The Writing Self In The World with Jessica J. Lee

Wed, 9/22 1:55PM • 51:59

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

writing, book, write, read, belonging, realised, writer, research, bit, memoir, questions, story, part, process, experiences, home, place, reader, person, journey

**SPEAKERS**

Jessica J. Lee, Nelima Begum

**Nelima Begum**

Welcome to the Being A Writer Podcast, Jessica, how are you?

**Jessica J. Lee**

I'm alright, thank you so much for having me.

**Nelima Begum**

Thank you for joining us and to explore the topic of The Writing Self In The World which is quite a big topic when you read out like that.

**Jessica J. Lee**

It sounds very profound as a title, I like the idea.

**Nelima Begum**

That's very existential like you'll be searching for something, but you're perfect for this so I'm going to jump straight in. So starting at the beginning, when did you realise that writing was your calling? And what did writing represent to you back then when you were first starting out?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, so I mean I think this for me was, I guess it was the sort of gradual realisation, because I had kept secret, perhaps even from myself from for many many years the idea that I wanted to write. I had tried writing when I was in uni, when I was younger, and then sort of filed away is this thing that I was not very good at that I enjoyed but it was not the sensible choice and pursued an academic career, and it was only towards the end of my PhD, I was in my late 20s when I got my when I got my first book deal. And I realised it was this thing that I could do, and I desperately, desperately wanted to do it like it was. Yeah, it was sort of all consuming once I realised that it was a door that was open to me. I wanted to sort of walk through it and keep walking.

**Nelima Begum**

Oh that's amazing! So you kind of just fell down the rabbit hole.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah and it's not you know didn't, I didn't have that path but I think a lot of writers these days have, which is, you know, very decisively saying I'm going to be a writer, I'm going to go do an MFA I'm going to do this I'm going to do that I'm going to publish in lots of lit journals to sort of make this path for myself, I, I sort of fell into it. Long after I'd already told myself that wasn't really an option, which I think, you know, perhaps magnifies my, my feeling of really wanting to hold on to this way of life and this way of making a living.

**Nelima Begum**

Amazing. So in regards to when you were first starting out, do you think the meaning of writing has changed for you?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, definitely I think in some sense, I think, you know, being able to preserve some of that early magic of like, I don't know, when you first get to write a book when you first get that opportunity to put your writing out in the world there's, I think a lot of gratitude that goes into that, and also a lot of just sort of like bewilderment, it's all very new, and I think that shifted after, you know, after a few years, essentially, on the job. As with any job you know you become comfortable, you start to figure out, okay, you know, this is how it works. And in some sense the writing can start to feel a bit routine it can start to feel like, like a job. And I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, I think for me it's like, it's, it's making that time and the space to re-enchant myself with the idea that I get to write for a living, that's that's sort of the big challenge, I think, on a day to day level.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay, so it's just keeping that, maintaining the excitement and things, even though you know the processes really well by this point.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, yeah, definitely.

**Nelima Begum**

So you're known for your love of non-fiction, which he manage to make communal, you know, instead of simply scholarly. What was it about memoir and nature writing that kind of just pulled you in?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Well, I think, you know for me I had, you know, when I had sort of first gone into academia, initially I was I was working on environmental humanities subjects - I was working in environmental philosophy and environmental history. And for me, those were always sort of on a, on a subject matter level the things that interested me. But when it came to writing for a wider audience,what I really wanted to be able to do was take that same interest take that same knowledge base and and expertise on a certain level, and make it approachable and make it, I guess intimate to readers, and that for me is why memoir and nature writing are such great paths to be sort of like fused together on some level, because I think the writing that... I could be doing very scholarly writing I could be doing very, you know, not inaccessible writing but writing that is definitely not intended for a general audience. And I think, you know, adding that personal element, adding that layer of intimacy, and I guess of one's own story, and really sort of dwelling in the senses as you go through that kind of story. I think that's where the nature writing element really comes in. I feel like it, it allows me at least to take, what would otherwise be a very like heavy expertise driven, kind of, you know subject matter and makes it approachable, makes it accessible makes it personal to readers, even in ways that they might not have seen before. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

