



## **Robert Webb with Alex Clark**

**Alex Clark:** Hi, Robert. It's Alex, here. My name's Alex Clark and we should have been meeting at the Cambridge Literary Festival this weekend, shouldn't we?

**Robert Webb:** We really should have, but there was something got in the way. I can't remember... My publicist hasn't told me what the problem was, so I don't really understand why I'm doing it from here. But, you know, I'm happy to go with whatever whimsy occurs to her.

**Clark:** The wonderful power of technology has brought us together, anyhow, and we're here to talk about your first novel, *Come Again*. And I recall... Brilliant, good. Very good product placement. We'll hold it up several times during the interview. I interviewed you when your memoir came out, *How Not To Be A Boy*, a few years ago, three years ago. And, at the end, I think you said... I said, "What are you doing next? More novel-memoir-manifesto?" And you said, "Oh, I think I'm writing a novel. I've got about a paragraph and... I've just got to keep going." And you have.

**Webb:** I have. Now I'm having flashbacks to the end of 2017, the beginning of 2018, when I did have a paragraph and, yeah... It was a good idea for the beginning of a story, it was just the question of coming up with an ending and a middle and then joining those three points up. So, it came quite... It happened quite slowly. But we're here now.

**Clark:** Well not that slowly, you know. Not that slowly. I mean, novels take a good long time, because they are a completely different kind of writing. I mean, you have done so much writing in your life - sketch writing, comedy writing of all kinds and then you write that extraordinary combination, as I was saying, of memoir and kind of manifesto. But letting your imagination run riot over the blank page over 300 pages is a different thing. Just tell us what was going through your head when you got that kernel of the idea?

**Webb:** I mean, it's very odd, I know exactly where I was. It was 2012. So the idea for the story proceeds the idea for doing a masculinity-based memoir, and I was filming a scene of *Peep Show*, and I was sitting in Jeremy's car. For some reason, Jeremy can afford to tax and insure a car, for reasons that become clear. And I was on social media and there's a very nice



man called Nigel Cole, he directed me in a film called *The Wedding Video* and he was sort of putting out a call saying, “Has anyone got any great ideas for a movie?” And I just remember unfocusing my eyes and staring out of the front windshield and Kate Marsden kind of appeared to me. And it was the idea of a middle-aged widow goes back in time and meet her future husband when they're just teenagers. That's when Kate, who we meet in the story, that's when she met Luke. She has been with Luke for a very long time, they met 28 years ago, when they were in freshers' week at University of York. One day, Kate wakes up in that college room, in that week. She's 45 years old. She remembers everything, her body is 18 and she's a fresher again and she is surrounded by all of her friends, none of whom know who she is, and her future dead husband, who doesn't know who she is. She knows that Luke is already ill, she thinks she's there to save him, so she's going to try and do everything exactly the same. Hence, comedy, because you can't do everything exactly the same. So, the idea of the time travelling widow sort of happened there, as opposed to the time traveller's wife, by the way, who doesn't do any time travelling. I'd just like to point that out. That was there for a very long time. And I was still very busy as an actor and the idea of the memoir kind of overtook it. Then it was the end of 2017 and time to come to the book. And so, yeah, it was so much harder than a memoir in one way, because with *How Not To Be A Boy* I'd given myself this massive head start, I had written two chapters and there was a 50 page document about what happened in the rest of the book. I'd done all of that before I sent it to any publishers, before I had any money or deadline or anything like that. I wanted to make sure I had it completely straight in my own head. Whereas this, it really was half a page of A4 from what I just said to you, but in less detail than that. So it was both liberating and terrifying. **Clark:** Quite nerve wracking?

**Webb:** Yeah.

**Clark:** However, it happened and I think what we should do now is to ask you just to read a bit. I think you're going to read from the beginning of the book, just to give a flavour of who Kate is and why we actually want to spend 300 pages in her company, which we do.

