



*Susannah Marren*

## 52: The Debut Author's Life

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to another exciting episode of DIY MFA Radio. In today's episode, I will be interviewing Susannah Marren, who is the debut author of *Between the Tides*. But before we dive into this interview, I wanted to remind you that the show notes for this episode will be at [diymfa.com/052](http://diymfa.com/052), because it's Episode 52.

I also wanted to mention an exciting thing that is going on at DIY MFA right now. We have a writing conference, an online writing conference that will be happening in October, and we have just opened the doors in the last few weeks for an early bird registration. Early bird registration closes in September, so, if you're interested in going to this conference, definitely hop on over. I will be including the link to the event in our show notes page, but you can also head on over to [diymfa.com/writerignitercon2015](http://diymfa.com/writerignitercon2015). That's the name of the conference, Writer Igniter Con.

I am really excited to be sharing this event with you. It'll be an opportunity for you to learn from some top experts in the field, get a chance to hear agents critiquing first pages and other queries and log lines and things of that nature. And it'll also be a chance for you to connect with me because I will be at the conference the entire weekend. Even though it is virtual, there will be opportunities to chat within the virtual classroom. And basically, you can come to this event no matter where you are, because you can even show up in your pajamas because it's totally online, and yeah, on the webs. So anyway, I really hope you'll consider joining me for this event. I'm so, so excited for it, but without further ado, let's head on over to our interview.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and I am so thrilled for today's interview. Today, I am speaking with Susannah Marren, who is originally from Long Beach Island, New Jersey, and currently lives in Manhattan with her family and still spends her summers on the Jersey Shore. She's also the author of the fabulous debut novel *Between the Tides*. I've just started reading this book, it is fabulous and I'm already hooked. I'm very excited to speak to her today and to introduce her to you. Welcome, Susannah.

**Susannah Marren:** Oh, thank you. It's a thrill to be here.

**GP:** Wonderful. Let's just dive right on into our questions. What inspired you to write *Between the Tides*?

**SM:** Well, I've always been very, very interested in the roles that are prescribed for women in our society. And what do we really owe ourselves? What do we owe our responsibility? What do we owe in terms of responsibility to our children and our partners? When I created these two characters, Lainie and Jess, I was continually thinking about how their daily life played out, you know, what was the truth and what was, what they thought they should put forth, which I think is a real issue for many women.



**GP:** Absolutely. As a working mom and wife myself, I know the struggles and the constant kind of balancing, juggling act that has to happen for being a woman who also wants to have a career, in particular, a creative career. Your character, Lainie, is an artist, correct?

**SM:** Yes. And that was very, very meaningful to me as a writer. I love art and the art world, and I've been aware that it's more difficult for women in many ways. And because Lainie lives in New York City, as you know, in the beginning of the book, she's really, she's gone, a life with other women artists, and it's very competitive and it's quite authentic. It's very real to her and she's put her art aside, the kind of art she did before she married Charles in order to raise her four children.

**GP:** It's interesting how you weave the silky myth into that whole story. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**SM:** Well, the silky myth is one of my favorites. I've often thought of, you know, I don't want to give away anything, but the silky myth is compelling because it also asks the question, what do we owe ourselves? What do we owe our families? What is it to be a wife? And of course, it's a very magical story and it's fabulous, but it also has a lot to do with how Lainie lives.

And as you know, if you're reading the book, you know her daughter Matilde, who's a very big part of this story. And let me digress to just say the mother-daughter bond is so meaningful to me, and so resonant for so many women. So, you know her daughter, Matilde, really relates to the silky legend.

**GP:** Very cool. What was the experience of writing this book? What did you enjoy the most about it?

**SM:** I think, and now I'm writing a new novel, so, I think it's the same for me in an ongoing way. I think that you really live and breathe your characters, that they're with you. I would say to myself, "What would Lainie think? What would Jess say?" You know, because Jess is the other main character. "What would do they do in this instance?"