Do you feel like it made you and your work just a bit more, as you say relatable to just general audiences?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah and I think you know it was also for me this process of like understanding that when I, when I tell a story about a place when I tell a story about, you know whatever non-fiction subject matter I might take on, it could be you know the history of botanical history of a tree, for example, when I, when I tell it on that sort of personal level from that first person standpoint, what I'm also doing is reminding myself that, that you know that pursuit of knowledge that I might have been doing academically speaking isn't actually, I guess, removed from me, it's not, it's not objective it's not this neutral thing that exists out in the world, it's always deeply tied to who I am as a researcher, who I am as a writer. Yeah and so for me I think it's like, it's not just making that possible for for readers to see but also for myself as, as the writing person, as the researching person.

**Nelima Begum**

Of course, because I you know, I suppose it's a bit like looking in a mirror because that work is a reflection of you in a way that maybe you previously may not have explored.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Exactly, and that you know like to underscore for myself that the act of researching and writing and and sort of putting the world on the page in a way is, is, like deeply personal I think, you know, it's not compartmentalised from all of these other things in my life so you know I can't say. Right. The part of me that's a historian and is trained as a historian is separate from the part of me that is, you know, that falls in love and that loves places and that gets homesick, like all of those things are really tied together.

**Nelima Begum**

I like that you've mentioned that it was very personal, because memoir by nature is very personal. And then, to then combine it with a great deal of research on a particular location is no small feat. So in the early stages, what did the drafting process look like for you and how did you strike balance between all of these elements in your writing?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, I mean I feel like this, this tends to change depending on the circumstances and on the scope of what I'm writing. But you know when I've worked on my books, very often, there will be sort of many iterations of the same space or the same place on the page there might be, you know, when I come back from a journey through a place I will. I was told my writing students this all right it from point A to point B, like from the day, from the day from the second I left the house to the moment I got back, I'll just write out every single thing that happened. And that is just like a record for myself in a way, I may use some of it. If you know once in a while when you find a great line and a perfect sort of description I might I might salvage some of that for the final text but I treat that as a sort of like palette to paint with. Yeah, and then I will go away and do quite a lot of research, you know, I do a bit of research before I go out into the field to, sort of, you know, have, have an experience, go on a journey, but I tried to leave, leave a lot of room for myself to have experiences that then lead me down other sort of research rabbit holes so I might be, I might come across something when I'm out that, that leads me to something I need to research more deeply. And so then there's always, you know, there's the point where I will pull out, you know 20 books on the subject or a million you know scientific articles on the subject and I will I will literally just start, you know, gathering quotes gathering interesting tidbits and putting those in a big research document, and then it's, you know, the writing process for me is about finding that middle point between the sort of point A to point B journey I wrote, and all of the research I've gathered and very often that happens sort of agonizingly, that's the writing process for me, it's sort of finding that meeting point between the two.

**Nelima Begum**

So just pulling it all together and are you I mean are you scribble in the notebook kind of person or you Post Its all across the wall?

**Jessica J. Lee**

I am a Notes app on my phone kind of person sometimes voice messages, I, the Notes app on my phone is it's sort of chaotic in the sense that I don't make clear notes I don't write down sentences I will write down, like, almost like found poetry, it'll be, you know just nouns, it'll just be a list of things I've seen just enough to jog the memory. And then, yeah research wise, I think handily, I've become very wedded to using Scribner, as, as a tool and that really helps me keep my research streamlined because I am as my husband would would say I'm not a tidy person at home. And if I do not have a space to like properly put things there will be things everywhere there will be PostIt notes everywhere there will be scraps of paper everywhere, and I'm not saying there aren't those but I've sort of reined them in by keeping all of my notes and research in a Scrivener document now so my Scrivener is like where I make my mess.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant. I'm sure your husband is relieved that that's where you make the mess too! So writing about place can demand very sensory inspiration. Has there been anything outside of writing that you've turned to in order to enrich your experiences of the world?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, I think definitely, you know, I obviously spend a lot of time in the world in order to, you know, really sort of feed back into my writing. But the big things for me I think are music and poetry. Every, everything I've ever written has sort of had a soundtrack, on some level, very often because when, when I get into writing I will, I will usually fixate on one song and I will play that one song on repeat for the entire duration of writing a project and so, you know, that could be two years, and it will become the sort of strange meditative background. Oh, yeah, I played one song on repeat when writing my most recent book To Trees Make a Forest, for probably 18 months straight.

