Episode 439

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 439 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Jeremy Treglown speaks with Ann Morgan about choosing biographical subjects, the fallibility of memory, trying to tell real-life stories fairly, and the experience of being a critic as well as an author.

Ann Morgan: Jeremy Treglown is author of numerous critically acclaimed nonfiction books, including biographies of Roald Dahl, V. S. Pritchett and Henry Green. A former editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, he has chaired the judges of the Booker Prize and the Arvon Foundation, and was a professor at Warwick University.

He began by telling me what drew him to writing biography.

Jeremy Treglown: When I began as a university teacher, indeed when I was a student, biography was absolutely not part of what people learnt about writers; it was the period when the French were saying that 'the writer was dead'. And it was perfectly clear to me that the writer wasn't dead: partly because when I was in my teens I used to go to literary festivals and see real writers, partly because I was friends with people who were going to become writers and have indeed made good careers as writers. The actual subjects...I've tended to go for people who haven't been written about at all or not much.

There have only been unreliable biographies of Rochester; in the case of Roald Dahl, he'd only just died and the only accounts of his life were more or less made up by him and steered by him. And I know the biography of Henry Green Pritchard and John Hersey were either the first or are the only ones.

So it's been to do with a fascination with the writing life and wanting to bring to a public audience somebody I admire, but who hasn't perhaps had their due.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, that is the common thread, isn't it, that they are all writers. And I wondered, because something that's so impressive in your biographies is the scope of research and context you bring.

Jeremy Treglown: Thank you.

Ann Morgan: There's a huge...it's extraordinary, John Hersey, for example, a life that roved across the planet: some childhood time in China, all kinds of context that you need to understand in order to bring the reality of that life to readers, and also things like the culture of New England a hundred years ago, things like that.

Reading them I was struck by something that I felt when I was researching *Reading the World*, which was that you could actually include everything written ever, in it. How do you know when to stop, how do you know when you've got enough?

Jeremy Treglown: Well exactly. One part of that question is how much background you need to give; what can you depend on the reader knowing? And of course, you just have to work that out for yourself. I more or less base it on my grown-up children and my grandchildren. And I can't really answer all the questions that my grandchildren would have, but I try to be clear enough for somebody with my kids' range of reference.

But you do have to contextualise and do a bit of world history if you're dealing with a world writer like Hersey. The question of how much to put in, in terms of the actual life of the person is also fascinating, I think. I'm in awe of Hermione Lee's life of Tom Stoppard, for example, which is a real doorstop of a book. And it tells you everything you could *conceivably* want to know about everything Stoppard ever wrote; what research he did for it; how long it took him to write; what stages it went through in performance and rehearsal and performance.

And I think she's done it with tremendous finesse and immense learning, I really admire it, but at the same time I find it a hard read. And as you can tell from my stuff, I don't go in for biographies that are longer than three hundred pages. Partly because that's not the kind of book...I don't want to read books that are that much longer – I don't mean novels but biographies – but also because I don't think I've got the stamina, it takes a hell of a long time to write a three-hundred-page book, let alone, a thousand.

Ann Morgan: Yes, absolutely. Maybe your editorial eye as well, playing a part there, because...?

Jeremy Treglown: I hadn't thought of that but certainly in starting out as a reviewer, you get the message very early on from editors that you've got to keep it short and crack on and get your main points in early, kind of thing. So that may have influenced me, but I think it's basically, you know, I'm a bit lazy.

Ann Morgan: Would you call yourself a literary biographer, because in biographies I've seen of *you*, you're usually described as a biographer? And I wondered...but you do in your books bring in...some of it, the writing of the writer and explore...with Roald Dahl, for example, you explore how his experiences in World War II are diffused, refracted, or distorted sometimes in the short fiction he wrote at the time.

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah. I'm interested in writers because of their writing.

Of course, Dahl had an unusually glamorous and event-filled life and was a controversial human being. So all that figured quite largely in my writing about him. But essentially, in his case, I had read those books to my kids; the BFG in particular, they absolutely loved. And I'm always fascinated in how aspects of the personality and the experience of a writer are refracted, as you say, in their work. It's not an easy...it's important not to make simplistic assumptions.

