

## A WEE BIT SUPERNATURAL: *Scottish Novelist Regi Claire*

By Ann Cefola

**R**egi Claire's writing has been called "beautifully precise," "heartbreakingly real," and "extraordinary" by literary critics in Scotland where she lives. The author of two short story collections and two novels, Regi is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Queen Margaret University and a creative writing teacher at the National Gallery of Scotland.

Regi's latest novel, *The Waiting* (Word Power Books, 2012), tracks the friendship of two girls through adulthood, evolving a fascinating plot. In weaving the story, Regi contrasts the Calvinism of her native Swiss heritage with Scottish mysticism. This is the perfect moment to talk to a writer who most critics agree is rapidly emerging as an impressive literary voice.

PHOTO OF REGI CLAIRE BY DAWN MARIE JONES, STOYANOV & JONES



**ANN CEFOLA:** When did you start writing, and what titles have you published?

**REGI CLAIRE:** I first dabbled with writing in the mid-nineties. Since then I have had four books published, two collections of short stories—*Inside~Outside* (Scottish Cultural Press, 1998) and *Fighting It* (Two Ravens Press, 2009)—and two novels—*The Beauty Room* (Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and *The Waiting* (Word Power Books, 2012).

**AC:** The back cover of *The Waiting* says it is part fiction and part memoir. What inspired you to write the novel?

**RC:** The inspiration came from an elderly Edinburgh lady called Dorothy, whom I met one day while walking our retriever in the Meadows, the big city park near which we live. Truth be told, it was Dorothy's strident voice as she kept having to shout for her scavenger of a Norfolk terrier that was my first introduction to her. Anyway, we became firm friends (as did our dogs!) and Dorothy started regaling me with stories, rather wild ones in fact, about herself and a girlfriend, way back in the past.

However, I didn't set out to write Dorothy's story. I have always preferred to create my own fictional worlds. *The Waiting* is really an imaginary retelling of what might have been, as Dorothy died suddenly and tragically, before I had written more than forty pages. She never saw any of them. But she did know that I had been awarded a writer's bursary from Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, as well as a writer's award from UBS Cultural Foundation.

**AC:** The plot layers two stories—the girlhood friendship of Marlene and Lizzie, and Lizzie's encounter with Rachel, Marlene's granddaughter, in present time. How did you manage

the deft back-and-forth between two complex narratives?

**RC:** I didn't actually write them separately. And I didn't really plan the individual sections beforehand; it all seemed to work out quite naturally. Of course I had timelines so as to be as accurate as possible within both narratives. For example, the action in the present takes place within the first three weeks of December, during the season of Advent.

**AC:** Lizzie stays faithful to Marlene, even when Marlene consistently hurts her. Is that a deliberate tension you created?

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— Regi Claire  
Author of *The Waiting*

**RC:** Not really. I think such relationships are not that uncommon, relationships involving an element of vicarious living and masochism, of near-fatal attraction. In a sense, Lizzie does get her own back by remaining passive and not making a stand for Marlene when it comes to the crunch. But the original bond between the two of them always proves too strong.

**AC:** I was struck by your accurate and compassionate portrayal of

Lizzie at an advanced age. You seemed to grasp the thought process and what-the-hell attitude of a mature adult. How did you get this insight?

**RC:** Thank you! I have always liked being with older people, and I was very close to my maternal grandmother. Not that she exhibited that much of a what-the-hell attitude—unlike Dorothy! Last but certainly not least, there is the magic of the imagination.

**AC:** You contrast Swiss and Scottish cultures. What has astonished you the most about one or both?

**RC:** When I moved from Switzerland to Scotland in 1993, I assumed that our cultures were essentially pretty similar, both countries being in Western Europe. How wrong I was! Coming from Switzerland, where we can vote on anything from speed limits to the acquisition of fighter jets by the government, I have always taken people power and rights for granted.

By contrast, Britain seems rather dictatorial. The ordinary citizen usually has no say in matters that concern him or her. Just look at the Edinburgh tram fiasco or the overblown cost of the new Scottish Parliament building. I am sure that things would have turned out quite differently had there been more grassroots input and transparency.

**AC:** There is a supernatural element at work which made me think of "the Scottish play." Do you find Scottish culture evokes or embraces such a worldview, and is that force always to be feared? A more positive example in Scotland is Findhorn, a profuse garden said to have thrived through other-worldly guidance.

