

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 400

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**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 400 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in the first instalment of our best writing advice series, RLF writers consider what advice might be most helpful for those hoping to pursue the writing life, including thoughts on time management, careers guidance, and maintaining emotional equilibrium through the highs and lows of the creative process.

**Ann Morgan:** Writing has to be one of the careers that attracts the most advice; bookshop shelves groan under the weight of volumes packed with hints and tips for those keen to become authors. And, as many people lucky enough to be published know, releasing a book often seems to act as an invitation for all sorts of people to volunteer opinions on the business of putting words on the page.

In this episode, we talked to Royal Literary Fund Fellows who have received all kinds of advice over the course of their careers and consider what has been most useful to them in pursuing the writing life.

For Kevin Clarke, a chance conversation with a stranger in a pub ended up setting him on the path to playwriting.

**Kevin Clarke:** So I'm sitting in a pub in Birkenhead and a guy a couple of years older than me, came and sat down next to me or near me at the bar. We got chatting, he was obviously a nice guy, I never really knew

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where he came from, one of those mysterious messengers from fate; he was doing A Levels in science; he was about twenty-one.

He'd decided he wanted to be a doctor, he was obviously very intent on this, and he mentioned that previous to that he'd been training as a drama teacher for a year at this place called Bretton Hall in Yorkshire. And I'd heard of Bretton Hall from musicians I knew, it was a very good place for music, music teachers.

I asked him about it and he was very enthusiastic. He said, 'Oh, it's fantastic; it's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.' He said, 'There's this fantastic stately home with a lake designed by Capability Brown and woods and so on.' And he said, 'The course, it's a brilliant course; it just wasn't for me I just decided.'

But he said 'Absolutely brilliant course, wonderful teachers, great people!' If I hadn't bumped into him that day I would not have gone to Bretton Hall, I would not have learned how to direct plays, I would not have learned how to write plays and I wouldn't be sitting here now.

**Ann Morgan:** Indeed, taking up the place at the college the stranger had told him about led to a second turning point in Clarke's life, several years later.

**Kevin Clarke:** On the very last day I was there, we'd all finished, and we'd been partying really for a week and it was kind of all over. There was the ball or whatever it was that night, and then that was the end of it.

And a little notice appeared that morning to say that the playwright Trevor Griffiths would be giving a talk that afternoon at two o'clock, somebody had got him in. And so I thought, yeah, *I'd spent three years reading plays, studying plays, studying theatre.* I'd never actually come across a playwright.

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This was the first time such a creature had come into my orbit. So I went, and Trevor Griffiths would forgive me for saying, I'm sure, that he's not perhaps the most prepossessing figure, and he sat there with this rather medieval bowl haircut. But as soon as he started to talk, I knew that was what I had to be.

That was what I had to be, 'ooh doo doo, I wanna be like you,' that's what I had to be. It was something to do with his resourcefulness, his mental resourcefulness. I was trying to work it out and I remember thinking that this man would never be bored. He was constantly thinking creatively and I was fascinated by it and I had to search for that.

And in that moment, I knew what I'd found. I knew I'd found what I had to be. So I was very lucky, twenty-two, I knew exactly what I wanted to do in life. All I had to do was achieve it.

**Ann Morgan:** For Tim Pears, much of the careers advice he received early in his life was most useful because it gave him something to react against.

**Tim Pears:** The best advice I received was advice I was obliged to ignore. You see, I stopped working at school when I was about thirteen, for reasons I won't go into now and finally left for good at sixteen. My grandfather, a retired Naval officer, remembering that I'd been pretty good at sums in primary school, advised me to do whatever it might take to become an accountant.

It was easy to ignore him. My father, a Church of England priest, advised me to learn a trade; plumbing might be best he thought, which I should point out was a lot less technical and complex than it is today. It was harder to ignore him, but I managed it and instead did all sorts of low-paid, unskilled manual work on building sites and elsewhere.

