



Dawn O'Porter x London Writers' Salon

Interview Transcript - 9 September

Unedited Transcript

Parul - LWS

[00:00:00] And welcome to the London Writers' Salon podcast. I'm Parul. I'm your host and the co-founder of the London Writers' Salon. In our salon interviews are a chance for us to go behind the scenes with a writer and explore the craft of writing, the art of building a creative career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

Today, we have the honor of speaking with someone who's explored the creative life in its full range. Today, we're talking to, of course, Dawn O'Porter. And Dawn is a best-selling novelist, also a memoirist. She's the author of eight books, including, uh, her YA books, Paper Airplanes and Goose, her adult novels, which include The Cows, and the latest one was, uh, Honeybee.

And her latest work is a memoir, Hungry Eyes: A Memoir of Appetite, Ambition and the Odd Bag of Wotsits for Dinner. And if you're American, you might need to look up what a Wotsit is. I don't think you get them in America. Uh, M- Matt Haig has called her work, "A total joy." And Marian Keyes says that Dawn's books are unputdownable.

Alongside her books, Dawn has written [00:01:00] widely on feminism, women's lives, and built a career spanning journalism, documentary filmmaking, and TV. She's also the co-founder of the charity Choose Love. So, in this interview, I have some questions for Dawn. I really wanna just explore her creative career, how she thinks about writing, how she entered the writing space, and how she thinks about growing her creative career in today's age.

But about an hour or so in, we will open it up to you for any questions you have. So do come on into the chat if you have any questions, and I'll try and get around to that at the end. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writers' Salon, Dawn.

Dawn O'Porter

Thank you so much. That was such a lovely introduction.

Thank you.

Parul - LWS

You're so welcome. I'm, uh, I'm s- I'm just so pumped to have you here. When I, when I'm, when I'm slightly nervous with a guest, I, I'm a bit quieter and I feel a bit quieter 'cause I've watched you for so many years. It's quite astonishing for me to have you in, in a Zoom room with us all.

Dawn O'Porter

Well, don't be nervous, please.

Parul - LWS

It's such an honor to have you here. And, you know, reading your memoir and, and also just interviews that you've done before, it's clear that food has always [00:02:00] been such an important part of your life. But I'm curious about your relationship with writing, particularly as a child. Writing and reading, h- how did that feature for you?

Dawn O'Porter

So the honest truth is writing always featured, always. I wasn't very clever at school, and I- Rea- I, I, yeah, I just, I just didn't feel like I made much of an impact anywhere apart from with the stories that I would write. My first ever story that I wrote, and I realize there's lots of people from all over the world, but it was, um, it was a UFO landed in Albert Square, which is a very famous square in, uh, in EastEnders, which is a big soap opera here in the UK.

And I wrote this one-page story where, um, the UFO landed, and I was so proud of this piece of work, and people just kept telling me how brilliant it was. My sister actually framed it for me. She found it and framed it for me for my 40th. Um, and it gave me the bug of, oh my God, all I really ever wanted was attention, and I, the attention that I got from writing made me feel just a little bit clever.[00:03:00]

Like, I didn't feel clever in any other aspect of my life. So writing was always there. I always loved it. But the honest truth is, and this is shameful, I didn't enjoy reading as a kid. I didn't read much at all as a kid. I saw it as boring schoolwork. I didn't get it. You know, after the kind of initial young story stuff, which was great, there's this kind of the tween and teen years.

Um, I wasn't much of a reader, and because I thought all books came through school, and they were all boring, and they were all textbooks. I just saw them all as that. And then when I was about 15, I read a book called Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson, and it changed my life. It made me go...

Firstly, my all-girls, quite strict school in Guernsey gave me this really gritty story about a lesbian. I was like, I was a young Guernsey girl, never read about a lesbian before. I was like, oh my God, this is just so exciting. And I was like, oh, maybe books aren't [00:04:00] boring, and there's people like her in books.

And that just kickstarted my love of reading and stories. And it was also the book that when it came to my own writing, I was like, be brave. Go for it. Put in the character that might shock people. Um, we don't have to love everybody. Um, difficult relationships with mothers are, are great to write about, which has always been something that I've written about.

And it was just the book that I felt gave me the license to go. And, um, so that's where it all started. But yeah, I think I was about 15 when I read it. And I've still got the copy, and it is just all the corners are turned down. There's, you know, pencil lines under every, like, so much of it. I was, I was like, this is the one

Parul - LWS

I love that.

Jeanette Winterson is, is definitely one of my heroines in the writing space. Um, and you talked about wanting attention, and I know, and you've spoken about this again in your memoir and elsewhere, that y- when you were younger, you wanted to be famous. Uh, what did you think [00:05:00] being famous would give you? Is it just attention, or what else?

Dawn O'Porter

It's such a good question because I think back then in the '90s, fame was different from what fame is now. Fame back then was, it was mega. It was the ultimate. It was, um, it was being a Spice Girl. It was being with Donna. I don't know what I thought I was going to do to be famous. I think I just ... I lived on a tiny island.

For anybody who hasn't heard of Guernsey, it's a tiny island, seven by four miles. It's so small. I was hugely involved in the local, um, youth theater. I failed everything at school, all my exams, everything. I failed everything. I didn't get enough to go further into education. I failed everything. I had to blag my way from the age of 15 to every next stage of my life.

Um, and so I just saw the one thing I had confidence in was being on stage and performing, and the ultimate goal of a success in that career [00:06:00] was fame. There wasn't really an in between back then. Now, you know, there's all these different levels of it, 'cause you can find your own version of it on the internet.

But back then it was- It was huge. And so I think when I was in Guernsey, it was, I wanted my name up in lights in the West End. I wanted to be singing and dancing on stage, and I thought that's what I was gonna do. And I was gonna do anything I could to get it. It was... Yeah, it's just what I wanted. I think it ultimately came from, if we're honest, I lost my mum when I was six.

I think it came from a place of being, of wanting to escape myself, of wanting to escape my life on the island and my family, and just get away and try to find something that would replace what I'd lost. So I think I look back on it and I'm like, I was searching for something. I was, I was looking for [00:07:00] something to just fill this c- cavernous gap that I'd been left with, um, which I think is probably why a lot of people want to work as an artist, because you are searching for something.

And it y- it could be seen as a negative thing. Now, as a 47-year-old writer, it's, it's the greatest gift I could ever have been given. And that's not to say, "Oh, I'm glad my mum died." Obviously that's not what I mean. But my childhood trauma plays out in my work every single day. I have, I have access to so much because of what I experienced as a kid.

And, um, and I think, I think that's the reason why so... You know, you read any, a lot of memoirs by artists and there's always some trauma in there somewhere, and that was mine. But yeah, I think the, the quest for fame was, yeah, just looking to escape myself, [00:08:00] thinking that adoration from strangers would make me happy.

And it did. It kind of does in many ways. For a bit anyway.

Parul - LWS

For a bit anyway. Well, thank you for that very honest answer. And you know, and I was saying to you earlier in the green room, that I've, I've known of you for many, many years. You, you definitely have entered the, the consciousness of the public in, in many ways.

Um, but you've switched. What struck me about... I mean, maybe of actually anyone I've ever interviewed, and I've inter- interviewed over 200 writers, I don't think I've met someone who's switched quite sort of dramatically across fields. And w- seeming confidence. It seems like you've, from my perspective, you've done very well across all of them.

Um, so I, I feel like you have an ability to switch directions when something's not working. Does it feel that way to you?

Dawn O'Porter

Um, does it feel that way to me? It's such a, such an interesting one because- I think the way that I see writing ... So for anyone that doesn't know, I have a history in TV as well, and I used to make documentaries for the BB- BBC.[00:09:00]

And that was, I had a quite a lot of success there in my late 20s, and then it just got ripped away, and the work just stopped, and my TV career just kind of ended completely out of my control. Um, shows just weren't getting picked up. And so for many years, I just didn't work, and it was quite frightening, or it felt like it didn't work, but actually if you look back on it, I never stopped writing.

