

INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON

Are you part of a writers group? How useful have you found it or, if not, would you like to be?

I'm a member of the OU Write Club Society and I love it! I work from home, so I find the daily interaction with other writers extremely rewarding. Write Club members offer each other advice, feedback, support, encouragement and basically anything else to do with the world of writing.

Do you think that writers' groups help to develop someone as a writer?

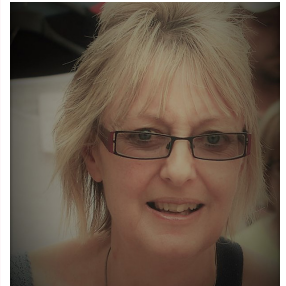
I think writers' groups can really help develop both new and established writers, by offering advice, feedback, support and encouragement.

Do you think that sharing your work helps your process?

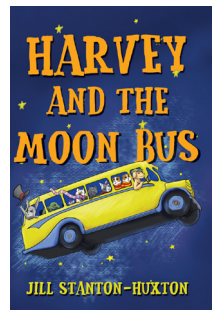
I think sharing work can help writers with the writing process. However, sometimes advice and feedback can be conflicting and confusing if too many people offer up their opinion. So, I think you need to keep focused and remember that the final decision on a piece of work lies with you and your individual writing style.

What advice would you give to new/aspiring writers?

I think one of the most important things is to write about what interests you, and not necessarily what is popular. In my opinion this will produce a far better piece of writing than if you had written on a subject that really didn't capture your imagination. Write as often as you can, even if it's just writing some notes in a journal or diary, getting into a routine I think is very important. There will always be distractions, other things that require your attention, so you need to recognise this and be organised. Also, don't worry about the quality of your first draft. I think the most important thing is to get it down and then work on it later. Finally, enjoy it – writing should be something you love to do, 'a passion' otherwise it's simply not worth all the effort.



Jill had a career in Commercial Librarianship and later HR at the Open University before taking early retirement four years ago for a health condition. Jill has a BA Honours Degree, a Diploma in Humanities and a Diploma in Literature & Creative Writing from the Open University. She has had non-fiction articles, short stories and poems published in magazines, local newspapers and online. She was also the winner of The Buckinghamshire Family History Society Alan Dell Memorial Award for 2013.



INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON (CONTD)

What inspires you to write?

I write fiction, non-fiction and poetry- and recently I've delved into the fascinating world of children's literature. I'm naturally inquisitive and interested in lots of things, so quite often I never know what I will be writing about next. For example, I found an old newspaper at my parent's house recently which had 'Spot the ball' in it. My Nan bought the newspaper and did it weekly in the 1970s. She would often let my twin sister and I pick some of the crosses. I'm now planning on writing about it for a magazine that I've had similar 'nostalgia' articles published in.

How does a story begin for you? Is it an idea, a conversation, a title or an image?

My story ideas come from anywhere really - conversations, memories, experiences, something I've read or even just a title. For example, a humorous story I wrote about a couple getting engaged was a real-life story (slightly exaggerated for comic effect) based on my husband's marriage proposal to me!



ALL ABOARD THE MOON BUS

Do you suffer from writer's block?

I've been very fortunate and never suffered from writers' block. In fact, quite the opposite really as I have a list of ideas for stories, articles, poems, books etc. The only problem I have (if you could call it a problem) is finding the time to write them all.

Describe your ideal writing space.

I am lucky enough to have a lovely writing space - our study looks out into the garden. The only 'problem' is the study is right next to the kitchen, so I spend too much time making cups of tea and trying to avoid the biscuit jar. Also, I recently put up some bird window feeders up, so I keep getting distracted watching the birds. It's a lovely distraction though.

What do you consider your greatest writing accomplishment? And which was your biggest challenge?

My greatest writing achievement, and my biggest challenge has been publishing my debut children's book *Harvey and the Moon Bus*. It's now being stocked in three local independent bookshops and is selling so well that we have just had a second print run. It's getting excellent reviews on Amazon - currently 20 x5*. Also, I was recently invited (as a new and local author) to showcase *Harvey and the Moon Bus* at Whizzfizzfest - a children's literary festival in Aylesbury; and a few weeks later I did my first primary school reading to over 50 children.

INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON (CONTD)

What are the current projects we should be looking out for?

