Being a Writer Podcast—How to Deal with Anxiety with Tim Clare

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writing, people, anxiety, book, writer, memoir, feel, speak, monologuing, life, editors, hear, stories, anxious, person, questions, read, working, sympathetic, bit

**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Tim Clare

**Nelima Begum**

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.

In this episode of the Being a Writer Podcast, we sit down with author, poet and host of the Death of a Thousand Cuts Podcast, Tim Clare, to discuss how to deal with anxiety. Having experienced severe anxiety and panic attacks for over a decade, Tim set out to find a solution and in doing so found the topic for his latest book, *Coward*.

*Coward* follows Tim’s journey of research trying and testing almost every means of managing and coping with anxiety, including medicine and beyond. We discussed his journey of finding a way to cope, and the process of writing the book itself, as well as how writers can come to terms with dealing with anxiety in their craft.

**Nelima Begum**

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Tim. How are you doing?

**Tim Clare**

I’m really well, thank you. How are you?

**Nelima Begum**

I’m good, thank you. It's lovely to have you on. So today we're speaking about how to deal with anxiety, which is a topic you know a lot about. I'm eager to start at the beginning, though. So, when did you start writing? What're your earliest memories of writing?

**Tim Clare**

I suppose the earliest writing—I mean, unusually, it's documented. I have an exact moment which is, I remember, writing my first attempt at a book [and] I must have been four or five. And I wrote a book and it was called *Try it Out*. And the plot of it was, it was it was done in a Winnie the Pooh sort of, one of those spiral binders or like ring binders, where it snaps together with hole-punched a4 pages, and I would draw a picture on each one so there wasn't much text apart from I wrote the three words of the title, which I expect I had helped with, but it was about two characters on the left-hand side of a river, trying various strategies to cross the river, and, of course, repeatedly failing. So you know, they would be trying to put down a—and it wasn't always clear because each one was only represented in one frame, so you just caught them mid-attempt, so maybe they'd laid a plank of wood across the river and it was breaking, or they were trying some kind of Wile E. Coyote style rockets, skates or something like that, to get across the river, and as the book goes on, I didn't realise this until recently, my mum found it. And I looked through it and I just very clearly get bored at some point with that plot strand and just, you know, like any good sort of picaresque saga it just wanders off into its own thing. There're various bits that are very clearly sort of pastiches of computer games that I'd played at the time and it doesn't, I guess it doesn't stick the landing in terms of the third act, like definitely you don't really know what happened then. But I'm really proud of it, in terms of I got very early on the idea of having a clear goal, and then some kind of conflict preventing a character from getting, they want to get across the river, and it's not easy and they go through a series of try-fail cycles. So I feel like—

**Nelima Begum**

You have that three-act structure nailed from the very beginning.

**Tim Clare**

Well yeah, if only I could have stuck to that beautiful simplicity. I think everything after them was kind of like fall from Grace, really, because I wish I could write stories was such, it's what it's kind of wonderful and everything has been downhill from there.

**Nelima Begum**

Well, it’s brilliant though, that you had like an actual, physical book. So, what made you want to, was that what made you want to pursue a career in writing? Did it start really early? Or did that come much later?

**Tim Clare**

Well, it kind of oscillates. You know, we talk about writers as being people who are incredibly creative and have a great imagination. But I think the opposite was true for me in the sense that I decided, at four, I wanted to make stories and I when someone said, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ I said, ‘A writer,’ and I never had the wit to think of another answer. You know, that was that, I didn't have, I couldn’t imagine different futures for me—just I’d make stories. And I think my ability to understand about jobs, and what a career was, was not fully formed. I didn't really understand what being an author entailed. I didn't know what grown ups did, really. So, I had an idea that I wanted to do stories. Long, long before I had any real conception of what being a grown up was in that way. My idea of what a grown up is may still be shaky, admittedly, but um, yeah, so ever since I was tiny, before I could write I knew I wanted to make stories and I wanted to write you know, before I could form letters, so it's always been, I don't, I should say, I don't think that that's necessarily a good thing. You know, I speak to so many writers and there's this idea of, sometimes people are a little bit shame faced if they don't have this origin myth that means they sort of pulled the writing sword from the stone and they were destined always to be a writer. And they always knew if that if there was sort of indifference towards stories, there's a sense in which they feel a bit like well, you know, am I a proper writer, if you're asking me how did you start? And then I say, I had to write, it was a compulsion. And they go, I never really considered myself as being a writer for a long time. I think that there's something to be said for doing different things and everyone has the kind of birth right to tell stories—it’s a human thing—and the problem with the way I came at it was that I made it quite a lot of my identity, being a writer and being good at writing. And you know, since we're going to be talking about anxiety, I think it's an apt thing to just flag up. As soon as you kind of go well, this is not what I like doing, so much as who I am, Like, if you're having a difficult day, you know, you might as well be looking down seeing your hands crumbling before you. It's like, I am a writer. Today I’m not writing so who am I? Like, what? It becomes an existential crisis instead of purpose—a little bit tricky.

