

Kirsty Bell

In conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly: Hello, I'm Andrew Kelly from Bristol Ideas and I'm hosting today's session. In our work on the future of cities we look at cities of the past, where those cities are now and what they can teach us. One city that has always been of interest to us is Berlin. We're joined today by Kirsty Bell. Kirsty Bell is a British-American writer and art critic living in Berlin. She has published widely in magazines and journals, including *Tate Etc.* and *Art in America*, and was awarded a Warhol Foundation grant for her book *The Artist's House*. Her essays have appeared in over 70 exhibition catalogues for major international museums and institutions, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and Tate UK. Her latest book is *The Undercurrents: A Story of Berlin*. Kirsty, thanks for joining us today.

Kirsty Bell: Thanks, Andrew. It's great to be here.

Andrew: Can we start with the theme of undercurrents? There are many undercurrents here, aren't there?

Kirsty: Yeah, there are many undercurrents in this city, And I think that was the initial impulse to start thinking about it as a topic to be writing about. I came from art writing, so this was a new area. But I was interested in not only the things that you can see in this city, the idea of cityscape not only as a visual entity, but also as something that has this kind of other layer to it. That's very palpable in Berlin, particularly compared to other cities I've lived in, where there are kind of atmospheric undercurrents that have an impact not only on the cityscape but also on your daily activities. So that was one of the things that I was trying to understand, to find a way to describe in taking on this project.

Andrew: You've lived in both the old East and the West, haven't you, in Berlin?

Kirsty: Yes. When I first moved here in 2001, I moved here from New York, where I'd been living previously, and I moved to an area called Prenzlauer Berg, which is the former East of the city. I lived there for the first almost 15 years I was here. It was going through this enormously accelerated gentrification process. And then around 2014, I moved with my family from the East to this house that I live in now, where I'm actually sitting now, which is in what was formerly West Berlin, but quite close to the border between West and East. I describe it as being a house that has its feet in the West, but it's looking East. It's actually on the borders of the Landwehr canal, this canal that runs through the city. So I'm on the west side of the Landwehr canal, but looking directly eastwards.

Andrew: It is the story of a house as well, isn't it? I don't know whether you know about this TV series we have in the United Kingdom called *A House Through Time*, which takes a house and looks at its history and the people who have lived there. I have to say your house would make an ideal subject for this, given what you've done, the people you've investigated and found, and the story of what happened about the house and also around the house.

Kirsty: Yes, I have heard about that programme. My mum lives in Manchester, and I've watched episodes of it when I've been up there visiting her. I think it's a fascinating idea, because there's so much insight that you can get through that format, through that container of the house. For me, it was really triggered by moving into this not only new environment but new building that had a very particular atmosphere. I started to think about two things, one of which was this idea of the house as a witness, and what would this house have witnessed in the streets outside it for the more-or-less 150 years that it's been standing here on the banks? And obviously in a city like Berlin, the kind of things that it's witnessed are very, very extreme, perhaps more extreme than in many other capital cities. The other thing that I started to be curious about was what the experience of the previous inhabitants of the house might have been, particularly the female inhabitants, who don't

necessarily get recorded in more general histories of the city. So that was the impetus to start this investigation and look back through these decades, and through these different eras, to the people who have lived here before me.

Andrew: I want to come back to women and Berlin, because you cover and recover histories in the book of particular women in Berlin, which I thought was brilliantly done. Just tell us a little bit about some of the inhabitants of the house. I was particularly taken with the Sala brothers example.

Kirsty: Yes, so the house was actually built right at the beginning of this period in Berlin called the Gründerzeit, which began around 1870. It was this period of massive growth and building where the city really came into being, where there was this huge influx of workers from the outskirts, from the Slavic countries, from the west. This house was built by a man called Zimmerman, which I thought was kind of very beautiful and fitting, seeing as in German 'Zimmer' means room and it also means carpenter, so this idea of the first person who lived here and built this house was actually named after the rooms.

I should say, also, it's a big house. It's a three-storey house with many apartments that are rented. It's not a single-family house, that's a bit misleading. He bought it to live here, but also to rent out these other apartments. And then, in the early 1900s, it was sold to this family called Sala, which you mentioned. When I found their name through the archives, I was particularly struck, because when we'd actually found the apartment and moved to this building, the name Sala had been written across the facade of the building. Their descendants, their family, lived here throughout most of the twentieth century, and they developed the plot and built a printworks in the backyard. They were a family of printers that made these very high-end lithographic prints and specialised, actually, in games – in card games and board games and the kinds of games that were made out of paper in the early twentieth century.

