

## Familia Interview - Regi Claire with Magda Danciu

*1. Romanian fiction lovers first read of you in 2004, with your first interview and short story translated in our literary gazette, Familia. Many things happened to you since then and I imagine there are some you would like to share with us this time. What would these be, Regi?*

It is a real pleasure to reconnect with *Familia* and its readership – thank you very much for inviting me to take part again, Magda.

The past fourteen years have been rather eventful in both my personal and writing life. In 2008 I was diagnosed with bowel cancer and spent a year undergoing first radio- and chemotherapy, then three operations. To read more about my experience, please see my blog piece (previously published – in different versions – on various literary websites and by Penguin Australia): [www.regiclaire.com/blog](http://www.regiclaire.com/blog)

Only a few weeks before my diagnosis, my second story collection, *Fighting It* (an oddly prescient title), had been accepted for publication by Two Ravens Press. It came out in June 2009 and received great reviews. *Fighting It* was shortlisted for the prestigious Saltire Scottish Book of the Year award (I was one of six shortlistees including Janice Galloway, A L Kennedy and Robert Crawford [winner]) and longlisted for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize for best collection. This really encouraged me and I went back to my ‘Scottish novel’, *The Waiting*, which I had been working on before my illness. Set almost entirely in Edinburgh, its action spanning the period from World War II to the early 21st century, *The Waiting* was brought out by the indie bookshop and publisher Word Power Books (now Lighthouse Books) in 2012, again to excellent reviews. Since then I have been writing more short stories (see my answer to question 11).

Ever since 2009, I have also been teaching/running regular creative writing classes (e.g. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh City Art Centre, Museum of Childhood).

In 2012, I was awarded a 3-year Royal Literary Fund Fellowship for Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. This Fellowship is a fantastic part-time scheme that places authors in universities all over the United Kingdom to provide academic writing support and advice to students (and lecturers). In 2015 I was selected as a Royal Literary Fund Lector (a new word coinage!) for Reading Round Scotland, an innovative part-time project that puts writers in charge of their own reading group (usually for two years). Uniquely, there is no cost for participants (all fees are covered by the RLF) and no homework. The lector/author chooses short, self-contained texts such as stories, essays or poems which he/she reads out to the group members – who are given photocopies – before an in-depth discussion. I am delighted to say that my group is still going strong, despite the fact that the course is no longer free as I now run it on a private basis.

*2. How would you describe what the process of writing means to you? Is it energising? Is it exhausting? Inspiring?*

Sometimes it is truly exhilarating, other times extremely frustrating. Always, though, I feel a sense of having progressed, even if infinitesimally, towards something new, something only I could have written, dredged up from the depths of my being.

I generally write on a laptop (as indeed I'm doing now, sitting at our kitchen table with a homemade cappuccino for stimulation). A computer is indispensable to me as I tend to revise while I create – not a 'method' I would recommend because it keeps interrupting the flow of inspiration and can destroy the spell. Often, I consciously stop myself from editing for several paragraphs, just to see how far I can go without the inner critic kicking in... When I manage to do so, I usually experience a sense of real achievement, a feeling of pleasure, almost a high (quite irrespective of whether what I have written is actually any good!). These are the moments that make all the agonies, uncertainties and setbacks of writing worthwhile.

*3. Readers are often interested whether a particular author has been supported taking up writing for a career. In your case, there is a fact: your husband is himself a writer. I ask you again, as I did more than twenty years ago, but the readers are different now, what is it like to be part of a writers' family?*

It is thanks to Ron's encouragement and support that I tried my hand at writing, a year or so after I settled in Edinburgh in 1993. Having always loved reading, I used to put authors on an imaginary pedestal. So when Ron asked me for feedback on his work-in-progress in 1992, I was rather nervous and only remarked on punctuation... I soon lost my shyness, however, and learnt to see a draft manuscript as exactly that: a piece of raw material that needs to be modelled and remodelled until its true shape emerges. At that time, I had embarked on a PhD in English literature (the works of Graham Swift), but felt increasingly envious of the creators of fiction. And that was when Ron urged me to give my dream a chance; that trying is more important than succeeding, because at least that way we can find out whether the dream is for us; that we don't want to grow old and bitter, regretting missed opportunities. And so I started to write fiction. My first published story won the *Edinburgh Review* Tenth Anniversary Short Story Competition, which was a wonderful boost.

For many years now Ron and I have been each other's most trusted critics. Living with another writer can be fun and invigorating. But it can also be hard, especially if one of you is going through a difficult period while the other is busily working away.

Most evenings when I cook dinner Ron reads to me. By now, we must have enjoyed hundreds, if not thousands, of stories and novels by writers from all over the world. It is a glorious arrangement: Ron gets the wine and olives, I get to hear exciting or lyrical texts read with gusto, even down to the voices, as I peel and chop, boil, sauté and fry. If Ron brings a few pages of his work-in-progress, that's an extra bonus. As you may imagine, even the washing-up has become a pleasure for me!

*4. What do you do when you have a writer's block? Are there any specific ways to overcome these moments that you could recommend to beginners in the field?*

Go for a walk or a run. If you have a dog like I do, he will be so happy!

Be kind to yourself. Maybe indulge in a writing ritual: I usually make myself a frothy cappuccino to take up to my study under the eaves.

If you are able to touch-type, try closing your eyes as you tap away on your keyboard. That way, you block out the sight of the empty screen and silence your inner critic. I guarantee you: what you write 'blind' will definitely have value. Some of it will be good, perhaps very good. Go on, give it a try!

Keeping to a writing schedule is invaluable (although I have to admit I am a bit undisciplined in this respect). Sit at your desk, at the usual time. Trust yourself and your imagination.

