



Candice Fox

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CHERYL AKLE: Do you dream of writing a novel? Or do you just like listening to authors talk. I'm Cheryl Akle from the Better reading *Stories Behind the Story* podcast.

This new podcast springs from many requests we've had from listeners to do more episodes on how to write. We've produced a six-part series where we discuss the craft of writing with some of Australia's top authors and industry professionals. Welcome to *Better Reading On Writing*.

Tim Winton

CHERYL: Start with a place.

TIM WINTON: Yeah.

CHERYL: And-

TIM: Is it always a place? Yeah, so it's always either, you know, landscape, or straight scape, or city scape. But it's a setting, it's the place is what, where the book begins. And it's often a place that I've got to know over time and got interested in and, and places produce their own ecology, their own logic. So the characters and the story come out of the place. And what happens in the book is the determining of the place determines what kind of people are there and what their lives are like and what their problems are. So as an ecological logic, to it, to their social problems, their physical problems, their spiritual psychological problems are very much bound up

in where they are. And if I was writing about a different kind of place, it would probably be a different sort of a story. So yeah, I build them from the dirt up, and they come up out of the dirt.

Candice Fox

CHERYL: That was Tim Winton talking to me about how his book starts with place. His characters, his novels literally come out of the dirt of where he sets his book. So how important is setting? How does it define the natural cultural and social aspects of a story? Unlike Tim Winton, many authors set their novels in places and times unfamiliar to them. Where does research come into this? Today we're talking with bestselling crime author Candice Fox, about both setting and research, two different subjects that are often connected. And we'll find out if Candice would be arrested if the police checked her internet search history. Welcome Candice Fox.

CANDICE FOX: Thanks for having me. Yeah,

CHERYL: I'm glad you haven't been arrested.

CANDICE: Not yet.

CHERYL: Not yet.

CANDICE: The day is young.

CHERYL: The day is very young. Okay, I really love that Tim Winton quote about how his characters come up out of the dirt. How important is setting for you?

CANDICE: It's critically important, because everyone you surround the main characters with is going to be from that place and should really, you know, represent that place. When I was coming here to do this podcast I was thinking about when I went to Oberon, and hadn't been to Oberon before and I bought my husband some fly fishing lessons there. And I met this guy while I was there, that was just so Oberon, you know, he, he had to fix my car, because something fell out the bottom of my car, and I just pulled into this mechanic, and he, you know, he was already covered in dirt. Because when someone would pull in, he would just, like, drop down under their car, you know, like he almost disappeared, he just went under the car, slid under there to have a look at what was wrong with it. And, you know, he had this big scary dog chained up in the yard. And then he was talking to me about the local because I said, why, we're staying here. Where should we have dinner? He's like, you got three choices. He's like oh, the local Chinese restaurant, they're really good. You can get chili beef or you can get chili chicken, or you can get chili combination. You see just like so much variety. They just had chili, you know, and he just represented the whole area for me like it was just so country and so sort of authentic, and-

CHERYL: It makes me think how character then...

CANDICE: Yeah,

CHERYL: ... is as much a part of the setting as anything else. Because I can hear his voice.

CANDICE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. really thick Aussie accent. Yeah. And it's, you know, I think it's critically important. If you're going to go to a place and say, you know, I think you should go to

a place if you are going to write about it, try to go there, the people that you meet and just going, they're being open to have experiences.

CHERYL: When you wrote your first book, tell me what you know? I mean, how did it come about? How did you come to writing? And how did you get the skill to write that book?

CANDICE: It was actually my fifth written novel. I'd written four before. And it shows you the critical nature of setting because the four before that were all set in New York, which I had never been to in my life.

CHERYL: And why did you set them in New York?

