Episode 428

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 428 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Jamie Lee Searle reflects on the experience of building a fiction-writing practice fifteen years into a translating career; then, Chris Simms explains why research is his favourite part of writing, considers the advantages of talking with real people when seeking realism in fiction, and his own scary undercover experience at the sharp end of an alsatian. First, here's Jamie Lee Searle with 'Taking the Leap into Creative Writing'.

Taking the Leap into Creative Writing

Jamie Lee Searle

It's a bitterly cold January day, and I'm housesitting in south London. On the sofa, my knees pulled up in front of me, I stare out over a garden laced with frost. There's a notebook balanced on my thighs, a pen in my hand, nib hovering over the thick, cream-coloured paper. My memory of this moment is visceral. Heart thumping, skin prickling, I'm about to do something that feels momentous. For the first time since childhood, at the age of thirty-seven, I'm giving myself permission to try – and, if it comes to it, fail – at writing.

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For the fifteen years before that moment, I'd been working as a literary translator, from German and Portuguese into English: fiction, nonfiction and occasionally poetry. For most of those years, my answer to the question: 'Do you write too?' was always 'No'. I remember bristling at the implication, whether intended or not, that translation wasn't enough, or that it wasn't, in fact, writing. Sometimes I went into more detail. 'I've never felt the urge', or: 'It's a relief not having to contend with writer's block'. I loved grappling all day long with words, their meaning and cadence, without the pressure of constructing a plot.

My source text, in book form beside my elbow, or on the left-hand side of my screen, functioned as a roadmap, ensuring I wouldn't get lost. Now the analogy feels restrictive rather than comforting — it suggests a tethering of my mind to well-beaten paths, an out-of-character aversion to adventure. It shows me the fear behind my emphatic *No*. It makes me wonder whether, at least initially, I fell in love with literary translation because it allowed me to do something I enjoyed in a way that felt safe.

Before I go on, let me say: I don't believe *all* literary translators have a desire to do their own writing. Translation is a challenging and rewarding craft that is not a secondary activity, or something that's *less than*. I've always believed this, and I haven't changed my mind. But at a certain point, I did change my mind about my own personal relationship with writing. This is merely a story about the interweaving of literary translation and creative writing in one life.

When I was a child, if I wasn't reading a book, or reconstructing a scene from it in my bedroom or garden, I was creating something: a painting, a short story. There's one I remember in detail, called 'The Underground Swimming Pool'. I wrote it one afternoon, bound it together with woollen thread, and painted a picture for the cover. Beyond that, my main memory of writing is the sensation of sitting with a pen in my hand, and what I would now describe as an *expansiveness*. At some stage in my early teens, writing slipped away from my life in such a way that I didn't even notice.

I still read, voraciously, but I'd discovered languages, and dedicated most of my time to learning them and planning the journeys around the world I would take.

For most of the two decades that followed, I worked with books in myriad ways: selling them, reviewing them, editing them, translating them. In my late twenties, I moved to London, found my tribe of fellow literary translators, and was settling into my life. The capital felt more like home than anywhere I'd never known, but the wanderlust I'd found through languages and books was always there. A few days after my thirty-first birthday, on a trip to Argentina, I met and fell in love with a Brazilian man. We married – swiftly, recklessly, after just a few months – and moved to the fictional-sounding island of Florianopolis. The deep cultural shifts that defined those years pulled me apart thread by thread, making me question everything I'd thought certain about who I was. I began journalling, spilling my fears and frustrations onto the page. I also recorded the sights and sounds of my *not-quite-home* in an attempt to make sense of them. It helped. Over time, descriptive fragments began to creep into my journalling. I can see now that I was tiptoeing towards new, fictional worlds.

Our marriage lasted five years, until we accepted that we hadn't known each other well enough, or, crucially, that we hadn't known *ourselves* well enough. One day, some months after my return to the UK, a few lines of prose came to me while I was out walking; they felt so fleeting I ran home to capture them. This began to happen more and more. I started to sense I needed to push myself, to make a decision to sit down and write, rather than just waiting for those moments. This excited and terrified me all at once. What if I sat down and found absolutely nothing there? I put it off again and again, until eventually I tired of my own excuses. Life is short. What if I reached the end of mine without ever trying?

