

Writers Aloud

Episode 432

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 432 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, 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.

Doug Johnstone: Syd Moore is a writer, presenter, curator and activist. She's best known for the *Essex Witch Museum Mysteries*, a series which includes five novels and two collections of short stories.

Books from this series have been shortlisted for both the Good Reader Holmes and Watson Award and the prestigious Dagger Award by the Crime Writers Association. Syd has also written two standalone novels, *The Drowning Pool* and *Witch Hunt*, and has been commissioned to write a new series set in the Second World War.

Prior to writing, Syd was a lecturer, worked extensively in the publishing industry, and presented Channel 4's book programme, *Pulp*. She was the founding editor of *Level 4*, an arts and culture magazine, and co-creator of *Super Strumps*, a game that reclaimed female stereotypes. More recently she founded the Essex Girls Liberation Front and successfully

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campaigned to have the definition of Essex girl removed from the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*.

Syd Moore, hi, how you doing?

Syd Moore: Hi Doug, it's great to be here, thank you.

Doug Johnstone: It's an absolute pleasure. One of the things I wanted to start off, I don't always start off interviews like this, but I wanted to ask, did you always want to be a writer, because there's a couple of things: you seem to have done a lot of stuff before you became a published writer, which I think is great. And also, I'm always suspicious about people who say, 'Yes, I knew I wanted to be a writer at the age of three,' because I wasn't like that. And I just wondered what your situation was?

Syd Moore: Yes and no really, classic cliché: always read books, avid reader, I liked writing poetry, I got into my local *Evening Echo* newspaper with a poem about an orange when I was seven.

Doug Johnstone: Nice.

Syd Moore: So I thought, obviously yeah, and I decided obviously I'm going to be a poet now. And then I did my Playwrights on my drama badge for the Brownies and I ended up writing a screenplay. So then I thought, *Well, obviously I'm going to be a playwright now*. And then I sort of became a teenager and decided I wanted to be a pop star, possibly like you.

And, well not a pop star, an indie kid, and so I did a few bits and pieces there, but I did do English at Uni, and I really enjoyed it. At the time though, we're talking about the late eighties, and really, although I had entertained ideas about writing, as a working-class girl from Essex, I kind of didn't think that I'd be able to do it? — because everyone seemed to me to be white middle-class men.

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And I just felt, you know, I haven't got anything, I can't write about going to the Alps. I didn't think I could write about going to the Algarve and having affairs with students and things like that.

Doug Johnstone: Oh, the Oxbridge dinner-party thing, yeah.

Syd Moore: Yeah, and I was reading Iris Murdoch, who I think is brilliant, and I was reading Martin Amis and that was sort of in vogue at the time. And I just didn't think I could belong to it because I just felt it was...I felt I'd othored myself, really. But I had this kind of epiphany when *Generation X* came out by Douglas Coupland. Yeah, one of my friends came in and just said, 'You've got to read this, it's amazing, it's about people like us!'

And then he lent it to me and I was just...I really like the book, but it's no great story; it's like a snapshot of different lives that were happening at the time. There was that slacker Gen X vibe going on in it and not much happens in the stories, but you did kind of suddenly...to me, I just thought, *Wow, I can write about what I know, and this has become a bestseller*, and so it just sort of gave me...it was like a window of opportunity, I think, and I saw through it and thought, *Okay, maybe there is something that I can do in the literary world*. At that time I was, sort of, being spat out the other end of education, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I liked books, that was it. I had an English and Inter-Arts degree. I started doing the classic slacker thing of working in a bookshop and I worked at Sherratt & Hughes and then went down to Waterstones in London. And I think it just sort of became clearer, that process of going to literary events and seeing more people like me, and realising that actually there was another world out there that I could write about and people might want to read about.

That's when I thought, *Yeah, I think I might try it*. And I tried it for ages and ages and didn't really get anywhere. I was at that point, as well, a performance poet, so I had managed to become a poet. So it was a gradual thing and I started writing and critiquing with a bunch of friends.

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We were sort of writing that slacker stuff, but we were also writing poetry. And at that time, so this is the nineties now, we were moving into Cool Britannia, that era, and people were doing lots of poetry. It wasn't a straight white man kind of vibe anymore, it was something really different; accessible, I guess. So yeah, that was how I sort of found my way into it. What about you?

