

Writers Aloud

Episode 437

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 437 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, 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.

Catherine O'Flynn: Lottie Moggach has published three novels, which have been described as literary thrillers. Her debut, *Kiss Me First*, published in 2013, explored what social media is doing to our sense of identity and real-life relationships. It was shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book award, won the Portsmouth First Fiction award and was adapted into a six-part series for Netflix and Channel 4. Her second novel, *Under the Sun*, was set in southern Spain during the 2008 financial crisis, when expats trapped in unsellable villas clashed with African migrants desperate for a new life in Europe. *Brixton Hill*, published in 2020, focused on a prisoner nearing the end of a life sentence. It was adapted and broadcast over two weeks on Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime*.

Before turning to fiction, Lottie had a twenty-year career in journalism, specialising in arts and literature. In recent years, she has taught an undergraduate course on the short story at Royal Holloway, University of London, and been a guest of the Arvon Foundation.

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Her current undertaking is a historical novel, set in late-Victorian-era Camden Town, the area where she grew up. She still lives close by, with her husband, son, dog and tortoise. I spoke to Lottie in a well-appointed shed in the garden of her London home.

Hello, Lottie, thanks for talking to me.

Lottie Moggach: It's a pleasure, lovely to meet you.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yes, you too. So normally, I'm always interested in the kind of homes that writers grew up in. Did they grow up in houses with books? — and that kind of thing. I guess given that your mother is a writer, the answer is probably 'yes'. But I was wondering how important were books and reading in your childhood or were you more into the TV? Did you write stories as a child?

Lottie Moggach: I did, and I wrote stories, yeah, lots of books, lots of telly as well, but definitely lots of books. Yeah, I wrote stories for fun in this halcyon age before self-consciousness, I just remember my mum would go out for the evening, and I would write a story for her for when she got back and put it on her bed.

Yeah, that sort of lack of angst, which just, I don't know, I spent the rest of my life, my adult life, trying to get back to in some way. But yeah, there were tons and tons and tons of tons of books, tons of writing.

Catherine O'Flynn: Were there any books you particularly loved as a child or was it just you were just reading loads of stuff?

Lottie Moggach: *The Silver Curlew* by Eleanor Farjeon. Do you know?

Catherine O'Flynn: No.

Lottie Moggach: Anyway, that was one which I still think about: a daily

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basis is too much, but maybe on a weekly basis. It's a fairy story set in Norfolk. What else did I love? *Just William* books, they keep you going, there's lots of them. Yeah, they're the first two which come to mind, but I'd read anything I could.

Catherine O'Flynn: And then I think you started off in journalism, is that right?

Lottie Moggach: Yes.

Catherine O'Flynn: So I wondered was that your first passion, or did you always think no, actually, I want to move on to fiction? What was your kind of route in to becoming a novelist?

Lottie Moggach: I think I probably always imagined I would be a novelist at some point. My mum, who is one, made it seem a very...not only desirable life choice, but also quite easy. She makes everything, she's a very...now I know that it's not that effortless, but she made it seem like a very easy and life-enhancing profession.

She just used to write in the morning. So we never actually saw her work because we'd be at school. And so by the time we came back from school she would be free. And so, you know, as a child you get the impression that she's been just wafting about all day. And she's a very un-angsty person.

So she would leave it behind when she stopped writing. And she would be very sociable, happy, lots of things which I know necessarily aren't often...

Catherine O'Flynn: ...to do with writing.

Lottie Moggach: To do with writing. So it all seemed, it seemed like an extremely good idea. And I went into journalism because I didn't have any ideas for books.

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And I did know enough from her by that point that you've really got to care about what you're writing, because you're going to be doing it for at least a year. I didn't want to just find a vague subject and just write a book for the sake of that. I waited until I thought I had something to say, and that took about fifteen years.

Catherine O'Flynn: And what kind of journalism were you doing?

Lottie Moggach: Arts journalism, I worked for *The Times* as a freelance arts journalist. So lots of actor interviews, lots of book reviews.

Catherine O'Flynn: Did you do lots of writer interviews?

Lottie Moggach: Lots and lots, I had a column called *How I Write*, in which I interviewed writers.

