

Writers Aloud

Episode 431

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 431 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in the first instalment of a series on the theme, 'How I Write', Royal Literary Fund writers discuss the tips, tricks, and rituals they use to structure their writing days, with approaches including everything from going for a good walk, to the Pomodoro Technique.

Haruki Murakami reportedly gets up at 4 a.m. when he's writing a novel. Kurt Vonnegut was a fan of push-ups and sit-ups. Graham Greene aimed for 500 words a day. But what part does routine play in the lives of Royal Literary Fund fellows? In this episode, focusing on the theme 'How I Write', we explore how different writers structure their writing days.

For Ian McMillan, it's all in the preparation.

Ian McMillan: At the moment, I'm working on a play, I'm writing a play, a rhyming play for radio about trainspotters, and it's called *Love Me Tender*. So what I'll do is the night before, I'll look at what I've been writing and I'll look and I'll finish deliberately halfway through a sentence. And I think that's a way of...sort of, you're teetering on the edge; it's a cliffhanger, a literal cliffhanger, not in the plot but in the language. And then I go to bed.

And I think it somehow marinates and it works itself out a bit in your

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head. And then I've always woken up ridiculously early, so I wake up about half past four. I don't get up, but I lay there, and I know that the play is churning round in my head and just going like an engine in neutral. So I don't need to worry about that.

And I'll then think, *Right, I need to tweet something, I need to tweet something about the morning.* And my first thought this morning was, I had a dream and I forgot it. And I thought, *That's like you've got a bowl in your hand that's full of water.* And by the time you get downstairs, all the water's gone, it's evaporated. That's you trying to think of your dream. So I kept that in the back of my head. But then the line occurred to me, 'the seamstress clears her throat, ahem'. And I was really pleased with that; it was like a kind of crossword puzzle thing. So I came downstairs, still the play churning around in my head.

And I tweeted that thing about the 'ahem'. Then I tweeted that thing about the carrying the dream, and that was really me getting into gear, ready to write. I think that's what I always have to do, I have to get myself *ready*. And pummelling the brain to think of the tweet, and luckily having two thoughts, got me in a state, a state of readiness, a state of preparedness.

Then I remembered what I was writing yesterday, I was thinking about the play, and that then inched its way to the front of me head. And I remembered what I was at, what stage of the play I was at, and the particular character. And they're all speaking in rhyme, these characters. And so then I got me notebook.

I always have a notebook with blank pages; I don't like lines in a notebook. And still this is very early in the morning. I'd sit and I'd write a few ideas, and I'd write a few lines. And they wouldn't make any sense, they wouldn't be chronological, and there'd be different parts of the page, and they'd be leaning over at different angles. But they'd be something else to work on.

RLF: Annette Koback claims that routine is about building a good working relationship with that most tricky of writing tools, the subconscious.

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Annette Kobak: I like very much what Norman Mailer says about writing and the subconscious, because I find that my subconscious is much more amenable and happier – and you have to get your subconscious happy – when there’s a framework that it can say, *Okay, fine, I understand this.*

And Mailer has this very good section in a book he calls *The Spooky Art*, about writing. Well, that’s the overall title, *Essays on Writing*, and he says the point is you have to maintain trustworthy relations with your unconscious. And he has this really startling insight, which is almost sci-fi.

It’s likely that your unconscious is never all that much in love with you. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a war of some dimension. So you have to establish decent relations with your working depths, and you might as well recognize that this procedure is possibly as difficult to achieve as any far-reaching union with someone outside your skin. The unconscious presence within may have as many interests, aspects, principalities, chasms, terrors, underworlds, otherworlds, and ambitions, as yourself. Your unconscious may even have ambitions that are not your own.

For practical purposes, Mailer says, it may be worth thinking of a separate creature. And I like that, and that really gels with me as a method of working. I’ve, it’s simply through long practice, in fact, I hit on the right solution early on, then wandered off-piste, for a few years, not getting that right, and I’ve got back to it.

So, with me, find out what my subconscious is happy with, keep a little bit of a disciplined framework so that it does what you expect: you give it an instruction and then it buckles under.

