Writers Aloud

Episode 392

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 392 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in our second instalment of Me and My Audience, RLF writers explore the effects that encounters with readers have on them and the sometimes surprising consequences of interacting with someone who might have read your words rather differently than you imagined.

Ann Morgan: 'A writer is after all only half his book, the other half is the reader and from the reader, the writer learns'. So wrote the Australian British author, Pamela Lyndon Travers.

But what happens when reader and writer come face to face? In this episode, focusing on the theme, 'Me and My Audience', we speak to a number of Royal Literary Fund fellows who have encountered their readers in different settings. And we consider how these interactions have moulded and shaped their work. A memorable encounter with a famous author in unexpected circumstances early in her writing career made Sharukh Husain resolve to avoid public events.

Sharukh Husain: The one thing I *don't* do is to engage live with audiences. I used to work at the BBFC, the British Board of Film Classification in Soho, and there was a big Waterstones there and I walked past it and I saw an author sitting at a table with piles of books around him and *not* a single soul there. So I thought I'd go in, buy a book. I didn't know who it was or what the book was.

It was *Michael Palin*, and the book was attached to a travel series he was doing. Now, for some reason, nobody had come in and you know what he said to me as soon as I walked in, he said: 'Have you come in because you feel sorry for me?' And I thought, *right, check book signings off.*

I'm not going to do book signings because if it can happen to Michael Palin, who's *so* famous, has a TV documentary series and the book is attached to that series; nobody's turning up. Well, at least you could say something weird must have happened because of all those things. I would feel like a little slug or something colourless and slimy, and everybody wants to keep away from you.

So I decided then and there, that I wouldn't do it. I didn't like the idea of going to festivals and speaking to large audiences, although I'd loved public speaking at an earlier age. I got this sudden thing that was a bit like stage fright at one point and just the idea of doing that, which I used to love, got in the way so I decided I wouldn't do that.

Ann Morgan: But there is a certain kind of reader for which Husain is prepared to make an exception.

Sharukh Husain: What I do like doing is workshops because I feel more like a teacher than someone who's doing a job and that I find quite fun.

The other audience I really like to interact with are children. Many of my books are retellings for children: books on religion and faith and so on. And I love those, I love talking to children and I love making them laugh and making them challenge me. They're very *challenging*, they ask these completely off-the-wall questions and you have to think about it and sometimes they'll catch you out on something you've said, hopefully not written, but said! and they don't hesitate to say: *ah, Miss you got it wrong didn't you?*

And I just love that; I absolutely love that! I don't do it a lot because I just feel it takes up too much time, but when my children were growing up and they were at school, I would go regularly to do assemblies and storytelling in different classes and help people to write their own versions of stories and so on. And so that kind of interaction I do like very much.

Ann Morgan: Children's writer, Becca Heddle, finds encounters with young readers, similarly stimulating, but as an education writer opportunities to engage with her public are few and far between.

Becca Heddle: In terms of trying to keep in touch with my readership, I don't think I have ever heard of any live events where educational writers actually get to talk to their public.

If they do, it would be in individual school visits. But primarily I think because these books are sold to teachers they perhaps appear at educational conferences where they talk to teachers, but you don't really get, as a professional, many opportunities to meet kids in a classroom. Similarly online, they don't tend to have an online presence, particularly someone who's just starting to read, that's a bit of a barrier!

So in terms of engaging with them, I do and have done various things to do with schools: I've been a volunteer listener to readers, I did this for about eight years on and off while my children were at primary school, going along on trips and seeing what makes them really bounce with enthusiasm. More recently, I ran a lunchtime reading club for a local charity, and occasionally I get involved with the events at my local library.

What it does help is to get in touch with what interests them, what frustrates them, their general energy, because kids of this age are just fantastic. There is so much going on inside their brains and in what they're interested in, and I'm constantly impressed by primary school teachers, and how they manage to harness and contain that energy. To be properly aware of that makes you, as an educational writer, aware of both the level of challenge that they're rising to by trying to read books and the reason why you are doing this.

Ann Morgan: Poet Mahendra Solanki found that a reading early in his career provided a powerful learning experience.