**Nelima Begum**

- Wow!

**Jessica J. Lee**

But it helps me right like it puts me into a headspace where that becomes the sound of the book, it becomes the sound of productivity on a certain level it becomes the rhythm of the actual words I'm writing. So yeah, music is a big one for me, walking, and yeah reading poetry I can't read, I can't read other non-fiction when I'm writing non-fiction. I mean I can hardly read even like even a good novel is a sort of tough one for me, I will. I'll read a lot of romance and crime while I write (laughs).

**Nelima Begum**

- Because it's so far removed from what you're writing -

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah it's nothing like what I do and I find that really helpful. Yeah and it's just, it's the only way that I think my brain can switch off while still reading. And so I think like when I was writing Two Trees I read all of the Outlander books which is just really far away from far away from what I do.

**Nelima Begum**

Good shout though! I love that you've mentioned music as such a significant one because I'd never thought of it in this way but maybe there are soundtracks to novels that we just don't know about.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Absolutely. This is what I love when writers put together like a Spotify playlist for their books and I always make one for mine because I feel like it's one of those things like we can't control the circumstances in which a reader picks up our work right like we can't, we can't have any say in all of the associations they might make when they're reading but there was that part of me that like if I could, curate that experience for someone, it would involve certain foods and certain sounds, certain songs, you know.

**Nelima Begum**

Oh I love that! This is what publishing needs to do next, just have an author menu and playlist to go with every publication...

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, I mean this is where book launches get really intense right?

**Nelima Begum**

Exactly - call the catering company. So, both Turning and Two Trees Make a Forest explore your relationship with the environment you're in, and always seeking answers in your surroundings. Have you learned anything about or from being attentive to the world that you can share with us?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, I mean I think the biggest thing I've learned is that I'm not very important in the grand scheme of things, um, you know, I think, as a nature writer, and we see it in so much nature writing there's that sort of temptation to read ourselves into the world rather than letting the world show us things much bigger than ourselves, right, and so for me getting out into the world has sort of - it's humbling right? Like it tells me a bit about my place in the world, it tells me a bit about, you know, just sort of the vastness of non human nature and how much more significant, that can be than me. And so, I don't know, for me it's always a process of taking me out of my own sort of emotional melodrama. Remembering, remembering, you know, the past legacies of places, you know, whether they be historical or linguistic, you know, to really attend to borders and issues of belonging in place. And, you know to climate change, and also to joy and productivity and resilience and all of these things that I think if I if I'm feeling sad about something and I go for a walk in nature for example it's like I'm going to feel better but I'm often redirected to things that are much, much more important than even just me feeling better.

**Nelima Begum**

And I think that's such a lovely way of looking at it too to just have that realisation that there is so much more beyond you, then you just have to go and look for it.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Absolutely.

**Nelima Begum**

So there are so many beautiful intricate details in your writing that feel like small revelations. So when reading the work of others, whether it's through the submissions for the Willowherb Review or books from your own bookshelves, what are some of the things you look forward to find a similar connection?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, I mean, I think, you know, every writer is really unique, so I don't want to be prescriptive about, you know what it is I tend to look for but I think I do have one bit of sort of I guess one criteria and when I'm, when I am reading someone for me to really love them, is it and it is humility. I think I look for humility in my narrators, particularly in non-fiction narrators. I love when people make themselves vulnerable in ways that I guess make visible the idea that they are still learning and that they are just one person with one perspective in a place. Very often I think, you know, there tends to be this strange voice from above expertise and nonfiction where it's like, I know all this, I don't need to tell you how I know this and I'm just going to just, you know, put it on the page and you need to trust me and I don't like that as a reader I really like getting to know my narrator as a person, and, you know, that doesn't mean like they need to tell me everything about their life, but that I can see where they're learning, I can see where they've done the work I can see where they've, you know, gathered their research and there's so many little techniques that do this right like like showing us them learning something in the book, admitting to us when they don't know something, but also, like, something simple like showing, showing a bibliography, I feel like things like that are really powerful.

