

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 424

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**R**LF 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 424 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second of a two-part interview, Gwyneth Lewis speaks with John Greening about being the first National Poet of Wales, attempting to sail from Cardiff to Brazil, her experience of severe depression, the joy and challenge of finding out what you mean in both poetry and prose, and her desire always to be trying new techniques in her writing. You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode, number 423. We re-join Gwyneth and John as they discuss what happened after the publication of her collection *Keeping Mum*.

**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 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 in a temperamental yacht. She's

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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.

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 at 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.

Well, *Keeping Mum*, 2003, then you became National Poet of Wales shortly after that collection. Did that change anything, I mean, a wonderful endorsement of your ability?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** It was a great honour. Did it change anything? Do you mean in terms of writing or...?

**John Greening:** Well, like when you hear...when people become Poet Laureate in Britain, they sort of suddenly...I think Andrew Motion was rather paralysed as a poet, wasn't he, by the experience of being Poet Laureate. It didn't have any effect like that on you?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Well, I was only National Poet for a year. So because it was at the very beginning of it, it was very uncertain, the funding from year to year, you see. So I was lucky in my year because the Senedd,

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which is the Welsh Assembly Building, opened that year. So there was an opening ceremony and I got to write a poem for that. And there had been big public occasions, like there was a huge dispute about Welsh rugby, the Welsh Rugby Union; and I wrote a poem which was read on all the news bulletins and I made them promise not to cut it anywhere.

And then the Welsh Rugby Union had to issue a press release against me, saying I was misguided in my opinions and so on and so forth. But that was great fun, and it allowed me to do a poem which was actually speaking on behalf of people and to use the platform. But in a way, after that year, I had said publicly what I wanted to say. There was a National Waterfront Museum opened in Swansea, there was a number of big national events, and I felt that if I did another year that I would be repeating myself.

**John Greening:** Yeah. Ideal then, really.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes, but I think it *can* be paralysing, but I didn't do it long enough for that to happen. What was *great* was people coming up to me and saying, 'Oh you're the poet'. And one time when I was naked in the gym, which was delightful, I just thought it was hilarious.

**John Greening:** Have you wrote about it?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Well, no, of course not. How could you, no, that would be very immodest. And to see people's response and getting letters from children, *that* to me was the thrilling thing.

**John Greening:** Between *Keeping Mum* and *Hospital Odyssey*, two memoirs: *Two in a Boat*, and *Sunbathing in the Rain*. *Two in a Boat*, I just swept through that and so enjoyed it, you draw parallels throughout, between the voyage and the relationship. Can you tell our listeners a bit about that?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Well, yes, the relationship is with my husband Leighton

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who's older than me and couldn't be more different from me, really, he's an ex-merchant seaman and married to a poet, and we decided we wanted to go sailing. So we learned to sail and set off from Cardiff, aiming for Brazil. But it was...actually, we had quite a tempestuous time to say the least of it.

And a story that turned quite dark, I won't give it away perhaps, but it turned quite dark when Leighton got ill. But for a poet, it was a fantastic opportunity to educate myself in a whole new vocabulary of the sea. Because you have to, you can't use the wrong language if you're making a Mayday call. You have to be able...you know, you have to know what you're doing.

**John Greening:** So that excitement comes across reading it, the excitement of, not discovering the sea and sailing, but the vocabulary, the language of it! And the parallels like depressions in the weather, but also feeling depressed yourself, and knot imagery and things like that, which itself –

**Gwyneth Lewis:** – yes, it's a gift, isn't it? –

**John Greening:** – It is a gift, and I'd really recommend it to anybody. It's a wonderful read and a glorious *diving* finale as well, and then, *Sunbathing in the Rain* came soon after, I think?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** No, no. *Sunbathing in the Rain* was before.

**John Greening:** Oh, it must be a reissue I've been reading. Right and that's slightly different. That's a sort of handbook as well as other things, isn't it?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes. *Sunbathing in the Rain* was an account of a severe episode of depression, which kept me off work for a year, more or less.