I have a few projects on the go at the moment. A book of short stories called *The Witness Tree* – the stories will all be connected to an old oak tree on a village green. *The Faerie Cat* a heart-warming story about our Norwegian Forest Cat, Macavity, who sadly passed away earlier in the year. Finally, I also have several non-fiction articles, a novel about a bookshop in Pembrokeshire and a collection of poems pending!

What is the strangest thing you have had to look up in the name of research?

A 'live' giraffe was given as a gift to Lorenzo de Medici in Renaissance Florence. I wanted to include it in a TMA for A215, which I did several years ago. It was true and there are even paintings of the giraffe. Sadly, though the giraffe didn't live long.

You are stuck on a desert island and can choose: one of your own characters, a character from someone else's book, a famous person to join you, who do you choose?

If I was stuck on a desert island I would choose to take the nature Writer Robert Macfarlane with me. I've read all his books one of which, *Mountains of the Mind*, won the Guardian First Book Award. I had the opportunity to meet him a few years ago at the Cheltenham Literary Festival. He is a captivating speaker and passionate about the natural world.

How did you decide on a cat as your main character in *Harvey and the Moon Bus*?

A cat is the main character in *Harvey and the Moon Bus* because the story was based on our mischievous Norwegian Forest Cat, Macavity. Sadly, our gorgeous boy is no longer with us, but his legacy will live on forever in the book. The initial idea for the story came about one day when he followed me to the corner shop. When I explained to the shop keeper he was our cat he told me Macavity was always sitting outside the shop as if he is waiting for a bus. I started thinking about where he would catch a bus too, and then I remembered that there's cheese on the moon - and cats like cheese!

When and why did you begin writing?

I started writing nature poems as a child. This was probably because I grew up in the country and my twin sister and I were always outside playing. I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a writer - well actually a reporter on the local newspaper, sadly though this didn't happen. I had a period in my twenties and early thirties when I didn't write much at all; this was mainly due to studying for my OU degree and then other work related courses. Then one day I was on holiday with my sister (who is an artist) and as she was sketching a beautiful coastal scene I picked up a pen and paper and started composing a poem. It was a real eureka moment because I instantly remembered how much I loved writing, how much I had missed writing - and that I would never stop writing again.

INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON (CONTD)

When did you first consider yourself a writer?

I always (deep down) thought of myself as a writer. However, it was only when I had my first piece of writing published- and had been paid for it that I began to take myself seriously as one.

Did you learn anything from writing your book and what was it?

I learnt an enormous amount about writing and the publication process with *Harvey and the Moon Bus*. For example, how to write for a certain children's age group. How important it is to have the manuscript professionally assessed, to make it as good as you possibly can and with as few mistakes as possible. I'm actually extremely proud to say there isn't a single mistake in the book.

What is your work schedule like when you are writing?

I like to juggle a few writing projects at the same time – so I can work on which ever one I feel like at the time.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

Reading, yoga, Nordic walking in the park and our local wood. Going to concerts and watching comedians. Visiting museums and art galleries. Travelling, socialising, gardening.

What does your family think of your writing?

My family are all really proud of my writing achievements, and particularly the publication of *Harvey and the Moon Bus*.

My twin sister organised a surprise family tea party to celebrate the publication of the book – and had bought a gorgeous cake with the image of the Moon Bus and characters on it.

What does your writing process look like?

I always start off writing with a pen and paper and sitting somewhere really comfy - usually the sofa. Then I will type it up on my laptop and continue working on it over a few weeks. When I've eventually got to the final draft I leave it for a week or so and then print a copy out to read over and make any final amendments. My husband also always checks it for spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and anything else he might find. I will then format it so it's ready to send out to a publisher. Finally, if I have a plan to submit it somewhere I will log the details onto my excel spreadsheet which has all my submission info recorded on it.

How important are the names of your characters in your work? Is it meaning, sound or just liking the name that informs the choice?

I generally choose names that I like and that fit with the age of the character and the time-period. With *Harvey and the Moon Bus* I chose names I liked and which I also thought sounded 'interesting' for each individual character. However, Harvey has a special meaning for my husband and I, so the main character was always going to be called Harvey. However, when I had the manuscript professionally assessed they suggested I change the name Harvey because there was a play on in the West

INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON (CONTD)

End at the time and it was about a rabbit called Harvey. They thought having the same name could become confusing. So, my husband and I spent one weekend trying to think of an alternative name for him before realising we just couldn't call him anything else. It was simple really, Harvey had lived with us both for quite a long time at that stage and we couldn't imagine him as anything else.