Andrew: So it was a house for residential but had linked work as well.

Kirsty: Yes, in the backyard, which was typical for these Berlin houses of this period.

Andrew: And when it comes to that family, you looked into who had been involved in the Nazi period as members of the party from that family. What did you find there?

Kirsty: I was really just trying to find out information about this family and particularly it turned out that there were these two brothers, and one of the brothers had adopted a daughter during the war. This female figure, this adopted girl called Melitta Sala, had really piqued my interest, but it'd been very hard to find out information about her. All of the various bureaucratic archival channels led to a dead end. I realised there was one other possible way to find out more about this family, through the Bundesarchiv, which has a record of all of the members of the Nazi party.

Investigating Nazi Germany or Nazi Berlin wasn't my main instinct with this project. There's been so much written about that already, of course, but on the other hand, there's no way around it. I didn't want to get around it. So I'd written to the archive, asking about these two brothers, and kind of forgot that I'd sent this email. I wasn't really sure if I was ever going to hear about this or hear anything. And then, out of the blue one evening, I got an email back with what they discovered, which was that one of the brothers had in fact been a member of the Nazi Party, and a very early member. I think he joined in 1932, which really says a lot, because that was before the Nazis came to power. He was clearly a committed Nazi. And his other brother, Bruno – they shared the business, they lived in the same house – he was not a member of the party. So just that quite simple fact said a lot about the period, about this family turmoil, and something that probably represented many other similar situations during that time.

Andrew: You were able to also follow the adopted daughter right through to the end, weren't you?

Kirsty: She lived here. Her adopted father, Bruno, had taken on the whole building when the brother Kurt died, and he died himself in the '60s. Melitta then eventually inherited the building from her mother, she owned the whole building and the printworks, but sold it, interestingly, just before the wall came down, literally six months before the wall came down, which I found so fascinating also, because we live just two blocks away from where the wall would have been. So this idea of how that might have felt during that period was really fascinating to me, and then that she had the misfortune to sell this prominent property just at that moment. But then, in the archive, I found this very nice detail that she agreed to sell it on the condition that she could carry on living in her apartment with these particular gold bathroom taps and central heating that she was very keen to keep hold of.

Andrew: Coming on to Berlin more widely and what you find and as you wander and cycle around the city. You call Berlin a 'City of extremes and interrupted histories' a city built on sand and swamp, a city built on ruins and change. How did you try and map the city as part of this work?

Kirsty: Well, what I ended up doing, or what I began doing, in fact, was I really stuck very closely to the position of this house, to this idea of the house as a witness, and more particularly to this one particular view that I have from the kitchen window, as if that view was an eye on to the city. I use that as a way to focus the research, because there has been so much written, it's such a long period of time, there is so much material, and so much fascinating material, so I used that as a way of orienting myself and keeping the research on track.

I curiously discovered that piece by piece, if I dissected the various elements in this view, then this history of the development of the city unfurled in front

of me. For instance, I began with the Landwehr canal itself and I hadn't known but I discovered that it was designed and developed and implemented by the famous landscape architect, Peter-Joseph Lenné, who is very well known in Berlin for designing the Tiergarten here, as well as all of the parks and palaces in Potsdam. He was moving from landscape architecture into urban design. He was keen to develop the whole city in a way that was going to be beneficial to its growing population, growing inhabitants, and wanted to include these generous parks and green spaces. This is just to show you how, like, just one little fact and I go off on this deep body of research!

So that happened with the Landwehr canal, and then beyond the Landwehr canal are the ruins of this important railway station called the Anhalter Bahnhof, which was one of the most important railway stations in Europe at the time that it was built in the 1870s. Through that, I was thinking about what the city was at that period, at the turn of the century, when Berlin did become this vital hub of industrialization, of mechanisation, of railways. It was growing and becoming modernized at this incredible accelerated pace.

