

PORTRAIT

PHOTOGRAPHER:
DAWN MARIE JONES

Turning over a new page



Regi Claire: newly published book *The Waiting* which unfurls around the Grange.

She brings a questing eye and ear to her writings. Regi Claire whose native tongue is Swiss-German believes her roots give her a unique insight. For the third in his series **PORTRAIT RICHARD MOWE** meets another celebrated habituée of the area, who has carved her own special niche among Scotland's literati both at home and abroad

She can often be spotted being taken for a walk through the leafy streets of the Grange by her sturdy golden retriever Leila. But there is much more to writer Regi Claire's meanderings than mere canine bonding and exercise.

Her walks have proved truly inspirational and have informed her latest book *The Waiting* which is described as "a tale of female empowerment from the 1930s to the present." Claire, who was born and raised in Switzerland (a small town near Zurich to be precise) can converse in four languages but has chosen to write exclusively in English. She moved here almost two decades ago, having got married to Scottish writer Ron Butlin (the current Edinburgh Makar). Her former boyfriend had written his MA thesis on Butlin's work.

Claire is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Queen Margaret University and teaches creative writing at the National Gallery of Scotland. She has published four books, including two short-story collections, *Fighting It* and *Inside-Outside*, and two novels, *The Beauty Room* and *The Waiting*. Her work has twice been shortlisted for a Saltire Book of the Year

Award, and has been longlisted for the MIND Book of the Year Award as well as the Edge Hill Short Story Prize for best collection. For *The Waiting* she received a writer's bursary from the Swiss Arts Council purely on the strength of the quality of its first chapter. "This book is totally Scottish. It's set mostly in Edinburgh and partly in the Grange. My first Scottish book," she declares.

She says that the first glimmer of the idea came when she was walking Leila through the Grange to the Meadows. "I heard this woman's strident voice calling for her dog Barney. He was always scavenging. I ended up walking along with her and her friend, another elderly lady and her dog. Then later I met Dorothy on her own and we got into conversation. She started telling me these stories about her life and her past. I was amazed by her tales. Some of which were quite crazy stuff," she recalls.

"Literally, though, the tales were just a springboard. Later on we became firm friends and she used to invite me for afternoon tea which always started with a gin and tonic for her and a vodka and tonic for me, then sandwiches, cake and

finally tea or coffee. Ron would often come to pick me up because it became a bit late and I was a bit merry."

Claire had never thought she would write anything that derived from these encounters. "Then one day I found myself writing something that eventually became chapter three. It was just the phrase 'Marlene had a horse face' in other words a long face. I took my inspiration from that one phrase and the shape of the face and that gave me the character. Even then I did not know what I was doing, but I realised that it was the beginning of something more than a short story. So it really was this notion of me being inspired, and then creating my own world"

Frequently she finds her creativity is stimulated by everyday occurrences. "Even just seeing someone in the street or hearing someone utter a phrase gives you the key and you can use the essence of that to go off in different directions. The way they talk, the way they smile, and the way they move... and that encapsulates something that might make a story. "I often write snatches of things when I get home and file them away. Years later I



Regi Claire: "The Grange is very peaceful and on one of my walks along Lovers' Loan I pictured how I could work it into the narrative."

PORTRAIT

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might look through them and find a kernel of an idea there. Quite a few of my stories have started like that " She has dedicated the book to Dorothy, the woman who provided the vital spark. When she told the old lady that she was thinking of using certain key events of her life in her story, Dorothy was delighted. "I never showed her anything and she sadly died before the book was finished and published. She was in her 80s. Later I met her daughter walking her little dog in the Grange. Sally and I have become very good friends, and the conviviality has carried on from mother to daughter."

Such close connections to the place she is writing about are more important to Claire than most. "Obviously I did not grow up in Scotland. Being Swiss, I do not have that sense of Scottish place and history. I did a lot of research – even about fashion and shops and things like that, and names that have changed. I think being an outsider gives me a unique perspective. The way I use language is different and unusual, and it brings things alive because I see them through fresh eyes. But I have to get the detail right." The reviews have been encouraging. Tom Adair in Scotland on Sunday suggested: "Much of the relish this novel provides resides in its author's gift for language. It marks a writer who challenges herself as she does the reader. And she can write." Laura Profumo in The Times Literary

Supplement wrote: "Reminiscent at times of an early Ian McEwan... there are moments of brilliant period detail." Claire's most recently published short story was selected for *The Best British Short Stories 2013*. She is working towards another book of short stories and a new novel set in Switzerland.

She loves giving readings of her work – and meeting people. When she writes she always hears the words in her head. "I work a bit like a poet, perhaps because English is not my native language, and I read the sentences aloud to myself because they have to have a rhythm."

Claire comes from a family who are enthusiastic about books and music. Her mother was a librarian and her father was a teacher. "I had books read to me on my parents' knees, bedtime stories, and I adored that. Books and piano playing were my only hobbies. A friend of mine once told me that I had to go out into the real world and not spend all my time wrapped up in books. I replied that books brought the real world to me. Books allow you to use your imagination." The tradition of having books read aloud continues with her husband who reads to her while she is cooking. "Admittedly the cooking process gets rather protracted as I keep asking for just another page," she says. Whatever the gastronomic result Claire appears to have found the right recipe for her literary ambitions.

EDINBURGH READS

Regi Claire will read from *The Waiting* on 17 Sept, 2.30 – 3.30 at Newington Library 17–21 Fountainhall Road EH9 2LN

The Waiting can be obtained from Word Power Books or bookshops



Regi Claire and Leila on Lovers' Loan