

Writers Aloud

Episode 436

RLF 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 436 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second in a series on the theme, 'How I Write', we hear about the relative merits of pen versus computer, the role stationery can play in planning, and some of the pros and cons of writing software.

Pen or pencil, desktop or laptop, Word or Scrivener? These days, writers have more choices about the methods they use to tell their stories than at any time in history. In this episode on the question, 'How Do You Write?', we talk to Royal Literary Fund fellows about their favourite tools of the trade.

With a career spanning more than four decades, John Keay has seen some dramatic changes in the technology available to writers.

John Keay: I started writing longhand, my first book was written longhand, and my wife – I was just married – dutifully, sweetly, typed it all up with carbon paper on a little Brother portable typewriter. So over the years we've moved on quite a lot in the technological front. I progressed to an electric typewriter and then to...I think it was a Radio Shack computer thing.

And at the same time, the fax came along, that was a tremendous excitement, the fax, and then in the 1990s, the Internet and so on. So, anyone who's been writing for the last forty years has had to perform

Writers Aloud

all sorts of technological conversions. So, here I am in this study, with nowadays, a couple of keyboards, and one more or less defunct computer and another laptop, which is fairly new, and a printer and photocopier.

And all these things are fairly essential and that's why I find it difficult to work anywhere else, partly, because all the hardware is there. The other thing is that all my books are there, the study's entirely lined with bookcases and the books have long overflowed the cases, and so they're mounting up on the floor as well as along the walls. And if I could jam books into the ceiling, I'd do that too, I think.

RLF: For Kerry Young, however, moving away from technology towards more traditional methods proved to be a revelation when it came to writing fiction.

Kerry Young: Before I started to write fiction, I'd written a lot of work-related materials: information packs, resources, learning materials, practice guides, project reports, research evaluations, loads of stuff for years, on and on.

And I'd written all of it straight on the computer. So I imagined I was gonna write fiction the same way. I was really surprised and I couldn't understand why it would take me a whole day to produce 500 words. And it was like getting blood out of a stone, it was horrible.

And then one day, I was down in Jamaica, sitting on the hotel veranda, while my room was being cleaned. And because I didn't want to disturb the maid, I decided to leave my laptop in the bedroom safe, and write longhand in my notebook. And boom! that's when everything changed. The words just flowed out of the pen: I was writing two-and-a-half, three thousand words a day, easy; like the characters were dictating their story to me.

So maybe they just didn't want to talk to the computer. After that, I decided

Writers Aloud

that the only place I could write was outside. So, as well as making trips to Jamaica, I built a small summerhouse in the garden in the house in England with heating and electricity, so I could work out there all year round. And that was brilliant, just sitting there writing about the heat of Jamaica, while looking out at the snow covered lawn.

And that's where I finished *Pao*. I got more flexible after that. So by the end of *Gloria*, I could write in the library and cafés, even on crowded trains, I could do that. I could even write at my office desk while people were wandering around the house deciding whether or not they wanted to buy it. By the time I came to *Show Me a Mountain*, it was writing anytime, anywhere, which suits me well.

RLF: William Palmer is also an advocate of writing by hand.

William Palmer: I write in the old-fashioned, almost medieval way, with pen on paper. This gives me the equivalent...a first draft written by hand gives you the equivalent of a musical score, a rough score, that you then improvise on and change when you come to put it on the keyboard.

And when I do put it on the keyboard, I print it off every evening. I don't trust memories or I don't trust my own memory, but I don't trust memories on computers and things, because they may go bust. So I always print it off. I write novels, short stories, poems. Novels are a *complete and utter* slog, and they don't come from the same place as the other two things, I don't know.

Poems I write by hand many times, different drafts. When I come to put it on the computer at last, I then print it out on the computer and change it many, many times until the successive drafts either collapse under the weight of their own internal contradictions or problems, or it begins to resemble something almost readable by someone other than me.

RLF: Meagan Delahunt is even more specific in her requirements, even down to the colour of the ink she uses.

Writers Aloud

Meaghan Delahunt: I have read somewhere that blue is the colour of creativity and that if you actually have something like a...I thought I should experiment with this, having a blue piece of cloth or something under your computer or over your writing desk, this can help stimulate creativity. I don't know why, but I find it very difficult to write in a black pen. I would never choose to write in a black pen, I always choose to write in a blue pen.

