Writers Aloud

Episode 411

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 411 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the first part of a two-part interview, Rebecca Goss speaks with John Greening about the poetry collection, *Her Birth*, and the process of writing it, starting out as a writer and the influence of English teachers, pushing herself in new directions with language in *Girl*, and fighting to break away from couplets.

John Greening: Rebecca Goss has won many awards and was selected as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets in 2014. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Cardiff University and has taught the subject herself for the Arvon Foundation, the Poetry Society, the Poetry School, and the University of East Anglia. In 2018, she was appointed Creative Writing Fellow at Liverpool John Moore's University, where she'd earlier studied English.

Her debut, *The Anatomy of Structures*, appeared in 2010 from Flambard Press, and was followed three years later by a Carcanet Northern House collection, *Her Birth*. This was widely praised, Helen Dunmore noting its translucent language and Brendan O'Donoghue 'its narrative compulsion', calling it 'a wonderful book'. *Her Birth* won the poetry category of the East Anglian Book Awards in the year it was published and was subsequently shortlisted for three prizes: the Portico, the Warwick, and the Ford.

This was the second of Rebecca Goss's full collections, and it explores the experience of losing her baby daughter in 2008. It was followed in 2019 by *Girl*, which Carcanet's cover note describes as a celebration of 'female identity and experience and the dynamics of family and friendship'. *Girl* also appeared on the shortlist for the East Anglian Book Awards.

Her two pamphlets highlight an interest in interdisciplinary projects such as the collaboration with photographer Chris Routledge, which led to *Carousel*, published by Guillemot in 2018. Rebecca Goss lives in rural Suffolk where she grew up.

Delighted to be here to chat with you, Rebecca, in deepest Suffolk. Let's start with *Her Birth*, because that seems to be at the heart of everything you've written really. And any parent who reads it must be prepared to weep. It's a very moving book and in the tradition of books like…there's Douglas Dunn, Gwyneth Lewis, Christopher Reid; elegiac books. Was there a model you followed in writing that or did it just happen or what, as a book?

Rebecca Goss: There wasn't a model actually, though I do remember reading Douglas Dunn at school and loving that book, though that kind of bereavement was so far away from me then; I was a teenager. I don't remember really deliberately focusing on any anyone else's sort of model. I think, almost selfishly, I was just too wrapped up in my own experiences probably at the time.

I think I went into the book more innocently, in a way that I just wanted to record her life. I wasn't thinking about it as a book, as having an audience, I didn't even have a publisher when I started writing it. I didn't know where it was going to go, so I think, for me, it was just about recording things for a long time.

John Greening: Do you read them aloud? I remember Douglas wouldn't read those poems aloud about the death of his wife. Will you read them to a public, is that possible?

Rebecca Goss: So I didn't know that about Douglas. Yeah, I did an awful lot of readings when the book came out, a *lot* of readings from the book, some of them quite long, looking back, you know, long stints on stage. And I do remember at first feeling it quite empowering that I was being given permission to talk about this terrible subject, child death is still such a taboo I think.

So I found myself thinking, *I can talk about it, this is all right*, because I found it so difficult in my *real* life, my *everyday* life, around other mothers, other women, to talk about the death of my child. I just couldn't do it. To then get up, bizarrely, and face a room of strangers, I found I could do it. But it didn't always stay that way, after two or three years reading consistently, it began to take its toll on me emotionally, I have to say, for lots and lots of reasons: people coming to you with their own stories, and I felt ill-equipped to deal with them, but then felt very guilty that they'd taken on board my story and were taking it away with them in a book. So I felt lots of things like that.

And also just the sheer exhaustion of it, not in a dramatic way, but just reading poems about the same experiences. And then was I maybe not thinking about other experiences; was I only thinking about her in the form of the book and the poems? Was I not thinking about her in other ways?

It became *really* complex actually for me. But that's what I went to do my PhD about. Yeah, I ended up writing a...I kind of sorted it all out by going back to university in my forties and I wrote...I did a PhD by publication and my thesis was about the consequences of disclosure. And I think I sorted a lot out.

