

Interview With Wendy Alexander by Joanna Penn
November, 2008

Joanna: Hi, everyone! I'm Joanna Penn from www.TheCreativePenn.com and today I'm interviewing Wendy Alexander.

Wendy is the author of "Chocolate and Vanilla," a book about her experience transcending apartheid in South Africa, building harmonious relationships with people from all cultures, and a journey of healing and forgiveness.

She is also an IT project consultant and single mum. Her website is www.mychocolateandvanilla.com.

Good evening, Wendy, how are you?

Wendy: Very well. Just finished a detox so feeling really fit—fighting fit at the moment.

Joanna: Oh, that's great. So just tell us a little bit about yourself and your book.

Wendy: Oh, goodness. Okay. About myself, I mean, I think it's hard to summarize yourself in a few sentences, but I like to think of a great song by Chaka Khan, called "I'm Every Woman." I think that summarizes me. If I was to answer your question, though, in a quick summary response, I'm 41 years old, was born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa. Migrated to Australia at the age of 20. And so I've spent the last 21 years in Melbourne, apart from the two years I lived in Los Angeles.

Joanna: Right.

Wendy: Book—I think the book was really a kind of catharsis, I suppose of looking over where I'd been, what I've lived through and how I came through the challenge of that experience.

And the aim of writing the book was to use my own journey to convey a message of healing and a way of moving forward.

Joanna: Right, that's great. So how did you get started in writing? Did you have any training?

Wendy: I've been writing since I could hold a pen and paper. So my journals, my notepads and my pens—when I look back now, they were my constant companions through my childhood and I think, in many ways they were my coping mechanism, through a time and an environment that I didn't understand.

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And everyone who knows me intimately always knows me as a writer. Apart from a creative writing course and majoring in English at university when I studied for my Bachelor of Arts, there's actually no formal training in writing. That's who I am!

Joanna: So what is your process of writing? You say you do journals. Was it different writing the book to writing your journals?

Wendy: Yes, journals—I keep a number of different journals. I have a gratitude journal that I do every day. I have a journal that I record thoughts in every day. I have journals for writing ideas. I have journals for poetry.

The book was—this book in particular, was very different in that I decided to do it on an interview process. I interviewed people and/or couples in cross-cultural relationships.

So, yeah, the book involved some kind of research with people and then actually sitting down and putting the whole thing together. So that's the difference between journaling and actually writing that kind of autobiographical book.

Joanna: So, did you have a ritual or a certain time of day to write? Because I know you're quite busy.

Wendy: I try to write every day. I tend to do this mostly at night, usually when my daughter's in bed and the day's activities are behind me.

There's times that I write in the morning, and that will usually be on the weekends because I'm the early riser in the household, so when it's quiet, I like to do some writing.

But yeah, I write when I feel like. And I also have certain disciplines around it, so it's a combination of actually inspiration and loving the process and then just jaw-hard discipline.

Joanna: Right. So it's definitely inspiration and hard work.

Wendy: Yeah, look, and it's very much a part of me. What I've noticed about myself is that if I allow long intervals to pass between writing sessions, I feel disjointed. And I feel unsettled, like a part of me is missing, so I suppose it's really an extension of me.

Joanna: So given that you have a lot of journals and you obviously write down a lot of your thoughts, what do you think about the editing and rewriting process that's an integral part of a book?

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Wendy: I think that writers can often be their worst critics. And there's always—we rarely feel satisfied with what we've written. Even if we perfect the sentence, there's always something you could have written differently. But I think that there does come a point when you've got to learn to let go of the sentence, the paragraph or the chapter that's driving you nuts.

So, I'm fortunate. I think I have people in my life that actually read my work—my sister, my father, my good friend Peter. There are a number of people that actually read my work.

And they come back with some constructive feedback. But one of the best bits of advice I received when I was writing "Chocolate and Vanilla" was from Peter, who the book is dedicated to. Because he said to me that I wrote sentences longer than normal, and I remember being quite taken aback and quite wounded at the time, but now it's like a bit of inside humor.

