

Writers Aloud

Episode 421

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 421 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Malachy Tallack speaks with Caroline Sanderson about how moving to Shetland as a child influenced his writing preoccupations, particularly his sense of place and the role of belonging, and how these things have come to imbue his varied fiction and nonfiction writing.

Caroline Sanderson: Malachy Tallack is an award-winning writer of both fiction and nonfiction. His novel, *The Valley at the Centre of the World*, was shortlisted for the Highland Book prize and longlisted for the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje prize. His first nonfiction book *60 Degrees North*, was a BBC Radio Four book of the week, and his second, *The Undiscovered Islands*, was named Illustrated Book of the Year at the Edward Stanford Travel Writing awards. His most recent book is *Illuminated by Water: Nature, Memory and the Delights of a Fishing Life*. Malachy is from Shetland and currently lives in Stirlingshire.

Malachy, you spent your early childhood in Sussex and then you moved to Shetland when you were ten, a place which feels so central to all your work, even though you've lived in many other places since, and you're now settled in Central Scotland. What is it that's given Shetland this prominence in your work?

Writers Aloud

Malachy Tallack: Well, I think in part it was that break, I suppose, in fairly early childhood from one place to another, that led ultimately to me having this interest in place, as a subject, in place as something that's part of character, I suppose, character-forming.

And so I was interested both in writing about my own experience; my own relationships with place and with Shetland in particular, but also, in fiction, in thinking about how place, how landscape shapes individuals, shapes cultures. So I think that it was that enormous change, I suppose, from Sussex to Shetland when I was nine or ten-years-old, that left me with a kind of lifelong interest in this subject, in this theme.

But Shetland itself also has been hugely important to me. It has been my home since then, both technically, in that, that's where I was, but also in the sense of coming to *feel* an idea of home, of what home means. So even though I don't live in Shetland at the moment, my family are all still there and when I think about home, Shetland is still where I think about.

Caroline Sanderson: This preoccupation with what home means and what makes us feel a sense of attachment and belonging to a place, it feels very prescient, but also topical in these days of nationalism, but also of conflict and displaced people. You know, what means we can settle somewhere new and what I guess homesickness means as well.

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, that's right. I think it's something that is both deeply personal and at times deeply political as well.

And I think that for me, really, that sense of home and a longing for attachment to home and attachment to place has really been always very much connected to the desire to write, I think. The desire to write has always had, for me, underlying it, a sort of urge for connection and writing about home has been a big part of that.

Caroline Sanderson: Well this is something that's encapsulated in the title

Writers Aloud

of your first book, *60 Degrees North: Around the World in Search of Home*, and you journey around the 60th Parallel in this book from Shetland to Greenland, Canada, Alaska, Siberia, through Scandinavia and back home to Shetland. So in what sense was this a journey in search of home, it's a sort of circle that you do, isn't it?

Malachy Tallack: Yeah. Well it's funny, it wasn't until later on in the writing of the book that the idea that of course you travel in a circle you end up home, seemed quite so inevitable. I thought when I started out, I thought I was writing a travel book, but as I went along, the kind of questions that I was asking in these places and of the people that I met were about connection to place.

They were about home and so as I continued to write, I realised that this was actually a more personal book than I had thought at the beginning. And I began to also write a bit about myself and my own experiences and my own feelings about Shetland and about home, and so the book became...that question became very much tied up within the book.

And so that traveling around the parallel, travelling to each of these countries, but always having the sense, the knowledge that the destination point was where I left off, it was home, that became the kind of unifying... the thing that tied the book together.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, I suppose we could say the best of travel writing is always about more than the journey, but I'm interested in...so you encounter lots of people who live at the same latitude as Shetland, very different people, different landscapes, different countries, obviously. But I'm interested in what you felt you had in common with these other northerners?

Malachy Tallack: I think...I mean I think in some ways it's a mistake to emphasise anything too much in terms of connection. But what ties these places together for me is partly that most of them are quite difficult places to live?

Writers Aloud

You know, when you get that far north, the seasons, the climate, the weather become challenging. So ordinary agriculture becomes challenging and at that point of challenge I think that that is often when people can start to become more aware of their surroundings. I think these days in particular, it's quite easy to live in places and not really think about place too much at all, not think too much about your connection to place.

