

Writers Aloud

Episode 412

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 412 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second part of a two-part interview, Rebecca Goss speaks with John Greening about collaboration with artists and photographers, the various uses of pamphlets at different stages of a writing career, her return to Suffolk and curiosity about rural life and the continuing importance of loving the process of writing.

You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode, number 411. We rejoin Rebecca and John as they begin discussing the influence of artist Alison Watt on Rebecca's collection *Girl*.

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 Moores 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

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translucent language, and Bernard O' Donahue, its narrative compulsion, calling it 'a wonderful book'. *Her Birth* won the poetry category of the East Anglia 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.

Several poems in *Girl* 'after Alison Watt': could you explain who Alison Watt is and what and why the interest?

Rebecca Goss: Alison Watt is an artist, a Scottish artist, and she paints wonderful...she paints in a variety of oeuvres, she's been a portrait artist. But I was very drawn to her more abstract canvases. I saw two of them at the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery several years ago, about 2016, something like that. And they're vast, vast canvases and they're close up twists and folds of white fabric, they're quite mesmerizing. And I found myself just staring at these paintings for a very long time, falling into them, loving them.

And the blurb, as in, in galleries beside the paintings said, that Watt was an artist drawn to the erotic connotations of fabric. That appealed to me. But it appealed to me *so much*, and it said that she implies a human presence in her paintings. And actually the reason she started that series of paintings I have come to find out, of the cloth, is when she used to paint live models, when they got up and left, she loved the imprint they left behind, on the fabric.

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And she thought that was really interesting and beautiful to explore. And that's where it came from. So I was really drawn to all that. And I love things she said about painting and the process for her anyway, but I found myself sort of wanting to go against what she was doing, which is only *imply* a physical presence, and I wanted to take the paintings and actually put a physical presence much more explicitly in there. But my take on ekphrastic work has never been to see the painting, go away and describe it in a poem. I don't see the point of that, I think the poet is purely then just meddling, you know, what do we do, what are we adding?

So I've always said that my Alison Watt poems are about how her paintings made me *feel*. They're not always about what I see, they're just about what they made me feel. And I just had such a strong reaction to them when it came to visualizing the female body and experience in her paintings.

But it was lovely, as a result she got wind on Twitter that I'd written some poems and I sent them to her and then she said I could use one of her paintings for the cover. So it was all –

John Greening: Striking cover!

Rebecca Goss: – So it was all a lovely thing in the end.

John Greening: Yes. So I Googled one or two of them, because it's a whole sequence of poems throughout the book, so it's interesting to see them online as well. Did you originally think of having them all together or were you always going to sprinkle them throughout the book?

Rebecca Goss: I quite like the sprinkle effect. I don't know about you but I think...and I think also because I'd written what was quite a realistic linear narrative, but in sequence form, with *Her Birth*, I quite like the idea of just scattering; I quite like coming across them again, and then you realize, *oh, the poet's doing this, are they, or they're exploring that are they? Because I've found another one.*

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John Greening: So collaboration: the same subject as the 2018 pamphlet, or ‘pamphlet’ is too meek word for *Carousel*, a lovely book from Guillemot, where you are collaborating with a photographer. Tell us about that.

Rebecca Goss: My lovely friend Chris Routledge, who I met in Liverpool, and we sat on a panel together at a literary conference and we were both very nervous and he’s got a great sense of humour and we really hit it off and he was very relaxed and funny and we always kept in touch from that moment onwards.

And that was a long time ago. That was about 2007 when we first met. And he’s a very interesting man, interested and good at lots of different things: writing, photography, teaching. And he approached me to say, a couple of years later actually, though we’d always kept in touch, to say, ‘Rebecca, I’m thinking of starting a blog, putting a few photographs on it. Would you like to write some poems in response?’

And we didn’t think of it as anything more than that. And we did start it. And it was a really enjoyable process of exchanging the work. He’d give me the photo, I’d go away, then send a poem to him. And then once we thought it was okay, we’d put it on this little blog that no one *ever* looked at.

And it’s still in existence. It’s still out there somewhere. And we just carried on like that for a long time, it was a very long time, about eight years or something. And then I think I must have said something about it on social media, I can’t remember. And Luke from Guillemot said, ‘Have you ever thought about turning it into a tactile thing?’

And I said, ‘No, but I’d be interested!’ And then that was it then. But I think I’d already worked with Guillemot on the triptychs before then. So I, I had some contact with Luke and he knew of my work, but I’m really grateful to him for taking on, because he really had that vision, I think Chris and I were so just used to seeing it on a blog and that that was the

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only way you could access it, but, Luke put so much thought into how it was going to...

