

# Writers Aloud

Episode 434

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**R**LF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 434 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Rosalind Harvey speaks with Ann Morgan about learning another language so well you dream in it, the process of finding the voice for other writers' characters, and the link between writing and translating.

**Ann Morgan:** Rosalind Harvey is a critically acclaimed literary translator who has been responsible for bringing a number of leading Latin American and Spanish voices into English. A founding member of the Emerging Translators Network and a mentor of a number of early career translators, she is a great champion of the craft of moving stories between languages.

She started off by reminding me how closely writing and translating are intertwined.

**Rosalind Harvey:** I suppose I should start by repeating a phrase that translators are often talking about, and talking about more in recent years, which is that, *translators are writers*. I think for me, I started writing before I was thinking about being involved in a career as a literary translator.

I've always written: I used to write poetry as a child, I wrote short stories, I recorded my dreams, I've always kept a diary. So there's always been some form of me putting words to paper. And I studied Spanish at school. I had an uncle, still have an uncle actually, who lived in London when I

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was growing up and he was always very interested in Latin America and in Spain, and used to take me out to lots of Spanish-related places when I went to visit, and I think that's where the interest in Spanish came from. It was offered at school and I did a GCSE and an A Level and then I did an undergraduate degree in Hispanic Studies.

And I suppose that's where I first started translating, as part of the degree, although it's very different to the kind of translation work I do now. And I then did a Masters in Literary Translation, which is where a lot of this stuff solidified into a practice. It was only then really that I started to think of how it might look like to work as a literary translator, so speaking with authors and that really intricate process of bringing a book from one language into another one.

**Ann Morgan:** So your Spanish skills...how did you develop that? Because it's actually very hard living in the UK, isn't it, to develop language to a strong enough level to translate? How did that happen for you?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah, I think it is hard. There's not as much value placed on modern language learning or any kind of language learning really in this country as I would like. I was lucky, as I say, because various languages were offered at my school. But it wasn't really until I was an undergrad studying Hispanic Studies and I got to spend a year abroad, in Latin America, where I had that fully immersive experience.

If that hadn't happened, I'm not sure if I'd really be where I am today. But it was that living and existing in another language, speaking it all the time; I ended up dreaming in it, doing your shopping every day. I was attending a Peruvian university, so I was studying and producing essays in the language.

This was when I was in my early twenties, so I suppose at a time when maybe it's more likely for that kind of language learning to be more deeply embedded in your brain. I imagine if I started learning another language now that I'm forty, it might not go in as easily.

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**Ann Morgan:** Could be an interesting experiment.

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah.

**Ann Morgan:** Fantastic. And how did you make the step to being a translator professionally; for a lot of people that's a bit of a mysterious process, I think?

**Rosalind Harvey:** I think it is still quite mysterious, although it's becoming less so. There are a number of really useful initiatives around which are aiming at demystifying the process which, yeah, still is quite mysterious.

For me, as I say, I wasn't really aware of literary translation as a practice, let alone a career when I was a student. I mean, I would have been reading books in translation, but I didn't give a huge amount of thought to how they came into existence. That only really started once I graduated, and I had a job the first two years after I graduated from my first degree, as a bookseller in a small bookshop called Grant and Cutler, which doesn't exist anymore.

It was sort of subsumed by Foyles, so it does exist in some form, I suppose. But I was working in the Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese department for a couple of years. And one of the roles that I had was to check the books that came in from our Spanish suppliers and translate the blurbs on the back for the bookshop's catalogue, which got sent out to schools and universities and academics.

And it was then that I started to realise that there was somebody behind these blurbs, there was somebody behind these books, they were being produced, there was this process of mediation. And it was around that time as well that I started attending the translation workshops at the Poetry Translation Centre in London, and really thinking about what it might mean to work in a role where I got to use the Spanish that I'd fallen in love with as an undergraduate, and to carry on with this writing

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which has always been a practice in my life but nothing that had ever been public, if you like.

