Nelima Begum 0:03

Welcome to the Being A Writer podcast. Damian, it's lovely to have you here. How are you doing?

Damian Barr 0:08

I am doing surprisingly well today. Thank you very much for asking, How are you?

Nelima Begum 0:13

I'm very well, thank you. So we’re sitting here on quite a gloomy November's morning. We've got a great conversation, because today we're talking about writing the truth and who better to talk about this than you? I'm going to jump straight in and ask, what does writing the truth mean to you? Does it have to relate to something personal?

Damian Barr 0:40

I mean, all writing is personal in the sense that it comes from you and your experiences. And, you know, so in that sense it's of you, I guess. And but, you know, just just the truth has to be of you. And that, I think is the that, I think is the question that you're really asking. And, you know, I've written memoir, and I've written a novel, and I've written video plays, and, and lots and lots of journalism. And I think in each instance, the truth means something different in each of those spaces, so for example, if I was writing a piece of journalism, and you know, and it was a feature, you know, I think a feature that I've written so, and I did a story for the Times Magazine, about people who live in hotels. And as part of that story, I had to track down people who lived in hotels. So one young woman who I spoke to lived in a hotel with her family, it was a benefits hostel, in the seaside and the south coast. And, you know, frost on the inside of the windows mould on the mould on the roof, absolute tragedy, bravery of this, young women holding a family together. And she had a truth to share. And I felt a responsibility to share her to share her truth. And just as much as as I felt a responsibility to share the truth of the incredibly rich couple of Russian millionaires and models that I interviewed who also left in a hotel, bar Hotel in Chelsea, you know, which was very, very glamorous. And they also had to choose and so, you know, I'm there was a wonderful woman I interviewed for that called Nancy Wake, who was a spy an Australian spy during the Second World War. And, and, you know, she lives in a hotel in St. James. And, you know, she, again, had a truth to share. So I think that journalism, you know, it's about getting quotes, right, getting facts, right. And finding the space in that to make an argument. So there's a sort of, you know, and you have lawyers, of course, and editors who are who are looking, and that's about that's about getting facts right, that's about getting, getting people's words right. And that's, and that's really important. And I guess that's where I started in my writing career when I joined the Times out of university. So I've always carried that sense with me that accuracy and fairness, is really important. And I went from there to writing memoir. And I think, in memoir the idea of truth. I mean, you know, James Frey famously talked about truthiness, the man who was castigated by Oprah, for exaggerating and falsifying stuff about his own story in A Million Little Pieces the famous memoir of addiction, I mean, and I've interviewed interviewed him about that experience. And, for me, writing memoir is about acknowledging that the truth you can tell is limited to you. Right? So it's your truth, and you might be talking about your mum or your dad or your neighbour, or, you know, your doctor or your lover or, you know, your lover, who is also your doctor, you might be doing all kinds of things, but, but that, you know, that truth that you can claim to tell a memoir, and it can only ever be your own, and that's why memoir contains, you know, me, moi and I. It is to an extent all about you. But, of course, it has to involve other people. And, you know, for it to be a story and it's memoir is a story it's a constructed narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end and, and, you know, that means that you have to make the make the truth, fit that some people would say, and other people would say you have to make the story, but the truth and so, you know, with with with memoir, I think it's helpful for people to understand that, you know, memoir is not the story of a life. It's a story from a life, right? So it might be a relationship, an illness, a journey, a job, an experience. It's not a diary. You don't have to be completis. So you don't need to feel like you're lying or not telling the truth if you leave stuff out. Memoir needs you to leave stuff out. And but, you know, can you can you make stuff up in a memoir? Yeah, you can fill in the blanks, you know, that, you know, was the jumper yellow was the jumper orange doesn't really matter. And was the door blue was the door red doesn't really matter does what happened behind the door? Or does what the person who was wearing the jumper do matter more? And so I think with stuff like that, that in journalism, you'd be expected to get right, you can kind of editorialize in memoir, but I think then the actual deeds, and the big stuff has got to be true.

And then when we get to fiction, and you know, the fiction I wrote, the novel, I mean I've written lots of video plays, and some more short stories. But the novel which took five years and is set in South Africa, was... Well that's a different kind of truth, because, you know, you're dealing with history of a long time ago, 1900. And the Boer War, the British invention of the concentration camps and burning of 30,000 farms, and, you know, the absolute horror that we that we did there, and the ongoing effects of that. So my novel looks at the, you know, my novel looks at the epic kind of sweep of 100 plus years of history, whereas my memoir, looks at the first 18 years of my life growing up gay in the west of Scotland, and my parents divorcing and, you know, the rise of Thatcher and the collapse of industry and, and all the rest of it. What's interesting about the novel is is that it's got near history, as in very near, like, practically now, and old history kind of dusty history that you find in books or classes, library and wonderful places like that, where I went to write. History from a long time ago is easier to find out about than history from more recently, because when does history become history, right?

