

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 426

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**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.

**Caroline Sanderson:** Hello and welcome to episode 426 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Sara Wheeler speaks with Caroline Sanderson about the sources of her inspirations as a travel writer and biographer, why the future of travel writing is bright, and why the writer's job is to find hope and celebrate the individual human spirit's survival.

Sara Wheeler is the award-winning writer of ten nonfiction books about travel and travellers. They include *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*, *The Magnetic North*, and *Mud and Stars: Travels in Russia with Pushkin and Other Geniuses of the Golden Age*.

Sara's shorter writing includes hundreds of articles and book reviews, and her broadcasting career has encompassed writing and presenting eleven BBC Radio 4 *From Our Own Correspondent* segments and a BBC Radio 4 five-part series entitled *To Strive, to Seek*.

**Caroline Sanderson:** Sara, what attributes does a writer need that are specific to travel writing? We all have to be observers as writers, but this seems particularly important if you're going to write about place and other people.

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, I think other people, as you indicate, is part of it, and allowing them to speak for themselves, to listen to what they say, to note

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it down very carefully and to allow them to have their own voice without trying to shoehorn it into your own preoccupations.

And I think whilst you are correct when you say every writer has to be an observer, I think in the case of the travel writer, it's attenuated because you've got half a chance if you can make the reader see, hear, taste, smell although not all at the same time! But you really do have to do those things; and I think thirdly, I would say, the selection of the fertile fact from the enormous heap of facts that there are, a few brush strokes rather than a whole portrait. And I think that you can spend your whole life trying to find which are the fertile ones. And my attitude is if my hit rate gets a little bit better after five decades, that's good enough and it's as good as I'm ever going to get.

**Caroline Sanderson:** I feel like also it's an element of surprise for the reader, I was very struck rereading your book, *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*, and the first sentence in the first chapter is, rather wonderfully, given that you are talking about the coldest place on earth, 'Each day was hotter than the last'. And you don't expect that.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes well, I think it's always good to dish up something to the reader that they don't expect. And I think that the narrative arc of a travel book is also very important and it can be forgotten. Every book needs a narrative arc: a structure, an organisation, a pattern in the carpet. There's lots and lots of images, and you wouldn't have a novel without a plot.

And, I do find when I teach travel writing that people have this idea that they go round Rajasthan, have the most marvellous time, and come back and go bllurrk! onto the page, and that's travel writing, and it isn't. What is this about? It has to have a pattern in its carpet. Now I'm very good at pontificating about all of that, but a lot of the pieces I've written and indeed some of my books, you might say, *Well, what is this, except a journey through this place?* And I would stumble around and come up

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with something, but I'm not quite sure how true it would be. *But*, it's okay to preach when you don't put things into practice yourself in some situations, at least.

**Caroline Sanderson:** I know you grew up in a working-class family in Bristol and that trips to far-flung places were not on the menu. But then you went to Russia when you were eleven, and I think that that sounds as if that was quite a profound experience?

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes. It was like going to Mars. We had never been abroad and package tours had started to make their appearance – this was in 1971 – when I say 'make their appearance', I mean on the pages of the *Daily Express*, which was the only newspaper that ever came into our flat. And my mother had this curious thing, she thought she'd been a Russian in a previous existence.

I never really found out where that came from, but she was very interested in Russia, and lo and behold this package tour to Moscow and Petersburg, Leningrad as it was then – Moscow and Leningrad – four days in each – appeared in the *Daily Express* and it was decided we would go. The money was found and we set off along what was not yet the M4, but was only how partly built the M4. So I think it took us a week to get to Heathrow and it was in Soviet times of course.

So we were billeted in these enormous hotels with sort of 6,000 bedrooms and no milk for breakfast and it was an extraordinary experience. And then we came back and battled our way back down the M4 and that was the end of that.

**Caroline Sanderson:** Was that in some way a spark, though, for something, I know you always wanted to be a writer, you said.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yeah, I did, yeah.

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**Caroline Sanderson:** And you always felt you'd be a nonfiction writer?

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes, absolutely, yes, that's right. Well, I say it was a spark, but I don't know how much it was really. I *feel* that instinctively the travel format was a perfect vehicle for me because it seemed to me you could smuggle in all the stuff one has to write about, like what it is to be human and so on, those amorphous things, within train timetable and chickens on the bus, and all of that kind of stuff.

And I still think that actually; that one can do anything one likes within the format of a travel book and one will be judged accordingly, like all writers. So there was something about the form that really attracted the younger me and I believe that writers are born fiction or nonfiction writers, I really do.