Catherine O'Flynn: And did any of that dent your mother's positive PR on being a writer, talking to writers day after day?

Lottie Moggach: It did, it certainly gave me a wider perspective. It gave me a wider perspective on it. But it didn't put me off actually. I still think her voice was the loudest in my head, I still thought that it was going to be, like, blissful, but now when I say this she gets a bit annoyed.

I don't think she's gets annoyed, but she, I think it's just maybe I wanted to see it...she's just a very positive person generally. But, I think she finds writing as difficult as anyone else, but she just doesn't moan about it.

Catherine O'Flynn: That's really admirable.

Lottie Moggach: It's really admirable.

Catherine O'Flynn: And really rare!

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Lottie Moggach: I know.

Catherine O'Flynn: I think...I saw an interview where you said something about writers complaining about being a writer, it's a really bad look. And I agree, even though it's kind of what writers do — a lot. But I was curious about that, getting that very positive impression of writing from your mother. And then I wonder how you portray...are you careful with the way you portray your working life to your son, you know, or are you still conscious of making this look too good or too awful?

Lottie Moggach: I'm certainly not making it look too good. No, I have to say my son can, at the moment, anyway, maybe when he gets older, but now he just really, I don't think he's got any aspirations to do writing.

He doesn't really know what I do, but he does ask me...it's quite useful because he'll say, 'Aren't you finished yet?' or 'What chapter are you on?' All those questions which you know, other people...you should never ask a writer! But they're quite useful for jolting you and making you realise you do actually need to finish this thing.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah: *You're still doing that, are you?*

Lottie Moggach: Yeah, exactly, that's his job. It's a little sort of cattle prod to get me moving.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, that's quite useful. So you've written three novels all with very different sort of settings, and I was wondering...how do novels start off for you? What kind of tends to kick off the process for you? Or is there not a general thing, is it very different for each one?

Lottie Moggach: It's usually a location and an image, actually, now I think about it. So my last one, which was called *Brixton Hill*, was about a prisoner on day release and a relationship, where he gets into a relationship with a woman when he's out in the real world.

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That was from walking up and down Brixton Hill, visiting someone, and then learning a bit more about Brixton Prison and realising that this long, long hill, where at the bottom of which is London, it's an old Roman road, so you can really see the city kind of glittering at the bottom of the road. That this was this thoroughfare for these people who were neither confined nor out free, and so it was that image which started that.

And then the one before that was about expats being trapped in Spain during the financial crisis, and that was just seeing lots of pictures in the news about people, again, to talk about moaning, being trapped in these half-built gilded cages. And then things grow off and expand from that sort of image, not always a concrete image, but, just sort of like an idea or something I read or something I've seen. And then, yes, it sort of expands from that.

Catherine O'Flynn: Are you the kind of writer who has loads of ideas going, you know, do you think: *I've got ideas-worth for six novels going ahead of me*, or do they tend to be quite, I don't know...

Lottie Moggach: I'm glad you're laughing when you're saying that! Does anyone say yes?

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, some, I don't know, I think, certainly...with, I dunno, I suppose I'm thinking more of like screenplay writers. They always have tons of different...because they have to, don't they? And I think that's why I think I could never do that, because I tend to have, you know, one idea every decade or something!

Lottie Moggach: Me too, I'm glad, yeah, I'm on your side in this. No, I don't have tons of ideas, I don't, in short. And that's also why I don't do social media, the idea of just having thoughts or whispers or even little tiny observations like which you can spare for social media just...

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, you need to jealously hoard all that stuff. And

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you know, yeah, oh, that's good to hear. You spoke about how the naming of your first novel was, kind of...I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about that because I can never name novels and I quite like this as an approach?

Lottie Moggach: Yeah. So my first novel was called *Kiss Me First*, and it's about a youngish woman who pretends to be someone else on social media. It was written when Facebook was starting, it was just in its ascendancy, so a long time ago now. But anyway, so she takes over someone's life on social media. And I couldn't think what to call it. And my Mum said, 'Call it, *Kiss Me First*, I've always liked that title', and it's got no association to the book at all, and she said, 'Just write it in somewhere'.