**Nelima Begum**

Interesting. So you've written memoir and fiction, and you're also a stand-up poet. Talk me through how you write memoir, in particular, because it's personal in nature, and can sometimes lead to a writer feeling vulnerable at times.

**Tim Clare**

Yeah, I mean, I think being a person who has spent a lot of his life struggling not to monologue at people, not to info dump, not to tell people just everything that's on my mind, to learn to take turns in conversations, things like that, actually, there's an element in which writing memoir is a huge relief. And I don't mean that facetiously. I mean, it's just a space and you still have that consciousness of am I oversharing in a way that's going to make people annoyed at me. Am I doing? You know, is this people going to be bored? I have all those feelings, but you can at least make the mistakes and know that if you don't want to show it to anyone, you can. So, I think it kind of comes in the first instance. It's not experienced, initially, as a, because when you're writing it down, you're not actually delivering it to someone, you're writing it down on the page. And so there is, like, a, I think, a helpful and necessary layer of protection kind of monologuing to an empty room. And if at some point down the line, you decide actually, I don't want to share that, you could choose not to. But at the same time, this is gonna sound odd, but it never really occurred to me to be worried about public reception about what I'm sharing, and I don't know that that's because I'm an open person, or because people who tend to sit down and read your memoir have generally opted in. They're, generally speaking, going to be a reasonably open and sympathetic audience. You're not repelling in through someone's, sort of, sunroof, while they're having a family dinner, and saying, Let me tell you about what happened when I was seven. Like, they've seen your book. They've decided that some aspect of the subject matter interests them and they're drawn to finding out more, so you're, a mean I'm sure there are books that you could write that would be very controversial and make people hugely angry, but I think, in general, and also I think from doing a lot of stand-up and having just done a lot of telling people things that have happened to me and getting to gauge their reaction and getting a sense of what people do and don't like to hear, I think you just go into it feeling a bit more like, most of the time I'm pretty confident about what people will think is—you know, we think of our, I think what I'm sort of dancing around here, and this is the kind of dirty secret of memoir, is that what can seem like, you're being very sort of, it's just very valorised to share difficult things. And people generally praise you for it, really, so if people go, How did you write about this sort of difficult or painful thing you went through? part of the answer is well, because I knew I would get some social capital out of it.

**Nelima Begum**

Spilling all the secrets today!

**Tim Clare**

Well, I think there's an element of that which is true.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, it's a really interesting way of looking at it, too. I think this leads us really nicely onto the next question on the topic of feeling, you know, like you're sharing. You've been very open about your journey in dealing with anxiety and panic attacks over the years. When did you first notice your anxiety and how did you identify it?

**Tim Clare**

It's really silly how long it took me to sort of get to a place where I was like, I have a sort of pathological or problematic relationship with anxiety that is not going away. That is not just because of situation X. I think anyone who's, you know, you just live as yourself for your life, that's what we all do. So much of what you experience and feel you just imagine is what humans experience and feel and is the default. And so every time I felt anxious, I could point to something in my life, some trigger, some situation, some stressful thing at work. I mean, the world is not short of potential targets for something that can be causing your anxiety, right, you can do this perpetually, the news, maybe some aspects of your relationship, your housing situation, a busy time at work, whatever, you can always really point to something and suggest that that's the reason you feel anxious. And it took me a long time to go, actually, maybe I'm not coping very well and maybe I need some support or intervention. But a bit more of a satisfying answer is that I know that things had sort of really ramped up when I started having panic attacks, and I probably had my first one, I want to say, like, 2006 or something like that. I can't quite remember what year it was, maybe 2007, but certainly by the time I started writing the book, I'd been having panic attacks for well over a decade, and they'd ramped up that I was having them weekly and sometimes multiple ones a day over a succession of days.

**Nelima Begum**

Wow. So your latest memoir, *Coward*, actually goes into this a lot further and follows you as you try to better understand anxiety and more importantly, ways in which you could maybe go about dealing with it. When did you decide that this was something that you needed to write about?