RLF: Gwyneth Lewis is also a believer in the importance of routine in fostering good relations with the subconscious. For her, this involves starting first thing.

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Gwyneth Lewis: I'm the type of person who gets up first thing in the morning and just starts writing. I don't speak to anybody; I certainly don't speak to my husband. If I don't have writing to do, I find it very hard to get up. So it does make me get up in the morning, which is a difficult thing to achieve.

I'll go straight, in my pyjamas, without washing or anything, to try and catch words when they're still close to my subconscious, I think it's that, that makes it good in the morning. Although I have to say that you can write at any time, anywhere, but these are my preferred and habitual techniques. So I'll stay in my pyjamas for as long as possible.

Douglas Adams once said that the secret to getting a lot of work done was just not to go out for lunch, and if you're in your pyjamas, you can't do that. But of course, you can't live in your pyjamas!

RLF: Other writers find that their previous careers shape their working practices. Doug Johnstone credits his media experience with developing the discipline that governs his writing life.

Doug Johnstone: I am quite disciplined, I think that comes from being a journalist first, in that no journalist has ever suffered from writer's block because you get sacked straight away. And so I used to be, I was always self-employed, I never had an office job as a journalist really, doing shifts occasionally, but mainly I was working on my own.

So I'm quite an organised person anyway, and quite sort of disciplined anyway. So I tend to be the same in my writing fiction. So at the moment, I have an office, which is up in the loft of my house, because there's nowhere else. I have to go up a ladder, and it's dark, and there's only one tiny little skylight, which I can't see out of.

I have a big massive desk there, which is a really crappy old thing. That

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I got from my old...when I worked as an engineer actually, they were throwing out some old desks, so I got one. It's a big chunky thing and I also have up there, unfortunately, a drum kit, because that's the only place it'll go, which is a bit of a distraction sometimes, but I try my best not to. I can't be drumming in the morning anyway, because I'll wake people up. So I go up there. And so I tend to write, I don't...I know lots of writers who do stuff like at night or weekends and stuff. I don't really, I find that my best writing energy is in the mornings, during the week. So I just go up and once I've got the kids all packed lunches made and push them off to school, so I go up there really and try and write fiction stuff for the morning. Now, a lot of that is sitting around thinking, or checking social media, or fanning about and doing work-avoidant stuff, but actually, I'll try and get something done every day.

RLF: Meanwhile, Eleanor Updale finds herself reacting against the habits and assumptions that teaching careers have instilled in many of her fellow children's writers.

Eleanor Updale: I feel really bad about how I write. It's partly because most of the books I've done, have been done or at least published, for the children's market, even though I think they're suitable for people of any age. That's another matter.

But being in that world means that I spend a lot of time with fellow children's writers, and a lot of them used to be teachers. Lovely people though they are, some of them haven't let go of this idea that you have to impose a template on a piece of work. And a great many of them have a strong view that there is a way you should write.

I'm very sorry I don't conform to that. Usually their view is, you spring out of bed in the morning, you go down to your garden shed, and you don't leave until you've written a certain number of words or you've done a certain scene or something like that. Well, it's not like that for me. I do like to go to work when I can, and there are lots of libraries that I've

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worked in over the years, and some have become quite like home to me. And I do like to get away from domestic distractions. However, I don't always manage that. The other thing is that I can go for days and days and days without writing a thing. This is partly because it seems to me one of the huge advantages of being a self-employed writer is that you have a lot of flexibility about what you do with your time.

And one of the things you can do is do things that people in nice comfortable salaried jobs can't do. As a result of that, I do a lot of voluntary stuff. Now this isn't because I feel I should give something back to the community, though I'm sure I should feel that. It's really because it's just such an immense source of interest, inspiration, raw material, it's fantastic. And actually, to go into other people's workplaces and...and see what the world of salaried work is like, can make it a lot easier to live with the stresses and strains of self-employment.

RLF: Hilary Davies, however, says the rhythms of the school year are responsible for her seasonal approach to writing.

