Writers Aloud

Episode 408

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 408 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Dilys Rose speaks with Doug Johnstone about her literary work, including poetry, short stories, novels, and historical fiction; the different technical challenges of each form; her collaborations with composers and artists; and her own visual arts practice.

Doug Johnstone: Dilys Rose was born and raised in Glasgow, but has lived in Edinburgh for many years. She's published twelve books; three novels, five collections of stories, and four of poetry, including one for young children.

Her most recent publications are a novel, *Unspeakable*, a pamphlet of poetry, *Stone the Crows*, and a collection of short stories, *Sea Fret*. Her interest in creative collaboration has led to a song cycle, *Watching over You*, and an opera libretto, *Kasper Hauser: Child of Europe*. Her writing has also featured in collaborative publications including *Twinset*, with artwork by Polly Thelwell and Laurie Hastings and *Once Upon our Time* with Moyna Flannigan.

Her awards and fellowships include a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, the McCash Poetry Prize and the UNESCO World City of Literature Exchange Fellowship. For nearly twenty years Dilys taught creative writing at the Universities of Glasgow, Strathclyde, and Edinburgh. Since giving

up teaching, she's been developing her visual art practice. She divides her time between writing and art.

Dilys Rose! Hi. How you doing?

Dilys Rose: I'm fine, thank you Doug, how are you?

Doug Johnstone: I'm very well thank you. So I want to talk to you today about all your many various kinds of writing, working collaborations. So it's hard to know where to start because you do so much different stuff. But I am right in thinking that poetry was your first love? Was that your first entry into writing?

Dilys Rose: Yes, it was. I began attempting to write poetry, very bad poetry when I was about sixteen. It really was bad, embarrassing stuff, adolescent stuff. And then I stopped for a while and then I returned to writing in my late twenties and yes, I started with poetry and then maybe a couple of years after that I started to be interested in writing fiction. But it took quite a while before I could cover more than two or three pages, just because I got used to writing very short poems.

Doug Johnstone: That minimalist thing?

Dilys Rose: Yes. I still prefer things to be short; I like short poems, short stories and indeed shortish novels as well.

Doug Johnstone: So what was it about poetry that first attracted you? Were you reading a lot of poetry as a kid? You said you were writing as a teenager, were you reading poetry then?

Dilys Rose: I did read some poetry while I was at school. I think Tom Leonard, *Six Glasgow Poems*, was one of the first books I got hold of. But I read quite a lot of various kinds of poetry. There was a good bookshop near where I went to school, it sold little pamphlets, poetry from all over the world, really.

And I suppose poetry seemed the most personal kind of writing? And when you're an adolescent, personal is quite important, I think.

Doug Johnstone: That sounds incredibly progressive to be reading Tom Leonard at school, that's not something that when I was at school, that was not something that was ever made available to us.

Dilys Rose: No, I didn't read it *in* school; I read it out of school. As I said, I found these pamphlets of different writers in the bookshop and they weren't expensive, so we could buy such things, we did buy such things in those days.

Doug Johnstone: And I guess a lot of that, if you're mentioning Tom Leonard, that must have been a really interesting experience because effectively it was the Glasgow voice. Surely there would've been some recognition there of that's how people speak in the street?

Dilys Rose: Yes, although people didn't speak like that at the school I went to. I think I liked them because they were funny; and because they were different and they were new and they were very short.

Doug Johnstone: Well, that's interesting you say 'funny' because there's a definite dark humour in a lot of your writing. I was reading one of your collections of poetry and I ended up smiling at the end of almost every one. Is that? — I wonder how conscious that is for you in your writing, or is it just something that comes out of your own personality or your own style?

Dilys Rose: It's funny because I remember a friend saying to me that she thought my writing was very funny but I was very serious, and it's probably true and I don't deliberately try to make things funny; when you deal with subjects which are serious, it does tend to help to have a bit of balance, you know, a bit of dark and light, and I suppose the vein of humour going through it does offset the darkness of the subject, a bit, it makes it a little

bit more bearable sometimes. I'm not doing that deliberately as much as that's the way it comes out. I never set out to write a funny poem. But I'm glad that there's humour in it because I enjoy reading both fiction and poetry which has an element of humour in it, there's not that much poetry that has... not enough poetry, maybe, I feel, that allows itself to include humour other than deliberately humorous verse or whatever, which isn't quite my style.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I sometimes feel that if you set out to write something funny, that'd be the least funny thing of all time. Because some people say about my more recent books, there's dark humour in it. I'm quite confused by that because I'm like, is there really, I didn't mean it? I'm glad it's there. But if I set out to do that, it would be impossible I think.

