

Writers Aloud

Episode 422

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 422 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the third of a four-part series on the theme, 'My Favourite Book', we hear from Royal Literary Fund Fellows about what makes particular books special to them, from subject matter and style to larger-than-life characters and those all-important opening lines.

Often the stage in life at which someone encounters a book can have as much to do with its importance as its subject matter. For Jackie Wills, this was very much the case with the childhood classic, *Amelie Aranne Goes Digging*, by Lorna Wood.

Jackie Wills: I've just always loved it, and I don't really know why as a child I was so attracted to the book, and why it stayed with me so much. I mean, possibly because it was one of the first stories that I had, and it would've been read aloud to me. And my writing in the front of the book shows that I wasn't writing fluently then, I got four out of five letters of my surname right, but the others I didn't!

But I think it's that archetypal dream of discovery that children have. You know, it's a natural instinct, isn't it? To want to find out, obviously, that's how we learn. I think also the idea of other places, which in 1960 anyway, would've been even more appealing and strange. You know, the idea of Australia was astonishing, it really literally was the other side of the world,

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and I do remember as well, as a child, whether or not I was influenced by this story, digging on a beach and thinking I could get down to Australia.

RLF: That sense of identification and recognition can be key to forging a lasting relationship with a story. John Crowley's *Little, Big*, had this effect on Becca Heddle, despite the fact that the subject matter is somewhat removed from daily life.

Becca Heddle: It's American, which is perhaps a surprise to me, I don't think I'm a huge fan of American fiction. But it's set around and in an architecturally implausible house called Edgewood, which has been built as a kind of 'sampler', showing off many different architectural styles, and whose inhabitants lives are intertwined with the little folk. Their fates interlinked to make one great tale, which is always mentioned with a capital T.

Features of it, it has: Ovid-style metamorphosis, fairy bargains worthy of traditional stories, a changeling, a memory palace, theosophy, a mage, engineering. It has sex and drugs and dreams, it has the country and the city, and the romance of both of those. It deals with hard times economically and emotionally, and is full of human frailty and strength.

There's something new in it at every stage in my life that I've read it. Some people might argue that none of the characters is truly despicable, but I think that's something that I like about it, you can understand where they're all coming from, though many of their actions are questionable. And again, I think that's a worldview that chimes with me.

Overall I think the thing that makes it chime repeatedly with me, is the fact that although it is in many ways reflective of traditional fairy stories and it has fairies and all sorts of craziness in it, that it's set very much in a world that otherwise we can recognise, and that feeling of wonder being just around the corner.

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RLF: Sometimes being familiar with the setting of a book can create a powerful connection between writer and reader. John Horne Burns's *The Gallery*, which depicts postwar Italy, very much struck this note for Ian Thompson.

Ian Thomson: What I love about this book – I know Naples well, I've lived there – and this book unfolds in this shell-shocked city during the Second World War where Burns himself actually served as a military intelligence officer. So in this great tangled wreckage of this great southern Italian city, this kind of ragamuffin capital of the Italian South, we see in the city the kind of moral and material ruins of Nazi fascism.

Burns arrives there just after the Germans have left. He arrives there and forms this very, if you like, romantic vision of Italy, which he then contrasts throughout the book with the moral bankruptcy, as he sees it, of American culture. So in a way, Naples changed John Burns's life, and *The Gallery* was, I think, intended at least in part as semi-autobiography. So when I read this book, and I know a little bit about John Burns's life, I read this book as a work of fiction, but as primarily a sort of memoir.

RLF: For other Fellows it is the fact that a book is unusual, that it swims against the tide, that makes it special. Robyn Marsack was very struck by May Wedderburn Cannan's memoir of the Great War, *Grey Ghosts and Voices*.

Robyn Marsack: I love this book. I think it's because we are so used to male voices coming out of the First World War, and that attitude we have that was really built up through the anthologies that started coming out in the 1960s, so probably after the fiftieth anniversary of the First World War. It was all about disillusion and futility, I guess, and here is somebody who's got a very different attitude to the war.

So...it was published posthumously and there's a preface by Basil Blackwell, the bookseller, who had also published May Cannan's poetry, and he

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calls her ‘a natural but untutored scholar, a mountaineer and in practical affairs, resolute and able’.

