Being a Writer Podcast—Writing and Motherhood with Winnie M Li

Wed, 3/23 1:27PM • 49:48

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

writing, writer, draft, mother, film industry, toddler, book, day, people, film, finish, bit, terms, motherhood, parents, complicit, words, creative writing, story, child

**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Winnie M Li

**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’re joined by American writer, novelist and activist, Winnie M Li, to discuss writing and motherhood. Winnie shares with us how she went out her writing journey while pregnant and transitioning to motherhood. She touches on the joys and moments of difficulty of both, and how she managed to strike a balance between her craft and raising a child.

We’re also given a detailed insight into her new novel, *Complicit*, and how her approach was different to her debut, *Dark Chapter*. Winnie also shares triumphs that she’s experienced as a writer and a mother, and advice on how to carve out time and space to enjoy both.

**Nelima Begum**

Welcome to the Being a Writer Podcast, Winnie, how are you doing?

**Winnie M Li**

I’m all right, I’ve been better, I’m just recovering from Covid. I think it was probably a bit better, like, two-and-a-half years prior. So I’ve got a bit of a cough which I apologise for.

**Nelima Begum**

Well fingers crossed you feel okay throughout this episode. We’re really excited to speak to you about writing and motherhood today, which is something we’ve not covered yet but it’s a huge topic. So, let’s start at the beginning: how long have you been writing and do you remember the first piece of creative writing you ever did?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah. I generally say I started writing when I was six years old. Um, so I'm not, I can't remember exactly how it worked. But there were two things that happened. One was my mother, who was a bit of a tiger mom, I'm Chinese American, right, she among other things, made me keep a diary every day I think from the age of six, like it was pretty early on, and I still remember exactly what my first diary looked like. It was kind of like covered in this like red fabric with flowers on it. And I had to write in it every day. And so I hated it first, right? I was just like, What am I gonna write about? And it probably wasn't very interesting, but she kind of made me do it. But then eventually, I don't know what clicked but I started to really like writing. So I don't know if it took maybe a few weeks for me to get into it or not, you know, and it was, I would just write, like, a few sentences each day, so that kind of started when I was six. But then also, in terms of creative writing, because that's more like reportage, I suppose, of a six-year-old’s life, right? Really important stuff. Not particularly interesting. Um, when I was in first grade, I wrote a short story for St. Patrick's Day. I think the assignment was we just had to write a story that somehow related to St. Patrick's Day, right? And so I wrote a story about a leprechaun called Shamrock Greenman who encountered a dragon when he was out on a walk and I think that's pretty much the whole story. I mean, I don't think exists anywhere except other than my mind at the moment, which is probably a good thing. Um, but yeah, and then somehow that prompted me to write a whole series of stories about this, this leprechaun character, and he visited a whole bunch of different lands. So I remember getting like really into it. And like I never wrote the stories down, like, I drew maps and stuff like that, but I was always just kind of like, wandering around thinking up the story in my head. So it got quite elaborate because I think they're about, like, 20 different worlds that he visited. Um, so yeah, I think that started in the first grade. And that was kind of my humble beginnings. And then I you know, obviously then I started running, possibly more interesting stuff for adults afterwards, but yeah, that was kind of how it started in terms of my writing.

**Nelima Begum**

Fantastic. So very early on. Before becoming a mother, what was your approach to writing in terms of carving out time and space?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, so I think if I want to link it to the earlier question about obviously, from a very young age, I started writing and I think if you asked me then in first grade or second grade, I want to be I would have said I wanted to be an author, right? And then that sort of fell by the wayside because you get a bit older and your parents tell you it's not a very lucrative job, which is largely true for the most part. And then when I was a teenager, I wanted to be a journalist. I'm quite interested in like social issues and stuff. And then when I hit my kind of my early 20s, I was trying to be a film producer. I was a film producer, and I was working in film production from my early 20s. But I always remembered that really liked writing so it did an Arvon course, in 2005, 2006, just to kind of be like, hey, I'll spend a week writing. And I was really lucky because my tutor was Bernadine Evaristo, who has been an incredible mentor and has been a really, really good person to know in terms of encouraging me to write, so she told me I should, you know, actually try to pursue writing a novel one of these days. And so it kind of like stuck in the back of my head and I'm still friends with Bernstein, obviously now she's a booker prize winner and that's amazing, but like, it was a very kind of long process from the age of six always wanting to write, not really pursuing it kind of seriously as a career. And then what really kind of did it for me was in 2008 a quite violent criminal assault happened to me and that's kind of what really prompted me to write. So, sorry, your original question was about motherhood, Right?