**Tim Clare**

I'd been struggling to write fiction. I wrote the first 30,000 words of novel really quickly and I was just having such a good time writing it. And then I kind of got to a little plot snarl, something tricky that I wasn't sure how to handle, and then I've read back what I'd written, and I suddenly hated it. I just was like, I don't think any of this is working. And it's quite an unsettling thing to go from loving what you've written to really not feeling like it's any good at all. And I felt like non-fiction might just be a relief. I mean, this is the sort of really silly answer: I thought, what have I got to say; what have I got to write about? And I thought, well, something that is part of my life that I'm dealing with at the moment. It's just this terrible anxiety. Like, I feel like I can't cope with anything. And at the same time, my daughter had just been, we’d just enrolled her in this sort of child development study. She was two at the time, two-and-a-half, where they were doing, they were studying her brain. And I saw her, you know, go into an MRI machine and I saw her wear this skullcap, that's called like an fNIRS (functional near-infrared spectroscopy), which measures blood flow in this upper part of the brain. And I'd had a couple of neuroscientists and psychologists on the podcast to talk about writing, none of whom I thought would say yes, when I asked them, and I had, like, a little moment, where I was watching the map of my daughter's brain, what they call the bold response, the blood oxygen level dependent response, as she did a visual recognition task in this lab, and all these pieces came together, where I was like, technology, [the] understanding of the human brain and psychology has come on so hugely in the last 20 years. And it turns out that the summaries and researchers seem actually reasonably willing to speak to me, and quite high-profile ones as well. And I need to write a book. Because that's what writers do. Otherwise, I'm not a person. Yeah. And so those things all came together and I was like, maybe I could, you know, when you think about writing a non-fiction, but you know, that's the classic thing when you're pitching a non-fiction book, or you're pitching an article, it's like, why are you the person to write about this? There're lots of topics that I'd love to write about, you knowm that I'm really interested in. I'm interested in Southeast Asia in [the] 20th Century, really fascinated in the history of 20th Century China, and the economic miracle, the Tiger Economies like South Korea and Japan. I could not write those books at all. They would require the ability to like read multiple languages. I don't have any background. I'd love to read books on them. I'm not the person to write them, and it would take 15 years of my life to get to the point where I could begin writing them. Something I do have lived experience of, that I felt like I really just have a basic grounding in that I'm invested in and can describe from the inside, is anxiety and panic attacks. And it's something I've well, and it's something that I had questions about, you know? I feel like sometimes we look at books and we see especially; we think you need to have answers about a topic, right? You're going, here's our solution to this problem. Right? I didn't have any answers for anxiety. All I knew was I wanted to, kind of, wrestle with that. And I think that's a really good motivation for writing a book, is having a bunch of questions.

**Nelima Begum**

Right, exactly. Having questions to ask and having topics that you'd want to interrogate further, I think, just, they often do form a really good basis for a good book because it's your research as well as wanting to maybe inform and enlighten your readers.

**Tim Clare**

And the readers can kind of go on the journey with you; in a way you get to be the proxy for the reader. You get to be the, and it does mean you've got a responsibility, you go around because, you're being the detective, and so you have to make sure you ask the questions that the reader wants answered, you know? And this is not my natural skill to speak. I went into a lot of interviews, wanting to be liked, really, you sort of realise after a while, you know, it's a book about anxiety that's not made up. I talk to people and I don't want to annoy them. I don't want to ask silly questions. I was speaking to lots of researchers who I wanted to both, sort of, like me, I wanted to impress them a little bit by maybe saying something about anxiety by going, Look I have done my reading. I would listen back to the transcripts and it was a bit excruciating sometimes to hear myself, but I guess I'm saying it because you don't have to be, I think it turned out alright in the end, and I think you don't have to be perfect at any of these things to kind of go into it. But you can cop to that in the book. And so I did talk about it sometimes that how, I think the worst was, I think there was someone I talked to who had to sit through 20 minutes of me monologuing at them, before I asked my first question, and I listened back, and I could see them visibly sinking in their seat as I went on for 20 minutes before I asked a question and they were very polite, but you know, these things, I think, the reader goes on the journey with you and if you're very motivated, and you care about the topic, that's what's going to make you read the sort of thousandth-and-one peer reviewed paper on the topic. That's what's gonna make you persevere to try and understand some of the basics of genetics, so you can understand what you're reading. That's what's going to make you send out those emails to ask if someone will speak to you, even when you feel very embarrassed and you feel like why on earth would they speak to me? You go, well, what else am I gonna do, stop writing the book? No, okay, and that pushes me and so that fear of not getting answers pushed me over my fear of disapproval.

**Nelima Begum**

Great, that's a really interesting process. So, more on the process of writing it. The writing journey itself seems like it was a very experimental one, because all the possible treatments and solutions that you write about, they were tried and tested by you. So how did you navigate that process and find balance between doing the research and then having to streamline it into memoir?

**Tim Clare**

Oh, my goodness. Well, the answer is I have a really good agent. And I'm not just I'm not just saying this to be crawling, because people rarely come on a podcast and go I should say just, between you and me, my agent is terrible, and my editors always… I'm sure there are some dreadful characters out there who would say that, but my agent is just terrific and gives me loads of, and her assistant, gave loads of editorial support. And then I was lucky enough to have two editors because I had my first editor, Jo Dingley, at Canongate, but then she went on maternity leave and I got a second editor. And yeah, most of the time you think sort of moving between multiple people is a bad thing, but actually it meant I got two sets of extremely skilled eyes on my work. And the answer is I did way, way, way, way, way more than could fit in the book. I think the first draft came to nearly quarter of a million words.

**Nelima Begum**

Oh my goodness.

