

Writers Aloud

Episode 440

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 440 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the third in a series on the theme 'How I Write', 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.

Plotting or 'pantsing', inspiration or perspiration?

Despite storytelling being at the heart of human culture, the question of how literary works are created remains a mystery. In this episode exploring the theme, 'How I Write', we hear from Royal Literary Fund fellows about their creative process.

The puzzle of where ideas come from remains one of writing's greatest mysteries; for Nigel Cliff, it starts with a physical response.

Nigel Cliff: It usually starts with a hot flush, the shiver of recognition that I've found a real story, and one I think I can tell. It has to have strong characters caught up in a dramatic situation at a turning point in history. It has to have a sense of danger for the character and for me. And since I like writing about the broad comedy of life, the more improbable the better.

Writers Aloud

If I've chosen well, I dig away until hopefully I've unearthed the bones of a thesis, then I read around to put flesh on them. This all goes into the pot and comes out as a fifty-page proposal. Of course, a nonfiction proposal isn't at all a snapshot of the final book, it's a genre unto itself with its own structure and rules. There are people who enjoy a perfectly fruitful career by being better at writing proposals than books, like screenwriters who only do rewrites.

Then there's a year of research, where I usually get carried away and go well off-piste, and a year of writing. I'd love to paint a pretty picture of my process, but I find I have to get my hands well and truly dirty to get anywhere. I tend to throw down lumps of half-digested material, like wet clay, and gradually massage them into shape. For me, writing and editing are really kind of the same thing. It's in the editing that your take on the story and your tone properly emerge.

I think that's one of the biggest differences between fiction and nonfiction, in fiction the tone tends to come first.

RLF: Dipo Agboluaje finds questions can often contain the makings of a new play.

Dipo Agboluaje: I'm more of an inspiration person than a perspiration person. I always start with a 'what if?' prompt. I think I'm very much interested in creating *worlds* before thinking of the characters that inhabit them.

So the question would be, for instance, what if a character, a man, decided that...*believed*, sorry, that he was the Son of God and came to Britain to lead the people of Britain into a Second Coming. Or, for instance, what would happen if a bunch of cleaners decide to overthrow the British government and institute a 'blackocracy'.

And so it's from around those situations that I begin to look for the kind

Writers Aloud

of characters that would fit in the story. And then the characters begin to influence the shape of the story. I'm very much always interested in seeing what happens when a character overreaches, as the case may be, overreaches his target; has a target that is almost impossible to achieve, but nevertheless sets on a journey. And that creates interesting dilemmas and situations and setups. And that's what keeps me going through the writing process.

RLF: Once an idea has landed, there's the issue of how to get it onto the page. Doug Johnstone swears by planning.

Doug Johnstone: Well, for quite a long time now, I've written a book a year, basically, on top of whatever else I'm doing. And that process about suits me actually, and it's weird because I talk to, quite often, literary writers who throw their hands up in horror that you can write one book a year. And then you talk to some crime writers who are bashing out two... ordinary genre writers, very often, can be bashing out two books a year, three books a year, sometimes more, horror, sci-fi, stuff like that.

But one seems to suit me quite nicely actually, I have a period of a couple of months, two or three months, where I will be planning, which is quite a grand word for what it really is. It's just, I tend to write sort of stream of consciousness notes, starting very, very loosely at the start with a kind of central idea, maybe a central character and a setting, things that are influencing what I'm thinking about at the time.

And so I'll just write, usually a few hundred words or a thousand words a day. I actually don't even go back and read some of these, or I flick through them and have a little...see what resonates. I'll do that for a couple of months, maybe. As the process goes on, things tend to get crystallized a little bit, so by the end of that process, I'll have not quite a scene-by-scene, but I'll have a pretty good idea of the start and the ending of the book, and maybe a grey area in the middle.

Writers Aloud

And it's not like a formal treatment or anything like that, but I'll have a list of key scenes with bits in between, things like, quite often it can just be: I need a scene with this character here because they haven't been in it for a while, or, you know, something needs to happen here, or stuff like that. And there'll be little character studies, I'll have done the main characters, I'll have character studies, like a page or a couple of pages about what they like and what they don't like, what they carry in their pockets, what's in their handbag, all that sort of stuff that you learn in creative writing class, which does actually help a lot.

