Being a Writer Podcast—Writing Music with Doug Johnstone

Mon, May 01, 2023 10:22AM • 56:15

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

writers, writing, people, stories, write, book, books, absolutely, feedback, editor, music, edits, career, read, reader, thought, songwriting

**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Doug Johnstone

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast from The Literary Consultancy. In each podcast we go behind the scenes of the writing process with a special guest and get to the heart of what it means to be a writer today. Being a Writer is a unique programme of support for writers that prioritises literary creativity wellbeing and emotional resilience.

In this episode of The Being a Writer podcast, we're joined by novelist, musician and TLC reader Doug Johnstone, to talk all things writing and music. Doug shares with us his early experiences with music and how writing, which began as something he did for fun, soon became a brilliant career of noir fiction. He walks us through the creative process for each one, and shares a treasure trove of writing advice. We talk about AI, how less is more, how feedback can be transformative for a writer’s career, the perks of forging a community and finding genuine fulfilment in the creative process.

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Doug, how are you doing?

**Doug Johnstone** 01:07

I'm great, Nelima, thanks very much. Thanks for having me.

**Nelima Begum** 01:09

Oh, it's so lovely to have you and your chirpy voice, and obviously, team TLC is thrilled to have you on here this month. It's always such a pleasure when we get to work with TLC readers beyond just our editorial services, which you guys all do brilliantly. So—

**Doug Johnstone** 01:25

Well, you have to say that, don't you?

**Nelima Begum** 01:29

Today, we're talking about writing and music. And it's a topic that you can speak to brilliantly. We're just going to dive straight In to all of it. So, when did you start writing?

**Doug Johnstone** 01:44

Well, I think I was starting to write stories, kind of, when I was a teenager. I really didn't like English at school. I didn't get on with my teacher very well, for various reasons, but I enjoyed the creative writing aspect of it. I really enjoyed creating something as opposed to analysing other people's texts and all that sort of stuff. And I was just writing stories, kind of, on and off for my own amusement, really. I don't think I showed anyone—I mean, I would submit them, you know, for, like, there was a part of the exam in English which you would do at school, and I would submit them. And they always got really high marks, and I was really chuffed. But I never really showed anyone or even told anyone that I was doing it. And I kind of just kept doing that through school and then into university I was still doing it, and I didn't really—I didn't know anyone else who really read books, weirdly, like my other friends so I wasn't really interested in showing them the stuff either. I didn't really think of it. I had no concept of writing as a career. I think one of the reasons I didn't like English at school was because everything we read had been written, like, over 100 years ago by, you know, posh white guys at Oxford or Cambridge, and growing up in a small fishing town in the northeast of Scotland I didn't really relate to that very much. And I didn't think that writers were, like, living people that did it, d’you know what I mean? It seems crazy, you know, looking back on it, but I was, kind of, very, very isolated and insular, I think, and I would just, kind of—so it never occurred to me that through writing those stories, that that was a thing that people could do, you know, for a career or to get their stories out there.

And I guess there was a few books that, sort of, changed my perspective a little bit. I mean, cuz Scottish literature at the time, I mean, there was a weird situation in Scotland where almost everything we learned at school was from England; from, like, outside our own country, which seems quite weird. It's not the case now, thank goodness, we have a, sort of, Scottish literature curriculum in schools now. But I mean, a lot of that literature that was kicking around, I wouldn't really have been aware of. Most of it was from Glasgow, which I didn't really relate to. But then I read *The Wasp Factory* by Iain banks, which… is sort of set in a… rural east coast Scotland. And it's about everyday people, albeit an extreme family. But I understood the way that they behaved and the way they spoke to each other. And that was a real eye-opener to me. I was like, Oh, my God, this guy comes from somewhere near like, what I come like, and he's written a story, and it's been published. And I was like, This is amazing.

**Nelima Begum** 04:26

Wow, that's really interesting that you, kind of, take it back to your days in school. And what you said about the curriculum, I think it still rings true in a lot of ways to be honest. Not just with English, too. So, for example, when I was in school, I was so into art and painting, and then I just thought it could never be something that I pursued long-term because everyone that we study or try and mimic is dead. So will they make all their money after they passed away? What's the point?

**Doug Johnstone** 04:53

Exactly. Yeah… I think… in Scotland in the 21st century, that has changed a little bit, but it's still hard. I mean, it's hard to think of… I mean, I didn't meet an author, I didn't *physically* meet an author ‘til I was in my 30s, probably, you know? We didn't have author visits to schools or anything like that, although at one point when I was living in Edinburgh, I remember going to the Edinburgh Book Festival and just being, sort of, bamboozled by the whole thing, because I've got a music background, and we’re going to talk about this, but I was used to gigs, I was used to, like, I was in grunge bands and stuff, so I was used to, like, mosh pits and loud music and people jumping around. And that was like, sitting in a, sort of, nice tent on a Tuesday morning listening to someone read from a book and I was like, What the hell is this?

**Nelima Begum** 05:37

Oh, I get that. That's so funny. It was just too peaceful for you, Doug.

**Doug Johnstone** 05:43

It was. I couldn't handle it!

**Nelima Begum** 05:47

Do you remember the first thing that you wrote? I know you said it started with exam questions in school, but it sounds like gradually it turned into a hobby or something that you found a lot of enjoyment in clearly because you kept doing it. So, what was, like, the first thing that you wrote outside of, kind of, a school setting?

**Doug Johnstone** 06:04

Well, I remember that, I guess I don't know what the first thing would have been. But I was definitely writing stories, short stories. I was really, along with *The Wasp factory*, I was really massively influenced when, like a lot of people in Scotland, when *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh came out. It was, like, an absolute—it was like blowing the doors off… your mind was just like, Oh my God, this is like, because I was living in Edinburgh at that time and when that came out I was at Edinburgh University by then. I mean, thankfully, I didn't have, like, a chronic heroin addiction. But I was going out a lot and partying and there was drugs involved. And I knew people in this, kind of, world that was depicted by Irvine. And I was just like, Oh my God, this is, like, literature, and it's about people I recognise again. And so I was writing stories then, and they were, kind of, just massive, like, Irvine Welsh and Iain Banks rip-offs. And so I had a bunch of stories, but they kind of didn't really go anywhere. I didn't have—I think one of the things that I didn't really understand at all, when I first started writing, was plot and plotting. I understand a lot more now, and I've, kind of, had to reverse engineer that and become more aware of that. But I was just all writing. It was all vibes d’you know what I mean? It was all, like, mood. And it was typical, sort of, teenager, early-20s, like, young bloke angst stuff, you know, but kind of writing about parties and clubbing and stuff like that as well. But they, kind of, just were… a whole bunch of vibes. There wasn't really anything going on, d’you know what I mean?

