Being a Writer Podcast—The Art of Research with Michael Langan

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Michael Langan

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

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're joined by novelist, editor, writing tutor and one of our very own TLC readers, Michael Langan, to explore the art of research. We’re able to pull back the curtain on the early stages of Michael's writing projects and learn exactly how much work goes into them, before pen is even put to paper. We learn about the tools, technique and vision for research, as well as how to tailor the approach to accommodate the ever-changing nature of the writer’s journey. Michael shares his methods and advice, as well as how his other interests, like arts, film and teaching, inform and inspire his creative writing endeavours. This episode truly goes beyond the act of writing itself and provides tremendous insight into the bare bones of how to create a solid foundation for your project.

Welcome to the being a writer podcast. Michael, how are you?

**Michael Langan** 01:12

Very well, thanks, Nelima. Thanks for having me.

**Nelima Begum** 01:15

An absolute pleasure [and] I'm really excited to speak to you today. You've been a TLC reader for a really long time, TLC loves you, so we're really excited to have you on. And today we're talking about the art of research with you. So, I like to start each episode with a bit of background to our guests, and, more specifically, their beginnings. When did you first become interested in research?

**Michael Langan** 01:37

Well, I have an academic background, though, at the same time, I'm also the first person in my family ever to go to university. I didn't have much access to books as a kid, apart from my local library, which was a great resource. And I also began my studies in, like the pre internet days, in the dark ages of the 1980s. And, you know, research at that time meant sitting at a desk or a table in the library with 15 books around me, you know, trying to filter out the relevant material. But actually, this was my happy place. You know, I felt very secure in that cocoon of books. Even, you know, just in my lifetime, I'm in my early 50s. Now I've seen big changes in how research happens, and with the ease of accessibility of material, and just the sheer amount of what's available. And this continued then into doing a master's and then a PhD, but I still get a buzz out of research because it's mainly about reading, which is still my favourite activity in the world.

**Nelima Begum** 02:47

Oh, I love that. I love that you've managed to root it back to just essentially loving books, which is fantastic. How did you then link it with the craft of writing?

**Michael Langan** 02:59

Well, at the same time as I was doing my academic studies, I was writing creatively kind of on the side, mainly poetry in the early days, which in my case didn't really require any research for the kind of poetry that I was writing. But then it was when I began to focus on prose that research really started to link with creative writing. For me, the first novel I ever wrote, the first complete novel I wrote, was actually part of a PhD. And the expectation there was that you write something like a novel, and then alongside that is an accompanying thesis that requires some elements of research. And that's a very clear link. But it also felt like a very natural and easy transition for me to make that one, the relationship between writing and research, I feel, is a very holistic one in my case. It's quite organic, so the link felt very, very natural to me.

**Nelima Begum** 04:04

Did that feel like quite a jump then, like moving from—obviously, you mentioned at the start that you had a very academic background, and then moving into prose.

**Michael Langan** 04:16

I think what was nice for me was that I, in all my writing, whether it was my academic writing or my creative writing, I tried to bring in a kind of similar energy to it, which is about thinking about what it is you're wanting to communicate. And I once had a really, really nice thing said about my academic writing by an external examiner, which was to just kind of praise the beauty of my writing, which I was so pleased by, because you know, a lot of academic writing is very dry and isn't particularly beautiful. But I always want whatever I write to be creative in a way, even when it's not fiction.

**Nelima Begum** 04:58

I love that. So, going back to more of the research aspects, if research is an art, as we've said, in the title of this podcast, what are the tools, the technique and the vision?

**Michael Langan** 05:11

Yeah, if it is an art. Well, I guess there's an art to it. And I think, also, everyone has to, you know, figure out what that means for them. In my case, and in a lot of people's cases I guess, you start with an idea, you start with an area of interest and an enthusiasm, that you're trying to communicate those in the writing to a reader who might not have that same level of enthusiasm, you know. I'll read about anything, if the writing itself is interesting, and that's what I'm trying to do in my research technique, is to keep that enthusiasm going. What works for me is to come at your idea, or your subject matter, from a variety of angles. So that can be reading non-fiction, reading fiction, watching YouTube videos, using other online resources. So I become, essentially, this big stew pot with things are bubbling away inside. And then I'm writing at the same time. I know some people, you know, they like to do their research first, and then they'll feel comfortable to start writing. But for me, I like to be writing at the same time as doing research and to see what the ingredients that I've put inside me are gonna give rise to. It’s like the Ready Steady Cook approach, you know, like, you get given this stuff and then you've got to kind of think, Okay, what am I going to do with that? You can always at some point, I think, take a step back and see what it is you're doing, you know, ask yourself, Okay, what have I done? Where am I, in my research? What am I? What have I been doing? Where do I want to go? Write down some questions, some thoughts and notes, if that helps you refocus, and then carry on.