But it taught me something. It actually taught me to shorten my sentences. Keep things a little bit simpler. So I think if you've got support in that way, then the editing and rewriting process is a lot easier. I think it's very difficult to edit your own work.

Joanna: Did you get a professional editor at any point for your book?

Wendy: Yes, I do have a professional editor. She's a wonderful woman who works in Tasmania. I just basically sent her—my father did meet with her, because she came to Melbourne a couple of times and I met with her. We just caught up for coffee, but yes, it's all done through email, online and then printing out the final draft and actually mailing it to her and then her sending it back, so...

Joanna: That's great. So you mentioned the inner critic there. So what do you do about that inner critic?

Wendy: I think a lot of the time—like I said, sometimes it's really hard to let go of a sentence or a chapter or a paragraph. And you keep rewriting and then thinking, *Oh, I can do this better.*

But there does come a point when you just have to tell the inner critic to bug off and get on with it! Keep writing! And let someone else come back later and say, "Look, I think you could have written this chapter.

And often I find that the bit that I've been struggling with, that I can't move away from, it does show up in my writing, because whoever else reads it after me will say, "Oh, that's not going very well here." So I can pick up the lack of flow.

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So I've learned—but this is years of writing. I've learned to just move on. And hope someone else picks up something and gives me good feedback.

Joanna: So how long did your book take you to write?

Wendy: The book took five months. The actual writing of the book took five months to write. The research and the interview process with the participants took about eight months, so it was a total of just over a year.

Joanna: Okay. And I guess a question just popped into my head about—you said you had been writing all your life. Is this your first book, and why do you think it took you so long to get to the point of writing a book?

Wendy: I've been writing a lot of poetry. I wrote a lot of poetry over the years, especially growing up in South Africa. And little bits and pieces on short stories, started on a few kiddy stories.

But really I think "Chocolate and Vanilla" was the first thing that I got into and actually finished. And then when I finished it decided I was going to get it published.

So there's a lot of pieces of work, if I go back and find, probably finished pieces, some started, some not finished. And I think you have to find the piece that becomes the personal piece for you. That's the one I went with.

It was a catharsis. I really needed to get that stuff out of me.

Joanna: That's great. So, when did you find the time to write then, and what would you say to people who say they're too busy to write? Because you have a full-time job.

Wendy: I do have a full-time job, yes. I work in IT as a project consultant. I work full-time hours. Nine to five or nine to six.

I usually wrote—"Chocolate and Vanilla" was written between the hours of 8:00 p.m. at night and one or two in the morning. Over that five months that I actually wrote the book, once I had done all the research, had the interview sessions and had the transcripts and everything, the writing process took five months and it was usually done between 8:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. in the morning. So I got very little sleep during that time.

Joanna: So weekends as well?

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Wendy: Weekends, yes, yes. I wrote full-on, solidly, for those five months. But either [00:09:23] I felt compelled to finish it. And yeah, I am very busy, being a single mum and a full-time consultant takes a lot of time. I'm also involved in a lot of recreational stuff and community stuff and self-development work.

But writing is my one true passion, and I think that we must make time for our passions in life. We must make time for the things that stir us. That motivate us and make us feel connected to ourselves, so, what I say to people who say they're too busy to write, I can only think that they either don't have the passion for writing, and they're writing for a different reason—like some people might write because they want to become an expert in a topic and they want to market material and so on.

And if they come back and tell me they don't have time to write, I sort of would say, "Well you can't afford not to, because you have a different goal. Your goal is to get something out there, to create some kind of career around it. Some people just write for the passion, so..."

Joanna: So is that how you kept yourself motivated through the process?

Wendy: Yeah. Look, one of my better qualities is that I'm incredibly disciplined. So once the goal becomes clear to me I seem to just discipline myself, get on with the steps, find the steps and then take it one step at a time and get through it.

