

Writers Aloud

Episode 420

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 420 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Adriana Hunter speaks with Anne Morgan about writing other people's books, how sex scenes change between languages, the art of word games and the novels that never get to speak English.

Ann Morgan: Adriana Hunter is an award-winning translator from French with around a hundred titles to her name. Her work includes international bestsellers and prizewinners, such as Hervé Le Tellier, and in 2017 she took on the mantle of translating the Asterix comics from the legendary Anthea Bell.

When I visited her at her home in Kent, I started by asking her where it all began.

Adriana Hunter: It all started with a particular book that I fell in love with. I was working as an interpreter for someone in Paris and I was just waiting for them to come down and leafing through a French magazine. And I read a review of this book, *The Disappearance* by Geneviève Jurgensen, and I thought, *Ooh, I'd better buy that, it sounds amazing.*

And when I did buy it, I was completely blown away by it, and I just thought, *More people need to read this and I want to be the vehicle.* So I translated a little chunk of it and sent it round to lots of publishing companies, got *lots* of rejections, and eventually Philip Gwyn Jones at Flamingo Books, which was part of HarperCollins, picked it up and

Writers Aloud

commissioned me to translate the whole book. And I then went on to do another book for him, and it sort of went from there.

Ann Morgan: Not many English speakers would have the skills to be able to translate a French novel, how was your language so strong as to be able to do that?

Adriana Hunter: That's an interesting question because it was actually Philip at Flamingo – this was something very flattering that he said to me very early on in my career when I was actually in slight competition with someone for a book – he said, 'You're not just a translator, you're a writer with access to a language.'

And I think the language skill, of the two aspects of the job, the language skills are possibly the less important; you have to be able to write because everybody can help explain what the original author is saying, you can look it up or you can contact them, or I can go running to a French friend and say, 'What's going on here?'

But if you can't write it doesn't matter how well you understand what's happening in the original language, you won't be able to put it in a palatable way onto the page in English. But the language skills did come from the fact that my father was military and he was posted to Switzerland for four years when I was little, and my brothers and I all went to a French school in Switzerland. And I'm very lucky, just the right age and stage because neither of my brothers really kept it going. But I ended up doing French at university and working abroad.

Ann Morgan: Wow. That's so interesting talking about the writing and it being a sort of rewriting of the story. Because translation is one of those concepts that you hear so many metaphors used to describe, I mean, everything from mathematical equations, to alchemy, to the Babel fish, even Mireille Gansel calling it 'Transhumance', the moving of pasture sheep from one pasture to another.

Writers Aloud

In my book *Reading the World*, I came to the conclusion that reading a translation was a bit like reading with someone else's eyes. How do *you* think of it, what are you doing?

Adriana Hunter: Oh, I have lots of metaphors as well. I often compare it to music, to playing something, but you've got to put your own interpretation on there in order to make it work. But I also remember once, in fact, with that very first book, *The Disappearance*, which was a deeply personal book about a woman who'd lost two children, she reads English, so I sent her my translation and she wrote me this beautiful email back, saying, you know, 'Oh, your work is so beautiful, you've made such a beautiful book'. And I said, 'Well, it's your book'. And I said, 'It's as if you were looking at a really stunning white rose; a perfectly beautiful white rose through a red filter, and you then got a perfectly beautiful pink rose'. It's still her rose, I've just put my filter on it. Yes, there are *endless* different definitions for it.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. And it really fascinated me, what you said about the writing because I remember attending a translation duel once, and I won't name the two translators, but it was using the windmill scene from *Don Quixote*.

And what was fascinating was that there there was a minor discrepancy between the two translations in that one translator had put the windmills in the same field, if I remember correctly, and the other had put them in the next field. And actually there was nothing in the Spanish to say conclusively one way or the other, which it was. And what became clear was they had both imagined the scene and then described what they saw rather than...is that...?

Adriana Hunter: Yes, you can't help bringing something of yourself to the table. You just can't help it; we all do it when we're reading books, so why wouldn't I do it when I'm translating a book?

