**Fiona Farr:**

Good afternoon everyone, I think we’ll make a start. My name is Fiona Farr, I’m Dean of Teaching and Learning here at the University of Limerick. On behalf of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Regional Writing Centre, I'd very much like to welcome you all to this afternoon’s event. This is the second event of the 2018 One Campus, One Book series featuring author Liz Nugent and her book *Lying In Wait*. We are delighted to welcome Liz back to the campus for the second time. This time with less inclement weather conditions, I think, than the first time. So it’s really nice to see you here.

And it's wonderful to see such a fantastic turnout for today’s event yet again, so welcome to everybody in the audience, welcome to our staff, welcome to our students and welcome to members who have joined us from the local community and the Limerick community as well. You are all really, really welcome. I know you are looking forward to this afternoon’s event.

I would very briefly like to thank very much my colleagues in the Regional Writing Centre; Lawrence Cleary, Íde O’Sullivan, and Luke, who is here somewhere in the audience, and all of our other colleagues for organising this event. It's been a very successful event over the past five years, and we are delighted to have another award-winning author with us as part of the series for this year.

Thanks also to colleagues from the MA in Creative Writing—Donal and Sarah are there, and Joseph and others who have been very supportive of this initiative and these events over the last number of years. And it’s wonderful to see them and all of their students here today for the event.

I always think this is like a big book club, this UL One Campus, One Book event. But a very professional book club, and with less wine, I think! But with lots of nice cakes to sweeten you up in advance. No there isn’t wine coming later, Lawrence!

But I suppose for me it’s really important because it brings a new perspective on the words that you read on the pages. So having read all the words in the book, it's going to be really exciting and interesting for me and, I'm sure, for everybody in the audience to have a new perspective on them by hearing what the author has to say about the characters, about the storylines, about the influences, and that brings a new lease of life and gives it a very new and interesting perspective, I think, for anybody who has read the book and for anybody who is halfway through reading it, or about to read it.

I would like now to introduce my colleague Lawrence Cleary, from the Regional Writing Centre, who is going to conduct this afternoon’s interview with Liz. So I’ll hand over to you Lawrence.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Thank you very much. I just want to thank everybody for coming, and I want to thank Liz for submitting to this trial to come here and talk to me about her writing process. You can see on the banner in the back here How I Write, Ireland. It’s something that we do regularly. And this is an opportunity for us to talk to writers about how they write, not what they write, but how they write. And so I sent Liz a little chat about how I organise questions, like what kinds of things I think about when I'm asking her questions, and it’s about her writing process. Like what she does, how she starts and how she finishes, what she does in the middle, about her strategies for when she runs into difficulties. And also about the situation that she’s writing in; in this case, it’s a creative writing situation, and it’s not something that I have a strong familiarity with and I'm not sure that it’s the same for each creative writer. But this is our chance to talk to Liz and to see if that’s the case.

When I sent her this chart, she wrote back to me and said you are very organised. I have to say that nobody has ever accused me of that before, ever! I was like "well that’s really cool".

I also want to begin by thanking Liz for clarifying in *Lying In Wait*, on page 197, something that has confounded me since I’ve been in Ireland. I think for people who don’t come from Ireland it's something that we kind of struggle with. Laurence is talking, he says ‘you know that outside Dublin dinner is called tea and lunch is called dinner.’ Now I'm telling you I for one am forever mixing these things up. And I'm constantly trying to figure out which one is which, so thank you for clarifying that for me because I’ll tell you my whole life has changed!

Let me begin by asking you, and this is something that I do with all the people who I sit with, I ask them to characterise their writing process. How would you describe it, how would you characterise it, would you say it’s a painful process, would you say it’s a smooth process, a methodical process, a frustrating process?

**Liz Nugent:**

It's kind of chaotic (laughing). I don’t have a specific discipline or structure around my day. But when I do it, when I actually open the document, I try not to read too much further back, you know what I mean? I try to just write forward. And I just do it, I suppose. I have to apologise to everybody here because Lawrence gave me some of the questions beforehand, and I had to just say to him ‘now I'm actually not an academic’, so you guys have far more vocabulary around these issues than I do. So I'm really sorry if I sound a bit dim, but I just don’t have the academic background that you guys have.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, and this isn’t really, the background that I'm bringing to this is actually kind of a rhetorical composition background. And that’s a fair point because a lot of people who come to university don’t have a way of talking about writing and so one of the ideas behind How I Write is a chance to kind of see if we can encourage a certain way of talking about writing. And a way to think about it.

**Liz Nugent:**

Just if you ask me a question and I'm going down the wrong direction, just pull me back.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Oh yeah, no problem at all. Actually, you gave me some really good information because I wanted to talk to you about—a lot of the writers who I interview will talk about having writing as a habit. But it sounds like, for you, it’s kind of like, it’s more: when the mood hits you, you go at it.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, I don’t feel compelled to write every day. I kind of have to force myself to do it. I don’t hate it, but I don’t love it either. It’s still a job of work to do. So when I get down to it, it's fine. Once I'm in there, its fine. It’s just the actual getting to it. My bathrooms are pristine because, you know, I'd do anything rather than actually write the damn books. But once I'm there, I'm fully immersed.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I mean runners talk about this, about how, if I could just get out and run, I'm running, I'm okay. It’s something I think a lot of people would relate to. And I think it’s really interesting because you are so successful that you don’t have this kind of like routine, and it's just like what you do is, you just know that you have to write, and you build up whatever you need to build up in order to get to that place where you go. “Okay, I'm going to just do it.”

**Liz Nugent:**

I think when you are not writing is when most of the writing happens actually because it's all, you know, the story is in your head. And you don’t, you are not fully aware that you are thinking about it, so it’s percolating or, as I like to say, festering in the case of my novels. The stories are festering in my head, and you know they are composting, the worms are coming out through the soil.

