



Michael Morpurgo with Clare Mulley

Clare Mulley: Hello, Michael, it's lovely to see you.

Michael Morpurgo: Hello Clare, lovely to see you. Very strange way of seeing you. But it's lovely to be with you.

CM: I know, but I feel like I'm almost in your kitchen, so that's nice.

MM: It's certainly a kitchen. We've arranged some flowers for everyone.

CM: Beautiful. So I don't think that you probably need much of an introduction, and I'm sure everyone here knows Michael Morpurgo. But did you people know that Michael has written 150 books, I understand? Which have won many prizes, including the Smarties, Whitbread, Blue Peter prize, and many many others. And some of these books, of course, have made it onto stage and screen. Michael's been the Children's Laureate, and with your wife Clare you set up the charity Farms For City Children which offers children from towns and cities the chance to live and work on a farm for a week. And you've been knighted for your services to literature and to charity, which I think means basically for writing good books and being a thoughtful and kind person so lovely to talk to you.

MM: Well, it's nice to know that I'm thoughtful and kind. Thank you. I have to thank the Queen for making me so.

CM: I was going to ask you my first question: have you always been, you know, have you always loved books and being a kind, thoughtful chap?

MM: Neither. No, no, I didn't like books when I was young. I was put off reading very early on by a teacher who tended to – my primary school tended to make books a source of testing, whether for spelling or punctuation or comprehension, and I wasn't very good at that. And when you fail as a child you sort of don't want to go on with that sort of thing, at all. And I got far too many punishments and really didn't like it. Found myself in the corner quite a lot. So I really abandoned books, which is a shame because my mother read to me as a little boy. And I really loved stories. I loved stories. But then school sort



of put me off the whole thing for years and years and years. And I really didn't come back to understanding the magic of a story until I was a teacher. Years and years later, I found myself in front of 35 Year 6s. And I realised the power of stories again and became much more of a reader. But I have to say even now, I'm much more of a writer than I am a reader.

CM: I was going to ask you about your teaching career. What made you change from being a teacher to deciding to become a writer?

MM: It really wasn't a change. It was just one of those sort of sleight of hands, lucky things that happened. My wife Clare decided, 45 years ago now, together we did it but it was her notion, to set up this charity called Farms For City Children. And she very fortunately had some money from her father, and she bought some farmland and bought a big house, set up this charity, and then invited kids from the cities down to this place to live and work on the farm. So I'd been a teacher for about seven or eight or nine years up until that point. And of course, my teaching place had been a classroom. And now my teaching place was the farm, was the countryside. So I would have 35 Year 4s, Year 5s, Year 6s, Year 7s, with their teachers, they come down to the farm in Nethercott in Devon, just down the road from where I'm speaking to you now. And we would work with them for a week on the farm alongside real farmers. So they'd be driving sheep, they'd be milking cows, they'd be mucking out calves, they'd be picking up the eggs, they'd be digging up potatoes, all the sort of things, you know, the countryside, but which those children had never never done before in their life. So it was a kind of teaching, I just changed the place I was doing teaching. The truth is I'd be a teacher really right the way through, and the only time I wasn't a teacher, strangely enough, was the year after I left school and I went into the army. I was in the army for about a year. Not really long, but long enough to understand what it was to be a soldier – not in action, I never went into action, but I understood about the camaraderie, I understood what it was that they were being trained to do. And it helped me a lot later on when I came to write about history and when I came to write about war.

CM: Yeah, absolutely. So let's talk about some of your war books for children. We're talking today to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day, Victory in Europe Day, on 8 May, 1945. And I want to mainly focus on your books set in the



Second World War, but I just feel like we can't ignore some of your First World War stories as well, including *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful*. I think perhaps *War Horse* is your best known or best loved book? And like much of your writing, it has been inspired by animals, and hearing you talk about the farm, obviously, you have a real love of nature. Why did you choose to tell the story of the First World War through the perspective of a horse?

MM: Well, the horse was part of it, but the reason I got to the horse was by accident. I met an old man in my pub, we're talking a long long time ago now – 35-40 years ago – in a pub called the Duke of York in Iddesleigh, my little village. And I met this old bloke. I gathered he'd been living there for some time. I'd just moved in. And I'd started to talk to him. He's called Wilf Ellis, and it turned out that he'd been to the First World War as a young man, and he just started talking to me. And at one point, he said something like, 'I was there with horses'. And I said, what do you mean with horses? And he said, 'Well, cavalry. I was Devon Yeomanry'. And then he started talking about his horse, and how much that horse meant to him. And how the horse was the only person really, he could speak to about what he really felt, that was the fear going on inside, and his longing for home, all this kind of thing, which was so important to all soldiers and they really couldn't speak to each other about these things, because they're all going through this, and living through this business and whether they'll be alive tomorrow, and letters from home, and the longing for home. He told me all about that and the tears in his eyes. And I was so moved by him saying that he was – he said 'Michael, you know, the best friend I had in the world in that war – I liked my pals and they were lovely – but was the horse because I could say to that horse everything I needed to say. When I went to feed him horse lines at night I'd stand and I'd put my hand on his neck and just talk. And I would talk sometimes for hours to that horse. He liked my company, and I liked his friendship.' And I thought, there's a story there, and an important story because I discovered – I rang up the Imperial War Museum, and I'm not a historian like you, but I do go to history, if you like, for what I need to be the background for my stories. So I said, 'Could you tell me how many horses died in the First World War? I know roughly how many men, and roughly roughly 900,000, a million, whatever. Dreadful.' Horses died,