CANDICE: I was writing like, supernatural vampire and werewolf things. And I just figured that's where they live, you know? There are no vampires in Australia, you know, which, you know, it's, it's, it's totally right for that to be tagged to that as a genre, Australian vampires, but I've never been there. So I was looking at Google Images. And I was setting things in Paris and trying to learn French and it just wasn't working because I hadn't been there hadn't spoken to the people. I hadn't, like, smelled the place, you know. And so I wrote Hades, and it sort of started because I was living in Queensland. And I didn't have any rubbish collection at this property I was living at sort of as a uni student. And I was trying to save money. So I was living in this shack in the middle of the rainforest. I didn't have any garbage collection and I, I used to have to drive my garbage into the rainforest to this dude who had like a kind of a makeshift tip, and he would just put all your rubbish in skip bins, and you'd give him five bucks. And that dude, I was like, he's so mysterious, and so creepy and old and weird. And I was like, I'm going to take him, you know, give him his own tip in Sydney. Yeah, yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah. And do you think the reason it's no coincidence that book sold because it is you wrote about something you knew?

CANDICE: Yeah, I think so. I don't want to say to people that they have to go and live somewhere for a year, you know.

CHERYL: It's not always possible.

CANDICE: It's not always possible, no. But I think that you just need to go somewhere and just be open to something happening to you. Like, my husband and I, we just spent a year in LA. And I said to him, I have goals, because I want to write about LA. And I said, I have goals for experiencing LA. And I said to him, I want to call 911. And I want to shout out, someone call 911. And I said, I want to get pulled over by like a highway cop, you know, on one of the highways out to like Vegas or something. And I want to say, what seems to be the problem officer? I had all those things done in six months.

CHERYL: You did all those things?

CANDICE: Yeah, Yeah, I did.

CHERYL: So what did you call 911 for?

CANDICE: Oh, my God, it's so amazing. This is like such as setting setter. I am. So we were driving around LA. I don't know, where we were, Crenshaw or something just like some suburb. And this woman comes out into the intersection in front of us. And she was obviously very drug affected. There were a lot of homeless camps around. And she was wielding a hammer in each of her hands. So two hammers, and she was like yelling and wielding them at people who weren't really there. And I said to my husband, oh my God, I think this is the time I'm going to call 911. And we're both like, yiheeee. You know, it's so exciting. So I called. We pulled over and I called

and I said to the operator, there's this woman, and she's, you know, she's, she's going crazy. And she's fighting air demons with two hammers. And the woman said, has she actually hurt anyone yet? And I said, no, but I feel as though that's kind of like the next step.

CHERYL: Imminent.

CANDICE: It's gonna happen any second now. And she goes "Ugh, I'll send a car." And I was like, oh, whoa, that is such a mark of what this place is like, because their whole attitude was like, if you think that's the most dangerous thing happening in LA right now, you're, you know, obviously not from here, you know.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CANDICE: So it was just perfect. And I think if you just flew in LA, and just experienced something like that, and then flew out again, two days later, you would get a sense of, you know, not to say that LA is this post-apocalyptic, crazy place, people with hammers, but you know, certain areas you can go into and go, hey, I'm really ready for something to happen to me. And then it does.

CHERYL: Well, I think in terms of crime, maybe because I've read too many crime novels set in LA. It does seem to be the perfect setting for crime is that? Yeah. Kind of a laconic, you know, Michael Connelly...

CANDICE: Yes. Yeah. Well, the second incident actually was like a Hollywood Hills. Because Tim is a huge Bosch fan. So he's like, let's go live in the Hollywood Hills. Yeah. And I said yeah sure, okay. So we rented a house to the balcony and everything just like Bosch.

CHERYL: Fantastic.

CANDICE: And we're sitting there and there's an explosion. And we were like, what? So we rushed out of the house. And all the neighbors rushed out. And we're there in the leafy, beautiful, you know, incline of the hills and celebrity mansions all around and there were all this smoke pouring out of this little house. And I didn't have my phone because I just ran right out of the house. So I said, someone call 911. I was like, yes! It's two out of three. Yeah. And the fire brigade came rushing up the hill. And, you know, the chief comes down, and he's got the handlebar mustache and is stocky and all that kind of stuff. And there's this red haired fire lady with an axe and all this, it was just like a TV scene, male rushed into the house, I'm hanging around, you know, to see what happened because I just have no discretion at all as person

CHERYL: And you're a storyteller.

