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NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

The following was recorded at Free Word, on the 23rd of October 2019, for Being a Writer: an Interactive Forum—a TLC event in association with the Royal Society of Literature. In this podcast, educator and activist Nathalie Teitler speaks to the theme, Creative Opportunity, Professional Development, on how writers can use mentoring, workshops and the creative writing industries to support their writing. It is now available here, on being a Writer.

NT [00:01:01]: So, I’m Nathalie Teitler, and I was really excited when Aki asked me to be part of this, because I am a huge fan of the RSL and the work they’ve been doing with A Room of [My] Own, and I love the way that Aki’s been updating that and making that that’s something real and concrete in her actual programming in this interactive exploration, and basically everything the TLC does, which is pretty amazing, for those of you who don’t know.

So, Aki said to me, ‘Would you like to do something around mentoring and development?’, and I thought well, I’ve been organising mentoring for 25 years, and I’ve been mentoring writers and artists for 25 years, so yeah, I can do this.

Then, she said, ‘I’d like it to be creative.’ So, I thought for a minute and said, ‘Okay, that’s fine. I am going to do a comedy routine and compare to online dating.’ And, to be fair to Aki, she only paused for a few seconds, but they were long, and then this voice came through: ‘Ah, wonderful, wonderful, I can’t wait.’ And you could tell the panic alarm had gone off—what had I unleashed? But the really god thing I discovered about turning 50, is that you can make the most ridiculous pronouncements, and people are just like, okay, because they’re completely scared of you. Which is fantastic. I never expected this. I am loving it.

So, why am I going to talk about mentoring? The reason I wanted to talk about mentoring instead of other forms of professional development is because in the many years that I’ve worked with artists, I have found that mentoring is the one form of development that takes writers from here, to here, in the fastest possible time. I am happy to discuss this with anybody, but I have tried so many other methods, and that’s really the thing that makes the biggest difference. It’s also something which seems to be able to get writers to develop and grow in a way that no other workshopping, or other form, quite gets to. And I think that‘s because of the personal element. So, that’s one of the reasons I wanted to talk about it.

The second reason is, there are lots of things about the mentoring relationship that cross over into all other forms of development, whether you’re doing peer buddying, or workshopping, or whatever it is. So it’s a really, really useful one to look at.

And the third reason is, in my 25 years, I have discovered that the question writers are the most afraid of is who do you want s your mentor? And, at that point, they look at you as if you’ve just proposed some arranged marriage, and they crumble, completely and totally. I know one writer, 10 years later I’m still waiting for the answer to that question.

It is quite humorous, but also there is an element of we need to demystify this a bit, because there’re some really weird ideas about what mentoring is about. So, mentoring and professional development, what we can learn from online dating. This is not what you were expecting, is it? I’ve spoken a little bit about why we’re going to talk about mentoring. We’re going to talk, very briefly about what a mentor actually does, and how you chose one.

So, the first thing that I wanted to talk about is the biggest myth of all, and this is that your mentor is going to be your best friend for life. Your mentor is going to complete you as a writer, and a person. Not going to happen.

Okay, so when do you need a mentor? And the time that you need a mentor is when you’re in a stage of growth or change. Now, I say that because, although mentoring is fantastic, if you’re not at the write place, it’s not great. So what your mentor will do, is they will try and take you in a new direction. A direction you have asked to be taken in. if you are, for example, putting the final edits on your book, and you do not want to rewrite it, getting a mentor is a profoundly bad idea. I’ve people take an almost-finished thing, but they don’t tell the mentor that they actually consider it to be finished, and the mentor says, ‘You just need to completely rewrite it, but don’t worry, it won’t take more than two year.’

So, be aware that if you go to a mentor, their job is to help you to change and grow. It may not be exactly what you want. A good mentor is basically there to guide you through a process of change. The change, preferably, being in your writing. If it’s not in your writing, they may not be that useful. The mentor is going to have specific skills that are useful to you at that moment, for the change that you want to make. You have to have an understanding of what that change is, and we’re going to get back to that. The mentor is usually further along in their career than you are, but it is an equal relationship, and that is very, very important as well, as we’re going to get back to that, because a lot of people think the mentor can tell you what to do. And I’ve seen bad mentors producing many, many mini-me writers, who are like a bad version of themselves (and that’s not what anybody wants).