**Nelima Begum** 07:03

Beautiful. It's really interesting that you mentioned your approach, because I am of the other group that you mentioned, where I like to usually do all my research first, and then try and lay it out in a way that will fit the writing rather than writing alongside, but I actually think I might try your method from here on out.

**Michael Langan** 07:21

Well, you know, it's always a good idea, you know, whatever it is that you feel has worked for you in the past to just kind of mix it up a bit, you know. A lot of writing is about experimenting. And I think it's also a really good idea to experiment with your process as well. I think, you know, everything is valid, and whatever it is that works for you is great. And I think, yeah, mixing it up is a really, really good idea.

**Nelima Begum** 07:47

Fantastic suggestion, because quite often we do say that writing in itself and [the] subject matter that your writing is very fluid and flexible. But it's really great that you've mentioned that the process can also be flexible, and open to trying new things. So, is the art of research something should be honed and refined over the years? What have you picked up along the way?

**Michael Langan** 08:08

Well, I think exactly what it is that you were just saying, Nelima, which is, you know, flexibility, I think, is a really good principle and mantra to have in your research process. Give yourself permission, you know, at any point to change tack or shift gear, especially if, you know, there are times when your energy dips in a research process where you get a bit bored. And you know, if you change it up, if you mix what you're doing, you can always pick up where you left off later on. You know, I sometimes make lists of things that I need to do, but then I often don't do what's on the list. What was important was the making of the list, and the list has allowed me to, you know, to take stock and focus. I mean, if you are a list a list maker, then good for you. It's not really me. Research as well, I think, should always be in the service of the work that it is that you're writing. So I think that the fiction, in my case, always has to come first. It has to work first as fiction, and the research is a kind of tool for that. And I think that that's something that I often have to remind myself that a reader, right, reading a novel which is research-based, is essentially going to care more about the fictional aspects than the research base.

**Nelima Begum** 09:38

Yeah, of course. It's great way of lining this up. I know you've given us some insight into your writing process and your research processes as well. How do you approach a new writing project and where do you begin with mapping things out in those very early stages?

**Michael Langan** 09:56

Well, I've usually got a few ideas bubbling away at the same time, you know, in my notebooks and my workbooks, and usually one will rise to the surface and make itself seem more urgent to get on with. And I tend, again, a bit like with the research, I tend not to map out too much in the early stages, but prefer to let myself explore, see where the writing takes me. And then at some point, further down the line in the process, I'll map things out, to help me focus and consolidate and shape a narrative. Having said that, funnily enough, the novel that I'm currently working on, actually started out as a short story. It was quite a long short story, and I presented it to some writing buddies I have who give, we give each other feedback, we meet, kind of, once a month. But as soon as I finished this short story, I thought, oh, no, this is a novel. And in that sense, I had a kind of map because I had this story written. But of course, it wasn't as simple as then going back and sort of fleshing out this map of the story. As I was writing, it kind of changed, but essentially, I did have a kind of template there that I was that I was working to. And again, I was surprised by that, because my first novel didn't really have that at all. So again, I think it's interesting, the question is interesting, because I think every time you approach a new writing project, then it's going to be a new thing. And again, you can try to apply what you've done in the past to it, but sometimes, it's just not going to go that way.

**Nelima Begum** 11:45

Right. So you kind of have to just take it as it comes, because each new writing project comes with a new energy, I'm assuming,

**Michael Langan** 11:52

Yeah, a new energy, a new set of challenges, a new set of questions. And also, you know, like a lot of writers, you can feel every day like you're a beginner. You know, you sit down at your desk, and you kind of [have] to once again ask yourself the same things about, you know, is this sentence any good? Can I do this? And research can be a great help with that, because it gives you a sort of solid foundation on which to then go off and explore. So it can really help in that, in that process at the early stages. It can be a real part of your map, your research, if that helps you.

