Being a Writer Podcast—Writers’ Roundtable

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Sally-Anne Lomas, Barry Norton, Mark Blackburn

**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 very special season finale of the Being a Writer podcast, we host a writers’ roundtable to sit down and speak with members of the Being a Writer platform.

We're joined by Barry Norton, Sally-Anne Lomas and Mark Blackburn to discuss all things writing, from picking up the craft late in life, to the imposter syndrome around calling yourself a writer; from the highs of being playful with your work to finding the writing process that works for you, and, finally, finding a sense of community and discovering what it really means to be a writer.

Okay, good morning everyone. Thank you for joining me on the season finale of the Being a Writer podcast. It's an absolute pleasure to have you all joining me today. To start with, I just want to jump in [because] we really want to find out about you, really—the writers. This episode is all about you guys. So, if I could ask each of you to introduce yourselves, please tell us your name, what you're writing and how long you've been a writer. We'll start with you, Barry, just because you're first of all my screen.

**Barry Norton** 01:32

Thanks. Yes, I'm Barry. By day I'm a scientist, and by nights I'm studying for my MA in creative writing in Lancaster. I can pinpoint the day that I started writing, which was September the 11th last year, 2021. Currently, I have a couple of things in progress. I've a novella around AI and sexual and gender identity. And then I have something much more close to home, based in the north of England and kind of [the] intersection of working class identity with sexual identity.

**Nelima Begum** 02:15

Fantastic. It sounds like you're wearing so many hats. Lovely, Sally-Anne let's come to you next.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 02:20

Hi, there. I'm Sally-Anne Lomas. I've been writing for many, many years, though I've worked predominantly as a television producer and director. But I guess for the last two years, I've been concentrating full time on writing, because in 2021 I published my first novel, which was a YA novel [called] *Love Like Your Head’s on Fire*. And I'm at the moment busy just about finishing the sequel to that novel, which is called *Love Like Your Heart’s on Fire*. And that's due to be published next year. So that's allowed me to concentrate full-time on writing, which has been wonderful.

**Nelima Begum** 03:07

Fantastic. So you've been able to fully immerse yourself in your craft and your various stories as well. Mark, let's finish off the intros with you. Tell us about yourself.

**Mark Blackburn** 03:18

Thank you, Nelima. I think as regards how long I've been writing, I'm probably halfway between Barry and Sally-Anne. I have felt confident enough to refer to myself as a writer for about two or three years. And I’ve probably been semi-seriously writing for about double that. And probably, I mean, I try to cover too many genres, I do too many things. I've written some short stories, had some success with those. I wrote a children's book during lockdown for local children, and that went down very well so I self-published that to a wider audience. But my big thing I'm doing at the moment is a work of creative non-fiction called *Final Approach: My Book of Airports*, which is my story. My story about life in a very unusual, dysfunctional family and telling that through the teenage eyes of the plane spotter I was and the adult businessman Globetrotter that I've been more recently, but now I'm semi-retired so I'm writing pretty much all, that is my main thing, that's what I do.

**Barry Norton** 04:36

That's awesome, Mark, because I'm actually sitting, as we were saying earlier, in an airport hotel right now. And I'm curious, what gave you the confidence to call yourself a writer?

**Mark Blackburn** 04:49

I think it was, I had a long period of feeling a bit pretentious about it and saying I think it was a mixture; I think once I began to have short stories published and… started to believe it myself through that sort of external medium, I thought, Yeah, I am. I'm a writer. And actually, I'm a lot happier. And I call myself a writer and I feel I'm a writer. And I think it's a great sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, because once you start saying it, you start believing it and other people believe it.

**Barry Norton** 05:27

Yeah. Similar for me. Short story was when I thought, Yeah, maybe I can do this. Maybe I've got over the imposter syndrome. Sally-Anne. What about, you?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 05:42

You know, in a funny sort of way, I still have the imposter syndrome, even though definitely publishing a book was a big step, you know, that felt like, well, now I’ve published, but I think it is all a continuum, isn't it? And getting [to] the other side of being published, you realise there's a whole other world out there still of writers to be… you know, how many published writers there are, and the challenges there. So it was almost like, you know, I felt I'd made it to be yeah, I'm a writer. And then there was a kind of, oh, oh my goodness, there's a long way to go to be a real writer. So I think it's a constant journey really.