**Nelima Begum**

How you approached writing in terms of carving out time and space for yourself, before becoming a mother. What was that like?

**Winnie M Li**

So I think actually before, it hasn't changed that much in terms of the attitude because I think for me, so my first novel came out in 2017, I didn’t become a mother until very late 2019, yeah, okay, so I think through the years because like, everything's blending together once you become a mother, like your concept of time changes. So prior to becoming a mother, I still had a pretty rigorous concept of writing in that if I wanted to write a novel, I need to be, you know, writing at least 1000 words a day towards my first draft, right? So it's very different when you're going from first draft to like, you know, second draft process, and all that, but first draft, that's like, minimum of 1000 words a day, right? So I started writing my first novel, my first serious novel, so I'd written the previous one which was not very good—I think that one is also sitting in drawer somewhere and hopefully nobody will ever see it, but like I wrote it, and I wrote the first draft. I've never even read through the first draft because I think part of me was just kind of challenge myself to see like, Okay, can I do this? Which I did, and then I got into the creative writing ma at Goldsmiths. So that was when I actually was like, I'm going to devote an entire year full-time to pursuing the craft of writing. So that's when I kind of developed the discipline of like, 1000 words a day, um, and so that's how I got the first novel written. And then the second novel I had written, I had probably done the third draft by the time I gave birth, and now I'm writing my third draft. And I've got the first draft of my third novel, and I've got like a two-and-a-half-year-old so it is a very different kind of lifestyle I live now because I certainly don't have all the time in the world to write. But still, that whole discipline of writing a minimum of 1000 words a day, if you're on first draft, is something I still follow. Because at the end of the day, I mean, whether or not you're the kid, if you're not putting down enough words to create a first draft, and you're not going to have the material to ultimately turn it into a novel. So I think, yeah, that general attitude of getting the words down is still pretty much there. It's just obviously a lot harder.

**Nelima Begum**

Because every minute of your day is basically accounted for.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, I mean, yes and no. I'm lucky obviously, you know, my toddlers in nursery two days a week and my partner, I mean, I think the real lifesaver for me is my partner's mainly the primary caregiver because he lost his job during COVID, and then we ended up moving to London and it was harder for him to get a job when he's not in London. So it just ended up, like, me being kind of the main person who's pursuing a career in the early years of having this child. So yeah, I mean, so I am very lucky in that regard in that if I absolutely have a deadline, then I can kind of hand the toddler to my partner and say to him, ‘Can you look after him this \afternoon because I need to get this writing done.’ So, yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

Okay, cool. I recently spoke to another writer who is also a mother and she kind of drew these really, really nice comparisons between writing and motherhood saying that the gestation period is very much the same for when you're expecting and when you're drafting a novel. It's a really interesting take, and I just wanted to run it by you and ask like, do you see any parallels at all between your life as a writer and your role as a mother?

**Winnie M Li**

Um, it's quite poetic what she said, that sounds lovely. I suppose yeah, I mean, there's definitely a gestation that happens, especially if you're creating something quite long form like a novel, like I generally have an idea for a novel knocking around in my head for at least six months before I start writing. So it's kind of had that time to kind of just be inside me and not have words put to it but having ideas and situations and characters sort of form in my head. But then obviously, the process of writing a novel is a lot longer and more drawn out than actual birth. You know, my birth, the birth of my son was was not straightforward, right? But it was pretty much over in 48 hours, right. So, you know, first draft of a novel, you know, at least six months, they're probably more like a year. So, but I would say, you know, similarities are that certainly it's an everyday practice. I mean, it sounds silly to call motherhood a practice, but I mean, effectively that's something that you're doing every day, right? So I guess, you know, it's not something you can really step away from, like certainly I can, if he's in nursery for X number of hours, or if I've given him my partner for X number of hours, but it is something you're working on every day. And I suppose as a writer, you know, there's the active process of sitting down and putting words to a page, which might only take like an hour or so each day or you know, a few hours a day. But then there's also the, the non-act of putting words onto a page where you're actually just thinking of things and absorbing and kind of observing things and that's all kind of going into the creative mix that somehow is the early glue for your novel right? So, um, that is sort of an everyday thing as well. So in some ways, I'd say for me at least writing and motherhood are both kind of quite essential parts of my life now. And you know, I can't not, in some ways I can't not be a writer, because writing is sort of very essential for how I go about living, and I also can't not be a mother just because I am a mother now. And, you know, my child is quite essential to you know, my world at the moment so, so yeah, I'd say that they're just very essential parts of my everyday life. And you can't really divorce yourself from either of them.