I also signed on the dole in between jobs. One time I was hauled into the Job Centre for obligatory careers advice. They gave me a lengthy

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questionnaire to fill out, subjected me to rigorous psychological tests and conducted an hour-long interview at the end of which, in order to make full use of the talents I possessed, they advised me to apply for a job in the Job Centre.

Of course, I was already dreaming of the life of an artist and the reason such advice was so helpful is that it meant that one had to defend oneself from taking it. Not in words since the vocation was yet naïve and vague, but there grew a resistance, an obstinacy, a perseverance that I suspect might not have developed if people hadn't been constantly trying to help me out of the apparent rut they saw me in: earning nothing, going nowhere, in short, a loser. For the next ten or fifteen years I did these bum jobs and quietly wrote.

I never showed my work to anyone except the magazine editors, those remote Olympians to whom I sent poems and stories. Or more likely, I now realize, the unpaid interns on those magazines who read unsolicited manuscripts and who sometimes scribbled advice on the rejection slips, suggesting the writer seek a different outlet for his creativity, or at least send a stamped addressed envelope next time.

**Ann Morgan:** With readings and public events featuring heavily in the schedules of many authors, good presentation skills can be very valuable for writers. Mahendra Solanki found that a memorable comment from fellow poet Ken Smith dramatically altered the way he reads.

**Mahendra Solanki:** Many years ago, doing an early reading tour, with Bloodaxe Books, we'd gone around various venues up North and then down South. This was in Norwich Art Centre with the poet, the great, late Ken Smith, who having heard me read a couple of times – and I'd grown up listening to poets like W. H. Auden and I used to go to a reading every month in Pentameters in Hampstead when I was a student in London, listening every month to the Liverpool poets and Brian Patten in particular. And Brian used to read in this particular hypnotic style and

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the Auden, and then listen to T. S. Eliot on record, on the old LP, and Dylan Thomas. So this very sonorous, melodic, hypnotic stuff obviously somehow it got into my bones, as it were, as a reader and in one of my first readings, this is when my first collection *Shadows of My Making*, came out – and I'd been reading with Ken and Ken was very nervously getting irritated and so on. And after the reading, he said: 'Mahendra, why do you read like a xxxx?!' So I stopped reading, as he suggested, and tried to adopt my own voice.

**Ann Morgan:** Courttia Newland found a script editor's advice invaluable in helping him keep self-consciousness at bay in his writing process.

**Courtia Newland:** Historically the literary establishment hasn't been so welcoming to writers of colour; they're being more welcoming now. I don't know if it's they're being pushed a bit, but they're more welcoming now. But even so as to what you're supposed to write, I don't think they're so welcoming to that, you know — like just being able to write whatever you want.

So if I started to think about that too much and think about who might be looking over my shoulder, it could just stop me, you know? And a script editor said to me one time, just *forget* all that stuff, when you sit down and write, forget about diversity schemes and initiatives and who wants what and everything, you just have to be, just, open.

In the world of imagination why would you want to start thinking about that? So I don't and I try and go wherever I want to go. A lot of times, even when I was younger, and I was just starting out, I think I came out writing stuff that offended people a lot of times, because of that, I will talk about this subject, I'll talk about the things that people say you can't talk about, but it's really liberating.

And sometimes it has an effect where I feel down actually afterwards, because I'm just like, *wow, man, people are really stuck in this kind of, you*

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*can't say that thing, which is so strange for literature. As a writer, it just feels really good to be able to have that freedom.*

**Ann Morgan:** Advice from an industry insider was also useful in helping Tobias James get started on his career in journalism.

**Tobias James:** I was very young, well, very young in terms of career, I was probably twenty-three, twenty-four, and I was at some kind of lunch on a small literary magazine. I can't remember if I was asking for advice, but anyway, someone said to me, 'You have to become a specialist in something.'