Nelima Begum 7:14

It's a great question to ask.

Damian Barr 7:16

When does it become history? When does, when does what happened yesterday or last year, become history? And where do you go to find sources about it? And who's writing that history and who's invested in concealing the truth, the truth of the Boer War was contested at the time, many newspapers that woulndn't carry news about the British concentration camps and the death of all those women and children. And then, because they didn't want that truth to get out. So as a writer of fiction, I think that you're aiming for a truth, which can be partly based on facts, in my case, historical facts that are little known, on exposing a hidden history, on looking at the effect of that in the present the ripple effect of that right up until now, and which I felt when I was there, researching it, and we can talk about methods and stuff like that. But I think that the truth that you have there is about is, again, about built on facts. But it's also about character, you know, you're creating these characters. And these characters have to feel real, and they have to be truthful to themselves. And at first, when I was doing fiction, I was terrified, because I was like, Oh my god, this can make anybody up, I can make them do anything I want. You know, so I had them doing like very little - I had done, like gently making cups of tea for 25 pages, because I was just terrified. The idea that, you know, suddenly I'd be responsible for these people. And then you start to make them do things, and you realize the origin of the expression 'out of character'. Because it becomes apparent when they do things out of character that you need them to do for your plot or your story or whatever. And you think, well actually she really wouldn't have reacted like that, Irma wouldn't have done that, Willem wouldn't have walked out of that room that way. Or whatever. So I think that you know, that the truth that has to correspond to facts to events, but also, you know, it's not about footnotes in the novel, it's about what feels right with those characters. And, and I think that great novels and great memoirs, there's a sort of Venn diagram that exists, and, you know, where, where they feel true. So you know, I get letters from people about Maggie and Me where they refer to it as a novel. And I get letters from people about my novel, asking me where they can go and see Sarah's diary - Sarah's a the character in the first part of the book, and I write a fictional diary for her - people think that the diary is real and can they go look at it in a museum. And so there's this kind of crossover that happens where people, where it feels real to people it feels to and I think we all know that, like, you know, the best memoirs and the best novels to us - whatever best means to us - feel real, and we feel possessive and in love with those characters, and we go and talk about them in the world to our friends. So I've given you an extremely long answer. And I promise they won't all be that long. But you know, I think, I think that the truth that you should be aiming for it's partly dictated by the form, and the limitations and demands of it, the expectations of the reader. But should also, you know, be strongly guided to your personal moral compass, which you can only ever acknowledge, as your personal, personal compass, and, and you need to be prepared, you know, when that comes out, whatever, whether that's a piece of journalism, whether that's a memoir, whether that's a novel for people to say, no, this is not my truth. This is not true. And to be prepared to enter into that into that debate with people or not, or just to ignore it.

Nelima Begum 11:01

That's an incredible way of looking at it. And you've literally gone and explored it in pretty much every, you know, every format that you can. It's great that you've gone into that much detail with it all because I think some writers might struggle to understand what their boundaries are, what their limitations might be within any given format. But because you've worked across those various formats, it kind of leads on brilliantly to our next question, which is, it can be quite tricky to get to the root of the truth. And what does that process of searching, so to speak look like for you?

Damian Barr 11:39

I'm thinking about it right now, like in terms of what my next big kind of, you know, working just now on the TV adaptation of Maggie and Me with a brilliant writer called Andrea Gibb who adapted, Elizabeth is Missing and things like that. So I'm looking again, at the memoir, and I'm thinking, what is the truth of that that has to come across in television, because television has to do different things than a book does. And, you know, there will be new characters and stuff that's new that's made up it's not the memoir, because it's a TV drama. So how do you do that and remain emotionally true? And again, that kind of comes back to comes back to the characters. And it's interesting, I use our the word characters because you know, when, when I was writing the memoir, I had a brilliant editor, a woman called Louisa Joyner who's now at Faber who edited Milkman. And she, she gave me some support and some editorial support. And she said, you know, it's freeing to think of yourself as a character in your own novel when you're writing a memoir, a central character in your novel, because it gives you a bit of emotional distance to feel able to deal with stuff, especially if that stuff's hard, and a lot of stuff, in my memoir, it's very painful. And there's much joy too, happily. And but so I think that, you know, I think, again, I think about what what am I being, what am I being asked to do here, like, you know, am I being asked to write an article or am I being asked to, you know, am I being asked for a piece of memoir or a personal essay is it a novel, you know, what are my freedoms? And what are my limitations? But for me, like, you know, a book takes a long time. And if you work out how much you get paid per hour, you know, it's, it's really not, you know, a well paying profession. So, you know, with outliers and exceptions, of course.

