

Writers Aloud

Episode 407

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 407 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in 'Three Little Things', the writer Ann Morgan and our host Julia Copus speak about three objects that have a special significance in Ann's writing life and Ann passes on three of her top writing tips.

Julia Copus: Welcome to episode five of the *Writers Aloud*, 'Three Little Things' podcast from the Royal Literary Fund, in which we talk with writers about their work and writing life through the medium of three objects that have particular significance to them, and then we cajole them into offering up three bits of advice that might be a help to you in your own writing journey.

Today's guest is novelist, nonfiction writer and editor Ann Morgan. Ann is based on the coast in Folkestone in the UK. In 2012 she set herself the Herculean task of reading a book from every country in the world in the space of a single year. And she recorded her efforts in her hugely popular blog, ayearofreadingtheworld.com.

Not surprisingly, the project caught the imagination of readers from all corners of the globe. It led to widespread media coverage and a TED Talk that has already had well over 1.8 million views. Now luckily for us, the project culminated in the nonfiction book that we'll be discussing today, *Reading the World: How I Read a Book From Every Country*.

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Ann continues to blog, write, and speak about international literature, as well as building a career as a novelist. Her debut novel, *Beside Myself*, has been, appropriately enough, translated into eight languages and been optioned for TV. Her second novel, *Crossing Over*, was published as an Audible Exclusive in 2019.

Ann, I am so excited to have you as a guest today. Your commitment and your passion for this subject is abundantly clear, and I find it pretty breathtaking, actually, that the first edition of *Reading the World* appeared in print just three years after you'd set yourself the task of reading a book from every country in the world.

So that includes: the reading, the writing of the book, and its publication, and now there's a new edition coming out. So clearly there's something in all of this that has struck a chord with readers. Why do you think it has resonated so deeply?

Ann Morgan: Well thank you very much first of all, Julia. Yeah, it's rather unexpected for me because, when I started the project to read a book from every country in the world in a year, it was a very naïve personal project.

I honestly didn't envisage that it would lead to a book and it just didn't occur to me that this had the makings of a book. And it was only about four months into the quest when I was talking to the literary editor of the *Scotsman*, who was writing an article about it connected to World Book Day and he said, 'Oh, surely you are going to do a book about this?'

And I thought, *Oh, well perhaps I am*. So that was a bit of a surprise. I think the whole thing was a surprise as well, because I had no idea when I started it whether anyone would be interested. I had started a blog in the hopes that people would give me suggestions and help me along the way, but I really had no idea if anyone would care. And what was quite amazing was how quickly people all over the planet became involved in it and went far beyond what I had imagined they would do, sending me books and helping translate things for me, and all kinds of things.

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I think what it was, I think there were two things: I think one thing was people respond really well to genuine curiosity and the admission that you don't know something. And that's not a complacent, *Oh, I don't know. I don't care*, but, *Oh, I've discovered I don't know this and I'd like to find out more and I'm going to approach this with a real openness*. People seem really to warm to that.

And I think also another thing is that the human impulse to share stories is universal. It's a really joyful thing that connects us across all kinds of divides. And so people around the planet were enthused at the idea of this eccentric person in London exploring the world's stories and keen to share their view, and share their nation's stories. So it was *that* – I think those two things – were what captured people's imagination initially. And then it's developed from there really.

Julia Copus: Isn't that great that you can say, 'from all over the planet'?

Ann Morgan: It's very sweet actually, I get messages still almost every day from people all over the place. I had an email a few weeks ago from someone living in the foothills of the Himalayas. And they were I think in their early mid-twenties, and they said, 'Oh, you'll never know the impact you had on a generation coming to reading in the 2010s'. And I just thought that's pretty lovely, you know, to have –

Julia Copus: – that's about the best thing you could hear really, isn't it? –

Ann Morgan: – it's pretty lovely, yeah. Also what's been special as well is the number of writers or relations or friends of writers who have featured in the project, who've been in touch over the years, and shared personal stories and shared their enthusiasm about having their work included.

Julia Copus: I think what's particularly lovely about *your* story is exactly what you've said about people responding to that admission; to not knowing. There's so much that every single one of us doesn't know, and to

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be open about that...there's something very attractive about that, I think it's a lovely thing that has propelled your project onwards.

