

Writers Aloud

Episode 415

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 415 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Polly Morland speaks with Caroline Sanderson about how the skills acquired during a fifteen-year documentary filmmaking career fed into her vocational nonfiction writing, allowing her to blend ideas from self-help, psychology and philosophy with reportage of ordinary, yet extraordinary human stories.

Caroline Sanderson: Polly Morland is an award-winning writer and a documentary maker. She worked in television for fifteen years, producing and directing documentaries for the BBC, Channel Four and Discovery. Her debut nonfiction book published in 2013 was *The Society of Timid Souls: Or, How To Be Brave*, which was a *Sunday Times* Book of the Year.

Next came *Risk Wise: Nine Everyday Adventures*, written while she was a faculty member at The School of Life, and *Metamorphosis: How and Why We Change*. Her most recent book is *A Fortunate Woman: A Country Doctor's Story*, in which, in the tradition of John Berger's *A Fortunate Man*, she shadows the female GP who doctors in the valley where she lives.

Polly, prior to working as a writer and publishing your first book, *The Society of Timid Souls*, your career was in television. So give us a snapshot of the kind of films that you were working on, and I'm interested to know what you brought from that career into writing books.

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Polly Morland: So I spent about fifteen-odd years working in documentaries and I went in at absolutely at entry level: answering the phone, picking up the executive producer's dry cleaning, and then gradually worked my way up and I, in the end, was making films across quite a broad spectrum.

I did quite a lot of contemporary current affairs, not the kind of *Panorama* investigations, but a kind of snapshot, I did a big series about terrorism, a kind of history of terrorism that came out not long...I think on the first or second anniversary of 9/11. So that was tracking back through terrorism as it had manifested it across Europe and in Latin America.

I did a big series about...oh, I'm trying to remember my professional back catalogue! Yeah, I did a big series about the kind of economics of organized crime, that was for the BBC, and looking at the economic structures that supported money laundering, all clustered around a lot of fantastic human stories from both former criminals and victims of crime. That was a fascinating series to work on.

I did some arts television as well, so basically, in short, I worked across quite a broad spectrum of serious documentaries, and it was the most fantastic education in a certain mode of storytelling, I suppose.

Caroline Sanderson: And you travelled quite widely as well?

Polly Morland: Oh, I travelled very widely for it, which was *glorious*, through my twenties and early thirties. So, I was looking back through the films I'd made: I've filmed several times in America, but filmed in fourteen or fifteen different countries around the world at different times, and it's a very particular mode of travelling. It's a very particular way to experience a different place and to immerse yourself in the stories there. So it was a wonderful experience. But also, there's something of the detachment that you get, particularly with a camera actually. If you have a camera and a microphone on a boom and a crew with you, there's both

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a level of intimacy, and there's also...it's a balancing act really between a kind of detachment, a distance, an impartiality, but also an intimacy of getting people to talk, trying to help people forget, forget the camera, forget the boom microphone.

Caroline Sanderson: Getting to the heart of the story?

Polly Morland: Getting to the heart of the story and trying to find a way of giving people both the space, but also some structure to tell their own stories. So, I learned a huge amount in that and I felt passionately vocational about it, and to *some* extent that's totally connected to my writing life, that sense of telling stories.

So primarily, I don't see a break between the two careers at all, both at a kind of practical level in that my methods such as they are, still have a lot in common with the way I worked in documentaries, how I now work as a writer, though I work solo now without the camera crew, et cetera.

But the objective in a sense, the telling of a human story, *that* runs through the whole project and remains the thing I feel vocational about really.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, because all your books, I guess, involve interviewing people and getting them to tell their stories, and you're just recording it in a different way.

Polly Morland: Yeah, there is a difference in the interviewing, I really notice that, and perhaps *particularly* for my most recent book where I conducted really long interviews and they were very conversational, and you'd be kicked out if you interviewed like that in television, very conversational, very back and forth.

And so that rather more structured Q and A in a sense, probably what we are doing in this interview, because that's what you do when it's recorded, increasingly the interviews for my books have become more discursive,

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which I do think at some level builds trust and intimacy and adds to the layers of insight.

So though it's never particularly matey, I've spent such a long time in television, I do have a slightly Graham Green 'splinter of ice', you know, I have the capacity to maintain distance. It never troubles me that I'm sort of getting too close. But there's something about that very conversational way of interviewing that I found just incredibly rich.

