

# Writers Aloud

Episode 456

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

**Ann Morgan:** This episode is devoted to an interview with poet, fiction writer and librettist Elizabeth Cook. A former academic, Elizabeth is interested in the ways that the past is remodelled and retold, a subject she has explored in her poetry and critical writing and in her novels. *Achilles*, which links Greek myth and Keats, and *Lux*, an enmeshment of the life of the biblical King David with that of the Tudor poet Thomas Wyatt. In the following conversation, she started out by telling me where writing began for her.

**Elizabeth Cook:** It started when I was a child, I think; I just wanted to make books, so I wrote stories when I was small and bound them and stitched them. Not as many as Emily Dickinson's fascicles or the Brontës', but I enjoyed actually the act of bookmaking as well as writing them.

**Ann Morgan:** Did anyone help you learn that or did you teach yourself?  
**Elizabeth Cook:** I taught myself. It was pretty clear to me what a book was because I had them around and read them and enjoyed reading them. So it just seemed a natural thing to try and make a few as well. One of my first books was called *Wonders of the Fish World*, very informative, and another was called *Bits of the Sun*, because I thought I'd found a meteorite.

I'm not sure if it was a meteorite, but I'd learnt a bit about what a meteorite was. And it began, 'As you all know, the sun is very hot, and when it gets too hot, it falls off'.

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**Ann Morgan:** I like it.

**Elizabeth Cook:** So it wasn't always works of fiction, I did write stories about children. Usually twelve-year-olds because that seemed the really, really exciting age to be, sort of aspirational age, being carried off to fairyland, that sort of thing.

**Ann Morgan:** Now you've written in a huge range of genres: poetry, prose, short and long form, and fiction, essays, criticism, and libretti as well. What do you find the differences between writing poetry and writing prose?

**Elizabeth Cook:** I think writing prose can be a much more deliberate act and it can be much more willed than poetry.

I don't find it possible to decide to write a poem if a poem hasn't sort of grabbed me in some way. If some element of a poem, maybe a rhythm, maybe an idea, maybe an image, they grab me and I have a feeling that there's a poem here, and I need to give it space and let it unfold and watch it. And normally that's a really, really pleasurable experience that may go on for hours, days, weeks.

Almost nothing in writing makes me as happy as writing a poem and completing a poem. And turning it, because I do feel a poem, until it settles, you just turn and turn and turn. And it is restless, and eventually, if you're lucky, it will find a sort of peaceful place where it's like, *Ah, yes, this is where it lives!*

Whereas prose, I find, I can sit down and decide, *Well, I'm just going to get on with the novel today and write something.* It may not be good, but I can usually write something as an act of will. When it flows, then there's a delight very close to the delight of writing a poem, but some of fiction writing is slog, actually.

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Getting from one bit to another in a really tedious way. Of course you can fly, you know, like Keats, 'Already with thee!', you know, with the nightingale, you can just go instantly in a poem. It's much more hard-won, I think, the transitions in fiction, even if you do make a sudden transition, you have to work for it.

I've only written one long fiction, *Lux*, and that took me all of seventeen years. The strange thing about working on something for so long is that you inevitably change in the process of writing something. And I was writing it in a sort of continuous loop, I kept going back to the beginning and then rewriting the beginning and changing the order.

And ultimately I think that the final form of it was arrived at in a relatively short space of time, by someone who I could identify with as a sort of relatively stable person. Whereas a poem, even though a poem may be written over the course of months or occasionally years, usually represents a shorter piece of time.

The poem seems to be much more like a short story. Years ago I was a sort of first-layer judge, for a poetry and short-story competition. And what I found was wrong with a lot of the stories I read, was that people were attempting to write the great novel in twenty pages.

**Ann Morgan:** In the sense that they were trying to go for too big a subject or how would you...can you explain that to me?

**Elizabeth Cook:** They were trying to cram in...yes, too large a subject, too long a narrative, too complex a narrative and all their insights into life as well, and that really doesn't work. But I think a good story can be something very beautifully turned, in a way, and there's a possibility that a story can be perfectly right, I think, which I don't think is possible in a long novel, and if it *were* perfection I think it would be stifling and airless.

**Ann Morgan:** Yes. What I find really interesting, and I noticed this in your

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writing and also in the way you talk about writing, is there's a real sense of tangibility, physicality, so you talk about having enjoyed the physicality of books, stitching them, making them as well. And you talk there about the story being perfectly turned, a woodwork phrase, is that how you think of your writing, as very much a craft, a physical tangibility to it?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yes, I think I do feel that. I write fairly slowly, well, seventeen years on a novel is pretty clear evidence of that. And I read very slowly, I don't know how that comes to be, but I hear every word that I read in my mind. So the sound and the physicality of words is incredibly important to me, as much so in prose as in poetry. So I'm very conscious of the weight and fall of words, the cadence of words.

