

# Writers Aloud

Episode 427

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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 427 of *Writers Aloud*, in this episode, the final instalment of our four-part series on the theme, 'My Favourite Book', Royal Literary Fund Fellows share what their favourite books have taught them about craft, the role of the writer in a text and the tricky art of blurring poetry and prose.

'It was impossible to feel alone in a room full of favourite books' writes the novelist, Riley Redgate in *Noteworthy*. 'I had the sense that they knew me personally, that they'd read me cover to cover as I'd read them'. Favourite books can be amazingly powerful, perhaps especially for writers. In this episode we talk to Royal Literary Fund Fellows about some of their favourite literary works and hear the impact that these books have had on their writing.

In some cases, favourite books have the power to change someone's thinking or worldview. This was the case for Zoë Marriott with her two favourite books, *The Curse of Chalion* and *Paladin of Souls*, by Lois McMaster Bujold.

**Zoë Marriott:** I first read them when I was about twenty, and I have reread them probably once a year ever since, and I have to hold myself back from rereading them more than that because they just fill me with such joy as a craftsperson and as a reader. They are fantasy novels and they're inspired

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by Renaissance Italy and Spain, and they have a kind of thematic thread running through them of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Canterbury Tales*.

But they're just these wonderful stories about how people find redemption, really. And the first one is about this broken-down soldier who comes back from the war and really wants nothing more than to sort of beg a place as a sculler or something like that, in a kitchen by a fire. And he ends up becoming the chancellor of the country just through the sheer quality of his soul, just from by being a good person who makes the right choice.

And then the second book is the mirror image of that, so a woman's journey. A woman who starts out in one of the highest places, she's the Dowager Queen of this country, and she's been broken by living in this kind of political society in the way that women are used and abused. And she goes on a pilgrimage to try and just escape from everyone really.

And she thinks that if she falls off a cliff somewhere along the way, it won't be any great loss. And by the end of it, she has found a new purpose in life and come to have a new faith in the religious gods of this particular fantasy world. And it's just some of the most delicate and fine-tuned characterizations that I've ever seen, and I feel as if I were to run into either of the characters on the street, they could even be in disguise, I would instantly know them and just fall into their arms and love them forever.

They're also books that have this amazing sense of wonder in them, so... it's difficult to describe, I'm not a religious person, but – and the religious system in the books does not exist – but I do feel as if, if those gods existed in this world, I would be very devout because the way that they move through people in the world that she's created, Lois McMaster Bujold, it's just so inspiring and it makes me understand religious people in a way that I never did before. And that's transformed my attitude towards religious people, because growing up I didn't really have much respect for religion at all, and after reading these books, I did.

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**RLF:** Sometimes it is the way a writer handles moral questions that speaks powerfully to another author. Playwright Dipo Agboluaje was very much impressed by Tony Kushner's handling of some very sensitive issues in his play *Angels in America*.

**Dipo Agboluaje:** It was written at a particular point in time during the Reagan era. Everything about homosexuals and about the crisis of HIV Aids and the way that community dealt with it, in that period at a time when *nobody* cared about it. And so for him to come out and write this play...what I loved about that play again was that I felt the anger, I felt the author putting he himself on the line when he wrote that play.

And I think you can only write plays of that nature if you put yourself into it, if you put yourself into shoes of your protagonist. If you put yourself in the period of that moment that you're writing in, that's when what you have to say, that's when you determine whether it is relevant or not, and what he had to say was relevant.

It was something that needed to be said. And it was something that people didn't want to hear, and that for me is where the power of that play lies. There is a fierce moral courage that I see in a writer like Tony Kushner. It's what I see also in the works of Wole Soyinka but *Angels in America*, when I first heard about it and read about it and read it, was what really triggered in me that sense of morality, a sense of duty of a writer. What a writer owes to his audience: to say the unsayable I put say it in a way that is epic, that is funny, that is angry, that is emotional and intellectual. I thought the way he combines all these elements together, for me, is what made *Angels in America* to be the contemporary classic that it is today.

**RLF:** Cynthia Rogerson found similar inspiration in Carson McCuller's portrayal of the nuances of this society she puts at the centre of her novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

**Cynthia Rogerson:** I guess, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Heart is a*

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*Lonely Hunter*, one of its main themes is racism. That's not overtly the main theme. The main story is Scout, the young girl in it who is having romantic feelings for one of her friends, a boy, but she's too young to recognise it for that kind of relationship.

It's quite interesting for the reader to watch their friendship: neither one really knows how it's changing or what's going to happen at the end of the summer. Meanwhile, the background to their story is all the kind of racial injustice that characters in the South at that time would just take for granted, but we find quite shocking. And it's written in the era that it's talking about so it's quite authentic.

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* I have read about ten times. Each time I read it I see something new in it, I feel like it explains the world to me, even though it was set maybe eighty years ago, and it's in the South and I live in Scotland, it still explains the world to me. Each chapter just focuses on one of the people in the town, one of the characters.

Their stories weave together, but it's so artless it doesn't look like it was even...it just feels like there's a camera panning through that town, peeking into people's houses and seeing what's really going on in their hearts.

