

Writers Aloud

Episode 410

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 410 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode in the first instalment of our 'My Favourite Author' series, RLF writers lay out their reasons for calling someone their favourite author, exploring the role that biography, style, message, and childhood influences all play in fostering powerful affinities.

Ann Morgan: Writing can be a solitary process, so it's no surprise that favourite authors can mean so much to those who work with words. In this episode, we talk to Royal Literary Fund fellows about their favourite authors and hear some of the reasons that a particular writer's work has resonated with them. Childhood influences can play an important part in determining someone's favourite author. Lorna Thorpe realized this had been the case for her when she attended an interview for the Creative writing course at UEA.

Lorna Thorpe: I did the MA at UEA and Andrew Motion interviewed me and he asked me what was my favourite Dickens novel. I was stunned, I was appalled, I didn't actually like Dickens. Although I had read and did like *Great Expectations*, so I was at least able to answer it to that extent. But I think that there's probably a number of factors, but I grew up in a house where the only books were a set of encyclopaedias and the complete set of works of Dickens.

Writers Aloud

Dickens was my father's favourite author, I had a very difficult relationship with him, and so probably there's something of that in my dislike. And I also thought, *He goes on and on doesn't he? He describes things for pages on end.* Then again, I think as I grew up, there was a certain snobbishness about Dickens, I seem to remember in the Seventies and Eighties one didn't really like Dickens. He was accused of sentimentalism, and he is sentimental. But I think that to dismiss him purely on those grounds, you miss the *joy* of Dickens, the joy of the sheer energy of the writing, the *daring* of it at times.

For me, he's an enchanter, the best writers for me are enchanters. You're not reading just with your head, you're reading with your entire body, you're responding, Nabokov used to call it, you're responding from this place between your shoulders. And I think absolutely that's the case with Dickens.

Ann Morgan: Parental reading tastes also played an important part in shaping Pippa Little's literary preferences. Indeed, it took her a long time to recognise the value of the work of Anthony Trollope, who she now considers to be one of her favourite authors.

Pippa Little: I'd love to have him over for dinner. We'd probably argue about foxhunting, which he loved, and his conservative liberalism.

But I'd have to thank him for the hours of pleasure and distraction he's given me over the years. The worlds he's created with their characters and communities, which have sustained me just as they sustained my mother. She read her way through his entire set of family-inherited, red and speckled hardbacks when I was fourteen.

I thought they were insufferably dull then with their small print and musty smell. How I kick myself now I didn't keep them. I wish too that she and I could discuss the awful yet delicious Mrs Proudie, for instance, the bishop's wife in the *Barsetshire Chronicles*, or the forensic explorations

Writers Aloud

of unhappy marriages in novels such as, *He Knew He Was Right*, which Trollope unpicks with fascinating insight and sensitivity.

He's particularly good I think on the conflicted positions of women in Victorian society. One of my favourite Trollope's is the satirical *The Way We Live Now*, which was written in 1875, and which spans whole swathes of society tracing the downfall of financial high flyer, August[us] Melmotte, and is clear-spoken about the greed, hypocrisy, and downright crookedness of people in high places; much of it recognizably similar now to the contemporary politics we have today.

Ann Morgan: Politics and the messages with which certain works are imbued can often be a central part of their appeal. Playwright Dipo Agboluaje found this to be the case when it came to one of his literary heroes, Arthur Miller.

Dipo Agboluaje: Miller holds a special place in my heart because of the way he writes about the common man and how the forces of society weigh against him, the choices that they make in spite of themselves. I think the really big dramas, the famous dramas of Miller, they stand the test of time.

And for a writer like me, I would love to write plays like that, modern classics. There's a kind of a poetry that Miller writes with, and again, it's the poetry of the common man. It's the cadences of the common man, the situations in which they find themselves in and try to escape. What they expose is the deep underlying humanity of these characters.

They're deeply flawed, we feel for them. We realize that in a sense they can't really escape their fate, if we were to call it so. And sometimes we watch with horror as the inevitable takes place. But Miller always points the finger at society in the sense that we have created this society and in order to change the narrative from a tragedy, we ourselves have to change as well.