And as I was coming out of it, at that time – there are many good books about depression now – but at that time there were very few, with some exceptions, and also because my concentration was shot, I wanted to

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write a book in short sections that a depressed person recovering could read in short bites.

So I decided, *Right, well, if I'm going to talk about depression, I've gotta tell my story.* But also I wanted to pass on some basic strategies that I'd found for making the whole process less painful. The main one of which is, just accept it; you know, the tendency is to battle against the depression because nobody wants to give in to it.

But actually, if you accept it for a while, unbearable though it is, you realise that it actually passes through you and that it's not going to kill you. So yes, that was coming out of that then, having been so ill, the sailing seemed like a tonic, well, it *was* a tonic. That's when we started sailing.

**John Greening:** So that happened after. So somewhere in that book, there's an anecdote about you climbing out of the window as a toddler.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes.

**John Greening:** Which seemed to come to represent many things.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes, apparently I was a...very small, and a neighbour phoned my mother or called round and said, 'Quick, quick your child is out on the windowsill of the bedroom!' And the story is, I'm not sure what happened: it could be that I edged out, it could be that the neighbour was wrong and that I was still inside, but it looked as if the child was out.

But in my mind it happened and it's about actually being both subject and observer at the same time, which is what you do as a poet or as any kind of writer. So you're...it's a split consciousness, I think, which is thrilling, but also potentially quite disturbing and dangerous because you could fall.

**John Greening:** So it's a very rich metaphor there; but extraordinary

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book, it's a kind of commonplace book as well as a collection of all these quotations *and* a book of criticism. You take on *Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy* in one point.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes. I don't like that book. Everybody else likes it. But to me...

**John Greening:** You dared to say you didn't like it!

**Gwyneth Lewis:** No, I found it deeply depressing.

**John Greening:** Yes, do you enjoy writing prose as much as poetry, you imply that you did from what you wrote?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** I do, I find it easier than poetry. Although, I think poetry is my native tongue. And I also...I like the battle to find out what you mean is a battle for clarity, in poems and in prose, and that's the struggle for me. And that's hard work in either poetry or prose.

**John Greening:** And you're working on a third volume of memoirs at the moment. Does that have a particular theme or you're not going to tell us?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** No, I'm not going to talk about that one.

**John Greening:** Very wise. And then *Hospital Odyssey* in 2010, that seemed like a new departure, a long poem, which I've just finished reading and seems to owe quite a lot to Edmund Spenser and *The Faerie Queene*. I was reminded of lots of other people's work, an extraordinary piece of work in five-line stanzas, did it start in that stanza, I mean, did...?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** When I was preparing to write the *Hospital Odyssey*, I decided I had to find a stanza that would carry me some distance. So I tried *The Faerie Queene*, that's an eight line...

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**John Greening:** Spenserian stanza?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes, I tried that. I tried various other, oh, Byron, Byronic, Don Juan. Yes, I tried all those.

**John Greening:** That's *ottava rima* isn't it, or rhyme royal as Auden did, that's right. Yeah.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** They seemed a bit too clunky for me, although I could technically do it, and I then was reading François Villon, and I really liked the simplicity of his shorter verses, so I took that as my model, made up my own little stanza, and it took me through. It was great fun.

**John Greening:** And did you have any idea it would turn into such a phantasmagoria as it did?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes.

**John Greening:** You knew you were going to open all kinds of new gates and...

**Gwyneth Lewis:** I had been preparing for a while for that. And I knew because I wanted to be so surreal that I would have to have a pretty tight stanza to carry me safely through. I remember saying to Les Murray that I was working on a stanza, and he said, 'Yeah, well you and I have both sat in a few stone jeeps'!

**John Greening:** Because he wrote a couple of verse novels, didn't he?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Oh, he *did*, and of course, that was one of the models, I admire that poem hugely. *Fredy Neptune*.

**John Greening:** A wonderful poem. And it was adapted for radio, wasn't it. How did that work?

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**Gwyneth Lewis:** Well, I toyed with the idea of keeping the verse, but that wasn't...