It *really* yields insight. And so there's definitely respect in which the encounters that I have, with my writerly hat on, as opposed to my documentary hat on, have a depth to them that I find hugely satisfying and that certainly builds on what I was doing years ago in TV.

Caroline Sanderson: So your first book, *The Society of Timid Souls: Or, How to Be Brave*, I think is such an inspired subject for a book because I've often thought in adult life, well, increasingly in adult life, that being brave is something that we all have to do at certain times. And I'm guessing that it was inspired by discovering that there actually had been a Society of Timid Souls?

Polly Morland: Well, actually, I came across the...so I'd been kicking around an idea...so my first book coming out of television, and I'd covered quite a large number of quite relatively extreme stories: with terrible war trauma, and death and destruction and extremity in them, and had swirled around this question of courage and what the hell it is, in television for years, without ever quite...without *at all* getting to the bottom of it, without ever really facing it as an idea on its own.

And also probably a sense that I was anything *but* brave you know, really a sense of being quite an anxious and timid soul myself. So I'd been kicking around an idea for some time and then had done a huge body of research. And then I'd come across the original Society of Timid Souls, which was this kind of self-help group in New York, just in the wake of...just

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immediately after Pearl Harbour, and it was a self-help group for stage-frightened musicians. And I'd come across this *immaculately* written, beautiful little sketch in *The New Yorker* that was written about...the journalist had gone to a meeting of the Society of Timid Souls that was full of terrified piano players and quaking sopranos.

Essentially the methods used by this man who...the musician and man who'd assembled the Society of Timid Souls, who was called Bernard Gabriel, Bernard Gabriel had come up with a kind of extemporary form of exposure therapy, so the pianist would be playing her sonata, quakingly, and he would throw the Manhattan telephone directory across the room and slam doors and go — 'Ah, you're *terrible!*'

People would break wind, sound claxons, and the point of it being...it was a very kind of comic sketch, this little piece in *The New Yorker*, but what it tapped into was an idea about, as per the title of a very famous self-help book, it was a kind of 'feeling the fear and doing it anyway'. It was an exposure to the thing that terrifies you, that is the way to summon some sort of courage. And that just seemed a very interesting lens through which to look at this much vaunted virtue in a sense.

So rather than it being a kind of intrinsic quality that people just have — 'Gosh, I'm jolly brave' — rather than it being that, that it being an acquired virtue and something that is learnt and rehearsed and built in very extemporary fashion, I suppose. And that then seemed a very interesting prism through which to then go and talk to a very wide spectrum of people who would be deemed to be brave in manifold ways and to explore how they had, in a sense, summoned some metal to face down what they were facing.

Caroline Sanderson: And so you've got soldiers in there, and you've got performers and tightrope walkers and surfers...

Polly Morland: And the terminally ill and people — freedom fighters —

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and so it was a really sort of, then, deliberately wide snapshot of those people. None of whom I think would call themselves brave.

So there's also something very interesting about an examination of courage which you realise, it's something that's sort of...the book in part is about what we talk about when we talk about courage because I think people in the midst of being incredibly brave generally don't perceive themselves as being brave.

Caroline Sanderson: And what about writing, is writing for you about feeling the fear and doing it anyway, in any sense?

Polly Morland: Oh, gosh, that's a good question. I remain *riddled* with self-doubt; I mean, probably most writers are.

Caroline Sanderson: Like every writer!

Polly Morland: Yeah, tremendously filled with self-doubt and the slight absurdity of raising your voice never, never that far away. Yes, I think there were definitely things that I learned within the process of writing that book about discomfort being okay, being part of the process, being an entirely natural part of the process. I would hesitate to put writing on a par with many of the courages in that book, which were quite considerably upwind of sitting at your desk and writing.

But there is something about...there's an interesting aspect to that book: so one of the areas of fear that I looked at is a kind of reputational fear or the fear of stepping out of the crowd, the fear of being conspicuous, of non-conformity, just metaphorically putting your head above the parapet. And I definitely think there is an element of that that is in every writer's life, not least because we spend half our time sitting in a quiet room on our own, writing. It's a very insular, quiet, tucked away, invisible, line of work. And then you publish and suddenly you have to pop out and come and do conversations like this. And so there's always a point of transition that requires a bit of guarding your lines in writing, yeah.