**Nelima Begum**

Definitely because it, you know sometimes makes you feel like you're figuring it out just as much as the narrator is.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Exactly like I want to be sort of taken by the hand and like go on a learning journey with someone. And so, I think, you know I'm always telling my students like if you need to go to the library to write about something like write about going to the library, like include that in the book. And I think that that I feel like it's important.

**Nelima Begum**

Definitely is because it's a transformative experience for both reader and writer, I think.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah absolutely and it, it's somehow creates that space for the reader to be there with you, which I think is really important, you know it invites the reader in.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah. So going back to your writing, there are parallels between you and the lakes you swim in, in Turning in that they how they hold untold secrets within them and histories of Taiwan within Two Trees that stretched across until as you say, 'borders grew too hazy to define', and I love that line so much! For me it's sentences like this that really capture the experiences of immigrants and in particular, children of diaspora. How did you come to learn to use place to contextualize your lived experience and what might you advise other writers who feel a similar desire to explore similar themes with their writing?

**Jessica J. Lee**

I mean, on a certain level, I think I don't think I had to learn to use place to do this I think it was always there for me. And that was why even on an academic level when I, you know when, when I started pursuing an academic career it was, it was a place based sort of research area for me because I think I had that question of home and belonging from a very very young age, sort of, obsessively like obsessively, I should admit this, it's, you know, I moved out of my parents house when I was 18, and from that moment on my obsession was figuring out what home was and making that for myself on a certain level, and it shaped every single thing I did, you know from research to the books I read to, you know, my love of throwing dinner parties, it was always you know in some strange attempts to belong and to feel in place and so I think that, you know, it was always just this, this question that was hovering over my entire life. And so, you know, realising that it was the thing I needed to puzzle out in my writing on a certain level like that... It was, it was always there, it was always quite obvious to me I just had to tackle it. And, and be as thorough and as honest as I could. And on a certain on a certain level, I do feel like it has been somewhat resolved for me. After two books, two books focusing on it. But I think, you know, finding that weird pulsating question that you can't quite get rid of, as a human being, not just as a writer is, it's a really fantastic way to, I think, how do I put it to drive the sort of direction of your writing so for those who are looking for that, that little hook right like I always think like find the sticky thing that you not only can you not get rid of it like it won't get rid of you like, it will not let go of you. Those are the things to write about.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant writing advice. Still on the topic of home, Two Trees Make a Forest is a beautiful work which follows your journey and reconnecting with your Taiwanese heritage, and in doing so, understanding your loved ones on a far deeper level and I know you say that you, you know, you sought to understand home from a very early age. What motivated you to embark on this journey?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, well I think a few things. It's a story that I had been holding on to in the back of my head for a very long time, basically since my early 20s. That was when I, when I talked about you know having tried to be a writer when I was in my university years that's what I was trying to work on I was trying to work on a fictional account of my grandparents story. And so I had that there in the back of my mind for a really long time, and I filed it away because I could never quite get it right. Um, and just, just held on to it for about a decade. And then when the story did come back to me it was, it was after my, my grandmother's death when we, we found this memoir that had been written by my grandfather and hidden from us for many years and it was the story of his life. And that for me was that sort of great moment of the universe saying, oh, you know, remember that story you were working on years ago? Here it is again, and it's still there, and you should probably look at it, and it, you know, there was that component, and it coincided with me, finding my feet as a nature writer which was you know how I realised that the book was going to be a nature book and not just a family story. Um, and uh you know I think it came out of a particular moment in time for me which is, you know I had settled in Germany, I was living in Germany and I was very, feeling very settled there I was planning to stay there, I was feeling very much at home but I had this sort of strange feeling. I guess it happened sort of when my German became better than my Mandarin had ever been. And, you know, I realised I was living in a place that I had no personal family connection to it was sort of arbitrary in a way that I was living in Germany, and it, I don't know, it started to sort of weigh on me in a way that I, I felt I hadn't really grappled properly with that aspect of my identity and I hadn't really given the full attention that I could have to my mother's side of the family and to my heritage. So it was sort of a personal crisis on a level. And so all of those things coincided and then I had to write a book.

