

Writers Aloud

Episode 403

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 403 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode Penny Boxall speaks with John Greening about poetry as igniting little moments of history, poetic inspiration as a gap that you feel yourself into, goes and duds, her move into other genres such as children's historical fiction and her advice for young writers.

John Greening: Penny Boxall was born in 1987 and grew up in Aberdeenshire and Yorkshire. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from UEA, but her parallel career has involved working in museums, from the Wordsworth Trust and Shandy Hall to the Ashmolean; experience she often draws on in her writing. Her first poetry collection *Ship of the Line*, drew considerable praise when it appeared in 2014 and was reprinted by Valley Press four years later, along with a second collection, *Who Goes There?*

Her most recent book is *In Praise of Hands*, a creative collaboration with the artist Naoko Matsubara, published in 2020 by the Ashmolean Museum. It was her debut, however, that won her international recognition, when *Ship of the Line* received the highly prestigious Edwin Morgan Poetry Award, one of the UK's biggest poetry prizes.

Other honours include the *Msllexia*/PBS Women's Poetry Prize in 2018 and a 2019 Northern Writers Award. Penny Boxall also writes fiction for young people and was shortlisted for the Hachette Children's Novel Award

Writers Aloud

in 2020. She recently received an Arts Council grant for the development of her latest work in that genre, which is set in the eighteenth century.

Penny Boxall has been a Hawthornden Fellow, writer in residence at Cove Park, Gladstone's Library, and the Chateau de Lavigny in Switzerland, as well as a visiting research fellow at Merton College Oxford.

And here we are in York, Penny's home, talking together, and it's a delight to be here. So York is home, but are you more of a Scottish writer really, would you say?

Penny Boxall: Well, I suppose in some way I feel Scottish in the sense that it very much influenced my growing up. I grew up in Aberdeenshire from the age of one, my parents were English, but the experience of Aberdeenshire seems to have settled into me in some way. My Dad still lives there.

And I think in Aberdeenshire there's a tradition of live music and poetry and it's quite integrated into the evening scene. And I think that was something that I definitely imbibed when I was growing up.

John Greening: So do you look to the Scottish literary tradition as well? Do you feel that you are a part of that tradition: the Kathleen Jamies and others, that they are influences on you?

Penny Boxall: I'd like to think so. I think probably it's more to do with an interest in image and landscape image than perhaps to do with language. But I think that that tradition definitely informs my work but I also feel, actually very much a British poet. I think there's a lot of English work that goes into my writing and I'm quite tied to countryside in various ways. I think that's something that's been quite an influence on me, all my life.

John Greening: Yes, that's funny, I was just reading some of the poems again in the train here and there's one about moles, isn't there? I was

Writers Aloud

reminded of Edmund Blunden and indeed John Clare. It's a very English tradition to write about moles hanging on fences, in that lovely poem, I can't remember what it's called now, but it's a lovely poem...

Penny Boxall: I can't remember what it's called either. Yeah, it's definitely something that sort of...these images that come to you, often quite strange images in the countryside; something that juxtaposes a strange visual in a particular context, I think, definitely sparked something for me. And also because I think moving as a baby to Aberdeenshire and then as a young teenager to Yorkshire, I think I've always been alive to these contexts and noticing things that take on a slightly different nuance in various places. So I think that's all fed into the kind of interests that I have in my writing.

John Greening: Of course the Edwin Morgan Award, Edward Morgan, great Scottish poet, did you ever see him?

Penny Boxall: I didn't, no, sadly.

John Greening: No. And so what was the effect of winning that — an extraordinary prize to have won?

Penny Boxall: Yeah, it was just a huge validation. I was utterly flabbergasted to win it. And I think it just gave me confidence to try something new because it felt like just a big *Yes!* from someone, and that really did feel wonderful and it just let me relax actually, it allowed me to do some travelling and just not worry immediately about the next pay cheque. And that is enormously freeing, and that travel is often what sparks ideas for writing. So I've produced a lot of poems since then. *Who Goes There?* was produced after the Edwin Morgan and I have a couple of collections which are pretty much finished subsequently as well. So it's just about freedom and relaxation. I couldn't be more grateful for it really.

John Greening: So, *Ship of the Line*, why that title?

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: Well, it went through many iterations, I had a lot of interest in eighteenth-century naval history that I like to use for my own purposes. I'm not a particularly accurate historian in lots of ways, but I like to take images from history and think myself into them and unpack them a bit to bring that experience alive, so there were quite a few naval or seafaring poems in that collection. And, honestly, I just spent a little time on Wikipedia on a list of nautical terms and I thought, *oh, that one actually sounds really quite nice*. And it also saved it from a much more terrible title, which I'd previously thought was the best one.