Doug Johnstone: Well, I had a similar...I mean, I wasn't working class, but I grew up in a sort of fairly small town on the coast of North East Scotland. And it was exactly the same, everything I read at school was by dead white men.

And I just didn't think, I had no concept that 'author' was a thing that you could be. And then, there was a couple of books, one when I was still at school, *The Wasp Factory* by Iain Banks just absolutely blew my head off for exactly the reason you talk about it. It's about, I mean, it was quite extreme obviously, but it was about people in the north-east of Scotland who were speaking like I spoke and I recognised their lifestyles.

And then in the early nineties, *Trainspotting* was a massive game changer as well. Talking about that sort of the culture at the time, that as a Scottish person living in Edinburgh, I was adjacent to some of the lifestyle stuff that was going on there. And I just recognised it.

It was so clear to me then that you could write about this stuff and it could be literature and people would read it and buy it. And it was an incredible moment, and then it took me, you know, another fifteen years to get a book out, but that's I think, par for the course quite a lot of the time.

But you were working, were you not working in the publishing industry, because you were doing marketing or something at, was it Random House?

Syd Moore: Yeah.

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Doug Johnstone: So was that just another way of just sort of being like adjacent to that world at the time?

Syd Moore: I guess so. So, the kind of slacker thing took me into Sherratt & Hughes, and then Sherratt & Hughes got moved down to London, and moved around to lots of different Waterstones.

I still wasn't really sure what I entirely wanted to do, so again, the classic slacker thing, I went travelling. Went through Asia, and then ended up in Australia, and I worked at a bookshop there. And then I came back and thought, *Right, I think I want to go into publishing*. So, then I immediately started working in another bookshop!

Which was Camden Waterstones though, but I sort of helped them with the events and did the windows and I just thought *You know what, yeah I'm going to go into publishing*, so I started applying for jobs. My first job was Ebury who did a lot of cookery books at the time and I was a publicity assistant and so yeah, I worked there and ended up...well I had to go on tour with *Two Fat Ladies* and I was so inexperienced I lost one!

That wasn't one of my finest points. But then after that, because I was starting to think about writing and, although still, I was still mystified by the whole process, but then I went up to what we called CCVP, which was Jonathan Cape, Chatto & Windus, Vintage, Pimlico. And then I started doing less publicity and more marketing so I was more focused on talking to bookshops, developing the posters and advertising campaigns and I was able to work on Irvine Welsh's stuff as well.

I think we were doing...I think *Filth* was one of the biggest campaigns when I was there.

Doug Johnstone: So round about that same time, explain to me the sort of timeline here, but you ended up being a TV presenter presenting a show, the Channel 4 programme *Pulp* about books. How did that come about?

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Syd Moore: So I'd been marketing Kevin Sampson's books and he had a friend, Paul Oremland, who wanted, was interested in doing a book programme. So I went over and he said to me, Kevin said, 'Look, go over and present some of the books that you're marketing and then you might be able to get them on.' So I went over and I had a big long chat with them and said, 'These are brilliant books... this is great... this is what's going on in the industry at the moment.'

And at the end of that, they said, 'Yes, would you be interested in presenting it?' And I hadn't obviously done anything like that before, but I am a kind of like, an in-for-a-penny girl. So I said, 'Yes, absolutely.' And then I didn't hear anything for about six months and I went to Australia for a holiday and then when I came back the answerphone, as we all used to have answerphones back then – we'll have to explain that to the kids – but it was absolutely jammed full of messages.

So I went in to have a chat with them and then while we were having a chat this man came into the room and started setting up a camera, and I sort of said to them, 'Do we need to go? He's starting to use this room for something else. And they said, 'Oh no no we just need you to do a review of a book you've just read, to the camera' and I just said, 'What, now?' and they went, 'Yeah, like maybe look at the camera, three, two, one, go.' And I was like, 'Arghh!'

But I'd read *The Beach* by Alex Garland and I had really mixed views about it, probably because I had been travelling. And I felt that parts of it were... slightly inauthentic, on reflection now, of course they were, because it's fiction and he needed to plot. But at the time I was sort of saying, you know, basically I was in my twenties and I was like, *This wasn't like my experience of backpacking actually!*

Doug Johnstone: ...*I've got opinions and you need to know them!*

Syd Moore: Yeah, *Why haven't you made it just like my experience, because*

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this is wrong! So I just did a fruity review of it and they went, ‘Oh, brilliant, get your coat’. So I thought, *Right, okay, thank you, alright, I’ll get my coat and see you later.* And they went, ‘No, we’ve got a van’. And they drove me up to Waterstones on Islington Green and just said, ‘Okay, go in there and ask people their opinions on the... I don’t know, what should we say... book jackets’.