**Tim Clare**

It had over 400 end notes linking to like, as I said, I genuinely read over 1000 peer-reviewed papers from beginning to end, not just the abstracts, and then you have to learn what it means because it might as well be Finnegans Wake, like I don't know what a ‘voxel’ is. Like, I don't know what any of these words mean? Well, I'm gonna have to go and learn and speak to people. And a lot of the time it was, genuinely, I just emailed the lead author on the paper and said, ‘Hello, can I speak to you? Can you explain your paper I want to make sure I'm not getting it wrong.’ It's pretty cheeky in retrospect, but always with the very friendly but implied threat, if you don't speak to me. I'm going to write about this anyway, but I'm going to completely butcher your work.

**Nelima Begum**

I will butcher the integrity of your work if you don't talk with me.

**Tim Clare**

I will misrepresent you, so please, because I would love to not get it wrong. I think that's probably what I was doing in a really pass-agg way. So I went and did all these different things. And so the way I streamlined it is, some of the stuff just didn't make it into the book, because it was useful, but it just didn't, or it gets a sentence, like I do a nod towards it. I went and did boxing training, and my first sentence to the guy I got in he said, ‘Why are you doing this?’ I said, ‘I want to learn how to get punched in the face please.’ Because I was scared and I it seemed like something that was, [and] I have to say boxing was terrific fun, and it made me appreciate how incredibly fit like modern dancers must be as well, like I feel like my respect for dancers was not lower to begin with, but I was like, oh my goodness, you must be so fit. But so I did a bunch of stuff that just didn’t make the book. And I did a load of, I mean, I cut so many interesting conversations that I tried to put in and I needed my agent and my editors to say, ‘No, like this needs to be shorter.’ And there were huge sections that I just had to take out and I think it was very painful cutting into live meat like that. There was a whole 13,000-word chapter on meta science and how we work out what's true in research and very, very crunchy, deep scientific stuff about how do we know any of this stuff is true, and what do we mean when we talk about peer review and research and could we have been studying all the wrong things? Really fascinating to me, really important, I think but I had to cut quite a lot of it out and a lot of people who gave up their time to speak to me ended up being a sentence or two in the book. And that was hard. It was something I resisted a lot of the way because I wanted, I really wanted just to give, if I'd had my druthers it would have been an unreadable book because it would have just been a transcript of every single conversation I had because I genuinely enjoyed that. But I had to filter it into something that was what a reader would want and could manage. And yeah, I think I hope I've done that and also some of it, just to sort of also find my final answer to your question, is that occasionally, if I was talking about a study or a piece of research, and there was more I thought was needed [that] I wanted to say, but it was maybe optional, it's like you didn't have to necessarily read it. I did use the endnotes and that was where I talked about study design and things like that, whereas like, oh look, this is an interesting piece of research, but there were only 11 people in the study. So, we've got to be a bit careful about generalising because I think when you're anxious, you do want easy answers and quick answers. If you're feeling very anxious and you pick up a book—I found it very frustrating at the beginning speaking to researchers who would go, ‘Yeah, I mean, so we could say this, but on the other hand, it's difficult to say.’ I thought they were being wishy washy and woolly. I felt frustrated, and I subconsciously felt that someone was more authoritative, the more definitive they could be. Now, part of the journey I went on was to discover that's not true. And the people who are most likely to be a flim-flam merchants, if you don't mind me sounding like a kind of World's Fair circus barker, they often are the people who are least overstating their case of it. And so I wanted to make it so that, if you're anxious, you don't necessarily want, there're going to be ways that you can skip past and miss some nuance and that be an optional extra because you want answers and you're very vulnerable to wanting, just tell me what to do. And if there's one person going it's complicated, and there's another person going do this three times a day and you'll be better, you follow that person who says do this, even if they're not probably wrong, because we want to. Anyway, that was part of the journey I went on, so streamlining it was tricky, and I hope I've done that but you're always conscious of the stuff that's on the cutting room floor.

**Nelima Begum**

Of course. There's always a bit of regret there sometimes. But, so, I read a blog of yours actually, from a few years ago, which kind of alluded to you writing this book at the time and you'd kind of asked people to take part in a survey because you were looking into this a lot more. So have you, at any point, come across others who struggled with anxiety or were there any networks or groups that helped you feel less isolated or more in touch with people who were kind of on the same wavelength and going through the same things as you?

