

Writers Aloud

Episode 433

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 433 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second instalment of a two-part 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 II and the dilemma of whether to address or ignore the Covid-19 pandemic in an ongoing book series.

You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode, number 432. We re-joined Syd and Doug as they consider whether the Essex girls stereotype and the terrible history of witch hunts in Essex might have the same misogynistic roots.

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.

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More recently, she founded the Essex Girls Liberation Front and successfully campaigned to have the definition of Essex girl removed from the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*.

You quite seamlessly mentioned the Essex girls stereotype and then went into witchcraft, and it seems to me that one is just a modern manifestation of the other, because they're both just like societal misogyny on a very simple level. So that the witch hunts were all about power and control for men over women, effectively. And it's the same with the Essex girl stereotype.

Syd Moore: Yeah, and actually one of the things that I did with *Strange Magic*, there is kind of a logic to my mad, sprawling ramble. I started to campaign about the Essex girl...when I was looking at *Witch Hunt*, I was looking at the statistic about so many women in Essex *and* some men, but not very many, something like ninety-five percent women in Essex. But when I was looking at the characteristics, I was thinking okay, *So they're all at the lower end of the social scale*; when they were taken to court they were unable to speak for themselves, they had to have a man speak for them, so they were legally dumb. And this was certainly the case in the Matthew Hopkins witch hunt, where most of the men were fighting for parliament or for King because it was a civil war. But also they were called 'loose women' because they weren't under the protection or shelter of a man.

So if you put those three things together and you sort of say: low end of the social scale, dumb and loose, you know, that really reminded me of another contemporary stereotype. At one point, Essex was called *witch county*, and I just wondered if maybe...because there'd been so many pamphlets – which are like the modern day equivalent of our tabloids – so many pamphlets about all of these witch trials in Essex, which believed all the tortured, hallucinatory testimony that was going out, and published it all over the country. So people did really think there were demons and witches, and the Devil was in Essex.

And it didn't die down for quite a while, I think the last one was about

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1737, the last, I think loose woman. So, I wondered if people had an idea about these women from Essex and there was something dodgy about that. And then as time washed away the memories of the witch hunts, people still just had this kind of *idea* that there was something dodgy about the women of Essex, just like when you're a kid and you can hear your parents talking about 'funny Uncle Brian', and you know, you don't know what they're saying, but you could hear them talking. And you'd grow up and you've forgotten all about it, but you still know there's something a bit funny about Uncle Brian and you just don't know what it is, and I wonder if that's what's happened to the women of Essex.

So, in the eighties, when the Essex girl reared her big, blonde, flossy head, the stereotype was picked up *so* decisively, and *so* firmly, because people thought, *Ah, yes, I knew there was something weird about the girls of Essex, that's what it is.* But actually, it had its roots in the witch hunts.

Doug Johnstone: And the series of books that you're writing now deals with that explicitly, you've talked already about two standalone novels and then you've got this great *Essex Witch Museum* books, mysteries I guess...strange series. And that seems like...I mean it's a brilliant setup. Do you want to just explain, just quickly what the setup is and there's been five novels and short stories and everything else.

Syd Moore: So, right, the premise is that Rosie Strange is an out-and-proud Essex girl constantly challenging the stereotype. And out of nowhere she one day inherits the great Essex Witch Museum. She goes down to see it and she hasn't really heard very much about the relative that she inherits it from. So she's quite keen to sell it and use the money to go off and have fun in Ibiza, but the museum exerts a strange magnetic pull over her as does the curator Sam Stone, who's really fit. And she slowly becomes reluctant and she starts getting dragged into these mysteries and murders that start to occur.

They are asked to investigate murders, which have got a slightly occult

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or witchy angle to them. So they go off and they solve all these different murders. And she's got kind of like backdrop, she starts to find out more about her own family and her own real origins. But it's a kind of vehicle for me to explore some of these terrible witch trials that have happened in Essex and to write about the women as well. So a lot of excavation of the witch myth, which Rosie and Sam have to look at, and always the historical mystery ends up providing clues to solve the contemporary crime. But they uncover what happens to these women and there's an element of magic, I guess, in the books.

I can use things like mind slip, and with fiction it's fantastic because you can just decide to drop back into the past and write from that woman's point of view. But, yeah, the primary aim is to shine a light on some of these women who have slipped through the fingers of history. And while we all know about the names of the witchfinders, we don't know what their names are.

So to talk about that, and also talking about the past, sometimes it's more comfortable for people than talking about what's going on in society at the moment. I think it's by looking at the past we can analyze the problems of today and make the future better for everyone.

Doug Johnstone: One of the things, reading the Strange books, they seem like a lot of fun to write because they're a lot of fun to read. They really sort of romp along and the relationship between Rosie and Sam is terrific, and that's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. It strikes me as quite hard to do that time-slip thing a little bit, you know, because effectively, these are action mysteries in the present day, but they're all about stuff that's happened in the past. So, is it quite a hard balancing act?

And also, you do it really well about looking at the resonances between the past and the present, about what happened in the past, how that will affect or how that affects people's attitudes now, or how things are the same or different or worse, or however you want to look at it.

