

# Short Stories & Fiction Transcript

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*This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!*

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**Ali:** Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and I'm here with Em Newman, who's a fantastic short story and novel writer. **She's going to be talking to us today about writing short stories, and about writing in general.**

So, just to introduce Em to you, I met her at her launch of her short story collection *From Dark Places*, in Oxford, maybe a year back now, and she's a really lovely writer. She's from the UK like me, and she writes – I guess I would describe it as dark, supernatural fiction, so stories with a bit of a twist to them, and a bit of an edge, and I really like that.

As well as *From Dark Places*, which is her published short story collection, she's also written a young adult novel, *Twenty Years Later*, published by Dystopia Press, and that's ages twelve to adult. Em is also working on a Split Worlds series, which is I think five novels plus weekly stories, all set in the same shared world, so she's doing loads of exciting stuff, and I'm sure she's got loads of great tips to share with us today, so welcome, Em.

**Em:** Hello.

## Getting Started in Fiction Writing

**Ali:** Lovely to have you. So, I was hoping you could tell us just a bit about how you got started in writing fiction. Is it something that you've always done?

**Em:** Yes, yes, it's one of those things. I remember reading about some sporting person who was incredibly successful, and it said that as soon as they started walking, they started throwing things, and then they became this massive decathlete. I remember thinking "Oh, people who start off doing stuff that they're supposed to do, they're really lucky," whilst completely not realising that I'd done exactly the same thing.

I was in the middle of a ten-years-long writer's block, and I'd forgotten that I'd ever written anything in my entire life, so yes, I started when I was four, according to my grandmother, it's her favourite story, and she was with me and I was at the kitchen table, and she said "What are you doing?" and I said "I'm writing a story" and I have no doubt whatsoever that it was rubbish, but that's when I started.

**Ali:** That's fantastic!

## How a Short Story Got Em into Oxford

**Em:** I wrote all the way through my childhood, and wrote a huge amount as a teenager, mostly to escape the real world, and before my A-levels, I made a pact with my best friend, for both of us to apply to Oxford.

I wasn't interested at all, but she was desperate to get in, and she was scared of it all, so I said I would do it with her, and then we ended up going to different schools. I had to move away again, and we still went through with it, and my school said "Look, there's no way you're going to get into Oxford."

I'd been to four different secondary schools, I'd had a very disrupted childhood, and I kept insisting on reading science fiction and not the classics, and so they were saying "Your education is appalling, and the only way you can get in is to send in some work, and hope that you can get an interview, and then you might have a shot."

So, I spent hours on this Shakespeare essay, and a Spanish essay, and I was walking to post it, and my English teacher came running out and said "Is that the Oxford application?" and I said "Yes", and she said **"Take out the Shakespeare, and put in the short story you wrote for your coursework."**

I said, "I can't do that, that's science fiction, you can't send science fiction to Oxford, everyone here keeps telling me it's a terrible thing" and she said "No, no, no."

We argued for about ten minutes, I think, and in the end I took out the Shakespeare, I put in a short story about a girl who's in an asylum, and it's very ambiguous about whether she's telling the truth about using a time machine to go back and kill this other girl, and inadvertently removing herself from reality in the process, and she goes mental, and it's all her psych evaluation.

And yes, I got an interview, and the night before the interviews there was this really agonisingly awful mulled wine evening, and I just didn't know what the hell I was doing there, and I felt really awful, and this woman came up to me, and said, "Oh, you're the one who wrote the story", and she must have been about 150 years old, this woman, and I was very noncommittal, because I thought "No, I can't really openly admit to that" and I just went "Mmmm" and she said **"You do realise that's got you into Oxford, don't you?"**

I said "Oh, I haven't had my interview yet" and she just laughed and started to walk off, and I said "Oh, who are you?" and she said "I'm the admissions tutor" and I said "Oh, right, you read everything, then, what did you think of my Spanish essay?" and she said "I don't read Spanish" and walked off.

I remember being really very annoyed that she hadn't read this Spanish essay that I'd slaved over, completely neglecting to be chuffed that my story had got me anywhere, and then I didn't write anything for ten years. It scared the hell out of me.

Then I started writing again, and got myself out of the block, and wrote about 100,000 words of utter tripe, and finally started to find my voice, and then *Twenty Years Later* happened, and I haven't looked back, really. That was a really long answer, sorry.

**Ali:** No, that was a great answer, that's really interesting, actually. I guess if you're an admissions tutor at Oxford you get an awful lot of essays on Shakespeare, and not very many interesting short stories to read. It probably made you stand out.

**Em:** Exactly, and I've always believed and still believe that they must have a secret quota that they need to fill of really freakishly strange people. They have all of these really really normal students, and they have to get their freak quota in, and I was that year's freak, so yeah, I got in on a short story, so there we go.

## Speculative Fiction vs Literary Fiction

**Ali:** That's fantastic. It's really interesting that you mention science fiction as being something that is a bit looked down on by the establishment. In the Huddle we've been looking at Steven King's *On Writing*, and obviously Steven King favours quite an anti-literary kind of writing, I think because he experienced so much of teachers saying "Oh, that's trash, write something that isn't sci-fi." **I feel, along with some of the people in the Huddle doing speculative fiction, that it's a perfectly valid genre.**

**Em:** Oh, more than perfectly valid, perfectly necessary. When I was doing my English A-level, the same course that I wrote this story in, I really fought tooth and nail to be able to do my dissertation on H. G. Wells, and my English teacher ... well, I don't think she knew what to do with me. She said, "You can't write a literary discussion about the work of H. G. Wells."

