

Writers Aloud

Episode 441

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 441 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Michaela Morgan speaks with Ann Morgan about becoming a book lover by accident, writing for reluctant readers, using stories to unlock people, and the importance of not writing down to children.

Ann Morgan: Michaela Morgan is a prolific author of fiction, nonfiction and poetry, mostly for children. With her subject matter encompassing everything from Victorian match sellers to Malala Yousafzai; and experience running workshops in settings as varied as schools and prisons, she is skilled at making complex ideas accessible and relatable to all kinds of readers. She started off by telling me where writing began for her.

Michaela Morgan: It's difficult to know when things start, isn't it? I mean, writing is one of those things that creeps up on you really. I suppose, as a child, I did like reading a lot, and I did like playing with language, but often it was spoken language: making things up, making up jokes and rhymes and telling tall tales and stories.

When I actually started writing...it's probably sort of teenage years, with those inevitable journals and diaries one keeps as an adolescent. So yeah, I think I was always short of a confidante, I think. So I used to have an

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exercise book or a journal and I would use that to sound out my ideas or to complain about things or to celebrate funny things that had happened.

So I suppose it all started with keeping a diary or a series of diaries and journals and just playing around. And little by little, it turned into writing; it was almost organic, really. So I can't really say how it happened, when it happened, or why it happened.

Ann Morgan: So it's always been with you, really?

Michaela Morgan: Always been with me. And it's actually very unlikely that it was with me, because I don't come from a booky family at all. I come from quite a large family and not one person in the household was a reader, apart from me, so I'm a freak of nature, really. I didn't come from one of those families where people read you a bedtime story or anything like that.

I never saw anybody reading a book. My mother referred to 'books' and when she did say there was a 'book', she meant a magazine, you know, the *Woman's Realm* or *Woman's World* or something, that was a 'book'. But there were no actual books in my house until we got – and I think it must have been a bargain – we got Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*, volumes one to ten, and I *really* owe Arthur Mee, whoever he might be, such a lot of gratitude because he had everything in there: myths and legends, little stories to learn French with, bits of information, and I loved those books, really. I can still see some of the pages in my mind now, and I became a reader, you know, by accident and carried on with it by getting stuff from libraries, really. So I would go to Longsight Library by myself, crossing a main road – different times in those days; nowadays, I don't think children go to libraries by themselves, especially not when they cross a major road. And I just kind of read my way through the children's section, really. And I read the books at school, even when I was in fact supposed to be doing other things. So maths is still a mystery to me because I was reading *Alice in Wonderland*.

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I became an absolutely...well, I'm not going to go 'obsessive', but 'fervent', I was a fervent reader and I was the only fervent reader I knew. So I was a bit of a weirdo, really, yeah.

Ann Morgan: But who was your first reader then, who did you first trust to look at your work?

Michaela Morgan: I don't really trust people to look at my work. Some people, they write something and they immediately want to send it to people for them to have a look at and to get their opinions and their feedback and their...I don't like that. So I write something and the first time somebody reads it is when I send it to a publisher.

Ann Morgan: Was that true right at the beginning, your first reader was a potential publisher?

Michaela Morgan: I've done a lot of books for children, which were highly illustrated, so they would have been seen by the illustrator. The illustrator would have seen them all, because I was the sort of person that works hand in glove with the illustrator, we weren't separated.

But otherwise, I didn't encourage feedback, and I didn't like it really, and I didn't like sharing my work with people. I just would send it to a publisher and even *then* it was slightly reluctantly. I wanted to get it published, I don't know why, but I did. But in those days it was by post, you put it in a brown envelope and stick it in a letterbox.

And it was a big effort for me to walk out with that envelope and to put it into a letterbox, you know; it really was. And nobody will have seen it before then or even known I was doing it. I'm a secret writer!

Ann Morgan: Yes, it's a strange thing, writing, isn't it, because I think for a lot of us it does start as quite a secret thing, something you do on your own. And unlike many of the other arts, which are collaborative,

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you don't have to work with anyone in order to write a story or a poem. And so it can be quite late in the day that you actually start to share your work. And that can be a very strange, exposing sort of process, can't it?

Michaela Morgan: Yes it can. And sometimes, especially...I've done some picture books where they've got to be minimal text and maximum illustrations, and sometimes they want edits after the story is written and I find it very hard. I really do, because I've weighed every word, you know, I've chosen everything *really* carefully and they suddenly want to take something out and I can feel the rhythm going and the voice going, and I'm not a happy person when I'm being edited really, I'm a grumpy.

