

Edinburgh Reporter chats – Nicola Morgan

☒ The Reporter met up with Edinburgh author, Nicola Morgan at the home of writing and writers, The Elephant House for an early coffee. But Morgan was planning to go back home to have a day of writing, rather than spending time in JK Rowling fashion writing in a cafe.

Where are you from?

“I am English but my husband is from Glasgow, which is my ticket to be allowed to live in Scotland and not have eggs thrown at me. We came from London about 22 years ago because of my husband’s job. I have lived elsewhere including other bits of Scotland as well. I was an English teacher and was trying to get a novel published – trying and failing! That trying and failing continued for 21 years.

How did you become a writer?

My first novel was published in 2002. I had had other things published before then, but not novels. I think I have had nine novels published, but about 90 books altogether, including lots of shorter books for children. As an English teacher I specialised in teaching children with dyslexia and other reading difficulties, and through that became interested in literacy and how children learn to read whether they have difficulty or not.

I did a diploma in teaching children and adults with specific learning difficulties, and was doing some of that teaching while also trying to get a novel published. Then I pitched some ideas for a series of home-learning books, really for parents to help their children who were having difficulties learning to read and write.

The message quickly came back that there was not a market for books specifically aimed at that group of people, even though they are a very important group of people. What I also realised was that in fact the good methods of teaching children with reading difficulties and delay are exactly the same methods as you use to teach children anyway, so I repitched it and was asked to do for Egmont a brand new series called 'I Can Learn' and that is a market leader and is still a best-seller in its genre. I wrote the whole series. Egmont is an international publisher and they had a UK trade division and although the books are on general sale, these books are used in schools a lot. They are also photocopied in schools a lot. I was only a proper teacher for three years and have been self-employed the rest of the time.

But the teaching of children with dyslexia is something you generally do part-time anyway.

As soon as I had quite a lot of these home-learning books published and it became apparent that the first novel was going to be published so I stopped teaching as I couldn't do both.

You have various blogs and websites – what are the purposes of the different sites?

I think I have always worn different hats and sometimes I have discarded some because you can't have too many. I think at the moment I have two main strands to my working life. One is the books for teenagers, so I have my author site for that, and the other is a blogging and writing and speaking for writers who are trying to become published. So that blog is for adult writers and is called Help I Need a Publisher


The blog came first. I started it over two years ago completely spontaneously with no idea where it was going. There were no aims. I just did it. It became much bigger than I had ever imagined and much more fun and much more

successful. From that then came a book deal. The book is called Write to be Published and that will be published in June.

So there is a blog Help I Need a Publisher and then there is the website set up for Write to be Published . Separately but obviously connected there is a writers' consultancy called Pen to Publication which again came from the blog. Through the blog I spent hours giving free advice to people, but people also email me individually from time to time for advice. Clearly I did not have the time to help each person individually, and also there is a problem in giving individual advice as you become very connected and involved and that can sometimes have very negative consequences if you don't manage it properly.

So I set up the consultancy making it very clear what clients would pay for what, and they knew exactly what they would get. So a client will come through that if they actually want to spend some money.

What I tend to do is that before I will take them on, before we mutually agree that they are going to become a client I make absolutely sure that they know exactly what they are getting into. Not for nothing am I known as the Crabbit Old Bat on my blog. What they know from my style on the blog is that they will get utter honesty. I will not tell them they are good if they are not. Even if they are quite good I will spend much more of the report telling them what is wrong as well, otherwise what's the point? Clearly they need to know what they are doing right as well but usually there is much more wrong than right and that is what they need to know.

(Here is another photo of the so-called Crabbit Old  Bat....make up your own minds!)

Do you think some people are born to write, or do they need formal training?

I think there can be a lot of routes to becoming a writer. I am not sure that people are born to it. There is a possibility that there is something hugely innate about the talent and skill to become a writer, but by the time you are an adult and by the time you start writing your first novel you have either got what it is going to take or you haven't. There is then a lot that you can do to improve that, and a lot you can learn through practice. If you are going to be a serious writer then by the time you are an adult you have actually been practising for years already. You can't suddenly at the age of 25 think that you are going to write a novel, start writing it and expect it to be any good without substantial years of practising. You don't necessarily need lessons or a course. There are many people who have many aspects of what it takes such as creativity and desire to produce something that others will want to read, but there are some formal skills that they perhaps lack. There are others who may have learned all the formal skills at school or university and who don't need that aspect of it but they need something to bring out their creativity or for them to understand how novels' structures work or whatever. But what I think that almost everybody lacks till they go into it is an understanding of why publishers say no or yes.

That is a big part of what I do on the blog and in the book as well in *Write to be Published*.

Publishers nowadays cannot spend too long on editing. There must be an editorial process and it must be rigorous but they cannot take a raw rough manuscript and spend the time on honing it because it costs too much money and there is no guarantee for them that the writer can make it good enough. The main reason why publishers say no is very simple – they do not believe that they can sell enough to cover their costs. It is said that 70% of books don't make a profit anyway. Publishers are trying to make a judgement to see if the manuscript which is on their desk is one of the few which will

pay its way. We, as published writers and literary writers, should not knock the fact that there are some commercial books out there which we may not rate very highly in literary terms, but which make a lot of money for the publishers.

Do you still have the same publisher you started with or do you have different publishers for different books?

It is a bit different for writers for adults. They may stick with one publisher for longer. But as a writer for children or young people you are usually doing several different types of things anyway. So you may have different publishers at the same time.

What happened to me was that my first fiction publisher was Hodder and my editor there moved to Walker Books and I followed her shortly afterwards because we had got on very well together.