John Greening: We all have those, yes, the titles that never happened. So what is it draws those poems together, travel is in there, you mentioned, how would you...give us some idea what was in the book really?

Penny Boxall: Yeah. I think, as you mentioned, I am a museums professional in some way, and I think I've always been interested in the way that objects can spark stories and you can have little glimpses of the past through them, tangible *senses* of the past, but you can't actually interpret them in a total way, you can only bring a certain slant of the light to them. So for me, that first collection was a synergy of poetry and museums for the first time for me where I felt like I was igniting little moments of history. And as I say, they're not necessarily accurate, that doesn't really bother me in lots of ways. I think it's more about that kind of little impulse of life that you can bring, when you examine an object in a slightly unexpected way, I suppose.

John Greening: Mmm. It's a wonderful job to have. I mean, some jobs feed naturally into poetry, don't they?

Though sometimes actually handling an object or reading about something that's going into the collection will spark a poem. How do you know when that's happening? How do you know when something's going to turn into a poem?

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: There's a sort of resonance and I think that that's almost when my mind goes blank and I need to reach for my phone or a notepad or whatever and just write down a few words.

And it's kind of about the gap that is created and I feel myself into that gap. So when I talk about blankness, I suppose it's about knowing that between these two things, there is something and I need to write into that space. So yeah, it's kind of more space than it is an object in its own right, I think.

John Greening: Yeah. That's fascinating. And talking of space, have there been spaces where you couldn't write? And how do you feel about that? How do you cope with that?

Penny Boxall: The bus! When I was working in London I commuted by bus from Oxford. And it took sometimes two and a half hours each way, and I thought *maybe I'll manage to write during that time*. And I couldn't at all; it was utterly dead time because I couldn't even really read on the jerking coach. So, yeah, that's not at all conducive! So being stationary seems to be a prerequisite.

John Greening: Do you compose in your head at all or is it pencil and paper or laptop or what?

Penny Boxall: It's always laptop actually. So most often I'll write a few notes on my phone, which always feels quite inelegant and especially when I'm interested in the past I have this quite uneasy relationship with technology. So, I write a few notes and then I always go immediately to the laptop.

And I like the fact that it looks impersonal and it looks a tiny bit at an arm's length from the original thought and also the ease of editing, I like to change it as I go; I'm not a smooth writer, I feel like I will do a first pass where I'll put the scaffolding in, and then I'll go back and that's when I put

Writers Aloud

the – I don't know what comes next – the bricks, and then the pointing and you know, it's various passes through the poem.

John Greening: So does that scaffolding include the form? There's quite a variety of forms in *Ship of the Line*, but is there a particular form you favour, a default form? For example, I always find anything I start to write seems to be an unrhymed tercet, then it turns into something else.

Penny Boxall: I tend to start off with just the line breaks and no sort of stanzas particularly. But often I do find I'm interested in couplets.

I think there's a lot that can be done with, again those gaps, and the way that your...well, I suppose it's exactly the same thing I was just describing about using museum objects, that you have a thing and another thing, and between them there's a sort of space that creates something else. That's where the ignition can happen, so I do love couplets, but it's something that comes in the process of writing and drafting, I feel like I'm much more confident with line breaks to start off with, and then the form will sort of be sculpted out of the block, I think.

John Greening: Are there other poets that you can safely read, to get yourself going? I mean, some poets I think it's dangerous to read: the Ted Hugheses and D. H. Lawrences and indeed Sylvia Plaths, they sort of influence one so much, but are there poets that you can read that sort get you going with writing?

Penny Boxall: Yeah, and I think that's a really good point. I think there are some poets I know I must avoid because no matter how much I love their work, I'll be writing pastiche and that's just not helpful. An old love is Larkin and I think there's a kind of aspiration there. I know it's probably fairly unfashionable now, but I think the way he handles turns is just really, really interesting. So, yeah, I find him quite helpful to read.

John Greening: Oh, that's refreshing to hear, I think he's the most *masterly*

Writers Aloud

of poets. Would you say a successful book of poems has to have something strange about it, an element of it that remains inexplicable?

