

Writers Aloud

Episode 454

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello, and welcome to *Writers Aloud*, the podcast about writing from the Royal Literary Fund.

‘In order to write about life, first you must live it’, claimed the great American author Ernest Hemingway.

Yet using real-life experiences in your work can raise many questions. What is acceptable to include? How do you stop people you know from getting hurt? Are there lines you shouldn’t cross? For many authors, the question of who owns a story and the ethics of sharing other people’s experiences can be problematic. As Jane Shilling explains:

Jane Shilling: As a writer of memoir, the thing that’s haunted me throughout my writing life of two books, is not so much what I’m prepared to say about myself, but what it’s alright to say about other people and who owns the narrative, if you like. Because, you know, you think you’re telling your own story, but actually you’re telling your own story and that of your parents, your son, you know, the people you worked with; all those other stories and to what extent you can use those.

I mean, ‘the chip of ice’ is one thing but...I suppose I begin to feel more compunction actually, I didn’t feel very much in my first couple of books. Certainly one person who’s sort of close to me would be completely appalled if I were to write anything; and so I’m in this sort of very curious position of pretending that I don’t have this relationship, that I’m unable to write about it.

Writers Aloud

And even now, I'm writing fiction, I'm writing about a real person, and that throws up a whole new, different set of problems, you know, to what extent...what do I leave out of her life? What do I put in? Is it alright to imagine conversations, and feelings, and things like that? So one is constantly haunted by the *ethics* of writing, whether it's memoir or fiction.

RLF: Yet, as Shilling found when she wrote a book drawing on her experiences as a horse rider, some people are only too glad to see themselves in print.

Jane Shilling: Certainly my first book, when I sort of got on with it, it became very clear that the person who was going to be the heroine of it was the person who was teaching me to ride, who was a very formidable lady called Jilly Rogers.

And I'd told her and the people on the yard that I was writing a book, but I don't think they were much for reading anyway, and so they hadn't got much sense of what that would be. And I was just going to give her a copy, I mean, I got a proof, I think, of the book, and I was just about to give this proof copy to Jilly, when it was too late for her to do anything about it, really.

And she took my mare to jump her around the cross-country field, and the mare put in a dirty stop, and Jilly fell off her and broke her ankle. And so I went to see her in hospital clutching this proof and sort of thrust it into her hand and ran away!

And I honestly didn't know what she'd think. And then the book was published and there were lots of reviews. And one of the reviews said, 'Mrs Rogers is one of the great comic characters of English equine literature'. But I wasn't at all sure how she'd feel about being one of the great comic characters of English equine literature.

And so the next time I saw her, it was at some, I can't remember what it

Writers Aloud

was, some social occasion, and there she was on crutches, holding court in the middle of the room, and I shuffled towards her, and she hobbled towards me at top speed on these crutches, and gave me this huge hug and was absolutely delighted.

And then a couple of years after that she moved to Ireland, and I used to go over and visit her in Ireland. And she'd take me around the Dublin show saying, 'This is Jane who wrote a book all about me'. And so that was lovely, that was absolutely fine and she was thrilled. But I'm very conscious that there would be other people who would be much less thrilled.

RLF: Helena Drysdale agrees that friends and family members are often honoured to be included in books. But, for her, there is a clear line she wouldn't cross when it comes to people's feelings.

Helena Drysdale: My family completely accept it. In fact, one of my daughters is becoming a writer herself and my husband's a painter, so he's in a similar situation. And I have written about my family and they say that they're happy about that. In fact, they're 'honoured' to be in a book. But there are of course, lines over which I would not cross; and personal things that I wouldn't write about, particularly other people's personal things and relationship things. And I feel that a book isn't worth the hurt to somebody else, it's not a big enough thing, perhaps. So there I would draw the line.

RLF: Subject matter can make some degree of hurt almost inevitable however, as Charles Jennings discovered when he was commissioned to write a book about parenting.

Charles Jennings: A couple of decades ago, I was asked to do a book about fatherhood, and I think that somehow followed on from the kind of, fag-end of the *new man* thing, and anyway, it seemed to be in the air.

