

Writers Aloud

Episode 404

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 404 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in another instalment of our 'Best Writing Advice' series, RLF writers share the tips they found most useful in helping them to hone their craft.

From advice on subject-matter choice and picking writing companions, to the tricky business of how to end lines well in poems.

Ann Morgan: These days, learning to write is big business, from evening classes to PhDs, there is almost no end to the kind of courses you can spend money on to learn the craft of putting words on the page. But what advice is *really* valuable when you are trying to make a career out of telling stories? In this episode of *Writers Aloud*, we talk to Royal Literary Fund Fellows about the advice that has been truly transformational for their writing process.

For Zoë Marriott tips from some of writing's most famous names have been invaluable in helping her get comfortable with discomfort when she's wrestling with a draft.

Zoë Marriott: There's two pieces that I tend to go back to, and the first one is a quote from the Young Adult novelist Tamora Pierce's website, and I don't know if she originated this or if it came from somewhere else and it was, 'dare to be stupid'; what that means to me is that sometimes you have

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to be willing to make mistakes, and that's something that is often said, but by that I don't mean that you should go into situations that stretch you artistically and assume that you'll be triumphant.

I think sometimes you have to do things that will make you uncomfortable, that are difficult, in the full knowledge that you can fail: *this may be a failing experiment, I might not get anywhere with this* — because sometimes you have to fail to learn how to get it right and sometimes you have to fail three times in a row before you get it right, and I tend to think that this is why I like to write longhand, because when I finish, you know, five pages of longhand, I'm looking at a page full of scribbling mistakes. And I've probably got it horribly wrong but there may be four or five paragraphs in there which are so right that I can take them and rebuild the whole thing around it.

So to me that is my motto, to sit down and just 'dare to be stupid' on the page and dare to make mistakes and get things wrong because it will teach you how to get things right. The other thing that I love to remind myself of is Gene Wolfe's famous advice to Neil Gaiman, which is: *You never learn how to write a book; you only learn how to write the book you're writing.*

It's of a piece with the first quote as well, because I think that you have to embrace uncertainty as a writer. And if you're feeling too comfortable, that's probably a sign of something wrong. You are always having to make up the next complex personality, the next plot twist, the next way of looking at the world, the next theme, and I think that part of that is finding new ways to write those things, the most effective ways, even if that makes you very uncomfortable, even if you have to fail and write a draft and throw the draft out and start again. Because if you're not willing to find new ways to create these things, then you can stultify and you just write the same thing over and over again.

So for me, those are the guiding mottos: 'Dare to be stupid'; and 'Accept

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that you will never learn how to write a book'. Although it may sound depressing, for me that that is a very inspiring mental viewpoint to have.

Ann Morgan: Penny Hancock has also found advice from famous writers inspiring. In particular, Stephen King's book *On Writing* has proved a very useful tool in helping her develop the stamina needed to keep putting words on the page.

Penny Hancock: The best tip that I ever read...I used to read quite a lot of books about the writing craft, and my favourite one is *On Writing*, by Stephen King, and the reason I love that book is because he's so business-like about the whole process of writing, he doesn't see it as a flighty, airy-fairy thing, he sees it as a job.

And he makes that very clear throughout the book and the piece of advice that really helped me when I was writing *Tideline*, my first novel, was that you can't wait for the muse to come to you, you have to sit down and write every day, and you have to treat it as a job and you have to treat it as work.

And if you do that, eventually the muse *will* come to you. The muse *won't* come if you wait for the muse before you write, if you sit...you have to write first. And that was really, really helpful. So, but what it means is you do maybe spend a lot of time writing stuff that won't ever see the light of day.

But unless you do that, you don't get to the point where you do get those nuggets that actually really, really earn their place. So I think that's the most practical and important piece of advice I've ever read in any of the books about character, structure, plot, whatever. There's all kinds of things about that, but in the end, it's a job. You have to sit down and do it and keep on doing it until you get there.

Ann Morgan: But for Hancock, staying power is only part of the equation.

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Penny Hancock: I think the other piece of advice that I would mention is that if you're really, really stuck – and it sounds completely counter to what I've just said – if you're *really* stuck, going for a walk, going for a run, going for a swim, doing some gardening, doing something that isn't writing often will spark off the idea that you are looking for.

So getting away from the desk and doing something completely different can sometimes actually enable your mind to be more receptive to ideas, but that should never be at the expense of spending that time at the desk writing. So it's that combination of the two things: making yourself sit down and write every single day, but also doing something completely relaxing and enabling your mind to be receptive to ideas.

I think those are probably the two pieces of advice I would want to pass on to anybody who is struggling with their writing.

Ann Morgan: Writing workshops can often be a source of great insight into the creative process. Jackie Wills certainly found this to be the case. When she attended a number of sessions with poet Matthew Sweeney, she picked up many tips that years later have stood her in good stead.