**Nelima Begum**

Oh, I love that. I love that approach, that both are essential to you. Do you have structures in place that kind of help you manage your time and your day better? Like, are there things that [help] you meet the demands of both, because obviously they're very big tasks?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, you know, structure makes things sound organised. I’m not usually an organised person, right. Yeah, um, I mean, I guess the structures that help are having a two days a week when my toddler’s in nursery right, I mean, I'd love for it to be three days a week or frankly, five days a week, it would be great, but you know, it costs a lot of money and I live in the middle of the countryside, so the nurseries actually a bit of a drive anyway, but certainly knowing that I've got two full days where I can have like seven hours and not have to worry about the toddler or thinking about being a mother at all is really helpful. So what I've done is, you know, so I live in the countryside, and there's a town nearby, about a 15-minute drive from my toddler goes to nursery so I did find a writing centre there. It’s quite an artsy town I live near so there's a kind of a writer's collective where I, you know, where I can just go and write basically, and other writers are there as well. And they're all trying to get their work done too. So I kind of drop off the toddler, you know, go to that writers’ collective, get a good six, seven hours of work done and then pick them up. So that, you know, effectively is kind of my commute in some ways. So knowing that I have at least those two days there where I can work kind of unbothered is very helpful. So I think there's really no like actual structures for me, you know, other than that, like but, um, you know, I can't get a novel written just based on two full days a week, right? So there're other days a week where I have to squeeze in an hour here and there and thankfully, you know, my toddler still naps for a good hour and a half, two hours, sometimes even longer. So, in the ideal world, I would be so disciplined where like the mini goes down for his nap, I then just go to my computer and start writing and that sometimes happens, but sometimes by the time it goes down for his nap, I'm so tired that I need to actually like, take a break. So sometimes it happens that I write during his nap, and sometimes it doesn't. And then but the thing is, if you're still sort of committed to at least 1000 words a day that means when he was down for his bedtime, you know, he's generally in bed by 7.30. That means I still have like, a few hours where I can really you know, I can write at night if I want. Generally, I fall asleep, if I'm writing like at night, but I still managed to get the work done. So it's not it's not great in terms of like, you know, I don't have a wonderful workspace where I sit and I'm charged and everything you know, other than when I go to that writers collective. When I'm trying to write at home I'm generally like, in my best falling asleep, but I still get the words down. So I think it's just about having it work. It's always kind of like a bit more slipshod and a bit more on the fly by the seat of my pants in terms of actually like getting the work done, but I do manage to get done it somehow. So yeah, that’s the main thing.