And I don't know whether it's linked to that, but yeah, blue pens, and I always have to meditate and do some yoga before I write. So often it'll get to three o'clock in the afternoon if I have my ideal writing scene, I haven't written anything! But often, actually, whatever time of day I get up, it doesn't matter if it's very early, which is unlikely, but even if I do get up very early, I find I can never get to my desk before eleven a.m.

And then I seem to work best between eleven and two, and then again in the evening. So then, I kind of know my rhythms of that. I know I have to do yoga and meditate and have several cups of tea before I can get to my desk. And I've been like that for nearly three decades now, so I know that process.

RLF: For Pippa Little, the notebooks she uses are as important as the pens she writes with.

Pippa Little: How do I write? Well, usually with a black uni-ball Eye pen, which gives a satisfying line, feels really good to hold, and in a wirebound notebook, with narrow faint lines, always, and a colourful cover, usually red. Apart from drafts of poems, there'll be first lines, quotations, phone numbers, shopping lists for bread and milk; might be a photograph tucked in there, maybe a feather, postcards from friends, and printed copies of poems I've taken from workshops. I've got to the age now where I'm thinking about the piles and piles of these notebooks that I've got around the house. What on earth am I gonna do with them?

Writers Aloud

Sometimes I take one at random and look back at a past period of my life, perhaps taking up a poem idea I'd left unfinished, or jolting my imagination into new poems. I write too much, I always have. And whittle away at only a fraction of what I begin. In some ways, poems are the diary I find I can't keep regularly.

Rereading them evokes powerful memories. Yet, if all goes well, the poem has somehow changed itself into something else along the way. It's always fascinated me, that change. The poems I feel work best are the ones which have lost their direct connection with me, and somehow become themselves.

RLF: While Susan Fletcher often writes on a laptop, notebooks play a big part in her process.

Susan Fletcher: I tend to go straight onto the laptop and just type. I don't know what we did before cutting and pasting; I think it's a writer's gift. But having said that, I always have a notepad with me and I'm very big on felt tip pens, different biros, pencils, Post-it notes.

So my notebooks do not look like neat, elegant things. They are not dissimilar to a collage at school perhaps, but they work for me. And it means, oddly, that I can find things very quickly. I might think, *What was that piece of information I wrote down about a hydrangea?* And I'll remember that I perhaps wrote it in purple, or wrote it on a Post-it note, and it's much quicker to find.

RLF: Translator Robin Marsack is another lover of writing by hand.

Robyn Marsack: I really love a good notebook, I've got stacks of them. I'm not so fussy about pens, I know some writers who are really fussy about pens, that doesn't worry me so much, but I love a good notebook. And, I was really interested...a poet recently told me that sometimes when he was stuck with his poetry, he would go out and buy a new notebook of a different shape.

Writers Aloud

And this meant that his poems would be a different shape, so that he would be physically forced into a different way of writing. And I thought that was a very interesting reflection. And I think that the computer screen is certainly an immovable format in some ways, and so I could understand what he meant about that.

And writing in longhand for me is a huge physical pleasure. And I write letters, which is quite a rare thing now. In fact, I've just read a bit of research, which says that one in three people in the UK write long-form letters, or documents, maybe at the most twice a year. So, it's a dying thing, this letter writing, and I know I got into it because I used to write once a week to my mother when I came to live in England.

It's very singular to you, it's very particular to you in a way that typing isn't. So that seems to me part of the writing, the individuality of the writing is partly about the handwriting. And a French psychiatrist said a wonderful thing I read recently: that there's an element of dancing when we write by hand, which I thought was wonderful.

RLF: Indeed, Marsack has noticed some unusual things happening when she switches media midway through a project.

Robyn Marsack: A friend recently read a section of my translation for me, and she remarked that there was a kind of a change of tone at one point, and that actually happened to coincide with a change of method for me, so I was writing directly on the computer at one stage.

And then I changed back to writing in longhand for the first draft and then transferring it. And the change in tone coincided with my changing over from the computer to the longhand writing. I don't know whether it's a coincidence or not, but it seemed an interesting thing that something suddenly happened there.

RLF: For Wendy Moore, stationery of many kinds can be essential to the planning process.

Writers Aloud

Wendy Moore: I think I'm good at being disciplined, perhaps a little bit too much in some ways. I set my deadlines too, so in a sense I try to break down the big deadline of a book, which is usually twelve months/ eighteen months to write, into chapters. So I'll have a deadline for writing each chapter.