**Ann Morgan:** Now, you've translated some extremely well known names: Juan Pablo Villalobos, whose novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, was shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book award, and that book was actually instrumental not only in establishing his name in the English-speaking world, but also, And Other Stories, the publisher, which at the time was really quite a new publisher and is now such a huge part of the international literature scene.

I love reading Villalobos' novel through your translation and it's such a strong, distinctive voice, the rhythm is so powerful. How did you go about finding that register, finding that way of bringing his work through into English, what was that process like?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Oh, that's a great question. I always like questions about this book because it had such a special place in my heart for me.

It was the first book that I translated on my own. I'd done a couple of co-translations before with a great translator called Anne McLean. But *Down the Rabbit Hole* was the book that I brought to And Other Stories' attention. They hadn't published anything before and Stefan Tobler, the publisher, was very generous and took a punt on a relatively unknown translator and asked me to translate it. And it led to a really long lasting and fruitful working relationship between me And Other Stories and Juan Pablo.

So it's a book that will always be a really, really special title for me. And in terms of the voice, the voice was what drew me to the book first of all; it's this incredible mixture of tenderness and claustrophobia. For anyone who hasn't read it, it's told from the point of view of a young boy.

His age is never stated, although interestingly enough readers always

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feel like they know how old he is. People always say, well, 'I'm sure he was seven', or 'I was adamant he was nine'. But I think he's somewhere in between range of seven and ten, something like that. He's probably not secondary school age, but he's old enough to read the dictionary every night and learn the words, although he learns them slightly incorrectly, which is where part of the tenderness comes from.

And he has this voice, which is partly built on the fact that he lives this very isolated existence. So he lives in a place, which he calls 'the palace'. He's not allowed to go to school; he doesn't have any friends his own age. He only knows his father and the various slightly dodgy adults around him in that environment, including a tutor who's brought in to teach him what he would have learned had he been going to school. And he learns these words from the dictionary. So his diction is really sort of fixed by the fact that he's in this strange claustrophobic environment where he doesn't have access to the speech of people out in markets, out in the street, at school, in normal workplaces.

And he's also a child, so he absorbs things and parrots them without fully understanding the context. And when I spoke to Juan Pablo about that voice, which is so unique, he talked about having wanted to develop a very powerful literary voice. But it's interesting to me that although clearly it is a literary voice, it's also highly believable as a child's voice.

And he wrote the book before he had children. In fact, I think his wife was pregnant with their first child when the book came out because it's dedicated to his son. But while he was writing it, he didn't have children and I think he has talked about listening to friends' children speak, and trying to absorb some of the rhythms and intonations of the way that children speak.

And so I was really conscious when I was working on it, that it was this combination of someone who had listened to how children spoke, but also wanted to produce this quite stylised child's voice, which sits in a

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tradition of other famous children's voices in literature. And so one of the things I did when I was working on it was I read quite a few other books written in the voice of a child. I read, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* by Roddy Doyle.

**Ann Morgan:** I was just thinking of that book. Yes, a fantastic book and I can see that comparison actually really strongly.

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah. I think they make for really good companion books actually. And I read *Room* by Emma Donoghue. There were a few other ones I can't recall right now, but I was trying to absorb what it meant to produce a child's voice within anglophone literature, so that I could do something similar to what Juan Pablo had done in Spanish.

**Ann Morgan:** Are there many comparable Spanish-language children's voices in literature, or was that quite a departure, what he was doing, was he carving a bit of a fresh path?

**Rosalind Harvey:** There are Spanish language children's voices but I feel like what he was doing with that book was unique because of the very claustrophobic circumstances. He chose to place this boy in this extreme environment and obviously largely the way that it works as a reader is that you have more knowledge than he does in terms of the things he's talking about.

You get to know quite early on what the situation is, before Tochtli the main character, does. And it's that sort of extreme...yeah, it's that extremity of his existence which I think is really unique.

