

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Before we start, if you could say your first and last name, to make sure that I pronounced it right. If you'd like to give pronouns, give pronouns.

**Susin Nieslen:**

Susin Nielsen; she, her.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Hello, and welcome, to Shelf-Healing. UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick.

Our guest today is, Susin Nielsen. Susin started her writing career writing for popular TV series *Degrassi Junior High*. Since then, she has written for many Canadian TV shows and has written a whole host of award-winning books for young adults. The latest of which is *Tremendous Things*, which came out earlier this year. We'll chat about that later on in the podcast.

The first question to get us through. It's nice and easy. I always say it's nice and easy, it really isn't really. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

**Susin Nieslen:**

I definitely feel reading is therapeutic. Absolutely.

Especially in these weird uncertain times that we're living in, there's nothing like escaping into a great book. Just to take your mind off things and sink into a different world.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Lovely. What kind of books do you go for if you want to escape?

**Susin Nieslen:**

Interestingly enough, I arrived here from Vancouver, Canada on Sunday. I left on the day that they were making all of these Omicron announcements. I forgot my iPad at home and on my iPad I had *The Lincoln Highway*, by Amor Towles. I was really looking forward to reading it and I left my iPad at home accidentally.

So, when I got here, I went into a bookstore and I bought *Shuggie Bain*, which I've just started reading. Everybody says it's so wonderful, and what I've read is wonderful. But I just feel like I needed something a little lighter. I could just tell that it was also going to be possibly traumatizing at points, which I'm all for, but not when I'm on this funny little book tour during a pandemic.

So, I just wandered over to the adult section of Anderson Press, where I am and they gave me a copy of Richard Osmand's new book, which I was very tempted to get at the

bookstore, but of course look how massive it is. So, it's at least paperback, but I just thought, 'well to hell with it, I'm just going to take this and somehow shove it into my carry-on luggage.'

But I think this is going to be the perfect book for me right now. I'll get back to *Shuggie Bain* when I get home.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

That's something I think it's worth chatting about: fitting all of the books you want to read in your carry-on luggage for a long flight. Because, if you pick short books, you're going to have to take lots of them.

And if you take a really big book, like you said, starting *Shuggie Bain* and you've decided it was a bit heavy for reading on the plane, it's quite difficult to make that choice.

**Susin Nieslen:**

Yes, it is indeed. Well, and that's actually the one time when I don't mind reading on my iPad. I still prefer a physical book, but for travel, it's great having an iPad.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Do you find the act of writing to be therapeutic?

**Susin Nieslen:**

Oh, definitely. Even when I'm trying to get to sleep at night I'm often thinking. I don't mean, because I can't sleep because of anything that's going on. I just mean in general; I'm often thinking about a scene that I'm working on, or a character, or what would happen if's. It's nice to have a fictional place to put some of my mental energy before I drift to sleep. Absolutely. If you have a job that you love doing, I think it's therapeutic to just have your mind engage in whatever it is that you're doing.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Have you found big differences with how you write for TV and how you write for novels, and sort of the therapeutic effects?

Because I imagine writing for TV is much more time-intensive: speed, deadlines. Whereas you can maybe take more time when you're writing a novel.

**Susin Nieslen:**

Well, that's very true. A novel can take as long as it takes really. Whereas in the TV world, yes, we are working to deadlines.

They're just very different. TV is so collaborative. I'm usually working with a team of writers, and that part of it is really fun. I love that collaborative nature of it. I think quite

honestly, I've been lucky because during the pandemic a show that I created got put into production. So, we've shot a couple of seasons of the show and it's been a real gift because it's meant that I have been able to engage with a lot of other people, both in the writing process, and then also when we'd been shooting. As opposed to being home alone, working on a novel, which is great. But all of the aspects that you normally get as an author for socializing, like going and doing school events, going on a little book tour, doing a reading somewhere; all of those disappeared or they moved to zoom. So, it's been nice being back in the TV world over the last couple of years, for sure.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

When you're sort of sat around a campfire and you're sharing stories among friends and everyone has sort of a similar story that they will share and it's sort of a community story telling experience. Do you find that it's similar when you're writing collaboratively for TV, or is it a little bit more just everyone's working on one idea?