apparently, in the same numbers. It's almost one for one, right the way through the war. And that's just on our side. And if we think how many armies there were in the First World War, how many millions and millions of men there were, millions and millions of horses died. And they were used for everything, not just for cavalry, but for pulling ambulances and pulling guns. For all sorts of things they were used, because of the mud. And because they could not get the vehicles on the land very often. So they were used and used and used and I thought, well, these – write a story. But if you're going to write a story about a horse, don't just tell it standing back. Tell it from the horse's point of view, which, of course had been done by Anna Sewell in *Black Beauty*, she'd already written this a few years before I was born. And I knew it could be done if you got it right. And my wife Clare knows horses very well. I've watched her my daughter, Rosalind, with horses. I'd heard them talking to horses. And there was just a moment when I thought, this is possible. One of the kids that came to the farm, who I'll call Billy – he wasn't called Billy – but he was, um, he was a sad boy in the sense that I think he had been in and out and in and out of different homes and he was a very upset child. But he loved the farm, he came from Birmingham and he really loved the farm. He loved all the animals, but he had a problem. His problem was he couldn't speak. He had had some trauma in his early life. And his teacher said, 'Don't question him, whatever you do, don't question him. Because he can't reply and if you try to make him reply, he'll get very upset and run back to Birmingham', and Birmingham's a long way so I did what I was told. Just watch this boy. And I watched him. When I came in to read on the last night, on Thursday night, because I used to read to them every night before they went home, in front of the fire. And there he was dressed for the reading in his dressing gown and slippers, but of course he wasn't inside where he should be. He was outside in the yard, talking to the horses, only he wasn't talking. He was stroking the horses and stroking the horses and stroking the horses. And I just watched him for a bit, and then he did start talking. This boy who couldn't talk was talking to a horse, and I went and got the teachers, and we all stood there in the darkness, because it was a November night, and we just stood there in the darkness. And I listened to this boy telling that horse everything that he'd done



on the farm that day, and his voice, his speaking was perfect. It flowed, it flowed it flowed. Well, what did that mean? It meant that he trusted that creature, he loved that creature. And that was really another difference I noticed then, is that the horse was listening. And I'm not stupid, I know the horse wasn't understanding every word. But that horse seemed to sense that it was important to be and stay with that boy, at that moment. I have no idea how. But that horse was listening. I saw the ears going, and I saw the body language. And I thought, this is not sentimental. This is a real relationship between two sentient creatures. You can write your story. So I went back and began to write *War Horse*.

CM: That's just absolutely wonderful. How did you feel about when it was put on as a stage play? I mean, I saw it and the puppetry was amazing. How was that, to see that translation?

MM: Well, it was wonderful, and having your books put on stage or on film is not always wonderful. You have disappointments, and you have wonderful moments. And one of the great moments in my life was going to the National Theatre and seeing that play for the very, very first time. And it blew everyone away. I could see that there were grown men crying, there were grown women crying. And the kids did not stop looking and looking because they just wanted the boy and the horse to join up again, to find each other again. The others understood, I think more, about the horror and the First World War and so all that came into it, but it was so wonderfully done. Yeah, much better than the book.

CM: I wouldn't go that far. But it was wonderful as well. So let's talk a little bit about *Private Peaceful*, which is a very different story about two brothers who both went to the First World War. And to me it seemed to be a book very much about love, about love between the brothers, but also they both like the same girl. And I wondered if you felt that love and war are often connected, or if that was a theme that you've taken.

MM: Well it is strange talking to you just now, in the middle of this pandemic that's going on, which is, in a way, and I'm not making a direct comparison, but in a way, it's the closest I've ever been in my lifetime to a situation where everyone is fearful, together. No matter who you are, you're the Prime



Minister, the Queen, or you could be someone sleeping on the street: everyone is fearful and wants this thing to end. And people are dying, and your parents are dying, your relations are dying. This is how it is in wartime. It's different, but it's how it is in wartime. And I think what it does to people is it makes us think and feel more deeply. So I guess our longing for happiness, and our longing for love, is even stronger when you are in that highly, highly stressed situation of war. Whether you're at home, you're a mum, you're a wife, you're a loved one, you're a cousin, and you're at home and you're waiting for news of *your* soldier boy across the water. There's that awful awful wait and wait. And then of course, there's what the young man is going through every day, every day, every day. So the stress is unbelievable. They are comparable. So I feel love does come into it. But I didn't come at it from the point of view of a love story. It is a story. I came at it really, again, because of history. It's interesting. It's wonderful doing research because this is where you come from. This is a document. This is a document I came across by accident in a museum in a place called Ypres, which I saw on a wall. And it was a letter written by a junior officer, which was typed out, but then signed by junior officer, and there was an envelope. And it was addressed to someone, I think it was somewhere near Manchester, Salford or something like that. And it was a letter saying something like, 'Dear madam, we regret to inform you that your son Private So-and-so was shot at dawn for cowardice.' And then there was a date in 1916. And I remember reading that and it took my breath away because it was just three lines. That's it. And the mother had to take that on her doorstep. And of course it changed her, and her life, and her family's life forever. And that's what made me write it. When I again researched, I went someone like you at the Imperial War Museum and that person told me how many young men on our side, the British side, had been shot for cowardice or desertion. So I thought I had to write the story.

CM: I did have a little, sort of, bit of historical research, dig into it myself. And I found that there was a private Thomas Samuel Henry Peaceful and I wondered, obviously that wonderful name to be called Private Peaceful in a war situation. Was it [cuts out] story?



MM: Well, it's an extraordinary story, and I had not found the name of the person I wanted to be a part of my story. I had gone to Ypres to do some more research with my wife, I was wandering through a cemetery there called the Bedford Cemetery, walking along the lines and lines, I think there were about 3,000 people buried there, and I just stopped because there was this name, Private Henry Peaceful. And I thought well what an extraordinary name to have. I did some research at the museum to ask if they had any relatives. They said no one has come to the place. We don't anything about it at all. So I used the name. And then what happens is, what's interesting about your wonderful art and craft is that the family, about ten years ago, had heard about this Private Peaceful. And the reason they'd heard about it is because so many people have been putting poppies – kids, going there, visiting the battlefields for the first time, had read the book, knew about this grave, had gone through it thinking it was really the soldier, which wasn't, it was just the name, and they'd been putting poppies and wreaths and notes all on it. And I saw that, I mean lots and lots of those, but by far the most decorated sort of grave in the graveyard. And then I got a letter, a perfectly nice letter saying, all this is wonderful, but do you know something? They've spelled the name wrong. Actually it should have two L's. And I went to a ceremony about, I don't know, two years ago, with the family Peacefull, and they replaced the stone. And now he's got a proper stone with a double L, which makes my, if you like, borrowing his name sort of all right, because – but I love that. I love that way that history and now connects, you know.