John Greening: People are often drawn to poetry and often try and write poetry when something dreadful happens to them. Would you give any advice to people about how to make such poetry work if you do have some seriously moving experience you want to put into lines?

Rebecca Goss: I think as a mother I went quite gently on myself, but as a poet and a writer, I was quite hard on myself. And I think, because I was already a poet, in the very early stages of her career, albeit, but I wanted the poems to be good, even though I wasn't even sure if they were ever going to be a book.

I knew that I would possibly maybe send them out individually to journals and things like that. So I wanted them to be *good* poems. So I think I did – was able in a way – maybe to stand back a bit from the content to make sure that it was working as a poem. I was quite disciplined about that. And I wanted the poems to also stand alone, even though it became apparent I was writing a sequence. I wanted someone to be able to just turn to any one of the poems and understand the whole story in a way.

John Greening: Does confessional poetry interest you? There's a Plath epigraph somewhere in the book, isn't there?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, I suppose it does. I don't seek it out necessarily but it certainly resonates, definitely. And I don't have any problem with the term 'confessional poetry'. I know there's lots of debates around it, but it doesn't...if people see *Her Birth* as a confessional book in some way, that's all right with me. I do…in a way, I carry her death like a sort of confession or I have done in the past anyway, because I find it so difficult to express in everyday life.

John Greening: Yes, yes. Some of those poems in *Her Birth* are apparently artless, quite sort of simple on the surface, but are they in fact a result of many drafts, do you do lots of drafts for your work?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, I think someone said before that it was 'deceptively simple' or something and I thought, *I can't take that as a compliment*, but yes, I do draft a lot, and a lot more as I get older, and I love drafting and it may be that by the time I get to, you know, 57, 58, the only difference is a comma here or not a comma there. But that's still a different draft in my

opinion. But I really like the process of drafting. One or two of the Ella, I call them the Ella poems –that was my daughter's name – one or two of them just came out straightaway. Yeah. But I think that's only because I've been thinking about them for so long.

John Greening: I don't know if you find that…I find if a poem comes out straightaway, I always have to rewrite it and rewrite it. And even if I come back to the original one, just to check. But perhaps you find the same?

Rebecca Goss: Yes.

John Greening: It seems to me rather beautifully constructed, the book, it was a beautiful book in many ways. But can you tell us a bit about the way you decided to construct the book?

Rebecca Goss: Yes, it fell into sections and I did take some advice from a poet and a friend towards the end. He was very good at sorting out the pronouns in the book for me. Because I wrote a lot in the second person at some point, and he said, 'It's all getting muddled, we don't know whether you're talking to your husband or Ella or Molly, the dead child or the child who's alive'. So that was really interesting,he made me tidy that up and I think Ella, I refer to in the third person, and Molly my daughter, my second child, I talk to her more directly. But the three sections felt they came about merely because I was stuck with the book and didn't know where it was going to go, and then I got pregnant with Molly and realized I was having another child, and I suddenly thought, *Oh, that's how this could be a book, and that's how it could end.* But then I was only then pregnant with her and I had all that to go through, and I finished the majority of the poems when Molly was born and I wrote – finished – the book during her naps actually; she'd nap in that blissful two hours in the middle of the day, and I'd write then. And then the sections became clearer then and I realised there was going to be Ella's life and her death clearly defined, then that period of grief that of course is not finite and boxed off as a section, but there was that very intense period of grief, and

then Molly's arrival, which changed the grief, didn't change everything, changed the grief, definitely. So that made sense then, Molly's arrival, that that could split the book into three sections like that.

John Greening: *Her Birth* wasn't your first book. Your first book was *The Anatomy of Structures*. How do you feel about that now?

Rebecca Goss: Oh, that's an interesting question.

John Greening: I think you said to me at one point that it felt like very old work to you?

Rebecca Goss: Well, it does. It does now, because I think even though it came out not long before *Her Birth*, it was written substantially in my very early twenties. It just took basically ten years of me submitting to magazines and trying to get more work out there because my pamphlet came out very quickly when I was very young, just as soon as I finished my MA.