In terms of the poetry it's quite, hard to define what kind of poet you are. Do you ever think about it? Because there are elements of experimental stuff, there are some collections that have concrete poetry and things like that. And then there are other things that are really quite narrative poems as well. I mean, obviously you don't think, *This today is going to be a narrative poem!* I'm interested in that diversity of the styles. You are quite hard to pigeonhole.

Dilys Rose: Well, I think what happens is that I get into a certain mindset for a while. I become interested in concrete poetry *for a bit* and I stay in that seam. If I didn't, if I just said, 'I think I'm going to write one concrete poem', it probably wouldn't work. I have to stay with that approach to writing for a bit before I see where it's going, and then maybe I lose interest or I find interest in something else.

I'm also, I think, always trying to find something new. I don't want to become set in my ways, even though I probably am to a certain extent. You talk about narrative poetry, and I think that's right because I write fiction as well, there's often a strong narrative element, but it depends on what's driving the poem in the first place, how it's going to turn out.

I'm not a planner, so I don't usually set out with a clear intention of what I want to do, but with the last full collection of poems, for example, *Body Work*, it was themed. So I was thinking about areas of the body that I might work on, and so I'd have a little bit of a plan in that respect, but in terms of how the poem falls out, that's really dependent on actually probably getting the first line. Though with concrete poetry, I think there's a very different way of working, reorganizing things, rather than a poem which starts with a story and tries to tell a story.

I can only retain my interest in that form of work for a certain length of time though, because it does start to feel a bit soulless. Doesn't have the same emotional charge for me as other types of writing.

Doug Johnstone: So what about the most recent, your most recent collection, *Stone the Crows*. How do you think that compares to what you've done in the past?

Dilys Rose: I'm not sure if there's any essential difference in the way I've approached it. Again, there are two or three ideas in there. There's a group of poems, which all use collective nouns as starting points like: wake of vultures and murder of crows, lamentation of swans. And again, I thought, *Oh I might write a whole pamphlet using these terms of venery* and then it began to just seem artificial. So I wrote as many as I felt happy with and felt interested in writing, and then I moved on to something else. And then there are a couple of other little groups of poems in that, there are three poems about different dresses all of which I owned at some point in my life. I'm still quite interested in writing more about clothes because I think clothes carry, what? — certainly for women, clothes do carry quite a lot of resonance.

They carry history as well. They remind you of places you've been or people you are with and yeah, I think there's still more clothes to be written about.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. So moving on, I was interested in you saying about, one of the things that poetry, one of the reasons why poetry appealed to you is because of the brevity, and that's obviously the same with short stories.

I was reminded of the reason Raymond Carver gave for a writing short stories, is because he could do it in one sitting, that he would write the beginning, middle, and end in one sitting. Is that's something that definitely still appeals to you?

Dilys Rose: I don't think I can necessarily write it all in one sitting now, but I can read it in one sitting. And I think I like to read short stories a lot and that's partly why, because I can get a sense of the whole when I've read it, when I read it in fifteen minutes, twenty minutes. Raymond Carver's short stories are very intense and dense sometimes, and I can see how he *might* write it all in one go.

Doug Johnstone: But the other thing that I think – I mean, you've touched on this really – but the other thing that some of the short stories and the poetry have in common is, the short stories really feel like they're written with a poet's eye; theattention to detail. Do you know what I mean? About how you describe a certain character or a place or a mood, it's as if it's glimpsed out of the corner of the eye?

Dilys Rose: I think I'm more interested in the glimpse in passing than I am in the extended narrative in the short story. Because I think a short story can be many different things. It can be simply a concentrated moment or it can contain the best part of a life of somebody. I think one of the reasons I'm drawn to the short story is its versatility.

Doug Johnstone: I grew up reading short stories, more than novels, but it seems criminally undervalued as a form, especially in the UK I think, more than other places maybe.

Dilys Rose: I think it is very undervalued in Britain. I don't think it's as undervalued in the States or in Europe. But I don't think there's much we can do about it. I published three books of short stories before I published a novel, I was determined not to be forced into writing a novel.