If it was a little bit vague in the Spanish, you know, they might not need

Writers Aloud

to specify. Then each of those translators would've had a mental picture of it and without even realizing they were doing it, they would write down their mental picture. In the same way as in lots of languages, possessive pronouns, the gender of a possessive pronoun is dictated by the gender of the thing you are talking about.

Well, in English, you know, tables and chairs don't have genders, so it's: *my* table, *her* table, *his* table, *her* chair. And I always make a bit of a joke about this, you know, in French, when you're translating a sex scene, it can get *very* confusing about whose hand is on whose thigh, because thigh is feminine and hand is feminine, but that doesn't tell you whether it's a woman's hand or a man's hand. So there are lots of things where, in that sort of similar example to the *Don Quixote* example, where two people translating the same scene about a couple might make different assumptions about whose hand is going exactly where.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. How fascinating. Would that confusion be the same for someone who didn't speak an ungendered language like English? For a French speaker would that same level of confusion exist?

Adriana Hunter: For the French, speaking English, they suddenly see new clarity because you say, he got into *his* car instead of...if you say...you know, if the man went outside and there were two cars, one was his and one was hers, in French, you have to add on extra words to say which one it was: 'savoir tu ras lui' or 'savoir tu ras elle'. But in English, they would suddenly discover this incredible clarity though: *Oh my goodness. I knew straight away whose car it was.*

Ann Morgan: Yeah, how interesting, I discovered this with *Google Translate*, is male-biased in that when it's dealing with gendered languages or languages that have neutral neuters, it makes more male, in English.

Adriana Hunter: That's interesting.

Writers Aloud

Ann Morgan: Yes. So I had a message sent to me by a Romanian and I plugged it into Google Translate to try and get the gist, and I had this nonsensical thing with a pair of trousers. The Romanian friend helped me out and told me that actually it was about...it was the Romanian phrase equivalent to 'put your feet up' or 'put your legs up', but the thing put, 'put his trousers up'!

Adriana Hunter: 'Put his trousers up', oh dear, what was he doing with his trousers down!

Ann Morgan: It's apparently the whole thing and certainly in those days, I don't know if it still is, that was its default: to impose a sort of male slant on everything, so, yeah, fascinating.

So your process, when you get a book that you're going to translate, how do you do that, how many drafts do you do, do you read the whole thing through first, how does that work?

Adriana Hunter: Oohh, okay, so there are lots of different ways of doing this and I'm almost *sheepish* about the way I do it because it feels a bit labour *not*-intensive compared to some other people. So I don't *always* read the whole book first and that's a deliberate choice I make. If it's a very, very finely crafted book or it's very sophisticated language or if it's difficult, I will read it first, because I think that's important, I owe it to the book to do that.

If it's lighter material, if it's a more sort of commercial work, I actually deliberately don't read it. Partly to keep sort of interested, but also so that there's a sort of freshness to my work that...I'm not saying that it's stale in the other iterations. But so that I'm discovering it as I go along and it's got that immediacy of a book that hasn't been...you know, every sentence isn't finely crafted, it doesn't need to be, it's got to have that immediacy.

So that's a deliberate choice with some books not to read them in advance.

Writers Aloud

And then the actual process is: I start at the beginning and I end at the end, and I'm not allowed to stop in the middle. And I have to find a translation for everything, even if I know I'm going to question the...ask the author questions.

I have to get everything down on paper and I'm not allowed to have options in my first draft. I know a lot of people do a really, really rough first draft where they have, you know: it was a *wet* day, no, slash, *muggy*, slash, *rainy*, slash, and I go, *No, no, you've got to make up your mind. It's a rainy day.* I will commit it all down.

And I work in little chunks of up to about an hour and a half at a time. After that the brain starts to go, just too many micro decisions going on. So after about an hour and a half, that's enough. And I'll go away and I don't know, hang the washing up or walk the dogs or something, come back, read through what I've just written, and then in that sort of momentum of reading it through, I'll then carry on to the next section. And that's the first draft which I then park and forget about for a month. And then I print it out so that it feels more bookish; I don't like to read it on the screen. I print the whole thing out and make my corrections, and then that's it, it goes off. So there's really one draft that gets corrected.