So I let all that happen. That’s all going around. I'm sure there’s a computer term for that, for stuff that goes on in the background, you know. All the Facebook stuff that’s coming out now about how data is being harvested, it’s all being harvested in the back of my head.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

This is processing going on.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, there’s a processing going on while I'm not writing. So that, when I actually do go to sit down, I know what I'm going to write. I'm not struggling, you know, when I actually get to it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I'm going to use this when I'm talking to Fiona about my Ph.D. if you don’t mind (laughing).

**Liz Nugent:**

Compost, its bullshit, it’s actually shit (laughing)

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That’s probably what she’ll say! And this is a question I wanted to ask, also, was that in academic writing we talk about writing situation when we talk about writing in the university. And the writing situation is, in this case, in the university, an academic one, which means we argue stuff. So that’s what our purpose is, is to argue, to make a case. If you are a student it’s to get an A. And so we are trying to persuade people that we are using what's permissible in an academic context. Like we can’t lie, which I hate. We can’t fudge, right. If you were to think in terms of the writing you do, would you say that what you do is rhetorical in the sense that you are trying to persuade people about something, or you are trying to get the text to do something with your audience? What do you want them to do when they read this?

**Liz Nugent:**

In the process of it, I'm telling all of the lies, and the challenge is to remember them all because it’s all a lie, the whole book is a lie. So it’s keeping track of that lie. And I'm not really thinking of the readers when I'm doing that. I'm just thinking of the characters and thinking where they will go. And where their destiny is and, you know, what their origins are. I would often have a sort of a bible of characteristics that I have before I begin to write down, so I know for example, even though it’s never in the book, I know what newspaper they read. I know what their favourite program would be. I know whether they prefer tea or coffee, or whether they would have wine or a gin and tonic. I know this stuff and, whether I use it or not, I have a very clear idea of who the character is before I begin to write.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That makes a lot of sense when you think about the book, for instance, in terms of like when Laurence went to Athlone, and everyone was quizzing him about what papers he reads and what teams he follows and things like that and, of course, they were all conflicting and so forth. That demonstrates exactly what you are saying. So that makes a lot of sense.

In terms of the audience, you don’t have an audience that you target, do your marketing people have an audience that they target? And does that influence?

**Liz Nugent:**

Well, very specifically, when I first, when I wrote the first draft of *Lying In Wait*, it was much funnier, in my opinion. I thought it was much funnier. And my editor said, not funny enough to be funny and not dark enough to be dark. So take out all the funny and make it more dark.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

You did a good job.

**Liz Nugent:**

I was trying to write, I was trying to break out of the crime thing a little bit and write a comedy-more novel. But because *Unravelling Oliver* had proved successful as a crime novel and a dark crime novel, they wanted similar because they said you’ve got an audience now who read you, who liked *Unravelling Oliver* because of its characteristics of darkness and psychology. So you can’t suddenly go off the beam and be funny. So that was a great disappointment to me.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That kind of answers another question I had in a way, and maybe you can elaborate on this: how did your process change after you started publishing? Is it the same process now that it was then? I mean there’s obviously some influence now between the publisher and you.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, well, I learned a lot in the process of getting published the first time. I learned a lot from my editor, particularly about structure. I learned, you know, she pointed out things that I was terrible for, you know, writing stuff where I would cut to the chase. So you know "two weeks later blah-blah" without actually writing out what had happened in the two weeks. When there was some turning point, I would just cut to that, and she would say, “No, you have to actually tell us what's happened. Show us”, you know, “what's actually led to these details.” So I learned from that. I learned from those instructions. She was very good at teasing those things out of me.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Like you knew the story, but you had to make it so that other people could follow the story as well.

**Liz Nugent:**

Exactly, and I didn’t use, I hardly used, I used very little dialogue in *Unravelling Oliver*. And there’s quite a lot of dialogue in that (pointing to *Lying in Wait*). But I'm not, dialogue is so tricky because of all the inverted commas (laugh). I'm a lazy writer on the keyboard. So yeah, I'd rather you know, a lot of writers just write a dash and then the speech. My editor won’t let me do that.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So your editor is part of your process in a way.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, and there’s a Penguin house style you know.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Oh, is there? Oh my god!

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, there is a house style, so you know, you have to write it in a specific style.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Are you talking about punctuation features and things?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, yeah, so I would have, the words like ‘realise’ I would have always spelled ‘ise’ but their Penguin house style was ‘ize’. So all of those words were ‘z-ised’. I just made that word up! So yeah, little things like that. But I thought that was an American spelling but it turns out it's not, it’s an old English one.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, the Australians use it, the Americans use it, I don’t know where the ‘ise’ comes from. But, like, I switch back and forth. Like, here, I always use the ‘ise’, but when I'm twittering Americans it’s the ‘z’. Go back and forth.

And are there other people that are involved in your process besides your editor? Do you bring other people into your process?

**Liz Nugent:**

Not really, I mean my agent doesn’t even see it. It’s really just, I mean, I show it to my husband, just, you know, for reassurance. He’s a terrible editor. (laugh) No, he’s a wonderful editor actually, but he’s not, he can’t be objective. Because he likes me! You know, so he can’t.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That’s fortunate though, isn’t it?

**Liz Nugent:**

It is very lucky. So he can’t, he’s unable to tell me the bits that are really crap.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Is he a writer as well?

**Liz Nugent:**

No, he’s a sound engineer.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, that’s good. It’s a real audience in a way. It’s not someone who has their own agenda.

**Liz Nugent:**

Exactly, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

It’s just an audience, and of course, there is this agenda that he wants you to be happy.

**Liz Nugent:**

No, he has, actually, he has pointed out things before. Like he’s a great man for telling me, you know, when I can raise the tension in the scene. You know, I think in *Lying in Wait* when, what is the character’s name? Karen? When Karen is invited to dinner by Lydia, and there’s all this stuff about, you know, her bringing out the evidence that implicates Laurence at the end, and I was going to have her do it all in one go, and Richard said, “just string that out. String that out a bit more, build up the tension, build it.”

