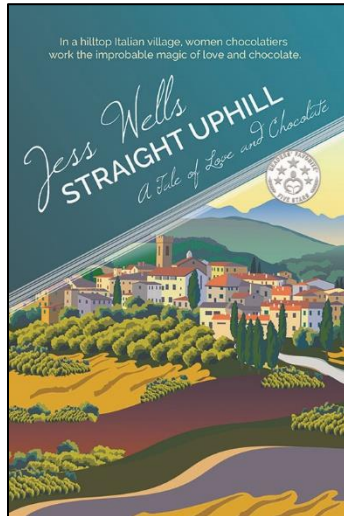


Interview with the Author: Jess Wells, *Straight Uphill: A Tale of Love and Chocolate* (Cotero/Fireship Press, 2020)



Q: Most love stories focus on romantic love and there is certainly a lot of that in this book, but you also deal with other kinds of love, don't you?

A: Yes, I wanted to discuss a broader spectrum of love, including love of mastery of a craft or art; love of community; maternal love, heartbreak and loss of love, even the willingness to settle for the echo of love, the remembrance of love. Plus, the way the imaginary ideal of love can embitter genuine love; fear of love and the vulnerability that love requires; the tough choice, especially for women, between love and freedom. And love of purpose, grappling with a shifting sense of purpose. So much of what we do is caught up with some type of love that it became a really fascinating topic to me.

Q: And why chocolate?

A: I recently became an empty-nester and it was so surprising to have time on my hands that I was able to ask myself "what else do you want to do?" I decided that I wanted to try to become a master chocolatier. It's a surprisingly difficult substance to work with but for the first time in my life I had a hobby that was compelling to me the way a hobby is supposed to be I guess: when I get started, the hours disappear. (My hands are so ruined after years of keyboarding that I'll have to settle for micro-batches, done at a middling level, but it's a hobby at least.) When

you're a writer, it's hard to know which came first: learning about something so that you can write about it or writing about it because you have learned it. In either case, after hours and hours of work with chocolate, an imaginary line of chocolatiers walked onto the stage of my mind.

Q: This is the first book you've written that is both modern and historical. How did that happen?

A: I always have several projects going and I had gotten stuck on a historical piece, so I thought "just write something that's fun and easy, something modern." I have had this daydream of romance that was set in a small European town and was happily writing away when I started to devise this back story about World War II and discovered that I had a lot of fun writing this historical part. It made me realize two things. First, that I could continue to go back in time in *Straight Uphill*, and that I should do that for the sense of balance in the story; and second, that I really do love to write historical work. Given the chance to write an entirely modern piece, I dove into World War II, World War I, and the 1600s. That was revealing to me.

Q: Your previous novel, *The Mandrake Broom*, was pretty dark. Why write about love?

A: While I was stuck on this historical piece I thought it would be fun to write a romance and even toyed with the idea of publishing it under a pseudonym but the longer I wrote the more I realized that love is not just romantic love, and that I had something to say about the many facets of love, the many types of love that have nothing to do with romance. And, of course, I'm definitely not opposed to romantic love, being married for 16 years!

Q: Tell me about the title. Why *Straight Uphill*?

A: I think love is like that, frequently. It's a struggle; it requires dedication and stamina. And while there is a chance to reach the top and enjoy the magnificent vista of life, there is as much a chance you can go backwards, can suddenly lose your footing so to speak, get on a slippery slope that sends you back downhill. You step forward in small increments, building on each little display of love.

Q: Why do you call it "a tale of love and chocolate" instead of a 'story of love and chocolate'?

A: I love to read magical realism and, honestly, wish I could master the art of it, so my writing is increasingly fantastical. In *The Mandrake Broom*, the protagonist has almost supernatural powers with plants and lives a tremendously long life because of a potion from her mother. In *A Slender Tether*, the middle story has an almost mythical ending. Calling this book a tale gives me the freedom to write things that are not quite fables but definitely not standard narrative fiction, so to speak. In *Straight Uphill*, an example of something a bit fantastical would be the end of Anya's life and the accolades she is given.



Q: Your last two novels have been set in the Middle Ages. In *Straight Uphill* there is a short, humorous section in the 1600s but most of the historical material involves the two World Wars. How was it to change eras?

A: Deceptively difficult. While there is more that you can take for granted because they are things that have carried through to the modern era, there are still the pitfalls of accuracy that you have to keep an eye on. When did the outboard motor come into use? What was the role of the Italian resistance in the war? But I love to research so while it was frustrating to come up with an idea and discover that it was anachronistic, it's still fun to dig up the facts that make a scene feel real.

Q: You say that another theme in the book is a shifting sense of purpose. Tell me about this concept.

A: After working full time for so long, it was a real shock to consider doing things that were not necessarily productive, that didn't earn money or were done for someone else. Reading for research feels productive but reading Shakespeare just because it's a joy seemed very indulgent and, in a way pointless. When you're a parent you spend a good 20 years putting your child's needs ahead of your own with an internal dialogue that says, "that thing you want to do for yourself isn't important." Who are you when you are not a hands-on mother and a full-time employee? How do you deal with this shifting sense of purpose? And since I am a writer, every internal struggle goes down on paper.

***Straight Uphill: A Tale of Love and Chocolate* by Jess Wells**

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