

Writers Aloud

Episode 398

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 398 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Anna Wilson speaks with Caroline Sanderson about wild swimming and taking the plunge with her writing, keeping a child's eye view of the world and how a blog about grief led to the writing of her first book for adults, a memoir of her mother.

Caroline Sanderson: Anna Wilson was born in Kent and now lives in Cornwall. A former children's book editor, she's the author of more than fifty books for children including *Nature Month-by-Month: A Children's Almanac*, picture books such as *The Wide, Wide Sea*, and several series for young readers, including *Nina Fairy Ballerina*, *Top of the Pups*, *Kitten Chaos*, and *Vlad the World's Worst Vampire*.

Her first book for adults, *A Place for Everything: My Mother, Autism and Me*, was published in 2020 and is a moving memoir of her late mother who was belatedly diagnosed with autism when in her late seventies.

So Anna, here we are right at the end of Cornwall, which is all about the sea here really, and I know the sea inspires you and that you are quite evangelical about wild swimming. Are there parallels between that sort of taking the plunge and writing?

Anna Wilson: Oh, definitely, yes. I think there are some days when I get

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down to the sea and I've told myself I'm going to have a swim and then I look at it and go, *I don't know, it looks a bit grey* or *It looks a bit swelly*. And inevitably I do get in and once you've taken that first plunge, you are in and it's wonderful, and you always feel great afterwards. And sometimes writing is like that, yeah, you come to the blank page and you think, *Oh, I don't know if I want to do this today*. But once you've started that first sentence and kept your pen moving or kept your fingers moving, it's yeah, same feeling, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: Got your body temperature sorted.

Anna Wilson: Yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: So you are primarily a children's writer, strange question I suppose, but why does one become a children's writer? Because if you are writing for adults, you're essentially writing for beings like yourself I suppose. And you know, you have children and we were all children once, but talk a bit about how that came to be and, I suppose, what sort of reader you were as a child and were you a writer as a child?

Anna Wilson: I was both a reader and a writer as a child. In fact, I've still got the early scribbles because my mum kept everything. So my grandfather used to have these big desk diaries that he used for work. And when he'd finished the year, there were inevitably lots of blank pages. So he just used to give me these big desk diaries, I think to shut me up, because I used to spend a lot of time at my grandma and grandpa's house.

And it's quite a small house. So to keep me quiet, I'd be shoved in a corner with a desk diary to scribble in, and I filled it with initially pictures and then poems. And that was my early writing and reading. Apparently I was reading before I went to school, but also I don't remember that, but I just read voraciously.

I was a member of the Puffin Club and I went to Puffin Club conventions;

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I met Roald Dahl. I decided quite early on that this was the world I wanted to be in. I didn't know that I wanted to be a children's writer to start with, I think I fell into that because I fell into children's publishing.

So I started off as an editor in educational publishing and I'm afraid to say found it a little bit dull, and then I just started trying to get other jobs in publishing and I got a job in children's publishing, and I just fell in love with picture books. So it was from that point on, I think that I decided that that's what I was going to have a go at doing.

Caroline Sanderson: What would you say are the qualities that a children's writer in particular needs to have? I think there's this terrible perception that it's somehow easier, but I mean, one of my mantras is that it is harder to write short than it is long and very often and obviously particularly with picture books, you have fewer words at your disposal.

So what would you say to that, and I know you've taught creative writing as well, so, what do you say about that in terms of the qualities that you need and the economy I suppose?

Anna Wilson: I think the quality is that you need a child's eye view of the world, that's the absolute essential, in fact, when I'm teaching I say it's the only rule really, because I don't really like teaching rules for writing. I think the most important thing is to approach it with fun. Any writing should be approached with an element of fun, even if you're writing something serious, I think, but writing for children, I think you have to have that child's eye view.

And by that I mean an inquisitiveness, a delight in the world that we have as children, that ability to just sit down on your haunches and stare at a beetle for ages or yeah, just sit on the rocks and wait for that seal to come up. Just that curiosity, I think is really important; and humour, again that's something that people sometimes think is, not easy, but perhaps don't take it seriously because you know, funny books aren't serious literature or whatever.

