

Writers Aloud

Episode 414

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 414 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Ian Ayris speaks with Ann Morgan about the therapeutic power of storytelling, football's role in male expression, learning to write in your own voice and discovering the joys of Shakespeare.

Ann Morgan: Ian Ayris never meant to be a writer, but when the voice of a story started speaking in his head, he felt compelled to write it down. There followed many more stories and a trilogy of novels called *Shining like Rainbows*, as well as a novella. Now a teacher of Creative Writing, Ian started off by telling me more about where it all began.

Ian Ayris: I suppose real writing didn't start for me till I was thirty-seven, maybe a little bit older than that; I vaguely remember winning a short-story competition when I was about nine. It was a Wombles competition and me mum tells me about it, I don't remember anything about it, she might be making it up to make me feel better, but that might have been my first go at writing.

Ann Morgan: And when you were thirty-seven, what happened?

Ian Ayris: Really odd — I've never seen myself as a writer, I still don't in a lot of ways, but I was coming back from Tesco's with my daughter, who...I don't know how old she was, but she was old enough to be in a pushchair,

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and I'd this voice come into my head and it was sort of telling me a story, but it was *really* nasty: it was swearsy and it was quite violent.

I'd worked in mental health for twenty-five years; I knew it was nothing to worry about, I knew there was a distinction there. And I went home and my first instinct was to write it down, partly just to get rid of it.

And I...it turned into a short story and I thought, *What do you do with this, what do you do with stories?* And the internet was, I don't know how long it'd been about for, I'm not a technology sort, but I found a writing site on the internet where people were putting on their stories. So I thought *I'll put that on.*

A couple of hours later I got an email from someone from the site saying that they moonlight on the site as a publisher. They don't say they're a publisher when they're on the site, but that's what they are. And he said, 'Can I publish your story?' And I said, 'Yeah.' And that's pretty much where it started, I suppose, officially.

Ann Morgan: Wow, and so voices, are all your stories voices like that, is that how it always goes?

Ian Ayris: It's either voices or pictures. It always seems to be sort of an internal stimulus rather than seeing something in the street or overhearing someone, you know, and then extending, expanding on that to make a story. It always seems to be at the moment an internal stimulus, and I don't know why.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, it's really interesting that idea of voice, because something that really strikes me in your writing and that I was really impressed with in your book, *Abide With Me*, which I really enjoyed was the rhythm, the sense of rhythm, this really powerful rhythm in the words and the way it *is* like a voice talking the whole time. How do you get that effect, is that just something that comes, do you hone it, how do you achieve that?

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Ian Ayris: I play guitar as well, I used to teach guitar, so I suppose I'm quite musical in some sense. So I've always seen writing as music, as rhythm, and speech especially as rhythm so when I write in the first person, when I'm editing, I'll read it out and it's like something feels off-key or a wrong note, and that will be a word I then take out.

Then I'll read it again and it sounds right. So I guess I write with my ears as much as anything else. So perhaps that's where the rhythm might come from.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. There's also a really strong sense of mission in your writing. Like at the start of your... I don't know if it's at the start of the trilogy as well as at the start of *Abide With Me*, but you dedicate it to anyone who's ever been lost, felt lost. And there's a real sense that this book is a kind of reaching out, a sense of handholding.

Ian Ayris: It's funny cos I get very choked up very easily and I've got tears in me eyes just thinking about those words. I think for those who ever felt lost or the day too long or the night too long, and I'm a trained counsellor as well, so I've been with a lot of people in some very dark places and it's only when I started writing, totally unconsciously, realised I was writing about my own dark places.

I realised I was the one that had been lost quite often in *my* life. And the characters in the books for me, they were so real that whatever happened to them, I felt, you know, so...

Ann Morgan: You talk about John Sissons, he's almost like an alter ego sometimes. You write in the introduction to the trilogy about how John was sort of using your contentment as a time to test his sadness or his real boundaries in some ways.

Ian Ayris: I mean it really was, all three books are *hugely* autobiographical, although *none* of them were written with that in mind, absolutely *none* of

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it. It's only when I look back, then I realised, *Wow, that was me*, and like, *He's speaking the words that I could never say*.