And then I did it in a backward way. I then had to build up a reputation in magazines and get my work out there. And *The Anatomy of Structures* is a result of that really, it's just ten years of writing poems, from my early twenties to my early thirties.

I don't regard it as like a piece of juvenilia that I'm going to ignore. I don't see it like that at all. It's a really important first book to me, as in, I worked really hard on those poems for a long time, and most of them were published in magazines and it was the real beginnings of my poetry career, and I was going to events and reading at...you know, those great magazine launches at the back of a pub and they're really nice events and not too jazzy and fancy. I *loved* all that. I loved that beginning, and that book is all about that time really. It just happened that at the time it actually became a book, it was 2010, and I was pregnant with Molly and everything else had happened, bizarre really.

John Greening: So there are some poems in it you would select for a selected poems?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, there are definitely a few in there.

John Greening: You seem to like monologues and dramatic monologues and little narratives as well.

Rebecca Goss: Well, I've said this before that I think I'm quite influenced by the short-story form.

John Greening: Right, have you written short stories?

Rebecca Goss: No. Well, I have, I've probably got two tucked away in a drawer that I never show anyone. But I did as a teenager at school, I loved writing stories at school. But I do like my poems to tell stories, I'm not as fixated on that as much now in my newer work, but definitely. *Anatomy* is all about stories, basically, my own or others I've stolen from other people.

John Greening: So where did the poetry all begin for you, would you say?

Rebecca Goss: It definitely came from, well, just being interested in story writing I think, particularly. My parents weren't massively into poetry... it was my dad who discovered *Death of a Naturalist* when it was first published, and then would read it out to me. I remember he just stopped me in the hall once and just said, 'I need to read you this poem, Rebecca', because we had some bookcases at the end of the hall.

And he read from that, he read 'Trout' out to me. And I remember listening to it and at that moment, thinking, *I would like to be able to do something like that*. And I had really positive English teachers who were really...my English teachers at school were arguably probably more into poetry than my parents ever were.

You know, and we were reading Douglas Dunn and contemporary volumes at the time, which was good I thought for...we're talking thirty years ago. And my English teachers were really into poetry and supported my interest in it and allowed segments of your English lessons to be creative writing, which was great, all that time ago.

John Greening: Very enlightened, yeah.

Rebecca Goss: Even, I think for my English AS level I was allowed to put in a portfolio of poems for some of it.

John Greening: That's terrific, isn't it?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, sure, it was. Yeah. So I think I was very encouraged at school, very encouraged.

John Greening: So tell us how you work as a poet, and how things begin. Does it begin with somebody saying something, or going to a place or reading a book…is there a typical way that a poem begins?

Rebecca Goss: Probably not a typical way. I would say, earlier on in my earlier work, now I'm thinking about this in this interview, earlier work, I think that was very much influenced by something I read in the newspaper, you know, a story, somebody else's story really that sort of stopped me in my tracks a bit. Then I'd think, *Oooh, can I turn that into a poem?*, things I'd witnessed, things like that. It would be very typical for my husband to come home and say, oh, you know, I found a poem for you today or something like that, which is actually how the Pigeon poem…I don't know if you...I'm not expecting you to remember things, John, but there's a poem I wrote about pigeon racing. And that all came from my husband hearing a programme on the radio coming home and saying to me, 'Rebecca, I heard this about pigeon racing today, and you are definitely going to write a poem about it.'

And I said, 'I'm not going to write about racing pigeons, what are you talking about?' but actually he was right. So, yeah, I think that, but it's changed a lot latterly, I found myself not necessarily having that kind of lightning moment of thinking, *Oh, I'm going to write about that*. It's been much more of a slow build of ideas and I really *like* now carrying poems in my head for a long time before I write them.

I really enjoy that, and just spending time, walking the dog or whatever, just thinking about the poem and I'm not frightened of losing it, I can keep it in my head and I really like that period of gestation I allow myself I think.