**Nelima Begum** 06:23

Absolutely. Agreed. And we have this a lot at TLC, actually, we find that we have many writers, some of which have been writing for decades, who still feel a certain reluctance to refer to themselves as a writer. So I'm glad that all of you so confidently do and you deserve to and so does every race. I want to start kind of I mean, a lot of you are in you're all at different points in your writing journey, different genres, formats, experiences, and such. What inspired each of you to start writing? And do you remember the first thing that you wrote? I'm gonna start with you, Sally-Anne.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 07:01

Yes, actually, I mean I can remember early in my teenage years doing tortured poems, but the first series thing I wrote was a short story called ‘Daddy’, which I wrote when I was 23. And it was about the experience of my father dying, and it literally came to me in the middle of the night. I can remember getting up at three o'clock in the morning and writing and writing and writing and writing and feeling that this was something really important. And in actual fact, I've still got the text of that, that I wrote. And it changed very little. And, you know, I've never had that experience, again—of something coming to me almost fully formed and flowing out in that way. But it felt so powerful, that experience, that that was the time when I thought, Yeah, this is this is really important to me.

**Nelima Begum** 08:00

Beautiful. Mark, let's come to you next.

**Mark Blackburn** 08:04

I think, now looking back at it, I think I was always a writer, and I always wanted to be a writer. And I think work and a career kind of got in the way of that. And yeah, I had to just park it for 20 or 30 years or whatever it was. And it is strange because since I knew I was going to be talking to you this morning, for some reason, I opened a book of poetry I've had at school. And on the front page, I've written my own poem. And it's not that bad for, like, a 12 or 13-year-old or whatever I was. And so that's, I don't remember the first thing I wrote, but I found the first thing I wrote.

**Nelima Begum** 08:57

Lovely and very on-topic for this. Barry, I'm gonna come to you, because you said you started last year, so it’ll be really interesting.

**Barry Norton** 09:04

I did. And just as I can pinpoint the first time that I wrote in decades, as Mark said, I had a very different career. I made choices early in school to start studying science, ended up with a PhD in computer science. And then last summer. A friend of mine, Jared McGinnis, had his debut novel published with Canongate. He has a PhD in artificial intelligence like mine, and that was the first time I thought, Ah, maybe it is possible to make the switch, even later in life, from sciences to humanities. So, yeah, that was definitely the inspiration. The first thing that I wrote that I would want other people to see was a short story that actually made it into an anthology. I'd been studying with Ashley Hickson-Lovence as a tutor, and he's his debut novel, *The 392*, was also a big influence. So I wrote a short story called ‘The 203’, about another bus, and dedicated to Ashley, because he's the one it gave me the confidence to submit it.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 10:25

It's funny, if I may interrupt, my novel features very strongly the number 11 bus in Birmingham.

**Nelima Begum** 10:33

We’re all following a theme here, we should all just contribute a short story about a bus. Fantastic. So, it's really interesting to hear, you know, kind of where all of your roots are. I always find that really fascinating. I want to take a bit of a deep dive into the craft element of things now, and find out more about the writing process itself for each of you. Because I know, when we get a bunch of races together in a room, that is the thing that usually varies quite starkly. And it's really interesting to hear how each person would tackle the writing process. So, I'm going to start with you, Mark. What is your writing process, and has it changed over time? What do you feel works for you?

**Mark Blackburn** 11:18

Yeah, I do find that I think I am, I've made certain discoveries about myself along this writing trip, and I do like things to be very organised, shall we say. So I find having a special space and setting aside a special time is an important thing for me, and that's what I do. So there is a space in my house, which I use just for writing. And I tend to do it in the afternoon, sort of, so I write in the afternoon having got everything out of the way, in theory, in the morning. It doesn't always work. And I must say, sometimes I do like to get out and I have a favourite cafe where they don't kick me out as long as I order a coffee every hour or something. So I like that very much. And in terms of how it's developed, I think it's got more serious, you know? I feel I have to be more, I want to give it more space, more time, more effort. So that's that, and I think TLC, and being a part of this to a degree has helped me ramp up that that kind of schedule and that sentiment about it.

**Nelima Begum** 12:35

Fantastic. So do you think that with time you have introduced more discipline and more structure, and are a bit more serious to the approach itself?

**Mark Blackburn** 12:44

Exactly. Yeah. And when I find myself drifting off that, I need to kind of give myself a shake and get myself back on that. Yeah. And sometimes TLC does that for me.

**Nelima Begum** 13:00

Glad to be here, doing that for you. It's really interesting to hear how the approach can be shaken up sometimes and how there are people who definitely thrive more when they're in a routine and when they have a very set timetable and way about going about things. Barry, I'm going to come to you next. What's your writing approach? Talk me through your process.

**Barry Norton** 13:21

Yeah, so I went completely overboard after having a couple of short stories published and did things absolutely backwards and got myself a writing shed. So, an allotment garden, as we'd say in in England, with a little place to write inside and outside. And this summer, I took the entire month of July off and wrote every day—got up at dawn, wrote every day. And what was really nice was this is when the TLC Being a Writer Festival was on, so I got to, kind of, intersperse my writing with listening to some really inspiring talks there.