It's really always a part of you. I found that the writing was wonderful, and I really understood my characters. And then I also workshoped it in a small writing group with a group of people, I've been with small group for a very long time, and that was also very helpful. So, it was the writing and it was listening, and it was going back to the writing.

**GP:** What did you find was the most challenging aspect of writing this book?

**SM:** Well, I knew the end very early on, and it always kept me going. Many people have said, you know, the sort of readers who've read it ahead—family, friends, some reviewers—that the ending is very surprising. Because I knew the end always informed the story, I found it really— it's almost like it was a path.

**GP:** In terms of knowing the ending, did that present particular challenges, especially because it was a surprise? Did you find yourself kind of having to balance giving away too much too soon? How did that work for you?

**SM:** I actually think that the story drove itself forward in a way that I felt I almost had no choice, but this ending, understanding my characters as I do and I hope readers do—And so I knew that every chapter would be leading up to an ending or really a resolution. I think a lot about the novels that I love and the writers that I love. I talked a lot with my writing group about suspense in a novel, and it's unexpected. I wanted to convey that and I hope that I did.

**GP:** Very cool.



**SM:** So, each chapter drove the story forward. Also, I was very interested in the families that both Jess and Lainie have; the children and, of course, the marriages, their husbands. So, you know, just the relationships as well as the action, those all drive the story forward.

**GP:** Very cool. Let's go back to those thematic elements. You talked a little bit about the silky myth, and then you also mentioned that art is a very big component in your story. What drew you to these particular themes? Is there any significance to your own experience? What brought you to these themes?

**SM:** Well, there's no question that, you know, growing up on Long Beach island and weathering storms and knowing which way the wind blows instinctively; I think that that was definitely important to me. As I said earlier, the idea of a woman artist—I think a woman's place in the work world, and you mentioned that about yourself, whether it's creative work such as being an artist, or something that's corporate, or somewhere in-between.

I think that for women with families and in marriages that might be conventional, if not exactly traditional, I think that we're looking at quite a balancing act. Women make different decisions. I know that from having been married with children. I myself know it. So, what are the decisions? Well, there's this huge dichotomy between working women and not working women. And there's a huge dichotomy between the suburbs and cities and small towns. Each of it has an identity that we relate to. How much more involved can you be then if you're the mother of children, finding friends for your children.

Lainie goes into a new town. I think that's always very challenging; everyone's giving—I'm not giving away anything because it's the first chapter of the book. Lainie leaves her beloved New York, where she also loves the waterways, just loves everything about the Hudson River and the East River and the Qantas Canal and Red Hook, Brooklyn. Lainie is always about water. That's what she paints, that's what she loves. And then she moves to a landlocked town, and it's a very different experience for her, so I was always conscious of that.

**GP:** That's really fascinating. As a fellow New Yorker, I absolutely could relate to Lainie's instinct of just like—ugh, being put in the suburbs. I can only imagine how constraining that must have been for her. And so you talked about the geography and moving from New York to the suburbs, and then also sort of the connection to the shore and all of that.

You mentioned that you're originally from the shore. And so it seemed to me like there might have been certain things that seemed familiar in your story. Things like the old adage, write what you know. Were there parallels, other parallels, between you and Lainie that you can talk about?

**SM:** I definitely know that Lainie is a product of my imagination, but she exists to ask us the question. I mean, she partly exists, you know, as I said, to be a mother of young children, to still have your own voice; this is something I've been keenly conscious of.

And then also Jess. Jess also reminds me of another type of woman. You know, when I was writing the book I said to my book agent, I said, "You know, we'll ask ourselves, are you a Lainie or a Jess? The way we ask ourselves, 'Are you a Betty or a Veronica?'"

Just the very different type, but in the end, also very similar because being a mother, if life is a pie is such a big piece of the pie, being a wife, fitting in in a society, and how much that's a part of our lives, especially when we're raising children. So, in that sense, I, and be in the whole wifeness of it—So, in that sense, yes, I really do relate to both Lainie and Jess.



