

Writers Aloud

Episode 416

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 416 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode in the second instalment of our 'My Favourite Author' series, RLF writers speak about the influence of favourite authors on their work, considering the technical, personal, and cultural effect that prominent literary figures have had on their admirers.

Ann Morgan: One of the most common pieces of advice given to those keen to write is to read. Small wonder then that favourite authors often have a profound impact on the way writers work. In this episode, we talk to Royal Literary Fund Fellows about the impact that their favourite authors have had on the way that they put words on the page.

The big picture contributions that famous names have often made to a particular style or field can be transformative. For Jane Rogers, this has very much been the case when it comes to the inspiration she draws from her favourite playwright, Samuel Beckett.

Jane Rogers: Samuel Beckett's drama for me achieves something which almost no other contemporary or modern dramatist achieves, which is that it's both spiritual without being religious, funny and tragic at the same time, but also perfectly theatrical. And I think what's incredible about Beckett is he creates his own theatrical language, which is universally understandable.

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It's visual as well as verbal, and it couldn't exist anywhere except on the stage. One of the things that I find very frustrating about a lot of theatre as it's performed is that it seems to be a very...almost purely verbal form, and that what used to be particular about theatre has migrated either to film or television, or to those few theatre companies that are purely theatrical and who often don't work with a set text.

So I'm thinking groups like Complicité, whose visual style is so extraordinary, but whose approach to text is improvisational. And I think Beckett is one of the very few artists who writes for the theatre, who combines for me something that is visual and verbal and perfectly theatrical. But also philosophically, I don't think one can watch *Waiting for Godot*, or *Endgame*, or *Krapp's Last Tape*, or any of those very short dramas without thinking that here is someone who somehow manages to encapsulate the meaning of life and the lack of meaning in life, so succinctly with such economy and with such compassion and humanity.

And although Beckett resolutely rejects God and religion and all of those elements that he grew up with, there is also something so humane about his work and so understanding of the human condition. I think they're works of great profundity and that's I suppose why I can't imagine that anyone wouldn't think Beckett was their favourite writer.

Ann Morgan: Poet Stephen Romer finds similar things to admire in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who he says has played a profound role in shaping modern poetry.

Stephen Romer: He invented a conversational style and a specificity that really becomes the bedrock of a certain type of English lyric, the convention bank, as we call it. The loose simile he derided, he said, natural images should be fused together by the imagination, not just held in loose solution with it or with each other.

He defined the imagination, that fusion of separate elements, which has

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become, I think, for the post-romantic sensibility, a touchstone of not only great poetry, but any poetry. And he waged war on the fanciful, the mere attitude or statement, which is still with us today. He was a metaphysical mind, but he also had a grasp of specifics.

Ann Morgan: Yet an understanding of large-scale considerations is only one of the things that writers often take from the work of those they admire. Technical considerations and insights into craft can be every bit as valuable. For Lorna Thorpe, the opening of one of Charles Dickens' most famous novels provides a masterclass.

Lorna Thorpe: I just recently reread and it opens with this description of fog and it's fog everywhere. But what's wonderful about this is the way that Dickens actually brings the fog...the fog is a metaphor for the story as a whole. So the fog comes out from the streets into Chancery and into the Lord Chancellor's head, and it's just a brilliant evocation of the fogginess of this court case that's been going on and on forever.

I read an interview with Martin Amis recently where he was saying that one of the things you get better at as a writer is getting your characters across town. Getting your characters across town sounds easy, but it's actually really difficult and it's often the boring bit. They've got to go from A to B, how you get them...what Dickens does is he uses these journeys to great effect, so in *Little Dorrit*, for instance, instead of taking the straight route from A to B, she crosses one bridge and comes back across on another bridge.

And the reason she does that is because of the traffic in London at the time. And so he uses...he takes characters off into side streets to show how busy the traffic was. So he gets his characters across town in a brilliant way.

Ann Morgan: Insights into craft can sometimes be even more direct. Laura Hird returns repeatedly to a technical guide written by her literary hero, Patricia Highsmith.

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Laura Hird: Strangely out of character, she wrote a great writing guidebook called *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, which I always recommend to students when I'm tutoring Arvon courses. And it's an incredible book about, not just suspense fiction, but how to plot a novel, how to carry the subplots through.

And I just find it, for such a supposed curmudgeon, such a giving thing to do to other writers, to share all these tips and things, although they were all relating to her own stories. But that makes it all the more fascinating; you know, looking into the processes she went through. There's so many clips that you can now watch on YouTube of Highsmith talking about her work, she'll always fascinate me, and I always return to her books. There's no one quite like her as far as I'm concerned.

Ann Morgan: Paula Byrne contends that few writers can be as instructive on the craft of wit and insight as her favourite author, Jane Austen.