But I was fortunate in the writing of "Chocolate and Vanilla" in that I had my friend Peter, whom the book is dedicated to, and he really helped me get through that writing process because he would call me every week, or sometimes he would call me daily and say, "What have you written? Can I see the next chapter?"

He was a true friend and he totally believed in me. And I think that makes all the difference, because writing is a very solitary experience. It's a solitary journey. And I think if you can find someone to share the experience with, a good friend or a partner or a family member, grab it with both ends.

Joanna: Yeah, and I think you mentioned to me that you corresponded with Maya Angelou?

Wendy: Well, I actually sent her a copy of the book. And I got a very nice note back from her saying, "Thank you." And wishing me well with the book, so, yeah, I was pretty stoked by that.

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Joanna: Yeah. That's brilliant.

Wendy: Didn't think I'd get a response!

Joanna: Yeah. Well that just shows you...

Wendy: I still have the note. I've actually kept it in one of my little, you know, your things to keep that you don't throw away

Joanna: That's brilliant. So do you say that you are an author?

Wendy: Would I say that I'm an author? Absolutely. Yes.

I mean sometimes people think that you're an author because you get published, but people who write are authors. People who have a passion for writing, that's what you are. You may never publish anything.

But it is part of what you do. Part of who you are. I don't know why I do it. It feels for me like it was always there. And it started with my father introducing me to books and poetry and the classics when I was really young.

So writing has always been a world that I go to that—it seems to me like it's a world that doesn't have the routine responsibilities. It's my world. I can do and explore and do whatever I want in that world. I love it.

Joanna: That's brilliant. So just, I guess talking a bit about publishing side, so why did you self-publish your book?

Wendy: This one I self-published because it was such a personal journey for me. My heart and soul is in the book. And so, my experiences, my thoughts, my opinions, are all in that book and I wanted to own the book in its entirety.

So, I don't know. It sounds a bit of a first-born child, and I wasn't good at or keen on the letting go process, I think. And so I felt like I had to nurture it all the way through.

And that was really the reason behind the self-publishing.

Joanna: And did you do everything yourself? Or what did you outsource? We talked about the editing. Did you get a publicist, or what else did you outsource?

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Wendy: Well, the first edition I did through lulu.com, which is, you know, these cover templates and they have all kinds of templates and you basically just upload your files and you follow the prompts.

And then once they send you a copy of the printed copy, if you're happy with it, you just go and click the box on Lulu and the book goes online for people to then order.

But prior to that, yes there was editing. As I said, I've got three personal editors—my father, my sister, Peter. And then I have a professional editor, so usually the first round of edits go through the family and the friends circle, and then the final edit goes to the professional editor in Tasmania.

Joanna: And what about a publicist?

Wendy: No. I didn't get a publicist. All of it was done myself. The second edition of the book was done through a group called, Bookpal, and they're here in Australia.

And they designed that cover, that brilliant cover for me, the very bold face, chocolate and vanilla face with a map of the world. And they're also an online—they also sort of work towards putting your book online but also sell it through their Web site and then just copies and things that go onto my Web site.

Joanna: So you mentioned the cover there, and yet your cover is gorgeous. I love it. Can you give any tips for cover design for self-published writers?

Wendy: Well with the cover for "Chocolate and Vanilla," I wanted the cover number one, to have shades of chocolate and vanilla in it. I also wanted the map of the world because somewhere in there I was promoting global and cultural harmony.

And I somehow wanted some racial integration or mixing represented, and so I communicated this to the Accounts Manager at Book Bound, and about within a week or two they came back with that cover and it absolutely blew me away, because I didn't envision that. And I described what I wanted and he obviously got it. Really clearly. Because I was thrilled with their cover.

My tips for cover design is be clear about what you want and then choose something that really represents the core message. I mean, all I said to this guy, I said, "I need to see chocolate and vanilla shades and I need to see a map of the world and I need to see something that tells me interracial mixing." And he came back with that.