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, because I think she came out with a couple of different things, but it was like, first, she did the photos, the box.

**Liz Nugent:**

The photo album yeah, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

And then she did the grave, and so she went through, she did lead in kind of slowly now. She built it up.

**Liz Nugent:**

Exactly. That was my husband’s encouragement to do that.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That’s great, and you brought up something really interesting too because I think that a lot of people don’t realise that sometimes you just need somebody who is going to be encouraging, even if they are biased. In other words, I know that Íde and I have done writing workshops, we were in IT Tralee one time, and we were basically trying to help people learn how to ask for feedback on a piece of writing that they did. And one woman had asked me, “is it all right if I just tell her to say something nice?” and I was, like, if that’s what you need,… and if that’s what *you* need that really helps.

**Liz Nugent:**

Well, that’s why my husband gets it because I need the nice before the editor comes in with her claw hammer to pull me apart.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Okay cool. I guess I wanted to also ask you, your routine didn’t change because you had deadlines now that you are published, so did that influence anything. When you wrote your first book, did you have your own personal deadline?

**Liz Nugent:**

No, I mean, the first book was written over the course of probably eight years, and for probably three of those years, I did absolutely nothing. For the other years, I was just doing it on my annual leave from work. I would take a week or two weeks a year and go to Annaghmakerrig and write there.

So, yeah, it was a very lazy way of doing it. But all through that time, things kept happening to me, and incidents occurred in my life where, you know, I went to a French chateau and it ended up in the book. And I read an obituary of a French general in a Nazi regime in France and that ended up in the book. That character ended up in the book. That character ended up in the book. So, like, lots of, it wouldn't have if I had written it from beginning to end in the eighteen months its now taking me it would have been quite a different book.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

And how does that work now in terms of like I would imagine once you get a contract you had deadlines. Did that cause anxiety or did that cause stress?

**Liz Nugent:**

The real stress, *Lying in Wait* wasn’t too bad because I had started that before *Unravelling Oliver* came out. So I had maybe thirty-thousand words of it done before *Lying in Wait* came out. *Skin Deep* was different, because I started writing it in September 2016, and for some unknown reason, I thought that I could finish it by January 2017. Which was…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Optimistic!

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, ludicrous, but I kind of convinced myself that I could do it. I’ll just write three thousand words a day or two thousand words a day. And I soon realised that I wrote thirty thousand words in a month, and I realised I had, I made this foolish promise to my editor, and I realised the thirty thousand words were kind of rubbish. They didn’t make any sense. And I had to go to my editor, well, I had to get my agent to go talk to my editor and say the book will not be ready. Because originally it was due for publication in September 2017, and I had to get her to go to Penguin and say she can’t do it. She really can’t do it. The pressure is too much because, when I was writing those thirty thousand words, I was writing them in a frenzy, literally just trying to up the word count instead of really thinking about the story. Trying to, you know, get to ninety thousand words because ninety thousand words is a book. It’s the worst way to write.

You’ve got to go with the story and listen to your characters and establish them and then listen to them and listen to their experiences.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Did you have to talk to somebody about what you should do about it before you actually went to your agent or was it just like, you know, that that’s what you had to do?

**Liz Nugent:**

I just knew it wasn’t working. I knew it wasn’t working. This was the wrong way to go about it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So you went to your agent?

**Liz Nugent:**

And while that was all, when I was in, I had got this wonderful residency in the Princess Grace Library in Monaco, and the purpose of the bursary was that you can live in this, you know, in this beautiful place and experience the Cote d’Azur, but I was just going to the library every day and writing all the words and missing the Cote d’Azur outside. So it was really, I really only explored the area, you know, the odd weekend. So I kind of regret, I had to go back to Nice several times after that to actually do the research. And I should have done it in the month that I was there when I was actually paid to be there. It was ridiculous. It was such a waste. I should have done the research while I was there. But I just thought, “I have a month, and I’ve got to produce a book really quickly.” So it was crazy.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So you have, like, a lot of people in your process. There’s your agent, your editor, your husband. Okay that’s cool. I think its something that a lot of people don’t realise, like, in an academic context, they don’t realise that they need to pull people in.

**Liz Nugent:**

It’s not a lot of people really though.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

No, but it’s still some people. Like, it's not, like, up in an attic somewhere with the candle lit and the feather quill.

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh, no, that’s true. But I’ve worked in television writing, and there there’s probably twenty-five people who are going to have a view and an editorial influence on what you are writing. So, for me, this is, I mean, I might as well be doing it on my own. It feels like I'm doing it on my own because all the words are mine. You know, agents and editors can suggest things, but the words are all mine. So I do feel ownership over it. Although I feel grateful. I mean, I'm extremely grateful to my editor for her input and her brilliant influence, but I do the writing.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Fair enough, yeah, I guess I'm mostly just thinking in terms of like when a lot of writers will experience things that stop them from moving forward, like, thinking things like “I can’t do this”! And then they freeze up. Or they say something like that and then the fear freezes them up. Do you have any of those kinds of things that block you from moving forward?

**Liz Nugent:**

Not, not on any kind of permanent basis. I haven’t so far (touch wood). I haven’t been blocked.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That really is wood too!

**Liz Nugent:**

I haven’t been blocked as such, but there are days I just can’t do it. You know, there are days where I'm at the laptop, and it isn’t really making sense. And, often, what I will do is close the laptop and put on some movie soundtracks because music written for a film is designed to provoke emotion in the audience. And really that’s what you need, it's what I need when I'm writing…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

What’s your favourite?