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But actually kids love funny books, they love to laugh, they laugh so much more than adults. So having a sense of humour is important and just letting your imagination run riot, you can write about *anything* for children.

That's the wonderful thing, you know, they want to read about Goblins and vampires, just as much as they want to read about real people in schools or whatever. For the economy, I would say, I think rewriting is probably even more important as a children's writer than in any other discipline. I say that having rewritten my adult memoir about ten times, as I know you have to do it whenever you're writing, but with picture books, I will write a picture book text and I will rewrite it and rewrite it and hone it down to what I think is its absolute perfect length.

And then if I'm lucky it gets accepted, and I start the conversation with my editor. And then it goes to layout stage and lo and behold, there are still too many words! And then we have to take out even more. And I was looking at *The Wide, Wide Sea*, the other day and that started as what I thought was a fairly short picture book.

But now, there are so few words in it it's incredible. And yet the story is still there because there's so much going on in the illustrations as well. I say to people, it's a bit like when you make a really delicious gravy or delicious stew and you have to reduce it and reduce it and reduce it to get its really beautiful flavours. And I think that's what picture book writing is like really.

Caroline Sanderson: That's such a good analogy, I love that. So I have a copy of the picture book you've just been talking about, glorious, *The Wide, Wide Sea*, illustrated by Jenny Løvlie. And it's clear that nature hugely inspires you, you're also the author of the annual *Children's Almanac: Nature Month-by-Month*, for the National Trust.

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And I read a lovely blog on your website about a favourite oak tree that inspires you as well. Could you write without being close to nature?

Anna Wilson: Oh, I think I'd find that really hard. I did live in London for a long time when I was working in publishing. And I remember there were times when I'd be walking along the grey pavements of Hammersmith desperately trying to find something green to fix my eyes on.

And I actually remember, this might sound a bit pretentious, but I remember one morning walking along and seeing little weeds poking up through the cracks in the pavement and thinking how amazing it was that nature always finds a way. And actually in lockdown, there was a woman who went around circling weeds and writing the names of them next to them.

I think that she lived in France, but then it started happening here as well. And I thought how lovely that was, that people were seeking it out. Yeah, so I'd find it very, very hard I think now; I'm so used to living in nature all around me, that I would find it very hard.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes. Well, you've also written quite a few series of books for young readers, a lot of them featuring animals.

And it made me remember how much actually, as a child, you love those book series. You know, for me it was, Famous Five and Secret Seven and all those Enid Blyton series. You've got the Kitten Chaos series, and Pooch Parlour series, and Top of the Pups series. And I read some of your Vlad the World's Worst Vampire books which I very much enjoyed.

It's such a pleasure as an adult, reading children's books, isn't it? What's the secret of creating a series that works, that the kids all really embrace and want to collect, do you think?

Anna Wilson: I think it's all about the main character. I do firmly believe

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that all story hinges on character anyway. I think if you don't know your main character inside out and back to front, it's going to be tricky, because you need to know how they're going to react in any given situation. And as you develop a series, they're obviously going to go through many more trials and tribulations, so you have to know how they're going to react.

With the puppy series, the Top of the Pups, that was quite easy because the main character, Summer, was basically me as a young girl. So I knew myself, and I wasn't allowed to have a dog. So that was how that first book started. I wrote it at the time that my children were desperate for a dog and I was resistant to getting one.

So I had the two elements of knowing how the mum was going to behave and also knowing how the child behaved. But with Vlad, I spent quite a lot of time developing him and I realized there was a lot of me in him and some of my son as well, and that he was quite anxious about a lot of things and about elements of his own personality.

But he also wanted to embrace them and there was a push and pull there. So I spent quite a lot of time working that out, and then lots of lists: what should vampires be good at, and what can Vlad not do.

Caroline Sanderson: He's born into a vampire family isn't he, a Transylvanian family, but longs to be in an 'ordinary' child and go to an 'ordinary' school, doesn't he, and do normal things rather than having to fly like a bat and drink blood and so forth. It's very funny.

Anna Wilson: Yes, he wants to be both in a funny sort of way, he wants to please his mother by doing the Transylvanian vampire things, which she despairs of him ever learning, but he also is desperate to be accepted in the human world. So it's a difficult one for him.