And so I was like, ‘*really?*’ So I did. Yeah, and then I ended up having to interview Kevin Sampson on stage at some point. It’s just like all really crazy and then they sent all the footage over to Channel 4 and Channel 4 said, ‘Yeah, okay we like her, go for it’, and so that is kind of what happened, it was just really a sort of whirlwind. They really put me on the spot, but I suppose they wanted to see how I would react, and I managed to get through that so we went on for three series.

It was the end of the nineties and then the beginning of the noughties, and it did have that kind of millennium vibe. Yeah, we did a lot of indie publishing, and we did things like, get Hells Angels to review books written by vicars, and sort of...mixed it up...

Doug Johnstone: That’s very Channel 4, isn’t it?

Syd Moore: Yeah, exactly. It was really, really good fun, I loved it. And they had always said that we were going to go into the mainstream, but I think the slot that they were thinking about us for, they decided to try this kind of like weird new idea of a reality format type thing. They were like, if it doesn’t work, we’ll give you a call.

And then that new format was called *Big Brother*. So, it was arrivederci books, we’ve got something else going on now. You know, I really loved it, I could travel around the country and I could talk about books and meet lots of interesting people. So it was just absolutely wonderful for me.

And that’s when I also thought, *Right, do you know what, if I’m going to*

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write a book, I really need to knuckle down and have a go at it. So I did, and actually, the first book I wrote, I did get an agent for, I think one person was sort of interested in publishing it, but I'm so pleased that it never happened because it was like...I don't know about you Doug, what was your first book, did you get it published?

Doug Johnstone: Well, yes and no, like I did have a first book and that got rejected by everyone and then I wrote a second one, which then did get published. But I then went back and rewrote the first one from scratch, pretty much. So the central premise was the same, but it was effectively... like you, I'm so glad that that first edition of it never saw the light of day, because it would have been, unbearable.

Syd Moore: Yeah, and also, you'd be typecast, wouldn't you? Mine was like, all of that kind of vibe that I was talking about, it's like: *Yeah man, okay, so this is about a young girl who goes clubbing in London.* You know, it was just like, *Oh my god, no!* Thank god it didn't get published. Actually, so that kind of coincided with there was... I was thinking about doing rewrites to that book, but I was also pregnant with my son, and in my stupid, kind of naive way, I thought, *Oh, do you know what, I'll do these rewrites once I've had the baby, because you know, I can't sleep at the moment, so the baby will be sleeping, I'll be able to bounce the baby on my knee and write at the same time.*

Doug Johnstone: *I'll have loads of time once the baby's born!*

Syd Moore: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, Like, oahhh, so that never happens, thank god! So I didn't write for ages, and then, well I had been writing, but obviously, then you have a baby, and you know, *bang!*

You have no time at all, your life completely changes, and you're just like, *God, I used to have all of that time I wasted.* And then I moved out of London, boomeranged back to Essex in search of cheaper childcare for my son's grandparents. But I took a job at the local college lecturing in publishing.

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And they were very keen on upskilling us, so in the end they said, ‘Look, do you want to do an MA we’ll pay for three quarters of it?’ I said, ‘Yeah’. And they said, ‘What d’you want to do?’ I said, ‘Well, I’d like to do creative writing’. So I ended up doing an MA at City and it was fantastic, it was such a good course.

I did two years part-time and I had to write a book for that, but my tutor was Harriet Gilbert, she now runs the *BBC Book Club* on the World Service, and she was fantastic. She was a really fantastic educator and I learnt loads and loads of stuff there and completely improved my writing skills.

And I started to understand the craft a bit more. But that book that I wrote didn’t get published either. But then the next one was *The Drowning Pool*, and that kind of was the one that got me started really, I do remember all of those years of thinking, *God, am I ever going to get published?*

When I was writing *The Drowning Pool*, I was thinking, *If this doesn’t get published, I’m not gonna try any more*. Because I always used to wonder: you think you can write, your friends say you can write, but actually are you like one of those people who was on *The X Factor* who said, ‘Yeah, I’ve got the X Factor’, and then they go *uahhh-uahhh!* I was thinking maybe that’s like me with the writing.

