

# Writers Aloud

Episode 390

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**P**RESENTER: 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 390 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode Penny Boxall seeks inspiration at Laurence Sterne's Shandy Hall, wondering how to move forward as a writer after the loss of her mother and her previous creative rituals.

Then, Jonathan Edwards considers the poet W. H. Davies, whose extensive body of work forms a bridge between two worlds, the natural beauty of South Wales, and the gritty reality of early twentieth-century London and its poverty. First, here's Penny Boxall with 'No Mood to Write.'

## No Mood to Write

Penny Boxall

'But what should I *write*?'

I was swivelling in a desk chair at Shandy Hall, Laurence Sterne's home in Coxwold, addressing the curator, Patrick, between despairing rotations. Patrick, admirably stationary in his own armchair – not swivelling at all – said: 'Write about the process.'

'What process?' I said.

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‘You type very fast,’ he said, ‘to get the writing out of the way.’

‘Do I?’

‘You told me that yourself.’

*Had I?* Now my memory, as well as my ability to write, seemed to be failing. I felt a chill on my mind, like a mist rising over fenland.

Presently Patrick went over to his study to check his email, and I (taking a break from the museum collections) continued to sit oscillating to and fro, staring at the ceiling. Chair, desk, paper... I had all the appurtenances of a writer except the most fundamental: an idea.

It was the same month that we’d received at the museum an inspiring artefact. Laurence Sterne’s own chair had recently been rediscovered in the archives at Jesus College, Cambridge. This was a rarity: something that we knew he’d used and touched and which had, we imagined, aided his own writing process. It certainly had something of the look of Sterne’s spirit, its witty Chippendale curves calling to mind something of the carefree flourishes and twisting plotlines he embedded into *Tristram Shandy*. On the back of the seat was a small brass plaque: *Hic sedebat Laurentius Sterne*; ‘here sat Laurence Sterne’. Or, as someone with better Latin than I pointed out, here *used to sit* Laurence Sterne. The wording suggested routine, repetition, a method. A regular, efficient ghostliness.

If Sterne were to haunt any one place, perhaps it would be this chair itself — his image, repeatedly sitting down to work, wearing thin a layer in time. This, I think, is the intangible stuff for which we reach at writers’ houses: the almost commonplace regularity of genius, or of success. But why, even though I found myself in such surroundings, wasn’t *I* writing? I started to wonder if my own spectre was, at this moment, rubbing a small hole in the

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future, so that one day someone would be haunted by a vague impression of a human shape vacillating to and fro. Staring at the ceiling.

Thoughts like this wouldn't do.

Patrick reappeared, and I asked him what Sterne's writing process had been. Of course, he said, there were no remaining manuscripts of *Tristram Shandy*, so we couldn't tell in what fits and starts he might have written; there were no changes of consistency where he'd dipped a quill, no spatters, no telltale inky accidents (serendipitous or otherwise). There was a manuscript copy of the first part of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, now housed at the British Library, with 500 insertions, deletions and alterations. This was used as the printer's copy — but that was rather further along in the creative process. What did great works look like when they were in-progress? At Dove Cottage, another literary museum I'd worked for, we had William and Dorothy Wordsworth's blotted notebooks, scrubbed with emendations, reconsiderings and marginalia; letters to Coleridge soothing any uneasiness should he be unable to finish a particular poem, entreating him to 'instantly dismiss the subject from [his] thoughts'; and a typically slapdash manuscript of de Quincey's, stained with what we'd all hoped had been opium, but really was a slopped relic of a visit to a London coffeehouse.

For *Tristram Shandy* we had none of these things. It was as though Tristram was born already clothed in waistcoat and wig, ready to entertain with his urbane, slightly mad perambulations. All we have is the printed text, the edited and ineffable product of all these presumed corrections — and without evidence of them, it's tempting to believe that those corrections didn't exist.

But — I remonstrated with myself — I was looking at this wrong! Isn't *Tristram Shandy*, for all its digressive fluency, a meditation on the difficulty, the impossibility even, of committing a life, or even a linear story, to paper?

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And, said Patrick, there is some reference in *A Sentimental Journey* to finding the process of writing difficult — when Yorick, Sterne's alter-ego, attempts to reply to a correspondent and is lost for words:

I begun and begun again; and though I had nothing to say, and that nothing might have been expressed in half a dozen lines, I made half a dozen different beginnings, and could no way please myself. In short, I was in no mood to write.

*No mood to write.* The phrase gave me a perverse sort of courage. Had Sterne, in fact, sat in his curvy chair and struggled?

