

Writers Aloud

Episode 402

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You are listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 402 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Lucy Flannery confesses to an out-of-control obsession with stationery, explaining that every notebook and index card has a role in her creative process and reminding us that nothing is ever really thrown away when you're a writer.

Then Alexandra Benedict considers the many different modes of sensory perception, including her own intriguing experience of synaesthesia and explores how the senses can make their way into writing. First, here's Lucy Flannery on stationery.

Lucy Flannery: All stationery obsessives – and all writers *are* stationery obsessives, no matter what they tell you – always have too many supplies. I am no exception.

From where I am sitting, I can see:

three rulers
a rainbow of Sharpies
highlighter pens galore
umpteen bulldog clips, arranged in descending order of size
a box of paperclips

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a pot of rubber bands
a different pot of coloured rubber bands
more post-it notes than it's probably possible to use in
a single lifetime and, of course, notebooks.

A4 and pocket size, single-ruled and double-spaced, rigid and ringbound they stretch without number across my shelves and surfaces. Their hard covers are eye-catching, shimmering, reflective — this one has a geometric design in bold primary colours; this one is Vincent van Gogh's exquisite Almond Blossom, delicate tracery of green and white against vivid blue background; this one features a stylised drawing of Bryan Cranston in his Heisenberg hat from *Breaking Bad* — a gift to a family member and subsequently passed on to me, the stationery nerd.

But the notebook right next to me, here on the desk, is a humble, one-page-lined, two-page-plain, common or garden, numbered triplicate book. The type that used to be a staple of workplaces across the land before the digital revolution. The kind that was used to record petty cash expenses of seventeen and six, or provide a receipt for the watch that you left at the jewellers to be mended after you'd overwound it.

This is the one I use, day in, day out; the one I reach for in phone conversations and Zoom meetings. Its unlovely cover is battered, a bit creased. The pages at the front are dog-eared and curling, the spine beginning to crack. I've had it seven months already and it will last the best part of another year, when it will be replaced by a new, identical substitute from WHSmith, if indeed WHSmith still exists. We can only hope.

As the notebook gets older, it grows progressively thinner; this is the direct opposite of most writers' experience. And in much the same way that my career is sometimes defined by the jobs I *didn't* get – the writers' room for the return of the well-loved TV sitcom; script editor on the big Hollywood blockbuster – this notebook too is in many ways most interesting in its absences.

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The majority of the missing pages relate to ideas I've had, either for plays or comedy pilots or short stories. Sometimes it's a whole premise — a fire alarm going off in the middle of a night in a hotel, for instance; sometimes it's a line of dialogue, overheard or misheard — I thought I heard someone say 'the eloquent is in the room', which set off a whole train of thought. Sometimes it's a character name — the name 'Lyle Beck' came to me in a dream once and I noted it down because it seemed so compelling. I was delighted to be able to use it, finally, in a script, for a character who was an out-and-out cad and very satisfying it was too.

Usually the very first note is recorded on my phone, as that is on me at all times and can be pressed into service whenever the muse descends, no matter how inconvenient — in the queue at the post office, when I'm elbow deep in suds, scrubbing a casserole dish or elbow deep in soil, trying to get at the taproot of a dandelion. Once my hands are washed and dry, the idea is transcribed into my trusty notebook and developed over the course of a few days or a few weeks. After that it either goes straight into a work in progress or the salient content is transferred, yet again, to one of those sexy notebooks that lord it over the desk, officially turned into a Project with a capital P. Thereafter its fate is uncertain, waiting for a producer or a director or an editor to embrace it, and then begins the agonising wait for the green light, or the funding, or the nod from the higher-up person to proceed to the next stage or even, dizzying thought, to get made.

If the thing doesn't take off enough to become a capital P Project in its own right, it's still ripped out — but not thrown away. The thought, whatever it is, will be transcribed into my card index of 'ideas whose time has not yet come'. (This index is on plain white card, not to be confused with the coloured index cards I use to plot thematic twists. I told you I have too many supplies!) Even the torn-out page itself will be chucked in the recycling, rather than thrown away. Nothing is ever *really* thrown away, when you're a writer.