**Nelima Begum** 12:35

Fantastic. And what kind of methods of research do you use for your own writing? So what do you find yourself drawn to? Because, obviously, you mentioned at the start that you've kind of seen this process of research through many stages. So you started off with a pile of books, and then there's the internet, and there are online journals, and suddenly, so like an influx of resources, almost.

**Michael Langan** 12:57

Yeah, it can be a bit overwhelming, can’t it. You know, in my case, I still, you know, start with essentially a lot of reading, a lot of note taking, a lot of absorbing different things, also listening to music, you know, music that I think might be in some way connected or relevant to what I'm writing. I know that writers also often fall into different camps when it comes to listening to music when they work. I love listening to music when I when I work. I find silence quite distracting because I grew up in a noisy environment. So I like having music on. And I try sometimes to pick music that fits, you know, with what I'm doing. Podcasts I listened to, I mean, podcasts, you know, have just kind of come on stream in the last couple of years, haven't they? And they're really, really useful. [Also] watching interviews and videos on YouTube. And actually, also, for my new project, I've been using Google Maps quite a bit because it's set in places where I don't live. So you can just kind of go on maps, and you can walk around a place where you know where the scene is set or whatever. All of this, yeah, all of this goes into a workbook and everything gets mixed up together. And then at some point, I'll go through it with a highlighter. And I'll pick out things that I want to transfer into the novel or the story that I'm that I'm working on. But I think it's important to say that you've also got to think, at that stage, about how are you going to transfer your research material, you know, into a piece of fiction. How is the information that you have for the material that you want to talk about, how is it going to manifest itself in the creative work? Is it going to be in dialogue? Is it going to be an action? In the mind of a character, or in the narrative voice? Or is it maybe just going to influence the mood or style of the prose or, you know, a combination, any combination, of any of those things? And that can be a real challenge as well. You know, do you give… some of your research? Do you give it to a character to say? Or are they just thinking it? Or is it just there in the story? How are you going to weave it into the narrative itself?

**Nelima Begum** 15:30

Yeah, I think it's brilliant that you've touched on that, because, obviously, I mean something that a lot of writers face is how to then, you know, they've done the research, and they've done preliminary work. And maybe now they need to figure out how to lift that off that page and slide it into their narrative and the story that they want to tell. So it's great that you've gone through that already.

**Michael Langan** 15:50

It's a real challenge. It's a real challenge. Because you know, again, this is where I think flexibility and experimenting with different things, is really, really useful. And I would always suggest that people try different fictional aspects of kind of fictional writing, to think about how to use their research material. It can feel very unnatural if a character suddenly starts talking about your research topic. But also, if you can, if you can do it, well, it can also be really, really interesting, because dialogue has an energy, that, you know, it’s different from descriptive prose. So if you've got that skill, then it's also really good to be able to utilise that sometimes.

**Nelima Begum** 16:34

Absolutely. And it's a different way of speaking directly to your reader as well. So, you are a man of many talents. You've studied English, cultural history and creative writing. What did each of those subjects teach you about your craft and the things that you wanted to write?

**Michael Langan** 16:54

Well, I guess I learned a lot about the interconnectedness of things. You know, books and stories that don't exist in a bubble. Writing doesn't happen in a vacuum. You know, cultural history certainly teaches you that. And they also don't stand still, you know, the fact that all these things are always open to interpretation, and cultural shifts and changes. And I've also taught all of these things. Yeah, and it's, you know, it's very interesting to teach something like English as a writer, or to teach cultural history as someone who's done research for fiction, because it means that you're not in a kind of box, you know, you don't put a frame around these things, and it stays in in that little area of study. So that's been really, really useful for me. So I mentioned before, I experienced lots of developments in in the area of research since I started in the late 80s. But yeah, at the heart of it, we've touched on this a couple of times, has been that fundamental notion of inquiry and curiosity. And how, in my case, you know, the novel can be the product of that inquiry, and then, in turn, the novel can add to that area of study. You know, it's a lifelong and never-ending process. I think if research tells you anything, it's that there's always more to learn. But then, you know, it's important that you that you know your limits and you know your goals. The danger is of being someone like the character of Casaubon BORN IN MIDDLEMARCH, who never produces anything, you know, because he’s so bound to his research. And, yeah, you've got to think about what it is you want to produce first, and then how the research can work to help you.