**GP:** I like what you said too, that the characters are a product of the imagination, because I think a lot of writers, especially when they're starting out, they have this notion that like either characters are completely different from who they are or they'll sort of take their own lives and then fictionalize it, sort of, barely. I like that you know there is a distinction there that these are characters, they have their own lives, but there are elements that you can find some common ground with them.

So, I love that. What are some of the advantages? When you're writing something that is familiar, obviously, there are advantages, you know the places, you know the setting, like your backyard, because it might be your backyard. What are some other advantages of writing something that's close to your own experience?

**SM:** Well, I have always been curious about writers in terms of places, almost a character in the novel. And if we look at it this way, well, then two places are taken away from, really taken away from Lainie. One is New York, a place/character to her, something so dear to her. She yearns for it when she's not there. She finds that going in for the day is not at all the same; as we know, it's a different experience. And so she has to adjust to that.

But also, you know, Lainie spent her summers in Cape May. Cape May is a very beautiful part of the most Southern part of New Jersey. She really yearns for that as well. She finds that really two big parts of her life are taken away. They still exist, but not in the same way, not in the same tempo.

**GP:** All right. So, this is fascinating. She's displaced. She no longer has a connection to two places that really ground her in her life. How does Lainie cope with that? And how might that be reflected in the way readers can learn to cope with these types of displacement in their own life?

**SM:** Well, again, without giving away too much of the story, she's fortunate enough at the beginning of the tale, to run into Jess, whom she's known for many, many years. That really is wonderful to run into an old friend. I think for many women, just revisiting an old friendship and getting to spend time again with a friend with whom you shared experiences many years ago is very exciting. So, it's kind of thrilling to see an old friend in a very unknown place for Lainie. Jess is entrenched in, again, without giving away the whole story, she is very, very much a part of Elliot, the fictitious town I've put Lainie's family in, a town near Bedminster, New Jersey that I named Elliot. So, Jess is sort of, you know—She's sort of the queen bee of Elliot. Jess is a good person for Lainie to know.

**GP:** Absolutely. That's an interesting contrast too, to that group of friends from the beginning of the story, her artist friends that you mentioned earlier because they seem more like kind of rebels and rebellious in their—You know, they don't want to fit the mold.

**SM:** Right, a very different experience, different gestalt and really different goals. And that's another theme I like, that we're not exactly twins. You know, women, we strongly identify with one another, but we're not all exactly the same. And you know, that twinning syndrome is, you know, oh, I have children and we live in this town, and therefore, we must be close; versus my friends who are artists and never married. You know, is there just one way to live your life? Is there one way to have a friendship? Is it all about mirroring one another? Or can you just really be drawn to each other for your intellectual pursuits, your emotional connection?

**GP:** Absolutely. You know what, I love what you mentioned there, because in a way, both the town, Elliot, and the group of artist friends, they're sort of creating their own versions of twinning within those cultures, because I remember distinctly at the beginning, there's that scene where she's with her friends and they're all saying like, "You need to go back to your art and this is how you need to be." They're sort of trying to kind of bring her into their—



**SM:** Exactly. Exactly. Well, that's what they believe in. One of my messages in this novel is we must be true to ourselves. It's great to be influenced. It's great to be part of a group. And she is a part of a group of artists. It's much harder to become a part of the group of mothers in Elliot where mothering takes precedence over many things, many parts of one's life in the group she meets. So, that's harder for Lainie, but the group—But I do hope that my readership will see also that being pressured by the group of artists is also kind of hard for her. So, Lainie is an outsider in every way.

**GP:** It's interesting too, because you talk about the mother-daughter relationship. How does Matilde handle, you know—I mean, she strikes me as a little bit of an outsider as well in the family. She kind of has her own unique way of being. The other members of the family, especially the boys, kind of gravitate to the dad. There's the little girl too, who's also the younger, the twin daughter; she also seems to kind of be like part of the pack. Matilde is a little, she's got her own take. How does that fit it?