CM: Exactly. It's a conversation across time. I wonder if we could move on to this fantastic book, *An Eagle in the Snow*, which is an incredible story inspired by the real events of both the First and Second World War. And I wondered if you could just briefly tell the bones of that story to us.

MM: Yes, I can, really. Like so many of my stories it has its feet in truth. There was an extraordinary man called Private Henry Tandy, who was a little man, quite small, he came from Coventry. And anyway, all that happened was that he joined as a soldier, 14, at the time just before the First World War. First World War came along, and it turned out this little man, who was a Private, was supremely brave, he won medal after medal after medal. And right at the



end of the war, he did something quite remarkable. He charged a whole lot of Germans as the British were advancing, and he captured many of them. We killed many of them. It was an extraordinary battle, and out of the battle, and this is where history and myth seem to sort of come together. The story goes: at the end of this battle, there was a German soldier wandered into the smoke of this battle, sort of not really knowing where he was, dragging his rifle along, and all the soldiers, Henry Tandy's group, raised their rifles to shoot him. And Henry Tandy said, 'No, don't,' and he waved him away. really telling him in no uncertain terms to just go home. And this man turned around and walked away. Well, that was it. No one thought any more about it. The war came to an end. For this action, extraordinary bravery during that battle, he won a VC, which is extraordinary. After the war, they promoted him to Lance Corporal, which he didn't like. So he said, 'Could I be a private again?' I have no idea why that happened, nor has anyone. So he entered the world of Private. And then he went back to Coventry and spent the next 30 years working in a car factory. It's a common scene. And that was that was his life. Only it wasn't, because in a certain time in the 1930s, about 1936, 37, 38, Adolf Hitler started telling the story of his life, of being spared by a soldier in the British Army. A Tommy. And he had seen a picture of this man receiving the VC from King George V. So he knew it was Private Thomas Tandy, and he had bought a picture especially of Private Tandy carrying a wounded man into a dressing station, which hung in his study at his sort of mountain-top place in Bavaria. When Chamberlain went in 1938 to talk to Hitler, to see if a peace could not be made, Hitler said to Chamberlain, the reason I have that hanging there is because the man in that picture saved my life. Now, it may have been a lie. Who knows, but you do ask the question, why would he bother to make such a thing up? So it is just either probable or possible that Private Henry Tandy, by sparing the life of that German Corporal, he might have stopped the Second World War and everything that followed. I mean, I know it's, it's only interesting. But it's also true that this man was extraordinarily brave. He was, to my way of thinking, what heroism is all about. He's quiet, he never showed his medals. He was never interested in playing the sort of hero thing. And was quiet. In the end, he lived in Coventry, there's a great irony about that, of course, in that Coventry



was appallingly bombed at a certain point by the Luftwaffe. And he was working with the people who went into the rubble and rescued people. He was an old man, he couldn't join up. He tried to join up, but he, he was working with a volunteer group going in and pulling these people out of the rubble. So, towards the end of his life, he saw the destruction that Adolf Hitler had brought upon this country and indeed the world. What was going on in that man's mind, I have no idea, but if this story is true, one can only imagine, so I thought it was really worth writing. And I dedicated the book to him because -

CM: It's an extraordinary premise for a book and just hearing you tell it again, my hairs are going up on my arms here, it's remarkable. But I love, it enables us to talk a little bit about that merging of facts and fiction and how you distinguish them and what you take from it. And one of the things is, you frame this story in a stranger telling the story on a train to a mother and a child, and the mum in the story says, 'This story, I hope you don't mind my asking, don't want to be rude or nothing. But you sure it's true?' And so you're even, you're asking people to question what could be the facts in this story. And I wondered, you know, what differences between the real story and the story as you tell it, you've given him a different name and so on. But also, whether you think – do you think novels can reach truths that nonfiction that I write can't? You know, we've got all the facts, but you've got other truths, haven't you?

MM: It's a different kind of truth. So and of course, as you know, as a historian, not all historians tell the same truth as each other.

CM: Absolutely.

MM: And interestingly, just at the moment with scientists, they're all speaking the truth as they see it, they're not trying to fool you, but their truths are not exactly the same, their emphasis is not the same. And that's the same in history. All I do is take a story and give it a new life. And what I hope is, when people read it, truths will come out of that book about how we behave towards each other, the appalling things we do to each other, in war and any other situation, but also the extraordinary courage that people have, how they deal with what happens in their life. I mean, interestingly, you mention that train journey. It is, it's told by a stranger on a train to a mother and a child,



travelling during the time when everyone thought this country was going to be invaded. And the reason I told it was because the only contact memory I have, and it's a given memory rather than memory, was my mother sitting on a train with me at some stage when I was about two, I think, and the train was being strafed by a couple of German fighters. And I have no memory of it. But my mother says, 'and this train just steamed into a tunnel and stopped'. And I just, that's the only connection I've ever had, actually, with that war – apart from bombing because I had to leave London at the time of the V2s and things like that. But nonetheless, that comes into the story. So I use my own life, I use history, and try to tell another truth.

