That's brilliant. Brilliant is always my word of the week. I assume or hope that a lot of people who are writing or would like to get back to writing or just want to start writing, listen to these episodes. So do you have a top tip for somebody who is just starting out or getting back into writing as to how they can go about that?

Jessica Andrews

Yeah, so I think that the biggest obstacle for me is definitely self doubt. I think that's the thing that stops everyone from finishing anything. And one tip [laughs] I have learned to overcome self doubt. You know, sometimes if you're like having a bad day, and you feel kind of low, and you read over your writing, and you're like, Oh my God, everything is rubbish, like, this is all pointless. And then you leave something and you never come back to it? I think it's good to kind of just write and write and write until you've got like quite a lot of words. So if you're working on something like a novel, wait till you've got 8,000-10,000 words before you like seriously read it back and look back on it. And I think that, that just stops that like stopping and starting thing. Or like, you know, maybe you'll read it all on a good day and you'll think it's brilliant [laughs] hopefully. Yeah, I think. And also, I guess, like sharing, like finding people around you who are interested in books and who you can talk to you about writing and who you can maybe share work or you can just like chat about a book. And I think that stops it from all just being in your own head, and it stops you feeling so isolated, and like demoralised. I think. It can make you feel excited about what you're working on.

Fran Harvey

Brilliant. That's a really good tip. Thank you. I wonder if we could get some sort of little group set up where listeners might be able to sort of meet up with other writers. Perhaps.

Jessica Andrews

Oh yeah that's a good idea.

Fran Harvey

That would be quite nice. I'll throw it out there. If anyone's listening and thinks that's a good idea, please get in touch with NARC and let us know and we'll see what we can organise. Jessica, thank you so much for chatting with me. I've really enjoyed this. It's been fantastic. And thank you for being so patient with me stumbling over my words and forgetting what they are. I'm having one of those days, clearly. Listeners, Milk Teeth is out on the 21st of July and you can join Jessica at the Biscuit Factory on the 27th of July courtesy of Forum Books, or in Sunderland at Pop Recs on the 28th of July courtesy of Waterstones. The Newcastle event is £10 pounds; Sunderland is free, but you do need to book tickets either way. And there's more

details in NARC on that, or use Google. Thank you so much for listening and please join me again next month.