But I think that was a probably a bad decision on my part, if I'd managed to get around to writing a novel sooner, things might have been easier. But at the same time I didn't have an idea then that was appropriate for a novel or would've worked as a novel, so you work with what you have really.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, and there's this strange idea in the US still, that young writers will write a short story collection, which is like a calling card, and then the second book is always the novel as if they always have that in their back pocket, which I think is a weird kind of thing. They're using it as a training ground rather than as an end in itself.

Dilys Rose: Yes. I really don't believe that writing short stories is a springboard for a novel because there are many things that are different about the two. One being that you don't usually have to deal with the passage of time in anything like the same way in a short story as you do in a novel.

And I just think that they work in many different ways. I think they're equally interesting but I'm honestly probably more drawn to the short story. I *have* managed to write three novels so far, which I'm reasonably happy with, but they were long, *painful* experiences, all of them. There's a lot of wrestling with them.

I think it's the fact that a novel's too big to really keep in your head, to keep a sense of in your head. There are always parts of it that are working in the background, needing to be dealt with, and also a short-story writer tends to want to, hope to, get everything right. It's impossible to get everything right in a novel, I think, I mean word for word, sentence for sentence, or you'd only ever write one book. There have to be certain concessions when you write a novel.

Doug Johnstone: Which brings me to my question about you writing novels! So, it did take you a long time, and was that just that you didn't have the right idea?

Dilys Rose: Partly it was stubbornness on my part as well, because I knew what people were saying about having to write a novel. I thought, *Well, I believe in the short story, I'm going to continue writing it.* But I honestly didn't have an idea which would have merited the amount of time and energy on it, I don't think, or would've benefited from being extended in that way.

When you start writing poems you get ideas for poems, when you start writing short stories you get ideas for short stories, and I was getting plenty of ideas for them. Then there just came this idea, which couldn't be done in the form of a short story. So I had to go a different way.

Doug Johnstone: And it was painful?

Dilys Rose: It was very painful because I had to learn things that I didn't know, and I don't know how you feel about writing, but I feel every time I start something new I'm almost starting from scratch again. I don't have great deal of confidence that I can pull it off because I don't really know what I'm pulling off; trying to pull off.

Doug Johnstone: I think that's very common. You see beginning writers saying, does it get easier with the more books you write...bad news, I'm afraid to say, if anything it gets harder because you feel like you should know more, but you don't. It's a weird thing.

Dilys Rose: Well, I think every new piece of work…there has to be an element of discovery in it for you, because if there isn't, there probably isn't going to be much discovery for the reader either. So there has to be an element of challenge to it. But sometimes I think, *Well, does there have to be this amount of challenges!*

Doug Johnstone: Well, all three of your novels are very different and I wanted to talk to you a little bit about *Unspeakable*. It was the most recent one, and it was very different from what you had done before across all your writing really: a historical novel based on a real-life situation with Thomas Aikenhead. Do you want to just talk a little bit about the inspiration behind that?

Dilys Rose: Well, there was a story went around our family that an aunt had been very interested in finding out that we might have been related to somebody important in the past, and had got hold of *Burke's Peerage* and discovered to her disappointment that the only name that came up was the name of Thomas Aikenhead, who was executed for blasphemy.

And I'd heard this years ago, and it stayed in my mind and, I don't know, at some point it came back to me. I thought *Hmmm…that might be quite interesting to try and write about*. And then the business of blasphemy was very much in the news at the time, not so much here, but people were being executed for blasphemy in different parts of the world, and I thought the situation that he was in with regard to the power that the church had was not really very different from the situation that's happening again in different parts of the world. So I was very fortunate, I was allowed to get some time off teaching, and research the novel and given funding to do so.

So yes, it was a very different thing for me. I had done some research before for the first novel, but writing a historical novel had never really appealed to me before. And when I got into the research, I found it fascinating, it's very difficult to stop doing the reading because there's so much to find out about.

I didn't really know how to go about it, but I just read and read and read, and read for about the first eighteen months, two years. Then I had to try and forget about some of that reading and some of the notes I'd made and get on with writing the story.

Doug Johnstone: Well, that's the thing, the best historical fictions and stuff is where the writer has done research but is not wearing it on their sleeve, it's informing what they're writing but not hammering the reader over the head with it, and *Unspeakable* definitely does that.

So how did you wrestle with the fact that you were dealing with real events, so the 1690s in Edinburgh, right, where Thomas was really executed for blasphemy. Obviously some of what you've written is fictionalised and how did you go about that balancing of things or with the real documented facts and the things you were making up?

