

## **Elizabeth Day**

### **Journalist, Author and Podcaster**

**Media Masters – January 17, 2019**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Elizabeth Day, award-winning author, journalist and podcaster. Since her first column in the Derry Journal at just 12 years old, she's written for a number of publications in the US and the UK including the Observer, the Times, the Telegraph, the Guardian, Vogue and Elle. She's also a columnist for the Mail on Sunday and contributing editor for Harper's Bazaar. Her podcast, How to Fail, was launched last year and has reached the top of the iTunes chart, featuring guests including Lily Allen, David Baddiel, and Mishal Husain. It forms the basis of her forthcoming book, How to Fail: Everything I've Ever Learned from Things Going Wrong.**

**Elizabeth, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you for having me. What a lovely introduction!

**It was quite lovely, wasn't it? But you've done a lot of things.**

Yes, actually hearing it all read back to me is very nice.

**I caught a bit of imposter syndrome as I was reading it, thinking, "I haven't done any of these things."**

No, you didn't! No, as I was saying earlier to you, it's very flattering that this podcast is called Media Masters, and I am on it, because I wouldn't consider myself a master – or mistress – but it's very, very kind of you to have me. Thank you. I was very flattered.

**It's a great pleasure. Tell us about the podcast. You've launched it only a few months ago, and it's already completely overtaken this one, so you must be doing something better. What are we not doing?**

I'm sure that's not true! I launched in July 2018. It's so weird to think that that's last year now, isn't it?

### **You're on season three now, aren't you?**

Yes. That was a deliberate decision actually, because I wanted to bunch together the early seasons so that people got used to it, and that there was a bit of a gap, but there wasn't too much that I would lose interest. I think if you're a new podcast, that's quite important. Basically, I launched in July, not having a clue what I was doing. All I knew was that I love listening to podcasts myself, and I also knew I'd come out of quite a tricky year in my personal life, and my 30s were a decade when a lot of things went down personally. I got married. I got divorced. I had IVF that was unsuccessful. My marriage broke down. I had another relationship. That broke down. Also, alongside that, I wrote four novels and things were going well career-wise, but it's quite interesting, that disconnect sometimes between the personal and professional. I just got to a stage in my life where I realised the most honest and the most engaging and intimate conversations I have with my friends were around failure, and almost around the missteps in my own life, and I got an enormous amount of courage and solidarity from sharing that with my friends – so these two things came together, the fact that I love listening to podcasts and the fact that I really value having these conversations, and I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could open up those conversations and make them more accessible to more people, and if we spoke to 'successful' people?" Because I know from my day job, interviewing celebrities, that fame, although it comes with so many benefits, also comes with disadvantages as well, and often people's journeys haven't been straightforward. So I thought, "How great would it be if the people that we look at in this Instagram-curated generation, the people that we look at with supposedly perfect lives, if they actually admitted to vulnerabilities?" That's how the idea started.

### **What a great idea.**

Oh, thank you! And also because I love Desert Island Discs, I was like, "I wonder if I could use that model, if I ask people to come up with three failures, and that could form the scaffolding of the discussion?" It would also mean that the guests got comfortable with the topics they were exploring – but I wanted to do it almost for my own reasons and because I believed in the concept. I said to myself that I would put my own money into it, and I did get a sponsor, an amazing hummus company, just because I ate their hummus once in Whole Foods and loved it – and I DMed them on Twitter and asked them to sponsor me and they said yes! But that didn't cover all of my costs, because I wanted to do it professionally.

### **It's never going to be a route to riches, I can assure you.**

Exactly. You do it for love, don't you? I really did that first season for love, and I relied on friends and contacts to be the interviewees.

### **This sounds like my journey in the terms of the early podcasts I did.**

Really? Yes, and I then just put it out there, and I genuinely didn't mind if a dozen people listened – because I was proud of it, and I felt that it existed in and of its own right, and so I put it out there, and then it massively connected on a scale that I had never anticipated. That has been one of the most beautiful things in my professional life, genuinely, because it's actually made me realise that in being the most honest

myself about my vulnerabilities, that has created the greatest connection with the greatest number of people. And that's a really good lesson, I think.

**It's an incredibly brave thing to do, to put yourself out there in the public sphere with your vulnerabilities.**

It's really interesting you say that because... thank you, but I've never considered it brave. I consider it quite a natural thing to do. I don't mean that I'm a massive egomaniac and I want to talk about myself all the time...

**Well, we've got an hour, so don't worry.**

Hurray!

**If you're not prepared to do that, then we're in serious trouble!**

Let's talk about you, Paul. How was your childhood?

**Terrible. Actually, my mum might be listening, so my childhood wasn't terrible. It was actually all right, but carry on.**

I know! It's so interesting. I'm always really worried if my mother is listening, as well. Hello, my mother. You're lovely.

**Hi, mum.**

I don't necessarily consider it brave, because I find in my writing – both in novels and in journalism – the writing I've done that feels most authentic, and that flows most easily, and that I get most from, is the writing where I am being really honest. Of course, there are certain things that I will never share publicly that involve other people or that are just too private to put in the public domain, but I think that one of the things that really motivates me is that idea of connection, and if I can help someone feel less alone by sharing an experience that I have been through that hasn't been wholly positive, and if I can tell that person that, although it was incredibly sad at the time, I gained a lot through it because I gained knowledge, and I feel stronger because of it, then that, for me, is really the essence of why I do what I do, because I consider myself a communicator first and foremost. I know that other people don't have that natural inclination and that...

**That kind of curiosity.**

Yes, and I know that other people very kindly have said that it's brave and courageous and that it's been a helpful thing for them, so I completely respect that. Yes, but for me, it does seem a natural thing to do and I feel that it's a meaningful thing to do. I suppose that's what I'm getting at. I really, really get a lot out of the fact that it feels like a meaningful connection with people.