I was, at that time, struggling too: with the plot for a children's novel — my first foray away from poetry. The more I tried to write it, the more I felt it melting away; the ideal novel I had in my head slipped elusively around the next corner, and then the next, as I stood calling after it and receiving no answer. My story, incidentally, has its seed in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, and I wanted to capture something of Sterne's voice in my narrator's: something a little rococo, fourth-wall-breaking, unexpected. But if I had ever, in truth, had a plot, I'd now lost it entirely, and all I was left with were those writerly appurtenances: the ink, the paper, the chair.

I turned back to Patrick. 'So what did Sterne do about writer's block?'

Patrick said, 'He put on a topaz ring.'

Again, he showed me a passage from *Tristram Shandy*. Here it is:

Now in ordinary cases, that is, when I am only stupid, and the thoughts rise heavily and pass gummous through my pen — [...] I take a razor at once; and [...] without further ceremony, except that of first lathering my beard, I shave it off; this done, I change my shirt – put on a better

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coat – send for my best wig – put my topaz ring upon my finger; and in a word, dress myself from one end to the other of me, after my best fashion... ...A man cannot dress, but his ideas get cloath'd at the same time.

*His ideas get cloath'd...* Next morning, intrigued to see if Sterne's advice would work for me, I put on my best peacock-feather skirt and went into town. There I stood at a secondhand jeweller's window, contemplating the rings for sale, and wondering if a topaz would bring with it an idea, a sense of my writing self. But I had no intention of actually *buying* one, and I left empty-handed.

The problem was that I no longer felt like the sort of person who wrote the sort of things I used to write. I'd had my routines, my own small-scale rituals and personal hauntings, which had always seemed to work: at first, it had been to write late at night, after midnight, when the blurred semi-dreamscape allowed me access to surprising images and unexpected paths. Later, the luxurious routine of a few residencies taught me that my best time was first thing in the morning; if I hadn't sat down to write by 10am, the day was a spoiled sheet, fit only for the wastepaper basket. I liked an early lunch, a spell of reading afterwards, and perhaps a second wind of writing or editing in the evening. It had been easy, a joy — until, suddenly, it wasn't.

I knew why, in part. The quick, shocking loss of my mother in 2020 had knocked me very badly. A kind friend wrote to me at the time, sympathising that losing one's mother is like losing part of yourself, and I didn't really realise how much that would resonate until months afterwards. Sadness had jolted me away from myself. I could no longer write poems as I used to: I simply wasn't the same person. Trying to write as I once had, felt like an irrelevance, a form of self-parody — which is why I'd turned to children's fiction. That was something new and untested; I had no preconceptions about how it might work for me. It was fun. And aside from that, it was a sort of tribute to my mother. She'd written stories for us when we were

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young, and somehow it felt important to continue this tradition — and above all to be *writing*, to be progressing, to forge ahead, to create an adventure for my characters.

But just now, it wasn't working. I'd fallen into a plothole, or snagged on a spike of plotline, or snared in a story that looped and tangled so I couldn't work out which way was right. Meanwhile, the clock was tutting on. I hadn't finished the book. I hadn't finished a draft. This was my life, and time was slipping on and through and behind me. It was a sort of relief, then, to know that Sterne sometimes felt the same, and to wallow in his words...

Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more...

*Never to return more...* I was still staring at the ceiling, still swivelling. Nothing had progressed except the clock.

Then there was a knock at the door, and – like a reverse Person from Porlock, interrupting not creativity but its lack – the man came to fix the Raeburn in the Shandy cottage. Patrick suggested I clear out — partly to avoid the stink of oil, and partly, I'm sure, to clear my head. I walked behind Shandy Hall to the gardens, and picked a fig off the tree growing in the crook of the drystone walls. It was early October, and the fruits were starting to turn, but there were still good ones to be found. I bit through a chilly green flesh into an interior of minute rubies. A new potential plot began to creep, mist-like, into my mind: something to do with treasures and forgeries, and clues hidden in stone... Here, perhaps, might be something. The breeze picked up. Over my head, in a code of light and dark, flew clouds; and with them, high up and unguessable, the hours, days, years.

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**Presenter:** That was Penny Boxall. You can find out more about Penny on the RLF website. Next, here's Jonathan Edwards with 'A *Poet's Pilgrimage*: W. H. Davies, a Poet of Two Worlds.'

## *A Poet's Pilgrimage:* W.H. Davies, a Poet of Two Worlds

Jonathan Edwards

On a morning in May, early in the twentieth century, the poet W. H. Davies boarded a train from London to Carmarthen. His intention was to walk east from Carmarthen across the following weeks, taking in the whole of South Wales in the process, writing about his experiences, the people he met, in a mixture of poetry and prose, a roving reporter in walking boots. The result, *A Poet's Pilgrimage*, is one of his most enjoyable books, a slice of South Wales from a hundred years ago, seen from the ground, and a model for a book written on the hoof which Simon Armitage would take up almost a century later, in his volumes *Walking Home* and *Walking Away*.