Dilys Rose: Well, I found that we knew a little bit about Thomas's life up until the time that he became an orphan at nine, and then there was a gap between nine to fourteen when I couldn't find out *anything* about his life. And then he came back into the research when he was around fourteen when he became matriculated at the university as a student, they started very young then. So there I had to decide what to do with that gap of time, he had a very short life, so that had to stay within that time. I decided that I would have to make that bit up, so I did. As far as his personality went, there was very little that was available either, we know basically his main claim to fame was that he was executed.

We didn't really know very much more about that. We didn't know about his personality. But the more I thought about him, the more I thought, *Well, he was charged with railing against the scriptures, charged with making fun of the scriptures.* So I thought he must have been a bit of a blab, he must have shot his mouth off.

He might have been a bit cocky as well, so that side of things, I had to just invent really. There was something that was useful in that basically his nemesis, Mungo Craig, the chap who denounced him in a pamphlet, was around at the same time as him. I didn't know if they actually went to school together or not, but for the sake of the narrative, it made sense that they knew each other at that time and then knew each other at university

because they did know each other at university. So I took some liberties like that in order to put together a coherent story.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. And there's other, like, really interesting stylistic choices in that as well, because it's an omniscient narrator. You're jumping around, which I think is really...it's not very common these days, but you handle it really well.

So as much as it's Thomas's story, it's actually a story about the whole of Edinburgh really and about society that time. It's kind of an overview of what it was really like.

Dilys Rose: Yes. You know yourself that the decision about point of view and who's going to narrate a story is always quite an important one.

And I did think quite a lot about how I was going to tell this story, and that seemed to me the only way to bring in some of what I had learned about the period was to use an omniscient narrator, who could observe such a thing. I didn't think it made sense to write it from Thomas's point of view, because that would've meant writing it from the point of view a child first of all, growing up.

Doug Johnstone: It's very restrictive.

Dilys Rose: It wouldn't have helped; it wouldn't have worked in terms of showing the cultural world or the social world in which he lived. So I had to, well, I didn't *have* to choose that, but that was the point of view that felt right for me.

Doug Johnstone: It's in Scots as well; there's a lot of Scots in it, I don't know, I have no idea, it's far too much work for me to think about historical novels, but presumably not like 1690s Scots exactly or we would never understand it. So are you sitting in a sort of middle ground, giving a flavour of the language and the way that people spoke and the rhythm of it?

Dilys Rose: Well, we don't know exactly how people spoke in those days. All we've got are written records and written records are going to change it; change the language. I made the decision to use a form of Scots, but there are so many forms of Scots, and I think the old dialogue is a construct, and it's mainly in the dialogue I'm using the Scots. I felt that we needed the sound of it a little bit, but it's not based on any particular period as such, but it was a decision to make that in Scots, it didn't feel right in Standard English and so…it's a novel after all.

Doug Johnstone: It's a story, it's made up. You're allowed to do what you want. I want to talk a little bit about your collaboration, because you've done various different things. You've done lots of writing that's accompanied music and accompanied art, and you've got your own art as well, I'll talk about that in a bit. So how did the music collaborations come about? You've done choral works and you're a librettist for things. How... when did that first come about?

Dilys Rose: I was put in touch with a musician through a friend who was interested in somebody writing a few songs that he was going to compose music for, and going to work with a group of young people. So that was the first. And then we did another project together, another choral work for young people. One of them was based on an old story up in Perthshire, about the plague, in fact.

Doug Johnstone: Right. Cheery stuff!

Dilys Rose: Yes. Really cheery stuff! But I remember the composer saying at the time when he was talking to these teenage school kids that were singing it, 'You know, you can be singing about the darkest things and really still have a great time!'

And I think that was true about music and the opera that I subsequently did with another composer was about Kasper Houser, based on the life of Kasper Houser, and he had a pretty dreadful time too. I think I enjoy

working with music because something great happens when you hear the words sung, something you can't do by yourself, apart from anything.

Doug Johnstone: And what about other collaborations then, you've had at least a couple of publications where you've worked with artists with your words? How do those things come about, again, is it just random contacts, have you got a radar seeking collaboration?

Dilys Rose: No, no. Well, the first one was a proper collaboration between myself and a painter friend, who was in the process of producing a new portrait miniature for an exhibition at the…I think it was the National Portrait Gallery.

We've been friends quite a long time and I like her work and I think she likes my work. And we spoke about the idea of me developing some very tiny little stories or portrait miniatures, fictional cameos I suppose, to respond to some of her paintings. So the way that happened really was almost wordless.