But at the same time as all of that was happening, there was political conflict. All moments of Berlin's history are laced with political conflict. So that was how my research progressed - in a way it does move chronologically through time, but it always circles back to the present, because I was very keen to be thinking about the past as it's present now, as we can feel it now, rather than history as being something that's distant.

Andrew: That's really important for us and the work we've been doing in Bristol. Both waterways and railway stations have been very important in Bristol's history as well, and similarly how we try and look at the city and learn about the city, not necessarily looking out from a window, but I was very much taken with that as an approach that you had. You talk also about Christopher Isherwood, another great chronicler of Berlin, doing a similar thing in his work.

Kirsty: Yes. There is this famous passage where he describes the window as being a camera, as if it was passively taking images of what was happening around it, and that was a similar approach to what I was undertaking. I think also through the writing process I was very sensitive about the fact that I'm not German, I'm not a Berliner, I'm a newcomer, this history that I'm investigating isn't my history, and what that might mean as the narrator of this story. But I think that also, as was also the case with Isherwood, this gives you a certain detachment and ability to see things in a different way than you would if this was your own culture and familiar.

Andrew: But you've been there a long time, haven't you?

Kirsty: Yes, over 20 years. So yes, that's officially a long time.

Andrew: Mind you, it takes a long time to become an official Bristolian, I find, so maybe that's something that we share as well. Berlin also has this burden and responsibility, doesn't it, of being a capital city now as well?

Kirsty: It is a burden, and it's a very particular responsibility. And it's also very new, which is very easy to forget. During this process of reunification in the early '90s, this was a big question in Germany: where would the capital city be? Should it still be in Bonn? There was a lot of reluctance, in fact, to move it back to Berlin, which is very far east if you look at the map of Europe. It's quicker to Warsaw than to Cologne, for instance. So it is quite fraught, it's distant... Also there was this desire to become a capital city very fast, and through that acceleration, decisions were made that were probably not the best decisions. There was this pumping in of money into the Potsdamer Platz renovation, which anybody who's visited Berlin in the last ten years will know just did not work. It's kind of a ghost zone, there's not really anything happening. But there was this desire and also this assumption that Berlin would return to the energy and the power and the status that it had at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Andrew: We're involved in a project – we have been for some years – in Bristol called Legible City, about how people learn about the place, move about the place, from practical things like moving from A to B, to get from the railway station to the concert hall, but also much deeper issues like how do you understand a place like Bristol? What do you pick up from the streets, almost from the stones of the place? And I thought your book was an example of that, how you try to investigate almost the soul of a place, in fact.

Kirsty: There was this one thing that triggered that in a way, which was I started reading this literature about what's known in Germany as the Kriegsenkel generation, which are the grandchildren of the war. As there's been these advances in epigenetic research and understanding of the fact that trauma can be inherited, there's been some really interesting and specific research on the inherited trauma of war that many, many, many German citizens have experienced. I'm also that generation, I'm the same generation as the Kriegsenkel, it's just that my parents weren't in Germany.

As I was reading this literature and thinking about the view out of the window and all of the damage that's visible – 80 per cent of the buildings that I can see are new, there was great damage in this area where I am – and I was thinking about the idea if that inherited trauma might apply to a city as well, what that would mean? It's a bit of a kind of out-there idea, but what happens in just the cityscape, the bricks and mortar, where do those traumatic experiences reside environmentally? Perhaps I wouldn't have come up with that thought if I hadn't really felt quite strongly that there is some residue of that atmosphere, that you can just feel on the streets. It has an effect, in some areas more than others, and certainly in this area where I live now, unlike the area where I lived previously, you just can sense the weight of the past here very much. And there's been, quite recently, attempts to find ways to represent this, through signs. Information is what we really need to understand what was there before. In Berlin, and across Germany, one of the most moving memorials is this project called the

Stolpersteine, particularly related to the Holocaust, where these small brass cobblestones are laid into the street in front of particular buildings where Jewish residents had lived. These cobblestones are engraved with the name and the dates of the residents. Stolpersteine means stumbling stone, so they are something that you literally kind of stumble across through the city, and that makes it very palpable what that actually meant, you know, in terms of the living population of a city like Berlin. So many citizens were extracted and murdered.