But when you live somewhere that challenges you in that way, where you have to be conscious of the weather, where the landscape can be dangerous or difficult, then you think more, you're more conscious of that sort of relationship between you and your surroundings.

So with the exception of St Petersburg, which is an exception in so many different ways along the 60th parallel, there's still places where it's not quite so easy to live as it would be elsewhere. And I think that was one of the things that tie them together.

Caroline Sanderson: And your attachment to Shetland also, it seems to me, reading your work, giving you a fascination for islands, both real islands and in the human imagination. And this in fact, gave rise to your second nonfiction book, *The Un-Discovered Islands: An Archipelago of Myths and Mysteries, Phantoms and Fakes*, and it's an illustrated atlas, illustrated by Katie Scott we should say, islands once believed to be real, but no longer on the map.

And I love the story of how this really came about. I think it stemmed from your school motto and the fact that Shetland may or may not be Thule, which was mentioned by the Greek writer and explorer Pytheas in the fourth century BC.

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, that's right. The book came out of *60 Degrees North*, really, in the sense that two of these undiscovered islands, these phantom islands, were at one time or another, believed to be at 60 degrees north.

Writers Aloud

One of them was Friesland, which was meant to lie south of Iceland, and the other was Thule, which has kind of been believed to be all over the North Atlantic at one time or another.

Caroline Sanderson: *Thoolay*, that's how you say it, right?

Malachy Tallack: Yes, I think so, Thule, yeah. And Shetland has been kind of tied to that place at certain points. The Romans thought that Shetland was Thule, and so I had this place in the back of my mind, and when I finished writing *60 Degrees North* — well, I wanted something that I could write without going anywhere. I wanted to be able to stay home but keep writing. And so the idea of a travel book about places that didn't exist really appealed to me.

And these stories about phantom islands was so appealing and there were these two that I knew about. And then of course there's Atlantis, which everybody knows about, but the more I started looking, the more of them I found, and in fact there were huge numbers of these islands all over the world that I could choose between as I wrote this book.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah. It's an amazing number actually, and it just indicates how the titanic power in the human imagination that islands have, don't they? I think there's something, there's some romantic notion of that sense of self-containment that the island life gives you, but it's also an isolated life and it feels like that's quite a significant idea certainly in your work.

We talk about the island mentality, don't we, and that's of course been applied even to the island of Britain, you know, to anyone who dwells there as a nation of course. But I think you play a lot with the sense of island life in your novel, your novel's called the *Valley at the Centre of the World*, which is a slightly ironic title, I think, isn't it?

Set in Shetland, and the title suggests one thing, but the characters, it feels

Writers Aloud

like a novel about the extent to which human lives on those islands, the extent to which it's satisfying to each person and the extent to which they need the outside world.

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, I mean, the title is not so much ironic as, I think, what I want is to kind of force the reader to rethink the idea of what a centre is, because of course for all of the people who live in this valley in the novel, which is in Shetland, this is the centre of their world. And if place is important to you, then wherever you are centred becomes the centre of the world and that by accepting that idea, you can begin to see place differently and more closely. I think places can expand under that kind of changed gaze.

And so the novel, yes, takes place in a valley in Shetland that I think many people from elsewhere would see as isolated. But in fact, what's revealed, I hope in the novel, is that the lives within that place are connected and tied up together in ways that, I think, perhaps would seem remarkable for somebody who lived, let's say in a flat, in the middle of a city, your life is tied to the lives of your neighbours in a way that is completely different to most urban lives these days, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes. And I suppose when I mentioned the irony, it's that sense of, actually, if you think about it in one sense, there are people who live a long way from anywhere else. But then they have this sense of self-containment and connection, that you, that you describe. I also love the way you evoke the Shetland dialect in that novel. I think it's called Shetlan? Or Shetlandic?

Malachy Tallack: Shetland, yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah. And you evoke that beautifully in your dialogue. And I love the way that you don't over explain it, so you, you allow us as readers, to settle into the rhythm and the strangeness of it, and somehow that really helps evoke the wonderful sense of place in the novel as well.

Writers Aloud

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, it's a bit of a tricky thing for novelists who...for fiction writers who write about Shetland or places like Shetland, which is that, people don't speak in standard English, and so you have to make a decision about how you're going to represent the speech, do you go for full accuracy which might then be extremely difficult for English speakers to read, to get to grips with.