Maybe just like everyone’s like, ‘Yeah, yeah, you can write’, but you write... it’s rubbish. But then, luckily, I did get the deal with HarperCollins, and everything sort of...moved on from there really.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I mean it strikes me that part of what could have influenced this book, and you couldn’t have written this book if you hadn’t gone back to Essex, if you know what I mean, Essex is such a big part of your fictional world now, and witches, so Essex and witches are your two things, right?

Syd Moore: Yeah, absolutely.

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Doug Johnstone: And I wondered whether the return to Essex was part of bringing that stuff back into focus because you grew up there then went away and did a lot of travelling and then end up going back, and I wonder if that was part of the backdrop to thinking about how *The Drowning Pool* was going to...was going to form.

Syd Moore: It's really interesting actually, Doug, no one's asked me that before, so this is an interesting reflection I am having at the moment. But you're right, I don't think I could have written it, I wouldn't have written it if I'd stayed in London, definitely wouldn't. I'd been really interested by the legend of Sarah Moore. I'd heard about it very, very vaguely when I was growing up. A few people knew about it, but when I was coming back down to look for places to live, *The Sarah Moore* opened.

So *The Sarah Moore* is the pub that is named after Sarah Moore, the sea witch of Leigh-on-Sea. And I was really interested in the legends, and because the pub had opened everybody suddenly knew the legend. So there was lots of talk about it, and I think, yeah, that definitely fired my interest and I had more people to interview about her legend.

And then I was able to...I kind of went on the detective trail to find out if she really existed. And also at the same time I was teaching publishing, and I was staggered by some of the...so it was a BND, so it was sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds, and staggered when some of them went out for interviews for universities or colleges or trying to get their first job.

Quite often at that time, the interviewers would open their personal files and say, 'Oh, you're from Essex are you, oh, so you're an Essex girl, are you?'

Doug Johnstone: Jesus Christ.

Syd Moore: Yeah, so, and I was thinking, *Oh my God, hang on*, this was in the eighties, this was going on. And this was sort of, like, the early 2000s. And I was like, really, it's still going on?

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And the problem with the Essex-girl stereotype is that, you know, it has been embraced by the dictionaries. It's in the dictionaries and the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, which goes out to foreign students and children, until recently, because we did manage to get it out, but until recently it said, 'The Essex girl is a young girl or woman who is unintelligent, materialistic, speaks in a loud and ugly way', and, wait for it, 'is very willing to have sex'.

Doug Johnstone: Just extraordinary, isn't it?

Syd Moore: Yeah, but, you know, my students were saying, you know, an interviewer, usually a man, if they say, 'Oh, you're an Essex girl, are you?' If you're trying to get into an academic establishment, you don't want to say, 'Yes, ha ha ha, yes, I am', because the stereotype's about you being thick and loose.

Likewise, you don't want to do that to potential employers, but then at the same time, if you go... 'Well, actually, I don't...that's a bit of a stereotype that we don't really agree with', then, you know, they can go, 'Oh, I've got the right one here'.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, basically, it's an impossible situation.

Syd Moore: Exactly, and I just didn't think it was very fair that girls from the county have to deal with that as well as everything else, it doesn't feel like they're on a level playing field. So I started campaigning about it and writing articles and then eventually the two worlds collided when I was doing my research for *Witch Hunt* and looking at all of the witch hunts in Essex and just sort of, we had loads.

My statistic that I always use is: between 1560 and 1680 in Surrey, Sussex, and Hertfordshire, there were 185 indictments for witchcraft, but for the same period Essex, on its own, had 503.

Doug Johnstone: Wow.

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Syd Moore: So really significantly a lot more. I mean, at the same time nothing compared to your lot up there! Yeah, you know, we were like the mini Scotland in England, but yeah, you guys were ferocious.

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RLF outro: And that concludes episode 432 which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 433, in the second part of this interview, Syd Moore speaks with Doug Johnstone about Essex witches and their influence on her books, her new project exploring the occult in World War Two, and the dilemma of whether to address or ignore the COVID-19 pandemic in an ongoing book series.

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