CM: Well you say that it's your only connection, but actually, of course, I mean, the next book I'd like to talk about is this one, *In the Mouth of the Wolf*. And of course, you do have a connection there, because when we first met, it was actually in 2015 at a history literary festival. And I was talking about a woman called Christine Granville, or Krystyna Skarbek, because I'd just written her biography, which is this book here, *The Spy Who Loved*. And we have a little chat about it, and you told me that you'd written hundreds of stories but never the story that was closest to you, which also involved Christine Granville, because this lady here in the Second World War saved the life of your uncle. And the story you tell in this book, *In the Mouth of the Wolf*. So now, I wondered if you could tell us, how did you first hear that story, that family story? Do you remember your uncle at all personally?

MM: Um, yes. I think almost every family has got this. There's usually, in a family, some story, which people tell a lot. And it passes around, and like Chinese Whispers it changes and changes and changes. And the story of my uncle, in fact, both my uncles – Uncle Pieter and Uncle Francis – and the beginning of the Second World War, 1939. My younger uncle, Uncle Pieter, who was an actor at the time, decided he would join up immediately and he joined the RAF. He thought the only way to confront Nazis and fascism was to fight it. So off he went. But my other uncle, Uncle Francis, was a pacifist. He believed very firmly as a socialist, and he was a pacifist. And he thought fighting is absolutely not the way – what we should be doing. There are other ways of doing this. And he was a teacher, so he thought education was the way



to solve all this, and he was a dedicated, dedicated teacher. Anyway, he refused to join up. And he found himself, as a lot of people who decided they were pacifists, sent to do something for the war effort. So he was sent up somewhere in Lincolnshire to work on a farm. And there were a lot of Quakers there, Christian Quakers, who were also pacifists. Anyway, he looked after sheep, he grew the cabbages, he did all this thing, and one day, the phone rang, and his brother had been killed in the RAF. Plane had crashed. Dead. 21. Well, my Uncle Francis was really, really upset. By this time he had a wife, Nan, and a small child, and he was holding his child. And he told me later in life when I got to know him really quite well, that at some particular moment, he looked into his child's face and thought, I cannot stand on the sidelines while people are out there risking their lives for me and for this child. I've got to play my part. He didn't know what to do. He hated being shouted at and marching up and down. He didn't like all that sort of stuff. And he had a friend called Harry Ray who had already joined an organisation we sort of, I don't think he knew what it was, quite, but Harry Ray said to him you've got to go to that house, Francis, go to these people. You speak French, you could be useful. Go in there and say, look, Harry Ray sent me. So that's what he did. And it turns out, he walked into the place which was the organisation called the Special Operations Executive, basically. It was spying, it was to be a secret agent. And because he could speak French, and because the Germans had occupied France, there was some use. The problem was he was six foot four, so it wasn't exactly invisible. But they liked him, and they sent him on a training course, and then six months later, he found himself dropped in France, fighting alongside the Resistance, organising their arms, their ammunition, money, all sorts of things they needed to continue to the resistance against the occupying Germans. And he was down in the south of France and the things I think were not going particularly well. Lots and lots of his friends have been captured, and he had about 10,000 resistance fighters to look after. It was a massive, massive job for this really young teacher to do. And he was of course nose to nose with the enemy every day. There was a price on his head of two million francs. So anyway, he said, he needed, he must have someone really, really good to pass the messages from group to group to group to group. And they sent this



woman, this Christine was dropped in, who was Polish, but been fighting with the resistance for some time. And she was dropped in, and they fell in love instantly as far as I can see. I have to say this woman, you know as well as I do, everyone loved her. Male or female, everyone adored her, because she was an extraordinary woman, quite massive charisma. Anyway, the two of them very much got together, and of course my uncle was married, and this is all part of the story – he had another child by this time as well, back in England, and they went on fighting this war together these two. And then there was an extraordinary incident where my uncle made a mistake, got himself captured and put in a Gestapo prison in a place called Digne in the south of France. Now, Christine got to hear about it and thought he was probably already shot, but she would go and find out. So she went to Digne, cycled there, which is extraordinary, because apparently she was terrified of cycling, but she's cycled there, and then she did something, which was so unbelievably brave that if you write it in a book, people would say you'd made it up. What happened was, she wanted to be sure that the reports were right and he was in this prison. So she walked past the window on the street outside the prison and sang the song they used to sing together. He was in his dungeon inside with his three friends about to be shot the next morning and he heard the singing and knew the voice. So what does he do? He sings back, because he knew perfectly what she was trying to discover if he was still there. So he sings the song back. Knowing he's alive, what does Christine do? She just walked straight into this place, talks to the Gestapo man in charge and said, 'My name is Christine. I'm a British Secret Service agent. My uncle is Field Marshal Lord Montgomery' – lie. 'My husband is in this prison here' – lie. 'And I'm here to tell you that if you do not release them, I shall see to it that the Americans are going to land any minute and shoot you. And if they don't shoot you, the Resistance will get you first and tail you from there'. I mean, just this terrific – and this man, he clearly knew the war was coming to an end and they were losing and he wanted a way out. And she knew that; she wasn't stupid. And he said, 'Well, it'll cost you, it'll cost you'. And she said, 'How much would I need to find?' And he said, 'two million francs'. So she had the money dropped, came in two days later with the money, gave the money over, and took Francis, my uncle and his friends out of



the prison. Saved his life. Then the war comes to an end, not that long ago – months later, the war comes to an end. And my uncle goes back to his wife, and it's done. And Christine of course is alone in this country. And it was interesting, really, because she was Polish country, and her country had now been invaded by the Soviets, so she had no freedom there. She knew she couldn't go back there. And she wasn't welcome in this country, as far as she could tell. So she, she just did some work. She hung around. And then sadly, sadly, as we know, she was murdered by someone who stalked her actually. And so it's a dreadful end to the story. And I've got a picture of my uncle standing by her graveside afterwards, and the next child that was born, this is what's really interesting, he called Christine.