Caroline Sanderson: You were talking a little bit earlier, you were saying that as a children's writer, it's quite important to stay in tune with the

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reality of children. You have a child's eye view and that's quite difficult actually isn't it, because I think your children are older now, they're adults. So perhaps when they're younger, it's easier and you are reading books to them and you are very much in their world. But I guess as they get older and fly the nest, you've got to stay there to a certain extent, haven't you?

Anna Wilson: Yes, it is tricky. I think I've had a bit of a hiatus where I've found that harder. Although, interestingly, I've been writing more picture books, so I've gone right back to the beginning again. And I've found that easier now than I had for a long time, but I've been resistant to writing any more middle grades certainly, because I think by the time a child is in that time of life, they're speaking in a certain way and they've got certain interests.

And certainly when the kids were that age and I was ferrying them everywhere, I loved the fact that I would become invisible to them. And they'd be sitting in the back of the car, chattering away either to themselves sometimes, or amongst their friends, and I would pick up these little snippets and scribble them in notebooks. And sometimes...

Caroline Sanderson: – Little did they know you were eavesdropping! –

Anna Wilson: Yeah, sometimes they used to say: 'You're doing it aren't you Mum? You scribbled something in a notebook, what's that?' And they used to get a bit cross that they knew they were going to end up in a book.

So I don't have that anymore, but I am starting to think it might be fun to go back again and have a go because there's always an element of me as a child. So although I know I've got to get the register and the tone and everything right, for children of today, I think essentially I am a big kid, so I'm always going to have that view on the world really.

Caroline Sanderson: And I suppose there's an extent to which children's

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books can't be *too* contemporary. You know, one thinks of all those timeless stories that we love. In a way they've got to have appeal for the adults who might be reading them to children, haven't they? I think that's really important too.

Anna Wilson: Yes. I think that's why I've never really wanted to write YA because I think YA has to be, unless it's set in a different time, I think it has to be quite up to date and contemporary in a way that I just know, I would sound like I was trying to be down with the kids and I wouldn't be able to do it.

Caroline Sanderson: No, those days are gone I think. So you mentioned that you began your career as an editor in publishing and how influential was that when you started to write yourself and why did you make the leap and how did that happen?

Anna Wilson: Well, the reason I made the leap was circumstance really. So I became pregnant with my daughter and we had to move to France for my husband's job. And so I had to leave my job at HarperCollins, and I thought I'd be able to pick up some freelance work, but in those days we hadn't really embraced the idea of working remotely. So people were still wanting to send manuscripts in big envelopes through the post and they didn't want to send them to France.

So while I was over in France, I thought, *Well, I could have a go at writing*, because I'd always wanted to see if I could get something published. And I started with picture books because that's what I knew about as an editor. And I thought, *Well, I know how they work so surely I can write one?*

And I did manage to get a couple published, but actually quickly found that it wasn't really where I was most comfortable at that point in my writing career. So I started playing around with short stories that actually then evolved into chapter books. And I was lucky enough to get an agent very quickly.

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So she was very encouraging in those early days as well. So it was circumstance really. I do wonder if we hadn't had to move to France, I probably would've just taken normal maternity leave and then I guess I would've gone back into publishing and maybe I wouldn't have started writing, I don't know.

Caroline Sanderson: So you are also an experienced creative writing tutor now you've taught at Arvon, I think, and the London Lit Lab. And so do you enjoy that and how does it compliment the time you spend on your own work?

Anna Wilson: Yeah, I absolutely love it. I didn't think I was going to, I was cajoled into teaching by someone who'd been my mentor for a while really. And I started teaching at Bath Spa University on the masters and then undergraduates and picked up some Arvon work through that.

And it's just gone on — snowballed since then, I've got lots of teaching now, which is wonderful and I absolutely love it. I love seeing those lightbulb moments in a writer's eyes where they've been struggling with something, and then you have that conversation and you just make a little suggestion and they go — 'Oh yeah, I could do that with my character!' And then they come back the following week and say, 'I did what you suggested and it's all happened', and I love seeing my students get published, which has happened. And I just love the writerly conversations in general, it feeds into my own writing.