**Susin Nieslen:**

Well, it's a bit of both. It's really fun being in the room. I'm in charge of the room, but I'm working with five or six really talented writers. So, we'll be working out the character arc for the season, the story arcs for the season.

It's very much, I have some ideas in my head about where things are going, and then we just start riffing on all sorts of stuff. It's called Family Law, so there's also always a law case at the center as well. So, we all call it 'beating out the stories' together. It's really lovely, because it really is a process of kind of best idea is what's going to land and I'm not precious at all about my own ideas.

That part of it is very collaborative and we'll actually go through kind of scene-by-scene what we think is going to happen. But then each individual writer goes away and writes their outline for that particular script. So, say I'll write the outline for episode one, Sarah, one of my writers will write the outline for episode two. Then we get back together, and we talk about those outlines, make changes, they get sent into the producers and broadcaster, we get notes back from them. Then, each individual writer goes away and writes the full script. Then, you know, I'll take my own pass later. I'll take a pass at everything, but the writers I work with are so good I don't have to take a huge pass. So, it's a strange blend of very collaborative, and then you go away and work by yourself.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Was it strange when you made the transition to writing some tie-in novels to the original TV series that you wrote for?

Was it strange making the jump from writing characters that you knew so well, and that you'd written for in TV form?

Was it difficult to make the jump from then writing your own creation?

**Susin Nieslen:**

Oh, going from the TV world to the book world, yeah, because a lot of my TV work up to that point was writing for other people's shows and other people's voices. Exactly. Which is really fun also. But it was definitely a transition. I'd known for a long time that I wanted to write a young adult novel. Just one, that was my plan. A character had been talking to me for quite a while, and this was Ambrose in *Word Nerd*. That was the first book that came out in North America. It was a period when the TV work had really dried up for a while. I was very mopey around the house.

Then one day I just realized, you know, 'you're a writer, so you don't have to wait to get hired by a show or have a broadcaster green-light your show. You can write, all you need is your laptop and an idea.'

This character had been talking to me, so that's when I started writing *Word Nerd*. It is a very different process of course, because it's so solitary. It's incredibly gratifying, because it's really your work until your editors get involved, and then they have great ideas of making it better and thank God for them.

I just set myself a goal. I think I had a goal that I had to write four pages a day or something like that. I kept a small goal for myself.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

You mentioned you wanted to write a young adult book and you've written many of them now. What kept you coming back to that middle grade, young adult fiction?

**Susin Nieslen:**

It's interesting. I really tried, briefly, to write a book for adults. So, to speak, I mean, a lot of adults read my books. I really struggled with that. I think it's because all of my books are first-person and when I can get into the head of my 12, 13, 14-year-old protagonist I fall in love with them. I have a lot of compassion for them. I found it harder to have compassion for the 50-year-old woman that I was trying to write in this adult novel. It's really interesting. That kind of 12-year-old range in such an interesting time of life where there's so many firsts for you. You're really coming into aspects of who you'll be as an adult. You're learning that your parents are fallible. It's just such an interesting time of life. There are still sometimes aspects that are still a bit innocent. So, it's just an age group that I really like writing for. I think I have very acute kind of emotional memories of that time and my own life.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Leads me on to your newest book that came out earlier this year. *Tremendous Things* focuses on something that many of us have experienced, that horrifying, embarrassing, horrific moment, that just sticks with you, and you can't stop thinking about it and it's impacting, you know, you can't sleep because it comes back to you at 2:00 AM in the morning and it's impacting sort of your daily life.

