Writers Aloud

Episode 388

Introduction: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Presenter: Hello and welcome to episode 388 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode of 'Me and My Audience', RLF writers consider the role that audience plays in the writing process; exploring the possibilities and limitations that thinking about who will read, watch, or listen to your work introduces to the tricky business of putting words on the page.

Writers are frequently told to think about their audience. Indeed the websites of literary agents often request that those sending in manuscripts should state what sort of reader the book might appeal to.

But what role should this idea of reader play in the writing process? In this episode, focusing on the theme 'Me and my Audience', we talk to Royal Literary Fund fellows who have given thought to this question and explore what role audience plays in their writing work.

For poet Michael Blackburn the question *who am I writing for?* has a simple answer.

Michael Blackburn: My feeling has always been: it's obvious that when you are writing something, that ideal reader that you have in your mind is just another version of yourself. I can't see how it can be otherwise, because what you're expecting is…you're saying to yourself: I'm writing this poem, it's really interesting, it's entertaining, it's got amazing insights. It's got all

this kind of knowledge behind it, perhaps. And you're assuming that the person who is reading it will have enough of that to really understand what you are doing. And in the end of course, that person is yourself.

On the other hand, it's not as if you are writing just for yourself, because that would be self centred and solipsistic. I suppose what you're doing is you are thinking: *this is my voice and that it's sort of me that I'm talking to, but I'm talking to me as if I were somebody else.* And you're always hoping, of course, that if a poem goes out into a magazine or is published in a pamphlet or book, that there will be readers who you've never met, who you will never meet; readers about whom you know absolutely nothing, who come from completely different lives and backgrounds to you, but who will read this and get what it is you are talking about.

So in some ways there's a part of you in them, and maybe of them in you. I suppose you're looking at yourself in that sense as a kind of example of everybody; maybe you're looking at yourself as an everyman or everywoman character. I certainly know that when I write I'm not actually thinking of an audience in that sense. And I work on the assumption that if there's enough in a poem, that it will get through to some people.

Presenter: Education writer Becca Heddle agrees that work has to please its author. When she is producing work for four-to-nine-year-old readers, she often thinks about what would appeal to her inner child.

Becca Heddle: The vast majority of what I've written has been for roughly four-to-nine-year-olds: the audience for primary school reading schemes. In terms of having an idea, who makes that up, and keeping them in mind when I'm writing, I have to confess that basically I'm a kid! I think most of us are in some way, but I generally work on the crazy principle that if something interests me, it's probably going to interest them.

I think as a general rule, it's probably not far off, because if a subject or an idea really buzzes you as a writer, you are much more able to put it across

to somebody else; to put across your excitement. And in primary school nonfiction, that's really important. So I get very excited, I get rather over excited, when I find the little bits of information that really jazz me, like the Portuguese town which fills its central streets with paper decorations every two years, or the fact that cobalt, the element, is the source of a particular blue colour: cobalt blue, but it gets its name or it shares its name with a nasty kind of goblin. And in fact, if you are mining it, you will find it in deep underground caves where it's damp and where it will corrode your skin. So how wonderful: it's a nasty thing that lives in the dark and could eat you. I get very excited by that sort of thing. So I trust that my readers will also.

Presenter: For Nick Holdstock, the imagined reader is one who shares his taste and outlook.

Nick Holdstock: I think you do have to be your first audience and it has to give you some pleasure, if only just to get you through doing it. So then the question is: what do I look for in something and then, what would I then expect it to give an audience? Narcissistically I could just say: *I want my audience to be like me*, but that doesn't really get to the quality of it.

I want an audience that pays attention to the language, that isn't just caring about moving on in the plot. I suppose I want an audience who've got a degree of patience, that can defer knowing things or understanding things and therefore willing to put up with a degree of confusion. Because if we do think we're writing art, art is very rarely about just stating things simply, if that's even possible.