CANDICE: Yeah. And I was like, I need to know I need to know what happened here. And the guy comes out and I said, what happened? What happened? He goes, oh, it's a hoarder house in there. I said, this is expensive place for a hoarder house. You know. He said, they're hoarding all these spray paint cans, and it got too hot, and one of them exploded. And then they all exploded it. And that's not smoke coming out of the house. It's paint, paint vapor. I said Oh, yeah, great. He goes, I don't want to start any rumours around this neighborhood, but that man's got a lot of dolls in there. And they're all naked.

CHERYL: It's just a plot, right there.

CANDICE: I know. I was like, who can I tell? You know, so great.

CHERYL: Are we going to see that in the next book?

CANDICE: Oh, maybe. Yeah, I'll find a spot for it. I'll just take these things and I hold them, like in a little basket in my mind. And every now and then if I've got to have like a strange incident or something happen in the novel, I've always got all this weird stuff. You'd be surprised how often I pulled stuff out of that basket, just to amuse people. You know, like, it's good to have a handful of stories, even if you don't use them all.

Minette Walters

MINETTE: I personally had to do a great deal more research because my knowledge of that period wasn't huge at all. My I'm very lucky in that my husband is an historian. And so I was constantly asking him questions.

CHERYL: Was he your researcher?

MINETTE: No he wasn't no, no. He works very hard himself, never has time for that. But he's very willing to answer questions –

CHERYL: Which is good.

MINETTE: Yeah, but the trouble is, I was asking him questions he couldn't answer, such as, so what would the landscape look like in 1348? And he'd ponder a bit and say, I honestly don't know. He said there would have been cleared land around each settlement. But he said what it looked like outside the cleared land, I don't know. So then I had to start doing all that research myself.

Candice Fox

CHERYL: Okay, so that was the English author, Minette Walters talking about research. I'd first like to talk about how you research where you set your books, but then more generally, obviously, a lot of research must go into your novels. So tell me, how do you start the research?

CANDICE: With a novel when I start a crime novel, I think to myself, you know, what would it be like to be the central person, you know? So, my last novel *Gone by Midnight*, I was trying to find a crime for it and I thought it has to be something that, that really gets people upset, you know? Well, you know, you would be passionate about it. So I was in my local IGA. And I'd split away from my husband, I was in the fruit and veggie section. And there was this woman at the counter, so I could see she just burst into tears. And I was like, what's going on over there? Everyone stopped, everyone's staring. And she, I couldn't hear what she was saying but she was making a low-down gesture, like sort of saying all this high, looking around here.

CHERYL: Oh, she'd lost her child.

CANDICE: Yeah. And I looked down, next to me is this two-year-old boy looking up at me, like, hi, you know, you're not my mum. And I was like, oh, man. And so I picked him up. And I said, "This boy over here?" You know, held him up in the air. And everyone was like "Hurrah!", right? And the mum comes over, and she's like hurrah, right? You know, I was like, well, hero of the day, you know? So I'm not very subtle when I get to be like a hero. And then I thought, hey, you know, that

everyone who was there at the counters was immediately, like, locked in. Like this woman's lost her kid. We must all stop what we're doing, you know, because they could all feel it. And I thought, hey, missing kid that that'll be the crime because it's, you know?

CHERYL: But I just felt it.

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: I just felt it right there. I've got goosebumps actually just from you telling that. So there are a lot of people in that supermarket who've felt it, right?

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: Do you tend to see and find stories more than most people? Because this is just your everyday life when you're picking that up. We all go shopping, we all do this.

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: But do all of us see as many stories as you do?

CANDICE: Ah, I'm incredibly nosy. And I'm always watching what other people are doing and eavesdropping. And it's inappropriate at times.

CHERYL: I can imagine.

CANDICE: Yeah, because, you know-

CHERYL: Have you ever been told off?

CANDICE: No, no, no, I'm kind of discreet with it. Like if there's a couple and they're having a break up at the next table at the restaurant, I am 50% tuned into that. And 50% tuned into whoever it is I'm having dinner with, you know what I mean? But I've just always got my radar out for curious things. I can think of a really inappropriate time actually. I was just having an ultrasound for my baby at 12 weeks, and it was the first ultrasound where it actually looks like a baby instead of a smudge. So my husband and I were both crying, oh my God it's a baby. And so

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CHERYL: That's a moment.