**Ann Morgan:** Now I was struck recently, I read your translation of Villalobos' story, short story, 'This Side of the Wall', which is coming out in the Comma Press anthology, celebrating ten years of the English Pen award. And obviously that's a different voice, that's an adult voice there, but cultural references, it was very interesting, there were a couple of

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things that jumped out at me and it made me wonder: so I think *Reader's Digest* is mentioned at one point, and the narrator says that his, I think, father or mother was a GP, father, I think.

Again, GP, a British, very British term. How do you make that call about where to situate those references in terms of where your reader is and where the book is coming from, where the text is coming from?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah, it's a really good question and it's a really difficult one. It's not difficult to answer, just that the answer is that annoying one that translators often give, which is, *it depends*, so it's very context-dependent. And I think it would be very rare for someone to say, 'I have a particular strategy for that kind of problem and I will apply it across a book or across a short story', because it doesn't really work like that.

But those two examples that you gave, so, GP, I'm trying to think what it was in the Spanish now, I think it's possibly *médico de cabecera*. So it's an analogous role that a doctor might have, I suppose like a family doctor, which might be the more American or U. S. term. The risk always with that kind of thing is that by picking 'GP' in this instance, you shut off the possibility of readers imagining this story as taking place in Mexico because they hear this very British term and they think, *Well, hang on, that's a bit jarring, I thought we were in Mexico!*

But I suppose the argument for doing something like that is that it's a very neutral term for most British readers and so it can slip by unnoticed within the rest of the context of the story taking place in Mexico. Now that's obviously not gonna work, you know, if an American reader reads this because Americans don't have GPs.

So you're always alienating somebody, you can't please all of the people all of the time. You have to land on one of these decisions. But I think it can be quite interesting within one text to adopt an approach that is, you know...it's not that uncommon, I don't think, where you're looking at all

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of the Englishes that you have access to and you might have a GP in one text, but you also might have a term that's used in American English or Canadian English or even Australian English, if there is a good enough reason to have that. You know, it might be for sonic reasons, it might be there's a poetic reason you pick a particular word. You have to use all of the tools in your toolbox and the coherence...the levels of coherence for that will vary depending on the text, I suppose.

I think *Reader's Digest* was *Reader's Digest* though, because they did, they literally had a subscription to *Reader's Digest*.

**Ann Morgan:** Really, because I found that amazing. I thought, *Really, is there, in Mexico, is there* Reader's Digest? But that's fantastic.

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yes, so that one was just kept as it was, but as I say, it really depends. And it's always a question of weighing up what your readers will be comfortable with, what they'll tolerate and what they will kind of...it's always...I always describe translation as, it's a kind of suspension of disbelief. You're asking your readers to suspend their disbelief and to believe that they are reading the Spanish or whichever language it might be through your English. It's a kind of sleight of hand.

**Ann Morgan:** Yeah, that's...it's a lovely way of putting it. And in fact, that brings me on to a question that I spend a lot of time thinking about, and I devoted a whole chapter to in my book, *Reading the World*, which is the fact that translation as a concept is almost untranslatable.

We have so many metaphors for it: people talk about Babelfishes or conjuring tricks or ventriloquism. Is sleight of hand the way you think about it or how would you describe it as a process to someone who perhaps doesn't know what it involves?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Oh, I think we'll need a whole other podcast! There are so many metaphors and that's one of the things I love the most about



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translation. Anything for which there are that many metaphors is a very, sort of, slippery beast, it's unpindownable. And that's why I think I and many other translators I know keep returning to it because it's always slightly out of reach, the practice.

You can describe it as being like acting, that's a very common translation metaphor, you're interpreting someone else's words, but your role is very important. I recently did an event with Daniel Hahn, who has a great metaphor, which is to do with somebody copying a piece of artwork, but using a different medium.