And so I think an audience might need to be patient but also…I suppose you almost think that they must have read similar things to the things you've read. You think of them as not just being obviously your readers, but being readers of people you admire as well; other writers.

I would almost want someone who liked, say for example, the fiction of

David Foster Wallace, or George Saunders or Mary Gaitskill or Virginia Woolf. That some of those readers, those very different kind of readers, could be part of an audience of mine.

Presenter: But Holdstock is aware that it's possible to take this idea too far.

Nick Holdstock: You can't realistically try and write a book for this sort of imaginary hypothetical reader who has read the things that you want them to have read, and who is therefore perfectly prepared to receive your book. I think that there's a danger in doing that, because there does need to be a degree of clarity at the same time to what you do.

It almost encourages you to be lazy because you're almost trying to preach to the converted. And I don't think that's a helpful thing, given how much of the process of writing takes place in your own head. And most writers would feel that what they've written makes sense to them, but it's rarely the case that, or never the case that, a reader will read something in the way that the writer of it would read it.

So yeah, having this sense of a hypothetical idealised…or a very specific kind of reader, probably isn't a good idea. You may be almost thinking about kinds of reader that you are not writing for. You may be thinking: *I'm going to almost wilfully exclude people who are impatient or plot driven or who want short sentences or chapters that end on a cliffhanger.*

You can just say: 'oh, I think all these kinds of books are terrible, but they are a kind of book that certain kinds of reader enjoy'. So the audience is both a sort of a positive one and then it's also a negative conception of what it isn't as well. And maybe out of those two, there is this balancing act, but ultimately it's yourself first of all.

Presenter: Judy Brown has mixed feelings about the idea of considering the audience in her work.

Judy Brown: It takes a commitment of time and a commitment of energy to read a poem or a book of poems that you've written, and it amazes me every time that someone should do that. So respecting the audience is really important. On the other hand because I've worked in law, the commercial idea of an audience makes me really, really uneasy: thinking of that idea of pitching for work and distorting what you do, because you know your clients want this outcome. That makes me uneasy about audience. So, I guess it's about respecting the reader, but the reader as an individual. Probably what made me uneasy about the idea of audiences, the audience as a group: What you're selling to a group may be a product, but I don't think the poem is the same.

You can't sell the same poem to a big group of people, it's different, each individual is different, they're not a crowd. Although sometimes poems which are contemptuous of their readers, interest me as a reader; unnerve me but interest me. Maybe because poetry's not a product, but it's something that changes in the hands of each reader. Maybe it's more like a collaboration, but that's not really my business, as long as I don't mess things up.

Presenter: For Brown, the idea that someone has taken the time to engage with her work makes her feel obliged to provide something in return.

Judy Brown: I don't think I'm doing market research to find out what readers want. But I do think it's really true that you must offer the reader something to make them bother. That may not be what you are ultimately doing with your poem, but you've got to offer them something along the way to make them bother… The pleasures, the immediate pleasures, may not be the main pleasures, but they're really important in just getting anybody there and keeping them there.

Presenter: Following in the footsteps of an international bestseller, Penny Hancock takes the approach of thinking of her work as a letter to an imagined reader.

Penny Hancock: When I write, I don't actually think about the demographic as such of my readership, the sort of social demographic, or what age group they are, or what socio-economic class or whatever, but I suppose I have in mind one or two people. I think Steven King said: all writing was a letter to a person, his ideal reader. And I suppose if you imagine, as you're writing, that you're writing to a person that you feel is on your wavelength, then you do have a sense of a sort of readership and I think that's probably what I do.

I think I do know that my readership is probably mainly female, probably mainly between the ages of about thirty and eighty; that might be a bit broad, but mainly for the probably middle-aged type women if that doesn't sound too stereotyping! So I do have a rough idea of that, but then I've also had a lot of men who've responded to what I've written and younger people. So you really can't second-guess that. It's more of something that publishers need to think about when they're marketing your book.

Presenter: Cynthia Rogerson also finds it helpful to think of writing for an imagined reader, particularly one who can be relied on for honesty.