I ... Writing was just always this incredibly loyal relationship that I had, where if I kept doing it, it would keep providing for me, and it would mean that I was in control of my own destiny. Where when I worked

in TV, I was so disposable. I could just get fired and not employed, and my life was just in control of, you know, networks and TV stations.

But if I kept writing and kept producing work, I would always find a paycheck somewhere. And so I just look back as this, like, this [00:10:00] love story between me and writing. It always saved the day. It always saved the day. The only issue with it is, you know, you go through different periods of your life where you lack confidence, and it's really difficult to write when you're lacking confidence.

So productivity was affected during those years where I wasn't really im- ... 'Cause I thought my identity was on TV, and when I ... It took me a long time to realize that actually my identity is completely on the page. TV is like this extra thing that is there as and when, but me as an artist exists on the page.

That's where, that's where I am. And if I s- y- if I stay loyal to it, it will stay loyal to me. So I do switch, and I can switch, but I always have this, you know, this thread of making sure that I'm producing words on a page. Because I think if I let that go, I'd be in trouble

Parul - LWS

I love that framing of the loyalty, that loyal relationship.

And I think many of us feel that too, that [00:11:00] we return to the page, we return to ourselves because it's home.

Sarah C

Mm.

Parul - LWS

It's where we can ultimately feel safe. Um, now I'm curious, so all, all this period, you know, when you're in t- teens, at university, in Liverpool I think, and then- Yeah ... in LA in your TV, TV life, um, were you

What were you writing? I know you wrote for The Stylist. Were you also writing books on the side, or attempting

Dawn O'Porter

to? So I, I started writing books when I was in my early 20s, and I ... When I was living out in LA, I moved out to LA to make a TV show for Channel 4, and it, um, I thought it was a huge success, and that is where everything went wrong.

So I'd moved there to work, and we made this series. It went out on Channel 4, and they said to me, "Oh, great, we're gonna do a second series." Six months later, "We're gonna do a second series." One year later, I've been staying out in LA waiting for this series, spent all my money, and then they were like, "We're not gonna do a second series."

Oh, my God, my life fell apart. During that time I was also [00:12:00] doing a weekly column for a magazine called Stylist here in the UK, and that was unbelievable because that was back then when you actually earned decent money from writing a column. And, um, I was like, that was my, you know, that was my lifeline. It was keeping me afloat.

But I think as the TV work dried up, they became less and less interested in me as a columnist, and so I ended up losing that job as well. That was where it all went wrong. I was like, oh, my God, now I don't even have writing. I was absolutely on my knees, um, living in LA, and ... Which sounds very glamorous, but I was really struggling.

Came back to the UK for a bit, and this is where it just ... I think years of working as a journalist and committing to putting out good work, and being brave and being motivated just paid off, and I got a

random call from an editor called Emily, um, and she said, "I love your column in Stylist." I didn't say, "I've just been fired," because that would've ruined the call.

Um, she said, "I loved your column in Stylist. [00:13:00] I think you'd write really well for young adults. Have you ever considered writing fiction?" And I remember saying on the phone, "All I've ever wanted to do is write fiction, but I thought I would be an old lady in a shed in the garden, and I would put my manuscript into the top drawer and die, and then it would be published, you know, years later when someone found it."

I don't think I would ever have been confident enough at that age, kind of early 30s, to say, as a journalist, to say, "I want to write fiction." And yet there she was on the phone saying, "I think you'd be really good at it." She gave me a two-book deal, and it changed my life. So that ... She said, "Have you got any ideas for a novel?"

And I said to her, "You know, my childhood was- quite dramatic. And I haven't really ever written it down, and I don't know if I'm able to write it down, but I think I could do it through fiction. So Paper Aeroplanes came out of me fictionalizing elements of my own childhood. And what I [00:14:00] realized was, and I would say this to anybody who wants to write fiction, if you have something inside of you that is huge, you need to write that first.

You need to get that out. It's, I always say Paper Aeroplanes is the book that I had to write before I could write anything else. I got it all out. And that doesn't mean you tell your story exactly. Fictionalize what you want. But if you've got this thing inside of you that you've never dealt with, find a way to write it out.

It clears a pathway to be able to do so many other things. And I just felt so lucky that I got offered those two books, um, because I just got my childhood out my system, and it was absolutely incredible. And as soon as I did that, this confidence that I had in writing fiction just was... I was like, "I am exactly where I'm supposed to be."

I was not supposed to be on TV. I was supposed to, I was supposed to write these books. Um, I feel like- [00:15:00] I was ... Sometimes I think I was incredibly lucky to get that call, and other times I remind myself I got that call because of the work that I'd done and that she'd read. But it still does feel quite lucky.

Parul - LWS

And then the thing is, the truth is, it's one thing to get a book deal, uh, or to have interest, but to deliver it is the test. Yeah. And for it to hit the market and be successful is the third test. So I'm curious. So you know you h- you've got a deal, y- but now you have to deliver. What do those early stages of writing look like for you?

Dawn O'Porter

I mean, it's hell. Anyone would say the same thing. The best thing about writing is getting the deal. After that, it's just torture. Oh my God, you've gotta write the book. And then the, another great bit is when you write those lovely words, the end. I am the kind of person who absolutely believes that great art comes from great pain.

I do not expect to sit at my desk every day and have a fantastic time. I am a nightmare when I'm on a deadline. I drive my friends and family [00:16:00] insane. "This is the book that's gonna end my career. It's over. I'll never write again. I can't think of anything. I just ... Ah, I need to get another cat." Like, I just go, I just go into this absolute cave of self-doubt.

And then somehow, somewhere along the line, around three months later, I'll s- maybe put a text on the, my friends WhatsApp say, "I, I actually quite like this book. I think it's quite good." And that's my general process. Absolutely delighted to sign the deal, total dread and fear, crash of self-confidence, um, horrendous creative process, and then absolute joy and love for what I've somehow created, and that's the process I go through every single time.

And I'm deeply in that right now. Yes. My, my hair's quite greasy because I, my personal hygiene really takes a dip when I'm on a deadline.

Parul - LWS

So I'm curious. So I, this ... You, you know you have to write a book, and you might maybe refer to Paper [00:17:00] Aeroplanes or the latest one you're on. What are you doing? Are you, are you just writing the scenes that come to you?

Are you stream of consciousness, tapping everything away? What does it look like if I was, uh, uh, standing over your shoulder?

Dawn O'Porter

So right now, I'm in my office right now. I've got my cats for moral support. Um, to my left is a corkboard with loads of Post-it Notes on it, which I put on about two months ago and never looked at again, and that's generally what I do.

I have an idea for a novel. There is always, there's always a character, a location, and a climax in my head, like the thing, the bit we're aiming for. Everything else is a free-for-all. On a daily basis, I, I don't necessarily know what's going to happen each day. I've tried to be the kind of writer who plans and plots.

It isn't my personality. It doesn't work that way. I find, I find myself feeling trapped by a plan, and actually, the [00:18:00] best way that I can be when I write is just to let, let myself go. And that means... That's exciting. There's a moment in one of my novels, um, The Cows. I won't ruin it for anybody who hasn't read it, but there's something quite shocking happens in that book about three-quarters of the way through, and I did not know that was gonna happen that morning when I wrote it.

So, and it's, it's huge. So- That was my first novel that I wrote for adults that wasn't inspired by my life story, where I could do whatever I wanted. So I was like set free when I wrote The Cows. I was just like, "How much of myself is gonna be in this book? How much am I abandoning myself? Where can the story go?"

