

Writers Aloud

Episode 419

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 419 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Ian Ayris reveals how stories have been his constant companions, accompanying him through the darkest periods of his life, and ultimately shaping his identity. Then Elizabeth Cook explores how losses of all kinds shape us and may sometimes lead us to richer discoveries. First, here's Ian Ayris with 'The Stories of my Life'.

The Stories of my Life

Ian Ayris

THE AMERICAN WRITER, Edgar Allan Poe, once wrote a story of a man dogged by a mirror image of himself — a stranger who turns up in times of crisis to reveal the man to be morally corrupt. The story ends with the man running the stranger through with a sword, thus killing himself in the process. My life hasn't been quite so Gothic, but it has been a life defined by reflection. I was born in Dagenham, 1969, an identical twin. Even now, in my fifties, I am still mistaken for my brother. My life has been one of constant comparison, a life dominated by a search for my own identity. I am a walking simile unable to escape the prison of mirrors I was born into.

My mum dressed us the same, for a while. We went to the same schools,

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played for the same football teams. We were known as ‘the twins’ or sometimes individually as ‘twinny’. And all this time, I looked on from the outside, observing, trying to find the details that might define the difference between us. My observing turned to daydreaming, spending much of my time staring out of the classroom window, and I soon fell behind my brother at school. As my brother studied Shakespeare, I was sitting at the front of the class down the corridor explaining to the lad next to me that ‘live’ – as in the verb – and ‘live’ – as in the adjective – are spelt the same but mean different things. I can see his burnished, apple-round face now, raging at me for apparently ‘winding him up’.

It was at this time, I had begun to read through the Charles Dickens books I’d seen at my Nan and Grandad’s house. The focus Dickens placed on the downtrodden and the dispossessed appealed to me immediately. I fell in love with his use of words. Even though I understood probably less than half, it didn’t matter. They sounded so playful, so beautiful, and so amazing — and the fact he had literally made me laugh out loud – and still does – was a huge thing for me. I became joyfully lost amongst the ragged inhabitants of Victorian London, its dreary courtyards and narrow streets. The world Dickens created became a place within me, a place I could retreat to when my own world became too much. It is a place, in many ways, I have never truly left.

Looking back, I can see my failure at school was an unconscious effort to create a tangible difference between myself and my brother, something others could use to tell us apart. I left school at fifteen as my brother continued his education.

A poem by Walt Whitman, called ‘There Was a Child Went Forth’, tells of a boy who everything he experiences becomes a part of him. Stories became that for me. Stories became the way I made sense of everything, and my insulation from a series of grim experiences in the world of work in which I found myself.

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I remember trying to read *The Outsider* by Albert Camus as I, and three or four other lads, bounced around in the back of a white van on the way to a day's work in a gin factory. I was meant to work there for a week, but a day was all I could manage in that gin-soaked circle of Hell. I next found myself working in a factory that made doors for the backs of lorries — spending much of my time putting nuts and bolts, and various other necessary fixings for the construction of the doors, into small brown boxes, wrapping them in tape and labelling them with a marker pen.

Break times were spent in the factory canteen where I found myself almost the only one not eating a bacon sandwich and reading the *Sunday Sport*, or some other dubious publication. Ridiculed for being a vegetarian and for reading *actual* books, I would climb one of the thirty-foot stacks of cardboard in the factory at lunch, do some yoga there and read. I vividly remember being up there reading Voltaire's *Candide*, as well as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig. Again, that need to carve an identity, a world of my own, seems obvious now, but back then, it felt more like surviving. I worked in that factory for five years — the characters from the stories I read, my constant companions.

At twenty-seven years old, I was struggling in a difficult marriage and, in terms of where I was going in my life, was utterly without direction. I needed to get away. I needed a space to reflect. Armed with a rucksack full of bits and pieces from a list I'd taken from a camping magazine, a tent, a sturdy pair of walking boots, and several maps — not that I could read maps very well, but I felt better for having them there — I set off. I had the vague idea of getting to Denmark and heading south for Italy, but no real plan. I boarded the ferry at Harwich, in Essex, and headed for the Danish coast. Tucked into the top of my rucksack was a journal, a paperback copy of *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie and *Gitanjali* — a book of Indian poetry by Rabindranath Tagore.

