

Writers Aloud

Episode 409

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 409 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Clare Chambers speaks with Ann Morgan about the experience of having a breakout success, the secret to creating convincing historical settings, the disruptive influence of mobile phones on storytelling and the importance of balancing pessimism and optimism in a writing career.

Ann Morgan: Clare Chambers published her first novel in 1992 and kept up a steady rate of publication for the following two decades, but it would be her ninth novel, published after a gap of nearly ten years, that would transform her career. Longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction and optioned for television, the historical novel *Small Pleasures* has been a massive word-of-mouth success. Sitting down with me in the dining room of her South London home, Clare started off by telling me where writing began for her.

Clare Chambers: I think I always knew that I was a writer from quite a young age. I was always writing stories and I think if you've got that sort of personality where you're someone who sits on the sidelines watching things, you kind of know that you might be a recorder rather than an experiencer of life. But I didn't start writing until after I left university, you know, writing for pleasure, really.

Ann Morgan: What prompted that, starting to write?

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Clare Chambers: My husband, well, he wasn't my husband then, my then boyfriend got an exchange to New Zealand as a teacher and I went with him for a year. So we swapped our house and his job and I couldn't work, I couldn't get a work permit. Part of the deal was that you couldn't then go and work.

So I had nothing to do for a year and I thought, well, if I can't write a novel in a year when I've got nothing else to do and I haven't got any distractions, then I'm not really a writer.

Ann Morgan: Wow, so really in at the deep end with a novel, as the first thing.

Clare Chambers: Yeah, I had a year and I'd been thinking how nice it would be to write a novel all the time I was at university but didn't have time because I was writing essays. So it was a novel of...a typical first novel, rite of passage, young person's sort of thing. So it didn't require research, so all about me, so it was easy to get into and without any distractions the easiest, really, way of writing a book you could devise.

Ann Morgan: Wow. And was that your first published novel?

Clare Chambers: Yeah, it was published when I came back to the UK. I found a publisher; I got a job in publishing with that in mind, thinking *I want to work with books in one way or another, whether I'm published or not*. And then after I'd worked for this literary publisher for about a year, I got up the courage to show it to one of the editors, and they took it from there and published it themselves.

Ann Morgan: Wow. I mean, for a lot of people who want to be a writer, that sounds like the dream, doesn't it? It sounds like, you wrote the book and then showed it and it was accepted and published. It sounds very seamless. Was that the experience?

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Clare Chambers: No, it wasn't. I'd sent it to agents and they'd been warm but non-committal. It was all — *Yes, we really like your writing, send us the next thing you write*, and that sort of thing. And I had no contacts in publishing.

All the contacts I have are ones I made through just getting a job in the traditional time honoured manner of writing hundreds of letters to publishers and saying, 'Please can I work for you, I'll do anything?' So, although once I was in publishing, I then had contacts because I was *there*, I certainly didn't have any to get in the door.

Ann Morgan: And you were quite young weren't you, mid-twenties when your first book came out?

Clare Chambers: Yeah. I wrote it when I was twenty-two, twenty-three, and it was published when I was twenty-five.

Ann Morgan: That's *Uncertain Terms*.

Clare Chambers: Yeah, I've since reverted the rights to that because I can see now that it has the strengths and weaknesses of a first novel by a very young woman, and I'm not sure I need it to be out there.

Ann Morgan: That's interesting. So it was André Deutsch, wasn't it, that you worked with, and Diana Athill was there?

Clare Chambers: Yes. She was an editor and a director of the firm at that point, I think. And I remember when I started, I saw this, to my youthful eyes, elderly lady walking around the building and I thought, *Good heaven's that poor old lady still having to work for a living, it's inhuman!*

And then I found out who she was and she would've been in her mid-seventies at that point, so she still had another twenty-five *years* of productive work ahead of her –

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Ann Morgan: – amazing –

Clare Chambers: – even though she wouldn't have known it at the time.

Ann Morgan: What was she like, I'm a huge Athill admirer, her writing I think is amazing. What was she like in person?

Clare Chambers: Well, in person, she was much quieter and more dignified than her life and her works would suggest; you would imagine you are meeting somebody much racier if you read any of her books, but she was very modest and charming and delightful.

