

Writers Aloud

Episode 423

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 423 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the first of a two-part interview, Gwyneth Lewis speaks with John Greening about the unpredictable inspiration of a self-described 'odd mind', the attraction of sequences, and the importance of fun as a motivator, writing about her astronaut cousin, and the influence of Joseph Brodsky.

John Greening: Gwyneth Lewis is author of eight collections of poetry in both Welsh and English. Having studied at Cambridge and undertaken research at Oxford on eighteenth-century literary forgery, she became a journalist and producer with BBC Wales. An experienced broadcaster, she's written for television and radio. She's also composed libretti for the Welsh National Opera, and her *Clytemnestra* was commissioned by the Sherman Theatre.

Her nonfiction includes *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book on Depression*, heard on Radio 4 and winner of an award for mental-health writing, and *Two on a Boat*, about the stresses and strains put on a marriage during a remarkable voyage on a temperamental yacht.

She's now a freelance writer based in Cardiff, her native city, but has also lived in America: as a graduate student at Columbia, on fellowships at Harvard and Stanford, and teaching at Princeton and in Vermont.

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Following *Parables and Faxes* in 1995, her next poetry collections in English were *Zero Gravity*, inspired by an astronaut cousin, and *Keeping Mum*. Both were Poetry Book Society recommendations, and *Zero Gravity* was shortlisted for the Forward prize. These were all collected and published by Bloodaxe as *Chaotic Angels* in 2005.

The long poem, *A Hospital Odyssey*, followed in 2010, and *Sparrow Tree* the year after. Recipient of many awards, notably a Gregory and a Cholmondeley for services to poetry, the Aldeburgh and Roland Mathias prizes and the Crown of the National Eisteddfod, Gwyneth Lewis also became the very first National Poet of Wales.

Her words appear in Welsh and English on Cardiff's Millennium Centre in what may well be the largest poem in the world. In 2019, she was elected Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford. Gwyneth Lewis was RLF Fellow at the University of Swansea.

And here we are in Cardiff, it's lovely to be here to talk to you.

Gwyneth Lewis: It's great to see you, John. Thank you.

John Greening: I'd like to know where and how writing began for you?

Gwyneth Lewis: It came out of the blue when I was about seven or eight years old. And I think it was a rainy Easter holiday and I must have been unable to play outside, and I decided to write a long poem. Not just, *a* poem, but it was, for a young person, very long, it was quite a few stanzas. I thought of it as an epic, and it was about the rain.

John Greening: Was that in Welsh or English?

Gwyneth Lewis: It was in Welsh, yes. It wasn't very good, but it gave me great pleasure. So that was the start of it.

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John Greening: That's interesting, it started in Welsh but you ended up... well, you ended up writing both. We'll come to that in a minute, but I mean, obviously it...

Gwyneth Lewis: It's not surprising really because we spoke Welsh at home, with my parents. So I was bilingual, of course, at that age, but Welsh is my first language, followed closely by English.

John Greening: Are there other writers in your family?

Gwyneth Lewis: Not that I know of, but we *are* descended from the Herbert family.

John Greening: Good Lord, there's a couple of decent poets there!

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, and that is a direct line of descent, I think we share an eleventh great-grandfather or something, but it's demonstrated. But I can't claim George Herbert, obviously, although I would claim him as a love match, do you know what I mean, as a poet!

John Greening: Yes, I would claim him.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yeah. He's one of the ultimates isn't he, one of the ultras?

John Greening: Do you see anything of either of the Herberts in your own work at all?

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, I mean, I am religious, so there is that sense. But are you thinking of Zbigniew Herbert or...

John Greening: No, I was thinking of the...is it Herbert of something or other, I can't remember. There's George Herbert and then there's...

Gwyneth Lewis: Herbert of Cherbury is it?

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John Greening: That's right, yeah.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes. I don't know his work, but you know, Zbigniew Herbert, amazing Polish poetry, *ur-poet*. So Herbert is a lucky name, is it not?

John Greening: It really is, yes. What tends to move you to poetry, would you say, is it people, places, ideas?

