

Good evening and welcome everyone to this very special event celebrating 25 years of The Literary Consultancy. This is the first in-person event we've run since the beginning of 2020 I'm so glad you are able to be here with us at the Fora Conservatory, in person and on our YouTube LiveStream.

TLC had visionary beginnings. It's easy to forget this with the proliferation of author services over the last couple of decades. But before Becky Swift and Hannah Griffiths put their heads together and decided to democratise professional feedback, there was simply nowhere outside of a publishing house that writers could come for honest, professional feedback. It was a beautiful, simple, and in some ways revolutionary idea. **Why should only those with a guarantee of publication get detailed feedback on their writing?** Why was this feedback only for those with work deemed 'publishable'? And what on earth in any case did 'publishable' mean? These were all things our co-founders were interested in. And that we continue to explore in our daily work as a team: myself, Joe Sedgwick, Nelima Begum, Amy Lord, and our incredible team of 90 Readers and Mentors.

Of the 12,500 writers we've supported over the years, hundreds have gone on to publication. And that's a happy wonderful thing; but it's not our reason for being. Worthy and earnest as it sounds, we have always believed that the greatest literature cannot be bound between the pages of books - we are just lucky that sometimes it alights there. I really believe that literature lives and breathes in ordinary, everyday acts of creativity and imagination. There are so many reasons why people don't or can't take that leap between imagining and writing. And there are storytellers out there whose voices deserve the validation that a truth-telling, mindful feedback service gives them. For 25 years we've held that space, joining the dots not just between writers and the industry, but between writers and their very sense of what it means to be a writer. To believe in themselves as writers.

In the early days Becky's resistance to the idea that author services should prioritise the book as product and not the writer led to her develop a psychoanalytic thesis at the Tavistock Centre. She interviewed published and unpublished authors, and explored the gap between writers and the publishing industry. The anxieties, the trauma, the fear, the imposter syndrome that all of these writers shared no matter what stage of their writing life they were at, that was the stuff she was interested in. All the messy parts of creative process, and all the reasons why we write and why sometimes we don't.

What we have always been interested in is meeting writers where they are on the page, and helping them to develop their projects and their writing lives. We take them just as seriously if they are sending in their first attempt at a poem or their tenth published novel to us. And I think that's key to what we do, and why it works.

We are only ever one moment in a writer's journey - many of the writers who come to us for assessment, or mentoring, or who attend an event with us, are also looking for other ways to spark connection, to find engagement, or to find support. We realised early on that support outside of the framework of publishing related goals was vital and in 2020 we launched Being A Writer, co-curated by the novelist Julia Forster. Being A Writer is an online membership platform that focuses on cultivating creativity and building resilience. We've welcomed 300 writers onto the platform so far - it's clear that this is another space we can hold for writers at TLC. Listening to what's needed in the moment has always been important to us.

In everything we do, our founding principles are never far from our mind, and for me personally Becky is never far from my thoughts. Her legacy lives on in the Rebecca Swift Foundation, a charity that advances the craft, creativity and wellbeing of women poets through a biennial free-to enter Prize and a nationwide Women Poets' Network. I'm so proud that TLC is able to be one of seven industry partners to the Rebecca Swift Foundation. Just like TLC it was a beautiful, simple idea and with over 1000 women sending in their work for the chance to enjoy a year of writing development, confidence-building, and creative opportunities without the pressure to produce or perform, it's clear it's just as necessary and just as relevant as TLC was in 1996.

I would like to think that while we are necessary and relevant, we'll stay here, steady and steadfast, but always attentive, always listening. And always, always in the writers' corner. Because if we don't champion our writers, help them grow, take them seriously, no matter what the 'outcome' may be, we will all be the poorer for it. Writers with a good sense of themselves and their work are in my view far more likely to keep writing, and to write more freely, to take risks, to be innovative, to be persistent, and to create great literature. We've seen it. We are the living proof of it.

I just want to share two stories with you before I give over the stage to the people who matter - the storytellers, standing in tonight for all storytellers out there.

The first story I'd like to share is of a manuscript that came in to us a few years ago. It was a memoir by the writer, activist and cultural historian Naseem Khan. Naseem's TLC reader felt this was a book we should try to find a publisher for. And so after she had made the necessary revisions, I set about sending the book to agents. In theory this was exactly the kind of book the industry was telling us it needed, it wanted. And yet, the responses were luke-warm at best. It was frustrating. I put together a list of small publishers that I thought we could approach directly. I wasn't sure how Naseem would react, but when she saw the list she immediately felt herself drawn to one of them: Bluemoose Books, a small press in Hebden Bridge. By this point Naseem was in her final weeks of life, dealing with terminal cancer. I pitched the book to Kevin Duffy, the publisher at Bluemoose. Within days he emailed me to say, this book needs to be published. We'd be honoured to be the ones to do it. As soon as the contract had gone through the necessary channels I called Naseem. She was in hospital and not well enough to speak with me, but she got to hear that she was going to be published. *Everywhere Is Somewhere* had found a home. Naseem passed away the following day.

The second story is about a writer who wrote and self-published a brilliant non fiction book following her mentoring with TLC. I was giving a lecture one day and recommended the book to a group. I thought it might be nice to let the writer know. A couple of weeks later I got a response. It turned out she'd enrolled on a creative writing course and was having a miserable time. And then she said something I'll never forget. She said, your email was a light bulb moment. I realised I was trying to find validation, and that TLC had already given me this. I just wasn't able to hear it. Until now. I've quit the course.

So I can tell you about the data, the figures and numbers and shiny book deals, the international partnerships, the consultancy and the training and the initiatives and the prizes. But they only ever tell half the story. TLC is interested in the whole story. We

believe every writer deserves good editing. It's that simple. And yet it's so much more. And it's my hope we'll be able to keep doing this for the next 25 years.

But listen, this is not an evening for lengthy speeches. It's an evening of celebration. You're about to watch a short film we commissioned as part of a series of films produced by Story Machine and featuring four of our most exciting writers: Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Hanif Kureishi, Elle McNicoll, and Kit de Waal. Then, a Dancing with Words performance by the poet Lydia Allison and the dancer Akeim Toussaint, produced by Books up North. Both take the theme of our anniversary 'Why I Write'. After that, a short break, then a very special live What Editors Want podcast hosted by Philip Connor and featuring Marianne Tatepo. Welcome again to TLC's 25th Anniversary party. Please enjoy.