**Nelima Begum**

I like that you touched on having a writers’ collective because I think sometimes, especially when people become parents, you need groups or spaces that relate specifically to something you want to do for yourself. I think it's just being in a different space and being around different people can make a world of difference.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah. And I think that's the same thing as, well even being a writer if you're not a mother, so I made very good friends with a number of people on my Goldsmith's masters course. And so, you know, I finished in 2014, and we're still meeting in 2022. And so there's still a group of us that meets in workshops every week. So that was actually really useful for my writing, after I finished the course, because that still meant every week, you know, we could meet up and workshop each other's stuff and kind of talk about books and give each other pep talks and stuff like that. And what unfortunately ended up happening was that once I had a child, that’s actually much harder because the group meets from six to seven, which is pretty much bedtime, and I’ve obviously moved out of London. So yeah, I kind of lost that writing community, frankly, because of motherhood. So it's kind of about then having to find another kind of writing community and this is quite different because now I don't have time to like sit around and chat like when I'm in the writers’ collective for the most part because I'm just trying to get work done. So I guess motherhood just kind of does make you have to be more disciplined with your writing. And, you know, I'd love to have all the time in the world to meet up with people talk about books, but I just don't have that kind of flexibility or that freedom anymore of my time.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah. Earlier, you also touched on just being tired or exhausted and not having the time. If there are moments of overwhelm and chaos, as there usually are when someone becomes a parent, how do you work through those and are there days where you just don't?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, I mean, I certainly don't meet my word limit every day. I mean, it's kind of a goal, right? You know, so if it's 1000 words a day like that is actually for me, because I'm a quite fast writer, like relatively easy to do, but there's certainly days where I'm like, at like 500 or 700. And then, you know, that's not great. But you know, it's not the end of the world and I kind of give myself a pass and I'll say, okay, maybe tomorrow, I can make that up. Or maybe I can’t, but it's, you know, good to have the discipline, but also you need to be aware of the fact that you can't meet every single goal that you have, especially if it's a daily goal. So um, yeah, I mean, I came down with COVID, like, two weeks ago, two and a half weeks ago, and that kind of put us off to a lot of stuff because I just ended up in bed for three days and, like, you know, that's what happens. And more broadly, and I'm thinking about the novel that’s about to come out, *Complicit,* you know, I wasn't planning to have a kid right? The whole story of how I became a mother is quite weird anyway, because I'd only met my partner three months before I got pregnant. So I was very focused on trying to write this novel. Met this guy. He's not my partner, I unexpectedly became pregnant at the age of 41. And, you know, on some level, I always sort of wanted to be a mother, but I'd been single most of my adult life because dating in London is not easy. And so I’d sort of given up on it, and I was like, alright, well, when I turned 41, I'm like, yeah, maybe I'll try and go on dates again, even though I don’t plan on actually turning it into anything. I’d only just met this guy and I ended up being pregnant.

So that kind of put a spanner in the works in terms of the novel being like finished because suddenly I was like, Oh, my God, I'm pregnant. You know, and I hardly know this guy. I was really trying to finish draft three by the time the baby came. I was really trying to get the book finished and sold to a publisher before the baby came and that just didn't happen because, you know, my writing got slowed down by suddenly being pregnant and having, yeah, my pregnancy wasn't tough, but it certainly wasn't a smooth ride. Like I was nauseous a lot. I was also in a pretty new relationship, so I had to like move in with my partner who I hardly knew. So there were a whole bunch of major life changes, which made it quite hard to write the novel. I remember finishing a third draft and sending it to my agents and being like, listen, like I hope you can sell this and they're like, actually, it's not ready yet to sell to shop around to publishers. And I just remember, I mean, this is probably about two months before the baby arrived. So I was like, very heavily pregnant. I just moved in with my partner and so I just remember bursting into tears. So it's like, Ah, I just want to give this novel finished and like sold and like put to bed, in a sense, before the baby arrives. And I realised that, you know, that wasn't gonna happen, right? I was like, Okay, there's no way I can get this novel. I can progress on this novel before the baby arrives. So I just have to put it on ice for six months.

So that's what I did. So I didn't think about the novel, just went into the late stages of pregnancy gave birth, all the weirdness of having a newborn plus, on top of that, you know, the lockdown happened [when the baby was] about three months old. So it was kind of around then actually that I was like, Okay, can I start thinking about this novel again? And, again, the lockdown helped because my partner wasn't able to go to his job. So he was around to parent, and at the same time, you know, I wasn't going out trying to meet friends during lockdown, so I was pretty much stuck indoors anyway with the baby, so that kind of did get me at least through the physical stillness, to be able to start thinking about the novel again, and then I ended up you know, slowly saying to myself, Okay, can I work on it an hour a day and it's quite hard when you've got like a three four month old baby to be like, okay, I'm going to step away for an hour day where I hand baby to my partner, and then that hour I'm going to focus on trying to rewrite this novel. That was manageable and then eventually upped it to two hours a day. So starting from around Easter until July, I finally finished that draft and then I sent it to my agent. That was probably, you know, not how I planned to get the novel done, because I wasn't expecting to have the baby but like, you know, things happen and you just kind of work out around it. But as long as you're still committed to getting that project finished somehow, at some point, then it will happen.