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh probably Jean de Florette, the French film. There’s an album called Cinema Café and its European films from the ‘70s and ‘80s, and it’s all the Jean de Florette soundtracks and its Betty Blue and all that era. And half the films I haven’t seen, but I know the soundtracks intimately. And they are beautifully constructed, and you know, you can feel anger and sadness and rage and revenge. It’s all in those pieces of music. So I find that helpful.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I have a confession, my music that I do, I do something similar, but it’s the Muppets Treasure Island soundtrack (laughing). I love it, it's just like da-da-da- it just gets me going like. It works.

**Liz Nugent:**

It does work. It does work.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

But it sounds like you are somebody who, like you say, my process is chaotic, but at the same time seems like you know when it’s time to just sit down and do it. As opposed to, like, you know, when it’s ready.

**Liz Nugent:**

It's like, when I sit down, I know what to do, but yeah, it’s the getting to sit down.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So there’s no fear that I'm never going to get there? You know you are going to get there.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, I mean, I’ve a very loose kind of deadline now. I mean, the next book doesn’t really have to be turned in until probably September of 2019. So I'm on the doss now for probably six months.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Oh good for you, probably…

**Liz Nugent:**

I hope my editor doesn’t ever hear this! She probably will now. I'm not on the doss at all. I'm working very hard. But you know, I won’t be pushing myself until…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

It takes a while to process the video so yeah…

**Liz Nugent:**

You can edit this out. (Laughing) I won’t be really pushing myself until the end of this year. And then I’ll work like a dog.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Okay, let me ask you about the way you make decisions about, like, I know that we were talking, in Donal’s interview, we were talking, and Joseph O’Connor, and they were saying that they had to know what the end was before they could get started. In other words, they couldn't start a story until they knew what the end was and then they would build backward. Is that a process that you follow as well, or do you do something different?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, well, because I more or less start at the end. In all three of my novels, there’s a significant event that happens in the opening chapter and the rest of the book leads up to that and then shows you the aftermath. So yeah, I start at the end. So I do know, I do know what has happened, and I know what the likely consequences of that are. It’s just how the character responds to those consequences that I have to explore when I get to the end.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Okay, so it sounds like it’s a pretty common way of going about it, start at the end and then build toward it.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, must be.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I mean, because, like you hear about writers who start out, just like, their drafting process would be “I'm just going to write and some stuff will come out and I’ll just take it from there”, but it seems like a lot of the writers I talk to can’t do that. That’s not the way they operate. They operate with the end game in mind.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, I'm just trying to think, yeah when I was writing *Lying in Wait* I knew that Laurence would be very damaged by the end of the novel. I just didn’t know how significant and damaged he would be. I didn’t know whether it was going to be mental or physical, and it was really when I got to the end, I just thought, it would be too cruel if it wasn’t mental.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I guess, in ways, you’ve answered a question when you were talking earlier about your editor telling you to fill in spaces. There is some revision that goes on in this whole process. You go back and you fill in gaps. Do you change lines?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, I mean, in the proofing process, yeah, you are changing things, but when I'm writing, I got some great advice from a guy I know who was doing an academic thing in NYU, and he was writing about music, in an academic paper. He said he went into some seminar for two or three days, all of the Ph.D. students were brought into a room, and they were given laptops and told to work, but the delete key had been disabled on the laptop. So they weren’t able to delete anything, but it forced them to move forward with their writing, and he said that it was just, he said he never got so much writing done, and he said, even afterwards, the work that he had done, yes, obviously, there was stuff to delete, but the fact that he couldn't delete meant that he was propelled forward.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Instead of fixing sentences, he was just writing, just keep on moving.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, exactly. So with *Skin Deep*, I certainly adopted that. I worked in that way by not revising because there’s a point, I think, it seems to be common enough among writers, the 30-k mark, where you’ve written thirty-thousand words, which is more or less a third of an average sized book, where you’ve written thirty-thousand words, and then you go back and you write them again. And then you go back and you write them again, and you go back and over and over, over and you are not moving forward you are just refining and refining.

Maybe there’s a value to that, you know. I was about to say that you shouldn't do that, you should just move forward but maybe you need to establish your opening very firmly. Maybe that thirty-thousand wall is there for a reason.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So that thirty-thousand is like beginning of story to somewhere towards the middle.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, it’s establishing everything.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

It’s the groundwork.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That’s interesting, I mean, because that would be academic papers the same way you start with, basically laying the groundwork what's going on here. Why are we doing this? What we are going to try and find out. That kind of thing, so it’s the same thing. Curious about the arrangement, when did you decide to organize the books around dates and the chapters around characters voices and characters dialogue?

**Liz Nugent:**

Well, when writing a character, I need to be in their head in order to fully explore them, you know? I can’t, I’ve never been able to write third person stories really. Everything I’ve written even short stories, even when I worked in TV, I would write a character bible, but I would write the characters, from the characters point of view.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, each of the characters’ narratives?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, so, even though I wasn’t writing the scripts, I would create this document for the scriptwriters, describing each character and how they felt about all the other characters, so that they would know so and so was on his third marriage, but he resents the mother of his second wife who gave him a hard time. You know? So that from their point of view, you were able to explore all of those things. So yeah, that was instinctive, organizing by character. The structural part of it…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Book one, book two, book three.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, that came later, I realised that I couldn't fill in, there’s a five years later, a five-year hop in that book. I just couldn't see how describing the five years that happened in between the discovery of the body and Laurence being a working adult. I didn’t think that would be very interesting. So I just skipped it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, and that makes sense too. It’s, like, okay, so this happened and then five years later.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, and five years later you find out what, you know, five years later you find out what Lydia thought of all of that. Or what Laurence thought Lydia thought. And you find out what Lydia, how Lydia dealt with all of that information. When she found out that Laurence had found the body.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

And also Karen starts to play a bigger part in the second book I think.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

This is really interesting because I was thinking okay, this is a decision you make in how you are going to arrange the story and how you are going to organise it and so forth. And I was just kind of wondering like what kinds of thoughts went into your head about organising it, but it sounds, like you said, it’s instinctive.