Ann Morgan: Thank you, yeah, I think actually we are educated not to admit that we don't know things. Something that I've worked on developing is some reading workshops about different approaches to reading unfamiliar texts or texts from outside traditions that you know, and essentially, I've called them the 'Incomprehension Workshops'. And what they do is they turn the idea of the comprehension exercise on its head.

So, you know, at school we're always given those texts, those extracts of texts where you're asked those specific questions, you know: *What does this word mean? Rewrite this sentence in other words. Explain what's going on here.* And obviously it teaches lots of useful skills, but it carries the implication that there's one ideal reading of a text.

Julia Copus: Yes, and your answer is either wrong or right.

Ann Morgan: Exactly, and also that if you can't explain everything in a text, you're failing.

And actually, if you're going to read widely, no one, not even the most sort of erudite expert in a particular region's literature can be an expert in *all* literatures. And so there're going to be things you don't know and having to encounter that and admit it and really explore it can be very fruitful I think. But it's not something that we are often encouraged to embrace.

Julia Copus: No. And the Anglophone publishing world does seem, traditionally, very narrow in its focus. That's not great as you say in the book because it's the only window that English-speaking readers have onto the rest of the literary world.

So I'd say lots of people know about, for instance, the Penguin Classic translations. I was thinking about this, they're mainly from Russia and

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France. Yeah. I'm thinking of books like *Madam Bovary* or *Crime and Punishment*, for instance. But most of us don't really know much beyond that. So, just very briefly, because this isn't really my main question, but was it roughly the same for you when you started out on your quest?

Ann Morgan: Very much so. Yeah, the reason that I started the quest was because I realized there was this huge blind spot in my reading that pretty much everything I read was written originally in English, and other than a few classic translations, I really didn't have anything to do with most of the world's stories, and that seemed crazy for someone who wanted to be a writer and who imagined themselves to be a cosmopolitan, cultured sort of person.

So yeah, very much so, and that was the reason for doing the quest was to explore beyond those familiar bulwarks of world literature that we all know, but to try and see what was out there and see what voices I could access, and what the world really had to offer.

Julia Copus: It's interesting because I think it's different in the poetry world, which seems to be in a much healthier state translation-wise. You know, there's the magazine, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, for instance, edited by Clare Pollard at the moment. [Clare has since passed the editorship on.] But anyway, obviously today we can only dip our toes in the waters of this fascinating subject.

So, ten years have passed since you started out on this project. And I imagine it must have been both exciting and rewarding for you, correct me if I'm wrong, to see the increasing access to literature from many other parts of the world that has happened over that decade. What are the things that surprised or enlightened you in your quest, most of all, or that just changed your way of thinking?

Ann Morgan: Well, first of all, yes, it is great to see how much more access there is to literatures from around the world. And it's been

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exciting to see as well that translated fictional sales continue to grow even as English language literary fiction sales are dropping. So that's, in terms of translated fiction, that's a real boon; that brings with it its own challenges, and I think this is something that I discovered during my quest, maybe one of the many things that struck me, was there is what I call the authenticity trap where readers who are ambitious to read more widely will tell you that they want something that captures the spirit of a place or that feels authentic.

And that comes from a very good place, a real desire to explore and to discover. But the problem is, of course, that what *feels* authentic to the average English language reader will be a sort of rehashing of images and tropes and stereotypes that we are already familiar with that have been broadcast at us by the Western media.

And the same thing is happening in publishing often, in that when nationality is used as a marketing tool, national literatures become a construct of Western publishers, if you're not careful. So last year someone tweeted with all the book covers of recent translations from Japan and recent novels set in Japan and they all had the Japanese flag worked into the design.

And the implication was, *If you like Japanese literature, you'll like this book* as though Japanese literature is one brand, so it's all like Haruki Murakami. And so it's that trying to push beyond that well-meaning but slightly wrong-headed desire for authenticity. So I think that's something that I try to adhere to, is not looking for what feels right to *me*, but what actually is out there and that's easier said than done.

Julia Copus: So can you explain a bit more about that, is it the separation, the sort of compartmentalization that concerns you?