**Tim Clare**

There's a lovely line in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, where this butler character is being spirited away at night, to dance with the fairies in a fae court, and by day he has to do his job, so he's not getting any sleep and he's continuously exhausted. Another servant encounters him and, not knowing the truth, presumes that he's depressed. And then it has this lovely line where it talks about him, this other servant, sort of making some gesture of fellowship towards the tired butler, and it says, “recognising in him a fellow in the Freemasonry of melancholy”, as if depression is this kind of secret society, but like recognises like, and when you see someone else who's depressed, there's a connection. And I think the same is true of anxiety, and what surprised me was how suddenly people who I wouldn't have thought of as anxious at all would, maybe I was they were a researcher I was talking to, maybe they found out was writing the book, would suddenly open up and talk about their struggles with fear and anxiety in a way I wouldn't have expected, and how clearly it was a relief for them to talk about it. And I have to say, every time that person was doing an amazing job of not giving away that they struggled either in the past or currently, with anxiety. It was clear to me that there are people going around who are brutally stressed, brutally anxious, and doing an incredible job of hiding it. So that in itself made me feel less alone. People read it, I mean, only a few people have read the book, outside of my editors, and again, the strength of reaction from people going, ‘I recognise my experience in this.’

You know, a lot of anxiety gets written about—I don't mean to criticise, I'm just saying that there's an imbalance—with a kind of arched eyebrow like, well, we don't want people to think we're whinging. That's a very sort of British thing. It's part of how we maintain the class system really, and this slightly servile edge, by making any expression of distress a form of whinging and complaining, and it's not something that's done, and it's very convenient for anyone in a position of power, of course. You don't want to seem to be self-pitying, and all this kind of stuff. And so you have to get round that by using jokes, right, and humour, and I'm not immune to that. I've done that a lot in this book, and so people who are anxious often portray themselves as slightly comic characters. Like, you know, me, I'm a worrier, you know, gosh, I'm so worried about this, and sending ourselves up. And I wanted to write about the truth of it, and the truth is, somebody in the midst of mental illness is not always a very sympathetic, or immediately likeable, character. A lot of what people don't understand about anxiety, is [that] the person who's suffering from severe anxiety, it's not likely to manifest with them standing there with their knees knocking, biting their fingernails. It’s not going to be like, oh, this lovely, wonderful wallflower doesn't want to go on stage to accept the award that they've been offered for rescuing puppies. They are likely to be the sort of person who's, like, the friend who flakes out on meeting up. And you go oh, they obviously don't respect or like me or they had something better to do. The person who's irritable with you, or closes down.

And those things are not sympathy. They're not great. But we hide these things so much, and we try and talk about anxiety. There was a temptation throughout writing the book, to continually edit it to present myself in the best light possible, and try to twist it to make myself more sympathetic than I actually was. And I want it to be really honest about what it looks like and how it feels. I think then if you do that, when someone reads it, and they connect with that on some level, that's very validating and I did feel less alone and I did feel connected to other people who went through the same thing because I'd not held back. And so you feel that they've seen you. And, of course, like everything is, you know, we're always unconsciously tweaking stuff to try and present ourselves in ways we'd like to be seen. But I think I did make a conscious effort not to cut out the difficult and less sympathetic stuff, and the fact that people saw that and felt like they saw something of themselves in it, that's been a really validating good experience.

**Nelima Begum**

How did, or does, the anxiety impact your writing and creativity, and how do you deal with it in those moments?

**Tim Clare**

Well, the really good news about it, about anxiety and writing, is that some of the fixes for that, or fixes to final, anxiety is managed, not cured. Because, with the exception of a very few people with rare genetic conditions, everybody experiences anxiety and anxiety is great. We read books because of the tension and anxiety of a plot hook and things like that. We don't not want to have it, we just don't want disordered anxiety that is so uncomfortable that we feel miserable, and that stops us making choices that enhance and nourish our life. But the good thing about a lot of writing-based anxiety is it's amenable to quite, almost insultingly, easy management, because it doesn't stop the anxiety, it just allows you to keep going in the face of it. So, I spoke to a guy called Dr. Tim Pychyl, who studies procrastination, and he said that the correlation between people who suffer from anxiety and people who suffer from procrastination is very high, and that we often see procrastination as a lack of self-regulation, you know, as people being lazy, but actually it's a failed self-regulation strategy. Procrastination is the attempt to regulate anxiety, it’s just not a good one because it just puts it off.

I did a lot of research into this and how this explains some contradictions with neuroscience to do with up-regulation of the prefrontal cortex, which, you know, we're past thinking of individual brain areas as being responsible for individual things, but its associated with executive function [and] self-control. Sometimes we often think, like, if you can see more activation, there’s more self-control, then the person must be doing better. But you can see up-regulation of the prefrontal cortex in people who are extraordinarily stressed and suffering from procrastination, and what you may be seeing is inefficient self-regulation, right, where they're constantly using that executive function to try and bludgeon themselves into doing stuff that makes them feel miserable and stressed and it's not working very well. Then you may see down-regulation, in that you don't need to exercise self-control if you're just doing something because you want to, like I don't have to exercise self-control if I'm enjoying writing. So, some of the simple things oh, gosh, it's so dumb, really, but when I'm doing well, and I'm really bad at this, by the way, like I still mess up all the time, I struggle with it—I've not solved writing anxiety by any means—but making a to-do list with things I have to do that day. Small tasks, and writing will be part of it but my break it down a little bit. The Pomodoro Technique that a lot of people swear by where you set a timer for 25 minutes and you write without checking emails or doing anything else for about 25 minutes, then you stop, and you can even do just 10 minutes or something, take five-minute break and then and then go again. I mean, I'm so, I get so uncomfortable that I often don't manage to do more than two rounds of that, but that's still 15 minutes that I wouldn't have done otherwise. And what Dr. Tim Pychyl talked about was his little slogan, which is like, these are kind of tips and sometimes I've been very withering about the idea that you can encapsulate change within a tip, a listicle, but this has actually helped. He always thinks, what's my next step? So, for example, it might just be opening your laptop. Like, if you need to write something that you're not particularly looking forward to doing, you just think what's the next step and it's opening my laptop and switching it on. It might be opening word, or whatever writing client you're using. It might be you know, if you're going out for a run, it might be what I've got to find my shorts, you're not thinking about psyching yourself up for the run.

