Writers Aloud

Episode 389

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

Hello and welcome to episode 389 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode Michael Bond speaks with Caroline Sanderson about his enduring fascination with observing the ways in which we're influenced by our social and physical surroundings, the joys of fandom, and the art of navigation: both outdoors and on the page.

Caroline Sanderson: Michael Bond is an award-winning nonfiction writer of books about human psychology and behaviour. Formerly a senior editor at *New Scientist*, he's been writing, editing and consulting on science and development for twenty years, specializing in social behaviour in a whole range of environments: from terrorist groups and explorer teams to communities and organizations.

He is particularly interested in how we're influenced by our social and physical surroundings; how the people we are with and the places we know affect what we do and think. This preoccupation has also led him to travel widely, to investigate the effect of different locations. And indeed, along with his two works of popular psychology, he has also written a work of travel biography about the settling of the Canadian prairies in the nineteenth century centred on an illustrious ancestor of his.

For his own physical surroundings he's chosen a cottage on a farm in rural Hampshire, and this is the location for our *Writers Aloud* interview.

Michael, so here we are in rural Hampshire, not far in fact from Jane Austen country. How would you say your writing's influenced by your social and physical surroundings, your own surroundings, and why have you chosen to settle in this place, is it its particular sort of feel and influence?

Michael Bond: Well, it's a family place, so I'm on a farm that my grandmother used to own and it's still owned by my family. And I have three siblings and they all live within a few miles of here. So it feels quite secure. And I grew up very close to here, so, close to my roots. It's also very quiet, which is perfect for…I prefer to write where there's no one around and in the countryside. So it's pretty ideal really, for what I'm trying to do.

Caroline Sanderson: So, very grounded here. And, and if you heard a little noise then that was Speckle the cat jumping off the table, deciding that what we were doing was quite boring!

So your interest in human psychology, how did that develop, can you trace it right back?

Michael Bond: So I studied science at Durham University but I didn't specialize in behaviour, I actually think I chose the wrong subject: I chose earth sciences and geology, which meant that I spent a lot of time, not being with people, out on field courses collecting rocks.

But when I left, I just became a lot more interested in how people behave. So I started to read a lot and I went straight into journalism. And started to specialize in science and then behaviour. And of course not having the academic background, it meant that I had to do a lot of learning. So I spent a lot of time with psychologists, with academics, and that became my specialism. So there was no big eureka moment, it was more just a realization that this was an exciting subject.

Caroline Sanderson: Well I first came across your work when I read your

book, *Wayfinding: The Art and Science of How We Find and Lose Our Way*, which is about the psychology of getting lost. And it contains some fascinating neuroscience about how our brains make cognitive maps that tell us where we are and why some people are so much better at navigating than others — I did find your cottage in the country quite successfully, or needed a few extra directions at the end! One of the things that I like about it is that it's not purely a scientific book is it, tell us about that subtitle, *The Art and Science of How We Find and Lose Our Way.*

Michael Bond: Yes. So in researching this book, I spent a lot of time with neuroscientists finding out how the brain allows us to make maps of our surroundings. And I spent also a lot of time with people who spend their days looking for lost people, to try and get the other, the other side of the picture.

And these people tend not to know about the science, but they're quite good at finding people because they study the patterns: the behavioural patterns, and they listen to people when they find them, who tell them what happened to them, why they got lost. And finding your way is an art I think, because it has a lot to do with how you relate to your environment and you have to be a bit creative about using certain cues, certain landmarks, the shape of the land, or if you're in a city, remembering important things: just the way a street looks, that kind of thing.

So it's difficult to look at it entirely scientifically. In fact, I know plenty of spatial neuroscientists who are not particularly good at finding their way. So knowing about the science of this doesn't necessarily help you when you're out in the landscape. It's a complex endeavour, I think, wayfinding.

Caroline Sanderson: It's so interesting, isn't it, and I guess that it makes sense because we all have those particular emotional attachments to landscapes and the way that we navigate through places is influenced by the people that we are, I suppose, is what you're saying?

Michael Bond: Yes, and your confidence levels are very influential in how you navigate a place. If you are nervous, it makes it difficult to pick out the right kind of information and to retain that information. So the sort of person you are: if you're neurotic, you'll probably kind of find it very difficult to navigate in any environment, if you are confident, outgoing or you've grown up using those skills, then you are going to relate to your environment very differently. So anyone does it differently and the skill set differs dramatically across the population.

Caroline Sanderson: So interesting, that notion of confidence as well, isn't it, almost that thing of setting out, looking like you know where you are going.