Jackie Wills: He introduced me and the other people in the workshop group to an enormous number of amazing poets and to the idea of the craft of writing. Essentially what he said to us was, you have to chase an image into a corner and let it fight its way out, and so what I think is so interesting about that advice is that obviously it is very much about the craft because it's not about the initial inspiration.

It's not about the first draft you do when you're sitting down to write, when you're writing freely and the images and ideas and words and phrases are surfacing. It's all about the really hard graft that goes in when you go back to that initial writing and when you're, I suppose, interrogating yourself, but in the way he put that advice, is making it a really active struggle, which of course it is.

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But he's showing the fact that the image has got to be vibrant and alive and determined to be present, and he's showing that you as the writer have got to be actively engaged with that image in a combative way, which I think is very interesting because it takes away this idea that it's a placid, peaceful, whimsical pursuit and makes it something that is actually very urgent and vital and important.

I think that has really always stuck with me, that there is absolutely no point in writing whimsy. I hope I never have, but I certainly would never consciously want to. I would always want a poem to need to be written and to have earned its right to be in the world. Now, obviously that's not possible, not everything you write can be good and can be that urgent, but I think if you keep that in mind, you're on the right track.

Ann Morgan: Sweeney was not afraid of getting into the nuts and bolts of writing. Indeed, Wills still often applies his approach to line endings when she's working on a poem.

Jackie Wills: Something I'm always asked is, *Well how do you end a line? What's a line ending in poetry?* And there's many theories about it, but one of the great things that Matthew said to me was, 'If you end on a verb, the reader has to carry on because the verb is forcing the eye to the next line.' And I thought that was really useful, and I've used that a lot, not slavishly, but it's a darn sight more interesting than ending on 'an' or 'the' or 'but'. So again, it's quite a simple piece of advice and if in doubt, that's what I would do. And then think, *Oh, well maybe there's a different ending I can use.* The other fantastic thing he said again about line endings, was the idea of when you are reading aloud your draft, the natural pause for breath is also a place where you can end a line.

So for me the most valuable advice from those very, very early workshops is all about craft. I think for many people the inspiration can be there, you can find that, you can find anything to write about, but I think it's always to remember that it's a struggle, but it's also *technical* and there are tricks of the trade that you can learn and pass on.

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Ann Morgan: A writing workshop was similarly transformative for Ray French, even if the initial feedback he received from Bernice Rubens left a little to be desired.

Ray French: I submitted something which I was really quite pleased with, and which went on to be published in my first book of short stories, but in my one-to-one session with Bernice Rubens, she pretty much tore it apart. She said ‘Well, obviously you can write, but I’ve got no idea what you’re trying to do here, this is all over the place!’ It wasn’t a good start and naturally we disagreed, but then she said, ‘Let’s move this on. I think you’re not getting at the heart of what you want to say. I don’t know what it is you want to say, but it needs to come out more strongly. So I want you to do this: I want you to list for me your five passions or obsessions, whatever they are. You can do it in five minutes; you might take half an hour, but go away and do *that*, come back and show them to me and then we’ll take it from there.’ So that’s what I did. I can’t actually remember now what exactly they were, but I know for sure that one was father / son, another was, belonging: in other words, did I belong in this country or did I belong in Ireland? And another was music.

So there were some very concrete ones and there were some very abstract ones. So I took this list back to Bernice and she circled them and said, ‘Well, this one can tie in with this one, this one has a relationship with this one.’

And the advice she then gave me, I still think is absolutely brilliant, she said, ‘If you write stories or a novel with two of these things in, very prominently, then you’ll be really getting somewhere. If you write something with three of them in, you’re flying. If you’re writing something with four or even five in, you’re probably being over-indulgent and you’ll need editing.’

A couple of years ago, I looked back over some of the things I’d written and I thought about what Bernice had said, and I did feel that all the

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things that I'd written which I still felt pleased with, I felt, *Yeah, there are two or three of my favourite passions or obsessions in those things.*

Ann Morgan: This approach was so transformative for French that he continues to offer it to students today.

Ray French: Whenever I teach an Arvon Foundation course, on the first evening I ask my students to do the same thing, and it's interesting how useful they find that, and how many subjects or themes come up time and time again: family, love, music, have proved to be three very popular ones. And once they get that in their heads, it helps their focus I think, just as it's helped me to focus.

Why are you writing this? Are you wanting to be clever? Are you wanting to be writing a particular writer that you admire? Or are you writing about something that *really* is important to you? And I think if it's important to *you*, if you're doing it correctly, it will become important to the reader. Because that's what readers want, they want to read about something that matters to them.

Ann Morgan: Yet it can often be the conversations that take place outside the workshop room that have the greatest impact. Nigel Cliff found this to be the case when he fell into conversation with the son of one of his heroes.

