

Writers Aloud

Episode 396

RLF 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 396 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second part of a two-part interview, Lucy Flannery speaks with Catherine O'Flynn about fallow and active creative phases, the terror and euphoria of live theatre, working collaboratively with other writers and adapting and extending Wodehouse and Austen. You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode, number 395.

Catherine O'Flynn: Lucy Flannery is an award-winning writer with credits in radio, theatre, film, TV fiction, and nonfiction. Her short play *Bear Hunt* will be performed at the Ink festival in spring 2022. She was a finalist in the Exeter Novel Prize, leads the *Get Playwriting!* and Script Lab courses at Chichester Festival Theatre, and is a member of the Writer's Guild of Great Britain Audio and London Southeast committees. Lucy was the 2020 writer resident at the University of Plymouth in association with Literature Works.

Her credits include: *A Business Affair* with Christopher Walken, *Like a Daughter* with Allison Steadman, *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *Tomorrow Will Be Too Late*, and various magazines and anthologies. Her radio sitcoms, *Rent*, and *Any Other Business*, are regularly repeated on BBC radio 4 Extra.

She's co-written two plays with Greg Mosse: *Poisoned Beds*, about the

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decline of the oyster industry in a south coast fishing town and *Lydia and George*, which takes up the narrative twenty years after the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. She was the creator of the Havant Literary Festival and a core writer for *You, Me & Everyone*, which has been confirmed by Arts Council England as the biggest crowd sourced literary art event in the UK.

Lucy is now an RLF consultant fellow. I spoke to Lucy at her home in Havant.

One of the thing that strikes me about your body of works: theatre, radio, TV, film, plays, but also, I suppose, coming up from doing a lot of stuff for radio is that you need to generate a lot of ideas. You spoke earlier about this analogy of the houses in the street, and you need to generate a lot more sparks I think than, perhaps a novelist who really only needs one spark?

Do you think that's something that you just naturally have, or is it something that people can develop; that ability to just be productive, come up with more ideas, have more sparks. What do you think?

Lucy Flannery: I think it's part of that fallow and active phase. I think when you're in that kind of dopey phase, you might be able to hear something and might vaguely make a note, but then sometimes when you are in the zone, it's almost like everything you hear triggers off a school of thought and you think, *Oh yeah, I could do something with that.*

Or maybe that is just me, I don't know. But I think writers do have many more ideas than ever see the light of day in any kind of finished product. I'm sure you find this too Catherine. It's just part and parcel of just being open to that and being open to... I mean it amazes me that people say, *Oh, I never read when I'm writing because I don't want to be influenced by any other author's voice.*

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And I'm thinking, *Well, how do you relax, how do you live?* Reading to me is breathing, I couldn't not do it, I need that stimulus as well. My creative juices, definitely, are stimulated, provoked, or made to flow, by reading other people's work and seeing other people's work and art.

It is very important to me. I think that's incredibly... It's recognizing where the ideas come from, and we've already said, they obviously come from cleaning the bath! But I think it's being open to have ideas; that sounds a bit ridiculous, but just being in that mindset where you believe stuff is going to come and it will come, they will flow, you can't avoid them.

Catherine O'Flynn: And those fallow periods in between projects or between ideas, do you embrace those and think *This is fine, I'm not writing at the moment. I'm not in that...* or are you burdened with hideous guilt when you're not writing?

Lucy Flannery: I used to be, but now I do embrace it because I'm old enough to know that they don't last forever and they are part of the cycle. I generally do think my writing is better for having a little break now and then, you know, even just having weekends off and that, and not writing weekends and just doing something else.

Maybe it's just going out in the garden or whatever, I think is crucially important. It's funny isn't it because we were talking about what I was saying earlier about — *Oh, it's not for the likes of me.* I always felt that I could write a book because I'd read so many, that was the thing.