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Joanna: Yeah. And just for the listeners, that can be seen on your Web site, www.mychocolateandvanilla.com .

Wendy: Correct. Yes.

Joanna: It's gorgeous. And I think probably that's the same for all outsourcing. You have to be very clear with what you want.

Wendy: Yes. And I think when you choose to self-publish something, I think there is that kind of clarity. You know. And there's no other outside influence. You know, I think sometimes if you go through mainstream publishing, everyone has ideas on how they think it should look and what's going to be the best thing for book.

But with self-publishing, yeah, there is that—you have that autonomy. You end up doing it and deciding this is the way it needs to be and really, the people like Bookpal work for you. And that's nice.

Joanna: So what will you do differently about your next book? Because I know you're writing the next one.

Wendy: Well, I'm working on the next one now. And it's actually five really, because it's one story told over a series of five books. It's fiction, so it's a big difference from this current autobiographical book.

So there's a lot of freedom for the imagination, which I'm loving, and yes, I'm actually going to seek publication on this one.

Joanna: Right.

Wendy: At least initially. We'll see where we go. If no bites occur—but I'm sourcing publishers in the UK and a literary agent.

Joanna: Right. How are you doing that?

Wendy: Just through research. I actually have a virtual assistant—or the woman that designed my Web site has taken on helping me—put them on that personal assistant basis because I'm really busy and I haven't had the time to do all this, so she's been looking at a lot of that side of things for me, just doing research.

And when I'm ready, it will just go up to a number of literary agents and see who wants to take it on. I mean, that's the place to start, I think, in the UK or the US.

Joanna: Yes.

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Wendy: Find yourself an agent and then they'll find the publisher.

Joanna: Okay. So what did you learn from the self-publishing process?

Wendy: Well I've learned that I loved the writing—the actual writing process a lot more than I do publication and marketing process. But they're all necessary processes if you want to see your book in physical print. And if you want to self-publish to people other than your family and your loyal friends.

So, I think if you're going to be self-publishing, you have to be prepared to take it all on.

Joanna: And so how are you currently marketing your books?

Wendy: Mostly through a Web site. I mean, I think that's—if you self-publish, that's mandatory. I think you need to create [inaudible] [00:19:12], and in this day and age, everyone runs to the Internet, and the first thing, when you talk about any product, people say, "What's your Web site?"

So that's one of the first things I had done. I also started to try to find out about cultural events, and news events, and so I've been sending out just a little bit of information about myself and see if there was an interest in me just sort of talking. And I have spoken at a couple of corporate places, and a couple of cultural events.

I've also recently sought assistance on something I know is a lot better at market research than I am, and this is the lady I was telling you about, the lady that did my Web site, and now she's done all the background work for me to get the book onto Amazon.com.

In the US you can also add to over 25 retail outlets, and in fact that's the global distribution that Bookpal offers at the moment, and so I've just signed up for that, so all of that will be handled on their side, but you know, Annie did a lot of that legwork for me.

Joanna: Right.

Wendy: So my recommendation to new writers is to figure out what you're good at and focus on that. Figure out what others are good at, and enroll them in helping you, if you can get them to. And if you can afford it, get a personal or virtual assistant to help out with the stuff that could easily distract you from writing or even dampen your writing process.

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Joanna: So are you using any Internet marketing, or sort of social networking?

Wendy: Not heavily at the moment, and having said that, I would get my personal assistant to do a lot of that side of it as well.

Joanna: Yeah.

Wendy: I just enrolled her to do, you know, literally everything. I rang her up one day. We became very good friends through her building my Web site. And as it happens, she also is working in a cultural community, doing some cultural training in Queensland.

And so she rang me and said, "You know, I might have a market for your book. This is what I'm doing with the government and so on, and I want to try and see what we can do around your book."

And then she said, "Why don't I start looking at social networking across the internet?" And she's done a lot of Alex Mandossian's courses and telemarketing and teleseminars, so all of that side of it is being handled by her.