**Liz Nugent:**

Originally, it was all going to happen together you know, so it was all going to happen over the course of, you know, so that Laurence would be twenty or something by the time the book would finish. I just thought that’s not real. First of all, its not realistic that all of this stuff could have happened and that Karen’s career had taken off and, you know, Laurence couldn't have been promoted to the degree that he was in his job, couldn’t have lost the weight, the weight gain, the weight loss, in that short space of time. So it seemed to make sense to spread it out.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, otherwise, its war and peace isn’t it? It goes on forever.

**Liz Nugent:**

That’s not the best thought (laughing), but yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

We generally run out of time before I have time to ask questions about like revision and how it functions in your process, so I had a couple of questions around this idea of revision. We tend to spend so much time on the drafting stage when we talk about these things that we run out of time. So just a couple of questions I had that were more focused on the revision. On page 28, Andrew says ‘what exactly is your rank Mooney?’ He lingered on the ‘oo’ in Mooney. And when I read that, I thought, she must have read this out loud. She must have heard this in your head or something, the fact that there’s this characterisation about how he said Mooney. It's like, I was thinking did she say this out loud, is this how she’s listening to her characters?

**Liz Nugent:**

It’s the kind of thing that my brothers do when they are disparaging.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Fair enough, you have a model!

**Liz Nugent:**

Or you know Moooney, like there’s a guy who, one of my brothers know, and he just refers to him as Cheesy. And it’s not his name, obviously, but it’s just a, it’s really rude way to talk about him. I just kind of thought that’s what Andrew would be like. He would be very dismissive of people who he didn’t consider of his class or rank.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

So you were associating this character with some people that you knew and some of the ways that they dealt with other people. That’s really interesting. So there’s bits and pieces of people you know that fit the mould?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, they take all the worst of all the people I know (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Good stuff! Also, I wanted to ask you about this, and I don’t know if there’s anything you could say about this, I don’t know how conscious it is and so forth. But Laurence, he matures over time, my perception was that his dialogue matured. In other words, like how he talked changed, and was that a conscious thing on your part?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, because if you, yeah, it was because Laurence up to the second part of the novel is an eighteen year old who doesn’t have many friends, lives at home with his mum and dad, is an only child, so he doesn’t have a society of people in his age group that he can pick up words or music references or anything like that. But by the time we see him when he’s twenty-three years old, he’s out in the world of work, and he’s meeting people, and he’s, you know, more attuned to what's going on, because he’s hearing about stuff from the people he works with. So yeah, he has, he does definitely mature, and I made sure, well I tried to make sure, that was clear.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

To me I was really perceiving it, and I was trying to figure out is it his attitude towards things or is it his actual vocabulary that’s changing.

**Liz Nugent:**

I think both.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

One of the things that stood out was when Helen used the word ‘fuck’ the first time and…

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh, yeah, he was really shocked.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

He was really shocked, and it was like you know people, nobody at Avalon speaks like that – something like that. And then later on when the fateful dinner that he’s taking Karen to, the last dinner, and she’s saying “is there anything that you know you need to prep me on?”, and he’s like “well you might not want to say the ‘fuck’ word until down the line a bit.” So he’s very relaxed with it at that point. And those are the kinds of things that I saw in the changes of the way… I thought that was really interesting. I was wondering what kind of work goes into that, did you have to go and do a lot of revision on that, or did it come up pretty well the first time and you just…?

**Liz Nugent:**

It came up pretty well the first time, yeah. I didn’t actually, that didn’t cross my mind, that ‘fuck’ issue.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That was just one instance that was just one instance where he was so much more relaxed as a mature person than he was as the kind of innocent eighteen-year-old living at home.

**Liz Nugent:**

I think he says, but we don’t have bad language in our house, something like that.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, something to that effect.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah because he’s not used to it in the home and, like, because he sees everything through his mother’s eyes, really because he’s been so mollycoddled and so dominated by her that he sees the world through her eyes. And doesn’t, so he would think what she thinks. We don’t have that language in our house. And it’s only when he’s out in the world, he realises that language is everywhere, and it’s normal. And you know, it is in Ireland normal. I don’t know how the Americans are going to take to it, we’ll see.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I keep going back on the bit here because I'm thinking about the whole rhetorical situation and the persuasiveness and one of the things that I recognised when I was reading this was that one of the jobs of the fiction writer is to persuade people that this could happen. And also the fact that you have to, one of the jobs that you have is to actually make sure that the characters are consistent. I can’t imagine what kind of work that is, is it just a lot of work?

**Liz Nugent:**

It’s a lot of work to keep characters consistent, particularly, when you want them to do something that’s out of character. So Lawrence, for example, there’s a lot of things that are out of character for him, so I had to make Lydia really manipulative in order to force him to do them. Like faking the letters, and all that, that’s not in Laurence’s character. He would never do that in a million years. He’s a much nicer guy than that.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, I was kind of surprised he bought into that, to be honest with you, but at the same time…

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, his mother is his mother, and you know she rules him, and he’s never quite cut the umbilical cord. He’s tried…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

And that was his undoing as it turns out.

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, it’s his undoing.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I just want to check the time, make sure we are okay. We are okay on time. Okay, I guess there was a lot of, one of the things I saw that was early on in the book from I think it was Laurence who was talking, and I was trying to find it and I couldn't find it again when I went back to look for it. But there was early on in the book, he was referring to his father by his first name. Do you remember that? He was referring to Andrew as ‘Andrew’.

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh was he!

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, and I just wondered was that because using pronouns would have been a real, in other words, it would have confused things if he had used a pronoun in that case? I wish I could have found that.

