

Writers Aloud

Episode 451

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

In this episode, three Royal Literary Fund writers share their take on how writing relates to the people around them. First up, novelist, creative-writing lecturer and literature activist Sarah Butler gives her views on what it's like to work with community groups.

Sarah Butler: 'Writing in community settings': when I finished my English degree, I had no real idea of what I wanted to do, other than write novels, and I knew that that wasn't going to pay my rent, at least not in the short term.

These were the days when a person might buy the Monday *Guardian* for the arts-job section, which I did and found, to my delight, a job advert for a literature development officer, something I'd never heard of before. The advert began, 'Are you passionate about books and reading?' Like some kind of a gift. I applied and, remarkably given my significant lack of experience, got the job.

And there I was, in the world of literature development, where people were finding creative, innovative ways of engaging people with reading and writing. From festivals to public art commissions, from working with teenagers to recently arrived asylum seekers, finding stories in marshlands and on train tracks.

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Here was my world, where stories and words matter, where everyone has the right to access literature in all its myriad forms. I still wrote the novels, and after ten years of trying, finally got my first publishing deal. But alongside this more private writing practice, I have developed a parallel career, as a writer who works directly with people in a range of settings, on a range of projects.

I love it. I love the immediacy and the variety. For me, there is nothing more satisfying than making a space for people to tell their own stories. When I listen to someone telling me about something, or someone, or somewhere, that they're passionate about, it's like listening to poetry. It is a huge privilege.

I'm going to talk about three of the many projects I've done over the last fifteen years, and try to draw out and share with you some of the things I've learnt along the way about working as a writer in community settings. In 2007, I shifted from being a project manager, initiating and overseeing projects, employing other writers to deliver work, to working more directly as a writer within community settings.

An early residency was on the Central Line, working for London's *Art on the Underground*. It was terrifying and fantastic in fairly equal measure. My brief was to work with staff and find ways to connect people across the whole of the line, all sixty-four kilometres of it. I had a research and development period, which proved invaluable.

My first top tip, if you like, is to try and find time at the start of a project to walk and talk and listen and read. To absorb the place and the people you're working with, and then design activities that respond directly to the context you're in. I've never been much of a cookie-cutter kind of a person, and although I re-use various writing exercises and approaches, I always look to design bespoke activities, depending on where I'm working and who I'm looking to engage with.

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On the Central Line, I did four key projects: first, I made a collection of stories behind the names of staff across the whole line. Second, I went out with two train drivers and co-wrote short stories with them in response to our conversations and experience of being in the cab. Third, I wrote an online, non-linear piece inspired by the structure of the line and the way it is used.

And fourth, I wrote a collaborative story, by travelling to each station on the line, writing a paragraph with staff working there, then printing out and faxing the story to the next station, and so on, and so on, like the game of consequences. It took a week; it was exhilarating, it was terrifying. And here is my top tip number two:

If you're asking people to come out of their comfort zone, it pays to come out of your own. I was *way* out of my comfort zone for this piece of work: having to meet strangers, make a very quick connection; get them to write with me whilst they were at work. I had to charm, cajole, negotiate, and when I think back, I'm sure that the reason it worked was because it was clear to the people I worked with that I was taking a risk.

I was stepping out of my comfort zone and asking them to meet me by stepping out of theirs. Which brings me to top tip number three: when working with communities, with people who often do not identify as writers and may even feel negative towards writing, it really helps to ask yourself, what are these people going to get out of this situation?

What am I offering them? Why would they want to take part? I've worked a lot with the idea of the gift, so participants offer me something and I give something back. Whether that's the experience of being listened to, or their story refigured into a poem, or a cup of tea and a biscuit, or all of these things.

When I write a novel, I sit alone in my room for long periods of time, working on something, which, if I'm lucky, will be published, a shiny book

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with my name on the front. There will be interviews, talking about myself. There will be articles to write about myself. Although writing novels is, in my opinion, deeply collaborative, my early readers, my agent, my editor, all playing significant roles in making the book the best it can be, it is at least seen as a solo endeavour.

Writing in community settings is vastly different. There is no place for the writer's ego here, at least in my opinion. This work is about other people's stories and other people's places. Yes, my role is important and my voice is there combined with the voices of others. My skills as a writer are central to each project, but it is not about me.

The focus is elsewhere. At the end of my Central Line residency, *Art on the Underground* created posters, which were displayed across the tube network celebrating the residency. This was hugely exciting for me, an unpublished writer at this point in my career. The designer chose to print the seven-and-a-half-thousand-word story I created in that project travelling from station to station, on the poster.