Ann Morgan: Well, the problem is that *if* the idea takes root, that all of a nation's literature reads like a particular writer, and usually it's when a

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particular writer has done very well, been a bestseller in English, publishers look for similar works that they can market and sell and complement that work with, you'll get someone who's a big name and the problem is that, while there are plenty of Japanese writers who write literature that's comparable, there are plenty of other writers who don't write anything like that. And the chances of those writers coming through into English get diminished when Japanese literature is seen to be a particular thing.

Publishers will be less keen to take a risk on it. And that's significant, not only because it means our access to Japanese literature is limited, but it also means that those writers's chances of success are hugely damaged because English is this extraordinary gateway language, because it is the most published language in the world, and because it is the language that has by far and away the largest number of speakers, when you include second-language speakers. Books that come into English or are written in English have far more global reach than those written in any other language. And far more chances of being translated into other languages. So publishers in the English-speaking world have a huge influence on, what is seen as a particular nation's literature.

Julia Copus: Yeah. I see. But in general, the shortage in the availability of translations has improved.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely.

Julia Copus: I mean, I mentioned that I have a couple of Fitzcarraldo editions, which probably two years ago I didn't know about, I'm not sure how long they've been going, but they're a big one aren't they?

Ann Morgan: Yeah, they've done really well. I think it was about 2015 they started and within the first few years they'd published two soon-to-be Nobel laureates. So they really hit the ground running. And that's the thing, publishers can play a huge part in amplifying really important voices, and it's often the small presses that are doing the heavy lifting with that because they will take risks.

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Julia Copus: Yeah. So there's Olga, I don't know how to pronounce her name?

Ann Morgan: Tokarczuk, absolutely. She's great and Svetlana Alexievich yeah.

Julia Copus: And are you optimistic that that trend will continue?

Ann Morgan: I hope so. There is certainly much more openness to reading more widely and it's discussed much more widely than it was. When I started my quest the main forum for talking about reading world literature was academia really.

And that has changed significantly, which is great to see. There are still a lot of challenges around who gets translated, and how translators are treated. The fact that today, even despite great efforts by campaigns like Women in Translation, seventy percent of works translated into English are written by men, there's a huge disparity there.

And there's a lot of work to be done about how translators are credited and how we think about translation and also I think how we talk about it. We don't really have the language as reviewers to review translations well, and that's something we need to develop, because people don't really know how to talk about reading a book by someone who didn't actually write the words in the book you're reading.

Julia Copus: So you're sort of, you're reviewing two authors.

Ann Morgan: Exactly, and the problem of well how do you do that if you can't read the original language? I think you can, I think there are ways of doing it, but it requires very careful thought.

Julia Copus: Interesting. Yeah. Okay. Well, would you like to tell us now what your first object is? Because I think it might shed a bit of light on

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your own approach to writing and what is and isn't possible to put into a literary work.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, so this is a tile that I picked up in an architectural salvage shop in Barcelona, I think, although it may have been Valencia, but I think it was Barcelona. And I don't know exactly how old it is, but it depicts the windmill scene from *Don Quixote* and it has Don Quixote on his horse and Sancho Panza down on the ground and a windmill in the distance. And it's a scene where he decides the windmills are giants and he's going to fight them.

It's such a ridiculous scene when you think about it in the cold light of day. You know, it's such a kind of preposterous idea and yet it's part of one of the great works of European literature. And it's a wonderful scene actually, full of the kind of whimsy and joy in story that makes that work so special. And for me it's a reminder that you can put anything into a book and make anything work in a story, if you do it well and approach it in the right way.

Julia Copus: Yeah. And it's even I suppose, led to a phrase in English, tilting.

Ann Morgan: Tilting at windmills, exactly yeah, absolutely. So it's changed our language despite being such a crazy idea really.

Julia Copus: Yeah. So we could call this your first piece of advice, writing advice, which you've snuck in early or maybe it's an added bonus.

Ann Morgan: Bonus. Yeah, I think so. Absolutely.

Julia Copus: Even better. And I understand you attended what you call a translation duel, that's based on this windmill scene depicted on the tile. That sounds intriguing. So did the duel shed any light on the translating process or was it just a bit of fun?