There are very few writers one can say have excelled in both. Well, let's think of some: Steinbeck, Orwell, Pamuk, a few others, but not many. In all the travel writers of the generation above me, many of whom I admire hugely, they all alternate with novels, regrettably, in my opinion. First of all, I think they do so because they feel, or in some subliminal way that fiction is a higher form of art.

Well, it might well be actually, but to my mind, that doesn't mean one has to do it. And secondly, judgment sometimes is suspended I think in the case of these writers who don't quite see that their nonfiction books are better. Anyway, that's not for me to say, but certainly fiction was *never* for me.

And I used to say to my agent, if ever he had... you know, in a lull in the contracts coming along, if I said, 'I think I'll write a novel' that he would shoot me. And I said to him, 'It would be very bad if I did'. And he said, 'Yes, it would, be very bad!'

**Caroline Sanderson:** Yes, there is this attitude, though I find it as a

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nonfiction writer. You know, people have said to me, ‘Oh, and are you going to write a novel one day?’ As if that was somehow the ultimate.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes, the aspiration. I mean, there is a hierarchy, I think – poetry would be at the top, wouldn’t it? – going right the way down. I think that’s why some writers have rejected the notion of even being travel writers, famously, Chatwin, who won the Thomas Cook Travel Book of the Year award and gave the cheque back, because he didn’t want to be tainted with something he thought was lowly, and what he was doing was of higher value. I just don’t see it like that, thank God, I never have.

**Caroline Sanderson:** I know that generally your books take around three years to write, and I wondered how you go about immersing yourself in a place before you go there. I imagine that you’d read some of the literature, well, I know you’ve done that, maybe learn the language. What does that process consist of or is there not that much of it? I suppose one could just set off?

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, I have just set off. For my book on Chile, I made the decision I would do all the research when I got back, which I did. Would I do that again? Yes, I would, I think it’s quite a good idea, one’s fresh to everything. I did learn Spanish as I went down, but Spanish is a very easy language to learn, and you have a lot of time when you’re sitting on thirty-six-hour bus journeys, and unless I spoke Spanish to people, I didn’t speak at all.

So doing the reading after, I think can be a huge benefit. Now there are disadvantages, there might be leads you want to follow and all the rest of it. So I’m not saying, advising, others to do it, nor am I saying I would do it again, but I might. So massive, massive reading. But I think there can be advantages for doing it when you get back. My book about Russia, yeah... Russian was to be my last language.

I had this very romantic idea of...about that, not quite factoring in, in your

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fifties, it's a lot harder to learn a language. Anyway, I did that, but that's the end of languages. I can't battle through that again. Although I hope that there'd be opportunities to brush up on the skeleton, the rudiments of some of the ones I've already got.

I think it's tough going to a place you don't speak the language. And for a sustained period, for a three-year project, I don't really think it's on the cards for me. Many have done it, I'm not saying it can't be done, in any shape or form. I think that immersion can go on when you've left the land. I mean, when my children were small, I didn't spend as long as I would've liked in foreign lands.

And I must say I found I could immerse myself when I got back. You know, 'The body stops travelling and the spirit takes over the trek', as Laurens van Der Post said – I don't quote him very often for obvious reasons – but I think that's a nice quote and I believe it, I believe in it. In the same way that you don't really have to go anywhere, as we all know. But it's rather agreeable going places. And I think if you don't go anywhere, you have to probably be a lot cleverer and a lot of a better writer, and that's okay.

**Caroline Sanderson:** And when you *are* travelling, what's your process, how do you record things? Do you write a diary? I know you take photos, but there's also, there must be, a process of recording it with your mind's eye as well, and you're remembering your emotions at particular points.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes, I'm rather dubious about the 'mind's eye' because I've learned that you think you're going to remember the little details and you don't. Nobody does, young or old, so remorseless notetaking every night. Preferably jotting some things down in the day. Sometimes I have two notebooks, particularly if I'm say, traveling with other people or in a bus or something like that. So I can just put some keywords down and then remorseless every night, often takes two hours, get it all down. You don't know what you're going to need, end of story!

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Anybody who says they did in my game is not doing it right. You don't know what you're going to need! So yeah, remorseless, and it's a right bore. But you won't remember, one won't remember, I won't remember, so absolutely everything. So I've got all these notebooks with countries on the spine, tippexed on the spine, and I can get them down and look at them again, which for the first time I have done for my current project.