Andrew: I've been to Berlin a few times, not recently with the pandemic, but in the years before the pandemic, and they were, I have to say, some of the most moving monuments I've ever seen. I often talk about this in Bristol, in terms of how this city comes to terms with its past, particularly the trade in enslaved people, and the remains of that in terms of the wealth in the city and the inequality in the city. And the Stolpersteine are one example of that. When I last went to Berlin, I deliberately walked around a lot of the museums, the remnants of the wall, and so on, and I thought the city had done the most I'd ever seen to try and come to terms with these many different aspects of their past, not just the Holocaust, but also the legacy of communism and the DDR, for example. I thought it had been done remarkably well. And in a very moving way, as well, I thought.

Kirsty: It's been incremental. When I first moved here, there wasn't very much at all. It's been, I think, over the last ten or 15 years that people have realised how essential that is, not just for people visiting, for tourists, but also for the people who live here. Because if the wall wasn't marked in some way, you wouldn't really know that it had been there, except again that sometimes you sense this weird atmosphere in areas around where it had previously stood. But the interesting thing for me about many of these initiatives is that they're not decided on by the state. They're private initiatives. They're grassroots initiatives that have taken hold. The Stolpersteine was a project developed by an artist initially in Cologne to commemorate Sinti and Roma victims of the Holocaust, and then he quickly

realised how successful it was, how poignant it was. And it just grew and developed through that.

Andrew: I deliberately went and looked for some, in the sense of keeping my eye on the ground and couldn't see any. It was when I wasn't looking for them that I actually stumbled across them. And then I saw them, not everywhere, but all over the city. We had a talk by one of the people who works with the artist a couple of years ago in Bristol, and they talked about how they were planning one in Britain, actually, for the Kindertransport. So that's another way of how memorialisation and education can expand into other countries, as indeed the stumbling stones have, haven't they? They've gone into other countries.

Coming to terms with the past is, as I mentioned, really important, and Berlin, and Germany, seems to have done that more than anyone in recent years, and certainly the post '68 generation helped foment that. But you bring into the book the interesting work on things like psychoanalysis that's taken place with the grandchildren and the children. But also looking back at the immediate postwar period, and the Year Zero and the forgetting as well that people went through, or the wish to forget what they went through.

Kirsty: The narrative was taking in this loose chronology through the period, and I discovered that the final street battles of the Second World War had actually taken place right outside my window, pretty much. It had been very difficult to write about the war period, but then I found that writing about that immediate postwar period was even more difficult, because, you know, just this feeling of like, well, here we are in this moment of devastation, and how can we move forward?

I think also particularly because I had been identifying with this family that was living in the house, that weren't victims of the war, they were on the side of the perpetrators. But then what does that mean? They're still traumatised, and that kind of helped me understand a little bit the dilemma

of all of these citizens at the end of the war, where there was just an utter loss of orientation, and then the dividing of the city. I think it just led to a kind of numbness.

The way that many individuals and families dealt with it was through work, and hence the German economic miracle, *Wirtschaftswunder*. I think that people just tended to put their head down and not think about the past, and then that's what leads to problems in the future generations if there are a lot of secrets, because it ends up that people don't talk about the difficulties and the trauma and these unspoken things get passed on.

Andrew: You write a lot in the book about the other books you've read, the films you've watched, and we would recommend your reading list and your watch list, as it were, to our audiences as well. I wanted to talk about a few and I want to focus particularly on women, because we know well books like *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Walter Benjamin's work and so on. What you bring back to attention is certain writers and commentators and activists who we might not necessarily have heard too much about. I was particularly taken with a few of these, which I'd just like you to go through and talk about. Gabriele Tergit, for example, is one who I knew a small amount about, but not much, but she was very influential, wasn't she, in the work you did?

Kirsty: Well, just by this kind of beautiful coincidence, because one of the things that I started doing as I was obsessing about this subject is that I would read every sign on the street that I passed, and one of the streets that I would pass frequently, which is on the side of the canal a couple of blocks along, is called Gabriele-Tergit-Promenade. I had no idea who she was, Gabriele Tergit, but I looked her up, as you would, and I discovered that she was a writer and a journalist born at the turn of the century to a Jewish industrialist family. She'd actually grown up also on the canal, a few bridges further north. She eventually got a job as a journalist, worked as a reporter at the criminal courts in Moabi, so she was reporting from these crime trials. She's also written two novels, which have very recently been translated and

brought out by the New York Review of Books, but I was actually more interested in these journalistic pieces because, again, for me what was really important was this idea of the eyewitness of a particular period, and wherever possible a female eyewitness, which was much more difficult to find, to get a sense of what a woman's perspective in these different periods of time might have been.