I had a real ego moment: this poster had my name on it, it was being shown across the London Underground. But it wasn't my finest writing by any stretch of the imagination. It was a performance piece of work created in slightly extraordinary circumstances. Surely it would be better to print one of the more considered and edited short stories I'd written?

But then I caught myself on, this was not a PR exercise about me, this was about celebrating the collaborative work I'd done with staff across the Central Line. A copy of the poster now hangs in my kitchen, and I still look at it with joy.

Another moment of swallowing my ego came in the second project I want to tell you about. I was writer in residence at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, working with patients and carers to create stories for a newly built wing of the hospital. I designed a three-stage process, where

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I first came up with characters and story ideas alongside patients and carers, using various creative activities.

Then I took all of those ideas and wrote the stories. And finally, I came back to the hospital to read the stories to patients and ask them to help me make them better. Again, it was a somewhat terrifying experience. I'd never written children's stories before. And reading a draft of a story to a child is different to reading one to an adult.

Children, brilliantly in my opinion, do not hide their responses. I could tell when bits were boring or confusing just from the look on their faces. Of the six stories I'd written, there was one which I knew at heart wasn't working. It was about a flamingo who was different from the other flamingos; about the creation of a nature reserve.

I can't quite remember the details, but safe to say it was very 'right on', the kind of thing an adult would approve of, but there wasn't much jeopardy or excitement. I vividly remember reading it to a fourteen-year-old girl called Aisha. I got to the end and she looked at me and said, 'That is boring'. Ouch! But she was right, it was, and so together we re-plotted the story and ended up with a much more exciting tale of flamingos being drugged and kidnapped and a daring rescue plan.

The final project I want to talk about is called *Not Home*. I'd been running creative-writing workshops for a charity, *Just Life*, who support people living in unsupported temporary accommodation in East Manchester. The workshops worked well, and I developed a good relationship with the charity. They approached me to ask if I would write a novel exploring and revealing the realities of life in unsupported temporary accommodation as a way of raising awareness of the situation and helping their local and national campaigning for improved regulations and conditions.

I really wanted to do it, but I felt conflicted about writing a novel to commission, it just didn't seem to fit with my process. However, the idea

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stuck and wouldn't go away, and so I refigured the project: I would write a novella in conversation with people living in unsupported temporary accommodation, and also collect first-person accounts and create a series of portraits with a professional portrait photographer.

This was the first project I've done, where I was creating long-term fiction, authored by myself, but in close conversation with the people whose lives I was representing. I had a lot of anxiety about the ethics of representation, but in the end, the people I worked with loved the book: 'Yes', one man said to me, 'this is how it is'. A relief, but also a testament to a robust process, I think. I spent a lot of time talking to people, visiting their homes, listening and observing at drop-in sessions. I had a notice board of story ideas up in the centre, and I invited people to read and comment on early drafts of the novella.

The project was hugely satisfying: to create a considered and high quality piece of writing, which sits alongside personal accounts and stunning portraits, and is used in political campaigning to improve the lives of the people who helped me write it. I'm not sure I could ask for more from a project.

Community arts, or community writing is sometimes talked about in quite snobbish, derogatory terms. Maybe it's something a writer might do to earn some extra money, but it's definitely secondary to the real business of writing novels. I could not disagree more. I have found writing in community settings hugely inspiring, often humbling. I have learnt about the world and about the lives of people with very different experiences to my own.

It feels like the deepest privilege to be trusted with people's stories and invited to find ways to amplify and share them more widely. And, of course, it has helped my own writing. Anything that expands and deepens our understanding of the world is going to help us write deeper, richer and more convincing fiction.

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The projects I have done have pushed me to write in different forms, from poetry to digital fiction to creative nonfiction. I have been catapulted out of my comfort zone again and again, and each time have returned with more ideas, more confidence, and more of a hunger to explore and develop further.

RLF: That was Sarah Butler. Now we hear from novelist, short-story writer and memoirist Tom Lee, on how he deals with the more isolated moments of the writing life.

Tom Lee: Loneliness, it is sometimes said, is a professional hazard of the writer, like alcoholism, and no doubt the two are linked. The long hours, days, months, years alone in a room, removed from the company or collaboration of other people.