And I just, I just went for it. And I remember writing that scene and thinking, "You can't just do that." I'm sorry I'm being very cryptic, but you can't just do that. And then I thought, "I can do whatever I want. I can do [00:19:00] whatever I want." And when I used to make my documentaries, I did some pretty wild things in those days.

Um, it was called immersive jour- journalism, and my job as the journalist was to turn up into these weird and wonderful worlds and experience the lives of the people that I was investigating. So I wasn't just on the periphery, I was getting stuck in. For example, I went to Japan and lived as a geisha for 10 days.

I went to, um, i- in America I lived with Mormon polygamists for a while. I went to a, a, you know, a free-loving, um, hippie commune in Germany where I got stuck right in with all of the activities. Like, I went for it. And I used to say to myself when the camera started rolling, you ... I used to h- have this thing I say to myself, "Commit to the promise that I will not let the viewer down."

I am here to investigate, and if they tell me that something happens here, I need to let the viewer see it, which means I have to go there. Don't [00:20:00] let the viewer down." And that meant that I, I became kind of known as being quite fearless because I would just go headfirst into these situations, and I have a very similar, um, attitude towards my novels.

Don't let the reader down. If I'm building up to something, if you are in ... Most of my books are written in first person. If you are in this character's head, you need to be in the dark corners of their mind. I have to take you, the reader, on this experience with them. So just don't let them down. And I think that moment in *The Cows* was my, like, eureka moment of that for me as a writer.

Just- Go for it. Just get it in. And that means that any sort of planning gets in the way of that freedom to just go for it every day. And it makes writing way more enjoyable for me, and my books way more unpredictable for readers, and I love that. [00:21:00] I love it.

Parul - LWS

This is wonderful. I lo- I love hearing how you think about writing.

And I'm curious, 'cause you talk about, um, being there, don't let the reader down and being there. Like, you're bringing us into your characters' minds. I wanna understand that just a little bit better. So like, say with, um, uh, your latest, oh, your latest fiction book, *Honey Bee*, where you're bringing Flo and Renee back.

Sarah C

Mm-hmm.

Parul - LWS

They were teens in, in the YA books, and now they're grown up. Um, how are you seeing this in your mind? Like, how does it app- how does it come to you when you're thinking about, say, a, a, they're, you know, they're visiting their auntie, for example. Are you seeing this visually? Are you talking out loud to build that scene?

Dawn O'Porter

Oh, that's a nice question. What do I do? I mean, I do... 'Cause I've got my office and I'm alone all day, I do say a lot of stuff out loud, and I do practice conversations out loud. I, um, I also think, like, I think sometimes it [00:22:00] would be easy as a writer to write an obvious conversation, and to get you to the next point of the story.

And actually, in real life, most conversations aren't that obvious. Small talk is. You don't wanna write a book of small talk. So I have a lot of great, you know, I have a lot of kind of artistic friends, and our conversation could go in any direction. And no one says the obvious thing, and everyone's very open, and I just try and put that into the characters.

So you've got a character like Auntie Jo, who is, you know, a kind of perimenopausal woman at a time where no one's really talking about that, 'cause it's, you know, backdated to whatever the date of the book is. And the stuff she says are kind of a bit wild sometimes, but they're, they're really emotional and meaningful.

And I kind of almost with her ... [00:23:00] But people didn't really talk about it back, back then. So I almost with her put, allowed her to say out loud what women are now saying about perimenopause. They're actually saying it out loud, but I put that into someone from that era who didn't really talk about it, and I just thought that was quite interesting to play with.

Um, it's almost like a bit of hindsight. So I think, you know, I lived in a house when I was a teenager with a perimenopausal woman. She didn't talk about it. So I was like, well, what would it have been like if the auntie had just said, "I'm insecure about sex. I don't know who I am," or just, you know, said those things like we would now.

Um, so that's kind of how I put that together. Um, I also just think, like, the great thing about fiction, and very much what I did in the, in the Renee and Flo books, Paper Airplanes, Goose, and on Honeybee because that, you know, I'm very loosely based on the character Renee, so much of those conversations were what were the conversations I wish I'd had, and that was a really fun thing to play with.

It was like what ... [00:24:00] These, these situations resemble loosely situations that I would've been in. What do I wish people had said? What do I wish I'd have said? What, who would I have liked to have met? If, you know, how do I, how, how could that have played out differently? That's always quite fun. It's a really nice writing thing to do when sometimes when you're stuck for something to write about, it's really useful to, if you've got a character

And I just did this yesterday with this book I'm writing at the moment. The character I'm writing, so it just wasn't coming together, and so I would just think who's she like in my life? And she's really like this friend of mine who I haven't seen for about seven years, but she's really like her, so I just nominate that person in my head and form the character to what would Mary say?

What would she, how would she have dealt with that room of people? And suddenly she starts coming together so much more easily. And it's, it's not that you're, it's not that you're basing a character on someone necessarily. It's just really [00:25:00] useful to, if that person who she reminds you of was to be in that room, what would she do in, in real life?

And I, I, I like using that tactic quite a lot. It was literally, literally yesterday that I did that, and had the best afternoon writing I've had in ages on the book that I'm doing because suddenly she was a fully formed person to me.

Parul - LWS

I love that, the anchoring.

Dawn O'Porter

Mm.

Parul - LWS

Using that person as an anchor. I love that.

That's a, that's a, that's a great idea. Um, do you, uh, as you go further on into the book, and maybe if we stick with Honeybee for a second, um, so maybe on the second or third draft, are you then- Do you, do you know some people have, like, character lists or, like, character books where they try and analyze their character in a more editorial way.

Do, do you do that or are you still going with gut the entire time?

Dawn O'Porter

Occasional spider graphs if I'm struggling with somebody. It is very, it is very good to just, if you've got multiple characters, which I always do, and very often multiple perspectives, and the, and Renee and Flo [00:26:00] books, so Honeybee they, they switch from Renee to Flo, Renee to Flo, and those, you know, the challenge there is making sure that those two characters, although they are so similar because they're best friends and the same age, but making them distinctly different for the reader.

That's always the hardest bit, and to get that right, it's very useful to have two lists. Renee's top k- uh, personality traits, Flo's top personality traits, just to make sure that you keep referring back to them. Like, Flo is very anxious. She's socially awkward. Just having that next to you at all times just reminds you to keep her on that track.

Then you've got Renee, who is deeply insecure, but embarrassingly overconfident, so she will burst into a room with no filter and say the thing, where to try and get information out of Flo is almost impossible. Those are the things that anchor those characters down, and you have to keep reminding yourself to bring them back to those character traits.

I [00:27:00] think if you don't, I'd say each one generally, if I'm doing a character, probably has, like, five things that I'll keep pulling it back to. If you don't have that, you will, you just end up in a, kind of in a, in a bit of a mess with them. That's when I'm doing multiple characters, anyway. It's a bit, I feel like when you've, like Cat Lady, my novel Cat Lady, I just did one perspective, which was, uh, Mia, and that was sort of easier because I didn't have to worry about her blending into anyone else.

But when I'm doing the multiple perspectives, you have to, you have to anchor them quite solidly

Parul - LWS

I love that. Um, how many drafts did you do for, for Honey- Honeybee? Do you have ... Or, you know, I don't know if there's an average or ...

Dawn O'Porter

Honeybee is a bit of a weird one because I ... So the novel that I'm writing at the moment, I started writing probably about four and a half years ago, and abandoned

No, about three years ago, and [00:28:00] abandoned because it just wasn't going well. Something about it, it's, it's my only novel I've ever sat- set in LA, um, where I lived for 15 years, and at the time of writing it, we were packing up and leaving- Mm ... and moving back to London. And the entire experience was so emotional and exhausting and draining, and it was this kind of crossover of my, my fiction and real life world.