**I think the meaning is derived from that authentic honesty that you get from your guests because we're in a kind of #FOMO Instagram-driven thing where everyone, whether they're a celebrity or even my next door neighbour, they always put the best of themselves on Instagram having a great time, blah blah blah, but most people want that connection. Do you find it difficult to get guests on, or do you have a queue of people that are wanting to open up?**

Interestingly, for the first season, I was worried that it would be difficult to get guests on, so I phrased my emails, my approaches, very carefully. I was like, "Failures can be anything from failing your driving test and going on a terrible date to something more profound," but actually, I find that people really engage with the idea, and if anything, they were quite thirsty for it. Now I'm at a stage where I'm lucky enough that people are coming to me and wanting to be on it – and also I am quite careful about the guests that I have on, because you have to be willing to be honest and open. Having said that, I've also had predominantly male guests on who didn't think that they had failed anything, which in and of itself is sort of an interesting interview to do, because you're exploring the context of that self-belief.

### **Typical men.**

Yes, I know! Well, I've had some lovely men on. Actually, they've all been lovely, but I've had some men who are much more self-aware. Sebastian Faulks, for instance, I'm sure he won't mind my mentioning him, because he is a friend. He was a first season guest. He was actually the first interview that I ever did for the podcast, and he sent me an email tongue in cheek beforehand, because I'd asked him for these three failures, and he's like, "I don't think I'm the right person for this podcast because I'm not sure I really have failed." His instances of failure were cooking a soufflé that had failed to rise, and not winning a tennis match – but his point was, when we got to speak and we got more in depth about it, was that it's actually just how you see it. So yes, he had lost that tennis match, but he had had a wonderful experience playing alongside his friend and he got a lot out of sport. Yes, he failed to win this prestigious literary prize, but he'd come second and wasn't that wonderful, so it's that kind of positive mindset that I actually think a lot of people can learn from. That's a long-winded way of saying that, actually, I find that people are more willing to be intimate than I had realised, and I do think that a lot of celebrities, to give them their due, are frustrated by the kind of PR-curated celebrity interview way. It's like a hotel room junket, and you get 20 minutes, and you have to ask them all the questions that your editors ask, and a lot of the time that's about break-ups they don't want to talk about or, "What was it like working with so and so?" or, "Oh, you're a woman in your early 30s. Do you want children?" That's as frustrating for the journalist as it is for the famous person – so for me, it was a real liberation being able to do a more free-ranging interview, as I'm sure you find, as well, in this format.

**Yes, and in many senses, they're similar formats because my next question was about the length of the podcast. If you had a forced brevity, if it was only a 12-minute podcast, you're only going to get quick bullet points and you're not really going to get the depth. With this interview, you have that depth in this space for people to talk about themselves.**

Totally, and I do think that podcasts like this really show that there is a demand and an appetite for it, because as well as living in a culture which is mediated by social media posts and filters and “perfect lives” and #blessed, we also live in a culture of 24-hour news cycles and soundbites from our politicians, and our attention is so constantly diverted that, actually, it’s a real relief to sink into a bath of conversation rather than a brief shower of a news bulletin, and that makes me very happy really, because I’m all about longform media, whether it’s in writing or auditory format like this one. I think that that says a lot about human insight and is a positive thing for the future.

**What’s the best thing about the podcast for you? Obviously, there’s things like being at the top of the chart, and the access it gives you, and the recognition. They’re all great, but like for example with this podcast, I genuinely do enjoy the conversation. I get to meet interesting people, and this does give you an opportunity to connect with people in a meaningful way that you wouldn’t have otherwise.**

Definitely, and I think when people say yes to coming on a podcast, they know that it’s going to go out as they’ve said it, rather than when you’re writing up an interview, obviously, you’re always going to have to choose which quotes to use because of word count. So for me, the best thing about doing the podcast has been the liberation of the freedom of the format and definitely meeting people, or sometimes interviewing friends and people I know very well, but in a very different context.

**Because you’re not chasing a news line, frankly. You’re not trying to... not entrap the interviewee, but you’re not trying to get them to say something that you can then get a page lead out of the next day.**

Exactly. You don’t need to worry about getting a headline, and yes, by the time I’m sitting opposite a guest they have committed to the idea of the podcast so they know what it’s about. A lot of the time they’ve sent me three instances of failure, therefore there’s a degree of comfort that comes with it. They know that I’m not going to booby trap them, and that’s really lovely. Yes, it’s the connection with the person I’m interviewing – but beyond that, the thing that I find really most wonderful about it is the connection with the listeners. People now message me on Instagram or on Twitter, whatever, most often about the podcast and also about things that I write, which is wonderful, but it’s been incredibly moving reading some of those messages from people who’ve said that it’s got them through really difficult times in their lives, and I massively appreciate all of that. I really do. It’s amazing.

**What’s the psychology behind people pitching themselves into it now given that you’ve got this level of recognition now? When you’re saying that you have to list three failures to pitch yourself in, if someone pitches themselves in and you don’t want them on, do you actually write back and say, “Well, actually, I can give you a fourth failure which is that you’ve not gone onto this podcast”? Sorry, I couldn’t resist that.**

Oh, my God. That’s actually good advice. Actually, that would be a great way of answering.

**It's quite brutal, isn't it, really? It's not very nice.**

Well, generally what happens is, because I'm an author, and because I didn't know what I was doing at the outset, and my podcast is categorised as a literature podcast, I tend to get a lot of book publicists coming to me with authors pitching authors, and generally, they are amazing authors who I am so keen to interview, but because there's like a gateway, I feel less bad saying to the publicist rather than the person in question, "I don't think this person is quite right," although I'm quite gutless and I don't tend to say that. I tend to say, "Oh, I've already got this season fully booked up," which is true because I made a decision at the outset that I was going to seasons of eight weeks and then have some time off so that I could record the podcast in advance and therefore minimise the stress. I honestly like a weekly podcast, because I know Deborah Frances-White, who is one of my forthcoming guests, who does the Guilty Feminist podcast. She does it weekly, different guests every single time, and that is an enormous pressure, and I just would burn myself out. This podcast isn't weekly, is it?