He says later on in the foreword that she was also a poet, so, you want to add that into the mixture. And the title, *Grey Ghosts and Voices*, comes from a poem that she wrote after the war, and there’s a few lines from that I’d like to quote:

Now must we go again back to our world
Full of grey ghosts and voices of men dying,
And in the rain the sounding of Last Posts
And lovers’ crying—
Back to the old, back to the empty world.

So it’s deeply melancholy that tone...it’s not melancholy throughout.

RLF: Indeed for Marsack, the tone in which this story was told struck a chord precisely because it was unfamiliar.

Robyn Marsack: The story is told with such an unshakeable and really admirable sense of honour. It’s full of love and it’s full of loyalty, and it’s not sentimental. You know, she was a practical person, she did these things for her country and later on when she becomes a librarian at the Athenaeum Club, she has some very shrewd things to say about some of the members of the Athenaeum, like Lord Curzon and Kipling, whom she had to deal with. She wasn’t blind at all, but she was full of this deep feeling, which she conveys.

And those of us who are brought up on this nineteen-sixties, and later, view of the First World War that came through the poets, there’s a saying, you know: ‘They went out with Rupert Brooke and they came back with Siegfried Sassoon’: they went out with the idealism and they came back with the cynicism.

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This book seems to me a hugely touching insight into a very different kind of mindset, what I might call ‘a shining patriotism’; I know it’s not fashionable to say that either, but ‘a shining patriotism’ had everything to do with the land and the community and the traditions and the literature and the culture of the countries, the communities they knew so well, and Scotland and Cornwall. The love of France is very powerful, and a passionate belief that honourable men could not have died in such numbers in vain.

RLF: Real-life events also formed the subject of Lucy Moore’s favourite book. *Everybody Was So Young*, Amanda Vaill’s biography of Gerald and Sara Murphy.

Lucy Moore: *Everybody Was So Young* is a shining example of how sometimes real life is more interesting or certainly as interesting as the fictions that people create around those stories. Gerald and Sara Murphy were the people that Fitzgerald based the Divers in *Tender is the Night* on, and they were both inspirations to, and kind of protectors of, a whole generation of writers and artists of that period; friends with Picasso, they painted the screens for the backdrops of the Ballets Russes. They had this house called Villa America in the South of France, and it was from there, really, that Americans first discovered the South of France in the 1920s, and it was kind of because they popularised it, that people started going to the South of France in the summer.

Previously there’d always been convalescents going in the winter, for the gambling and stuff, but it was a winter season thing. They made it into a summer thing and because of them, it was immortalised in Fitzgerald and Hemingway and all these various American writers.

Their own life story is really moving, they had three children, one of whom died of tuberculosis, and it’s just as moving as any novel could be. And I love that sense that it was like seeing the photograph of something real, beside the artist’s portrayal of it. And I love the fact that the two were connected and I find it very inspiring.

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It's a lovely book, he was an artist and they're described so well, by...both in their own letters and in these books of fiction about them. And what Amanda Vaill did brilliantly was bring that together to create something that was better than just the story of their lives, and hugely instructive when you read again the books about them.

RLF: But fictional characters can be every bit as fascinating, if not more so. For Stephanie Norgate, it is Jane Austen's portrayal of Anne Elliot that makes *Persuasion* a lasting favourite.

Stephanie Norgate: Like many of us, she made a decision when she was young which she longs to undo; persuaded to be prudent, that is, here, class-and-money conscious, by her mentor Lady Russell and her father Sir Walter Elliot, nineteen-year-old Anne broke off her engagement to Captain Wentworth. Eight years on, she lives with that regret.

Anne's chances of happiness are limited by life with her narcissistic cold father and elder sister. She's a middle, unmarried daughter, enduring loneliness with no prospect of change. Austen uses locations very skilfully to take Anne on an emotional journey.

She's forced to leave her home, Kellynch Hall, because of her father's debt. We like Anne immediately because she wants to retrench drastically on their expenses in order to pay creditors, something which her father and sister refuse to do, and it's Anne who visits neighbours and villagers to say an embarrassed goodbye while her father and sister avoid it.

It's these small moments of integrity that mark out Anne's heroism: being true to appointments and friendship, resisting the calls of status. Marriage to Mr Elliot, Anne's third suitor and the heir to Kellynch Hall, could sort out the family problems of inheritance. But Anne resists him because of her love for Wentworth, even though she doesn't know if it's returned. Throughout the novel class and privilege are seen as barriers to communication, love, and truth.

