

# Episode 4 SdTW Podcast

**Suzy:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Show Don't Tell Writing with me, Suzy Vadori, where I teach you the tried and true secrets to writing fiction and nonfiction that will wow your readers, broken down step by step. This show explores writing techniques and shows you a glimpse behind the scenes of successful writing careers and coaches writers live on their pages so you can learn and transform your own storytelling.

Whether you're just starting out crafting, editing, or currently rewriting your first book or maybe even your 10th, this show will help you unlock the writing skills you didn't know you needed but you definitely do. I'm looking forward to helping you get your amazing ideas for from your mind onto the page in an exciting way for both you and your readers so that you can achieve your wildest writing dreams while having fun doing it.

Let's dive in. [00:01:00] I can't wait for you all to meet Jessica Bull, my guest for today. She's the author of *Miss Austin Investigates* and addicted to stories she studied. English literature at Bristol University and information science at City University in London. She worked as a librarian under the false impression that she could just sit and read all day before becoming a communications consultant.

Book two in the series is coming out and she's going to be sharing some of the information on that in today's podcast. She grew up in southeast London, where she still lives with her husband, their two daughters and far too many pets. I met Jess really early on in her writing journey and she's been part of the inspired writing community for a long time.

So she was one of my very first calls when I started this podcast. Uh, I knew that you would all want Really benefit from hearing her journey because she has reached immense success with her book and it started out with a dream to write, just [00:02:00] like all of you in this episode today. She is really candid about that journey, what it looked like for her, and she shares her best advice for you.

So I can't wait to hear what you think. I am so excited to have Jessica Boll here with me today. I have not had a chance since her book debuted in February 2024. We haven't caught up. We're going to do it for you right here so that we can share with the podcast. And I can't wait to hear all about it.

Jess, how have you been?

**Jessica Bull:** Oh, it's been manic Suzy, absolutely manic, really busy, really, really fun, absolutely wonderful, wonderful year. But it's just, it's sped by so quickly and it's so lovely to take the time to catch up with you podcast.

**Suzy:** Yay! Um, okay, so Miss Austin Investigates launched February 2024.

Can you tell us a little bit about the book?

**Jessica Bull:** So it's a Jane Austen murder mystery. So it's [00:03:00] very much inspired by Austen's real life. Um, and at the moment when the book starts, she's 19. She's trying to get a Lefroy. Um, and they're at a bar. Bull trying to enjoy this romantic assignation, but unfortunately, that's all goes out of the window when the body of a milliner is found bludgeoned to death.

And Jane wants to solve the murder, first of all, because she knew and respected the milliner. She bought a bonnet from her. Um, and then secondly, when her gentle brother, Georgie is arrested in connection with the crime, she has to find out who the true culprit is. Otherwise, Georgie will be hanged.

**Suzy:** Oh, I just love it.

I, I, it never gets old hearing about this book. Um, how's the journey been so far? The book came out in February. How's it been?

**Jessica Bull:** Well, I think it's been a long journey, um, to get to the point where it came out in February. But yeah, it's been amazing since it came out in February. So it came out in the UK in January, um, and [00:04:00] then the U S and Canada in February.

Um, and then it started to come out in other countries around Europe and across the world since then. Um, so the most amazing thing has been chatting to readers and other writers about it, doing things like this podcast and in person events. And I've had a couple of Zoom, um, with librarians across North America, which has been really fun.

Um, so yeah, that's, that's the really exciting part where suddenly it's not just real to me, but it's real to all of my readers as well. And that's been really fantastic.

**Suzy:** Yeah. I think I sent you a photo. Um, my team member, Liz, she lives in Virginia and she was at the library like a couple of weeks after the launch and she was just walking by it.

It was on this huge display and she was like, she was so excited, um, that you've been part of the inspired writing community and that, that she'd, you know, been. been a small part of that as well so it was exciting. I really

**Jessica Bull:** love hearing about it in libraries as well so I used to be a librarian that's how I started my career when I [00:05:00] um was a teenager when I was still at school and my mum knew that I desperately wanted to be an author so her advice was um read as much as you can and she encouraged me to get a part time job at the library and then I ended up like staying there all through school and uni and I was Afterwards, it became my full time job.