And I always vaguely felt I could write a TV comedy or indeed a radio comedy, because I'd seen so many, I'd heard so many; I grew up listening to things like *The Navy Lark* and everything. You know, really, really funny stuff. And that's why I think theatre in particular, because as a child, I wasn't exposed to much theatre. It just wasn't what we did.

I didn't actually see that much film either because we were too hard up,

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but it was an incredible treat when we did go and it was very, very special. So again, I felt like I understood film. And obviously when I was a bit older and I used to go, I understood the vernacular and that's the thing I think about working in different areas.

I think having to work in one area makes you much fresher when you come to work in a different one again. So if you're writing a one-act play or something and then you write a short story, I think both are better for the fact that – well for me anyway – for the fact that I'm changing horses kind of thing, and then exercising slightly different writing muscles each time.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, well, that's interesting. So with all those different media you work in and different forms, is there one that you think: *Oh, this is home for me, this is where I feel most at ease.* Or are you very much spread across all of them?

Lucy Flannery: I really do literally enjoy every type of writing that I'm asked to do. I would say theatre is very, very addictive, live theatre. It is *so* completely terrifying, and *so* euphoric when it goes well. I think the most frightened I ever was in my life was the first time one of my plays...immediately before the curtain went up, because I'd never really experienced that absolute loss of control before, because if you are recording or you're filming if it gets messed up, you can do it again.

When you're on a stage, you're flying blind and of course it's not even you, it's them. You've just got to trust that your cast are going to make it work somehow. The fact that it is different every night as well, it seems incredible to me and again, part of the magic.

You can watch an old sitcom and watch it again and again, and love it and really enjoy it. And then you can go and see a play and see it again the next night, it would be a totally different beast. That seems really remarkable to me. So I suppose if somebody came up and put a gun to my head – and I hate it when that happens! –

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Catherine O'Flynn: – Funny, isn't it! –

Lucy Flannery: – Yeah, oh dear, if I had a pound for every time... – I probably would have to say theatre, I think is probably the most kind of... it's the most adrenaline rush. But I love, I do love, I'm one of those nine people who actually likes the writing!

I know a lot of people love having written, but they don't really enjoy the writing, I actually like the writing. I like sitting at my laptop and tapping away.

Catherine O'Flynn: That's real bonus for a writer, isn't it?

Lucy Flannery: Absolutely.

Catherine O'Flynn: It's a real help.

Lucy Flannery: Yes, it it really is.

Catherine O'Flynn: You've done some adaptations; you worked on P. G. Wodehouse stuff. Tell me about that, how was that?

Lucy Flannery: It was great. I love P. G. Wodehouse and he's kind of a bit local because he lived down the road from me. I'm on the South Coast and he lived in Emsworth before the First World War and a little bit after, in fact that was the last sort of time he spent in England really, in the UK properly. And things like Blandings started then; Lord Emsworth of course.

And I'm pretty sure Jeeves started then as well, or the first short stories did as well. So, a really important period in his life and obviously, tremendous local pride taken in the relationship with Plum. Yes, I just love him. I just think he is laugh-out-loud funny, just beautiful, beautiful construction. The way his sentences are put together...things like, 'His chin had been published in three editions.' That's genius isn't it, you can sit for a month

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and not come up with that, I could sit for a month and not come up with that. There's real economy and elegance there I think.

And very, very funny stuff. And yeah, a couple of times I've been able to actually adapt for the stage and it's a real challenge and a real privilege, because you have to try and really up your game to write dialogue that sounds like it was written by P. G. Wodehouse.

And I think one of my proudest moments was when I adapted one of the books and the biggest laugh of the night, which involved the banjolele was actually a Flannery line, not a Plum line. And I thought, *Yes, you can't see the join, that's really pleasing, I've done my work here, I've done my job.* I was proud of that.

Catherine O'Flynn: Well I suppose, slightly linked to an adaptation is one of the things that's most enviable, but seems impossible to me about script writers is the ability to collaborate, and this is something you've done on many occasions. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your first experience of collaborating with another writer and how you approach writing collaboratively?