**Nelima Begum** 18:59

[It]s] really interesting that you've brought this up. How do you, I mean, how do you figure out what your limits are? Because you said, you know, knowing when to sto,p knowing when you actually have to produce something?

**Michael Langan** 19:12

Yeah, you have to be quite, sort of, ruthless with yourself, because there's almost a kind of mental editing that has to go on. And again, I remember going back to the very early days of my research, and, you know, when you are sitting there with a stack of 15 books in order to write one essay, you know that you can't read those 15 books, [so] you've got to be very, very clinical and surgical in your approach to research. And really think about what it is that you need to know right now, and then you can always, you know, go down a different wormhole later on. But really, it's about both exploring but exploring with a particular sense of purpose and a goal in mind. So that, you know, you are thinking very much in that direct line between you and the work you want to make.

**Nelima Begum** 20:13

All right, fantastic. And you've touched on editing. I mean, you were previously arts editor for Polari Magazine where you covered visual arts, cinema and books. So again, more very creative outlets. How did that role impact your writing?

**Michael Langan** 20:29

Well, you know on one level I just had the great privilege of speaking to and interviewing some really great writers and artists, people like Edmund White, and Van Bauer, and, you know, this was very, very inspirational to me, just as an activity, because I then had to think about my relationship with their work and how I would talk to them as one writer to another writer. And in that, you know, you're really thinking about your own process, as well as what it is you're going to ask them in an interview. It really helped me as well [to] think about readership and audience and how you communicate with a reader to try to be as clear as possible in my writing, and to interest people in a subject they might not necessarily be immediately drawn to. And then as well as in terms of research, it made me think about the individual take on a subject. And I think this is an another really interesting and valuable thing to think about when you're doing your research, is that, you know, very often you're reading the works in the words of other people, right? But what is your unique take on a subject? Right? What is it that you're going to? What is it that you're going to bring to the subject that's different from everything that everyone else has said? So that's what's going to excite a reader, you know, that when you as a writer are thinking your way through this material, [you are] then adding something new to it.

**Nelima Begum** 22:16

Really interesting, actually. I hadn't thought of it like that. But yeah, I can understand why, you know, it'd be important to bring your own, to see how you connect with that research and how you interpret it. And what you make of it.

**Michael Langan** 22:28

So that you're not just kind of reproducing what other people have said and thought, but thinking very much about, you know, your particular vision. That's, you know, particular to you. When you do a PhD, you know, there's this phrase that stays in your mind all the time, which is about this unique contribution to knowledge. And there's a sense in which, when I write, I'm always thinking about, well, what is my individual consciousness saying about this subject? And how does it think and feel about this particular area and theme? And that's something also to try and believe in, when you're when you're writing to believe that your unique take on something is valid and valuable. And that energy is also going to carry you through your research as well.

**Nelima Begum** 23:24

So as you're staying curious and interrogating things like this, I mean, with everything you've just said, I can imagine sometimes there must be moments of overwhelm, and maybe you feel a bit of pressure, because again, you are almost expected to bring something different to the research you've been looking at. How have you dealt with those kinds of pressures, or those moments where maybe it might not come to you so easily?

**Michael Langan** 23:51

I think take a step back, you know, take a step back, and then think about, and remind yourself, what it was in the first place that got you excited. And hold on to that quality of the enthusiasm, which is, you know, it's a word I've used a number of times already. But if you can communicate that enthusiasm and that joy in your subject, then that's going to help you I think, push through those moments when you think, oh, you know what, maybe I don't have anything interesting to say. I think a lot of people go through that. When they think that their work is not interesting enough, or it's just not cutting it. And you know, or every everything's already been said, but you know, there's always something new to find in in any subject. I think. You know, I was thinking in terms of today about just if you think about the number of novels, for example, that have been written about the Tudor court, and about Henry the Eighth and his wives, and you know, they're all different and they all have different tastes. You know, Hilary Mantel's work is very different from Philippa Gregory's work, for example. And you know, but they're both using exactly the same material. And neither of them have said the definitive thing to be said about, you know, that subject. So don't let that, kind of, put you off and don't let that overwhelm you. Just keep the faith in your own particular vision.