John Greening: I think I read that you've been doing a lot of chatting with local people about crafts and that kind of thing for your Suffolk poems, which we'll come onto a bit later, because I know you've been writing a lot about Suffolk. So, in your writing, once you get the subject right, what's the most difficult thing to get right, would you say?

Rebecca Goss: Well, that's interesting, right now it's my endings and I've never had a problem with my endings to the point where I did actually for a long time come up... I haven't told very many people this, but I used to see the...I don't know if it ever happens to you, but I used to see the ending first. I could actually…

John Greening: Simon Armitage does that, endings first.

Rebecca Goss: Oh, right. So I would actually carry the last line in my head for a bit. It would come to me quickly, the end. But I told Gwyneth Lewis that once and she was *mortified*; *appalled*. She said to me, 'How could you do that, how could you not just let the poem take you somewhere?', I remember she really told me off. She came to talk to us on our MA. And I told her, so I never really told anyone after that because I thought it was a bit of a wrong way of doing things.

John Greening: Well, tell her about Simon Armitage.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah. And now they're not coming as easily and I'm a little bit cross about that.

John Greening: But does that ending always stay the same?

Rebecca Goss: Pretty much when it comes. Yeah.

John Greening: Fascinating. Have there been blocks?

Rebecca Goss: Yes. I don't write consistently, I'm not one of these writers who gets up at five o'clock in the morning and does her allotted hour or so. I think I've always juggled, I've always had children in my life from the age of twenty-two, I'm a step-mum and a mum, so the poems have had to fit in around a lot of other things that are equally as important to me, so I've never really been blocked, I've been *frustrated*, not latterly, I've been blocked, I've been frustrated, if I can't get to my desk, maybe sometimes. But the big block came with the collection I'm working on at the moment, which actually started six years ago. And I sort of had a plan for it, thought it was going to go in a certain direction, then had to admit to myself that I was finding that very difficult, it wasn't coming easily to me. This approach of, like you say, researching for the book and interviewing people and talking to people about their lives and then translating that into a poem, for me, it just wasn't working. I don't know whether it wasn't *instinctive* enough or I didn't feel left to my own devices, or I think I was feeling more like a reporter with a clipboard, or someone told me that's what the poems were coming out like.

And I just lost sight of it and I just put it in a drawer and I left it for quite a long time. Last year something clicked. And someone actually said to me, 'You do realize this is a much more personal book?' And I suddenly thought, *Oh,* this *is what the book is going to be about.* And I've had a bit of a change and I've realized that those earlier poems about other people's

lives here in Suffolk can actually be mixed in with my own childhood and my husband's new life here and Molly's life, my children's life. And it can all work together, I just thought it couldn't.

And also I'm finding myself touching a little bit more on…there's only one or two poems about the loss of my daughter, you know, how that's affecting me nearly fifteen years on, and I didn't feel I was allowed to do that. I thought I'd done it all in *Her Birth*, and I wasn't allowed to return to that as a poet, because people would think, *Oh my God, she's still carrying around that dead baby*. Surely I was done with that when it came to poems, I couldn't write anymore about it.

And again, it was just somebody saying to me, 'Don't be ridiculous, you of course will always return to that subject'. And so knowing that this book could be much more mixed up has *completely* freed me up. And that's been very positive. But there was a *big* block there, it was making me quite grumpy.

John Greening: So how do we recognize a Rebecca Goss poem? A terrible question, isn't it.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, that's a really hard question. I did a reading once and someone said to me, 'Oh, I would've known that was your poem, if you hadn't read it'. And it was a commission actually, working with scientists, but the poem still managed to involve motherhood, I suppose, in some way.

John Greening: This wasn't with the other Rebecca Goss was it, you've got a poem about the scientist?

Rebecca Goss: Yes, I have. Yeah. No that is another sort of interesting, forthcoming project actually. But this was with another scientist. Just before the pandemic, I was paired up with a virologist in Cambridge as part of a group of poets commissioned by Lucy Cavendish College actually, to do a project.