Lucy Flannery: I used to collaborate with another comedy writer, another female comedy writer called Sue Teddern, who's actually also an RLF Fellow and probably a very well known name.

Who's also, funnily enough, just written her first novel as well, just had it published. She and I, it was great, we absolutely loved working together, we had such a laugh. And what was nice was going in to pitch meetings, because pitching can be quite hairy, and quite often you find yourself straying somewhat into Alan Partridge territory!

The best of us do, if the first thing that you pitch doesn't fly and then you start getting distracted, yeah, it's very easy to stray into monkey tennis if you're not careful. When you've got someone else with you, it's great

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because they can see the danger signs; they can see when you're going into over-waffle and they can cut you off at the pass.

It was great, we'd perform that function for each other. We kept each other on the straight and narrow, so that was wonderful. I once went into a meeting and didn't have her with me and I was talking about how I do sometimes work with her as well as on solo projects, and I said more or less what I just said then. So that's one of the nice things and then started to actually pitch my ideas to an extremely unresponsive panel of people who increasingly did not like what I was saying, I could tell. And in desperation I actually said 'Oh, is it all right if I go and phone Sue now and she'll talk to you for a little while, while I just calm down. And they did not find that funny at all, but I thought it was hilarious and needless to say I did not get the gig. So that was my first experience and it was lovely and I've had many over the years and they've all been great.

I don't have any horror stories; I've never been ripped off or messed about by any of my writing partners. I've been writing quite a lot of theatre with Greg Mosse, and that's been really lovely. Our most recent project is *Lydia and George*, and Austen aficionados would've sat up at this point, I know, because they would've recognized that that is Mr and Mrs Wickham, of course.

And this takes place twenty years after the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, and it's what happens to Lydia and her rascal of a husband, and they're now on the stage and George is an impresario and Lydia is a leading lady.

It's great fun, it's really, really nice. I think if you're going to do an Austen follow on, you've got to really, really make it worth people's while, because there's a lot of nonsense about... I quite like the zombies and stuff, I think that's quite funny. But I think there are some kind of slightly wishy-washy sequels and prequels and all that.

And none of them really add anything much to the characters. And I

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think some of them are *slightly* disrespectful in as much as they are very specifically not what Jane Austen said was going to happen. Because at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, she says, this is basically what happens. Now having said that, of course, we also took liberties.

Because she actually says that Lydia and George: their affections cooled. But we've actually picked that up and run with it and in the play we've acknowledged that their affections cooled and they went through a rotten period and then things picked up again. And I think that's okay.

I think we can just about get away with that. So we are respectful of the source and obviously I'm not claiming for one second to be in Jane Austen's league, I'd be an absolute idiot, but I think it's a nice play. I think it's fun and enjoyable to watch, hopefully, and I think the nice thing about it is that if you are an absolute dyed-in-the-wool Austen fanatic, you will enjoy it; hopefully, you'll get something from it. And if you've never even heard of Jane Austen, you'll still understand the story and be able to follow it and enjoy it because it stands up in its own right.

Catherine O'Flynn: Absolutely. So that's collaborating with Greg Mosse. When you come together in a collaboration with someone, I understand what you're saying about working with Sue Teddern: when you were pitching you could stop each other veering off the cliff, but when you're actually writing, are you looking for someone who...I'm just wondering what it adds...what's the difference between writing on your own to writing with someone else: are you're looking for someone who fills the areas you feel not so comfortable, or someone who's very similar to you that you can bounce off?

Lucy Flannery: I think you've got to be on the same wavelength definitely. Certainly you've got to have the same sense of humour. Really I think I'm looking for someone who's going to take my stuff and make it better, is the short answer. And when we wrote *Lydia and George*, and it doesn't always work like this: I wrote the first act, Greg made it better, Greg wrote the

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second act and I made it better. So it worked really, really well. And that's what you want I think, somebody who's actually going to challenge you to be better.

And also you get this thing where I've got my authorial voice, Greg's got his authorial voice, and then there's this other thing, there's this third entity, which is us together writing. And probably neither of us would've got there on our own. And I think that's the hallmark of a really good, collaborative, creative partnership.