**It is.**

Is it? I'm so sorry. How do you do it, Paul?

**We do them in bunches. You're asking very good questions there, because we're going to have to let our listeners in to the secret, but I'll record five or six, sometimes seven or eight, in advance. I'll have one week when I'll record six podcasts and then I'll forget about it for a couple of months.**

Sorry, this is shop talk, but do you ever do two in one day?

**Yes, but very rarely back-to-back. I try not to because I'm usually knackered by the end of the first one.**

It's so knackered, isn't it?

**You have to listen to the guests. That's my only interviewing technique.**

What?

**Yes, exactly! Is to actually just listen to what you're saying which everyone seems to think is revolutionary. When you go on things like LBC and things like that, you see the presenter in front of you, and they've got a bulleted list of questions, and they're just working their way through it, and question two is completely unrelated to what your answer was to question one, whereas I just have this revolutionary technique of just listening to you.**

I'm exactly the same and it's my number one tip when wannabe journalists come and ask me occasionally for advice about how to do interviews. Because people make the mistake, I think, of thinking an interview is about the quality of your questions, and actually, your questions don't have to be that great. Your question can be a

really, really basic one, and I find some of the most interesting questions are, “Tell me about your family,” or, “How did you grow up?” because often that has the key to what a person later becomes. I went through this phase as a newspaper journalist of interviewing celebrities, all of whom had moved around a lot as kids, and so they changed schools a lot, either because they were from military families – name drop, Clint Eastwood, because his father worked on roads building roads and infrastructure, Christina Hendricks because her dad worked for the Forestry Commission – and all these people then had to change schools a lot, and make themselves popular, and make friends as quickly as they could in their new school, and so they became performers, and that was often why they then turned their hand to that profession again. I find stuff like that really fascinating.

**Yes, in a sense, I have some stock questions that I go to. It might be my interviewing style, but I’m always interested in what inspired people along this journey, whether it be on the podcast or your journalism, why you want to be a journalist, per se. I often ask people about what their typical week is because I’m interested in that because you can get a lot out of that. What people do in day to day gets them to reveal the four of five different things that they’re on with at the moment.**

Yes, that’s so true. A friend of mine, Sathnam Sanghera, who’s a journalist at the Times, you should get him on, he says that he starts every interview with, “Describe a typical day.” The vast majority of people say, “Oh, there’s no such thing as a typical day,” and then he’ll be like, “Well, what did you do today?” You’re right. It’s very revealing.

**Well, let me start with some stock questions, then! Did you always want to be journalist, though? Having said that, that is one of my stock questions. Did you always want to be a writer? What did you want to be when you were young and when you thought when I grow up?**

I always wanted to be a writer, which looking back, is quite odd because there were no writers in my family. When I was more grown up, I did meet a distant-ish cousin who was a journalist, but there were no immediate novelists or examples I could look to. But I remember very vividly, aged four, deciding I wanted to write books – which makes me sound like a bit of a precocious brat, but I think it’s because I loved books. I was lucky that I grew up in a house surrounded by books, incredibly lucky in that my parents fostered in me a love of reading. My father used to read me bedtime stories. My mother taught me to read and write before I went to school, and all of those things I loved being surrounded by. I remember, aged seven, deciding that I should really make some money before I launch into writing novels so I should become a journalist, because it’s still writing, and I love that.

**This seems very precocious and well-thought-out.**

Well, not that well-thought-out when you consider what print journalists are actually paid!

**Yes, they're not paid anything nowadays. The money's in PR, unfortunately.**

I know. I know. It is slightly strange, and I think I was just quite a strong-minded child and I don't know where all of those strong opinions have gone, really. But yes, that was me at age seven.

**And your first column at 12.**

Yes.

**How? Wow.**

Because I had started saying, "I really love writing." It becomes a sort of virtuous circle, so then writing becomes Elizabeth's 'thing', and so teachers at school would be really encouraging as well. Everyone was like, "Oh, write a story for our Christmas present," and I used to write long letters to my grandparents and stuff. Then I met a real life journalist who was staying at a health farm down the road from us. I grew up in the north of Ireland, and it was the first health farm in the province. She was a journalist called Lynda Gilby, and she worked for Sunday Life newspaper in Belfast. I was so excited when I heard that there was a real life journalist near me that I asked to meet her. I met her and she gave me brilliant advice. She was like, "If you want to be a journalist, start now. Get as much work experience as you possibly can." That really changed my life, and I took it so literally that I wrote to the editors of all the local papers. I was lucky enough that the Derry Journal got back in touch. I said, "I think you should have a children's column, and I am willing to write it, and I'm 12."

**I'm said child that can write said column.**

And the editor, Pat McCart was a lovely man. He said...

**"Why not?"**

He said, "Yes, come around and meet me." My mother had to drive me to his house. We met on a weekend and he was like, "What ideas do you have?" And I told him. He was like, "Okay, let's give it a go."

**That's incredible.**

And gave me a fortnightly column. It was really amazing, and I'm forever grateful to those two people specifically. He paid me, as well. I remember getting my first paycheck for £72. And I remember buying a pair of black Doc Marten boots with purple laces with that money.

**It was money you earned.**

Yes, exactly.



### **For writing.**

Footwear has never felt so good. I still get an enormous buzz from the fact that I can earn money from the power of my pen. I think it's a beautiful thing. I'm very lucky.

**It's a shame, because journalism itself is just, there's no money in it these days. It's great that you've established that brand, because... we had Jeremy Vine on the podcast a couple of years ago, and he was saying that when he started at The Leicester Mercury or whatever it is, there would be 50 people in the newsroom. Now they'll be lucky if they have six.**

Yes, it has been really sad to see the decline in resources in print journalism. I was very, very lucky in that I think I got in just at the end of the glory days of Fleet Street. I graduated university in 2001, and my first job was on the Evening Standard. I started in September 2001, just after 9/11. I was very lucky in that I got that chance. I think it's so hard now to get a foothold. I'd done lots of work experience along the way, but I think it's incredibly hard for people who, like me, don't have a family background in media.