And there was a precedent, I can't remember...Elizabeth Taylor the novelist, who just said, I can't remember what it was, but let's say it was kind of, *The Road to Chelsea* or something. And you know, and all it was one tiny little line, it's: 'I'll meet you on the road to Chelsea', and that sort of justified the whole title, but it didn't actually have much to do with anything to do with the story.

And so I took that approach and I just, bunged *Kiss Me First* in, as something which this young woman sort of...a little catchphrase of hers. But anyway, it certainly doesn't encapsulate the book in any way. But my mum said, 'If it's a good title, it's a good title'. And it's, yeah, I think, it's a massive laugh.

Catherine O'Flynn: Actually brilliant, I love the idea of just having a little drawer full of potential titles. I used to do that with...I used to invent ideal band names. I can't play any instruments or anything, but I used to imagine I'd be in a band and so I'd say, 'Oh, that would be what I'd call my band'. But the idea of, yes, saving the words never occurred to me, because I'm so bad. The only ideas I ever have are really terrible puns, which...who would want to read it, you know, awful, awful things.

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So, going back to your first novel as well, I think I read a quote from you where you were saying, 'I really wanted to engage with what's happening now'. And that's something I really love about your books because they are these, very skilfully plotted engaging page-turners but they're really acutely observed portraits of the way we live now and I think they really get that grain of contemporary British life.

I loved, like, you know, in *Brixton Hill* all the stuff about the charity shop and, I dunno, there's something about that richness that I really like, so I just wondered did those two attributes: the sort of plotty side and the beautifully descriptive side naturally come together, or do you feel yourself more drawn to one than the other?

Lottie Moggach: That's really interesting, I definitely like a plot, and again I think this is something I've inherited from my mum. The thought of not having one is just terrifying to me. And I know lots of writers hate them, I know several very good writer friends of mine just think that there's no point to plots whatsoever.

And I admire that hugely, but that's the fun bit for me, I must say, is the plotting. And the detail, I enjoy it, but that just doesn't come as easily, I often have to go to the places and really, I find it hard to imagine myself in a situation just sitting at my desk. I really need to research and yeah, that's more effortful.

Catherine O'Flynn: That's interesting. So with plot, I mean, how did you...I don't know if this is a question you can answer – sorry it's one of those stupid questions people ask writers – but I just wanted...how did you develop that command of plots, you're saying that kind of comes more easily to you? Is it just, do you think, just from reading lots of books and being able to see the mechanics of it?

Lottie Moggach: Yeah, I think reading lots, listening to my mum, she's a really good storyteller, like not even...just away from her novels, she

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just metabolises life into narrative. She's a very entertaining person to be around and that's why...she shapes things and it comes so naturally to her.

And I suppose...I mean, I'm not as good as her, I'm not nearly as entertaining as her, but I think I became aware of that, how you can...telling details or, you know, giving something a satisfying shape.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, yeah yeah. And so do you plan a lot in advance, do you kind of know where the plot is going or are you one of these people who just...?

Lottie Moggach: Yeah, I do. I do know where it's going. Yeah, I never get carried away, or go off and let the characters take me somewhere. It's: I like to know.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, I identify with that. And you mentioned there about sometimes you need to go and have a look at the place to work, to get that. So, I was wondering about research, because with the novel set in Spain, did you find you had to go out there and explore those...or did you just watch a lot of *Place in the Sun*?

Lottie Moggach: I did watch a lot of *Place in the Sun*.

Catherine O'Flynn: So I do that anyway.

Lottie Moggach: Exactly, it's making your shameful daytime hobby into...pretending it's work. I did go out to Spain and to these eerie half-built villa complexes and some ghost towns there. And that was, yeah, it was really crucial, it was just...maybe if I had more imagination I wouldn't have to, but I did think, yeah, it's just got...it's a particularly sort of eerie in – not all of Spain obviously, but down in certain areas of the coast – where they are just complete, you know these...all this infrastructure there, but you know, these playgrounds which have never been used.