Ann Morgan: Problematic isn't it?

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, it is problematic, but at the same time, it's quite pointless to pretend that there's no connection. Martin Amis once said in a conversation, a public conversation I had with him at Warwick, 'I accept that what I have written is a full account of myself'. And that's a faintly gnomic way of putting it, but basically saying, it's not that I am an autobiographer, although now he has written more personally about himself, but that somehow or other every aspect of him sooner or later comes out in his work.

Ann Morgan: And one of the things that's really fascinating about your books is they are each in their different ways critiques of different kinds of storytelling, I think.

So Hersey, for example, you write a lot about war reporting and also storytelling during war; there's a lovely quote, you talk about anti-war literature, and you say 'It makes its arguments against war by in part, focusing on individual experience and where that is factual. It is intrinsically unjust to what other individuals have gone through'. And I wondered whether that's true of biography as well, picking out one life and putting it under the microscope, does that automatically unbalance?

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah, it's a really good question, thank you, and a difficult one to answer. I've always been very interested in war, as I find most of my generation born immediately after the Second World War are.

It's just that it was a presence, but at the same time it was absent, and so it was mysterious.

That's a different question, but the question of fairness, I've always been fascinated by books and the writers of books who try to include as many people as conceivably possible. In Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, has a pretty large cast. A book that is to some extent modelled on that one, by Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, again about the Second World War, has such a huge cast that it's very, very, very difficult to keep in mind who everybody is, indeed, there's a sort of cast list at the...I can't remember whether it's the front or the back of the book, and I used to get my students to think about the question: how many individuals can a human being keep in mind? Social media has, in a way, given a number, because of how many friends you've got or whatever, on a website.

But, how many people can you actually seriously sympathise with and care about? It is a question of the scope of the imagination. Religious people will say, 'I keep you in my prayers', and if the person in question is a priest, you know that that person has got literally thousands of people that they notionally have to pray for.

And you think, well, what does it mean exactly, it's a sort of philosophical but also cognitive question. And there isn't an answer in terms of the choice of subject, except that as with charitable work, in the end you have to say to yourself, well, this may not be enough, but it's something, at least it's something.

If you are teaching for the Arvon Foundation, which I've been involved with recently, you may help a person or a couple of people to change their lives. That is a well-known, documented, factual aspect of what Arvon does. But it's only one person, and in a sense you didn't choose them, they happened to be on the course you taught.

Ann Morgan: But with biography you do choose?

Jeremy Treglown: With biography you do choose. And in that case, as I've said, I think what I've been trying to do is to pick out people I think deserve more attention than they've had. I wrote a book, which was not biographical, although it has a few life stories in it, about the culture of Spain. After the...

Ann Morgan: *Franco's Crypt*.

Jeremy Treglown: That's right, yeah. And in a chapter about writers, it is about writers, I gave thumbnail sketches of a whole lot of books that dealt with the Spanish Civil War. A hostile reviewer in the *Guardian* said – a historian – said that I'd simply given my opinion of these books and that I hadn't backed it up with, as it were, any socio-historical data about readership or anything like that.

Well, I felt like saying, 'Well, in your review, you're just giving your opinion of *my* book'. But I mean, she held this to be an aspect of my having been a literary journalist. I thought it was a bit unfair because we do read accounts of books, when we read reviews, because we're interested in what other people think about them.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. And I find that reviews often tell you more about the reviewer than about the book, because you're often...

Jeremy Treglown: I know what you mean.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, the response...and sometimes, as I said, depending on the publication and the editorial line, there can often be a display of knowledge and expertise that takes up the bulk of the review. And actually the impression of the book is...the book is sort of really just a way into that person grandstanding about their own topic.