Writers Aloud

There's always a sense of inevitability in Miller that I find fascinating. But at the same time as that sense of inevitability the real journey is that struggle, the struggle of those ordinary folk to be *more*, to do more with their lives. And so then you see these dreams that they had, particularly a character like Willy Loman, and all the big dreams that he had, and his belief that working according to the dictates of his society can achieve those dreams.

But the cards are already stacked against him and they're not just stacked against *him*, they're stacked against his children, so it's a generational thing. And so although Miller offers no immediate *easy* solutions as a way out of these problems, what he does is vividly portray these problems in a way that makes an audience member sit up and listen and pay attention to that little man on the street, pay attention to the little woman who's struggling, try not to be too judgmental. Because all they're trying to do is live the dream with the one hand tied behind their back.

Ann Morgan: Frequently a work's political leanings can strike a chord with another writer. Growing up in Australia, Meaghan Delahunt found this very much to be the case with one of her favourite authors, Dorothy Hewett.

Meaghan Delahunt: When I was growing, I was interested in people like Simon de Beauvoir and Sartre, and the idea of the engaged writer. I remember as a teenager being very interested in that idea. And it's a very European idea because the Anglophone idea is more that the novel is something separate from power.

So that's why Jane Austin's so loved in Anglophone circles, because she seems to have nothing to do with politics and it's society of manners, the novel of manners, which personally I can't abide by. So I was more always drawn to a European sensibility in that way of drawing on something bigger than just the novel of manners and Dorothy comes into that because she's obviously dealing with being a woman, her early communist experience. She had a very wide range of reference and I really responded to that.

Writers Aloud

Judith Wright was also very important to me, reading her poetry. They were really significant for me as a young woman, as a teenager, and I think they probably...those poets certainly shaped as women. And then Helen Garner, I remember when *Monkey Grip* came out and I was a kid in the suburbs hoping one day to get into the city, into Melbourne and live this life, I just thought it was amazing, this kind of bohemian life; if we look at it, that was like the *Trainspotting* of Australian literature at the time. And I've continued to really enjoy her work and her sensibility, and I think she's been very important to me too.

Ann Morgan: Where the engagement with another writer's work is very personal our relationship to it very often shifts over time, Donny O'Rourke found this to be the case with one of his heroes, the poet Frank O'Hara.

Donny O'Rourke: Frank O'Hara and I are not on the terms we were when I was an impressionable young man. And now I go to O'Hara for technical reassurance, for a sense of remaining in touch with an old friend.

And also I have to admit that, and this is an unworthy thing to confess, when O'Hara was little known, when people like me were discoverers, when he was ours, maybe I liked him more. Now, Frank O'Hara is everywhere, he's gone from zero to hero, in my case a favourite writer. And maybe I'm just so shallow that I enjoyed it more when he and I had a more private thing going.

But the exuberance, the pathos, the life behind the poems, a man dead at forty, maybe semi-suicidal by that point, lost to drink pretty much by that stage, having trouble keeping himself going as a writer —well, maybe I identify with some of those things, but it's the distinctiveness and that's why eventually he surpassed Robert Lowell.

It's the distinctiveness, it's the in-love-with-life-ness of the work. It's this defiant brio. It's his capacity to be unashamed, to be unabashed, to be very present as a witness in his own life, and the mixture of an almost-narcissistic self-obsession with this tremendous generosity.

Writers Aloud

The poem in which he gives us a list of all the things he's going to buy, that great poem about Billie Holiday, nothing that he's going to buy in that poem is for him. They're all presents for other people; and his way of being quite solipsistic, but also very giving, I find sustaining.

Ann Morgan: Nevertheless, certain details in O'Hara's biography struck a chord with O'Rourke meaning that the poet will continue to have significance for him.