**Ann Morgan:** So the physical feel of words seems, it seems to be quite present in your work. And physicality, textures, and the feel and smells and tastes of things, something that comes across really vividly in your writing. In *Lux*, for example, one of the things that I found so impressive about it was the way it summoned very distant worlds, but that the physical experience of being in those worlds in a way that I don't think I've really seen much in writing about such distant experiences.

The biblical story David and Bathsheba, and there's a particular section that stands out in my mind where David, at a crisis point in the story he retreats to a cave and prays, and goes through a crisis of the soul really and all kinds of shifts go on. And yet, really, it's just a man sitting in a dark hole, and yet you managed to make this so...the reality of it, the physical experience, and also the spiritual experience, feel so real.

And how do you go about getting that kind of layered, textured experience into the work?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Oh, well, thank you for what you say, Ann. I do find myself at every stage of my writing, thinking, when I'm writing fiction, *What was it like? What would it have been like?* And just asking that,

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almost every inch of the way, which is possibly a contributory factor to the slowness of it.

But I think that's true of all fiction, isn't it? That one inches forward and you hope that a reader will read it in half an hour, what you've been labouring over for days. It's a bit like making animated images. The number of frames that have to be drawn for Donald Duck to...

**Ann Morgan:** Walk across the room.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Exactly, yes. And I think writing fiction is a bit like that, isn't it? And it has to seem ultimately very fluent if it's going to work. But it is for me always asking, *What did it feel like? What did it smell like? What's going on here?*

**Ann Morgan:** I remember back when I was at university being taken by a lecturer to a museum where they had lots of replicas of Greek statues and you saw those beautiful sort of, alabaster, bleached figures, extraordinary works.

And then being completely astonished when this lecturer told me that actually back in ancient Greek times they would have been painted and highly coloured. And I suddenly...it was a really powerful way of getting us to see how different our perception of what things might have been like, or that idea of that world and the reality.

And that it was a very different world, the culture, the way of thinking. How did you navigate that, dealing with, going back to, Biblical times and Achilles, you know, writing about Achilles, again going, returning to the ancient Greek world? How do you navigate that very different world, that very different way of seeing and being?

**Elizabeth Cook:** It's a difficult one that, because I don't think we can really enter into a consciousness of the first millennium BC. Of course, again,

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going back to physicality, that is something we have in common, because the actual structure of a human body really hasn't changed very much at all. So that's somewhere to rely upon, I think, that continuity of the body, which interests me very much.

And presumably it's some kind of continuity of the senses. But I do think consciousness was certainly very, very different and it's very hard to have access to that. Of course, in Homer we have some access to some kind of consciousness from that time and in the Hebrew Bible also, we have written records; that can be a way in, I think.

But even though it's really interesting and I think important to find points of connection between peoples in the past and now, I think it's a mistake to think we're all the same when we always were the same. I mean, even now, there are moments when one's confronted with the sheer, absolute difference of the way another person thinks and feels, and it's really important to be open to that, and continue to be surprised by it and to learn from it.

**Ann Morgan:** So much of your work has involved taking very familiar stories or, you know, the libretti that you've written are both biblical, they focus on different aspects in the Bible, and then Bathsheba and David in *Lux*, and also Thomas Wyatt, a very well known figure in the history of the Tudor period, very well known, and also Achilles, of course.

These are figures that many people have presented in art in different ways, and many people have very strong impressions of. How do you, as a writer, deal...I would find that very intimidating, to present such a familiar figure or a world that so many people feel they understand, or that means so much to so many people. How do you approach that? How do you deal with that, that massive bulk of material that's already there?

**Elizabeth Cook:** I don't necessarily find it intimidating. I suppose in an early incarnation I worked as an academic, and among other things I

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wrote on Shakespeare. And if you're writing on Shakespeare, you can either think it is impossible to contribute anything new to this, or you think Shakespeare is just fantastically nourishing and inspiring, and will always generate new thoughts and excitement, and how wonderful to be thinking about this literature.

I think with great stories, they are continually new and making themselves new and continually generative, so rather than being intimidated, I felt grateful for the real sort of *power* that these stories have. *Lux*, strangely enough, began with Thomas Wyatt, even though the actual book arrives at Thomas Wyatt after two previous sections.