The mentor should not try to impose their view or their ideas. And again, this is how you know, immediately, [that] this mentor is possibly not that experienced, or they’re not the wright one for me. if you start to feel that, then immediately address it with your mentor.

They should be working to make your voice as strong as possible. So, if in your earliest meetings they’re not talking with you about what you want to do with your voice, and what you think is happening in your work, there may be a problem.

So, how do you choose wisely? This is the point at which all the writers crumble into dust. I’ve had great fun with the complete works, watching people. The only question which I’ve seen scare writers more, is when Bernadine Evaristo said to them at interview panel—sand this will stay between us—what makes you think you’re a poet?

Those poets unfortunate enough to get that question, apparently ran next door to the Poetry School (because Spread the Word used to be next door to the Poetry School) and they cried for an hour. They had to be comforted, literally. So, the Poetry School people came in and said, ‘Why are all your people crying? Bernadine, rain it in.’ She didn’t, but, you know, look where it’s gotten her.

Now, I should start out by saying that this presentation is based on my perspective. There may be a little bit of objectification in it, and there may be some obvious things that I have chosen. So, first of all, can anybody tell me which movie that’s from?

AUDIENCE

[00:08:30]: Meet Joe Black.

NT [00:08:32]: Fantastic, you’re all winners. Okay, appearances can be deceptive. Now, just as in online dating, if you pick somebody just for the looks, it’s not likely to work. So when I say appearances, that can be things like somebody who has massive amounts of prizes, somebody who is appearing at every festival in the world, and is always in the press. Now, if that person is that busy, the chances of them being a good mentor to you are very, very slim. The only mentoring relationships I’ve seen which have been complete disasters, are when somebody went for a celebrity mentor, and they never saw the mentor. Or the mentor just had so little time, that they didn’t have that generosity. So, that’s one thing to look out for: does your mentor actually have time? Are they the right person for this? And [the person you chose] may not be the strongest writer, or the person with the most prizes.

Mentoring is not marriage. Your mentor is not your soulmate. They will not complete you as a writer. I’m repeating this because, it doesn’t matter how many times I say this, people come to me with stars in their eyes and they really think this is what’s going to happen. In reality, if you become best friends with your mentor, the chances are that it’s not going to be a particularly successful mentoring relationship. I had one mentor who was constantly inviting the poet over for lunch, for dinner, on holidays, and [when] I looked at his poetry, there was no change at all.

It really should be more like a professional relationship. You have a set goal, and you should know where you want to go or have a feeling that you’re moving or progressing. They should push you. Respectfully, but they should push you. So, if they’re not doing that, you may want to say to them, it’s okay to critique. I want more critique. I want more feedback. Know yourself, and what you need, or you might have trouble choosing from the options.

Okay, I apologise. That’s a lot. But, you know… [that’s] the way, sometimes, writers get with mentors. They just start looking at all of the mentors on offer, and they just start thinking, which one, which one? This one’ll do this, this one’ll do this. Who do I choose, who do I choose? The thing that you need to be able to do, is have an idea of who you are as a writer. So you need to be able to go into that thing, before you pick the mentor. Or, [in] any other workshop or anything else, you need to be able to say these are my strengths, these are my weaknesses, this is the thing I want to work on most now. I’ve got great imagination, I’ve no trouble writing really powerful work with a voice that isn’t present yet in British literature, but my editing skills are crap.

That may be where you’re at, in which case, that’s what you want to focus on. Or, you may be aware that you use a different form or craft [that’s] not as developed as you’d like, and that’s another area where a mentor can really help you. The more you know about who you are, and where you are, and where you want to be, the more likely you are to pick a mentor who’s actually going to do that. And that’s why I always stat with the mentoring question of where do you see yourself in a couple of years from now? That awareness, as a writer, is a responsibility, but it also means that you take charge of your destiny, because if you don’t have that self-knowledge and that self-awareness, you will always have different views thrown at you at workshops and events, and it’s going to get really, really confusing. You need to know which voices to say yes, that’s for me, that’s good advice, and no, that doesn’t fit in at all with who I am as a writer. Because even the most brilliant writers will give you advice that’s completely wrong for you. You are there as a professional writer, so don’t be afraid to say no, [to say] this is good, this is not.