I must have been horrendous to teach, I was really stubborn, and I did it in the end and I think that she was quite shocked that there was actually a lot of stuff to look at and to talk about and really interesting themes.

**Stuff happens in these books, that's what I love about them, I can't stand contemporary literary fiction where nothing happens for 300 pages apart**

**from navel-gazing** and you know, some event that is a terrible moment in that person's life that they take 250 pages to hint towards and to ruminate over and it's nothing much, and then it just fizzles out.

It makes me very angry that a lot of the literati say "Oh, it's all tropes and it's all the same old thing all over again." I doubt that they've read much science fiction, and I could say exactly the same thing about the literary fiction that they seem to love, and say "Okay, well I've just read five of these that won the X award, and they all have the same structure, so please can we move past this snobbery." Ooh, it makes me mad.

**Ali:** Yes, I can tell. Literary is just another genre. It's a genre that has respect in a certain, really quite small, area of society. I think people writing fantasy and sci-fi are much more likely to meet with commercial success, certainly.

**Em:** Yes.

## How to Get from an Idea to a Short Story

**Ali:** I was hoping you could tell us maybe a bit about some of the short stories in *From Dark Places*, because I know that those were written in response to prompts, sent in by members of your short story club.

Almost all of them are supernatural sort of in some way, you know, some of them are a bit more down that road than others, like they have supernatural beings, some of them it's just more of a hint of something going on. It's a fascinating collection, and I wondered how the process worked, in terms of, so **once you'd got a prompt in and you'd chosen the prompt, how did you get from that to a fully worked short story?**

**Em:** Well, with the collection, not every single one was a prompt story.

My little boy says that ideas “float into his funnel,” bless his heart, and if I say “Ooh, I’ve had an idea for a story” he’ll say “Oh, did it float into your funnel, mama?”

Like Thomas the Tank Engine, some of them just floated into my funnel, but some of them were prompts, I’d say about 60% to 70% of the stories were. Every time I put out a call, I would get somewhere around ten to fifteen prompts sent in, and they would be opening lines, or a line of dialogue, or a title, or just a concept.

## Step #1: Choosing a Prompt to Work With

The way that I’d approach it would be, I’d take all of the prompts, I’d look at all of them, and it would be a purely instinctive thing of “Hmm, what do I feel about these?”

That would be the first round, and then when I was looking through short-list of prompts, it was always, always about the question that they made me ask. I’m just trying to think of an example. Funnily enough, *Shedding*, which I know that you’ve been talking about in the Huddle, is not a prompt story, so I can’t really tell you, I can’t dissect that.

There’s a story in here called *Everything In Its Place*, and that is actually from two different prompts. The one that was sent in was “The clock stopped at exactly the wrong time”, that was just a line, and I could feel my synapses flaring when I read that, because it was like “**How can it be the wrong time, why would it be the wrong time for a clock to stop?**”

From that, I started to think “Okay, how can I answer that question? What are all of the things that could possibly explain why it’s the wrong time that that clock has stopped?”

## Step #2: Rejecting the First Few Ideas

One of the rules that I always followed in the dreaming up process of how to turn the prompt into a story, is to **always reject my first, and often second and third, ideas, or second and third answers, to that question, because usually they’re too obvious.** It’s also likely that they’ve bubbled up because they’re related to something that I’ve been consuming recently, so I’m always reading

books, I'm always watching TV series, so I'm aware that I have to be careful not to be overly influenced by things that I'm consuming.

If something bubbles up straight away, then I reject it, and then when I start getting closer to the thing that I'm going to play with in the story, it's answering that question, but it's also something that is interesting to me, something that can lead me to interesting characters, or an interesting situation.

### Step #3: Deciding How to Tell the Story

Then I start to get a sense of "Okay, that's the answer to that question, but that's not a story, that's not the way that the story will come out." **Then it's very much like a film director deciding how they're going to shoot something. Which angle are they going to put the camera at? Which character are they going to follow through this scenario?**

So I'm making decisions about point of view and setting, and at which point I come into the story.

### Creating a Twist in the Tale Story

**If I think there's a twist, or potential for a twist, in the story, then I make a conscious decision early in the process to misdirect the reader.** I say "Okay, it's likely that somebody will think it's this, so I'm going to let them think that. I'm going to make them feel comfortable in this idea."

There's a story in *From Dark Places* called *In The Bag*, and everyone who I've talked to about that story has said "I could have sworn it was a vampire."

When the story opens, I describe this guy; everything he says, everything he does, and the setting, are deliberately made that way to play with those tropes. There's the Eastern European appearance of his face, he's got all this wealth, he asks the girl if she wants to live with him forever ... and it has nothing to do with vampires whatsoever.

People really enjoy when they find out what's going on in the story, that A) it hasn't got anything to do with vampires, and B) that it's actually all about another common thing that people play with in genre fiction, which is zombies,

but even the zombies aren't a normal zombie scenario either, and it's actually about something else completely different.

## Step #4: Finding the Shape of the Story

When I'm getting close to the stage where I'm going to start writing it, I always make sure I have the shape of the story.

The shape of the story where I think **"Okay, this is where it's going to open, this is what I need to tell the reader, and here is my satisfying ending."** I need to know where I want it to stop and it's either going to be the revelation for the twist, or it's going to be a joke, or it's just going to be the end of whatever conflict is being centred on in that story, but it has to feel right, something has to have changed.