**Nelima Begum** 25:26

Brilliant, so stay curious and stay excited about what you're writing, because it's important to remember why you're doing it in the first place, really.

**Michael Langan** 25:34

Totally.

**Nelima Begum** 25:36

Great. On to your own work. What inspired *Shadow is the Colour as Light is* and how did you set yourself up to write it? What did that research and drafting process look like for you for that particular work?

**Michael Langan** 25:49

Yeah, so that that novel uses particular works by Paul Cézanne, the French post-impressionist painter, and also uses aspects of his life as well, his life story. And it uses both of those to examine the relationships that the characters have, between their lives and particular artworks in the novel. It did start out as a very different novel, essentially. But the there's a Cézanne painting in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, near where I grew up. And essentially that painting, had a very small cameo role in the original novel that I was writing. But as I learned more about Cézanne, he just began to take over. And I became really fascinated and interested in him. And as I was writing, so I was reading about him, I was reading biographies of him and books about him. I was reading his letters, which have been published, I was reading some other writers writing about him, not too many, because I didn't want to muffle my own voice with those of others. And, again, I think that relates back to the question, you just asked Nelima about knowing your limits. You know, there was a point at which I thought, you know, I want to read enough, but I don't want to read too much.

**Nelima Begum** 27:26

Because you want to give your own voice a platform.

**Michael Langan** 27:29

Absolutely. And not feel that everything's already been said. And also, you know, particularly when you're dealing with writers whose reputation is kind of really, you know, big, and that can feel a little bit intimidating. I was also very lucky, at one point, because I was working at the University of Greenwich at that time, and I applied for a research grant to go to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where they have two rooms of Cézannes. And there are a number of scenes in the novel that take place in in those rooms of the Metropolitan Museum. And I spent a week just kind of sitting in those rooms with my notebook, just kind of writing and that was really, really fabulous and fantastic, as a way of researching, again, just my own responses to the paintings and try to have a kind of unmediated response to what I was I was looking at. So I was absorbing as much as possible, making my notes while I was writing. One thing I hadn't planned on, though, was how, how these paintings would affect the structure of my novel. So one of the things that Cézanne is known for is having this kind of multi-perspective in his still lives; he will see things from side on and above at the same time. And that built into the structure and the form of the writing. So I ended up writing a novel which has got different narrative strands. And it's a kind of multi-dimensional novel, with the same events sometimes being looked at from different perspectives. And that's something that I became aware of in the early stages. And then in the redrafting process, I very much, kind of, focused in on that and trying to make that work. It took a lot of figuring out how to place things in the novel and where the connections were going to be between the different narrative strands, but Cézanne was a good model to have for that. And he really inspired me to really just go for it and be quite bold.

**Nelima Begum** 29:50

Fantastic. And I really like how you've mentioned that, you know, it took editing, it took looking at it from different angles and, you know, approaching it from in different ways. And I think it links really nicely to the next question as well in that how do you tailor that process of writing research to fit you and any changes that occur throughout that writing journey?

**Michael Langan** 30:10

Yeah. It does feel quite instinctive to me, but that's, I think, probably because I've been doing it for a fair while and I forgot, you know, how I learned how I learned the research process. But I do try to think of it throughout the process as always wanting to feed the energy of the writing, you know, to keep that inner flame burning. And so research might not be only about your subject, it can also be about your form, or your genre. So you can look at what you're doing from an oblique rather than a direct angle. So, you know, reading a novel or reading other works that are linked, say, stylistically or thematically, to what it is you're doing, can really help you refocus and generate surprising ideas or consolidate what you've done so far. So, I'm tailoring that process, or my research process, by thinking also about those research elements which are linked tangentially to what I'm doing, rather than just directly to what I'm doing.

**Nelima Begum** 31:21

Brilliant. So I've gathered that you're an art enthusiast, and this has shaped a lot of the work you've done both in and around writing. What, for you, are the parallels between arts and creative writing.