John Greening: *A beautiful book!*

Rebecca Goss: Well, Chris and Luke spent hours and hours about the paper and the photos. I literally felt I'd played a very minor part in that book. Yeah.

John Greening: But it matters with that kind of thing. There's a... an honourable tradition of such books. I think particularly of Fay Godwin and Ted Hughes's *Elmet*, where they also spent an awful lot of time getting the presentation right, big Ted Hughes he had the whole thing reprinted because he wasn't happy with it.

But did you look back at what other collaborations between photographer and poet had done, or did that interest you?

Rebecca Goss: I knew of some poet friends who had also gone down a similar route. My friend Mary Robinson, she did a collaboration with a photographer too.

I didn't look too much at it, I think also because a lot of the work was already done, you know, as in, on the blog. And there's part of me that thought, *Right, well, that's just going to be a book now*. And then, of course, Chris and Luke became very, very focused on what it was really going to look like.

I didn't step back from it like that, but I would...it was important to us...I love that kind of square shape of it. I think that's come out really well. And we were very conscious... we wanted it to look like the poem was almost like a picture in itself as well against the other picture.

We didn't want the poems to look quite rambly. It was quite conscious how the poems looked on the page as well.

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John Greening: And it's structured very cleverly. So the *blurred* photo leads to one about Moorfields, which we associate with eye hospitals and they're not necessarily the kind of photographs you would think would spark a poem either, always, and yet the poems that emerged from them are wonderful.

Sardines, a chair, the checking-in, a picture of just of a sort bare hotel room, which you get some brilliant images from.

Rebecca Goss: So that, that's quite an interesting one because that's where we didn't fall out, Chris and I, but we were very candid with each other. And he actually was always said he felt quite unnerved if I took his photograph and that was one of them, the hotel, and then applied this narrative out of nowhere, this whole story to it. It's a room with an empty bed in, which looks like a hotel. And I put people in it and their back story. And he was like, 'Whoa, don't do that too much!' But that was really quite interesting. We had that conversation and then we tried it once. I gave him a poem and he went away to do a photo.

But it was really, really...and such a literal interpretation of the poem, and I said, 'No, I don't like that.' So, no, we were quite good at saying to each other, no, that's not working.

John Greening: You've got to allow yourself kind of freedom really, haven't you? So what's the appeal of the pamphlet, the chapbook, a twenty-, thirty-page book, do you think?

Rebecca Goss: Well, I think they're lovely things. Do you think they're lovely things?

John Greening: I do, yes. I'm in favour of them.

Rebecca Goss: Yes, I thought you might be. I think they are...can be an important stage in a poet's life if that's your first route into publication, and I think they're getting more highly regarded all the time, aren't they?

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So I love my first pamphlet. I think they're a great way to showcase a voice and what you want to do. But I love the way now that poets dip into pamphlets – or dip out of the, oh, this is my trajectory, collection after collection – and actually think, do you know what I'm going to...it allows you to step out of that pressure of: I need to find sixty poems for the next book.

And actually, can I just go off and do something a little bit different? You know, explore it just with the same passion and energy that you would a full collection. And maybe as in depth in such a way, but not necessarily have to produce sixty poems and it take five years like it does me, you know?

John Greening: Which brings us to that next collection. You told me that you were working on a whole series of poems about Suffolk. Tell us a bit about that and Suffolk is obviously important to you.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, so I came, I grew up in Suffolk, and then went to university at eighteen to Liverpool and basically stayed away for twenty years, and was up north. And then, came back nine years ago actually. And I never thought I would come back, and of course now I'm back here.

I'm the eldest of four and one of my siblings is back and the other one comes back a lot. And we've often had conversations about how we were so desperate to get away from here, but have all found ourselves gravitating back. And I've met people in the town I've moved to who've...who did the same as me, moved away and then came back.

I don't think it's uncommon and I found myself wanting to write about here, a lot to do with my husband's working life here. He started his life as a...he started it up north, but he's a furniture and cabinet maker and he found a workshop in Suffolk and that was all part of our move to live that kind of lifestyle here.

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And through him – his workshop is on a farm – I just began to see lots more about how rural Suffolk working life operated, found myself getting to know...and because we live in a very old house that we're very slowly, I don't want to say renovating, because that sounds disrespectful and we're not modernising it in any way, but we're just very *gently* repairing parts of it, shall we say, I found myself meeting people like lime plasterers and thatchers and seeing people at work on the farm and Jim's work is so physical with his hands in the workshop.

John Greening: It all sounds a bit like Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*?

Rebecca Goss: Well, yeah, that's one of my dad's favorite books too. So, yeah, I suddenly thought...well, I had this idea then to interview local people who work with their hands and write poems about their lives.