**Nelima Begum** 14:01

Oh, fantastic. That shed sounds lovely. And it sounds like you had a very productive summer as well, so well done. Sally-Anne, what's your writing process?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 14:14

It's a world of writing sheds out there, Barry. So, I have I have my own writing shed as well. And that was part of my taking writing seriously, you know, when I decided to dedicate it and a treat to myself for finally getting a book published, you know, my writing shed. And I'm afraid, Mark, I'm a morning person, not an afternoon person. I'm one of those irritating people that gets up very early and writes first. That grew out of when I was working full-time as a television producer, which was drawing on a lot of similar creative energy. I found that if I was going to actually give anything that had any worth, I had to give the first energy of the day to my writing. So I would get up Every morning and write for an hour. And I found that kind of slightly dreamy space when I'm kind of half-awake. Just coming straight out and doing an hour’s solid writing, particularly for first-draft material; for new material, I find that absolutely vital. So, I still try to keep to that for new material. And I mainly work in the mornings. And then I, unlike you, Mark, I then try and do the rest of the stuff, all the businessy stuff, all the workshops, everything, in the afternoon. I have been trying to extend the hours that I can give to writing because I find I can't really do that much. I mean, I kind of have a sort of three-, four-hour limit, and I've been really trying to push to do more, but I tend to go out for walks in the afternoon. And then you have a different kind of thing that goes on where it's kind of working through your head, ready for the next day. And maybe that's enough, but because I've found pushing myself doesn't seem to increase either the quality or the quantity of the writing, so maybe I just have to accept that that's my pattern. And you do as much as you do in a day.

**Barry Norton** 16:19

I really know what you mean about that morning experience. I'm not a morning person at all. But having that routine of getting up, seeing the dawn, having a cup of coffee and immediately putting your hands on the writing, yeah, I found a lot of discipline in that, that was really useful.

**Nelima Begum** 16:38

So interesting to hear how the patterns vary. I have to say I'm more of a morning person myself, so I do prefer to get up before the sunrise and getting cracking with different tasks and things. But actually, Mark, I think I might give your pattern a go as well, because it sounds like it might be a nice change of pace. And a nice way to switch things up as well. Which is, you know, one of the nice things about speaking to different writers is that you get to learn yourself. So I'll be taking on board all of these techniques that you guys are sharing.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 17:10

I do enjoy that whole thing of a deadline, so when you’re getting to the end, and I really like the intensity of doing an all-nighter or something like that, you know, working late. But that can't sustain on a novel, I learned that you can't do that all the time. You have to have a rhythmic pace that takes you through. But there is something nice about the intensity of a final, you know, the finishing line,

**Barry Norton** 17:36

I think I think you're so right. So for 20 years, I was doing scientific academic writing, and it's a paper deadline or a grant deadline, and you burn the midnight oil, as you say, and then it's out of the way. But I've also found the same, moving on to longer fiction writing. It's just impossible to keep up that kind of pace.

**Nelima Begum** 18:02

Yep, no, I think this is another thing—it changes throughout your writing career as well, doesn't it, depending on what you're writing. If there's a sense of urgency, as you say there's a deadline, Sally-Anne, so that sometimes is more than enough to keep someone spurring on through the night. You know, I don't think I'd be able to do an all-nighter now, definitely not out of university, but back in the day I did a fair few. [It’d] be really interesting to hear, I guess, what writing has taught you about yourselves since you've started. Is there something that writing has drawn out of you that you've kind of looked at and thought, Well, this is new, or I didn't realise this about myself until I started my writing journey. I'm gonna come to you first, Mark.

**Mark Blackburn** 18:51

It's quite a big question because it's, I said something earlier where I kind of maybe suggested I like to be very organised, and I think, if you forgive the cliché here, I'm not just on a writing journey, but I'm on a self-development journey as well. And I've been coming to terms more with the fact, I mean I mentioned I was in business, and I was selling shoes and involved in property for several decades, and to some degree looking back that feels like it was more of an act. And the writing is more the genuine me. So I'm finding that, I'm realising that, I hate to sort of use the word neurodivergent, but I'm getting more and more drawn to that is a sort of understanding of some of my habits and some of my behaviours. And I think that's the first time I've ever set that out to a, sort of, wider audience, but that whole interface between your writing development and your personal development and understanding what you are and having the confidence to be what you are is a fantastic, sort of, reassuring, self-fulfilling, positive process. So, yeah, that's a very big answer.

**Nelima Begum** 20:22

Mark, that’s a beautiful answer.

**Barry Norton** 20:25

I love it.

**Nelima Begum** 20:26

It's beautiful, thank you so much for sharing that with us and for trusting us in this space. You know, I think that's a lovely response.

**Mark Blackburn** 20:34

Thank you.