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Ann Morgan: Yeah, absolutely. Translation duels are fascinating, if you ever get the chance to go to one. The way they work is two or more translators are given the same passage, often from a well-known text.

And in this case it was the windmill scene, and they each independently produce their translation of the scene and then in the event they bring their translations together and compare notes and explore why they made certain choices and challenge one another on the decisions that they've made.

Julia Copus: I think that's the interesting bit. I remember I did do something like this myself for the Poetry Society years ago. I love the idea of challenging each other and trying to sort of work out which is a better translation.

Ann Morgan: Yes, exactly. And what was fascinating in this particular case was, the translations were broadly very similar in what they'd done, however, there was one particular disparity, which was that one translator had put that the windmills were in the same field, and the other had put that they were in the neighbouring field. And when this came up, they went back to look at the original text and it became clear that in the Spanish, it wasn't stated.

So what they had both done was they had imagined the scene and written what they saw, rather than translating literally word for word what was in the Spanish. And that made me realize, you know, the mechanisms of translation and also writing that you aren't working word by word, really. You are working from an image, from a vision and trying to convey that in language.

Julia Copus: And also that's how we read. I mean, we fill in the gaps.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely, yeah. Wolfgang Iser talks about filling in gaps in reading, and that's something with *Reading the World* that I've had to

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think about carefully because the gaps that we fill in when we are reading literature from traditions that are unfamiliar to us, sometimes we fill them in with the wrong things or quite irrelevant things because we don't have the material to hand, the cultural capital, to fill in the expected gaps in the way. So you can get some quite unusual readings, particularly when you are reading more widely.

Julia Copus: Now, you are very interesting in your book on the subject of self-publishing and of course this is a generalisation, but there tends to be, I think, a bit of a snobbish attitude towards the whole idea of self-publishing among traditionally published authors in the Anglophone world. And I think it's because they feel they've had to go through a process of selection, that simply isn't there when you self-publish.

But it was a real eye-opener for me to read about what you had to say on this subject in the book about the usefulness of self-publishing, for instance, in parts of the world where writers simply don't have access to more conventional ways of publishing. Could you tell us a bit about this?

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Well, the fact is that there's quite a grand tradition of self-publishing. Many of the big names of literature have self-published at some point. Including British writers like Virginia Woolf. But further a field, particularly in places like the Caribbean where distribution is very difficult, where the mechanics of printing books and transporting them from place to place can be very difficult, it's simply not practical for writers to be published locally or in places where there are restrictions on writing or you have to get government permission for certain kinds of writing.

Julia Copus: Yeah. You mention Derek Walcott, don't you, in the book?

Ann Morgan: Exactly, yeah. Derek Walcott self-published. I think he used some money from his mother, to produce his first book. So for some people it's the only route or the one of the few routes to getting your work out there and there is a very different attitude to it.

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It's interesting as well when you start to read widely, because there are a lot of self-publishing companies, particularly these days, that produce books that you wouldn't necessarily be able to tell the difference between them and commercial trade publishers's output often, the quality is very good, and when you get to parts of the world where you don't know a great deal about the publishing industry, you can't often tell whether a publisher there is a self-publishing house, or if it's a more traditional house. And sometimes the distinction's quite blurry. So I think our idea of self-publishing is certainly not universal.

It's also been complicated in recent years by hybrid models and publishers like Unbound, for example, which have very different models of funding books. And I think that's a good thing. There are some challenges to it and there are issues with quality control in some cases, I think, but I think it does allow for a much more diverse spread of storytelling to come through than can often come through traditional houses.

Julia Copus: And of course Derek Walcott, who we mentioned just now, became a Nobel laureate. Yes.

Ann Morgan: Exactly. Yeah.

Julia Copus: Yeah. But it's a reminder that there are different ways of getting excellent work out there to readers. And also all sorts of ways of championing that work once it is out in the world. Which is a sort of tenuous link to the second object you've chosen to share with us, a rather lovely looking trophy in the shape of a giant pen nib. So tell us about the trophy and why you've chosen it?