The idea for the novel began with Thomas Wyatt and it was simply love of his poetry and wanting to write something about him, for him? I was very unclear how to do it. I knew I didn't want to write something scholarly about him. I didn't want to get immersed into textual variants in Wyatt's case.

And he was a poet...he seems to me one of the first poets whose very breath you can feel on your neck. His irregularity of line is so human and humane and real. He was a poet I fell in love with when I first read him, and for years have been looking for a way to honour that.

**Ann Morgan:** I think that is something that also comes across really strongly in your work, is this really close engagement, personal engagement, with the work of other writers. So, in your collection, *When I Kissed the Sky*, you have three poems, 'Thinking of Thomas Hardy', and in the second of those poems, you're focusing on the fact that Hardy's heart was buried in a biscuit tin.

And it starts off in the third person, and then you turn to the second person, almost as though you're turning to Thomas Hardy, as though he's sitting beside you, and how, you know, *how strange to think of your heart* — I'm paraphrasing a bit; it feels so personal and the connection is so strong. Do you feel that to all writers that you read or is it only certain...?



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**Elizabeth Cook:** Not to all writers, but to the writers that really matter to me. Yes, they do feel like friends and they are sustaining. And I think reading work that one really responds to is a very intimate process.

I've always disliked the separation people have between literature and life as if they were separate. I think if you are a reader and a writer, then literature is a huge part of your life and a huge part of your experience and I would be *so much* the poorer, I can't even imagine who I would be, if I hadn't been reading all these years.

So yes, Hardy feels like a friend and Isaac Rosenberg feels like a friend and certain other writers are just terribly important to me.

**Ann Morgan:** Yes, Isaac Rosenberg you've been a huge champion of. Can you say a little bit about your connection with Isaac Rosenberg? You've introduced me to him and his work is extraordinary. How did this relationship first start and where did it lead?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Well, it first started in a bookshop when I was a student and I just opened up his *Collected Poems* and read his poem 'August 1914', and it felt like a sort of bodily blow. I'd never experienced a poem so strongly before and so I bought the book and grew to love him and then subsequently in the 1970s I found myself living in East London in a tenement flat just round the corner from one of the homes that Rosenberg and his family had lived in.

Later on I got a job as a lecturer at Leeds University and became friends with the poet Geoffrey Hill who was there then. And along with Geoffrey Hill we hatched a plot to campaign for a plaque to be put up in commemoration of Rosenberg because East London isn't really bristling with plaques. And there was a great difficulty there because all the homes that the Rosenberg family rented had been bombed and lost in the Blitz. So even though...first the GLC, who we applied to, and subsequently English Heritage, agreed in theory to place a plaque, they didn't know



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where to put it. But then Whitechapel Public Library, which has now been incorporated into the gallery, offered itself to our minds as the ideal place. So there was quite a long campaign, with getting a lot of signatories from notable Jewish writers, and Gentile writers as well.

And it was the ideal place for a plaque to be put up. And so eventually it was. Emanuel Litvinov unveiled the plaque and there it sits outside Whitechapel Public Library.

**Ann Morgan:** Amazing. Yeah. And his work is truly wonderful, I was actually astonished that I didn't know of his work when I read it because it's so powerful. And so direct...

**Elizabeth Cook:** Isn't it.

**Ann Morgan:** ...the directness that speaks. There's a certain...among certain poets of similar vintage, there can be a slight sense of distance. The language has withered slightly, with the years, but not with him, I don't think, it's incredibly, or certainly not in the work I've read.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yeah. I think he really wrote to save his life in a way. It didn't save his life, of course. But it was his lifeline completely. And unlike most of the other poets that we think of as the war poets, he wasn't shocked into poetry by the war, his poetry written in the trenches is continuous, I think, with what he wrote before.

**Ann Morgan:** So Isaac Rosenberg wrote to save his life, what's your motivation for writing?

**Elizabeth Cook:** It's interesting: I remember when I was gearing up to leave my academic job because I felt I needed to do other writing, and needed not to be an academic for the rest of my days, I started translating a play by Seneca, *Thyestes*, and I had the feeling that if I didn't translate ten lines a day, I would die. I have no idea where this came from, but maybe there was a similar feeling that I absolutely needed to do it.

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**Ann Morgan:** A compulsion almost?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yes, yes.

**Ann Morgan:** Has that been throughout your life, or did this build?

**Elizabeth Cook:** It built, Ann, it built slowly I think. I wrote occasional poems when I was a student, but not many. Poetry came relatively late.

**Ann Morgan:** But was it poetry, I mean I know you wrote stories as a child, but was it poetry as an adult that was your first...?

