



**Susanna Jones** was born in Hull in 1967 and grew up in Hornsea in East Yorkshire. She studied drama at Royal Holloway, University of London and then spent several years abroad, including two years in Turkey and five years in Japan. She taught English in secondary schools, language schools, a steel corporation and worked as an assistant editor and presenter for NHK Radio. In 1996 she studied for an MA in Novel Writing at the University of Manchester and now lectures in Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London. She lives in Brighton where she is a co-creator of *The Brighton Moment*. She has published three novels, *The Earthquake Bird*, *Water Lily* and *The Missing Person's Guide to Love*. Her work has been translated into over twenty languages and has won the CWA John Creasey Dagger, a Betty Trask Award and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. Cyprus Well caught up with Susanna this month to ask a few questions about writing, being a writer, and her own work.

***The Missing Person's Guide to Love* is your third novel. Does it get easier? Is the writing career what you imagined when you were writing *The Earthquake Bird*?**

In some ways it seems to get harder. Every novel is different and beginning each one has felt like learning how to do it all over again. I'm working on my fourth book now, a historical novel, and that has been a completely new challenge, though I enjoy the fact that it's difficult. What gets easier is knowing the patterns and rhythm of the process better so when things aren't working I'm better at knowing why and what to do about it, when to keep going with an idea, when to drop something and when to put it aside and go for a run/to the pub instead.

I imagined it would get easier and I thought that, since my first novel took about two years to complete, I would be able to produce a novel every two years. In fact, in between the four novels, I've had a few false starts and written a lot of material never to be used. It gets dumped in a folder on my computer, named '?' and will probably be there for ever.

**Describe for us your typical writing day – do you try to follow a routine, for example, write in a particular room?**

I'll have a routine that lasts for a couple of months and then I'll get bored and make a new one. In summer I like to get up at the crack of dawn and write but that never works as well in winter. Some mornings I go out to a cafe to write for an hour or so, or edit what I've done

so far, or hopefully bump into a friend and put off writing till the afternoon. I have a study to work in but at the moment I'm happier writing in the living room with my laptop, for some reason. I'll probably move back into the study in a few weeks when I'm tired of the living room. I don't usually work a set number of hours a day or write a fixed number of words. I might make a list of things I need to do, for example sections that need work, problems that need solving and then spend the day working through them. I drink a lot of tea and coffee when I work and seem to spend as much time lingering round the kettle as I do at my desk. When I'm stuck I go to the gym or for a run along Brighton seafront because something about being on the move makes the ideas move round my head faster and I usually seem to come back with solutions or, at the very least, a sense of achievement (not often produced by a day of writing). I have a part-time lecturing job so I also have to balance the writing with teaching, marking, emails and so on. I like to do a bit of work late at night before bed. There's something exciting about writing when it feels as though the rest of the world is asleep.

**We're often asked for advice on getting a first work published. Do you have any tips for aspiring writers?**

People sometimes send work off to agents before it's ready and it's always disheartening to get a rejection letter, even if you half-expected it. I would say, don't send off under-developed work and always read through your draft asking, 'what's in it for the reader?' If you don't have a writer or a critical-but-tactful friend on hand to give you insightful feedback before you send work off – and you feel you need it - it could be worth considering doing a course such as those run by [The Arvon Foundation](#). When approaching agents, always do your research and read their websites to find out what they want, which writers they represent and so on. It is competitive but agents are always hoping to come across a new voice or talent. It's how they make their money.

**Do you plan out the characters and plot of your novels before you begin, or do you just "start"?**

My starting point is usually an image, some sense of atmosphere and then I work with that and start to find the characters. I write a lot of bits and pieces bringing these together until I start to see where the plot might go. I'm usually working parts of the plot out as I go along but I'll have a good idea of the direction and shape before I start. I change things a lot as I go along so what I finish with never looks much like what I planned, though the atmosphere and images that I began with will be there.

**Can you talk about influences on your writing?**

*Jane Eyre* was the most important book to me when I was a child and teenager. Whether that's influenced me as a writer, it's hard to say. It's difficult to know why one's own writing comes out the way it does and what might have influenced it. I like the personal memoir form of novel. It seems the most natural way for me to write so perhaps that came from 'Jane Eyre', along with wanting to be a writer in the first place. I remember reading *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro just before I first went to live in Japan, in 1988. The simplicity of style and a kind of author-invisibility appealed to me much more than many of the noisier novels of the 1980s which didn't always seem to say as much. It was an exciting revelation and I have loved all his subsequent novels.

**You have a number of [worksheets on your website for readers groups](#) discussing your work. How do you feel about readers groups?**

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What I've learned is how different they all are from each other and that it's difficult to generalise. I think they can be a brilliant forum for ideas and it's great when novels that haven't had much attention become popular through reading group word-of-mouth. I know reading groups who have been together for decades and that's impressive. I've had very searching, interesting questions from readers groups that have made me think twice about my own work.

**Finally, there is a great deal of discussion about the future of books, what with the move to iPad, digitisation, etc. How can you see this digital future affecting authors?**

I don't know and I wish I did! I'm sure the impact will be huge. It will affect authors' rights etc, of course, and the way people read, but how it might affect the novel itself, and the novels we choose to read, remains to be seen. I thought I would only want to read printed books but I can already see situations where I'd rather read an e-book (I don't yet own the technology!).

[Visit Susanna's Website](#)