And obviously it's a middle grade book, young adult. So, you've given this to some bored teenager. There's a horrible experience. How did the idea come to you to write about something where your protagonist is dealing with that and trying to kind of overcome that awful experience that I know many people well into their adult lives will focus on something that happened to them when they were 12 or 13, that they just pops back at the most awkward unhelpful times..

**Susin Nieslen:**

Yeah, it's funny. I don't really know where the initial idea came from. Fortunately, I never had anything that humiliating happen to me in high school. But I certainly had humiliating things happen to me in high-school, but nothing that stuck for years and years. I certainly did know people who did have that embarrassing thing.

Oh my God, yeah. Thinking of one guy in particular, mind you, I mean, I think he kind of deserved what he got. But he was given the nickname, peeping Denny. This is awful, because more than one of us as young women found him like peering into windows after dark. Awful, right? I mean, it's terrible. I mean, we kind of treated it as a joke, but then we shouldn't have, it wasn't. It wasn't a laughing matter. I mean he actually was harmless, even if it was super creepy. Like imagine, like that becomes your moniker, you know? And then he goes on in life and, um, you know, where he went to university, a handful of people from our high school also went to university, so that, you know, kind of becomes your legacy for a while.

I probably had had that idea for a while. Then I wanted to tell a story about a really decent male friendship as well. You know, men helping men, I suppose. I really wanted a friendship between a straight guy and a young gay man as well.

Then of course, Sal, who's his other best friend, who's 85. Wilbur is a kid who thinks so little of himself and over the course of the book, with some help from his friends, I think that he shows us how you can be a very strong, very courageous young man. But not by being a testosterone filled jerk either. So there was sort of a whole bunch of things at work, I guess. And then I really wanted to do an exchange trip from Paris, because I love Paris.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

I think that's a really important thing to highlight as well as the fact that you've got a really brilliant male friendship. That's just a fabulous friendship.

I think, like you said, it's people being courageous and strong without being sort of over-the-top testosterone filled man. It's just people being people and just how wonderful that is when it all goes right and you've got a solid foundation and a solid friend group. Whether that's another person of a similar age or an 85-year-old lady. It's the connection that matters. I think it makes a very subtle, yet strong point to have that in a book that's aimed at children that age, just to reiterate, you know, friendships are powerful things really.

Talking of powerful things, powerful stories, is there a piece of writing, a book, a TV series, just a poem, anything or even a non-fiction work that's profoundly affected you in your life?

**Susin Nieslen:**

Well, probably quite a few. I'm a big fan of David Sedaris, he's nonfiction for the most part. What I love about his writing is, first, that he exposes the worst in all of us. Our horrible inner thoughts, which I think I do some of that in my books. Of course, because it's first-person narrative, you're getting all of their thoughts. I love the way that he can make you laugh and cry practically within one paragraph.

I mean, there's so many books that I've just loved over the course of my lifetime. I can't compare myself to these people because I think they're so uber talented. But a book that I really loved in the past five years was *A Gentleman in Moscow*, by Amor Towles. I just thought again how he took such an unlikely scenario and wrote these beautiful characters. Who were actually in some harsh circumstances, but there's humour and I love books that also have humour. I love books that can imbue even sad things with humour. Gosh, I mean, Anne Patchett's *Bel Canto* was another one that really rocked my world.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Is there a specific place that you read? Are you a read in bed kind of person?

**Susin Nieslen:**

I'm a read in bed kind of person, for sure. Then I also read on the couch in the middle of the day and possibly close my eyes for 20 minutes.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Are there any books that you return to over and over again, like a comfort book?

**Susin Nieslen:**

I think because there's just so much to read, I've sometimes thought about, 'oh, I should go reread that book'. But then I think, 'yeah, but then I've got that stack of books that I have never read, sitting on my bedside table'.

Once in a blue moon, I have started reading a book that I thought I hadn't read, gotten about a third of the way through and thought, 'wait a second... why do I know everything that's going to happen in this story'. So, sometimes that happens.