Not long after came that January day on the south London sofa. The pages I wrote that afternoon were about a young woman driving on a

summer's evening in the American Midwest, longing to break free of the constraints and comforts of home. I looked back at it the other day, and my editing pen would be all over those lines now. But what hooked me was the intoxicating feeling of creating my own fictional world — the very thing I'd thought I *didn't* want to do.

I started to make more time for writing. A few weeks later, I attended an event where I met a creative writing lecturer. I asked if we could do a couple of mentoring sessions. We met for coffee, and she gave me what I needed most: a deadline. For the next couple of weeks, I worked on a short story that I'd been drafting in my mind. The fear that nothing would come was still there, each day, but it was outweighed by those moments where the story seemed to write itself, where dialogue or description flowed as if from nowhere. It felt exhilarating, like walking through a door into a wide-open space whose existence I'd forgotten. A couple of weeks later, I emailed my new mentor a 3,000-word draft, dizzy with nerves as I pressed send.

The sense of achievement I felt after writing that story was incredible. It was the first time I'd shared my writing, so I felt elated when she praised the sense of place and encouraged me to continue. There was constructive criticism too, of course, making me realise how much there was to learn. She pointed out, though, that by translating I'd learnt subconsciously about narrative structure and characterisation, that I perhaps knew instinctively what worked and what didn't.

It wasn't long before I realised the writing life is defined by ups and downs, much like the translating life. The moments of exhilaration are joined by hours of frustration, when I start paragraphs and abandon them, gaze out of the window, make one procrastinatory coffee after the other. Surprisingly though, I don't miss the anchor of the translation text like I thought I would. I've realised that many of the tricks I use when translating help me here too. If I'm really struggling, to get the creativity flowing again — I can skip ahead. It had never occurred to me that you

could do this as a writer — how could you run ahead on a path that wasn't yet constructed? The realisation that it's mine, that I can do anything I want with it, was empowering.

I love my translating and writing practices in their similarities and their differences. When I translate, it's like studying a tree in minute detail, then painting it, attempting to capture the intricate detail of the leaves, sometimes rearranging them on a bough. In my own writing, I graft branches onto the trees or strip them off, maybe even uproot the entire tree and plant a new one. Now I've had a writing practice for almost three years, I can see how it's informing my literary translations too. I've become more daring as I translate, more confident. I believe this comes from more time spent playing with my native language, stretching it, testing it, making sure every word in a sentence is working as hard as it can.

When it comes to balancing writing with my translating, this is a work-in-progress and probably always will be. Most of us need to continually edit our approach to the writing life as our lives shift; to accommodate changes in our families, our health. I would love to say I sit down and write every day without fail, but this isn't the case. During particularly demanding translation projects, my hours become filled with the author's voice in a way that seems to drown out my own. At those times, I seldom have creative energy left for my own writing. I'm okay with this, providing I carve out moments that are creative and not project-linked; by reading and writing poetry and flash fiction, for example; these short bursts of distilling language.

Curiously, I've also learnt that having *too much* open-ended time to write is overwhelming to me. This is very different from my approach to translating; for that, I often do residencies where I hide myself away for days or weeks on end. I need to live and breathe the author's voice, have it inhabit me. But perhaps that's because it isn't *mine*, so the act of climbing inside it is more intentional. My own voice I find in the *in between*, and for that I need life's other layers to be there. I need the snippets of strangers's

conversations overheard in the street; the thrill of grabbing a moment to write a poem or a paragraph on a busy day; the rootedness of being around those who know me.

When I wrote that first story, I didn't realise I would go on to redraft and restructure it countless times. The urge to tweak never stops, even once something's in print. And that's okay, because it means we're growing. If deadlines didn't exist, there would be no final versions; just works-in-progress that writers carry around with them, polishing them in their minds and notebooks for eternity. I'm grateful that, through working closely with authors as a translator, I've learnt that nothing is ever really finished. Hearing about the multiple versions that could have existed, helped demystify the writing process for me. I realised that perfection doesn't exist, and the relief of this chipped away some of my fear.

