

Felicity

An extract from the one woman show

Phil Tong

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

IN THE DARKNESS, SFX OF APPLAUSE. THE RECORDING OF AN ANNOUNCER IS THEN HEARD OVER THE PA.

ANNOUNCER

Thank you so much Laura!
Now just time to grab a cup of coffee before, up next, we have a talk by Felicity Hargreaves, author of the recent best seller, 'Shelf Life...' who will be talking about her writing, what can often be, 'That Tricky Second Novel.'

LIGHTS UP ON STAGE. FELICITY STEPS OUT TO ADDRESS THE AUDIENCE. A STOOL IS ILLUMINATED AS HER DESTINATION ON STAGE.

SHE IS CLEARLY ANXIOUS. SHE SITS.

THE USE OF ITALICS IN THE SCRIPT SIGNIFIES THAT THE VOICE IS NOT FELICITY'S OWN.

FELICITY

Good evening everybody,
And can I start by making an apology,
An apology to anyone who has bought tickets for this session
Hoping to hear something useful and cogent from me about writing.
Because,
Frankly,
I have nothing to say.
Not really.
Normally, when I'm asked to do this sort of gig, I get to read an extract from something and you all ask me questions,
But tonight, I was asked to say something about my writing process as I work on completing my next novel.
You notice I've avoided using the title of tonight's programme.
Why?
Because, it terrifies me.
But despite that, I keep accepting invitations to events like these.
It was Albert Einstein, I think, who said the definition of madness is repeating the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.
Well, here I am.... Once again.
At another Literary Festival.
Wondering, 'Why?'
Asking myself ...
Why they think I have anything of any interest to say?

And it's not that I've not done the preparation.
I have.
Look...
These are my notes.

*FELICITY WAVES THE NOTES SHE HAS IN HER
HAND ABOVE HER HEAD.*

FELICITY

So....
There's nothing else for it.
I'm just going to have to start taking my own advice and just begin...
I'm writing, I'm writing, I'm writing
And even as I do this, repeating the same endless phrase, something begins to
happen.... Stirrings within...

THE AGENT

FELICITY

Sat here, it's almost as though I can hear my agent chuntering away in the
background.....

*HERE FELICITY BEGINS TO IMITATE HER
AGENT AS SHE STRIDES ABOUT THE SPACE IN
A CONFIDENT MANNER EXPRESSING HER
WISDOM IN A STRONG SCOTTISH ACCENT.*

FELICITY

*"What you have to understand, Felicity, is that the success of your first novel is
paving the way for me to represent a never-ending stream of 'Limping Lindas'
and 'Wannabe Wilmas' who contact me daily, thinking that 'one-day' they
might hit upon the perfect formula for 'novel nirvana.'
It's often said, 'Hope springs eternal'.
Well, next time you're in my office, just take a look at the pile of discarded
manuscripts on my desk, and that should give you a sense of the truth of that
statement.
I think some people take a perverse delight in cluttering up my inbox with their
tear stained chapters and sad tales of life in suburbia.
To be honest with you, Felicity, I've been there, done that, got the T shirt.' Get
me?"*

*FELICITY RESUMES HER OWN PERSONA AND
MOVES TO SIT ON THE STOOL TO SPEAK
DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE AS HERSELF.*

COMING CLEAN

FELICITY

Now what am I supposed to say to that?

And why she had to tell me all that,

At this particular moment in time,

I have no idea?

All she's managed to do is burden me with other peoples' hopes and ambitions.

It's hard enough writing a novel in the first place without all the expectations of the world on your shoulders.

Frankly, it all just goes to increase my own sense of inadequacy.

You'd think with one novel on the best-sellers' list, and another on the way, my 'cup would runneth over'.

But what 'Creative Writing for Dummies' and all the other handbooks never tell you is, the sense of impending doom that any success brings you as a writer.

Frankly, it haunts my every waking moment.

'What if I never have another good idea?'

It's terrifying!

Look, I know it's daft, and that I'm not the first person to ever write a successful book...

I end up asking myself, 'Why shouldn't readers have the opportunity to find out how 'the magic' happens?'

And.... I recognise it's always going to be necessary for writers like me to do events like this.

I get it.

But that doesn't make it any easier.

And I know other writers do it.

But, I'm sure they don't go through this sort of agony every time.

If they did, why would anybody put themselves through it?

Writers might be a lot of things but we're not masochists.

And nobody chooses poverty.

Doing talks like this is an important part of our income - people think once you've written a book, that's a licence to print money.

But trust me, it's not!

Yes, if you sell the film rights...

That's another matter entirely.

But for most of us, that isn't a possibility.

We have to do stuff like this just to pay the bills!

Not that it's all about the money, you understand.

That can never be a writer's prime motivation.

At least, not for any writer worth their salt.

And even as I make that statement,

I'm aware

The sad fact is.....

I'm flattered by all the interest.

If I'm honest, I think anybody would be.

Because you don't get it at home.
Really.
You don't!