**Nelima Begum**

But again, going back to what you said earlier it was just that that thing or that idea that didn't leave you.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yearh, you know it was that that really sticky thing and I was you know, like it just would not let go of me. And you know it's not to say that books have to come from that place but, for me at least the books that I really want to write that I think I need to write, are those ones.

**Nelima Begum**

That's great, though, that there's a story with a sense of urgency there. Do you feel like your writing and recounting your journey has changed you in any way and if so, how?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah I mean on a certain level, I think it's made me really, I think, attentive, attentive to the world in ways that perhaps I hadn't been before. Um, yeah, I think it's, you know, doing this kind of work has just made me attentive to the world, attentive to my position in it. Perhaps in ways that are like, I think I just live a little less automatically I'm a bit more watchable even in in my everyday life. Not to say I'm always taking notes but there's perhaps a part of my brain that is always taking notes now. So I think there's that, that component. Yeah, it becomes harder to switch off on a certain level, I guess.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay, but it's definitely made us, you know, slightly more observant, I guess, to the everday...

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah definitely more observant. And definitely, I think more probing in terms of just like looking, looking for stories but asking myself questions and constantly, I think, you know I like to question the things that I take for granted in ways that perhaps I might not have before. Before writing about my own life. I think I asked a lot more questions of myself and my motivations now.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, of course I think with writing with any story really you'll find as you go along, there are stories within stories and so there's tons to just explore and look into...

**Jessica J. Lee**

Absolutely, and I think there's that part of me that's like, I'm almost overwhelmed at times with how many stories, there could be in the world, and in a way it's like, I feel a bit like a magpie like I feel like I'm always, I probably have like 10 folders on my computer that are like 'potential new book' right because I just want to write so many things. And then it's, it's really a matter of stepping back and sitting and waiting for that sticky thing to come along.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, the sticky moment. A portion of your travels and hikes were done, alongside your mother - did that experience have an impact on your relationship dynamic, and just as you learned more about your heritage, do you think your mother got to know you in a different light, in any way?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, yeah I mean I think it definitely changed our dynamic in the sense that I put it like I, I became much more watchful of my mother and inquisitive, in ways that perhaps I ought to have been at a much earlier point in life, I, I started asking a lot more questions, so there's that. I do wonder how it has been for my mum actually now that you asked me this because I you know I do sometimes wonder if mum has just really trusted me to, for example, tell her parents' story, I mean she has trusted me with that, and she's been so sort of, you know, given me so much grace in allowing me to tell that story a certain way. So I definitely think it created a kind of closeness and perhaps even a strangeness in our relationship, a closeness in that you know, we talk more we share more. I think I asked a lot more questions, but also perhaps a strangeness in that, you know, I do write about it and that must be actually quite odd for her. But I'm sort of endlessly grateful to her and for the time that we've had to spend together.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, I think it's beautiful that she gave you the creative freedom to, to just probe that aspect of your life a lot more.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Absolutely, you know, and in a way, you know, to even write about her, um, which I have done in both of my books and she's been really generous with giving me the space to do that. I keep promising her that I will stop writing about her one day,

**Nelima Begum**

- Not any time soon though! -

**Jessica J. Lee**

- but I'm definitely not working on anything about her right now. (Laughs) I'm the worst!

**Nelima Begum**

Another thing that comes up quite often in your writing, I found, was duality, so duality person, culture and language, especially. The contrasts are really striking. Do you think writing in a particular place gives ways to another layer of identity to surface or reassigns meaning to things that you already know but in a different way?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Absolutely, I think, you know, if place can act as this sort of, you know, I already talked about it being sort of opening up to us, much bigger things. You know it does also mirror back to us our own position, very often and, and I think for me, particularly writing about, like when I wrote my first book, Turning, because I was writing about Germany and I, you know, as I said I don't, I don't have a family connection to Germany. That for me was really revealing in terms of just like making plain to myself, my own questions about my own position, it made my own position quite plain to me and raised a lot of questions so I think there is that aspect where it's like, the second you, you start to write about place the second you start to write about land, in particular, then you're, you're confronted with questions of, of borders, of belonging of, you know, the two things on either side of a border there's there's that automatic duality right and I think that for me has been a sort of unavoidable question and of course it's, it is written in my body being being mixed race, being, you know like dual passport holder I have, I have many hats that I wear and. And I feel like you know when I write about place that is always the thing I'm really writing about a certain level.