**Nelima Begum** 07:38

Yeah. Here for the vibes. I love it. We've touched on this briefly, because you mentioned that, obviously, you're a musician. So, you are a man of many talents: crime writing, journalism even, music teaching. And you're also the co-founder of the Scotland Writers Football Club, which I found incredibly cool. Is there overlap in all of the hats that you wear and the work that you do? Because it's a lot!

**Doug Johnstone** 08:01

Yeah, I think there is. There is an overlap. Yeah, the overlap is me, right? But I think I tend to think of, and I've been thinking about this a lot more recently, I tend to think in terms of like a lot more holistic approach to stuff, like, a lot more… interconnectivity of things that you do. I've always thought there was a really big connection between the writing and the music for me. And, you know… I've deliberately blurred those boundaries quite a lot, like, my second novel called *The Ossians*, was about an indie band, an unsigned band, who tour the Scottish Highlands and, kind of, fall apart in a mess of drink and drugs. And, you know, it was slightly autobiographical, in some sense. And, you know, it's just building on the experience I had of being in crappy bands who play in crappy venues, and like, you know, have a bad time. But at the same time as that came out, I had some lyrics at the start of each chapter for this fictional band that I had written. And then me and my real band, actually, I wrote some songs to go with the fictional lyrics for this fictional band. And then me and my real band, like, recorded them and released an album, which actually got better reviews than the book sometimes, which is quite annoying! So I've always blurred it. I've written short stories that are based on other people's songs, I've written songs that are based on books. So, there's been a lot of cross pollination there between them.

As for the other stuff, it is all connected. I mean, all the teaching stuff is all to do with writing, and the stuff obviously I do at TLC, and various other places, you know, it's all to do with trying to connect to a community of writers, I think, and help people who are at a different part of their writing journey. And I think that's super important. It's something that has become more apparent to me the older I've got. And the football and the band and stuff like that. They're both things, I mean, I was one of the people who started the Scotland Writers Football Club. And I'm in the Fun Lovin’ Crime Writers, which is a band of crime writers. And they're both… very obviously, it didn't occur to me at the time, but they're both very obviously attempts to forge, like, social connections with other writers. And because it can be quite a solitary existence, because you're just basically sitting in your little office or wherever you write for months or years at a time making up fictional people in fictional worlds… it can be quite an isolating career. So, I think both of those things have been hugely beneficial to me in terms of allowing me to connect better with communities of writers.

**Nelima Begum** 10:41

It's really interesting that you brought that up, because that is something that, you know, comes up quite often at TLC. We have writers who, you know… are longing for community and for networks and to just have other people to, kind of, share the journey with. Do you have any, like, tips or recommendations for how writers might find their community or find their tribe, as it were?

**Doug Johnstone** 11:02

I don't really. I'm quite bad. Something that I've realised over the years, Nelima, is that I'm quite isolationist. I'm quite bad at joining in things. I'm not naturally a joiner-inner, d’you know what I mean? I'll just be, sort of, like, Yeah, whatever, let them get on with it. So, I don't know if I'm the best person to ask for advice for this. And I know a lot of people, you know, find that sort of thing in writing courses, you know, online courses, or, you know, in person. And I mean, that's one of the main reasons I would say is to do some kind of, you know, creative writing course. It’s not necessarily for what you're getting taught or what's getting facilitated for you, but actually the camaraderie and the support you get from peer to peer networking that way. And then people go, as writers, to informal writers groups and stuff like that. And I'm always, kind of, quite jealous of that, because I think I would just… cringe so much. I would crawl out of my skin in, sort of, embarrassment.

**Nelima Begum** 12:01

You like your own space too much.

**Doug Johnstone** 12:03

Yeah, I think so. So, in terms of finding… you’re making the links, and you just have to try and force yourself to try and be open to opportunities when they arise. And things, kind of… can happen that you don't expect to happen, like, both the football team and the band are both things that could easily have not happened. They could easily have just, we could have played one game or one gig and just given up, or had one rehearsal and fallen flat, or we could never have quite got it together to get a rehearsal even. So, I think one of the things is you just plug into something and then have to give it a good go, actually, to try and get something off the ground. It can be hard work, but it's certainly been fruitful in my in my experience anyway.

**Nelima Begum** 12:49

For sure. I think, I mean consistency is key with anything, really, if you want to see it thrive and flourish, you have to really commit the time.

**Doug Johnstone** 12:58

That's the same with a career in writing, like, just on a, sort of, more individual level, I think, that, you know, countless people that I speak to, you know, people who are trying to get published, see getting their first book as the end goal. You know, I really want to get published, I really want to get published. And I completely understand that mindset. I was kind of the same. But it's the first step on a ladder, like, getting published. And actually, you know, everyone, every writer who's still going now has had, you know, innumerable setbacks in their careers, and have kept plugging away. And it's one of the things I think that distinguishes you from, I mean I can think back to when my first book came out, however long ago, quite long, 2006… 17 years, something like that. And I can think of writers who I was on events with, y’know, debut authors at the same time, who didn't get a second book or, you know, have ended up doing something else. And I think one of the things that differentiates people who are, sort of, still in the business is just, like, blind persistence, almost. Like that kind of doggedness that you are in it for the long haul, and that you want to, sort of, continue; you’re continually trying to improve your own craft and get your stuff out there if you can.

**Nelima Begum** 14:20

Absolutely. And we see this in a lot of areas, not just writing, I think, you know, talent obviously makes up a significant portion of it, but largely it is to do with how hard you go and how regular you are and how much effort and time you give it.