## Step #5: Making Sure that Something Changes

If I think I've got the shape of the story and it does everything I want it to, if it answers that question in a way that interests me and makes me want to write the story, then I have to make sure that it is not only answering that question and doing all of those things, **but that something happens in the story and there is some kind of change.**

That change can either be in the story itself happening to the characters, or it can be in the mind of the reader alone, when they suddenly realise that it isn't what they thought it was, that it's actually something completely different, so that change happens in the mind of the reader, and doesn't have to happen in the story itself.

**Ali:** I think that's all incredibly useful. I know I've read a few twist stories where either you see the twist coming from miles off, and then it falls flat, or the twist is so contrived, or it's just been done a hundred times. Something that seems to be popular in women's magazines here is the twist of a woman on her wedding day waiting anxiously for the wedding, and then you find out it's the bridesmaid and she's six, or something.

**Em:** Yes, we've seen it done a million times before, and that's hard, because obviously when you're a writer you're not going to read every single story out there, because that would be impossible. It may just be that it has been done several times, and you just don't know, and that's just really bad luck.

But I think that if you're writing within a genre – in *From Dark Places*, all of it comes under dark speculative fiction, so there are a couple of stories in there that are completely straight, there is no supernatural whatsoever, but they are very dark – so **when you're writing within a niche, effectively, then you can be more confident that you can read a lot of the stuff in that niche.**

I do read a lot of short stories in the online community in that niche, so yes, I see things coming up again and again, which all goes into the compost heap in my head of “Okay, I've seen that done, I don't need to do it myself, now, and I won't do it myself.”

## Writing Twist Endings

**I love twists, I love experiencing twists, and I think that's why I like to put them into my stories,** because as a writer, it's all about what the experience is that I'm giving my reader. The reader is everything, you know, they're the ones who are going to experience your work.

I know that I love twists, so that's why I want to put them in them, but, like you say, the ones where you see them coming a mile off, or the ones that seem really contrived, don't work. I think it's so, so important to be authentic in the storytelling.

It makes me sound like I'm horrible saying “Yes, I will deliberately misdirect people,” but you can do that in a way that is still authentic to the story, and to the reader. **Once you know the twist, the test of a good twist is to be able to go back to the beginning of the story and read it all again, and it's a completely different story, because you know what's going on.**

This was something that I studied in my psychology degree as well, and I think that plays into it, with the way that people process information when they only have a certain amount of information, and they process it completely

differently, unless they have certain clues. I'm explaining it very badly, because it's actually a massive part of cognitive psychology that I'm trying to summarise in three pithy sentences, but anyway, doing stuff like looking at studies where people are given a description of something and then they have to figure out what it is, and then a very, very important noun is placed in the description, and they're like "Oh my goodness, I never would have guessed it was that". That all feeds into the technique as well.

**Ali:** That makes really good sense, I think to me it relates to what you were saying about rejecting some of your initial snap responses to a prompt or to an idea, because those maybe are the ones where it tends to be "Oh, okay, that's something I've seen on TV," or it's something that's maybe quite conventionally done.

**Em:** Exactly.

**Ali:** Yes, and it also ties in with what you were saying about when you misdirect people by playing on conventions. You know, playing on the vampire things, like they're always Eastern European, and they're tall, handsome men, and it's so easy because we do automatically fill in the gaps, I think, and that's the psychology side.

We do just get a small piece of the puzzle and we think "Oh yes, I recognise this pattern, it's going to be a vampire," and then it's not, and then **we're intrigued, because it subverts expectations.**

Em: Yes, and I love that kind of stuff, and maybe I'm just subversive, but I love playing with those kind of ideas, and playing with the way that people think. I'm saying this like I sit there and think "Now, today, I will manipulate the way that people think by doing this," and **I don't want it to give the impression that all of this is a conscious process, because a lot of it happens unconsciously.**

I can sit back after the story is finished and go “Okay, so that’s what I was actually trying to do here,” and in the second draft I can refine it, and put a couple of signposts here, and a couple of signposts there, and this process that I’ve just described to you has been an organically grown process over years of writing short stories.

## Finding Creative Methods That Work For You

One of the things that I’m really careful to get across is that **you have to feel your own way, you have to feel your way into this**. I would hate for someone to listen to what I just described and think “Right, I’m going to sit down and do exactly the same thing, because that’s how it’s done.” It’s just how I do it, and everyone has to find their own way. I’m good friends with other writers who write short stories in completely different ways, and all of it’s good. This is just what’s worked for me.

**Ali:** What I’m definitely taking from what you’re saying is the importance of being conscious about what you’re doing. Even if you do the first draft and you experiment, and then you can look back and see what you’ve done, because I agree with you that **the whole process of writing, really is the process of manipulating the reader**.

We manipulate people to feel something, we don’t always trick them, but we certainly play up sympathy with one character, or sometimes make them sympathise with one person and then undermine that, or vice versa.

**Em:** Oh yes, yes.

**Ali:** And this is the whole point of being a writer: you have to have control over what you want the reader to experience.

## Abandoning Short Stories (or not!)

So, something I was interested in ... I've not had a lot of success with short stories, I wrote maybe twenty or so before I did my Master's, so over the space of maybe about a year in 2007, and I got a few placed in competitions and stuff, but of the twenty, probably fifteen or sixteen of them are just ones that I've kind of scrapped. Does that ever happen to you? Do you ever attempt a story and then, for whatever reason, you just scrap it in the end?