**Elizabeth Cook:** No, no, it wasn't. I mean, it was what I loved most. And I think for a long time I thought I valued poetry more than prose fiction. But on reflection, I don't value it *more*, exactly, I value it differently. But I had written some short fiction before I began writing poems regularly. And now I feel that poetry is more at the heart of my writing than anything else.

**Ann Morgan:** Yeah, I think when we first met you described yourself as a poet first.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yes.

**Ann Morgan:** Most certainly that was the impression I got. But actually, you do everything, you are one of the most versatile writers that I...

**Elizabeth Cook:** ...a little bit, not a great deal!

**Ann Morgan:** So I'm fascinated by your collaboration with Francis Grier, a fantastic composer, how did that work in terms of piecing together that oratorio that you worked on with him? How did that process work?

**Elizabeth Cook:** It was a very enjoyable process because Francis is a

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really interesting and delightful person to work with and, unlike some composers, he always wanted the words to come first, which was really helpful for me. So there was never a case, or there was one emergency case when he said, ‘Now you must be really professional because I need a very short aria with so many beats to the line’.

But there was just one occasion when that happened; but on the whole, the libretto came first: I would write a scene, as it were, and then send it to him, and then I’d hear his sort of draft of the music. So it was backward and forward like that. One of the difficulties, I would say the principal difficulty for me of working on a libretto, is that if it comes first, which is lovely because I can develop it as I see fit in terms of the drama of it, once I hand it over it’s not set in stone but it becomes set in music and it’s very, very hard to claw anything back.

So with my tendency to wish to draft and redraft, I can’t do that after a while, because obviously the work of composition and instrumentation is enormous, I mean, it’s a massive task, I don’t know how composers do it, really. So I know that I have to hand over and let it go, even if there may be parts that I slightly wince at.

**Ann Morgan:** And seeing your work performed in that way, what was that experience like?

**Elizabeth Cook:** Oh, it’s completely thrilling, *The Passion of Jesus of Nazareth* – I can’t say ‘Nazareth’ – was performed at King’s College Cambridge, and in Minnesota. And it was just extraordinary to have wonderful musicians and the BBC singers, really transforming it. There’s something about music, which lifts language to another level. It had something of my words in it but it was no longer mine. It was something transformed really.

**Ann Morgan:** A lot of your work touches on or centres around religious topics. What role does faith play in your writing?

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**Elizabeth Cook:** Gosh, it's hard to say. I don't think of faith as a separate entity, I suppose if it's part of one's life, it embraces the whole of life. I know that for years...I mean, I quite like solitude, probably like an awful lot of writers, like solitude and need it. And I sometimes feel that time as my desire for solitude which I've often expressed as needing time to write, hasn't actually been about writing, it's been about: thinking, praying, being.

I don't think of faith as a subject. I mean, obviously, writing a libretto, the Passion or the Nativity, those are subjects and working with the Psalms in *Lux*, that's a subject. But I feel that faith, for want of a better word, isn't a subject, it's a stance or a way of being. Not even an idea to me really. So it's a way of experiencing the world. So in that sense I suppose it's completely sort of coterminous with the writing.

**Ann Morgan:** So it's threaded through it, or kind of colours it rather than being something that you write about.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Yeah, I mean I would write about it if I had to but...

**Ann Morgan:** But you present prayer in your work, you know, you do really carry that experience through in a way that I think is accessible to people whether they share those beliefs or not, which is powerful because I think sometimes religious writing can be offputting to people who don't share those views. And so it's a real art to express that experience in a way that draws everyone into it.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Oh, thank you very much. I think religion's got a justifiably really bad name at the moment. And there are really ugly caricatures of it going under the name of the real thing. It's a tricky time to even own up to this being an important position, as it were, stance, yeah. I can't think of the right word.

**Ann Morgan:** So all these, these huge stories that you've taken, these huge topics, is there anything that you wouldn't write about?

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**Elizabeth Cook:** I don't know. I can't imagine writing a thriller because I'm not very good on plot and I never follow them, even on the telly I don't really follow what's going on.

I'm just...I'm interested in the sort of relationships on the screen but not in the story. So I can't imagine ever writing such a thing. But no, I don't think anything is necessarily off limits. And I think for a writer, you know, as for a doctor, nothing human should be alien. So nothing's beyond, nothing *should* be beyond. Much might be beyond my capacity, but that's a different matter.

**Ann Morgan:** That was Elizabeth Cook talking to me, Ann Morgan. There's more information about Elizabeth's work on the Royal Literary Fund website. This episode was produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up next time, Adriana Hunter talks translation techniques, Simon Robson describes his writing process, and Anna Wilson confronts writer's block.

We hope you'll join us.