There was a time in one of the books where he was completely stuck at the same sort of time in my life, that I was stuck. And this is going to sound a little bit over...but we helped each other find our own answers. So when I found an answer, I was able to find his answer.

So I was able to then carry on the book, so yeah, he's *completely* an aspect of me. I mean, I didn't even mean to write the first book, I had no idea of a second book, didn't even think of a second book or a third. It was only when, I'm guessing, my life was in a particular place, that I then heard his voice again. And I thought, *Right, now it's time to write the next one, because he's telling me*.

Ann Morgan: Because he goes to some really dark places, doesn't he? And he ends up in, well it's not a borstal, but the equivalent, at one stage. And he's caught up with the gangs. Is there a sense of, kind of 'there but for the grace of God', that's a route I could have gone down, that could have been me?

Ian Ayris: I think not as such, in that my childhood wasn't as precarious as John's. It's more that the feelings he was going through when he was in these places were my feelings, so when he was in the prison, he was in juvenile detention centre, like the borstal, he was lonely and he felt he'd let everyone down.

I felt like that, but I'm guessing that when I wrote it – dramatic licence or whatever – I constructed somehow a vision of John where he could put words to those feelings that I could never put words to. And he needs to be in a place of loneliness and feeling like you've let the whole world down, to be able to find those words.

Ann Morgan: And something that I felt was a real parallel actually,

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between the work that I try to do and your writing is: I think in my fiction, I often try and take people into the life of someone who you might cross the street to avoid. And show how it feels to be that person and I felt very much with John Sissons, there is an element of that in what you were doing.

Ian Ayris: Oh, it really was. I mean...I wasn't conscious of writing, I'm never really that conscious of writing when I'm writing. So it comes from, I suppose, much more of an unconscious place. And I've always been...it's funny because I'm a twin and I'm the younger twin, and I suppose, in my brother's shadow.

I've felt like that, whether that's been the truth or not, probably doesn't matter. That's how I saw it: so the underdog, that sort of side of life has always been something I've been drawn to, and only ever done, if you like, working-class jobs, and I've met people that were incredible.

And yet, like you say, people perhaps crossed the street if they didn't know their story, you know, and so I felt a lot of the characters in the books...I think I describe one of them as just like he's sitting there, inside, just doing the best he can, like the rest of us. So I think, yeah, it all comes from a very dark, deep place.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. I mean there's a quote that I found really powerful in *Abide With Me*, when you say, 'Because there's holes in this world see, holes, and the likes of Tommo and Keith and me and Kenny, we just sort of fall through em. We weren't never bad kids, we just didn't have nothing to hold onto. That's all. That for me sort of seems to sum up what you were doing with the book.

Ian Ayris: It is funny just even hearing that gives me chills a little bit, because I don't know why I wrote any of those books or why I write at all. But when I hear that, I think *That's why I write these books*, because I know that if I hadn't of written these books, they're books I would like to have read.

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And when some of the messages that I get from people that have read them, are so emotional...when I teach adults to write books now I'll say the only reason I have is to inspire, I see no other reason to write books; so yeah, hearing that, it's like hearing an old friend talking, yeah.

Ann Morgan: Something that's really impressive as well in your work is how you write the East London vernacular on the page. I think what's really interesting about it is, and it reminded me of books like Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and also Graeme Armstrong's *The Young Team*, more recently, because what's different about what you do and what those books do is that if you read a classic English novel where someone's speaking in, say, what you might call 'cockney', you'll see apostrophes from missing letters and things and all that.

You don't do that, you miss off the 'g's on what we would call a Standard English word because that's the way the characters say them. But you don't have an apostrophe showing there's a 'g' missing because it's not like you're writing for a Standard English reader, you're writing this is what this person...

And I think that's a really important political statement in a way. You are not taking Standard English and showing how it's being altered, you're presenting a different kind of English. How did you go about getting that system right on the page?

Ian Ayris: I suppose, underneath all of it, the approach I've took to writing is, it just it is what it is. So all of the characters, you look at them, you hear them, and there's no secrets. This is what you are, take it or leave it. But when I first wrote the book, I don't know how, I can't remember how now, but an agent from New York read the first three chapters and wanted me to send the rest, and I *had* the apostrophes on, when I first wrote it, because I thought that's what you do you know, I had no education to speak of in terms of writing, but I thought I knew that, knew when you did that. And she said, 'The thing is there's loads of them.'