And so, for me, to come across Gabriele Tergit was just an absolute treasure trove, because she was such a perceptive observer of this very volatile period. Her first article was published in 1915, and she was writing right up 'til 1933 when, just a couple of days after Hitler was elected, she fled to Palestine. So there's this incredible trove of writings that were just very rich with ordinary detail about how people lived during these different periods. The impact, for instance, of the First World War, what that meant for women and the emancipation of women and the rise of the young working woman. Unfortunately, those journalistic pieces haven't been translated into English yet, as far as I know. But anyway, a lot of her thinking, her very precise and witty observation, flows also into her novels.

Andrew: And another one to talk about is Clara Zetkin.

Kirsty: Yes, Clara Zetkin, also powerful proto-feminist, activist and very close friend of Rosa Luxemburg. And Rosa Luxemburg was somebody also that I looked into a lot. I read a lot of her letters, primarily because she's very connected with this canal, with the Landwehr canal, because after she was murdered, her body was thrown into the Landwehr canal and discovered several months later. Clara Zetkin was a politician, a communist, and actually had a seat in parliament for many, many years. She gave this very rousing speech just after Hitler was elected, if I'm remembering that correctly. She was also a pacifist, and had written some beautiful texts that are now very relevant to read now, with the war in Ukraine happening.

Andrew: The final one I want to ask you about is Christa Wolf, who I read as in the 1980s her work began to be translated into English, and I read her a lot. But she also sums up, doesn't she, some of the difficulties of coming to terms with the past of Germany?

Kirsty: Yes, Christa Wolf is a fascinating example and just such a brilliant writer, and interesting because she was from East Germany, and so has this other perspective. There were two books of hers that I was reading very closely in research for my book. One of them is called *Patterns of Childhood*, and she is talking about her own childhood. She grew up during the Nazi era in a small village in what is now Poland. In this book, she goes back to the village with her own daughter to retrace and rediscover her childhood and try and access some of the memories that have been buried. She just writes about it so evocatively – what that actually means to have grown up in that situation, where all of the local streets are named after Hitler and his men, and about how memory hides certain facts from you.

There's a second book that I read of hers, called *City of Angels*, which also has very much to do with memory, and has to do with her own concealed memories of her involvement with the Stasi. It turned out after the reunification, when all of the files were opened, that she was on record as being an informant, and that created a big, big scandal. She doesn't really recollect that, can't really recollect that and it was a big scandal in the literature world here. Of course, during that time, every third person was a Stasi informant, so whether or not that actually meant something is kind of up for debate.

Andrew: We've talked about how Berlin, particularly, has tried to come to terms with its past, and that's one of the lessons for how we think about cities now, particularly cities that have gone through periods of trauma or crisis or conflict or, as in Bristol's case, helped build the city into the city it is today through the trade in enslaved people. I wanted to talk about some of the other things you mention in the book about making better cities. Just

linked to the work that you did on the women writers and commentators and politicians in the past is that I read in the book that Berlin decided about ten years ago now, I think, to name every new street after a woman – is that right?

Kirsty: Yes, yes. They realised that there were practically no streets named after women so they drew up a law that every new street would be given the name of a woman. That's how come this weird street in my neighbourhood is named Gabriele-Tergit-Promenade. But they are often these very weird streets that have the names of these very prominent women. Yesterday, for instance, I was riding my bike down Hannah-Arendt-Straße...It's in the centre of the city and not a street that you would often find yourself on unlike Friedrichstraße or Wilhelmstraße, which are these very prominent big alleyways. But it has an effect, taking that that kind of decisive action. I think that it's all about visibility, that when something is visible and signalled, then it can have an effect on the inhabitants, just on this second-level of awareness of the past and who had been living in a place.

Andrew: We've taken great inspiration from Rebecca Solnit's work on this. I noticed a map was done of London's subway stations recently, where all the stations were renamed after women as a work of the imagination. Certainly in Bristol, this is something we've looked at. There's a wonderful writer in Bristol called Jane Duffus, who's now published two volumes of *The Women Who Built Bristol*, bringing back to a lot of public attention often-forgotten people, or ones that deserve to be remembered in a bigger way.