Are you a plotter or a pantser?

I'm a bit of both. I sometimes just have a small nugget of an idea and start writing and see where it leads me. Interestingly, this is what I am doing at the moment with the first story in *The Witness Tree*. I have no idea what will happen, and I am keen to continue writing it each day to see what does! Other times I have a basic storyline and over a few days will be thinking about it in my head until I eventually have a rough beginning, middle and end then I can start writing it up.

Do you read your reviews? Do you ever respond?

I have read all my Amazon reviews for *Harvey and the Moon Bus*. If I know who has written a particular review I always contact them to say thank you.

Do you have any marketing tips?

The publisher did most of the early (pre-publication) marketing for *Harvey*. However, now the book has been published I have taken over most of it. Although I'm enjoying this I must admit that it's a lot

more time consuming that I thought it would be – liaising with bookshops, posting news about the book on social media, sending out new book requests, finding and booking venues to show case the book, ordering merchandise, contacting schools for readings (which I aim to start doing in September).

What is the best literature festival you attend?

I've been to the Oxford Literary Festival twice and the Cheltenham Literary Festival once, and have enjoyed them both. I'm hoping to see Kate Atkinson (talking about her latest novel, *Transition*) at the Cheltenham Literary Festival in October.

What book/s are you currently reading?

I've just finished reading *The Last Duchess* by Gabrielle Kimm. It's a historical novel set in Renaissance Italy and based on a true story. It's the best book I've read this year. I'm also reading *Yesterday's Countryside* by Valerie Porter, which is research for my book of short stories; and *Happiness and How it Happens – Finding Contentment Through Mindfulness*, which a friend has just given me for a birthday present.

Who are your favourite author/s and what is it that really strikes you about their work?

I have several favourite authors: Tracy Chevalier, Kate Atkinson, Colm Tobin, John Banville, Linda Proud, Robert MacFarlane and John Lewis-Stempel. And for poetry Alice Oswald and Simon Armitage.

INTERVIEWS

JILLY STANTON-HUXTON (CONTD)

Which authors or poets influenced your work?

The poet who has influenced me most is Alice Oswald. Her poetry is about the natural world. *Weeds and Wildflowers*, which also has gorgeous illustrations by Jessica Greenman, is my favourite ever collection of poems.

Do you hear from your readers much? What kinds of things do they say?

Since the publication of *Harvey and the Moon Bus* in February 2018 I have started having a few people contact me who have either read the book, or some of my published short stories and articles and wanted to let me know how much they enjoyed them. The most exciting contact was from the organisers for Whizzfizzfest (a children's literary festival based on Roald Dahl) in Aylesbury. One of the organisers had read an article about the book in the local newspaper and invited me to show case *Harvey* 'as a new and local children's author' at the event. It was a really enjoyable, if slightly surreal day!

Has a book really touched you? Made you rethink your views on life? If so, what was it?

Yes, I recently read the poet Benjamin Zephaniah's autobiography. He grew up in Birmingham in the 1960s and the book covers issues of race relations, world politics, disability, social and civil unrest both then and now.

END

Facebook Jill:
<https://www.facebook.com/Jill-Stanton-Huxton-1703811016499516/>

Facebook Harvey:
<https://www.facebook.com/Harvey-and-the-Moon-Bus-1711948882371897/>

Facebook The Faerie Cat:
<https://www.facebook.com/The-Faerie-Cat-378358326012468/>

Facebook The Witness Tree:
<https://www.facebook.com/The-Witness-Tree-10910933027798/?ref=bookmarks>

Blog:
<https://www.facebook.com/Nature-Notes-of-a-Country-Girl-383704501724842/>

Books available at:
https://www.amazon.co.uk/Harvey-Moon-Bus-Jill-Stanton-Huxton/dp/1788038983/ref=sr_1_16?ie=UTF8&qid=1508585944&sr=8-16&keywords=harvey+moon

<https://www.troubador.co.uk/bookshop/young-adult/harvey-and-the-moon-bus/>