**Nelima Begum** 20:36

Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 20:38

Yeah, well, gosh, when I published my first book, it was a real revelation because suddenly, and I know, I say this in all humility, you know, in a very, very tiny way, I realised that you sort of become a public figure, you know, something that you've said and written is out there in the public. And you have to stand by it and be responsible for it and own it. So that really made me realise that it was like a kind of wake-up call, about how, you know, what you're putting your words in. It's so important, you know, you have to absolutely believe and be there and work out what it is that's important to you, and what matters and be able to stand by it and defend it and own it and sit in it. And it may seem obvious to other people, but honestly, it wasn't until I was suddenly facing people's responses to my work, that it really dawned on me how it is a measure of yourself exactly. As you say, Mark, you are constantly you know, you are exposing yourself, you're exposing everything about your inner beliefs and your structures. And even if you're using fictional characters, and it's entirely make believe, the whole thing is still a product of your understanding of the world. And that understanding of the world is going out there… to be commented upon. So you need to… [it’s] that thing of oh, my God, I really need to be sure that what I'm putting out there has value, you know, and that I can defend it and I can be proud of it and I can stand by it, if that makes sense.

**Nelima Begum** 22:32

Absolutely.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 22:33

So it made me question more deeply everything I believed in and everything I thought about, and so it was kind of revolutionary, really.

**Nelima Begum** 22:45

Wonderful. Yes, it's definitely a really big step, I think, with any kind of writing project that you pour yourself into, because you do open yourself and make yourself vulnerable, not just to your readership, but to the industry and your peers and everyone in between. So thank you for sharing Sally-Anne. Barry, I'm gonna come to you next.

**Barry Norton** 23:04

Yes… I'm going to, again, thank Mark for what he just said and echo it myself. I also had a long, very different career from writing. And writing does help you to get to know yourself, at least that's what I find as well. So, when I announced that I wanted to write to a few close friends, everyone said, ‘You’ll write science fiction, you're a scientist, that's what you'll do’. And very quickly, I found that, again, sexual identity, gender identity got into the story very quickly. But then, I got a diagnosis as being bipolar type two this year. And that went hand-in-hand with writing. And that's when I thought, Hey, it's really important to represent these things in writing, it's really important to have neurodiverse characters. And that's something, you know, I've been working on quite a lot this year. There're a couple of other things that surprised, I guess, things that are at the back of your mind. The act of writing brings them to the front, and you start to think about them consciously. So for me a real surprising one was, I used to work at the British Museum for a while, and now I found myself after, you know, a long period working elsewhere, writing about decolonization in the museum space. And that's obviously something that had been at the back of my mind and now that I'm thinking about writing for other people, that that's something that I want to raise. It's the kind of social issue that I want to talk about.

**Nelima Begum** 24:55

I’ve noticed a really lovely theme here of just writing encouraging each have you to be your most authentic self and helping you reconnect with yourself in a really deep and meaningful way that perhaps, you know, no other activity has don so, which is useful to hear. And it really… leads on very nicely to the next question, actually, where, you know, I want to move on and talk more about the wellbeing side of writing and being creative in general, seeing as wellbeing is very much at the heart of the Being a Writer platform. How have you taken care of yourself while writing? I think we should start with you, Sally-Anne.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 25:40

Well, I have found that enormously helpful, as part of the Being a Writer programme, and it has really helped me think about writing and wellbeing, and that has changed the way that I write a lot. I've done some writing with wellbeing courses, which I've found hugely enjoyable, and they enable me to write in a different way. I've got a whole big thing on my board there that says write like a dolphin, which is playfully and freely, and that image, I've got big dolphins up there as well to remind me to enjoy the writing and to play with the writing and to have that sense of space and freedom. And I got to that place through doing writing with wellbeing courses and through the Being a Writer [programme], because, I'm sure you're going to talk about it later, you know, you do get an awful lot of knocks. And… it's a place of a lot of criticism. So I think the more that you can find ways to support yourself as a writer is just vital. I've also done writers retreats with friends, which have been enormously supportive. So going somewhere nice with other writers, and choosing to share time and encourage each other. That also feels a really vital part to me.

**Nelima Begum** 27:06

Definitely, lovely, thank you for sharing. Mark, I'm going to come to you next. Now, how have you taken care of yourself while writing?

**Mark Blackburn** 27:16

Well, another thing to lob out there is I also… have quite an issue with, like, chronic illness and I had ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome a number of years ago, typical, sort of, when they used to call it “hippy flu”, you know, burning the candle at both ends and working too hard. And as a result, I've had issues with my immune system ever since, so it's quite important for me to look after myself. And I agree with… Sally-Anne that by putting yourself in the, sort of, Being a Writer capsule, if you'd like, you are more nurtured than you are on your own. I had a particularly unfortunate experience, or my wife had a much more unfortunate experience, when I was supposed to be going to the TLC retreat at Casa Ana in Spain, and we had an emergency and I didn't even make the first day I had to come back from Spain on a plane as my wife was going into theatre, operating theatre, so that completely… was lost, but the care and the you know, it was so, with TLC it felt like it was a kind of family, in the sense that the support and the concern that I got helped me and helped us through that whole process. So, you know, I have to take extra care, and sometimes it's really nice to feel that you're not on your own in that sort of situation. And being in a group like this has definitely helped that.