CM: An incredible story. And of course, for Christine, I mean, she had survived six years of active service, she was first woman to sign up as a special agent, and the longest serving agent, male or female, for Britain in the war. And they gave her a six-week life expectancy, but she did six years, and then came to such a terrible end afterwards. But the story with her and your uncle is a beautiful story, really. And I've always found it very inspirational myself. But when you're telling it, it's something very different. It's a very personal story because Francis was your uncle. Does that hold special difficulties for you when you're telling a story, to recount something that has this personal and family history?

MM: Well, it's never been as close. I mean there are parts of my story always. My uncle Pieter was involved with another one called *Elephant in the Garden*. There was a pilot shot down and that's my uncle. So I've used relatives, really all my writing life, sometimes by naming them, sometimes not. The interesting thing about *In the Mouth of the Wolf* is that the only thing that's fiction about it is the telling of it, that what actually happens in it happened. And that's – I know I didn't make up anything. All I really had to do to create a situation. And I got to know my uncle when he was very, very old, only in about the last six months before he died. And I remember going down to his house in southern France because that's where he moved to, to be next door to his old French comrades. And he lived in this little house and there's a church outside that, and I went and saw his bedroom, he took me up to see his bedroom. And



that's where he used to spend every night of his life and looking out the window. And I was told by his daughter before he died, not long before he died, it was his 90th birthday. All the villages there, they thought he was pretty much an interesting man because he was the English Colonel and he had a Coeur de Guerre, that sort of thing. They treated him as a bit of a hero – he'd been part of the liberation of their country, that really mattered to them. And so they had this wonderful party for him, which they threw just outside his house. And he was there. And he just sort of sat there and drank and the children came along. And they sat. And so my idea really was to have him there, right at the end of his life, and listening, listening and watching watching these people who clearly adored him, and he goes to bed and lies there. And what do you think of, in that situation? You think of the people who have not been at the party, and all the people who have not been the party, which included Christine, which included his wife, which included his brother Pieter, which included all the people who fought with Resistance who hadn't made it through who should have been at the party, And he runs through his life from childhood right up to the present day, in a way speaking in his mind's eye to these people. And that way, I trace his life. And I had to do quite a lot of research. And for that, a lot of research was with him. He told me a lot about what he'd done. In fact, he helped me with another book called *Waiting for Anya*. And what he did more than anything else, it will come up, I know in a moment, but when he told me more than anything else was – and this is interesting for you, because I mean, it's what you do – he told me that when it comes to the French Resistance, the men are very feted, they're the heroes, but people forget the women. And he said that without the women of France, doing what they did, bringing the food, bringing the money, passing things on, there would have been no Resistance at all. And they're completely unsung, these people. And he kept telling me and kept telling me. So the reason I wrote *Waiting for Anya* was that I wanted a woman at the heart of whatever happens in *Waiting for Anya*, which we'll get onto later.

CM: We'll come to that in a second. And, of course, these people, those women were risking not just their lives, but the lives of their families as well. But just before we move on from Christine, a couple of years ago you and I met



at Ognisko, the Polish club in South Kensington. And they commissioned a bronze bust of Krystyna by the artist Ian Walter who I must sort of admit here is my husband. And he created...

MM: Oh I didn't know that, I didn't know that.

CM: You didn't know?

MM: Oh that's great. It's a very, very strong – I mean, I don't know, I mean I know what you look like in photographs, but it's a very strong sculpture. Tell him, great. I didn't realise that.

CM: I'll pass that on. And in fact anyone can go and see it at the club there. They're delighted if people want to go and find out about her story. But when I took you it was the first time: how did it feel to see this recreation of the face of the woman who saved your uncle's life?

MM: Well, that was extraordinary. Even, I have to say, more extraordinary is that you walk up the stairs in the building where we launched the book, which is in the place where the Special Operations Executive, the veterans gather. I can't remember what it's called, but it's a place for Secret Service people – you know all about it, I guess.

CM: Special Forces Club.

MM: Special Forces Club. So I walk up the steps there. And I see a picture of my uncle, and just below, a picture of Christine, and right next door to each other, as if they were holding hands across the wall. They're that close. And yeah, it was extraordinary to see that sculpture. And it's very, very powerful, to realise that this woman did this extraordinary thing for Francis and for the whole family and saving his life. So the family goes on, and it goes on to this day.

CM: I think you've chosen a passage from that book to read to us a little bit, if you wouldn't mind.

MM: I'll just start with this. I told you that he's lying there, this old man Francis, and he's lying in his bed and just remembering the people who weren't there, and one of them is his radio operator. Which sounds rather disinteresting, but he is the most important person in Francis's life in terms of companionship. He stayed with him and stayed with him. He was utterly loyal, and put Francis in touch, made the thing work really:



'We became, in a few months, a small army of thousands of brothers and sisters, most unknown to one another. Nothing was ever written down unless it was to be destroyed at once. Mistakes were made, people got careless, and that cost lives. But through all the triumphs and disasters, Auguste was at my side, looking out for me, for all of us.

Ninety years old. Without Auguste, I would never have reached thirty. There's that owl again, hooting away outside my window. Auguste knew his birds, their calls and cries, their homes and habits. Pigeons were his favourite. They were best for sending messages – far safer than carrying a radio around. But the trouble was, he said, they didn't fly fast enough. Auguste, Auguste, you hear that owl? Scops owl, am I right? Not like the too-wit- to-woo of tawny owls, or the screech of barn owls. This is a French owl, hooting in French. You always knew your birds better than me. You grew up a country boy, a farm boy. You read the countryside like a familiar book. Knew instinctively how to move unseen, alert in every fibre to danger. You were a creature of forest and field. All I had to do when I was with you was follow and I knew I would be safe. You know, I always see you, Auguste. You are sitting by a bedroom window, just like this one. Headphones on. Your little wireless in its open attache case on the table in front of you, and you're tapping up a message, twiddling your knobs, listening, writing with your stubby pencil. And those messages to London, to Algiers, arranging drop sites and times, brought us the weapons, the ammunition, the money, the supplies we needed to resist, to fight on. But it was never enough. No matter how often we sent messages telling them we needed more. I just don't think they ever really understood how many fighters we had to keep supplied up in the hills. 10,000 or more towards the end, wasn't it? They needed food, clothes, tents, blankets. You were there. You sent the messages, Auguste, so you know, and every time you send a message you risked your life. The Germans were out there, close by listening for you, closing in on you. It still angers me. But you always said that they had other things on their mind, like the liberation of Europe, the landings everyone was longing for in France. You were always so reasonable, always so calm, and I was so angry. My job, your job, was to disrupt and destroy the enemy, to kill, to frustrate, to inconvenience. We blew up bridges and railway lines, a turntable in a station