**Nelima Begum**

Really goes back to this nice you mentioned the topic of belonging, I was quite fascinated by the language aspect of things, especially now that you've just said there was a point where you felt like your German was significantly better than your Mandarin had ever been. I mean, what was that journey like?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, well I think. Yeah, you know it's been a challenge for me in accepting that those things are just part of my identity now and, and my ways of belonging, now that I guess... I think I, for many years had a very fixed understanding of what it would feel like to belong in a place, and to feel at home and to be sort of read of this strange troubling question of what home was and where I belonged. It sort of really preoccupied me for many years because I thought I needed fixed answers and the big thing for me was realising that like, I don't need fixed answers, that those answers could be constantly changeable, and that there could be multiple, that identifying with one part of my, my heritage was not a sort of, you know, did not automatically revoke the other parts. And so I, you know, the thing I always come back to is, you know, all of the cities I've lived in and called home, I, you know, even on my Twitter bio or on my Instagram, I don't delete them when I move, I just had one. And I think there is this like lovely cumulative process of becoming who we are and it's not this process of taking away it's a process of holding many things at once, and being allowed to hold many things at once. Um, so I mean, that being said, I've just moved again to a new city, I live in Cambridge now, and there's no room I run out of characters to add to my Twitter bio, and it won't let me add a new city and I actually don't know what to do.

**Nelima Begum**

We need to figure out a way around this because you need to keep building on it, but it's such a great way of looking it because I think that, you know, as we go through life, the meaning of home changes and, you know, belonging evolves as well. The idea of belonging evolves.

**Jessica J. Lee**

And, and that it's not about choosing one or the other, right, like I can have many homes. I can be stretched across places, and none of those is less than another, right? As a mixed race person, you know to stop saying like I'm half of something, was like a really hard thing for me to realise I could do, but that it's like I am, I am wholly these things. The things that I am I'm not, I'm not a part, you know part something, it's not a lack.

**Nelima Begum**

I'd never thought of it like that but it's really interesting that you mentioned it in that way I mean things only add to us and our identity, our lived experiences only contribute more rather than take away.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yes, exactly.

**Nelima Begum**

So there's something to say about vulnerability that is a key part of the territory where writing memoir is concerned - how did you bridge the gap between keeping parts of your life to yourself and putting it all out there? And were you hesitant at any point in the process?

**Jessica J. Lee**

So this is a challenge I think and it's something I still grapple with, which is you know, it's sort of deciding how much you want to share with the world, and deciding what your sort of memoir persona is going to be and, you know, I think this is sometimes it's difficult for readers to remember and it's something I would love to be able to sort of whisper over their shoulder from time to time, it's that, you know the the person that you read on the page is never the exact person in real life in the same way that, you know, social media is filtered all these other things are filtered through the, you know, through one's artistry, through one's craft, through the shaping that happens in writing a book and I think making decisions around that is really challenging and there's no fixed answer for myself, at least you know I have certain boundaries around, and I don't really write about my husband, and I, I'm pregnant and we'll be having a child soon and I, I don't really plan, I don't really plan to write about that a huge deal. You know there is that part of me that sort of, you know, I know that I have to make those decisions, but I also know that a certain amount of vulnerability is needed. So I often think about, there was a moment when I was writing my first book, Turning and I was dancing around the subject a little bit, at one point in the book and I didn't really want to put everything on the page, I was a bit scared. And my editor at the time was, she was just fantastic. She sat me down. I remember this, we had a meeting at her office and it was in one of those like fishbowl meeting rooms and she closed all the blinds. And she was like 'okay tell me everything that happened'. And I did. I told her the full story of what happened that I didn't really want to put on the page and she said 'Okay. You don't need to include all of this but I want you to go home and write all of it'. And so I did she sent me away and I wrote you know, four or five pages that accounted for the things I was leaving out. And then she had me go through and say okay well which are the bits that we need in the story, and it was like two or three sentences, but I needed to be pushed to find those two or three sentences that just sort of had to be there for the emotional integrity of the story without telling every single gritty detail of like my family story, right?

