

Writers Aloud

Episode 391

INTRODUCTION: 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 391 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode Julia Copus speaks with Anne Morgan about building a varied writing career; the need to be brave; creating a new poetic form; and the days when the words just won't come.

Ann Morgan: Of the more than 500 writers who have held Royal Literary Fund fellowships in the past two decades, Julia Copus has to be one of the most versatile: the author of four poetry collections, including her most recent, *Girlhood*, which won the inaugural Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry, she has written a biography of Charlotte Mew and a number of successful children's books and several radio dramas.

I first came across her work in my own time as a Royal Literary Fund fellow, when her book *Brilliant Writing Tips for Students* became one of my go-to resources at the University of Kent. So it was a pleasure for me to have a chance to talk to her and hear more about her work.

So Julia, where did writing start for you?

Julia Copus: Well, I wrote as a child, I was one of these kids that stayed in in the lunch hour in primary school. So scribbling away, writing ten pages when two had been asked for, and it was actually stories that I started with rather than poetry. Although I did have a poem published in a comic:

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when I was seven I sent in a poem to *Tammy* and an envelope came back through the post and it said ‘Tammy reader’ on the envelope, and I came home and my Mum had written on it ‘not known at this address’. I saw it on the side and I realized what it was because she thought that was a name, ‘Tammy Reader’.

So they’d given me a two-pound postal order and it was *so* exciting: my first taste of sending something out into the world and getting a response, a positive response. And as you know, it’s addictive, so that’s sort of where it started I think.

Ann Morgan: And of course you’re best known for your poetry and you’re an award-winning poet, but you do write other things as well don’t you, and in an industry that loves to pigeonhole writers, you’re very impressive because you’ve written nonfiction, you’ve written stories, you’ve written writing guides for students, and for children. How have you managed to have this incredibly wide-ranging career, what’s the secret?

Julia Copus: Most of those things came out of writer’s block! The *Brilliant Writing Tips*, which came out in, I think, 2009, was a direct result of my work as an RLF fellow at Exeter University. I had just been through quite a painful divorce and brought out a poetry book fairly recently. And I just couldn’t write poetry, and I was trying to think of all these new ways to explain different bits of punctuation and structure to the students at Exeter and finding that some of these really caught on.

It was extraordinary actually, I just wrote to Palgrave MacMillan and said that I had an idea for a very short kind of pocketbook on this subject of tips for undergraduates. And I think it was very lucky timing; they wrote back straight away and said: well, we were thinking of doing a pocketbook series. Either it was good timing, or they nicked my idea and pretended it was, so that came about like that, it’s all kind of by accident.

The children’s books – I write rhyming picture books as well, that are

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published also by Faber – that came about because my adult poetry tends to be more serious and I’ve got another side to me, I suppose! And I wanted to explore that more, or to write about or use the more fun side of myself in my writing.

So, I wrote to Faber and said that I’d like to bring out a picture book and I’d written this first draft. And again, it was extraordinarily lucky because they had stopped doing picture books for a number of years. And they were *just* about to start a picture book series again and they liked my manuscript, I had to do quite a lot of work on it, because people think that picture books are very easy, but they’re not, they’re really, really hard. And so my first picture book, *Hog in the Fog*, was one of the very first of a quartet of picture books that Faber started in their new series. So that was really lucky as well.

Finally, the biography: I originally intended to do something a lot shorter than it ended up being. I loved the work of Charlotte Mew, I first came across her when we were both in an anthology and it was a century of women’s verse in English.

Charlotte Mew was the very first poet in that book and I was almost the last, so we were born exactly a hundred years apart and I wrote to Faber and said: *Can I do something short on Charlotte Mew, I want to be part of the Faber Poet’s Poet series?* — where a contemporary poet introduces the work of a poet that they love.

And they said: *Well, that series is dormant at the moment, but maybe think of something longer on Charlotte Mew.* And, you know, seven years later... Yeah, I make it sound easy — not easy, but...

Ann Morgan: You do, it’s amazing. Serendipity seems to play a part, but it’s obvious that hard work is a big part of it as well.