But in recent years, with young children, a million work meetings to attend, ten million work emails to reply to, and now looking after my widowed mother, this kind of loneliness feels like a glorious dream. What I wouldn't give for three months alone in a hut in the backwoods of Wisconsin. I'm being glib, of course, and being alone is not the same as being lonely.

It's perfectly possible to be around people all the time, even loved ones, and still be lonely. A recently divorced friend of mine, with three young children, said that when she was married she had felt lonely all the time. The idea of loneliness is romantic, but the reality is no fun at all, it's the worst thing in the world, just ask my mum.

But a writer...most writers I think, do need space and silence, the opportunity to think, and of course to write. Writers – writers on social media – always seem to be going off on retreats and residencies to remote lake houses on Norwegian fjords or lighthouses off the west coast of Ireland or Scottish castles where no one is allowed to speak to each other before nightfall.

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I have a writer friend who, every few months, leaves his family and takes himself off to an Airbnb in some out of season seaside resort where he writes intensely for several days before returning to civilization. This is how he produces his novels. I love the idea of all this, I love the idea of a small but well-equipped little cottage, an open fire, intense and fruitful writing sessions, interrupted only by long, lonely – lonely in a good way – walks on moors or in mountains.

I wish I was this kind of writer, what seems to me like a real writer, but I'm not. I find writing difficult, often very difficult, a battle with myself. To be alone with that battle for a long period of time is not healthy or usually productive, I find myself losing the battle or feeling like I am. When I began to write seriously, before children, I was alone a lot of the time, long days at the desk trying to make things work.

It was not good for me, I was morose, often bored with what I was doing, divorced from the rest of the world, in fact, lonely. It took me a long time to learn that what I need to stay sane, to stand the best chance of writing something is variety, texture, distraction, other people. It's a balance, and a difficult one to achieve, because then the work piles up, and the emails pile up, and the kids come home, and my mum rings, and I think, *If only I could get away to that hut in Wisconsin.*

RLF: Tom Lee there. Finally, crime novelist Sarah Ward writes a letter to her readers.

Sarah Ward: 'Dear reader': how I love that salutation. In my teenage years, I used to read Victorian Gothic novels, which often had a letter from the author. I read each message avidly, drinking in the writer's words, which were as important to me as the novel themselves. Later, I stopped reading these notes, as they sometimes gave away too much of the plot. Besides, I began to care less about the author's intentions, and more about my response to the book; *Do away with writers' letters*, I thought; then, I began my own novels.

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Reader, I think about you a lot when I'm writing. I imagine you're a little like me, you're passionate about crime fiction and love a good ghost story. The mystery is as important as the ending, sometimes more important. I imagine you're a big library user, taking out piles of crime novels and supernatural thrillers and returning the following week for more.

That doesn't stop you buying books; like me, you can't resist a good bookshop. When I was writing my first novel, you were an imaginary figure. Although I wrote the story that I would want to read, I also thought of you walking beside me and reading those same words one day. Then, once I was published, I met you.

My first-ever author event was at a large Nordic festival, my second at a library in Northamptonshire. What united the two were the readers I met, some of you had already read my debut novel and wanted to tell me how much you enjoyed the story, it's about family secrets, and you told me some of your own. I haven't used them, I promise, in my writing, but I appreciated the confidences.

Since then, every event without exception has been a joy, because I get to meet you, the reader. Writing is a solitary occupation, and I find the whole publishing world opaque and stressful. Events aren't, and I appreciate all your lovely chats. Some of you write to me via my website or through my social media pages; there are kind comments and occasional corrections. The latter I appreciate as I can get inaccuracies or mistakes changed for the eBook or in future print editions.

I reply to you all as I value you taking time to write to me. Some of your questions make me think about my motivations, writing can also be intuitive and I don't think too deeply about why I've written a particular passage. Answering your questions gives me time to reflect on my state of mind, personal circumstances or preoccupations at the time I wrote the novel.

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As a big, big reader myself, I'm often to be found sitting in the audiences of other authors' events and I can see the pleasure they get from talking to you too. So please, keep writing to us, tweeting us to say how much you enjoy our writing; it's a cliché, but it genuinely makes our day.

RLF: That was Sarah Ward. If you'd like to know more about any of our featured writers' work, you can find them on the Royal Literary Fund website.

This episode was produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up next time, award-winning poet, playwright and critic John Greening speaks to Caroline Sanderson about his wide ranging career, how to start writing poems, and why you should never trust someone who misuses a metaphor.

We hope you'll join us.