One thing that fascinates me about *A Poet's Pilgrimage* is that, on his walk, Davies passed through Crosskeys, the village in which I lived, a place so out-of-the-way that no one ever passes through it at all really. This was more than half a century before I was born, but it's likely that he would have walked past the house in which my grandfather, still unmarried and perhaps already back from the war, would have been sitting, nursing a broken lung and mourning a brother. Here is what Davies has to say about walking through Crosskeys:

Soon after leaving Pontywain I came to Cross Keys, without having enjoyed any green country at all. Moreover, the

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houses had no gardens in front of them, and were as bare and uninteresting as the long common streets of our large cities. And so it was all the way...

If Davies rushed through Crosskeys and didn't rush back, one thing that was clear from my education and my early attempts at poetry was that, growing up where I did and wanting to write, there was no avoiding Davies. His famous poem 'Leisure' was everywhere as I was growing up, with its invitation to 'stand and stare,' even appropriated by television adverts. When my grandmother celebrated my GCSE results by gifting me a copy of Davies's *Collected Poems*, I found that the book was almost 600 pages long and contained 749 poems. I've always loved books so big and heavy you can wield them as well as read them, solid items, books that can do some damage. But I also wondered how much time Davies had to stand and stare, when his pen must have been as permanently wedged between his fingers as his pipe seems to be wedged between his lips in so many of his portraits. I wondered what was beyond 'Leisure,' beyond the couple of lines that everyone can quote, in the many poems that no one seemed to read or talk about.

Davies is in some ways a poet of two worlds, and the first of these is the natural beauty of the part of South Wales I know best. It's not surprising that a poet who told us to 'stand and stare' grew up in a place where there is a hell of a lot to stand and stare *at*. When folks from London step off the train in Crosskeys, they look up at the soaring green mountains which hold this valley of houses in place like shreddies in some huge weird breakfast bowl, and they say *Wow*. To grow up round here is very much to see nature as a playground, to walk all day over mountains, make dens, find secret paths, imagine pirate ships somehow into the middle of forests, wreck bicycle wheels or lungs on some steep uphill curve. But for whatever reason – education, canon-making, the industry of this area, the nature of publishing, a sense that writing is done by other people, somewhere else – the beauty of this area, so enthusiastically explored by



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playful kids and courting couples, goes largely unexpressed in poetry. We don't have a Dylan Thomas in a writing shed, looking up at these mountains with all the awe with which the real Dylan watched the birds soaring over the water at Laugharne.

Davies, though, *does* celebrate this area. Here's the fourth stanza of 'Days That Have Been':

Can I forget the sweet days that have been,  
The villages so green I have been in;  
Llantarnam, Magor, Malpas, and Llanwern,  
Liswery, old Caerleon, and Alteryng?

In two lines of poetry here, and the listing of places, Davies makes more reference to the area I grew up in, live in and love, than I have ever seen anywhere in poetry. I respond to these lines now as I did when I first read them, with a sense of empowerment, the thrill that someone is claiming this area for poetry and, by extension, claiming poetry for this area. For any writer, growing up in a territory that no one writes about is not necessarily a bad thing, because it means that you can put that right, can write onto a clean page, show people what they've been missing, free of the writing of ghosts and competitors. But to find writers who have made the case that poetry belongs *here* too, belongs to us, is a wonderful inspiration. It's crucial that Davies's writing about this area is consistently given back to this area, in the schoolroom, so that children who were out stomping these hills last night can see this morning that it can all be celebrated in writing.

Perhaps my favourite of Davies's poems about this area is 'The Mind's Liberty', in which he celebrates the power of the imagination in a singular way. The imagination is so powerful, he suggests, that, wherever your body happens to be, you can escape in your mind to somewhere else. In his case, in the wonderfully surreal and beautiful images of the poem's second stanza, he sees the landscape of South Wales imprinted on the

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London skyline. Anyone from the valley I live in knows what it is to grow up looking up at the distinctive peak of Twm Barlum, north-east of Risca, and will love this image:

And when I'm passing near St Paul's  
I see beyond the dome and crowd,  
Twm Barlum, that green pap in Gwent,  
With its dark nipple in a cloud.