**Em:** No.

**Ali:** Lucky you! (Laughter)

**Em:** Yes, You're going to hate me aren't you? But there is a big caveat to that. Sometimes I will sit down, and I will have gone through my processes, and I think "Okay, yes, that's the shape of the story, that's what I want to happen, okay, go," and then I sit down, and I think "Oh, this isn't working, this is not working," but then I go back to the beginning, or I change something.

There have been stories, especially for the Split Worlds project that I'm working on at the moment, where I've started them and, even though I've got the shape of them in my head, it's become apparent very rapidly that they are not going to fit in to a thousand words. That they might actually be better for a longer short story or, in one case, they might just bleed together and make a novella.

So, there are times where I've had to abort a story for a specific purpose, but, I'm really wracking my brains here, **I don't think I've ever aborted a story that I've started working on, because so much of the work happens before I get to the page.**

I think that's the reason why, and maybe it's just because I'm really bloody-minded. If I'm going to stand there in front of an English teacher and shout at them about H. G. Wells being a viable topic for a dissertation, I'm sure as hell

going to sit down and get that story onto the page. Sorry, I'm trying really hard not to swear, I've just been watching *The Wire*. Have you ever watched *The Wire*?

**Ali:** I haven't, but my husband likes it.

**Em:** We've just binged on season one over the last four days, and I just want to swear prolifically, it's terrible! This is what I mean about influence, I have to be really careful. The scene I'm going to be writing this afternoon, I have to make sure that people don't just swear all the way through like Baltimore cops. It's terrible.

**But yes, one of the things that I think helps, is making sure that it feels right, and not giving up.** There are stories where I've hit a brick wall about three quarters of the way through, and it's just not working out how I thought it would, either the characters haven't developed the way I thought they would or, once I'm there in the room, with the scary thing in the corner, suddenly what I thought they would do is actually really stupid, and it's like "Oh, okay, this isn't viable."

I just walk away, go and do something completely different, and maybe even leave the story for a while. I think the longest I've ever left a story was a week, and I really didn't know my way past the problem. Then something occurs to me and I go back and just rework it.

**Ali:** I think for me it was maybe that, a) I was attempting short stories at quite an early stage of my development as a writer, and possibly b) I'm just someone who works better in a novel form, I want that space, generally.

**Em:** Yes, they're very different.

**Ali:** Very different, and deceptively different, I think.

## Short Stories Have to Feel Complete

**Em:** Absolutely, and there are quite a few people whose stories I've read online where I've thought "You're not a short story writer" – this is a scene in a book, this is not a short story, because it doesn't have that satisfaction.

**When I know that I've got a story right, every hair on my body stands on end, and I can write the whole story, but if the last line isn't right, or the last paragraph isn't right, and I don't get that feeling, then it's not done.**

I get it when reading stories as well, especially Ray Bradbury, I don't know if you've read any of Ray Bradbury's short stories.

**Ali:** Not very recently.

**Em:** There was a story of his, which I think attracted me to short stories full stop, which is called *A Sound of Thunder*. I read it once a year now, it's something I have to read once a year.

I love it so much, and it's arguably a perfect short story, in that it tells you what you need, it gives a huge amount of depth in a very short space of time, but the satisfaction ... even just talking about it now, all of the little tiny hairs on my arms are standing up, because it's so satisfying.

It's just, "Oh yes, that is it, that's the story," and that's something that I'm always striving for and craving, every time I write a story – that moment, that feeling.

Sometimes, especially with the project that I'm writing at the moment, I don't necessarily get it so viscerally, because, I'm writing one every single week, and writing five novels at the same time. I don't really have the space to wait, but

every single one that I put out there has to satisfy in some way, and satisfy me that it's a story.

The Split Worlds project is very different, as well, because they're designed to be all together, there's going to be 54 stories, and some of them are slightly different kinds of story, in that they're designed to be taken as part of a whole, so some of them are just seeders for another one later on. If they're read as a body, then a story that may not stand alone as much as other ones would, actually become part of a bigger whole, and that's where you get the satisfaction.

**Ali:** No, that does make sense, so it's more like a short story cycle, where they all tie in together.

**Em:** Yes.

## Short Story Competitions

**Ali:** I was really impressed that you got a short story collection published, because I know that, certainly in the UK, it's really hard to get short stories out there as a collection. Even to get just one short story into a magazine or something, there's a lot of competition going on within a small market. I know in the US there's a bit more in terms of short story markets.

But there are a lot of competitions for short stories. That's where I started out, trying to get short stories placed in competitions, and I wondered if you'd done that, and do you have any competition-specific advice?

**Em:** No, I've entered one competition, and that was when I thought that I might start writing short stories again. I'd written *Twenty Years Later*, and I

hadn't written a short story since the short story that was put in the Oxford application.

I'd written a whole novel, and I think another aborted novel, before I wrote *Twenty Years Later*, and actually I can't even call it an aborted novel, it was just clearing the pipes, it was just dross, it wasn't even a novel. So when I started to get this urge to write a short story, it just happened to be that there was a competition online, it was a writers' website, and the prize was a blog design, and I think I'd been blogging for, I don't know, four or five months, and I thought "Ooh, I'd really like that, I'll give that a go," and blow me down, I won!

**Ali:** Congratulations!

**Em:** Thank you! It was, I don't know how many entered, or whatever, but it was great because I got this really cool custom design ... which doesn't exist any more, because it was a long time ago.

There have been a couple of others, so my competition experience is very much in the online community, I haven't done the whole magazine thing.