Gwyneth Lewis: Totally unpredictable. I find I have quite an odd mind in that subjects that I would *like* to write a poem about, that I think are worthy of a poem, don't come out. And ones that start with something maybe more quirky and idiosyncratic, do. And I think it's really the action of words, it's not a question of willpower, it's a question of the action of words on your mind.

So you have to find the right words and let two of them play together and see if there's any electricity. So it is, in a way, even though there are subjects and I do believe in researching poems, it is an abstract art as you know yourself, in the sense that it's a musical entity primarily.

John Greening: You called it in the *Hospital Odyssey*, I think you called it a 'puzzle in sound', which is a wonderful definition of poetry, I think.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, and hopefully both writer and reader come out knowing a bit more about the puzzle or having got the Wordle out, you know?

John Greening: That idea of poetry as a game, that comes up occasionally, there's that one about, 'Will in the Wall', is it? This sort of almost like a nonsense poem really, but this is one of the extraordinary things about your work, you seem to cover so many areas. Do you rewrite much, and do you enjoy rewriting if you do?

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Gwyneth Lewis: I've changed my mode of proceeding. I used to write in a very...I think it's quite an unusual way, which was that I would start at the top, I would get the first line right. And only when I got that right, I could go to the second, get the second, and then go one by one and then never change it.

John Greening: It's a bit like Philip Larkin who worked like that, he worked steadily through, from start to finish.

Gwyneth Lewis: And that is a bit like knitting and usually then, if I am stuck on line seven, I would go back and look at...and quite often the problem would be not in line six, but in line five. I have to go back and fix it. But then I decided that I needed to teach myself to revise more radically and I felt that was limiting me to fixed patterns.

So now I will actually throw something down, get a draft, look at it, and I might change it quite radically. And I think it's about the move to freer verse, as opposed to fixed patterns.

John Greening: It's interesting you mentioned the knitting analogy because you actually developed that into a whole sequence, quite a celebrated sequence later on, didn't you? Knitting a poem!

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, that's right. And of course it doesn't have to be perfect either. I mean, one tries...you try to make your knitting perfect, but it's not such a problem if there's little holes and dropped stitches, I mean, that's how people speak, isn't it?

John Greening: It is. Amazing the different approaches writers take, I mean, Simon Armitage starts with the last line, I heard someone say once, extraordinary different approaches. Well, let's think about your books in turn, *Parables and Faxes* was the debut collection, 1995. How do you regard that now?

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Gwyneth Lewis: I stand by it. Yes, I give myself such a hard time when I'm preparing a manuscript and editing that I want to be able not to be ashamed. So yes I do...so far, so good.

John Greening: Quite a few sequences in that book, aren't there, you seem to be drawn to the sequence?

Gwyneth Lewis: I do like a sequence.

John Greening: What is it, I like sequences too, but what is it that...what's the attraction of the sequence?

Gwyneth Lewis: I think I like a story and a plot. And it doesn't have to be a *this happened and then that happened* plot, although I have done that too in *Hospital Odyssey*, but ideas are stories, aren't they? So I always want to know, where have I travelled from and where have I got? And I think of the whole book, actually, each volume as a journey – that's a debased metaphor – but as a whole, I don't think of it as a wardrobe with all my clothes in it, I want it to be an outfit in itself, you know?

John Greening: I think the actual title sequence, *Parables and Faxes*, is one of the more puzzling sequences you've written...

Gwyneth Lewis: Ohh!...

John Greening: ...would you say a bit about what's going on in that?

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, I was trying to work out how to write, and I basically thought there were two kinds of poems that I was producing: one was a literal account of something happening, so I thought, *Right, that's like a fact*, and then another one was telling something in terms of something else, which is a parable. So I thought, *Right, if I set them off, both against each other we'll see who wins*.

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But of course, neither really wins, but they sort of combine into a third concluding position, I suppose. But it is the movement from one to the other that's the win, I think. That was my thinking.

John Greening: And even in this earlier collection, we find this fruitful tension between the Welsh and the English, and it's common in Welsh writers...one thinks of R. S. Thomas, of course. But 'Welsh Espionage' sequence, for example, do you want say a little bit about that? It seems to connect with that more recent one which we'll come onto in the *Keeping Mum* book, the detective story there.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, it does, the later one is a detective and the central figure in 'Welsh Espionage' is the spy. I just wondered what you could write about in a country where very little happened. And then of course it's not true that nothing happens in Wales, that's a fiction, but it's a useful fiction. So I thought...again, I thought I would put the spy figure where everything is of significance next to a scenario where nothing is of significance or things are trivial.