Donny O'Rourke: I suppose it's also about him being gay. I am lucky enough never to have had any, I hope anyway, never had any difficulties with that kind of acceptance, and O'Hara pointed the way to some extent for that. And of course, I now see him as a great gay poet and an exponent of what Susan Sontag identified in her marvellous essay, 'Notes on Camp'. He's, he's a personification of camp.

Take the very serious things lightly and vice-versa. And the campiness, the swagger, the smirk, the celebration of notoriety and otherness, that's a big part of his appeal too. So he remains a favourite writer. I'm the kind of person who has many, many favourites in every aspect of my life. But Frank O'Hara, even before Seamus Heaney, even before perhaps Edwin Morgan, was a poet I recognized as having something special to say to me that may even allow me in due time to try to say something myself.

Ann Morgan: Sometimes it is not the *similarities* of a writer's experience to our own, but the profound oddness of their personal life that fascinates. This was the case for Laura Hird when it came to her idol, Patricia Highsmith.

Laura Hird: The woman herself I found utterly fascinating. Andrew Wilson's wonderful biography of her, *Beautiful Shadow*, her strange behaviour, her sexuality, which she hid for so many years, but then, having affairs with her friend's husbands and wives, just because she felt they'd done her a bad turn.

Writers Aloud

Carrying around a bag of snails too in public conventions so she had someone to talk to because she didn't want to talk to the people at literary events. It just fascinated me. And also when she stayed in Fontainebleau my friend, the writer, Gordon Legge, he won a scholarship a few years ago to go to Fontainebleau and write for a month, and it was near to the place where Highsmith lived.

And he knew I was a huge fan. So he went around and spoke to the neighbours and said, 'Do you remember Patricia Highsmith when she was here?' And apparently they all said she was a thoroughly unpleasant woman. But that just makes me love her more in some strange way.

Another biography, Joan Schenkar, a more recent one, it wasn't until after Highsmith died that her diaries and everything were made available, and Joan Schenkar did a talk, an illustrated talk at the Edinburgh Book Festival, which was just *fantastic*, wonderful photos and incredible insight. And also at the end, she had Highsmith's diaries and huge plans she'd made for the plots of novels and things. And she said, 'If anyone wants to come down and look at them, but you're not allowed to touch'. And it was like, *Ah!* It was so tantalising.

Ann Morgan: Charles Boyle found himself similarly fascinated by some of the more bizarre anecdotes from the life of the writer Stendhal; many of these were recorded in *Memoirs of an Egoist*.

Charles Boyle: The whole book is actually *haunted* by Stendhal's memory of his disastrous liaison with the love of his life. He did have several loves, but the one who had most influence over his writing was a woman called Mathilde Dembowska. She'd been previously married to a Polish army officer and they were separated.

There was an absolutely *absurd* episode when Mathilde decided to visit, for a weekend, her sons who were at a school in another town. And Stendhal couldn't abide the thought of living in Milan without her, even for a few

Writers Aloud

days, and so followed her in ridiculous disguise, including an overcoat and enormous tinted glasses.

And of course, immediately he arrived the first person he saw was Mathilde, and she recognized him and was absolutely furious and sent him packing.

Ann Morgan: Alongside such escapades, many of the writer's other biographical details have continued to fascinate Boyle.

Charles Boyle: He was very short, he was overweight, he wore a toupée ever since his hair fell out when he was very young. This was after taking Mercury as a treatment for syphilis. He was always bungling things, for example, he was employed as a console in a small Italian port, and in one of the letters in code that he sent back to his employers in Paris, he managed to include the key to the code in the same envelope. He kept a tally of his love affairs on his braces.

He was very fond of children. He was so fond of using epigraphs from well-known authors to decorate his chapters and his books that he habitually made all these up. He rewrote and rewrote and rewrote his will, there are thirty-six versions in one year alone without ever having anything of much consequence to actually leave to anybody else because he was never rich at all.

His funeral, according to one of his close friends, was attended by three people. In fact, a year before his death, he wrote to his friend that he thought there is nothing ridiculous about dying in the street as long as one does not do this on purpose. And a year later, Stendhal was dead, in the street. He led a very busy life, among other things he was part of Napoleon's army that invaded Russia and took part in the retreat from Moscow in 1812. Because of this busyness it wasn't until he was aged around forty-three that he got round to writing his novels, and he had only sixteen years left to live. The most famous of his novels are *The Red and the Black*, and *The Charterhouse of Parma*.