I'm starting to think that one of my future goals with a short story is to get a story into *Interzone*, which is a sci-fi, speculative fiction magazine that comes out six times a year and the stories in there, my God. They are something to aspire to, they are absolutely storming. I can't recommend it enough.

If you have a Huddler who is interested in writing sci-fi, and they're stories in the longer range, I would say that the shortest ones I've read in *Interzone* are 3,000 to 4,000 words. In *From Dark Places*, the stories range from around 500 words to about 2,000 or 3,000 words, so I tend to write at the very short end, but those are great.

That's what I aspire to, but I know what you mean, there are a lot of short story competitions out there, and I've never gone for them for a couple of reasons.

**One is, a lot of them charge money, and I see it as a gamble, and I'm not a gambler.** There are just so many unknown variables, the judges change every year. I also know that a lot of those kinds of judges, and those kinds of competitions, won't like the kind of stuff I write. I write weird stuff, and dark stuff, and spec-fic, and they want short stories which are more literary-focus, more mainstream, and less weird.

So, there's that aspect. I did go through a phase where I seriously considered it but I thought "Okay, well, I could spend £200 entering competitions, and get nowhere.

**The other reason as well is a pure lack of confidence,** and thinking "Okay, there's no way I'm going to win it, so why try," which is a bit rubbish of me, really, but being entirely honest, that's mostly the reason why.

## ***How From Dark Places Got Published***

In terms of how *From Dark Places* came about, that was all Twitter, it all came from Twitter. **In fact all of my writing career, and everything that I love most in my writing life, somewhere along the line, originated with Twitter.**

I was, you know, plugged into lots of writing circles on Twitter, and there was an anthology being put together by the publishers who published *From Dark Places*. They had someone who had dropped out, and they needed someone at the last minute, and the publishers had been following my stories that I put up on the Friday Flash community, and they contacted me, and asked if I could fill the gap, and I said "Oh, yes please."

That led to a commission for a specific anthology, and then they did a second one where they commissioned me again, and then there was a point later on when, through my short story club, I'd built up a fair number of stories that I was quite happy with, and I thought "Oh, I should do something with them, I'll chuck them up on an ebook or something, but I should get an editor."

I contacted the half of the publishing company which is more the editing side, and I said "Look, you know, would it be possible to negotiate a deal for some freelance editing?" and she just turned around and said "Actually, can we just

publish you instead?" and I was like "Well yes, yes you can, that would be very nice."

## Being Visible in the Writing Community

So, yes, that was all kind of luck and good fortune, and **being in the right place at the right time, and being out there, being out there in the writing community.**

I see it happening time and time again, people who have started out at the same time as me, people who have been there less time than me, making friends online with other writers who then get involved in the project, who have read each other's work online, who will then say "Hey, I know this writer who's really good." Then they're brought in, and then who knows where it goes, and that's exactly what happened to me.

So, it was really just good luck, and you're entirely right about there being a very small market for short stories, but there's a lot of underground movements starting up in the UK, there are a lot of very local short story specific communities that are doing some really exciting things.

Bristol has got a fantastically vibrant short story community, where they do ShortStoryVille every year, and they publish an anthology, and they have the Bristol prize. Oxford have the Eight Cuts Crew, and there's a lot out there when you start to look for it.

If you get online and start looking around, there are lots of really supportive communities like the Friday Flash communities, all very very supportive communities that are really good for beginners who are just feeling their way and just trying to see how it all works. I couldn't recommend them enough.

**Ali:** I think that is crucial as a writer, just to, I know it's hard, but just to keep being pro-active, and making contacts with people, and just getting involved in the world of writing beyond just doing your own work, because, yes, I know I've had opportunities come to me just through one tweet. Somebody at Oxon Digital, which is a little digital meet up in Oxford, wanted someone to speak,

and they just threw out a tweet saying “Does anyone want to speak?” and I was like “Hey, I’ll speak, I’ll do a talk for you,” you know, excitedly, and then yes.

**Em:** And then it all happens.

**Ali:** Yes, it happens, and it’s good because it just helps to build up those connections. It gives you a good network. I don’t really like the word network because it sounds so corporate.

## The Importance of Writing Community

**Em:** No, I think you’re entirely right, I think that, I mean, this is all stuff that I just stumbled into accidentally, and it was just such a revelation to me that there were other writers out there.

When I was writing *Twenty Years Later* I was completely in isolation from other writers, there was no-one else, and then to suddenly stumble upon this brave new world of Twitter and, you know, the internet, and writing communities, and there are people who I have subsequently met in the real world, who have become really good friends, and we all know where we’re all coming from.

You can say to these people, “Oh, you know, I’m having this real problem with this bit of the book,” or “This bloody character, they’re not doing what I want them to do” and **they know what you’re talking about, and understand, and that is so, so precious.**

I think that’s one of the important things about any outwardly facing or out in the public contact that you make, is to remember that it’s just like a pub, that’s how I see it. It’s just a really big pub, that’s the whole world, and it’s open all the time, and there are always people there who know your name. It’s like *Cheers*, the best writer’s *Cheers* ever.

It doesn’t matter whatever time of day I go on and say hello, someone will be there to say “Hey, Em,” and have a chat, and it’s just the best thing ever.

## Using Twitter (and Social Media in General) Appropriately

If you treat it like a pub, it generally means that you don't do anything really stupid, because if you walked into a pub and said "Buy my book!" every five seconds, then no-one would talk to you, certainly no-one would buy you a beer and sit in the corner and have a chat with you.