Hilary Davies: I don't write every day, and I don't write regularly. Sometimes I castigate myself for this. It's a habit I partly got into from the time when I was teaching full time, and really only had the holidays in which to write. And in order to do that, I and my husband regularly went on retreats together. He is also a writer, so we used to call it 'writer's retreats', and we still do that during the holidays.

So that meant that I tend to write in concentrated bursts. I do a lot of research beforehand, and that may continue in the writer's retreat, so I will take books with me. And one of the things I never do take with me is a computer. So I write longhand still, and it is transcribed onto computer later. In terms of actual physical space, therefore, strangely, I find it easier to write when I'm out of my familiar circumstances.

Places typically we've always gone for writer's retreats are France, Wales

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and Greece, particularly France and Wales. I think it must be that having nothing to distract me, I'm able to concentrate better.

RLF: But former teacher Kevin Clancy explains that he had to unlearn certain patterns when he became master of his own time.

Kevin Clancy: When I started writing full time, having had the experience of hard work which I previously outlined, when I started writing full time, I thought, *Well, the way to succeed is you have to work hard*, obviously. So, I was doing, I was trying to do seven, eight hours a day, I nearly had a breakdown, it was *far* too much.

Fortunately, after about six months, I read George Eliot's letters, and discovered there that she says somewhere, 'We write in the morning until our heads are quite hot, and then we go to a museum'. Hooray! I'd got permission from George Eliot to just write in the morning, which was what my mind had been telling me to do all along.

I've always had a rule that I start at nine-thirty, and I normally find I go straight through without pause, I will have a mid-morning cup of tea, but I go down, I make it, I don't do phone calls, I don't talk to anybody, I take it straight back to the desk, and then I continue until about one o'clock.

Suddenly, it's as if a light goes out, that's the end of it for today, and there won't be any more. And in the days when I sat there for seven and eight hours, there was nothing worth a damn, I was just giving myself a headache.

RLF: For many writers, word counts rather than number of hours provide useful targets around which to structure the writing day. Nick Holdstock, for example, finds them useful for setting achievable goals.

Nick Holdstock: I write with a routine, you know, there's a beautiful sort of notion of the writer producing in this great stream of inspiration and, you know, not sleeping and not eating and feverishly producing. But for me, like, it's really quite the opposite.

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You know, I have to write a certain amount of words a day. I *can* write more than that, but I do need to have...you know, this sort of sense of a small achievable goal that I can produce and succeed at. And then, my sense of self worth is briefly sort of backed up for sort of twenty-four hours.

So there is that sort of routine for me, which is essential if I'm writing something long. You know, if you try and think, I'm writing an 80,000-word novel, it's a slightly overwhelming thing. But if you're thinking, *I just have to write 500 words a day or 1,000 words a day*, then, as I say, that's a goal that you can achieve and sort of feel you're making progress. And, you know, quite quickly that stuff sort of stacks up and then you do suddenly have half a novel or more.

RLF: Zoë Marriott, meanwhile, uses the Pomodoro Technique to help break up her time into manageable chunks.

Zoë Marriott: So I write for about forty minutes, which is rather longer than you're really supposed to, but I can't quite trim myself down to any shorter than that.

And I write longhand, and at the end of that forty minutes I do some hand exercises, because I have repetitive strain injury in my hands, and I kind of warm my hands up a little bit. And then I check my internet and just do something else for five/ten minutes, and then I go back to what I've written and read it over again, and type it up and revise it.

And I usually try to do that two or three times in the morning. And then when I get to mid-afternoon, I stop, I have something to eat, I take my dog for a long walk. And I'm technically free at that point to do other things, because I've usually written about 2,000 words, which is what I aim for.

But if it's been a really good writing day, the laptop will come out, and I'll probably go over it again, and you know, there'll be something on the TV, but I won't really be paying attention.

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RLF: Rituals can play a big part in dictating the writing process, as Elanor Dymott explains.