### **That first rung on the ladder.**

Yes. It's really difficult unless you have someone who gives you an opportunity. I was very lucky in that respect. And yes, I started out as a diarist, and then I became a news journalist. To see the shrinking of properly great reporting on newspapers is so very sad. The thing is, I'm actually unfashionably optimistic about print. I think that we're in the bottom of the dip at the moment, and I think it's going to climb up again. I think, as we were talking about earlier, the first sort of longform, meaningful journalism lends itself very well to print and long reads. I think we've seen that with the popularity of the Guardian long reads section. And so...

### **I save them up for my flights. I put them on Pocket.**

Yes, exactly.

### **And then read them. It gets me to New York.**

Yes, exactly. It's like the print form of a podcast, in a way. I actually think that the younger generation, so like the Gen-Zers, are turning away from too much screen time and too much social media. I feel that they will like reading more. So I'm still optimistic about it. I still think journalism is an unbelievably brilliant career, and I would never put off a young person from pursuing it.

**It's incredible with this very podcast, because I have a human being that transcribes them. Allie, she's lovely. She'll like the fact I've namechecked her, because she'll be transcribing that herself now.**

But that's how I came onto this podcast! Because she once transcribed an interview for me. Hello, Allie. And she did it in a very short timeframe, and I was very grateful.

**She's amazing. But we'll spare her blushes as she's transcribing this. One of the things I was going to say is, interestingly, about seven or eight per cent of our listeners are actually readers of this podcast. So they don't listen to the audio, but they do read the transcript.**

I heard that, so where do you put the transcripts?

**We put it on the website, mediamasters.fm.**

That is great.

**And it's obviously very good for deaf people, because it's every single word that was there was said. There's automated services that do it now. But just, this is about you, so let's go back to you. Going back to when you were an aspiring journalist, did you have an idea of the type of journalist that you wanted to be? Was it the kind of Woodward, Bernstein investigative journalism, change the world, slightly softer, more news driven? What was your idea of a journalist?**

That is such a great question. I've never been asked it. My idea of a journalist was Julia Sawalha in Press Gang!

**Press Gang.**

Press Gang and Dexter Fletcher, oh my God, I love that programme.

**Their relationship was amazing.**

It was amazing, and to me, she was just so glamorous.

**And she was so... not bossy, that's a pejorative term. But she was so...**

Assertive.

**Yes, assertive. And she was a proper editor.**

Feisty.

**Yes, feisty. I respect her.**

So I grew up with Kate Adie as my idol.

**She's amazing.**

Who is amazing, and really taught me that women can do anything. Her and Margaret Thatcher. Whatever you think of Margaret Thatcher's politics, the fact that I had a female prime minister and Kate Adie breaking these stories from war zones, and doing what male war correspondents had been doing for decades, and bringing

that to my consciousness, was a huge deal for me. I remember that very vividly – but that wasn't the type of journalist I wanted to be. I was very interested in politics when I was younger, and I wanted to be a political journalist. I had visions of myself stomping around the House of Commons, breaking all these exclusives.

### **In print or on screen?**

In print. I always wanted to be a print journalist.

### **You never wanted to be...**

Never.

### **On the one o'clock news.**

Never. And I've never wanted to be an editor, either. It's the writing that drew me into it. Writing is my first love, and really, what I consider to be, without sounding pretentious, a vocation. It's something I can never imagine not doing. And I always felt editing takes you away from writing, and it just didn't really interest me. So I thought I was going to be a political journalist, but life didn't turn out that way.

### **Who'd be a political journalist now?**

Well, now I'm very grateful. It's really hard work, apart from anything else! It's nice being in the shallow end of features, political journalists have to work every hour God sends, and break stories. The pace is extraordinary.

### **It's all sound and fury though, signifying nothing. We had Tim Shipman on the podcast.**

Love Tim Shipman!

**Tim's a friend of mine. I really like the guy, and I read him every week in the Sunday Times, of course. But basically, part of his shtick is, I have no more of a clue than you do, dear reader. They're all crazy.**

I love Tim's books, as well. He's just the...

### **Oh, yes.**

I mean, they are such compelling reads. So basically, I saw myself as the female Tim Shipman. But it didn't work out that way, and I'm grateful that it didn't, because I had a really interesting route through journalism as a result. I love writing features, because you get more of a chance to write, actually to write, because I think I realised quite early on that there were brilliant news reporters who broke stories and had a real hunger for that, and there were people who were drawn more to art of the writing, and that was me. The writing one.

**But you've written extensively about lots of different things. I mean, you've done celebrity interviews, psychological novels. There's been four, hasn't there? Crime reportage. Even just saying that you only do features, that's quite a broad range of things that you can write about. It's a fantastic amount of freedom to have.**

It is. To be fair to my own trajectory, I did have a time at the Sunday Telegraph. I was there for three and a half years under Dominic Lawson, who is one of the best editors I've ever worked with. I was a news reporter there, and then I became religious affairs correspondent, which was my way of getting on staff. I didn't know anything about religious affairs, but I learned on the job, and it was kind of fascinating. So, I did get used to breaking stories, and there is a real adrenaline buzz that comes from that. But I knew that I always wanted to concentrate more on the craft of writing. And you're right in that I get to do an enormous variety of things. In a way, there was a patch in my late 20s when I worried that I was a sort of 'Jack of all trades and master of none'. I got a reputation as being someone you could ask to do anything, and I would say yes. And I would turn my hand to it.

**You saw that as a bad thing rather than a good thing.**

I don't now, but I did at the time because I felt that I was occasionally being exploited. Not in a sort of harassment way, just in terms of... for instance, I was on staff at the Observer for eight years and I was a feature writer there, which is a dream job, really. But I would be asked to do a bloody Q&A on the New Review, which is the page three thing, which is where you have to go and interview someone, and it's as much work as a normal interview because you've got to think of the questions, go and do it, type it all up, but it's verbatim. So you don't get any of the chance to do any of your flash writing. It's literally just question and answer.