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We move from coldness to warmth, to passion and longing, to happiness, and pass through a character-scape of alternatives that enhance the satisfaction of the ending. In fact, the novel has contemporary concerns, Austen values emotional truth over celebrity wealth and narcissism. It's through Anne's father's loss of money that Anne is forced on her journey to freedom and has to leave the gates of the big house and find intimacy. I love the weaving of these characters and landscapes that reflect on the past yet show a present emotional journey.

RLF: But it's not simply admirable characters who win our hearts. Elizabeth Strout's formidable Olive Kitteridge has been a lasting source of inspiration for the writer Pippa Little.

Pippa Little: Olive is in many ways an anti-heroine: anti-literary, very unlikeable, often angry, sometimes cruel, definitely not a *nice* woman. On the face of it, she seems to have a pretty comfortable life. She's an ex-maths teacher, her husband is a pharmacist, and they have good standing in their rather claustrophobic but secure coastal, Maine, community. However, the blackness in her makes Olive often restless and desperate and harmful to those she's close to.

There isn't anything that's comfortable about her. Strout captures this beautifully, and yet nothing is that simple, she's very vulnerable and damaged herself. I think this is a magnificent portrayal of a womanhood in which even the most fortunate experience themselves as being pinched in, unable to even know what they really want, far less how to go and get it.

Olive rings very true to me, I've known several women very much like her. And Strout gives her the space in this book she's denied inside her own life. Flawed, clumsy, and blunt, she's still fascinating, warts and all. Though unable to express the great and deep love she has for her son, and the love she feels for her long-sufferingly naive husband, she has the ability to connect with strangers and acquaintances, notably the young man she saves from suicide, and the anorexic girl she disregards social niceties for, and she's then able to offer her a rare and healing empathy.

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There's nothing at all sentimental in this book. Olive herself has a dry sense of humour and a piercing intelligence, it is just so amazing on so many levels. It isn't often we are given such a complex, charismatic, central character as Olive Kitteridge.

RLF: Even when we don't love all of a writer's work, a particular book can stand out and speak to us. This was the case for Charles Jennings, who names Martin Amis's essay collection, *The War Against Cliché*, as his favourite read.

Charles Jennings: I've got to say, I don't totally enjoy Martin Amis's novels, I think I probably dialled out with *London Fields*, that long ago – I can't be bothered after this – but his short writing I think is just, it's super-compressed, it's super-strength, it is *so* clever, it is *so* agile. All the blurb on the back of the book is for once true, and that word *brilliant*, which is now used just about every second sentence, really applies.

He makes the point... he did a wonderful profile of Gore Vidal quite a long time ago, to visit Gore Vidal – and did another brilliant one on Truman Capote as well – and he says the problem with Gore Vidal is that he's too clever to be a novelist, the novels don't really work, but as an essayist, he is perfect because you cannot be too clever to be an essayist, and that precisely applies to him.

And I like short writing as well, I like journalism, I think some journalism is as good as anything you can possibly get, and this is a kind of journalism at the highest pitch. So, *that* — and I consult it all the time and I read it and I think, *How can I...how can you do this, how can I get some of that flavour?*

So I'm picking that one, I think it's a sort of *vade mecum*, really, it's just a wonderful book.

RLF: Sometimes even books that advance objectionable arguments can find a place in our admiration and affection. Judy Brown explains that

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this was true for her with Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, translated by Carol Stewart.

Judy Brown: It's quite a difficult book to summarise really, and in some ways it's a slightly nasty book. It's divided into two sections, half of it's about...it's called *The Crowd*, and the other half concerns itself more with power and the sort of nature of power. It's almost like a personal anthropology that he speaks.

It's written with astonishing certainty that things are what they are, and things mean what he says they mean, without lots of external footnoting. It just goes in and says what...this sort of anthropology of what he believes, that how he believes the crowd works, and how he believes power works. In some ways it's a book of its time, he obviously has enormous confidence in talking about what things mean in different cultures and stuff, and the confidence is very strange and odd. In some ways that confidence reminds me of the confidence that people make statements with in poetry, and there's an odd way in which it's less that I believe everything in this book, or I accept everything in it, but it has an effect on me, which is akin to poetry, I suppose.

RLF: Social commentary of a different kind inspired Jo Bell, when she picked up J. B. Priestley's *English Journey*.

Jo Bell: We sometimes fall into the trap of assuming that to be a serious writer, we have to be serious all the time. Well, funny poetry can be serious; serious poetry can be funny. That noise that you could hear, for instance, is a duck laughing very loudly outside, as I'm speaking to you seriously about art; it's part of life, my little duck, and it's important to incorporate laughter too.