Also, by that point I'll usually have pictures on the wall of some of the setting on maybe one or two pictures that might represent what the physical characters look like, one or two central characters.

RLF: Cynan Jones, meanwhile, takes a long time to think a story out before committing words to the page.

Cynan Jones: I write in my head, and I try to write everything that I need; and see everything that I need; and build everything that I need; research everything I need: on my feet, busy, walking, working.

There's a point for me that a story then becomes ready, and it wants to be written down. And it's only then, in an ideal situation, that I sit down and I write it. I tend to write as if I'm remembering, as if I'm watching, I try and let the characters proceed ahead of me, keep my eye on them. And because in general I'm writing stories that are set in this place that I know very well, intimately, I only have to flick my eyes to one side or the other of the character to see the landscape around them. So I don't really struggle with those descriptions of place or setting a story into a place. That comes really from the grounding of the characters themselves and the process that is waiting until a story is clear before writing it.

RLF: But other writers find planning can kill ideas. Catherine Czerkawska, for example, has to jump straight in.

Writers Aloud

Catherine Czerkawska: I'm not a plotter, what do they say, they say there are 'pantsers' and plotters: and you either walk right by the seat of your pants or you plot meticulously and I don't plot meticulously at all. I know the beginning and I know the end, and I kind of write to find out how to get there. And so I think I would be bored...if I try and plot everything out meticulously, I get very fed up of it.

I might as well not have bothered writing it. So I do change, I do change quite a lot, because I'm finding things out. And with historical fiction I think you only find out what you don't know when you're writing. So I will do a lot of research and then put that to one side, and then do the writing really pretty much without looking at the research at all, I have to be there, but then I do find out what I don't know and have to go back and look things up. And do a bit more research as well, and keep making discoveries, keep finding things about it.

RLF: There's also the issue of how research relates to the writing process. For Caroline Moorehead it is the most pleasurable part of her work, a sort of compensation for the slog of putting words on the page.

Caroline Moorehead: My writing life is neatly divided in two. The research is what I love and I know of no greater pleasure than visiting archives with all the sense of anticipation of the riches they may yield. Writing is a chore, an unknown, a time of uncertainty and apprehension. When it can be put off no longer, when every last scrap of possible material has been squeezed out of the research, when every archive has been visited and every possible contact spoken to, then comes the dreary routine of the writing days.

It is payback time. I think of it as some kind of athletic challenge for which I have to be healthy, well slept, un-preoccupied by other things. I dread it. Only routine saves me. I have a small study in my flat, it is here that I keep my files, loose-leaf folders in which the notes taken during some two to three years of research are filed, arranged chronologically or thematically.

Writers Aloud

When the terrible day of writing dawns, I begin to make my way through the material in the files, pulling out what I will need for a first chapter. This may take several weeks, reading, rereading, drawing up a structure and a plan for the book, breaking it up into chapters, deciding what will go where.

Then the egg has to be laid. It never gets any easier, book by book. But as I reach the end, I'm already imagining the huge pleasure a new topic will bring me and keep me content for two years at a time. For those happy days in libraries and archives, I would do anything — even write a book!

RLF: Writers who work in several genres often find themselves adopting different approaches, as Lorna Thorpe explains.

Lorna Thorpe: How I write depends on whether I'm writing poetry or prose. Poetry is a much more...responsive in the sense that I'm responding to something. And I say 'something' because it's often quite hard to define what that 'something' is. It often feels like it's at the periphery of your mind.

It might be sparked by an image, or a few words might come into my head, or I might actually be reading something, and I notice that I'm paused while I'm reading. It might be entirely unconnected to what I end up actually writing about, but there's something there that has prodded me in some way, prompted me to want to write something. And with a poem, I really need to get that, try and capture that as quickly as possible. So it would have to...you know, I have to get whatever I can onto the page as quick as I can because these things are a bit like fireflies actually, they wink in and out of existence. You're lucky sometimes they come and it's almost there – obviously there's editing still required – but others take a lot of work and could change almost entirely from what you've first written down to what you actually end up with.