**You could send a stenographer to do it, couldn't you?**

You could. I mean, I got a reputation for being good at them, which I suppose is nice, but I also got a reputation for saying yes to them. Because I felt that as a professional I should say yes when my superior asked me to do something. But it meant that I felt, and I don't know if this is true, but I was taken less seriously as a result. A very good friend of mine, actually, who's also a journalist, said to me, "You have to be careful that you're not becoming Features Liz." He's like, "You've got to say no to more stuff and be selective, because actually, that's how you carve out a reputation for yourself as a 'serious writer'. As in one who's taken seriously." I think he was right. I think that's why things like the Guardian long reads are respected. It's because they have the resources to give a writer a couple of months to look into something in a really in depth way, whereas I felt as some points in my career, I was just turning my hand to everything, and I wasn't immersing myself properly in one subject. Having said that, the amazing advantage of being at the Observer is, I got to do... some of the pieces I'm most proud of still, because there was enough space, I could write 5,000 words on a Swedish serial killer who never was, who made a series of false confessions. That kind of thing was really wonderful.

**Real variety.**

There is so much variety, yes. There was so much variety. I mean, sometimes I would feel I was going slightly bonkers, because I'd have one week where I was doing a Swedish serial killer, then a man with locked-in syndrome, and then I'd be writing a comment piece about the return of the female rockstar, and then I'd be doing a book review on Simone De Beauvoir, and then I'd be doing a piece in the magazine about wearing new high heels for a week. So the sheer variety and the sheer stimulation of that was such a brilliant learning experience.

**I think someone once said that journalism's the worst job in the world unless you just happen to think that it's the best job in the world.**

I mean, I do, definitely think it's... I think making my living as a writer is the best job in the world.

**So how do you write?**

It depends on what format I'm writing in.

**For novels, for features. Do you have different writing styles? How do you do it? What is a typical day?**

So, if I'm writing journalism, I will get that done first, because journalism deadlines are far tighter than book deadlines. I will generally write that at my desk. I'm now a freelancer, and I have a desk in my flat with a very nice view. It's important for me, as I'm sure it's for lots of freelancers, psychologically to have a space where I work rather than lounging around in my pyjamas and doing everything in my bed. So I will go and I will sit at my desk and I will write whatever the journalistic mission is. Then, generally I will take my laptop, in the afternoons, to a local café. That's where I write my fiction. It's important for me to be around the hubbub of other people when I'm writing fiction.

**Because that would put me off. Obese people arguing with the Starbucks barista that they've only got half a muffin or something.**

So, sometimes it becomes too much of a hubbub, and I need to plug in my earphones and listen to classical music. That's the only thing I can listen to when I'm writing.

**But you still want to be in the café?**

Yes, I do. And I'm not entirely sure why that is. I think it's possibly because I need a psychological separation between fiction writing and journalism. So just being in a different space is helpful for getting me into a different mindset. It's also partly because it gives me the opportunity to observe human interaction. I do sometimes worry, because the life of a freelance journalist can be quite solitary. I love that, but it does sometimes mean that I might not speak to anyone all day, apart from the Sainsbury's checkout man. So I like being around other people, and sometimes snatches of dialogue from the café have made their way into the novels. Having said that, over the last couple of novels, I've found it tremendously helpful to go away

somewhere at the beginning and the end. So I spend quite a bit of time in LA, which is a place that I love. For *The Party*, which is my latest novel, I had three months in LA actually working for the Observer, but I was writing *The Party* in the afternoons. And I went back to LA recently when I had to meet a very tight book deadline. There's something about that that I find very helpful as well, because you're away from your normal life, normal routine. And it is helpful at the beginnings and ends, just to be able to concentrate on one thing.

**I'm in LA one week out of every month.**

Are you?!

**Yes, it's a bit of a crazy schedule, but...**

Where do you stay?

**I stay on Hollywood Boulevard.**

Oh! So how... anyway, we'll talk about it after. Sorry.

**But it is a crazy place.**

That's the dream!

**Well, yes. I spend a lot of time on planes.**

I love LA so much. It's my... weirdly, I never would have expected it for myself, but I think it's my spiritual home.

**It's incredible. I spend half my... every other week in America. I alternate between New York and LA, because we have clients there, but it is incredible, the juxtaposition. Every time I'm in LA, I think, "This is far better than New York, you've got the palm trees, all the space, there's all the creativity." Then when I'm in New York I think, "Sod LA. This is where it's at. The culture, the business, the commerce, the busy-ness." So I'm quite fickle, really. Whichever town I'm in, whichever coast I'm on, that moment, is my favourite.**

It's quite a useful life skill. I'm different. I just love LA. Every time I go to New York I'm like, "Ugh. This is just like London but less friendly." It's genuinely what I think of New York now.

**I'm going to generalise now, but New Yorkers are blunt and to the point, but you know where you are with them, whereas I've always found with LA, first of all they're all crackers. They are!**

Maybe that's why I like them.

**There's an LA-ness, I think. You never quite know anything, frankly. You meet loads of faith healers and spiritual people.**

But I love that stuff.

**I'm not into any of that. But each to their own.**

One of the funniest commissions I ever had was actually from the Sunday Times when I was in LA. It was to live life for a week as Gwyneth Paltrow. So I got to experience all of that. Faith healer, sand baths, weird facial therapy. The one thing that everyone always remembers from that piece is that I had my vagina steamed.

**Oh, God. Well, this is a family podcast, so we won't ask about that. Where do you think things will go next?**

For me, personally, that's a very good question.

**Many people are quite proud of the fact that they don't have a plan. They work hard, they carry on what they're doing and they say, "We'll see where fate takes me."**

Do you know what? That is a mindset that I have actively sought to cultivate, because I am naturally an inveterate planner, and I think I've always had a kind of plan, and a strategy, and I've always worked very hard.