**Doug Johnstone** 14:34

Yeah… absolutely. I massively agree with that. It is about putting the shift in. It’s about putting the work in. That's why stuff, like, you know, the new like… ChatGPT or whatever… there's talk about using AI to write stories. It just fills me with terror. But I mean it's, you know, there was a science fiction magazine which had to close submissions because they were getting hundreds of submissions of stories quite clearly written by ChatGPT.

**Nelima Begum** 15:00

Yeah, I've seen that it can, well, the most recent version ChatGPT 4 apparently dishes out very accurate medical advice as well, according to all sorts of journals and things, and that is just terrifying!

**Doug Johnstone** 15:12

It is kind of terrifying. I can't get on board with that. And I think… what I can't really understand [is] imagine what's the mindset of someone who isn't a writer but thinks I'll just, say, you know, write a science fiction short story about X, Y, and Z, plug it in, and then submit that and think that that’s how you—what’re you going to do? That's not a career. Are you trying to—I mean, it's a scam is what it is. I don't understand the mindset of not just sitting down and doing it, like, I write every day—every weekday, I give myself the weekends off because, you know, mental health,

**Nelima Begum** 15:46

Well, that’s your job, essentially, as well. Monday to Friday.

**Doug Johnstone** 15:49

Yeah, but I sit down and I write every day when I'm writing, or editing when I'm editing. And it's just, like, about getting on with that stuff. And it's weird at the moment, I'm just, sort of, slightly, it was around about Easter time and I've, kind of, finished the first draft of one book, and I've just done the copy edits of another one that's coming out earlier, and I'm about to do another draft. And I'm actually, sort of, just… kicking around going, What am I doing? I’m wasting my time. Because I just want to get on with the next thing. I always want to get on with the next thing. And it's, kind of, a forward-looking mindset as opposed to, kind of, just sitting around. That idea of waiting for the muse to strike or whatever is absolute nonsense. You sit down and you get your bum—I mean, that's a terrible bit of advice, but it's the absolutely crucial bit of advice: sit down, get your bum in the seat and write. That's how you become a writer.

**Nelima Begum** 16:36

Just do the thing. I’m glad we’re on the same page with AI with regards to creative pursuits, because it was really discerning for me. I was just like where did it come from?

**Doug Johnstone** 16:46

It's so weird but I think the interesting thing you mentioned of what you just said there was creative pursuits, because I'm, like, you know, I'm big into science stuff. And I'm subscribed to New Scientist magazine, right and every week there’re stories about AI, right. And I would say the majority of them are really positive. I mean, they're amazing. I mean, they can programme AI to help find cures for diseases, you know, medical stuff like that. And it's doing amazing work. But I think in the creative industries, it's really just missing the point of what creativity is, d’you know what I mean? It's not understanding… [that] about it's about the making of the thing. It's not about what the end product is, or whatever. So, I mean, you can use it for technology for medicine for all sorts of stuff like that. But I just think it's completely missing the point in the creative world.

**Nelima Begum** 17:36

Yeah, I completely agree. Um, how long have you been a musician? And how did that, kind of, start for you? Did it come before creative writing, or—?

**Doug Johnstone** 17:47

Yes, it did. I was a drummer from, I think, when I was born, basically. I was a drummer from a really early age. My mom tells a story of me, like, drumming on the sofa with, like, her knitting needles to stuff on Top of the Pops and stuff like that. And so they bought me a drum, they bought me a snare drum and a cymbal first, and then eventually a drum kit, the idiots that they are, nice and noisy in the house! But I played drums from, you know, from four or five years old, honestly. And I absolutely loved it. It was my total passion when I was growing up. And at the same time, I also taught myself guitar. My sister had an acoustic guitar in her room and I used to sneak in when she was out and teach myself how to play guitar. And so I could have done that forever. And as I, kind of, I was mainly drumming in bands at school, then at university. But I'd started a song writing by that point, I was writing songs for the bands that I was in, because I played guitar. And then much later on I sort of became a singer, like a solo singer-songwriter, and, sort of, started to front bands, like, playing guitar and sing. I can play keyboards a little bit, but you know, enough to get away with it. But again, that comes back to—I love the song writing process. What's interesting to me is I get more immersed in that stuff than I get in writing, which is interesting. Like, if I'm writing a book—and I wonder if this is because that is technically my job now—if I'm writing a book, like, I'll be on social media, like, you know, 10 times during the morning when I should be writing. But if I'm recording a son; if I'm writing and recording something, like, I put an album out a couple years ago, I could sit down at nine o'clock in the morning with a computer and, like, I've got my drum kit here and guitars and amps in my little office, and then I won't, like, I'll forget to have lunch, and it'll be like, it'll be six o'clock in the evening and I haven't looked at my phone once.

**Nelima Begum** 19:39

That's incredible. So you're more immersed in the musical side of things, or less likely to get distracted when it comes to—

**Doug Johnstone** 19:45

Less likely to find distraction, yeah. Which is really interesting. I don't know why that is. Maybe it is because it was the first thing I'd ever really liked to do?

**Nelima Begum** 19:53

Wow, incredible. So, we've touched on, you know, your starting point when writing a song, and I just wanted to know if song writing and crime writing, or the approach you take to both, have anything in common?

**Doug Johnstone** 20:07

I think the initial inspiration stuff does have something in common, like, I will just, you know, I'll just be jotting down ideas. It can be like, you know, a phrase that you overhear on the bus, or just an idea that comes to you when you're walking down the street or anything like that. So, I've got a little file of ideas. And I can't remember what the files called. But it's not delineating between writing ideas and music ideas. So, it can just be, like, a bunch of creative ideas. Like, here's a thing, here's a title, this could just be a title of a song, or an idea for a story or something like that. And then at some point, if you're thinking about making something into a story, you have to think—I mean, I'm mostly a novelist; I do write some short stories, but a novel’s a big thing. It's a big, structured thing that you have to really think about, so that becomes a much more, like, sort of, ordered and structured, kind of, process. Although there is still a lot of room for, kind of, moving things around, like, when I'm writing a novel, I will start off with an idea and some characters and maybe a setting and some themes. And write, kind of, stream of consciousness… files, and just sort of type stuff about ideas of what might work or might not. And that gradually coalesces into a story with, you know, main events happening, and then it kind of gets broken down scene-by-scene. So, that's a process of getting from a, kind of, initial inspiration point to something that is a big structured beast, right?