**RLF:** *The Plague and I* might sound like an unlikely title for a favourite book, but Betty MacDonald's unexpectedly funny memoir of working in a TB sanatorium struck a chord with Joanne Limburg, who found its portrayal of character and the way it showed the importance of human relationships, particularly powerful.

**Joanne Limburg:** One of the things I like in *The Plague and I*, and it's a great model for how to write memoir, is that Betty MacDonald is so good at constructing character out of real people, and so good at showing the importance of people and relationships, which if you imagine you're stuck in a bedrest ward with someone twenty-four hours a day, it really, really matters. And she gets so much comedy out of these characters and how they interact with each other and how they drive each other mad.

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And there are great major characters and great minor characters too. There's one wonderful scene where there are two other patients next to a partition on the ward, and she said, 'One patient talks about all her organs as if they're machines, they're just complaining about their ailments', which is what you do in a TB sanatorium, and the other one she calls her 'the friendly organs woman', and she talks about, 'Oh, my intestines, were playing up something awful!'

I just imagine her intestines as these little children round a table banging on it with their spoons! And how can you not love that?

**RLF:** Sometimes it's the technical aspect of a book that particularly influences another writer. Susan Fletcher found herself strongly drawn to the way that Michael Ondaatje blurs the line between poetry and prose in his famous novel *The English Patient*.

**Susan Fletcher:** I read it fifteen years ago now, and no other book has really come close to it in terms of the impact it's had on me. I certainly haven't read another book as many times as I've read *The English Patient*. I think it was, or is, such a powerful book because for the first time when reading it, I discovered that you could fuse poetry and prose and I had never really read a piece of fiction that seemed to so often follow the principles of poetry. So despite this being a prose piece, there is rhythm, there is pace, there is often there is rhyme in amongst the paragraphs.

It felt like an absolute work of art and despite the fact that it is an incredible story, it has a very interesting narrative voice, it has challenging viewpoints, the thing that I keep coming back to time and time again is his choice of words. The part that really blew me away was how right at the very end of this three-hundred page, third-person narrative, out of nowhere, Michael Ondaatje brings himself into the story, he has one sentence right towards the end, where suddenly he's first-person. He's speaking of Hannah, one of the primary characters in the book, and he says – I have the quote here – 'She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers

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have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life.' Even now, it makes me feel quite emotional reading it.

It was a breathtaking moment reading it, if I'm honest, because I didn't know writers could do that. I didn't know you could play with narrative so much. I didn't know you could suddenly jump into your book at the end and give an opinion like he does, and it lends the feeling, I think, of having been sitting by a fireside all this while, having Ondaatje talk to you in the oral tradition, it wasn't just a novel, it felt like a very ancient story being told face to face. And it also, for me, I think, sums up how it feels to spend three, four, five years writing your fictional characters. You feel you know them intimately, but they also don't feel like they're yours and you can't hold them in your wing for the rest of your life, you have to let them go.

**RLF:** Jane Draycott was similarly impressed by the stylistic effects that Henri Alain-Fournier employs in his book *Le Grand Meaulnes*.

**Jane Draycott:** It's very poetic in as much as there are two characters in it. There's the character of the narrator François, the young François, who observes the adventures of his friend Augustin. He observes the man, he lives through them, he almost lives the adventures himself, he comes to fall in love with the same woman in the end. And I think that's very like a writer, it's almost as if this isn't an account of a writer imagining the possibilities for themselves.

So entering a world, which is purely imaginative, but is utterly real and is somehow or other connected to what you might become, or what possibilities lie ahead, it's tremendous. It's a fantastic book, I mean, it's very flawed, it's a little bit sentimental perhaps, but for me it absolutely endures every time I listen to it or read it.

**RLF:** For some writers, the structural ingenuity of a favourite book can have a lasting impact. James Woodall was never the same after a boyhood brush with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

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**James Woodall:** Any aspiring novelist, any writer should read it simply from the point of view of its innovative, radical way of arranging narrative, because of course, the story is told first from Lockwood's point of view, then from Nelly's point of view. And then from the retelling of the whole saga of the Earnshaw, Heathcliff, Linton families, in a sequence of interconnected narratives, which leave you wondering how the story has happened at all.

But at the same time, you cannot get away from the events as they unfold because they are so compelling. That's the first thing to say, it is from that point of view it's a masterpiece. The second thing, of course, is that these are wild and crazy events in a bit of Victorian England that you don't necessarily – if you are unused to reading, and if you haven't read Dickens, which I certainly hadn't at the time – you don't expect to encounter *this* particular world.

And I think that's the point, the first reactions to it, of course, in the 1850s was that it was full of dissipated, dreadful creatures that nobody could possibly identify with, and how on earth could somebody get to the end of this, of writing this narrative without committing suicide, because at the time, nobody knew that this was a young woman

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And I remember thinking, *This is something new*; there were many other books that I probably had read by then. I remember I read a lot of Aldous Huxley, which I thought was rather a modish thing to do in the mid-1970s, and thinking that he was just the grooviest writer ever, sort of probably, still, in a way, think he is.

