

Regi Claire interview: The fight of her life

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By DAVID ROBINSON



Regi Claire: the story of how she fell for Ron Butlin is stranger than most fiction.

Picture: Dan Phillips

THE PHOTOGRAPHER HAS JUST called, and Ron Butlin and Regi Claire are three floors down in the garden at the back of their Newington tenement. I can hear the photographer working out how to get his picture, hear them shouting at their golden retriever to either get in or out of the picture. I'll wait up here, I decide, in their kitchen, at their table. They're friends, so I won't nose around.

Ron is Edinburgh's Makar, the official poet of the city; Regi (pronounced "Reggae", like the music) is his Swiss-German wife. Her collection of short stories, *Fighting It*, was launched on Thursday, their wedding anniversary. I know Ron better than Regi, but I can't say I know either well: a couple of walks with our dogs, not much more than that.

As I wait for them to come back up the stairs, I get to thinking about friendship. It's odd, isn't it, that we can be friends with people we hardly know? Yet in December, when I got an e-mail from Ron saying that Regi's cancer seemed to have cleared away completely, I was as delighted as if I'd known her for 20 years. Why should that be, I'm thinking, as I wait for them in their kitchen. But I know the answer.

Ron and Regi are one of those couples who just belong together. Every night, while Regi cooks the meal, Ron reads to her. They've ploughed through a

small library of books that way: right now they're on to Somerset Maugham's short stories, and after that they'll move onto some by Scott Fitzgerald that Ron bought at a charity sale last month. As I sit at the table from which Ron reads, waiting for them to come back into the room, that's not too hard to imagine: two writers, sharing, talking, reading, their golden retriever Leila stretched out on her mattress against the wall, rösti on the hob, maybe Regi quietly chopping tomatoes for the salad while Ron turns the page ...

Yet all through the second half of last year, that domestic idyll was on hold. Last summer their golden retriever Amber had to be put down after a tumour ruptured in her liver. The house was covered with scaffolding, with builders replacing stones on its front and back and repairing its roof. And in August Regi began a combined course of radiotherapy and chemotherapy for late-diagnosed bowel cancer, popping tablets so toxic she was told to use gloves to handle them.

Her agent had placed her short story collection with a publisher just before all of this happened. *Fighting It*. At times it seemed a cruelly ironic title: how could she fight anything when she couldn't read, couldn't write, couldn't sleep, could hardly eat any of the hospital food, could hardly concentrate on anything apart from the burning pain in her stomach?

Yet there the book was, all the same, slowly coming to life just as the tumour was being chemically, but painfully, shrunk within her. She'd never thought about the book's cover image, but when she saw it, that picture of a woman struggling out of a frame, out of confinement, it just seemed right. Because that's what she was trying to do too, even in the dark days of despair when she was learning to cope with the temporary ileostomy bag, even when she could feel herself growing weaker and weaker and couldn't keep her food down, even when Ron was wearing himself out with worry, with caring for her and looking after the new puppy they'd bought to replace Amber. In hospital the cover image of the book became her talisman. She didn't want to die before the book came out. If the tumour didn't shrink, there was a one in four chance that she would not make it.

But it did. Hence that e-mail from Ron at the end of the year. Regi was back home. The tumour had been zapped to nothingness, he'd put a small Christmas tree next to her camp bed in the living room, and was answering get-well cards and e-mails. Her parents came over from Switzerland to help fix things in the flat and care for the new puppy. Slowly, a corner was being turned.

Even before then, Regi had been able to proofread the stories for *Fighting It*. They're an imaginative, wide-ranging bunch, from stories about a Swiss railway track inspector to a would-be transsexual settling in the Borders. But even though they were all written before Regi was diagnosed with cancer, and 14 of the 16 had got nothing to do with her own life, the two that did – one about a woman with cancer, another about a woman coming to terms with the death of her dog – seem ominous.

She's back in the kitchen now, so I ask her how the experience of living with cancer differed from what she had imagined. "It didn't," she says flatly. "I wouldn't change a word of the story. I wouldn't need to. My imagination had evoked that situation without me ever knowing it – in a strange way, I was glad to find that out."

Without Ron, she admits, she would never have become a writer. Growing up in a Swiss village to the south of Lake Constance and studying at Zurich University, she had no such ambition. That only came by degrees – and the fact that her long-term Swiss boyfriend decided, for his PhD, to study the works of ... Ron Butlin!

"I must write this up," she laughs, "because it's just such an odd love story." She pours me a cup of tea, shoves a plate of Swiss chocolate in front of me and begins to tell it.

"I'd been going out with my then boyfriend for most of my twenties. He'd lived with me in Aberdeen for a year when I was an exchange student there, and that had sowed his interest in Scottish fiction. He picked out four novels – one of them was Ron's – and decided he would write his thesis about him. We all met in 1989 for the first time, and they kept in touch."

There was no spark of attraction between Regi and Ron back then, but when they met again three years later there was beginning to be. By Easter 1992 they had started writing to each other. Her boyfriend, I suggest, must have been doubly jealous. "I think he might have been a bit annoyed, yes!"

In September that year she decided to go over to Britain to meet Ron, and wrote to tell him. She heard nothing back, and she had just about resolved not to call on him in Edinburgh when she got a telephone call from her Swiss boyfriend. The letter she'd sent saying she was on her way to meet him had been returned unopened. Ron wasn't ignoring her; he just hadn't got her message. Without her boyfriend telling her this, she and Ron wouldn't be together now.

Even then, they didn't fall in love, as Ron thought they might both be on the rebound from their current relationships. "I remember we went for a walk on Arthur's Seat and he told me he didn't think it would work out. He'd brought pork pies and thought that'd be a nice picnic. I never liked pork pies. And I was so disappointed, because I knew by then that I wanted to be with Ron."

Within two months he'd changed his mind. He visited Regi in Switzerland and their relationship began. Seven months later they were married. And here's the curious thing: the very day they started going out, Regi's boyfriend met the girl he was to marry.

Although she'd never written stories before, she was doing so now. At first she wrote in German, but she soon switched to English. "Maybe it was a little bit easier for me because there's already this split in languages for people like me who grew up speaking Swiss German. At school, on the news, in railway station announcements, it's only High German – which is quite different – that's used, so generally you don't find yourself writing in the language in which you think.

"Once you get the nuances right, writing in English actually freed up my imagination and creativity. The hardest thing to do is to write dialogue, and most of my early stories didn't have much of it. They do now though." And sure enough, you could read any of the stories in *Fighting It* and not realise that they are written by someone who didn't speak English as her first language.

Looking back on my interview notes, I realise it contains two stories. One of them is threaded through with contingency and chance. A telephone call not made, a book not chosen, an illness not fought – just one of those things happens and this evening Ron isn't reading Somerset Maugham's stories to Regi as she cooks the meal. That warm circle of books and love is either broken or no longer there.

The other story is more straightforward, although it's intertwined with the first. It's about learning to think in a language that isn't your own, learning to write in it, pulling stories apart and making them better. Putting stories out in the world, using all your imagination, all your will. Expressing yourself. And yes: fighting it.

- *Fighting It*, by Regi Claire, is published this week by Two Ravens Press, priced £9.99. Regi reads at the Edinburgh International Book Festival on 19 August.

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