I think the song writing stuff, the initial inspiration stuff, is the same, but I think I don't then analyse it as much, d’you know what I mean? I just, sort of, go well, this—it comes back that vibes thing—it’s, kind of, more like a vibes thing, that quite often the songs I write are slightly abstract, or either, I don't know what they're about necessarily, consciously, or I don't want to explain about what they are, or I don’t want to think about what they're about. And it just, it tends to be more instinctive. An instinctive process, like, I'll sit with a guitar or something, a keyboard or some beats and just, sort of, like, try stuff out. I listen to several like, song writing podcasts about, you know, [where] musicians explain, or talk about, their writing process. And it's amazing how many of them don't know what it is, or can't explain it. They're basically like, quite often they'll be like, Oh, well, I just really liked this David Bowie song, so I was playing it but then I played it really wrong, but it sounded quite good. And then I thought, well, I'll do something different. So, it's like, you get inspiration from other art [and] unexpected things. Like, if I was to try and write a book in a certain style, it would be nothing like that because I'm me and I write the books that I write, and then it becomes something else. I often think the creative people are wary of revealing that because it feels like it's cheating or plagiarism or something. But, you know, whether it's song writing or book writing or whatever, but it's absolutely not, it's all right to take the inspiration of what you find really exciting and go, Well, that's really good. But I'm going to do it like X, Y and Z and make it different.

**Nelima Begum** 23:27

For sure. I think you've touched on something really brilliant there that it is not plagiarism to just lead into something that you like, or that you've enjoyed and, you know, take it wherever you want it to go or put your own spin on it.

**Doug Johnstone** 23:40

Yeah, well, it sort of runs counter. I mean, there's a sort of, you know, there's a bit of a plague at the moment of, well it’s kind of died down a bit, you know, of people getting sued for, sort of, ripping off other folks’ songs. And you can, I mean, there're one or two cases where it is, you know, just that's exactly the same chords and the same melody, and it's like, you’ve just ripped that off. But mostly it's like well if someone's kind of inspired by something, it's absolutely fine. What was the one that amused me quite recently? You know the singer Lorde? She brought out the first single off her last record [which] was basically so, so similar to, like, a song by Primal Scream from, like, 25 years ago. And she'd never heard it. And then they interviewed Bobby Gillespie about it and he was just like, I don't care. Let people get ideas from everywhere. Who cares? It's like, there's only so many notes in the scale, get on with it, dear! I was, like, so relieved. That's so nice.

**Nelima Begum** 24:28

Oh, for sure! Especially with something like music where, yeah, as you said, there are only so many notes there. People just find combinations that happen to work.

**Doug Johnstone** 24:37

Yeah, exactly.

**Nelima Begum** 24:38

Interesting. Okay. So, you’ve recently several bestsellers throughout your writing career. What is it that draws us the crime fiction in particular?

**Doug Johnstone** 24:50

That's good question. I didn't know I was a crime writer to begin with. I think that is the case for some crime writers, actually. I was surprised to see my books on the crime fiction shelves to begin with, because my first 10 novels are all, like, standalone books. They're not about detectives. I'm not interested, really, in solving crimes. That's not the kind of books that I've tended towards. I love reading those things, actually, by the way, but I kind of think it's just not for me, it's not where my passion lies. What I tended to do in those in those standalone books was write about, kind of, ordinary people thrown into extraordinary circumstances, and seeing how they cope. So, you know, it's just, like, a little kernel of an idea that kind of starts these things off. So, it kind of has a lot in common with what would I would think of as traditional noir fiction, which I think is distinct from crime fiction a little bit. Crime’s about a detective or someone coming in and solving something. That's the, sort of, police procedural aspect. Noir, I think, is about either the criminals or about people doing bad things, and then the repercussions of those things, right? So that's what I think of [when I think of] classics like *Double Indemnity* and the *Postman Always Rings Twice*, those kind of classic stories from America in the 40s.

So, I was kind of writing those stories about people doing morally dubious things, and I never make them good guys or bad guys, hopefully. They're kind of just somewhere in between, like everyone. One of the interesting things you can ask a reader is, you know, the reader wants to be asking themselves, what would I do in this situation, you know? A lot of us like to think that we would… do the morally right thing. I think that's easy to say if you're not put under pressure. Like, you know, I sometimes think, Well, if we were on the Titanic, we'd be scrambling over people's heads to get to the lifeboats.

**Nelima Begum** 26:40

Sure, you'd be throwing people overboard to, like, make space for yourself, wouldn’t you!

**Doug Johnstone** 26:44

Everyone likes to think of themselves as a model.

**Nelima Begum** 26:46

No one’s going to offer a seat on the lifeboat when they're scrambling for their own life and there's, like, a limited number of spaces. Interesting that you brought that up. And I think it's really thought provoking that your books kind of interrogate those questions of what ordinary people would do in those kinds of like, you know, exceptional or extraordinary circumstances.

**Doug Johnstone** 27:02

Yeah. What I did was, [in] the first few books, I think I deliberately was pushing the reader as far as possible into, sort of, possibly not sympathetic central characters. I think I've, kind of, laid off that a little bit, and I've tried to make the central characters a little bit more empathetic as I've gone on. But there's still always a question to ask. Like my novel *Breakers*, which did really well. The central character was a teenage boy who was in a family of burglars; a family of house breakers. And that came about because we got burgled, like, 10 years ago now. And the people that broke into our house, they got in through, like, a small window, which isn't big enough for an adult. So it must have been a kid got in and then came around and let the rest of the burglars in. And I was, you know, obviously I was outraged by the whole thing and, you know, felt insecure and stuff, but at the same time, I was thinking, What must that guy’s life be like, you know? What was it like to be in that situation where that's how you've been raised, is that you're in this family, you can’t be a normal teenager, and you're basically involved in, like, a family of house breakers. And they obviously did it, you know, quite a lot, because they were very professional. And so that book came about there, so that was a challenge to me deliberately to try and write about someone who's breaking into people's houses, but who the reader also has sympathy for. And I quite liked that challenge. I always, kind of, feel like a walk in that, sort of—

**Nelima Begum** 28:25

Devil’s advocate sort of, thing.