CANDICE: Well I leaned over to the woman who's doing the ultrasound and I said to her, do you just ultrasound babies or what? And she said, oh no, I ultrasound anything that comes in here that needs an ultrasound. I said, what's the strangest thing you've ever ultrasounded? Because I find when you say to someone "What's the strangest thing?" You know, you get a really good answer. Like, if you're talking to the police, and you say to them, what's the worst thing that's happened to you this week? you might get a really horrible answer that you weren't really ready for, or, you know, what's the best thing that's happened to you this week? They're gonna say, oh, we all got our pay on time or something. So I said to her, what's the strangest thing you've ever ultrasounded? and she said, a guy came in here from the prison and he wanted a day off prison. And so he ripped up a piece of lino from the floor, and he stuck it down his penis. And she was like, I'd have to ultrasound it to see like, how big it is and how can we get it out. And what's the best way in all this. And I was like, okay, I have so many questions for you about that. And I don't know if I'm ever going to use that as a thing. But I said to her, when you ultrasound a penis, who holds the penis... like does he hold it or do you hold it? Or is there some kind of special rack, or like something?"

CHERYL: And how is your husband dealing with that?

CANDICE: This is the inappropriate part because before I could even get my answer, he leans over and he's like, can I just interrupt this because I'm trying to see my unborn child. And she was laughing at my questions. And the ultrasound wand was like coming off my belly and he couldn't see the baby. So sometimes my curiosity will just take over and I'm like, I need to know everything there is to know about this thing, even if I never use it, you know?

CHERYL: So in a sense, to be a writer there, that curiosity has to be there, doesn't it?

CANDICE: Yeah, all the time.

CHERYL: Because you've got to write, because I think when we're talking about setting and research, it's the nuance of that person.

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: It's all those little things. The description of those things that add up to mood, I guess.

CANDICE: Yeah, yeah.

CHERYL: Is that right?

CANDICE: It's also getting over the shame of being curious and nosy and asking questions. I have a legitimate thing of being able to say, I'm a published author, and I'm interested in that. But if you're not, you just have to accept the fact that you're going to be that person watching at the crime scene tape or asking the questions or -

CHERYL: Yeah, so when we're talking about researching a book and doing former research, you just draw on experience? Or do you go looking for things? Is there some things you need to find out?

CANDICE: There's a lot of legal stuff that I have to find out, you know. I have to speak to lawyers, or I have to speak to cops-

CHERYL: And how do you go about that?

CANDICE: Usually, if it's a lawyer, I say, can I hire you to answer these two or three questions? And usually, they'll just answer them for me, because I mean, to them, it's like 100 bucks or something, they don't really care. So recently, I was trying to speak to a Californian lawyer about, the legality, of accepting gifts if you're a police officer, and so I just googled a lawyer, and I'm like, hey, can we talk? Usually people will, because-

CHERYL: Do you just phone him or email?

CANDICE: I just email them. And then I had to speak to a botanist, because I wanted to know about vines that grow really fast in winter. Sometimes you'll find someone who really loves talking about themselves. Like, when I was in LA, I wrote to a serial killer in San Quentin. And I said, not in these words, but I was like, hey, you're, like the worst serial killer I have ever heard of in my entire life and just watched the documentary on you and I'm absolutely horrified. Can I come to San Quentin, and see death row and chat to you and do all that stuff? And he's like, yeah, great. Okay. You know, on his part, he's like, I'm a psychopath. I love talking about myself. Yeah. Going to get this 32-year-old writer to come and talk to me in San Quentin. It's, you know, it will be a fantastic day for me," and it seemed to be.

CHERYL: And so you did do that?

CANDICE: Yeah, I did do that.

CHERYL: So how do you get permission to do that? You need permission from him or permission from the prison?

CANDICE: Oh, no, permission from him. Yeah. But anyone can write to a serial killer in the US and say, hey, can I come visit you? You just look up their CDCR number, their corrections number online, and you find them so you've got their address, and you write and you say, hey.

