

Interview

Werner Stejskal

Interviewer:

Well, dear listeners, today is a bit of a special treat. I've finally managed to convince the wonderfully prolific author Werner Stejskal to join me here in the studio. Werner, welcome, it's so lovely to have you.

Werner: Thank you, it's lovely to be here. I'm really glad you invited me.

I: I have to say, I've been quite excited about this conversation. Now, for those listening who might not yet know your work, let me paint a quick picture. About ten years ago, Werner created a charming children's picture book series called *Oliver and Jumpy*, about a kangaroo and his rather endearing feline friend. A delightful and slightly unusual pairing, I might add. But then, quite unexpectedly, you changed course. About a year ago, you stepped into the world of romance... and didn't just dip your toes in, you dove in headfirst. And here's the part that still amazes me, you've written nearly one hundred romance stories in that time. I mean... when do you sleep?

W: (Laughs) That's a good question.

I: It's genuinely impressive, and I think we're all a little curious about the secret behind that kind of creative energy. But before we get swept away by romance, I'd love to go back a little and hear about you. Tell me, where does *your* story begin?

W: I was born in Vienna, Austria, and my life has been closely tied to Australia as well. My wife and I actually emigrated here twice. The first time was shortly after we got married, when we moved to Sydney and spent a bit more than three years there. After that, we returned to Vienna for quite some time, but fourteen years later, we felt the pull again and moved back to Australia, this time with our two children.

I: Twice. That already sounds like a love story in itself, and don't worry, I will come back to how you met your wife, because I have a feeling there's something special there. But first... we have to talk about romance. I can almost hear our listeners leaning closer right now. How does a man go from writing children's stories about a kangaroo and a cat... to producing such a remarkable body of romantic work in such a short time.

W: I might not look it, but I've always been a very romantic person. A bit of a daydreamer, really. I've spent a lot of time imagining different ways of meeting someone, all the twists and turns relationships can take, the drama, the tenderness... all of it. And as you get older, those inner worlds, those dreams, they don't fade. If anything, they become more important.

I: That's actually quite beautiful... and it explains a lot. So tell me, where do your stories come from? What does your routine look like? I think everyone listening would love to hear a few of your creative secrets.

W: There's no strict formula, but I do have a kind of ritual. Most mornings, I go for a walk, about an hour, near where we live, close to the beach. And while I walk... I dream. I let my mind wander freely, almost like I'm drifting above everything, picking up fragments, moments, little "what if" ideas. When something interesting appears, I grab hold of it. I turn it around, look at it from different angles, test it a little. If it feels right, I start building a story around it. I imagine scenes, I play through situations, and quite often, the dialogue already begins to form in my head.

Of course, not every idea leads somewhere. Sometimes something feels promising at first, and I dive into it, only to realise later that I've hit a wall. When that happens, I don't force it. I let it rest, let it simmer. I might come back to it later with a fresh perspective... and occasionally, I leave it behind altogether. But most of the time, by the end of my walk, I return home with a clear concept, ready to sit down and start writing.

I: I love that... the idea that your stories begin out there, between the sea and the sky. It almost sounds like you're collecting them rather than inventing them.

W: That's an excellent observation, and it's very close to how I actually experience it. Sometimes it feels less like I'm inventing stories and more like I'm rediscovering them. I have this sense that everything has, in some way, already happened... and that I'm simply finding fragments of it again, bringing something back into being, almost like recalling a memory from another life. I would describe myself as a spiritual person, though not religious in the traditional sense. I strongly believe that everything in the universe is connected. What we do, whether good or bad, doesn't just disappear. It comes back to us in one form or another. If you give kindness, you will, eventually, experience kindness yourself.

I: Wow... that's beautifully put, and quite philosophical. But I have to say, it does explain a lot. When you read your stories, you can really feel that underlying sense of connection, of fate, of things circling back in unexpected ways. It's almost as if your characters aren't just falling in love... they're finding something that was always meant to be theirs.

This feels like the perfect moment to turn to your own love story. Would you share with us how you met your wife?

W: Of course. That was my very first romance... not written, but truly lived. Back then, in the 1960s, I loved to travel, and I had many pen friends around the world. There was no social media, no internet, just letters... and patience. One of those pen friends became my wife. I spent four months travelling, and during that time I went to Hong Kong to meet her. I stayed for three weeks, and somewhere in those days, I fell in love. When it was time to leave, I made her a promise, that I would come back. People today can hardly imagine how difficult it was to keep such a promise. Flights were incredibly expensive, phone calls even more so, and a single letter could take two weeks before you even received a reply. It was a different world. But I kept my promise. I returned, and this time I stayed for nine months in Hong Kong. My wife showed incredible courage. She married me, a foreigner, against her mother's wishes, and left everything behind to come with me to Austria, into a completely unknown life. It took me many years to fully understand just how brave she truly was. To trust me, to face a new country, a new family, a new culture... that was no small thing. And I will always be deeply, eternally grateful for that decision.