So you might be looking at an oil painting, but reproducing it in charcoal. So you're aiming to give a similar effect, but some of the tools that you're using will be different. I have a metaphor which I like to use, which is... you're cooking a dish from memory and you might not have all of the same ingredients in your cupboard, but you can kind of approximate some of the flavours. So if you don't have wine, you might use lemon juice and sugar, for example.

**Ann Morgan:** Ah, I like that. Yeah.

**Rosalind Harvey:** But all of these metaphors, they're only ever gonna be incomplete and imperfect. And that's part of the joy of translation as it generates, it's constantly generating new ways of thinking about itself.

**Ann Morgan:** Yes, yeah. Now, you translate Latin American writers, but also Spanish writers, and I wondered if you have to sort of adjust your working process slightly between the two. How close are those two kinds of Spanishes, and do you tend to adopt a slightly different approach to them?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah, that's a good question. I translate far more Latin Americans, to be honest. I've not worked on that many Spanish writers, and I think, for me...there's great writing coming out of both regions, but I

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think I'll always feel a bit more comfortable working on Latin Americans because, as I was saying before, that's sort of where, I suppose that's where I fell in love with Spanish, that's where I really immersed myself in it. And although my Spanish now is, it's quite rusty and it's a slightly strange sort of mongrel mix of Peruvian Spanish from twenty years ago, plus bits of Mexican and bits of Iberian Spanish from various friends that I now know and speak to in Spanish along the way, so it's a bit of a homeless Spanish, the kind of Spanish that I speak, but I always tend towards Latino Spanish just because that's where I fell in love with it.

But yes, there are definitely...they are mutually intelligible, but there are huge variations within all of the different Spanishes. So a Mexican will understand someone from Madrid, will understand someone from Uruguay, but there's a lot of very different vocab that varies a lot across the region.

There's different grammar as well and different ways of structuring phrases. So for example in Peru the syntax will be inflected by Quechua, which is one of the main indigenous languages there. So the verb will often go to the end, for example. So there's a massive amount of variation depending on where you are.

And it would be very difficult for any translator from the Spanish to feel like they knew and were comfortable working with all of those variations of the language. So one of the best approaches is just to ask people that you know who spend time in those places. And there's also a limit, I might turn down a book if it was a book from, I don't know, from Nicaragua, somewhere where I hadn't spent any time. It may well be that there's another translator who's far better placed to work with that particular variety than I am. I think knowing your limits is also a useful watchword.

**Ann Morgan:** Yes, absolutely. Now, you talked about having a really long and fruitful relationship with Villalobos. How does that working relationship go, does it vary between writers or how do you like...what's

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your ideal working process with a writer, how much involvement do you like them to have?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yeah, I think it does clearly vary a lot between writers and translators. I mean, the most extreme example would be if you're translating a dead writer, there's obviously not much of a relationship that can take place. Although some translators like to joke that that's the best scenario possible, because then they can't argue with your work.

I've had a range of different kinds of relationships, I suppose. So partly because that first book...it was Juan Pablo's first book, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, it was the first book I translated. It was the first book *And Other Stories* published. So, it was kind of this early crucible, it felt like we all came up at the same time together.

And I think that's maybe one of the reasons we've got this lovely longstanding relationship. But I've also got writers that I've worked with who...we've just had a relationship via email. And all it's involved is me acknowledging that I'm working on their book, sending them a few questions, and them replying with the answers.

And it's a courteous and a civil relationship, but it hasn't evolved into a friendship. And there's everything in between, I know, for example, there are quite a few writer/translator, husband-and-wife teams out there. There are translators who become very, very close with their writers.

And there are other writers who don't have the time or the inclination to meet their translators. So it depends on the individuals involved. I think for me, I like to feel that I can speak to an author to ask the million and one stupid questions that I will inevitably have about a text. And I sort of feel, especially now as I'm starting to write my own stuff, I think I would feel quite uneasy if someone was working on my book and they didn't have any questions and they didn't want to reach out and engage on some level about that process, because it's a hugely complicated process.