And I have done that, not a huge amount, I suppose, but I met a blacksmith, I spent a day with a farmer and the lime plasterer at work. And I do find it fascinating and I have enjoyed writing those poems. And they are going to be in the collection. I'm definitely not going to lose them. But I found it hard to sustain for a whole book.

And that's when I became stuck and thought, *Well, how am I going to do fifty-five poems of this?* So now I suddenly...not suddenly, but now I'm realizing maybe there's more to explore about my own childhood here and the reason why I've come back, I think, that's what I'm exploring: why did I come back?

John Greening: It's a county much associated with poets. Michael Hamburger I know lived here and wrote about it a lot. Neil Powell lives here, you mentioned Rachael Boast.

Rebecca Goss: Rachael Boast has a connection in a village not far away. Pauline Stainer was living here when I moved and we became friends.

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John Greening: That's right. And so I don't why, Norfolk, something about Eastern England, which does encourage poets. And you've got Crabbe there as well.

Rebecca Goss: Yes, of course. Jim actually ended up making Pauline a writing desk in his workshop.

John Greening: Really?

Rebecca Goss: Yes. So that was a nice connection.

John Greening: Wonderful poet, Pauline Steiner. Are there other things you want to get into your work or are there other genres you want to experiment with, like plays, for example, or children's writing, we were talking about earlier?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, we were weren't we. No, though I admire all other genres, I like reading plays and no...I would love to be able to write a screenplay, but that's just a fantasy, that's just something I think about because I love films as a genre. Yeah, films can actually really inspire me as well, creatively, so I would love to be able to write a screenplay. I met someone on an Arvon course once, and he said, 'Well just go away and write one!' And I was like, well...

John Greening: Easy to say.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, and he did write screenplays. But I thought, *No*.

John Greening: Is there a poem of yours about film or am I imagining it?

Rebecca Goss: Well, no. I wrote about *Mad Men*...

John Greening: About Draper?

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Rebecca Goss: Yeah, Betty Draper.

John Greening: Betty Draper. Do you know, I didn't get the reference there, but there's another poem which mentions Don Draper and I put two and two together...shooting pigeons, that's right, isn't it?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah, it's about a scene in *Mad Men*. Yeah, I'm often inspired by film or some kind of telly, you know, good telly. So I would love to, and I know people who write for telly. I know somebody who writes for a soap and I would love to be able to do it, but I wouldn't know where to start, I guess I feel at the moment.

John Greening: What about a long poem, because your poems are generally not long, are they?

Rebecca Goss: No, they're not long.

John Greening: Have you ever thought of *a* long poem?

Rebecca Goss: So they are going over the page now, John!

John Greening: I mean, you've never considered book-length?

Rebecca Goss: I can't imagine that, I do like reading them, and poets I admire have done it. Like Deryn Rees-Jones, *Quiver*, that was really interesting. And that was a long time ago as well. You know, doing very interesting things there, oh, I don't know, it's taken me a long time to go over the page, let alone write a long one.

I'd have to be very, very sure about what I was going to write about, I think. But you find it easy, don't you, you like the long poem?

John Greening: I think most poets should be stopped from writing long poems. Do you have a favourite quotation about poetry?

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Rebecca Goss: No, but I do have a quotation that was up on my wall for a long that time. It was Joan Didion. And she said...

John Greening: The late Joan Didion.

Rebecca Goss: The late, late – unfortunately – Joan Didion and I watched that documentary about her on Netflix, did you see it?

John Greening: No.

Rebecca Goss: It was several years ago now, it was incredible, her whole body language was fascinating, whenever she moved her arms around and anyway, I admire her very much, but she said this line where she said ‘See enough, and write it down’; but there was a comma after ‘see enough...’, ‘see enough,...’ she paused, and ‘write it down.’ And I thought that was so brilliant on, you know, we’re so used to saying writers are just watching everything and taking everything in and we’re constantly, we’re like sponges and duh duh duh.

And actually it was just the way she said, ‘see enough’ and I thought, *Yeah, it’s about seeing things, but knowing that it is just going to be a part of that maybe, that is the poem or part of that.*

John Greening: Yeah. Seeing the right thing.

Rebecca Goss: Seeing the right thing. I loved that, yeah.

John Greening: That’s good.

Rebecca Goss: So I used to have pinned... that was pinned on my desk, when my desk was in a different room.

John Greening: And any advice you’d give to other poets or wouldbe poets?

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Rebecca Goss: To make sure that you always are enjoying it: the writing, really. I think you get so caught up in everything from rejection... I work with mentees now who can be crushed by rejections, and other poets. You know, I continue to be accepted and rejected in equal measure in my working life, and I'm much more relaxed about it, but then I would because I'm twenty-five years in the game.