**Doug Johnstone** 28:27

Yeah. And that's kind of gone on. My most recent books, I've written a series of books about a family called the Skelfs, which is three generations of women who have to run a funeral directors and a private investigators when the patriarch of the family dies, as a kind of grandmother, a mother and a daughter [who] all have to do stuff. And it's more—I don't know how to explain these books, there's quite weird—but there's more, obviously… crimes to be solved, because there's a private investigating element to it. But it's not like… it’s kind of like existential. I know that sounds really up itself. But it's, kind of, I'm not really interested in solving the mysteries, actually; I'm interested in how people navigate the world in a, kind of, interconnected way. Again, coming back to that idea of connection. I find myself writing about that so much now, with those Skelf women, about how they are, how they deal with life and death and the interconnections between those things, and with each other, and with the society around them, and with nature and everything else. And so they're quite complicated books, I would say, and they're certainly not conventional crime novels. I mean, the mysteries do get solved (inverted commas), but it's, kind of, not really about that

**Nelima Begum** 29:40

Goes a bit deeper than just the crime itself.

**Doug Johnstone** 29:43

I hope so.

**Nelima Begum** 29:44

Yeah. So you've obviously done your fair share of creative writing and, you know, had so many things published and they've done really well. What was the process of getting feedback on your pricing like for you? Do you remember when you first got feedback on your work, or how that process has played out throughout your career?

**Doug Johnstone** 30:03

Yeah, well… like I said earlier on, I’m not really a joiner-inner. I wasn't in writing groups so I didn't have that feedback at the start. I was just, kind of, isolated. I wrote this novel, and I did the whole thing back in those days of buying the *Writers and Artists Yearbook* and then going through all the agents and editors and emailing the ones who looked like they might be interested. And it's a war of attrition, right? It's, kind of, diminishing returns because half the people don't reply, those that do half of them turn you down, the ones that want something they don't get back to you until later on, and so on and so on. I didn't have an agent, and I was getting this book rejected by agents and editors at the same time, which was fun. Some of them just stopped replies. Some of them were, kind of, more informed. But I didn't get any in-depth feedback, and I kind of don't know; I wish I had, at that point, maybe gone for something like TLC, actually, to, sort of, go for, you know, an in-depth analysis of what I was doing wrong. Looking back on it, the book was terrible and needed totally rewritten. I'm aware of that now, but the realisation for that came. Because that first novel was actually *The Ossians*; it was a version of *The Ossians*, which got rejected. But a couple of editors sort of said nice things about it, but, you know, weren’t going to publish it. And they said, ‘Are you writing anything else? We'd love to see it.’ And so I then… that was enough… of an idea that I wasn't completely wasting my time, d‘you know what I mean? So, I wrote a second novel and sent it to them, and one of them offered to publish it. I had an absolute lightbulb moment when I got my edits back on that first novel, from my editor, Judy Moir, at Penguin, because it was just, I mean she had bought the book at this point, you know, to publish it. And it was like, every page was covered in, you know, covered in corrections and changes, and I was like, Holy shit. But, you know, 98% of what she put in was, you know, made it so much better. And I really took that on board, like, every single thing that she was doing. I was like, if I didn't understand why she was doing it, I would just ask her and say, ‘Why have you done this?’ And so she would explain it to me and I’d say, ‘Okay, that's fair enough, I get it.’ And then with that experience, I went back and rewrote *The Ossians* from scratch. That was a life changing moment, just that sometimes you need that ruthless, you know, kind of, impartial edit, or, like, the notes to say, ‘This is what's wrong with it. This is what needs to changing. This is why it isn't working.’ And you can argue your case, if you want, you know? There are certain elements where you might say, ‘I know more about this, maybe, so I think this should be like that’, or whatever. But I think that was hugely important to get that really quite early in my career. And I've taken that on board, I think, with every book that I’ve written since.

**Nelima Begum** 33:05

Amazing. So it sounds like it was a really transformative experience for you, getting, like, proper, thorough feedback for the first time.

**Doug Johnstone** 33:13

Yeah, like, properly, I mean really hard edits. I mean, Judy is very experienced and had… been at Canongate for 20 years and had, you know, discovered, you know, umpteen writers, like, Louise Welsh and James Robertson and stuff like that. So, she knew what she was talking about, right? I wasn't gonna argue with her! But it was absolutely transformative. I understood a little bit about how to make a story leaner, and I'm quite to the point now where I really like editing my own stuff. I know a lot of writers throw up their hands in horror when I say that, but I find that writing the first draft is the hardest, actually, and I really like self-editing. My first drafts are usually about, I mean the one I've just finished is about 97,000 words, but the second draft for that will be about 70,000 words, like, I'll cut 30,000 words out of it. And it's just guff. It's just stuff that I know that this is my process that I overwrite to start off with, and it's like there's too much internal monologue, there's too much dialogue, there's too much description, too much, blah, blah, blah—kind of a word soup. [That] stuff can just all go, and I always have this mindset when editing that, like, words are the enemy. Seems crazy for a writer, but I love it. It’s basically trying to kill as many of them as possible.

**Nelima Begum** 34:32

I mean, if you're trying to refine it then that is the approach that you kind of need.

**Doug Johnstone** 34:36

Yeah. I mean, I've got a sign above my desk… [with] various little bits of pep talk on it. One of them is “every word must justify its existence”. And I really strongly believe that if it's not doing something, if you can take it out, or change it, then do that. And that's the only way to make a story actually sing on the page when it's like, you know—and I get a lot of the feedback I get from a book, so they're really fast-paced and easy to read, which I take as a massive compliment, because I think making something easy to read is not necessarily easy to write. And I think people conflate those two things. Do you know what I mean? I think making something easy to read is what all writers should be trying to do. Why would you make something hard to read? That's insane.