**Over-planned.**

I think I've over-planned, yes. I think I've over worried. Actually, if the last few years have taught me anything, it's that sometimes, the most unexpected things can be the most fulfilling. And so I like to be open to that, which means not over-planning. So, what comes next in the immediate future is that I have the How to Fail book out in April. I'm looking forward to that, because it's my first non-fiction book and there'll be lots of promotion around that. Then, beyond that, I'm really happy to see where that takes me, and how that's received. I'll also be working on a new novel, and I've just started as a columnist on You on the Mail on Sunday. So, I really want to do a good job there. So I'll be concentrating a lot on that as well. So that's enough for my year, and I don't really want to think five years ahead.

**Given that you are increasing in prominence in terms of the column and the podcast, how has your impact on social media been? Have people started to interact with you? I remember just in research for this podcast, I was looking at your social media profile, and someone was asking you weird questions about the way you were stood in a picture. It was just an odd... I was thinking, "Why do people care?"**

I mean, you get quite a few creepy men. But also...

**Mute or block, what do you do?**

I mute, unless someone... and I did get a death threat, once. I blocked that person.

### **I'm not surprised.**

Unless it's really sinister, or it's someone who's being actively rude, I will block them. But generally I mute, because it's so nice not knowing. Again, that's another thing that I've taught myself is not to look at the comments, not to look at the online comments.

### **Never go below the line, darling!**

Never. And actually, once you've made the decision not to do it, it's quite easy to stick to it. It's so much nicer. It's like, I can just believe what I believe. If I think what I've written has merit, that is what I have to stick to. But social media is a funny beast. I think I'm lucky in that I've got quite a good relationship with it. I'm not someone who finds myself defined by it, either negatively or positively. I can quite easily not look at it. It just so happens that I quite enjoy it. I do think it's... Instagram is the most incredible marketing tool, apart from anything else. I like Instagram because it's predominantly a visual medium. It's a sort of mobile photo album. And I've noticed since the podcast has taken off, I've got a lot more interactions on Instagram, rather than any other form. Twitter, I like for jokes – and also for generating column ideas. It's quite interesting, if you put something on Twitter and see what takes. See what gets the response, and then you're like, "Oh, maybe I could write something longer about this." And I find it useful for getting in touch with people.

### **Twitter's very good for building relationships, I find. A lot of my work relationships, even podcast guests, I'll invite them on Twitter.**

Definitely. I also think, again, as that solitary freelancer, there's a very supportive community of fellow writers on various social media platforms. Particularly Instagram and Twitter. And that's how a lot of listeners contact me as well. So for me, it's definitely more positive than negative.

### **Would you want to work in an office environment like you did before? Because I mean, I know we've got the idyllic dream of you kind of writing the stuff in your pyjamas at our desk then going into the coffee shop, but would you ever return to an office or a newsroom environment?**

Never, ever, ever, ever. I can tell you that. I mean, unless I have to. I find that offices waste a lot of time and...

### **Meetings and pleasantries.**

So many meetings. Exactly! And you make good friends, but I also find it frustrating because I'm very self-disciplined, which is a useful skill for a freelancer, and actually when I work from home, I can get things done so much more quickly than if I were doing the same work in an office. I feel that my experience has been that, in an office, you eke out something that you have to do, like a piece of sort of caramel, you



stretch it to last the whole week. I can't stand that presenteeism culture where you have to be in by a certain time and you have to stay until at least 6pm, because if I've done my work, I feel I should be able to go – and I find them stultifying and kind of anti-creative actually, offices. And I did have this experience relatively recently where I was asked to do some kind of consulting work for a branding agency, and they asked me to come into the office. And I went into the office, and I was treated like I was a member of staff and they set me up with a computer intranet, and honestly I almost came out in a rash. I was like, "I cannot stand it!" It was horrible. I couldn't wait to get out of there, and then I sent an email saying, "I'm really sorry this isn't for me. I won't have time." So I sort of turned it down.

### **I would have smashed the place up in protest and then just done one.**

Paul, I took a long lunch break and then I was like, "Why am I even looking at my watch for my lunch break? I should be able to do what I want! I am an individual." Anyway. No, I think you can tell that I'm not an office.

### **Not an office person.**

Not an office type.

**What have you learned from doing the podcast, both in terms of the craft of podcasting, but also from the guests? I've done about 160 of these, for my sins, and I can think of five or six things that have really changed my life. Just a comment and an aside from a guest here and there, what I call eyebrow-raisers, and they've really stuck with me. So I feel privileged to do this because I'm interested in all the guests. I'm quite a curious person, but I have genuinely had some incredible experiences.**

Yes. Like you, some things have really stuck with me, and it's often the unexpected interviewees. So one of my guests was James Frey, who is an American writer and he famously wrote what was meant to be a memoir called *A Million Little Pieces*, and it was chosen by Oprah's Book Club and it sold millions of copies globally. And then he was unmasked as a fabricator, and actually, he'd made most of it up. Oprah hauled him back on and took him to pieces. Since then, he's become a successful novelist. And he came on the podcast, and a lot of people, although they listened to that episode, they slightly took exception to him because he comes across as being quite arrogant.

### **I thought so.**

Yes, one of the things that he said was one of my mantras is fail fast, fail often. And he was like, you know, who cares if it fails because...

### **I do. I don't want to fail.**

Well...

**I'm not frightened of it. I don't want to fail, but I prefer to not fail.**

His point was you have to take a stab at it in order to get to the thing, and often failure is just a subjective opinion. So his whole outlook was to be as stoic as possible. Failure and success were kind of flip sides of the same coin, and they were just subjective opinions and really the most important thing is to be yourself and be true to yourself. And that stuck with me because I think it taps into a lot of what I think about, you know, I started doing yoga a few years back and that idea of having... of existing apart from your thoughts. I think if you were like you and me...