I was teaching on an Arvon course recently. And I just felt so enthused at the end of every day, I was scribbling away. I was doing all the prompts *with* the writers, because I was just enjoying it so much. There's something incredible about feeding off one another, so I do really enjoy it. There are times when I think I'm giving more to other people than I'm giving to my own writing, that can be difficult.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes. I wondered about that, whether it...yes. I can see

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that that might be a danger, but yes, it is so interesting how as writers we need that, really, really need that solitary time. And it's very, very difficult to work if you don't have that and don't have the head space, but also there's definitely a place for what you're talking about, that sharing of ideas and getting somebody else's brain on a knotty issue.

And I think you're also a mentor for other writers too. I suppose that's similar, but it's kind of supporting somebody for a longer period, I suppose?

Anna Wilson: Yes. So that started when I was working on the master's program at Bath Spa because I was a manuscript tutor, which is essentially being a mentor. So I would have the students come once a month, with a chunk of work. And I would read a couple of thousand words before we met, but then you don't go through it like a liner, you just talk more broadly about, you know, what they're hoping to achieve. And sometimes they'll have been in a panic and a writer's block and they won't have written anything, but they just come along and they pour out their anxieties.

You're a bit of a cross really between being an editor and being a life coach. Just trying to help them through those difficult periods and then celebrating the highs with them. Sometimes...it's very interesting, I was mentoring somebody recently who wanted me to look at a synopsis of her novel and I hadn't read the novel.

So I looked at the synopsis and it was quite flat and it didn't really tell me what the book was about. And then she started talking and it was fantastic. And I said, 'Well, you haven't put any of that into your synopsis'. She went: 'Oh, no, I haven't!' But it was having that, the woods for the trees point of view, and having the second pair of eyes and being able to then go away and re-craft it.

So it's a funny role in a way, because you never know what that person's going to bring to you, and it could be that they just want to talk about how

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difficult life's been and how they haven't been able to write. And then you have to try and coax them back to it. Or it could be that they want to talk about a specific element of the writing. It can be very broad. Yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: It's also often about confidence, isn't it, just instilling confidence in people, as you said that goes with the life coaching you were mentioning, but yes, I think synopses are so difficult to write anyway, aren't they, it's almost easier to write the book, I've found, in the past.

Anna Wilson: Definitely.

Caroline Sanderson: So in 2020, you published your first book for adults, an incredibly powerful and honest memoir about your parents, in particular your, at times, highly fraught relationship with your mother. Your mother was belatedly diagnosed with autism at the age of seventy-two, a discovery that as you show in the book was both heartbreaking and kind of revelatory really; so the book's called *A Place for Everything*.

Why did you decide to write what must have been an incredibly painful experience really, to get all that down. I've read it and it's extraordinarily moving and shows just what you went through with both your parents, because your father became ill and died. And then you lost your mother not long afterwards and it was a terrible time in your life really.

Anna Wilson: Yeah, I think I started writing it as a blog and I started writing it because I wasn't writing anything else. And I was in quite a panic that I couldn't write, I couldn't do funny anymore which is what I'd always done for children really.

And it was a year to the day that my dad had phoned me to say that he had a terminal diagnosis and I woke up on that morning and I just thought I've got to record what happened a year ago. And I honestly don't know why I started it as a blog rather than just...because I journal pretty much every day anyway.

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So, you know, why didn't I just write in my journal? But there was something about memorializing that day, really, that was really important. And I wrote this blog, which just told the story of what had happened on that day. And I put it on Facebook just as a Memorial and lots of friends pinged me and I don't normally get many comments on Facebook, but that day I had an awful lot of people who said, *This is amazing, write some more.*

And I thought, *Oh, I don't know if I want to write any more*, but I did. And once I started I couldn't stop. And it became quite a regular blog and I thought I was writing about grief and I thought I was also writing about what you do when someone dies, because I was quite angry at that point. You're suddenly thrown into this maelstrom and nobody prepares you for it.