**Nelima Begum** 35:19

I'm convinced that there are books out there that exists solely for that purpose.

**Doug Johnstone** 35:22

Yeah, I mean I'm sure Will Self has got that sign above his desk. “Make this harder to read!” Sorry, Will, if you're listening!

**Nelima Begum** 35:32

Some people just like complexity, I think that's just what they lean into. But from, like, an individual standpoint, as a reader I don't enjoy books that require a whole lot of thought, because for me reading is escapism.

**Doug Johnstone** 35:44

Exactly, yes. And for so many people as well.

**Nelima Begum** 35:48

Sure, it's really interesting to hear, kind of, your approach to receiving feedback, and editing. And I think actually from time to time it’s really important to hear that from published authors, and, you know, TLC editors, because all too often we have writers who come to TLC, they go through the feedback process of an assessment or whichever service they've opted for, and sometimes the feedback isn't necessarily, you know, it's not led with praise always. There is, you know, it's a critique, it's meant to be honest and objective. And sometimes, I think it surprises a few writers, but it does have a positive impact because we get the emails that say things like, ‘It wasn't the easiest thing for me to read, *but* I can see why they've said that, and it's actually really useful and it'll be a massive help in me taking this forward and making the changes that I need to, to really develop it and get to the heart of the story.’ I think, a lot of the time, we're under the impression that getting feedback is supposed to be this really wholesome, lovely process, and it's not, it's, you know, largely figuring out how to make what you've got better.

**Doug Johnstone** 36:51

Yeah… absolutely, absolutely 100%, Nelima, I totally, totally agree. But that never changes throughout your whole career, you're still getting that feedback. And of course it can be hard to take because writing a book is a very personal thing. You're putting, you know, it's that whole thing of like, you slit your wrists and bleed on the page, right? So, it's like you're putting a lot of yourself into this thing, but one thing [is], the more you do it, the more it becomes clear that feedback like that is not personal, and you can't take it personally. But it feels personal, because you've written this very personal thing. And the feedback of a good editor, or you know, a good reader at TLC, is something that is meant to improve the story in its own right. And it's exactly the same wherever you go. My lesson to anyone getting, like, my advice to anyone getting edits, or anything, like that, is… if you get the email, read through the comments, read through the report, read through the edits, and then step away from the computer. Like, never reply straight away. That's like,

**Nelima Begum** 37:51

Absolutely, because you have that knee-jerk reaction sometimes, you know? You might come back to it and think otherwise, but in that moment where you've just had it and it's quite fresh, replying straight away does risk a knee-jerk reaction that you might, you know, later on you might not be too happy with [or] you might not be proud of it.

**Doug Johnstone** 38:08

Yeah, I still get that now. My editor sends through, like, you know, a list of stuff. And… I'll read it and… my [in] initial reaction I can feel myself getting anxious. My initial reaction is like, yeah, how dare you? This is my masterpiece! You're an absolute idiot. But of course, and genuinely this happens every time, I'll go away for a long walk out in the fresh air, I’ll walk around, and then by the time I've come back, it's like, yeah, actually. And this is a really interesting point as well, that edits are not like, you know, editorial suggestions are exactly that. And what always happens is my editor will highlight what they think is an issue and suggest a solution. And she will be 100%. right about the issue. That is an issue. You're right. That was niggling me, actually, in my own subconscious, you're absolutely to bring it up. But the solution you've suggested is not correct, either. It's something else, and I'll work out what it is. So, it's this conversation. It's the start of a conversation, the editorial process. So that highlighting the problem is basically the most valuable thing. And quite often, you know, that happens all the time. My editor’ll be like, ‘Maybe you could do this?’ and I’ll say, ‘No, that's not quite right, actually. But there’s another way of dealing with it. I'm going to work it out and work out what it is.’ And quite often it can be back and forth. You can say, ‘That's not right. But it might be this’, and then she'll go, ‘I'm not sure that quite solves it’, and… so on and so on. So, thinking of it as a conversation, I think, can really help.

**Nelima Begum** 39:34

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I think you've hit the nail on the head there by just saying they are just that, they’re suggestions. They're not set in stone. If you don't feel like they line up with your vision for your work, you don't have to put them in there. You know, you sought out another opinion and they've given it to you. But I think what you've mentioned regarding distance is also super important. So, when we've got any kind of manuscript assessment or core service running, we always ask that after the writer has submitted their work, they don't make any further changes to it. And they don't look at it for a while until they've had the report come in, because obviously the feedback will be misaligned. And then after they've had the report, [we ask] that they let the report, kind of, sit there and marinate for a while before they approach editing, or getting back in touch with us, only because distance can give you a world of perspective.

**Doug Johnstone** 40:27

I really can, [and] it doesn't have to be a long time, just, you know, a day, a few days or whatever, even a few hours, you know—

**Nelima Begum** 40:34

A weekend, even if you want.

**Doug Johnstone** 40:36

Yeah, yeah, it can make all the difference just to take the edge off that [because] it dulls the emotional response, and it, kind of, gets you to be a little bit more clear headed about things.

**Nelima Begum** 40:46

Absolutely. So, obviously, you've shared so many gems of wisdom in this episode already, but you've taught creative writing in a variety of environments, and you assess your fair share of manuscripts for TLC. Is there a common issue among writers that you feel always pops up, and what would you advise writers to do about it?

**Doug Johnstone** 41:05

A common issue? Yeah, there are things. I mean, it can be really some summed up in three words. My advice is less is more. Like, almost everything I ever see is overwritten. And that goes for, I mean, I've done work for—I do work for—the Royal Literary Fund in academic writing, as well, so for essays and dissertations stuff, and it's exactly the same there. People overwrite in a number of, like, really obvious ways. I think… there's too much of everything, [which] seems really basic, right? You know, but dialogue runs on too long. It's, you know, there's a bit of hey, how are you doing? Yeah. Okay, how are you? Yeah, it's nice weather. No. Cut all that. For every scene, for every bit of dialogue, for every part of your writing, how late can you arrive and still have it make sense to the reader, and how early can you leave, right? People hang around too long. And it's totally natural, I do as well, because people, writers, want to write their way into a scene. I do as well, you know, I'm not quite sure what this is yet and so I've wasted 500 words, sort of, getting used to what I'm actually [doing], who's where and what's happening. And actually, most of that can be cut. My old editor at Faber used to always cut the last line of every chapter, and it really bugged me because he was absolutely right. He was like, ‘Yeah, you don't need that.’ And then I would try and second guess him and, like, cut them myself. And then he would just cut the next one.