**Michael Langan** 31:37

You know, I've for a long time, for as long as I can remember, been obsessed with the surface of paintings, and, like, looking really closely at the surface of canvas and the application of paint and the texture of surfaces. I don't know why this is, I didn't grow up in a family interested in art particularly, in any way. I can't paint or draw myself for toffee. But I did marry an artist, which is quite interesting. Let's not get too psychological about this. But you know, I mean, Henry James thought that painting was the closest art to fiction writing. And there is quite a tradition of novelists using painters as kind of surrogate creative figures through which, to examine the creative life. I think particularly there of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which is one of my favourite books of all time. And, you know, she has the character of Lily Briscoe in that novel, who's a painter who's trying to paint a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. And she's always kind of looking at her and trying to capture her on the canvas. But also, as a woman artist, you know, she's always kind of struggling with what it means to be a woman artists particularly and the demands upon her as a woman to fulfil other people's expectations. So, it's interesting to me that the figure of the painter works in that way in a lot of fiction. And I think maybe, because, in some ways, painting’s a much more dynamic act from the outside, than someone sitting down and writing, you know. You kind of move around when you're painting. But I think in both senses, there is a link there between the idea of representation and writing, not just, you know, kind of figuratively, but also in terms of how you see the world, and how you view existence, you know, and what a painter is putting down on a canvas might link in that way to the way that a writer is putting down words on the page. But there's also a lovely sense of mystery to that, in that I don't really know what the answer is to the question. But I just know that I love both, you know.

**Nelima Begum** 34:30

I think you've linked them beautifully. And I think it's true that, you know, linking back to what we were discussing earlier in that, yes, you know, the painter and the writer both [have] a different take on things and they view existence in the world in their own way. And it's just conveying that in a way that others can really enjoy. And it's open to interpretation so other people can make of it what they will, too.

So, you do a lot of work with other writers as a mentor and teacher, and as a fantastic reader for TLC, of course. Are there any common writing hiccups or issues that come up that you notice where you think, further research could really help? So, basically, common problems as they were.

**Michael Langan** 35:14

Yeah, I think, well, I mean, thank you for your kind words there, Nelima, I love working for TLC. It's one of my most fun jobs.

**Nelima Begum** 35:22

I did not ask Michael to say this. Shameless plug.

**Michael Langan** 35:27

Yeah, I mean, obviously research, further research, can help if you're in any way, kind of, stuck, because it just might hopefully unlock things for you and give yourself a break from the, you know, the difficult task of writing. And that can be also just, again going back to, it needn't be further research, it can be revisiting research that you've done, and reminding yourself about certain things and what your fundamentals are. I think, particularly when I'm mentoring or working for TLC, with writers who are working within the historical genre, it's really important to wear your research lightly and don't let it become really heavy and weigh you down, you know. It is a tool that you're using to help you write a story. And sometimes, I see with writers, them getting bogged down in their research, and especially when, you know, if you've put a lot of time and effort into your research, one of the hardest things that can be for a writer, is to admit to yourself that something is not going to eventually ended up in the novel. Yeah, letting it go. And also realising that you had to do that research in order to get to the point that you're at, so nothing is wasted in that respect. And also, if you do cut anything, don't ever throw it away, you know, open another document, call it notes, call it ideas, you know, call it whatever you want, put it in there. You never know what it might turn into, you know. Cuttings can grow into something else, it could be something new, it might be a short story, or even a blog post that you want to write about your work. It can even be the next novel, if you give it enough time and space.

**Nelima Begum** 37:32

Everything branches off one another. Having that holding pen is really important actually, like, don't ever get rid of it. Because everything you write is intentional, at some point or another in your life. It was meant to be there.

**Michael Langan** 37:45

Yeah, even if you don't know what it is that, you know, kind of working towards, there is a reason why you were drawn to that in the first place. And I think, you know, be aware what's called the info dump, as well, in any novel that involves research where, you know, suddenly, and we touched on this a little bit earlier, suddenly a block of information will appear in a text which doesn't seem quite to fit into the narrative or into the character who's thinking or speaking about this information. And that becomes very jarring, sometimes, in the reader’s experience, where suddenly you see the hand of the writer, just kind of placing this information in, in the in the narrative and in the text. If you if you're not able to somehow sort of weave it in or thread it through, then probably, it needs to just go.