**Liz Nugent:**

I don’t remember where that is, but it might be when he’s talking about how his father is seen, Andrew Fitzsimons was the Supreme Court Justice or something, because him referring to his father as Andrew in his own head is a mistake. It shouldn't be in there if its there (laughing)

**Lawrence Cleary:**

No, no I didn’t think…

**Liz Nugent:**

It might be there…

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I had to go back and look at it because I said did he just call his dad Andrew. And he did. I was sitting there going, I thought it was kind of strange, but I wondered if it was because if he had said like *him* or *he* or something like that, it would have been…

**Liz Nugent:**

Was he talking to his father at the time?

**Lawrence Cleary:**

No, I think he was, he was narrating. Andrew doesn’t usually do something like that, or something like that.

**Liz Nugent:**

Unless he’s being sarcastic about his father.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Yeah, maybe that’s what it was. I wish I could have gone back and found it.

**Liz Nugent:**

That’s okay.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

That was just one of those things that I was…

**Liz Nugent:**

It could well be a mistake. It could well be.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Or it could have been a decision to stop it from being confusing. That’s what I was wondering.

**Liz Nugent:**

No, it wasn’t that. If it’s there, it was a mistake. (Laughing)

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Okay, I wanted to open it up to the floor if that’s okay with you?

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah absolutely.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

We have a couple of mics around so, if you have any questions we want to focus the questions on her process, her strategies, how she goes about what she does. It’s less about the book than it is about how she writes the book. And that’s what we are here to talk about, so if you could focus the questions on things like that, that would be great.

**Question:**

I was just wondering would you ever relocate for a book to make it more authentic to get the deeper experience of the character?

**Liz Nugent:**

I strongly believe that you shouldn’t write about a place unless you’ve smelt it. Unless you’ve actually walked the streets, so that’s why I had to keep going back to Nice and the south of France after my month’s wasted residency in Monaco. But I just got another bursary now for a month in the cultural centre in Paris, so I have a character in the novel that I'm writing now who needs to go off somewhere and lose himself. And the ideal place was going to be Paris, but when I thought I hadn’t got that bursary, because they announced the recipients and I didn’t get an email and, it turns out, they just forgot to email me.

So I thought I hadn’t got it. I was just thinking “oh God, he’s just going to have to lose himself in Monaghan” (Laughing) because Monaghan is the other place where I go to write and where I kind of have got to know because I spent a lot of time there writing. So I was kind of going “oh god” you know, “Monaghan is great but I don’t know of its going to be the same experience”. But now I'm going to get him to go to Paris, so yeah, there will be a section of the next book set in Paris. Because I’ve never been to Paris, so it’s really exciting for me.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Ah it’s beautiful.

**Question:**

I have a question about editing. Once you have that first draft, do you have a process when it comes to revising and editing that first draft. I know you said you don’t have a process for the first draft, so maybe that applies to editing as well.

**Liz Nugent:**

I submit the first draft to my editor. She makes all the notes which I automatically take really badly. She will give me very constructive criticism, and I will take it as like blatant, “she hates it, it’s terrible”. And I will rage and cry for about three days, and then I will just set to work and take it note by note. Because really you know sometimes, when you get a glut of notes, it can be terrifying because you just go “my god she wants to change the whole thing”. But that’s rarely the case. If you take it note by note, you can really break it down and see that she’s actually right.

**Question:**

And this draft that you submit, is it really the very first draft? Haven’t you revised it before sending it to the editor?

**Liz Nugent:**

It’s pretty much the first draft. But. if you are writing a first novel, never ever submit your first draft. You only get the luxury to do that when you have got a contract and you’ve already been published. But, if you are writing a book for the first time and you put it out on submission, it should be as far as you are concerned ready to publish right then. Make it as good as it possibly can be. Because, really, these days, editors generally, I'm very lucky with mine, generally, editors don’t have time, you know what I mean?

The publishing industry moves so fast now, so yeah make it as good as it possibly can be. Show it to your friends, tutors or whatever. Get as much advice as you can about it, and if they are giving you really negative feedback, particularly if it’s all the same negative feedback, act on that. Act on it, take it seriously, and work on that. I mean, I know a guy came to me with a manuscript and asked me to read it, and so I gave him notes which I thought were very useful and constructive. And he then just submitted it without acting on any of the notes, and I wasn’t really surprised that he didn’t get published because there were kind of fatal flaws in the manuscript, but he just wasn’t willing to do the work. You have to be willing to do the work. It's not, it’s not a lazy job. You have to do it.

**Question:**

That’s why I was wondering if you have like a process, like some people say I deal with the big things first, and then I deal with the smaller tings.

**Liz Nugent:**

Chronological order, yeah, just as the notes as they come in the book, and if there is a big structural change, then I’ll do that at the end. But pretty much chronological order of the pages of the book.

**Question:**

Just a quick question about, you know, you get the idea originally and, let’s say, we have a finished product at the end. You are walking down the street. You are getting ideas. You hear a song, something inspires you, whatever. Are you like writing them on post-its or the back of your hand? Do you kind of compile your notes? Do you accumulate a big load of research notes?

**Liz Nugent:**

Generally I just keep it in my head. It goes into the processing, a kind of thought bank. Occasionally, I will make notes in my phone. I don’t have notebooks and post-its. I know people, writers who have like walls of post-its and timelines and everything. I do when I'm writing a book. I have a timeline as well. I keep a calendar of dates, of what dates every character was born, what age they were when this happened.

All of the events and serious incidents or significant incidents in their lives, I have those dated because that really helps you a lot when it comes to proofing and copy editing. If you can give that to your editor, they can work off that, and they’ll come back and tell you because often you get lost in that and you make mistakes. And you’ve skipped a year or two or the character isn’t old enough to do whatever, so yeah, I'd really advise keeping a timeline for your novel, for the action of your novel. Even if it goes backwards and forwards in time just to have a dated time of when everything happens.