**Nelima Begum** 42:30

He was always one step ahead.

**Doug Johnstone** 42:31

Yeah, always one step ahead. So, less is more. Probably less description. Just small, telling details. The one that I think is most common is too much internal monologue, like, too much of your central characters thinking about things. Obviously you want some of that. That's one of the advantages of writing a novel as opposed to a screenplay, because you can get inside your central characters’ heads. But there's always just too much of it. I think it can be… so much more effective in small doses, like, so many things in writing. Writers tend to do this a lot more when they write in first person. That's maybe one of the reasons why, subconsciously, I've not written a novel in first person. I have done short stories that way, but not a whole novel. Because… you're in that head the whole time, right? You're in first person, I did this, I did that. And it can just, you can just go, Ah, now I'm thinking this. And people make their characters think the same things over and over again, and it's just like, you know, once someone's thought it once, that's enough. I've just been through this with my copy editor for my next book coming out. And he was like, ‘Yeah, somebody else has thought this in chapter nine.’ Okay, well let's get rid of it. It still happens. But I thin, yeah, less is more. Less of everything, you know? You have to be really—it goes back to my editing thing, just to be really brutal with your own prose. If a word’s not justifying its existence, or a sentence or a paragraph or a whole scene or a chapter. I've lost whole chapters before, like, you know, in books, because they weren’t moving things forward. And it's like, okay, it just has to go. So, less is more.

**Nelima Begum** 44:09

Interesting. So, bringing it back around to music, I'm curious to know, what kind of music do you have on in the background when you're writing, if any?

**Doug Johnstone** 44:20

I do listen to music, I listen to, sort of, instrumental music, neoclassical stuff like that, soundtracks—I think it's maybe because I'm a songwriter, [so] it can't be anything that's a verse, chorus, verse, chorus structure stuff, because I tend to, sort of, hook into it and analyse it or write a song. So, usually instrumental, no vocals, something slightly off kilter, I find, helps me. The work of Jóhann Jóhannsson, who's done loads of soundtrack stuff for movies, but also, like, his own albums. He wrote the music for the movie *Arrival* which is one of my favourites, I love that. And Alex Somers is another one. He did a lot of work with Jónsi from Sigur Rós. I'm just getting into A Winged Victory for the Sullen who are a band who have about half-a-dozen albums of really quite creepy instrumentals. Mogwai is another one as well [that] I listen to. So, anything that has got a slightly off-kilter, so I don't want something, I don't want, like, nice Bach piano music because it doesn't get me in the right mood. I want something that's slightly unsettling for the mood of what I'm writing. But definitely something more abstract and concrete. That's something that's very important.

**Nelima Begum** 45:37

Very cool. Do writing and music play different or similar roles in your life?

**Doug Johnstone** 45:44

I think they’re similar roles, actually. I think I have been… I found the last few years especially, I'm absolutely in love with the creative process in a way that I wasn't before. I had a stroke in 2020, so it's a bit of a cliché to, sort of, say, you know, you come out of a life-threatening experience… smelling the roses, and you know, seize every moment, all that sort of crap. But I think, subconsciously, I have been, I just threw myself into writing after that in a way that I hadn't before. I just thought, Let's go for it. And that's partly, you know, [why] I've ended up writing a science fiction novel, which I hadn't done before, because I really wanted to do that for a long time. And I just feel less inhibited in the creative process. And I think that's the absolute joy of music for me, like, I'm not really interested in, like, selling a lot of albums. I mean, I'd love millions of people to hear the music, right. I'm not an idiot. But at the same time, for me, the most important thing was that I made the music. It was absolutely, I mean, I really, genuinely mean that. And some people, I think—I have friends, writers, who are more commercially successful, and they're like, ‘Do you really mean that?’ and it's like, I genuinely do; that I just would do this… anyway if nobody was hearing it, or nobody was reading it. And so I'm kind of… I just love the creative process. I love making things, you know? There was a blank page, and now there's a story, or there was, like, silence, and now there's a song. It's just, I can't explain it… it just gives me a sense of fulfilment that I don't get really anywhere else.

**Nelima Begum** 47:29

I was gonna say it sounds like it is just genuine fulfilment within your life. And it's so nice to hear you talk about it that way, because it sounds really poetic as well. What's been your greatest challenge as a writer, and then as a musician?

**Doug Johnstone** 47:47

As a writer? So, I mean, it feels like constant challenges, you know? I think, I mean I was, you know, I've been dumped by publishers a couple of times. I've been through, I’m on, my third agent. I write a third novel which never got published. I guess that was a big challenge. But I think, you know, at the time, I didn't really—I was down about it, but I didn't really, I don't know if I was just stupid and didn't realise, [but] I still know nothing about the publishing industry, I still feel like an absolute novice. I don't understand it in so many ways,

**Nelima Begum** 48:27

[There’s a lot that’s] really confusing about it. But if it means that you didn't let it get to you that much, then I guess it was, you know, it was okay.

**Doug Johnstone** 48:36

And well, actually, it was instrumental in me… actually finding my writing voice, because I then went and wrote something else after that, that was completely different, that became a third published novel. And that was the book where I feel like I'd actually found, yeah, I'd found my voice and got into the groove of what I was doing. So, I mean, it worked out great in the end, but that was a big challenge, I think. Constantly you're always challenged. I mean, books still go out on submission, and like, you know, get turned down by 25 editors at various different publishers. And then, you know, it gets picked up and then it gets nominated for an award or it becomes a best seller and you think, Who are these idiots? What do they know? But that's kind of the wrong attitude because if an editor doesn't want to buy the book, then it's not the right book for them. It's as simple as that, right? And you wouldn't want to go forward with an editor who wasn't 100%, you know, in love with what it is that you'd written. So there're constant challenges like that, I think.