Well, so it seemed to me at the time. You know, I didn't even know how to get a death certificate or any of those things, how to deal with probate, I didn't know anything about those things. And all of a sudden I was the adult because Dad had gone and Mum was very sick at that point. And I had to deal with it all.

So writing has always been my way of dealing with life, and I think it was a coping mechanism to start it as a blog. And then a few people, writers who I really respect got in touch with me privately and said, *You know, there's a book in this.* And in fact, my boss at Bath Spa said to me 'What are you writing at the moment?'

And I said, 'I'm not writing anything.' And she said 'Well, you are, you're writing this blog and I'm sure there's a book in it.' And I thought, *More than one person has said this to me now, perhaps I should do this.* So I printed out the whole blog one day and laid it all out and thought, you know, *Is there a narrative here? That's the real challenge.* You know, *What am I really trying to say?* Because blog posts by their very nature, they can be quite repetitive in theme, and they're very episodic and don't

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necessarily have a narrative arc. So it was quite tricky, but then it just took hold of me, I don't really feel like I had much of a choice, I had to do it. And as I started gluing it all together and writing it out, I realised actually the book wasn't about grieving Dad, it was about Mum. And it was about this discovery that she had autism and how that had affected everything, not just the period of time that I was writing about initially, but actually my whole life had been affected by it, looking at it through that lens. So yeah, it's a very long way of saying this. It just became something that I had to do.

Caroline Sanderson: I think at that point it also becomes a book that... it's always, I think, useful to read about other people going through something that you might be going through, but that revelatory diagnosis, that becomes a book that's potentially of use to other people who may be in a similar situation, doesn't it?

And gives it kind of an altruistic point as well, important to get it down for other people too, just apart from yourself. And then as you said, the contrast with your cheerful, very funny children's stories couldn't have been greater. Did you feel as if you had to become an entirely different kind of writer to do it or did it feel just like another step, another stage or another extension of the writer you already were?

Anna Wilson: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I think it was an extension...is an extension of my role as a writer. I had explored that in writing the blog because I'd explored whether I could convey deep emotion through writing, which I think I had in my children's books actually, because I'd attempted to convey, certainly, that early adolescent awkwardness which can be very tortuous when you're going through it. And I'd had scenes between children and parents that, although they were still funny still had, I hope, a depth to them, but I'd never really gone properly serious.

So it was an extension and, in that horrible writerly way, I guess I was

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quite enjoying it on one level, thinking *How far can I go with this, and how can I use the words?* There's always that terrible layering when you're a writer I think, where you are the person and you're experiencing stuff, and you're trying to record that, but at the same time you were also the writer trying to craft something.

And I remember at the time actually, I remember listening to...I can't remember the name of the actor, but I was listening to the radio and there was an actor talking about grieving his father. And he said he remembered his father died and he got the news and he was down on the floor in a ball howling and experiencing the grief very deeply, but somewhere, in his words, 'horrible actor's brain', he was thinking, *You're going to need this at some point, remember it, you're going to need to use it.*

And that *really* struck a chord with me because I thought *That's what it's like writing this book. I have to keep going back, almost like scratching an itch, keep going back to those really intense emotions so that I can convey them to the reader.*

Caroline Sanderson: We've already talked about all the things you do channel as a writer: you talked about channelling your own childhood in your children's books. That's just sort of what we do, and thinking about actually your picture books, *The Wide, Wide Sea*, which is a lovely relationship between a young girl and her grandmother and also grandpa and the kingfisher, which has this, again, a lovely child-grandparent relationship, there's a real poignancy to those...there's a real underlying, I guess, sadness about passing of time and changing relationships isn't there? You can see how that relates to a lot of things you're writing about in the memoir.

Anna Wilson: Yes, well, I suppose the picture books are an extension of the memoir because I wrote them as I was editing the memoir. So that's interesting because I hadn't thought about it at all, but you're right.

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When my parents died, I re-grieved my grandmother's death as well. She was really my spiritual mother, I suppose, because she did a lot of my upbringing and then also...yes, grieving the fact that my children had lost their grandparents. So I suppose that is going into those picture books.