**Mindfulness.**

Mindfulness. And I think if you're like you or me, and you're used to like thinking at 100 miles per hour about any given news story and having to write to deadline, it's quite a frenetic pace.

**You have to have a true creativity.**

Exactly.

**My best ideas come to me in the shower or when I've left my phone somewhere in another room, and I've got a minute of grief where I think, "Oh, I can't go on Twitter for the next minute," and then I think, "Oh, I'll have a think about a few things." Sorry, I interrupted.**

Yes, or you're just looking out of the window in a bus, or something like that. But that idea that you exist apart from your thoughts I think is a very, very helpful one for just calming down. So that was one thing I really picked up from the podcast and the other one was an interview that I did with Otegha Uwagba, who is also a brilliant podcaster. Her podcast is called In Good Company, and she said her mother had given her this advice once, which was: "Not everyone's going to clap for you." And again, I just revisited that recently and it came up in my head and I was like, that's very useful. Not everyone is going to be happy for your success all the time, obviously.

**Dan Rather, an American journalist and former news anchor, he says, one of the toughest lessons in life he's ever learned is that not everyone wishes you well, and that's always stuck with me.**

And not everyone is going to like you, and I think I was a people pleaser for many, many years professionally. You know, the fact that I said yes to every single Q&A, personally in relationships, and actually I ended up getting married, and then I got divorced, and there's nothing like getting divorced to teach you that not everyone's going to like you. And it was a helpful lesson for me.

**But when I've failed in the past, like I went bankrupt many, many years ago, over a decade ago, that was a lot of shame and a lot of agony at the time. But a friend of mine taught me reframing, which is if you met someone in a pub and you'd learned that you'd gone bankrupt 12 years ago, or that you learned they**

**got divorced 10 years ago, would you actually think ill of them, or would it actually make you think of they're quite an interesting person. Would you judge them? And the reality is that if you're a nice person, you don't judge people who failed like that. I mean, clearly if they've robbed a bank or they've been nasty and horrible and they're in prison, then of course you would. But people, things happen to people, don't they?**

Definitely, and I think the thing to remember is that you as an individual know the truth of what happened, and a lot of other people who form judgments of you won't know the exact truth, and they won't know the agony that has gone into producing a piece of writing or a podcast, or they won't understand how much it means to you, and they'll have their own baggage that they bring to it, which is about bad stuff that's happened to them.

**It says more about them than it does about you.**

Exactly. And all of that has been a useful lesson, but it has taken me a while. It really has.

**Because people fetishise failure, particularly in the business community now, and one of the things that interests me about your podcast, is it's real, emotional, actual failure that people don't necessarily feel comfortable about talking about. Whereas if you get an Anthony Robbins or a Bill Gates character, they often preface their big business speech on the stage of how they failed five or six times, "But then I turned it around into a billion dollar business." And the failure is almost just the springboard to the amazing heights of success. They don't dwell on the fact that they might have been miserable for five or six years.**

Yes, I think that's something that I only realised through doing the failure podcasts that in the entrepreneurship community, failure is worn as a badge of honour because there are certain venture capitalists who will only invest if you've got two failures to your name, and then there's the sense that you've learned from those and therefore it's like third time lucky. It is always more interesting to me when someone talks about failure in a very real way, and I do think I'm very honoured that most of my podcast guests have opened up in a very moving way and a very authentic way. I think that we also live in a time as well as that curation of Instagram perfection, I think the other extreme of that is the curation of imperfection. And what I mean by that is various people who have reinvented themselves as campaigners, saying that we should all embrace the negative attributes that we have. And whilst that's amazing in so many ways, like I'm all for body positivity and so on and so forth, I also think that there's a pressure that comes with that. There's a pressure if you're sitting there thinking, "Well, I don't feel that great about my body, but I'm being told I need to embrace it." But actually I want to lose some weight and go to the gym. You're made to feel bad both ways. You're made to feel bad.

**You can't win.**

Exactly. You're made to feel bad for going to the gym too much, you're made to feel bad for not going enough. I just think that there's too much judgement really.

**And there's conflicting messages. I mean there's often kind of jokey mock-ups of like Cosmopolitan front pages where it will say, why your man should love you for who you are, and then the next headline is how to lose 20 pounds.**

Yes. I mean, I think women's magazines come in for a lot of stick and I actually don't think a lot of it is warranted because I think, you know, Farrah Storr of Cosmopolitan is such a brilliant editor, and does a lot. Is she a former interviewee?

**A former interviewee.**

Well, there you go, and you know she does...

**She's amazing.**

Outreach. She really is amazing and does a lot. So I think that's a historic argument that luckily no longer really bears weight, because I think actually the women's magazines have come under so much scrutiny that they're the ones often doing the most inventive stuff. So I feel less judged by them and more judged by, I don't know, preachy people on Instagram!

**There's just so much negativity on social media. I actually feel sorry for a lot of these people that just seem to be so horrible all the time. I'm not horrible. I've never understood that mindset. It's not something I really want to embrace.**

No, I know. And it's that thing I remember listening, so one of my other favourite podcasts, The High Low with Dolly Alderton, former interviewee of Media Masters.

**Yes. I'm just going to go through all your former guests as well, and try to get them on.**

But I remember them having a discussion, because Instagram again had come in for criticism for projecting an unrealistic way of life, and they were both like, "I don't want Instagram to be a picture of someone picking their nose." And it's true! Like I feel I know what Instagram is, I know it's not real life.

**It's a snapshot of real life. I think I was thinking about this the other day and I've got an Instagram and I put pictures of my dogs on, and my car, you know, and I'll take a picture of my wife and she'll decide whether I'm allowed to put it on or not, and that's her choice. But ultimately it's not the whole truth because I don't put on yet another boring day at the office, dealing with emails or whatever. If I put a picture of my car on, it's always when it's been cleaned. I would never put it on before.**

Yes, and that's fine, because I didn't want to see, no offence, I don't want to see a picture of you answering your emails, and therefore I know why I'm going on Instagram as well. I'm going on Instagram because I like seeing pictures of your dogs, and I know that having a dog is actually a lot of work and you need to go for walks and to pick up their shit in a little bag. But I don't need to see that.

