

Writers Aloud

Episode 450

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

In this episode, writers grapple with the knotty question of how to achieve a work/life balance, taking in everything from juggling family commitments to finding a room of one's own.

For many writers, having children can make achieving a work/life balance particularly challenging. Gloomy pronouncements about the effects of 'the pram in the hallway', hang over us and can sometimes lead to feelings of resentment, as Christie Dickason explains.

Christie Dickason: I think it's particularly hard to be a good parent: for a start, you have to fight your own anger at constantly losing moments, turns of phrase, to: 'What's for dinner, Mum?' I was once at a celebration workshop where we were invited to bring an article, an item that meant something to us, and I took a potato ricer and I put it in the centre of the fire circle and put some flowers in it, and said, 'Now, that is representative of something that the children always like to have for special occasions'. I got nods around the circle. But then I said, 'But it also means all the moments when something was lost'. And *then* I got the chorus of other mothers who were writers.

RLF: Ian Thomson also found children presented difficulties when it came to structuring his writing life.

Ian Thomson: I'm particularly fond of a quote by the Baltic poet Czesław

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Miłosz who said that the moment ‘a writer is born into a family, a family is finished’. I’ve had a lot of difficulties with being a parent, I never realised really that parenting would be the hardest thing I would ever have to do. Forget about writing, parenting is the real challenge for me. I think that one of the biggest difficulties I’ve found with being a parent is finding the time to be the carer of these three young children I have, no longer young, these three children, but also finding the same time to write. I mean, this is a perennial problem: how do you accommodate this business of writing and looking after the children? One of the difficulties I have that’s allied to this, is that the house is very porous, I find. Because I write from home, I kind of bring my work downstairs when it shouldn’t be brought down. So I’m sort of bringing works in progress around wherever I am. I should only really leave them in the place where I work.

And it’s difficult, it’s very galling for Laura my wife, in particular, to see that I’ve got like a manuscript with me in *bed* at night. So I’m sort of editing this sometimes when I really shouldn’t be doing that in bed. There are better things to do, I think, in bed than edit your writing. However, sometimes when I’ve got the bug and a sentence isn’t working out, I have to get it right. Wherever I am, I just have to get the sentence right.

RLF: For Thomson, spatial separation proved to be a great help in establishing boundaries and convincing his family of the value of his work.

Ian Thomson: I think that one of the great moments for me in my writing career was when I was made a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and I was stationed at University College London. I had an office on Gower Street, and for me – this is maybe nine years ago or so – the great thing was to be able to take my children to this office and show them that in fact I had a proper job.

Because they’d never really believed that I’d had a job. So actually to be able to go in and show them this desk, this chair, this other chair for a student whose work I’m looking at and I’m trying to help his or her

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writing, was a great moment for me. They really believed that finally I had a job of some sort. I think it's better now that they can see that things are a little bit more comfortable, maybe financially, because I do a lot of review work, tons of real, kind of mucky, Grub Street hackwork. And that's fine by me.

I enjoy it, and I love the turnover, I love being paid for it instantly. The children benefit from that, because I'm able to take them out to the cinema, to restaurants. I'm able to buy them the odd treat even, as it might be called. Nevertheless, it's tough for them having a writer as a father. I think they look at other parents and wonder why they haven't been on holiday to these exotic parts of the world as their peers have been at school.

I've had flak from them, justifiable flak, that I spend too much time on myself in my room. And that actually it's about time that I came down out of my room and chatted, conversed more with the kids. I find that difficult to do at times, I even have to own up to feeling resentful towards children, my own in particular; I mean, I love them all dearly, of course, but sometimes I find it so difficult to reconcile writing with being a parent that I have allowed this very corrosive sense of resentment to creep in.

RLF: Roopa Farooki finds that her family can be a great source of inspiration, although she also understands the importance of having a room of one's own once in a while.

Roopa Farooki: First of all, to be a writer with a family...and there's that famous quote about how a buggy in the hall or a pram in the hallway is anathema to any kind of creativity. And I don't quite agree with that because I find my family inspiring in many ways. I mean, I try not to be a spy in the house when I write, but I find lots of what I've learned through my family relationships have been useful to my writing and have, I guess, informed it, and illuminated it in some ways.