Ann Morgan: Yes. Well, this was a participant's trophy. It wasn't an award for anything. It was simply for turning up, that I got for being involved in the Brahmaputra Literary Festival in Guwahati in Assam. That was a whole undertaking to get there because my flight was badly delayed and I ended up spending two days in an airport hotel and then finally having

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to book this last-minute multi-hop dash across the world to get there in time for the main events.

It took me about twenty-four hours going via Cairo and Kuwait and Hyderabad, and I finally got there. I only ended up spending about thirty-six hours in Guwahati in total, *but* it was *totally* worth the effort because I was amazed when I arrived to find this multimillion-person city absolutely festooned with posters for this festival, with banners across road bridges.

It was quite surreal actually seeing my face on posters and the faces of many of the other writers who were taking part, all over the city.

Julia Copus: So they actually commissioned artworks that featured...

Ann Morgan: Yes, that's right. They commissioned...so there was this giant cube, which had the photos of a number of us on in the centre of the festival site and this wall of 'great writers,' they said, and they'd put our pictures up and all these different installations.

Julia Copus: That's so lovely because I think one thing we are not that good at doing, certainly in England, and I do think it's slightly different in Wales, Ireland and Scotland actually, but I think England is particularly bad at making writers feel valued.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely. Well, that was the thing because it was quite funny because there were lots of school groups coming to this festival and they would run after you saying — 'Oh, mum, mum, selfie, selfie, can I take a selfie?' And they'd take a selfie and then the effect was slightly spoilt by the fact that they would then say 'What is your name, please?'

But I said to the director of the festival, 'This is amazing, this effort you've gone to, why have you gone to so much trouble?' And what he said will always stay with me I think, he said: 'If these children see writers being

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glorified and people running from tent to tent to say literature is their lifeblood and that this is a really special thing, they will know that writers are important for a civilized society and that's why we do this.'

Julia Copus: How amazing.

Ann Morgan: And I just thought that was really powerful and really made me think about how important it is to champion that.

Julia Copus: We could definitely take a leaf out of that book, yeah. Yeah. Wow. So taking a bit of a step back, in thinking about what it even means to come from or belong to this country or that, and thinking about the subject from the perspective of individual writers, as you do in your book, I was fascinated by an actually rather tragic story that you tell about a writer called Aglaja Veteranyi.

Now she was Romanian by birth, but she eventually settled with her relatives in Switzerland, from a really interesting family, and you can fill in the gaps here, but what is it, do you think that Veteranyi's personal story can tell us about the importance of place and also of language when it comes to a writer's sense of identity?

Ann Morgan: Yeah, so Aglaja Veteranyi, she wrote one novel that was published in her lifetime, which was called *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*, an unusual title, but it was strongly autobiographical and drew on the fact that she as a child had travelled Europe with her circus family.

Julia Copus: So she came from a family of circus performance.

Ann Morgan: That's right. Yeah. And she had no real formal education; she was illiterate until the age of seventeen when she settled in Switzerland. And she taught herself to read and write in German, which was, I can't remember how many languages she spoke, but it certainly wasn't her first, second, or even probably third language.

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But it was her adopted language and she wrote this novel, which I wrote about on my blog. Sometime after I did that, I got a message from her former partner, Jens Nielsen, saying he would be very happy to speak to me. And he came to London and we met up and he told me this story about her: She sadly took her life in the early two thousands, having had long struggles with mental illness and various other issues. But he said that she had spent twenty years trying to write, and had finally written this novel. And for her it had been a real grounding to have this language and to be able to express herself in it on the page.

Julia Copus: I mean, that's extraordinary that she had no language really before, age seventeen, did you say?

Ann Morgan: That's when she learned to read and write. Yeah. And she taught herself. And, she wrote this extraordinary book, it's a very strange, quite troubling book that, as I say, draws on a lot of her childhood experience and written in this very strange, childlike voice, and the child cooking in the Polenta is an image that the heroine and her sister conjure up to comfort themselves when life gets too frightening.

Julia Copus: To *comfort* themselves? Wow.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Because they faced some pretty horrific things, and so when life gets frightening, they use this horrible image to make themselves feel better, at least they're not cooking in the polenta, you know? But yeah, it was that sense of grounding, the language being a *home* almost.