If you still can't get anywhere, read through the discarded bits of your old writing. Some of them might inspire you and give you the confidence to carry on. I have a whole file of miscellaneous passages from my novels and various stories. In fact, that's why I love writing on a computer: rather than deleting, I often move phrases, sentences or paragraphs to the bottom, so that by the time I finish a text, I also end up with fragments of new work.

Lastly, read and read and read. I have found that certain authors and their books really make me itch to get writing myself!

*5. If you think of your own experience, what do you feel is the most difficult stage in the writing process?*

Getting the first draft completed. I often deal with the nitty-gritty of editing too soon, no doubt to make myself feel more confident about what I have already written.

In the case of a novel, you need to have a lot of staying power, especially when you reach that making-you-feel-adrift middle bit. It's similar to being far out at sea, with no land in sight... That's when you must take several deep breaths, gulps of breaths really, and trust yourself. Your imagination will get you to your destination – if you let it!

Endings can be problematic, too. I may think I have found the right ending, only to realise, usually on rereading (sometimes months after 'final' revisions), that the closing paragraph just doesn't work. If my work passes this test of time, it is truly finished.

*6. How did you decide on the genre or form that can best represent you and be the carrier of your literary intentions?*

I feel I didn't so much choose – rather, the form and genre chose me.

In terms of form, I prefer creating short fiction as opposed to novels. Doubtless, this is to do with me being a non-native speaker and hence very slow and painstaking. Reaching the end of a short story or indeed a piece of flash fiction doesn't take years and years, as a novel does. I like using interlinked narratives to explore different perspectives and experiences and to drive the action forward.

Actually, it just occurs to me that my latest novel, *The Waiting*, could at some level be seen as a novel of stories, an episodic novel, kind of picaresque.

Regarding genre, I have always had a bias towards the uncanny, the darker, more serious side of human (and animal) life. The supernatural, the gothic, the 'otherworldly' all appeal to my sense of the precarious nature of our existence, that anything can happen at any time and that we can't and mustn't take anything for granted. Style and quality of writing are very important to me, so I guess my primary genre is literary fiction.

*7. Prose writers are mostly concerned with finding their characters. Do you think that being a woman you should decide upon opting for female protagonists?*

I suppose my characters find me, rather than vice versa. If a voice in my head turns out to be male, so be it. In the story collection I am currently completing, about one third of the protagonists are male.

I have never liked conformity in any way. So 'should' doesn't come into it for me. I write what I want. Personally, I find gender politics (and political correctness) in fiction a little bit off-putting...

*8. Can we say that the centrality of female characters is connected exclusively with women's writing in contemporary Scottish fiction, for instance? Have you often encountered difficulties when writing characters from the opposite sex?*

I don't think that strong female characters are necessarily associated with women writers in contemporary Scottish fiction. Bernard McLaverty's Booker-shortlisted, Saltire-Scottish-Book-of-the-Year-award-winning *Grace Notes* (1997) and his latest novel *Midwinter Break*, for example, both have female protagonists. Conversely, Louise Welsh's Saltire-Society-First-Book-of-the-Year-award-winning *The Cutting Room* (2002) has a male protagonist.

When creating any character, male or female, I use my imagination and powers of observation. One of the most important aspects of writing is truthfulness. You must remain true to a character within the confines of the fictional world you have created. As long as you adhere to this, the reader will trust you, to the point of a suspension of disbelief. Still, I must admit that writing from a female point of view comes more natural to me.

*9. Do you think that there is a major change in the post-millennial gender approach in fiction writing in general? Are there any examples of strong female characters that generate role models or trends today?*

Yes, there is definitely more fiction writing these days that is gender-oriented. So much so that gender becomes the focus rather than one among many aspects of a narrative.

*10. You belong to the category of authors who chose to write in another language than their mother tongue (like Joseph Conrad or the Romanian philosopher and essayist, Emil Cioran). What are the challenges that this kind of decision implies?*

For me at least, writing takes much longer, possibly because I have a higher degree of self-consciousness than a native speaker. Occasionally, there are matters of vocabulary and grammar I need to double-check. Also, not having been brought up or educated in Britain, I can never fully share the cultural, historical or social heritage. Certain ways of behaviour – be they verbal or nonverbal – remain a mystery to me.

On the other hand, writing in a foreign language can be extremely liberating. It allows you to break the rules without any feelings of guilt. Something I would find much harder to do were I to write in German, because of my school-instilled knowledge of what constitutes ‘good writing’.

P.S. Swiss German, my mother tongue, is a spoken, not a written language. ‘German German’ or ‘High German’ is the written language we are taught at school – it is a foreign language for Swiss people and not used except in interaction with foreign visitors (also for train announcements and news readings on TV and radio).

*11. And to end our interview, what are you working on? What are we, your readers, to find on the bookstore shelves? Or on Amazon.com...?*

I have almost completed a third story collection, provisionally entitled ‘Off Limits’. Of the twenty or so stories written so far, the vast majority have appeared in anthologies (including *Best British Short Stories*), literary magazines and on literary websites both in the UK, Europe and the USA; one story is forthcoming as a Royal Literary Fund podcast and another is going to be part of an oratorio in Switzerland. Most of these new stories have a strong element of the uncanny, the gothic and the criminal. I hope you will enjoy them, once they come out in book form.

Apart from the stories, I have a new novel on the go. It is currently on the back burner, where it has been simmering away for quite a while. Fingers crossed it will be ready for consumption in the next few years!

Thank you very much, Magda, for your brilliant, thought-provoking questions. I really enjoyed this interview.