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But it's not just ideas that get recorded in this notebook — everything in my life gets jotted down in here initially. Research notes, to-do lists, preliminary thoughts on applications for residencies or funding applications, records of how long I've spent on an editing job and how much I need to charge, the phone number of the plumber I've been trying to get hold of that everyone says is so brilliant, the name of that plant I saw growing in a garden two streets away and finally found out what it was called, instructions on how to boost my faltering wifi signal. They all find their way into my humble triplicate book where they can be found again, days, weeks or even months later, when it's time to send the invoice, or cadge a cutting, or finally get to grips with my broadband package.

But back to the absences: pages twenty-eight, twenty-nine, twenty-nine, twenty-nine and thirty relate to a frustrating incident when I was struggling with three individual projects and blocked on all of them, so I took an Angel Card as an instant oracle. Angel Cards, if you haven't come across them, are small cards with a single, positive word inscribed on them like *Freedom*, or *Abundance*, or *Joy*, accompanied by a cheery illustration of an angel mountaineering, or skinny-dipping or generally having a jolly time. That grim day when I was blocked on three different commissions I reached for the cards, confident of some inspiring, constructive message like *Simplicity* or maybe *Adventure*. The card I actually chose was *Surrender* and it depicted an angel on top of a hill, waving a white flag. I was so furious at this that I spent ten minutes free-writing, filling five pages with scrawled invective about how *unhelpful* and *pointless* this card was and how it had completely failed to offer guidance, succour or support. The pages were then immediately ripped out and fed through the shredder — and I did seriously consider setting fire to the strips, my wrath being still not entirely assuaged. Funnily enough, all three projects sorted themselves out shortly after that. Coincidence, obviously.

Page four, page eleven, pages twenty-one and twenty-two, page thirty-two and page forty-five are also all gone. They contained preliminary ideas for activities and exercises. I teach playwriting and creative writing

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and some of my course members stay with me, coming back for more, term after term. It's important to ring the changes now and then, to keep those creative juices flowing for them and for me. So I'm always on the lookout for new ways to change 'write a scene with two people having an argument' into a more interesting, more compelling framework.

My own juices also need stimulus: the pages that are still there hold observations from courses and sessions that I attend myself as a student. I'm a firm believer in lifelong learning and the Zoom revolution has opened up all sorts of opportunities to make that easier. These notes stay in the notebook so they can be consulted and referred to again — unless of course they are ideas for writing exercises that I have pinched from other, cleverer people. In which case they get transferred to the bulging folder on the laptop, the paper original fluttering into the recycling along with the plumber's phone number (he's booked solid for the next six weeks), the done and dusted to-do lists and the redundant first draft of an application for a writing residency. (I didn't get it. But the application itself is stored in the cloud. If any similar opportunities present themselves I can re-use some of the wording. No need to reinvent the wheel every time, I can just cut and paste the bit about being good at collaborating with other creatives and reliable around deadlines. Like I said, nothing is ever wasted when you're a writer.)

One of the courses I attended recently was *Developing Original Narratives for Augmented and Virtual Reality* and my notes duly record the burgeoning markets for immersive storytelling in virtual and hyper-real worlds. Pages twenty-five, twenty-five, twenty-six and twenty-six record details of branching narratives, gaming frameworks and story clusters. In this world, I learned, a PowerPoint presentation is called a 'deck'. I also learned that there are pockets of funding available from companies keen to develop ideas told in new and immersive formats and will commission writers from concept through to delivery. This is reflected in the burgeoning appetite for non-traditional storytelling. Theatres increasingly ask for bold, imaginative and preferably digital formats

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with which to connect with audiences. Food for thought, here, and more scribblings in the notebook.