Writing prose is an entirely different thing because, whereas I think with

Writers Aloud

poetry I feel as if I'm constantly responding to these prompts or these ideas, with fiction I have the idea and then I've got to work with that, it's the slog, if you like, of getting that down and it does often feel like a slog. So, for that, it's bums on seats, get yourself to a desk. And to be honest, my favourite part of writing fiction is rewriting. The first draft is...I was going to say hellish, but then, you know, I think I'm not exactly out in a deep-sea trawler or anything, am I? But it's horrible, I really...the first draft is hard work, but, so the actual...for me the real writing part of it comes in the rewriting when you're looking at the structure, and obviously you're back to playing with words, which is probably the thing that I like best.

RLF: Often it's the rewriting stage at which a project really comes alive. This is the case for Jan Marsh.

Jan Marsh: I write for the sheer pleasure of a blank page, or a blank screen, and a subject, or half a subject, or the hint of a subject, to craft into words. That's why I write. One starts, stops, starts over, sketching phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pages, all in a slightly scattergun manner, until the prose begins to flow into its own curves, to shape itself in narrative or argument, description, dialogue, whatever. The words have to be exact and apt. And they edge ever closer to what they wish to convey, even if that perfection remains always out of reach.

I work with dictionary and thesaurus close to hand always. There should always be the right word somewhere that carries the precise meaning and inflection. And if I can't find that word, maybe the meaning is awry; try again from another angle, a different syntax can yield what one is after. Now the prose aims to be both serviceable and pleasing.

Whether the subject is dark, colourful or light, the reader should enjoy the brushwork. Enjoy, but almost without noticing. Phrases and sentences must also have their sounds and rhythm audible to the silent ear in their vowels, consonants, commas, end stops, exclamations. Punctuation is a major part of writing, I think.

Writers Aloud

So there is a melodic line, as it were, with discords and pauses as required. But it aims never to be toneless, or never all on the same level.

RLF: Reworking can sometimes demand some surprising tactics. Meaghan Delahunt, for example, adopts a physical approach to restructuring.

Meaghan Delahunt: After I've done a draft, I have to see it visually and walk through it, and so I throw it on the floor. And then I get scissors and Post-it notes and sticky tape, and I try and organise it in that way, because I don't write in any linear kind of way.

So, I have to try and see the patterns and so I see the patterns on the floor and I can see, *Oh, this goes there, that goes there*, and then after I have this very...it looks more like a sculpture, some paper sculpture. Then I go back with the sticky tape and the Post-it notes, and then I go back and do another draft.

So that's a really important part of how I work. I have to throw everything on the floor and see it, see what the patterns of my subconscious has made. And from that, then I get the structure of the novel, or the story.

RLF: And on the days when the words aren't flowing, it's important to have strategies to stop a funk setting in. Jeremy Seal takes several approaches to problem solving.

Jeremy Seal: In terms of bad days, in terms of problem days where I'm not making any progress, I tend to stubbornly dig in and just keep reworking at it until at least I feel I'm halfway through solving that problem. It's unlikely I will leave the problem intact and walk away from it.

What I tend to do is to at least get myself to the point where I've begun to get a glimpse of how I might solve it. And then I'll put it aside and go for a walk and come back in the hope that, in the course of that walk, I'll explore and extend that idea to the point where, when I come home, I've

Writers Aloud

progressed it to the point where I can actually put it on the page, and I can actually apply it and solve the problem.

It happens, obviously, fairly regularly, that the writing doesn't go as well as well as one would hope. But it seems to me that my writing gets better, I get more and more in the groove once I've been writing for a few days. Once I'm in the groove and I've been writing for a few days without breaks, my writing is a lot better.

When I come back, I've lost the habit. And it takes me a good period of time before I can bludgeon myself back into writing with the sort of ease that I hope to have after a few days of actually writing.

RLF: Helena Attlee is also a fan of getting away from the desk.

Helena Attlee: I have learned over the years, that just getting up and leaving it all and going for a walk is not a cop out and a waste of time. Because within minutes of the kind of rhythm of your footsteps being set up, that whatever it was that you couldn't write starts to come clear.