Ann Morgan: And do you often work with the author?

Adriana Hunter: I'll almost always have *some* sort of discussion with them. I mean I like to anyway, and it's quite nice, it shows a sort of respect for the book, not to just think, *Oh, bish, bosh, bash, translated your book!* And even if I don't need to ask them any questions, I might send them the translation, when my version that's finished at the same time as it goes to the editors. It's quite nice to send it to the author and say, 'I've really enjoyed working on your book', but sometimes there are little questions that I need to ask.

Ann Morgan: One of the books that you translated that I've particularly

Writers Aloud

enjoyed reading is Hervé Le Tellier's *The Anomaly*: massive international hit, bestseller, prizewinner, and a real feat of a book, an incredibly complex idea, of this storm in which a plane somehow lands twice and causes this national emergency, international crisis.

Adriana Hunter: So I think it's the fifth book of Le Tellier's that I've translated. And he's a very, very intelligent man and very playful, and that comes across in this book. It's *massively* commercial, but at the same time, very sophisticated and little jokes and word games and things all the way along. So it certainly kept me interested, there wasn't a moment when I thought, *Oh God, I can't wait to get to the end of this chapter*.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I mean, something that fascinates me, and a distinction I often see between the French and the English markets, is that in France, and I'm sure there are exceptions to this, but broadly speaking it's entirely possible for something to be a massive commercial success *and* a prizewinner.

There are writers like Le Tellier, Leila Slimani, but also more historically, George Simenon, who are massively popular but also win the highest honours. In the English market there's this kind of snobbish distinction between commercial and literary, and ne'er the twain shall meet. Is that a problem for French books coming through? Because Le Tellier's book is a very literary novel, but it's also clearly got huge commercial potential. And does that cause problems?

Adriana Hunter: Yes, I think it does. I think it causes a certain amount of bewilderment with authors, you know, French authors, who may be extremely successful and they've won prizes. And their foreign rights people cannot secure an English language rights contract because there's this sort of different appetite. I have translated some very, very commercial books, a real sort of beach read, fun, rompy books. When they first started coming through and I'd get these contracts and I'd think, *What is this? This isn't the sort of book that people translate*; but I think the

Writers Aloud

publishers are quite canny and they've realized that it's good material, it's fun, it's relatively cheap to get something translated, boom, boom, boom, you've got a fun book. But there is that strange thing in English: a book is either literary and prizewinning, or very commercial, and it is difficult for people to understand that there isn't that crossover that can happen in other countries.

Ann Morgan: In terms of the titles, do you have much...because often titles change between languages, don't they, do you have much input into that?

Adriana Hunter: Yes, very much so. And sometimes publishers will make assumptions about, you know, that the title will be translated very literally, and I'll say, 'It's just not really working in English' or it's not doing the same in English as it did in the original language.

I mean, some of them, like *The Anomaly*, it's pretty straightforward, it's *The Anomaly*. But others, you have to come up with something completely different because there may be a pun in the title, or there may be a cultural reference that simply doesn't work in English, or it may be too sort of long and gangling.

So that's quite fun, that's quite a fun aspect of the job. Right at the beginning when you first start work on it, they say, 'Well, we are putting together our catalogue for next spring, so if you could tell us what you want the title to be'. And I think, *No, no, I want to get immersed in the whole 400 pages of this before I can tell you what the title's going to be!*

Ann Morgan: Gosh, it's so interesting because my experience as a writer is that you have relatively little control over titles. I'm always consulted and involved, but there is certainly a sense of the publisher does have quite a say, but it sounds as though your experience is that as the translator you have a degree more?

Writers Aloud

Adriana Hunter: Yeah, I think it's because I'm seeing the book possibly before the person who's going to be editing it, and the person who's the commissioning editor, who's in charge of it, may not have access to the original. They haven't actually seen it, so they're having to trust me. They're trusting readers reports to tell them whether or not it's worth doing, and they're having to trust me about the content of the material to decide what the title ought to be.