Ann Morgan: A reluctant editee.

Michaela Morgan: Oh yeah, yeah, very reluctant, yeah.

Ann Morgan: Now you say you've written a lot of titles for children, that's somewhat of an understatement because you have, well, in the region of two hundred titles: fiction, nonfiction and poetry to your name, which is an extraordinary number of books. How do you manage to be so prolific, what's your process like?

Michaela Morgan: Every day I work, I'm not one of...I'm not a person that has to sort of wind myself up and combat a lot of reluctance and writer's block or anything. I do something every day, it's just like eating or sleep. Well, I'm not very good at sleeping, so that's not a very good example.

But it's something I have to do, really. Fortunately for me, the market for children's books is quite a hungry market, you know. They're always wanting new things, especially in the part of children's books that is devoted to education, that's a very hungry market. And once you get into the world of education, you start providing things to educational publishers, they will always be asking you for something else.

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And I will always say ‘Yes’. ‘I’m just a girl that can’t say no’, as they sing, that’s...is it Doris Day or somebody sings that?

Ann Morgan: I think you’re right. Yes.

Michaela Morgan: They ask me to do something and I immediately think, *Oh, I don’t know if I could do that!* And then my mind gets chewing it over and I start finding a way of doing it and then I’m caught, aren’t I? Then I’ve got to do it.

Ann Morgan: Now, one story that’s captured your imagination, and you’ve in fact done two, I think two, if not more books about, is the Walter Tull story. Now, Walter Tull, being in Folkestone, he’s something of a local hero here, because he was born here. And you started working on his story nearly twenty years ago now didn’t you? Before he was as well known as he is now.

Michaela Morgan: He wasn’t known at all, he really wasn’t known at all.

Ann Morgan: What drew you to him, can you tell us a bit about him and why his story attracted you?

Michaela Morgan: Yes, I did quite a bit of work for a publisher called Barrington Stoke. They publish books for people who don’t really want books, right? So, reluctant readers or children who might be dyslexic or, you know, and I, I love that audience. I love to make books for people who don’t think they like books, you know? That’s my happy space; I like to do poems for people who think poetry is rubbish and I like to get them to love it, you know.

So I’m always...I was very keen to do things for Barrington Stoke. I can imagine the people reading the books, I really know who I’m writing for when I’m writing, I can feel them there, really. And I wanted to get a story for the sort of...it was typically a boy, although girls also like the

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Walter Tull story, but I was thinking of the typical boys that think books aren't interesting, and really all they want to do is kick a ball round the playground.

So I thought, *Let's do something about football*, you know, and I kept a sort of ear out, an eye out, for stories about football. And then I was on a bus in Manchester and I picked up one of their free newspapers and it had a very, very small article, it was about three lines: and it said there was an exhibition in the Imperial War Museum, the Manchester Imperial War Museum, and it was an exhibition of sporting and war heroes, so sporting heroes who were also war heroes.

So I went and had a look, and there I found a photograph of Walter Tull and a postcard that he'd written in his own handwriting, in pencil. And there wasn't a lot of information about him, but the photograph of him standing there looking so proud and almost defiant, you know, I thought *This is an interesting character* and I read the little bit that was already known about him, and it was very little.

There was a book written for adults by somebody called Phil Vasili, and he wrote a good book about Walter Tull, but it was targeted at people who wanted lots of detail, were grown up and knew everything about history and football, whereas my audience were not going to be the same sort of reader at all.

So I found out what I could, and I discovered that he was of mixed race, that he was orphaned very early on, that he was separated from his family and sent to be brought up in a children's home with his brother. And then his brother was taken away and adopted and Walter was left alone. And Walter discovered his talent – I love it when somebody finds their talent, you know? – and he was actually a good cricketer as well as a good footballer. But he was spotted, scouted and became a player in an amateur team and then spotted again and became the first black British professional footballer. He played for Tottenham Hotspur, the Spurs, and he was doing really well.

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Ann Morgan: And this was over a hundred years ago, wasn't it?

Michaela Morgan: A hundred years ago. And he's the first recorded example of racism, racial abuse on the pitch, because he did an away match where he suffered a lot of abuse, and it affected him. And he recovered and he became a great footballer but his career was brought short because in 1914 war broke out and he joined the army, and he became the first black British officer.

And I thought *There's a boy who's gone through hell and stayed strong and he's become a professional footballer, star, and then an officer and fought at the Somme — twice!* I mean, his story was almost impossible to believe, and it was incredible, but what was even more incredible was that nobody knew it, he was the unknown hero.