I think it's hard for them because in many ways, even when I'm at home

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and I had the privilege for, I think, the first several years of my writing career to be a full-time writer; I wasn't doing any other sort of work, apart from being a mum, I guess, and I spent much of my time – even though I was at home, I was physically there – lost in my imaginary world, and I felt that they were all very patient with me. I particularly remember when I was writing my fourth novel, I would spend six hours, literally just locked myself away, in my bedroom in France.

And I would just write until it was my turn to look after the babies. We had two very little children at that point. And I wouldn't do anything else, I barely ate, I resented the time it took to brush my teeth, or to take a phone call, or to say hello to a friend. I was actually quite a kind of not very pleasant person to be around.

That was a short writing period, I actually wrote that book in a little over a month. So, people...they only had to put up with me doing that for a while. But I'm aware of how difficult it must be to have a writer as a partner, because, I mean, as my husband said, quite fairly, 'How do I know what you're doing in there, how do I know you're not just having a nap?'

And you don't know, you actually don't know why we demand this time, this privacy, this space, this room of our own. And yet we do because we have to convince ourselves and everyone else that it's important. And sometimes you do feel a bit deluded: you're just, you know, you're not an important person, you're just a dilettante, scribbling and making things up and writing them down in a room, how on earth could that possibly be worth more than the important things other people are doing: raising children, looking after families, working, and properly, I guess, being part of the world and their lives. So, I think it is...there is a balance to be struck. I think I've got better at doing it in recent years.

RLF: Penny Hancock also found writing difficult when her children were young. But, as the years have gone by, she has seen her family become a great asset to her work.

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Penny Hancock: I've always written alongside being a mum and usually having another job as well. So writing versus life has always been quite a balancing act for me.

And in fact just yesterday I was talking to my husband about when the children were little. He's a teacher and in the school holidays he would be around, so I would sort of assume that he would take care of the kids so I could get on with my writing. But that often just didn't happen, because the children didn't recognise the boundary between what I was doing and their play and their fun, so they would just burst into the room when I was writing and interrupt me. So I would often lose my thread and get quite irritated about that. So it did cause quite a lot of conflict at one stage in our lives. Things have moved on a lot since then, my children have grown up; two of them have left home.

And so my son, who's now eighteen, is actually a huge help with my writing. He's got such a brilliant concept of plot, so whenever I'm stuck I just talk to him about it and he comes up with a solution for me. So he's been a real help with my writing. So from the family being a bit of a hindrance, it's now become a help.

And my daughters also are my greatest editors, they'll read my work and tell me when I've got things wrong, particularly about young people and social media and things like that. So they've become...yeah, so family have become a help rather than a hindrance.

RLF: For some authors, children can have a focusing effect. Wendy Moore's writing only really took off once she became a parent.

Wendy Moore: So, as long as I can remember, I always wanted to write books. But when I look back, it's quite laughable that when I was young and single and had no children, and really no responsibilities, I just fuffed around for ages. So, I wrote a few short stories, I tried a few novels, but none of them went anywhere.

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None of it kind of came together, finally. And I didn't really have, I think, the impetus to just get on and finish something properly. So, ironically, by the time I actually did really start writing books and getting books published, I had a young family. And obviously a lot has been said already about 'the pram in the hall' inhibiting people from having the time and the energy to write, especially for women.

But for me, I think it was the breakthrough: when I first had young children, I was still working as a journalist. So, I was freelancing, and all my work – it was poorly paid – nearly all my money went into childcare whenever I freelanced. So that really made me think very hard about whether it was worthwhile actually spending that time working when I could have been with my children.

It wasn't financially advantageous; it wasn't really getting me anywhere. I, by that point, really got quite fed up with writing about healthcare and not getting particularly any further. So, having children made me think, *If I'm going to spend time away from them writing, then I want to make it something that's worthwhile.*

RLF: Now that her children are older, Moore says her family is vital for keeping her grounded.

Wendy Moore: Having a family really keeps me grounded and puts things in perspective because although I'm driven by deadlines, you know, I'm absolutely committed to working as hard as I can on a book, there are times when I think to myself *Actually, no, the important thing is to have time with my children.*

And I remember a few years ago, it was autumn and I had a deadline approaching and my daughter was at home and – I think she was probably at college in London at that point – we just went to pick blackberries and I thought to myself, *Okay, my book might be a day late now, but I've just had this absolutely glorious afternoon in the autumn sunshine, picking blackberries with my daughter, which will be memorable forever.*

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RLF: But it isn't only writers who suffer for the storyteller's art; as Susan Fletcher explains, creative people don't always make easy housemates.