Julia Copus: I wondered maybe if at this point you could read out the extract from Veteranyi's book. So would you do that for us? This is from *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*.

Ann Morgan: 'Our story sounds different every time my mother tells it. We're Orthodox, we're Jewish, we're international. My grandfather owned a circus arena, he was a salesman, a captain, travelled from country to

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country, never left his own village and was a locomotive engineer. He was a Greek, a Romanian, a farmer, a Turk, a Jew, an aristocrat, a gypsy, an orthodox believer. My mother was appearing in circuses even as a child, so she could feed her whole family. Another time, she runs away to the circus with my father against her parents' wishes.'

Julia Copus: That really suggests the fluidity of her identity, doesn't it? It sounds as if she gained a *form* of rootedness in Switzerland and in the German language, but at the same time she felt cut adrift from her sense of origin. And it seems particularly poignant to me, you say she was found floating in the water, between lands... A terribly tragic story really, isn't it?

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Well, Jens Nielsen was interesting about it, he would say that all the *belly* things, the *mother* things, were Romania, that's where all that was. But the language things: the heart, the head, was in Switzerland. So it's this interesting, as you say, between lands. It's a fascinating book, it's worth reading.

Julia Copus: Yes. I definitely want to read that one. So belly things meaning, well, I suppose birth from her actual mother.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, and things like food. So they were both performance artists and they spent some time traveling Europe, doing this sort of experimental performance show to complement the book. And she would do readings from the book and he would do performance art while she was reading and a lot of their performances involved food and eating or serving food in fantastical ways.

And interestingly she had eating disorders throughout her life; that was one of her major struggles. And the relationship with her mother, I think was a real challenge for her. So all that, the belly things, as you said, those were the difficult things, but she managed to find some mental space in this other language, in this other way of expressing.

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Julia Copus: And thank God she produced this piece of literature. We have that.

Ann Morgan: And, she's actually a real national treasure in Switzerland. Her work is in the Swiss National Archives, along with, actually, a copy of *Reading the World*, Jens Nielsen asked if he could include a copy of the book with it.

Julia Copus: Oh, how fantastic.

Ann Morgan: So it's there with her work in the Swiss National Archives for the next three hundred years.

Julia Copus: And beyond, we hope!

Ann Morgan: Well, you never know! Who knows if the world will last that long? But fingers crossed.

Julia Copus: That's a whole, other story. Anyway, so this brings us all too quickly to your third and final object. Tell us what that is and why it's important to you.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, this is a strange one. It is a broken plate, which raised a few eyebrows with the picture framer when I took it to be framed. He thought it was the result of a domestic argument.

Julia Copus: A sort of a divorce celebration or something!

Ann Morgan: Yes, exactly, it's a plate that came from my grandparents's house. We have quite a few domestic objects from their old house in our house now. And this was a plate that, of all prosaic things, it had a jacket potato on it, and it was in the microwave. And I at the time was going through a rather tricky spell with my writing and had got rather stuck in a rut and a number of negative patterns, I think I was being very hard on

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myself, and finding it quite difficult to...despite working very hard and driving myself pretty hard, finding it hard to produce anything that I was happy with. And spent a lot of time beating myself up about it. And I was just... I had an epiphany that I was being too hard on myself and that I sort of was performing some inherited patterns, I think, of perhaps being rather unkind to myself.

And I was telling Steve, my other half, about this, and just at the point where I said, and I realized I need to break that pattern, the plate in the microwave split.

Julia Copus: Your grandmother was speaking to you, or your grandfather!

Ann Morgan: Maybe. Yeah. So I have to say I'm not a huge believer in symbols, but the timing of that felt significant.

Julia Copus: That is strange. Yeah.

Ann Morgan: So I got it framed and it's on the wall in my writing room as a reminder to myself that that's what I decided.

Julia Copus: So we can see a picture of this online, and it's a rather beautiful thing. If it wasn't broken, it would just be a normal plate. But the regular pattern of that break makes it into a beautiful object. It's like, I can't remember the word for the Japanese, you know, when an object breaks and they do the gold painting.

Ann Morgan: Yes. I can't remember it either, but I know exactly what you mean. Absolutely. Yeah. So it's a reminder really to try and adhere to that. And I think it's been helpful in that way.