And she just loved books and writers and editing even into her seventies, eighties, nineties; at that point, she was more of an editor than a writer really. So obviously *we* knew that she was a really good writer, but she wasn't...certainly wasn't famous as being a writer at that point.

Ann Morgan: She was young in her writing career really! And after that first novel, you wrote and published another seven novels in twenty years, a really prolific spell.

Clare Chambers: I never thought of myself as being prolific. I always thought of myself as being fairly slow. I take about three years to write a book and I always felt that was a decent length of time to spend, you wouldn't want to rush it, and it's not as if people are short of other material to read. So I never felt obliged to do any faster than that and besides, I had children to bring up and it just it wasn't possible. But, within twenty or so years you find, *Oh, I have written a few books!* — none of them with any great fanfare or success. It was a very slow and kind of unrewarding process really.

Ann Morgan: How did it tend to work for you, was there a sort of recognisable pattern that there was a certain period in which an idea would form and then you'd work. Was there a particular process?

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Clare Chambers: Yes. Usually it would be dictated by contract. So the first book would grow out of enthusiasm and interest and be perhaps the stronger of the two books of a two-book contract, and I would write the book and then sell it, and it would be a two-book deal. And then I'd have to write another one to a deadline.

So I always felt that the second of every two-book deal was slightly rushed or I was writing it perhaps more urgently than I would have if I had been out of contract. And I also knew how little it was worth because I'd already been paid for it. You know that it's not going to surprise you, whereas when you are writing a book without a publishing contract, you have this idea of infinite riches and celebrity and success in your mind, and you certainly don't have that when you're writing the second.

Ann Morgan: And then there was a bit of a gap?

Clare Chambers: The last book I published was a young adult book called *Burning Secrets*. That was the second of a two-book contract again. And having done that, I felt I'd really done with YA Fiction. I really felt it wasn't really my avenue because I like to write what I think of as a sort of realism.

It's very difficult to write really realistic adventures, because they're not that realistic or they're not that adventurous. And I'm not a sort of fantasy writer and I wasn't a historical writer. So I felt it's very difficult to write contemporary books for young adults, especially if you're very slow as I am, and your audience is going to have grown up and not be a young adult by the time you finished.

So I felt I wanted to go back to writing adult fiction again. And I spent about five years writing a book, which I thought was going well. And when I finished it, my agent was a little bit unenthusiastic and I have a regular publisher who turned it down, and that floored me really, because I hadn't seen it coming, I hadn't known that there was something wrong

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with it, which worried me because I thought if I didn't notice that it was unpublishable, how will I know next time that what I'm writing is publishable or not? It was quite a difficult time because obviously five years is quite a long time to work without pay, and I think that sort of did cause me to have a year or more of quite deep depression about things. I felt perhaps my writing career was over and that there wasn't a way back in to publishing from where I was. The longer I left it, the more I'd be forgotten and it did seem really as if it might all be over for me writing-wise.

So it was quite difficult to get myself out of that mindset and to build up the sufficient motivation to try something new.

Ann Morgan: How did you build up that motivation?

Clare Chambers: It was a realisation that the only way to solve the problem, the only way to get out of this sort of ditch I was in, was to write my way out, there was no other way. Nothing good was going to happen to me that I didn't make happen. The only thing I could do was make my writing better. All the things about publishing that you can't influence, there's no point in fretting about them. The only thing you have any influence over is the quality of your own writing.

So I just thought I need to write better; it sounds so glib, it's easy to say. It's very difficult to do because it takes so long to go from that position of thinking *This is what I need to do*, to actually doing it. You know, years, another few years, and keeping positive in that time is not easy. But my husband's very supportive and he always encouraging me and not making me feel that I'd wasted time or my years would've been better spent in a more productive career, which would have at least earned regular salary. So he never made me feel that writing was a gamble or a waste of time, which is very important for a writer. You need people to reinforce the sense that what you're doing is worthwhile.

Ann Morgan: And so then it was another book?