Julia Copus: Yes, definitely.

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Ann Morgan: And being open to possibility by the sound of it, open to other ideas and other ways of thinking about things.

Julia Copus: Yes, I think so. And I think I just get curious and a little bit envious of, you know, I want to know what it's like to write in another genre. And can I do it, it's a challenge isn't it, to find out if it can be done!

Ann Morgan: Well, my daughter and I have been reading *My Bed Is an Air Balloon* lately, she's four and she really loves it. And what I love about it actually is the playfulness, which you talk about, but also the quality of the writing, the language, the use of the language is so beautiful. And that's often not true in many children's books.

I mean, there are fantastic children's books, there are some amazing children's books; but there are quite a number that I've read through in recent years that leave quite a bit to be desired in terms of the quality of the writing: a certain sloppiness or laziness or in some cases, a certain po-facedness about using language correctly, almost as if we must present children only with the correct uses of language, or words that actually exist.

Whereas with yours, you invent creatures and you bend language and do interesting things with it, and it's really joyful, it's really fun.

Julia Copus: Well, that's so nice to hear. And particularly that your daughter loves it. Thank you for that. Children love language don't they, I think they love sounds and they're very, very inventive themselves with language and it's about trying to pick up some of *their* joy in the sound of words.

Ann Morgan: Because actually that book is a specular poem, isn't it, the form that you...

Julia Copus: It is, yeah.

Ann Morgan: You created it, do you want to explain what specular poetry is before we go on; what the specular form is?

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Julia Copus: So, specular: I'm not sure the word 'specular' and fun go together at all!

Ann Morgan: It certainly does in this book.

Julia Copus: Well, yeah, so it came out of... I was writing a poem about a difficult memory and you know the way that your mind sort of circles back when you're thinking about something traumatic, and it keeps going back to the beginning of the story, and so the beginning and the end get blurred. I was working on this poem and it wasn't working, it wasn't very good. And I noticed that I was repeating certain phrases and I thought: *What would happen if I do this more consciously?* So that's how the form came about.

And a specular poem is two stanzas, two verses. And the second verse is a mirror of the first. So it uses exactly the same lines, but in reverse order and differently punctuated. So the last line of the first verse becomes the first of the second. So it's like a palindrome I guess. I called it specular because my publisher wanted me to give it a name, and *speculum* is Latin for a mirror, and also a rather unpleasantly cold medical instrument!

Ann Morgan: Yes. I was just thinking that!

Julia Copus: So that's what it is. And it just occurred to me that it might work well for a children's book, again to do something a bit more fun with it. Originally that book, *My Bed Is an Air Balloon*, Faber were thinking of bringing out with two covers, so that you could read it from either end, but the logistics became so difficult: how do you flip it around? We couldn't do it in the end, but it's a really big shame, because I'm not sure everyone realizes as you have, that it is a mirror of itself.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I loved the form, I really enjoyed it with my daughter in that book, but also in your poetry, to me it feels...particularly in your

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adult poems, it feels almost like swimming out to the far reaches of a poem and then turning back towards land.

Julia Copus: That's brilliant.

Ann Morgan: That's the reading experience to me, particularly in some of the poems that deal with the heavier subject matter, you are really getting into the depths of something and then turning back and finding your way back through it to a place of...

Julia Copus: Exploring it from a slightly different angle, yeah.

Ann Morgan: Exactly, and I think it's really powerful. I was wondering when you're writing a poem, do you know instantly that it's going to take that form – we should say, of course, that not all your poems by any means take this form, but it is a form that you've written in, numerous times – but do you start out thinking this will be a specular poem or does it occur to you as you're working on an idea that this is suited to that particular form?

Julia Copus: Well, I think it occurs to me, but you have to decide fairly early on because in effect it is like writing two poems at once. So every line you write, you're testing how it will read both ways: what it will lead onto in the next line and then what that line going backwards will, so you're writing two at the same time.