This works for so many things. It's how I managed to kind of swim in minus two, the temperature was minus two and I was swimming in the river in Norwich, and I was really up for it and it wasn't difficult but when it's going into cold water, the way I do it is not think about going into the water but if I'm standing there and I'm still wearing my trousers, the first thing I'll do is like take my shoes off. I've got to take my left shoe off, and then once you're sort of moving, you're moving in the direction of these things get easier and easier.

I'm just very conscious of hypocrisy here. I still struggle with writing. I still struggle with playing chess on chess.com Instead of like writing a scene. You still have to take some action, but there are ways of taking the path of least resistance. I think having a timer is really good even if it's just for 10 minutes. I think people can start beating themselves up that they are intrinsically lazy, when what we're doing when we procrastinate is you're trying to protect yourself from feelings of discomfort and anxiety. That doesn't make you a bad person that you don't want to feel them. And honestly, if you do start writing they may well initially increase. That's something to be aware of. The idea that you're gonna sit down and just suddenly be transported to this, you're gonna go, ‘Phew, I'm really glad.’ [But] you may come up against a series of problems that you've been avoiding, and it may be really tricky, but I think you will be glad of having done it. And that's the place I've got to with sort of, like, going for runs and having cold showers or cold swims and stuff. I know from experience I've made myself check at the beginning of the end, so it kind of hammers the lesson home. When I finish I go, ‘Do I regret having done that?’ And the answer has never ,ever been yes, I regret it. And do I feel worse? And the answer is no. And if I were starting to feel worse sometimes, then actually it would be legitimate to sometimes avoid those things, right. That's what we can ask ourselves. I think you know, taking the time when you finish a session of writing, if that session was five minutes timed, to stop and just be in your body for a moment and think, Do I regret having done that? And if the answer is yes and you felt feel miserable writing consistently, then you can start going well how can I approach this differently, or do I want to write at all? That's fine. It's okay to not write if it makes you feel horrible every time you do it. You're not a bad person. Loads of people in the world don't write and have wonderful, fulfilling lives. You're already a human being who is intrinsically worthwhile. Writing is just a lovely current bun with some strawberry jam in it [that] you get to enjoy that can improve your life. It is not a grim duty or obligation that you have to perform in order to be a worthwhile human being [because] you're already there. But how can we make writing something that you enjoy that makes you feel thrilled? For me, writing my non-fiction books feels like I've been allowed to enter a sort of real-life detective-story-stroke-spy-thriller without the danger, where I get to go and explore things and speak to people I would never normally get to speak to. And go, ‘Tell me about the human brain.’ And they go, ‘Yeah, all right.’ I was speaking to a professor about how we can play the human brain as if it were a sort of keyboard and we can fire individual neurons. This is amazing! I wouldn't normally get to do this in my life, but because I'm in this, and once you're there, you don't actually have to use any self-regulation to be up late at night, reading multiple research papers. I did it because I—

**Nelima Begum**

Really wanted to

**Tim Clare**

Yeah, it was always just like, I have to know. And that's a great place to be and I know that different writers have talked to me about this, the time when they're writing their story set in sort of late-medieval periods. And they're like looking up leatherwork, and they're like, ‘There's gonna be a renaissance fair with a leatherworking demonstration, and you can go and have lessons. I’m gonna go and get lessons with someone who's gonna teach me how to do leatherworking!’ No one's getting up in the morning and going, ‘God, now what's on my to do list? I’ve got to learn leather working? Flipping heck!’ It's intrinsically fascinating and interesting to them, and it's going to make their story sing with authenticity, and that's a place that you can get to, and you can hear from the way I’m monologuing about it now, that I get so excited by that moment. But it starts with just, like, doing the five minutes, the 10 minutes, and just taking your pen for a walk, really, and seeing where it goes. And that frees you up against the fear of failure.

**Nelima Begum**

I love that, and I love that you've kind of emphasised how it's something to be done in small steps and small, easy digestible chunks that work for you because I think, a lot of the time when we're looking at writing anxiety, so to speak, we're thinking about the really heavy big picture stuff like I need to feel inspired and I need to write this many 1000 words and I need to draft and redraft and there's the fear of failure and the fear of success. But before you get to any of that, you could just start with the really simple steps [in a way that] it works for you.