And when she needs me, or needs me to, she really only involves me when number one, she needs my credit card—okay? Or sends me the link to go and pay for whatever needs to be paid. Or tells me that the next step is ready. You know, get ready to talk or get ready to do something.

Joanna: And how did you find her?

Wendy: She's a [Wildly Wealthy Woman](#). She found me.

Joanna: Right.

Wendy: Yeah, she was advertising Web site building, and there was something in the way she wrote it. She had this really—I don't know—real gentle, great way about her. And I responded to her. And at the time I was actually looking to get my Web site revamped. I've had it built by somebody but I wasn't 100 percent thrilled with it and she just sent out this email and I responded to her email.

And then she responded back to me and we started working together and then we started talking on the phone, and that's how the rapport was built.

Joanna: So again, you were clear on what you wanted, and...

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Wendy: Absolutely. You do need to be very clear on what you want and then communicate that. But also figure out what other people are good at, because we can't be all good at everything.

Joanna: As well as working full-time.

Wendy: That's what I like to do, so I do that. And then I go and figure out who can do whatever else they can do and just involve—I mean a lot of this stuff—yeah, some of it I've had to pay for. But some of it is also bartering your time. And Annie's wanted some feedback on me on some of the things that she's doing.

And storytelling, and working with young children, and she knows I love all that side of things, so you know, it comes to an exchange. Wonderful.

Joanna: That's great. So what are your top three tips for new authors?

Wendy: Oh, top three tips. Tip number one is write. Develop the discipline for writing. If it's not an ingrained passion, but you have the desire to see your ideas or your experiences or your thoughts in print, then you must write. There is not other way around it.

Tip two—read and research the genres you want to write in, to see what type of style actually made it into print? I think that's important.

And my tip three is develop a sense of humor about everything to do with writing. The process. Because it's a profession, it's a hobby or it's an interest, it often brings a lot of rejection with it. And you have to have a sense of humor about it. Otherwise you'll be crushed.

Joanna: But is it worth it? You think?

Wendy: Absolutely. I mean, I guess I can say that because I have a passion for writing. So for me it's worth it. You know, just the fact that I actually write and then when I see something of mine in print or when I see it making a difference, or when I see it being read out or I hear people talk about it—well yeah, it's worth it to me.

I don't know—if someone hasn't got an ingrained passion for writing, to them it might not seem worth it. It might seem like a long slope, but I think if you have a goal and your goal is to be successful in whatever career and if part of the career is you want to become an expert in a topic, then yes, it's worth it. Regardless.

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Joanna: Yeah. No, that's great. So, I guess just another thought is that writers are avid readers. We tend to read a lot. So what's your favorite book at the moment and why?

Wendy: I don't know if this will be a surprise or not a surprise, but the entire "Harry Potter" series is my favorite at the moment. I absolutely love it. I love it because it's well-written, but I think more importantly, it's so free in its imaginative expression.

I mean, absolutely all of the amount of freedom she used and gave her imagination. I love J. K. Rowling's personal story, as well. I mean, she's an inspiration to me because I figure if one person can do something like that, why not other writers? Why not me? You know?

I am bold enough to believe that.

Joanna: Yeah, and she was a single mum, wasn't she?

Wendy: Absolutely. I mean her story is so parallel to mine, that it's bizarre. I mean, I've really obviously followed—you know once the books came out and I actually picked them up and started to read them, and saw the writing style and just got into them so quickly, I started to do research around her, obviously.

And found out what a journey. I thought, "My God, what a journey. We have walked a very similar journey." So yeah, absolute inspiration. Love the books.

Joanna: And I think it's good to have somebody you want to be like in terms of your writing, isn't it? Someone who's made it, I guess.

Wendy: Yes, somebody who's made it. And against all odds. Really, I think she—you hear so many stories when a first-time author doesn't attain that kind of success. Well, you know, all boundaries can be broken.