I think some of my specular poems work better than others. And there is – I don't know whether it's my own self-perceived expectation – I feel there's an expectation that I will do it at least once or twice in each new collection. Sometimes I will set out to: oh I better write a specular poem, but even then I think it's really important to marry that very particular form to the content. You know, why write it like that? I mean, it is bloody difficult to do, so I think there has to be a reason for doing it. And one of those, as I've said, is cyclic nature of memory: the way it circles back round on itself.

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Yeah. I think all my poems actually have to do with going back into the past – all my specular poems – with going back into the past and coming out to the present. But I think you have to be really careful with a form like that, or in fact any form like sonnet or anything: that it's worn as lightly as possible. So that it doesn't draw too much attention to itself, because then the form becomes more important than the actual words.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. I think it's something that's really powerful in your work is not only the way you use form, but also references because your work is very referential. You have huge numbers of things: the classics, psychoanalysis, all kinds of different things that get worked into it. And yet you manage to do so in a way that...whereas in some poet's hands, those things can feel quite intimidating or possibly exclusive, and if you don't know the context of those things or the background then you are somehow not able to understand the poem, whereas you are very careful to give the reader – without patronizing the reader – give the reader what they need to know in order to appreciate the point of these things that you're bringing in.

And so it's lovely because it doesn't feel as though you are shutting people out or that someone who maybe didn't know about Lacan before they started reading *Girlhood*, can't understand the poems that refer to his work. I just was interested to hear how you walk that line, how you think about that; because that's a tricky thing to do: to bring in such a wide range of things, and yet make everyone feel that they can access them. That really takes some skill, I think.

Julia Copus: Again, it's really delightful to hear that. Thank you. I like reading as much as I like writing and I don't like feeling patronized and I don't like being made to feel ignorant. So I don't like it, for example, in readings where the author says, *as you know, Lacan blah, blah, blah, blah, blah*, because I usually don't know! I didn't know much about Lacan, if anything, before I started writing *Girlhood*. So there's that, and I think the

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other thing is that when I'm using, for example, a piece of Greek myth, I'm doing it because I feel a very personal connection to that myth.

So sometimes the most personal poetry can actually seem the least personal. I'm thinking of a poem in my third collection, *The World's Two Smallest Humans*, so that poem is called 'Hero' and in the legend of Hero and Leander, Hero was a priestess of Aphrodite and she'd taken this vow of chastity, but she very soon regretted the decision when she fell in love with a young man called Leander, who lives across the water from her on the other side of the Hellespont.

So they found a way around this. And the idea was that they would wait until after dark, when Hero would light some oil lamps, both to guide Leander on his way to her and to signal to him that the coast was clear. And that worked very well until one terrible night when the lamps blew out in a storm.

So that was the background, but actually what I was thinking of when I started writing this poem was: a night when I was waiting for somebody who was very important to me to come and see *me* on a dark night, and it was quite a precarious situation. So it was...it is, incredibly personal.

You know, I *am* Hero in the poem and I'm waiting for this person to come to me. So I think – I hope – that the intensity of emotion comes across and that it doesn't just read as a kind of exercising, showing off that you know something about Greek myths, for example.

Ann Morgan: I absolutely think it does: that emotional reality. One of the things that I think is really powerful is actually the way you use the unsaid as well: that often it's the gaps, what you don't say in the poems.

So a poem like 'The Grievors', for example, where you almost go round the edges of what it is to lose someone. And you don't really talk directly about grief. You talk about the *effects* of grief or what it is to step away

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from life for a while and come back to it. But in a very light way that actually, I think, brings people almost to the brink of what language can do, and makes them look over into that very personal experience which perhaps each of us can only feel in our own unique way.

Perhaps there isn't a precise way of describing that for everyone. And so you take us to the point where we're able to glimpse that for ourselves. Often in your poems...sometimes it's about looking at something that's on the periphery as a way of allowing the emotional power to play out off scene almost, off stage.

So like: a shard of pottery becomes the focus for when a beloved pet is dying, something like that. I find that really interesting and I wondered because in my writing, when I try and do something like that, I often find that in the first draft I say too much and I'm too sort of, on the nose with things and then I have to take it out.