Penny Boxall: Well, I was thinking about this recently with children's fiction, and someone wisely said that quite often titles have to have an element of irony to them and that's what will spark the reader's imagination, so a book titled *The Ascent of Gravity*, for example, will be much more intriguing than one that isn't or that's called something more literal. In poems, I do like poems that keep a little of the mystery of composition intact. I'm not so drawn to those which are 'handholdy'; I like the ones which let you step off the edge.

John Greening: You have a few notes, don't you, for *Ship of the Line*, that's an interesting one, for example, I read the one about the Battle of Trafalgar not realizing it was about Trafalgar. And you get quite a lot from it, and I deduced it was a sea battle of some kind and then you gave me the note to say that. It's always a tricky one, isn't it, whether to give that note or not, or yeah, I don't know, an epigraph or something like that?

Penny Boxall: I think increasingly I'm moving away from that actually. I feel the poem probably needs to work on its own terms for me.

John Greening: But people perhaps who don't read much poetry sometimes say, well, 'I would've liked some notes'. So I'm interested whether you revise much, are you one of these obsessive revisers or is it sort of there in one go?

Penny Boxall: I tend, for better or worse, to spend quite a long time actually creating the poem in the first instance, but then, either it works or it doesn't, and I've very rarely successfully salvaged a poem which doesn't have that resonance that I want in them. So it feels like, yeah, I can construct it and then it's either a goer or a dud.

John Greening: Are there a lot of casualties? Do you have...what sort of proportion?

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: Increasingly actually, yeah.

John Greening: And would you go back to something from five years ago or something and work on it, or are they done when they are?

Penny Boxall: I never have; maybe I should. I think it's just that the excitement and the interest that led me to put a poem together in the first place, if it's gone, then I feel the poem's gone with it. So I either try to capture that excitement in a poem, or yeah, it needs to go and it was more of an experience than something that I would want to record.

John Greening: And the issue of the 'I', do you use the first person a lot? And is it usually you?

Penny Boxall: Almost *never*, originally. I used to use 'we' quite a lot, but I felt very, very shy about using 'I', I think partly because I'd always been very wary of being an embarrassing teenage poet, which was something I was told, everyone went through a stage of being; and I think I was, but in a different way, a non-confessional way.

I've always been interested in voicelessness. I was quite late to speak and I think I've always been quite reserved, relatively reserved. So I think it started off as a way to circumnavigate that. If I wasn't writing in my own voice or anything that could be mistaken for my own voice, then it felt safer and also that I could explore a subject more thoroughly, keeping it at arm's length.

But I am playing with it much more now. Either through using versions of my own experience that I feel more comfortable presenting under an 'I' speaker because it's okay, it's art, it's artifice. I've finally let go of the fact, of the idea, that everything has to be directly drawn back to me.

And I also think it lends a lot more possibility to poems as well, this kind of tension between what we think we're reading and what we might actually be reading, that's good.

Writers Aloud

John Greening: So, *Who Goes There?*, twenty-nine poems, how does that collection differ or develop? Is it a sequence? Is it more experimental? It's a slimmer volume, isn't it?

Penny Boxall: I think it feels like it's a collection of voices rather than a collection of objects. In both there are objects and people, but *Who Goes There?* feels more masky and more full of character, I suppose. I felt like I was beginning to take a few more risks maybe, and again, using voices which have an element of truth but aren't factual. Blurring the lines, I suppose, between fact and fiction.

John Greening: The subject matter is always fascinating in your poems, again, that's a Larkin thing actually. They're always about something, something interesting, for example, there's one in *Who Goes There?* about stumbling on a film set in Oxford.

So again, they've all got this narrative hinterland haven't they, an accompanying story? I wonder whether you would say one of your aims is to shatter prejudices and stereotypes. So the poem, is it 'Work Box', where the fisherman turns embroiderer? That seemed to be a sort of characteristic interest, looking at things in an unexpected way.

Penny Boxall: Yeah. I don't know if it's an aim so much as an obsession! That's one way to slant the light off things in ways that you don't quite expect. I feel like it's one of those mirror mazes where you've got things that you don't expect to see periscoping towards you. That's what I like to do, redirecting the light, I think.

John Greening: There's a prose poem, 'Operation Mincemeat', is it? What do you think of the prose poem? Are you a prose poem enthusiast?