But the truth of it is that you've got to want to do it, you've got to, there's got to be something bigger that you get out of it than than finishing it, or than good reviews or ego rubbing or money. You know, you've got for me and for me, that's the truth. Like, I wanted in my memoir, to get to the truth of what happened to me in my childhood, what really happened to me, as opposed to what I imagined happened. What I was afraid happened, what I told my therapist had happened. What I hadn't told my family had happened. And with the novel, it was, you know, I was taken into the world of the novel by a photograph that I saw in the newspaper of a boy and this boy, this beautiful blonde teenage boys so 15 kind of slightly squinty, looking out under his heavy brows at the world this picture of this boy in the newspaper. I saw this pictures and I was like, oh my god. That's him. He is a boy who came to my school in Scotland for a year from South Africa. We'd become friends. I had a huge crush on him. He moved back to South Africa. I'd not heard from him for years. I'd lost touch - this is before Facebook. And I saw a picture of this boy in the paper and I was like, oh god it's you, I hadn't realized that I'd missed you. And then I went on to read the article. I turned a page and there's another picture - unrecognizable, not the same boy. It was the same boy but it was unrecognizable. He looked like something from Belsen, broomstick arms, eyes sunken, bald, horrific, horrific image of this boy who had been tortured and starved and beaten. And the, you know, and the boy in the picture of health to the boy in the picture of death, that process had taken a couple of months. And I, you know, and I thought, well, that can't be my friend because he would be a man, he would look like me now, but, but it looks just like him. And so I had an emotional connection with a boy in this picture. And that boy's name was Raymond Buys, and he was a boy who'd been sent by his mother and his stepfather to a camp in South Africa, near where he left that promised to, quote unquote, 'make men out of boys', which is just chilling. And this camp in fact made corpses out of boys and several boys died, and he was, I think, the third to die there. And I just became obsessed by this boy like, Who was he? Because there was a lot of talk that he was gay, that he'd been sent to a conversion therapy camp, and you know whether or not he was gay, no one will ever know, but certainly he was a victim of homophobic violence. They thought he was soft, and 'moffie' in their Afrikaans, and so I wanted to know, who is he? What kind of place was he sent to? Who runs the kind of place like that? What were they thinking? What was his mother doing? And I kind of, you know, and I started off thinking, well I didn't to be honest, start off thinking, I started off feeling. And I just wanted to know, and then I thought maybe I would do a better journalism about it or something, because it was taking up all my time. And then. And then I, you know, I started to ask bigger questions like, Well, why? You know, there was, it wasn't just one camp there was a network of camps. Why did these camps exist in South Africa? And then we get to the history of camps in South Africa, which takes us to this history that we are not taught in school of the Boer War, or the Boer wars, rather, because there were more than one and the British invention of the concentration camp and where that comes from, and where does it come from? We burnt 33,000 farms, to try and starve people into submission. And we were left with a homeless nation of women and children, and we concentrated them into camps. That's where you get the expression, 'concentration camp' from, very simple and very awful. And, and I just, you know, the truth of that, the truth of what happened then, and the impact of it now, to me, felt urgent. I felt like somebody has to tell this story, you know, somebody... the world has to know about about this.

And there was a further, you know, factor for me, which was that I felt like, well, you know, part of the reason this boy Raymond was sent there in real life, was his mother claimed that she didn't know what would happen to him there. And I thought, well, if people know what these places are, like, perhaps they'll think twice about sending their, their sons there. And so there was that kind of impetus for me as well. But, you know, the driver in whatever I write, for me is about either kind of getting something out of myself, and or in front of the world. And of course, we must accept that nobody else may care. Right? It's entirely possible that you can spend years doing something like this. And literally, nobody else will give a shit. But if you've got to do it, it's got to be, you know, for you. And you've got to produce a book, that it's not just about pleasing your agent, or your editor, or anybody else, if you have those people in your life. It's, it's got to work for you, you're the person who has to march into the world with this. And it's never going to be perfect, and you're never going to be totally happy with it. Accept that now. But you've got to be as close to happy with it, and you've got to think: I've got this truth. And that's what you've got to feel because the truth is the shield that you take out into the world with you.

Nelima Begum 19:21

That's a brilliant way of looking at it. And I love that you kind of spoke deeper about purpose and like that motivating factor finding a sense of urgency in your writing.