And the reason that they want to do it so far in advance is because they're putting together their catalogues. Once they've seen the book or if they read French and they've got access to the original, then they do have a complete power of veto. And my little, 'Oh, I think it should be this', it's 'No, no, not interested in that'.

Ann Morgan: So it all depends on timing then?

Adriana Hunter: Yes, I think so, yes.

Ann Morgan: Now, in 2017 you had very big shoes to fill in that you became the new Asterix translator following in the steps of Anthea Bell. What was it like taking over such a huge gig?

Adriana Hunter: Really, really scary; it *was* really scary actually. And my initial reaction was, *I can't do this, why me? I can't do this!* And then they asked me...I was approached, it's not something I sort of put a bid in for. I was approached when unfortunately Anthea was very ill at the time, and they weren't sure whether she would be able to recover, and sadly she didn't.

And they asked me to sort of put together a, you know, *Why should it be you?* And I thought, *Well, yes, why should it?* And then I thought about it and I thought, *This is absurd, you know exactly why it should be you.* And I absolutely love word games and puns and crosswords, and funnily enough, when I looked back through my career, I thought, *I've never done anything like this. I've never done graphic things before.*

Writers Aloud

But I looked back through it and I said, ‘No, you haven’t done anything graphic, but you’ve done an awful lot of books that played with words.’ The thing that frightened me more than anything else wasn’t the word games, because that’s huge fun, it was actually the cultural references.

Because I thought I’m just going to miss stuff, I can’t be inside every French person’s mind of what their cultural experience is, so I won’t pick up on these references. When the first one arrived, an awful system of military grade security that the documents go through, and they finally arrived in my inbox after I clicked on all these passwords and things.

There’s a crib sheet, there’s a crib sheet because they are being translated... they go into, I don’t know how many languages, but the initial launch, it comes out in about seventeen languages simultaneously. There are more later, but in the initial launch there are about seventeen. It’s a *very* intensive period.

It’s a sort of two or three weeks when everybody suddenly gets it and it needs to be delivered. The authors don’t want to spend those two weeks answering questions, so they flag up everything: this is a word game, this is a reference to a very famous speech by Giscard d’Estaing, this is a reference to a rapping song by, I don’t know who, so all those references that I was so scared I was going to miss, I needn’t have worried.

And of course I had Anthea’s wonderful work to fall back on. I could look back through back copies. She’d named so many of the characters with her brilliant names. So I had all that there, as a sort of...not only material that I obviously re-use, characters that she’s named, I use their same names, but as a sort of how-to.

And she injected a lot into them and I’ve continued to do that. There are more jokes in the English language versions. The last one I translated, there were characters who were Amazons as in, you know, the mounted horsewomen, Amazons, but there was so much scope for making jokes

Writers Aloud

about Amazon and you know, deliveries and packages and notifications, and oh, taking us all around the houses.

I just went on and on and on, and it was just I couldn't help myself, that every time a silly joke presented itself, I thought, *Oh, well, I'll go with that!*

Ann Morgan: I know some translators sometimes think in terms of, if it's not possible always to bring a joke through directly, you think, *Oh, hold that in hand*, and create a joke later that feels roughly similar. Do you ever work in that way?

Adriana Hunter: Absolutely. It's like a sort of audit and funnily enough, the edit of the *Asterix* album is called an audit. And I think of it as a sort of numerical joke-for-joke, you know: *Has she managed to match this joke?*

But I do think of it like that, if there's something that I really can't recreate, you might be able to change the meaning of the sentence in order to make a word game work, but if the meaning is really important, you've got to give your reader that same laugh at some stage. So yes, I'll find somewhere else to put it in.

Ann Morgan: An audit of jokes, it's a nice idea. You mentioned you've worked on a number of Le Tellier's books, but also you've worked on several other authors, several of their books, Camille Laurens, Agnès Desarthe. Working on the same author's work on a number of books, is that easier, do you feel that...do you click into, or are the voices so different?

Adriana Hunter: That's a really good question and well, yes, it's lovely working with the same author more than once. It's nice because you can sort of build up a relationship, but each book is different; each book has its own mood and voice.