So it's really exciting for me to see Miss Austin investigated in libraries. And of course, Jane Austen loved libraries as well. So, um, in terms of her education, she, her formal schooling was over by the time she was 11, but the reason that she was able to educate herself really was through access to libraries.

So I never get tired if anyone wants to take a photo of it in their local library or show me them borrowing this as an investigator, so it always gives me a particular joy.

**Suzy:** Okay, so you said that it's been a long journey, when did you first start thinking about this particular book? Because you say, you know, you've always wanted to be an author, you went and worked in libraries for some time, right?

And when did you first start writing this book?

**Jessica Bull:** Um, I think I first started [00:06:00] planning it in 2020. Um, so like a lot of people, the pandemic was a really horrible time for my family where we, you know, found it really hard and we lost loved ones and my kids didn't get on with homeschooling at all. Um, and my freelancing job, I was a communications consultant by then and my freelancing work kind of dried up and it was all just a really tough time.

trying time. So to help me get through that, I really leant on my love of Jane Austen, um, and I researched her life as well as reading her novels. So I read every biography, I listened to every podcast, um, and it struck me really that although that there were representations of her that I enjoyed. None of them particularly reflected the Austen that I felt that I knew and loved from her novels.

So that wonderfully joyful, witty and irreverent woman. Um, and then I had this terrible thought of like, oh my goodness, Jess, you're a writer. Why don't you

have a crack at it? Um, but it was so [00:07:00] intimidating I didn't start it for a couple of years until I'd kind of worked out a format in which I could do it, because yeah, I think, um, writing in the tradition of Austin Fiction, um, is inviting people to compare your writing to the greatest novelist who ever lived.

And that's not fair, is it? She's a genius . But, um, yeah, so it took a little while for me to work out the confidence and to think about a way that I could do it and I could make it my own.

**Suzy:** Right. And so we met actually a couple of years later, I think in 2022 when you took my Wicked Good Fiction Bootcamp, you'd had a friend that had gone through it and, and had written a novel and gotten a book deal.

And so you're like, all right, I'll try this thing. And so where were you when you came into the bootcamp with that novel?

**Jessica Bull:** I think I just started, I drafted perhaps the first chapter and I was planning it and what really attracted me to the boot camp was that my friend had recommended it as a masterclass in planning [00:08:00] really and I was Um, kind of at that time where I knew, I knew I wanted it to be a murder mystery.

So I'd come to that decision already, and that I really wanted to write genre fiction. Um, and by taking something like Jane Austen and applying it to a genre that I really loved, which was the crime fiction murder mystery, that perhaps I could make it uniquely my own. But I think, um, crime fiction and genre fiction in general really benefits from really rigorous planning.

So that's what. Brought me into the course. I was told that this is, you know, a no nonsense, absolute boot camp, masterclass in planning. So I thought I'd come along and that taking the course would really help me to flesh this idea out. And then once I'd done that, there would be no going back. I couldn't kind of worry about being overruled by Austin's talent.

I would have a roadmap that I would have to follow and get this book written.

**Suzy:** You [00:09:00] did, you, did you drafted that book pretty quickly after, because it wasn't long after, um, the bootcamp that we were chatting, you had a draft Mm-Hmm. . And you were getting what I would say, I don't know if I should say this, I would say you were getting warm rejections, right?

Yeah. So you were querying this book and you were getting like some feedback. Do you wanna talk a little bit about that moment?

**Jessica Bull:** What was the thought? Yeah, so this is the fourth book I had queried or maybe the third. Um, uh, and I think like the. People always, you know, worry that the worst thing about querying is that you're going to get lots of rejections.

But actually what's even worse than that is that you get nothing at all, no responses at all. So just absolute crickets. Um, and what is actually really good is when you do get rejections and there are personalized rejections. So agents start saying, um, well, not this time, but, um, or not this project, or maybe not this version of this project.