And she certainly smashed them all, so...

Joanna: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. So just like, if leading on from that, so you're working on fiction. Is it in the style of J. K. Rowling?

Wendy: It is—yeah, there's some magical elements to it, but it's also a message about loving relationships. What that [inaudible] [00:26:43] in with others, so it's really—it does follow on some of the "Chocolate and Vanilla" theme. But it's done for the teenage market or the young adult readers.

Joanna: It's not a picture book, or...

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Wendy: No, it's not a picture book. It is a novel. It is a novel style and it will be five novels. It's been plotted out. I've plotted out all five books at a high level already—are completely plotted out. Book one, in fact I'm probably halfway through writing book one.

Plotted out book two and three. But you know I have a little notebook that sits beside my bed and another one that's in my bag that I carry with me every day and thoughts just come. When they come, I just keep adding. Adding to and just keep plotting out.

So when I struggle with the actual writing process, which can happen, I go back to the plotting board. I try to do something on it every day, and even if I can't write on the actual story, I go back to the plotting board or go back to the notes and just keep working on it, so that I'm in constant movement with the book and idea.

But it's exciting. I'm actually enjoying it a lot more than I did "Chocolate and Vanilla."

"Chocolate and Vanilla" was an autobiographical book and I suppose it's a how-to and a self-help book in some ways. So it's non-fiction, whereas this one's fiction so the imagination can go wild a little but there is also themes that it's following, so-very, very—it's wonderful.

Joanna: So do you think you'll write another non-fiction at some point?

Wendy: Yes, I think I will. Actually, ideas have come while I've—because I've had a few challenges with my health this year, and health is finally back on track, but that's been a journey and so I've gone and put myself through raw foods and cleansing and so I'm actually working on something around that.

Because I'm diagnosed as diabetic but I've managed to just, against many odds, actually get back to normal people's levels of sugars and insulin and so I'm actually going to put together a book to help people regain their health.

Joanna: Yeah, that's brilliant.

Wendy: Because that's what I've done, and that was what the last year has been dedicated to that. I was determined that I was never going to end up on insulin or on any kind of diabetic medication. One year later, I've actually turned my entire health around, so...

Joanna: Just a question—getting to know your personality, do you do a lot of goal-setting?

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Wendy: I do. Yes I do. Like I said, we all have good points and bad, but one of my good qualities and I'm proud to say it is that I'm a disciplined person. I figure out what it is that I want and then I write out, you know, how I need to get there.

I'm in project management as well, and that makes a big difference. You need to be incredibly organized. You need to have a plan, a project management plan. And you need to have a schedule. So I'm trained in that.

And then so I apply a lot of those disciplines to my writing.

Joanna: But you can still create and be a fiction writer as well as planning and...

Wendy: Well, yeah. And look—I've also got a wild imagination, you know. As I said, that's what got me through South Africa. It was a world I was able to escape into. I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have my writing, because that was a world I didn't understand. I was young when all of those things were happening around me.

And a way for me to escape that harshness was to go to my writing, to go into the world of fantasy and imagination.

And so that part of me has never died. But then along with the many lives you live over your 41 years, you develop other disciplines, and so I've combined, I suppose, all my different skills and put it into this personality.

Joanna: No, that's brilliant. All right. Then so how can people get in touch with you, if they're interested in finding out more about your work?

Wendy: The best place to contact me is on the current Web site, which is www.mychocolateandvanilla.com. Click on the contact page, because it's got my postal address. It's got my email, and my telephone number.

So, yes, if people want to reach me, find me there.

Joanna: Brilliant! Excellent!

Wendy: Buy the book!

Joanna: Yeah, I was going to say they can buy your book there as well. All right, Wendy, well thank you ever so much.

Wendy: Oh, it was an absolute pleasure!

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Joanna Penn is an author, speaker and consultant who helps people create their own books.

If you are interested in writing a book, you can get your free workbook at <http://www.HowToBeAnAuthor.com>

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