Damian Barr 19:30

Mm hmm. It has to feel that way. Because otherwise, like, why are you doing it? You know, um, I don't know, like, I wouldn't want to write about something that I wouldn't know until it come to me but like, you know, things I'm thinking about, just know, and, you know, feel important to me. None of not one of them feels more urgent than the other. So I'm kind of like sitting thinking well, which idea do I go with, who knows, maybe something else completely different will occur to me in the meantime, but it takes a long time - writing and editing and publishing - they're all different parts of the process, they all demand different bits of you. And so I think it's that impetus that can, that takes you through it, you know, you've got to be able to reconnect with it. Even now talking about, you know, my memoir, talking about my novel, I feel that sense of urgency. And it's one of the things that's most gratifying about hearing from readers.

Nelima Begum 20:33

Yeah, so it's finding your why and finding that driving thing that is going to take you all the way with your story and with your truth. I think it's also what keeps you going through the highs and lows of the process, because the writing process itself is quite difficult.

Damian Barr 20:47

I mean, it can be. I do a number of different things with my time. So I write and I also host my Literary Salon and, and I host radio and TV programmes, mainly about books, and they all seem quite different in a way, but really all they're about is about stories, and you know, me, you know, feeling like I'm in one never ending masterclass, reading other people's books, and looking at them and understanding them and deconstructing them and getting to have conversations with the writers about them. And that's a great privilege, and it all adds to my writing, you know, I'm a better writer for reading, and for listening, and for being able to ask those questions. And, you know, that is one big part of my life and the writing is another bit of it. I don't want to be, and couldn't be, I don't think, either one of those things on their own. And I think if I was just, you know, doing all the kind of stuff on stage, and on telly, and whatever, I would personally I would feel a bit purposeless, if I didn't have a book or a story to go back to. And, you know, equally if I'm just if it was just me in the book, I'd be a bit lonely. I really like people and company, and, you know, the telly, the festivals and all the rest of it and things like this is people and company and I find that stimulating in a different way. So, you know, the balance isn't always right. I probably spend too much time thinking, Oh, I should be doing more of this less of that. But actually, you know, it's obviously what I need, you know, I'm never gonna be the kind of person who can, you know - I have friends who do and I admire them greatly - who can put out a book a year or every two years. That's just not, I think, going to be me.

Nelima Begum 22:41

So everything enriches one another. The things that overlap so like, your books, the TV, the radio...

Damian Barr 22:48

Yeah, yeah, they do. I often refer to them as mulching or composting. You know? And that's what that's what they are, you know, time spent reading is never wasted?

Nelima Begum 23:02

No, of course not. On the topic of books, you run an iconic literary salon. And I love that you say your superpower is telling, sharing and celebrating stories. What inspired you to begin your journey of not only storytelling, but sharing those of others?

Damian Barr 23:17

Well, I mean, like, a lot of people listening to this podcast I suspect, I was, you know, the geek in my class, and I spent more time in the school library than I did on the football pitch and - in fact, no time on the football pitch and all my time in the school library. And there are complicated reasons for that. But I, you know, I am I I feel like that has always been with me, books have always been a comfort and a sanctuary. And I had always wanted to write stories. And I did that as a child and I you know, journalism was the outlet then - there was a route for working class people into journalism. There now isn't really a route for working class people into journalism that's been cut off by by nepotism and by a hollowed-out profession and, and all the rest of it, although there are still, you know, brilliant charities trying and brave individuals making that difference. And I direct you towards, you know, Sathnam Sangera's charity, or Creative Access, and you have to check those out. And but, you know, I, I thought I had always wanted to write and journalism was a way for me to do that. And I think, you know, I, as a journalist, I would often be sent to cover literary events in the hope of getting a story or I'd be sent to a festival or whatever. And I just noticed that when I was there, I would often be the youngest person in the audience and I felt like literary events at that point, we're talking about 12 years I've been doing the Salon now, they were very exclusive. They were very expensive. And it was, you know, the dreadful question that's not a question, chin-strokiness, that still happens in the world that will happen so long as there are people ... but you know, it just all felt very rarefied and, and not like just a normal part of your cultural life. You know, books are on this pedestal and book events had to be done in a way that, you know, that just felt too much and I wanted to do something a bit more accessible a bit more fun, a bit more social and so I started off my salon at Soho House, where we did the first actually the very first one was in Shoreditch House upstairs in a room that no longer exists called the Snug. And my guests were the very first one was Susie Boyt and Sam Leith. The second one, I think was Katie Guest and Jenny Colgan, and the rest is the rest is history. We've had amazing people, you know, starting out their careers there Naomi Alderman, you know, Ned Beauman, people like that, who were emerging writers at the time who we now think of as big names. And, you know, I remember David Nicholls premiering One Day there. He's premiered every one of his novels with us since, and Jojo Moyes and Helen Fielding. So we do a mixture of kind of like big best selling, you know, household names, and then, you know, you'll get people like, you know, Bret Easton Ellis, Valeria Luiselli, you know, American writers we love who aren't known in the UK, like Richard Rousseau, I remember Ya Gyasi and Garth Greenwell making their UK premieres with us. We've shifted venues, we're now at the Savoy in London, but, you know, because of the pandemic, we've been being digital we've been all over the world, and that's been great, because people who couldn't come from wherever, Australia, Germany, America could come so-

Nelima Begum 27:07

It really opens up the world.