THE GIRLS 1

*FELICITY STANDS AND BEGINS TO REPRESENT
HER CHILDREN ON STAGE FOR THE AUDIENCE*

FELICITY

Where my daughters go to school, their teachers have often been known to ask...
'Is it your mum who's the writer?'
And their answer is always the same.
Dunno.
What no idea at all?
Nah.
She does spend a lot of time on her own 'in her room'.
And, we're not supposed to disturb her when she's 'in there'.
But...
She's just had a novel published, hasn't she?
Might have.
You must be very proud of her!
Honestly?
Of course.
Not really. It's embarrassing, Miss.

*DEFLATED, FELICITY RESUMES HER OWN
PERSONA AND SITS ONCE MORE ON THE
STOOL.*

FELICITY

Whatever happened to sisterhood? Eh?
They're at an age where they live for the weekends.
That's when their dad visits.
How does he put it?
'Just taking the girls off on one of our little excursions.'
And how does that make me look?
I'm just the woman who pays the bills and bosses them about.
He's the one who spoils them and takes them out for treats.
That'll change...
But there's no point explaining that to them.
Or him, for that matter.
It's just something they'll have to find out for themselves.
Not that I want you to think my life is all about him.
It's not.
I don't write because of him.

I write for me.

When I chose to write about a woman going through a break-up, it wasn't because I needed to tell my story - whatever my daughters might think.

The last thing I wanted to write was another, 'poor me' story.

Another, 'Look what that horrible man did to me,' sort of book.

I wanted to write a book that said something about me and women like me.

That said something that might find a home with readers attracted to the topic.

And to be honest, anyone else vaguely interested.

Still you're not here to listen to all my woes.

Are you?

So before any of that...

What you all want to know is..... Why do I write in the first place?

And that's important!

It's the reason I'm here tonight talking to you.

SO.... WHY?

FELICITY GETS OFF HER STOOL AND MOVES, CONSPIRATORIALLY, TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE. FELICITY IMITATES THE FESTIVAL ORGANISER IN THIS SECTION. THE CHARACTER HAS A ROUND AND PLUMMY VOICE.

FELICITY

I write because...

Because that's what I do.

It's like breathing, I suppose.

You might as well ask, why do I breathe?

The answer would be very similar.

So.... Let me simplify the question for you.

Why am I here?

Well, that's easy!

We'd just had a big gas bill.

You wanted honesty; this is it!

I wish the reason was more poetic.

But it's not.

So, that morning when I opened the brown envelope that fell onto the front doormat I had no idea where I was going to find the money to pay it.

And then... the phone rang.

I picked it up.

No idea who it was.

A voice spoke at the other end...

It's amazing how that happens.

But working the way we do - the way all writers do.

Life can be a 'hand to mouth' existence.

You just have to embrace it.
 Trust that something will turn up.
 'Manna from Heaven,' so to speak.
 Suddenly I understood all those Bible stories we did at Sunday School all those years ago.
 When Moses led the Israelites out into the wilderness.
 They wanted to know 'why' too!
 'What's he brought us all the way out here for?' sort of thing.
 They were convinced they were all going to starve.
 Until...

*FELICITY IMITATES HERMIONE MONKTON, A
 RATHER PLUMMY-VOICED, EDUCATED,
 MIDDLE CLASS WOMAN.*

FELICITY

Hello?
 Hello. Who's this?
My name's..... Monkton. Hermione Monkton.
And I'm part of the organising committee for the Wealden Literary Festival.
Is that Felicity Hargreaves?
 It is....
I'm so glad to get to speak to you personally.
I did wonder if I might get someone in your office.
 'Office?'
 Who does this woman think I am?
 Do I look like the sort of woman who runs an office?
 She went on....
I got your number from your publisher.
I hope you don't mind.
 Mind?
 Why would I mind?
And, if I might just say, how much the committee and I enjoyed reading your recent novel.'
 To be absolutely frank with you, I wanted to say... 'birthing that bastard was so hard I'd completely forgotten it was a best seller.'
 Because you do.
 You might find that difficult to believe.
 But it's true.
 What you're writing in that moment is pre-eminent.
 Everything else is in the past.
 Long gone.
 Forgotten.
 Writers more experienced than me tell me that it doesn't matter how many books you've written in the past.
 The one you're working on now is always just like your first.

And it's hard.
 Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise.
 Not because it's difficult.
 It's not.
 If you've got an idea.
 Start.
 Begin.
 And from somewhere the ideas will start to flow.
 Because...If you 'know' books.
 I mean, really know them.
 Deep in the heart of you.
 From the inside.
 So that you write, like you read.
 It just happens.
 It was books, you see, that gave me a chance to escape.
 Sometimes.
 Let me swim with the dolphins.
 Sometimes.
 But more importantly, reading was a chance for me to get to know who I was.
 Really was.
 Because, let's face it, none of us really know who we are, exactly.
 Do we?
 I'd say none of us are the same person we present to the world on a daily basis.
 Are we?
 That's just the mask we wear.
 Sometimes more successfully than others.
 So it was a chance for me to get to know me.