She just showed me some images and I looked at them and I wrote some texts. And in some cases I wrote some texts before I'd seen an image and she responded back. So it was a two-way trade, but we didn't…neither of us would've interfered with what the other had done really. I certainly wouldn't dare to interfere with her

The other pamphlet was a pamphlet, which was two poets and two graphic illustrators in that – that's called *Twinset* – in that one it was the poet, myself and another poet, who collaborated and the graphic artists were brought in by the publisher later on. It was a very nice result. But the poet and I who collaborated, she is a Tasmanian poet who I met in Australia in 2006, and then she came over here, it was a sort of mutual exchange. I was sent to Australia, she was sent to Scotland. And so we decided to try and do a collaboration because we were in different parts of the world. Night and day, summer and winter. And so once a month for, it's meant

to be a year, it took eighteen months, but once a month roughly, we wrote a poem on a great theme and that's how we did it. So there are twelve poems from her and twelve from me. That was fun, but again, we didn't interfere with each other's work. So we're still speaking.

Doug Johnstone: You're still speaking. Yeah. So I'm really interested to talk about your own art. I know that you're producing stuff, I had a look at your online exhibition and I thought it was brilliant, I really loved that stuff. So how would you describe it, is there maybe two different kinds of different techniques that you're using in that exhibition, is that what you're still doing now?

Dilys Rose: In that exhibition there are a series of collages, and there are a series of line drawings done with gel pen, which were all based on life drawings that I did through the pandemic. All the work was done through...started actually at the beginning of the pandemic. There were some online life drawing sessions that I attended, because I used to do a lot of life drawing and I missed it as an activity.

So I was very glad when the online sessions started up. So these drawings are based on the original drawings. They weren't done in the kind of detail that there is at the time, because you've only got ten minutes in a pose or whatever. The abstract collages were done primarily to cheer myself up in the first place because of the pandemic.

And it was actually quite hard to get hold of art materials for a while. All the art shops were shut. You could buy stuff online but you didn't always know what you were going to get. And I decided that...I've always liked paper, but if I have nice paper, I can't always do anything with it because I'm scared that I'll ruin it. So I'm going to do something with the paper I've got.

And most of these are paper cuts; hand-cut with scissors and a lot of old bits of music, manuscript paper, things like that. Again, I found the

activity of cutting the paper quite therapeutic. There was also a decision on my part to literally try abstract work because up until then I had been pretty caught up with figurative stuff and I was getting a bit frustrated with it.

I thought, *Okay, let's try something different*. It's a bit like following something through, keeping on working in that field and seeing where I can go, seeing what happens when I do this or what happens when I do that, and then eventually coming to a point where I think I've probably done enough.

Doug Johnstone: Is that a similar kind of attitude to the story writing or to the writing in general then?

Dilys Rose: I think so, I think it's certainly similar to what happens when I get involved with concrete poetry. There are certain restrictions that concrete poetry forces upon you and certain things you can do within that space, or I can do within that space and other things that I can't; I'm still interested in collage, I'm still interested in abstraction, but for me, I'd like to it to go somewhere slightly different. I'd quite like to get some sort of…more atmosphere into collage somehow or other, but I haven't got there yet.

Doug Johnstone: And do you think there would ever be a project that involved you doing both artwork and writing?

Dilys Rose: Well, I've thought about it and other people have suggested it to me, but I haven't quite got there yet. I'm not sure if it's a good idea. I don't know, I'd have to try, I've avoided it so far. I don't think I would like to, for example, illustrate my own poems or anything like that because I'm not an illustrator. If I found that things I had written went with things I had drawn, that would be a nice result. But actually deliberately coming up with an idea where I'd want to do both, I haven't found one as yet, but there's still time.

Doug Johnstone: And so what's next then, are you working on everything, all at once, doing some art, doing some more writing, where are you?

Dilys Rose: I'm working slowly on new poems and I'm also going back to etching, which I got very interested in before the pandemic, and then I haven't been able to do it at all since then, I'm going back to etching — soon.

Doug Johnstone: Okay well, I think that's a good place to stop Dilys. Thank you very much for your time.

Dilys Rose: Thank you.

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RLF outro: That was Dilys Rose in conversation with Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Dilys on her website at dilysrose.com. That's Dilys spelled D I L Y S. And that concludes episode 408, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 409, Clare Chambers speaks with Ann Morgan about breakout successes, writing history convincingly, and retaining a balance between pessimism and optimism. We hope you'll join us.

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