**Tim Clare**

Absolutely. And I would say, from having done over 100 hours of interviews with authors on the podcast, a really common through-line with some best-selling authors who’ve sold hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of copies of books, is [that] their big breakthrough came when they were supposed to be writing one book, and they went you know what I'm actually starting to hate writing to I don't think I'm gonna be a writer anymore, right? And then they started writing a second treat book for themselves as, kind of, their “you can't fire me I quit”, like they wrote a book that they felt was so self-indulgent, just for them, that no one would ever want to publish it, but they would deliver it like, ‘Oh by the way that I said I was gonna write actually, I've written this one instead. Yeah, you can tell me I don't have to write anymore because I know it's rubbish. But I'm writing because I want to write this.’ And they wrote the secret one just for them that they then couldn't stop writing. And then it goes on to be a bestseller. They keyed into something that was just so easy to write; [that] was a joy to write; that they wrote just for themselves and then they had a great time. And I think there are times, you know, when you'll get edits back from an agent or editor and they're asking you to do something, they're pushing you to do better than, you know, to dig deep to find something in yourself to write better. And you're scared because you think maybe I can't do that, [and] I've had points like that where get notes back and I feel resentful because I'm like, ‘I might mess it up. If I tried to do what you're saying I might not be able to do it or you seem to think I'm a better writer than I am.’ You’re like, ‘Can you can you make this seem better by doing this, this and this?’ And I'm like, ‘I actually don't know if I can and you're going to see that I can't do this, and you're gonna be disappointed because you wouldn't have asked me to do this if you knew how bad I am.’ And actually they were right and I could do it with their support—doesn't always get it on the first bite, but there, are you know, not all writing, I don't suggest it's all, kind of skipping through rainbow meadows. It's not, but the idea that good writing cannot go hand-in-hand with engaged, rapturous joy, I think is a fallacy. It can be wonderful.

**Nelima Begum**

Beautiful. Now, I don't want to give away your final takeaways from the book itself, but is there anything that you tried and found worked really well in helping you manage your anxiety better than when you began the journey?

**Tim Clare**

Yeah, I'm not gonna sit on the conclusions like a miser. I think like, I'd want to share them far and wide. And really a lot of what the book is, is about the journey, and about the kind of nuance and about embracing uncertainty. What I would say to start with is that anxiety has lots of different causes. And it's a bit like a headache in some ways. So we can't always give one prescription for every single person. We try lots of different things and actually sometimes lots of things in combination. You know, like going out in the cold with a woolly scarf, hat and gloves, and a coat. You don’t know one of those things is the cure, and sometimes we get into terrible arguments in anxiety, you know, [it’s] so silly, where people are arguing, ‘This is the way to deal with anxiety.’ ‘No, this!’ and it's a bit like hearing people have an argument whether you make bread with flour, or with yeast, it's like you need all of these things, actually. These things aren't in competition.

For a lot of people I would say, as a starting point, finding someone or some format in which you can talk honestly about what you're going through and what you're experiencing, and you could admit it with the full force because often we don't want to tell our friends or family because we're scared that we're going to cause harm, because they will worry about us. It is quite a thing to lay on one's partner or someone close to you, to go I can't go on like this. That's quite a scary thing to hear from someone, even if they don't mean that in the sort of dark sense, but they just mean I can't keep living this way. Something has to change. You know, in many ways that is a positive statement. It's a positive thing to hear from someone in many ways, because they're going, ‘I recognise that there are problems, and I am seeking, I'm wanting change, and I'm disclosing that to you because I want help with change,’ right, in many ways [that] is positive, but the fear is that that's going to impact other people negatively. We're going to hurt other people [and] cause them distress. So we keep quiet and it can be such a relief to have that heard, speak to people. And, to a certain extent, to bring it back to writing, there's very good research for people writing about things in memoir form in a supported way, having really, really good outcomes on the sort general level, like if someone is suffering from clinical, disordered anxiety, then I would always say go to your GP. Talk to them. See what's available for you. CBT in the UK is, there's a big waiting list for cognitive behavioural therapy, but there's a certain degree to which a lot of the studies suggest that bibliotherapy versions of that, so reading CBT has as good an outcome, as working with a therapist. So it may be that you can simply get hold of online or book-form resources, and use those. And it's possible, in some cases, that it's appropriate for people to go on a sort of short course of SSRIs or SNRIs, if that's something that you're open [It] helps some people. You know, there are 25% of people who do both CBT and take an antidepressant like an SSRI or SNRI and don't show any improvement. So clearly, those cannot be the only interventions. But you know, I think those, I really would say fundamentally, before anything else, is that ability to have someone understand what you're going through. Yeah, there's kind of three things: for someone to understand, you've got to have been able to articulate it, so it predisposes that you understand it yourself, just the act of telling someone else often gives you some recognition of what you've been through. Being heard by someone else, that act of compassion of someone hearing you, and then being understood by someone else. I think that's profoundly healing. It's the beginning of a process, not the end of it, but I think it can be profoundly healing.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant advice and massively helpful as well. Of this group of questions—I just want to round off with one— more, what's one thing you learned while writing *Coward* that surprised you about yourself