And I had a lot of fun with that. I mean, fun is actually a really important motivator in these poems, you know, because if I'm not enjoying it, how can anybody else be enjoying it?

John Greening: I quite agree, I quite agree, I often say that to myself when I'm writing. And in every one of your books there is something which brings a smile to one's face. There's also a mystical streak in you. And you said you were quite a religious person, I think one senses that just reading the work. That comes up particularly in the next book, *Zero Gravity*, 1998, with the title sequence partly about your astronaut cousin, but also in memory of your sister-in-law, I believe. Which is a wonderful, powerful piece of writing, part-space documentary, part-requiem. What was your cousin's reaction to it?

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, I sent it to him for a technical check-through,

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because it seems to me that part of one's duty as a writer is to get things right, certainly in terms of vocabulary and if you are using scientific facts. So he checked everything, but being an astronaut means that you're not very communicative emotionally, I think, it's the right stuff, you know? So I think I'd have known if he wasn't happy about it, so, you'd have to ask him, but I think he didn't mind.

John Greening: And how do you look back on that sequence now, is that... if you had to pick out one of your sequences, which is the most important, would that be it, because I think I might pick that one out?

Gwyneth Lewis: It is a good one, I knew it was good as I was writing it. But I don't think of things in terms of better or worse. Except for when you're doing a reading and of course then you have to pick...it's not again, quality, it's actually what reads well. And that sequence does read well, which is always a good sign, I feel.

John Greening: Are there any other tests for a good poem? There is the old A. E. Housman one, about when he was shaving, his bristles stood on end or something didn't they? Or Yeats talked about having an 'audible click' when a poem was just right. Is there anything like that you could...?

Gwyneth Lewis: I feel it in my bowel.

John Greening: Right!

Gwyneth Lewis: Other people...I've asked other poets about where you feel; I mean, you know, if there's a stirring in the bowel, I think, *Oh, this is good*. And I've asked other poets and they have different signs. Gwyn Thomas, a Welsh poet who was also National Poet, his muse is, and I suppose it is the muse, 'behind him and to the left'. Do you have a specific... physical location?

John Greening: I don't think I have a location for my muse. It sounds a bit like something out of Philip Pullman, doesn't it, really?

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Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, but it intrigues me. I think Les Murray recognised what I had said because I remember asking him. And he talked about a trance that you go into.

John Greening: I agree with that.

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, there you are, you see, you're just not recognising it in those terms. But it is a physical thing, yeah.

John Greening: Where suddenly you can reach...you reach for the bookshelves and the right book comes off it, and you open the dictionary and it falls to the right place; when you're in that –

Gwyneth Lewis: – in the flow –

John Greening: – creative process, you reach another...it's like going up a gear, isn't it?

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, it is.

John Greening: Poetry as a 'lie detector', you talk about in one of your memoirs, I think. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, yes, it's very important to me to tell the truth as best as one can work it out. Given that I think – I suppose I'll talk about myself – I have a strong capacity to deceive myself and, you know, I suppose in religious terms you'd call them sins. So I think of poetry as a form of discernment. You don't have to be religious to see it in that way. So it's honest speech because you're submitting your fantasies to the common medium of language.

Which is...you know, you're not on your own when you're doing that, and also, to the whole tradition of poetry, so far. So I think that when it doesn't work, when the poem is bad, it doesn't work artistically. Look

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at propaganda, always bad poetry, never good, never good poetry. So somehow artistic value goes with the truth in a remarkable way, which I find thrilling.

John Greening: I think the passage I took that quotation from, you were talking about Joseph Brodsky, who was a friend of yours, I believe. Tell us a bit about that friendship and why Brodsky was so important to you, as someone for whom truth was a life or death issue, I suspect.

Gwyneth Lewis: It was, and he paid a huge price. He was tried as a social parasite in the Soviet Union and condemned to labour, hard labour. And I think he had a heart problem ever since then. And then went into exile in the States where he was teaching. Yes, good Lord, if ever one could have a touchstone, he is a magnificent one.