**SM:** Well, Matilda is a 12-year-old daughter. I really loved writing Matilde. I loved being inside her head, and she was inside my head. She and Lainie are very, very, very connected. The mother-daughter bond is just something for so many of us that is so meaningful, so profound really. And Claire, the little sister, she's the five-year-old twin sister, right? She's the twin sister to Jack. She really is young and not as looped in to Lainie. Lainie and Matilde have something very special going. And of course, the question is, is this best for Matilde?

**GP:** Absolutely.

**SM:** And is it best for Lainie? That's another hard question to answer because it's nuanced. I hope that a lot of this story is, but this is definitely nuanced. You know, there's a lot about it that's very good, and there's a lot about it that makes you think that; I think makes one say, "Lainie, don't lean on your daughter." Right?

**GP:** It's interesting—I mean, as a mom, so I have a three-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter.

**SM:** Oh, they're young children.

**GP:** Very, very young. There is that part. Like, I totally see myself doing this sometimes where you try to—You don't even notice you're doing it, but you start to kind of project what you want your kids to be or what you want of them without even thinking about it. Like, I'll say silly things like, "Oh, do you want to go to the same school that mommy went to?" Like talking about whatever, like, the same high school I went to or the same college. And then all of a sudden, I'll catch myself and be like, "Wait, I'm not asking my kid what they want to do. I'm sort of projecting what I want them to do into their existence." I think that that's something that a lot of parents struggle with, that balance between helping to guide and raise these little humans into adult humans, but also not kind of shoving them into a direction that we want them to be.

**SM:** I agree with you completely, Gabriela. I think that it is a very, very delicate balance, a very delicate dance. You know, on the one hand, if you love art as Lainie does, you hope that your children will love art, not just as an artist, but to appreciate art; and if you love water, the same thing. If you're a math whiz, you hope that one of your children will reflect that talent too. I think that that's only natural, but again, where do we draw the line?

And with a 12-year-old daughter, it's a pretty precarious age for girls. And here she is in a new town, and that's really a part of the book. You know, Lainie's navigating a path. Each of her children navigates a path. Tom, the eldest; the eldest of the four children, he is quite facile. He really ends up with a lot of friends pretty quickly.



**GP:** That's not so surprising to me actually, because even from the get-go, he kind of strikes me as almost like the mini version of the dad. And the dad also seems to kind of have everything figured out and everything settled, and kind of, he has the game plan. I can see that reflected in Tom.

What I think is interesting with Matilde is how, in some respects, she almost seems to know Lainie better than Lainie knows herself, in some moments. I remember the conversation right at the opening of the book, they're talking about the silky myth. Matilde just cuts right to the chase, like she gets it. It's almost spooky like how insightful this kid is for her age.

**SM:** Well, yeah, Matilde is like that, but she's also just a 12-year-old girl. She's a bit of both. She really carries—If you believe in family systems, which I happen to, I think her role is, I think she's burdened. I think she's burdened on some level with a mother who's quite dreamy and a father who's a very successful surgeon. She sees it all. Maybe she has a bit of that artistic nature and a very sensitive person. Each of her children, each is very different. I liked that as part of this story too. You know, this is a tale about each family member recreating herself or himself, and forging a new path in a new environment.

**GP:** Let's shift gears a little bit and talk a little bit about the publishing process. This is your debut novel. And for a lot of pre-published writers, the debut novel is kind of the Holy Grail, that's what writers are waiting to get to. And of course, you and I both know that there's a vast career that goes on beyond the debut novel, but this is sort of that big first hurdle that is sort of mystifying to a lot of writers. I was hoping you could kind of give us an inside look of what that process is like as a first-time author.