So yeah. I knew something was different with Miss Austin Investigates straight away because [00:10:00] immediately I started getting those rejections. Um, and then, um, I did have a couple of falls and, um, full rejections that were full of really encouraging and warm feedback that I'm immensely grateful for. Um, and then I was really, really fortunate because Just at the time when I realized I was going to, that it was a first draft, that it was, it was a good first draft, but it was very much a first draft and it needed lots of development and that I was prepared to commit to doing that development and doing the hard work to make it into the finished product.

I actually got an offer of representation on that first draft, which looking back, I'm still amazed that, um, by my wonderful agent, Juliette Mushins, who could see the potential in it and trusted me to do the work to deliver that potential. But looking back, I got the offer of representation on what I would now consider to be [00:11:00] a first draft, quite a patchy first draft.

**Suzy:** Yeah, definitely. But you came to that with So, so I remember talking with you and you're like, Oh, I don't know what to do with all these warm rejections. It's great feedback, except it's all contradictory. Um, it felt very different. You know, you had different advice about what to change in point of view or tense, or there was all kinds of suggestions and I said, all right, like fire it over.

Let's take a look. And so we took a look and, um, even though it was all kind of a little bit different and they were offering suggestions on how to fix what it was that wasn't working, it was kind of. Yeah. That deepening Jane and your love of Jane that you, you eventually layered in that made this really, really shine.

Right. And then you went back to Juliet with that. Hey, here's what I'm planning to do. And then that's where that offer came from, which was super exciting. Yeah.

**Jessica Bull:** Yeah. That was a big, I think the big thing that still The topic that, like, divides the writing world, really, [00:12:00] um, is first, I wrote this book in first person.

Oh, no, I didn't. I wrote this book in third person, present tense, um, which I think is really divisive. And I I wanted to be brave in this product, in this project, and I wanted to put my heart into it. And I wanted it to have a really strong and unique voice right from the beginning. Um, so I chose that third person present tense because I wanted to be absolutely immediately there in the room with Jane.

Um, and Some people hate tense, they don't, they don't get on with it at all. Um, but it felt right for me and it was how I heard her speaking, um, so it was how I wanted to write the book. And some agents actually on the warm rejections, um, said that, that they would consider it if I rewrote it in a different tense.

Um, Not my agent who I eventually went with [00:13:00] and when I showed it to you, your feedback was it's not that that's putting people off. There's other things really that that could make that emotional link that people are reacting to. They're saying that it's that tense, but actually, if you really want to stick with that, there's other things that we could work on.

**Suzy:** Yeah. And I think what struck me when we spoke about it, I mean, I met you in the bootcamp, which is a group program, but when we worked one on one, what's your love of Jane Austen and just like how you lit up and you're like, you know, so involved with the, the fan clubs and the things. And, and like the way that you spoke about Jane, and even in the beginning of this interview was like electric.

And you, you know, were able to layer that in, and that's what really made this book stand out. Right? And so you worked really hard on that next draft. You almost gave yourself permission, right? You gave yourself permission to express [00:14:00] what it was that you loved about Jane, and that's what's in this book now that makes it super special, and makes it so that you did have choices.

Right. I think that was the

**Jessica Bull:** fun thing about doing the boot camp for me. So I've done, I've done, I was looking for like online courses and I did a few different ones. And you know, when we met, I was in that period where I was reading lots of different craft books and looking at lots of different courses, um, and trying to take the bits that I connected to out of all of them.

Um, and like to find my own approach, my own approach. And the thing that I loved so much about the boot camp, um, was. your encouragement for all the writers to connect with their why. It did feel like being given permission to tap into this really enthusiastic, geeky side of myself that just had this massive passion.

Um, and that wasn't not to hold it at arm's length, not to look at it academically so much, but to really embrace it and write from the [00:15:00] heart about this person that I really love and adore and wanted to bring to life and just have fun with it. So yeah, that was, that was the bit that most connected.

**Suzy:** Yeah.

I mean, there's technical craft and that's important too. And we can talk about the tense and point of view and all those things all day long. But at the end of the day, what made this book magic was actually your passion and you were able to capture that and like, just. To be able to see that transformation and then to see what happened with this book.

Can you tell our listeners what ended up happening with this book? It went to auction.