Here he is, J. B. Priestley, talking about his visit to the potteries:

I guessed of course, that it could not possibly be as easy as it looked. But men do not have seven years apprenticeship for

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nothing. But I did not care how big a fool I made of myself before these grinning lads and lasses. I had to try my hand at it, and of course, I cherished a vague hope, which was perhaps less vague after lunch than before, that I would prove an exception to this rule of craftsmanship, that I would be miraculously endowed with potter's thumbs at once.

He talks about it in that way so that he's *leavening* the serious message of the book, which is that people in England are not being looked after properly and that the working people are being overlooked, with the genuine humour of the moment, with the silliness of it. And he says in that passage about the potteries that he's kept on cherishing this wild hope.

So the reason I come back to this book again and again is that it's true and it's serious. It makes many comments on the state of the nation, which are still horribly true now, and come round in cycles again and again and again. But he does it in a true voice of the North, and he does it with flashes of wit and humour, which carry the reader through and deliver the reader again and again to the points that Priestley wants to make.

So it serves to remind me that wit can be a spotlight and is a precious part of human communication.

RLF: The interplay between humour and suffering is a strong thread in several other writers' favourite works too. Jane Rogers picks out the Czech classic, Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*, translated by Michael Henry Heim.

Jane Rogers: It's one of the most brilliant books I've ever read, I suppose because it manages to be both funny and incredibly moving, because of course the backdrop to it is oppression, political repression, and the fact that this character is living in a society where books are forbidden. And the fact that this kind of poetry and a sense of the absurd and this colourful world as created in this very unpromising environment of a

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cellar, I find incredibly beautiful, and one of my first short films was inspired by an episode in this, so it has influenced me a great deal. One of the things I love about Hrabal is this combination of pathos and humour. And another of my favourite books is *Closely Observed Trains*, which was made into a brilliant film, and he has this incredible eye for absurdity and comedy, which he sets in a context that's tragic.

And I think it's one of the things I always really respond to in books, when I think about many of the books that would count amongst my favourites, there is always this very thin dividing line between what's funny and what's tragic.

RLF: There's a similar mix of bathos and pathos in Amanda Mitchison's favourite work too, a lesser-known novel by one of the UK's most famous contemporary authors, *Beyond Black*, by Hilary Mantel sheds fresh light on the quest for the spirit world.

Amanda Mitchison: I was just in a bookshop and I read the opening, and the opening page and a half I think, and I know this is a tall claim: I think it kicks the opening of *Bleak House* into the long grass. It is the most *fantastic*, versatile, interesting, imaginative and playful piece of writing.

It's also...the whole tempo of it is perfect; it's so concise, so clever. What she's writing about is the two protagonists of this book, one of whom is a psychic, and is called Alison, and Alison's sidekick, Colette, who's her sort of Girl Friday and driver, and they're on the sort of orbital peripheral area round London.

And she talks about this as the time, 'The dank, oily days after Christmas'. And then she says, 'This is marginal land, fields of strong wire, of treadless tires in ditches, fridges dead on their backs, and starving ponies cropping the mud'. And she builds up from there this extraordinary description of this desperate world on the outskirts of London and the little ribbon developments up the M3 and the M4 and the A303, and describes this

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world where the present is there, but also there's Alison, also sort of relating all the time to her awful spirit guide, who's actually in the back of the car at the time when they're driving.

Now, what's so wonderful apart from anything else is there's a metaphorical grasp that she has that is quite astonishing. She talks about 'The leaves of the poison shrubs striped yellow-green, like a cantaloupe melon'. Later on when she's talking about Alison's black gowns that she wears for her seances with the public, and she says, 'A thin line of sequins ran down the sleeve like the eyes of sly aliens'. I just remember these metaphors, you know, after closing the book, you still have phrases of her writing resounding through your mind.

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RLF outro: That was 'My Favourite Book', an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast, recorded by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this episode were: Jackie Wills, Becca Heddle, Ian Thompson, Robyn Marsack, Lucy Moore, Stephanie Norgate, Pippa Little, Charles Jennings, Judy Brown, Jo Bell, Jane Rogers and Amanda Mitchison. You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 422, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 423, Gwyneth Lewis speaks with John Greening about the unpredictable inspiration of a self-described, odd mind, and writing about her astronaut cousin.

We hope you'll join us.

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