Mahendra Solanki: I remember one of my first readings – when I did a tour with Bloodaxe Books in promoting my first collection in the mid-eighties – was to come across in the audience three or four nurses in white uniforms, come straight from the hospital. I made a joke, foolishly and totally stupidly now I discover, thinking about it later. I made a joke, I said that they'd come for me earlier than I anticipated: the men in white coats, in this case women in white coats. But what was extraordinary is that my first collection is trying to make sense of a woman who had not got a voice, namely my mother, who ended up being a patient in a mental home.

And there's a poem about the mother advising a son, you know, mother's advice to the elder son: not to listen to strangers, not to be taken in by so and so, and you know, they'll come to take you away and all that. The nurses came to attend my reading because they had somehow go hold of *Shadows of My Making*, the collection that had come before the reading.

And they had been reusing it as a book, as a text with some of the patients there, Asian women interestingly enough, and it provided succour and comfort. And so provided some meaning, apparently, which in my foolish youth, as a thirty-something poet, I had not made any sense of, and arrogantly possibly assumed, I was writing for my peers or writing for literary audience. When in fact the reason why these nurses had rushed – that's why they were in their white uniform to come to the reading, which was happening early evening in an art gallery in the middle of Newcastle, in the centre of town – was to be present, to listen to a poet who meant something to the women they were working with.

Ann Morgan: Michael Blackburn finds readings similarly powerful, in particular he sees them as invaluable in giving him insights into how his work is received.

Michael Blackburn: One thing I've learned from readings, which is very useful, is that you can go into a room and stand in front of a bunch of complete strangers, and it could be in the middle of a city, or it could be way out in the sticks, say Lincolnshire, which I have done, and be confronted with people who normally wouldn't read a poem from one day to the next or one year to the next, and you can read something and you can see they get it, they're really into it and they're really enthusiastic.

And you think: *wow, this is really good, why doesn't it happen more often?* So I think there is a kind of audience out there. There's the audience in your own head when you're writing and then there's the actual audience or the readership. It's just very difficult, to first of all, get to it, but then to keep hold of it beyond the moment.

Ann Morgan: The internet has offered Blackburn fresh ways of holding onto these encounters with his readers. Indeed, he has been surprised by some of the things it has taught him.

Michael Blackburn: I never really sell very many copies of my own books and pamphlets, but I have been putting my work online on a particular website and it's available for people to read anywhere, anytime, and it's actually absolutely free. So I put most of the work online.

And the interesting thing is you can tell how many hits each particular piece gets and the whole kind of oeuvre, and that's what I can't quite square with the whole thing, because I look at the number of hits and they're in their thousands. And I say: *well, how do these people come to this site, to this particular poem say, when there isn't any publicity?* You take for granted that some get there by mistake, that some hit on something and then maybe read just a bit of it. But even if you reduce it by half, we're still talking about *thousands*. So it's a kind of mystery, but obviously there are enough people in the whole world, I think that's the way to look it, there are enough people in the whole world to want to look at it and read it. So, yeah, maybe there is an audience out there, which is bigger than we think. I suppose we have to be hopeful don't we?

Ann Morgan: For some writers it's possible to sit amongst your audience as it absorbs your work. Playwright and scriptwriter, Nicola Baldwin, finds that audience reaction can be pivotal in shaping her work.

Nicola Baldwin: Audience, I suppose, is why I write drama. I'm endlessly fascinated by sitting at the back of the room watching how your play plays out: those nights when people are laughing at everything and that's great, assuming it's a comedy…in which case, it wouldn't be very good if it wasn't!

Or audiences that sit there and they're really quiet and you think they really don't like it. And then at the end they clap because they've just received it in a different way. I think that you learn a lot as a writer and the piece of work itself evolves, depending on what it gets back from the audience.

I had one play that started life...it was actually written with a particular kind of area in mind. It was first performed in Peckham and it was in a theatre, it wasn't a pop-up theatre, but it was on an industrial estate in Peckham. And there were aspects of that play that were very much about that local area, and it played in a certain way: it was very funny; the play was funnier when it played there. It transferred to a theatre, to the King's Head in North London. And we still got fairly diverse audience, but it was different and there were different characters that the audience were responding to in different ways at different times.

It's very unsettling for the cast actually, because they were all starting to think that somebody was coming in early with a line or somebody was doing something different. It took us a while to realise it was actually a local thing.

Ann Morgan: Michael McMillan draws similar inspiration from audience responses; indeed he often sees his work as a kind of dialogue between those watching and the action unfolding on the stage.