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Clare Chambers: Well, it was a complete change of direction for me. I found a new agent because I thought I need somebody I've not exhausted, that I haven't sort of dragged them down with me into my failure, I need somebody who is coming to my writing fresh. So my new agent sort of gave me permission to do something different and say, for a start, 'You don't have to be funny if you don't want to be'. I'd always felt a sort of obligation to entertain the reader by being funny and it's quite difficult to be funny all the time and doesn't always work.

And it means that certain stories are also out of bounds because some things aren't that funny. And the story that I had in mind to write about was something I'd heard on the radio about twenty years before and parked as an idea: about a woman who claimed to be a virgin mother. And it was obviously set in the 1950s when DNA tests weren't available. So I knew it was going to be historical type of fiction, which was also a departure for me. But I had a sort of feeling that it wasn't at heart a funny story, that there was going to be some sort of darkness in this. It was important for me to be told, 'You don't have to be funny, you can just write, just tell the story'.

So then it was a question of deciding this time, instead of making the mistake I'd made with the five-year failed project, what I needed to do was really plan what I was going to write before I sat down and started. It's very tempting to launch into something in a great access of enthusiasm before you've really ironed out the wrinkles, and I didn't want to do that this time.

So I did plot it quite carefully before I started, and then once I had that plot and that skeleton, the writing of it was much more pleasurable. It flowed much more easily because I wasn't reaching those little impasse points that you get in a novel that you are trying to grow organically, where you realize you are in a sort of dark wood and you can't see the way out. So I didn't have any of that with this one. That was a real pleasure.

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Ann Morgan: That's really interesting because as a writer I find that if I plan *too* much, it can kill the thing. I fear that there's no sense of discovery or joyfulness, playfulness to it, which very much in a first draft I need. And yet *Small Pleasures*, which is the book we're talking about, which went on to be a huge bestseller and optioned for TV and all these other things, and was longlisted for the Women's Prize of Fiction, it does have that real sense of playfulness, it does have that sense of surprise. How did you manage to hold onto that?

Clare Chambers: I think the structure just gives you the permission to not panic and you can still change things if those serendipitous moments of inspiration come to you, when you suddenly have this brilliant idea that definitely wasn't there at the beginning. You can still do that, you don't shut them down. It's just that you're not waiting for them anxiously and they're not coming, you can proceed with your plan. My previous books I'd always written in the way you describe, where you let it grow and you see where it takes you and you may have a sense of a destination, but it's very much every time you sit down you are thinking: *Right, what now, what now?*

I just slightly lost confidence and lost courage with that approach. And I think maybe it's to do with getting older. You feel that your mind is not quite as playful or not quite as energetic as it was in your twenties, and you don't want to risk wasting those years again. So I just felt that the structured approach was the best one for me.

Ann Morgan: It's really interesting because although in some ways *Small Pleasures* is a departure from your previous work, as you said, there are, I think, recognisable Clare Chambers's traits that bridge through from your earlier work into that novel. So something that really struck me reading *The Editor's Wife*, for example, and thinking about *Small Pleasures* as well, was that with both of those you start with something that's quite intriguing as a story concept: so the virgin birth idea, for example with *Small Pleasures*, where you have your central character Jean, who's a journalist at a local

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newspaper, sets off to investigate this story of this virgin birth. And then about a quarter of the way through the novel, maybe slightly less than that, almost the main story comes in which actually isn't the virgin birth, it's something else, it's about a relationship that develops as a result of this investigation, without trying to give too much away. And similarly with *The Editor's Wife*, we start with this intriguing situation where two brothers have been left in a situation: their parents have died, and there's the house, and there's this difficult brother who is getting in the way of the narrator and dealing with this legacy.

And then again, about a quarter of the way in this other story, the editor's wife, in fact, the title character, doesn't appear until about a quarter of the way into the novel. And I find that really interesting because these days there's this real fashion for grabby prologues where you hit the reader with the main story straight away, almost drop them right in at the most dramatic moment, and then reel back and tell the story.

And with you, it's almost like sleight of hand. You start off with something that is attention grabbing but isn't actually really what you are up to.

Clare Chambers: Yeah, I think that's been a method of writing that I've... one might say flogged to death, or you know, *developed and refined*, to put it another way! But I think my earlier books certainly started with a sort of interesting premise or starting point, springboard, and then we'd jump back into the past and work out how we got there and then we'd go on to find what happens next.