Susan Fletcher: The question I think I often ask is whether it's easy for other people to be around me, to be around a writer. I don't think it is at all, I think it is hard to share space and time and life with somebody who is constantly thinking about a made-up world that they can't access. I think it is hard to understand what is needed for the writer, so needing time alone, needing to walk in places on their own.

And understanding that just because I might be in the house doesn't mean I can put down pen and paper and meet someone at any time they drop by, much as I'd love to. I think too it must be very hard when a book is published. Certainly in the early days I think friends and family must have found it hard to separate the narrative voice from *me*. They probably read the book and thought *This must be what Susan thinks and feels and her opinions must be these*, when so often they're not.

I think I'm very lucky because despite all of this, family have never been anything but a hundred per cent supportive. And it is a strange job to make up people, particularly when writing historical fiction: research worlds that have been and gone. And I'm secretive, incredibly secretive when writing. I find it very hard to talk about the plot that's taking shape, I find it very hard to present these made-up people and these events until they're fully formed. It's like a house of cards that if I show anyone too early I feel the whole thing will crumble if someone says one bad thing or offers one thought that hurts in some way. So I think I'm a secretive and rather withdrawn writer in that respect and I think it must ask a lot of family and friends but their support never changes and the part that I think must be lovely for them is when it's published and we can celebrate.

RLF: Trish Cooke's solution for bridging the gap between work and home life was to move her writing closer to her day-to-day reality.

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Trish Cooke: Writing is quite a selfish profession, and so it's been one of those things where I've had to really close off the family when I'm writing on something seriously. But the kids have been really good, they've grown up with me always being a writer, and so they know when to talk to me and when not to talk to me.

I know that I decided to be a children's writer really when I had Kieran, my first son, because I knew I wanted to write something that included my child. And so the stories that I wanted to write had to be about the world that I was living in. And with Kieran being such a busy child, I knew that I had a very limited amount of time to write. And so I made sure that the stories that I was writing were stories that he'd enjoy.

RLF: Julian Turner agrees that certain genres lend themselves more readily to fitting into everyday life.

Julian Turner: One of the good things about poetry, and lyric poetry in particular, is that it's time limited. You can write a poem in a relatively short space of time, in terms of writing a first draft, say. So, that's really helpful in terms of fitting it into a busy life. But I have found writing a poem does go in phases; it's almost like I know when I'm ready to write a poem or poems. And it's a bit like, I think, a build up of pressure inside. And so, if one doesn't have the opportunity to sit down and write on a regular basis, it gets to the point where you just know one morning that you'd better bloody write, because otherwise you're going to be without what you will produce, forever. Because the poems do not stay there forever, they are waiting to come and to be perceived and to reveal themselves to us.

And they don't hang about forever. It's partly to do with our memory, you know, we don't remember what it is that we have got to say because it doesn't stay around that long.

RLF: But while time and mental space to write can often feel hard won,

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Turner cautions that too much silence and isolation, or the wrong kind, can be just as destructive for writers as not enough.

Julian Turner: I can be in a room full of people and write, so sitting in a cafe is not too bad, because you're kind of on your own in the middle of a group of people, and it's not like you have to interact then with anyone, but you do need to be able to tune in to your own wavelength. So I've heard people talk about, you know, this idea of the Third Eye, that saying, that 'In the presence of another, the third eye is always closed'.

Which does sound really *nuts*, you know. But actually, there is some truth in it, you know, that we can only imagine when we're on our own, really. And ordinary everyday life is a bit of an interference with that, there's different sorts of silence. Often, you know, poets and writers will talk about silence as being a positive virtue, and I can really see why that would be the case for them.

But, that's not true for everyone, there are some sorts of silence that are forced upon people, where words have been taken away from people before they've had a chance to use them. Different sorts of coercion and tyranny require different sorts of silencing mechanisms and methods.

So they're always cautious about talking about silence, because I think that there's different sorts, and some can be productive and some just are barren, and we shouldn't make the assumption that just because someone is in a quiet place that that's a good thing for them, because it might not be at all.

Julian Turner there, concluding this episode, which was produced by Ann Morgan. The other writers featured in this episode were Christie Dickason, Ian Thomson, Roopa Farooki, Penny Hancock, Wendy Moore, Susan Fletcher, and Trish Cooke. There's more information about their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

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Coming up next time, three writers share their perspectives on how their work relates to the people around them.

We hope you'll join us.