And the book I'm writing is entirely fiction, and yet because I was saying goodbye to LA after all of that time, and packing boxes and doing shipping and s- everyone was so emotional, we were all just a bit of a wreck. I would be drifting onto the page so much and confusing myself and just thinking, "What, what am I doing?"

And I just, it was due to come out like a year later, and the only time I've ever done this, I said to my publisher, "I have to abandon this book. It's just not working. It's, I'm getting, it's depressing me. I [00:29:00] feel like I'm, I, I'm, I can't, I'm so emotional about leaving LA and I'm writing about LA and I just, I'm not ready.

It's just too hard, and I don't know why. It's just this massive creative block." And they were like, "Okay, but we have a book coming out in a year." And I was like, "Oh my God, I'm gonna have to start something completely from scratch. This is just awful." And then- I spoke to them about the idea of doing a third Renee and Flo book, and they were really into the idea of a third Renee and Flo book.

And then I remembered that I'd written one. Now, I know this sounds insane, and I am not that much of a prolific writer where this is by any means normal, but I think around 2018, 2018, 2019, I had, had a deal with a publisher to write the third Renee and Flo book. And I'd written a draft of it, like 75,000 words of this book, and I'd sent it off to the [00:30:00] publisher that I was working with, and they'd sent it back and with quite a few notes, and I'd just not done it because I think another publisher came in with another book deal and I just wrote those.

And this book was like, I kept writing to the publisher that was... I was doing that one with going, "Really sorry. I will get back to it, I promise." Ah. And Harper Collins ended up buying that deal. And I said to do a third, this is very complicated, sorry, but publishing is all a bit all over the place, to do a third Renee and Flo book.

And I was like, "Well, actually I did write a draft of one a few years ago." And so I dug it out, and I could not believe that I actually had this full manuscript. I read it thinking it was gonna be awful, and I really liked it. It was all set in London, and it was wrong. It was... There was loads wrong, but it was a nugget of an idea.

And I sent it to Harper Collins and were like, "We'll publish this book," but we all agreed it needed to be set in Guernsey where the other books were set. So it was a massive edit and a rewrite, but that ended up being the book that came out the following [00:31:00] year instead. And that is exactly what I mean when I said earlier that writing has always saved the day.

It's always, there's al- it's always been the thing when I think I'm in crisis, somehow I'll be able to write my way out of the crisis, and that's what, um, Honey Bee did. And so now I'm back to that LA book again because I love it. And I left LA three years ago, and I can look back retrospectively on that time and, you know, romantically about LA and write about it in a very different way.

Um, and I think it's gonna be great. But it was such, yeah, it was such an interesting experience because I just, I just could not find the balance of what I was going through in my real life and the book that I was trying to write at that time. Um, so yeah, back to it now, and hopefully it will come together a bit.

So in terms of how long it took me to write Honey Bee, it's just a sort of impossible question because I can hardly remember writing that first draft. And then I edited it- [00:32:00] in about three months and got it out. So, yeah. Wow. Don't know.

Parul - LWS

I love that you found a book at 75,000 words that

Dawn O'Porter

you could use. I know.

I'm like, gonna go through all my files going, "Is there another one in there somewhere?" But unfortunately, no, that was

Parul - LWS

the only one. In a little bit, I definitely wanna- I'm curious, 'cause to, to have a 75,000 word novel that you didn't realize you had, I'm curious about your writing habit. We'll get to that in a bit.

But I just wanna talk a little bit, just really quickly, about that shift from young adult to adult. You know, by no means is it easy to write for YA market, and by no means is it easy to switch from YA to adult, and yet you seem to have done pretty well. I mean, I was looking at The Cows, which is your debut adult, and it had like 20,000 reviews on Amazon.

People have really, really taken your work to heart and love it. Um, how have you approached both of those types of books? Like, I'm curious about, you know, did, did you read in the market? Did you ... What considerations did you have trying to think about the reader and the kind of story you wanted to tell?

Dawn O'Porter

So Paper [00:33:00] Airplanes and Goose are called young adult.

However, to me, the only reason they're young adult is because the characters are younger. Because it's set in the '90s, I just wrote it as, as my life was in the '90s. I really didn't think about writing it for a younger audience. I thought about me as a woman in my mid-30s, that I was at the time, writing about what it was like being a teenager in the '90s.

Um, so I wasn't thinking, how can I make this appropriate for a younger audience? I just wrote about teenagers and what it was like being a teenager. And I'm sure that, like, there were moments with some of the, there's, some of the sex scenes, I think, I'm trying to remember if I toned them down a bit, but I don't think I did.

I just tried to keep them really real. Um, I think with, with, for my version of young adult, if I was to write for teenagers again, I wouldn't patronize [00:34:00] them in any way at all. I think chil- like, teenagers are so ... I remember being so, not experienced, but so aware. I was experienced, experiencing real life in real time.

The idea where I would read a book that softened the experience of being a teenager would be insane to me. So I feel like it's the same, um, it's the same process and it's the same commitment to not letting the reader down. They're just younger characters

Parul - LWS

F- fair enough. But I, but I'm curious- Well,

Dawn O'Porter

I, but I would say in, in terms of that, like, so they're doing all these things, but you know that they don't have experience.

So when... I guess the answer to your question is when you're writing about teenagers, heartbreak is catastrophic because they don't know that it will pass. You know, all these things that, these massive things that they're experiencing for the first time, I guess, are more elevated than they would be in a grown-up novel, 'cause they've absolutely got no life experience to tell them that, um, shit happens.

Everything is huge. Um, friendships are so much [00:35:00] more, um, they're so much more important. When they go wrong, they're so much more catastrophic. You know, it's like they're... Everything is bigger. But, um, yeah, I don't know. I, I actually really loved writing for teenagers, but in the '90s. I, I don't know how good I would be at writing teenagers today 'cause I wasn't one and I don't really understand it.

I feel like that's a whole other world than I've ever experienced. But it's, it was really, I loved writing about them in the '90s.

Parul - LWS

And more broadly, what do you read? I read somewhere that you are trying to make reading part of your writing life. W- d- what do you read to help you, or to help you stay connected, I suppose?

Dawn O'Porter

I read all sorts of things, mostly fiction. Um, I love writers like Miranda July and w- you know, characters, w- female characters that are just bizarre. I'm really sorry I don't remember the name of the author, but I just read a [00:36:00] book that I loved called My Year of Rest and Relaxation. Have you read it? It's-

Parul - LWS

No

Dawn O'Porter

it's my recommendation to you all, and I'm so sorry I don't have anything to look up by.

Parul - LWS

Some- someone will, someone will chime in on the chat, I'm sure. They'll look it

Dawn O'Porter

up. Just a, a female character who is, oh, just, I don't wanna say weird or-

Parul - LWS

Otessa.

Dawn O'Porter

Yeah.

Parul - LWS

Otessa Moshfegh. Yeah.

Dawn O'Porter

That's right. It is an absolute nugget of a book.

And I just, it's not about a woman trying to be successful in any part of her life, career, love, motherhood. It's just a woman fucking trying to exist. Like, with a really good amount of madness to her, and she's extraordinary, and, um, uncomfortable, and I just love it. Like, All Fours to me, Miranda July, was just, that book, I [00:37:00] read it and just went straight back to the beginning.

I just absolutely love books about just uncomfortable, awkward women. And, uh, like, w- Miranda July, people didn't really know about her here for quite a long time. A friend gave me one of her books years ago called The First Bad Man, and I felt like I had discovered gold. And I'd be telling people about her, and they're like, "I don't really know who she is."

And then All Fours kind of brought her to the forefront here as well, and then lots of people loved it. But just dirtbag, filthy women. I just, I just love those books because they are, those are the fearless writers, you know? And my, my books aren't quite that, but they're heading in that direction of, like, this- This is kind of, I, I know sexual deviancy, um, social awkwardness, uh, trauma-driven weird women.