CHERYL: And how does that look? Because one, I would never do it. I'd be so frightened.

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: But you walk in. I mean, are they hand cuffed? I mean, tell me how that works.

CANDICE: Oh my god this is terrible story, because I thought that it was going to be like you see on TV with like a glass window, and a handset and all that, because this guy was really, really awfully violent. And he killed all these young ladies. And I'm like, I'm kinda a young lady, you know. So I imagined it would be that, but no, when I got there I got through all the stuff that you have to, like the barking dogs and the angry guards and the fences and all that kind of stuff. I get in there and I say to the guard, hey, nobody's telling me what to do. I don't know where to go, which window is mine? Now I'm seeing this inmate and he said, actually, that inmate will be in that cage over there. And it's this floor to ceiling cage. Two meters by two meters, really small. And you know, steel mesh and bulletproof glass cage? And I said, "Oh, okay, he's gonna be in there. Yeah, right. Make sense," I said, where am I gonna be?" and the guard said, in there.

CHERYL: In the cage with him.

CANDICE: In there with him. And I was like, wow, this is where I die. Clearly, because I get to get in there with him, and he's gonna be uncuffed and we're sitting in there, like knee to knee, on two plastic chairs. And when they put us in there, exactly like that, the guards padlocked the door and walked away, actually walked away. And I was like, well, my death, my violent death in this cage is going to be so great for book sales, but I'm not going to be around to enjoy them.

CHERYL: To reap the benefits, no.

CANDICE: Yeah.

CHERYL: Do you know just in you telling me that story, so you pass the parking dogs you pass the grumpy, guards... I mean, there is the description and the setting right there. Yeah, isn't it?

CANDICE: Yeah, yeah.

CHERYL: I've already got the scene.

CANDICE: Yeah, the thing that I find when I read the work of aspiring authors, is you can sometimes be a little bit patronizing to the reader when you over describe. I sent a manuscript in once, before I was a published author, and then the editor said, you described a storm in this book for 4 pages. And I was like, yeah, it's pretty epic storm. And she's like, I know what a storm looks like. You know, and so if I say to you, you know, prison, really big prison, barking dogs, angry guards, big fences, like you've got it that in those three things. You've got it. I know, what a prison looks like. I don't need you tell me for a whole page. So you just need to pick like the key things. Like if you're describing like a hipster cafe, you'll have like, you know, polished concrete

and exposed piping and really expensive coffee machine and everyone in there is wearing a man bun. You got it.

CHERYL: You got it.

CANDICE: That's it. Yep. That's all you need, you know.

CHERYL: Hey, tell me what book number you up to?

CANDICE: I'm working on my thirteenth book.

CHERYL: Wow. And so you've partnered, you've co-written with James Patterson.

CANDICE: Yes.

CHERYL: And Bill Clinton.

CANDICE: Well, Bill Clinton co-wrote with Jim.

CHERYL: Okay.

CANDICE: You're thinking of when Bill Clinton and I had dinner together.

CHERYL: Yeah, I saw that on your Instagram.

CANDICE: Oh yeah cool, they have collaborated.

CHERYL: So you just happened to have dinner with Bill?

CANDICE: Well, no. Jim said, hey, come and have dinner with the two of us, because we'll be in San Jose, that's not far away from you. And I was like, sure, I'll have dinner with an ex-president. Like, why not? Because somebody said to me, oh, even if they're an ex-president, you still get to call him Mr. President. And I was like, oh, my God, I gotta do that. That is like a life goal. And so Jim said, come and have dinner with us. I said, cool. And so I wrote to the serial killer. And I said, hey, you're in San Quentin, that's only an hour and a half north. I'll have breakfast with you. And then I'll have dinner with the President. And -

CHERYL: That's a lot to do in one day,

CANDICE: It was pretty wild. It was a pretty wild day but Bill was lovely.

CHERYL: As lovely as the serial killer?

CANDICE: No. (Laughs)

CHERYL: Just kidding, I love Bill.