Penny Boxall: It's not something I've felt particularly confident with actually for much of my life, and actually in that poem, I didn't quite commit...didn't have the confidence to make it a pure prose poem. It sort

Writers Aloud

of indents as you go through, I was hedging my bets a bit there, I think. I admire a lot of them, but I don't know if I've...well, I haven't written very many. I think because I do love this...I love gaps in poems. So I feel a little bit panicked when I think, but where are the gaps going to be in this poem? But, yeah, it's not a form I've particularly used very much. But it felt like it was right for that poem because it was dealing with blurrings of fact and fiction and also the kind of ephemera of lives. So it felt like it needed to be a little bit more diary-like or letter-like somehow.

John Greening: Yes, then this wonderful more recent book *In Praise of Hands*, which I wish we could show people, but perhaps you could describe it to us and tell us a bit about the book *In Praise of Hands*, which the Ashmolean published?

Penny Boxall: Yeah, it's a collaboration between me and the woodblock artist Naoko Matsubara. She created this series of prints called *In Praise of Hands*, which she created over forty years and they each depict hands engaged in some activities – some are playing musical instruments, some are dancing, some are gardening – really beautifully. The whole project started with watching her baby son's hands and marvelling at them. And so it became quite a preoccupation for her. And in, I think 2018, she donated over a hundred prints to the Ashmolean, including this series.

And she likes to work with poets. So I believe that Robin Skelton had begun this project and...

John Greening: Canadian poet.

Penny Boxall: Yeah. And it wasn't finished. So the Ashmolean, knowing me, I'd worked there for a few years. So Clare Pollard, the keeper of the Japanese collections –

John Greening: – That's not Clare Pollard, the poet? –

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: No, it's not. No, but she, also Clare Pollard, she got in touch and asked if I'd like to have a go writing poems for this series. And I was really happy to do this because it's obviously *exactly* what I like to do. And I wanted to let the prints speak, I didn't want to be too prescriptive in the poems, so I went for often quite short poems, I probably went for clear visuals, or tried to, that complimented the images because I didn't want to send people in certain directions when I feel that the images are quite open often. Also I felt that I wanted to make them quite joyful poems, the prints *are* joyful. And I think that that was its own challenge in a way as well, you know, yeah.

John Greening: Yes, because your poems are not quite haiku-ish and they're not...they're closer to epigrams sometime, aren't they, or a sort of middle ground really. And rhyme is in there as well, isn't it? Which isn't so common in the other collections or am I wrong in saying that?

Penny Boxall: No, it's not, and it was just something that felt right for this sequence, because I suppose there's a kind of rhyme between the image and what's depicted and between the poem and the image. That's how they started to come out. And I just went with it really.

John Greening: So this was written during Coronavirus, or published during the Coronavirus?

Penny Boxall: I wrote the bulk of it in 2019, when I was at Merton, and then the project continued through 2020. And actually, quite movingly, Naoko said she wanted to create a woodcut to go with one of my poems as the last in the series. And I had lost my mother in 2020, so I wrote a poem for her, and Naoko created this beautiful woodcut. And so the sequence in the book is bookended by images of mothers and children, so it's created this really lovely arc.

John Greening: Wonderful. Would they work without the pictures? I'm wondering if in a future *Selected*, whether you'll be able to reprint them without the images. Would they work?

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: I hope they'd stand up. I think they're designed to go with the images. So I think there is this conversation between the two that would obviously be lost without the images.

John Greening: Yeah, tremendous book, just as a physical object, and the poems are glorious too. Someone ought to do an anthology of poems about hands because there're lots of great poems about hands, Ted Hughes did one. So forthcoming collections, other projects, tell us what's going on. We haven't even talked about your fiction. Tell us a bit about what's going on and things you've got in mind.

Penny Boxall: Well, in terms of poetry, I've, I would say, completed a new manuscript, which is to do, I think, with light and dark. And there is a sequence in that about the loss of my mother, which is again, as we were talking about, very different subject matter for me.

But it felt quite vital for me to do that in lots of ways. So I think the collection is about loss in various ways, it's about objects missing, it's about missing people, and so the way I've structured it is to move from light to dark, in terms of how much light there is in the poems. I hope it's not as bleak as it sounds. I think there is hope in it as well.

I've also been working on a project I'm calling, *A Book of Moss*. Which is about a Victorian bryologist, a moss and lichen expert called Richard Spruce, brilliantly! He was real; he was from Yorkshire and in the 1850s he went to South America and spent fifteen years there, at various points spending time with Alfred Russel Wallace and Bates. He was collecting a variety of plants for subscribers, but also maintained this lifelong love of moss. So the collection, it's a sort of narrative in poems. They're quite, I think, impressionistic; I've use physical spacing on the page in a very different way from what I've done normally.