**Nelima Begum** 38:50

Fantastic. And where would you advise writers to start with researching for their work in progress?

**Michael Langan** 38:57

Well, this is, I think, where lists can come in really handy, you know, because in a lot of areas of research, you start with a series of questions, don't you, at any stage of your process. Whether it's the very beginning, or further on, you can check in with that idea of the questions that you're asking in your work. And, you know, write down five or six questions maybe, so not too many, so, again, you don't feel overwhelmed. Write down five or six questions that you think the work is trying to address or is concerned with. And you know, you don't necessarily have to answer those questions. But they're the form and the focus for that research inquiry, and they might change those questions as the process develops, or you might move on from them. But again, it's another good source of energy as well to ask yourself at any point, the fundamental question what am I trying to say? And what's going to help me say what it is I want to say.

I always think that, you know, at the end of the day, if you were to gather up all of your research material, imagine it like a big pile of paper, and put it in a drawer, and lock the drawer and hide the key, when you sit down to write all of that research is still going to be there inside you. And what will happen as you write is that those things you really need are going to come to the surface and appear when you need them. You are your own search engine, right, you're your own set of filters, and you've got to trust yourself to be able to write once you've put the research to one side. Trust your vision, trust your process, you know, be as free as possible. Fact checking you can do at the end, you know. And that is a really important thing when you're starting—to remember that you are the mind that is doing this work. And that's good enough.

**Nelima Begum** 41:16

An excellent way to round off, Michael, thank you. So, for season three, we have been finishing off with some quickfire questions and these ones require a little less thinking. So just say the first thing that comes to your head. Your favourite artist is—

**Michael Langan** 41:31

Oh, God, that's such a hard question. Okay, so in terms of, alright, let me think in terms of living artists, I'm gonna go for Paula Rego, who's a Portuguese painter who’s lived in Britain for many years and I love her work. I also love Bridget Riley as well. She's a fantastic painter. Those are probably my favourite living artists, and then of all the old dead artists, probably I’m going to go for Caravaggio.

**Nelima Begum** 42:02

Beautiful. If your life was a film, what would the title be?

**Michael Langan** 42:08

Okay, so oh, you know, thinking about everything we've talked about today, it has to be something that implies that sense of a continuous quest. So I'm gonna go for [the] Neverending Story.

**Nelima Begum** 42:23

I love that. Straight to the point. What are you currently working on?

**Michael Langan** 42:28

So I've just finished, or recently finished, my next novel. Yeah, it's exciting. And I sent it to my agent. And my lovely agent gave me some really valuable feedback. So I'm just working now through the cuts and edits and changes that she suggested. And hopefully, that's going to go out on submission to publishers at the end of that process, hopefully, at some point later on this year.

**Nelima Begum** 43:01

Lovely, lots to look forward to. So, what's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

**Michael Langan** 43:09

You know, some of the best writing advice is also really good life advice. And one of my favourite pieces of writing advice is something that I also pass on to others. And it is, you know, to be a good friend to your writing, and be a good friend to yourself as well. So treat yourself and your writing with kindness, treat it with respect. And that's not to say, you know, not to see the flaws in the writing, but approach your writing with a certain empathy and openness. Yeah, treat your writing as you would a friend.

**Nelima Begum** 43:52

I love that, that's fantastic. And what's the number one piece of writing advice you would give to others? I guess it kind of relates to what we just asked you. But if there's anything else do, do share.

**Michael Langan** 44:02

Yeah, I think that is a really good piece of advice. But also linked to that is the idea of perseverance, you know, perseverance and writing. Things always take longer than you think they're going to. And, you know, keeping the faith with your ideas and nurturing that flame of your enthusiasm. When the process is difficult, try to remember that the foundation of what you're doing is love really, you know, like love of reading, love of writing, of stories and words. Apart from that, get yourself a good chair.

**Nelima Begum** 44:39

There's practical advice there too.

**Michael Langan** 44:45

And I'm learning that myself, lately.

**Nelima Begum** 44:50

Thank you so much, Michael. What a brilliant end to an incredible conversation full of wisdom and insight and fantastic advice. So I'm really grateful for your time. Thank you for joining us.

**Michael Langan** 45:00

Thanks, it's been lovely to talk to you, Nelima.