This brave new world is also reflected in the change of name of the Writers Guild Committee I serve on; formerly the Radio Committee it is now the Audio Committee in recognition of the shift towards new broadcast platforms. My notes on pages thirty-eight, thirty-eight and thirty-nine tell of broadening markets for scripted drama far beyond the confines of the BBC, which is just as well, given that broadcast radio-drama slots on Radio 4 reduced from 413 hours five years ago to a mere 160 hours a year now. Podcasting is the new wild west and it has never been easier to reach an audience, if not necessarily get paid very much for your work. It's ironic that the cuts to radio drama by the national broadcaster coincided with the biggest upsurge in appetite for audio narratives, fuelled by a pandemic in which storytelling became a mainstay for so many isolated people.

So I sit at my desk and I dream about the stories I might tell and the myriad exciting ways in which I might tell them. New narrative worlds open up every day which allow revolutionary possibility and, indeed, play with the nature of reality itself.

And then I reach for one of my seventy-five biros and I make a note. In my dog-eared, WHSmith office notebook where the only technology is two unused sheets of carbon paper.

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RLF: That was Lucy Flannery, recorded by Catherine O'Flynn. You can find out more about Lucy on the RLF website. Next, here's Alexandra Benedict with 'Writing the Senses'.

Alexandra Benedict: I'd like you to think of your favourite place in the world — a real location you know well. Don't think about it too long, go with your first instinct. Now position yourself there in your mind. What

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can you see, hear, smell, touch, taste? It might be nothing, or maybe a grey, hazy sense of your surroundings; or perhaps you can see some things but can't conjure how they feel; or maybe you can make out the ghost of a smell but can't see the source.

There's no right, wrong or indifferent way of doing this exercise: we all have unique ways of perceiving sensory input. Finding out your own way of processing the world will do much to help create a unique writing voice.

And that's what this Talk is about: the senses, and how they can be used to give life to writing. I'll keep revisiting this exercise throughout this Talk, conjuring more of your favourite place through your sensory memories. Hopefully, by the end, you'll have more of a sense of how the senses can be used in writing.

There are between twelve and twenty-one senses, not just five; some people say even more. Sensory systems are both external, known as exteroception and internal (interoception) based on sensory organs of the eyes, nose, ears, mouth, skin, the inner ear, nervous system and the vestibular system. Internal senses can be sense of balance, sensation of pain, spatial orientation, and body position — also known as proprioception.

All sense information is processed, or transduced, into an overall experience, called multimodality. And each of us has a different resulting multimodality of the senses.

In, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Aristotle states that 'about all perception, we can say that a sense is what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter, in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet ring without the iron or gold'.

In other words, the way we perceive sensory data is only an impression.

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We are the wax, with all our experiences, ideas, prejudices and memories melted into it. The impression that sense data makes upon us is affected by what we already have perceived, so everyone experiences the same scent, sight, and everything else in a slightly different way. For example, there is a molecule called propylthiouracil, I think, but let's call it PROP, that some humans perceive to be bitter, some as having no taste, while others experience it somewhere in-between. There also a genetic component to transduction too, such as perception of coriander. A study of fourteen-and-a-half-thousand people discovered that those who perceive coriander as 'soapy' are more likely to have a particular olfactory receptor gene.

Neurodivergence also affects perception. I've been diagnosed with ADHD and autism recently, all of which affect the way I process sensory data. I also have synaesthesia, where the senses are linked with each other in an unusual way. I smell music, and hear colours; people also have a note or chord, or sometimes colour as well. Perceiving the world like this can be brilliant fun, like when I went to a Rachmaninov performance and colours rained down on the audience. Sometimes though the wealth of data causes a shutdown in me where I can no longer see or hear, and need to be in a dark room alone for a while. It does infuse, however, my writing with a sense signature. I often yoke one sense to another while writing, so I describe smells with colours, or sound with textures. This was also affected, I think, by being blind and deaf for a while as a child. No one will perceive the world quite like me, just like no one perceives the world quite like you, and there is a strength in that when writing.