**Jessica Bull:** Yeah, right. My first lucky break was getting a wonderful agent. And then, um, I worked on it and worked on it and worked on it. And then after several kind of, Several drafts. Um, finally my agent felt that it was ready to take out to market.

Um, and then in the UK, um, it went to auction, um, with four different publishing houses interested. Um, and then we got, we got. Fantastic [00:16:00] deal. And then in the US, it was preempted. We had two preempts, actually, but we accepted one from Union Square and Co. Um, and then it has subsequently sold in total to 18 territories worldwide, which is just absolutely wonderful.

**Suzy:** Yeah, I think the last count that I saw was 15. So 18, it's before language rights and territories. Yeah, and it's, it's got three different covers that I've seen. I'm on a quest to collect them all. It's got so many covers, Suzy. Yeah, yeah. Oh,

how many covers do you think it has then? Oh, I suppose, yeah, but the four language rates, but in English.

**Jessica Bull:** Oh, in, you know, in English, just the three. Oh, no, four, actually, because we have, um, large print here. And, um, the large print is actually a different cover again. So, yeah, they just keep coming.

**Suzy:** I wish that, I wish the listeners could see your huge smile. Because, I mean, this is, this is, this is, [00:17:00] beyond what, I mean, it's obviously what you hoped for.

I love working with writers who have just amazing dreams and you knew what this could be, but were you surprised by the reaction? Were you surprised by the reaction of the industry and just how it took off? Oh, I'm still pinching myself.

**Jessica Bull:** Yeah. All the time. I'm still pinching myself. Yeah. It's really, it's really amazing.

Yeah, especially when the foreign rights are funny because, um, to think that your story stacks up in another language is really exciting to think that, you know, your characters and your jokes and your writing and, you know, the arc that you've set out works even when it's translated. It's amazing.

**Suzy:** Yeah.

And I gotta tell you, you know, working with you on these drafts and seeing it transform, it was ready. Absolutely. Absolutely. It was great. It was an amazing book. And so I'm not surprised that it got picked up, but the, the topic and what's hard to sort of imagine is that this topic was so timely and that people were so excited about [00:18:00] Jane Austen.

And so that's the piece that was like, it was, you know, not surprising to me that you're getting all this attention. The book was amazing. It's brilliant. Um, But what was surprising was just that sort of market interest in this topic, because there are other books, um, there are even other cozy mysteries, right?

Or other series that have this kind of Jane Austen. But what, what sets that apart? And what do you think it was about the timing of this book and the interest in Jane Austen that just really readers are so excited about?

**Jessica Bull:** Um, I think the reason this, what I have received in terms of feedback is the reason that this has taken off so much is that there is The Austin

link and the Austin link is really well researched and gives an insight into her family.

Um, and then it's also a great mystery in its own right. So if you change the name of the [00:19:00] characters, um, it would still work as a mystery. Um, and then also what I really, really tried to do was make the stakes for Austin as high as possible to make it so that she couldn't refuse to investigate this crime so that it wasn't.

It wasn't too cosy. It wasn't just, you know, she could do this. This could be a fun hobby for her investigating to make it a real life or death situation for someone that she cares about. Um, so I think, you know, in the UK, cosy, all over the world, actually, um, in the UK, UK, um, Source cosy crime is really popular.

Um, a lot of my European editors tell me that, um, yeah, they particularly source cosy crime from the UK because there's something just slightly different about the tradition here that really works. Um, and then historical fiction is so popular at the moment. And then there's a huge resurgence of interest in the Regency with Bridgerton coming on TV, um, Sanditon, all [00:20:00] those amazing costume dramas that I love.

Um, so yeah, it just caught the interest of like lots of different entry points, really. So lots of different audiences that people might come to it from that, um, hopefully means it's got a broad

**Suzy:** Amazing. So the idea came to you in 2020 pandemic, you started writing, Uh, book is now published in, you know, 18 foreign territories, um, four years.

Right, four years is that timeline and it just felt so fast and people I often I always ask this question when I interview writers, you know, how long from start to finish, but I know the answer to this one. And I would say that this felt so quick, like to be in the traditional game and to get there as quickly as you did is actually phenomenal.

Feel about that timeline.