But I think, to not let yourself be crushed by that and to understand that your work just wasn't the right fit for that editor at that time. It doesn't mean it's not necessarily going to find a home, but to just make sure that when you are *in it*, you love the writing, and that's the reason you're doing it.

I did meet somebody once who told me they didn't like the writing very much. They loved the going out with the book afterwards and meeting the audience and all that, and I just couldn't get my head around that. For me, it's to enjoy the writing and all the kind of poetry angst that goes with it from, you know, rejections or prizes or social media, and that's always gonna be there now, whether we like it or not.

But to just...and write what you want to write, don't worry about what's being published out there and that you are nothing like that. You're nothing like that for a reason, that might be more interesting. You know, it'll be more interesting for the audience surely, that we're all doing different things.

John Greening: And finally, I haven't really asked you about...we've talked about Eavan Boland and one or two others, I haven't really asked about poets that are important to you, that have influenced you. You mentioned Amy Lowell on the way here? Which is an unusual name to hear mentioned.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah. Do you know why, I think, also because she liked the short poem, didn't she? And you were talking about long poems then. And I am such a fan of the short poem.

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John Greening: Like Pauline Stainer, she's a specialist...

Rebecca Goss: Isn't she, so we've talked about that as well, and somebody said to me once, 'Oh, the reason you don't win any poetry competitions, Rebecca, is your poems are all too short'. But I think...

John Greening: Well, it's true. How often does a very short poem win one, and would you choose one if you were judging it?

Rebecca Goss: Exactly. Yeah, I'd be *tempted*.

John Greening: I did once when I was judging. Yes, controversially.

Rebecca Goss: Oh, well there you go, you see: 'controversially'. But I love the short poems, the *challenge* of them to make them work, and how much can you pack into a short poem?

John Greening: So Emily Dickinson?

Rebecca Goss: Yeah.

John Greening: What other names of poets that you would recommend to others, perhaps poets that people don't know that you are particularly fond of?

Rebecca Goss: I always say Sharon Olds because I loved her growing up, but latterly I've really enjoyed collections by Ella Frears and Rachel Long. But one of my favourite collections is Louise Glück, I don't know how to pronounce...

John Greening: What a wonderful...oh, Louise Glück.

Rebecca Goss: Yeah. *The Village Life*? Yes, or is it called *The Village*? I love that collection. Yeah, latterly I've been reading a lot of prose and you know

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how you said I was influenced by film, I'm also very influenced by novels. So I don't have to be necessarily reading poems when I'm writing poems. I can also be very influenced by fiction, *hugely* influenced by fiction.

John Greening: It's interesting how writers in a particular genre often don't read much in their...I remember William Golding saying he never read novels, he read poetry all the time!

Rebecca Goss: That's interesting. And I think, so, like, Marilyn Robinson, I love the detail she goes into and that she could spend, it could be two pages on a piece of paper burning in a fire, but there's something to me really poetic about that and I can be very inspired by that too.

I've just thought of my all-time favourite poem. I can't believe...because I was only talking about it the other day to someone. One of my all-time favourite poems. And you talked about the confessional poet, funnily enough, is Anne Sexton's, 'Young', which is one of my absolute favourites. Just about the young girl looking back up at her parents' house and it's become hugely resonant.

And lying outside in the grass with the stars above her, asking, you know, wanting to give the stars her questions. It's been very relevant to my Suffolk book, that poem. Yeah.

John Greening: Is there a, one of your own poems that you would regard as a signature poem, or perhaps the poem you want to be remembered by, or the poem you perhaps always read at a reading that defines you in some way?

Rebecca Goss: Well, that's really hard. That's really hard. Because even though I feel I'm so defined by the book about Ella, in a way, I have become defined a bit by that, I probably wouldn't want to pick one from there, really. You know, so I think it would either have to be right back at the beginning, like something from *Anatomy*, like the man who has that

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sexual fantasy about the girl with the one leg, because to me everything's in that, you know: sex and the body and a marital relationship and a kind of pseudo-domestic situation, that kind of thing. Home and sex and the body, really. That would, if there was one that ticked all those.

John Greening: Yeats said that poetry was sex and the dead. That nails it really.

Rebecca Goss: There you go. Yeah, it does. It does.

John Greening: Rebecca, it's been a delight to talk to you. Thank you very much for inviting me into your home.

Rebecca Goss: Thank you very much, John. It's been lovely to have you here.

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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 412, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 413, Adriana Hunter considers the limits of automated translation and Brian Clegg rues our human tendency to reduce the world into rigid categories.

We hope you'll join us.

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