And I thought, *Well, I'm going to tell his story.* So I did, years and years ago, and it's never been out of print. It's constantly reissued in a new format, I've done it in two different ways now: once as a story, and once as a nonfiction book: I've done it like a scrapbook in the nonfiction way, so it's got his photos stuck in and real documents and the actual telegram that was sent to announce his death.

And, yeah, I'm really pleased with Walter Tull because it's *loved* by everybody that reads it. Mostly because of him, because of his character, and it appeals to readers of all sorts. So, you know, really booky kids read it because it's a nice quick read for them. Grown ups read it because they're entranced by the story.

Those who struggle with reading read it. Those who are really don't see themselves as readers, read it. So it's very big in units, you know, specially devoted to children who are no longer at school for one reason or another, or who don't read. And I get reviews from these kids saying, *I don't read, but I've read this, thank you.*

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And it got voted in prison...in Perth Prison in Scotland, I read about it in the newspaper: they did a competition in Perth Prison to find out which was the most popular book in the library in Perth prison, and it was Walter Tull by Michaela Morgan!

Ann Morgan: How amazing!

Michaela Morgan: I know, I beat, what's the person who did *The Da Vinci Code*... Dan Brown, I beat Jeffrey Archer, I was very pleased about that. All sorts of marvellous popular writers were reduced to second and third and fourth because Walter Tull their...took pride of place. And I don't think...it's partly the way I told it – I did tell it well – but it's mostly the man's life himself, you know, he was a remarkable and wonderful person.

Ann Morgan: But I think it is also your writing actually, because something that is very striking in your work, both in that book and in other poems and stories you've written, is your directness. You don't shy away from very difficult issues, even writing for children.

I mean, obviously Walter Tull's life, as you say, had a number of very difficult things in it: racism, the First World War, Battle of the Somme. But you've also covered a whole range of quite difficult topics. Everything from the phossy jaw that Victorian match sellers used to get, to US politics with Hillary Clinton and Malala's attempted assassination.

And you don't shy away from the hard truths about these things. In fact, you often say to your reader: *Can you imagine what it would have been like? Put yourself there, think about that, 35,000 men killed*, you know, how do you get that balance, what makes you...I mean, a lot of people would shy away from being so open with children about these difficult things. Why do you think it's important not to do that?

Michaela Morgan: I don't know the absolute answer to that. But I don't think of children as being that different to me, or I don't think of myself

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as being that different to them. So I don't sort of write down for them, really. One of the poems I've done is called 'My First Day at School', and it's about Ruby Bridges, who at the age of six was the first little black girl to go to a non-segregated school in America.

And who, on her walk to school, had to walk through crowds of people shouting abuse and insults at her, right. And when she got to school, found that nobody else had stayed in the school, so she was the only pupil in her class. But I find children inspirational, actually. Ruby is inspirational, because of what she did in her life.

But also when I read that poem in schools I'm inspired by the children. Because often they start off...if you're starting with older children, they're often *slumped* somewhat. You know, their legs are all over the place and they've got their arms folded and they've got that look that says, *Go on then, impress me*. And sometimes I'm tempted to go comedic for them because I've got some funny, light-hearted, all join in, sort of poems, and I enjoy them.

But sometimes I look at them and I think, I'll try Walter Tull's story or Ruby Bridge's story. And that happened recently in London. I had a fairly disengaged bunch of kids, and I started off with that 'My First Day at School' poem. Quite a brave decision on my part, I have to say, because it's easier to go for the laugh, really.

But to see them get caught up by the story, their faces tilting, their shoulders going back, their posture changing, and them focusing completely on the life of this child, and them understanding something. I just feel really privileged to be able to do that, really, and I think I identify very strongly with my audience, so *that's* how I get across to them. I think that's how it is really.

Ann Morgan: I mean, that...what you say about being inspired by children is really interesting because the dedication to the poetry collection that

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you did with Liz Brownlee and Jan Dean: they both dedicate it to people, but you dedicate it to ‘the stars as yet unseen, shine on’.

And there’s a real sense of, that you’re really open to other people’s potential.

Michaela Morgan: Yes.

Ann Morgan: As you said, you love when people discover their talent, when Walter Tull discovered his talent and I think that’s really clear, that comes across really clearly in your work. And another thing that I really enjoy about your work is how much you enjoy playing with stereotypes and subverting expectations.