**Nelima Begum**

That's quite the journey that you've had. On the topic of your work, your new novel, *Complicit*, is set to publish very soon. What was the inspiration for it?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, so that's the novel I was just describing, the one that I somehow managed to finish the fourth draft of, like, after the baby was born. Just to put this in context, the baby was born December 2019. July of 2020 was when I finally finished the fourth draft and gave it to my agent and then it was sold that autumn to publishers. And it's now coming out in 2022. So that that is how long it takes, sometimes, for novels to actually get come out into the world. But obviously, you know, I'd started writing that novel in July 2018. Right, so I'd been working on it for about a year and a half with the baby arrived. And so July 2018. I remember, when my first novel, *Dark Chapter*, came out, it came about a year prior to that, June 2017, and I ended up doing quite a lot of, I guess what you might call a book tour, but it wasn't as organised I did like a lot of speaking events around *Dark Chapter*, because it's about sexual violence, which is a topic that you know, people are sort of scared to talk about, but then in 2017 ‘hashtag me too’ happened or rose to prominence, and suddenly it was this topic a lot of people want to speak about. *Dark Chapter* is based on my real life rape, which happened in 2008, so there is that kind of authenticity, I suppose, to the writing and the way I spoke about it. So ‘hashtag me too’ happened, in terms of it gaining prominence with the Weinstein allegations and everything in August of 2017, and my agents at the time, had said, ‘Well, you know, a lot of editors are asking what's your next novel gonna be? Or are you working on the next novel?’ And like, [I said,] ‘I'm not working on one right now. But I had this idea for something historical.’ And they're like, ‘Okay, well, you know, historical is good, but you know, you're known now for being a feminist writer who deals with these issues through suspense,’ because there's, you know, I use suspense a lot in my novels, ‘and, you know, there's this whole thing happening to the film industry, and you used to work in the film industry, so you might be quite well placed to write about these things’— you know, the Weinstein allegations and things like that, and I just remember thinking like, Oh, I'm so tired of sexual violence. I don't know if I want to write about it. And so I kind of have, like, this thought process where I'm like, Okay, do I want to write by this? Because in some ways, yes, I'm well placed, and it's good for the market, etc, etc. But like, how can I write about it in a way that is interesting for me as, A. as survivor and B. as, you know, just as a writer, right? Yeah. So, um, that was kind of like the challenge, right?

I decided, like, yeah, actually, if I write about it where it's a mystery that's kind of unfolding in terms of, yeah, okay, ultimately, we know what ‘hashtag me too’ is about, we know it's about sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace, in the film industry. But, you know, what if a woman who used to work in the film industry 10 years ago is contacted by a journalist 10 years later, who has some questions about a producer, a male producer, she used to work with, and she doesn't really want to tell that story. What if that was the setup? Right? You know, so we kind of learned about what happened 10 years ago, but it also becomes sort of a, you know, it's a reverse coming of age story because we hear about how she entered the film industry is an innocent, passionate young woman wanting to make movies and how that suddenly all sort of changed as a result of you know, who her boss was, right? And so it kind of, in some ways parallels my own experience in the film industry because you know, I used to work in film from 2002 until 2008. I had a female boss, it was quite different experience. But in 2008, my own rape happened and it wasn't within the context of the film industry. I was raped by a stranger. That's what my first book was about. But I wasn't able to get a job again in film because the PTSD was too much and then the film industry is not, you know, you don't have very stable workplaces with revenue and all that kind of stuff. A lot of times it's hard to even have enough payroll, enough money, to pay people. So I wasn't able to get a job again in film production, and it was kind of a huge sense of loss for me. Somebody who always wanted to be a filmmaker. So in some ways, I was channelling my own emotions about no longer working in film, but it was also a completely fictional story that I was creating because it was a young woman who had a male boss right and so I was like, Okay, if I can structure it like that, where she's sort of telling the story, and slowly revealing it to a journalist, and at the same time is sort of coming to terms with what has happened in her life and what she's lost as a result of this particular boss that she had, maybe that's a way I can write it using suspense in a way that's interesting for me creatively, right?

So that's kind of ultimately what *Complicit* it's about. It's about, you know, a young woman who ends up, well now she's no longer young, but she used to work in the film industry and she’s relating the story to a journalist, but she's also sort of confronting ways in which maybe she was complicit to gendered structures of power within an industry. Because if you work in the creative industries, oftentimes when you start out, you don't have any power and you end up having to do whatever you're told to do. So is that exploitation? At what point do our own professional ambitions start to blur our own moral boundaries? So it's kind of that's kind of what it looks at. But it also was very much about the film industry and so hopefully anybody loves movies will like reading about it as well because you know, it follows the making of a movie. And yeah, and then it's very much about loving movies and loving filmmaking, but also sort of hating in your actual workplace. But I mean, it's not also as dark as I just made it sound.