I just love it. Can't get enough. I just can't get enough of it. [00:38:00]

Parul - LWS

Well, we love the recommendations. We'll be sure to add them to the notes- Mm-hmm ... uh, for the podcast. I'd love to now move to Hungry Eyes, your memoir Uh, I'm curious, why this memoir now?

Dawn O'Porter

Well, it was an accident. I did the TV show MasterChef last year.

Um, I love to cook. I'm a, I'm a, I'm an obsessive cook. I... It's the thing that I do. I write and I cook. I'm always doing either one of those things. Um, and- And

Parul - LWS

your parties sound legendary.

Dawn O'Porter

They're great ... I have lots of pa- lots of parties out in LA. We cook for lots of people on Sundays, have everybody... The thing about LA, everyone's always just passing through town, so my husband and I

would just say, "If you're in town, come over on a Sunday," and we just cook loads of food and, and drink lots of margaritas.

And, um, food is, if I'm stressed, that's what you'll find me doing. If I'm happy, that's what you'll find me doing. If I, if I think you need some love, I'll cook for you. Like, it's just the thing that I do because it's what saved me as a child. Back to my trauma at six years old, [00:39:00] I lived in a house where my mum had died, or she was dying upstairs.

It was tense and sad, and when food was on the table everyone was just okay for a minute, because it just brought this, like, release in the tension. And then when I was 10 I went to live with my auntie and my uncle, and my auntie was just this absolutely amazing cook, and suddenly our house was the party house.

People over every Sunday. They threw these wild dinner parties and I was like, "Oh my God, if you cook, you bring people in." Like, you create a life. Your home becomes the center of your universe because you... You know, it's, some people go out and some people bring people in, and I always just wanted to be the person that wa- brought people to my table.

I wanted my memories for myself, and I want my memories for my kids to be at our table and for that to be the happy place that they come back to throughout their lives. And you get that by cooking and creating those moments, and that's, so that's what I do. So I did MasterChef the TV show, and because I love cooking and, um, I think [00:40:00] may have mentioned that, and every time you submit a recipe on MasterChef, you have to do a little paragraph about why you're cooking the recipe that you're cooking.

And all they want is so that the, the hosts know what to talk to you about when you come round. But I'd be, like, writing these stories crying, going, "Oh my God, this is from when I was this years, uh, this old, when my auntie made me this and we..." I was like, "Okay, I've got a lot to say about food." So I said to my publisher, "Listen, I'm, I'm just realizing this emotional connection that I have with food, and I would like to write a book," and I pitched a book, and it was 12 pivotal moments of my life and the food that was on the table.

That was it. And I was just gonna pick, like, motherhood, your childhood, motherhood, university, whatever it was and, you know, what I ate at the time. And so I wrote that book, delivered it ahead of schedule, absolutely delighted with myself, and then my editor said, "It's really good, but I think it's a memoir."

And you haven't written it as a memoir, so you need to go back, write it all chronologically as if you are the protagonist of the story. And [00:41:00] I honestly just wanted to die because it was two weeks before Christmas and I thought I'd handed in it early, and then I just got this massive edit bomb that I had to do.

And kind of resentfully, I kind of went at it, chopped it all up. You know, there'd be a sentence three-quarters of the way through about my childhood that needed to go back to the beginning. It was, it was like, it was this with 80,000 words. It was horrendous editing experience, but she was absolutely right and I'm so glad that we did that.

Because suddenly it was a memoir that I never intended to write. I have no interest in writing a memoir, and yet I felt, even knew as I was writing it, um, I just wanted to document this kind of lifelong relationship with food and how emotional I am about it and how important it is to me, not only for the literal nourishing that it's done for me, but for the people that it's sat me at tables with and connected me with.

And, you know, whatever your relationship with food is in your life, [00:42:00] whether you're not bothered about it, have a negative relationship with it, positive relationship with it, you have a relationship with it.

Everyone has a lot to say about it, and I just hoped with the book, people would get to the end and go, "My God, look back on my own life and the meals that I've shared, and the, you know, the bread that I've broken with all those different people."

I think it, it's an emotional subject if you allow it to be

Parul - LWS

A hun- 100%. And that's, I think that's what happened when I read your memoirs. I started to think back to my relationship with food growing... I grew up in Wellington. Uh, you wouldn't know it from my accent, but I grew up in Wellington in this Kiwi Indian community, and that's how we gathered.

Dawn O'Porter

Mm.

Parul - LWS

The Indian families would gather together across Wellington in different houses. And I was like, "Ah, like I, now I know why I'm so nostalgic about New Zealand and Wellington. It's the gatherings-

Dawn O'Porter

Yeah ... that

Parul - LWS

we had." Um, I'm so curious about so much about this book. Um, was there anything that, apart from the actual wrangling of the text, was there anything [00:43:00] difficult about having to dive so deep-

Dawn O'Porter

Well, I'll tell you-

into your childhood? ... to be completely honest. So my childhood's something I can write about very comfortably. The only issue is, is that no one in my life wanted to be written about. Not my family, my husband, my kids. So you try to write a memoir whilst protecting everybody at the same time. It's a really, really difficult line to draw.

And, sorry, line to walk. And, um, I think that's, I have every right to tell my story. And, you know, as a, as a massive oversharer and someone who's been writing for, you know, the best part of three decades, was just like, "I have every right to write my own story." And yet my story is littered with other people who don't want to be written about.

My first draft, God. I sent it to my sister for a bit of a proofread, and she just came back saying, "No, you can't say that. You can't write about them in that way. You can't mention that random auntie that we haven't seen in 20 years. You can't do this. You can't bring people in. Just pare it right back.

[00:44:00] Always make it about you. Always make it about the food and bring the people in as, like, you know, as, uh, spare parts around you." And I was like, "Right. Okay." So I had to do a massive rewrite there as well. I'm really happy that where I got to on that. Um, but anybody, there'll be lots of people listening to this who want to write a memoir but don't know how because it involves other people.

And my advice on that is, is keep it about you. And that means that when you talk about other people, what they did isn't important, it's how it made you feel that is important and that you have every right to write about. So that's, it's got to remain about what happened and how it made you feel. And the second thing is a device like food or another theme for a memoir is very useful.

Because if you feel like it's getting too personal about somebody else, you can always pull it back to that theme. And that was the great thing about having the food. Because I'd be like, I could have gone deep into other people's lives, and I wanted to, but I could just keep bringing it back to how [00:45:00] I felt and the food that was on the table.

So I was thinking you could do that with a memoir by, you know, the, um, the theme being The clothes that you wore throughout your life, or the, the places that you've been throughout your life, or the food that was on the table, or ... You've just gotta find a way to bring it back to, to you and the theme.

Because, yeah, it's, it's, it's difficult. But so far they've all read it and everyone absolutely loved it, so that was, that was really lucky. But that was my challenge writing this one. I could t- as you can tell from the way that I'm talking, I could ... I'm open and speak about myself openly and everything is, you know, I'm not, I'm not guarded at all.

And that's why I love writing. That was always why I think I did well at writing. But, um, but because I'm like that, it's not everybody else's problem.

Parul - LWS

I mean, I- And they don't, they- I am very curious about that first draft.

Dawn O'Porter

Yeah.

Parul - LWS

I wish I could read

Dawn O'Porter

it. Well, I think it was j- I think it was a lot of childhood stuff where you realize, oh, I've got quite a lot of resentment towards quite a lot of people, and but they're actually not [00:46:00] part of the story, and they don't need to be in my book about food.