Michael Bond: That's right and if you don't have confidence, you're less likely to do that, to dive into streets of a city you don't know; you are more likely just to take a taxi for example, but if you have confidence, you're going to do it more, so it's a self-fulfilling circle really in that way. Which is why it's difficult for anxious people to become good navigators because they just don't have the opportunities.

Caroline Sanderson: I remember giving my young son the map of Venice and Venice is a great place to do that with kids because obviously there's no traffic and just saying, right, okay: get us there! and getting him to read the map in that way. And it feels like there's not so often that we get to do that?

Michael Bond: No, well there aren't many places where you can feel safe in that way. The flâneurs of old who used to wander around cities...that was a form of artistic expression in a way: they weren't that interested in finding their way; I think they were more interested in not finding their way probably!

Being lost added to that experience. But not many of us do that these days.

Caroline Sanderson: No, the flâneurs and the psycho-geographer of today…

Michael Bond: There are apps you can download, which will help you get lost, so it's come full circle really!

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, and you write about some of those in your book, and I thought that was completely fascinating. Because I personally love the idea of map reading as an art and as a form of reading actually. So I was taught to map read as a small child by my father who loved maps so much that he collected antique ones to hang on the wall, and I loved maps too, you know, their colours and their useful artistry and yeah, I'm a bit grumpy about SATNAV really, it's a matter of personal pride to navigate by paper map!

Are you the same, do you like that 'art of map'?

Michael Bond: I am the same, Caroline, I prefer to wayfind without a SATNAV, but I'm not a technophobe. So I don't think there's anything in principle wrong with using a SATNAV, and I often use it particularly in a city.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, so perhaps I'm being a little fanciful here, but reading your work made me think about what an ability to navigate or *not*, and our relationship with others, which is your sort of other big subject, might shape a writing life. And I wondered if you could draw, if it's possible to draw, a parallel with navigating the writing of a full length book, when as a sort of former journalist, you're used to setting a simple course through a piece of freelance journalism, or a fairly simple course, where you can see your destination from the outset. And I guess that when you're deep in the writing of a book…I guess we all have to keep a sense of where we are and make sure that…I was going to say: make sure that neither you or your reader gets lost, but sometimes it's quite good to

get lost for a while in the writing of a book, isn't it? Because it's somewhere you've never been before I suppose.

Michael Bond: That's right, if you are writing about popular science or if you're writing about science and trying to explain it to a general audience, I find you end up with far too much information, too much detail because not being an academic myself, I have to learn about the subject in order to write about it.

So I start a book, once I finish the research, with way too much material and I find it impossible to start without a really solid structure. And so I do try and map it out and imagine how each chapter will link together and within the chapter: how it'll look within a chapter and I try and have that fairly well laid out.

And then I almost immediately veer from it when I start, because I find it makes it more interesting to go a different direction, which I hadn't anticipated. So I think it's really useful to have that structure, to have that map, but to have the possibility also of going outside it somehow, or following a road that you didn't think existed.

But I think one of the first things that an editor looks for is sensible structure. You need to have a structure and you need to be able to draw a map of the book once you've finished it, but it doesn't have to be the same one that you started off with, I find.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, that's a very good way of talking about it.

And I guess it is slightly different as you say. If one was writing a novel, for example, I suppose there would be more point in getting lost in that, but of course there are novelists who plan very carefully what's going to happen in their book, so not just crime novelists, where you need to know what's going to happen.

Michael Bond: I'd love to have that conversation actually with a novelist, on structure; whether it's important to have that.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah. I think probably the point about your books is you are a science communicator, so you are trying to communicate ideas to others and sometimes quite complex things.

Michael Bond: Yes. I suppose it's got to be surprising to readers, even if you know what you are in for when you're reading a book. And maybe it's helpful for a reader to know where they're going, but they need to be surprised as well, so the writer has to be surprised. But the thing with nonfiction science writing is that there's always this idea: you need to hold people by the hand as you take them through complex ideas, but that can be limiting I think: the language that you then end up using to steer people can make it seem very formulaic and take that surprise and spontaneity out of the language and that's something that I struggle with, I haven't worked that out yet.

Caroline Sanderson: I think we also get something of *you* in your books, and I like that as well. You're not just delivering as a kind of lecture from on high, you're part of it. The other thing that I was wondering about, and perhaps this also relates a bit to fiction, but any type of writing: I can imagine that the knowledge that you have of human psychology and behaviour, that's quite useful to a writer, isn't it, it could be useful to all kinds of writers?

Michael Bond: It's really useful, exactly, for all kinds of writers, fiction writers…just an awareness of how people behave in their particular situation or in relation to what they've experienced in their past, those sort of things.

There's this idea that's quite dominant about personality: this idea that if you know someone's personality and their character and their disposition,

then you can tell how they might behave in a particular situation: this idea that these traits are fairly fixed and they shape people's behaviour.