**Jessica Bull:** Um, Yeah, it's, it is quick, but then, [00:21:00] like, I think that what had happened was that I'd been, I'd been writing all my life, and I'd queried a novel in, um, 2000, a kind of contemporary romance novel in 2000, um, And a kind of time and then rewrote that and had some interest and rewrote it, but never kind of got anywhere.

Never kind of got it over the line. So I had interest from, um, an agent and a publisher, but not representation. Nothing like that far. Basically a revise and resubmit, but I didn't really know, um, what that meant at that time. And then I kind of sat on that dream while I had young children and a full time career and never really found the time and wondered if I'd ever get the inspiration to write again and then got this like huge motivation to write during the pandemic.

Basically because it, was an activity which consumes my mind completely. So when I'm writing, I'm not worrying about [00:22:00] anything else. It's a quite a meditative task for me. So it's something that I can, I can do in times of stress and it really helps. Um, and then in 2020, I wrote three, well, from 2020, between 2020 and the end of 2021, I wrote three novels in quite quick succession.

Um, and this was the third, and I think I just kind of decided to throw myself into it and, you know, fail fast and learn even quicker. Um, I just put myself really out there. take every opportunity to study the craft that I could. And secondly, to get over my fear of sharing my work and take the feedback.

Um, and I think by doing that, I kind of pushed myself into a corner where I ended up. Doing what I really, really loved and had learned so much that although it seems like this final novel Um, was written and went to success really quickly There's a whole, [00:23:00] it's the tip of the iceberg of a lot of time, of a lot of wasted time and a lot of time Like trying things out and then not getting anywhere.

Um, So, yeah, it is, it is still a pitch me moment, but it's the final kind of legacy of my journey. Yeah, it does seem

**Suzy:** fast, and yet it's not fast, right? It's a lifetime. Okay, so we're on the Show Don't Tell writing podcast. Let's switch gears a little bit and talk about whether or not showing in your novel plays a role in how you think you got this reaction.

Do you use the techniques of short old tell?

**Jessica Bull:** Yeah, absolutely. So I think, um, the other piece of feedback that I really love when, when people give it to me is that it's a historical novel, um, and it's steeped in research, but it moves very quickly. Um, the pace is really fast and it wears. It's history very lightly.

Um, and to do that took an awful lot of work, [00:24:00] obviously, because, you know, I had to do so much research on how people lived at the time, on the

legal system of the time, but I don't want to bog you down with all of that. So, yeah, what you kind of reach is, is just. Just what you need to know, just what you need to know in order to understand the world, um, and to understand what Jane's feeling and her motivation and what's going on with everybody and to follow the crime through.

But it takes an enormous amount of effort to restrain myself so that I'm not explaining everything to you. I'm not telling you that this is, you know, this is, this was a custom in Georgian England so that you can just pick it up from the clues that I give you in the writing.

**Suzy:** Yeah, we often talk about, you know, just a detail or two, a detail or two, you know, that I'm, I know I'm a broken record when we go through these things.

It's a detail or two and not, like you said, not bogging it down, but making sure that everything that you introduce isn't [00:25:00] just breakfast. It's also educating. It's also teaching. It's also showing right. Yeah. So if you were just starting out right now, you're talking to newer writers, writers who like can, are aspiring to have the success and the change, you know, the change in their lives that have happened to you.

What's your best writing advice, Jess?

**Jessica Bull:** Um, I think first and foremost, write what you love. Don't worry about writing to the market and don't worry about kind of being cool or different or original. Find something that you absolutely love. And because writing is really hard work. We've talked about all the different drafts of this novel that I did.

You know, you're going to have to read it like a thousand times. Even if it gets to publication, you're going to have to keep going through it, keep working on it. So if you don't love it, it's going to be a real problem. It's going to be a real problem. First of all, find something, a story that you're absolutely burning to tell.

Um, because you'll need that love to carry you through. Um, and then secondly, kind of do [00:26:00] what you're doing now, get out there and build a community by listening to podcasts with other writers, do courses, um, join writing groups in person or online, because it's only by taking part in those kind of communities that you'll get the support that you need and learn their craft really.