**Webb:** OK. She woke with her mouth forming a single word: You. This is how they always ended, her dreams of Luke. The detail is varied, but they would be alone together back in his room in college. Two people still in their teens, asking their first questions, sharing their first jokes. Kate noticed the freckle on his knee showing through his ripped jeans, his ready smile, the way he tilted his head when he listened. The 28-year conversation was a few hours old,



the first night of their first week. This was the beginning. She sat in the little armchair in the corner of his student room, Kurt Cobain watching her with an intelligent smirk from the Nirvana poster on the wall opposite. Below Kurt, sitting on his bed and leaning against the wall was Luke, similarly slim but darker, unbleached and with a face that had seen less trouble. He was jiggling his foot off the edge of the bed. Kate had just given him something to jiggle about.

“I mean, I wouldn't have to take all my clothes off, right?”

Kate adjusted the A4 pad on her lap and carried on sharpening a pencil.

“No, of course not. Just slip your shirt off, if you like. The trouble is I'm not good enough to draw clothes. That pyjama top would present quite a challenge.”

She looked up from her pencil and met his mock-insulted gaze.

“It's not a pyjama top,” he said, slightly pouting. “It's a Granddad shirt.”

“Oh, yes, of course. The blue and grey stripy cotton thing, with four open buttons at the top definitely doesn't look like you're wearing pyjamas.”

Luke pinched the top of the shirt to one side and frowned a bit.

“Yes, it's possible.” He nodded, like a barrister. “It's possible that there is a resemblance with...” Abruptly, he glanced up at her. “Hang on, where did you get that pencil sharpener from? This is my room, isn't it?”

Kate stopped turning the pencil and took a breath. Not yet. Let's not wake up yet. The intrusion of logic threatened to end the dream too soon. She felt the beginnings of a rise towards consciousness, but resisted it by talking. She wanted to stay right here in this room, in this moment. She wanted to stay here forever.

“Oh, it's my pencil sharpener, I carry it around everywhere in case I run into a boy I want to seduce.”

Luke stopped jiggling his foot.

“I'm being seduced, am I?”

“Certainly, why do you think I told you to strip? You don't think I can actually draw, do you?”

Luke looked round his room with a mixture of surprise and excitement.

“To be honest, yes, I did think you would at least make a token effort.”

Kate put the drawing materials to one side and moved over to sit beside him on the bed.

“And what was going to happen after I'd made a token effort?”



She ran her hands slowly over the shoulder of his shirt, her fingers tracing the V shape of the top buttons, down to when they met the sprinkling of chest hair. She knew this body like no other. 19-year-old Luke. Luke in his 20s, Luke in his 30s. And then, halfway through his 40s... He gave a quizzical smile that always signalled the end of the dream.

He said, "What's the matter?"

She searched his face helplessly. "You died."

He took a hand and gently said, "I know, my love, I know. But you have to wake up."

"Can't. Don't want to. Can't."

"You can, sweetheart."

"Go to the doctor, you're still young. The tumour is tiny now, they can take it out. You can—"

"Kate, my love. It's too late."

Luke looked down at their hands. She followed his gaze, down to their wedding rings and then back up into the eyes of her middle-aged husband.

He said, "You're going to be all right, Kate. Come on, you know things. You're the girl from the future."

She gently took her hand away and whispered, "I'm not going to be anything like all right."

"Get some help."

"No," she said with certainty. "No one can help me. And I've had enough of the future."

So, there are funnier bits than that. But that... that's how it starts.

**Clark:** Well, we should say, actually, because you call it, in your acknowledgements, you call this an adventure story, and I promise to our audience that these are not spoilers, but there is a car chase, there is a fight scene, there are some gangsters, so, I mean, you kind of wanted to get a lot of different things in there, I think. But the central thing is this idea of a terrible loss that sits in your background. What would you do if years in the future you could go back to the past and change what happened?

**Webb:** Yeah, and I think daydreaming about going back to various points in your life is pretty common, I think it would be odd not to think about that from time to time. Obviously, the game is totally ruined the moment you have children, because if you start mucking around in the past too much then you don't meet the person that you meet and then you don't conceive the children at the same time. Before anything you've bumped off your own kids. So, that slightly spoils it. But, also the other thing is that once you are in the past, you only have to think about it for five seconds before you realise it would be incredibly lonely,



because you'd be the only person there, you wouldn't necessarily know the people who became your best friends, you'd be isolated through your knowledge of their future, your own future, the future of world events. It would be a very lonely place. So, it is tough when Kate goes back. It is basically a story about... Although there are lots of jokes, and there is a punch-up and a car chase and Russian gangsters. It's really a book about grief, it is charting back territory that journey from when you're stuck in the past, when you lose someone, particularly someone that you live with and everywhere you turn, their absence is a presence. And you're stuck there. And in Kate's case, she has to literally go back into the past in order to learn how to re-engage with the present. The process when you start to remember what the present has to say for it, that it does have something to offer and you start to blend the lost past with the new present process that we call mourning. But at the moment when we meet her straightaway, Kate is still in shocking, terrible grief and she's not getting better and this needs to happen before there is renewal and then it all gets very exciting and considerably happier.