Which is a travel memoir, it hasn't got a title yet, although I'll tell you in a minute what I want to call it. It's a woman's life on the road, from my twenties to my sixties, which I am now, so, *Nubility to Invisibility*, is the subtitle in my head. Of course I won't be able to use that because those words aren't suitable for a subtitle, but that's what the book is, it's *Nubility to Invisibility*, and the next volume will be, of course, *Immobility*! But we'll deal with that when we come to it. So it's about my life on the road, the practicalities, about the role models I had, there were some, not many, but they were there. And about themes that have preoccupied me since the word *go*, which tend to be women's stuff.

Of course, you know, I lived through the environmental movement starting to move beyond scientists and specialists who knew about it. When I started out, you know, the *New York Times* was publishing stories saying, a minority of scientists think that humankind, they're having a decisive effect on a changing climate.

Nobody had coined the Anthropocene. So that's a lot to have happened in forty years. So all stuff like that woven in. And the title I would really like is, because I said there were role models, and one of my heroines who comes into the book a lot is Martha Gellhorn, and she was a war correspondent writing on fighting for many decades. And the open road she said was her great love.

And she had this great quote about travel, she said, 'Oh, you know, everybody else seems to do it better than I do, and puts you in a bad mood and it's tiring and you snap at people unnecessarily because they're

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annoying you and it makes you frayed and bitter'. So I thought *Frayed and Bitter*, what a totally stupendous title, which just expresses everything I want to say!

**Caroline Sanderson:** Well, let's talk about some of your books that are already published and which rove across different continents, and in the case of your biographies, across different lives. I noted that you've described yourself in the past as a generalist, as a writer. What do you mean by that?

**Sara Wheeler:** Oh, *absolutely*. I feel that in my heart. What I mean is I'm not a specialist and I'm not an academic. For example, I wrote a book about the Antarctic and I wrote a book, a biography of a man who was in the Antarctic, and then I wrote a book about the Arctic. And there's a tremendous appetite for books about little wooden ships and the pincers of flow, and I could have gone on churning those out forever.

And everybody wanted me to write a biography of Shackleton and all the rest of it, and I feel in my heart to be a generalist, going onto the next thing as a blank page. The first place I went to write about after the Antarctic, it was Bangladesh, because it's the most populous country in the world by square metre, and I wanted the opposite.

And I've got very used to the fact now of going into something new, which a lot of people out there know masses about, for example, Russia. I'm writing about the Golden Age writers, millions of brilliant academics out there and non-academics, but specialists don't own anything, any territory, and one is allowed to go in as a generalist with a fresh eye and one will be judged quite rightly, accordingly.

And I just feel I didn't want to be...I'm the opposite of the academic with whom narrowing, narrowing, narrowing, narrowing down into the field, so that one is in fact the first person ever to write about one unpublished page of Pushkin that resides in the Tretyakov, you know, and it's very important people do that kind of thing, but it's not what I want to do.



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So everything is a new start, as biography was, I've written two full-length biographies and lots of biographical essays. And I really enjoy the biographical space, you know, the place where the documents stop and that conjuring from the elusive flame-like spirit of the human nature. And when I wrote my first biography, I thought, *Oh my goodness, this is a whole new genre, and how's it going to be different from travel writing?* And it turned out really not to be different at all, they're just conjuring people in the way I try to conjure places, and I find the two extremely conducive. And I like to write about people who have some travel component about their own procession through life, they are travellers in their own way, I guess I understand that. And I've always thought a third full-length biography will come, and I've always thought it would be a woman, and the right one hasn't presented itself, and I hope it will.

**Caroline Sanderson:** I love the spirit of that, though, the spirit of being a generalist because I think as a writer you can sometimes think, *Oh I've got to find a subject that nobody else has written about.* Or you can feel intimidated by the body of work that's already out there. So I find that really inspiring what you're saying, the fact that you can find your own take on most anything really.

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, I'm glad you find it inspiring. I hope other people do, I mean, intimidation's a good word and you've got to be ready for it and able to take it when they set to it with the knives and forks in the reviews. I think maybe there are fewer academics whose role in life is solely to destroy those daring to earn a living without having to do the ghastly work academics do, fewer, but some of them do just want to point out that you know less than them, which of course, one knows a million times less than them! That's not the point. But anyway, intimidation, you've got to be able to take it when it's dished out.