If you are someone who has aphantasia, which is the absence of visual representations within the mind's eye, then the exercise is still fruitful. I don't really see things in my mind, but spatial orientation, proprioception, and other senses come into play. If I read in a book about a red door, with a black door knocker and a gold number 12, I don't have a clear image in my mind but I sense the heft of the door, and smell the wood it's made from as well as smelling, and hearing, the colour red. I *feel*

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where things are in comparison to my body, rather than seeing them in my mind. I can walk into memories, and take a turn in places I've lived or been, and while I won't 'see' it, I can wander through and know every detail, from hearing the creak on the third stair to smelling where I'll find the gnarled half of a lemon. I can still paint pictures for readers while I write. There's some fascinating recent research into aphantasia, if you're interested. Look at Dawes et al in issue ten of *Scientific Reports*, and C. M. K. Whiteley, issue 178 in *Philosophical Studies*, going from there. Try not to get too distracted, as I did.

It's also important to recognise that you and/or others may not have one or more of the many senses, or that one dominates. This will affect the way this exercise manifests for you. So, basically, do whatever works, with your fabulous brain, whatever that looks, smells, feels, and tastes like.

Let's start with touch, a sense that connects us to our surroundings, as well as people and creatures. It places us in space. When humans hug, kiss or touch each other, or animals, the bonding chemical oxytocin is released, as are the soothing serotonin and rewarding dopamine. Stress chemicals are reduced, so it can feel nourishing. For some people, though, if they've been through insecure attachment or trauma, human touch can *bring on* stress chemicals. Again, it's about individuals experiencing *their* world.

Touch is made up of composite information from four different types of receptor — mechanoreceptors, which sense vibration and pressure, nociceptors for damage and pain, proprioceptors for how body parts relate to each other and thermoreceptors for temperature. You, and/or your character that you're writing about, may have a dominant, or no, sense of pain, or maybe a heightened sense of temperature. Maybe they can sense electrical or magnetic fields. When you're writing, think of all the ways your main character would respond to touch as a way to show their personality and past without spelling it out.

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Go back now to your favourite place. Are you sitting, standing, lying, crouching, kneeling? Which way are you facing? What can you touch around you? What can you sense that is further away? Where are you in relation to everything else in that place? Are there objects that you can reach? Imagine picking one up and holding it. Is it rough? Smooth? Soft? Hard? Does it have marks you can feel, edges, a texture to the material? What memories does it spark?

Now lift it to your nose and take a big sniff. What does it smell of? Maybe it has no smell. But maybe it makes you think of a memory of a smell. Many studies link odor to emotional memory. Fukada et al., in 2012 found that rose essential oil limits a rise of stress hormone cortisol and Lehrner et al, in 2005, found that lavender and orange essential oils improve the mood of patients in dental surgeries. I now take lavender when I go to the dentist.

Smell is also personal. Just as with touch, smells make us react physiologically. They can set off endorphins from one sniff, or make us nauseous. In our brains, the amygdala, OrbitoFrontalCortex or OFC and hippocampus are all involved in processing smells and connecting them with emotions depending on learned experience and connections.

Olfactory science is fascinating, but if you are a beginner sniffer, may I suggest you take yourself on a smell walk? I often take me and my dog, Dame Margaret Rutherford, for a smell walk. She snuffles along the wild flowers that grow through the stones on the edge of the beach, tail swishing like boat masts in the wind; whereas I head for a snuff of the last rose of summer or handling a gangly strand of lavender. Follow your nose and smell everything; within reason, obviously.

Now, back in your favourite place. I'd like you to close your eyes and engage your nose, and any memories of smell. Is any food cooking nearby? Can you smell any flowers or greenery? Any animals? Someone's perfume? Your own?

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For me, smell and sound are interrelated, and find it fascinating that the language of sound is built into that of smell. Perfumes are described as made up of notes, with different ingredients treated as notes on a piano or other instrument. They are broken down into descriptions of base, middle or heart and top notes. The word ‘chord’, relating to more than one musical note played at the same time, comes from the French word for agreement, ‘accord’, and ‘accord’ is also used for a combination of the raw materials of smell to make a scent. Accords can evoke something specific and concrete, like a rose, recreate something specific like ‘old book smell’ – *mmmmmm* – or something abstract, like ‘honesty’.