**Nelima Begum**

It sounds like it interrogates some really important questions as well. Can you talk me through the drafting process of *complicit* and how it compared with when you were writing *Dark Chapter*, given that both were written at very different points in your life?

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah. And they’re both really quite different books as well, I mean, just in terms of craft because *Dark Chapter* is told in close third person, but it moves point of view between the victim of this rape and the perpetrator. And everybody always asked me, ‘But why did you write from the perpetrator’s perspective?’ And like, I wouldn't have written the book if I wasn't trying to investigate Johnny's perspective. Johnny's based on, or inspired by, the 15-year-old stranger who raped me in the park. So I think that’s shocking when people hear that, but it was shocking for me, obviously, to be, you know, experiencing that violence but also to think like, Okay, how could a 15-year-old do that? So anyway, from a craft perspective, I was moving back and forth between writing Vivian's character and Johnny's and that was kind of for my own mental health as well, like, I didn't want to be writing just Vivian the whole time, because that was revisiting the worst period of my life, right. But I was very much following in some ways what had happened in real life so it's kind of following the real life chronology, but also at the same time making up, or trying to envision, what Johnny was going through at the same time, right. So that was kind of the thread that I was following, that chronology. And that was kind of how I ended up drafting *Dark Chapter*. When I drafted *Complicit*, um, it was really different because it's not based, yes, it's inspired by many of the stories that we hear—people that worked for Weinstein and other kinds of bosses—but you know, it was a completely fictional scenario I was coming up with right so, um, I knew at the back of my head ultimately what was going to be happening to young Vivian, but then at the same time, I was kind of very much kind of making things up as you go along, which is what first draft is mainly about. So with *Dark Chapter*, I had a bit more of a crutch in terms of following what had happened in real life and *Complicit* it was it was very much like a blank page. And I guess it was, for me, you know, the drama emerges out of the relationships between the characters. So there's young Sarah who wants very much to be a film producer, and she's got a female boss, Sylvia, who is in some ways a mentor, and in some ways maybe exploits her a little bit by making her work too hard to not paying her much. And then, suddenly, there's a male director, Xander, who's like the Hot shot filmmaker whose work they're producing, and then they need money to make Xander’s next film. So then this male, very wealthy financier shows up, Hugo, who says, ‘I'll finance your film, but I also want to, you know, part-own the company and this and this and this and that.’ So that's kind of how everything, how the main story kicks off because suddenly this very wealthy male financier shows up who you think is going to kind of solve all their problems, which actually creates a whole host of other problems. So it was kind of about that sort of power dynamic between those four characters plus then there's the rising starlet, Holly, who was kind of plucked from obscurity to become the star of their next film. And so if you imagine how all those relationships and those five characters could develop while they're trying to make a film, which is a quite pressured environment, if you're trying to make a film, that's kind of what ended up creating this scenario where I just ended up, like, building the plot out of that. But yeah, I imagine writers have all sorts of different ways of doing their first draft. I mean, certainly in the crime genre, a lot of writers write a very, very thorough outline, and some people write like 60-page outlines and then start writing. And I couldn't do that because you know, for me, part of the joy is imagining what's going to happen between the characters when you're writing the actual scene.

**Nelima Begum**

Great. We've talked a lot about storytelling and how you've done it with both of your works. Has motherhood changed the way you look at your craft? Has it influenced your approach to storytelling in any way?

**Winnie M Li**

No, not yet. I’m sure it will.

**Nelima Begum**

Obviously, the genres that you write are not for kids.

**Winnie M Li**

I don’t write children’s**.** I might in the future, who knows? But I think if I was writing children's or YA, which’d certainly be more the case, you know, I write about quite hard-hitting topics. But I think you know, I mean, there're a few times in *Dark Chapter* where I wrote from a child's point of view, like young Vivian, young Johnny, and now that I'm a mother, I think if I were to write child's point of view, it would be probably a bit better informed. I don't know, I mean it's interesting when you think about adult fiction, where it's written from child's point of view, like how accurate is it? You know, now that I'm a mother, I'll read adult fiction written for child's point of view, like I dunno, are you even an eight-year-old? Would they be that put together? I don't know. My child's two, right? So I don't know, yet, what eight-year-old’s are like, and maybe one thing that I think is quite fascinating for me as a mother is to see how the child's brain develops and at what age they start thinking about themselves in the world. And so that is something that I don't know about much since my child so young, but I imagine as I continue, I’ll maybe get a better insight into, you know, what children are capable of at what age.