yard, knocked out communications wherever we could, and power stations like the hydroelectric stations on the Durance, do you remember? We blocked roads with fallen trees or rocks, poured sand into petrol tanks, ambushed German lorries and patrols. But the reprisals were terrible. They exterminated entire villages out of revenge, out of hate. Do you remember Oradour-sur-Glane? What was it, Auguste – 642 dead, burnt alive, slaughtered? They would execute ten civilians for every German soldier, we killed but the more of us they killed, the more we knew we had to get rid of them. The more we longed for our freedom, the more determined we were to fight for it, and no one was more fiercely determined than you. These people were in your country. They were careless and brutal occupiers and you were going to drive them out. You lead from the front, and we followed.'

CM: Thank you very much. Thank you. So I think with that we really got a feeling for what it was like to be behind enemy lines in France during the war, which takes us on perfectly to *Waiting for Anya*. And again, this is a story from a different perspective – a female perspective and the French Resistance. And, can you explain a little more about what the risks were to the French civilians who were serving in the Resistance?

MM: Yes, anyone, anyone who was caught looking after or supplying resistance fighters would be shot. It was as simple as that, or you would be sent to one of the camps. It wasn't much of a choice. So anyone who really lifted their head above the parapet, and took up arms, or made life difficult for the Germans, you were in danger. And not only were you in danger, but your whole family was in danger, and sometimes your entire village or town was in danger. So it's one of those things which we don't really understand in this country. And it's worth talking about. The last time we were properly occupied here was about 1,000 years ago – let's not count the years. But the last people to come here were the French. They were called Normans at the time, and they occupied the country and we've been living to some extent, indirectly, under their occupation ever since. Our language is partly French, our kings and queens are partly French, and they're partly German, they're partly all sorts of



things. But what's really interesting is that we've never never had people in other uniforms, walking our streets. Yeah?

CM: Apart from the Channel Islands.

Mm: Yes, yes, thank you for mentioning the Channel Island. But yes, Jersey and Guernsey and Sark. They were all occupied, you're quite right. But the mainland of the United Kingdom has never been occupied. So we just don't know. People in Jersey know all about it. It's in their history, their grandmas and their grandpas would have told the stories and all the rest of it. But in France, and for years and years, what was it, five years. They were occupied by the Germans and dreadful, dreadful things were done. And it was very hard for them to come out of that, because first of all they were defeated militarily on the field, so there was the humiliation of that. And then there was this business of looking out of your window and seeing German troops occupying your country, enjoying your country, drinking in the cafes, having a fine old time. The humiliation just went on and on and on. And it's something we've sort of got to remember whenever we go to Europe: all the countries the other side of the Channel, with the exception, perhaps of Switzerland, were occupied either by the Germans or by the Soviet Russians. There were jackboots in their towns, and there were people being taken away and massacred, that this really happened. It's not a fiction, it really happened. We can tell stories about it, and it's not that common, I have to say, for an English person to deal with this subject in fiction. And the reason being, in a sense, it's not our business, we think. And it is difficult when you're writing a story about the occupation of France. You have to do it with great sensitivity. The reason I felt I could do it is because I have a son who married at one stage into a French family. And the grandmother was there during the occupation. And she talked very freely about how it was to have German troops around the place. And I thought, well, this is an insight we need to know. We do need to know this. And then I just got really lucky. She told me at one point, and my wife, because I wanted to do this thing – I wanted to go and stand with one foot in Spain and one foot in France. It sounds stupid. She said, we'll go to this little village. It's called Lescun, high up in the mountains, and you can go and stand there and it's wonderful. So we went there, checked into the village and a little hotel there,



tiny, tiny, tiny. And this little girl comes up to my table to Clare. And she's carrying a book and it said *Cheval de Guerre*. So I said what have you got that for? And she said, 'Well, my uncle keeps this hotel. And he said a person called Morpurgo had written in the book that he was staying in hotel, and there can't be many of them, would you sign it?' So I signed the book. And then she said, 'and my daddy is the mayor of the town, and he farms sheep up the mountain. He wants you to come to lunch tomorrow.' So my wife, and I went, and we had lunch, pate and wine, and we sat and we talked. My bad French, and he talked in his French, and we just about managed. And then he started telling me all about how it was to be a young boy when the Germans came to the village. And he told us this remarkable story about an old lady living in the village who all the way through the war, and no one knew it at the time, had been looking after refugees, those who were trying to flee down through France over into neutral Spain. And amongst them, well, dozens upon dozens, probably hundreds, of Jewish children. She'd saved the lives of these people quietly. Again, it's this business, these heroes and heroines who don't talk about it, and I thought we'll tell her story. So that's what I did in *Waiting for Anya*.

CM: So this is *Waiting for Anya*, and I'm delighted to say we've got a short clip from that film we're going to show now.

MM: Wonderful.

FILM CLIP:

So tell me what did you see in the bar?

Nothing madam.

What did you see in the bar?

Whimpers

Train whistles

Virgil, do you know what the Germans do to the Jews?

I thought we were safe, my little Anya and I.

We always said if we ever got separated, we will meet again in this house.

I don't want to go – Papa!

I'm staying till Anya comes.



Some people collect coins, stamps. We collect enemies of the Reich, children, Jewish children. Benjamin gets them across the mountains into Spain. They're safe there.