Paula Byrne: Not only was she such a pioneer in terms of realism, in terms of the heroine-centred novel, in terms of the technical abilities that she had, her development of free and direct speech, which is just pure genius; memorable characters, fantastic dialogue.

There's a phrase that she uses in *Emma*, when she talks about human disclosures and she says, there's something always a little mistaken in human endeavours and human disclosures, we don't really ever fully know each other. She'll somehow spin a sentence that you just almost sit back and shock and think, *Wow, that is so profound.*

It's almost like reading Tolstoy, you just suddenly get this profundity of an observation about human behaviour that is utterly stunning. She's so full of wit and wisdom, that's why to me, she's so incomparable and I'm *staggered* by the genius.

Ann Morgan: Even when a writer doesn't believe much in their own

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success, their work can be hugely influential. Karin Altenberg found this to be the case when she encountered the novels of the Australian author, Patrick White.

Karin Altenberg: He thought that his books wouldn't be read for a very long time, but I certainly keep reading and rereading his work. I think they are extraordinary, epic, panoramic, cinematic novels, usually set in Australia, but completely universal in terms of topic. He said that it was abstract painting that made him start to write from the inside out, and I think that's exactly what he does.

His characters are fully psychological beings and in fact they stay with you, so I feel I know all of them. The worlds that he creates are quite mundane, they're ordinary people, but always in the midst of some huge drama it seems. He's very good on women, especially independent women, and I feel I know the characters like Laura Trevelyan and Theodora Goodman, Eudoxia, and Ellen Roxburgh, and sometimes I even think I *am* these women.

Ann Morgan: For some authors, writers we admire can even act as companions when the going gets tough. Dipo Agboluaje finds that he often turns to the work of Arthur Miller when he struggles to solve problems in his own plays.

Dipo Agboluaje: What he does is vividly portray problems in a way that makes an audience member sit up and listen and pay attention as it were. Pay attention to that little man on the street, pay attention to the little woman who's struggling. Try not to be too judgmental because all they're trying to do is live the dream, but with the one hand tied behind their back.

I've always been interested in stories about the little man trying to make it, and so that's why every time I find myself in a bind or in a problem, trying to fix a problem with a play or something, I always return to Miller.

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To his plays and to...he's got this big fifty-page introduction in one of his play collections and I always return to that for nuggets of wisdom and also to remember the reason why I'm writing, that there is a...in Miller, there's a fierce morality, and I think when I read Miller, it makes me remember that as a writer that there is a moral obligation to my characters as well as to my audience.

Ann Morgan: Knowing another writer's work inside out can be extremely powerful. Claire Harman for example, feels that she has internalized the words and style of her literary love, Sylvia Townsend-Warner.

Claire Harman: I think about her works in some form or another, I think, every day. I've read all her works that are published and unpublished and her use of certain words has imprinted themselves on certain situations and objects. So it's a sort of super-knowledge. It's a knowledge of an oeuvre that I certainly don't have of my own oeuvre, I mean, I just don't know my own works as well as I know *her* works.

And subsequently knowing something that thoroughly, means that it's like a sort of veil over things. Her description of things and feelings and situations is impressed on my memory in a way that I find extremely exciting and enlivening.

So all the years that I've been reading her and remembering her, I've fallen in and out of love, and mostly in love, with a lot of other writers. But just that continuous interest in her has been remarkably enriching, I think for the whole of my life, not just my reading life, but just being able to tune into her sensibility and her really unique take on the world, her philosophical bent, her remarkable sort of genius, which is free of circumstances of gender and time, her actual life, which of course I've researched and know a lot about. But her mind is very, very free, her intelligence was very high, and she has a kind of battery power in her intelligence, which keeps one interested also as a reader, there's a kind of liveliness about everything she writes. I think it's been very inspiring

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to a lot of people, but certainly to me. I think even though I've got other writers like Nabokov, whom I absolutely adore, Alice Munro, William Trevor, all these wonderful writers who you go back to again and again, and I keep copies of all those writers and others. In every place I go to, I'll have another, a duplicate copy, because I can't bear not to have an Alice Munro story or a Nabokov book.

But Warner kind of overarches all that reading by being someone whose work I really know so thoroughly that it's almost as if I've been an amanuensis or something. I feel I've got a stake in it, a cognitive stake in that work. It comes to mind very, very frequently, it's embedded in my mind very deep.

Ann Morgan: For some this internalization goes even further. Clare Pollard, for example, freely admits that she has helped herself to many of the structures and techniques she has encountered in the work of Anne Sexton.

Clare Pollard: Because of her, I've always had the confidence to alter the facts a bit. She talks about 'faking it up with the truth', and I really like this idea of giving your poems the kind of texture of reality, but you're in control, you can always hold something of yourself back. She has a book called *Live or Die*, which she calls 'a fever chart' for a year, she says all the poems were written in order that year, and I copied that structure for my book, *Look, Clare! Look!*. I also realised her collection *Transformations* was a big influence on me, which is where she retells all these fairy tales in this very modern anachronistic voice full of soda pop and penicillin and stuff.