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So like, when you're reading, you're drawn to all of these, little almost like raindrops I suppose you could see them as, and this is what made me realise she actually got what I was trying to do with the book. She said, 'Look, people know there's a 'g' missing, you know, you don't have to put in an apostrophe to tell them.'

And I took them out and suddenly it was like a veil had been lifted and it was like a style that just revealed itself and it was plain and it was unapologetic, and I thought, *That's it*. And when another publisher asked me to write a novella, commissioned me to write a novella, I wrote it without the apostrophes, and he said, 'There's no apostrophes.'

But by then I was a lot more confident because he said he absolutely loved the story, he said, but could you put the apostrophes in, and I sort of said, 'No', and it was one of those times when I sort of...I never envisaged being a writer, so I've never had any pretensions of any sort.

And I thought, *No, I don't write like that, that's not how I write*. So I said to him, 'Look, I don't write like... I don't have them in, so it's up to you what you want to do, but I don't want the apostrophes. He's a great bloke, and he said, 'Well, alright then', and he published it anyway because he loved the story, and that meant so much in terms of validation for me.

It felt like: *I have got a voice in this writing world and it's saying, this is how I want it. If you like it, great, if you don't, that's all right as well.*

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Something else I really loved about your book is how you presented football in it. Now, I have to confess, I'm not a football fan and my heart did slightly sink when I think, *Aw, I've got to read the novel that focuses on football*, but actually, it really drew me in.

I found it really...and I've always find that novels that can write about things that aren't your interest, but really take you into that, that's a real strength. That's a real sort of testament to the writing. And something

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you showed me about sport that I don't think I've ever really realised before, is how it's kind of a focus for magical thinking in a way for grown ups, for playing.

So that kind of, *Oh, if we don't mention it, we might score, we might kind of...let's not jinx it.* And it's also like the chance for grownups, maybe particularly for men, because it is quite a male-dominated world isn't it, to be children again, to sort of hold onto that magical child's *I can make, I can change the world if I just do this, if I follow this in the right way.*

Ian Ayris: Oh, definitely. And it works the other way that if you get the right result, your world has changed, even for that just one week. The world is as it should be. I mean, for me, I love football. I'm not a West Ham...I know the book centres on a West Ham supporter, but I support Dagenham. But a lot of the emotion, well, the emotion comes to me as a Dagenham supporter, which is why it's so bleak, I would imagine at times. But for me, I've always seen football as a vehicle for men to show emotion, whether with each other or to express emotion.

I mean, especially if you look at say the East End culture, where it's better now, than when I was a counsellor in Dagenham, it's much better now when men will talk about emotion much more than they used to. But football has always been that vehicle where they could show emotion, where they could cry, where they could get really angry.

So in the book, to me it's not the football that matters, it's the relationship between the father and the son that football facilitates. I think that's what I wanted to get through in the book, was the sense of belonging for someone that doesn't feel they belong anywhere. They've got this family, where they can belong.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, it's that sense of family and belonging and being able to express things, isn't it? Because that's another thing you do really powerfully is showing when people can't say things, can't express things.

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There's so many scenes in the book where people can't tell each other how they're feeling and that seems to be a real strength in your writing I think that you can show the reader and the reader can sit there knowing but the other person in the scene can't access that.

Ian Ayris: It would be wrong of me to say what I've always tried to do writing because I've never been conscious of what I do with writing. But when I reread passages, I'm one of those people that sometimes...I am not great in saying what I feel, so I'll feel it and I'll feel it really deeply, but I won't put words to it. When you get two of those people in a room, it's very difficult. And so the male relationships in the book to me are really important because you've got the bravado of the football, and it's not all about football to me, I don't even see it as a football book, to me it's a book about relationships and how, if you can't find the words, those feelings just stay there and they fester and they turn into other things. So through the books, it was my journey of finding the words, putting words to what I feel, and how I have felt.

