

West Dunbartonshire Libraries

Ron Butlin and Regi Claire at Kaffe on the Loch



The tremendously popular husband and wife team of Ron Butlin and Regi Claire re-visited the West Dunbartonshire Literature Festival on Tuesday evening (22nd May). The readings took place in the comfortable intimacy of the *Kaffe on the Loch*, at Lomond Shores. The splendid vista of Ben Lomond and the Loch were clearly visible; everyone was relieved that the dreich weather which has afflicted several of the events was not in evidence.

Regi read a short story called ***Cool Room 3*** which has recently been broadcast on the radio. Everyone was engrossed by the tale of how a middle-aged man abandons his family after an incident involving an ice cream cone. The story was set in Switzerland, although it took place against the backdrop of the July bombings and it explored the theme of loss. The story was very funny, as well as being poignant, and the descriptive qualities were extraordinarily vivid. Regi comes from Switzerland originally, and her accomplishments as an acclaimed author are all the more remarkable when you consider that English is her fourth language. Regi has said that, "Much of (her) writing gives a voice to people on the fringes, people who don't quite belong, often catching them at crisis point. (She has) always been fascinated by the darker side of human existence, particularly the casualness with which we hurt each other and ourselves." Regi's delivery of her story managed to capture the humour as well as the real pathos of her character's situation as the enormity of his decision to abandon his family comes home to him.

Ron is a multi-talented author; he is a novelist, short story writer, poet and librettist, as well as being a freelance journalist. He opened his half of the evening with a poem called ***A Recipe for Whisky*** which instructs us to 'Wring the Scottish rain clouds dry;/Take sleet, the driving snow, the hail;/ Winter twilight; the summer's sun slowed down/to pearl-sheen dusk/... And, most of all, take the years that have already run/to dust, the dust we spill behind us.../All this, distill. And cask. And wait/... Here's life! Here's courage to go on! Ron said that this poem was uncharacteristically life-affirming, a tendency that is becoming more apparent in his work as gets older. The theme of aging was very much to the fore in his reading of his short story ***Kindness***, in which an older lady struggles to cope with the relentless kindness of neighbours and strangers. The story was delivered brilliantly by Ron and many of the audience were wiping away tears of laughter as our elderly heroine took revenge upon the impositions of the world. As with Regi's story, beneath the humour, there were real insights into human pain and loss.



The cosy atmosphere of the venue lent itself to a very informal and intimate question and answer session. Anecdotes of rebellious older people were passed around, following the theme of Ron's story. The consensus seemed to be that whatever other disadvantages the aging process may have, older people can sometimes feel that they have less to lose, and start taking risks, perhaps for the first time in their lives. One of the audience alluded to the fact that both Ron and Regi had written stories whose central character was of the opposite gender to their own. Although this fact had not crossed their minds, Ron said that he had no problem writing from the perspective of a female because he believed that we all have masculine and feminine components to varying degrees. Ron and Regi shared insights into how they write. Ron referred to himself as being a 'lark'; he likes to get up early and write, whereas Regi is an 'owl'; she finds that her best ideas and work come at

night. They tend to socialise together in the afternoon! Ron loves writing and he feels a day is wasted unless he commits something to paper.

Ron and Regi had brought a selection of their books along for sale, and it is safe to say that they had far lighter bags to lug home to Edinburgh, than they had when they arrived. They signed books and talked to those members of the audience who had additional questions. The whole evening went very well, with two especially memorable readings.

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