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And yeah, these whole towns are set up for these people who can no longer afford to be there, it's, yeah, it's kind of fascinating. So, I did, I sat and drank Irish coffees and wrote in these sort of echoey hotels on the coast. So, yeah, I did.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, it's the traditional drink of the coast of Spain, isn't it, Irish coffee! Your books are described as literary thrillers, and as with any kind of label I've no, really, idea what that means. I'm not even sure – I was thinking about this on the train coming here today – I'm not even quite sure what it is that distinguishes a thriller from a different book because, I mean, they're all kind of thrilling in different ways, aren't they?

But I wonder what you felt about that, is that a helpful way to think about your writing? And also, whether you feel that that's an area that you'll probably always inhabit or whether you think, well, no, I might well write something that's completely romantic or completely...what do you feel about that?

Lottie Moggach: I agree, I'm not sure what a thriller is. I can recognize it in other people, but I don't think...a plot, maybe if it's got a plot, then it's...yeah, and a bit of suspense, maybe that makes it sort of...? But they're not...I think with my first book, it was marketed as a thriller and it really isn't actually.

And I think that some people were disappointed and it may have contributed to it not doing as well as the publishers hoped, and in America too they market it as a thriller and they had a big pair of sort of beestung lips, you know, they made it seem like *Silence of the Lambs* or something, it really, really isn't.

So I think it would probably be more helpful for sales if I did choose, say, and was more solidly fit into a genre. I can only really write what I...I couldn't imagine just saying, 'Okay, now I'm going to go in a completely different direction and be much more plotty or much less plotty and be much more literary'.

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I just yeah, I feel only capable of doing...

Catherine O'Flynn: ...whatever it is you do, yeah...

Lottie Moggach: ...whatever it is I do. And I agree, it would be more sensible to be a bit more directed about it in terms of marketing and selling stuff. But I admire people who do that, but saying that I am actually writing a historical book now, so I am trying something slightly different.

Catherine O'Flynn: Oh, that is quite different to your contemporary side, and how are you finding that, because you were talking about the research, is that daunting, the research, or is it...?

Lottie Moggach: No, I love it. I could read – it's Victorian – I could read...I mean, my book's upstairs, that's the worry also; you spend your whole time researching, and not actually writing it. But no, I think possibly because the world is so mad and upsetting at the moment that just being able to slink back to a hundred years ago is really...it's really surprisingly wonderful, actually.

I was...I did it because the story I was interested in just happened to be set then. So, you know what I mean, it wasn't that I thought, *Now it's time to write a historical book.*

Catherine O'Flynn: How we're moving into the 19th century!

Lottie Moggach: Yeah. But no, I'm absolutely loving it. But it's a whole new set of skills because you have to, somehow absorb...I mean Hilary Mantel obviously she's a supernatural genius, but you know, if you look at all the Wolf Hall books, they're obviously deeply historical, but she doesn't... they're so close up. She doesn't need to describe the geopolitical landscape or the context, because Cromwell doesn't need to tell himself that.

So obviously I'm not going to even speak of myself in the same breath as

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Hilary Mantel, but it's been useful to...you've just got to think of different things when you're writing a historical book, which you don't when you're in a world which everyone...you take for granted that people know, you don't need to explain it all, it's quite interesting.

Catherine O'Flynn: Do you, do you tend to have fallow projects between... are you always writing or if not actually writing, always thinking about writing or do you feel bad if you're not writing, as in guilty, or do you think, *It's fine I'll just write sometimes and sometimes I don't?*

Lottie Moggach: Oh I feel bad and guilty all the time, completely. But yeah, there's always something vaguely rumbling away but I take – I don't know about you but I take – a very long time and there aren't that many ideas, so I do nurture them, they're with me for ages and ages and ages. So yeah, there's always something vaguely on the go.

Catherine O'Flynn: When you're in a kind of environment where people ask you what you do, which for me tends to always be when I'm getting my hair cut at the hairdressers, do you say you're a writer or do you lie?

Lottie Moggach: I do say I'm a writer, I do say I'm a writer. Why do you think...

Catherine O'Flynn: How does that go I'm curious what other people's experience of this is?

Lottie Moggach: They say, 'Oh, that's nice, what kind of things?' And you say, 'I write novels'. And they're saying, 'Will I have heard of you?'

Catherine O'Flynn: That is the question, 'Will I have read you?' And I have no idea how we're supposed to answer that question.

Lottie Moggach: I know, I just say 'No', now.