Is it similar for you, do you pair down or does it automatically come like that?

Julia Copus: Yes, absolutely I do. Yeah, I often say too much. I think probably most writers do start out saying too much. That's the joy, isn't it of an early draft, no one has to see quite how bad it is!

But I think it's wonderful what you've just said, and I think it's exactly that isn't it, it's about creating...because our experiences are all different and unique, when you're writing about a universal experience like grief, you have to create that space, don't you, for the reader to step into and fill in the pieces in their own way.

Otherwise you are too much in the poem yourself, or whatever the piece of writing it is. And I think you do need to create those spaces that will allow what you are writing to resonate individually with people. So they feel they can own the writing themselves. And because really once it's

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published, as as you know, it's not in your ownership anymore, it belongs to the reader.

I think you have to be brave. I believe strongly that, life as it goes on around us has its own strangeness and innate mystery I suppose, and that we need the courage when we write to trust to that. And that does mean to a certain degree surrendering control, which I'm not *always* good at doing, but you have to learn to do it don't you, and just allowing the mystery of an experience to reveal itself.

And I think that's what's meant by that overused phrase: poetic truth. And so the Greeks had this word for truth, the ancient Greek, 'aletheia', that literally means the state of being unhidden. So it implies that something has been hidden and you are un-hiding it.

And I think that's what should happen when we read, as well as write.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. I think something else though, that you also do really, really well is to anticipate the movement of the reader's mind. So I often found reading your poetry that I would get to a line and find that you had got there ahead of me, you knew the question that would be in my mind after the previous line or what image might already be working its way towards the surface of my awareness, and it was there! And it was quite an uncanny experience at times to find myself anticipated in that way.

Julia Copus: That's so interesting. I wonder if that really would've been in your mind or if the poem has made you feel like it's inevitable or like...I don't know.

Ann Morgan: I suppose, thinking about it in terms of storytelling, which is what *I* do, you are always trying to deliver an ending that fits, that feels satisfactory, that feels as though it's necessary. And yet it's not obvious. So I suppose in the same way, you are trying to anticipate what a reader's mind or steer a reader's mind in a certain direction so that they feel...but

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with your writing though, to me, it felt as though I was being met, like repeatedly in several poems I read, that: oh, she's got there, she knows what I'm thinking here. It was a really delightful experience, but also slightly kind of uncanny at times because it was sort of really astonishing, it felt as though I'd been found out or I'd been caught.

Julia Copus: That's so interesting. Well, two things: one: when I was a very little girl, I used to see auras around people. My parents took me to the doctors to have my eyesight tested and so on, and it must have been a very enlightened GP because he said: *well, you know, lots of young children see – or not lots I don't know how many – but some young children see auras and it's something that disappears when they're older.*

So I have had a few psychic experiences, I don't think that's what's going on here. I just slightly worry though, because I do think the element of surprise is so important – and I think it's lovely to feel *met* like that – I wonder if it's slightly a fault of mine though; I think what I would really like to do, and maybe this is sort of a development in me, is to move on from that, and to just completely surprise you; surprise the reader. I love that too, when I read a poem and there's a sort of a thump of inevitability.

Ann Morgan: I don't think it's a thump though, to me it was a surprise, because it felt as though I was in dialogue with someone who at that moment knew my mind better than I did.

Julia Copus: Oh, well, that's fantastic.

Ann Morgan: That was the feeling.

Julia Copus: Well, thank you.

Ann Morgan: And which was a real surprise because, particularly when it's a writer who you've never met in person, that's quite a thing to experience.

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So, no, it wasn't that it felt like: oh, this is predictable, by any means. It's just sort of: I've got your number. I knew what you were going to...what you'd think!

Julia Copus: Spooky.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, exactly.

Julia Copus: Oh, that's great. Thank you.

Ann Morgan: There's a lovely quote: you said once that 'Writing poems is a bit like panning for gold. You have to be prepared to sit for a long while in the cold murk of the river bed and grow heavy with alluvial dust for the sake of the gold it contains.'