The other person I'm writing with at the moment is my son, who is obviously a writer in his own right. I find that amazing that I'm writing with my son; so far as I know, we're the only mother-and-son writing partnership in the country, if there's another one I'd like to know about it.

Again we're writing comedy, we're writing radio comedy and what I found with that is he has really stretched me to be braver, not just in terms of structure and everything, not to take the lazy way out or the obvious route or anything, which I hope I would do a little bit myself anyway, but he's said — 'Oh, can we, can we take it a bit further here, can we make it a bit wackier, a bit madder?'

So there again, I've got my authorial voice, Liam's got his authorial voice, and then we've got this third entity and we've come up with this absolutely cracking sitcom pilot that we're hoping will see the light of day, maybe next year.

That has been an absolute joy because what I found was, because we wrote a bit at a time: so I'd write a scene or maybe a scene and a half, hand it over to him when I started to flag and then he'd improve that and carry on. So like a little bit of knitting we'd pass backwards and forwards.

And sometimes I would get up in the morning and he'd sent me overnight, the new draft, and I'd sit and read it and I would literally laugh out loud at

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some of his lines, it would make me howl with laughter and I think, *Well, that's good, isn't it?* You know, if you're going to be writing comedy with someone that is the minimum requirement, that they make you absolutely shriek with laughter.

And vice versa. Hopefully he also finds my stuff very funny. So that's lovely, it is joyful writing comedy; one of the wonderful things about it is you will have a laugh in the day. It's like having a dog, you can't not laugh in the day if you get a dog.

Catherine O'Flynn: Like having a dog, I'll remember that! You've written so many different types of material: comedy and drama and monologue and so on and so forth. Can you see a common thread that runs through your writing? Do you look and think — yeah, that's pure Flannery there, that's classic Flannery!

Lucy Flannery: Well, yes, I can certainly see faults, because when I'm writing fiction people gaze out of windows far too often and then they turn to someone and say, 'You know', and I think, *Oh, so that's all the bad stuff I have to take out.*

I write a lot about grief and I don't know why, but that is absolutely a recurring theme, which comes up. This isn't a conscious choice, but I often find in my writing, I deliberately lead the reader / audience down the garden path. So they think this is *this*. But actually, oh, it's not *this*, it's this other thing.

So that's not something I consciously do, but I do absolutely recognize, and I quite enjoy that; and I think it's enjoyable for a reader / audience member to be confounded. I think it's great to wrongfoot the audience if it's intentional, not so good if it's not intentional.

So that's something I really like. I recently had a one-act play on called *New Year's Day*, in which the character is dressed as a duck and it starts

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off hilarious, but also you don't really know immediately why they're dressed as a duck. And then it becomes obvious that that they're actually a football mascot and they're observing the two-minute silence.

And it's very funny, it really is, you know, shrieking. It was inspired by a YouTube video which my son pointed out to me called, 'Football Mascots, Looking Sad', which I heartily recommend anyone seeking out if they want to entertain and amuse themselves for five minutes while having a cup of tea.

But it gets quite dark and it gets very, very sad at the end. So it's ostensibly a sad thing but a funny thing as well; visually, there's this kind of dislocate between the sadness of the occasion, the solemnity of the occasion and the ridiculousness of the appearance. And then the internal monologue that's going on is quite funny.

And then again, it gets quite sad at the end, so I quite like that. You think *Oh, this is happening, oh no, it's not this, it's this other thing*. That's the only thing that I've observed in myself. I'm sure there are all sorts of things, I'm sure. I don't have enough distance from my own work to know.

I really like writing older women because I think, why wouldn't you? Older women have had interesting lives, interesting experiences, and they're very underserved, I think both in terms of audience and in seeing their own experience in life reflected back to them. So I'm happy to do that.