It's interesting. I'll tell you one book I did reread after like decades. *Harriet the Spy*, which I don't think was as big a hit over here as it was in North America, by Louise Fitzhugh.

That was a middle-grade book when I was growing up. It was a unique female protagonist who was not a girly girl. She wanted to be a journalist when she grew up. She was kind of mean, said mean things about her friends in her journal, which then gets discovered. They had the 25-year anniversary of the book; I think it was. I re-read that, and I was actually amazed and possibly slightly embarrassed, just how much she had influenced my writing. I hadn't realized that.

I'll tell you somebody else who influenced my writing. I was at a school this morning, here in London, and a boy said to me afterwards, he said, 'what you read from your book reminded me a little bit of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*.'

I said, 'you know, you're absolutely right!' I love Sue Townsend and I loved those books. So she's another one. Actually, she would have been an influence too, I need to remember to, to think about Sue Townsend because those books were amazing, you know?

**Rebecca Markwick:**

I always loved the little random doodles that were in them as well.

I think kids' books have, particularly the middle grade, young adult, a solid chance that they will stay with people forever.

You're sat in a room at the minute with Elmer behind you, which is obviously aimed at much younger kids, but as soon as, as soon as the camera turned on and I saw Elmer, I instantly had like lovely memories of Elmer. Just from seeing all the little elephants everywhere.

**Susin Nieslen:**

We didn't have Elmer in North America!

**Rebecca Markwick:**

What! You missed out!

Now like you said you write young adult middle grade fiction, they're written in the first person, and obviously that's in very stark contrast to your TV writing where obviously you're, you're writing for people to externally see characters, and you've kind of gone from kid stuff all the way through to kind of your adult TV. Is it a weird mind shift you have to go through when you kind of sit down to write something for TV compared to having that ability to explore the internal thoughts of your characters in the novel? Or do you feel like you can do that in both? Just in different ways?

**Susin Nieslen:**

That's a great question. Certainly, what I loved when I started writing the books was that I could go into the internal world of the characters and delve more into that. As you say, you know, TV is a very different beast. I feel like in this show, which, you know, I

hope we'll come to the UK one day, they'd been selling it to different markets, but I don't think it's sold to the UK. I've been so blessed by the actors who we cast, because, especially our lead actress, Jewel Staite, is able to give you a lot of her internal monologue with just a look. It's quite amazing. So, I will sometimes write things in the scene description. If I feel, I want to make sure that somebody knows, like, I don't know how, what would be an example, like, you know, a character says, oh yeah, I'm fine. And then the scene description might be, she's not. If you've got great actors, which, you know, obviously here in the UK, you've got tons of them, it's amazing how they can play a lot of that stuff.

I don't miss not being able to necessarily write gobs and gobs. You have to be much more efficient in the TV world. Every single scene has to count, right. But I think with both genres, I've learned valuable lessons that have helped in both. So, I think my TV writing really helped me with my novel writing because I don't have a lot of flab in my books. You know, you're not going to read one chapter that's just boring description of something. Everything kind of keeps the momentum moving forward. Even if I am allowed to pause to go into internal stuff, it's still moving the story forward. I think I can write snappy dialogue. I know how to write chapter endings that make you want to start the next chapter right away. Because of course, all of those things you learn in TV. You've got a right to your act break, so people will come back after the commercial, even though, you know, now a lot of stuff doesn't have commercials, but so I think, and then I think my novel writing, honestly, I think it helped me to write more nuanced characters with my new show.

It's been fun doing both.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

I did screenwriting at university for a year, which was thrilling. Good stuff. And it, like you say, it's, you have to rely on the actors a lot. If you're going to put those little scene notes in you. It doesn't work for everyone because obviously everyone acts slightly differently and every story is different.