**Question:**

Can I ask you as well, have you ever felt that any of your characters who were, like, I won’t say air lifted out of someone else’s book, but not far off it? If you were really struck by either a very funny character or someone whatever, has it ever stayed with you and manifested in a different way in your book?

**Liz Nugent:**

Well, I would say Oliver from *Unravelling Oliver* is directly influenced by Freddie Montgomery’s *Book of Evidence*. I mean the book, it’s a totally different character in a totally different story, but I wanted to write a cold callus unfeeling character like Freddie Montgomery, and I read that book, I don’t know when it first came out, in 1991? And then I worked on the stage production of that book in 2003. But I didn’t read it again until after I had written the book, and then when I read it again, after I had read the book, I realised that you know as callus as I had thought I had written Oliver, he still wasn’t really as callus as Freddie Montgomery in that book. So I thought I was heavily influenced, but maybe not as much as I thought.

**Question:**

When you were talking about how you develop and construct characters in your book, you said that you know more about them than you put in. You said that you maybe write a character bible. What's involved in that? Do you interview the character? Or do you like tell a mini-story about them?

**Liz Nugent:**

No, it’s just a list of: Is he religious? What’s his relationship like with? What does he do? If he comes home on a Tuesday evening, and he’s on his own, what does he do? Does he turn on the television? Does he log onto Facebook? Does he go onto a gambling website? You know, what are the things that he does in his every day? So when he’s not, like in *Lying in Wait*, for example, I really struggled with what Lydia is doing, how she is spending her days. She doesn’t have a job. She only has one child. How does she fill her days? I realised that the most Lydia-thing for her to do was to be working on her self-improvement. So she has beauty regimes and ballet and everything, even when she’s in her 50s, you know, she is constantly honing her appearance because she has to be beautiful. That’s her primary motivation for everything is that she’s perfect and beautiful and her home is perfect and beautiful. And her son shall remain by her side at all times. So it’s kind of a warped relationship in that she’s trying to make herself attractive for her son. It’s kind of sick.

**Question:**

Just wondering post the process of writing, the book is finished, its published, what's your involvement then as a writer after that? Do you get involved in the marketing of it, or is that all done by the publisher?

**Liz Nugent:**

No, thanks be to God. I mean, yeah, I’ve been whoring myself out on television and radio all of this week, and I'm sorry if you’ve had to turn on your television or radio in the last couple of days because I’ve probably been on it. But yeah, that’s all organised for me by the publicists, so I have to show up and answer questions. And its time away from the laptop, which I kind of enjoy, because writing is a solidary thing. So getting away from it is actually great and meeting readers is even better. So thanks.

**Question:**

You mentioned earlier that you preferred yourself the humorous version of it, is there any likelihood that sometime later down the road you might just produce a director’s cut?

**Liz Nugent:**

Well, yeah, there was a deleted, a whole sequence in the book, where Laurence had a party in the granny’s cottage and everything went disastrously wrong. He was trying to impress. He had invited Karen, but at that stage, there was another character in the book who was a heroin addict, and he had locked her in his room to help her detox. And he had this party, and one of his colleagues came and brought his four children who ran riot around the house. And I just, I still have that party sequence, I’ve been commissioned to write a play, and I think it might end up in the play. It will still be sinister, but yeah all of that is going to come out in a different way. I think it's going to be in the play when I write it (if I write it).

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Tricky balance, ever read David Foster Wallace? American, dead guy, kind of comical, but morbid at the same time.

**Liz Nugent:**

That’s what I'd like to go for. Comedy-mor. You heard it here first, it will be a thing.

**Question:**

Just wondering, you know, the way you said you write the end of the book first, and have you ever then wrote the ending and had to change it? You know the process you’ve gone through and then you thought, God, no, that’s not the way it should end.

**Liz Nugent:**

Well the ending of *Unravelling Oliver*, the opening of *Unravelling Oliver* which happens towards the end that always remained the same, but the actual finishing of *Unravelling Oliver* like when he ends up in the psychiatric unit, that was rewritten probably seven times. Because when it was first submitted to publishers, that was the part they all said, you know, we don’t like the ending. And like I said, you know, you’ve got to act on that feedback. If they don’t like the ending, there’s something wrong with it. It was very abrupt, the story kind of stopped rather than ended. And I think endings in books are really important. You need to leave an image with your reader that’s going to stay with them. You need to leave something for them to think about. Preferably they won’t pick up another book for a few days, you know, you want to have them dwelling on your final scene.

**Question:**

Lovely to hear you chatting and, good man Lawrence for the interview. I'm just wondering, you were talking about the six months off coming up and that you were going to take some time off. Would you do any writing whatsoever?

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh, I will, but I just won’t be, I won’t be very disciplined about it. I mean, yeah, I’ll be writing next week. I’ll be writing next week and the week after, but I won’t be, I won’t be, you know, doing the thousand words a day thing, which I should be doing. When I am locked in, that’s what I aim for a thousand words a day. But yeah, I won’t be really getting down to that until the autumn I'd say.

**Question:**

Just for myself, I think I need to be writing. You know, just in my own head.

**Liz Nugent:**

Good, you are a better writer than me. I wish I had that compulsion to write. Unfortunately, I don’t.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

How many people are creative writers here? Quite a few, I was going to say, because these are some of the best questions I’ve ever heard in one of these interviews. It's great, good questions guys.

**Question:**

I'm going to assume that you are going to have days that would grind when you write and days that will come to you quite easily. I wonder how important those days that it grinds that is to the finished product?

**Liz Nugent:**

You just have to get through them, you know what I mean? Yeah, there are days where you are stuck and the music thing doesn’t work or whatever doesn’t work. You just have to go back to it, just keep at it, and work through it. Get over yourself, really. You kind of go "oh, I'm a tortured artist", you know, shouldn’t be having to do this and then your husband tells you to put out the bins and you have a meltdown. And then you know, you just get on with it, just keep doing it. Fight your way through.