Parul - LWS

Mm. I, I'm curious about how you think about, um, you know, like we talked about fiction and, you know, when you start you have the sort of character, the s- um, the character and you have, you think about the climax. How do you think about that arc in memoir? And did you think about that like a sort of climactic moment or movement throughout the book?

Dawn O'Porter

I did. When my editor sent back the notes of write it as a story and make yourself the protagonist, it was ... I was like, what does that even mean? But actually, it was, it was quite easy in a way. I think because, um, it was kind of gearing up to ... You know, a lot of the book is about food, but it's about my, my need for success.

Or what I thought was success. My am- it's about my ambition and where I wanted to end up. And actually, it just, for me personally, it came to a very ... Just as I was writing the book, we had just left America where we'd been living for 15 years, starting [00:47:00] a new life. I'd gone back into TV with MasterChef. Like, there seemed to

There was this, there was this very natural kind of thing that we were building up to, which almost became the crescendo of the book. And then this, yeah, I don't know, I think mid, mid-life was actually a great time to write a memoir. I always thought it'd be something you do when you're older, because I look back on, like, my 20s and 30s, and the first part of my 40s is just, like, chaos trying to work out who

you are.

And as you approach 50, you really get a sense of who you are. And then you're looking at the next, you know, few decades very differently. I'm not trying to climb anymore. So it almost felt like Honeyed, uh, sorry, Hungry Eyes was, was the story of the climb. And then you get to this point in your life where- I, and that isn't to say that I'm not still ambitious and I have to still work.

I have, you know, I have to work every day to, you know, to live the life I want to live, and it's like the, the [00:48:00] effort isn't over, the motivation isn't gone, but I'm not... I don't have this, like, you know, oh, I don't know what the word is. It's, it's like insatiable ambition anymore, which is what got me to where I am.

So it was all worth it, but I feel like now there's just this calmness. Now it's about maintenance. That's a good way to say it. Now it's about how do I maintain everything that I have, but I'm not on this grab for more and more and more like I always was, and I think that's what, that was what the book ended up becoming, is that kind of journey to chilling out essentially.

Parul - LWS

Yeah, that makes sense. Um, I, I, and I loved, just a slightly off, a slightly left field here, but in, in your book, you know, there's, there is definitely a thread of, like, satisfaction and, and community, or satisfaction through community, like all the sort of gatherings you had. I feel like you, like you were saying, you bring people together.

Um, what- I mean, [00:49:00] I personally love creating community. I love in-person events. What do you think your mindset is when you're trying to bring people together?

Dawn O'Porter

I just love it. And it- so I've, we moved back to London three years ago, and a f- couple of months ago I was like, right, we live in this really nice part of London, and I don't know that many people where I am.

And so my friend who has a local shop, I was like, "We need a WhatsApp group of great local women." And so we just started to create groups of, I don't care if we know them, just if you've heard they're cool, whatever, just a- add them and so let's start hanging out. I wanted to walk around where I live and say hi and stop to a chat like five times, stop for a chat five times on the way to my office every morning.

I have no desire to live, um, outside of my local community. I wanna get stuck in. I want to do Christmas wreath making sessions at the local cafe. I want to do book clubs with locals. I want to host events with local people. I want to get stuck in. I just, I think that's the [00:50:00] Guernsey girl in me. I think I grew up on a small island, and where people would just, you know, walk into your house, and the idea of living in LA and not having that, because you have to really try and find it there, um, living back in London and not having that is just not my vibe.

You know, my husband's the same. He's Irish. He's youngest of five. Lives in a small town in Ireland where people are just always there in, uh, my mother-in-law's kitchen drinking tea. And that's, that's who we are. So in terms of creating community in real life, I'm really proactive aga- about it. I'm really proactive about it online.

You know, I have a Substack now, but I had a Patreon for years, and it was so, we were such a gang. Like I would c- I would write for that every, you know, three times a week throughout the pandemic, and it was, I loved it. And I think people were a bit surprised by how open I was and how much I gave to it, but I'm like, just because you're in the public eye, for me anyway, [00:51:00] doesn't mean that I want to like, not be involved with everything.

And when you're a writer, my readers, like we're a gang. I, I want to be a part of this with you. I want to create this art for you and then, you know, watch it with you in the cinema type vibes. I want to be, I want to experience it with you. I'm married to an actor. It's all so collaborative. You know, when they make a movie, they have a s- uh, you know, a premiere.

They all watch it together with loads of people. Everyone's kind of writing about it, buzzing about it. And in books, you could live a life where you write on your own all the time, and then you send it off, and you have nothing to do with any of that. I don't want that. I wanna be in the room with my readers.

I wanna have events with them. I want to communicate with them on Substack. I want to like, communicate with them on Instagram. That community is, I need that as an artist, and I need it in my daily life as well, so I'm incredibly proactive about building it.

Parul - LWS

That's gorgeous. I love that. Um, just a bit of a time [00:52:00] check.

Probably have another five minutes of questions from me and then we'll turn it over to any questions you have. We'll be ending at-

Sarah C

Ask anything, guys.

Parul - LWS

I love that. And we'll be ending at quarter past 3:00 UK time, just, just so you're aware, um, as Dawn has to go pick up her children. All right. I have some questions about the writing process.

I wanna go a little bit more granular about h- how you write. So you talk about your office and you're there now, I believe. That's where you're writing. Yeah. And you s- do you treat it like a 9:00 to 5:00 job? What does it actually look like? Your-

Dawn O'Porter

So what that actually looks like is kids get dropped off.

Well, I have one who just started secondary, so my youngest I'll drop off by 8:30, and sometimes I might go and do a fitness class straight away, stretch my bones, work some muscles, and then I get to my desk by 10 o'clock latest generally. And I try and write all day. Um, it, it's either me or Chris picking the kids up, so I'll either work till, you know, 3:15 or 6:00, 7:00.

Um, five days a week when I'm not on another kind of job, and I just come to my [00:53:00] office every day and I, and I do it. And that means I don't work in the evenings and weekends anymore. I, I host a radio show on Saturdays, so I don't have time to write at the weekends. Um, but if I commit to those Monday to Friday hours, I get so much done.

When I'm on a deadline and it's crunch point, I might throw in some late nights and stay at my desk until, you know, 10:00, 11:00. Um, but generally I'm on average realistically a 10:00 till 4:00 working day. Um, I'm not writing that whole day. I'm, um, you know, trying dress on 'cause I keep all my clothes in here.

I'm procrastinating. I'm making really, um, laborious lunches in my air fryer. I am scanning the internet for, I don't know, new caftans. But if I, if I get like four solid hours writing a day out of the seven or eight that I'm at my desk, I will be on track to get everything done. However, there will always be, if my deadline is on the 30th of September, that last three [00:54:00] weeks of September will be crunch time, and I will, it will be round the clock all in.

That's how that looks

Parul - LWS

And do you have, do you give yourself any daily targets or is it hour based?

Dawn O'Porter

I never, ever have given myself daily targets, and I think I should start because I think it would be helpful. I'd probably more realistically go for a weekly target than a daily target, because I think that's too much pressure.

And honestly, I think if you're writing absolute crap because it's just not happening that day, I don't, I don't want 2,000 words of crap to have to sit- sift through. So I would say probably a week- if I was gonna set myself a weekly target, I'd probably say about 6,000 words a week was a good weekly target.

6,000 to have it good by Friday, you know, edited it a few times. That would be an excellent, that would be an excellent achievement. Do I ever actually achieve that? It depends where I'm at time-wise.

Parul - LWS

And you know, as you were talking earlier, you're in the middle at the moment of a book, and you're in [00:55:00] that sort of tricky phase.

What is your self-talk like when things are rough?

Dawn O'Porter

Again, don't let the reader down. Come on, Dawn, you can do this. I don't know if anyone is aware of the writer Emma Gannon, who I love. I've known Emma for years. Um.

