Writers Aloud

Episode 455

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

In this episode, three writers reflect on how past events, conversations, and projects have shaped their work. First off, thriller writer Sarah Hilary explains how enticing tales of her mother's childhood were not what they seemed, and explores how discovering the appalling truth influenced her writing.

Sarah Hilary: 'All our Yesterdays: How Family History Informs my Writing':

I can trace the moment I knew I wanted to be a writer to when the stories of my mother's childhood fell suddenly and shockingly into place. For years, when we were growing up, our grandmother shared with me and my siblings fragments of the full truth.

She was a natural storyteller. We saw our mother learning to write with a stick in the sand, running barefoot until her feet became hard and polished like horn, splashing through monsoon rains, surrounded by jungle. We loved the stories and would beg for more; wanting to taste the funny things our mother ate, sing the songs she sang, cuddle her homemade toys, which had been stuffed with old scraps and sand.

For years, our grandmother held back the bigger story, of a captive childhood; four years in a Japanese prison camp in Sandakan, on the

northeast coast of Borneo; a death sentence, a desperate rescue. At the end of the war in the Far East, after the atrocity of the atom bombs, the Japanese gave orders for all prisoners held in their camps to be killed. The men were to be marched to their deaths in the jungle, women and children were to be poisoned and burned in their huts.

On the eleventh of September 1945, against all the odds, my grandmother's prison camp was liberated by Australian troops. Because she had sold her engagement ring to a guard in exchange for penicillin, her daughter, my mother, survived pneumonia to see the liberation, watching with the other children as thousands and thousands of red, white and blue leaflets were dropped from Allied aircraft into the camp, telling the prisoners to be of good cheer because rescue was on its way.

A photograph, smudged and grainy shows my mother, then six and smiling, in the arms of an Australian soldier. For a long time I kept my grandmother's story a secret, as she did. Returning expatriates were instructed to keep quiet about their ordeal for the good of morale in postwar Britain. Many never spoke of it.

My grandmother never talked with her daughter about what they went through, believing it a blessing my mother remembered so little; thinking, in fact, that my mother remembered nothing; she remembered terrible snatches. This silence was a kindness, an act of faith between them, to keep the horrors of the past at bay.

Only when she became a grandmother did she begin to tell her story to me and my siblings. Gently, and with humour, setting the horror aside of those long, desperate years of captivity, the constant threat of sickness, of death. Every day in the final years, the children in the camp saw the same flag used to cover coffins of the dead.

Every day, sons dug graves for their fathers. Instead, my grandmother told stories of happy Christmases, of meals magicked from chicken bones

and dried pig's blood, a precious egg, snatched moments of happiness when the children laughed and danced. And we listened, enthralled, not knowing until we were grown up that there was a secret to the story.

I remember the day it clicked into place in my head, vividly and with a sensation like vertigo, a familiar landscape suddenly seen upside down, inside out. As if I'd speed read a novel reaching its awful climactic scenes before I realised it wasn't a happy story; or, not only that. From my grandmother I learned how many doors can be opened into a story, how light always balances darkness, and how one person's perspective of events can differ wildly from another's.

She inspired so much of what I do. If, as she believed, her spirit was forged in the fire of the prison camp, then it was an indomitable spirit, full of love for life, full of courage. She knew I wanted to be a writer, and so I hold this hope: that she told me the truth of the prison camp because it needed to be told; needs to be told.

Digging deeper, I discovered more stories, a series of diaries written by those interned by occupying forces during the Second World War: a young evangelist trying to see the good in everyone; a middle aged nurse determined to stay cheerful; a sergeant major consumed by bitterness and anger. It is a humbling experience for a writer to discover words written by people in extremis, people without recourse to what we take for granted: pen, paper, food, freedom. Who nonetheless are compelled to write, even when the act of doing so is a punishable offence, which must be kept hidden at all costs. I had, like many writers, been in the habit of complaining quietly to myself when the light wasn't right in my office, or if my favourite brand of notebook wasn't immediately to hand.

How can I write under these conditions! was doubtless prompted by an unconscious desire to avoid work on that particular day. But these hidden words were a revelation. Not least because they demonstrated the imperative to write is not the preserve of writers, but can strike anyone

with an urgent sense of a story to tell, of words which must be heard and should not be forgotten.