Jeremy Treglown: Well, you've had this experience, I think we all have. Quite often the expertise of the reviewer is largely derived from the

reading of your book. And it's very irritating when you feel that an essay is written which depends on what the reviewer has read in your book.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I mean the question of subjectivity is a tricky one, isn't it, because I was struck by something that you wrote in the Hersey, you were talking about an account that he gives of Father Walter, this missionary who's doing work...you really quite closely read a section of his account, and you say, 'In the course of a few sentences, we've gone from a sense that we're reading a reliable narrative to a sharp reminder of its double subjectivity, in that Father Walter is telling a story that's then being reflected through Hersey's mind', but of course, we're reading it with *triple* subjectivity, because yours is laid over the top.

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, absolutely.

Ann Morgan: How do you weigh that, because one of the things that's really enjoyable in your writing is, you're very clear, you have a very direct style and you don't shy away from expressing definitive statements about what someone was thinking and feeling. But of course, to a certain extent, that is your construction, how do you weigh that?

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah, well, I do try to remind myself and readers that there are those elements, but at the same time, you have to press on and you have a story to tell. And you can't with every sentence say, you know, 'If I'm correct about this', or 'If you can believe X'.

It is though that subjectivity in terms of memory, for example, is one of the things you come up against all the time in biography. People, I find… more than once, that people who at first said they didn't want to help, for one reason or another, even because they couldn't remember enough about somebody, subsequently, wanted to be in the story. Because perhaps friends of theirs said, 'I've just been talking to this biographer'.

Ann Morgan: They didn't want to be left out?

Jeremy Treglown: And in some cases, you have to be careful because they want to be perhaps more important, they think themselves to be more important than I would judge them to have been.

I co-taught at Warwick, with Jonathan Bate, a module on life-writing. And we would say to the students right at the beginning, we want you to do something halfway through the term in reading week, and you must start preparing it now: think of a story that is told in your family, an event that looms large and that involves several people.

Get in touch with all the people who were involved, and say you want to talk to them about it. But because of the nature of this exercise you don't want them to compare notes with the others. And then write about it, come back in the second half of the term with an account of that.

They all came back somewhat alarmed or horrified by the fact that different people put themselves to the centre of the story or claimed they'd done something: driven somebody to the hospital, helped them out of the ambulance, into the ambulance, whatever it was, when actually other people said, it was them. You know, very, very simple tricks of memory that produce very different accounts, so, you just have to be on guard about that.

Ann Morgan: I mean this is something that you highlight in Roald Dahl's *Boy*, that he misremembers the identity of the headmaster he delivered a particular speech to.

Jeremy Treglown: That's right, yeah, yes.

Ann Morgan: And throughout his life maintained....

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, exactly.

Ann Morgan: Who it actually wasn't as he'd left the school the year before. It's a real minefield, isn't it?

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah.

Ann Morgan: This memory and the fallibility of memory in that way. And I was wondering about the responsibilities that go with that, as a biographer?

Jeremy Treglown: Well, I have a quite simple kind of opinion on this, which is that if a subject is sufficiently interesting, somebody else will come along and do another book. You think about all the different accounts of John le Carré: his life, in journalism as well as in books, and editions of letters and so on. So there is a process of correction that goes on, let alone in the case of Shakespeare, about whom we actually literally know not very much at all.

Ann Morgan: Yes, 'second-best bed'.

Jeremy Treglown: Exactly, exactly. So, there is a kind of corrective process that goes on. Part of that, of course, is not only to do with the facts of somebody's life, but is to do with their importance or not. And what we've seen during my lifetime is a huge amount of investigation of women writers, writers from the former empire, that kind of thing, all of that very valuable, and asserting that there are a lot of people out there writing books.

And always have been, I mean, since writing became a practice, and there will always be scope for bringing somebody back into the spotlight, or just putting them into the spotlight for the first time.

Ann Morgan: Now you say that you look for subjects who deserve more attention and who you admire, but you also are very even-handed in your treatment of the people you write about, you don't shy away from presenting their weaknesses.

Jeremy Treglown: Right.

Ann Morgan: A more problematic side, I mean, Roald Dahl, you know, was an extraordinary character, admirable in so many ways and yet reprehensible in many others.

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah.