Damian Barr 27:08

It really does and I think that's been a good thing about this pandemic, there aren't many good things, but that has been a good thing. And Dolly Alderton was our most recent guest there. And so yeah, and you know, and I've done hundreds of those interviews, and if people want to check them out, they just go to the website, which is just theliterarysalon.co.uk. They're all on our podcast, and you know, we've also got Salon on Demand on YouTube. And, you know, we do all kinds of content, we're a magazine, really, we have Word of the Week, we have monthly bibliotherapy online, we do Instagram Live bookshop tours. And, you know, there's a team of eight people who work on the Salon, and I'm very proud of all of them. And, and, you know, we could always do more we could, we could do better, I'm sure, but we're always listening and always trying to balance that mixture of established and emerging voices and, and also really, you know, focus on - we've done a lot this year, to diversify our social media and decolonize it and, that's an ongoing process. But it's about listening to other people, and their truth, however uncomfortable, it might make you.

Nelima Begum 28:27

So it's really, it's grown beautifully.

Damian Barr 28:31

It's grown, whell I don't know if beautifully is the right word, there have been days where I've been like, oh, my god, how can we how are we doing all this there've been days when it feels like it's been held together by elastic bands and chewing gum. I mean, it's, um, you know, we've had lots of nice partners over the years, sponsors and partners, and we have a partnership coming up in the Spring with the Reading Agency, and we've partnered with Slightly Foxed, the wonderful journal and, you know, we, we want, my objective is that for the Salon to be what it is, which is a community - it started off as an events community, and I want it to be a space that supports readers and writers and celebrates that, you know, reading and writing, that's what I want it to be: welcoming, and joyful, and, you know, that means we we have got values and they are clear, you know. We're not going to be for everybody, you know, we are going to be angry about libraries closing, we are not going to accept that bullying in the workplace is all right, we, you know, we do have views about the environment. We do believe that trans women are women. We, you know, we're very clear in our values. And we feel that even if we haven't always been able to articulate that and I think you know, that we do that we articulate that in our programming and in our content. And that means we're not for everybody. That's fine.

Nelima Begum 29:59

On to more specifically your work, You Will be Safe Here was inspired by a true story. I'd love to know, what was the appeal?

Damian Barr 30:09

Well, I mean, I kind of feel I've addressed that already talking about the photograph of, of, of the boy. And, you know, where, where that inspiration came from. I think part of what I realized when I talk about that, though, is is that I have always sort of thought I would hear from him or whether I, you know, that he would pop back into my life. And, and that hasn't, that hasn't happened. But no for me, you know, the desire to do it was to give voice to these women and children and men from 1900, whose stories just aren't known, you know? If you think about the fact that, you know, over 30,000 people died in these camps, and more people than died and more soldiers than died in the war. And, you know, then these are stories that we don't know. And I feel like we should know. So for me, it was about giving a voice to those people. In the past, and also a voice to, you know, these boys in the present. Raymond's story was much written about in the press here and there and around the world. And the character he inspired a boy called Willem, I mean, they're not the same boy at all. You know, again, thinking about truth, there are elements of one in the other, but they are not identifiably the same boy. I went to South Africa and I spent time with Raymond's mother, I went to the camp where he was murdered. I've interviewed the police who were involved in tracking down the people who killed him. And, you know, I did a lot of research for the contemporary part of the story, and then going into the historical part, which meant going to Bloemfontein, where the Anglo-Boer War Museum is, which is built on the site of the Bloemfontein concentration camp, which was the first of the 30 plus white and then 30 plus black concentration camps that were built by the British there and then. So you know, so the impulse was really to give a voice to people who didn't have a voice then or now, but I need to mention a brilliant woman, Emily Hobhouse who travelled to South Africa in 1900, very much against British advice. They didn't want her there as an aristocratic bold woman who heard about what was happening and wanted to go and find out about it and she went there and was horrified. She said that women and children were drooping like hothouse flowers. And you know, she saw death everywhere, she saw these children dying. And she couldn't believe the British people would allow this to happen. And so she recorded the testimony of women and children, she got them to tell her their stories. And she wrote them down in a book called War Without Glamour. But you know, nobody believed her in the UK. She was pilloried and despised as an anti patriotic woman, particularly, you know, the woman, part of it: the Daily Mail ran a headline 'Women: The Enemy' all about her. And Emily Hobhouse recorded these stories and really, I think if Emily hadn't recorded these stories, none of the men who were there would have, because it made them look bad. And those stories would have been lost. So I'm very grateful to Emily Hobhouse for recording these stories. And Emily Hobhouse is a woman who Sarah Perry writes about in her new book Essex Girls. And so I think Emily Hobhouse deserves our attention. And she certainly deserves my gratitude. And, you know, without Emily, it would have been impossible for me to do what I wanted to do, which was to kind of give voice to these to these stories.