**Nelima Begum**

So there's lots to look forward to.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah. I mean, and it is kind of one of the wonderful things about being a parent, just kind of the fact that there's sort of a new discovery every day.

**Nelima Begum**

I was actually just about to ask you, on the topic of new discoveries every day and the most interesting things about being a parent, could you share with us one writing-related triumph and one parenting-related triumph?

**Winnie M Li**

I would say the writing-related triumph was managing to finish the fourth draft of my novel while I had a newborn. Right, cuz I think—

**Nelima Begum**

That's such a big feat. Oh, my goodness.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, that was probably the biggest challenge because it was, you know, when I talk about it, it sounds a lot more fraught than it actually was. And I think that's the thing with writing in general, like you think about writing a novel it sounds completely overwhelming. But when you're in it, if you're just thinking, I'm gonna write for an hour a day, or I'm gonna write 1000 words today. That is manageable, right. So I think it was being able to break it down into those manageable chunks that made it possible, and that is ultimately how you write a novel, right? You can find maybe some people sit down and write an entire novel in five days, but it’s probably not very good. It’s about having that very gradual, slow drip. That is ultimately what leads to, you know, having enough words for a novel. So I think that was probably my biggest triumph was being able to get that done.

And then, you know, *Complicit* thus far has been pretty life changing for me in terms of, you know, the deal that my agent was able to get through with a British publisher and then it sold at auction to American publishers. There was a five-way auction for a lot more money than I was expecting to get so that, in that sense, you know, has been pretty life changing for me. I mean, we'll see, you know, you have to, you know, it'll come out and hopefully people will like it. if I think about the fact that I could have just easily said, you know, whatever, I'm not going to finish writing this novel, my life would be completely different now.

**Nelima Begum**

If you had to share a piece of writing advice with writers who are also parents or parents who would like to be, or are trying to become, writers, what would it be?

**Winnie M Li**

Um, break it down. Even if you give yourself 20 minutes a day to write, that is something, and you know, if I think about it, if I give myself 20 minutes a day and say, ‘This is all I'm gonna do. I'm just gonna write for 20 minutes. I'm not going to think about parenting,’ 20 minutes is manageable, I think. That really kind of does free up your mind and if you stop at the 20 minutes and you want to keep on writing then you know, like, man, this is something I could do next day, right? So if you're giving yourself even 20 minutes a day to write that is a way to get your creativity fired up, and let your imagination loose. So I think it doesn't have to be, I'm going to write a huge, massive novel. It's just needs to be, I'm going to give myself 20 minutes a day to write. And I think that's one way to go about ultimately writing a novel. But even if you're not even trying to write something that you're going to publish, just giving yourself that 20 minutes to focus on writing is, hopefully, going to be really good for your own sense of self and your own creativity and your own work as a writer.

**Nelima Begum**

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

**Winnie M Li**

Sorry, I realised I didn't do the parenting triumph, right, so if you just want to hold on to that question you just asked me. So, the parenting triumph, right, yesterday, I took my toddler to the library. It wasn't the first time he went to the library, it was the first time he decided to pick up a book and we checked it out. So he was just kind of looking at the different kids’ books and there is a book on diggers because he loves diggers, and so he was drawn to this book on diggers when we started looking at it, and I'm like, you know, we can actually probably check this book out. So, I mean, he obviously doesn't really get the concept of, you know, borrowing a book from a library, but, you know, the librarian was very friendly and she's like, we were gonna give it to her, but obviously now these days you're supposed to use a self-service machine.

**Nelima Begum**

Taking away the magic!

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, exactly. But she encouraged my toddler to bring it up to the self-service machine and we pressed the buttons and there were lights so he liked that whole thing. And then we're able to walk out of the library with that book on diggers. So yeah, I would say, um, that was kind of a quite nice parenting triumph having my child check out his first library book.