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When I first started this writing journey, and heard other writers say they'd begun as a child and never stopped, I felt a little envious; how did they know to hold onto it, when I hadn't? But now I know those twenty years in between were never lost. The shift that brought me back from not-writing to writing felt surprising and unexpected; it's only when I look back that I can see its beautiful inevitability. I needed to throw myself into the rest of life first. Instead of regretting anything, I'm celebrating having found my writing practice now.

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That was Jamie Lee Searle, recorded by Ann Morgan. Now, here's Chris Simms with 'Pleasure or Pain? Researching Novels'.

Pleasure or Pain? Researching Novels

Chris Simms

For some, typing 'The End' is their favourite part of writing a book. I suspect that was the case for George Orwell, who once said: 'Writing is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness'.

When asked which part of the writing process they enjoy most, the authors I've spoken to have picked various things: conjuring the characters, crafting the dialogue, creating the plot's pivotal moments. Or, it's that magical occasion – you might be tying your shoelaces or sitting on the loo – when a thought drifts into your mind and you instantly think, 'Now *that* could make a good story'.

But for me, the most enjoyable part of writing a book is the research. The idea has occurred, the skeleton of a plot has been mapped out, a rudimentary cast of characters is waiting in the wings, *but* I need to find out some *stuff* before going any further.

Writers approach this aspect of research in many different ways. Annie Proulx's method is immersive: she settles in a specific place and lets the environment and its people slowly fill her head. It's led to stories rich in descriptions and delightful dialogue — and the author herself ranging far and wide across North America, including stints living in Newfoundland, Wyoming and Washington.

Ian McEwan is known for the meticulous way he conducts his research. For his novel, *Saturday*, which has a neurosurgeon as its protagonist, McEwan spent two full years shadowing just such a person at a London hospital. That's some commitment to accuracy, especially if you take into account the entirely unproven equation which states only twenty percent

of research actually finds its way into the final manuscript. All those careful notes that will never see the light of day; like the jars of dried herbs that sit in our kitchen cupboards.

The internet is a limitless source of pickings for a writer doing research. With my genre being crime, the police *always* make an appearance at some point. *'Ello, 'ello, 'ello*. I couldn't quite believe it when I was told the Murder Investigation Manual – written for Senior Investigating Officers – can be downloaded by anyone. Detailed chapters on everything from 'Removal of the Body' to 'Implementing A Media Strategy'. And only about one percent of the text redacted.

Or, if I'm researching how to approach a crime scene, and have doubts about the accuracy of a website on forensics, I can easily purchase a textbook that lays everything out in, well, forensic detail. But nothing compares to first-hand accounts: actual chats with the proper professionals. Over the years, I've had many 'off the record' sessions with police officers who – by hook or by crook – I've got to talk. That includes high-pursuit drivers, counter-terrorism officers, firearms specialists, dog handlers and your standard bobby on the beat — a great source for the everyday lingo officers use without even realising it. What do they ask for when they need one of those big metal battering rams for smashing down doors? The *Key*.

Surveying the books on the shelf behind me, who else takes especial pride in their research? Steinbeck drew on passages of his life as the basis for many of his plots. He grew up in Monterey County, California, and migrant workers he met while labouring on nearby farms fed directly into perhaps his best-known novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. In *Cannery Row*, actual people Steinbeck knew and the imaginary people on the page start to merge. For instance, while living on Monterey's coast, Steinbeck became profoundly influenced by a marine biologist, Ed Ricketts. No prizes for guessing who the mentor-like character of Doc in the novel is based on. The street where much of the action takes place –

Ocean View Avenue – was eventually renamed 'Cannery Row' to honour the book that had immortalised it.