Some authors are more of a pleasure, they're easier to translate. It comes more...just because of the way they structure their sentences, it's easier.

Writers Aloud

A bit like meeting four children from the same family. Yes, they've got family traits, but my goodness, they're all their own person.

Ann Morgan: Yes, don't mix them up.

Adriana Hunter: Don't get it wrong!

Ann Morgan: And now in the last, particularly last ten years, I think, there's been a real shift in terms of the recognition that translators receive. We see a number of the literary prizes now are shared between authors and translators, and more recently the *#NameTheTranslator* campaign, has had a great deal of attention and calls from some very prominent voices to give translators the same recognition as authors on the cover of books. How do you feel about the issue, what do you...?

Adriana Hunter: That's an interesting one. And now the movement has really got a big head of steam. And I completely agree with the sentiments of it, and now that it's sort of more out in the open, I'm very supportive. When people first started jumping up and down about this, and I was relatively new in the industry, I was painfully aware of the fact that in this country, there's still a certain resistance to material in translation.

And *my* feeling was, so long as everybody in the industry knows who I am, I don't really care if my name's not very visible on the book. Because I wouldn't want the fact that it's a translation to make people go, *Oh, I don't want to read that, it used to be French!*

I don't want them to flick through it, I mean people don't flick through things in bookshops so much nowadays, but you know, flick through it in a bookshop...read the back and think, *Oh, this sounds really interesting*, open it up and go, *Oh, it's translated. I don't want to read that*. So in the same way the editor who does a huge amount of work on a book, their name doesn't...you don't know who edited a book.

Writers Aloud

But having said that, it is very nice that it's now a recognized thing. And I also think that translation has really upped its game. Translations used to be much more word-for-word, much more literal, much more wooden. And you'd get these extraordinary, convoluted sentences trying to battle with the syntax of the original in English, which just doesn't work, you just *can't* do it like that. And I think people now have understood, they've given themselves the freedom to write proper English sentences that convey the meaning of the original.

Ann Morgan: So there is a degree more artistry perhaps to it?

Adriana Hunter: Yes, or people are being allowed to use that artistry and readers are enjoying it the more for that because they're reading a work, which to all intents and purposes is English. I still think there's room for even *more* parking the original syntax, and parking the ways things are said in different languages, in order to produce a work which somebody who didn't know it was a translation, wouldn't guess it was a translation.

Ann Morgan: Mmm. It sort of makes me think of some of those experiments that have been done, there's that book, around ten years ago, *Multiples*, with this story that was translated between different languages by people with varying degrees of competence. And the most extreme example was Sjón, the Icelandic author, who because the authors were given their licence to do it however they wanted, so he got his fourteen-year-old son to read the story and then tell it to him, and then two weeks later he sat down to do his version!

Adriana Hunter: Oh my goodness!

Ann Morgan: It makes you...I mean, obviously there was a great deal of scope for artistry there, but whether actually what we're talking about here is a greater lag between the original and the new version, to allow for a degree more creativity?

Writers Aloud

Adriana Hunter: Yes, and I mean it's interesting because of course different people take different liberties with translations, some people will stick more slavishly to the original. I would contend that if you stick too closely to the original, you are drifting away from it because you are not being true to the spirit of it, by being *so* true to the letter of it.

Ann Morgan: I mean...it makes you think how far...if you think of, say, Shakespeare's plays, and he's taken some ancient stories and reimagined them and retold them, how close is that to translation? It's almost a sliding scale as opposed to a sort of...and I tend to think about translation in these terms anyway, rather than a binary it's translated or it's not.

We are always moving between registers and moving between different sorts of languages, even within one language. And so it's less of a clear cut, something's always translated or it's not, there can be degrees, I think. And yeah, it's fascinating to think, well, how far can you push that?

Adriana Hunter: How far is too far?

Ann Morgan: *Should* you push it...yeah, yeah; do you write your own material alongside your translations?

Adriana Hunter: Not really, I've sort of *dabbled*? Ages ago that there was a *ghastly* first novel, which luckily has sort of been swept under a carpet somewhere. There is the beginnings of a second novel, but I've slightly dissociated from it.