CANDICE: The serial killer was extra lovely because he's a psychopath. But I didn't realize when I went to have dinner with him that ex-presidents still get all the Secret Service so we had all these Secret Service agents just like hanging around us staring at us. And we went to dinner, and they shut down this restaurant especially for us. And there were six Secret Service agents just sitting there in a booth, you know, maybe 10 meters away, just staring at us while eating dinner. And I said to Bill, doesn't that get weird? He's like, no, you get used to it super early. Then he was he started hassling me about this book. He goes, when's *Liar Liar* are coming out in the US? And I said it's going to be a while. That's only just come out in Australia. And he said, well, I want to

know, you know, what happens with the brother? And I'm like, well, Mr. President, I can't ruin this book for you because if I tell you anything about it, it's gonna ruin it. You know, it's a really tight plot. And he's like, "Oh well, you know, you could just tell me", and I'm like, nah, I'm not gonna do it. I look over and the Secret Service is just like staring daggers at me. They're like, tell him what he wants to know kind of thing, you know? And I said, just give me your address and I'll send you a copy of the book. Yeah, and he did. And I did. I just sent him a letter printed on a piece of paper from like, like from office works or whatever. And he sends me back this piece of paper in like this special envelope with all this gold embossing, and the person at the post office handed it to me like, because she's obviously used to handing me things that say San Quentin prison or whatever. And now she's really curious about who the hell I am. And yeah, the letter made me feel so terrible about my stationery choices, because it was like, if you got a letter from God, or something, that's what it would look like.

CHERYL: So, we going to see me Mr. President in an upcoming book?

CANDICE: Possibly. I'm ready. I have the experience now,

CHERYL: So tell me, what are your three writer's habits? What are your three tips for writers?

CANDICE: So the first one is just a simple writing tip. A lot of writers talk about a minimum word count per day. I think Stephen King, you know, on writing says you should aim for 2000 words a day, which is utterly ridiculous, because I don't even get 2000 words a day. I sort of aim for 700. But I have this strategy of luring myself into the writing if I really don't feel like it. And that's just to set a timer for 15 minutes. And I just say, I'm just gonna write for 15 minutes. And if I do nothing else, all day long, that's fine. You know, and that that's just like, getting the whiff of something, you know, that smells really good to eat, and you like, well just smell it and then by the end of the day you've eaten the whole bag of chips or the pizza, or whatever it is, you know what I mean?

CHERYL: I like that, set a timer.

CANDICE: It lures you into the writing, yeah.

CHERYL: Two?

CANDICE: So my second one, I think is just a general practice sort of thing. I think it's really important. Everyone that you meet in the book industry, whether it's the bookseller, at a library, or a librarian, or a publicist, or you know, the head of the company, you should just be enthusiastic and grateful towards that person. No matter what you're feeling, or anything, I think it's important because you can very quickly get a reputation when you rub someone the wrong way, and everyone knows each other. And it might be a bit of a controversial tip that you should just be nice to everyone all the time. But I think -

CHERYL: It's a life tip.

CANDICE: Yeah, it's just a bit of a life tip. And also, people aren't going to give you opportunities, if they think that you are not going to go for it, you know, and you just need to be, as a writer, just up for anything, just willing for things to happen to you, you know, and to hear all the people around you who are speaking to you. Yes, I think that's just -

CHERYL: Okay, number three.

CANDICE: Number three. Just a just another general writing tip, what should you do about like writer's block, and I have a bit of a drastic measure that I take when I get writer's block. I just delete, like the last couple of chapters or whatever it is, the path that I'm going down is obviously, obviously has a dead end. So you should stop going down that path all-together. Don't force

yourself through it. Because that plot point, whatever it is, just doesn't work. It's not exciting to you obviously because you're not like aching to write it. So just get rid of it, delete it. And going and deleting, you know, 5000 words or recently I deleted 30,000 words of a manuscript just because it wasn't just wasn't working in, and you'll say, oh, I just wasted 30,000 words, but like, it's not wasted. You just had to find out the hard way that that's not an option for you.

CHERYL: They're great tips.

CANDICE: Well thanks.

CHERYL: Candice fox, always a pleasure.

CANDICE: Thanks so much. Same here.

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