**Nelima Begum** 29:11

Thank you, Mark. We’re so thrilled to be able to create this community for you all and to be able to support you as well through those times as best as we can. Barry, how have you taken care of yourself?

**Barry Norton** 29:24

So I had a very strange and fortuitous coincidence that came up this year, that after my diagnosis, I found a therapist and then, talking to one another, I talked quite a lot about writing and how helpful I found it with respect to mental health. And we realised together that she'd actually been a fiction writer and moved into academic writing and I was doing the opposite. So a lot of the conversations we have are around writing. I'd also echo what Mark says, something that I really value and wish I made it to it more was the TLC online Write Club on a Sunday morning once a month. It's that similar, I feel a little bit isolated as a writer of fiction in English out here in Denmark. But just that chance to log on and see some familiar faces and hear about, you know, how their writing has been going and sit together for a little while, I find it really useful that sense of community and support.

**Nelima Begum** 30:37

Hopefully, and I actually think that's one of my favourite things about the Being a Writer platform is the monthly Write Club, just because it's that moment of, you know, as you say, everyone joining from different places and having conflicting schedules and having so much going on, and yet, once a month, everyone manages to find that little bit of time to come together and just sit in silence and write and I think there's so, there's so much power in that, too, for all of you and your creativity. And for us to see as well; to see so many of you being brought together by your craft. It's lovely.

**Mark Blackburn** 31:08

Can I add something slightly tangential to that, but it came to mind while you were talking, and I think writing itself can help you care for yourself. A couple of times, we've said how, you know, it can be quite therapeutic, and I, especially during lockdown, I felt that by having allocated time and space to write, it helped to put some sort of regime into a very difficult and challenging environment. And I found that there’s are very sort of symbiotic relationship there between my mental health and my writing success.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 31:49

I actually did a course in therapeutic writing this year, which I was thinking that would be something that I would like to maybe do workshops in, but actually I found it incredibly useful for myself. And it was really enjoyable and interesting to do. And you know that thing you were talking about, Nelima, about the authentic self? So it both helped you reach towards your most authentic self, as well as giving all these tools that you could use to soothe and heal yourself through writing.

**Nelima Begum** 32:30

I always appreciate that approach to things, when a person or organisation places great emphasis on providing people with the tools and the skills that they need to help achieve their goals rather than just a one-stop solution. So I think that's a brilliant way to look at it. And I think it's definitely something that we're big on at TLC as well. We've talked a lot about the writing, and there are times when we can get too close to the writing, as it were, so, writing is often a very personal endeavour. How do you manage boundaries and know when to distance yourself from the work? Because that's often what, you know, I find a key moment in a writer’s career is knowing when to have those moments of hang on, I need to just take a step away from this for a moment, and perhaps look at something else or just take a breather from it. How do you know when to have those moments? I'll start with you, Barry.

**Barry Norton** 33:30

Don't think I do know yet.

**Nelima Begum** 33:34

I love the honesty.

**Barry Norton** 33:35

Being the newest writer on the podcast. Yeah, I still find that my first drafts [are] often too autobiographical, too personal, and I have to then edit and withdraw some of that. I think it's a skill that I'm still learning—not to pull too much of myself out into my writing.

**Nelima Begum** 34:00

Lovely, so it's something that you're still very much learning as you go along. But it's so great to, kind of, catch you at that stage of, you know, it's quite early, and it's coming to you and it will come with time. Yeah, thank you for sharing. Mark, I'm gonna come to you next.

**Mark Blackburn** 34:15

I actually was at the opposite end, I think, to Barry. I mean, when I started out some of my writing was criticised rightly because, although it was technically proficient, it didn't have enough of myself in it, and I was too held back, too constrained, too inhibited. But the opposite of that, of course, is you go too far the other way and you're giving far too much of yourself, and I have to say I think it's useful to have somebody else to give some sort of feedback. And I think in the end you don't actually need that other person to do it, you can kind of see it a bit more objectively yourself and you can read your own stuff and imagine somebody else reading it and thinking, Would they be saying hold on, that’s enough, rein it in, rein it in a bit there. So I think that it's interesting. I think Barry and I are both working on the same conundrum having come from slightly different directions.

**Barry Norton** 35:26

Absolutely. It's funny, sorry to jump in, but in software we have this funny term called ‘rubber ducking’. And it's exactly this idea that you work things out for yourself by talking to someone else. And when you get good enough at talking through the problem and finding the solution yourself, you could just talk to a rubber duck. So literally, I have a rubber duck on top of my standing desk.