Nelima Begum 34:11

It's incredible. She gave a voice to the voiceless. And it's one that everyone can hear now. I think, more so on the topic of your writing as well. I watched a very quick fire interview with Bloomsbury where you talked about why you love and hate Margaret Thatcher, with reference to her creating the cost of the individual. What is the power of individual truth and how far is it from what is real? How do we know?

Damian Barr 34:41

Well, that's interesting, isn't it? I mean, Maggie's having another moment because of The Crown, of course, with Gillian Anderson. And I know my relationship with her is very complicated because she overshadowed my childhood and so much of what happened to me in my life happened because of her, most of it bad I have to say. But I think one of the things that was interesting that reached me in a positive way as a child - one of the few things and I don't think in the way that she intended it to - was her idea, her message that you can be yourself, you know, you are, the 'I' is more important than the 'we' was very much the message. The community that I was growing up in at the time, it was very homophobic and very violent and macho for a lot of it, and there was also a lot of joy and love and support too and community that I've never experienced since living away from it. But that message of you know, blonde ambition, Madonna, Maggie, you know, I think can and did propel a certain number of people a certain distance in their lives. But for me, you know, that's not a renewable energy. For me, I certainly realized, you know, writing the book, which took seven years, I realized that that the individual me is only me in context. You know, me with my family is me on my street is me in my school is me, you know, now in my Salon, and it's me, you know, in my village, it's me, in my community, my LGBTQ+ plus community. So I feel like the limit, there are limits to that. And, you know, I'm not that interested in myself, like, I'm much more interested in other people. I don't find myself endlessly fascinating. So I want to be out there, meeting other people hearing their stories and their truth. And that's, you know, that's what motivates me to write even though you know, I write memoir, and I've written memoir and will write memoir, again, it's still about other people really. And so yeah, I feel like that, that there's a limit to the politics of that, which means that, you know, I feel my obligation is to help others, is to empower and enable other people to tell their story, you know, that's a big part of where I am at, right now in my life as a person is that, you know, I feel really moved and urgent to help - not to help, that sounds patronising, it's not some white saviour or whatever narrative, but to enable people to tell their stories, or to at least realize the value of their own stories, whether that's memoir, or whether that's a story that they know that they want to tell in a novel. And I feel that that's really urgent, that's part of the story of our times, I think that's why we've seen the election result we've just seen in America, I think it's why you're there's so much right anger, in the Black Lives Matter movement, and I think, you know, we're seeing more of that this year, people using social media to tell their stories and, it's not always the safest way or the best way. So, so I've given you a rambling answer to that question. But it's basically to say that, you know, that I think the idea of an individual is a good place to start, but it's not a good place to end. Because for me, it's about connections. And hearing those other stories, and that, you know, people need to feel like... Well you're not gonna have an audience if it's just you, you're not gonna have readers if it's just you. You know? It's about - I don't want to get all EM Forster - but you know, the idea of connecting. That's what it is.

Nelima Begum 39:24

It's great that you've mentioned, like, the individual being a starting point, but maybe not the ending point because it leads on really well, to our next question. I mean, you also mentioned that sometimes it's about asking the questions that people really want to hear the answers to. So what should we be asking ourselves before during or maybe even after all writing journey?