In the sense that, poetry was the most important thing, and he had such a formidable intelligence, but also a verve for language, not only Russian, but also English, that just made him untouchable. You know, he knew that poetry made him untouchable to tyrants. And of course, this is very much on our mind at the moment with the situation in Ukraine and in Russia.

I'm thinking of Russian poets and writers and journalists who are facing horrific situations as well as Ukrainians.

John Greening: You wrote an elegy for Brodsky, didn't you? A fine elegy.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, well, thank you. It took a bit of cheek because, you know, he's one of the greats. It takes courage because you think, *Oh, who am I to pay an elegy?* But I can. I decided, I am allowed. Yeah.

John Greening: It was Brodsky, I remember him saying once, that he regarded metre as a kind of sacred vessel that you carry meaning down the ages. Metre is something that is used with variety and considerable versatility in all your books.

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Gwyneth Lewis: He said more about language and about poetry in particular, which is that it was part of human evolution. And he always stressed the fact that aesthetics comes before morals. And you know, the longer...I've thought about this for decades and since I heard him say these things, and the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced he's right.

Because, you know, the poets are where the imaginative and moral laboratory is, for all of us in this communal medium, which is language. I mean, these are high claims for poetry, but I think they can be backed up.

John Greening: But yes, all that's true. But I think he felt that metre was the sort of the seal on the casket as it were, that he had to have that, from what I've read of him.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, I think so, because of its connection to memory.

John Greening: Ah.

Gwyneth Lewis: That's the key, he used to make us memorise poems.

John Greening: Are you good at memorising poems?

Gwyneth Lewis: *Terrible.*

John Greening: I'm useless.

Gwyneth Lewis: *Terrible!* I wish I could say I'm not, some people have a facility for it; I don't.

John Greening: I don't know anything about the performances at the Eisteddfod, but are they done from memory?

Gwyneth Lewis: Oh, yes, I did those for years. But I have a good memory

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for rhythm and quite often if I forget the words, I've got the rhythm, and that's more...that's the basic thing.

John Greening: Of course it is. Well, *Keeping Mum*, 2003, the first part was adapted from a Welsh original. So this is a new departure in a sense, was it not, bringing the two strands of your work together? I don't know your Welsh work at all, so I can't really comment on that.

Gwyneth Lewis: Well, I had decided I would try and translate my own book, which was a...it was a detective story about who had killed the Welsh language. And I tried...I started off trying to translate it and discovered that, because the two audiences are different, I had to write a different plot.

Because the same figures in both languages didn't mean the same things. So I moved the main character from being a detective in Welsh to being a psychiatrist in English. So, in fact, I started off with translating some poems and then actually went off-piste and wrote a whole other poem.

John Greening: How did *Chaotic Angels* come to be the title for your *Selected*...that's the final section of *Keeping Mum*, 'Chaotic Angels', isn't it? A little group of angel poems. Is that the growing religious side of you, or...it was from some paintings?

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, it was a commission based on angel paintings. It was commissioned by the Festival of London. So I had my subject, but I also wanted very much not to have mushy angels; soft-focus angels. So I was thinking about Chaos Theory and about angels as a form of message, but the messages don't have to be, you know, 'Hail Mary, you're going to have a baby,' that it could actually be in radar signals and things like that. I just wanted to open out the concept.

John Greening: There has been a lot of mushy angel poetry in the last couple of decades.

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Gwyneth Lewis: Some of it is very nice...

John Greening: Rilke is to blame, I think?

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, well, his isn't mushy!

John Greening: His isn't, but I think he led to quite a few.

Gwyneth Lewis: Yes, his is so strong that it's actually very difficult to go in that mould, so I decided not to even try.

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RLF outro: That was Gwyneth Lewis in conversation with John Greening. You can find out more about Gwyneth on her website at gwynethlewis.com. And that concludes episode 423, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 424, in the second part of her interview, Gwyneth Lewis tells John Greening about being the first National Poet of Wales, attempting to sail from Cardiff to Brazil, and her desire always to be trying new techniques in her writing.

We hope you'll join us.

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