**Nelima Begum** 35:54

That's something I would definitely pick up on. I've recently started a bit of a tech journey myself and group work and peer review and talking through problems with other people and then progressing to a stage where you can eventually do it yourself is a really big thing, and I'm yet to learn it completely. But the rubber ducking technique is wonderful. Sally-Anne, how do you know when to distance yourself from the work and create that boundary for yourself?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 36:21

Well, I do think first readers are important, you know, having people in your life that you trust, I feel that there's a lot of, I mean I've never had a child myself, but I do feel there's a lot of giving birth about writing. So, you know, by the time I’ve finished a draft, I'm kind of usually, like, well ready to be rid of it. Particularly a long piece novel that's maybe taken you a year to get your draft out. But I think letting it out to somebody who you trust, and then I really enjoy the process of letting it go. And having that space apart from it. Because I really make myself stop thinking about it. And I try and work on other things or have a break altogether, so that when it comes back to me, I too am approaching it freshly. And I'm approaching the response to it freshly as well. And then I can start again. So in my working pattern, there's generally this thing of kind of total immersion, and then, you know, being ready to push it out. Leave it to somebody who I trust, and then receive it back gratefully and welcomingly. And then I can work on it again. But I do think those breaks from the intensity of it are extremely helpful.

**Nelima Begum** 37:44

Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. And I think it's always nice to, when you are taking those breaks, or when you've put it in a drawer, perhaps go and read something else, go and write something else write a different genre or format entirely, go for a walk, immerse yourself in nature have a playlist, there are so many ways in which you can stay creative and keep your creative energy whilst not being so close to your manuscript itself.

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 38:09

Yeah, and I also think, Nelima, that, you know, writer's block, whenever I get a writer's block, I usually think that is a sign that I need to take some space from the thing that I'm working on. And I've learned over time, that rather than kind of trying to push or force myself through, you know, if the writing is feeling very difficult and really hard work and stuck, then actually to just at that point, leave it and rest, do something else, exactly as you say take that opportunity, is my best response to that resistance.

**Nelima Begum** 38:49

Great. I'm glad you've mentioned writer’s block, actually, because it leads us very nicely on to our next question. So writer's block, imposter syndrome, burnout, I'm sure, you know, we're all familiar with them. They're all issues that come up time and time again in the writing community. How do you approach these matters? And what kind of advice would you give to other writers who are creatives who are facing them? I'm going to start with you, Mark.

**Mark Blackburn** 39:16

I feel quite lucky in that I don't feel I've been too badly affected by some of these things. I mean, the imposter syndrome we talked a bit about in the sense of talking about where we felt we could or couldn't call ourselves at writer. I think early on I did have I did have doubts. I did feel pretentious and that I didn't have the authority to call myself a writer. But that's changed. Writer's block, I don't really get it these days, because I just, I have notebooks and I have things, and there always seems to be something that I can pick up.

**Nelima Begum** 39:55

Wahey! Barry’s showing us the TLC writer’s diary.

**Mark Blackburn** 40:03

But I think the important, what I would say to somebody else, is that yeah, don't force yourself, don't think, I've got to do 2,000 words in this next three-hour section I've set myself aside. You know, be kin, be gentle. If you've got a vague thought that you had last night, just put down a few words, you know, just write a couple of sentences, couple of phrases, then maybe try and link them together or see where they take you, if they take you anywhere, but just don't stress too much. Don't force yourself, just let it happen and be kind.

**Nelima Begum** 40:43

Absolutely. I'm going to draw out the words be kind and be gentle from what you've just said, Mark, because it's so important. And it's so easy for us to forget to be those things towards ourselves. We’re so compassionate towards everyone else in their writing journey that, you know, far too often we forget that we are in need of the same kind of compassion ourselves. And we should say it to ourselves too. Barry, can I come to you next.

**Barry Norton** 41:10

Yeah so I'm really glad that Sally-Anne mentioned nature, because that is how I recharge. That's how I get over block. That's how I try to avoid burnout. So when I mentioned my writing shed is on an allotment garden, just going outside and pottering in the garden, doing a bit of weeding. I also deliberately bought it by a forest that I know I can work in because that's always where I get my energy back from, from nature. I remember, a few years ago, I lived in Innsbruck in Austria, up in the mountains, and that was during my academic time. I remember one particularly difficult grant proposal that we were writing, when we'd been working for two weeks straight through the weekend at the university. And the second weekend that we were working, I just said, ‘That's it. I'm burned out, I'm going for a walk in the mountains, I just cannot do any more.’ And two hours later, I came back and people said, ‘Are you feeling better Barry?’ And I'm like, ‘Yep, let's get back to it.’