I mean in that collection there are several poems that you’ve written that actually take long-established nursery rhymes and things, and turn them on their heads, ‘Sugar and Spice’, for example, and ‘Girls of the Week’, where you take that ‘Monday’s Child’ poem and rewrite it with girls in mind, and actually sort of twist the ending about. What is it about that that you enjoy?

Michaela Morgan: About twisting well known..?

Ann Morgan: Yeah, subverting those stereotypes and playing with accepted ideas I suppose, or things that maybe we don’t even question because they’re just so much part of the furniture.

Michaela Morgan: I think it’s my early childhood, as I say, it wasn’t a book-rich environment, but it was a lot of wordplay and making fun of things and making jokes and making up stories. I think there’s a bit of that in it. And you’re quite right, the dedication for *Reaching the Stars*, I dedicate it really to the people reading the book.

Ann Morgan: Yes, exactly.

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Michaela Morgan: Yeah, because I'm very aware of the person reading the book and what a difference a poem or a story or something to imagine, can make to the person reading the book because that's what happened to me.

Somehow I found a book, I really don't know how, and it made *all* the difference. So I know that writing, reading, books, poetry, stories are keys to *unlock* people. I'm aware of that and I use any means to unlock, and one means is to go for what they already know and to sort of use that as the basis to build on.

So with the nursery rhymes, for instance, I did work for a long time in prisons, and people, especially grown-up people, and these were men, grown-up men, not young, you know, they were lifers, so they'd had a life. It's quite a lot to ask somebody to write but if you give them something as a springboard to start off from, they can write about it, so I used to use nursery rhymes with prisoners.

So I got 'Humpty Dumpty' from one of them it goes like this: 'Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, / he fell off and cracked up after all. / All the psychiatrists, psychologists too, / sectioned him off under the Mental Health Act Subsection 2.

You know, it's great, isn't it? And there's another one about...which somebody started off doing a nursery rhyme and ended up writing about what it was like to be homeless. So I'm using things really as like springboards to give people a start, really.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. And you also write quite a lot about traditional feminine stereotypes and again, tackle those. A lot about the fashion of previous periods: stays and corsets. And you do that in a really powerful way, I mean, something again, that I think is a real strength in your writing is how you make those quite distant periods and experiences very present for your reader.

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What is it about, about writing about history that you enjoy?

Michaela Morgan: I find history is a bit big really, it's a bit big for us all to understand. So the First World War, for instance, it's impossible for anyone to understand it really, it's too huge. The numbers that died are too enormous. So I like to hone in on one person's story, really or one person's experience.

So that's what the Walter Tull story did, it dealt with, human dilemmas and war, but one person's experience of it. And the same with those poems in *Reaching the Stars*, I nearly always go for one person's experience. I don't write about segregation, I write about Ruby Bridges, you know. I suppose it comes naturally to me to make a story personal, rather than big.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. So those details are something that you can clutch onto and build something around and feel quite present?

Michaela Morgan: Yeah.

Ann Morgan: Very powerful. And what advice would you give to someone who might want to write for children? Are there any tips or tricks of the trade that you would share?

Michaela Morgan: Yeah, well first of all I would say, don't think it's the easy option, because people do, they think, *I tell you what, I've got twenty minutes free, I'll write a children's book*, you know.

Ann Morgan: They're very short.

Michaela Morgan: Because there are so many celebrity children's books around by people who aren't devoted writers, it looks as if anybody can do one. Although most of those are ghostwritten, I have to tell you, because I've done some of them myself. I am some famous people, but I can't say who.

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But I think we should never imagine that children's...that work for children is less important than work for taller people. Children are an important audience and a valued audience and not an audience to be talked down to or taken lightly, really. And to write a good children's book, I think, is really something, because it can live for a long, long time.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely.

Michaela Morgan: We know that we at the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship are partly financed by *Winnie the Pooh*.

Ann Morgan: Yes, indeed.

Michaela Morgan: Who's still popular all these years later, you know. Peter Pan subsidises the Great Ormond Street Hospital. So a good children's book will tap into kind of universal and eternal things, really, it won't be limited by time and age or geography or fashion, it will carry on.

So if you want to write a children's book, don't belittle your audience or patronise your audience, or think they're not important because they're small; or think that children's books are somehow much easier than anything else. Respect children, respect your own writing, respect children's books and put in them as near as you can get to the truth.

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RLF outro: That was Michaela Morgan in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Michaela on her website, michaelamorgan.com. And that concludes episode 441, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 442, Alan Jenkins speaks with John Greening about winning the Forward Prize, the moment he knew he would spend his life writing poetry, and the role of loss and death in his work.

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