I spent the next month not knowing where I would sleep each night or where I would be going each day, but for the first time in my life I had

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the space and the time to write down my thoughts. I remember sitting on a bus crossing the Alps, almost in tears at the beauty of it all whilst the other passengers – clearly on their way to work or school or something equally monotonous – read newspapers or looked at the floor. I spent one night sleeping in the bus stop near a graveyard in a tiny German village in the middle of nowhere. I fell asleep on the side of a road near Munich, waking to find a policeman kicking my boots to see if I was alive — and consequently being threatened with a night in the cells if he caught sight of me again. I was thrown out of a hotel on a frozen five o'clock Innsbruck morning, my clothes mud-spattered and bedraggled from the day before, the manager wanting me out of the building before the other guests woke up.

I was in the Dickens novel of my dreams.

As I wrote these experiences in my journal, it was as if something shifted inside me. I had spent my life reading about the stories of others, all the time not realising I was the central character in the story that was my own life.

After spending a month travelling in this way, methodically filling the journal with my observations on what I thought and felt and believed, I returned home and signed up to train as a counsellor. I had caught a glimpse of what made me tick, and I wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn what made others tick. Why they do what they do, why *any of us* do what we do? Especially, why we *keep* doing it — even when the results of our actions cause harm to ourselves or to others.

Three years later I'd qualified and was working in a counselling agency in Dagenham, listening to stories of heartache, of courage, of absolute searing pain. It was as if the characters from the stories I had read all my life had leapt off the page and were sitting right before me, crying real tears. It was my job to listen to the story each client told, to walk the darkness with them, to help them make sense of who they had been, who

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they were and who they might become, ultimately helping each become the author of their own destiny.

It was during this period that I wrote my first story.

I was forty-one years old.

Within the next two years, my publishing credits totalled one novel, a novella and almost forty short stories. I had been interviewed on the radio and in newspapers, I'd given talks at libraries and a local college, and signed copies of my novel on a book tour of Waterstones. I was often asked during these experiences what my writing process was. I'd reply with the absolute truth — I hadn't a clue. I just wrote what I heard inside my head. I saw – and still see – my writing process more akin to channelling than any deeply thought through process. I truly believe my lack of education in terms of how to write was the key factor here: I didn't know how to do it, so there was no undoing to do, so to speak. I was free to write however, and whatever, made sense to me.

Deep down, on some level, though, I think I was always aware the voices I heard telling me the stories I wrote were only ever aspects of my broken self.

Everything I wrote – novel, novella, short stories – they all came from that same unconscious place. I knew it was dark in there because the emotional energy it took to bring each into the light was enormous. I wrote the last third of the novel in tears, and in the novella I put into words for the first time some of my darkest moments and deepest anxieties. It was as if I was writing solely to make sense of myself, much as I'd spent my years as a counsellor helping clients make sense of themselves.

Even though I'd stumbled into being an author, that primal feeling of inadequacy with which I had always defined myself was still there. It was time to slay some demons, so I signed up for an Open University English

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Literature degree, spending five years studying literature in the way I didn't have the chance to do at school. I came out with a First, leaving a hundred demons in my wake.

In the meantime, I had been asked by Dagenham Library if I could write and present the Beginners and Advanced Creative Writing workshops for *Pen to Print* — a new Arts-Council-funded project they had set up. I had never taught anything before and my experience of public speaking had been restricted to the library talks and the college. I had no idea where to start in terms of setting up two twelve-session workshops, but I said yes, anyway. Saying *yes* had become an important maxim for me — a way of forcing myself from out of the shadows.

From realising I was the central character in my own story, to helping clients become the central character in theirs, I now had the opportunity to help writers create stories of their own.

A successful application to become a Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund followed, spending my days helping university students with their writing. What became apparent with every student I saw was how important their own story was. Helping them place their field of study within the context of their lives became a vital part of the work, often reinvigorating the student with a real sense of purpose.