Berlin isn't immune to the issues that affect all modern cities, but it's tried to do something about them. I was reading recently about the attempts to bring, for example, rent controls into Berlin, which I think failed or were declared illegal in the end.

Kirsty: Well, they came up with a very radical plan that was actually very extreme but quite brilliant, because they set a fixed capped rent at really

quite a low price per square metre, city wide, across the city. Anybody who was paying more than that immediately got a rent rebate. So there was this beautiful moment of reversal, where all of this money that had been flowing into the pockets of landlords suddenly came back into the pockets of the tenants, except that it wasn't actually legally watertight. The landlords, especially these big corporations who own thousands of apartments, took it to court and it was overturned, which was kind of tragic for many individuals who then had to pay back rent or were supposed to pay back rent for that period.

There is in Berlin a very sturdy grassroots political activism about many of these issues, about urban development and gentrification and raising rents. There was a referendum last year about whether or not to - enteignen is the German word - re-nationalise, essentially, apartments that had been bought by corporations who owned more than, for instance, I can't remember what the level was, but 3,000 apartment units in Berlin. It passed, the referendum passed, there was a majority in favour.

But again, the question is what can you legally do to enforce that? And then the dilemma is that as rents goes up, and the cost of living increases, which, of course is very extreme now with the gas crisis, then people have less time to be grassroots activists. This is the kind of catch-22 – you have to work harder to pay your rent and pay all of your bills, so you don't have that time to invest in that. There was this period in Berlin, really up until about 2010, where the rents were very low and it was possible to live in different ways, and there was a lot more empty space, it hadn't been developed to the extent that it has now, and that is reducing.

Andrew: And what does that mean for you as a resident of the place? You talked about the way activists now will have to work harder and their activism will be lessened to deal with crisis. We find that people who might have come to cultural events, for example, will have less money with the cost-of-living crisis, and will have less time, and probably a lot less energy, I

should think. As a resident of Berlin, how does that make you feel about the place and your involvement in the place?

Kirsty: Well, it's definitely changed. I mean, I do remember a certain period around 2010 or 12 of suddenly noticing what Berlin was becoming. Because for a long time, Berlin had just been full of cranes and building sites and heavy machineries, and that kind of excitement and potential of things being built, and a lot of empty spaces and plots just full of weeds where, again, you had this sense on the one hand of there being potential, and then on the other hand of there being this sense of the past represented through that empty space.

And then at a certain period, the cranes have gone and the diggers and the scaffolding comes down, and then there are just buildings, and they're not interesting buildings, and it's not social housing – it's investment- driven properties. And then there isn't any potential anymore. That potential has all been drained out.

In this city, as in many other cities, a lot of the real estate investors aren't even based here, so they don't care about social infrastructure, they don't care about quality of life. So it's just this drain of resources out of the city. It just makes me really disappointed and kind of frustrated and angry, as are most of the people that I know who moved here or who've been living here for a longer period of time. But Berlin is also a transitory city where people come and stay for a while and leave, and that's not just a recent phenomenon. It's always been like that throughout history. So a lot of people come and have a few years here and don't really engage with the problems that are happening on a more kind of infrastructure level.

Andrew: I think this is one of the big issues for cities, really, how you develop that rootedness in people who may not be rooted there for very long, and their responsibility to the place and the way you build social infrastructure. A city like Bristol is not an unwealthy city. It has very poor areas, but it's

generally a wealthy city, but even its tax base is fairly limited, for example, to invest in the social infrastructure, and this will just get worse over the next few years with the cost-of-living crisis, I think. When I was last in Berlin, a lot of the big main museums were closed for renovation, and there still seemed to be a lot of investment going into the arts and culture of the place, and far more than takes place in this country, but I guess that's always under challenge as well.

Kirsty: Since reunification, there has been this long, long, long, long-term plan of each of the main museums undergoing this renovation, so that's happening bit by bit, but really at a glacial pace.

Just picking up on that question of responsibility, I think that was also one of the questions that drove me to write this book. I'd been living here for 20 years, I was at this turning point in my life, thinking, am I going to stay here? What's at stake for me here? What's my relation to this place? Through this research, and really engaging with the past, and trying to understand how this city has become the way it is, why it is like this, has really developed in me that sense of responsibility and a kind of compassion towards a place that's not always easy to live in.