Elanor Dymott: I was really inspired early on when I was trying to be a writer and trying to learn how to do it. And you have this massive want, you want to write, you want to write, you have ideas but you don't know how to do it. And I read an interview with Toby Litt where he said there are two things he did. And I think because of the time that I read it and because they sounded like quite good ideas and because I started doing them and they worked, I now still do them ten or fifteen years later, and I actually can't write without doing them, so I blame him entirely for that. I sharpen...they're pretty simple things, but he talked about them and I went away and tried them: the first is to always write on a piece of paper and write on every other line, so you always leave a line in between.

I'm sure he doesn't have a monopoly on that, but that's where it came from for me. I wrote it by hand for the first few years, all my short stories I wrote by hand, not typing. So you'd write every other line, and then you'd have room in between to edit, effectively cross things out, replace with a new phrase or something like that.

And then, the other thing he said was just sharpening pencils. That slightly holds me back in a way because I have to sharpen a pencil. I use an *HB*, *Art No. 112 HB*, the red and black stripy ones, a Staedtler, I don't know if that's how you pronounce it, 'Stedler'. And I have bundles and bundles of them, I buy them in boxes, and as soon as they become not quite exactly sharp, I have to resharpen them.

Which is actually a great prevarication method, because you can spend an awful lot of time sharpening pencils. But what I actually do when I'm writing is I'll sharpen twenty of them and have them in a pile. And then I can just throw them aside and pick up the next one and carry on writing. And as soon as that one's blunt enough, I throw that one aside and get the next one, so it can be quite quick and it feels a little bit like someone in a

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western using a roll of ammunition, rolling it through their gun...did they do that in westerns? No, a war film. And you feed it through and then you pick up another pencil and then another one and another one.

RLF: Other writers are less concerned with a strict routine. David Spencer, for instance, prefers to think in terms of number of hours, rather than attempting to write at the same time every day.

David Spencer: I don't write at the same time. I don't think I ever did, although I've been writing since the early eighties. I write when I've got the opportunity. What I do do though, is I try to write for the same amount of hours each day, which will mean that I spend three to five hours on any given day writing.

At the moment, that is seven days a week. And then when that doesn't happen for whatever reason, because of work, or because I'm tired, or because I'm spending time doing something else, that's the only time that I don't have a five-days working week and then two days off or anything like that.

Ideally, I'd write at night, the reason for doing that is because it's quiet and everybody else is asleep and you're undisturbed. Quite often I want to be able to get up and go and do something in the kitchen without somebody talking to me, or I want to be able to move around and I like the quiet. My ideal way of writing as well would be to write from midnight to dawn, because I like the way that the sun comes up.

I think it's nice to be clarifying something as the light's growing, which is probably a superstition. But I enjoy that, especially if I'm finishing something and it's completing.

RLF: But Basir Kazmi is wary that *any* kind of routine may inhibit his creativity.

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Basir Kazmi: I don't force myself to write, I try to keep it natural. As Keats said, poetry should grow as naturally as leaves on trees. And Ghalib, Mirza Ghalib, the great poet on the subcontinent, in one of his Persian couplets he says that the verse itself expresses the desire to be composed by me; so, the verse chooses the poet. Now, in my case, the thing to be written chooses the time, place, and also the form.

A word, a phrase, or a line from a conversation, or wave of thought, starts the process. I don't have any routine or rituals to help me get started or keep going. It can happen anywhere, anytime. Sometimes when I'm *extremely* busy, a phrase from somewhere, some idea, it's a mystery, every writer has said something about that, where the idea comes from, from 'airy nothing'. And then of course, I am just be with that idea, along with my other occupation or whatever I'm doing. Sometimes I take a break, sometimes the idea *forces* me to take a break whenever possible, but I don't force a break. And then when I find the opportunity, the next possible and available opportunity, I make a note of it on *any* piece of paper that I can get hold of, *any* piece of it. There are so many examples.

RLF: Despite the gloomy statements about the perils of the pram in the hallway, many parents manage to forge careers as writers. Family life can dictate routine to a great extent. Roopa Farooki discovered the best way to manage this was to start early.