Parul - LWS

We're interviewing her next week.

Dawn O'Porter

Oh, great. I love Emma, and you can tell her how much I love her, even though she knows.

She hosted a dinner a couple of months ago for the release of her book, Creative Compass, and my book, Hungry Eyes. She very kindly asked me to be her guest of honor for this dinner, which is so sweet of her, and she said that ... She got up and she did a speech. I was suffering quite badly from a massive lack of confidence about this book at the time, and she stood up, and she did a speech.

She has read my books since the very, very start, and she said, "The thing I love about Dawn is that nobody tells Dawn what to write." And I went, "Oh my God." Something about her saying that just went, "That's it." That's what I've always said to myself. That's the thing that I have lost sight of, and I'm [00:56:00] allowing too many voices to come into my head saying, "Make it more mainstream," or, "Make it more..."

And Emma just reminded me- that I have my own voice on the page. Nobody tells Dawn what to write, and I was just off after that. It was the best thing anyone has ever, ever said to me as a writer, delivered at exactly the right time, and she knows how grateful I am to her for saying it. But it was so not a flippant compliment, generic compliment.

It was really specific and yeah, and I c- that is my mantra in my head. And I, I told her, I was texting her the other day, I'm gonna get it printed out and framed and put it up in my office. No one tells Dawn what to write. It's my own no one puts Baby in the corner moment. But it's like this is ... It's, it's just so good because it reminds me that my characters can do fucking anything I want them to p- to do, and it's all down to me.

Parul - LWS

Love that. I feel like that would ... I'd love that on a [00:57:00] T-shirt or something.

Dawn O'Porter

It's really good, isn't it?

Parul - LWS

But- We could adopt that for ourselves. Yeah.

Dawn O'Porter

Exactly. I know. It's really, really good.

Parul - LWS

Uh, I'm curious if you think back to the Dawn who was writing, starting to write Paper Airplanes, what advice would you give her as she's starting to embark on her-

Dawn O'Porter

Ooh

Parul - LWS

writing career?

Dawn O'Porter

That you don't need, yeah. Uh, that, just that. Just trust your gut. Don't follow a formula that other people, that other writers have. It might work for you, but if you f- so I found, I went to a wr- I did a writing course where it gave me the formula of what a novel does, and I've never been more stunted, stilted, and held back in writing ever.

Um, I understand that's useful for some people to get you going, but I think your book doesn't have to be like any other book on the planet. It doesn't have to, it doesn't have to be like anything. And so I think I would go back to her and just be like, "Right, once you've got this book out your system, just..."

I mean, to be honest, I, I did. [00:58:00] I was, and this is where I know that I'm in my right place in my life because I wasn't very good at many things, but I feel really confident when it comes to writing fiction generally. You know, there are moments, but, um, and I just think that that call I got that day from Emily saying that she was gonna give me a book deal was, it was just the universe saying, "Dawn, this is exactly what you're supposed to be doing."

Um- Yeah. Oh, well, I will-- oh, there is one thing I would say. Sorry. The success. I used to think success was about what was in my bank account. I used to pin my self-worth on how much money I was earning, and if I wasn't earning much money, I would think everything had fallen apart and it had failed. And now the best gift that you can do for yourself is not see...

I know it's so stressful when there's no money in your bank account, and it happens to all artists, and it's awful. But it doesn't mean that you're not successful. Your success is based on what you've [00:59:00] managed to achieve yesterday, 10 years ago, 20 years ago. It doesn't change. If you've achieved something you're proud of, you've had a massive success.

Being an artist is feast or famine all the way through. It never stops. It never stops. And every time I think, "That's it now. I never have to worry again," it's just never the case. And every time you pin your success on what is in your bank account and who is, who is taking a chance on you, it will all go wrong.

Your success is what you have created and whatever you feel proud of from any point in your life, and I think that's a really important thing to remember, and it took me a really long time to realize that.

Parul - LWS

It's really refreshing to hear, actually. Thank you. I'm curious, what are you dreaming of these days?

Like, what... You know, you've climb- I feel like you've climbed so many mountaintops, so many different ambitions. But if you're to think in the next, whatever period of time, two, three, five years, what, what would be a dream for you?

Dawn O'Porter

I just want to get to a point where all I have to do is cook and write. [01:00:00] I just want to cook and write, and unfortunately, I'm not quite there.

I still have to do other jobs and, you know, that kind of... And, like, that kind of thing. But if I can just get to a point where I can just cook and write, I would just be the happiest person on Earth. I just think that sounds like heaven.

Parul - LWS

I love that. What a, what a, what a beautiful idea. Um, well, I would love to invite you all to, if you fancy it, actually you can turn your videos on if you want to.

Come and say hello. Sure. I'm sure that Dawn would love to see your lovely faces. Come say hello. And I know there are a few questions. I will invite you, if you have asked a question and your video is on, I will invite you to ask your question to Dawn. Or maybe you're shy. Maybe you don't wanna turn your video

Dawn O'Porter

on.

Be shy or not, it's fine.

Parul - LWS

Okay. All right. Let's see. It's me. I've got some... Okay, some people are coming through slowly but surely All right. There we go. Hello, hello,

Dawn O'Porter

hello. Hello.

Parul - LWS

Hello, friends. Come, come on in. Come on, join the party. This is a community. Hi. Come on in.

Dawn O'Porter

Oh my goodness, how nice. Hi.

Parul - LWS

I was trying to think of your middle name.

Alison? Here are the lovely writers that have [01:01:00] been listening to you and, uh, waiting for this interview. Uh, let's see. We've got some questions that have come through. Uh, Sarah, you had a question if you'd like to ask it, if your video is on. Otherwise, I'll ask it on your behalf. I'll give you a couple of seconds.

Hi there, friends. Lovely to see you. Lovely. Isn't she great? I, I feel so inspired by this. I feel, I, I feel like... Actually, I don't... May- maybe people say this to you all the time, Dawn, but you have this very transferable energy. Oh. It's like just listening to you talk, I want to do more in the world. I want to be better.

Oh,

Dawn O'Porter

well, that's nice. Oh, I hope it's motivating.

Parul - LWS

So motivating. I feel like I wanna do, I've got like some rocket fuel up me now.

Dawn O'Porter

Good.

Parul - LWS

Uh, okay, I'm gonna ask Sarah's question on Sarah's behalf. Sorry,

Sarah C

c- uh, I am on, uh, am I allowed to ask it without- Oh,

Parul - LWS

go for it ... saying please? Go for

Sarah C

it. Uh, you said about greasy hair, Dawn.

I'm in a much, uh, greasier state, so- Okay ... I'm gonna save you from that. Um, yeah, I loved this

interview, thank you so much. Uh, my question was that I really love the humor in your writing, in your novels, and in your memoir. Um, and I just wondered how you [01:02:00] balance that with the drama and the tension and all the stuff you have to do plot-wise, 'cause I'm trying to do a similar thing. And I said in my comment when I try the more dramatic scenes, it ends up sticking out like a sore thumb, and it feels like I've put an episode of Hollyoaks in.

So yeah, just really- Wow ... interested in how you blend the comedy with the, the drama and the tension and all the stuff you have to do to move your characters along.

Dawn O'Porter

I mean, I think I, I just think comedy is so realistic in awkward situations. And that, generally, even when something really awful has happened, very often at some point in the, in the s- in the process, someone will do something funny, and so don't be afraid of throwing it in.

And also, I think some, a lot of comedy comes from people trying to be funny in those times. That's also something quite fun to play with. It's like when someone is trying to make something less tense, if you don't know how to make something funny, make someone try to make it funny, and that would be obvious to your reader that that's what's happening, and I think there's a lot of comedy in that.