Ann Morgan: Anti-Semitic, a bully, all kinds of...a fantasist, making up all sorts of stories and, you know... And as one of the people that you quote talking about him says, 'Almost everything you say about him, the opposite could also be true'.

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, yeah the housekeeper, yeah.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, so how do you get that balance, because you don't want to just write praise for someone. There's no…it's not much fun to read, is it, and probably not much fun to write. But how do you...

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, well, I think it's part of being judicious and balance of probability is a topic I was talking to my wife about yesterday, she's a philosopher. And there'd been a discussion about, what does the balance of probability mean in legal cases. Well, in the end, we all have a sense of what it is, and you get a jury together and they thrash it out.

And it's the same with opinions of...it's the same with gossip and literary opinion. I've never been very keen on scandalous gossip, although, you can't avoid it in life, people like to talk about each other and sometimes there's a real relish in it.

Ann Morgan: And particularly a life as scandalous as Roald Dahl, so much isn't there?

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah, exactly. And in his case, I felt the interest was

partly that he had made up such a version of himself, almost as assiduously as he'd written stories, and that actually investigating the truth of what he said or otherwise, was worth doing.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I mean, that's the point you make in the preface, that you had some obstacles to face with that book because there was reluctance and resistance on the part of the family. But you felt, you squared it with yourself by thinking, *Well, he courted this sort of attention in the way he presented his life...*

Jeremy Treglown: Absolutely, yeah.

Ann Morgan: ...and that he is a well-known figure and there's public interest in...

Jeremy Treglown: But it was...one of the things that were fascinating, I was writing more or less in tandem the book about Dahl, which had an early deadline, and the book about Henry Green, which I started around the same time but which took longer. And Dahl came particularly from a Hollywood kind of world, because of his marriage to Patricia Neal. And, in both cases, there were reasons for people to hesitate about whether they would talk to me or not.

In the case of Dahl, all these Hollywood people, and you know, people in the general world he came from would say, 'I can't talk to you because I know that Felicity, his second wife, doesn't want this book to be written... but where did you say you are'? And this is a particular case, I was in New York, and I said 'Well, I'm in New York', and the person I spoke to said 'Oh for God's sake, come on over, have a cup of coffee anyway, you've come all this way'. And then of course he told me everything that he knew about Roald Dahl.

Henry Green came from the much more reticent world of the British upper classes and in that case Diana Mosley, Diana Guinness, as she had

been, said – we talked on the phone – and she said, 'I'd love to talk to you about Henry, I can't think of *anybody* I would like to talk about more, I loved him. I loved him but really, I knew him so little, I knew him so little, I can't really help you'.

And that was the end of that conversation. Afterwards, somebody, a mutual friend, said, 'You know, Diana was saying to me, why didn't you go and talk to her?' And I said, 'Well, I actually asked her and she said she wouldn't talk to me'. So, part of all this is, in all the different questions of reliability and unreliability and of accounts is, where you get your material. And who will talk and who won't and whether they can be relied on. So you do have to be very cautious and make that part of the story, I think.

Ann Morgan: I was fascinated to learn that you edited the letters of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. I did a dissertation on him at university.

Jeremy Treglown: Really!

Ann Morgan: I was fascinated by him and I no doubt used your edition during my research for that. He strikes me as an absolutely ideal figure for your biographical attention. He's got exactly the sort of contradictions and conundrums attached to his life. And as you mentioned earlier, there are a number of unreliable biographies of him; you're not tempted, I can't persuade you?

Jeremy Treglown: Well, it's an interesting thought. I'm not sure that we're any closer to being able to answer the questions that are raised in my little introduction to that book.

And there's a huge amount of work, like yours, that's been done on the period and I would need to make myself an expert in a period that I thought I knew a bit about when I was in my twenties, but haven't really thought about since. But he is a very, very attractive figure, partly because

he was such a gifted writer, such an attractive personality, but also he was very naughty...

Ann Morgan: Yes. And for me it was the – oh gosh the title's escaping my memory now – but 'After death nothing is, and nothing, death'. I just fell in love with that poem. And I sort of wanted to know the mind that had created it.