Writers Aloud

And they are completely modern in sensibility and completely contemporary. Stendhal is set to be an obsession of mine for a few more decades to come.

Ann Morgan: Yet it is not only the perverse and contrarian that draw our interest. Learning of the difficulties a writer has overcome can win their work a place in our heart. Poet Steven Romer has this to say on the subject of *his* favourite author.

Stephen Romer: For my money Coleridge has everything. He was one of the great early Romantic poets, but he also felt he was a failed poet. He did not have Wordsworth's long-lasting verbosity, and he was a metaphysical thinker. He was also a great keeper of notebooks.

He also had a very difficult private life, which touches a chord in many of us. I love him because he has a line like 'that peculiar tint of green that lingers in the West'. So he had an extraordinary specificity, in fact, he invented a conversational style and a specificity that really becomes the bedrock of a certain type of English lyric; the convention bank, as we call it, the loose simile, he derided, he said that natural images should be fused together by the imagination, not just held in loose solution with it or with each other. So he defined the imagination, that fusion of separate elements, which has become, I think, for the post-Romantic sensibility, a touchstone of not only great poetry, but any poetry. He was a drug addict, he was miserable all the time, but he remained true to his calling and that's why he is a heroic author and my favourite author.

Ann Morgan: Now and then another writer's work can prove to be the gateway that leads us to our favourite author. James Woodall experienced this when he read about James Joyce in Tom's Stoppard's play, *Travesties*.

James Woodall: When a class of us studied this play, so intrigued, totally intrigued was I by this guy James Joyce, *in* the play, that I thought I'd better go out and fi... I knew, of course, his name, was possibly post-O level as it

Writers Aloud

would've been then, or possibly pre-...again, I can't quite remember. But I was reading very widely at the time and was become very interested in modern and indeed modernist literature.

And I thought, *Well, if this guy is as amazing as he seems to be in Stoppard's play, and if he is as important as it's thought that he is, I'd like to find out about him.* And that's really how it came about. And I think I therefore had decided to sit down and read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which I think I had in my book collection but had long postponed reading because I was doing other things. But I did read it and was absolutely gripped.

Ann Morgan: By the same token, our favourite authors can often introduce us to other works. Martina Evans, who also considers James Joyce to be one of her favourite writers, found this to be the case when she started excavating some of the multitude of literary references in *Finnegans Wake*.

Martina Evans: I thought, *Well, the only way to try...to get all these references, is to try and read what James Joyce read.* And what's really interesting about James Joyce is he didn't read any contemporary writing. He read all the old writing, and I find that very interesting, the old classics: Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, and yet he was one of the most innovative writers.

So I decided, I would get back to Shakespeare, Dante, the Bible. This is three years ago. I'm very slowly making headway and it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that I'm not going to get back to *Finnegans Wake* because what this decision has done is opened up an amazing world of writing. So by the time I've got through Shakespeare, read it really carefully, Dante, Dante means I have to read Virgil; I also have Homer, I've got the Bible...

At first, I was kind of slightly panicking, thinking *I'm never going to get*

Writers Aloud

back to Finnegans Wake, and now I just think it doesn't matter. And it's almost like, yeah, he was great, James Joyce, but this stuff is *amazing* and he's introduced me to it. So thank you, James Joyce.

Ann Morgan: You've been listening to 'My Favourite Author', an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this episode were Lorna Thorpe, Pippa Little, Dipo Agboluaje, Meaghan Delahunt, Donny O'Rourke, Laura Hird, Charles Boyle, Stephen Romer, James Woodall and Martina Evans. You can find out more about these writers' work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

✧

RLF outro: That was 'My Favourite Author'; and that concludes episode 410, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 411, Rebecca Goss speaks with John Greening about her intensely personal first collection, her early career, and seeking new directions. 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.