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Caroline Sanderson: I could ask a similar question, I guess, in relation to your next published book, *Risk Wise: Nine Everyday Adventures*. So this is a journey into the world of risk. You profile nine people who work and live with risk every day: there's a Paris Opera ballet dancer, a family living on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, and I guess, a similar question is, you were considering what risk means and the balance in our lives between being too cautious and being too reckless.

But there's a risk to be taken in writing as well, isn't there, you have to risk that something will work because you're going to invest so much in it?

Polly Morland: And also, and this is probably particular to all of my books, is that I try to tell stories that aren't just there as human oddities, like, here's a great story, or here's another great story. But they knit together some profound and ancient ideas about how we live and about the human experience and how one can take those ideas whether philosophy or psychology, and how those play out within individual human experiences. And so there is an element of risk in terms of trying to take those rather grand ideas from the academy, if you like, and putting them to the test in the real world and taking them out of the ivory tower and exploring them in real life.

The risk being one of how to give those ideas a kind of weight in the real...this goes back to my documentary discipline, it's that I don't think documentary is a *light* art, I don't think it's flimsy or shallow, I mean, it can be, sure it can be, switch on the telly, very easy to see that. But I think that there are, in those individual stories, there are profound truths as anyone who's ever read a novel will know.

And so it's trying to use that journalistic process to explore some of those more profound ideas about how and why we live as we do, that feels quite a risky project creatively, at some level.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, I totally get that, because you write the kind

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of nonfiction that I love, which is genre bending, it's a blend, you blend ordinary human stories with...there's some self-help in there, there's philosophy, psychology, reportage, a bit of smart thinking, and a soupçon of memoir as well, we get a bit of you. And I think it's quite a grand ambition in nonfiction.

So I can see where the risk taking comes in because that blend, it's got to come together, hasn't it, and it's quite a wild ride knowing whether it really will come, and the mix will come out how you want it.

Polly Morland: Yes, and there have definitely been stages during the writing of, probably particularly my early books, of feeling like I'm carrying a large platter with a very soft set jelly on it, that could all fall apart at any given time.

But I do think I feel quite vocational about the purpose of that. I'm horrified by an idea where journalism and human stories sit in one quite easy-to-digest category, always in bite-size chunks. And that the profound ideas are the preserve of philosophy and possibly the novel, and I've always found myself inspired by the nonfiction that is audacious in terms of the ideas it takes on. That's the aspiration, goodness knows whether I reach it, but that's what I'm reaching for.

Caroline Sanderson: I admire that aspiration, and also they're helpful to read your books as well. I'm thinking of *Metamorphosis*, the third book, which is about change in our lives, and change is one of the fundamentals. So you think of *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, talking about the fundamental thing, change, the fact that life makes no sense at all, so don't try to understand it, and humour, which I think is a wonderfully three-pronged attitude to have life. Yes, embracing change is something that we all have to do, and it can be one of the most problematic things that we have to do in life, can't it?

Polly Morland: And bewildering; *fundamentally* bewildering, the fact that

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it unfolds by increments or sometimes it comes about in quite catastrophic happenings, but that incremental change is unfathomable. And if you think about it, sits at the heart of every novel, every Shakespeare play, its place so central, and remains very difficult to fathom, I think, for everyone at some level.

So in a way coming up with, or pulling together – rather than coming up with – pulling together, some frames through which to think about it and some stories through which to think about it, felt like quite a useful project in some sense. Yeah, it certainly felt useful to me and I hope it's been useful for some of my readers.

Caroline Sanderson: I think there are tales of serendipity and happenstance in most writer's lives. And an example of this, I think I'm right in saying, led to your fourth and most recent book, *A Fortunate Woman*. And we were talking about your travels and how far you went in pursuit of stories as documentary maker, but this fourth book is very much rooted where you live, in the valley where you live, a very rural, hidden, secluded place. In fact, you can probably hear on this recording the wind. Whistling away!

Polly Morland: There's a storm coming.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, so we're in deep countryside here. So tell us about how this latest book came to be, because it's quite a different work for you I think I'm right in saying?

Polly Morland: Yeah, it is. I've had quite a big-ish gap between my last book and this most recent one, during which I've been giving a lot of thought to looking for a story, a single story. I adored writing the earlier books and they began with an idea and then composite stories were pulled together in order to serve that idea.