**Nelima Begum**

And that sounds like it must have been quite a, quite a therapeutic process in a way...

**Jessica J. Lee**

Hugely, hugely and this is, you know, when I say, like, the process of writing these books has been really powerful, powerful for me and grappling with, I think some, some core questions and I certainly don't like to think of writing as, as therapy for myself, I don't like to think of writing as something I do in order to solve my problems but it is certainly a really nice benefit.

**Nelima Begum**

Definitely helps. Has your rising or rising process change in any way since you first started?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, and I think I sort of touched on this earlier. It has in some sense become more routine, more like work, more like this thing that I, I don't know it's so it's sort of like I lost that initial feeling I had, and I'm glad I have lost it in a way. I guess that, that idea we all have, what a writer is and what it means to be in an artistic, creative profession, which I don't think is always a healthy image right, like I, I think sometimes we, we take too much of ourselves in, in trying to emulate that. And so it is much more structured for me my process is much more like, I don't write on the weekends, I don't write every day, I, when I do have to write, it's in my calendar. It's, you know, it's sheduled, and you know I do have certain things about the process that are always the same I write really well in coffee shops I, I'm one of those people that needs the sort of, you know, a certain amount of noise going on around me in the background. My, you know, my one song on repeat on my headphones, you know, all of that is that has stayed the same, but I am no longer, you know like when I wrote, turning my first book, I, I mean granted I was also like a bit younger and single and all these things and I definitely wrote some of it at three in the morning on my bedroom floor, and I don't do that anymore. I have a desk, and I bought a proper chair so that I stop you know pretzle-ing myself in strange positions -

**Nelima Begum**

- Your back is probaly really grateful -

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, so, you know, but there are like certain things that are like, if it had just been, I think I did as a hobby, or as a passion, I'm not sure I would have taken those steps but now that it is my work I you know I do, I do schedule that I do get myself proper gear I treat it like work. And I try to, you know, treat it like work but not in not in the bad way like I don't want it to be a chore but I, I do treat it as a you know a profession.

**Nelima Begum**

It's something that you do, yeah. So I think it's I think it's good to look at it in that way because I know writing, although, you know, quite fluid. It doesn't always have a structure. I think having those processes from time to time, like you said, marking it in your calendar and having certain routines or places that you know, you flourish and in the long term I feel like they must benefit your mental health and make the writing journey more enjoyable than a way.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Exactly, and it also, it means that I can sit down and say I'm going to write today without it being guided entirely by some whim or by some like, like creative muse right like I'm not, I'm not just there waiting for inspiration, I'm sitting down and I'm doing the work.