**Nelima Begum** 42:17

Fabulous. No, I completely agree. And it can be something as simple as going to your local park or local forest or just having a really nice, long walk in the morning. That morning air and just looking at greenery does a world of good. And far too often we underestimate it, too. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 42:36

Yeah, well, I couldn't agree more with you, Barry. I mean, absolutely, nature is just wonderful. But I guess I also wanted to talk a little bit of, I have struggled more than, with writer's block and with burnout, I kind of take a break, and I understand that, but the imposter syndrome, I struggled with that all my life. So, as long as I've wanted to be a writer, there has also been an incredibly loud voice in my head telling me that, you know, that is utterly preposterous, and that I'm absolutely useless. And, literally, you know, for every sentence I write that voice is there telling me how terrible that sentence is. And so I would say that for as long as I've been trying to write, I've also been trying to deal with that voice in my head. And then that's been as important as any workshops or crafts or things that I've done, and that it is a constant, constant battle, the voice on my shoulder that's telling me that I'm useless and I'm worthless and there is no point me doing this. So I have a whole range of strategies to deal with that. You know, talking to it. I do affirmations every morning to confirm myself and to kind of put it to one side. I refuse to listen to it. I do power stances, you know, but it does feel like it's, and I've done therapeutic courses, you know, I've spoken to people, therapists, about it to try and find strategies to deal with it. So I think it doesn't go away, but I don't let it stop me anymore. Yeah, that's the important thing, that I do not let it stop me anymore.

**Nelima Begum** 44:22

That’s a really interesting approach to take, Sally-Anne, and one that I appreciate very much because I understand just how severe impostor syndrome and get sometimes and it is really important to tell yourself to slow down and no matter how small those things are the affirmations or the power stance or even just listening to your favourite song, anything that helps you is worth doing.

**Mark Blackburn** 44:45

Can I respond to that as well, please?

**Nelima Begum** 44:47

Absolutely. Go for it, Mark.

**Mark Blackburn** 44:49

Because I think that obviously there's a kind of correlation between those kinds of feelings and how we’re feeling genuinely in ourselves. And one of the things I found, I am aware that a very good friend of mine had a short story that he loved. And he was just getting absolutely nowhere with it. And then last week, he was runner up in one of the biggest short story prizes in Ireland, and had a radio show of an hour given to it. And he won several thousand Euros as a price. And he had been going through one of these stages where just nothing was happening and he was starting to question himself. And I think I find that it can be helpful to have a try and put the science into it when the emotion is getting on top of you. And I do, I have an Excel spreadsheet—sorry!— but I put everything on those spreadsheets, all the failures, all the successes. And I think it's helpful to sometimes bear in mind… how difficult it is, how bad the stats are, how against you as a writer they are, and just sort of check-in sometimes and remind yourself that, hey, yeah, I did do this or so-and-so did like that, and that book I had out last year did do this. So yeah, we just have to, wherever we can, we have to kind of rationalise it and [be] scientific (sorry, Barry).

**Nelima Begum** 46:30

Yes, and celebrate the victories as well. Barry, have you got anything to add?

**Barry Norton** 46:34

Yeah. So reflecting on what Sally-Anne was saying, it always makes me feel guilty how correlated impostor syndrome is with class and gender. So, you know, I am from a working class origin, and I definitely have a devil on my shoulder saying, ‘You're a sheep farmer, what the hell makes you think you can do this?’ But then I have the huge privilege of having been to a private boys’ school, where another figure is grafted onto your shoulder that says, ‘You can do anything, you’re master of the world’. That's what public school is like. I wouldn't call it an angel, it's probably another devil. But, you know, I feel the strain between those two things. And I, even more so being, you know, a white passing-for-straight (even though I'm not), man, I come with all of that privilege. And you know, if I have impostor syndrome, how much worse can it be for other people?

**Nelima Begum** 47:38

Yeah, absolutely. It's definitely worth considering how other people might be feeling in their approach to it. But I think we've got some really golden advice in this episode for dealing with it, and I'm hoping that it reaches a lot of writers and that people are able to benefit from all the wisdom in this. I think for the last 10 minutes or so of this podcast, I'd really like to focus on doing some quickfire questions. So, these are questions where you don't have to think, just say the first thing that comes to your head. And I think that's what keeps it jumpy and interesting. It’s something that we started doing from about season two and I've just kept it on because I love it so much. I love hearing people's like knee-jerk reactions to things. So, I think we'll just go in the order that you guys appear on my screen. So we'll go Barry, Sally-Anne and Mark, if that's okay, for each of the questions. And I’ll start off with what has been the highlight of your writing journey so far?

**Barry Norton** 48:33

That's the first time I got published. The first time I got an acceptance letter.