*FELICITY BEGINS TO VOICE AN IMAGINARY
CONVERSATION.*

FELICITY

Hello.
 Hello. Who are you?
Me?
 Yes.
I'm you!
 Really?
 Yes.
 Hello 'you'.
Hello. And welcome!
 I'm not sure people always understand that. A good book can do that for you,
 And more.
 Often...
 So much more.

*FELICITY SEEMS EXHAUSTED BY TELLING
THIS AND GOES BACK TO SIT ON HER STOOL.*

FELICITY

I'm aware I may have contradicted myself here - sometimes easy, sometimes hard?

I suppose, in all honesty, it can be a bit of both.

You see, writing's the easy bit.

It's editing that's hard - the craft.

That's what sets the good writer apart.

A wiser writer than me once told me, *'Felicity, you have to learn to kill your babies,'*

And she was right.

Sometimes you have to ditch your favourite bits in pursuit of the whole.

And the golden rule?

Never say too much.

Get in and get out.

Which is probably a good rule for life too.

But if you're really honest in what you write...

It saps the very life out of you.

So that... when you're finished, you're,

Shriveled somehow.

Shrunk!

Shrunken.

Diminished.

Not because the task of writing sets out to punish you.

Although you do become obsessed with words!

But because...

All the stuff you're used to 'being' on the inside is now out there on the page in front of you.

Naked.

For the whole world to see.

It's akin to being eviscerated.

And that's quite scary.

*FELICITY ADOPTS THE VOICE OF A SENIOR
JUDGE.*

FELICITY

'You will be taken from this court, to a place of execution - where you will be hung, drawn and quartered!

Or is it hanged?

See what I mean?

Obsessed!

FELICITY RESUMES HER OWN PERSONA

FELICITY

At least, that's how it is for me.
 And for your children too, I suppose.
 Can I admit that?
 And, if I'm being really honest, that feeling can come as a rather unexpected shock.
 But Hermione went on...
We're not the largest of festivals but we can offer you.....
 And then,
 Like a fairy godmother in a pantomime,
 She mentioned the magic figure,
 And the gas bill
 And all the worries it brought with it....
 Just evaporated.
 It was like a weight was lifted from me.
 And then my head is off and running!
 Thinking about what being freed from all that anxiety means for me.
 And that's what it's like being a writer.
 Feast or Famine.
 There's no let up.
 But Hermione continued....
We'd like to know something of your process as you prepare to write - 'That Tricky Second Novel'.
 Tricky?
 Tricky for who?
 For me. The writer?
 For you, the reader?
 Or for my agent and publisher?
 Now let me see.....

FELICITY LAUGHS AS THOUGH SHE HAS MUCH MORE TO SAY BUT HAS CHOSEN NOT TO.

FELICITY

Ideally....The first thing I like to do when I've finished a novel is take a holiday.
 Take a break!
 But then.... It's like being an addict.
 A little voice in your head starts to nag away at you.
 Honestly, sometimes I just want to curl up and die when that happens.
 And before you know it,
 You're sat back in front of your screen,
 Mapping out a new story.
 And that can be hard.
 Relentless.
 There's no respite from it.
 I hear people on the radio say they think they have a novel in them.

Well, let me tell you now,
 You might think it's only one,
 But once you start, you can't stop.
 There's a whole string of them in there!

*FELICITY ADOPTS THE TONE OF A DOCTOR IN A
 MATERNITY UNIT*

FELICITY

*Mrs Hargreaves, you're having twins!
 At least!
 Maybe more!
 More?*

*ONCE AGAIN SHE RETURNS TO SPEAK TO THE
 AUDIENCE AS THE WRITER*

FELICITY

Trust me!
 Writing's a drug.
 If the government knew that, they'd probably ban it!
 Somehow there's an expectation because you've done it once,
 You can do it again.
 At least that's certainly true for your agent and your publisher.

*FELICITY ADOPTS A VOICE OF 'THE WORLD OF
 BOOKS'*

FELICITY

*Come on, Felicity, don't go all coy on us now.
 You said you wanted to be a writer and we took a punt on you.
 Backed you all the way!
 So now it's 'pay-back' time!*

*FELICITY RESUMES HER OWN PERSONA AND
 THEN, ONCE AGAIN THE VOICE OF HERMIONE,
 THE FESTIVAL ORGANISER.*

FELICITY

But, the plummy woman on the phone still had things she wanted to say...
*'We'd like you to tell us about the process you've been through as you write your
 second novel.
 And how that's similar or different to writing your first book.
 Really?
 If it was only that simple.*

What people don't understand is, as a writer, mostly you have no idea why the first one was the success it was.

For you, the first novel, just sort of happened.

Poured out of you.

One day there was nothing at all on your screen and the next.....

It was done.

Written.

But it's the expectation that kills you.

Everyone, your agent, your publisher...

They all think they're in for another big pay day with the second novel.

And, if I'm being frank...

They don't always care if it's any good or not.