Um, and then thirdly, read, read everything, read everything in your genre, read everything that you aspire to, read new novels that are coming out now, um, because I don't, I don't trust a writer who doesn't, Read. Um, you have to read, you have to understand, um, the landscape and the conventions and you have to not be intimidated by other writers as well.

You have to read other books and be inspired by them and learn from them.

**Suzy:** Oh, amazing advice. Amazing advice. And the, the right, what, you know, it's, it's a, it's kind of a twist on right. What, you know, it's right. What you love. And I think, you know, if I could sum up one thing that I could point to [00:27:00] that you achieve what you have, it's that you love this subject, right?

And that love came through because it's, it's really about connecting with your reader and, and sharing that passion. And people will feel that. And I know we, we think sometimes that you can't, but if it comes through, it's gonna, Draw your reader in that much more. That's much more. Awesome. So what's going on with book two?

There's a book two in this series coming, is there not?

**Jessica Bull:** It's a book two. Um, yeah. What can you

**Suzy:** share with us?

**Jessica Bull:** I can tell you about book two. So, um, I think the other thing, if you want to write a series. So what I did right at the beginning was I realized that I had so much to say, so much I wanted to say about Jane Austen because really this series is an allegory for explaining how she lived her life, how she achieved what she did.

So all the challenges that she faced in getting published are the same challenges that she faces in solving the mystery and what I wanted to do was [00:28:00] show how she overcame that to leave us her legacy. Um, but there was so much that I wanted. Say that what I did first of all, was I looked at it as a series and thought, if I have the opportunity to write more than one book, what incidents and what relationships and what things about her will I put in different books?

Um, and that gave me permission on the first one to really hone in and focus on that time of her life. Um, and it means that there's still plenty of stories left to tell. So in the second book, um, which at the moment is called a fortune, most

fatal in the UK, um, and. In the U S it's still up by its original title, which was a foreign princess.

Um, I'm not sure which way the U. The U. S. and Canada are going to go, but it's the second Miss Austin Investigates book. Um, so in this one, Jane is, um, in Kent, so a different region of the U. K. to explore. She's gone down to see her very wealthy brother, Neddy, who was adopted by their cousins when she was a child.

And, [00:29:00] um, she's gone down there ostensibly to look after his kids for the summer. Because her sister, Cassandra, was meant to go, but she's just found out her fiancé's died, so Jane has volunteered to go instead. But when she gets down there, she realizes that her time would be better spent investigating the mysterious young lady that Neddy, Edward's adoptive mother, has taken in, um, who is claiming to be a shipwrecked foreign princess.

And Jane thinks she has to find out who she really is. Before she steals the enormous fortune that all of the Austen's have come to expect will be Neddy's by right. Oh, I love it. I love it. Do you have a timeframe on that book yet? Yes. So we're hoping it will come out in March next year on both sides of the Atlantic.

**Suzy:** March 2025. Yeah. Awesome. Okay. So if people, I mean, people are going to be so excited to read Miss Austin Investigates after listening to your story and that's how it works, right? We want to connect with the writer. We want to know about that and trust [00:30:00] me, it is totally worth it. How can readers find you?

**Jessica Bull:** Um, so on Twitter, X, I'm Novelist Jessica, um, and on Instagram, I'm Jessica Bull Novelist. Um, and yeah, come in, come and say hello. How can they best find your books?

**Suzy:** I guess if it's in

**Jessica Bull:** 18 different

**Suzy:** regions, there's probably lots of ways.

**Jessica Bull:** Um, yeah, well it's in, it should be in all your bricks and mortar, um, local bookstores, um, and it's on the site owned by the millionaire as well.

Awesome. But in Canada it's in Indigo, in the U. S. it's in Barnes Noble, and in the U. Waterstones.

**Suzy:** Amazing. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show this week to celebrate our launch of this podcast. I am going to be so excited to have you back and hear all about book two when it's time. Oh,

**Jessica Bull:** brilliant.

Suzy. I'm so excited to tune in and listen to all your other guests. Thanks for tuning in

**Suzy:** to Show Don't Tell Writing with me, Suzy [00:31:00] Vadori.

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If you're feeling called to write that book, keep going, and I'll be right here cheering you on. See you again next week!