As for music challenges, I don't know. Have I had any challenges in music? I'm always trying to do something different from what I've done before. And that's the same with the books as well. That I kind of, I grew up in a sort of guitar, bass and drums, sort of, set up, you know? That's the kind of music—I was into rock music a lot as a kid, stuff like that. And I've got much more eclectic music tastes that I listen to now. I don't think that's properly reflected in the music that I'm making, just simply because I'm not skilful enough. Or I haven't yet, kind of, got to grips with other elements of musicality. And I don't have, you know, you have to allot your time. There're only so many hours in the day, you know? I can't wander off and spend a month learning how different synthesiser arpeggios work and stuff like that. I have to write books, because that's how I make money. So that's the challenges, I think. I still don't feel like I'm doing myself justice in terms of the music that I'm making compared to the idea I have in my head.

**Nelima Begum** 50:53

Okay. But you’ll get there.

**Doug Johnstone** 50:56

I mean, even if I don't get there, it's, like, it's the journey, yeah, it's that cliché that it's the journey, not the arrival, right. Okay? It’s not the destination.

**Nelima Begum** 51:06

Given that you have all this brilliant experience as a writer, what's one piece of advice that you'd give to budding writers out there? It’s good to emphasise that less is definitely more, kind of similar to the whole show, don't tell thing.

**Doug Johnstone** 51:22

I mean, there're two, sort of, things I would say: just don't be disheartened. Keep plugging away, and learn from feedback you get. It’s so easy to get disheartened. It's so easy to, I mean, it's, you know, the house needs cleaning, the dishes needs done, the dog needs a walk, you know, the kids need picked up from school, all that stuff. There're a million reasons not to write, okay? I totally understand that. You have to dedicate yourself some time to… writing. When you're doing it, I mean, it can be done, but it's incredibly hard to write consistently, you know, at a certain level, when you're just grabbing 10 minutes here and 10 minutes there. I know it's not easy. Everyone's circumstances are different. But if you can dedicate, like, an hour a day, for example, to just sitting down and blocking everything out and writing, then you will improve with your craft. And, like, look at the feedback you're getting, if you're getting feedback, and try to learn from that feedback, try to take stuff on board. It might not all be—it might not all resonate with you, that's fine. Or look at the books you love, and take them apart, find out why you love them. What is it about them you like? You know, is it structure, is it character, is it plot? Is it, you know, writing style? Whatever it is. Is it the themes that they're talking about? Look at the things that you absolutely love [about] your favourite five books and basically pick them apart and say, ‘These are why I love these books. And this is what I want to do with my writing.’

**Nelima Begum** 52:54

Fantastic. Well, that closes out the longer segment of this podcast, Doug. Thank you so much for sharing so much about your journey as a writer and everything else you do. You're just really cool. You bring the vibes—what else? What else is there to say? So now I'm gonna finish off with some quickfire questions. We started these in season two, but essentially don't think, just answer. What song do you currently have on loop?

**Doug Johnstone** 53:21

What song do I currently have on loop? You see, I'm stalling already, Nelima! I tell you what I love at the moment, a New Zealand indie rock band called The Beths, and one of their singles more recently was called ‘Silence is Golden’, which is brilliant. It's, like, a two-and-a-half-minute, like, absolute mad romp of a thing. It’s great. Loads of really tuneful melodies and loud guitars. That's right on my street.

**Nelima Begum** 53:46

Fabulous! If you could write songs or play music for any musician, or band past or present, who would it be?

**Doug Johnstone** 53:53

Oh wow! I would love to play drums for Biffy Clyro. I'm a huge fan of them. Scottish rock band with lots of weird stuff going on in their songs, but also massive anthems. I mean, I'm not a good enough drummer, really. And I'm certainly not fit enough, because it's just, like, he's absolutely hammering that kit for two hours every night on tour. But yeah, the drummer for Biffy Clyro, let's say that.

**Nelima Begum** 54:17

I like that you kept it close to home. So, what are you, if you can share, what are you working on at the moment?

**Doug Johnstone** 54:23

Well, I mentioned I've just finished the copy edits for the next Skelfs book, which is going to be out in September. It's called *The Opposite of Lonely*, which is about connection and about how we connect with people in the world. And I'm working on this, and then after that, um, the next thing is working on the second draft of my sequel science fiction novel. My first science fiction novel, *The Space Between Us*, has just come out, and I'm writing a sequel to it called, at the moment, it's called *The Collapsing Wave*. So, I'm between first and second drafts, so I know when I go back to the first draft it's going to be simultaneously awful and amazing. You’ll look at it and go, ‘Oh my god who wrote this garbage?’ but there'll be a little moment you’ll go, ‘Oh, that's quite good. Oh, that was clever of past me!’ So, I'm looking forward to that experience.

**Nelima Begum** 55:11

Lovely! If you had to write, well I know you write fiction, but if you had to write an autobiography encompassing all of your life's experiences, what would you name it?

**Doug Johnstone** 55:21

What would you name an autobiography?

**Nelima Begum** 55:24

This is a tough one. I hate receiving questions like this by I like asking them.

**Doug Johnstone** 55:29

I want to say less is more. Is that—?

**Nelima Begum** 55:33

Very fitting!

**Doug Johnstone** 55:34

Well, how about Only Connect?

**Nelima Begum** 55:37

Oh, I like that. Yeah. And finally, what does being a writer mean to you?

**Doug Johnstone** 55:43

Oh, everything, Nelima, everything! It's just the opportunity to make something out of nothing. It's the creative process I love about writing.

**Nelima Begum** 55:51

Beautiful. Thank you so much, Doug. This has been an absolute pleasure and just such a joy. I've had so much fun. You really do you bring all the vibes, Doug.

**Doug Johnstone** 55:41

Well, you’ve been very kind, thank you very much.

**Nelima Begum** 56:05

Thanks for your time.

**Doug Johnstone** 56:05

Cheers.