**John Greening:** So you adapted it yourself?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** I did, yeah. And it was a bit of a poser how to do it, but we decided to break the form and just keep...the great thing about narrative poetry – and of course Epic is different from Lyric – your main motor is the story. It's not how you feel about your story, even though that's there, so basically you've got the plotting.

And that leads...that, it's like having a thread to guide you through the maze and that in narrative poetry is the plot. Yeah.

**John Greening:** I believe you wrote quite a bit of the long poem on Achill Island, Bill's cottage, is that right?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** I *did!*

**John Greening:** Did you enjoy the isolation?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Oh, I absolutely loved Achill, as I know you do; extraordinary place. Yes, I made a little nest for myself in that office that you know, and had a lot of postcards of Hieronymus Bosch, for the books that I knew I'd be writing when I was there.

**John Greening:** Conducive to a poetic sequence, that cottage. Then your most recent books of poetry, *Sparrow Tree*, 2011, it's strikingly different from...it couldn't be more different from *A Hospital Odyssey*. Lots of...

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Short!

**John Greening:** Economy is the word.



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**Gwyneth Lewis:** That's right, short poems. I think I've done length now.

**John Greening:** Yes, strikingly different. And is there another collection on the way, of poetry?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes. And you know, in a way...some poets seem to deepen one furrow as they go along. I get bored with doing the same thing, so I prefer to try something new technically. Which means that the gist of what you say has to...is different. But yes, I'm putting together a collection; after a long time...I've probably written enough poems for three collections in the period between *Sparrow Tree* and the next one, but I've changed so much in that period that I think they've become subsumed by other poems and I want to write quite a few new ones.

**John Greening:** So it's important you don't repeat yourself essentially. You want each new book to be a step forward rather than just...

**Gwyneth Lewis:** I do, but I don't think...I get interested in different forms and skills and sounds; very often the *tone* is so important in a poem, once you get the tone right. And people don't talk about tone of voice so much as other things like metre and rhyme and story and so on, but the *tone* is the key, the tone of the speaker.

**John Greening:** Absolutely, as it is talking to a person. I mean, the tone of their voice tells you everything, really, so in a poem it's crucial too.

**Gwyneth Lewis:** But the metre and the rhyme then, if you've done it properly, they are the stage directions.

**John Greening:** Ah, which brings us neatly, because I haven't really talked to you about your experience of stage, because you've done so much drama and you've written libretti, important to you I assume?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Yes, but theatre is so difficult because, again, you can't

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just have people up on stage spouting words. You actually have to have something happening, and that is *surprisingly* difficult. Although I love the collaborative aspect of performing, the performing arts; so that is like a little holiday from being locked in a room counting syllables on my hands – not that I’m like that all the time – but it is a nice corrective. But I have so much respect for dramatists, it’s *really* hard.

**John Greening:** Are there other genres that you’ve not explored that you want to?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Well, a full-scale opera, but the opportunities to do those are very few and far between. I enjoy writing for television as well. It’s a theatrical skill and a great exercise in bilingualism in the sense that you are using images and words together, so that the one doesn’t repeat the other.

**John Greening:** Have you done a television poem at all, the sort of Tony Harrison type of thing?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** D’you know, I haven’t! I don’t know why. I think that is a really difficult thing to pull off.

**John Greening:** What advice would you give to a young poet?

**Gwyneth Lewis:** Oh dear. Well, I’d say, ‘Don’t be put off. It is more possible than you think, and don’t be put off by anybody or anything, if that’s what you have to do’. But I would also say, ‘Look after yourself, because it’s tough’.

Not only do you have the discipline of the art, which is, to quote that poem to the Makars, ‘long and hard to learn’; financially it’s very difficult, but what a joy and don’t give up on it and don’t let anybody put you off.

**John Greening:** Well, it’s been a joy talking to you. Gwyneth Lewis, thank you very much.

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**Gwyneth Lewis:** Thank you. I've loved it. Thank you very much.

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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](http://gwynethlewis.com). And that concludes episode 424, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 425, we take a poetry break with Rebecca Watts and host Julia Copus.

We hope you'll join us.

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