**Nelima Begum** 48:39

Beautiful. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 48:41

Walking into Waterstones where I'd imagined, as one of my power exercises, my book on the shelf with one of those reader reviews, and seeing it there with the reader review that said it was great was just wonderful

**Barry Norton** 48:52

Beautiful.

**Nelima Begum** 48:53

Fantastic. Mark?

**Mark Blackburn** 48:56

This not difficult: being at a short story award ceremony this summer, and having Dame Margaret Drabble say, when my story was chosen as runner-up, that she loved my story, and that she very much related to it.

**Barry Norton** 49:16

I'm so jealous.

**Nelima Begum** 49:18

I think we're all feeling a bit jealous! The next one: how has the Being a Writer platform contributed to your writing journey. Barry?

**Barry Norton** 49:27

Oh, there you go. So here's where I got to get to talk about being shortlisted for Pen Factor this year, right in the middle of the month that I was taking off to write. That was just such an affirmation.

**Nelima Begum** 49:39

Wonderful. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 49:42

Yeah, on my board here I have all writing goals weekly, writing goals monthly, I love all that order and everything. I love that that you've set that, I like the goal setting. My yearly goals are there and I read them every single day. And I'm keeping to them mainly. And it just has absolutely clarified my writing journey. useful.

**Nelima Begum** 50:08

Beautiful. Thank you. Mark?

**Mark Blackburn** 50:11

I'm sorry but I'm going to use the word journey again because I'm on my turbulent journey with my final approach and on my final approach towards hopefully publication, like Barry being shortlisted for the TLC Pen Factor pitch prize 22 was a pretty good so affirmation of that relationship with TLC.

**Nelima Begum** 50:36

I'm glad. What are your biggest takeaways from being a part of the Being a Writer community? We'll start with you, Barry, again, we're going in that order.

**Barry Norton** 50:48

I feared you would. Can you can you give me a minute and

**Nelima Begum** 50:54

They’re quickfire questions, Barry, you need to say the first thing that comes, can’t give you the luxury of a minute, I'm afraid.

**Barry Norton** 51:01

All right, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Then my quickfire answer [is] community.

**Nelima Begum** 51:05

Lovely. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 51:08

Yeah, I've really enjoyed those flow workshops. And that whole idea that has come to me through Being a Writer about caring for yourself and the community, you know, looking after yourself as a writer, and actually just the enjoyment and the sheer joy of thinking of a writer in that way, and of writing in that way, has been really special.

**Nelima Begum** 51:33

oh, I love that. I love that it's kind of brought back that element of playfulness for you, which is great. Mark, what is your biggest takeaway from being a part of the Being a Writer community?

**Mark Blackburn** 51:44

Well, I think this is. I mean, I've networked a little bit with Barry and we kind of communicate on social media, but this is, this feels to me like the summary, the zenith of that, for writing here with TLC, and to be able to talk about things I haven't really talked about and share this with, with other writers. And in on this platform. That's my answer.

**Nelima Begum** 52:11

Lovely, thank you, Mark. Okay, what is your key piece of writing advice for other writers? Barry I'm gonna put you on the spot again, because we are going in that order.

**Barry Norton** 52:23

Of course. I think the key advice is have some self-belief. Everybody had to write their first word, their first paragraph, everybody doubted it, but have some self-belief and try it.

**Nelima Begum** 52:42

I love that. Thank you so much. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 52:46

Don't give up. Just keep going. Just keep going and right like a dolphin. Enjoy it. Have fun.

**Nelima Begum** 52:53

Write like a dolphin. I love that. Mark, your key piece of writing advice for other writers.

**Mark Blackburn** 52:59

My key piece of advice is if you're writing, you're a writer. That’s all there is. Anything else is a bonus. If you're putting words on a page, you're writing, you're a writer.

**Nelima Begum** 53:11

Absolutely. Okay, we've got one more big question to round off with. What does being a writer mean to you?

**Barry Norton** 53:20

Then I would go with learning about myself and putting a more personal side to myself out into the world.

**Nelima Begum** 53:29

Lovely. Sally-Anne?

**Sally-Anne Lomas** 53:32

Being a Writer is how I understand the world. It's how I live. And it's also how I express myself.

**Nelima Begum** 53:40

Beautiful. Mark, let's round off with you. Bring us home.

**Mark Blackburn** 53:44

Well, authenticity keeps coming up. And I think that is the key word. Yeah, it's about me being authentic. It's been about me being the real me and not the me that I thought I should be or that me that I thought other people should be. But I'm the authentic me. And I'm writing and I love it.

**Nelima Begum** 54:05

Thank you so much. This has been such a delightful episode to record, and I'm so grateful for your time, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us. I've learned so much about each of you. And it's just so nice to have that kind of insight about the sense of community that you all have with each other and with other writers and with the Being a Writer platform as well. So, thank you so much for sharing so much about your writing journeys and everything else. It's been a truly insightful conversation.