**Nelima Begum**

I love that, and that’s something I'm sure both of you will remember.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, sorry, and then the question that you just asked which I—

**Nelima Begum**

What does being a writer mean to you?

**Winnie M Li**

So I would say being a writer, for me, means that I need to be writing every day. It is kind of like my life blood for me, so if I don't write then something feels a little bit out of whack for me, right? In the same way that other people are very good at, you know, physical exercise, which I am not. People that are runners, you know, they get their runner's high and if they're not running every day, then they feel out of whack. So same thing for me except not running, it's writing. So if I don't sit down, if I'm not giving myself that freedom with words for a little bit of time every day, then I do feel like I'm not actually myself. So writing is it's my life blood, but it's also very restorative for my own sense of self and my own kind of sense of purpose. So I guess I'm lucky in that, you know, I've managed turn it into a career, but I think even if it's not your main source of income, you know, if you're a writer, you're somebody that does need to write every day and you need to kind of honour that, possibly in 20 minutes a day or more. You need to honour that every day to kind of feel like you are yourself.

**Nelima Begum**

That’s a beautiful way to round off. Finally, from this set of questions, what does being a mother mean to you?

**Winnie M Li**

Um, what does being a mother?

**Nelima Begum**

A really big question.

**Winnie M Li**

I think with being a mother, until you are it, you don't actually realise what it means, right? Obviously, you can read all the books that people tell you and stuff, but, like, when you actually finally are a mother, you realise there is this whole other human being, this other kind of life form that completely depends on you to exist. And yes, you can have a pet and that is another example of that. But you know, this is a life form that will continue to grow and turn into another human being and will ultimately become someone you can have a conversation with and you know, somebody that when you get older can hopefully look after you as well. So it is kind of amazing how from something, especially in my case, something that wasn't planned, right, you know, suddenly you have this whole other person that's going to continue growing and become its own person with its own minds and thoughts and its own aspirations. And that, ultimately, becomes your family. So I think it's just kind of a deepening of the understanding of the human experience, which you can get through writing of course, but then, you know, you finish a book and it's done right? And being a mother is always going to be there, because your child is always going to be a part of your life in some way or another.

**Nelima Begum**

Incredible. So, to round off these podcasts, we ask a few quickfire questions as well. And these ones don't require as much thought just kind of say the first thing that comes to your head.

**Winnie M Li**

Okay.

**Nelima Begum**

So, first one: what do you turn to for inspiration?

**Winnie M Li**

Nature. I now live in the countryside so it's quite easy. I just step outside the door and like, you know, I can go for a walk, but when I was living in a city, you know, if I went to a park and looked at the trees and the flowers and the birds, that was also quite inspirational. So yeah, I turn to nature for inspiration.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. Does your son have an idea of what you do?

**Winnie M Li**

No, no, I mean he doesn't even understand the concept of work, you know, and long may he live in that kind of a wonderful place. But yeah, I mean, he doesn't know what I do. Maybe I should tell him at some point because he likes reading. So at some point, I should tell him that I create books—

**Nelima Begum**

Could be a brilliant lightbulb moment for him.

**Winnie M Li**

Yeah, but also the books that I write, I wouldn't want him to read them.

**Nelima Begum**

If you had to sum up both writing and motherhood in just one word, what would it be?

**Winnie M Li**

Inspiring.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. What will you be working on next?

**Winnie M Li**

Well, I'm currently working on the first draft of my third novel, which I need to finish by May 1st, so by the time people hear this podcast, I will have been done with it. So yeah, I'm due to hit 80,000 words of it today, if, you know, I get my writing done. So that's good. But then obviously, that's just the first draft, so there’re many more drafts to come. And I'm also working on the screenplay adaptation of *Dark Chapter*, as well. And so I'm in like, draft 2.4 of the screenplay.

**Nelima Begum**

So there's a lot in the works. What's the greatest piece of writing advice you've ever been given?

**Winnie M Li**

I don't know who said it, or if it was a particular person, if you can, you probably can't ascertain it to a certain person, but just keep writing is probably the best writing advice and you know, you might have a day where you're not creating anything great. That's fine because the next day you might create something great. So if you just keep on writing, that's the best piece of advice I can imagine.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant. Thank you so much for joining us, Winnie. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak to you.

**Winnie M Li**

Okay, no problem.