**Any kind of behaviour that would be inappropriate in a pub would be inappropriate on Twitter**, and I think if you just follow the rules, that it's there to make friends and to meet lovely people, then you make friends and meet lovely people, and everything else is just gravy.

**Ali:** Yes, I agree, I think, you know, it's just being yourself, and being appropriate for the place, which I think most people are, like, I've not come across many writers being really self-promotional on Twitter.

**Em:** Ooh, I have, I have.

**Ali:** Have you? Okay, maybe I just don't follow the right people.

**Em:** I have, because they follow me, and then I look at their thing, and it's like "Ooh no, it's just a whole page of promotional tweets. No, I'm really sorry darling, but we're not going to get on."

So yes, it's usually just by them finding me, because I'm plugged into lots of different communities, with lots of different people, but **the great thing about Twitter is that you pick and choose your circles**. So you can hang around with your right people any time you want to, and that's a beautiful thing.

**Ali:** I agree, and it can be a really inspiring sort of place, there's a lot of support. If I tweet my word count or I tweet that I'm struggling or that I'm writing, I'll always get replies, and feel like part of a community.

**Em:** Absolutely, it really is. The other community that I've just discovered this year, which is fantastic, again if you're a sci-fi or spec-fic writer, is the convention circuit. Good grief, I'd never realised that these things existed until last year.

It's just like being at university again, and hanging out with all my geeky friends, and you can sit up until two o'clock in the morning, debating new Battlestar Galactica versus old Battlestar Galactica, and you know, just really really wonderful geeky stuff, but again, a hugely supportive community.

They're all out there, it's just a matter of being patient, and finding the right people, but this is a great time to be a writer. There's all sorts of nonsense about "Oh, it's a terrible time, it's a terrible time," but it's not.

**We've never had so many opportunities to get meet so many cool people and get involved with so much cool stuff, and be in direct contact with our readers.** That never used to happen in the past, it didn't happen ten years ago. There was no way to contact authors, unless you found someone's agent's address or something and wrote a fan letter. You certainly couldn't hang out with them on Twitter, you know, or any virtual place. That's wonderful.

**Ali:** Yes that is almost miraculous, and I think it's easy to under-appreciate just how good we have it.

**Em:** Yes, we're living in the future and it rocks.

## Managing Your Time and Energy While Writing

**Ali:** So I guess this leads into what really is my last question, which is, you know, obviously you're working on the Split Worlds stuff, and that's, what, five novels plus weekly short stories for a year. It just sounds like, wow, that's an awful lot of creative energy going on. Maybe in some practical terms, or some inspirational ways, how do you manage your time, and how do you stay inspired and energised?

**Em:** Well, I should say, right off the bat, this is my full-time job now, **there is no way on this sweet earth that I could write five books and 54 short stories in a year if I had anything else to worry about other than keeping my child clean and fed and at school.**

Nothing else. There is nothing else happening here. My house is an absolute pit, there is so little housework that happens, unless I have met my word count for the day, or whatever.

This is the priority, so I don't want anyone to think "Oh my god, she can write five books in a year, and I'm struggling to get a thousand words done in a week? I'm going to give up now." I've heard people say things like that about other people's word counts, and no no no.

**This is a full time job, and I'm treating it like a full time job. I usually work somewhere around twelve to thirteen hours a day, and I write an awful lot.** These are all first drafts, I hasten to add. I'm writing all of the first drafts in a year, and I'm doing a rolling program of editing alongside that, so the first book I wrote in five weeks at the beginning of last year, but that is 100,000 words that needed to be polished.

It's now at the third draft, and I'm writing the first draft of the third book, and the second draft of the second book will be done after the first draft of the third book. I'm even confusing myself, doing this, but anyway, how does it all work, how do I do it?

**I have to get the story out.** When I wrote the *Twenty Years Later* trilogy, I wrote the first book, spent a lot of time trying to find an agent, trying to find a

publisher, and that consumed me for a while. Once I'd secured the publisher, it was suddenly like "Okay, now I've got all this energy again, I've got to write the rest of the trilogy, I've got to get the story out." Books two and three are ready and waiting for my publisher to decide whether to publish.

With the Split Worlds, it's another case of I've got to get the story out, and if I don't write every day, I start to go a bit doolally.

**Ali:** Me too.

**Em:** Yes, I get really grumpy, really. It helps with the anxiety as well, if I keep writing.

In a practical sense, I do it in sprints. So every day, when I'm having a full on writing day (I haven't been doing that so much lately because I've had a lot of promotional work to do for *Twenty Years Later* and for a couple of other things, so I've taken my foot off the pedal with the book a little bit) ... but when I'm in my full on "Right, I'm going to crack out this first draft in the next month" or whatever, it's 4,000 words a day, five days a week, 20,000 words a week, so 100,000 words in five weeks.

That's the way that I cut it up, and it's in four sprints, so I do 1,000 words in a sprint, which is anywhere from half an hour to an hour to two hours, depending what's going on in that 1,000 words, because not all the 1,000 words are equal, as you know. So, there's a scene that I'm about to write, that's going to take probably around three hours to do 1,000 words, because I've got to figure out a lot of stuff around it.

That's how I keep moving through, and the word count thing helps motivate myself, because I like to say "I have a goal, okay, I've achieved that much."

**There's no way on earth that I'd do this project unless I'd done three other books and figured out how I write books.** I think a lot of people assume that I've just magically been able to produce a book in five weeks. No, there have been five years now of working out how I write a book, how I am the most productive, and constantly experimenting with writing in different ways,

different word counts per day, different times of day. All that kind of stuff, approaching it scientifically, just to work out how I can be my most productive.