Small Pleasures wasn't quite the same as that because it took place within six months. The backstory of the characters you might get in conversation, but it wasn't a dive down into the past and reconstruct the childhood or something. It was a fairly straightforward narrative with a fairly limited cast, whereas I think my previous books and certainly the one that went wrong had many more subplots and side plots. That's what had gone wrong with the failed book, was that it was *all* subplot and no plot, and I

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was very conscious that I was going to rein in that tendency that I have, to get more interested; to be distracted, by a minor character and get more interested in them than in the plot.

This was why I needed to plan it, to stop that tendency; to try and just tell the story I was telling. But I suppose an element of that crept in where the virgin birth investigation...it's not a crime story, it's not a mystery novel, it does have an element of that, but it's about characters.

So that sort of structure, where you are going forward relentlessly, wasn't quite good enough, I needed to expand it and have that slight detour where we are taking in the relationship that develops between Jean and the family she's investigating. And that becomes the story and Jean becomes the miracle rather than the virgin mother.

Ann Morgan: That's a lovely way of putting it, yes, that's exactly what happens, isn't it? Although you do, in a way, because you do have a prologue, don't you, which is about this train crash, which is actually quite risky in a way because this prologue...it the newspaper report, am I remembering it right?

Clare Chambers: Yes, it's a fictitious newspaper report of a real train crash.

Ann Morgan: And it's there, and it's not referred to again for a very long time, and almost to the point of...I'd almost forgotten by the time it became relevant, that it had appeared there.

Clare Chambers: That was the plan. I'm the sort of person who impatiently doesn't properly read front matter at all. I impatiently flick through those early bits, you know, in *Frankenstein* or whatever, there's a letter within a letter with another letter. So I wrote this really to punish people like me who don't read the front matter properly.

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But of course there was no way of jogging the reader's mind or refreshing their memory because the thing that I was writing was in the future and the rest of the book was set before. So you couldn't then remind people of something that hadn't happened yet. There was no way around that and I wanted it to be forgotten and then remembered.

Ann Morgan: What's so clever about it actually is because it is so...yes it's forgotten and then remembered, it lends a feeling of inevitability to what happens, having had that there, having it somewhere in the back of the reader's memory. We don't remember it, it may not be at the forefront of the mind, but there's an extra level of something coming.

Clare Chambers: Yeah, and there are many significant moments that take place on trains in the book anyway. And so the train journey becomes a sort of fraught...or area of potential and danger with every trip.

Ann Morgan: There's something that's so brilliant in the novel – there are many things that are brilliant – but the *detail*, the way that you get the household brands in, the fabrics, all these things, it's done really skilfully because it feels entirely real and not showy at all, there are some historic novels that feel almost that they show off the amount of detailing that's there. But in Jean's world, it just feels entirely natural. How did you go about doing that, at what point did all that research come in?

Clare Chambers: I felt that that was really something that was very necessary to do because I felt one of the things I like about writing is doing that observational thing where you notice odd, quirky, funny things and you put them in. But when you're writing about a period that's too early, you can't do that because you weren't there to notice anything.

You can't notice things that happened before you were born. So you are having to construct this sense of observational awareness. You need to know everything about what was available and what was possible and what wasn't, so that it's not anachronistic. But then you just have to use

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hardly any of it, because in a contemporary novel you wouldn't describe everything in terms of what it was made of.

So I just kept having to check myself and think *I mustn't describe something just because I know what it was like or just because I'm giving a point that this is set in the fifties. I must only describe it if I would've described it in a contemporary novel and I must do it exactly in that way.* So for instance, you wouldn't say, 'She picks up the heavy Bakelite telephone receiver', because you would never say, 'He picked up his crystal and aluminium iPhone', you just wouldn't. And so those things were constantly in my mind, not to over-describe, but to be very sparing with the detail, only use it where it was necessary. And also the idea of furnishing a house, in your mind, from the 1950s: you look at all these books on 1950s furniture, but then you have to remember that, of course, if your characters are anything like my family were then unless they are super-fashionable people, their house isn't going to be furnished with things from the 1950s. They're going to have stuff from generations before; their house is going to be furnished in the style of, a house from the 1920s or previous. So it's kind of easy to fall into traps with historical fiction where you are desperately trying to make it accurate, but you are forgetting that history's continuous and that people aren't as fashionable as you think they would be.