The idea is that sometimes, if you’re having a real meltdown when somebody says to you where are you as a writer and where do you want to be, it may be that you’re not quite ready for a mentor. To be ready for a mentor, you already need to have reached a certain level of self-knowledge as a writer. [This] does not need to mean your craft has to be great. It doesn’t. You could be trying an entirely new form. You may have gone from writing poetry, to trying theatre, or something completely different. But you have to know who you are, because otherwise it’s going to be incredibly confusing. If you’re still working out what your strength and weaknesses are, where you want to go, where you see yourself fitting in as a writer, what group. I always say to people, if you want into a bookstore, where would you see your book sold? And if you don’t know those kind of things don’t panic, but you may want to do some workshops, some peer buddying, before you spend a lot of money on a mentor.

Are you looking in the right places? People look for their mentor sin the most successful writers, so they look at the prize winners, or they [think] oh my God this person wrote a book that changed my life. That’s not the way to look for a good mentor. In my experience, the best way to look is, who’s teaching at the poetry school, at Spread the Word, at Arvon, on MAs, on PhDs? Who has mentoring experience where I can actually go and speak to previous mentees? This is actually a very different skill. It’s about generosity, it’s about teaching abilities. It doesn’t necessarily have to be someone who is a writer who you think is the best writer in the world. Preferably, you shouldn’t think their writing is rubbish, and it really helps if you’ve read something of theirs, before you meet the mentor, because so many writers I know go off to meet the mentor and they haven’t read anything, and it’s really, really obvious, [which] is not good.

So, look at people who have that experience, because you will get a much better experience. Know your own voice and stick to it. Your mentor is not a dictator. Now, this one is really tricky, because the likelihood is that your mentor is going to be more advanced than you are in their career. That doesn’t meant to say that they’re a better writer than you at all, they’re just at a different stage of their career. And that means, if you don’t get the write mentor, they may think that they need to impose their ideas. I’ve seen a lot of mentors try to do this, and for that reason I changed the contract for The Complete Works, for the second round. It was “I will be true to my own voice”, and I made the mentors sign that as well, that they would respect the voice of the artist first, because otherwise, I saw so many people in the first round being pushed and pummelled into what people thought would be published. And that’s the worst way. It just makes the whole experience horrible, and it’s not successful, usually, as writer, either. So don’t be afraid to say to your mentor, that’s not who I am. And that’s a really important one.

Clear communication and setting boundaries. Very much like anything else, when you’re doing online dating or anything else in life, say what you want, and say what you want to achieve, the timeframe, and how you want to do it. The more clarify you have about it, the better it’s going to go.

Do not ask to meet the family on the first date. This is awful. So many people I know go rushing up to the mentor and before they’ve even said their names, they say can I meet your publisher? Mentors hate that. It’s not really fair, because it’s not part of it. If you started messaging people on your online dating thing, when can I meet your parents, can I meet them now? You probably would not get a good result. So, hold back on that.

Intense flings can be problematic. Spread your meetings out. Sometimes, because the mentoring is usually costed by the day, people think right, you have to do a whole really intense day. No. This is probably not going to be your best way forward. If you’re costed for a day, [it’s] probably best to switch it into four shorter segments. Otherwise, it just gets into this really intense thing. I had one mentor, who went with his mentee to breakfast, lunch, around a gallery, to the theatre, for dinner, and then they went to an after party. Needless to say, the change in his writing was minimal. Fun, but not really what you want to do.

You are bound by a contract. So, this is a bit like online dating where you also have contracts, but know what you’re getting into. You are paying money, you have the right to request certain things, but the mentor has certain rights as well. It’s a good idea as well around all the formatting to check with the Society of Authors, to check with the Arts Council, The Literary Consultancy, and get some feedback on what mentoring should look like, to make sure that you’re working in the right professional format. They’ll probably be able to provide you with some contracts and some ideas for that as well.

Do not forget the boy or girl or both next door. A lot of people say to me, okay, mentoring, I’d love to do it, but it’s not cheap. The usual cost of it is about £1,500, so that would be three days’ worth, which you’d split up. And that’s a lot of money for most people, so what I say to people is, you probably can find peer mentoring. And that may well be a skills exchange, so if you know someone who’s in theatre and wants to work on their fiction, and you want to work on your theatre skills, that’s a great exchange, and no money changes hands.

That is probably the last thing I’m going to say, so hopefully I have slightly demystified the process of choosing a mentor.