And I think like a lot of humanities graduates, I thought, *well I've studied English and History, therefore I can be a writer.* Whereas actually I suddenly realised some of the best writers and journalists were doctors or lawyers or people who were really proper experts in their field. So I thought, *blimey, I've got to become an expert.*

And I spoke to the person on the foreign desk of the newspaper where I was working, and he said, 'The Americans are only interested in the three I's: Ireland, Israel, and Italy'. So I ended up in Italy and that became my area of specialization. But I think that was the most important thing: have something for which every time the subject comes up, editors will think of your name.

**Ann Morgan:** With writing, being a notoriously precarious and unpredictable career, many authors find the emotional aspects of publishing as challenging as doing the work itself. For Alyson Hallett another chance conversation with a stranger ended up providing her with a pearl of wisdom that has stood her in good stead.

**Alyson Hallett:** I have no idea who gave me this piece of advice, but it's the one that has stuck with me. I know it was a man, I think maybe I met him on a train. He was maybe in his middle or late ages and we got to talking

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and he offered it to me as the best piece of advice that he'd ever been given. And I think I expected something fairly grand or fairly monumental, but the advice was quite simply *To steer a steady course*.

That was it. At some point in our conversation, he looked at me and he said, 'This is the *most* important advice I've ever been given and the most useful, and that's *To steer a steady course*.' And it sounds like nothing and yet for me, it's probably been *everything*.

I find it very easy to veer between extremes; I'm not a very temperate person. And I think living as a freelance writer is an *incredibly* precarious life. I've rarely had times when I've known what my income will be. And it's one thing to talk about negative capabilities and instabilities and not reaching after facts and reasons, as Keats advised, but it's another thing to live with these instabilities.

And of course, as a writer, I've had far more rejections of my work than acceptances. And there's been many a day when I've crawled under my desk and wept and thought — *That's it, I've had enough, I can't take one more day of this! I'm going to go and retrain as a...* I don't know, I always thought maybe a plumber.

I'm hopelessly impractical, but I thought maybe a plumber or there must be something I could do that would, maybe, give me more security. Anyway, that's never happened; some other piece of work has turned up or a cheque has appeared just when I've needed it.

**Ann Morgan:** For Hallett, friends can be valuable allies in maintaining that necessary equilibrium.

**Alyson Hallett:** I think my friends have often kept faith for me when I haven't been able to. So even if my hands have come off the steering wheel, there have been people beside me who've buoyed me up, because of course you know me, I can't avoid a nautical reference here: steering a



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steady course, keeping the ship somehow afloat and following whatever star or constellation it needs to follow to get where it's going.

So like any ship on any sea, there will be storms, there will be doldrums, there'll be rogue waves. There'll be days when the sun is out and the waves are glittering, and you just feel like the happiest person on earth, and through all of that, steer a steady course. It just seemed the best thing someone could tell me in terms of how to be able to keep turning up at a page and doing what I do.

And just one tiny thing, because of course you need to have ideas and thoughts, but one of my best friends is an opera singer and she always says, *you need some skill, but the biggest thing you need is perseverance*. And how do you summon the strength and the energy for that? Somehow you, along with your friends or your family, you steer a steady course. And thank you to whoever it was who told me that; it's been really useful.

**Ann Morgan:** Heidi Williamson has also found that advice focused on keeping calm and keeping things in perspective has served her well.

**Heidi Williamson:** I forget who said it, but I've got it in a mantra list that I have on a word document on my laptop: 'It's not a hotdog-eating contest'. The reason I like that is because it's playful and it makes me smile. And also it reminds me that it's not the volume of poetry that I produce, but the quality of the work that I aim for.

Some of the writers that I admire the most – Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin – only did three or four books over the course of many decades of writing. And that's partly because although they worked very hard and edited very hard, they looked at the quality of what they were trying to produce overall.