Michael McMillan: The audience for me over the time of my practice: I have brought the audience sometimes in as participants, as contributors, and it's a kind of call and response involved here, and this is a very ancient African practice, you find it in the church with the pastor and the congregation, in the sound system, for instance. So I'd like to think that what I'm doing is sending out a call out, and see what the response is from the audience. It may not affect them, it may not have any resonance with them, but for some more it may do.

And that's where the next stage of developing a conversation, developing a dialogue through the work with the audience begins, and how they can contribute and actually bring new stories to the development of that piece. So always I'm thinking from a theatre idea of what's called breaking the fourth wall. Breaking the fourth wall: that barrier between the performer and new audience and making it a kind of communal activity, really; a form of ritual, which has a spiritual effect on us all.

Ann Morgan: Radio dramatist and playwright Marcy Kahan is similarly fascinated by the possibilities of observing people watching her work.

Marcy Kahan: I don't have an identity as a theatre playwright, so if I have a play on at the theatre, I don't think my audiences are coming to see a Marcy Kahan play in the way that my radio audience might be tuning in, but I am *fascinated* to be sitting among my audience in the theatre.

I think it's good not to be frightened of your live audience. It's good, when you're writing, not to try to pander to what they want. It's good in previews to monitor where they're confused, so that you can clarify; where they're bored, so that you can make cuts.

In general I'm just fascinated by live audiences. When I'm at other people's plays, I watch the play and then I watch the audience watching the play.

Ann Morgan: Indeed for Kahan audience responses have proved instrumental in shaping future work.

Marcy Kahan: When I was writing my romantic comedy series *Lunch*, which I did over a period of five years, I'm not on Twitter, but my friends who are on Twitter showed me that *Lunch* had a Twitter following and it was very exciting to get immediate responses.

I'd never done something that went on for years, and I found that the audience of *Lunch* was affecting the next series because people would make comments about the characters Bill and Bella. They would say things about what they were expecting or what they thought would never happen, which of course prompted me to reverse their expectations. For instance, at one point, somebody said: 'Bella is never going to get married'. And I thought: *oh, she must get married then. I must at some point marry her off!*

Ann Morgan: It may be possible, however, to place too much weight on audience responses. Fiction and nonfiction author, Penny Hancock, sounds a note of caution.

Penny Hancock: I would never try to tailor a story to fit who I imagine the publishers think my audience is. I write what I want to write and I write about things I care about or that come to me and need to be written, but I would never tailor it specifically to a type of person. I would never try to do that because that would really restrict my imagination.

However, also there is the publicity aspect of being an author: and when you are invited to talks and crime festivals and so on, you do meet people who say they read your work. So you do get a sense of the range of people who are attracted to the kind of books that you write. And that's always really interesting, it's just lovely to talk to people and to understand what they get from what you've written. I find that very, very rewarding and affirming as a writer. It makes you feel you are giving something to people, because you can feel very, very isolated when you're sitting alone at home writing, unable to really believe that anyone's ever going get anything out of what you're writing. So that is very affirming: meeting the audience.

Ann Morgan: The affirmation that comes from seeing your work read and recognized can be extremely powerful. For poet Christie Dickason one such encounter proved a high point in her career.

Christie Dickason: One of the best reactions I've had was when I was doing the 'Green Cantata' and I had an overflow of poems that were contributed by various people and they were posted around a nature trail on the farm at the places where they were supposedly inspired. And one of them I had written was about filling vegetable boxes. It was an organic farm; it distributed 400,000 boxes a week. And there it was when I went back, the poem I had written: posted by the door under plastic, framed, so that everybody who went in to work had to pass it. Not a particularly good poem, an apercu, if you wish, but I had celebrated them. And when I walked in to the shed, all the women looked up and they said: 'hello, Christie', and I thought *that's it, that's as much as I can ask ever, as a writer.*

Ann Morgan: Though the results are unpredictable interactions between writers and readers can often leave both parties enriched and changed.

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You've been listening to a *Writers Aloud* episode on the theme, 'Me and My Audience'; the featured writers were Sharukh Husain, Becca Heddle, Mahendra Solanki, Michael Blackburn, Nicola Baldwin, Michael McMillan, Marcy Kahan, Penny Hancock and Christie Dickason. You can find out more information about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

RLF Outro: And that concludes episode 392, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 393, Jonathan Edwards speaks with John Greening about the Welsh poetic tradition, writing about family and his creative process. We hope you'll join us.

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