The book agent and the publisher are completely separate. If they have a connection of any sort they would have a conflict of interest. Your agent's task is to get you the best deals possible. You would certainly hope to stick with your agent longer than a publisher, and really you do not want to transfer too often. A relationship has to be built up with a publisher, but really it is more important to stick with the same agent.

Has your consultancy work resulted in success for any notable or well known writers?

With the consultancy all my clients enjoy complete confidentiality, so I will never say who has been a client, but on my website there is a section called Blog Babies. A writer called Marsha Moore (a.k.a Talli Roland) very kindly wrote and said how much the blog had helped her. I decided that she would be my first blog baby and I interviewed her when the novel came out. There have been a few more blog babies since.

What's your writing timetable like?

Today I will be writing from 10.30 till 4. It is very different. I don't really have a routine. The position at the moment is that my agent wants the first draft of my next novel for the last week of the month, so I have had to identify some days as 'writing days'. If I make an appointment for the middle of the day then I find I cannot concentrate for the rest of the time.

There are not really rules about length but there are some commercial realities that you have to think about. You don't want it to be too long because that will put some people off and you don't want it to be too short because that will put some people off as well! My target for this one is 65,000 words. My problem at the moment is that I already have 62,000 words but there is an awful lot left to happen! I am having a problem with the plot. I think what I am going to have to do is have a time gap and not describe everything. There is a court case coming up. For realistic reasons I cannot have the court case coming up immediately. There would be four or five months delay. So I think I am going to have to do what they do in films and have something like "Six Months Later".

The first draft for me means that all the words are down there. Yes I will make loads and loads of changes afterwards but they should be relatively small changes. Until I get to the end of that first draft I can't actually know the story that I have had in my mind is going to work.

The ending of this one is causing some difficulties. My books are always complete standalone stories. Usually people have died so by the end there is not much scope for a sequel!

How do you write a book for a teenager?

All of my books are very different. My last book which was called Wasted appealed very much to adults, and has been described as a cross-over. That was not intentional. I just

wrote a story for teenagers but I knew that adults would like the last one. This one that I am writing now is different, in that it is a thriller for teenagers and adults will not find enough of interest in it.

It is partly the subject matter but also the tone. This is a thriller for teenagers and adults won't find enough of interest in it.

Lingo is not included in a book for teenagers. Teenage lingo is very temporary and you want your book to last a lot longer than the latest word or phrase. With a conversation between teenagers in a book you have to be quite careful. You have to create something that is realistic which does not sound like adults or old-fashioned people talking, but still sounds like 2011 with general modern phrases.

Has Edinburgh influenced any of your books?

All my books are set in the UK and Edinburgh has been very influential in one particularly which was *Fleshmarket*, my second novel, a historical one. I then wrote a modern novel called *Deathwatch* which was set in Edinburgh, although it did not really need to be. Yes it was, and you could tell that it was, but while in *Fleshmarket* the Edinburgh setting is crucial, in *Deathwatch* it was incidental, and others have been set all over the place. The one I am currently writing is set in London.

Of all the books you have read, any favourites?

The three best books that I have read are:- Anything by Bernice Rubens who was my favourite novelist for a long time. She died a few years ago. I love all of her books because they are a bit wild and weird and break all the rules and conventions. I suppose that gives you an insight into me!

There is a teenage novel called *The Moth Diaries* by an American author called Rachel Klein. which is really dark and

gruesome and horrible, but also very clever and witty.

For a long time one of my favourite novels was a book called *The Countrywoman* by Paul Smith which is set in Dublin, a story about huge poverty and huge deprivation – the main character has far more children than she has the strength or health to look after – and a cruel husband and lots of suffering going on.

Does writing certain books require considerable research?

The historical ones – of which I've written three – obviously take a lot of research. I tend to do research as I go along, because you don't know what you need until you get there. For example the one that I am writing now is set in London and includes a hospital/ambulance scene and a court case. I don't yet know what I need, but although I will go to the court soon it is only now that I know what I want from it. Some writers can take far too long doing the research and not enough time getting on with the actual writing. That is a temptation.

Do you know how the book will end when you start it?

I pretty much write and find out as I get there. I very rarely know what is going to happen. I usually don't know anything about what is going to happen!

In *Deathwatch* which is about a girl who is being stalked, I set up various suspects as the stalker. There are four or five or six possibilities. I had no idea which of them it was until I got almost to the end and then I realised I had got a lot wrong and had to go back and change it! In a way I like it that way, but on the other hand it is a bit terrifying because you don't know until you get to the end if it has worked.

Nowadays first authors have to have written the whole book before a publisher will take it on, unless you have a

relationship with them anyway.

So what's next?

✘ My focus at the moment is when [Write to be Published](#) comes out on 1st June 2011. I will have a lot of work to promote that, and the other one is the teenage novel that I am working on.

The other time-consuming part is that, as a children's writer, you do a lot of school related events. I almost never read. I usually go and shock them with gory stories from one of my books. The silence is such that you can hear a pin drop! I often about *Fleshmarket* or whichever is my latest novel at the time. The best thing is that the librarian usually emails after a school event to say that all my books are out on loan- this week the librarian emailed before the event to say all the books were already borrowed!

You can create readers by going along. It happens to be the case that boys are more reluctant to be openly proud of being readers, but if you tell them gory shocking stories you know that you have turned somebody from being a book cynic by finding something for them.

School events that authors do are very important. You hear people question why you need a library when you have the internet, but when you are a child you need lots of books to learn from, some of which you might not initially like.

And my favourite place in Edinburgh – is Calton Hill. The three hundred and sixty degree views are amazing!”

Nicola's new book [Write to be Published](#) comes out on 1 June and is being published by Snowbooks

Nicola's Websites:

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