**SM:** Well, I have a very wonderful agent and a wonderful publisher at St. Martin's Press. My editor is amazing. I think that what works so well for me was how they related to the story, how much they really saw the story as something to get out into the world. I thought it was a great process. There were, if you want specifics, there were two go-rounds, the pass and the second pass, and copyediting. I just thought it went very smoothly.

I will say that the book jacket, which I just love and I feel that it really—I feel that it really represents the book, was the first one they showed me. I've heard other stories about going back and forth with a book jacket, but this design just completely represents my novel. I had a great, great experience.

**GP:** Was there anything about the experience that might have surprised you or that was different from what you maybe might have expected beforehand?

**SM:** Well, I think that fiction writing is, you know, the novel is so dear to you. I was surprised at how much respect there was for that. I don't know what I expected, but I found that no one ever questioned anything about how I had written the book, and that's very meaningful. I've heard that sometimes an editor would like something different, but that really isn't, you know, "I like this, but I want that." And people have talked to me about that, but this really went so smoothly. I mean, not to be boring, but it was really, it was really joyous for me.

**GP:** Well, these smooth-sailing stories are often the ones that we don't hear about, right? Often, you'll hear about the nightmare stories where people are like, "oh, and then they stuck me with a book jacket that was just awful. And then they did this and that. And they made me rewrite the whole thing in 24 hours." I think it's also very heartening for writers who are hoping to go the traditional publishing route to hear that there are situations where it does go smoothly, and that's great. That's awesome.

**SM:** Thank you. It went so smoothly. As I said, when I saw that book jacket design, I felt so understood.

**GP:** It's beautiful too. It almost makes me think of, sort of, the painting a little bit, like it's got sort of that painterly feel to it, and it's just—Yeah, it's lovely.



**SM:** Oh, thank you.

**GP:** What's next for you? Do you have other projects in the works? You mentioned that you're working on a new novel.

**SM:** I am. I am. I signed a contract for a new novel with St Martin's, and I'm very excited about that. And again, the characters fill my head, and what they would do and how they feel, you know? It's just great.

**GP:** So, as far as the process goes, you said you've signed a contract. So, you're writing the novel right now, or is it like on proposal?

**SM:** No, I'm writing it.

**GP:** But the first one, did you have the full manuscript before querying it?

**SM:** I did.

**GP:** So, that's a different experience too, like writing before querying and then, versus writing with already a proposed, you know, an outline or a sort of a contract and a deadline. What's that like? How is it different?

**SM:** It's very different because I said to my agent that I had this idea, and I spoke with my editor. I wrote about eight pages and submitted it, and they bought it. It was really—it was so uplifting and so exciting. Then I wrote an annotated chapter outline, and then I started to write it.

I'd say I'm about, I don't know, 25,000 words into it. It'll be about 80,000 words; and I'm really loving it. You're right, Gabriela. It's very different to have a story in your mind and start to write it knowing it's due on a certain date, but it's also quite magical and wonderful to know that you have that.

**GP:** Absolutely.

**SM:** I feel very fortunate, very happy.

**GP:** It's nice also to sort of have the security of knowing, this book will—Because when you're writing the first book and you're writing, creating that manuscript, there are writers who have first novels that are still sitting in their bottom drawer and like, that book, they don't know if that's going to come to light and end up being published. But kind of knowing like, "Okay, this book's already got the green light," it adds a new set of pressures, but also a certain security to the process, I would imagine.

**SM:** That's exactly right. Look, I would say to anyone who has a novel in the cabinet, to dust it off and take a look at it, really, because I think that it's so hard for novelists to. You know, one of my cousins is a writer, and we always talk about how solitary it is to be a writer, to do that, to choose this as your career. I would say that, you know, take another look at that novel. I've read some great newspaper articles about people who have dusted off novels, and gotten them out there and gotten contracts. I think it's very promising and upbeat. People should think about it.