Julia Copus: Wow, did I say that?

Ann Morgan: You did say that, yes.

Julia Copus: Yeah. It rings a bell.

Ann Morgan: And I just wondered, what does that process of sitting involve: is that writing words, is that sitting with ideas, is it making notes. How do you sit with something before the gold appears?

Julia Copus: Yeah, there's something to do with *fear* here. I think you have to again have the courage to do that. In periods when I can't, I forget that actually, that that is needed. When it works, I often *start* with a brainstorm of just words and notes. And so I'll cover a piece of A4 paper with that, maybe A3 paper sometimes. And yes, there's a lot of dross and a lot of silt, and then it does feel a little bit like...even, you know, more than panning for gold, it's like things float to the surface and will stand out on the page. They very often have a certain rhythm and that's a sort of seed for the rest

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of the poem. The poem might take its metre from a couple of phrases that have lit up on the page. Yeah. I'm thinking of a film, *A Beautiful Mind*.

Ann Morgan: Oh yes.

Julia Copus: And the main character, he's got a mental illness. I can't remember what?

Ann Morgan: Schizophrenia.

Julia Copus: Right, so he has schizophrenia, that's right. And there's one bit where he thinks that messages are being sent to him, via newspapers. And he pins up all these different bits of newspaper on the wall. And the director communicated this by some words being lit up on the page. And I think it happens a little bit like that when I'm writing a poem, it's a clutter of brainstorm notes and then *hopefully* something gets lit up or emerges out of that mess.

Ann Morgan: Does it always happen or are there days where the words go down and nothing lights up?

Julia Copus: Oh my God. There are many days when I...

Ann Morgan: That's such a relief to hear.

Julia Copus: Yeah, of course, and there are days when I just don't feel like I can write at all. And of course, as writers, we have to make money. So we do things like make podcasts and other...I mean, we're so lucky to do that, because that is also very creative, but yes, there's lots of times when it doesn't work.

And I feel that you are always beginning, so even if a book has won a prize or something, there is the question in your mind of whether you can do that *again*. And you want to do something slightly differently anyway, you

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don't want to go on repeating yourself. So, yeah, I think it's a question of keeping what's sometimes called the beginner's mind.

And not getting too confident, which is just as well, because I think most writers are severely lacking in self-confidence. But in a way...I was speaking to Don Paterson about this, years ago, and he said it's when that doubting mind goes and you feel absolutely secure, that's when you got to worry, because there should be some doubt there, you know?

Ann Morgan: Poetry seems to be going through a bit of a purple patch at the moment. There are a lot of amazing young poets coming forward and it's cool, it's on Instagram, and on various social media channels poems are big news. How do you feel the discipline is doing these days, and what would you like to see happening in the years ahead?

Julia Copus: I *really* love the diversity that's around at the moment, not just in terms of race and gender and very many more minorities writing and being published, but also in terms of form and lack of form. It is just very exciting. I think social media has something to do with that.

I've got a friend who said she felt a bit like a lyric dinosaur in the context of all of that, but I think what's dangerous is if there becomes some sort of divide between old and new. In a way that's inevitable, you always have the new coming in and kicking out the old, but I think there has to be respect on both sides. The ideal thing would be, if both sides – meaning the very new writers and more so-called established writers, people who've been publishing for a while – if they could be more porous and open to each other's work, *that's* where the exciting stuff happens, that sort of cross-pollination or whatever.

I think it's dangerous to dismiss what has been before, because there is some *amazing* poetry that has been written previously. So that's the only danger I think, but otherwise I think the diversity is fantastic and it's a rich time for poetry, very exciting.

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Ann Morgan: Excellent. Well, Julia Copus, thank you so much for talking to me. It's been a great pleasure.

Julia Copus: It's been *such* a pleasure for me, Ann. Thank you so much.

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Outro: That was Julia Copus in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Julia on her website at www.juliacopus.com. And that concludes episode 391 which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 392 in 'Me and My Audience', RLF writers share their experiences of encounters with readers. We hope you'll join us.

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