So that was a good moment, when I thought *Actually they wouldn't have a fifties house because they're old people who've inherited all this rubbish from generations before.* It's better to, I think, err on the side of a light touch with detail, rather than trying to get in everything that you know.

Ann Morgan: Now, all that effort paid off didn't it, because *Small Pleasures* was a huge success. When did you get the first indication that it was going to take off in the way that it did?

Clare Chambers: Quite late on, it wasn't one of those books that was a success pre-publication, although three publishers had bid for it. It wasn't what you'd call an auction, I think of it as more of a boot fair really, because

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I didn't get a huge amount of money for it, and the three publishers who were interested all offered the same amount, so there wasn't a question of them out-bidding each other. It was just, *This is what we're offering, which of us do you want to go with?* The advance was similar to what I'd received from my other unsuccessful books. So I had that slight presentiment that things were not going to be any different this time than they had been in the past.

It was quite late on that the feedback from social media, when proofs went out, was starting to be very positive and they put a beautiful jacket on the book. The publisher just did a really good job of getting it into the hands of people who might have enjoyed it, and social media had obviously completely changed the marketing arena since the last time I was published.

When I was first published, the publishers would say things like, 'Oh, this is such a word-of-mouth book!' And you think, *By which you mean there is no budget for publicity; not going to spend any money*, because word of mouth in the days of pre-social media was useless.

I mean, how long does it take somebody to read a book, recommend it to their next-door neighbour over the fence and then them read it. Word of mouth has no effect in the days before social media, but now word of mouth is incredibly useful and powerful and somebody with 70,000 followers recommends a book in the warmest possible terms, it's really useful.

I suppose just before publication I started to feel a fluttering of anxiety that maybe this was going to be quite successful, and I got that sort of dreadful fear of success, which is the other side of the coin from fear of failure, which had been my previous companion throughout my career.

Ann Morgan: It's funny, isn't it, it's wonderful to see the success of the book, but I know that these things can be a bit destabilising. How did you cope with that?

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Clare Chambers: It was generally all very pleasant. It does make you rethink your sense of yourself, because I'd obviously developed a sense of myself as being somebody who is an underachiever and that had been a core part of my personality for many years, and then suddenly had to have that taken away from me; cruelly snatched away from me!

I had to reimagine myself as somebody who might even perhaps be an overachiever and had been over-estimated in my abilities and I had to rethink my position. And of course then you start to worry that, having had all this positive publicity and great sales and people generally seeming to like the book, and it selling and actually earning some money, you think, *Well this is a trick you can only play once because next time the rags to riches goodwill is not there. You can really only play the card of this poor undiscovered writer once. And I've already played my joker now, and so the next book I feel is almost doomed to disappoint.* So obviously that's something in the back of my mind as I write.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. So it's a pressure isn't it, can you do it again? But you have such a groundswell of support for your work now, your backlist has taken off hugely as well, hasn't it, lots of people going back to discover those other books?

Clare Chambers: Yes, that's really been the nicest thing almost, the fact that those books that I laboured over and with each one felt, *Oh, this will be the one that will sell finally.*

And one of the only things that kept me going was the thought that if I didn't, then all those books in the past were wasted. And I was just trying to keep going in order to resurrect those. So it's really nice to see them back on the shelves with new jackets and looking nice, even though they feel as though they were written in another century.

I mean, they were, they were written in not only another century, another millennium in fact, they were written so long ago. But it's just nice to think

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that that investment wasn't wasted. And it's another kind of reinforcement of that idea that the only thing you can do as a writer is write the best books you can.

And I always thought, with each of those books, I still like them, I still think they're good. I've never written something I thought was rubbish and just published it because I could. So I've always felt that I did as much as I could to write the best book I could, and it's still there. And therefore, those qualities, however old it is, are still within it.