And I wrote a poem about Zika, and it was really interesting talking to the virologist. She was talking about, you know, disease X, it's always around the corner, we're always being prepared for it. And then of course, six months later we were in the pandemic. So it was...

John Greening: You've got a vaccination poem as well, haven't you?

Rebecca Goss: Yes. But that was written a long time before the...

John Greening: Cutting edge!

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, that was just about going to get my flu jab up the road.

John Greening: By the time this interview goes out, it'll all be ancient history, I'm sure. But yes, it was a cruel question.

Rebecca Goss: I suppose I've probably got the motherhood label on me a bit, but like the confessional one I'm not going to worry about that too much.

John Greening: My impression reading through your books is that it's becoming more and more pure and pure, whatever a Rebecca Goss poem is, it's getting more and more the real thing, the further on we go, you're refining and refining, very distinctive. Tell us about the collection, *Girl*, which is certainly one of my favourites of your books.

It's prefaced by a line from Eavan Boland, 'As time went on, I found the shape of my life'. One of my favourite poets as I say, Eavan Boland, but has she been important to you as well?

Rebecca Goss: Not long before I…towards the end of finishing *Girl*, actually, I came across her book, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*. Found it far too late, I think, in my writing life. But I was

absolutely mesmerised by it. I was just sort of...I'm not a terribly good sleeper and I was waking in the night reading it, and wanting to read it again as soon as I woke up in the morning.

And it was just her careful attention which she paid to not all...not only writing about her own life and her own experiences of writing and motherhood, and the juggles and everything, but you felt really conscious she was wanting to pull in all other women poets close to her and say, *Listen to this, I'm not preaching to you, but this is valid. These are our voices, I'm claiming my own, but claiming yours too.* And yeah, I just felt like I'd found this real sort of guide really, and presence in her; that book was really important.

John Greening: So did she help you give the book a shape?

Rebecca Goss: Yes, and just seeing that line in that about finding the shape of my life. I also feel that that *Girl* is so much... it's *me* all those years after *Her Birth*. You know, this is the woman I've become as a consequence of Ella's death maybe, but this is me, growing up yet again. There are such gaps between my books really, they don't look like it in print but there's the decades…there's my twenties, my thirties, my *forties* really, in the three books. And I think, yeah, that's what *Girl* was, me, just sort of, this is the girl post-…about her… birth experience.

John Greening: It's much preoccupied with physicality, with physical health. I say the vaccination poem. I felt it was a bold style, rather different style. How would you characterize any difference between that and what had gone before in terms of the actual writing?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah. I think I was pushing myself to be slightly – bold is an interesting word – yeah, slightly more, I'm not an experimental poet by any means, I wouldn't ever use that word, but pushing myself with language a bit more to be less explanatory, not quite as narrative, a bit more…slightly more abstract and things like that. And I enjoyed that.

John Greening: Do you have a favourite form or a default form, couplets, you like couplets?

Rebecca Goss: I do like couplets, but someone did haul me up on, not me personally, but in one of the reviews for *Girl*, it was a very generous nice review, but did haul me up on the couplets and just say, it's always couplets with Rebecca, maybe it's time to shake it up a bit, and I did sort of take it to heart.

I do feel pathologically addicted to them. Someone said in…I remember there was a review of *Her Birth*, saying that the couplets made sense in *Her Birth*, because it was like the tick-tock of a heart, that two, sort of, two note…that two beat, that kind of pattern.

I know you can read an awful lot into things, can't you? But I have wanted, in my much more recent work, I've kind of wanted to push at form. I have to push myself a bit at form, I think.

John Greening: We all have a default form.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, we do. And I think mine is couplets, but I know lots of people don't really like them, and I think I have had to force myself to break away from them.

*

RLF Outro: That was Rebecca Goss in conversation with John Greening. You can find out more about Rebecca on her website at rebeccagoss.wordpress.com. And that concludes episode 411, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 412, in the second part of this interview, Rebecca speaks with John about collaboration with artists and photographers, the various uses of pamphlets at different stages of a writing career, a return to Suffolk and

curiosity about rural life, and the continuing importance of loving the process of writing. 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.