Andrew: One final question about cities generally. One of the things that Germany has tried to do in recent years is assimilate immigrants better than other places, partly built on its history. This is something which we deal with not well in the United Kingdom. I mean, Britain has changed, as you know, over the past decade. Germany has struggled in the past with this. Do you think it does it better now?

Kirsty: That's a very difficult question. The governmental response to the immigrant crisis, for instance, the 2015 immigrant crisis, was absolutely commendable, and disappointing that all of the European countries didn't follow suit and share that responsibility. But what it looks like in everyday terms is something else. There's a big, Turkish population in Berlin that

began to settle here after the Second World War. They came as so-called guest workers. And that term of the 'guest worker' was still very much in use when I moved here in 2001, so there's this sense that it's a temporary population, even though these people were in the generation that they'd been living here. So that's not very useful when it comes to assimilation. And I think a lot of that thinking lingers on. I think that on a governmental level, there's a lot of good will and real action, as was also seen when the war started in Ukraine, and a lot of immigrants came very, very quickly to Berlin, it was very visible. Yeah. As everywhere, it could be a lot better.

Andrew: A final question is about writing about cities. We encourage people to write about the place they're in. We publish some of that work and we're trying to encourage national publishers, predominately London-based publishers, to do more. Interestingly, I did an interview a couple of weeks ago with someone who's written a big book on Birmingham, which Penguin has published, and I'm hoping they'll be impressed with the decent reviews they've had on that, to encourage them to look at other cities outside London.

You did a prodigious amount of research on this. What advice do you have for someone who wants to write about their place? Where would you start?

Kirsty: Start with whatever's nearest, I would say. Whatever is nearest and whatever you're most curious about. Just follow whatever your instincts are telling you, where the questions are, where the difficult spot spots are, what are the things you don't really understand that you find perplexing.

I love that kind of research; I love going to archives and getting a big folder of musty papers and seeing what's in there. I find that so thrilling, and like that programme about the story of a house. There's so much that you can understand through that information about social structures that aren't just to do with the past – they have an influence on us now. I just feel like it's so fascinating, I don't know why everybody doesn't want to do it.

Andrew: We have a wonderful project in Bristol called Know Your Place, which is a website which was originally set up as a planning tool for the city council, for planning applications, but it's turned into this site where you can look at your street and zoom in and see your house, and there's sometimes photographs of what it was like through time, and what the street was like, what the area was like. This has been built up slowly to become this major resource for the city, and anyone who is looking into where they live in Bristol, or indeed the city, our first advice is to go to Know Your Place, because it also links to all the archives and library material that exists. Every city should have something like that, I think, it is a brilliant resource.

You've talked a lot about a lot of the writers and as I mentioned, there's lots of reading in your book that we would very much encourage people to go to. I think one of the best books about Berlin – you mention it in the book – is *Grand Hotel*, Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, because it does bring to life a certain period in the city's history, I think, and the pulse of the city in between all the machinations in the hotel itself. I do think that's a wonderful book, actually.

Kirsty: Yeah, it's brilliant. It's such an enjoyable read. The reason that I read it again was because the building that it's set in is this Excelsior Hotel that, again, is something that I would see out of my window, in the view from my window, if it still existed. So, again, it was for me that thing of cropping into what's in my immediate vicinity. But yes, that gives you a really lively understanding of the period and also the complexity, this fantastic cast of different characters that made up that Weimar period.

Andrew: And I'm glad you mentioned the word compassion earlier on, and you talk about that in the book. You also say, 'With inhabitation comes responsibility: to witness, to document and to act.' and I think that is about that, being rooted in a place and helping that place become better.

Kirsty: It's been very rewarding to me to get resonance from people who live in Berlin or who know Berlin. And also the book was translated into German, and I've had amazing feedback from German readers – some very old German readers, Berliners who grew up during the war years and who really responded to this unusual narration of the city that they know very well.

Andrew: Well, thank you very much Kirsty. *The Undercurrents: A Story of Berlin* is out now in English from Fitzcarraldo Editions, and as we've just heard is in German as well. Thank you for being with us today.

Kirsty: Thank you, Andrew.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.