In one instance, the writing I discovered was nothing more than signatures, dozens and dozens of them, the names of every woman and child in the prison camp, written and then embroidered onto a tea towel, with the date of their internment stitched across the top. Seeing my grandmother's handwriting on that tea towel was extraordinarily affecting.

I wanted to abandon all other writing projects and focus on finding out everything I could about her experience. Did she believe she would survive to tell her story to grandchildren and great-grandchildren? How was she feeling at the precise moment when she added her name and her child's name? Did she have hope or only despair? Was she afraid of being found out?

The tea towel was an act of defiance, flying in the face of the rules of the camp, just like the diaries and lists of war crimes big and small committed by their captors: a promised banana ration that never materialised; the brutal beating of a prisoner for his failure to bow his head.

Some of these words have been preserved in museums; the tea towel is part of an archive held by National Museums Scotland. But these stories deserve to be resonating right now. People risked their lives to record these details. Their accounts crackle with colours, scents, tastes. You couldn't hope for better examples for the old maxim, *Show, don't tell.*

Unsentimental, even inconsequential, chatter that takes you right under the skin of the authors directly into their lives, exposing truths comforting and uncomfortable about the price we're prepared to pay when life becomes desperate. These are stories of survival, unexpected stories, detective stories, love stories.

On scraps of paper or cloth concealed under stones or in the hems of

skirts or under floorboards, these words survived thanks to the ingenuity of their authors. To read them is a privilege and a responsibility: you feel the weight of the words. This is inspiration at a gut level, life-changing; it altered the way I feel as a daughter and granddaughter, and the way I feel as a writer.

To take custody of family history in this way is at once exciting and daunting. Perhaps all writers struggle with the question of how much autobiography we should allow into our fiction. Too much, and the appeal narrows, or even disappears, swept away by self-indulgence. Too little, and we risk holding back the best of our writing, that which comes from the places where we hurt or heal, fear or love too much.

As a crime writer, I've become accustomed to being asked how much of myself I put into my books. The darker the story, it seems, the more readers expect it to be informed by real life experience. But I've never believed in *Write what you know,* always preferring *Write what you fear*, or even, *Write what you don't know*, because isn't all writing a form of exploration?

I am fairly certain, however, that I wouldn't choose to explore the shadowy avenues of crime fiction had I experienced even a fraction of the darkness about which I am writing. In the end each writer must decide for themselves how much of their family history they want to allow into their books. But be prepared for at least a little of this decision to be made subconsciously.

After four novels, it took me by surprise when a reader asked, 'Do you write such a lot about people held prisoner because of your family history?' I hadn't even known I was doing it, but yes, each of my novels has a subplot, sometimes the main plot, centred around what it means to be held against your will, scared and hopeful, trapped and rescued.

All good writers begin as great listeners. My grandmother's stories, like the best stories, live in my heart. And while they may sometimes be quiet,

they are always urgent, needing to be told. One day, I hope to find the words to tell them.

RLF: That was Sarah Hilary.

Whatever our family situation, few young writers get away without people sharing their views on how we should do our work at some stage in our careers. With that in mind, nonfiction author and former editor and publisher, Peter Fiennes, recalls the best advice he's ever received.

Peter Fiennes: The best bit of writing advice I've had came from Sam Carter, my editor at One World.

I'd written a proposal for a book about Britain's woods and forests, and was thrilled when it was accepted. Sam and I were now going over this somewhat overcomplicated document, picking out the main threads and themes, and wondering whether there should be anything about wetlands or wild camping. I was keen to write about the history of woodland, and the reasons why we had so little, but also about woods and magic, and folklore, and conservation, and woods and childhood, and also about our fear of the woods.

There was going to be a lot about oak trees in there too, and also our sense of belonging and ownership. And there also had to be some humour; nature writing never seems to have any jokes. 'Above all', said Sam as I was leaving, 'you must make it personal'. And this simple statement threw me into a spin; what did he mean, make it personal?

I didn't particularly want to write about myself or my family, not unless it seemed absolutely necessary. I didn't think I had many relevant childhood memories to share. I wasn't planning on writing a misery memoir. And I most certainly didn't want to describe a personal journey through the woods in which I wrestled with demons and found enlightenment.

I thought we'd agreed I wanted to write about the forests of Britain, not myself. And so why did he want me to make it personal? One of the reasons I found his advice troubling was that up to this moment I'd worked for *Time Out* as a writer and editor of travel guides. We'd worked hard to give *Time Out* a recognisable, punchy style, but none of us would ever put ourselves at the centre of the story.