Nigel Cliff: I was about thirty and in LA studying on an intensive professional screenwriting course, which actually, to be honest, was neither really very intensive, nor especially professional: the teacher spent most of the time dropping names, every so often delivering a pearl of wisdom that could have been had much more cheaply by reading the introduction to his book.

But between trips to Vegas and the beach, I did meet up with Tom Sturges, the son of the great movie director, Preston Sturges, he's a great

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hero of mine. A couple of years earlier, I'd written a piece for *The Times* on the centenary of his father's birth. And though it turned out not to be wildly accurate, Tom had gotten hold of my phone number and called to thank me.

We went for burgers in a roadside diner. I remember I was so engrossed, I started eating the wrapping paper at one point. And he passed on his father's advice to would-be writers: find the craziest, most unlikely story you've ever heard, it doesn't matter where, steal it if you have to, and write it with such conviction that it feels inevitable.

It's kind of obvious, but it made me really think about just how outrageous and far-fetched many of our most familiar stories are. We're always looking for the unexpected, the dangerous, the unconscionable or inconceivable that forces us to go further in search of a surprising truth about our lives. But whether you're writing social realism or fantasy, whether you're looking at the big picture or the attention you pay to each detail, I think it's something to keep in mind, and certainly encouraged me to think more boldly and push more deeply.

Ann Morgan: Throwaway comments can often have a lasting effect. Mahendra Solanki found this to be the case when he fell into conversation with his publisher, the poet, John Lucas.

Mahendra Solanki: He had a friend, Matt Simpson the poet in Liverpool, and he told me the story of how they would exchange poems regularly and as you do with other writers, as well, and I remember interviewing him for a journal, for an article that I was putting together, an interview. And I asked him the question and it was advice that I took very much to heart myself. I said: 'What's the best bit of advice you can give to a new writer?' And he said: 'Trusting your fellow writer who you can trust to kick the shit out of you for writing badly!'

Ann Morgan: Industry professionals by no means have the monopoly

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on good advice. Tim Pears found that when he finally plucked up the courage to show his work to a friend, the response had a lasting effect on how he writes.

Tim Pears: 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 slip, suggesting the writer seek a different outlet for his creativity. But then eventually I *did* show a short story to someone, a friend called Sean Hand, and I did get some useful advice. The story was about a woman whose husband, a retired history teacher, dies of a heart attack while gardening.

Now, I had done conscientious research consulting medical textbooks in order to describe what happens in the poor man's body at the moment of cardiac catastrophe in forensic detail. And Sean said to me, 'Tim, how about if you make the man a retired doctor, so then even if you don't make it explicit, we might imagine that as he suffers what you describe in such gory detail, he will know what is happening to him?'

What terrible knowledge. Well, this advice opened up fiction for me: layers of irony and meaning a writer and a reader might explore in their collaboration. For this advice, I remain forever in my friend Sean's debt.

Ann Morgan: For Paula Byrne some of the most useful writing tips have focused on reading.

Paula Byrne: I think the best advice I've really been given is to read more, and in fact, this is advice that Jane Austen gave to her niece. She said, 'I wish as a young girl I'd read more and written less', which I think is *really* fascinating. Read, read, read, read everything you can get your hands on, it just makes you a better writer. Read aloud. So somebody said to me, one of my tutors at university said, 'It's really important to read your essays aloud because you really get the rhythm of the sentences and you get the sense of it.'

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So I'm a great believer in reading aloud, I think it helps us all as writers. And then you can start...you know, you really get sense of, here's a long sentence and a short sentence and a long sentence and then you read it aloud, and, that doesn't make sense at all and it's really the most helpful advice, is reading your own work aloud.

Ann Morgan: But Byrne is clear that reading should by no means be limited to the genre you hope to write.

Paula Byrne: I'm a very eclectic person in terms of, like, what I listen to musically and also in terms of what I read. I have four or five books on the go. And it might be a poetry book, it might be a thriller, it might be biography and a novel.

I'm really a believer in reading all sorts of different genres; I'm not somebody who just reads, you know, a particular genre. So I think just the variety is really important and it really helps us as writers knowing what we like and what we don't like, as well.

Ann Morgan: Perhaps like books themselves, the value of advice about the craft of putting words on the page very much comes down to the taste of the writer.

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast produced by the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this episode were Zoë Marriott, Penny Hancock, Jackie Wills, Ray French, Nigel Cliff, Mahendra Solanki, Tim Pears, and Paula Byrne. You can find out more information about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

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RLF outro: And that concludes episode 404, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 405, Andrew Greig speaks with Doug Johnstone about music leading

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to poetry, Himalayan climbing, and the importance of emotion in his writing. We hope you'll join us.

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