**Caroline Sanderson:** So, your first travel book, *Evia: Travels on an Undiscovered Greek Island*, published in 1992. You've since expressed your dissatisfaction with this book, you said it contains 'too much labour' and 'too much love', and I'm intrigued to understand what you mean by that?

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**Sara Wheeler:** Yeah, I stand by that, ‘too much labour, too much love, not enough heart’. Yeah. Well, too much labour, I worked too hard without really knowing what my pattern in the carpet was and what my themes were, and ‘too much love’, I was just deeply involved with Greece and Greekness before I started and couldn’t take the essential step back, and there was just not enough art to smelt from this huge amount of material, something that was art rather than just a very nicely put together, if I might say so, slab of information about a tremendously interesting place.

And that’s what I mean by that, I mean, I feel that book is too much a slab of information and not enough a crafted set of themes with a pattern in its carpet beyond a portrait of a very beguiling island. I didn’t think I made it beguiling enough. There’s something worthy about that book, in my opinion, and goodness, I hope in forty years I’ve learned something about writing also, I hope I would write it better now.

And in fact, when a second edition was reissued, I said all of that in the introduction and my editor said ‘Honestly Sara, I really don’t think we can publish a book where the author says in the introduction, it’s not very good’! So that got rather amended!

**Caroline Sanderson:** And your next book, and you’ve mentioned this book already, *Travels in a Thin Country*, a journey through Chile, a country which gave you the first sight of Antarctica, actually, didn’t it? And there’s a wonderful story, I think about where the inspiration to go to Chile came from, because I guess one question you could ask travel writers is how does each destination choose itself? There’s a man at the pool and the phrase, ‘En Chile no pasa nada’: ‘In Chile, nothing happens’. And that was intriguing enough to send you there. Have I got that right?

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes, you have got it right that that all happened. The thing is, is that it relates to what I’ve said about knowing too much about Greece and having so much about Greekness and Orthodoxy and what it meant in my head. And I’ve lived in Greece for a long time and I had too much

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going on and my agent said to me, 'You must go somewhere you don't know anything about.'

And I didn't know anything about Chile except I was fascinated by how a country could possibly have such an absurd shape. And how could that person, the woman at the top, have anything to do with a woman at the bottom? And then this bloke at the pool says, 'Nothing happens there.'

And so that was the link between the first book and the second: it was knowing too much, and not knowing anything. And as you said, that led onto my third one in a much more tangible link, in that to complete my portrait of contemporary Chile, I had to go to what they fondly claimed to be Chilean Antarctica.

They're one of the seven claimants, didn't mean anything to anybody, but to a young country like Chile, hugely important. And it's *illegal* to publish a map in Chile without that triangle of land, which they call Chilean Antarctica, on it. Even a boy scout with his badge on his arm has to have a...with a map of his country, has to have that triangle.

So I had to go there to complete my portrait, which was rather a nuisance at the time, tremendous effort. And of course when I got there, I looked out over this ice desert, bigger than the United States with no people getting in the way. And I saw my next book really in front of me then. And of course I didn't know how hard it would be, but it's a bit like having a baby, if you had any idea at the outset, you wouldn't have the spirit for the fight. And then once I'd invested so much time in going to the Antarctic, I had to keep going, it's like waiting for a bus, I can't stop now. So that took me two years to organise and yeah, that was the Antarctic.

**Caroline Sanderson:** We've mentioned *Terra incognita: Travels in Antarctica*, perhaps the book for which you're best known, and it feels like the ultimate travel writing challenge, an inhospitable place unlike anywhere else. And you spent seven months there and you describe it as

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your 'love affair'. I mean, one can have more than one love affair in one's life, but I was very struck by that.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yeah, I think that's right. I've had a lot of love affairs with places, with that one and I think most people who've been to the Antarctic say the same thing. When you're unmoored from all your cultural points of reference, there's nothing, there's not even a time zone; you've got twenty-four-hour light or twenty-four-hour darkness, you have a sense of something that's beyond the terrestrial realm and, you know, all this energy coming off...literal energy coming off this ice sheet, which goes on for thousands of miles and with no people in it. I think it turns a woman's mind to things that are important and different.

Yeah, I do think back on, if you asked me what the strongest bond I've ever had with a place, it would be with the Antarctic.

**Caroline Sanderson:** So then came two biographies, of Apsley Cherry-Garrard and Denys Finch Hatton, very different men, different settings. Did they have anything in common?