The last thing the police officers I've spoken to would want is to be identified, either within the novel or the acknowledgments. But that's not always the case with experts who've been kind enough to give me their time and specialist knowledge. The senior officer, for instance, in Manchester's Fire and Rescue Service who enlightened me about arson attacks. Did you know that a trained investigator can burrow down through the layers of charred debris to track the arsonist's exact movements from the distinctive burn marks which accelerant leaves when sloshed about on a floor? Or the lead investigator at the RSPCA who told me that he's known the elusive types that steal eggs from rare birds's nests to break down in relief when arrested, desperate in the hope that custody might finally cure them of their compulsion.

Then there's the veteran rough sleeper who shared his hard-won tips on how to survive life on the streets. Turns out a lot of it involves cardboard. Easy to find and free to take, carefully placed sheets of cardboard can allow you sleep in doorways or on pavements without the cold seeping into your bones. The reason why you might not realise this is because the cardboard is best-placed *inside* the person's sleeping bag, stretched right to the end so the feet also keep warm. While we're on the subject, buying a homeless person a pie, pasty, meat-laden sandwich, crisps or similar snack might seem a good bet, but inwardly the person could be groaning: too much of that stodgy stuff and all you eventually want is a pasta salad or some fresh fruit.

On the shelf below *Cannery Row*, I can see Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Like Steinbeck, another author who mined parts of their life – however painful – for material which was then poured into a novel. Or, in Kerouac's case, spewed ticker-tape style. The material lay in a series of notebooks Kerouac filled while he and a group of friends had travelled across the United States. It features many of The Beat Generation's best-known

figures who appeared under different names, including Kerouac himself, whose part is played by the narrator, Sal Paradise.

Can taking events from your own life and using them in a novel count as research? I suppose the research could be described as retrospective in the sense the author is sifting through their past and selecting specific elements which suit their plot: certain people, places and events. But this activity doesn't involve actively seeking out information the author doesn't yet know. It's there already, in their memory. Truffles waiting to be dug up. At what point does this material take the writing from fiction to memoir?

Those novels in which real-life events are barely obscured by a veil of fiction are sometimes known as roman à clefs. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a good example. The book was originally published under the pseudonym, Victoria Lucas, and it contained many references to events – and the people behind them – that Plath experienced in her own life. The novel charts the descent of Esther Greenwood into mental illness and confinement to hospital. Plath took her own life within weeks of its UK publication.

A few books along, I can see *Post Office*, by Charles Bukowski. Work of fiction or roman à clef? I suppose the latter, since the protagonist is called Henry Chinaski. But, like the author, Chinaski worked for the United States Postal Service, drifting from bar to bar, bed to bed, gambling what earnings he didn't spend on booze. Tellingly, Bukowski inscribed the novel as follows: 'This is presented as a work of fiction and dedicated to nobody.'

Going back to the realm of research where the author leaves the confines of their skull to seek out new material – information that's needed for the story to feel authentic – one of *my* scariest experiences was when I needed to visit a battery farm for chickens. I won't go into details of the plot, but it tried to draw parallels between how the chickens were forced to live and the way our wider society allows certain people to be treated. Thankfully,

this form of farming is now banned. But those satanic factories usually consisted of a series of concentration-camp sheds in which thousands of poor birds lived out their days crammed six to a cage barely bigger than one in which you might house a hamster.

Unsurprisingly, not a single so-called farmer I managed to contact was keen to let me poke around. Phone calls and letters went unanswered. So, finally, I resorted to sneaking into one, reasoning that, as the places were more-or-less automated, there was little chance of anyone catching me. As I re-emerged from a building that reeked with ammonia and was thick with layers of dust shed by the wretched birds, I walked straight into the owner with his very large Alsatian. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded, the bristling dog baring its teeth.

A swiftly concocted story of how I was researching the way big supermarkets were squeezing suppliers on price got me an enthusiastic welcome. He even showed me round the entire operation, including his office. So, I got away with it. And stroked the nice dog. But it really was a time when getting material for a novel was nearly paid for in blood: mine.

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RLF outro: That was Chris Simms, recorded by Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Jamie Lee Searle and Chris Simms on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 428, which was produced by Ann Morgan and Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 429, Juliet Gilkes Romero speaks with Ann Morgan about childhood influences and how a career in journalism led to shaping narratives for the stage.

We hope you'll join us.

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