And all my work has involved retellings, actually, of old stories from the ballads in *Changeling*, to Ovid's Heroides. And I use quite an anachronistic voice for that actually. In my latest collection *Incarnation*, actually, I take quite a lot of children's stories: Hamelin, *Pinocchio*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and kind of retell them.

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So this idea is something I've nicked off Anne Sexton. And there's so many other things I nicked off her: she's great at dramatic monologue, she's great at having an intimate addressee: loads of her poems have kind of 'darling' in them and things like that, 'my dear', I totally nicked that.

Ann Morgan: But admiration does not always lead to emulation. Nick Holdstock, for example, is adamant that he would never try to write like his hero, Thomas Pynchon.

Nick Holdstock: Pynchon is the sort of writer who's not afraid to be genuine and deal with these huge questions, and yet somehow able to be incredibly playful while doing it. Pynchon's novels are full of, like, ridiculous songs, absurd moments, there are mechanical flying ducks, just ludicrous things that happen. And yet, whilst you're enjoying yourself, there's also tragedy in the background.

And in Pynchon's case, because so many of the novels are historical, the tragedy is that you know how the books are going to end because they're going to end in the imperfect present that we're in. So I guess Pynchon for me remains this ideal of having perfect command of both the sentence and then, you know, these huge long novels; they may lose their way in places, but they are trying to circle around these quite difficult themes.

So I don't think I try and write like Pynchon, I wouldn't even dare. I would tend to go to the more personal and individual level. But yeah, I think people try and read Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and they often talk about not being able to, and I understand why, it's a very difficult book.

It starts with one protagonist and then it sort of forgets its protagonist for a few hundred pages and then comes back to him, which for most readers is not going to really work. But for me, it's good that people try and read these kinds of very difficult books because they have rewards that are richer and deeper in some ways than the ones you can just get from reading a novel once or even twice.

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Ann Morgan: Indeed, for some writers, the power of the work of authors they love lies in the permission it gives them to move away from the accepted and the known. Martina Evans found the novels of James Joyce gave her precisely this.

Martina Evans: I think he gave me permission to do certain things and I think he's got something quite haunting about him. Because I think one of the things *Ulysses* is, is it's a haunted book. It's haunted by Irish history and it's haunted by the lost language, Irish, which I'm beginning to miss more and more as I get older, because I wasn't a very good student of Irish. And he put things into *Ulysses* that were so familiar to me, the sound of certain words, idioms, things you wouldn't write about, for instance, in *Portrait of the Artist*, somebody writing about what it feels like when you wet the bed, that was very liberating for me. And also he wrote with his ear and I write with my ear, and it was exciting. Frank Budgen, the friend of James Joyce, said that James Joyce's favourite instrument was the sound of the human voice. And I think that's what I really took from him. And he *was* a poet, and I think in a sense a lot of *Ulysses* is poetry.

Ann Morgan: Max Eilenberg also names James Joyce as his favourite author; encountering the Irish novelist's work at an impressionable age, Eilenberg was stirred by Joyce's individual and unique style and the impetus it gave him to develop his own approach to storytelling.

Max Eilenberg: I was going through a period where everybody else was reading – I don't know, what they were supposed to read – Charles Dickens and things like that. It made no sense to me, I had no connection with that world. I tried to branch out, I read, I remember so vividly, a Victorian writer, H. S. Merriman, a book called *The Vultures*.

It made absolutely no sense to me, it was to do with a world of adulthood. I remember feeling so clearly, *How can he write with such knowledge, as if he understands everything in at least three dimensions, with an experience that I just don't have as a child?* And then I came across the great *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

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And this is how it begins: ‘Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo’. And I thought, *That is my man, that is my man! This is a writer who can do different voices.*

And from that moment on, with the help of a *fantastic* teacher at school and then subsequently at university with the help of the great, humane, Richard Ellmann, who wrote *the* book, not just on Joyce, but on Yeats as it happened, and on Wilde, I made my way through the whole of Joyce’s work and a more flawed, complicated man who could write in any way he chose, and leave you gasping. I don’t say he’s the easiest, I don’t say I go to him for relaxation, but he *is* my favourite author. He taught me that you can choose your voice.

Ann Morgan: That was ‘My Favourite Author’, an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this episode were: Jane Rogers, Stephen Romer, Lorna Thorpe. Laura Hird, Paula Byrne, Karin Altenberg, Dipo Agboluaje, Claire Harman, Clare Pollard, Nick Holdstock, Martina Evans and Max Eilenberg.

You can find out more about these writers’ work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

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RLF outro: And that concludes episode 416, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 417, Alexandra Benedict speaks with Doug Johnstone about being a writer at three, the allure of dark and disturbing themes and experiencing synaesthesia. We hope you’ll join us.

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