**GP:** Absolutely. I can think of several colleagues and friends who have had that debut, not the debut, but like the first manuscript they wrote in the bottom drawer. And then they might go on and write two, three other manuscripts, eventually get one of those later ones published. And then once they've kind of built their brand as an author, built their credibility, they can then go back and also built up their



writing chops— Because sometimes that first story might not be the right first story to get published, but it might be a fabulous story to get published once you've kind of grown into it as a writer.

I know I have my own manuscripts that I kind of needed to let marinate and let grow, because I wasn't ready to really do the stories justice, but now later years I might actually have those writing chops and be able to pull it off. So, I think you're totally right that writers should never forget their manuscripts in the bottom drawer, but every so often dust them all off, see what you can do with them. See if you can bring, breathe some life back into them and get them out there.

**SM:** You make a very salient point here. And that is, what do you do with the novel you wrote that might or might not work? And could you maybe update it or add some cell phone since you started or texting or whatever it might need? Because with this novel, *Between the Tides*, I had been in this writing group for while and I was workshopping another novel. Gabriela, I kept rewriting it. And finally, one day in this very small writing group, there're just four of us. It's a powerful group. One of the writers said to me, "Wow, don't you have anything else to bring?" And I said, "What do you mean?" I couldn't even wrap my mind around it. And he said, "Well, you've been workshopping this for a while. You've written it first-person close. You've written it third-person close. You've added this, you've added that. Do you have anything else?"

I went to the cabinet and I pulled out a very skeletal, maybe 50 pages of *Between the Tides*. I looked at it and I rewrote a few parts right away. I brought it back to my writing group and they all said, "Where have you been hiding this?" This is the book that's coming out. So, I really encourage people, based on my experience, to dust off what's in the cabinet.

**GP:** That's so great. I'm so glad that you mentioned that because I think a lot of writers, they do kind of, they're afraid to sometimes go back to those perhaps abandoned novels. There there's a danger, I think, that sometimes writers, they pour so much of themselves into those very first manuscripts, and then those manuscripts just need time to rest. And sometimes, you keep kind of working at the same manuscript over and over and over, and you can kind of beat the life out of it. It needs to go in the bottom drawer for a little while, but then you need to bring it back.

**SM:** Or, as in my case, I was doing exactly what you said. I was just rewriting and rewriting a very beloved early novel. And then when one of the members made a comment, which really threw me for a loop, I decided to do just, to go and look at what else I had. I had started many other projects over the years and I had also written a bunch of screenplays—I write scripts—And so when I did dust this off and looked at the beginning of a novel, which is what it was, it really was an opportunity. I think that's what so, to me, meaningful about it. It became an opportunity.

**GP:** That's really great. I'm glad that we're really getting a chance to see kind of behind the scenes, what the writing life can look like for an author, because every author's writing life is going to be different, but being able to see how other authors have coped with different challenges, dealt with different hurdles in their writing life, can help a lot of writers to overcome those challenges or similar challenges in their own writing lives. So, that's so great. Thank you so much for sharing all of that.

**SM:** You are welcome. I'm glad we talked about it.

**GP:** Absolutely. Basically at the end of every interview, I always ask the same question to all my writers and professional industry pros who come on the show. And that question is, what is your number one tip for writers?





**SM:** My number one tip would be to write and to not get caught up in the minutia of life so that the day didn't end up having an hour or two even for writing. And actually, Lainie, my character is a good example of how easy it is to get lost in the daily shuffle.

Writing is solitary and it requires enormous concentration and thought, but without it, I think for someone who is truly a writer, it's almost a form of denial, denying yourself what you need. So, for writers everywhere, I say find the time because it's only when we write that we really feel whole, I believe, if we are writers.

**GP:** That's so wonderful. I love that. It totally reflects the DIY MFA mindset and everything that I talk about at DIY MFA. Thank so much for that and thank you for being on the show. This has been absolutely a pleasure.

**SM:** Oh, it's been as—I think I told you in the beginning, it's really a treat, a thrill. I'm so happy to meet you.

**GP:** Wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Susannah. And to all my listeners, keep writing and keep being awesome.