But I definitely had an itch, if you like, I really wanted to find a single story and I'd been kicking around various ideas. But what was so extraordinary

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about the story in my most recent book is that it found me, I mean, at risk of sounding a bit woo-woo, I'm not particularly woo-woo about it!

I'm not sure about the fates, but it did find me. So what happened: this was a few months into the pandemic, and my lovely elderly mother had been very, very unwell, so she was suffering from Alzheimer's and had had a very, extremely chaotic, difficult, gruelling, gruelling year and then was admitted to hospital, caught Covid and was then moved into a care home where she was to spend the rest of her life.

And you know, it had been an experience of...very intense experience of healthcare in a sense, and contemporary healthcare. She had excellent care at every turn, but she wasn't being looked after by someone she specifically knew. So that's in a sense, the background to this. I am in her house clearing it because if we're going to pay for this care home, we need to clear the house.

My mum adored books, adored books, and her house was silted up to the rafters with books, there were books on *every* surface. The bookcases were stacked, double depth. You'd remove one lot of books and there'd be a whole other row of books behind. So I'd been standing there all day in one of the rooms in her house packing up boxes of books.

And I'd spotted this book that had fallen down the back of one of her bookcases. And it had never hit the floor. It was sort of hung on a metal strut at the back of the shelf. I should say at this point that my mum lived 150 miles away from me in the valley, up in the Midlands.

Anyway, so I fished this book out, pulled it off the strut, smoothed the dust off it and opened it. And it was a book by John Berger who I'd read some of, so I'd read *Ways of Seeing*, and was familiar with some of his work on photography, but I'd never come across this book and it was called *A Fortunate Man*.

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I'd never even heard of *A Fortunate Man*, and I'd opened it and it's a narrative about a doctor working in a valley and has these beautiful black and white photographs in it. And I'd opened the front page and there was this photo of the river down in the valley *there*. [Indicates to interviewer.] I mean, *literally*. I know the field.

Caroline Sanderson: You recognised it?

Polly Morland: Oh, totally, yes, you know, pin sharp, I know the field, I can picture the tree, the hedgeline, the hedgeline's moved a little bit, but *instantly*. And I thought, *What is this?* And I plugged it into my phone to find out. And sure enough, Berger's book was written about a doctor in the valley, *right* in the section of the valley where I was.

Caroline Sanderson: In the sixties, wasn't it?

Polly Morland: Yes. So it was in the mid-sixties. And so the book is an account of a doctor working in this valley in, I think – Berger and the photographer, Jean Mohr, shadowed the doctor – in 1966, and the book was published in 1967, and actually this edition had been from 1971. So I realised that my mum had bought it when she was pregnant with me, so I was born at the end of 1971.

But what was so extraordinary about it is that, I *knew* the doctor, not well, but I *knew of* the doctor, it's a small community here. I knew of the doctor who serves that community today and is much loved by that community. So there's something about a collusion of connections, where as a family we'd had this very intense experience of a possibly rather transactional model of healthcare.

I'd found this book, it was about a place that I know and love, and I, in a sense, knew the successor of this doctor just over fifty years on, *and* we were in the middle of this extraordinary event, the pandemic, this extraordinary experience. And so the whole thing sort of coalesced in about twenty minutes, into a, *I've got to write this*.

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Caroline Sanderson: Well, sometimes it's fast for writers, isn't it, when things kind of...?

Polly Morland: Yes, it was, literally, I had the title, I said, 'Right, I know who it's about, it's about a woman this time', and I'd very much wanted to tell...I've written a lot about men in my previous books, some women as well, but I really wanted to tell a story about a woman. Yes, so it came together.

What I didn't know at that point was that there was another whole layer of coincidences, where the doctor today, had read the same book, *A Fortunate Man*, as a teenager; been profoundly influenced by it. She's not local, she's in a different part of the country and was already working in the practice in this valley before she even realised that the book was about the valley where she'd lived.

So there were these double layers of serendipity and coincidence. And so when I'd got in contact with her and said, 'Have you ever read *A Fortunate Man*?' She was: 'Yes, I have, it had the most extraordinary impact on my career pathway'.

Caroline Sanderson: Not only that, but you were writing about her work as the GP in the valley and a GP very embedded in the community. And we should say actually that like the original *A Fortunate Man*, *A Fortunate Woman*, is again a work of, I wanted to call it reportage but that makes it sound a bit cold.