What does honesty sound like to you? What does dread smell like to you? What does memory smell like to you?

Once again, in your favourite place, start by listening to what’s inside you. Can you hear your sense of balance? Where you are sitting or standing or kneeling, what can you hear that is very close to you? What is in your peripheral hearing, let’s say within an arm’s span? How do those sounds merge? Wider again, far away, what can you hear? Take in every sound that you can summon; notice how it affects how you perceive the space around you.

Now we come onto taste. An exercise I like to do with writing classes and creative writing students involves toast and butter, with variants for people with intolerances or allergies or people for whom toast and butter would be triggering. Because food sparks memories. Proust’s madeleines are probably the most famous but memories generally carry stories and trauma within them like a snail in its shell.

In this exercise I bring in a toaster, a loaf and a block of butter then ask participants to close their eyes and concentrate on their senses as I make the toast. We concentrate on the lever being depressed, the smell of the toast cooking, the jack-in-the-box *pop*, the scrape of butter on a cat’s-tongue bread ...by the time they receive the slice of toast, it has a ritual-

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like property, a transubstantiation from sense into memory. As they slowly eat, eyes still closed, I ask them to focus on textures as well as taste. Is the butter cold or has it become one with the toast, what happens when they chew, what senses are happening elsewhere in their bodies? What memories are being elicited, what images and associations? They become spirit guides to their own memories, challenging, being ill, and being brought a phalanx of stiff soldiers, ready to dip into a molten egg. Or they channel breakfast after a hangover, with a stack of cold toast in a balm of butter.

So, your favourite place again. What can you taste? Is the air sweet, sour? Is there a remnant of something on your lips or teeth? Are you eating something? If so, what data are your taste buds sending? How much of taste is made up of what you can smell and what you see? Be a wine taster, plucking shades of flavours from wherever you are, however tangential they seem.

Now onto sight. A sense prioritised in modern life so I won't do that here. But call on all visual memories you have in your favourite place. What time of day is it? What time of year? What season? How does the light play around you? What colours can you see? What shapes? Turn around so you see all around that place; move so you get up close to something. Peer at it. Look out for shadows.

Now let's fuse these sense-experiences into a synaesthesiac one. What colour is that sound you're hearing? How do the colours taste? What texture have the sights? If you are in pain, what temperature has that pain? If you are unbalanced, how does that sound?

Now, if you have time, space, a pen or a keyboard, you could pause the recording and write all this down. Let the words fall like rain, let them saturate the page or screen without judgement or care, just write those sensations down. I'm going to do it too.

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So pause now; or just carry on. What I wrote down was that I'm in Whitby at the beginning of one of two twin piers that reach out into the harbour like a crocodile's mouth, jaws opening to eat the boats. A tall lighthouse stands a way ahead, like a widow in a white veil, waiting. Smells of smashed toffee apples, candyfloss perms, old oil and lost doughnut holes crowd me. The wind cold shoulders me out of its way. Gulls umami scream as they dive into the waves. Crab traps clunk. My hands are warmed by a yellow bouquet of chips. Vinegar stings a cut on my finger. Salt chaps my lips but I don't know if from chips or the sea.

Just placing myself there in my memory of Whitby led to a cascade of sensations, some of which I could use in a novel or play, maybe, but the exercise itself connects me with the way I perceive. The same exercises can be done to give real depth, authenticity and voice to any prose or poetry you write, both establishing location and giving a sense of character by the way they paint their world, because each character will have a different way of perceiving the world. This perception will be shadowed and skewed, as Aristotle says, but these are our unique shadows. And people love to hear, taste, feel, touch and see each other's shadows; and they definitely want to read about them.

RLF: That was Alexandra Benedict, recorded by Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Alexandra on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 402, which was produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 403, Penny Boxall speaks with John Greening about poetry and history, successful and failed poems and advice for young writers. We hope you'll join us.



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