**RC:** The supernatural (or the uncanny) is something that has always been part of my work, though over the

years I believe it has become more pronounced. My most recent stories might more accurately be called "slipstream" as someone pointed out to me only the other day.

There is indeed a strong supernatural tradition in Scotland that pervades the whole culture, both past and present. But I suspect that rather than the Scottish heritage, it is my Swiss upbringing that has influenced me the most in this respect, especially Swiss and German literature, for example Friedrich Dürrenmatt (*The Visit, The Judge and His Hangman, Suspicion, The Assignment, "The Tunnel," "A Dangerous Game"*), or Jeremias Gotthelf (*The Black Spider*); Goethe, of course (*Faust, Elective Affinities*), as well as Heinrich Kleist and, most disturbingly, E. T. A. Hoffmann.

Then there are the legends. In the region where I grew up, a powerful story still survives which I think will play a central role in my next novel.

So no, I don't regard the force of the "other-worldly" as something intrinsically threatening; it is something to be aware of, something to tap into but not to meddle with.

**AC:** The book travels through almost every decade in the 20th century, and each era felt authentic. Did you do any research, historical or otherwise, for the novel?

**RC:** Yes, quite a lot: I went to the library to study old newspapers, magazines, books about fashion, old post-office directories; I consulted history books and encyclopedias to check on dates and chronologies; and, of course, I did online searches for the more elusive details.

**AC:** *The Waiting* also suggests that the sins of one generation are passed to the next, or a belief in predestination. Can you comment on this philosophical context?

**RC:** I suppose I wanted to thematize both the idea of fate, personified by

the fortune teller Tinker Jeanie, who teaches Marlene the art of palm reading, and the idea of Calvinism. John Calvin was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and greatly influenced John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland—hence the figure of Rachel as a Swiss-Scottish PhD student doing research on the Reformation in Scotland. However, Calvin's doctrine of predestination, of the elect and the damned, is not really discussed in the novel and it is up to the reader to make the connection.

**AC:** In your writing, what themes do you return to and why?

**RC:** I am not sure, actually. To be frank, I tend not to analyze my work because I am a bit superstitious: too much awareness might interfere with my imagination, kill it stone-dead.

**AC:** What experiences, events or activities stimulate your creative process?

**RC:** Meeting people, friends and strangers, and hearing or imagining their stories; travelling—quite a few of my stories have been sparked off by trips; walking Leila, our golden retriever, in the quiet of the nearby cricket ground; reading the intriguing newspaper clippings my mother sends me from Switzerland every so often.

**AC:** Do you have a favorite quote that feeds your writing practice?

**RC:** Not a quote as such. But I do try to encourage myself whenever I'm plagued by self-doubt and fear of failure. Or whenever I find myself procrastinating and doing the housework instead of sitting down to write. "You can do it, Regi," I remind myself then, "Just get on with it!"

**AC:** When you are teaching, what is your sincerest desire for your students to discover or learn?

**RC:** That they learn to trust their imagination; that they find their own unique voice; and that they write what only they can write, not something they think sounds good or impressive.

**AC:** What are you working on now, and is there anything you'd like to create one day that feels a little outrageous?

**RC:** I am working on another collection of short stories and by now have written about a third of it. The stories have all been published (or accepted for publication) in literary magazines and anthologies, most recently in *The Best British Short Stories 2013*. My newest piece, which took months to finish, I sent off only last week.

On and off over the past few years I have also been working on a new novel set in Switzerland. Parts of it, I have been told, are actually pretty outrageous—so much so that I might have to consider toning them down, if just a little!

**AC:** I look forward to reading your new novel, Regi. Thanks for sharing insights into your work and process—it's been fun speaking with you. ■

Ann Cefola is a poet and translator who lives in the New York suburbs. She is the author of *St. Agnes, Pink-Slipped* (Kattywompus Press, 2011), *Sugaring* (Dancing Girl Press, 2007), and the translation *Hence this cradle* (Seismicity Editions, 2007). A Witter Bynner Poetry Translation Residency recipient, she also received the Robert Penn Warren Award judged by John Ashbery. Learn more at [www.anncefolo.com](http://www.anncefolo.com) and [www.annogram.blogspot.com](http://www.annogram.blogspot.com).

*The Waiting* (Nov. 2012) was reprinted this summer, and *The Beauty Room* (2002) is being reissued as a Birlinn e-book (distributed by Faber Factory). For more information, visit Regi Claire's website at [www.regiclaire.com](http://www.regiclaire.com) or the publisher at [www.word-power.co.uk](http://www.word-power.co.uk).