Let's just keep this a secret.

German soldiers they're in the village!

Papers must be carried at all times, and patrols will take place around the border. Make sure that no free Jew crosses those mountains into Spain. For those with secrets, rest assured we will come to your door

My little Anya is getting close, I can feel it.

When the day comes, I'll be taking one of them with me.

When can Benjamin take them?

They'll never get them past the patrol.

There's always a price to be paid.

You may have a death wish, Henri, but I don't!

Gunshots

They're invaders. Never forget it.

You're a monster!

They're searching houses.

I'm not leaving you.

We've got to get the children across the border.

We can't wait.

One day Anya will be one of those children. I'll never give up hope.

MM: Wonderful film and do you know, they filmed it in the place? They filmed it in Lescun, the music is the music of the mountains, they're all the local people acting in it. It's a stunning, stunning, beautiful film.

CM: And it's got a wonderful cast as well. We've got Jean Reno, Angelica Houston and Noah Schnapp, who is famous from *Stranger Things* my daughter's.., marvellous. So did the film – it sounds like the film did fit your vision very much.

MM: Very much. There's a very, very sympathetic director called Ben Cookson, quite young, who went down there and did this wonderful thing which every director should do, I think, which is to go and be and live in the place where



you're going to film – particularly if it's a story which has truth in it. So he went and lived down there. And that's how he found about the music, that's how he found out about the transhumance, this business of taking sheep and cows up into the mountains for the spring grass, which they do every single year, the summer grass. He found out all about that from talking with the shepherd, so when it came to making the film we could work with the shepherds and their sheep, and that's what makes it so powerful. It's full of integrity, this film.

CM: So you were down there during some of the filming. Did you ever sneak into a scene Have you had a little...

MM: Yes. I always sneak into a scene, that's a sort of condition really with the people making them. So yes, I've got the smallest part you have ever seen in all your life. That's the challenge – go and see the film and see if you can spot me, And mean you blink and it's gone. But nonetheless, I just love being there, watching the process of making the story, which, as it happens was, had a lot of lot of truth in it in the place that it actually happened, all these years later. And that was very interesting, because they were costumes which they had discovered historically. They put out a call saying if you've got any costumes from the 30s or the 40s, and any uniforms, German uniforms, bring them. And they brought them, and the costumes are stunningly good. They're wonderful.

CM: Brilliant, wonderful. Which takes us on to the last book to talk about which is your lovely book, I've just finished it, *Flamingo Boy*. I very much enjoyed it. And that is again, told through a narration story, isn't it? There's a young man, Vincent, who was inspired by this Roma saying, to follow the bend in the road. And it made me wonder whether sometimes, are you a bit of a traveller, sort of storytelling through your books?

MM: I think I am. I'm not sure I've been aware of it, but when I look, I did my own research on myself not long ago. And I wrote down the countries I'd written stories about, and it was just extraordinary. I mean, I've travelled, but no more than other people. And they have inspired, I didn't realise, I mean, literally hundreds of stories set in different parts, not just of Europe, but of the whole world. I mean, I did one called *Kensuke's Kingdom*, which is an island in the Coral Sea, which involves the Japanese so wherever I go, I seem to find the link into some other country and some other culture. And in this particular



case, *Flamingo Boy*, yes, I use the wandering student having finished A-levels, what I did myself, and he goes off actually trying to trace where a painting on his wall had been painted. This is a very famous picture by Van Gogh. And he for some reason had been given it by his grandparents, I think it was hanging on his wall, and he was wanting to find out where it was painted. And he knew it was down near the Camargue somewhere so he just went off and got lost, and then falls in amongst these people who tell the story.

CM: The Camargue of course has this stunning scenery. Can you describe what makes it so special?

Mm: Well, it's now a national park. And it is extraordinary because it's flat, flat, flat. It's land adjoining the sea, it's all marshes, salt marshes. And salt is very important, they create a lot of salt down there in these lakes. But it is a place where wildlife is quite quite extraordinary. It's a place where flamingos live in thousands. And they have horses that are white and their bulls are black. And they're a very, very different sort of field and the Roma, Gypsy people come into this, because they live down there, and they still do. They have a big festival down there by the sea, which is really important. And that's one of the reasons that he went painting there, because the place where he painted these four boats drawn up on the beach is just in the Carmargue, right down the end of the Carmargue. And it's a story of liberty. It's a story of discovery, but it's also something quite important, which is on the side. Yes, it's set during the occupation, and that's part of the story. But it's also about an autistic boy. And I'm very interested in autism because I have a grandson who is autistic. And I've watched him grow up and I watched him become the sort of person he's becoming – the joy he has in life, the difficulties he has in life, how families live with that, work with that, try to make the very, very best of it. And how much children like this need to be surrounded by affection, and love. And this is really about a boy like this. What happens very often is these stories are just about boys. This is about a boy who grows up and it's also about the man he grows into. So I quite like following that trail as well. So another bend in the road I haven't followed before.

CM: Yeah, it's a wonderful story. So it's about this autistic boy, but it's also about a girl, a Roma girl. And a German officer as well, during the war and



what it strikes me is they're all people, or characters, certainly we've made pre-judgements about them in the 1940s. And yet it's about the humanity in each of those individuals. This is sort of a theme that comes through a number of your books. Do your books have a common message, do you think?