I was watching *Mrs America* last year on telly and thinking *Gosh, we are so under-entertained, as a group*. Just seeing something like this that is so straightforwardly catering to that constituency; that demographic doesn't often get concentrated upon.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, absolutely. The other thing, I suppose slightly leading on from that is, you're the creator of Havant Literary Festival and you've been writer in residence at Plymouth University and an RLF Fellow

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obviously. And so to me that speaks of you evidently enjoying opening literature up to others.

You spoke earlier about how you felt writing wasn't for the likes of you when you were young, growing up. Do you think it's still something that many feel excluded from and it seems to me that you're someone who wants to try and overcome that in people and make them feel that they have a total right to do that as well.

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, and I think whenever I meet young writers, students, undergrads; I teach playwriting as well and I obviously meet novices and that. I'm always very, very encouraging and enthusiastic, I'm challenging as well, I would point out where things could be improved and I would suggest ways of improving it.

But yeah, I think as a writer, you get a lot of disappointment, you get a lot of rejection, you get a lot of hard stuff. So, why on earth wouldn't you encourage people as much as you possibly can? Because everybody's got their own precious gift, which is their voice and no one can write that for them.

Everyone's got that and I think that is a precious thing. And certainly when I ran the Literary Festival we did try very, very hard to reach out to groups that wouldn't obviously be attracted to, or even feel confident about, coming to a literary festival because I think that's one of the real joys.

I mean, if you run a jazz festival, you could run the best dance festival in the world, but the only people who are going to come to it are jazz fans, which is fine, there's nothing wrong with that. But if you've got a literary festival, you've got an opportunity to do readings and panel events and debates and quizzes and games and theatre, and all sorts of things. And one of the things we had was a trail in the High Street, of books by our authors, hidden in the shop windows. And if you could find all of them, you won a prize, and the prize you won was two tickets to the local football team, who were one of our sponsors.

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They were great, it was Havant and Waterlooville, and their nickname was The Hawks and it was — *Eyes like a Hawk*, that was the thing. So things like that, I think absolutely, spread the fun, spread the positivity around books, books as a good thing, as a jolly, fun thing. We tried really, really hard and I was proud. I was incredibly proud of what we achieved and the audiences that we managed to touch in the years that I was doing it and subsequently; I think it's important.

It's lovely to go and see the big stars and touch the hem of their garment and everything, but it's also great just to hear each other and each other's work and some Year Eight kid who's written a poem or something and has got every bit as much right to be there, and should be heard and have that audience, as anyone else.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, absolutely. So do you have any burning goals for the future, do you think — *Oh, that's one thing I've never done or one thing I've never tried*. Is there something that you've shied away from in the past? You say that now you're writing novels and so on, is there any other area that you think that, or do you just meander along quite happily?

Lucy Flannery: I can't write poetry. I really can't write poetry. My poetry is a bit like – oh God, what are they called? the people in Hitchhikers? – the race that write poetry that's the worst in the entire universe. But I'm okay with that, I've made my peace with that. What I would like, it's not so much that I'd like to write one because I've written many, but I would like to see a film get made because I've written a lot of scripts and I've been paid for a lot of scripts and actually getting to see one see the light day would be lovely because funding is always the issue.

It is a very fraught industry, obviously. And it's very, very difficult. I would not like to be a producer, it's very, very hard, but that would be lovely. I have got an additional dialogue credit, and I've seen my name up on that big silver screen. So it was really like giant letters and it was very, very thrilling, but that would be nice to write a film and see it get made.

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But really I would just accept a career in which I can continue to plod along earning a crust and just being read, being watched. I think that that will do me.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah. Me too. Okay, well thanks very much Lucy, that was great.

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Episode Outro: That was Lucy Flannery in conversation with Catherine O'Flynn. You can find out more about Lucy on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 396, which was recorded by Catherine O' Flynn and produced by Kona McPhee. Coming up in episode 397 Michael Bond speaks with Julia Copus about his significant three little things. We hope you'll join us.

RLF Outro: You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF, please visit our website at www.rlf.org.uk

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