So I did this, and obviously, you're talking about two – as they were at the

Writers Aloud

time – small boys, and your wife. So, there is an element of, you know, it's a tiny bit revelatory; it's got to be a bit indiscreet otherwise it's just too boring for words. Most of the revelations and indiscretions are about myself, obviously, yak, yak, yak.

And I thought, *Well this is okay, this is fine, this is fair game; it's a respectable publisher, I'm not going to say anything that, you know, you couldn't tell your grandmother.* But, when it came out, actually, there were a few raised eyebrows; things I thought were just mere statements of fact had actually slightly transgressed onto somebody else's territory, into their private space.

So, after that, I thought, if it ever happens again, if I am going to have to use some sort of larger part of my family, or my friends even more – because the family's stuck with me, but my friends can always drop me – I am very conscious of the fact that what you as a writer, with the best will in the world, perceive as utterly harmless, irreproachably sane observation, can mean something quite different when it's the other party in question.

You know, when you're young and aggressive and stropy and you don't give a shit about anything, you will use *everything*. Now, older and tamer, and perhaps I'm more conscious of the way human relations work, I think I probably wouldn't, which, I don't know if that's...you know...that's just the way it is.

RLF: Christie Dickason got to learn how it feels to have your personal experiences made public when she was in a relationship with another creative person.

Christie Dickason: I think that any artist is going to be a difficult spouse, partner, or parent, because we're committed to telling the truth. I remember that my ex-husband was an actor, and we were having a fight once upon a time, and I felt myself reaching a peak of anger, and I saw

Writers Aloud

something, something in his face that was not, you know, not of the moment. And I said, 'You've just filed that one away, haven't you?' And he said, 'Yes, I have.'

Now, funny enough, I was watching him in performance at the Manchester Royal Exchange when he was having a fight, and he reached a certain peak, vocally, and I thought, *Ah, I know that moment!* And I said to him afterwards, I said, 'That was the moment, wasn't it?' And he said, 'Yes, I'm afraid it was'; but I understood.

RLF: But though the experience didn't deter Dickason from writing, she can understand why her children tend to give her work a wide berth.

Christie Dickason: Your children don't read what you write; I think they're a little bit afraid of you as a non-mother. I remember my eldest son saying to me, 'Mother, I can't believe that you are capable of imagining that,' and I said, 'Yes, I am, but not as your mother'; he was not reassured.

And I had to tell him that I had thought of the worst possible thing that could possibly happen to my character: she was having to change her life, she was having to uproot everything she knew; what could possibly be? And in fact I had – it was in my first book – the dissection, the opening of the gut, of the stomach of a newborn baby, to smuggle drugs.

He was reassured by that explanation, but he still didn't read my books. I think the fear remained.

RLF: Roopa Farooki meanwhile, says that people are often mistaken when it comes to identifying themselves in books.

Roopa Farooki: One of the things that's been asked is: *Is there a line you won't cross in your work when it comes to a family's privacy?* I think, of course, there are some things, I mean, I don't write memoir, and I don't think I really ever could. Even my closest book to a memoir was the novel

Writers Aloud

about my father, *The Flying Man*, and that was very much me spinning my own story from a starting place.

So I think that you have to be quite careful as well because it can be quite, I guess, difficult for people to see their work, to see themselves, put into fiction. And I would actually challenge most of my friends and family to find themselves there. Although I am quite amused when people do see themselves in something I hadn't intended.

And they always pick the hilarious and attractive character to say 'That's definitely about me'. And then I just nod and smile and agree.

RLF: These cases of mistaken identity can be the source of a great deal of outrage, as Tina Pepler explains:

Tina Pepler: There probably are lines I wouldn't cross in respect of anyone really, not just family. I did write a three-part drama for radio quite a long time ago now called *Sisters*, that's semi-autobiographical, and it tells the story of a diplomatic corps family of four daughters and their parents, and travelling around the world. And it's set in...one episode is set in Belgrade, mostly, but it begins in France and then goes into flashback. The second episode is set in southern Iran. The third episode is set in France. These are places that – although Belgrade was before any, any of us, any of...I wasn't born, my sisters weren't born – but the places, the other places, we've lived in all of those. I wanted to write about family, I think. I can't really remember what prompted me to start.