Roopa Farooki: I think it's fair to say that I try to write every day and I discovered through trial and error and through children, and from before I had children, that probably the best time for me to write now, at this point in my life, is absolutely first thing in the morning.

So quite often I set the alarm for five and I will write for one hour or two hours. Sometimes the children come in and I have to pause or I have to get a train. But I try and write before I do anything else really, apart from my exercises, which my friends and colleagues joke about occasionally. And I try and get at least 500 words done, and if I manage that in a day, I feel I've done my job.

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I'm actually quite happy just to have written 250 words, and if I reach 1,000, I stop. So that's how I set it for myself. It wasn't always that way; I used to have much longer to write before I had quite so many kids. And I was able to set aside a whole six hours, which seems like an *unbelievable* luxury in a day now, to write those 500 words.

And I would write them anywhere; we were travelling a lot when I wrote my first novel. So I'd write them in the back of a car or in a rental or in a chalet, or in a park, or in a café. I remember writing one chapter in my in-laws' living room just before dinner. I would write whenever I could, and I would make sure that I would spend a couple of hours reviewing what I'd written the day before, a whole two hours considering what I might write next, and then the last two hours actually writing it and writing those 500 words, which was, I realise now, a huge indulgence, and I was very fortunate to do that.

RLF: Mark McCrum says, he did take a salutary warning from a character in a popular children's story.

Mark McCrum: It's hard to be stuck into the complex world of an imagined narrative and then have someone knocking at the door wanting you to dry their hair or read them a bedtime story. One of my favourite characters in those very bedtime stories is Enid Blyton's Uncle Quentin, in *The Famous Five*.

Uncle Quentin is always hard at work in his study; he's not to be disturbed at any cost, even in midsummer, even in the holidays. 'Will the children please be quiet!', he shouts, 'I'm trying to work here!' Sadly, I don't think it's possible to be Uncle Quentin these days. Not unless your writing is earning the family so much money that it's allowed to be a sacred activity. And sadly, mine isn't, anyway, you've got to stop sometime.

As writers know, the subconscious does a lot of the work overnight: sorting out plot problems and stuff like that, *ping!* quite often the solution

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just comes to you when you sit down with that thermos in the morning. Anyway, you don't want to get too obsessed.

I've watched one friend of mine destroy his marriage, all because he preferred writing at night. I don't want to get like that. Or even, really, to be honest, like Uncle Quentin.

RLF: But even with the focusing effect of family life, for some writers, the question of how to structure the writing day remains something of a mystery as Nigel Cliff explains, the ideal routine continues to elude him.

Nigel Cliff: I used to have a terrible nocturnal habit, which began with university all-nighters and steadily worsened through years of writing theatre and film reviews to nine-a.m. deadlines. It got to the point where I couldn't sit bodily still during daylight hours. But that had to go; now I have a family, so I can't get away with it very often, thankfully.

Instead, I switch between home, libraries, cafés, airports, and anywhere else that feels right at the time. I keep hoping I'll somehow fall into the perfect routine, like Trollope with his 250 words per quarter-hour and his ludicrous habit of immediately starting a new book if he finished one mid-session. Or the perfect space, like Cheever riding the elevator down to his windowless room in the basement and typing in his underwear till lunchtime. But I might just have to accept that my routine is to have no routine.

RLF: That was an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund. The writers featured in this episode were Ian McMillan, Annette Kobak, Gwyneth Lewis, Doug Johnstone, Eleanor Updale, Hilary Davies, Kevin Clancy, Nick Holdstock, Zoë Marriott, Elanor Dymott, David Spencer, Basir Kazmi, Roopa Farooki, Mark McCrum, and Nigel Cliff.

You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

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RLF outro: And that concludes episode 431, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 432, in the first instalment of a two-part interview, Syd Moore speaks with Doug Johnstone about her early writing life and the inclusive inspiration of seminal eighties and nineties culture, unexpectedly becoming a TV presenter on Channel 4, the self-doubt she experienced on not getting published, and the problematic Essex girl stereotype.

We hope you'll join us.

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Thanks for listening.