You blend in nature writing, we get this extraordinary sense of the landscape and the natural world that you're both working in. And it's also a collaboration with a photographer as the original was, so you work with a photographer called Richard Baker, who also took photographs for *Risk Wise*.

I love that, so the photographs are interspersed through the book. What does that bring to the collaboration for you, apart from the obvious,

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illustrating it. It's almost going back to your documentary days when you had words and pictures, isn't it?

Polly Morland: Yeah, oh my goodness, the joy of it, because occasionally I have missed pictures, so there are pictures in *Risk Wise*, but not pictures in *The Society of Timid Souls* or *Metamorphosis*. So what does it add, so you say it's an illustration, in some sense I see the pictures, particularly in *A Fortunate Woman* as being in some sense, parallel to the story rather than purely illustrative.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes. That wasn't a very good...I didn't put that very well. They certainly enhance it and give us glimpses, it's not as if it's an illustrated book, but they just give us wonderful glimpses that enhance your storytelling.

Polly Morland: And so I think they tell their own story and so this is the thing...that's wonderful about documentary making is that you don't always have to say everything. Sometimes you can show something and you can create a mood or you can create a breathing space. And so there's something in, if you like, not quite the *content* of the storytelling, but the sort of music of the storytelling, the cadence of the storytelling, that's really *thrilling* to use pictures in this narrative.

So yes, it gives a sense of place. So you can see, *Ah, yes, I can see the shape of the valley, I can see the texture of the woodland, or I can see the shape of the doctor's eyes when she looks over at a patient*. So the photographs are both of the landscape and we had a few days of photography access to the surgery, obviously with patient permissions and all the rest of it, quite complicated from that point of view. But so there are these observational photographs of her at work and beautiful landscape photos of the landscape.

Caroline Sanderson: And I think what it achieves is, on the one hand, I guess you could say it's a documentary record of a particular time that we've all been through because you can see photographs of the doctor at

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work and wearing PPE and obviously that's very much recorded in the text, so in that sense it's specific to a time and a place, but there's also a universality to it in terms of thinking about themes of what it is to doctor, what it is to care for people at different times of their lives.

And for that reason, you are deliberately...you don't name the doctor, you don't name where it takes place. And that's very powerful because it makes us think in much more general terms about what medicine is, and in a kind of ancient sense really, what it is to tend to people and look after them.

Polly Morland: And how very central the doctor-patient relationship, the warmth of human connection is to that medical process. You know, there are various medical studies that have now looked at the kind of medical efficacy of continuity of care and the impact on patient outcomes.

And even on lower referral rates, lower hospital admissions, even lower death rates, the mortality rate with good continuity of care is lower. You know, greater patient satisfaction, greater physician satisfaction. There are many metrics by which continuity of care and its efficacy and its importance can be measured.

Nevertheless, it's something that has perhaps slid from view in contemporary healthcare under manifold pressures, economic, social, and so on. But this book tries to look at that through stories. So you can look at those statistics, the ones I've just listed, and statistics tell a certain story.

But without really exploring the story, the human stories at the heart of that, it's hard to communicate that. And so I think if the book had a purpose or an aim, it's to communicate the value and the subtlety and the nuance of those relationships.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, I think human stories run through all your work, don't they, human storytelling, as a writer? But I wondered what

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you feel are the preoccupations that run through all your work, and maybe always will?

Polly Morland: So, having spent, many, many, many, many years interviewing people and telling their stories, I remain as fascinated as I ever was by people's inner lives, and I think there's something about the telling of those stories and the exploration of those inner lives.

And, regardless of background, regardless of circumstance, there is such a world, it *is* the world in a grain of sand. I like the idea of a world in a grain of sand, and I like to take quite a democratic approach to the notion of an inner life, so an inner life is not just the preserve of writers, of intellectuals and politicians and people that you might see on the telly...everyone has one in there.

And so I have a sort of endless fascination and warmth towards the subtleties of people who aren't normally interviewed really, or that aren't... you know. And I think that's the thing I want to communicate. I think I'm more interested in the people that you perhaps haven't heard of, than the ones you have, and finding a way to give voice to those stories feels like a good use of my time. I feel quite vocational about it, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: Thank you so much, Polly, it's been a great pleasure, listening to you.

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RLF outro: That was Polly Morland in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Polly on her website at pollymorland.com.

And that concludes episode 415, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 416

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in 'My Favourite Author', RLF writers explore the influence that favourite authors have had on their own work.

We hope you'll join us.

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