I even use journalistic notebooks still to write my research in. Everything's catalogued on computers, all my files are put into filing cabinets. I'm a bit of a stationery fetishist as well, so I love to collect different kinds of paperclips and treasury tags and have little sticky labels on the sides of my notebook.

It sounds very rigid, and I know other writers who are a lot more free, who can spend the morning in their pyjamas writing in bed. It just doesn't work for me, but I obviously do have to have some moments when I can let my imagination go and allow a bit more creativity into my work. So I think that happens when I switch off.

So I switch off my computer and I actually walk round the park, that's when I'm still thinking, still working. When I'm travelling, when I'm on trains, it's a really good time to think through what I'm trying to say and for getting more inspiration. And even in bed, I lie in bed at night and I'm often thinking through and even have to get up in the middle of the night sometimes to actually write down some notes when I get the urge. So, yeah, sounds very boring, but it works for me.

RLF: Charles Jennings works on a desktop computer, although he does sometimes wonder whether he might have missed a trick.

Charles Jennings: I have a room that I just have a table in and that's it, that's where I do it. The room moves around: it was at the top of the house, and then, when we had the kids then it moved out to the little sort of Wendy house, and then I moved back to the top of the house. And I promised myself one day I would move to the top of the house, but the room at the

Writers Aloud

front that gets the daylight; the room at the back has the north aspect, and all this sort of stuff.

So really, I've just set it up so that it's displacement, displacement, displacement. You know, does my computer operating system need a total upgrade, because I'm quite interested in that. You know, and so I don't know if it's: are things sufficiently squared off on the desk or should I leave them slightly kitty cornered?

But yeah, so I just sit in this room at the top of the house with an old fashioned, on-the-desk PC and that's it. And for a long time I used to think, now I'm going to my workplace, to dignify it with that sort of concept. I've been doing it so long I can't, it just feels like the rest of the house, only it's a particularly dreary aspect of the rest of the house.

And I do think, now, I've really missed a trick, because people with laptops...I just have this clunky old desktop thing; people with laptops, they can move around, they can stimulate themselves, they can go and sit in the kitchen, they can sit in a café – why you would want to do that, I don't know, but you could – I could sit here in the sitting room. There are all sorts of places I could do it.

I know somebody who writes in the morning *in bed*, just props the laptop on his knees in bed, and he does two hours straight work, he's extremely efficient. And then reviews it in the afternoon, once he's got out of bed. So you think, I'm so missing...or maybe I should dictate, or I should stand up like Nabokov. All these things cross my mind, and it always comes back to the dank, north-facing room at the top of the house. So that's how I write.

RLF: Catherine Czerkawska writes straight onto the computer and has tried various programmes in an effort to see what works best.

Catherine Czerkawska: I don't like the blank screen, I write straight onto the computer. And I just...it's so much better just to have something *there*

Writers Aloud

to work on. Otherwise it's very daunting I find, in prospect. And I work on one long document, I don't use Scrivener, I don't use any of these things. I use Word and I divide it into chapters, but I work on one long document almost as if I have to hold it into my head, in my head all at the one time.

I found...I did try Scrivener and found it really distracting. I don't know how anybody uses it for fiction. I didn't persevere with it because it seems so counterintuitive to the way that I write. I think if you write in very separate chapters, and also if you're doing nonfiction that involves a lot of research that you have to reference, then I think it might be quite handy, because it gives you lots of extras.

But I don't need all those extras, I just start and keep going till I get to the end and then stop, essentially. So it's one huge document divided into chapters, and I divide it as I go. And just work on it and just get it, get something down on the screen very, very quickly. I know a lot of writers of fiction who do use Scrivener now. I like...I also have a lot of...I like *stuff*, I like pictures and maps and that sort of thing.

So I will use a lot of that and perhaps even put it up around me; things that put me in the right frame of mind for it.

RLF: Although Kate Colquhoun usually works straight onto the computer she sometimes finds that certain genres can be helped by switching to writing by hand.

Kate Colquhoun: There are a number of times when using a pen and pencil works very well, and one of them is if I'm writing a review for the newspaper. Instead of sitting at my desk and ploughing through it, in some ways...often on a train or if I'm going on an aeroplane somewhere, where reviews have come most easily to me is when all I've had access to is a pen and a piece of paper and I'm kind of scribbling it on the back of an envelope and it flows better and it's more true and it's less encumbered by my concern about getting it absolutely right because it is such a duty to get it right when someone else's livelihood is at stake isn't it?