**Question:**

Do you find there’s a difference in the quality of writing between the days that grind and the days that it flows?

**Liz Nugent:**

Not really, the difficult, the stuff that’s difficult to write turns out as well or as bad as the stuff that’s easy to write. And the days that are easy to write are definitely fewer than the days that are hard to write. I do find it hard work. It is hard work. I don’t mean to put you all off, but (laughing) every job is hard. That’s why it’s called work.

**Question:**

Liz, thanks very much, it’s so interesting hearing you, and also to Lawrence for the questions. I think it’s really great to talk to practicing writers about their process. I'm such a believer that students and writers and emerging writers and existing writers can learn so much by listening to each other, and its often something I say to the students that people are often quite deathly silent about their process. And not necessarily fully aware of some of the things they do until they are asked. So it’s nice too I think.

But the question I had for you, was to do with something that Donal and I and Joe and others tell the students all the time, that is, you can listen to our feedback and you can hear the critique and probably means that everyone is saying the same thing that probably means you do need to look at it, but there are also times that you need to stand your ground. Because you know, your story sometimes better than even your editor, definitely, than your editor would. So there’s something about understanding their misunderstanding, but not always changing the thing that they think you need to change. Can you talk a bit about some of those experiences?

**Liz Nugent:**

I think, yeah, as you go on, you get more confident, and you get more able to stand your ground. I mean, the first time I just, you know, everything that my editor suggested I just went with it, and then the second book, I was kind of questioning her a bit more. And arguing the toss with her a bit more, and so I was able to kind of persuade her to certain things because,… but she did point out well okay you may say tha,t but that’s not clear from what I read. So that will help me, you know, so I’ll keep the part that she wanted to delete, but I will justify it.

I'm going to be really stroppy by the time, in a couple of novels time, I’ll be like I won’t have any editing (laughing). I believe Dona Tarche doesn’t take any editing. And probably that’s why her books are eight hundred pages long! But she is brilliant, but I think the value of having an editor is really worth it. I think you have to trust your editor. Usually, always, they have been doing it longer than you, and they know more than you about what the readership wants and how the book comes across. You are too close to it, yourself. When I'm writing it and I'm too, I'm in the characters, I'm with the characters, so I can’t see the wood for the trees. So you need that distant eye to be able to tell you, but yeah, I am getting a bit blotchier as time goes on. But not too much. You are all sick of me now. Do you want to go home? (Laughing)

**Question:**

A couple of questions, one is do you find the things your publishers create more restrictive or more comforting?

**Liz Nugent:**

As in crime or..?

**Question:**

As in you were saying you wanted to write a comedy more, on that side of things, do you find you are more limited in what you can write about by your publishers?

**Liz Nugent:**

Hmm…. If I had been allowed to write *Lying in Wait* the way I wanted to write it, I don’t think I would have the readership that I have now. Because I gave, I wrote a book that followed *Unravelling Oliver*, it’s not a sequel, obviously, but it was a natural progression from that kind of story to a more gothic type of story. And the same progression has happened now with the next one, so yeah… I'm not defeated by it. That comedy stuff or whatever else I write, or whatever is deleted, I can use that in a different context. I can use that in some other way. It all has to come out, some way. You probably heard this, if you’ve turned on the radio this week, but I did a talk about the fact that the new book, most of the island stuff that happens in the new book, came out of the fact that it was originally pitched as a drama series to a television production company who rejected it. And because I had done all of the research on that, it stayed with me, and I was still fascinated by the evidence. So I used that and put it into that book, so you know, it’s all useful. There are outlets for everything.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

I assume the option is there to adopt a pseudonym, like a separate author name and publish it in that name, all these experimental…

**Liz Nugent:**

Yeah, the publishers don’t really encourage you to do that unless you are somebody like J. K. Rowling, and you want to do something radically different. But they don’t really encourage you to do that because they want to keep selling Liz Nugent.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

They want you to focus on what they are trying to market.

**Liz Nugent:**

They want to keep selling Liz Nugent or Donal Ryan or they want to keep that audience. I don’t know, Donal, if you wrote a madcap screwball comedy, I think your readers would be disappointed. Because you’ve got that reputation. (Laughing)

**Question:**

Sorry, Liz, the other one that I had for you was: you were talking about editors, and like I know a lot of us in terms of the creative writing MA and all the rest, we are not at that point yet where we do have editors. Could you talk about the process when you were initially writing before you had the luxury of having an editor that you could send that draft on to?

**Liz Nugent:**

Oh God, that’s a good question. I just wrote and wrote. The story developed organically and structurally. It was very unsound. So before I had an editor, I didn’t know it was structurally unsound. But… I didn’t have any deadline, and I didn’t have a genre in my head. I just wrote the story that I had in my head. So yeah, God, those Hossain days, it seems like that was such a luxury, but you know, it turns out that a lot of work had to be done on that novel with my editor to get it into shape for publication. So yeah, I don’t know, I mean, it’s the only way to write. If you haven’t got an editor you have to do it, but yeah, just do it and finish it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Folks, we’ve hit the limit of time, unfortunately, I’m going to have to drive to a close. I'm going to hand over to Íde, but before I do I just want to thank all of you for coming and some of the greatest questions I’ve heard, and Liz, thank you a million. It wasn’t as bad as you thought it was going to be.

**Liz Nugent:**

No, it wasn’t, wasn’t as heavy.

Applause

**Íde O’Sullivan:**

I just want to echo Lawrence’s thank you to everybody for participating today and for making such a wonderful event with your contributions. Thank you to Lawrence, and Fiona for leading the event, a special thank you to Donal and Sarah for their suggestions for our author this year. And for helping us to track you down. And I want to say a very, very special thank you to Liz. She has been immensely generous with her time. So thank you. And just a little token of our appreciation. I’ve a little gift from UL, so that you remember UL, and a Writing Centre hoodie…

Applause.