**Clark:** You, of course, have set this book in freshers' week, which to many of us is a kind of agonising memory and it is interesting thinking about that today and noticing how there seems to be this upswell on things like show social media for people to kind of post pictures of the past and remember these times, which kind of makes me quake a bit. And I know that your early university days were not very happy ones because you had suffered a terrible bereavement. You'd lost your mother. And you had to go to university with this essentially accelerated adulthood. You had seen things that most of the people, nearly all of the people that you met, hadn't. And I wondered if that tied in to the inspiration for this book?

**Webb:** I think that must be a big part of it. That feeling of being older than everyone else. I was... I was literally 20 by the time I turned up, because I was old for my year and I had to take a year out. My mum died halfway through my A-levels, so I buggered them up the first time and then I had to sit in the class with the year below, that polished off... I was a 19-year-old man in a school blazer. So that shaved a few corners off me, I can tell you. And then I turned up... Yes it was, it was a question of, you know, having some compassion and some patience with people who are really upset because their cat had died and trying to remember that pain is relative, and it depends what has happened to you before how you're going to deal with this particular thing. So that was definitely there. But it wasn't... Freshers' week, itself, was... I remember, I say, remember, to people who have read *How Not To Be A Boy*, I



was hellbent on getting into that university and so very elated and happy when it eventually happened, that when I got to Cambridge I was absolutely delighted, as well as being in quite a difficult place emotionally, a difficult thing had happened, but it was brilliant that I got there. I remember Freshers' Week as a very exciting time. That first term was a really, really formative and thrilling part of my life. I was meeting all kinds of people and I thought it would be really exciting and it didn't let me down. So there is that feeling of being older, but also that feeling of discovery and Kate doesn't get that this time, because she has done that already. And what she learns is you can't fake innocence, you can't do something for the first time twice and that includes falling in love with Luke.

**Clark:** There is this awful thing, isn't it, that she goes back and of course she is a middle-aged woman with quite apart from her recent bereavement, a whole wealth of life experience. She meets these teenagers and they're idiots, including the man she really, really loves. They're just idiots.

**Webb:** He's not the man she lost, he's still this boy. Because he hasn't had 28 years of living with Kate, who changed him, because we change each other when we are together for a long time. He is still doing all of the studenty affectations that you'd expect of most... not most, but some, middle-class English students. He's pretending to be French, his pretending he has read books that he hasn't read and all the titty affectations that go along with that territory. She's kind of rolling her eyes all the way through this and waiting for the moment when she has to convince him that he's seriously ill and he needs to... She's his wife from the future, but he's the guy who needs his head examined.

**Clark:** I was thinking, when you were talking about your own feelings about getting to university and the time of discovery and liberation and elation, that one of the things that you talked about very powerfully in the memoir was this feeling of escaping somewhere that felt like it was constraining you. And it struck me that it's really interesting, the pull of the past. There are things we want to escape about our pasts, our formative years and our upbringings. And yet, as we get older and as we reach middle age, we're kind of pulled back to it. It's a very weird thing for us to reconcile, isn't it?

**Webb:** It is a really ambiguous relationship, that we have with the past. I've noticed that myself in the lockdown days, that yes, every time I go for a walk, I don't want to listen to new music. I want to listen to pop songs from the 80s and 90s and I'm rereading books that I remember enjoying before. We're all kind of, you know, everyone's doing their best, but let's



face it we're all pretty stressed out and knackered. And all this kind of talk about, "Oh, let's read *Ulysses*, if not now than when?" When there isn't a horrible virus outside the front door! So, I think we should all give ourselves a break and I think a lot of people's comfort zone will be certain times in their past. Not *all* of the past, what I've been thinking is if you're stuck in one household, there's never been a better time for me to be stuck with the people that I live with that I currently live with, my wife and my two daughters. When I used to live with my dad, or naming no names, certain flatmates, you know, to be in that house back then, that would have been worse than it is now. So, I thank my lucky stars for the present moment, this version of the moment, the people I live with I'm very grateful for.