Ann Morgan: As you say, some of the books were written in the last millennium and actually in our lifetimes we've straddled huge change. When your first books came out in the early mid-nineties, mobile phones were still pretty much in their infancy and the internet wasn't an everyday thing and these days, of course, those things are central to most people's lives.

I remember as a young writer feeling really cross about mobile phones, thinking that they've ruined the possibility of any stories that I might want to tell, because all the novels that I loved, that I knew, hinged hugely on people not being able to get in touch with people at the essential moment to tell stories or to share their truth, share the letter under the carpet, all that sort of thing.

And I remember thinking, *Oh God, I don't know how I could write a story now because anyone can get hold of anyone instantly!* Is that something that you felt conscious of in your work or how has technology, how has that changed, shaped...?

Clare Chambers: No, what you're saying is exactly what I felt, especially when I was writing Young Adult fiction, because mobile phones very much had come in by then. And I felt I'd used every trick in the book to get my characters away from their technology for long enough to get into some kind of peril because, you know, I felt that they're completely

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connected up to everybody all the time, and how do you get that sense of isolation and danger that you need for your characters; and like you say, the misdirected communication and the letter that takes too long to arrive, and all those things, all those ways that people *don't* communicate seem to have just been taken away. And I think that's why a lot of Young Adult writers write fantasy or historical because that's a way of avoiding this deadening effect of technology. It's really difficult for it not to scupper your plotting.

Ann Morgan: Will you return to trying to write about the contemporary era again, about the Internet age or the digital era?

Clare Chambers: I don't know. I don't feel attracted to it. The book I'm working on at the moment is set in the past again in the pre-internet era. I think that's not a coincidence. I think I just feel more comfortable looking at the past, really. I'm sure that's something to do with getting older, that old things suddenly seem more attractive than they used to.

I enjoy reading books that are very contemporary and manage to deal with this without spoiling novels. And they work really well and I'm always trying to notice how they do it as I read. But I just don't think...I'm not of that world because I didn't grow up with it and so my inner child doesn't recognize it.

And technology will continue to outpace us. We can't write fast enough to keep up with it, so in a sense, we're always writing historical fiction as regards to technology. Things by the time you've written them will be old. I almost think writing historical fiction is partly a way of just embracing that idea and avoiding the pitfalls.

Ann Morgan: There's also something quite comforting about the past, isn't there, because we know how it ended, we know that we all survived. So it's not as though...whereas I think there's so much uncertainty and anxiety these days about what's happening to the world and about the

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pandemic and all these things. Everyone actually having that reassurance of: *Well, if I read a novel that is set in the 1950s, I know the world's not going to blow up at the end!* That's one last thing to worry about.

Clare Chambers: Yeah. I hadn't really thought about it like that. I mean, I don't read every modern novel with a fear that their world is going to end at the end of the book. I'm always slightly suspicious of nostalgia, I think it's got its pitfalls, and I think it's led us into some dangerous places recently. So I'm always aware that I don't really like to have a rosy glow around the past.

I like to see it in all its sort of sooty, foggy, spiteful reality; tempting though it is to wallow in this Village Green and the Morris Dancers and all that sort of thing, I tend to look at it with a slightly cynical eye.

Ann Morgan: Yes, it's probably the wisest way to look at it. So, if you could go back to that young twenty-something returning from New Zealand with a manuscript with high hopes, what might you say to that young writer?

Clare Chambers: I suppose I would just be saying what I always knew to be the case, that you're just going to have to be very patient; you're going to have to adopt a mindset of short-term pessimism, but long-term optimism.

Each book you write, you think *This probably isn't going to do anything, it's probably not going to make my name, it's not going to make me any money, it won't get any reviews, it'll probably hardly be in the shops, but eventually something good will happen if I keep going.* And I've had that kind of attitude all the way through. Just not being too optimistic in the moment, for the immediate future, but thinking, *If each book is good and I honour the book itself and do it as well as I can, they're not going to go anywhere; they'll always be there. Everything will come right in the end.*

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RLF outro: That was Clare Chambers in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Clare on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 409, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 410 in our new 'My Favourite Author' series, RLF writers explore their reasons for naming a particular author as their favourite.

We hope you'll join us.

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