So to me all three books are just my therapy. The fact that other people have enjoyed them to me is a bonus. It's not even...it's wrong to say it's not that important because it's amazing some of the things people have said about them, but it wasn't the point of me writing them, I suppose is what I mean by that.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, and some of the stuff you showed, say the gangs, for example, John gets caught up after – when he is an adult – he comes out of prison and he gets caught up in the gangs. It's a world a lot of people don't know very much about, how did you access that?

Ian Ayris: So yeah, a lot of the gang stuff, I know people that have been in prison, but I've not been myself. So probably from popular culture, I would say the gang stuff, without it being...obviously didn't want it all Danny Dyer, you know, so to me it had to be real. Whatever I wrote had to feel real. So, like, I've never been in prison, but the loneliness had to

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feel real. So not having experience of some of the things I erred on the side of feelings. So it then became a bit easier to write then.

Ann Morgan: That makes sense, I like that ‘erring on the side of feelings’. I think, again, that’s something that in my writing I try and try to do. I don’t always manage it, I find my head gets in the way.

Ian Ayris: It’s the universal I suppose.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. That’s right. So obviously you write a lot of short stories. You’ve talked about your novels as being your therapy, how is short story writing different for you from the novels?

Ian Ayris: It’s sort of not, it’s all the same stuff. And all the short stories come from that place of just literally making it up as I’m going along. And I find it’s the not tampering too much with what first comes out, is what gives them their voice and their meaning.

Ann Morgan: You’ve talked before to me about this idea of opening a curtain and looking out. Can you explain, because I found that a really powerful way that you, I think it’s something you tell your students, can you explain what that is?

Ian Ayris: Yeah, because...I was never...no education to speak of regarding English. I was never taught how to write stories, how to write books, anything at all. So I would just write in whatever way come to me. And I’ve always loved reading and there’s a Walt Whitman poem where he talks about looking through an interstice — which I had to look up at the time, I had no idea what it meant.

And it’s like just a crack in a window — and the whole poem is like through that, and the idea that when we go through life, we just see slices of life, we see minutes, seconds, and yet in those moments can be so much.

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So when I teach people to write stories now, teach adults to write stories, I say don't go for the beginning, middle and end, just that little glimpse. But if you can put meaning into that little glimpse, that's worth a hundred pages, you know? So yeah, the stuff I write, it can be anything from...I suppose my average is between 100 and 500 words for short stories, or flash fiction.

I read it somewhere about like...some of the most powerful writing it's just that thing of: you get in quick and you get out quick, so whether that's a scene in a book or a book in itself. One of the things I teach my students is when you've written a short story, take out the first line or two lines, take out the last two lines and see what you've got, because you'll almost always have a better beginning and a better end.

And the same with a book, look at the first chapter, does it really need to be there, you know, the last chapter, how far are you winding down? So that idea of just giving what needs to be given. So just say what needs to be said, why say anymore, and it's quite intense in that way.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. And also another thing that we have in common is we both blog. And you, on your blog have been doing a series: 'Scenes From a London Bench', which is a really fascinating series, can you tell me a bit more about that?

Ian Ayris: Yeah, what prompted it was, I've been teaching children in schools in East London the last few months how to write stories. And one school's in Leytonstone and I was going for me lunch, just sitting on the bench down Church Road in Leytonstone where the station is, at the bottom. And I forgot to bring a book with me.

So probably that's what sparked it, because I thought *If I've not got a book, what am I gonna do?* Because I'd nothing to write on because I left all that in the school. So I was just watching and it was almost like a film playing out; suddenly I was taking notice of stuff that probably has happened all the time around me that I never take notice of.

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So there's so much, and I just thought when I got back to the school, I noted loads of things down. Went back and wrote it down, and I really believe that things appear in my life at the moment to teach me about myself. So whether that's people who appear in my life at the right time, situations, opportunities...and I'm thinking...on the train on the way back, I'm thinking, *Why was all this happening today, to me? Why did that man walk past and say those things to me? Why did that woman and the pushchair walk past me? Why was that man across the road doing that?* It was almost like a play, just for me. So when I wrote it up, I wrote up what happened, and I think I viewed it with a bit of philosophical talk as well, and the response from people was amazing, so I done another one.