**Sara Wheeler:** Yeah, they were born in the same year. That was the key thing. Well, actually it's 1886, 1887, which was not a coincidence. It was because I'm not a historian and I could go back that far, and I felt that going back any further than that to write about, there'd be an inauthenticity I couldn't cover up. After I'd done the first one, I kind of understood a little bit about what happened in obviously the Edwardian summer and the ten years before the First War, which was so critical for both of them.

More significant than the war itself really, those ten years, and all the things that happened, they're both very, very English, things that happened in England in that period. I got it. And then, reading all the newspapers through the twenties and the thirties, so that was not a coincidence, I was looking for that. But apart from that, they were indeed, as you say, couldn't have been more different temperamentally.

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I wrote about Cherry because in the research for *Terra Incognita*, I'd read as much as I could and his book is without any question – I don't think you'd find anyone to disagree with this statement – the best polar book ever written, his own book, *Worst Journey in the World*, published in the magical year of 1922. And he didn't have his biography, he didn't have his place on the shelf like the others, and I thought he deserved it. So that was that.

And then I wanted someone else born in the same time who also had a big travel component, and I hadn't been to Africa much to speak of except for short-term assignments. And Denys Finch Hatton is the eternal wanderer; died young, which is a tremendously attractive characteristic in a biographical subject! We don't have those endless chapters, and so the years passed.

Immortalised, of course, by Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*, and with a lovely love affair with the, to my mind, more interesting woman, Beryl Markham: one of those aviatrixes, you know, with their lipstick and the rubber helmet. Yeah, the eternal wanderer, and hardly left any material behind, because I'd realised what I really like to do is conjure the background against which they move.

So I'd had to read all the papers in the Mombasa archives in 1920 to find out what was going on in the Mombasa area in English language papers, the small ads and all that kind of thing, I *loved* all of that, I loved it.

**Caroline Sanderson:** You referred to your latest project, your memoir, charting that forty-year period as a writer, and your next travel book that followed the biographies, *The Magnetic North: Notes from the Arctic Circle*, you've described that as a middle-aged book, and I think also with your book, *O My America!*, about six women who – it's a group biography – fled various kinds of trouble from nineteenth-century England and went to America to sort of reinvent themselves.

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It feels like that was a sort...you described that as a different phase of your writing life. So how do you feel about, I suppose it's one's progression as a writer, as you write through the years, but what different perspectives your age brings on your writing and whether it be places or people?

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, one's preoccupations are bound to change and one outlook is bound to change and one's very idealistic as a young writer, as young writers should be. And I saw the Antarctic as a great symbol of hope and what the Earth could be and all the rest of it. But then you start being a bit more realistic and I saw the Arctic as a symbol of what the planet really is: owned and spoiled and polluted and tons of people there have been...indigenous people have been dragged into a cash economy with varying degrees of disaster, by the governments who own the circumpolar lands.

And that chimes much more with my notion of what life is now. It puts the boot in, both on an individual level and on a planetary level and every level in between. And likewise, my middle-aged women from in *O My America!*, you know, life had put the boot in for all six of them in very different ways, and they went to try and reinvent themselves. I found the middle two quarters of the nineteenth century, the interesting one in America, when it became itself, and once the rails joined it together in 1876, it becomes less interesting to me.

And those fifty years, 1825 to 1876, I find absolutely gripping beyond belief. And then you have English women like Fanny Trollope, Anthony's mother, who went in 1828, *fantastically early*, for reasons that were *only* economic: useless husband, the usual story. And had to go and try and make a fortune, which was a process which was a spectacular failure. But there she was getting a steamship up the Mississippi, I mean it's *absolutely incredible*.

**Caroline Sanderson:** And then there's *Mud and Stars: Travels in Russia with Pushkin and Other Geniuses of the Golden Age*. I personally love 'in

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the footsteps'-type travel books. So with this book we get a sort of a meld of biography and travel, don't we? And it feels like it brings your journey full circle in a way, back to that first trip to Russia, but in very different circumstances and time.

**Sara Wheeler:** Yes, well, the writers of the Russian Golden Age, so Pushkin to death of Tolstoy. If you love reading and if reading is one of the main planks of your life as it is of mine, then, they're just there, aren't they. And I've always known I would have to write about them sometime, I wanted to. So I decided, as you say, to combine, and I went on many different trips to Russia following in their footsteps.

So following Chekhov to Siberia, for example; Pushkin up there to his ancestral estate in the North West; Dostoevsky to his place, Staraya Russa, where he wrote a couple of the great novels; Lermontov to the Caucasus, where of course he was killed eventually, his house there; and Turgenev his estate, Spasskoye-Lutovinovo. And they were my guides to Russia and to life itself, and allowed me to write about them and reread all their stuff and learn Russian.

