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Dennis Olsen | University of West London, UK

The Joy of Guests: a podcast journey

An interview with Jeremy Strong





Image courtesy: Mark Owen ©

Abstract:

The podcast market continues to grow, with almost half of UK adults in their 20s and 30s now listening to podcasts at least once a week, and listenership in the UK predicted to grow from 9 million in 2017 to 28 million by 2026 (Statista 2022). Podcasts have developed an undeniable appeal to mass audiences, and as such have also found their way into Higher Education, where they are used to enrich and support learning and teaching (see, for example, Alison Hawkings' article in this issue of New Vistas) and/or offer academics new ways of disseminating their scholarly work and reaching broader audiences.

In light of the increasing popularity of this medium, Jeremy Strong discusses and traces the development of his podcast series *The Joy of Guests* with New Vistas senior editor Dennis Olsen.

DO: Thank you for taking the time to talk about your podcast series *The Joy of Guests*. Let's start at the beginning, what is the podcast about?

JS: Well, the summary we offer to listeners is this... "Once upon a time we could rely upon Mrs Beeton and her *Book of Household Management* or perhaps one of the many Victorian guides to etiquette, for advice on catering and the entertainment of guests. But, with the passage of time, and the absence of kitchen maids and butlers, a fresher perspective is needed. *The Joy of Guests* brings the manual on dining, drinks, and associated courtesy into the 21st Century. Or maybe the 20th, since discussion of smartphones, Tinder and selfie-sticks is pretty much absent. But, if you're the type of person who might enjoy a meal based on dishes from the James Bond novels, or need some strategies for dealing with fussy eaters, or you've ever wondered what the perfect mixed grill looks like, then you've come to the right place. Informative, mouth-watering, and quite possibly with its tongue in its cheek, *The Joy of Guests* is waiting for you."

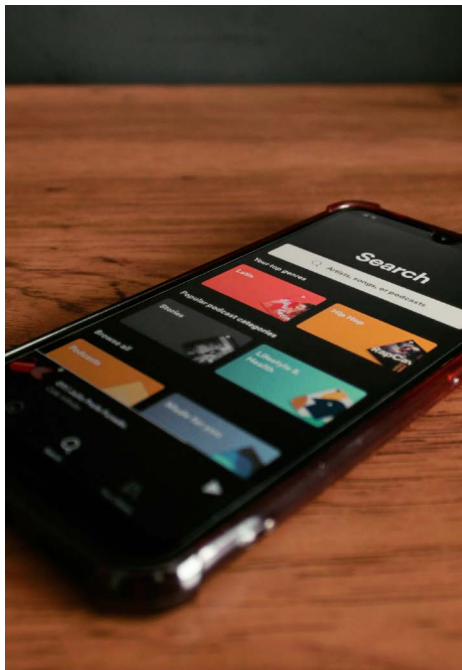
DO: This seems quite different from your day-to-day work as a Professor of Literature and Film. How did you come to take an interest in this field?

JS: I have always had an interest in food, drink,

and entertaining; not least as a consumer. Until *The Joy of Guests*, my writing on food was academic, essentially in the field of Cultural Studies. Back in 2006 I published a piece entitled 'The Modern Offal Eaters', looking at how certain foods have been relocated in what we think of as a spectrum of value, becoming signifiers of 'good' taste and, relatedly, social standing. This got a surprising amount of traction and ended up being cited a fair bit. Once, when I was on a plane, I was amazed to see it being quoted in a food article in the in-flight magazine! Since then, I have given a number of food-centred papers at conferences, done some book chapters and journal articles in this area, and published the book *Educated Tastes: Food, Drink, and Connoisseur Culture*.

DO: So, do you revisit some of the themes and topics from your academic writing in this more popular format?

JS: Absolutely, yes. Several of the podcasts take ideas and inspiration from the scholarly work. There's a menu based entirely on offal dishes (not for the squeamish!); Another which combines dishes from Ian Fleming's *James Bond* novels, the subject of my article 'James Bond: International Man of Gastronomy'; Foraging for wild food, crops up a couple of times and draws on work I did for a chapter on foraging in the *Routledge Handbook of Landscape and Food*; Ideas around food and ethics, which I addressed in the book chapter 'A Short Poetics of Cruel Food', also make an appearance several times. More generally, my interest in food



and drink and my background in literature and the screen intersect in lots of references to and discussion of dishes that appeared in books, movies and television.

DO: Why a podcast?