My own story has come full circle. As well as running the adult *Pen to Print* workshops I now run workshops in schools, teaching children how to write stories, encouraging them to trust in themselves, that to write a story is to create magic.

Stories have kept me company in bleak times. Stories have helped me make sense of myself, and the world around me. And in the depths of my own darkness, stories are that shining light, that blazing fire that keeps warm the small boy who felt so lost and inadequate, so long ago, looking out of that classroom window, searching for who he really was. Sitting

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around that same fire with him now are Oliver Twist and Pip, Huckleberry Finn and Thoreau, John Valjean, Ivan Denisovich, John Yossarian, Walt Whitman and a hundred other souls searching for their own truths.

That little boy inside me, he searches for himself still, but he no longer searches alone.

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That was Ian Ayris. Next, here's Elizabeth Cook with 'The Art of Losing — and Finding'.

The Art of Losing...and Finding

Elizabeth Cook

I lost my way
I lost my car keys
I've lost my sense of smell
I lost my mind
I lost my cat
I lost my best friend

THE ACT (if it is an act; maybe it's a condition) of losing covers a multitude of experiences from the trivial to the devastating. Recently I lost my voice. This is not a metaphor but an awkward physical reality. I didn't answer the phone for days, unable to make myself heard. Where had my voice gone? Though I suspected that after a few days of self-imposed, quite welcome, silence and honeyed drinks, my voice would return, there was a small, nibbling anxiety that it would not. When the sun dips down behind the horizon, appearing to plunge into the sea, will it really rise up in the eastern sky again tomorrow? When a loved-one goes out to the shops or away on a long journey, can you ever be sure that you will see them again?

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I am forever looking for things that I have lost; books in particular. While a book is lost I set great store on what it contains, thinking of the vanished book as the key to all knowledge. There are those that I have lost consciously — like the book about self-portraits that I found and lingered over, years ago in a secondhand bookshop in Sudbury. I decided that I could not afford to buy it and proceeded to regret that decision ever after. In vain have I pored over library catalogues, off- and online, to identify that particular, irreplaceable masterpiece. The ‘loss’ of that once-seen book has had the effect of sharpening a long-standing interest in self-portraiture that may yet bear fruit.

Then there are the many books that I lose in my own home. These are not so much lost as misplaced. What keeps me from finding such a book is often the fact that I have misremembered its appearance. I am looking for a slim, battered, red spine with the title running vertically down it in thick black letters, whereas the book I need is dumpy and brown and the title has faded and worn into illegibility. Not long ago I was preparing to run a workshop on nature writing through the centuries. I remembered that I had inherited my grandfather’s copy of Charles Darwin’s *The Voyage of the Beagle* and thought that Darwin’s writing and meticulous illustrations could play a useful part in the weekend’s work. I repeatedly searched all my shelves for the beautiful, gold-tooled, leather-bound, nineteenth-century tome that I seemed to recall. The book I eventually found – several months after it was needed – was no such thing. It was octavo and plain. No leather; no gold. The paper, thick, slightly foxed with age.

In the course of searching for what I have lost, other forgotten treasures are often discovered. I occasionally envy the well-organised people who can always put their hand to whatever it is they need, whether it’s a book or a brooch or a tube of wood glue. But they seldom experience the thrill of finding things they didn’t even know they’d lost; whose very existence they’d forgotten: a childhood toy, a letter sent by their grandmother when they were seven, a perfect toffee-coloured ammonite picked up on the beach at Lyme Regis. These discoveries, which would never have occurred

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without the loss of something else, are akin to those finds in a bookshop or good library, when it is a book in the *vicinity* of the one you set out to find that proves the most interesting and fruitful. The end-gaining process of online ordering and the unimaginative suggestions generated by computer algorithms yield no such inspirational delights. Instead of merely finding (laying one's hands on a wanted thing) there is *discovering*. Walter Benjamin considered losing one's way to be an art: he writes, 'Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling.' To Benjamin the art of losing one's way is a dynamic process allowing for revelation, discovery, and growth. A very different matter than an irritable failure to adhere to a plan.