Good question. I think the success of a piece is - is it successful on its own terms? Like, does it answer the questions that it asks? You know, you might set out with a set of questions. For example: what happened in South Africa in 1900? You know, and end up answering questions about what happened in South Africa in 1994. But if you ask the question, what happens in South Africa in 1994? and answer it, then that's a success, but if you ask what happened in 1900, and tell us what happened in 1976, as interesting as that might be, it's not successful in and of its own terms. And so I think that you have to be quite clear about - with the reader. And that's the job of editing, I think, not so much the job of writing, I think. I think editing is asking the questions of yourself. Sorry, writing is asking the questions of yourself, you know. What am I really interested in? What do I really care about? Why am I really doing this? Who gives a shit? And then the second bit is editing, which is what am I really asking? Like, what am I really saying, what is really important here? And then you know, and then, you know, the edit after that is, is making it is, you know, people read books and they think Oh, wow. How does somebody you know, how did they do that? Well they did is because they edited it. They didn't ask that question at the start, and then answer, they were writing and they said something that they realized was an answer to a question they'd been asking subconsciously, and they went back and dropped the question in. You know, nobody's that clever. Well except maybe Hillary Mantel and Bernardine Evaristo. But I think that we have to be gentle with ourselves as writers, and understand that it's a long process and you don't have to get all right on the first day. And it doesn't matter if you change the questions that you ask because you get different answers. So long as it's, the thing has a fealty to itself. And so long as it honors itself, so long as it - and you don't have to have all the answers, either. It's really alright, to leave.... You know in my novel, there are spaces for the reader to ask their own questions, answer their own questions, or disagree about some things. And a couple of reviews were like, you know, well, you know, there are some loose ends. And it's like, yes, there are, because guess what, there are in life, too! And I'm not giftwrapping, I'm writing, and that's, you know, that and so for me, that's, that's what's why, but then again, also, part of it was like, you know, there was a thing that I wanted to leave hanging in the novel. And I left it hanging in my head, I was like, I just don't think that works. Then I thought, it really works, it's really important that, you know, I don't think we need to close off that possibility, blah, blah, blah. And I realized it was just because, you know, I didn't want to kill a character that I loved. So I was just putting it off, you know, and so I think you have to also, you know, be brave, and honest with yourself as well, about what, you know, what, you're really what you're really doing or what sometimes more importantly, you're really avoiding doing. We all know that. Who was it that said, I think it was a film critic that said, you know, they were talking about going to play and he said it was all 'warming the pot' - there can be too much warming of the teapot, you've just got to crack on. Sometimes that means jumping in at the scariest part, and just doing it. I mean, one of the brilliant things that my agent has said to me - the wonderful Claire Conville who's an incredible reader and writer and agent - and she says to me, 'you can't edit nothing'. You know? And it's so basic, but it's so true.

I think sometimes we're hit by the simplicity of it. Just write. You just need to, you know, put the pen to paper and get it out there.

Yeah, and there are so many barriers to that, you know. If you're, if you're a woman, if you're a working class person, if you're a queer person, if you're, you know, differently abled, if English is not your first language, if you have 15 jobs, 28 children, whatever - there are so many barriers to doing that. And they are all real. And I'm not going to sit here and say, from my place of privilege that they are any more real, you know, than the big barrier, which is, you know, can I or should - should I write. But, you know, given those inequalities, I think there are so many great writers that we're never going to hear from and that makes me really angry. And, you know, and there are so many mediocre writers that we do hear for that, frankly, we shouldn't just because they've got all this time and space and resources and I'm like, shut up! You know? But there is something that I talked about in memoir, when I teach memoir, or when I'm talking about any kind of writing, which is, you have to give yourself permission. And there's a process that I call self privileging. Where it's like, I'm giving you a laminated permission slip that says 'I'm allowed to write today'. And I am allowed not to be perfect, I am allowed not to have to win a Booker. I am allowed not to have to sell millions of books, I am allowed to write today. And that's all right. That's all right. Do it. And sometimes I still struggle with it myself. There'll be days where I sit down to write. And I think, Oh, actually, what I should do instead is reply to those emails. Or, I should instead read that article because I'm not aware about this thing. Or I should reorganize my books, or whatever. And, you know, and you have to think about, well what is that? Is that some internalized prejudice, is it fear, it is just straightforward procrastination? What is it? And be gentle with yourself, and forgiving.

And get to the root of what it is that you think is getting in your way?

And it will be different every time.

In lots of ways, I mean, we just discussed this a little bit earlier. But the topic of writing the truth speaks for nonfiction and memoir, both of which you're very familiar with. It's incredibly easy to feel as if you're sharing your life with the world. How do you distance yourself from that feeling in a way that allows you to approach the work with confidence and conviction?