I'm *so* busy translating other people's wonderful books. I'm so busy writing other people's books, and I'm not convinced that everybody wants to read the story I've got to tell. So I'm okay with the fact that at the moment it's parked, and I love my translating.

Ann Morgan: I'm always keen to know, what we're missing in English, that's what I'm fascinated by; are there any things out there that you would

Writers Aloud

love to see come through, but for whatever reason haven't, or that we're missing in the English language market at the moment?

Adriana Hunter: Yes. It happens *all* the time, every now and again, something comes along that I absolutely love and somebody else gets the job and then, oh my goodness. It's like being that person in the church going, 'It should have been me!' at the wedding. You see this book and the deal is struck and the translator is hired and you think, *I'll never get to do that book. I'll never get to hold that one in my arms.* So that's very sad.

But there are also the books that get forgotten, the books that are overlooked. In France, they have two really *big* times of year when they publish new work. It's not like a sort of drip feed thing that we have in this country; it's September and January. It used to be just September was a *huge* thing, *all* the new books came out in September. And now they've tried to sort of spread the love a bit and it happens in September and January.

Well, last September – it's called the *rentrée littéraire* – and it was a slightly disappointing *rentrée*, I think, but there were two books that I really, really enjoyed, and so far nobody has bought the rights for them. And I'm sort of jumping up and down and, you know, for free, for just for the love of them, I've translated sample material from them and sort of thrown them in various directions to various publishers and nobody wants them.

It might be, you know, there's this thing, 'Oh, it's too French', or 'It's not for now', but it's frustrating because both the books I'm thinking of are *hugely* original narrative voices. One is a traditional sort of love triangle, but it's presented in *such* a humorous, dry, new way. And the other one is very unusual. It manages to be a whodunit, but also very poetic at the same time. And so, they've got a lot going for them and they're different and fun and it's just frustrating. I've got some on my shelves, the ones that have fallen by the wayside, that never got to speak English.

Writers Aloud

Ann Morgan: Ah. Looking up at your shelves now in a wistful manner! And what would your advice be to someone keen to get into translating in some way, what would you suggest?

Adriana Hunter: Do a huge amount of reading, which is, you know, any writer, that's what you need to do, is read a lot. Do a lot of translating, even if you're doing it for free, even if you're doing it for yourself, you're not doing it for anyone, but enter competitions and offer things to magazines. The problem is, it is now really, really difficult to do what I did when I first started out, to just send stuff around to commissioning editors, because there are real gatekeepers now. It's *really* difficult to get hold of people's email addresses, and even if you do email them, you just don't hear back.

There are courses that you can go on, the British Centre for Literary Translation runs a summer school and there are similar summer schools. There's one in Bristol, I think, and there's one in the City of London, they're all over the place. There are panels and groups and there are ways of getting a toehold.

Even if you don't end up making contact with any sort of publisher, you will at least be moving in the same circles as other people aspiring to be literary translators. And there's a lot of support networks between them.

Ann Morgan: Is it worth it?

Adriana Hunter: Well, I think so because I really, really love my work. I *really* love my work. It doesn't pay terribly well, but it pays even worse if you're very slow at it. And when you get to my sort of age and stage, there's a lot of problem-solving in translation, but the more you do it, the more you know how to solve that problem; *I've done this before, I've had exactly the same problem before* and it's a bit like, everybody does cryptic crosswords but you learn to recognize, *Oh, this is an anagram.*

You know, *This clue is telling me that this is an anagram;* done, sorted. So

Writers Aloud

just like that you think *Oh, I've come across one of these*. So the more you do, the better it pays, because you just get quicker at it. And it's *such* a pleasure to be paid to do something you enjoy, it's a real blessing to enjoy your work.

✧

RLF outro: That was Adriana Hunter in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Adriana on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 420, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 421, Malachy Tallack speaks with Caroline Sanderson about growing up in Shetland and the role of place in his fiction and nonfiction writing.

We hope you'll join us.

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF, please visit our website www.rlf.org.uk.

Thanks for listening.