**Tim Clare**

That I could change. It's so odd, that the fundamental to all storytelling—someone goes through something and it changes and the character develops, right?—should be a revelation when it happens in your own life. But I didn't think I didn't think I could change because if you do something for 10 years, and it's the same you just don't think. And things did change. And it transformed my life. I don't want to sound evangelical, also I’m aware that maybe I'm not a credible source because I've done a book and so I'm not gonna go, ‘Yeah, I did it and to be honest it’s all very much this,’ like I'm not saying that. There was an uneventful period. In fact, to the extent that I found it slightly professionally embarrassing, like I would say, honestly, you know, the dumb thing, if you're writing something with a kind of literary edge, is to end with a little bit of aporia. You know, in the Samuel Beckett style, where there's a sort of ambiguous epiphany, that doesn't really get anywhere, but it sort of feels like there's a sense of an ending. But no, like some things I do, at the time of talking to you I haven't had I haven't had a panic attack in over two years, from having had them for over a decade weekly, almost daily, like, that's just night and day. Do you know I mean? I think that's absolutely bananas to me. And that's what I would say about writing memoir in general, is it actually has often has a terrifying transformative effect on your life in a way that you might not be ready for. By, you know, writing my first non-fiction book, I think it was like 13 years ago or something, was how I ended up meeting my wife. Hence it's why I've got my daughter, you know. These things change, if you write about the thing that matters to you, and you throw yourself into it—

**Nelima Begum**

It will change your life.

**Tim Clare**

Yeah. There's that, I can't remember whose line it was. I think it was Thoreau, who had that line about the writer is one who, having spent his arrows throws his body at the mark, which is a really dumb way to do archery right if you just like rugby tackle the board, I think people will just think you're an idiot. But I love that idea of throwing yourself into a piece and living it, if you're writing non-fiction. Even if you're just doing the story of you know, stone carving or something, I think that can completely consume your life in a way that's not unhealthy. And I think whenever you do that, if it's something that you had to write, something that means a lot to you, it will change your life.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant point to round off on. Now, we've got some quickfire questions for you. There's just five and for these, kind of just say the first thing that comes to your head, so no thinking. What helps you feel creative?

**Tim Clare**

Well, I think going for a walk is, I know that sounds very cheesy, but I think walking somewhere new and trying to see new things.

**Nelima Begum**

When you need inspiration, you turn to…

**Tim Clare**

Ah, wow. I think when I get inspiration, I tend to open spaces. I think it's a similar thing. Inspiration comes from the Latin *inspirare*, so it's like to breathe in, to breathe in spirit to inspire. And so really, it's that process of breathing in so I think you need somewhere with like a big open sky and that ability to sort of inhale so I think it would be sort of anywhere where there's lots of sky.

**Nelima Begum**

Love that. What’re you working on at the moment, if anything?

**Tim Clare**

I'm working on a book with the working title, *No More Games*, about tabletop games, and my obsession with games, and what makes people get together to play games around a table all around the world and the ways in which communities form.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. What’s the greatest piece of writing advice you've ever received?

**Tim clare**

So I can't sum it up in a single sentence. But when I was filming in 2005 with Channel Four, I met Terry Pratchett, and he looked at the book I was working on, and he just immediately started riffing on the fantasy world I'd created and go, ‘Well if this is true, then this would of course be true. And then probably the whole culture developed differently.’ And in that instant, I realised two things. One, that my book, my novel would never be published. It wasn't very good. And two, that there were so, so, so much more to fantasy than I had ever given credit. There was so much more depth I could give it and I think that was a moment where I initially realised I was doomed and also it was my salvation.

**Nelima Begum**

Amazing. And finally, what does being a writer mean to you?

**Tim Clare**

I think it's just a silly hat that you put on briefly. I think it's really important to get rid of writer as an identity. I think it gives you an incredibly constrained sense of your personality if you take it too seriously. The worst thing you can do for your writing is climb fully inside the writer clown suit and zip it up. Like you will have a horrible, unless you can do that in a very playful way. You can sit down at the desk and go, ‘And now I become the writer.’ You can actually have a great time right? You're smiling, right? You laugh, it opens you up. You can have a lovely time. As long as you don't then go down to dinner with your friends and go, ‘The writer has arrived.’ That's the time to step out of that clown suit you step into the I’m human being one.

**Nelima Begum**

I love that. Thank you so much for sitting down to speak with me, Tim. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you.

**Tim Clare**

Thank you for having me.