Julia Copus: Yeah. So that leads on very nicely to my final question, which as always is to ask our guest for some writing tips. Now, I usually ask

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for three pieces of advice, but really you've already given us at least two by now. So you've talked about, not being afraid of pressing ahead with seemingly ridiculous ideas, because they might even be what your work is best remembered for like Don Quixote, fighting with his windmills.

And then you've also talked about not getting weighed down by those doubts and negative patterns of thinking that we all get from time to time. And I think writers are particularly, or maybe all artists, are particularly, prone to. Can I be greedy and ask for at least one more?

Ann Morgan: Yes, absolutely. Well, I think this is something that I actually learnt fairly early on, but I've had to remind myself of in more recent years, which was when I was about twenty-six – and I spent my twenties trying to be a writer, but as I say, writing pretty unpublishable things – and I had this epiphany when I was about twenty-six, when I was sitting at my desk and I was working part-time for a charity at the time, and was just about making ends meet and just about affording to have the time to try and write.

And I suddenly realized that maybe that was all it would ever be, me sitting in a room on my own playing with words, maybe it would never go any further than that. And that if that wasn't enough for me, then I should stop and do something else, something that would mean that I didn't have to eat baked beans for dinner several nights a week and all that sort of thing. But that if it *was* enough for me, then I should structure my life in a way to be able to continue to do it, and that anything else on top of that would be a bonus.

And I decided it was enough for me, and so I carried on. And it was four years later that I got my agent and my book deal for *Reading the World*, which was an accident really, because as I said at the beginning, I didn't expect that project to lead to a book. So it was a sort of...

Julia Copus: ...so there's the irony, and that's a lovely story, isn't it? I always

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say to people who are – because I do a little bit of mentoring – if your aim is to get published, then you are doing this for the wrong reason. And the irony is when they give up that hope as their main goal, and start focusing on actually delighting themselves on the page and delighting the reader on the page, you know, that's when the publishing deals come along.

Ann Morgan: Yes. Yes, absolutely. So that was something that I had to remind myself of. And I think because I've been lucky, you know, with having *Reading the World* and then my first novel *Beside Myself*, I was lucky with that being published in a number of countries, it was actually quite easy to forget that deal I'd made with myself, so I've had to remind myself of that in more recent years that, no, hang on, this is the deal you struck, and anything else is a bonus. And I think that attaches to another piece of advice, which is similar, which is I suppose to hold onto your own definition of success.

Because a lot of people have definitions of success and they have to do with sales, or they have to do with prizes, or they have to do with other kinds of recognition. And actually for me, success is being able to live this life and to...

Julia Copus: ...live this writing life, you mean?

Ann Morgan: Yes, exactly. Live this writing life. And so it is closely connected, really, and I think trying to hold onto that, even in the face of sometimes other people's questions and assumptions, particularly sometimes people who don't know the reality of the inside of the industry, who can make some rather sort of perhaps unfair assumptions about what success looks like as a writer. But I think it's important to hold onto what your definition of success is.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and the writing is so much more important than publishing, in fact. As witness Emily Dickinson, who published, I don't know, three or four poems during her lifetime and is now a national... international treasure, maybe.

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Well, Anne, it has been fascinating talking to you and this is clearly an ongoing state of affairs that you explore in *Reading the World*, I'm wondering now if there might even be a third edition of *Reading the World* in another ten years time, or perhaps even sooner.

Ann Morgan: Who knows?

Julia Copus: It's changing so quickly. Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and insight with us on this fascinating subject. You have definitely inspired me to spread my wings a bit more in terms of what I choose to read next.

Ann Morgan: Fantastic. Well, thank you Julia, it's been a real pleasure.

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RLF outro: That was Ann Morgan in conversation with Julia Copus. You can find out more about Ann Morgan on her website at annemorgan.me. That's Ann spelled A N N. And that concludes episode 407, which was recorded and produced by Julia Copus.

Coming up in episode 408, Dilys Rose speaks with Doug Johnstone about the challenges of multiple literary genres, collaborating with artists in other fields, and her own visual art. We hope you'll join us.

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