But in reality, that doesn't seem to be the case. And behaviour is very hard to predict. One example was when I was doing research for *Wayfinding*: a book about navigation, the way people behave when they find that they're lost and really lost in a wilderness situation, however well trained and well informed they are about what they should do in that situation, almost invariably, they would suffer a panic attack, lose the ability to think their way out of that situation. So that's an example, a quite extreme example of how the situation, the environmental context, *entirely* shapes your behaviour, and your training and your personality has very little bearing.

So that's the kind of thing that interests me: how unpredictable really behaviour is and how surprising: influenced by your environment, but also by your social environment, people you're with. There's something quite hopeful about that as well I think: we're not determined by our traits.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, and thinking about your book *The Power of Others: Peer Pressure, Groupthink and How the People Around Us Shape Everything We Do*. And we discover in this book that our innate socialness as human beings holds huge sway over how we think. How important are other people to writers do you think, and how does that need for other people square with the writer's instinct to be solitary and to come up with their own ideas, at least a sort of mode of presentation that's really individual and original? I guess most writers say they need both things, but I know I don't really like other people around when I'm writing.

Michael Bond: It's a really good question. I'm a member of the London Library, which is full of writers who go there to write, and I also sometimes write there. But talking to people there I have discovered that people have so many different ways of writing and different needs. I have a friend who *cannot* write by herself. She's got to be surrounded by people. She needs to hear other people being productive – Caroline, shaking her head! –

[laughter] I'm with you, that's not really for me, but some people find it very difficult to be alone; daunting, I think, and they need others. They need to see other people being inspired or being productive. Again, it's just difficult to imagine a formula for how best to write a book. And it takes some people a huge amount of time to write a book. I have some colleagues who write in popular science who rattle off a book in a year, and they're doing 1500 words a day. I never like to hear about that because it makes me feel incompetent!

Caroline Sanderson: Don't think any of us do! So maybe that's treating it like an assignment or maybe if I was writing a journalistic piece, then you just go for it and you do just get it down.

But as we were discussing, I think books take more navigating than that, you can't just plough straight through it or I certainly can't.

Michael Bond: There's also the audience, your relationship with your readers or who you hope will be your readers and I think that can have an effect on how you write; imagining who you are writing for.

If you are writing for a paper or a magazine, then you're fairly sure of that audience because they know who buys that paper and so you're aiming at that particular audience. But for long-form, for nonfiction books, unless you are writing in a very tight genre, you're not quite sure who's going to be reading your books, which can make it feel that you're in a bit of a vacuum and you need an anchor. And I think imagining your audience or part of your audience can provide an anchor in some ways.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, that act of trust that someone else is going to find this interesting other than yourself.

Michael Bond: Yes. God, you hope so!

Caroline Sanderson: I've certainly had that.

You've made, as we've covered, a specialism of writing about what happens in our own heads and why. This might suggest that you don't need to go very far to research your writing but actually, I know you've travelled a great deal, and I know some of that's been on journalistic assignments in the past, including to the Middle East, but tell us something about how travelling to different places has informed your writing.

Michael Bond: I think people are very similar in some ways, we have similar psychology. But people respond very differently to their setting and the way they behave and their outlook on the world varies hugely I find. And that has a lot to do with how people fit into where they are. So for my book on wayfinding, I was talking to neuroscientists in their labs in University College, London, who spend their time in a very highly focused experimental setting, studying rats with electrodes in their hippocampi. And then I went to Canada, North America, to talk to people who work in these *huge* landscapes, studying people who get lost in that setting or actually finding people who are lost; and so they have a *completely* different view of the world.

So they're talking about roughly the same thing: what orientates people and what happens when they become disorientated, but they're seeing it in very different ways. So I think for my area of science writing, it's important to meet people in their settings because their view of the world is profoundly influenced by where they are and what they've seen in their experience, even though they might share the majority of their genetic makeup, and the psychology is the same. I think it's difficult just to talk to someone to work out who they are, you need to observe them, and the best way to do that is to go to where they live; where they're comfortable.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, it makes so much sense. And I guess this is the most true for your book *Wayfinding*, but I guess one could say that it's looking at the way that people behave, it's such an important constituent. And I know that in your latest book, you're looking at fans and fandom aren't you, and why people become fans of whatever they're fans of.