**Clark:** There is that great thing about the middle-aged lockdown, that you think, "At least I don't actually want to go out to a nightclub! Thank God!"

**Webb:** I had to write a diary piece to promote the book, and I would have been having to make up exhibitions and theatre trips that I've not seen. I don't really like going out anymore. So, it would have been a pack of lies, but now I just got to talk about the minutiae of my boring, domestic life.

**Clark:** Now, I mean, I don't want to kind of do really creepy, obsequious stuff, but it has again struck me... Is it OK...?

**Webb:** Oh, go on!

**Clark:** Well, a lot of people, when they're talking... it's endless, "What box set shall we watch?" And this goes back to, in this kind of time, let's go back to something we really enjoyed and we knew we really enjoyed it. *Peep Show*, has come right up there. You must be, I know you're gratified anyway by its continuing success and devoted fanship, but it's getting yet another life now.

**Webb:** Yes. I couldn't be happier. It really seems like - sorry, I'll try and inject the odd moment of modesty - it appears that it has really stood the test of time and it hasn't really aged that badly, even when they're talking about the Home Secretary being David Blunkett! I mean, you can forgive moments like that and I'm just really thrilled that people still enjoy it and it still has this life. And the sketch show that I did with David, it comes back, the working from home sketch is rather more joyful than the *Remain Indoors* sketch, but they've both sort of been circulating and it is very nice to be associated with a couple of shows, or a body of work, I nearly pompously said there, that sort of resonates now and again and particularly if it cheers people up during tough times, that's great. Because I think every artist,



every comedian, secretly aspires to be useful as well as entertaining and you want to make the contribution. Maybe that's just people when we get to be over 40, and that's why we stop making our earlier, funny stuff and start making more serious things or comedy things with a more serious intention behind them.

**Clark:** Like, in fact, another show that you have made recently, another sitcom with David Mitchell, *Back*. Which again is a kind of delve into the past. Again, it's like something comes back from the past to completely disrupt the present.

**Webb:** Yes. Yes, written by Simon Blackwell, and we were a tantalising three days away from wrapping on the second series before we had to stand down, otherwise that would be ready to go. But another three days of filming before it is finished. I think they should just fill in those scenes with claymation. Little, plasticine me and David in stop motion animation doing scenes. But that was pooh-pooed. We'll have to wait to do that. But no, you're right. I think it's just when writers get to a certain age, we start constantly talking about nostalgia. *Come Again* is very interested in nostalgia, but also the dangers and limits of nostalgia, as well as its pull and '92 is quite an interesting time from that point of view, because you think of the 90s and you immediately say Blair and Britpop, but of course, that was quite late on. Most of the 90s was yet another Conservative decade and '92 you were two years into John Major with another 5 to go. There was a recession and it was very painful to a lot of people. But apart from that, it was really a golden era of total boredom and I think given that the horribly, horribly exciting times that we live through at the moment, even before the flipping plague, Brexit and Trump and all of the stuff that unbalanced the likes of me, I speak for myself, that have been very dramatic and peculiar and odd, that was all going on. And so you think of the 90s as this time when it was really dull and the worst thing that could happen was... well, I don't know. There were terrible things that were happening all the time in the 90s. It just felt like a normal level of terrible.

**Clark:** Yes. Exactly. I think everybody, as you say, is feeling pretty destabilised and freaked out and weird at the moment. But, you yourself are recovering from a pretty serious and seismic clash with severe ill-health that you had no idea about, and, of course, it now seems very peculiar when that is kind of what your book's about. Somebody not knowing they have something wrong with them and...

**Webb:** Yeah, so I finished the book and to do the second series of *Back*, I went for a cast medical, which is normally a very perfunctory affair. And the GP put his stethoscope on my



heart and pulled a face and said, “OK, and what have you been doing about the heart murmur?”