And yeah, they were tremendous interpreters and I really sort of set out thinking, *I will learn through this how Russia has changed*, and it really turned out not to have changed at all. And I think that still to be the case, I did home stays almost wherever I went, a very easy thing to organise in Russia, and I found the people there accepting that their lot was a desperate and miserable one, as had been the lot of their forebears, stretching back to czarist times and times before Cossacks rode east across the Urals. It's something remorselessly unchanging, regrettably for them; no regime does any better than the last, and I have a tremendous sense of sympathy with the Russian people who are not warmongers.

It's not their war that we've seen, and they were going to be suffering themselves from it. Most of the 144 million are poor; most of them are battling with a broken infrastructure, basics like health and education.

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Most of them trying to keep their grandsons out of the Army, military service, or enduring the fact that corruption trickles down to the very lowest levels, you have to pay to get anything. All knowing that their leaders live in yachts and have huge Swiss bank accounts.

And that makes me feel empathy towards them and a tremendous amount of sympathy. And it's regrettable that their leaders have led to an evil picture of Russia, the leaders *are* evil, but the people aren't. The Orthodox Church has not come out of recent events smelling sweetly, which would be no surprise to anybody.

When I say the Orthodox Church, I mean at the highest echelons. A great number of Orthodox priests in Russia actually, spoke up very eloquently against the war, risking their own positions, but not at the top and only what one could be expected. And I have a lot to say about that supine role of the church and about the role of organised religion in general across the world.

But my response is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I think that what people need to reach is the transcendental, we know it's a fundamental part of what being human is, indigenous peoples across the globe have shown us that. And so we mustn't despise religion, but I think we can do an awful lot of despising of those who say they speak for it at the highest level.

**Caroline Sanderson:** The future of travel writing sometimes feels precarious. We have the climate crisis of course, and global instability. But in another sense, it feels even more crucial that we learn about other cultures and cherish the myriad landscapes of the Earth. What do you say to that?

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, of course I've had to address this issue of the future of travel writing in my memoir because when I started out, travel was good, even *morally* good. It showed you had a broad mind, interested



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in other people, weren't a little nationalist, travelling was good. Now travelling is wicked, one: climate change, two: covid, and three: voice appropriation. You're subjugating the global South by even going there and writing anything.

Well, where does that leave us? Then there's a fourth Horsewoman of the Apocalypse, which is, we've been everywhere, which started up long before all of this. We have been everywhere. So that's rather a bleak picture. But I think that slightly the demise of travel writing's always been predicted and the daily detail of life will continue going on everywhere in the world, just as it always has.

And I find it's that daily detail of the person struggling on through the supermarket that makes life unbearably poetic. And that's not going to stop any time soon. So I think the future of travel writing is extremely bright. We will battle through as we always have.

**Caroline Sanderson:** You said that a writer's job is to find the hope. And you certainly bring humour and levity and a sense of the absurd into your writing, quite often. So tell me about finding the hope.

**Sara Wheeler:** Well, I certainly think the sad absurdity of life you ignore as a writer at your peril. And I stand by that statement, 'It's a writer's duty to find hope', and in the end it's to celebrate the individual human spirit that survives against the bad guys. And God knows there's enough bad guys out there. And to look at the good in humanity and the beauty on the planet together, in spite of the overpowering evidence that there's bad in humanity and that we're destroying the beauty on the planet, and we have to acknowledge those two things and do something about them, that's the most important thing. But in order to do that, I think we have to have hope. Otherwise, we might as well go on and hasten our group demise. So I think that the writer must celebrate the individual ability of the human spirit to survive all things. And goodness knows there's enough examples out there of people who have; and to create great art, which elevates the human spirit above.

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And I've always thought the point of listening to Schubert was to make me think that all the things I feel have been felt before, that's what Art does, and that's where the hope lies.

**Caroline Sanderson:** Sara Wheeler, thank you very much.

**Sara Wheeler:** Thank you for talking to me.

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**RLF outro:** That was Sara Wheeler in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Sara on the Royal Literary Fund's website. And that concludes episode 426 of *Writers Aloud*, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Kona Macphee.

Coming up in episode 427 in the final part of our series on the theme, 'My Favourite Book', Royal Literary Fund fellows share the effect that their favourite books have had on their writing.

We hope you'll join us.

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Thanks for listening.