JS: The project started out as a book. I wanted to do something rather different to the type of writing I've done for most of my career, something more light-hearted. As part of my undergraduate teaching, I deliver a first year creative writing module, and working on that made me think more about writing in a comic vein. So I decided to write a different kind of book. Informed by some of my academic interests certainly, and to a degree fuelled by the fact that part of my teaching and research degree supervision was in creative writing. I wanted to write about food and cooking, but with a particular emphasis on the culture of dinner parties and entertaining at home. I wanted it to be tongue-in-cheek and funny, rather than prescriptive, though I also wanted the information it contained to be accurate and interesting. I liked the idea of a modern take on the guides of bygone eras, like Mrs Beeton, as well as upon the conventions of the weekend at a country house that one finds in P G Wodehouse.

DO: But what you ended up with was a podcast, rather than a book?

JS: Indeed. If my imagination had supplied a surfeit of eager literary agents and enthusiastic publishers clamouring for my manuscript in a frenzied bidding war, reality unfolded otherwise. It was, I discovered, not that easy to re-brand myself as a different kind of writer. I was, and remain, moderately well-acquainted with parts of the book trade. That is, I've written and had accepted several book proposals and manuscripts, I've been paid by publishers to evaluate innumerable proposals by other writers and prospective writers and to give feedback on draft



manuscripts, and I've worked with other authors on their projects. What I wasn't, was remotely connected to those branches of the trade that don't look first and foremost to university libraries and students for their sales. If anything, my background in academic publishing seemed to make me less, not more, of a prospect in terms of popular publishing. After hawking my wares about, without success, for some time the only offers I got involved a small print run and an absurdly high cover price, which is fairly regular in academic publishing, but the kiss of death for anything you'd like to be widely read.

DO: So now we get to the podcast?

JS: We're nearly there. I was bemoaning this state of affairs to a former colleague, Pam Myers, who works in radio, in particular in the field of voice-casting for advertisements and drama. Send me the manuscript she said. I did. Shortly afterwards, I heard from her again. "It's really good" she said, "hilarious" in fact. Naturally, one can never hear things like this often enough, so I was delighted. And next she ventured "It should be a podcast." I paused.

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I wanted to write a different type of book, then I began the podcasts hoping that they'd help me achieve that initial aim. Now I've come to look at them as completed objects in their own right; things with their own qualities and affordances... I've begun writing for listeners, rather than reader

You should be aware that, at this point I had heard about podcasts, I may even have had a hazy notion of what they might be. I had certainly never listened to one, or sent or received a tweet, or even a text. But I was very keen on anything that might get the work out there. "Who could we get to read it?" I asked, immediately recognizing that there was a radical disconnect between what I might want, and what was affordable or even possible. The likes of Stephen Fry or Hugh Laurie would be too expensive, while John Gielgud and Richard Burton were too dead. "Don't be daft" She said (or words to that effect) "You should do it. It was your voice I imagined while I read it."

DO: And how did the prospect of doing the recordings seem to you? Is it fair to say that you're not the most technically savvy colleague at UWL?

JS: Indeed. I'm quite the Luddite. But, like many university teachers, in the course of the pandemic and its lockdowns, I had found myself recording lectures. In my case that meant following the advice of my teenage daughter, using the 'record audio' function on PowerPoint to transform my hitherto silent slides into a veritable *son et lumière* of pedagogical thrills. I had discovered that, provided I scripted it carefully, I could speak for a minute, 90 seconds at a pinch, without making a stumble, error, gulp, gasp, or cough that would require me to start over. Pam assured me that this experience wasn't a bad foundation and, crucially, offered to produce and direct. She set about making the necessary arrangements and we selected and revised the first few scripts. Shortly before Christmas 2021, I found myself in the recording booth of a professional studio in Chiswick, connected by headphones and mic both to the amazing studio engineer Jonathan, a few feet away and to Pam, who dialled in from France. To cut a long story short, I quickly discovered that

any number of seemingly tiny things, like moving paper, scratching one's stubble, and – in fact – breathing, can scupper a take, but after these early mishaps, we settled into a pleasant routine. And a little while later, we launched and they can be found, for free, on the major platforms.

DO: Did developing it as a podcast series change how you thought about the material and your relationship to it?

JS: Yes, completely. First, I wanted to write a different type of book, then I began the podcasts hoping that they'd help me achieve that initial aim. Now I've come to look at them as completed objects in their own right; things with their own qualities and affordances, and I'm developing new podcast material that was never in that original, unpublished, volume. I've begun writing for listeners, rather than readers. It has a dimension of performance that you just don't have when you're writing only for readers. And, I have to say, I'm enjoying doing it. If any of the readers of *New Vistas* have the time to give it a listen, I'd welcome their feedback.



The Joy of Guests

<https://open.spotify.com/show/7Lh7nAua6OoYy57HimzIFi>

Inspired by his scholarly and creative work in the field, Professor Jeremy Strong shares a wealth of advice and anecdotes both for the aspiring host, and the seasoned veteran of a thousand menus and seating plans. Average episode length ranges between 10 and 20 minutes.



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