

Five minutes with...

SWISS-BORN AUTHOR, REGI CLAIRE

Regi Claire is a Swiss author who has lived in Scotland for almost twenty years. In that time, she has published four books: two collections of short stories (*Inside~Outside*, *Fighting It*) and two novels (*The Beauty Room* and *The Waiting*). Claire was born and brought up near Lake Constance in Switzerland, but it was only after settling in Scotland that she began to write. Her first published story won the *Edinburgh Review* Tenth Anniversary Short Story Competition. Claire's fourth book, *The Waiting*, which was recently launched in Edinburgh, is an unflinching portrait of female empowerment from the 1930s to the present day.

Swiss Review: Your two main characters, Lizzie and Marlene, sound typically Scottish. How easy was it as a Swiss writer to place these two strong-minded women accurately in their Edinburgh surroundings?

Regi Claire: Having lived in Scotland for nineteen years now, I think I've become partly Scottish myself! The more I was writing about Lizzie

(the first-person narrator) and her maverick friend Marlene, the more I found myself slipping into their skins: I could see them as young country girls pretending to be city-savvy, dodging the trams in Princes Street in war-time Edinburgh; I could feel Lizzie's frus-

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tration at Marlene's cavalier attitude towards her children; could smell Marlene's sour breath after yet another night in the police cells.

SR: Reading about their childhood antics was very amusing. What were your reference points to find out about Scotland in the 1930s?

RC: Dorothy Harrower, the elderly lady who inspired the novel and who sadly died before I had written more than the first few chapters (which she never saw), had regaled me with some of her memories, including memories of her childhood in Kelso. By telling me about herself and her past, Dorothy gave me a sense of the two characters. Then my imagination did the rest. And, of course, there are my own recollections – emotional recollections like the intensity and indolence of childhood, the friendships and betrayals, the potent mix of innocence, curiosity and ignorance, the guilty pleasures.

SR: There are many uplifting moments, but equally there are moments of despair. Which of these two emotional spectrums do you enjoy writing about most and why?

RC: As a writer, I find it more intriguing to plumb the depths than coast along on waves of happiness. Somehow, descriptions of joy and positiveness tend to be rather 'samey'. Just like Tolstoy says at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*: 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' To a certain degree, this also applies to writing, I believe. There's also the therapeutic effect: dealing with darkness and sorrow imaginatively can truly lighten the burden in real life.

SR: The book is drenched in local colour. How has life in Edinburgh and Scotland influenced your writing?

RC: Edinburgh and Scotland – or rather, my Scottish husband, the writer and Poet Laureate of Edinburgh, Ron Butlin – have really provided the spark I needed. I hadn't done any creative writing before (apart from several pages of a story about Red Indians when I was about eleven), just essays at school and academic work at university. While still living in Switzerland, I had always been keenly



Regi Claire at her Edinburgh book launch

aware of the difference between the language I spoke in (Swiss German) and the language I wrote in (High German). Coming to Britain meant finally being able to speak and write in one and the same language – no more split between feelings and thoughts. And having a writer for a husband allowed me to take my own imagination seriously at last.

Signed (or unsigned) copies of *The Waiting* (£7.99) can be ordered direct from the publishers, Word Power Books:
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Online shop: <http://bit.ly/TDhPTp>

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And finally...

Regi Claire has very kindly arranged for the *Swiss Review* to give away two copies of her latest book, *The Waiting*. To enter the draw (20th February) to receive one of these copies, please contact: editor@swissreview.co.uk, or phone: 020 7372 3519



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