And I sort of went for something of a compromise, which was to try and represent the rhythm and the sound and the grammar of Shetland speech without overloading the dialogue with vocabulary that would be unfamiliar, and so hopefully – I mean, there is a glossary, but it's, it's not very extensive – and so hopefully the reader quite quickly comes to hear these voices without feeling overwhelmed or feeling that they can't understand what's going on.

Caroline Sanderson: I think you achieve a real lyricism to it. I think it's a really tricky thing to do because one thinks of dialogue that's, you know, translated into say, cod cockney or...you know, it can come across as really artificial, can't it? But I think it's really seductive in terms of rooting your reading in the place that we're reading about.

Malachy Tallack: Thank you. It's hard for me to imagine writing fiction set in Shetland without using dialect. It's so much a part of the character of the people in the place.

Caroline Sanderson: Now you're relatively unusual, Malachy, in having published acclaimed fiction and nonfiction. Something that I personally always found very interesting: the relationship between the two. And you are also a journalist, of course, you're a former editor of *Shetland Life* magazine amongst much else. So I wondered how do these different forms of writing relate to each other in your head, and do you deliberately resist being typecast as a writer, or is it just how these books have come to you at a particular time?

Writers Aloud

Malachy Tallack: It's definitely not about being typecast. I'll be honest, I find the process of writing quite a chore for the most part. And I think often, well, most often, by the time I finish one book, I'm desperate to do something as different as possible from what I've just been doing, just for variety's sake!

So I'm sort of admiring, but find it difficult to understand people who can finish writing, say, one novel, and then begin writing the next one in the series or something like that, because I desperately want to do something *completely* different. And that for me has meant writing a book of narrative nonfiction, then writing a very different illustrated book of nonfiction and then writing a novel and then going back to nonfiction.

So it's that sort of jumping between one thing and another has been in large part about keeping myself enthused and interested, but you know, while the form has changed there's obviously been themes that have continued through each of these books. So *The Valley at the Centre of the World* is fiction obviously, but thematically it's very much tied to *60 Degrees North*. It is about home, about place, it's about connection and division and it's...yeah, it's about that sense of being tied to where you are.

Caroline Sanderson: You are also a singer-songwriter and you've done four albums and an EP and you've performed across the UK. So I was interested to know how your music relates to your writing preoccupations, or is it just an entirely different creative outlet?

Malachy Tallack: The music was something that I did a lot more before I began writing books. And in part I think that's because my writing brain, my writing energy now goes very much towards the books and doesn't leave a whole lot left over for songs. I think being a songwriter was what I wanted to do when I was younger, but I never really pursued it with a great deal of energy.

I wrote these songs and I produced these albums together with friends

Writers Aloud

and so on, and I played live a fair bit, but I never pushed with the kind of energy that you really need to push to be part of the music industry these days, I think. But in terms of the connection to prose writing, I think one part of it is, is that I have a real focus, almost obsession with, with the idea of rhythm in prose.

And of course it's the kind of rhythm in prose and in song is very different, but there's a musicality to language that is really important to me in any kind of writing, that I'm doing. I do have this idea for a novel that has songs as part of it, and I've kind of been turning this novel over in my head for a long time, but I have not yet started writing it. So who knows whether it will ever come to fruition.

Caroline Sanderson: With that musicality though, that rings true, having read your prose, both fiction and nonfiction and of course what we were talking about, when we were talking about the novel and the dialogue and then there's a certainly a musicality to that or a lyricism to that, I think, which is very, very seductive.

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, all of my work, I read out loud over and over again, trying to find that rhythm and hopefully a kind of musicality, that's always been really important to me.

Caroline Sanderson: So let's talk about your most recent nonfiction book, *Illuminated by Water: Nature, Memory and the Delights of a Fishing Life*. So this is a beguiling blend of memoir and landscape and nature writing, centered on your lifelong love of fishing. And as a non-fisher myself I didn't expect to find it as alluring as I did, and I wondered if that's the challenge that you set yourself to explain the lure to somebody on the outside, if you like, or somebody not standing by the riverbank.

Malachy Tallack: That was definitely the main challenge. For a long time I have thought this is something that I would like to write about simply because it's something that I think about and enjoy doing. But the question

Writers Aloud

was: how do I write a book about fishing that is not just for people who already go fishing? Which is who almost every fishing book is aimed at: the already converted.