If I see in 'The Mind's Liberty', and its writing of Gwent onto the London skyline, permission to write of this area in poetry, this is also a poem which serves as a bridge between the two worlds that I see as being at the heart of Davies's most significant poems. On the one hand, his poems love the natural beauty of South Wales, the country of childhood. On the other, they are deeply in touch with the gritty realities of London in the early twentieth century, of the lives of the down-and-outs Davies moved amongst. A century after Wordsworth, in the 'Preface' to *The Lyrical Ballads*, aimed to extend the franchise of poetry to 'the real language of men', Davies seeks to extend that franchise again, writing with empathy of those who lived in poverty in London, out of his own lived experience. 'The Lodging House Fire' speaks of the stupefying effects of the fires in lodging houses, the way men spend much of the day round the hearth, the sapping of energy and power of lives lived in drink and dissipation. Its final stanza is a powerful antidote to the idea of having 'time to stand and stare':

But all my day is waste,  
I live a lukewarm four  
And make a red coke fire  
Poison the score.

Davies's poem 'Saints and Lodgers', drawing on this experience, gives us a cast of characters who live the lodging house life, alcoholics who squabble over petty loans, washed-up sailors, down-at-heel Einsteins,

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folks who sell their lives door-to-door, and come back in the evening for another shift round the fire, with less than the nothing they started with. The poem 'Australian Bill' picks up on one of these characters for a more detailed study: Bill is a man who gets drunk early in the morning and spends his days searching local schools for his child who an alcoholic life has parted him from. In a gripping poem of empathy and authenticity, we get to spend that day with him. 'The Old Oak Tree,' meanwhile, gives us this portrait of the horrors Davies had seen:

Thou hast not seen starved women here,  
Or man gone mad because ill-fed —  
Who stares at stones in city streets,  
Mistaking them for hunks of bread.

Thou hast not felt the shivering backs  
Of homeless children lying down  
And sleeping in the cold, night air —  
Like doors and walls in London town.

If Davies teaches us as writers, then, to celebrate the uncelebrated, he also teaches us to be honest, to see poetry as an endless well of empathy for people and for lives, and to extend poetry's gift of empathy in every direction, to people in every walk of life. In this sense, his poetry is an endless inspiration. These poems were written thirty years before Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and can in many ways be seen as its poetic predecessor, working through the same sort of milieu and with the same sorts of writerly motivation.

If 'The Mind's Liberty' can be seen as one marrying of Davies's two worlds, of Wales and London, of nature and grit, 'The Soul's Destroyer,' the long title poem of Davies's first collection, also connects these two worlds, in a very different way. The poem opens with a description of something that many Welshmen will have experienced in London, especially perhaps on the day after a rugby international: a hangover:

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One morning I awoke with lips gone dry,  
The tongue an obstacle to choke the throat,  
And aching body weighted with more heads  
Than Pluto's dog; the features hard and set,  
As though encased in a plaster cast;  
With limbs all sore through falling here and there  
To drink the various ales the Borough kept  
From London Bridge to Newington...

Seeing a return to Wales as an escape from this grim, drink-addled urban existence, the poem's speaker determines to walk home to Newport from London, and the poem describes how this is managed within a week. When he arrives though, far from escaping the world of alcohol, the speaker enters a pub and finds there the husband of an old love of his, who is very much the worse for wear:

He who had wed my love stood shaking there  
While to his lips another held the glass  
Which his own hand lacked power to raise unspilled...

The poem concludes with the death of this man and the speaker's condemnation of drink, which 'fathers half our sins.' At moments like this, and in a wide range of other poems, including 'Ale,' 'Come, Honest Boys' and 'They're Taxing Ale Again,' Davies makes a significant contribution to the literature of alcohol, treating honestly and in a way that seems to emerge from significant experience a subject that writers like Patrick Hamilton, Charles Bukowski and even Douglas Stuart would later powerfully explore.

To return to *A Poet's Pilgrimage*, the book with which I began this journey through Davies, Davies begins his own journey, at the start of that book, from Carmarthen to London, with a poem, 'The Start,' which sees a wandering, walking life as an expression of faith that 'The whole wide world can be my home.' I'm sorry that Davies didn't see Crosskeys as

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a potential home, even for one night, that he passed straight through, recording only the absence of green life, though his impressions of the village are not unfair. Like lots of places, my village isn't one you might see much reason to stop in if you passed through, but once it's home, it's home, it's part of you, and you see its specialness, you want to stay forever. I'm glad Davies himself did come walking through Crosskeys though, however briefly, and saw what I see every day, because his words and the significance of his poetic achievement pass through this village again and again. I wonder sometimes if my grandfather might even have left the house the morning that Davies passed through, might have strolled past him in the street. In the licence Davies gives those who come after him to speak of the beauty of this area, and in his determination to speak for everyone who faces the most ugly challenges of existence on the breadline, his work is an endless inspiration, which keeps my own pen moving, which keeps my own feet walking.

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**Presenter:** That was Jonathan Edwards. You can find out more about Jonathan on the RLF website.

And that concludes episode 390, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 391, Julia Copus speaks with Ann Morgan about her varied career, courage, and poetic innovation.

We hope you'll join us.

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