Michael Bond: Yeah. So again, this is about how people's interaction with their surroundings shapes their behaviour. But in this case it's their social surroundings, because that book is mainly about how people behave within their fan group fandoms. So I was looking…this is a great place to be… I had a chapter in that book on Jane Austen fans and this is Jane Austen country: we're in Hampshire, she was born a few miles away from here. So this is one thing I *could* do during the pandemic lockdown, where we couldn't travel very much, but I could get out to meet Jane Austen followers – there's plenty of them around here – talk to them about why they love her literature and why they dress up in Regency costumes and get together for picnics and this kind of thing. So I was able to really study these people in their setting, their natural settings. And I met all kinds of people doing this research for fans: from Jane Austen to members of the Richard III Society who are convinced that Richard III has been maligned. And then of course Harry Potter, David Bowie, all the traditional sort of celebrity fandoms and looking at the social psychology of that was really interesting. And just seeing how people benefit from finding that they're not actually the only person who thinks this way about…Taylor Swift! There's actually…when they link up with other people, that kind of sharing of passions has an incredible effect on people and the sort of meaning that it can give to people is really fascinating.

Caroline Sanderson: That is fascinating. And it's a distinct thing, isn't it, because I've written about Jane Austen, one of my books is about Jane Austen. And so I would describe myself as a...you know, I've been to Steventon where she was born, just up the road, but I really really do draw the line at dressing up in Regency costume! It's strange how a real abiding interest is distinct from what you are talking about I think, isn't it.

Michael Bond: There are different levels of intensity of fandom, but people when I talk to them about the fact that I was writing about Jane Austen fans, they often presume that they would be women in their sixties or seventies. But the people that I was talking to were mainly in their early twenties; mainly women, in their early twenties.

So they have a very modern take on Jane Austen and they see her as a sort of radical revolutionary in some ways. And they use some of that in their own lives. So Jane Austen I think has been re-interpreted over and over.

Caroline Sanderson: That's so interesting, I like those radical readings, I think they're really interesting. Anyway we digress slightly! In my introduction I mentioned your adventure-craving forebear, Viscount Milton who in 1862 set out to travel across what is now Western Canada, partly to explore the possibilities of a usable land route through the Rockies. So in *Way Out West on the Trail of an Errant Ancestor*, you describe your own journey west from Winnipeg in his footsteps.

So it's quite a different book from those that follow. Did it any in any way set the tone for what you've subsequently written?

Michael Bond: So that was my first book, it was twenty years ago. It was before I thought of myself as a writer of books, because I was just setting out, trying to be one and I was still a full-time journalist at that time. But I think it was more to do with…I was interested in this particular ancestor, because he was an eccentric, but he also grew up in a family that was very traditional and he was clearly a black sheep and he suffered from epilepsy and he was an outcast. But he went out and he did this journey and he wrote a book about it and he became a success really through his own imagination.

This is what he decided he wanted to do: get well away from his family, but achieve something as well. And his journey was nothing like he expected, he was traveling across the Canadian prairies before it had been settled by Europeans, and he ended up spending a winter with a group of Cree Indians and he learnt a lot from that and profoundly changed his view of the world.

So I think it was that that drew me in, there was a lot of looking at his behaviour, the sort of psychology of that and coming out of this very

straight-laced family and finding his own way. So although it was difficult to really make that link at the time, to what came after for me, looking back, that's what really drew me in. And after that, human behaviour was eternally fascinating.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah. He's an extraordinary character, I loved reading about him. So what are the preoccupations would you say, that run through all of your work?

Michael Bond: I think I see myself as an observer really; because I'm not an academic scientist I spend my time learning from psychologists and behavioural scientists and I really just observe what they do and then observe what other people do, and with that knowledge, try and make some sense of how people behave in the world. So my main preoccupation is probably as an observer and trying to get better at that, honing that: the art of really looking for certain things in someone's behaviour or picking up their use of language and just taking yourself out of the mix as far as you can. I find that fascinating. So that's the front end: the research side.

As a popular science writer there's always the thing about trying to make difficult science easy to understand. And I spend quite a lot of time trying to work out what's going on for myself.

And then ultimately the reason I'm in the game, I think, is the writing side: trying to write it all down, getting it across in a way that is enjoyable for people to read. I just enjoy the craft of writing, knowing that this is something that you get better at, the more you do, the harder you work at it.

And that's what I absolutely love really, that last third of the operation of the book, when you're actually sitting down making sense of everything and…

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, helping other people navigate it, I suppose, as well.

Michael Bond: Yeah. That's right, I hadn't thought of it like that, but that's how it is.

Caroline Sanderson: Thank you, Michael. Thank you very much.

Michael Bond: Thank you very much, Caroline.

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Outro: That was Michael Bond in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Michael on his website at www.michaelbond.co.uk. And that concludes episode 389, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Kona Mcphee. Coming up in episode 390 Penny Boxall seeks inspiration at Lawrence Sterne's Shandy Hall and Jonathan Edwards introduces the poet W. H. Davies.

We hope you'll join us.

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