**Susin Nieslen:**

Absolutely, yeah. I do kind of believe that there's usually only that one person who's exactly right for the role. There are so many ways in TV that it can go sideways. You know, if you don't get the absolute right person for the different roles. If you, I don't know, don't have a great cinematographer, or a great director, I think there's so many ways it can go sideways. Whereas book, you know, if you're going to blame anybody, like it's, well, it's kind of the opposite, right? Like love or hate the book. It's like, well, yeah, that's kind of on me right.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Obviously, the other big difference that a lot of people have in the way they write things is the plan everything, all the way out, and then the pantsers, who just write by



the seat of their pants and make it up as they go along. I'm going to guess, and I may be wrong, but from all of your TV writing where, you know, everything's planned season arcs, episode arcs, character arcs are all planned out, kind of right from the beginning that you may be a plan, everything kind of writer when it comes to novels, as opposed to.

**Susin Nieslen:**

Well, interestingly, the first part of your statement was correct. The second part was not as I think, because of all the planning that I've had to do in TV, I'm a pantser when writing a novel. I might have a general idea of where I think things are going, but then I really just start writing. I feel like if I planned everything out it would, oddly, kill some of the process and kill the chances for things to take a different direction. I like to have the freedom to see where the characters might decide to take me and where I might go off on a tangent for a while. Sometimes, they've taken me in a different direction than I anticipated.

I'm more of a pantser. I like that. Yeah.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

I did not expect that. I just expected the drilled organization of the, of the writer's room to come with you into the novelists.

**Susin Nieslen:**

It did not!

**Rebecca Markwick:**

It did not. I feel like you've covered literally everything. You're a pantser you're also a planned person. You write first person, you also writing for TV.

It's like, you've, you've tried a bit of everything and just fingers and all of the different types of writing pies

**Susin Nieslen:**

Well, and I think if you're, you know, like trying to actually build a career in this field, sometimes it's good to be able to do more than one thing, if you can.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Now trickiest question of all time. If you could suggest a book that you think people may enjoy any book at all, it can be, it doesn't even have to be a fiction book. It could be poetry. It could be non-fiction. It could be a screenplay, anything you'd like, do you think people might enjoy that will maybe make them laugh? Oh, be a good escape for them. What would it be?

**Susin Nieslen:**

A book that blew me away in the last couple years was, *Girl, Woman, Other*, by Bernadine Evaristo who won the Booker with our very own Margaret Atwood, whom I also love. But you know, I'll be honest, I picked it up a bit reluctantly because I didn't love the title. I thought, well, what is this going to be like? I don't know. And dang! She's such a good writer and It's just got all the things. It's got some humour. It's got incredible depths. I felt like I stepped into worlds. Like I was walking in other people's shoes, you know, who aren't my background, but who I could completely empathize with and sympathize with.

That book did what the best books do I think, right. Which is also allows you to have a window into somebody else's world, right. I just, I thought it was a tremendous book.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

Yeah, it's great. It really is. I was very upset when there was a dual winner of the Booker. Then I looked at the books and I was like, 'oh, I can see how hard that must've been to pick one'. I would not want to be.

Well, this is fantastic. I'm going to put all of the books, the authors and everything in the show notes. So the listeners can find them along with links to your website and to your new book and your old books. And if you're on Twitter, on your Twitter as well, definitely Paul's Twitter. Cause I know his Twitter because that's how we managed to get this happening. I love Twitter, Twitter, so helpful for things like this.

I've really enjoyed chatting with you. It's been fabulous!

**Susin Nieslen:**

I've enjoyed chatting with you too, Rebecca. Thank you very much.

**Rebecca Markwick:**

A really fun time chatting with Susan all about her new books, her writing style. Her really awesome, cool, new TV show *Family Law* with Jewel Staite. I cannot tell you how amazing the room that Susan was sat in was it was just Elmer everywhere. And I love Elmer so much. Anyway. I highly recommend you read Susan's books. They are great.

Thanks as always to Nicholas Patrick for our music and to Nat Balch for our transcripts. Do check us out on Twitter at shelf underscore healing.