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You know, your translator is gonna know your book inside out. And part of that getting to know a book involves, I would say, speaking to the author, if they're around and available.

**Ann Morgan:** As you say, you're starting to write your own material. What prompted that, what made you decide to take that leap, make that shift?

**Rosalind Harvey:** It was a range of things, I suppose, as I said before, I have always written, but it's always been a very private practice for me. It's been a sort of, a way of processing, a way of figuring out what I think about things, or figuring out what the questions I need to ask myself are. And then I suppose, during my translating life, lots of questions kept emerging and re-emerging, similar kinds of questions that I had, about the process and about the industry and the profession and the way that it all sort of slots together.

And I started writing down some of these questions and seeing links between them and seeing a few possible answers to them. And during lockdown, when I was at home a lot, as we all were, I started to realise that it was more than just notes, it was more than just me trying to figure something out in my own head, and I wanted to make it a bit more public and to maybe start asking some other people some of these questions, and see what they had to say. It's starting to look like it could be a longer project. So it sort of comes out of a need to ask questions, I suppose, and to maybe ask some other people those questions.

**Ann Morgan:** And I've often thought that, because for me as a fiction writer, although I spent my twenties trying to write fiction and writing basically unpublishable stuff, it was only after I did the Reading the World project and had read all these extraordinary stories from all around the world. Many of them that worked in ways that were very different to the tradition that I was familiar with, and it sort of blew open my imagination.

And I can imagine that as a translator – I know that a number of writers

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almost learn their craft by sometimes even copying out other writers' novels or short stories – and so it seems to make a lot of sense that a translator might well begin to write their own material. And in fact, many of our most famous international writers translated as well between a number of languages.

It's just simply that so many English people don't speak, or English speakers don't speak another language to the level of being able to translate but that I think perhaps isn't so much the case in the English language fiction. So that makes a great deal of sense.

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yes, exactly. And I think for me, producing a number of books over a number of years has been a really great apprenticeship in terms of bashing out a certain amount of words in a day, and just feeling like I have produced a book. Although there are differences between the two practices, but just in terms of feeling like I have worked on a book and I know I can sit down in a day and type for a certain amount of time.

And I can think about what it means to reconstruct a sentence creatively. That's been a really great kind of training ground in terms of moving towards doing my own writing in a more serious way.

**Ann Morgan:** Now you've also been involved in lots of initiatives to increase people's awareness about the possibilities of translation, including the intriguingly named Real World Translation Treasure Hunt. What does that involve and why do you think it's important to do that sort of work?

**Rosalind Harvey:** Oh yes. So the Treasure Hunt is actually known as Word Keys, the Real World Translation Treasure Hunt is sort of a subheading. We called it Word Keys based on the title dreamed up by the guy who I originally developed it with. And it came about as part of a translation residency that I had at the sadly now departed Free Word Centre in London.

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**Ann Morgan:** Oh, I know. It's such a shame.

**Rosalind Harvey:** It is a shame; it was a really wonderful, hopeful place. And they were brave or foolish enough to host one of the first translation...I think it was *the* first translation residency in the UK, which partly came about by plotting by Daniel Hahn who I mentioned earlier and Ros Schwartz.

And I was there with another translator, Nicky Harman, who works from Chinese. And our remit was to put together a programme of translation-related events that would demystify the practice for the general public. And so we used Free Word Centre to host some of the events, but we also did a lot of events just out and about in London, which was really, really fun.

And the Translation Treasure Hunt was one of those, and I developed it in collaboration with a real-world games designer, which is this great small organization called Coney, as in Coney Island. And they're made up of mainly theatre makers, independent theatre makers.

And so the brief that I gave them was I wanted a game that involved two teams of people moving around on the streets, you know, sort of getting down and dirty and talking to store holders and passers-by, and in some way they would have to translate clues to get to some sort of prize at the end. And it's a really fun game and it's also nice in the sense that it functions as a metaphor for – talk about metaphors for translation – it sort of functions as a real-world metaphor for translation in many ways. So the teams always get through the game in very different ways. They all reach the end point, they translate themselves through the clues in very different ways, depending on the makeup of the team and when it's happening, whether it's raining or not. It's a really nice way to get people to think about how languages connect all of us.