I'm just going to unpack that question for a minute. Because I think there are a number of things in there. You know, social media makes us very reachable, and there are writers who aren't on there at all, like Maggie O'Farrell who's a friend of mine. David Nicholls wasn't on there for years and now he's on there. And I think about Truman Capote squandering his talent at cocktail parties in the 1960s. And I sometimes wonder if, you know, if we aren't too reachable, we don't spend too much time knowing what readers say, and what they do and what they want, and, and, you know, so there's kind of that dimension, that dimension of it, but I think that as a writer, for me anyway, you have to give of yourself. And that can be, that's a lot. With memoir I remember, I was writing about stuff that I had not thought about for years, I realized that for me, it wasn't about remembering or going over old diaries or something. It was about re-living. Right, it's about re-living: you have to go back there. And in the case of me, you know, going back to the place where my stepfather was trying to drown me in the bath. That was traumatizing, that experience was traumatizing, and, writing about it was in some sense, cathartic. Diana Athill told me, you'll find it so cathartic. And I'm like, I won't because I've talked about in therapy or whatever but actually, writing it is different. When you write it, you realize things that you didn't ever realize, when you talked about it. And I realized things about my life that I had not known that I'd concealed from myself, or that I had told myself were different, scenes where I'd made myself the hero, moments, sequences of events that were impossible until I'd written them down. And so, writing does change the world. And it changes the world inside you as well. And I feel like you've got to, you've got to go there, if you're going to do it, and that's the same for fiction as well. You know, I had nightmares about my characters, about what was happening to them, I worried about them constantly, while I was writing them, I was afraid for them, I was in love with them. I was probably just, I was neglectful of the real world around me. That's the other thing. You know, it's like, my husband would just go, oh god, you know, you and Sarah - when will it end! I think you have to acknowledge that it's difficult and selfish when you are necessarily removed from the world around you because you're in the world in your head and in the world of your characters, and so, you do have to give something and there is a price to that there is a cost to that. And that is: you get a lot from it, but you have to give a lot too.

So it also be quite, I mean, it's also very rewarding, but also quite taxing as well at times.

Yeah, totally. I mean, there'll be days where I sat down and, you know, I've tried to find those recognize those days where I'm sitting down, it's like, oh, great, I've managed to write 150 words. Why did I not just go out and enjoy that sunny day that was outside the window? Or, why did I not go to that party, because, I said, I was gonna stay in and write or whatever. Those 150 words might have unlocked something, or they might not, they might just be rubbish. But I think, you know, I can speak for me and say, the things I find hardest about it. I do feel that I'm missing out. I get massive FOMO about events, or even books; people will be reading stuff and I'll be like, god I can't read that, because I've got to read this book about post apartheid Johannesburg architecture, so that I can describe accurately the house that my character is living in or whatever. So you're not going to be able to be doing all of that at the same time as writing your book. There's a price. But there's a much greater advantage, and benefit.

You've been exposed to so many stories throughout your career. And that's just, that's wonderful. It feels like you have the best job in the world. What's been your favorite story to hear and your favorite story to tell?

Damian Barr 51:30

Oh there are loads, I don't know where to start! Immediately Diana Athill came into my head who was a guest at my Salon originally who became a friend and who was of course, one of the greatest editors of the 20th century - she edited Simone de Beauvoir, insert name, she edited them, you know? And she became a brilliant and wonderful writer in her own right, first of all of short stories, but later memoir. Diana's from, you know, a grand country house and sounds posher than the queen. I'm from a council house and don't. And I remember talking to her about when she wrote her first memoirs, and I think she was like, in her late 60s then or her early 70s. I can't remember the exact age anyway. But she'd retired and, she said to me, it might as well have been written over the nursery door, 'you are not the only pebble on the beach'. She said. And so that is what stopped her, this idea that none of us are special or exceptional. And I remember talking to her about it. And, you know, she said something along the lines of you are the only pebble that is you. And that's how I always paraphrase it. And I think of that. And I think if you know, all those people waiting to be given permission to tell their story. Nobody is ever going to give you permission to tell your story, the world isn't waiting. It has to be from you. It has to come from you. If you do need permission, I hereby give you permission. But you don't need permission in the world to do it. It has to come from you. And and so I think of Diana with all her advantages and all her challenges. But you know, someone is brilliant and clever, as her. And I think you know, I would never in my way have thought that she would have faced difficulties, feeling like she was allowed to use her own voice on the page. But she did. So you know. So I think about that in the context of writing. I mean, there are many other scandals, stories I could tell you that are not for this space. But that's one that I like to think of.

Nelima Begum 54:04

I usually like to round off these podcasts with a spot of advice from the guests themselves. Because I always think it's really nice to finish off in that way. You're very passionate about giving voice to those with unwritten stories as we've just seen from your answer. So, if you could give one piece of advice to a writer who is at odds with writing their truth or just struggling to get the words out, what would you say?

Damian Barr 54:28

Forgive yourself. Do not berate yourself for the days where you haven't been, do not bury yourself for the words that you have written that you think aren't good enough. Forgive yourself and allow yourself the space to get better. And to try and to to keep moving forward. And never describe yourself as an aspiring writer. You're writing. You're just aspiring to get better.

Nelima Begum 55:04

That is an incredible way to round off this episode. Damian, thank you so much for joining us. This has been so insightful and such an empowering conversation, which I'm sure many of our listeners will benefit from.

Damian Barr 55:16

Well, I really hope that that's true. And I hope that it enables them to tell their stories. Thank you for making it happen.

Nelima Begum 55:24

No worries at all, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you, Damian.

Damian Barr 55:28

You're welcome.