I: That's... truly moving. And I have to say, it sounds like the kind of love story people would assume only exists in novels. But in your case, it came first... and perhaps the writing followed.

There's something I've been curious about. Why short stories instead of full-length novels? You did experiment once with a longer novella, something like two or three hours of reading time, but most of your work is much shorter. What drew you to that format?

W: That's true. And maybe the answer is a bit unexpected. When I was younger, I was a voracious reader. I must have read around three thousand books, and the thicker they were, the better. In the library, I was always drawn to those thousand-page volumes, almost like a magnet. But over time, with all that reading behind me, I began to notice something. Many books are... stretched. They contain a lot of filler, passages that add bulk rather than substance. So when I started writing myself, I discovered that a strong plot can often be told very effectively within about ten thousand words. You can keep the story focused, the emotions clear, and the pacing tight. And then there's the modern reader. People read on their phones, on the train, in short moments throughout the day. They don't always have the time, or even the desire, to carry a long, complex story in their head over weeks. A short story gives them something complete. They can begin it and finish it in one sitting, without losing the thread along the way.

I: That makes a lot of sense. And I've also noticed something else about your stories... they tend to end on a positive note. Things come together, people find their way.

W: Yes, that's very intentional. I feel there's already enough darkness in today's entertainment, too much violence, too much chaos. I prefer to focus on ordinary life, on human connections, on hope. Stories don't always need to be complicated or filled with constant drama. Life itself has enough depth. And sometimes, it's simply comforting to see things resolve, to see people find happiness.

I: I like that... it's almost a quiet rebellion against all the noise out there. And speaking of something I've picked up on, many of your stories seem to carry a distinct Turkish flavour. The settings, the characters, the atmosphere... it's very present. Where does that come from?

W: I have to admit, it started quite simply, I watch a lot of Turkish series. All with English subtitles. They're often dramatic, sometimes a bit over the top, classic soap operas really... but I'm completely hooked. And when you spend hours watching them every day, they inevitably leave an impression. It even got to the point where I started learning Turkish on Duolingo, just to understand a little more without relying on subtitles. I've always been fascinated by languages. I've explored quite a few over the years, but Turkish is particularly interesting because its grammar is so different from European languages. It makes you think in a completely new way.

But to come back to your question about my writing... what really draws me in is Turkish society itself. Especially in more traditional or rural settings, the structure of family life, the expectations placed on women, it's very different from what we're used to in the West. Women are often under the authority of a father or an older brother, and later a husband. That dynamic creates a kind of emotional tension that offers powerful storytelling possibilities. Situations that would feel unlikely in Western societies become very real and very compelling there. It allows for bittersweet love stories, for conflict, for longing... although I should add, my

female characters are usually strong. They don't simply accept those limitations, they challenge them. And then there's Istanbul... I absolutely love that city. Did you know it's approaching sixteen million inhabitants? It's vibrant, layered, full of life. I often find myself placing my characters there, walking along the Bosphorus, sharing quiet moments, declaring their love with that incredible backdrop. People always talk about Paris as the city of love... but I sometimes think they underestimate places like Istanbul. There's a deep sense of romance in Turkish culture, in the Middle East in general, that we don't fully appreciate in the West. There's so much history, so much emotion, so much storytelling in that world. I think we're only just beginning to understand it.

I: That's fascinating... and I have to say, you're making me want to book a ticket to Istanbul immediately. But I also love what you said about your female characters. Strong women, even within restrictive worlds... that feels like a powerful thread running through your stories. If it's alright with you, I'd like to ask something a bit more personal.

W: Of course. We spoke before the interview, and I did say I have no secrets. I'm happy to answer just about anything.

I: Alright then... listening to you, and especially reading your stories, I couldn't help but wonder. Your romantic and often quite intimate scenes feel very real. Almost lived-in. So I have to ask... how much of that is fiction? And how much comes from personal experience?

W: In terms of real-life experience, it's actually very simple. There has only ever been one woman in my life, my wife. So everything you read is imagined. But... and this is important... I don't experience it as something distant or detached. When I write, I live through the story. Completely. I become the character. I feel what he feels. I go through every moment with him. When he's happy, I'm happy. When he suffers... I suffer. You'll notice that I often write in the first person. That "I" is me, in that moment. Sometimes it becomes quite overwhelming. I'll be sitting there writing, and suddenly I realise I'm in tears. It happens often enough that I keep a roll of toilet paper right next to me. And when I come out of my office, my wife takes one look at me, sees my eyes... and says, "Ah... one of those again."