And how talking to people on the street, you know, those kind of

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connections, those unexpected connections we can make, can lead to the game being, being won. And the way that the game is won is that both teams have to collaborate, so it's also a really nice metaphor about collaboration.

**Ann Morgan:** And it's been great to see in recent years a number of these questions being much more widely discussed and a lot more focus on the role that translators have. One of the big discussions at the moment is whether translators should translate it two ways, traditionally there's always been an assumption that a translator should work into their mother tongue, certainly in the English-language publishing world.

And now that's being challenged, with good reason, because it does actually limit the circulation of texts to a certain extent, and it limits what certain translators are able to do. Where do you stand on that question? How do you feel about the idea of translating either way into Spanish or into English?

**Rosalind Harvey:** I like this question. I think my views on it have changed. I think when I was just starting out, I think I'd probably swallowed wholesale the idea that you only translate into your mother tongue, which is quite a lazy thing to do. And I think now I feel very differently, especially because I know lots of L2 translators, as it gets called when you're working out of your so-called mother tongue, which in and of itself is a slightly problematic term.

**Ann Morgan:** Yes, absolutely.

**Rosalind Harvey:** But as you say, it limits the amount of work we have the privilege of reading. I have one colleague, for example, who works from Kurdish. I mean, how many quote/unquote native English speakers do we know who are going to bother to learn Kurdish and translate Kurdish literature for us, very few, I would argue.

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He works with a co-translator or with somebody who will read various bits that he sends her just if he's unsure about certain English elements of the phrasing. But I think questioning whether somebody is able to translate out of their mother tongue, if we're going to do that, and sometimes it can be a valid question, then it also has to go alongside questioning whether somebody like me can translate from a language, which, you know, I learnt it twenty years ago, I haven't lived anywhere Spanish-speaking for a long time. My Spanish is often quite rusty, I don't think there's any more reason why somebody working out of their mother tongue should be able to do it than the doubts around me being able to do it, for example.

**Ann Morgan:** No, it's fascinating, and I think it is a really important thing to consider. And actually I hope that the discussion is going to open up more diversity in terms of the kind of storytelling that we get, and the kind of translating that we get as well. I think there's lots of possibility there, so it's quite an exciting time.

**Rosalind Harvey:** It is, it's really exciting. And it's also, just to answer your question in a slightly different way: I think the idea, this trope that a lot of us maybe absorbed when we were first starting out, or several years ago, that you can only translate into your mother tongue, it comes from this idea of somebody growing up in the UK, going abroad, learning a language, and then coming back and sort of bringing the spoils from...

**Ann Morgan:** ...Yes, a sort of colonial hangover, yeah.

**Rosalind Harvey:** It is, yeah, and I think we've got to be really careful about that. You know, what does that mean about the kinds of stories that we're bringing, what does that mean about the mediation process that's taken place?

**Ann Morgan:** Yeah. I think also perhaps a hangover of the assumption there used to be, that a good translation was an invisible translation; that a good translation should read like a Julian Barnes novel! And actually



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increasingly we're seeing translations that are much more adventurous in terms of what they do with the English language, as well as...because often the source language is very adventurous and playful and much like we were talking about with *Down the Rabbit Hole*. So yeah, I think that that's maybe part of it, as well.

**Rosalind Harvey:** Yes. No, it's a really exciting time, actually.

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**RLF outro:** That was Rosalind Harvey in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Rosalind on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 434, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 435, Brian Clegg speaks with Caroline Sanderson about how he brought together his parallel passions for writing and for science, explains why we can all claim to be descended from royalty and describes the sense of wonder that he believes is integral to science writing.

We hope you'll join us.

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