Cynthia Rogerson: When I'm writing, the audience I write for aren't the strangers that might buy my book. They're people that I love and respect, like my brother and sister and my husband and certain friends who are very critical readers.

I'm writing to please them, in my mind I'm talking to them, I'm telling them the story. And I know when one of them would say: 'oh, that's bullshit' or 'that's not ringing true Cynthia'. So I'm talking to them in my head and I read recently something that echoed this: Kurt Vonnegut, he wrote to his sister. In his head he had an audience of one in mind for all of his books.

He lost his sister when she was in her twenties and he loved her very much. And she was one of his most critical readers. He relied on her and

once she was gone, he kept writing for her. He knew what she would not like, and he would just hone it for her, and he attributes any wholeness of style that he's achieved because of his sister.

And also, I imagine he missed her so much, that was a way of communicating to her. So my audience in my mind, I'm trying to tell my story to people who would tell me, honestly, if it works or not.

Presenter: Heidi Williamson, however, is careful not to allow the imagined reader into the writing process too soon.

Heidi Williamson: I think I'm very conscious of audience at a certain stage in my writing. In my training as a copywriter, I had to vary my writing very much for different audiences: for people that knew the subject, for people that didn't know the subject, for buyers or sellers, even from a different brand's perspective: a different tone of voice, a different personality.

For a long time when I was beginning writing, I thought there were two stages to my creative process. One was coming up with the ideas however you can, don't mess with it, just try and come up with them. And then the second one was editing, which for me is a very long and very ongoing, but also pleasurable process of trying to find out exactly what the poem wants to say.

As I developed in my writing, I began to think about a third level, a third layer of my creative process, which is thinking about the poem from the point of view of the reader. As a reader, however much I love the writers that I'm looking at, I'm really only interested in what it brings to my life and my understanding of the world.

And I started to think about how poems can be layered and open to different people and different interpretations. So now when I've got a poem and I've edited it to the best of my ability, I take it to a feedback

group, I belong to two or three, and I really value all the different points of view that people come up with.

Some of them I know I won't necessarily want the poem to be open to that reading, but others I'll think, yes, that's what I want to do. Or this is confusing what that reader is understanding from the poem, so I need to change that. So I really value the feedback I get in those groups.

Presenter: For Williamson poetry readings can be an excellent place to test and hone work.

Heidi Williamson: Although they're nerve wracking, and however much I try to tell myself that those nerves are excitement, what I really value is that connection with the audience in the way that you connect with a poem on the page, and the way that when I read, I love watching, as George Szirtes says, another mind moving on the page. There's so many different perspectives in the world that come alive to me when I read other people's work, and when I'm in the room with an audience, sometimes, just sometimes, there's a moment, where you feel like you're all on the same page and it's making some sort of connection and some sort of sense out there. And if people come up afterwards and give me feedback, whether it's good or bad, I'm always really respectful because that's how that person has taken those words in to themselves, and for me, that connection between people is what poetry can do really strongly and really deeply, and I think why I value it so much.

Presenter: Amanda Dalton holds that writing is about communication with others. Nevertheless a strange thing sometimes happens to her when she reads her work back.

Amanda Dalton: For me, writing's about communication. I don't very often write to just work out something for myself. I think it through in my head, but I don't necessarily write it down. So for me, as soon as I write, I'm thinking about audience. Often in an abstract, vague kind of

way but sometimes I find it really helps me to be thinking about who I'm writing for. It can help me to focus the writing and it can help me to give it a charge.

I sometimes think I even don't believe when people say that they write for themselves. I certainly don't believe it if they then show me what they've written, because if they're writing it for themselves, why are they showing it to me. And I think actually that our impulse to communicate is really huge, and that writing is one of the ways that we work out how best to do that, as well as actually to do it. I read somewhere and I can't remember where, 'bad art is from no one to no one'. And I think there's something about if you are writing at some point for yourself that you become the audience.