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That wasn't really a question that was a ramble and a compliment. So, do you have to think hard about how you go back and exactly how you do that balance between the present day and the past?

Syd Moore: To be honest, not really, because there are so many myths and legends and trials as well that took place in Essex and I'm really interested in the history pretty much of all of them, and because the books have now got a reputation. Whenever I do talks, people come up to me and say, 'Oh, have you heard about this one over here?' And I say, 'Oh that sounds really interesting.' So I've got a massive list of..

Doug Johnstone: I was going to say, there must be like an endless list of great research that you can use for future books. Back to the books a little bit, I want to really pick your brains a little bit, because you're sort of five books into a series, right, and I'm just starting the fifth book of a series. And I was wondering how you're finding it. I was in the planning stages and I kept rejecting ideas, going, *Oh this is a bit too similar to that*, and also trying to get more of the character arcs in your development, because you were talking about developing your central characters more. Are you finding that a challenge, are you finding it dead easy — you're just scooshing through it?

Syd Moore: Well, Rosie, who I thought when I developed her...so, she's a benefit fraud inspector, and I chose that because I wanted for her...she's got an element of the witch about her. But she's also got an element of the witchfinder about her, and that's in being a benefit fraud inspector.

And so I therefore wanted her not to be a really nice character, I wanted her to be a bit spiky, also a bit obtuse at places. And also you can't...the way I write, I need her not to be able to see everything, otherwise this is going to be a really short book, you know, you work out who did it immediately. So you've got to have a misunderstanding, clues, etcetera.

But what I didn't realise is...I thought everyone'd get that, but actually

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when the reviews came out for *Strange Magic*, some people just completely hated her as a main character. And I was just like, *Oh, okay, but she's a witchfinder, hasn't everybody got that, benefit fraud inspector...* But of course, no, they hadn't, so I did start to soften her. I think I wanted to soften her anyway; as part of the character arc, she finds out about herself, but actually, it sort of became necessary to try and keep the attention and the engagement of the readers. And I always had a backstory for her, so the more she finds out about her family, the more she reflects on herself. And also there was a backstory for Sam, which gives both the main characters more depth, but it's sort of like, how far can you go along the series before you reveal major chunks of information, how far will the reader go with you, because I can't see them really going past book seven without finding out who her real father is.

So I think it's about just seeing how far you can go, but also I don't ever want to stretch something out for the sake of it. I'm happy with the way it's going at the moment, and the individual stories for each book I am also quite happy with. And I quite like the way the characters are developing. Between you and me, it's really difficult to keep the sexual tension going between Sam and Rosie. Because, you know, I don't really know what to say now, but if you get two characters that have got sexual tension together, everyone wants them to get together. But then if you think about moonlighting, if they get together, then it's like...ooooaapwoooo...all the sexual tension fizzles out.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, then what?

Syd Moore: Yeah. This Mr and Mrs investigation team doesn't seem to...I can't think of anyone who does it successfully. I'm not going to go down the *Hart to Hart* line, but yeah, that tension is great to play around with but if it goes, it goes.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah.

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Syd Moore: You know, I dunno. That is one of the dilemmas I have, although I'm writing a new series at the moment.

Doug Johnstone: Can you talk about the new series? Are you allowed to?

Syd Moore: I think so.

Doug Johnstone: Okay. What can you tell me? That sounds interesting already.

Syd Moore: Three-book series. Most people know about the Nazis obsession with the occult in the Second World War thing? You know, it's everywhere really, isn't it in pop culture? *Captain America*, *Call of Duty: the Zombie edition*, blah, blah, blah. It's all there. The mad scientists, the weird fringe science and the strange occult beliefs I think certainly Rudolf Hess and Himmler and Adolf Hitler had. And actually a lot of Germany was interested in all of these different kind of doctrines.

Everybody knows about that, but what people don't know about is how the secret service over here tried to exploit what they saw as a weakness in the German command. And we got up to all sorts of crazy goings on in our efforts to do some crazy occulty type stuff, which was sanctioned, as I said, by what now is MI5, but the Domestic Security Service.

So we've got sort of weird rituals, grimoires, tarot, and all of it's based in, as far as we know, it's based in truth. There are conflicting reports about who was part of it. So some people have said that occultists were part of it. Other people have said, no, there were Canadian airmen who were dressed up to look like a cultist because they just wanted Hitler to get the information that there was this weird ritual going on.

And they did it because they had German spies in the area. All kinds of very crazy things that we got up to in the Second World War. So I'm looking at a three-book series, starts in May 1940, when Hitler was getting

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ready for *Operation Sea Lion*: the invasion of the British Isles, and it ends in June 1941.

Doug Johnstone: Okay, so...

Syd Moore: And I won't tell you what happens then, but something did happen.

Doug Johnstone: So fully historical then, so that's an interesting shift, has that been quite a challenge or has it been relatively okay?

Syd Moore: Yeah, well, you know, researching the Second World War. It's just like...phweeahhh!

Doug Johnstone: There's not much that's been written about that has there!