And I said, “What heart murmur?”

And queue studio laughter. And he sent me to see a cardiologist and I turned out that I had a prolapsed mitral valve, one of the valves in my heart, instead of opening and closing, one was just doing this. So over half of the blood that was supposed to be pumped into the upper chamber – or was it the lower chamber - that it is then sent round your body to do stuff, it was flowing backwards, so my heart was having to groan and change shape and it was doing all kinds of crazy things to keep the show on the road and it was about to fail and the cardiologist said, “You’re going to have a heart attack in the next fortnight, the next two or four or six months, this heart will fail.”

So, that got my attention. So basically, I had to have open heart surgery, which I did last November. I’ll show you the scar. No, you don’t want to see the scar.

**Clark:** I think why not, they can always cut it.

**Webb:** Look, there we go. That’s a good’un. Look, there we are.

**Clark:** Wow.

**Webb:** Next time I do a book event, I won’t necessarily start taking my clothes off. But you know since we are here, in a theatre that would feel weird, but since I’m at home it’s amazing I got dressed anyway.

**Clark:** Well, as we all know, we only have to get dressed from the top up these days, don’t we?

**Webb:** It’s OK. I am wearing trousers.

**Clark:** That was, you must have felt terrified. Obviously, that’s an obvious thing to say. But you must have felt absolutely terrified.

**Webb:** Yeah, it was a kind of... a “Don’t panic” kind of moment. OK, we’re not going to hyperventilate, we’re just going to sit down and talk to my wife, talk to a few friends. OK, this is what needs to happen. Tell the children in a calm and sensible way. What are the risks and what does recovery look like? It is a big old job, because it is one of the biggest operations you can have, apart from having a baby, it is pretty much the most traumatic thing you can do to your body. I won’t go into details. It’s pretty... It was a slow recovery. So, I was kind of fit for work by February. So the operation was at the beginning of November and



by February I was ready to do Back in a slow way. In a way that I was pleased that my character isn't a stuntman.

**Clark:** And what has it done to the head, that kind of experience?

**Webb:** It's been basically 100% positive. It's been, I mean, I think I probably needed that. I was still drinking quite a lot and still smoking, for crying out loud, and I'd been sort of looking for this, "Oh, I just need a some sort of watershed, it may be this birthday is when I'll stop smoking or this anniversary or..." OK, here was a nice watershed for me, they literally turned me off and on again. I haven't had a drink for five months or a cigarette and it just feels like a completely different part of my life now. This brush with something that nearly ended my life has almost certainly extended it, assuming I'm spared by COVID-19. That's fantastic. I just feel like I've got a new... I've taken a much greater interest in my own body and my own health. I have a very affectionate attitude towards my internal organs. I want to look after those guys.

**Clark:** Yeah, you need to mollycoddle them. You gave an interview where you said you'd been feeling tired for quite a long time in the run-up to this all being discovered. This was a very... it's a very vivid image. You said you thought, "It's just what happens when you treat your body like a skip." Which I think, is some way to put it. It's funny, but I think you meant it, didn't you?

**Webb:** Yes. It was abusive. I was in a... its addiction and I was in a terrible spiral of your brain is just... I've read a few books about this. I didn't join AA or anything like that, because I just can't quite see me doing that, it's not for everyone. But whatever works for different people. But I've read a few books and your brain just gets hijacked and your brain is very good at addiction. Addiction is where your brain is trying to form habits, which is usually a good thing, your brain is very good at forming habits. But it gets a bit carried away and these routes to finding a sort of high of serotonin or whatever it is, your brain finds these... This sounds ridiculous, because everyone likes a drink. But with me it just became a kind of anytime of the day or night thing. So it took a while for me to understand that I'm not someone who can just have a drink with friends from time to time, it's probably going to be curtains from now on, as far as the booze is concerned. There is a lot of boozing in the book.

**Clark:** There is a fair bit, isn't there? I'm thinking about how the book is going to kind of play a part in your life and how writing is going to play a part in your life. One bit that really made me laugh a lot and that I don't think is in any way a spoiler, is Luke is a wannabe



writer, he is a writer in fact. There is a moment when we are treated to some of his extraordinary prose, which I don't know, I felt that he probably read Martin Amis. Is that a fair assessment?