And I did fictionalise an awful lot; I introduced a big love story in what would have been my mother's life. And I have no idea if anything resembling that story happened. And all the sisters: I had the characters to build on, the characters who are very, very close to me. And the funny thing is that although it was very different, it started quite a debate in the family. And what that taught me, and I know I'm not the only writer who's found this – and perhaps particularly with drama – is the indignation

Writers Aloud

when they think they're being portrayed and they're actually not, and what they don't recognize when they are being portrayed,

I just find that very funny, but I do think writing about family is, whether you've got siblings or not, I think siblings are endlessly fascinating for an audience, so I was very glad to have done that one. People wrote into the BBC or phoned and said, 'Why can't I find the book?' So I'm trying to write that one as a novel, but finding it such a vastly different and incredibly challenging thing to write it as a book, or a series of books. But it...anyway, it went down well. Which I think just goes to show that family is endlessly absorbing for all of us, isn't it?

RLF: Pepler's solution, when it comes to using real people's experiences in her work, is to change something fundamental. This usually gives her the creative freedom she needs.

Tina Pepler: I had just moved into Bristol; I had a phone call from a friend, not that close a friend. She'd been working as an astrologer and living in Bath, and she'd gone to give some talks in the States, and she met a publisher while she was there, and they fell madly in love. She came back to England, packed up her life, gave up her work, her flat, her relationship, went out to be with this man.

And a couple of months later I had a call from her, and she said he'd had a diving accident and he was paralysed from the neck down. And it had happened a month or more before she called me. And she said he was getting a monkey to help him, a capuchin monkey. And it was going to be trained to fetch him a prepared snack from the fridge or to point a laser at a CD and the monkey would know to put that CD on, all kinds of things; and to be a companion, to be a constant companion; and that haunted me until I wrote about it.

Every step of the way, I checked it with her and with him, although I couldn't speak to him because he was still hospitalised. So that was quite

Writers Aloud

an extraordinary story to tell. And with that, I was very aware that I needed to change something about it. Not, I think, because he would have minded, because he absolutely wanted the story told. But I made him a woman; I needed to free myself so that I had all the liberty I wanted, I needed to change something pretty fundamental about it. So I swapped around something very fundamental like that.

RLF: For others, the key is in the spirit in which the story is being used. This came home to Stephen Romer when he contemplated using his father's journals in his poetry.

Stephen Romer: Obviously a question that concerns, especially the confessional poets; Robert Lowell was, as is famously known, accused by Elizabeth Bishop of using private material that might be hurtful, in this case, his wife, Harriet's letters, just to write his sonnets. I wouldn't legislate on such a question.

It once arose in my own work when I wrote poems about my father; I had been handed by his second wife, after his death, diaries that belonged to him as a young man, that I didn't know existed. And they are documents that were priceless because they are transparent, transparently of his character, of his soul, un-cynical. They recount his romantic encounters in London and in the barracks he was in near Winchester, extraordinary personal documents.

And I decided I would use them because I felt that my use would have been done with love, and I had that insurance in my head. And I feel that I haven't abused them. I *hope* I haven't abused them.

RLF: Although, even with the best will in the world, Romer concedes that the tendency to scavenge from experience can make it difficult for writers to be good partners.

Stephen Romer: Is it possible to be a good partner? This we are prompted

Writers Aloud

as a poet. Well, my own particular problem is that I'm a muse poet, I suppose. I'm known to some extent as a love poet, whatever that might be. And I can say this: that there is a problem of material, if the material you are working on is the relationship, or you were expecting the relationship to provide material, unconsciously or consciously, or if your partner is your source, then there is likely to be trouble ahead.

As the old Montale said, asked, 'Is the love in your poem one or many?' He says, 'I cannot recall, but beware the muse.' That would be my last word on it.

RLF outro: That was Stephen Romer concluding this episode, which was produced by Ann Morgan. The other writers we featured were Jane Shilling, Helena Drysdale, Charles Jennings, Christie Dickason, Roopa Farooki, and Tina Pepler.

There are details of their work on the Royal Literary Fund website. Next time, writers reflect on how past events, conversations and projects have shaped their work.

We hope you'll join us.