And it is a very special relationship, the grandparent relationship, isn't it, if you're lucky enough to have that. They give you a completely different outlook on life and you can talk to your grandparents in a way you can't talk to your parents. I see it with my own children with my mother-in-law, you know, they'll go off on little walks with her and have chats. And I know they're saying things they wouldn't say to me.

Caroline Sanderson: It's so interesting isn't it, because on the face of it these picture books have little to do with this memoir, but having read both, I really feel that they come from the same person, from the same writer, it makes sense.

So 'You can't write a good memoir without spilling a little blood', a friend told me about that quote, it was from a speech made by Peter Parker, I think at the presentation of the PEN Ackerley Prize. Do you agree with that? I guess if you were going to do that memoir, you were going to have to go all the way with it.

Anna Wilson: Yes, I think that's true. And I think, unfortunately, you don't only spill your own blood, you spill a bit of other people's as well. And that's the danger is that you are writing your perspective on a story that involves more people than just you. So that's the really tricky thing. And I did send my early draft to my uncle who features quite prominently in the book.

He's my mother's brother; and to my sister, and also my husband got to read it at a very early stage. And I said to them, 'If there's anything in it that you feel strongly, that you don't want to be there, then let me know.' And actually neither my uncle, nor my sister had anything to comment

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on apart from apparently I got a type of wine wrong, my sister corrected me on that! But otherwise they were fine.

Caroline Sanderson: Wine is drunk isn't it! Unsurprisingly.

Anna Wilson: Absolutely, and my husband picked up on one thing that he wanted me to remove, but it was minor and I did that and that was fine, but I did send it off with trepidation because I thought *Well, if they hate it, what am I going to do, because I still really want to send it out on submission?*

So I luckily didn't have to contend with that, but I was very conscious of the fact that I was playing with other people's lives. And one of my cousins who features very briefly in it, I've used a very light touch with him, because I knew that he just wouldn't want to be really featured in it very heavily.

So I tried to be as sensitive as I could, but I did realize that it...yeah, potentially contentious. And then there were scenes where I definitely was spilling my own blood. There was one scene in particular where I'd written it in quite a passive way, I'd just described it. And my editor said to me, she kept coming back to it, she kept saying, 'I need to be in the room with you; you need to make it more active'. And I just *really* resisted for a long time. She was right and it is a scene that people pick up on a lot, but I can't...yeah, I had to read it out loud once at something, and I'm never going to be able to do that again. I almost couldn't get to the end. So yeah, it's very hard.

Caroline Sanderson: But I think you can't write worrying about what other people think, you can't do that can you? And certainly not at that stage. So right at the end of *A Place for Everything*, your memoir, you write about trying to find the story, and I think you mentioned earlier about the narrative arc, and you were trying to find the story, both her story, your mother's story, and yours, and to find some sense and meaning in it, is that why we all do it, what we do?

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Anna Wilson: I think so, I really do. I think every book I've written has got a bit of that.

When I was writing the Vlad books, I was actually seeing a therapist because I was grieving Dad and I was writing the fourth Vlad book and I got to the end and I thought, *Oh my goodness, I've actually written about my therapist in Vlad*, and I went to one of my sessions and said, 'I think I've made you an ogre in *Vlad the World's Worst Vampire*', and she laughed and she said 'Oh, can I read it?' So I sent her the early draft and it's a conversation between Vlad and the butler who's an ogre, where he's talking about his mum and saying he doesn't think he's ever going to please her and he's never going to get things right.

And the ogre's talking her through it. And my therapist said 'Yes, that's you and me, yes!' So I think that I've always tried to work myself out through my writing, whether it's past grievances: from not having a pet, how I dealt with being bullied or whatever, right through to my relationship with my parents. Yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: And who'd have thought that would come out in a funny story for middle grade readers about the world's worst vampire.

Anna Wilson: Yes. I know. It's a bit worrying really isn't it?

Caroline Sanderson: Thanks very much, Anna. It's been great talking to you.

Anna Wilson: Thank you.



RLF Outro: That was Anna Wilson in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Anna on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 398, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Kona Macphee.

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Coming up in episode 399, Peter Oswald speaks with John Greening about verse drama, theosophical theatre and the struggles of long-form poetry. We hope you'll join us.

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