**Webb:** Yes. It's my impression of what a bad writer would do if he was overly influenced by Martin Amis. Yes. It's an affectionate... I like Martin Amis, but it is an affectionate pastiche of that kind of very heightened prose.

**Clark:** Yes. I think, as I understand it, you have been pretty taken by the business of writing novels and this is not going to be a one-off. I don't think you want to be that kind of pastiche writer of bad Martin Amis prose, so where... what would you like to do?

**Webb:** I want to write more books. More novels. I don't know if they're all going to... I don't know what their relationship with this one is going to be, whether this is an outlier, because it is trying to do quite a few things. Sometimes it thinks it's quite a thoughtful little book about love and grief and memory and then at other times, yeah, it's got a punch-up and a car chase and it's an adventure. And I don't know if I've managed to make those things cohere properly, but I think the readers are going to have a really good time watching me try. Maybe the next book will be a first person thing and it will be a much quieter thing, or... Or I don't know what it would be, but I didn't want to write one novel, I want to write ten. That's what I'd like to do next. I'm not going to stop being an actor, I enjoy it too much. But I'm going to write more books.

**Clark:** And tell me this, was that something that was always in the plan? You knew from an early age that you were great at performing and that performing, imitating, acting out, being kind of funny was the way to blend in, in a way. A way to influence situations and feel, I suppose, feel kind of safe and accepted. Writing is a much, much more solitary affair. Was writing something that you always thought, "Yes I am going to want to write a novel one day?"

**Webb:** Yes. I mean, in terms of a big prose project like a novel, not necessarily specifically that, but I was always a writer performer, and the two things have always gone together. And one of the things that David and I agreed on very early on, was that no one was going to make us choose. Although, to be honest, we were earning a living as writers first. We were writing for other people's sketch shows. Armstrong and Miller and Jack Docherty and that is how we were subsisting before *Peep Show* came along, but then we got our big break. We always wanted to do both. They were kind of inseparable like that. And as far as I'm



concerned, the novel is just another way for me to entertain people. And it's always about, it's always an act of communication, even acting and writing. It's always reaching out and trying to make people laugh, or in the moments in this book where I'm not trying to make people laugh, I'm trying to make people go, "Oh yeah," or... It's that kind of just trying to touch people. Yes, I see it as... I don't really see it as much of a change. This is just the latest way that I'm trying to...

**Clark:** Different kinds of creating and connecting. Now, it is an interesting time to publish a novel to say the least. As you said, you were going to be going around the country, all over the place talking about it in front of audiences and that hasn't happened, although we are doing this and I know you're doing lots of these sorts of things, so you're getting out there, again, communicating with people. But it is a big thing, isn't it, to publish a novel that is about grief and sadness and loss at a time when that is actually so incredibly at the forefront of people's minds?

**Webb:** Yes, I mean my big worry... God knows, there are greater calls on our sympathy at the moment, but my worry was that I was just going to irritate people by going on about this being... This is a funny book, mainly, it is a funny book, it's uplifting, it is there to be enjoyed. I think whilst on the one hand people do want that, we can't go around being miserable all the time, certainly people want escapism and people want to think about something that isn't a virus. At the same time, there's a way of doing that and my natural way of selling something would be to really go for it and you know, make a joke of how mercenary and conceited and pleased with myself I am about the whole thing and that doesn't really work in the current climate. So, it's, you know, it's tough finding the right kind of voice to say, "Please buy my book." Particularly when some people haven't got much money at the moment and they're worried about their jobs and it's a hardback book, they're not cheap. So you feel a bit... I just feel a bit, unusually for me, sheepish about trying to sell the book. I wrote it, so people bloody well need to read it.

**Clark:** Let's flip that a bit and say there might be, you know, it might be a very good time for people to read something which is honest about the emotional loss you can feel and how it can completely capsize your life. Your protagonist, Kate, is not dealing with grief in a way that is allowing her to be remotely functional. She's drunk all the time, she's losing her job, everything.