Mm. I think for me [01:03:00] it's like, um, I came from quite a, a, a funny family. Um, and yet we were all dealing with, like, real trauma, but I do remember people saying funny things. So I think it takes a minute to get it right. You've just got to be brave. Write the thing that makes you laugh, and, and just put it in, leave it, come back to it later and see how it sits.

But yeah, don't, don't be afraid of putting funny into tense moments. Um- But there's, there's a few scenes. I'm trying to think of where it was. I think it might have been in The Cows, where there's quite a difficult scene, and the, the humor comes from someone trying to be, trying to be funny. And your reader's- Mm

in it with you there, which is quite useful.

Sarah C

Oh, that's great. Thanks so much.

Dawn O'Porter

You're welcome.

Parul - LWS

Thank you, Sarah, and thank you, Dawn, for that. Um, Molly, you have a question if you'd like to ask it.

Molly Ovenden

Hello. Um, you mentioned about sharing your memoir draft with your sister, and I'm curious, how have you chosen trusted readers for your books, [01:04:00] and is there a specific set of questions or things that you ask them to look for?

Dawn O'Porter

So I gave that to my sister just because I'd outed loads of family members, including her, and I thought it was the right thing to do, and it was the right thing to do, and she was absolutely right to put red lines through almost everything. Um, but generally though, I have to be honest, I do not let anybody read my books other than me and my editor until it's finished.

And the reason I don't is because too many cooks spoil. And people always say to me, "Well, do you give it to your husband to read?" I'm like, "No." Because the thing is, unless, for me personally, unless I can find someone who is exactly the same type of writer that I am, they will s- and if they come back with...

Otherwise, they come back with notes that just send you off on a tangent. Like, the worst thing that someone can do is, "You know, she could, um..." That kind of, for ex- I always say for example with Chris, 'cause he's such a, he just is such a brilliant comedy writer and he's wild. He just goes off in, like, tangents.

So I can imagine my, my [01:05:00] novel about, you know, people who live in a, an apartment somewhere quite basic, and they're having a very female experience. Then Chris will be like, "And then an alien lands in the garden." And then suddenly I'll be like, "No, that's ridiculous," but I walk away going, "Well, maybe there should be an alien landing in the garden."

And I just get in such a state. So it's all own fiction. It's all me. I don't even like giving it to my editor until there's a beginning, middle, and an end, until it's done. For, I find that that means she can take it, and she, at least I've got everything that I want to get down on paper. If I hand it over before I've written all of my ideas in, some of my favorite things might not make it, because she'll, it will go off on a tangent.

That's taken a while, maybe, to get to that, and it's a confidence thing. I think as a writer, you've, you've got, you should just, you should just try and get to the end of your story on your own. I really think it's a good idea, unless you're really struggling. [01:06:00] Obviously, a brainstorm with someone is a great idea.

But if you feel like you can, if you can get to the end. Now, sometimes that first draft, you think, "Oh, a final draft would be- Anywhere between 80 and 100,000 words. That first draft that my editor gets might be 40,000 words. It's like, I call it a skeleton. It is my story, it's where I want to go, and then I give it to her, or give it to somebody else, whoever you've got, and they get to fill in the gaps that way.

And then I always say the first edit is just, it's called coloring it in. So I hand in my skeleton, I get notes back, and then I color it in, and suddenly that 40,000 words suddenly becomes 65,000 words, and it's the, the last 40,000 words of the book are so much easier. I, I cannot stress enough when you're writing fiction, don't feel you need to h- your first draft needs to be the whole book.

Again, for me [01:07:00] personally. Get a story down, and then go back and color it in. Those extra 20, 30, 40,000 words will just come so easily when you've got your basic structure there. Um, I can't even remember what your original question was. Sorry.

Molly Ovenden

That was really helpful. Thank you, Dawn. Yeah.

Dawn O'Porter

I think, I think the, the blank page is the most intimidating thing, and the blank page is the thing that is always against us.

So you just want to put yourself in the strongest position of not having a blank page, and that's what the skeleton draft or the vomit draft is really good for. Um, and it can be short.

Parul - LWS

Hmm. I have a question for you as well, just around, I guess, the, the tightness of your novel. Like, there's no... Every sentence earns its place.

It feels like you've really worked and honed that, and I'm curious about, I don't know if there's anything you, any tips, anything you can say around that. Um, how you get to that polished state. Is it- I, I actually- ... vomit draft and you're editing it down?

Dawn O'Porter

Just [01:08:00] before we started talking I had this, I had this, I've got this paragraph in this book where I was writing about what it feels like when a powerful woman walks in the door.

And the line is something along the lines of, "The reason why women stand to attention when a powerful woman walks in the door is because it, it reminds us of what we're capable of being." So it's a, I think that's quite a good line, and it's, it says everything. But then I'd written this whole paragraph after it of, like, what it felt like when she walked in the door, and I was just reading it going, "I've said it.

I don't need, I don't need to now-" Overexplain it. I've said it with a, with something quite punchy. Um, I think, you know, great writing is often what you're willing to cut. The flowery overexplaining, no matter how beautiful it is and how proud you are of that great sentence, if you're overexplaining anything, it's so satisfying for a reader when you just get, bam, a line that you'll remember.[01:09:00]

Um, and then we can ruin it for them by overanalyzing what we've said really succinctly. And I think that's ... I, I, I think I've finally got there. I think that took a while, but I feel like now I'm brutal with the cuts. Um, it's always hard to cut, cut words, especially when you're trying to hit your word limit.

And then you want to leave in ... I'd say it's better to be slightly under with your word count than have lots of flowery, unnecessary sentences that overexplain.

Parul - LWS

Thank you. I think I needed to hear that.

Dawn O'Porter

Mm.

Parul - LWS

Well, that brings us to the end of this interview. Thank you so, so much, Dawn, for your time, for your energy.

Like I said, it's ... I feel like it's very transferable. Just listening to you talk about writing makes me wanna run back to my story and actually just spend some time on it.

Dawn O'Porter

Good.

Parul - LWS

Um, one, couple of quest- two questions for you. What's the best way for anyone to stay in touch with you? What social media do you prefer?

Dawn O'Porter

I mean, I'm always on Instagram, as you probably noticed. Even when I do a post saying, "I'm leaving Instagram because I have to write," I will be back on it within 24 hours. [01:10:00] Um, and so you can always find me there. I love Substack. I'm very, kind of, responsive on Substack. And yeah, just generally any kind of social media, I'm always on.

Parul - LWS

Great. And your latest book is, of course, Hungry Eyes, so do check out ... It's, and it's fascinating to dive in, dive into your life, Dawn. You've lived so many lives. When I first was composing the questions, I was like, "Dawn, you've lived 1,000 lives," and I edited it down. I was like, "No, I'm not gonna say that."

But it does seem like you've lived so many lives. It's a fantastic book. I would definitely recommend it. Thank

Dawn O'Porter

you.

Parul - LWS

Um, thank you so much for your time again. Friends, I invite you to unmute yourself. Let's give Dawn, a London writer, some round of applause. Make some noise. Thank you.

Dawn O'Porter

And best of luck. And best of luck with all your writing projects.

It's like, you know, it's a slog, and it's hard, and I would, I, I always want to s- tell people, "Oh, it gets easier." It doesn't. But I, I think that is ... I don't think art should be easy, and your best work will come from the pain of, you know, getting it done. So if everyone could do it, they would.

Parul - LWS

We are the chosen.

Um. Some [01:11:00] said. And thanks so much, guys. Thank you so much, Dawn. Have a lovely, lovely rest of your day. Friends, we're gonna turn this into a podcast recording, and we'll share the recording in the community, but that's us done. Thanks again, Dawn. You're-

Dawn O'Porter

Bye ...

Parul - LWS

phenomenal. Fantastic. Thank you. Can't wait to read your next book.

Bye. Bye, friends. We'll see you later.