Our aim was to write with Olympian authority and detachment. The opinions, although rather forceful, shall we say, were still presented as fact. Even so, I absorbed Sam's edict, *Make it personal*, and without realising it, I started to think: *How do I feel when I'm reading and researching about the woods? How do I feel when I visit the woods?* And even, *What about the trees, what do they feel?*

I think this is a question I've been asking for most of my life. I changed, we probably all do when we steep ourselves so intensely in a subject for so long. And I came to understand things about myself over the course of writing the book. I realised I had much more to say about the woods and the trees than I'd thought, but also that there were moments when I wanted to say something about myself, something personal.

And of course, personal is not the same as revelations. I just felt more deeply about things than I realised, I was angrier and more upset by the loss of our forests. I also found more to laugh about. Writing a book involves tens of thousands of decisions about theme and words and language, about what's in there, and what can't be.

We choose all of this, although sometimes our choices are unexpected, and often they don't, on the surface, even feel like our own. But all of these thousands of decisions go into the finished book. So, of course, when *Oak and Ash and Thorn* was finally done, and that title was another agonised-over decision, of course it was personal.

It still wasn't a misery memoir, but it was something of a journey. It was

very different from the book I'd envisaged, but it was entirely mine. And for that, I thank you, Sam.

RLF: That was Peter Fiennes. However good the advice we received, it's almost inevitable that some writing projects won't come to fruition. Award winning poet Claire Williamson looks back on some of the work buried in her bottom drawer.

Claire Williamson: Many years ago my poet friend Rose Flint and I were at the same writer's meeting, and she happened to mention that mice were literally nibbling away at the poems in her bottom drawer, so she decided to start sending them out to magazines and journals before they were eaten.

This was in the days when posting paper copies to publishers was far more prevalent. I thought to myself that mice were metaphorically nibbling at my poems in my bottom drawer, because they were similarly sat there in darkness, ink jet-black fading to grey. They existed, but had never been shared. These particular poems had been written following my brother's suicide, as I tried to unpick the enigma of how it came to be that he'd taken his own life.

Perhaps they'd stayed in the bottom drawer because of that emotion that instinctively makes us want to hide our faces: shame. There's nothing like bringing up this kind of death to kill a conversation. A poem, however, is patient and unashamed.

I remember being completely blocked on writing about my brother for three months.

If there was a bottom drawer in terms of feeling, this is how I felt, hidden away, unsure when, or even if, they could surface. It was when I was on a poetry walk at a writing conference with the poet Susan Richardson that things shifted. It was very early in the morning and I was the only participant. We wandered for a while through the inspirational grounds

of Yorkshire Sculpture Park with an invitation to bring something back to a bench for writing.

I found a catkin husk on the path and subsequently wrote this poem:

An Empty Catkin

for Nick

An empty catkin
has shed all its golden pollen
given everything up
like a good boy.

Its brown casing
the way it spins down in staves

has a twist of DNA about it.
Its destiny decided
long before it caterpillared
from weeping willow.

And yet it has
a backbone quality
each vertebra separated
by discarded delicate tissue.
Bend it the wrong way
and it will surely

snap.

I think of your spine
longer than ever
first and last time
hanging in the outbuilding air.

Waiting for a friend
to take your weight
your six foot of muscle and bone
and curiously disconnect you
from your branch.

This poem formed the foundation of what came to pile up in that bottom drawer. I aimed at thirty poems, one for each year of my life at the time of writing; I'm fifty now. I ended up writing seventy-two poems that became an Arts Council funded book, *Ride On,* a narrative in poems, employing different family voices.

From this bottom drawer came the books, plus poetry films, a reading tour of the South West accompanied by a flamenco guitarist, Mark Dennett. It launched my poetry career and received many heartfelt responses from other people who'd lost loved ones in all kinds of circumstances. If it hadn't been for that funny remark that Rose made about the mice, I think the poems would still be in my bottom drawer.

Now my bottom drawer contains the last few copies of *Ride On* and a DVD of film poems. I wonder, what's in your bottom drawer that's worth bringing out into the light?

RLF outro: That was Claire Williamson bringing this episode to a close.

There's more information about the writers we heard from today on the RLF website. This episode of *Writers Aloud* was produced by Ann Morgan. Next time, poet and novelist Elizabeth Cook discusses the experience of seeing your words set to music and the difference between creating poetry and prose.

We hope you'll join us.