I was waiting to post something in a post office in Romford and I thought, *That's vaguely London. Perhaps I'll do something on that,* so wrote that, and Liverpool Street Station...done another one. So yeah...to realise that all around me are clues to who I am, and I just don't look. So yeah, and I don't write nonfiction, and I'm really enjoying it.

Ann Morgan: Fantastic, and you've also recently started a project to read a Shakespeare play a week. Can you tell me what's behind that and how are you finding it?

Ian Ayris: Yeah. Again, at school I was in the bottom class of English at school, all through school. I didn't do...I done an English Literature degree when I was, I think forty-one, Shakespeare had always been a name – I'd never read any, at all – but the more...I'm obsessed with reading, always have been. But perhaps the last ten years or so I've been much more obsessed with, like, the classics, if you like, because I've never read them and so many of them had quotes from Shakespeare, like *Moby Dick*, so many quotes from Shakespeare and I thought, *I've got to start reading that.*

Meself and me wife was in a secondhand bookshop in Felixstowe, they've got two secondhand bookshops in Felixstowe that are incredible. And

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there was this complete set of Shakespeare on the floor. And I'm not great at buying things for meself; we've never really had the money to splash it on anything at all.

I saw this set of Shakespeare and it was all of them, complete set, sixteen volumes I think it was, or twelve volumes, all the sonnets, and it was forty quid. To me I thought *That's forty quid, that's such a lot o money*. So me wife said, 'D'you want them?' I said, 'Yeah.' And we went, we left, and as we were going, we was, like, halfway down the road and me wife said, 'Look, just get them.'

So I went back and just bought them, and they sat on me shelf for probably a year, and then I thought, *I need to start reading*. So I thought, *One a week, see how that goes*. And the experience...I started with *Hamlet* — I'd read *Macbeth* before. That's right, I've read *Macbeth* before, just a one-off — so *Hamlet*, then I read *King Lear* and what amazed me was almost the story didn't matter.

The story seemed universal. It was the use of words; the language was just almost from another planet. I'm guessing everyone's got their own experience of Shakespeare in terms of what they get from it. For me, it was like, *Where did he come from? you know, How can someone just write this stuff?* And like the *King Lear* with portrayal of madness, which, reading it again, it seems more akin to Alzheimer's than anything else.

And I watched the Anthony Hopkins film version after I'd read it, which is one of the most *amazing* films I've ever seen in my whole life. And I have to say, I think I preferred *King Lear* to *Hamlet*, but I'm reading *Much Ado About Nothing* this week.

Ann Morgan: Oh, bit of a change.

Ian Ayris: Yeah, and I imagine it was hilarious in fifteen-whatever, but I'm not falling on the floor at the moment, but yeah, I'm sure it will...yeah,

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but I'm just looking forward to just going through the rest and thinking...

Ann Morgan: There's a line in that play that I always think of, where I think Beatrice says, 'Not till a hot January', and I'm thinking *We're not far off now*.

Ian Ayris: I must say, with, em, is it Beatrice and Benedict? — it's really funny, yeah, it reminds me of me and my wife, we worked in the same place and we were sort of like that.

Ann Morgan: Sparring with each other.

Ian Ayris: Yeah, without realising anything at all, but yeah, I think you can only have so many overhearing conversations, people pretending to be other people. But then realising soap operas nowadays have used *all of this*: Shakespeare created *EastEnders*, you know, which is awful to think of, but yeah, I'm absolutely loving it, absolutely loving it.

Ann Morgan: What would you like to achieve with your writing, are there any goals left that you'd like to achieve?

Ian Ayris: My life has become more teaching writing now than actual writing. And a lot of people ask me, *When's the next book?* And I think ah phh...so I don't see myself as a writer.

My world is writing, if you like, and I love the teaching, but I also know that whatever books or stories I need to write, there'll be the right time for them to be written. But as far as ambitions, just the fact that people get anything from anything I've written, that's as good as it gets for me.

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RLF outro: That was Ian Ayris in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Ian on his website at ianayris.org. And that concludes episode 414, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming

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up in episode 415, Polly Morland speaks with Caroline Sanderson about filmmaking leading to vocational nonfiction, blending ideas for different disciplines and telling human stories.

We hope you'll join us.

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