MM: Well, I think they do. I think the thing is that, because our history, Europe's history, we know the terrible things that we've done. But what we have to remember is that in amongst all that, there will be wonderful and good people in all countries in all uniforms. And we know how indoctrinated the German people were, and what that turned the Nazis into. And we also know that in amongst them there were some wonderful sons and fathers and uncles, who were decent people who found themselves in an appalling situation, and unable to cope with it, that's for sure, doing things they shouldn't have done. Well, actually, people do that on all sides. And it's really the story of – yes, the humanity of one German officer. And I very often do that. It is important to focus, if we can, on the goodness as well as the, and it's more for children to know that that's the case. And you know, when we nowadays, you know, when we send our soldiers off the wall which we have done in Iraq or Afghanistan, the people there don't like them. They would think of them as being invaders, but we know that they're dads and we know that they have relationships, and love them. And I think it's important just to remember that. So yeah, it's a story which is very, very much concerned with counteracting all the prejudices that we have. Yes the child, one of the children is Roma, because Roma people were also collected up by the Nazis and sent off to camps and there was a camp not far from there, and that comes into the story. But yes, it's connected to that, it's connected to autism. It's one of those stories which reveals itself, almost I love it, but I don't love all my books. And at the centre of it, in fact, it's on the front cover of it, this is one of those carousels. If you ever do go – have you ever been down there to the Carmargue?

CM: No. But I think I am now, having read this.

Mm: Outside every town or in the middle of the square, you will find one of these things, even there now. And they will have white horses and they'll have black balls, and



this is very much the centre, it's the symbol of the destruction of war and then the rebuilding afterwards.

CM: Yeah, it's a beautiful, it's a beautiful book, I do recommend it. So I think you're writing for young people, children and young people. And I do feel that you try to quite softly, but you obviously feel it is important to tell stories about conflict to children. Do you have a particular reader in mind when you write your books, or an age? Are you writing for adults as well? Have you any...?

Mm: I haven't any sense at all of who's gonna read the book. I hope there'll be lots people who read the book but I have no sense at all of who I'm writing for, and I think

after a certain age anyway, out of four or five or six, you're in dangerous waters if you do, because what you will then presume in your mind is that all children are sort of the same at seven or eight or nine. Well, they're not. They have different interests, they have different rates of development, different sort of take on the world. You can deal with very, very difficult subjects with children. They need the challenge of that, that's for sure. This is their world. And they're finding out, pretty quick, that it's a world which is dangerous. So whatever you're writing, I think what you mustn't do is write down to them. Tell them everything's all right. I don't mind, and I think it's quite important that every story should have a positive side to it. I think that's, that's certainly Dickens, he does that pretty well, too. But I think what we need to do is to make sure that the stories make kids think, stretches them, tells them things they don't know about our past and of course our past leads on to where their future is. I mean, the most serious things you can possibly imagine, I've written about. I've written about the Holocaust, in a story called *The Mozart Question*. It's about the music in the camps that were played during the ghastly, ghastly time for the Jewish people, and other people and homosexuals all the rest of it. But I've also written about some things that we have to question ourselves about, which is the bombing of Dresden. The bombing of Dresden, which killed goodness knows how many people over a couple of nights, the Americans and ourselves flattened the place. And the death was just appalling. Well, we need to know those things. We need to know it because we're were in Europe, we



are close to Europe, we meet these people who've lived with this history in their heads and their hearts. We have to know the connection is there – not to feel the guilt and the rest of it – It's to know about. Knowing is really, really important. Because through knowledge comes understanding. You can do it through history books, which is really important because the facts are important. But you can also do it through stories.

CM: I completely share that sentiment. It's wonderful to hear you put it so well. So I just like to end – well, here we are in the middle of these sort of dark days for us in with the Coronavirus going on, and a lot of people are stuck inside, which is why we're doing it this way, our interview, and I always think that a book is a bit like a TARDIS. It can take you outside, can take you anywhere, any country, anytime. I wonder, what TARDIS have you chosen. And what are you reading at the moment? And what would you recommend?

MM: Well, I'm reading a lot of Shakespeare at the moment because I'm in the process of retelling Shakespeare's plays, which was done a couple hundred years ago by a man called Charles Lamb, and I thought it was about time it was done again. So I've been reading Shakespeare, and the good thing about Shakespeare is that you sort of, of all the writers there've ever been, he seems to know and understand more about the human condition. And that's what books are wonderful for at times like this, because we do have to dig deep. And we can't laugh all the time. I know we want to laugh all the time. And it's good that people are out there trying to make us laugh. But actually, the important thing is children are going to know. They really are not stupid. They're just small. And they know perfectly well that stuff is going on out there called pandemic, called viral infection, whatever it's called by the grown-up people around them, and it's keeping them indoors, and it's keeping people frightened. Well, if you've read any of my books, you know that people live through fear and they come out the other side of fear. And that's very, very important. It's why I said it's so important there's positive, particularly at the end of the story, a lift, so you could say actually, it's okay. It's not perfect, the world is not a perfect place. But the wonderful thing that's going to come out of this pandemic, and I think it's the children that will lead it, is that I think they will not put up with making this world the same as it was before we went into



it. I think, already we've seen with the environment, they're putting their foot down and saying that enough is enough. And I think they'll do it about how we are in society. And I think these big moments in history, like the Second World War, like the First World War – if you think of the Second World War, let's talk about that, just after the Second World War. People knew they'd been through this unbelievable horror for six years. One thing they wanted was to make a better world. So what was happening, they set up Education Act, which meant that everyone could go to school up to the age of 14. The National Health Service grew out of it. One thing after another, they thought we are going to make a better world, not just for our soldiers coming home, but for all of us. And I think we've got to think like that. We've got to think that this has been the most appalling thing that's happened in our lifetime, but we don't sit back and say, isn't it terrible? Isn't it sad? We know it is. But are we going to do with it? I've got grandchildren. I want them to grow up in a world which is positive, which has decided this world is everyone, that everyone matters, in all countries. And I think we learn that, there will have been some benefit. And I know we need the vaccine, of course we need the vaccine. But the other kind of vaccine we need is knowledge and understanding, and above all now hope and determination.

CM: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. Thank you very much. And, and the role of stories is so important in that. Thank you very much indeed for a very fascinating and very thought provoking conversation.

MM: Great, thank you Clare, very much indeed. Bye bye.

CM: Bye.

MM: Bye bye. Happy days.