I: (Laughs softly) That's both touching and very telling. Tell me... does your wife ever get jealous of these characters? Of these emotions you're experiencing so intensely?

W: (Smiles) That's one question I probably shouldn't answer for her. Let's just say... we all have our private dreams. Mine just happen to be written down for everyone to read.

I: There's something else I've noticed in your writing. You often begin your stories with a kind of statement... almost like a quiet declaration. Is that intentional?

W: Yes, very much so. I'm glad you picked up on that. In fact, those statements are often the very first thing that comes to me. Before there's a plot, before there are characters, there's usually a thought, a conviction, something I feel strongly about. From there, I start to build a story around it. Almost like exploring that idea

through the lives of the characters. It gives the story a certain depth right from the beginning, and it also gives the reader a sense of direction, an understanding of where things might be heading. And perhaps just as importantly, it allows the reader to decide early on if the story resonates with them... if they want to continue the journey. Most of those opening lines reflect my own beliefs, in one way or another. So if someone reads enough of my stories... they'll probably get a pretty clear picture of how I think. (Laughs) Maybe even more than I intend to reveal.

I: I like that... it's almost like you're inviting the reader into a conversation, not just telling them a story. Do you spend a lot of time researching for your stories?

W: I wouldn't say a lot... but I do make sure to get the details right where it matters. I use Google to check facts, whether it's something like earthquakes in Turkey, the structure of a traditional wedding, local laws, or even specific locations. The stories themselves are, of course, fiction, but I want the world they exist in to feel believable. It's those small touches of authenticity that make a story come alive. I think I've always been like that. Even at school, I preferred writing things that felt real rather than purely invented. My mother used to get quite frustrated with me. She would say, "The teacher won't even know what's true and what isn't." And I would answer, "Yes... but I will." (Laughs) So that instinct never really left me. And the beautiful part is that research means you're constantly learning. Every story teaches you something new. So in a way, when readers go through my stories, they might pick up little pieces of knowledge along the way. Nothing heavy or academic, just subtle details... but enough to feel they've gained something as well as enjoyed the journey.

I: I like that idea... being entertained and learning something without even realising it. That's quite a powerful combination.

We're slowly coming to the end of this fascinating conversation, and I think it's time to ask the question everyone is thinking about these days... Werner, do you use AI in your writing?

W: (Laughs) I knew that one was coming. We're living in a time of rapid change. The world is evolving quickly, and it can feel like it's leaving people behind if they don't adapt. I've actually written about this in one of my articles. As you may have noticed, English is not my native language. On my own, I wouldn't be able to shape my stories into a form that feels fully polished or natural. That's where AI comes in. I write my stories first in simple English, focusing on the ideas, the emotions, the structure. Then I use AI to help refine the grammar, the spelling, and the style. It's a tool that helps me present my thoughts in a clearer and more engaging way. But the core of the story, the imagination, the dreams, the characters... those are all mine. I believe AI should be used as a support, not a replacement. It can enhance what we already have, but it shouldn't take away our individuality. Personally, I'm very grateful to be living in a time where this kind of technology exists. It has allowed me to bring my creativity to life in a way I simply couldn't have done before. And I would encourage other writers not to be afraid of it. Use it to the extent that feels right for you. Because the truth is, others will use it, and it can make a real difference.

I: Before we wrap up, I'd like to ask one final question. What advice would you give to writers, and people in general, when it comes to AI?

W: I believe we are standing at the edge of a transformation unlike anything we've seen before. People with vision can already sense what's coming. The pace of change is extraordinary, and I'm convinced that twenty years from now, the world as we know it today will be almost unrecognisable. That may sound dramatic, but history shows us that technological shifts of this scale reshape everything, how we work, how we create, even how we think. The key to navigating this is adaptability. Those who are willing to learn, to experiment, to embrace new tools, will find their place. Those who resist completely may find it much harder. AI is not something that will simply disappear. It's here, and it will become an increasingly central part of our lives. So my advice is simple: don't be afraid of it. Try to understand it. Use it where it helps you, and shape it in a way that supports your own creativity and individuality. Find your place within this new landscape. Because in the end, it's not about competing with technology, it's about learning how to work alongside it.

I: A powerful message, and perhaps a necessary one for our times.

Werner, thank you so much for sharing not just your work, but your journey, your thoughts, and your philosophy with us today. It's been an absolute pleasure.

W: Thank you. I truly enjoyed our conversation.

I: And I do hope we'll have you back again in a couple of years to see where this incredible journey has taken you next.