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Catherine O'Flynn: That feels rude as if you're saying they're not well read, it's a lose-lose question.

Lottie Moggach: I know, but this is so embarrassing because then also if you've got a slightly...I have to spell my name, and you can see them think, you know, it just gets awkward for everyone. They're just like, *oh...* and then very occasionally people will think that they'll remember and they'll think I'll maybe be talking about my mum. And it just leaves, this innocent question which they're saying just to pass the time, it just gets us both mired and it's just easier to just try and cut it off at the...

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, that's why I wonder, do you not lie, because I have sometimes? I've just said: I'm a teacher or something, something sort of fairly...something that will hopefully repel further questioning.

Lottie Moggach: I should try it, I'm just not very good at dissembling, so I just usually, if someone asks me a question I usually answer it blindly, but you're right.

Catherine O'Flynn: No, no, I think that's admirable, I don't want to be the person who encourages you to lie, I think that's good, but it's a funny thing how awkward that question is to answer. So, *Kiss Me First* was adapted for TV, wasn't it, I haven't seen it, actually I'd like to see it, I didn't know if that was safe to say, was it not Netflix?

Lottie Moggach: It was, it was a Netflix and Channel 4 co-pro, as they say. And it was meant to be a big thing and it was really bold – I can say all this because I didn't write the script at all – it was all set in virtual reality and it was very, very different from my book; *really* different actually. To the point where I get sometimes people writing the occasional fan letter, from people who have seen it, offering me dystopian science-fiction ideas or inviting me to conferences about...and really my writing couldn't be less like that.

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Who knows why things don't work; it just didn't catch fire. But I was really...like I said, I admired it without feeling any kind of sense of personal ownership because it was so, so different.

Catherine O'Flynn: Well that's interesting, but it seems like all three of your books would work really well on screen I think, have you ever been tempted to go into screenplay writing or that kind of area?

Lottie Moggach: I've been tempted, I think it's really... I tried to write one once and it was...you get *Final Draft*, this software, which means that whatever you write is put into this format, which looks like a script so it's very easy, I found it very easy to think that I was writing a script just because it looked like it.

Catherine O'Flynn: Kind of like Ernie Wise!

Lottie Moggach: Yeah, exactly. And you have, you know, beats and you put in all the technical language and it makes you feel kind of cool, like this is easy! But actually then, it was much, much, much harder than I thought it was going to be, and it was terrible, what I produced was terrible so I haven't tried since then, but I do think it would be good to learn it. I certainly don't think I could just do it, I could just turn my hand to it, I think it's a whole new set of skills. My mum does that too though and she would say, she would agree, it's a whole different game.

I'd like to, but also then you get lots of other people involved and I think if you're a novelist, if you're used to just incubating, sort of sloshing around with your own thoughts, it's very different to know that you don't have much time with it alone, I think, a screenplay, before you have to start collaborating and it's a different mode of working.

Catherine O'Flynn: It's quite alien. With the sort of writers that you love do you feel that they're writers that have inspired you to write or inhibited you from writing, because when people say, 'Who inspired you?' And

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I think, *I'm not sure that the writers I love have inspired me that much actually.*

Lottie Moggach: I'm glad you said that. Yeah, in fact, I'm reading less... when I write I find it very hard to read at all, because I'm either, I'm just like, *God, what's the point?* You know, with Tessa Hadley or I can think of many, many examples of people I really admire. So yeah, and again, the innocent days of childhood where you just devour stuff and you wouldn't be thinking about your own place within the writing world, I miss that a lot.

I don't read in that kind of way hardly ever now: with pure abandonment. I wouldn't say it's ruined reading, but it did...I wasn't prepared for it, I didn't realise they couldn't coexist very happily.

Catherine O'Flynn: I think that's it Lottie, thanks for talking to me.

Lottie Moggach: Oh, great. It was a pleasure, complete pleasure. Thank you.

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RLF outro: That was Lottie Moggach in conversation with Catherine O'Flynn. You can find out more about Lottie on her website, lottiemoggach.com. And that concludes episode 437, which was recorded by Catherine O'Flynn and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 438, we take a poetry break with Emily Berry and Julia Copus.

We hope you'll join us.

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