And I think really it's about loneliness and obsession and the way that life can be constructed in the cracks, much as moss comes up in the cracks.

Writers Aloud

So each poem is named after a different British moss of which there are *many* hundreds, and which all have fabulous names like Goblins Gold and Portuguese Feather Moss and Bird's Foot Wing Moss, and you know, every permutation. And it's sort of a Victorian specimen book, but it's also a life. So that's been great fun to do.

John Greening: Absolutely. I don't think anyone's done moss before. There's a line in Alexander Pope, when he says, there are many types of men as moss, in the little footnote, it gives the 385 types of moss or whatever!

Penny Boxall: Yeah.

John Greening: I remember that for some reason! So children's fiction is something that's becoming more and more important to you?

Penny Boxall: Yeah, it was just wanting to try and see if I *could* actually, because before I started writing children's fiction I hadn't done anything longer than a poem and my poems tend to be quite short anyway.

I see them as little distilled images and I'm now seeing children's fiction as a kind of zoetrope of these images strung together and creating movement and hopefully a plot, although that's something that I struggle with quite a lot. So the one I'm working on at the moment: it's set in the eighteenth century based at Sir John Soane's Museum in London to start off with, and then it goes on a Grand Tour throughout France and Italy, borrowing from Sterne.

And really it's a way of drawing together these preoccupations and interests I have: history, objects, travel, but stringing them into something that I hope might be of interest to children, but it's good fun and a completely different kind of writing for me.

John Greening: So we've talked a lot about your writing. What about when you're not writing? What are your interests that take you away from that?

Writers Aloud

Penny Boxall: Walking. I do a lot of walking in the moors and the dales.

John Greening: Which generates poetry, I imagine?

Penny Boxall: Yeah, you always have to have your phone with you so you can jot anything down.

And music, I play violin and piano, and I love to sing, although that hasn't happened very much recently, but I like to fill my time with those sort of things I think. Really the pastimes of a Victorian lady! So yeah, maybe I should try and do something contemporary at some point.

John Greening: Looking to the future with your writing, what other things are there you want to get into your work or what other things are there you want to try to get into, drama for example, or translation, or things like that?

Penny Boxall: Yeah. Well, I'd like to try some translation. I've been trying to learn some Italian, which I enjoy very much, having never really done anything with languages beyond GCSE French, which went okay, but I don't use it. I'm enjoying seeing how grammar works, it's not something I've ever looked at before, so it's really quite interesting to me.

And yeah, I'm starting to think, *ooh, maybe I could use this in writing?* Something I'm going to do, hopefully with Naoko, is produce some new versions of the Man'yōshū, which I think are eighth century...a collection of 1400 poems, I think.

John Greening: Good lord!

Penny Boxall: And she's chosen twelve to illustrate, so I think that's something we're going to try to do.

I'll be doing, very much versions, not knowing any Japanese. Yeah, I think

Writers Aloud

that would be something I'd like to try, but really *anything*, I'd love to give it a go, because having been dabbling in children's fiction, I've realised actually writing is so much wider than I have always considered it to be. So it's quite invigorating in some ways.

John Greening: If a young person came to you wanting advice as a poet, is there any advice you'd give them?

Penny Boxall: Well, I heard some good advice recently from the children's writer, Katherine Rundell, who said, bad writing can be made into good writing, but *no* writing remains *no* writing.

And I thought, *yeah, just do it*. And that's something I'm trying to apply to my own practice as well, those days when you just think *I can't do it*. Actually, if you write anything, then it's going to have the potential to become something you are happy with, whereas, if you don't write anything at all, then it won't do that. Yeah. So I think that's probably stellar advice for everyone really.

John Greening: And if another young person came up to you and perhaps after a reading and said, as someone did to me perhaps on more than one occasion, said, 'What is poetry'? It's a horrible question, isn't it? What's your answer? I didn't quite know what to say when I was asked that.

Penny Boxall: I'd say it's a way of looking closely, it's quite a broad definition, but I think that might be just about as close as I can get. It's a way of focusing through words on images of various sorts, I'd say.

John Greening: Penny Boxall, thank you so much for talking so eloquently about your work. It's been great fun.

Penny Boxall: Thank you.

Writers Aloud

RLF: That was Penny Boxall in conversation with John Greening. You can find out more about Penny on her website at pennyboxall.wordpress.com. And that concludes episode 403, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 404 in our 'Best Writing Advice' series, RLF writers share the practical tips that they themselves have found most useful.

We hope you'll join us.

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.

Thanks for listening.