**But it's not Instagram's fault.**

Exactly.

**But there is that worry, isn't there, because even I do this a little bit is, you know, I wish the people I'm following, I wish them well. I'm glad they're having a great time, but there is, is there not a kind of threat to mental health that, you know, after 20 consecutive images of lots of people having a great time, if you're feeling a bit down that you might think, you know, this #FOMO. Why is everyone else having a great time and I'm not?**

Yes, I'm sure there is, in which case if you know that that's happening, stop following those people.

**Step away from the 'gram.**

Yes, and not even because sometimes I understand it's hard to step away, but stop following those people and follow people who make you inspired. I follow a lot of jewellery designers and artists and people who post like... actually Farrah Storr's husband, Will Storr, who is a writer as well, he has a beautiful eye for photographs, and he just takes beautiful photographs of landscapes. So I think there are ways of handling it yourself, and actually it's infantilising to try and mediate Instagram for other people. You're in control of how you digest it. So take control and feel better about it.

**I tell you one of the amazing things about Twitter that I discovered a couple of years ago, is that you can mute certain words. So like I consider football to be a waste of time. So when the World Cup was on, any mention of world and cup or FIFA, I just muted, and even now I'll have weeks where I mute the word Brexit. Because I just can't be bothered.**

Oh, yes. A friend of mine does that. A friend of mine has a whole list of like muted words of their sort of nemeses, and also of terms like Brexit and Donald Trump.

**For example.**

Yes, exactly.

**Tell us about Pin Drop. It's a live performance short story studio.**

That's right. So Pin Drop started a few years ago, I think it's 2012 now, when a good friend of mine who I met on my gap year, he's one of my oldest friends, and he opened an art gallery, and I jokingly said, "I should be your writer in residence." And then from that developed the idea of having a kind of Jackanory for grownups. So as children, we're so often read aloud to, and I was like, you lose that joy when you're a grown up, and so from that seed developed this idea that we would read short stories in beautiful locations, and anyone could come and listen, and it would be a sort of snapshot of what it was like to read an entire book. So it wouldn't take as

much time. You could carry on with your evening afterwards. You could switch off your mobile phone and really engage on a tangible level with something immediate and live and beautiful, and it honestly snowballed from that. And it began with me reading a short story every Wednesday at my friend's art gallery and having free hot chocolate for whoever turned up. And then I wrote about it for the Observer, and they Audible got in touch wanting to sponsor it, and then it massively snowballed from there. And I'm not involved day to day now, and Simon, my friend, runs it full time, and we have amazing locations. So we do a series at the Royal Academy, we do a series at Soho House. We've done events in LA. We've done events in the Houses of Parliament. We've done events in various kind of art galleries, and last year Simon edited the first ever Pin Drop short story anthology, where we have not only winners of the Pin Drop short story competition, which happens every year in association with the RA, but former readers of ours who included Lionel Shriver, Will Self, Ben Okri. So that's been a beautiful process, and again, I think we identified a demand that we hadn't really realised was there before. Not only from people who were falling back in love with the short story format, but also from authors who didn't feel that there was enough outlet for short story performances. So it's been a really a lovely thing. But as I say, I'm not involved day-to-day now. I just get to turn up for the fun events.

**And be credited with being the co-founder.**

Yes, exactly.

**But that must give you a sense of, a real sense of pride that you can start something and see it flourish.**

Yes, it does. It does. And again, it was a really nice lesson in allowing things to develop organically. So it really came from a friendship, a proper friendship, and that's a lovely thing, and it came from something that we were both passionate about. So the sort of intersection between art and literature, and yes, it has been really lovely to see it go on to great things. And actually A Short Affair, which is the book, which is the anthology of short stories, is – and I'm not just saying this because I actually wasn't involved in any of the production other than submitting a story myself – but it pairs short stories with specially commissioned artworks from Royal Academy students, and it is such a beautiful book. The cover's designed by this artist called Eddie Peake, who is phenomenal, and it's just a very beautiful thing, as well as being a thing that contains wonderful writing, so I'm very proud of that.

**A final few questions. What advice would you give someone listening to this that wants to be the next Elizabeth Day? So they're an aspiring journalist. They might be doing a course. They might be a 12-year-old writing a column for their local paper, although I doubt it. What advice would you give them?**

Well, first of all, I'd say that's so lovely, and how flattering. Thank you! I'd say don't be the next Elizabeth Day, because you'll just be riven with self-doubt and anxiety! No, I wouldn't say that. I would say what Lynda Gilby said to me all those years ago, which was get as much work experience as you possibly can because really you can only become a writer if you write. I know that that sounds basic, but a lot of people are put off writing novels because they want to come up with the perfect idea and

they imagine the perfect execution. They never actually do it because the thing about writing is that it's actually an exercise in imperfection. It's never going to be as good as you imagine in your head and the only way you can learn it is by getting over yourself and putting words on a page.

### **#ImWriting.**

Exactly, so that would be a massive piece of advice. Another one would be, don't be dissuaded by the naysayers. The people who say print journalism is dead, or the people who say you can't get into the media unless you have family connections. Because I am a big, big believer in the fact that talent will out, and if you have talent and if you have application, I believe that that will be rewarded. And then I would say also, not to worry if it seems like your life is stagnant, or going in slightly the wrong direction, because actually those periods of gestation and sort of unexpected turns can sometimes afford you the greatest opportunities, and you can never see them until they're right in front of you. And so I would say not to worry too much about not being on a motorway to success because actually the B-roads are so much more enlightening, and the landscape is much better, just to overextend a metaphor horribly.

**Elizabeth, it's been a hugely enjoyable podcast. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you so much for having me, Paul.