And if you can walk somewhere quite isolated and talk to yourself, it's great. And you don't even have to...you have to keep on saying it and saying it, and you memorise it, and then you come home and it's just down, and you've done it. I've also found or I've recognised recently, that when I'm having trouble writing something or finishing something, if I can put myself in a situation – and this is incredibly unfair – where I'm writing against a distraction, and so very often what I will do is, go to a concert or even go to somebody else's lecture and appear to be assiduously writing notes, and in fact I'm finishing the article or the chapter or whatever I need to write, because that somehow seems to be better. I don't know why that works, because I don't listen to music when I'm working, but that works.

RLF: Meanwhile, Kevin Clancy warns it's important not to expose the process to too much scrutiny.

Writers Aloud

Kevin Clancy: You have to protect yourself as a writer, you have to protect that part of yourself, I think. Finally, it has to be private to you, which is why this is probably the first time I've ever talked about it in any depth.

Even when I'm with friends and colleagues who do the same thing as I do, I don't like talking about it. I kind of feel if you touch it, the bloom is gone. I have an instinctive fear, perhaps, of disturbing the muse. I've realised, the older I've got, why the muse is such a telling image: it is as though a voice emanating from some creature you can't actually see is singing in your ear.

It's a highly romantic vision, and I don't think of myself consciously like that, but I can see where it came from. It does personify the idea I have of writing. I suspect this is what Keats meant by 'negative capability': it's the unconscious, it comes from the unconscious. It can only speak to us symbolically, it can't speak to us directly. And learning to make it speak to us at all takes time and effort.

RLF: For Ian McMillan, the secret lies in finding the right balance between pragmatism and idealism.

Ian McMillan: For me, writing's a combination of the very, very mystical, which is this getting up early, pummelling your brain, hunting for words, keeping some words on't back burner, going out and seeing things, spotting things that are kind of beyond language and you're trying to turn them into language.

They're mystical like that. But also they're very practical, of thinking: I've only done that many words today, I need to do some more. So I know that tonight, later on, which in't me best time, but after tea tonight, I'll sit down and I'll try and write some more words. I'll probably try and write another five hundred. And they won't be all that good, but I'll have written them.

Writers Aloud

And then I'll go back and rewrite them. And then tonight, when I go to bed, I'll do the same thing, I'll leave it, I'll leave a line half-written, so that tonight it'll marinate again. When I get up in the morning, I'll force myself to think of something. Because I think if you don't...then it's like doing exercise.

Every morning I get up, they're ridiculous, fifty-nine-year-old men's exercises: press ups and stuff to get me body going. But also if you don't, as a writer, exercise your writing part of your brain every day, then it is going to go slack.

RLF: And when the going gets tough, Michael Bywater finds it helpful to remember that even some of literature's most famous names had their demons.

Michael Bywater: When Tom Stoppard wrote *The Invention of Love*, I think probably his finest play, about A. E. Housman, we did a thing in the National Theatre, sort of interview type, public, whatever they call them, me and Tom.

Before we went on, he said it's quite interesting with this one – don't forget, this is a man who's written *Jumpers*, he's written *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, he's this *great* playwright – and here he is, and he said 'I thought after worrying for about nine months, I thought, 'no, to hell with it, I'll just rely on my technique for the first draft'.

And there's a huge relief that somebody of his stature obviously had the similar insecurities, and it'd taken him Lord knows how many great plays to think, *Actually, I can do this*. That's probably all it takes, but it's a jolly hard one to get, and I think professionals have it as badly as people who would like to be professionals.

Writers Aloud

RLF outro: That was an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast, produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund. The writers featured in this episode were Nigel Cliff, Doug Johnstone, Cynan Jones, Catherine Czerkawska, Caroline Moorehead, Lorna Thorpe, Jan Marsh, Meaghan Delahunt, Jeremy Seal, Helena Attlee, Kevin Clancy, Ian McMillan, and Michael Bywater.

You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 440, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 441, Michaela Morgan speaks with Ann Morgan about becoming a reader by accident, writing for reluctant readers, using stories to unlock people, and the importance of not writing down to children.

We hope you'll join us.

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