Writers Aloud

I find reviews intensely difficult and I also use a pen and paper sometimes when I'm sketching out ideas or planning or trying to work out a structure. And I find that very useful too, but no, I don't write large tranches of any of my books in pen and pencil. The other thing of course I'll do is, I'll write down a sentence, the beginning of a paragraph or something, in pen and paper if I've just got into bed and I've suddenly thought of a way of starting tomorrow, I find that very useful, but that's the only time.

RLF: Sometimes it depends on the stage a piece of work is at. David Spencer often switches media midway through his writing process.

David Spencer: I do still write with a pen. I've got a biro, a steel-bodied Parker pen that I use to write with. I think that's the most creative way that I can write. My handwriting moves at a speed that my thoughts and my feelings move at, my typing doesn't do that. So when I'm working something out, I'm working out on a piece of paper with a pen. But, later on, I will write a treatment for a play, usually. And that will be written using a word processor, which was what we used to historically call a computer.

That will be done so that I can tell just how many words the end document's gonna have, how long it's going to be. Then the next phase is usually some research, which sounds a bit odd, but I tend to write the plan of what I want to write before I do the research, because of the way that I get my ideas.

That can be anything. That can be interviews with people, that can be watching films, that can be reading books, that can be going through my own memories or something that I might have seen or heard whilst outside in the world, so to speak.

RLF: Jane Draycott takes a similarly hybrid approach to her work.

Jane Draycott: I always start with a pencil, I mean handwriting, because there's a terrible temptation when you're using a computer to correct as you go, to make everything neat, to make corrections, not save the original.

Writers Aloud

And often in the process of a first drafting, just a spill of ideas, a sort of crash of ideas on paper, you'll leave things behind you, which eventually, once you understand where the poem's heading or what's at the heart of the poem that you hadn't understood when you started, you come back to those, you pick them up again because you hadn't understood how they might be part of the thing and you don't understand that until you've finished it.

So that seems very important, to still be able to do that. Even though I think I've heard that in the United States they're actually thinking about not teaching handwriting anymore, which seems extraordinary; there's a very close connection between the rhythms of the physical body that writes, and the imagination, the brain that writes, so to speak.

So part of it is wanting to handwrite, which seems to have something to do with making connections, rhythmic connections, I don't know quite what, or being physically connected to the words at your fingertips. All this sounds ridiculously mystical and mysterious, but it's just a sense of what works best.

RLF: Gillian Allnutt also changes tools as a piece of work nears completion, although she finds she has to keep herself some distance from the piece of technology she most dislikes.

Gillian Allnutt: When I'm at home, I nearly always start on the kitchen table because it's large, and I can spread myself out. And also, the kitchen is the hub of the house, and if I had to live in one room of my house, it would definitely be the kitchen.

I start poems longhand, always, I think. And then, after a while, I move upstairs to the computer. The computer is banished to upstairs because I don't like it. But I do need to make a typescript, a typed draft. And I'll probably do several and once I get going up there and print out several drafts and I'll bring the latest draft down back to the kitchen, and then

Writers Aloud

I'll probably do something different like make soup and I sneak looks at it and change things.

My partner's house is 250 miles away and so it's partly because when I go there, even if I take work with me, I have a feeling that I'm on holiday, and also when I first went there I didn't have much access to emails, only five minutes a day on his laptop. And so I found myself, I think for these two reasons, writing a lot of poems in his house, and that was obviously wonderful.

RLF: Whatever tools you use, as long as you produce a piece of work that satisfies you, the means are surely justified.

✧

RLF outro: That was an episode of *Writers Aloud*, a podcast produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. The authors featured in this episode were John Keay, Kerry Young, William Palmer, Meaghan Delahunt, Pippa Little, Susan Fletcher, Robyn Marsack, Wendy Moore, Charles Jennings, Catherine Czerkawska, Kate Colquhoun, David Spencer, Jane Draycott and Gillian Allnutt.

You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 436, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 437, Lottie Moggach speaks with Catherine O'Flynn about following in the footsteps of a novelist parent, the joys of plot and research, the experience of diving into writing historical fiction, and how to answer when someone asks you what you do.

We hope you'll join us.

Writers Aloud

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF, please visit our website at www.rlf.org.uk.

Thanks for listening.