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, exactly. Yeah.

Ann Morgan: And that was what fascinated me, and yeah, it was... I just think he's an extraordinary figure, and I've read a number of biographies of him that made me quite cross.

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah, exactly.

Ann Morgan: Now, a lot of critics struggle with writing books because they feel very hemmed in by knowing...sort of anticipating the baying hordes waiting to...

Jeremy Treglown: Yes, yes.

Ann Morgan: How did you deal with that?

Jeremy Treglown: Well, I think that I've been timid in that respect, in that there have been people I would like to have written about, I've long had an ambition to write about Dryden, for example. And I've just been daunted by the thought of, not only the amount of primary material one would have to read...

Stevenson, Robert Louis Stevenson, is another case. I spent quite a lot of time working on Stevenson, I did a little selection of his essays. And I thought about doing a biography and then I thought, *It's not just the huge amount of primary material* – because everybody who ever met

Stevenson, you know, kept everything that was connected with him, and he became such a sort of talismanic figure – *but the vast amount of secondary material, one would have to read everything everybody else has written about him*, and I simply couldn't face it. So, a mixture of laziness and timidity, I think, has meant that I've tended to go for somebody who hasn't been written about much. And in the case of Rochester, hasn't written too much, that helps too.

Ann Morgan: Well yes, that does cut down the research time, doesn't it? I suppose with Rochester as well, there's no kind of interviews to be done with contemporaries who can tell you the background.

Jeremy Treglown: No, exactly, exactly. Well, that was one of the interesting things about finding myself writing about people who were alive in people's memories. I've never written about anybody, and I wouldn't want to, who's still alive. But, what I didn't bargain with, having written about a long-ago historical period, was that when I started to write about recent people, twentieth-century people, there would be ferociously partisan and indeed ferociously loyal emotions that one had to deal with.

My first meeting with John Hersey's daughter who is also his literary executor, she's a psychotherapist in Upper Manhattan, and I said to her, perhaps rather rashly, 'Of course, the difference between you and me is that you know more about somebody than anybody else, in their relatives, their family, possibly even than they know themselves. And then you don't tell anybody; I try to be somebody who knows more about the person than anybody else, and then I do tell everybody'. She didn't exactly find that funny because she was very, very worried about this book. In the end, she was pleased with it, but she wouldn't authorise it. And there were things certainly that I realised I was going to have to be very cautious about, and tactful about.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Yeah. You've been writing biographies for, well, twenty-five years, thirty years, getting on for. Has the discipline changed

over that time and where do you think it's going? We've had a lot of talk in the last decade, particularly about truth, fake news, all this stuff.

And these anxieties are starting to play out a lot in fiction, a lot of novelists now are writing stories from, much as you...that exercise you described of getting different perspectives, no definitive, no one definitive... Can biography survive this, this onslaught?

Jeremy Treglown: Yeah, of course it's very interesting, and there has been that very marked vogue for writing about the process of doing the book. There's also been a tendency for biography to be a term used in relation to a family or a group or just a period in somebody's life. And now you get biographies of cities, biographies of musical instruments. So it is a capacious genre and it's inevitable that climates of opinion and, you know, the weltanschauung will affect how a genre is used.

People have always wanted though, to know about people. There have been lives of heroes, saints, from the beginning of written narratives. And, of course now they can take very many different forms and you can do things with IT in terms of actually giving people the research materials, so that they can do their own investigation.

But I think there will always be people who say, 'Well, I don't want the whole lot. I just want you to tell me the essence of the life'. So I don't think it's going to go away and I think there are always going to be people who like to tell stories and there are always going to be people who like to hear them and read them.

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RLF outro: That was Jeremy Treglown in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Jeremy on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 439, which was recorded and produced by

Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 440, Royal Literary Fund writers discuss the mysterious mechanism by which stories, plays and poems are born, taking in everything from the arrival of the idea and the slog of the drafting process to the joys of editing.

We hope you'll join us.

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