In terms of just getting the sheer amount of wordage done, that's how I approach it psychologically. **The hardest thing is switching from novel writing to short story writing**, because there's always some point in the week where I have to step away from the novel and say "Okay, I've got to get a short story out this week," and that's a real head shift, because, as you mentioned before, that's a very very different discipline, and that's hard, and coming up with a new idea every week as well.

Sometimes people send in prompts, but prompts haven't been so much of a feature with the Split Worlds, I haven't called for them as much, and the ones that I've had, they just haven't been right for the project.

So they've just mostly been my own ideas, and coming up with a new idea each week is quite demanding, as well as creating all of the world and then writing all of the books in it.

**I love it, and that's the other big part of it, there is nothing else I want to do, there is nothing else that I want to create or work on, other than this world and these characters and this story**, and that really helps. It's not like every other job I've ever had, where I've thought "Oh, god, I hate this job," it's always reached that point, and I haven't, thankfully. Maybe I will at some point, but I haven't yet, not with these.

I think I'm in love. **I think being in love with your book, when you're writing your first drafts is very important.** You have to have a really awful breakup at some point, just before you really edit the hell out of it, and then you have to really hate it, and it hates you, and it's a really tempestuous and stormy relationship, but at the beginning, it just has to be pure love.

So, yes, that's how I'm approaching it, and in terms of maintaining it creatively, yes, it is a huge, huge creative output, and there are some weeks when I just feel like a dishrag, especially if I've just done a 20k week, I just can't produce anything more, that's like my upper limit of how much I can produce every week.

**I make sure that I read a hell of a lot of books, and I watch very, very good films, and very, very good television.** I'm really strict, if there's something crap on, I won't watch it, it's like "You are what you eat," but with creative media.

**Ali:** That makes sense, yes.

## Filling the Creative Well

**Em:** Yes, so, when people talk about something being incredibly creative, or incredibly well-written, it goes on my list of good things to fill the world with, and I read very very widely, probably a couple of books a week, and it's very much a balancing the books.

I have to make sure I put in as much as I put out, otherwise I'd burn out, I think, I'd run out of story. That's how I see it, that actually consuming all this stuff is as much a part of my job as producing the word count. So, yes, that's how I'm approaching it. Does that answer the question?

**Ali:** Yes, I think it does, and I think you're very right about the need for us to refill that creative well, and just to be reading good stuff or watching good stuff, or taking in creative inspiration, rather than just trying to write just because we feel like we should be writing something, but writing from a place where "I really love this, I really enjoy this, it's fun, it's creative."

**Em:** And I think also, if you've spent a lot of time working out how you write, then your instinct develops. There are times when I will hit my brick wall with a scene, and usually it's because there's something wrong with the scene, but **I've got the confidence now to know that it's something wrong with the scene, and not with me.**

All of those procrastination issues and the motivation issues, I've found the way to cope with them, so when there's a problem with writing something, in the past I used to think "Oh, is it just that I can't write anymore?" or "Oh no,

I'm scared of it, I can't do it," or "No, I just don't feel like it." All of those things are irrelevant now, because I can write without mood.

That's another critical thing for a professional. **If you're going to make your money from your writing, you can't afford to just write when you're in the mood for it**, because you'd probably write about 10,000 words a year.

You have to do whatever it takes to get yourself in that mood to write, and then get to the point where mood is irrelevant. Mood is just this thing that makes us feel great and rubbish, but it's not actually what produces the work, and all of those things help, it's just about, you know, sitting down and putting in the time.

And reading. Reading so much, reading different styles, and I'm very strict with myself, where if I've read an author that I particularly love, or a particular sub-genre or micro-niche of urban fantasy that I've particularly enjoyed, I'm not allowed to read another thing by that author, or in that same niche, for at least five books, otherwise it could creep in.

**Ali:** Yes, I see, you don't want to be overly influenced by just one person.

**Em:** Exactly, and that was a major problem that I had early on, when I was writing *Twenty Years Later*, was that I realised later, when I was reading back over my work, that I had started to sound like all of the people I'd been reading at the time. It was because I was still finding my own voice, and that's less of an issue, but it still can influence too much, you know.

There was one bit, at one point, when I was writing *Twenty Years Later*, when I thought "Oh, I'll nip into the Iliad," and then my goodness, all of these, like, big fights, with all of these very flowery descriptions, and I'm like "Oh, bugger, I'd better stop reading that, hadn't I?" and that's less of a concern now, but it still seeps in on a very very deep level.

I was talking to someone the other day about the creative mulch, I think it was a radio interview I did about making sure that you consume not only other people's writing and, you know, other forms of media, but just life, that you

still have to remember to live life as well, because all of it goes into the mulch. There's this kind of black, gooey, sticky mulch in my unconscious mind, that has to be constantly fed with new peelings from books and life so that stuff can grow out of it, and I think that is as important as the writing.

**Ali:** Yes, you never know where an idea will come from, or how it will develop. So much just goes into your head and comes out in such different forms on the page.

**Em:** Absolutely, and there have been occasions where I've watched a film that I hadn't seen for twenty years, or that I saw when I was a kid, and there's an element in that, and I think "Oh my god, that's where I got that idea for *Twenty Years Later*," or "Oh, that is what made me want to write that story," but of course it comes out completely differently.

When you are reconnected with that bit of rotten peeling, that's grown out into that story, it's such a shock, but it's all there, it all goes in.