And I kind of favoured the modern world and modern art, and this was where I was headed in my mid-teens, my mid-to-late teens. It was all about the modern world, and this came along as such a complete and utter surprise.

**RLF:** Daring and playfulness in whatever form can have a strong appeal.



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In Harriet Castor's favourite book, *The 13 Clocks* by James Thurber, it's the use of language and the way the author subverts the reader's expectations that continue to delight her.

**Harriet Castor:** It opens in what looks like quite a usual way for a fairy tale. 'Once upon a time in a gloomy castle on a lonely hill where there were 13 clocks that wouldn't go, there lived a cold, aggressive Duke and his niece, the princess, Saralinda.'

Now that sounds quite standard in a way for a fairy tale; couple of little clues to the brilliance. One is the idea of the 13 clocks: the Duke decides that he's very interested in time, and he decides that he has killed time, he has slain it and wiped his bloody blade upon his beard, left it bleeding hours and minutes, wonderful image.

And all the clocks stopped seven years ago, at ten to five in the afternoon. I *love* this, seven years, fairy tales are so often concerned with time. You think of Sleeping Beauty, sleeps for a hundred years, Cinderella, midnight, all this kind of thing; seven years is a very fairy tale-ish sort of time.

Ten to five, totally prosaic, there's that humorous juxtaposition. And then just in the opening that I read to you, 'cold aggressive, Duke', *aggressive*, that's already a bit of a sign we've got something a little bit different here. I love that. The Duke is 'six feet four, and forty-six, and even colder than he thought he was'.

And he has a voice that sounded like 'iron dropped on velvet'. It's just wonderful. He's only afraid of two things. One is, 'now' because 'now' is sort of alive and 'then' is dead and buried and these are wonderful ideas for children to play with in whatever way they like. The other thing he's afraid of is the Todal, which is a mysterious creature.

And it's described like this, 'The Todal looks like a blob of glup. It makes a sound like rabbits screaming, and smells of old, unopened rooms'. It's



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waiting for the Duke to fail in some endeavour, such as setting a prince a task that he can do. And it says that if the Todal attacks the Duke, he will 'glup him'. So I love this, I love this language.

**RLF:** Sometimes favourite books can have quite unusual premises. Ruth Thomas names *Turtle Diary* by Russell Hoban as being among her favourite reads. She loves the way that Hoban uses detail to bring to life this engrossing and strange story of two lonely individuals intent on releasing the turtles in London Zoo.

**Ruth Thomas:** A friend lent it to me, maybe seven or eight years ago, said 'Oh, you might like this'. And I said, 'Oh, thanks'. And I didn't actually read it for a while, and then I picked it up and was just utterly enchanted from the start. Just this incredible voice, or these two amazing voices; these two quite lonely, middle-aged people living in London.

They're linked together by the fact that they both want...they have this desire to free the turtles from London Zoo, which sounds like a very odd premise for a novel, and it sort of is, in many ways, because Russell Hoban was a very extraordinary and sort of magical writer, I think. And he didn't...he never went for the ordinary.

And partly what I like about it is, is the fact that the novel is in the form of two interlinked first-person narratives. So you see the world from the point of view of William H, who works in an antiquarian bookshop, and....no, sorry, William G and Neaera H, who is a children's writer and illustrator. And they're both very jaded individuals, very down on their luck and questioning life, questioning the purpose of life, which sounds terribly depressing, when I describe it like this, but they both have this very witty and wry take on things. And Russell Hoban has this amazing ability to just focus and pinpoint the small and the everyday, the little details that just make up life.

That's what I love about fiction, not the kind of big themes that are poorly

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described, but the little, the tiny things that suggest a much bigger set of circumstances. So this really is the book I return to when I want to feel kind of connected with other people's thought processes, because both these characters have such a funny way of looking at the world, but it's also very recognisable.

**RLF:** The cross-pollination between one art form and another can form rich subject matter. For Gillian Allnutt, this is very much the case with her favourite book, *Letters on Cezanne*, by Rilke.

**Gillian Allnutt:** This account has led me to a biography of Cezanne by Gerstle Mack, a small book of Cezanne's own letters, and I don't remember what else. But I think I like this book because although I've now read it, I think, nine times since I was given it in 1992, I don't really understand it. Which is to say that I still have difficulty in recapping or reproducing the argument that Rilke is making about the nature of art and of the work and being of the artist.

I understand it intuitively, and in that way, I guess it's like a poem. Each time I reread it, I realise I've been walking slowly towards and into an understanding of it. Rilke is saying how slowly for him also, Cezanne has taught him about objectivity in art, in making, in making a painting or a poem.

Cezanne has taught him about the necessity of leaving behind the ego, the subjective personal self, of leaving that part of oneself out of the making, of effectively letting the work make itself.

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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 Zoë Marriott, Dipo Agboluaje,

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Cynthia Rogerson, Joanne Limburg, Susan Fletcher, Jane Draycott, James Woodall, Harriet Castor, Ruth Thomas, and Gillian Allnutt. You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 427, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 428, we hear from Jamie Lee Searle on the experience of building a fiction writing practice fifteen years into a translating career, and Chris Simms on why research is his favourite part of writing.

We hope you'll join us.

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