**Webb:** What was enormously encouraging is I did an interview with Decca Aitkenhead, just before I turned up, I googled her. You Google people when you're going to be interviewed. Come on, it's only polite. And I was horrified to find that she had lost her partner not long ago. And I thought, "Jesus Christ, I've got a real widow reading my made up character, who is a widow. And she's going to think this is a load of childish nonsense." And, actually, she was very, very nice about it. She said it was really well done and I choose to believe her. There was no reason for her to say that. She was genuinely really pleased with it and so I took that... I was very encouraged, as someone who has been through it. Of course, I lost my mum. But, I think to lose a partner is a whole different order of things. So, that was encouraging, that my experience of losing a person, you can transfer it, if that's not a horrible kind of businessy way of putting it.

**Clark:** We always come back to this, don't we? As a kind of species, that grief is absolutely universal and absolutely specific. And you all feel things that are so utterly specific and particular to you and yet there are similarities and there are bonds between people who are grieving, aren't there?

**Webb:** Yes, I think that's absolutely right and, yeah. Yeah, that's right.

**Clark:** Robert, now just give us a little insight into the lockdown lowdown... How is it? You are homeschooling a bit... well, I suppose it's the holidays, now.

**Webb:** The holidays, for us, have just finished. We've been homeschooling this week, which is largely a matter of IT support. I didn't realise I was going to be embarking on a second career as a primary school supply teacher who's patronised by eight-year-olds, but that's part of my life at the moment and we've got a timetable which we try and stick to. We've got alarms set for the end of lessons. It's all quite stressful. But it kind of finishes by 3 o'clock, 3:20, so you've got the rest of the day to write bits and bobs and I'm not idle. I keep hearing about other people being bored. Honestly, I should be careful what I wish for and I might regret saying this, but I'm quite looking forward to being bored after the book is actually out. Because I've been fairly busy, flogging it and writing bits and bobs, so, yes, I'm looking forward to doing a better job as a supply teacher than in the afternoons maybe thinking about the next book.

**Clark:** You kind of alluded to, no, actually, this isn't the time to feel *Ulysses*, to read *Ulysses*. Have you found things that you have wanted to go back to on your bookshelves and felt sort of the kind of thing that is just the right sort of thing to read at the moment?



**Webb:** Oddly enough, I started reading quite a bit of Clive James literary criticism essays, Clive James writing about Larkin makes me very, very happy. And it's because I can't quite settle down with a novel. Although, I did, ridiculously find, right at the beginning of lockdown, I bought this notion that maybe now is the time to... I did find the first volume of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and I thought I was going to read Proust. I just got to the end of the third half page sentence and I thought, "I don't know, I don't know if this is the time." In translation, I should say. So, I've got more than half a dozen books open by my bed at the moment, I've been even more chaotic and idle a reader than usual. Rupert Everett's memoir is a lot of fun. This is very looks-ist of me, but I always thought he was probably too beautiful to be a good writer, but he's actually a very good writer. Yes. I love those books. And David Nicholls' lovely *Sweet Sorrow*, I can now read. I was trying to avoid it while I was doing this, because I think there is a bit of overlap. I flatter myself that we're not in a completely different ballpark, Mr Nicholls and I, so I can read that now and am enjoying it. But I've got quite a lot going on. Clive James writing about writers is definitely a comfort zone, because I'm an English student and feel guilty that I wasn't a better English student, because I was too busy doing Footlights and also because he is such a terrifically approachable and witty and such a great teacher because he makes you feel smart, he makes you feel as smart as he is, which you're not, but when he is writing about brilliant writers I'm having a good time.

**Clark:** And there is a little bit of Larkin in your book, isn't there? Larkin creeps into the book in a very kind of touching way. Now, before I let you go, you're started on the second of this projected series of 10 books. Maybe not a series, but I did hear you say and I'm sure your publishers have written this down, you want to write 10 novels. So, the next one, I won't probe too much, but how is it going, where is it at, anything you can tell us about it?

**Webb:** We are nowhere. There isn't even a title, not an idea, not a character, not a setting, not a genre. I mean I didn't really decide on a genre for this novel, as you know, it's about six. But I don't know. I don't know. But it's going to be fantastic. But anyway, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

**Clark:** Hold that higher, a bit higher! Robert Webb, *Come Again*. Do come again, please! Come again and speak to us actually in person when we get through this current emergency. Thank you so so much for being with us today.

**Webb:** My pleasure. Thanks, Alex. Hurray!