Syd Moore: Exactly. At the beginning I was like, *Oh no, what have I done?* But, yes, I think it's better once you get into it and you refine your research, refine, refine, refine, move into it. But it is...obviously, some parts of it are fictionalised as well. And it is, what, three novels, so I am imagining stuff.

And I think what I'm going to have to do, because again there are some things that have got lots of different versions. There's an event that takes place, which people have written about very, very differently. So I think I'm going to do the classic novelist get out, of, this book has been *inspired by*, which I like.

With the *Drowning Pool*, I was trying to keep to the facts, as we knew them as much as possible about Sarah Moore. And then actually it was my editor who said look change her name and just say, *inspired by* and then you've got more leverage. You've got so much more leeway to imagine, I went, 'Ah, that's amazing, thank you, why didn't I think of that?' Yeah, so I am doing that with this. So a lot of them, they are inspired by true events but really good...

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Doug Johnstone: Sounds really interesting, really fascinating.

Syd Moore: It is really good, and I'm finding out so much as well about all these fantastic women who were involved with the war effort, and some of whom have never been acknowledged, and so I've got still this feminist activist streak running through the writing of it.

For instance, the Lumberjills, although Scotland has acknowledged them, but we haven't down here in England. The Lumberjills were female lumberjacks who took over the work because we had a timber shortage at the beginning of the war, and so they took over the work. And they were *ridiculed* and people...because they wore trousers, which meant you were loose, apparently...I know, *crazy!*

But people refused to billet them, people used to shout at them in the street. And they were basically just doing the work of the men who'd gone off to fight, to keep the production lines going. But they've never ever been officially invited to any commemorations of the Second World War, or thanked at all. So there's lots of stuff like that that I'm looking at.

Doug Johnstone: Cool, and is there going to be more, I take it there's going to be more Strange books, more witch stuff?

Syd Moore: Yes. So once I finish this first book in the new series, I'm going back to the Strange stuff. Actually, this is a quite interesting one for you because at the moment I'm looking at fascism and folklore, which ties into my other series. But I'm sort of making my way up to 2020 slowly. I'm not sure what to do about the pandemic. Where are you with that?

Doug Johnstone: I have just pretended it didn't exist, kind of, because I didn't really have any option. The first book came out before it started, the second book was already written but then came out in August 2020. And for the third book, I was writing it in the middle of the pandemic and just couldn't face writing about it.

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Plus, it was also...a total moment in flux. So you didn't know, at that point, at certain points we didn't have a vaccine or other things. So we didn't really know what was going to happen, so you can't write about it because you're speculating. And the fourth one is now, I don't think I have a mention of it, but there's a kind of...it feels like it's kind of afterwards, I guess.

There is one or two elements of that. So I've totally hedged my bets a little bit. But I wasn't sure that people wanted to read about it, especially not when it was actually happening, that seemed like crazy to me.

Syd Moore: Yeah, I agree I think. I wrote a couple of short stories, but I think that's going to be it.

Doug Johnstone: You mentioned short stories there. I just wanted to very briefly mention the Strange short-story collections, because there's two, we haven't talked about them at all. How are they to write, because they're kind of...they're delicious, they're like, I don't know, Christmassy *Tales of the Unexpected*, kind of things.

Syd Moore: Yeah. Thank you.

Doug Johnstone: And they struck me as a lot of fun as well to write. I thought, it seemed like you were having a lot of fun, did you?

Syd Moore: Yeah, I love writing them. I really, really love it because you're trapped in – for the other books I mean – Rosie's head basically, it's first-person narrative, past tense. So then, although it's brilliant, you are limited by what that character sees, what that character thinks, how they process information.

So the short stories are a way of being able to break out of Rosie's head and move into different characters. And yeah, you can go backwards and forwards in time. I've sort of created this universe so I can go anywhere

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in it. And for me, it's a breath of fresh air, I love doing them, I love writing the short stories, they're kind of like a lemon sorbet in between meals.

Doug Johnstone: Nice palate cleanser!

Syd Moore: Yeah, yeah, they're great. I find short stories really easy to write. As long as I've got inspiration, it will come out. Yeah, and I really enjoy writing them. Thank you for your very kind words about them.

Doug Johnstone: Is there going to be more, is there going to be another collection? Do you see that in the...

Syd Moore: Yeah, I imagine so, my publishers are sort of saying – I've now got four books to write – so they're kind of like saying, *Write those first*.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, mebbe just...the ones you're contracted to do, maybe do them first!

Syd Moore: But I'm always...always coming up with ideas and I just jot them down and think, *Right, that'd be a good one for when I've got time*, if I ever have time.

Doug Johnstone: If you ever have time. Cool. Well, listen Syd, I think that's a good place to finish. Thank you very much for chatting to me, thanks for your time.

Syd Moore: Oh, thank you Doug, it's been lovely.

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RLF outro: That was Syd Moore in conversation with Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Syd on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 433, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone

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and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 434, Rosalind Harvey speaks with Ann Morgan about learning another language so well you dream in it. The process of finding the voices for other writers's characters and the link between writing and translating.

We hope you'll join us.

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