So when I read back what I've written, I'm the audience. And that's slightly different from the moment in which I'm writing, where I'm not the audience. So something changes I think, in the process between the act of writing and then reading back what you've written. I think you're a different person when you read it back. I think you're sitting in a slightly different chair.

Presenter: Sometimes audiences can be hard to predict, particularly when you have a runaway success on your hands. TV writer Tina Pepler found this to be the case when she worked on the internationally renowned *Downton Abbey.*

Tina Pepler: I didn't really have a clue with *Downton* who we were going to be talking to. And it turns out it's hugely popular in America and China. I understand America, but China, who would've predicted that, but it's one of the biggest audiences for it is in China.

And then *Princes in the Tower*, which is a two-hour film about the princes in the tower and the Perkin Warbeck conspiracy. Again, because that was a commission from the history department of Channel Four, so whatever

audience we wanted to aim for, we had the audience of the people who had commissioned it, who had very clear requirements of faithfulness to history. Whereas actually, if you dramatize what was known about the princes in the tower, it would take about ten minutes and we were doing a two-hour thing, so playing with the audience with that — and we were very aware of the Richard III Society, I remember, and all the historians who would write in and say that we'd got something wrong. So, yes, I was very respectful and I was allocated a researcher and confined to a room with him for quite long periods of time.

Presenter: The audience profile can also vary dramatically depending on the platform. Pepler often finds that she has a rather different experience when writing for radio.

Tina Pepler: There's an on-board audience already with radio. And it's a very, very intelligent and intuitive audience has always been my reading, that if you set up a convention in a radio play, they get it straight away — as long as you set it up clearly, and then the thing is always that you mustn't do that thing that I tell the students at Oxford sometimes, you know: this gun that I'm holding in my right hand is loaded! You have to be clear, but not clunky; and names, when somebody's coming into the room, so, of course, with radio you're very aware the audience can't see, and that's the accommodation you're always making.

With television my experience has been that the editorial awareness, the steer that you get is there constantly, so they'll say: 'well, you know, this is pre-watershed', or 'we've got to think about commercial breaks' or 'we're trying to reach a different audience with this'. They will have a very clear sense of what audience they want and you will get a steer on that.

Presenter: An awareness of your audience's requirements and sensibilities can be a key factor in getting your work heard. Jonny Wright has found this to be increasingly important over the course of his career.

Jonny Wright: As I've got older, I've definitely consciously started using the N-word less in my raps, as I've discovered that many of my rap fans aren't black, many of them aren't native speakers of English so don't understand the complexities around using the word, and also a lot of black people find it offensive too. Art to me is still the most important thing and I still use a word if I deem it appropriate in the song. But I'm aware of my audience when I'm writing my raps. I won't be led by them, but also I don't want to alienate them either.

For the same reason when I wrote and directed the short film *Huey and Louis*, I think it only had two swear words in it. Before we started shooting I thought eventually it was a film I would like to show in schools during black history month. And for this reason I replaced the swear words. The film didn't lose anything, but it may well have gained a much larger audience because of that choice.

And I've already been able to screen it at a 100 Black Men's graduation day, which is a black Saturday school. It went down a storm, but if it had the swearing in I wouldn't have been able to screen it there. So it's about thinking about your audience and making compromises without losing your artistic integrity.

Presenter: The delicate dialogue between writer and audience is a balance that can be tricky to achieve, but, when it works, magic happens.

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You've been listening to an episode focusing on the theme: 'Me and my Audience'. The featured writers were: Michael Blackburn, Becca Heddle, Nick Holdstock, Judy Brown, Penny Hancock, Cynthia Rogerson, Heidi Williamson, Amanda Dalton, Tina Pepler and Jonny Wright.

You can find out more information about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

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Outro: And that concludes episode 388, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Anne Morgan.

Coming up in episode 389, Michael Bond speaks with Caroline Sanderson about the influence of surroundings, fandom, and navigation skills. We hope you'll join us.

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Thanks for listening.