The title of Elizabeth Bishop's justly-famous villanelle, 'One Art', suggests (in line with Benjamin) that there may be an art to losing. The phrase, 'The art of losing isn't hard to master' occurs four times in this poem with one slight, crucial, variation towards the end; with each recurrence the possible significance of the phrase deepens. The poem suggests that loss may be a stealthily continuous process: that each small loss opens up the way to a greater one. An ever-deepening concatenation. You begin by losing small things like keys but this minor irritation is merely practice for the graver losses of loved houses and, worse, the person most dear to you. If some losses are trivial, others are irreparable and devastating. The art of losing may require the greater art of surviving loss.

If loss can be seen as a continuous process the same, as I've already suggested, can be said of finding. The word 'invention' is derived from the Latin, *invenire*, 'to find'. Though there may be nothing new under the sun, all novelty being simply a matter of recycling and rearrangement, all creativity – all 'invention' – is essentially an act or a series of acts of finding. The very act of searching sharpens the mind. As I leaf through a book which I believe to contain *exactly* the quotation I'm looking for, somewhere on a right-hand page, about a third of the way down, I am alert to other passages in that book that may have previously passed me

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by; and not just to these: I am in that heightened state of alertness which attracts needed ideas as a magnet does iron filings.

We all on occasions search for the right word. As a writer, I am frequently engaged in such a search and the satisfaction of finding that elusive word is immense, particularly when it comes as the solution to an unsettled part of a poem. In the course of searching, the mind travels widely, going over and rejecting far more possibilities than if the right word had been found at the outset. The poet Thom Gunn advocated formal constraint and the use of rhyme for precisely this reason. He writes that ‘In looking for a rhyme... you are often having to go deeper into your subject so that you discover things about it, and about your reaction to it, that you didn’t know before... As you get more desperate, you actually start to think more deeply about the subject in hand, so that the rhyme turns out to be a method of thematic exploration.’ Gunn’s deep-diving search for rhyme is the source of expanded awareness. Searching finds more than what it consciously sought. Like an endless string of objects seemingly drawn from a magician’s throat, the possibilities are surprising and might be infinite.

One of the joys of metaphor (at the heart of so much poetry) is that it affirms, through the connections it makes, that everything in the universe is interlinked and potentially in relationship: a trembling web in which the beat of a butterfly’s wing can be involved with – or even initiate – a climactic event on the other side of the world. Metaphor, with its lightning-swift linkages, knows this. In Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the face of the fatally injured Hyacinthus, accidentally killed by his lover Apollo’s flying discus, is compared to a wilted flower — a violet, a poppy, or a lily. From this analogy it seems but a short step for Hyacinthus himself to become the flower that bears his name, with the words of Apollo’s grief – *Ai Ai* – inscribed through the stalk like *BRIGHTON* in a stick of rock. I wonder who first noticed that if you slice through a hyacinth stem, you might find what looks like those Greek letters in the transverse section? Hyacinthus is both lost and found, complete with Apollo’s lament at his loss.

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Some losses, as Bishop's poem and the experience of most of us some time or other attest, are irreparable and refuse consolation. John Bowlby, the psychologist who developed attachment theory, writes that 'To the bereaved nothing but the return of the lost person can bring true comfort.' He uses the word 'insatiable' to describe the yearning of a bereaved person. No find can make up for such loss; yet might it be possible that the space left is one in which something new and unthought-of can occur?

The word 'insatiable' has a desperate energy to it. I am reminded that some of the greatest and most universally touching stories in our world entail the desperate search for a lost beloved: Orpheus for his Eurydice, Ceres for her daughter Persephone, Mary Magdalene for her crucified Lord. In the last two of these cases, what is restored is other than what was lost and the restoration brings about a radical new reality. Poor Orpheus loses Eurydice altogether, though he is left with much fuel for poems. If he found consolation in this he's typical of a certain kind of poet! Poems have long offered shelter to the lost.

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RLF outro: That was Elizabeth Cook. You can find out more about Ian Ayriss and Elizabeth Cook on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 419, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 420, Adriana Hunter speaks with Ann Morgan about writing the books of others, shapeshifting sex scenes, and non-English novels. We hope you'll join us.

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