I'm a very slow writer; it takes me a long time to get from initial idea to maybe another initial idea that I'll bash into it, and then starting to draft



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something, and then editing it for a very long time. So the fact that I should focus on just each individual poem, making that the best it can be, instead of how many poems I can churn out a week, is very reassuring to me.

Another really good piece of advice came from Moniza Alvi, a poet who shares my Wymondham home and whose work I think is incredible. When I was struggling with a particular book and trying to figure out how I was going to approach the topic and so many ways to come at it from, and really struggling. She said 'Just put one poem in front of another'.

And that idea again, that you just focus as wholly as you can on the piece that you're working on and pulling out and teasing out all of the different meanings and areas and interests in that poem, really helped me focus and calm down and slow down and enjoy the work again.

**Ann Morgan:** An insight Williamson gleaned from another local author has also stood her in good stead when it comes to teaching.

**Heidi Williamson:** The final piece of advice actually comes from the other incredibly famous Wymondham poet, George Szirtes, which is more about his whole approach to writing and how he teaches. And I've been very fortunate in that many, many years ago when I was just starting out, I went to a workshop he ran at the art school, not just for people attending the art school, but for anyone in Norwich.

And when I was at my copywriting job, I would walk a mile and a half across town and take a long lunch break and take short lunch breaks the rest of the week, so I could sit in and hear him talking to people who were studying at the art school. And one of the things that he said, which really stuck with me was that, he saw himself more as a facilitator than a teacher.

He was working with words in the same way that other people were. But

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his job was to say things like *You seem to be going in and out of this door, did you realize there's also a gate around the back and there's some windows up here, have you had a look in there?* I'm paraphrasing now, but the idea that his role was to turn things around and show people different ways, *their* ways in, was something that really stuck with me.

And whenever I'm working with other writers, I think of myself more as a writer the same as them, perhaps a writer who's been on a lot more courses and got more years under her belt, but one that's trying to do a similar thing to them in different ways. So that advice really sticks with me too.

**Ann Morgan:** But while strangers and famous authors can often be great sources of insight, sometimes the most valuable advice comes from those closest to home. This was the case for Marina Benjamin, whose husband ended up making a comment that helped her out of a particularly tricky writing rut.

**Marina Benjamin:** This bit of advice came to me from my husband and it was actually real-world advice, and it's advice for writers that I've subsequently passed on, and has been as well received as I received it myself. It's designed for writers who don't have the luxury of writing full time. In my case, I could only write, my last book for example, I could only write half the time, the rest of the time was committed to various editorial jobs.

And my husband's advice was this, it was: *Retain the best energy for your book; give your best energy to your book.* I know it sounds incredibly obvious, but it had a remarkable effect because what happened was, it stopped me feeling swamped by multiple commitments and not knowing when to give attention to what, which was the danger of being overcommitted and of having more than one job, all of which were equally demanding.

And so what I would do is...in my case, and it would be different for every

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person, but my best writing energy is in the morning and so I basically gave the mornings to the book. And the rest of the time I divided up between my other commitments. I feel that it didn't lead to the other commitments suffering because I did worry about that.

I thought, *Well, if I'm giving my best energy to my book, then does lesser energy get given to the other equally important tasks that I've got to do and for which I'm being paid?* — so there were standards in play. But actually, funnily enough, I felt it had the opposite effect because it allowed me to allocate specific focused time to the other tasks and the anxiety of *not* getting enough time for my book had been removed because I'd already given it my best energy.

**Ann Morgan:** Perhaps the best advice when it comes to writing advice is to keep an open mind. You never know when something might strike a chord.

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You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast produced by the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this episode were: Kevin Clarke, Tim Pears, Mahendra Solanki, Courttia Newland, Tobias Jones, Alyson Hallett, Heidi Williamson and Marina Benjamin. You can find out more information about these authors and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

**RLF Outro:** And that concludes episode 400, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 401 Lawrence Sail speaks with Ann Morgan about fallow periods, poetry versus description, and the sheer power of words. We hope you'll join us.

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