**I think that learning how to manage your own fear is a massive part of being creative and being productive with creativity,** because I'm starting to think that fear is at the root of every problem that people have with writing.

Fear is an insidious little bugger: it materialises in different ways, or it doesn't materialise, it just stays under the surface and looks like something else, but it can all be traced back to fear of success, fear of failure, fear of, well, maybe it's just fear of success and fear of failure.

**Ali:** For me it's fear of looking stupid.

**Em:** Yes, which is just a form of failure as well, and that fear can just cripple, so that whole thing about realising that the first draft is not only allowed to be utter rubbish, but must be utter rubbish, gives you the freedom to just write what you will. It actually produces a better first draft, once that's clicked into

place in your head, yes, when you give yourself permission to fail, you're more likely to succeed, that's the way I see it.

**Ali:** I think that's a great way to look at it. Wow, we have covered so much ground, I'm really impressed. We seem to have done a fantastic amount of stuff on short stories, but also on fiction in general, and being a writer.

So I think that this is a good place to just round off. I wondered if you just had any final tips that you wanted to leave us with, in the Huddle. Maybe for people who are just getting into doing short stories, or just getting into fiction as a whole. **Once you get through that initial fear and make a start, what would be your tips for that point in time?**

## First Steps in Fiction Writing

**Em:** It's a bit annoying that Steven King effectively coined it already: **read a lot and write a lot.** It doesn't get much more simple than that. **Read a lot, write a lot, don't be afraid, and put the time in.**

But the thing that I always say is also "don't ever listen to another writer," so everything I've just said, just ignore that, because you have to find your own way.

It's so easy to look for all of other things that writers do and think "Oh, well, I don't do that, I'm doing it wrong" or "Can they write that much? Well I can't possibly write that much" and even when I'm cranking out 4,000 words a day, someone will pop up online and say "I've written 6,000 words today, and I feel fantastic," and I'm like "Aww."

But this isn't some kind of competition for food, or resources, you know. Let's calm down and say "This is what suits me, and everyone has to find what suits them," and I think that is the most important thing, but you can only find it if you experiment and if you put the hours in.

**Ali:** I would absolutely agree, yes. Awesome, well, I think you are a hugely inspiring person to follow on Twitter, so you're [@EmApocalyptic](#), and I'll put that in the notes for the seminar so people can click on the link more easily. But yes, follow Em on Twitter, because she tweets about writing, and she's lots of fun to listen to and to chat to, and I think we met on Twitter, didn't we? Probably quite a while back now.

**Em:** We did! Yes, really quite a long while back, and I wanted to say, you know, if there's any huddlers who have got any questions or, you know, you can usually find me lurking somewhere on Twitter, and if I don't reply immediately, I will usually reply in the next day or so. I'm happy to answer any questions and whatever else anyone wants to know.

**Ali:** Fantastic stuff, and your website is <http://www.eneuman.co.uk>, and again I'll put that in the notes.

Go to Em's website because she has some fantastic pieces on writing and stuff, and on the process of being a writer. There's so much good stuff, I can't just go and recommend one piece, either, yes, so go read more from Em.

In terms of within the Huddle itself, if there is a short story you're working on, the Critiques forum is there for you, but there is also writing chat, where you can just ask stuff more generally about perhaps the process of short story writing.

Maybe if you want any recommendations of what to read, you know, just ask some other Huddlers, because we've got so many people working on really interesting stuff in there.

If you get stuck, feel free to email me, or to tweet at Em, and we'll be really glad to try and help you out with some questions as well.

**Em:** I was just going to say, one thing that I can't do, is read people's stories or critique. I just wanted to say that straight off because I'm trying to write five books and 54 stories in a year, and I don't have enough hours in the day

I'm here for support and advice in general writing terms, but I'm very sorry, I can't critique stories. People do try to send them to me, and I have to say "I'm sorry, but no."

**Ali:** Thank you for saying that, that's an important thing to point out. Any professional writer will not be thrilled if the first thing they get from you is "Hey, can you read my novel" or "If you could tweet my short story..."

Obviously, when I run the Huddle I'm happy to help out Huddlers with their work, and work with people one on one and so on, but in general it's considered quite bad form to email writers your work and expect them to read it.

**Em:** It's understandable bad form, because it is very scary when you're early on in writing, and if there is someone there who's chatting away on Twitter, it can feel okay to do it, socially, but it still isn't, for the reasons we've just said.

**Ali:** Good point. Yes, so what I would recommend, if you've got a short story that you would like some feedback on, or even a novel, is ask around in the Huddle, or look around for offline writing groups.

I've been a member of physical writing groups, which have helped hugely with developing short stories in particular, because a short story is a good length to just read at one evening meeting. Get feedback on your work.

If you need just a quick hand with something, then, you know, chat to me or Em, and I'll hopefully see you around in the Huddle.

Thanks so much to Em, for coming along and being part of this today, and for sharing some really valuable advice with us on short stories. I've been busy taking notes.

**Em:** Well, thank you for having me, and thank you for looking at *Shedding*. I'm very fond of that story.

**Ali:** Yes, I meant to say, thank you for letting us have that to have a look at in the Huddle, because it was really good to just have an example short story, particularly a twist one.

If anyone's listening and they haven't read *Shedding* yet, [it's available in the Huddle here](#). It's a great short story to read, and just to see how Em has put that together, and get ready for there to be a twist. I guess I've probably spoiled it now.

Thanks Em, and see you around on Twitter.

**Em:** Thank you. Yes, I'll see you there, bye!