So how do I share, I suppose, how do I share a kind of passion and joy that is, for most people must seem pretty weird and very difficult to understand. So yeah, I had these two readers in my mind as I started out: one of them was somebody who had never fished, but who was interested in the outdoors, in nature, and the other was somebody who had fished all of their lives. And I wanted to try somehow to reach both of those readers. And so there was a really kind of difficult tightrope that I felt I was walking at times with the book.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, it really spoke to me and I remembered my Scottish great-uncles who used to go...who were fly fishers and used to go out on a boat on the loch in Perthshire. And it made me think a lot about them and this kind of understanding of what they might have loved about it. But at one point in the book you describe the kind of meditative sense of presence that you feel when fishing, that sounds very like that sense of being in the zone, that we can know as writers, that we try and find as writers, don't we?

Malachy Tallack: Yeah, that's right. I think what can happen when you're fishing is a kind of...it's so difficult to describe, but it's a sort of concentration that is also open. It's a kind of focus that is open to the senses and open to the imagination, so you're, you're focused in on this one thing.

If you are float fishing, you are looking at the float waiting for it to go under. Or if you're fly fishing, you're kind of feeling the fly moving beneath the water and you're focused there. And yet at the same time you are listening and looking, and you are imagining and waiting and remembering.

So there's this combination of extreme focus and extreme kind of openness at the same time that I don't really experience in any other way. But of course it's kind of what we are aiming for often as writers.

Writers Aloud

Caroline Sanderson: I think it very much is, you know, that sense of when you're in the zone and you are writing and the words are coming and you are concentrating very hard, and yet you are not, it's coming from somewhere deep inside you. It's so interesting and I liked the idea of using fishing as well as a...there's this sense of ordinary human activity, hobbies, if you like, being a sort of metaphor for human existence in some way. For me, I could say it's gardening, you know, growing and cultivating something beautiful whilst also knowing that it's impermanent. So that sense I really loved as well.

Malachy Tallack: Well, I think what was interesting for me is the kind of weirdness of human pleasure, where we find enjoyment. And I think often as, as writers, we are drawn to questions of what are the opposite kinds of emotions really: we're drawn to sadness and grief and anger and things like this.

And actually I started writing the book during the pandemic. And at that time it was really important to me to look in the other direction and to think about sources of joy and just say, 'Okay, so what is it about this activity, this weird thing that I do fishing, what is it about this that brings me joy, how can I explain that to other people?'

Caroline Sanderson: You describe in the book, you describe your life as being 'illuminated by water', and I'm thinking about all the things we've been talking about, islands and Shetland, where the sense of the sea all around you must be very strong. So what do you mean when you say your life has been 'illuminated by water'?

Malachy Tallack: I think I mean that, looking back, I feel that many of my strongest memories...I mean, specifically in terms of the book, I found that I had very clear memories of days spent fishing, which are essentially days spent doing nothing, and that seemed odd to me, almost, that I could remember so clearly doing nothing.

Writers Aloud

But the fact that I was fishing had kind of imprinted these days on my memory, so that was interesting. But that sort of gave a sense to me of looking back, of my memory being kind of cut through with these days of pleasure and joy that very much were about water, that were focused on water. And so that idea of a life illuminated by water just became really strong to me as, as I was writing.

Caroline Sanderson: Now you touched on this earlier a little bit, but I just wanted to ask you finally, how would you characterise the preoccupations that you think will always run through your work?

Malachy Tallack: Well, I think that place is always going to be something that I think about a lot. And that's obviously a big multifaceted, subject. So I don't feel that this is something that I'm going to exhaust very quickly. So yeah, the idea of place and home, and I'm very interested in communities as well, different kinds of communities; the way that people engage and interact with each other when they're kind of thrown together or brought together in one place.

Caroline Sanderson: Malachy, thanks very much. It's been pleasure talking to you.

Malachy Tallack: Thank you.

✧

RLF Outro: That was Malachy Tallack in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Malachy on his website at malachytallack.com. And that concludes episode 421, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Kona Macphee.

Coming up in episode 422, in 'My Favourite Author', we hear from Royal Literary Fund Fellows about what makes particular books special to them.

We hope you'll join us.

Writers Aloud

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 at www.rlf.org.uk.

Thanks for listening.