**Nelima Begum**

You're getting it done. Yeah. So what's been the most significant lesson you've taken from your writing experiences thus far?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, well this is a really hard question. I have no idea. You know, I think. I think for me on a certain level, it's, it's about that sort of a bit of gentleness, but also about. I think creating structures that work for, for, for oneself as a writer. And, and that gentleness is a huge part of that for me, like, I, I think I went into this, as I do with most things in quite a hard way, in that when I start something new, I am obsessive about it. I push myself, way too hard, I don't take proper breaks. I do all the things that probably you know would just lead to burnout eventually and, you know, over the course of my writing journey, the big thing I've learned is to step back and say, all of these other things I do going for walks, reading books, zoning out and watching some TV, going on trips, listening to music, all of those are actually part of my writing process, and they may not all be the things that put words on the page but they're part of the process of getting there. And so for me, you know, letting go of that, you know that advice that people have writing every day, I, I do not advise that and I would never ever tell someone to do that. I don't, don't do it myself, I write, maybe once a week, maybe once a month, sometimes I go months without writing, but all of that is a process of building towards the words on the page, and so I think it's been about wrapping my head around that right, that it's like I don't mean to be. I don't need to be ritualistic. Yeah, and it's like, I can schedule it I can structure it but I don't need it to become, I guess, a chore.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, I love that you've looked at it in that way though because it, you know, it sounds like every single thing, regardless of whether you're aware or not, it's a stepping stone to where you need to be.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Yeah, and I think you know, part of this just comes naturally when your career becomes writing in a way that's like, you know, you become an author I guess is the way to put it as a career like you, you, half of what you do is like, I don't know, dealing with copy edits, dealing with Twitter promos, doing book events you know, like all of the things that are not writing that are part of the work, they take up a lot of time and I choose to see that as part of, part of the work, not as to the detriment of the work.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay. Have you experimented with any other genres within fiction or non-fiction recently, and is there one that you're particularly keen to try?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Um, yeah, I mean I I dabble and the year before last, I think I was trying to write a novel. I didn't get very far. Again, it was like the third time I've tried to write a novel, I think, I'm not very good at making things up. Um, yeah, I'm very write what you know, so I haven't really made much progress there. I recently taught a workshop I co tutored with Nina Mingya Powles, and it was really exciting because I did all of the in-class exercises she had us do for the students. And I just enjoyed them so much, so we did a bunch of food writing. We did some zine making, and it was for me really liberating because I think my nature writing can be quite academic on a certain level and I found it really loosened me up.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, just something refreshing and different. What writing advice would you give to aspiring writers of creative non-fiction?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, I think, perhaps I've already said this in a way, you know be structured but go gently. Don't feel like you have to emulate a certain image of what you think a writer is find the structures that works for you, I would say. And that might mean writing every day, it might not, it might mean you know interspersing research with writing with journeys that you might take. Um, but I think the thing is it's like, it's about finding the solution that fits for your life, right, because no one can tell you where writing should fit you know you might have caring responsibilities you might have work responsibilities and I think, you know, finding just those bits of breathing room in your own day that is, that is the bit to use.

**Nelima Begum**

I agree I think just acknowledging the whole one size fits all, with regards to writing practice, just needs to go out the window.

**Jessica J. Lee**

We can't all be chain smoking, you know, with no jobs, drinking whiskey all day. We can't do that! (Laughs)

**Nelima Begum**

(Laughs) I love that. Thank you Jessica, so to round off, we're going to do some quickfire questions, so for these ones don't think, just say the first thing that comes to your head.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Okay, okay, okay.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay, so what's your favorite place that you traveled to?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Taiwan. Let me be more specific, I went to this island called Jibei Islands on my honeymoon with my husband, it's in the sort of Penghu islands in the Taiwan straight and it's really beautiful. There's a beautiful beach there, it's awesome.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. And when it's safe to travel again, where will you be heading to next?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Actually back to Berlin, probably, obviously we're not going anywhere anytime soon because baby's incoming But the plan is that the first trip that we take the baby on should be back to Germany, haven't been back since we moved away and I really really really miss it.

**Nelima Begum**

What are you currently working on, if you can share that?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Like a million things, I keep saying, oh I'm going maternity leave, yeah, I'm winding down. I have like an anthology in the works, I have a collection of essays in the works, I have a podcast in the works, I like, I'm the worst at slowing down, because all of those things are happening despite me being like, oh from January, I'm not doing any work I'm just gonna try takes like taking some parental leave. Yeah, I suck at that.

**Nelima Begum**

Full steam ahead, just go for it. What are you currently reading?

**Jessica J. Lee**

I am currently reading, I received a proof copy of Amy Liptrot's new book The Instant, so I'm reading that at the moment.

**Nelima Begum**

Fantastic. And to round off, what's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

**Jessica J. Lee**

Oh, um, again, I think it's that piece of advice of not needing to write every day, just writing, as and when it suits you know according to, according to you know when you need to finish something like don't miss your deadlines but don't feel like you have to do it every day.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay, thank you so much, Jessica, this has been an absolutely delightful conversation, and I'm so grateful that you could join us for this.

**Jessica J. Lee**

Thank you for having me. It's been so nice. Thank you.