

Writers Aloud

Episode 443

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 443 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Jamie Lee Searle tells Ann Morgan about unpicking books layer by layer, overcoming the fear of writing, and the practicalities of the creative life.

Ann Morgan: Jamie Lee Searle is a translator from German and Portuguese into English, with publications including Anna Kim's *The Great Homecoming* and Joachim B. Schmidt's *Kalmann*. A co-founder of the Emerging Translators Network and a mentor of early career practitioners, she has also been developing her own creative-writing practice in recent years.

She started off by telling me how she got into translating.

Jamie Lee Searle: After I finished my German BA, I worked for Reuters for a while, translating updates from the stock exchanges, so for Germany, Austria and Switzerland. And I really loved the process of translation, just not so much the subject matter, very much about stocks and shares and so on.

It was around that time I just felt myself being pulled in a more creative direction. I did some research and discovered a publication called *New Books in German*, that promotes German language contemporary writing to publishers in the US and the UK. And I wrote a letter to the editor who

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was incredibly kind in her response and gave me the opportunity to write a review for them.

And then I moved to London around about that time and did a Masters in Anglo-German cultural relations, which had a translation module. And through the link with *New Books in German* and just through being where everything was happening publishing-wise, I started doing sample translations for publishers and just started to realise that this was something I really loved.

So initially I was quite keen on pursuing a career in diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and the translation was more of a stopgap. But once I realised how creative it was and how enjoyable, I then started pursuing it more intentionally, really.

Ann Morgan: Fantastic. Now, you translate from German and Portuguese, language skills are not actually that easy to come by when you live in the UK. There have been a number of frightening reports and pronouncements in the last decade or so about how difficult it is for English speakers to acquire a reasonable level of competence in other languages. How did you come to speak such good German and Portuguese? How was it possible for you to use your languages in this way?

Jamie Lee Searle: Very different stories for each of them; with my German, I started doing it at school, and I had an incredible teacher, she was very inspiring. And I think that's often what makes the difference, because I did study French at the same time, but just didn't click with it in the same way.

And so the German, that led to German A levels, led to university, and so on, and lots of trips across to Germany, like German exchanges, that kind of thing. So it was very much studying academically, forming a connection with the country. Then I started spending lots of time in Berlin, because I've got quite a few friends there, so I would regularly go over, maybe a few times a year and to book fairs around Germany and so on.

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With Portuguese, it was actually an unexpected life change. I was spending time in South America because I had gotten into Spanish mostly through having a love for salsa dancing when I lived in London. So I listened to a lot of Spanish language music then and decided I wanted to try and improve my Spanish to the point where I could translate from that as well.

So I was over in Buenos Aires doing Spanish school in the mornings and my German translations in the afternoon. And then I met a Brazilian at my Spanish school and we fell in love and I moved to Brazil with him. And so that's how the Portuguese happened essentially, just being thrown in at the deep end. And I was only...I was there about five years, but I was very immersed in the local culture.

Ann Morgan: Wow. Gosh, in the pursuit of one language, you end up acquiring another.

Jamie Lee Searle: Yeah, the unexpected turns that life takes!

Ann Morgan: Fascinating, yeah. Now a lot of people when they talk about translation will use all kinds of imagery to try to convey what it involves: people talk about ventriloquism or acting, there's the babel fish metaphor. When I was writing about it I came up with the idea that it was like reading with another person's eyes, almost borrowing another person's eyes to read. I was wondering, is there a particular way that you think about it when you're...how would you explain it?

Jamie Lee Searle: In terms of visual imagery, I think I see it quite similarly to how I've always envisaged the process of learning a language. For me, that was when I first started with German, so I'd have been about eleven, I remember looking at pages of the language and initially it felt like this tangle of threads that I couldn't really...I could spot the odd word amongst them that I understood, but overall the page felt quite impenetrable.

But over time, as I started to understand more of them, it just felt like they

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settled into place and I could find my way through it more easily. It feels similar to me with the process of translation: that a book initially when I start translating it, it feels like there are so many different layers and threads that I need to gradually unpick.

And every time I think I'm there and I've got to the...I don't know, the deepest layer or something, I then realize there's even more. So, I think both in terms of language acquisition and translating, I see it as something that initially looks like a tangle or a thicket or something like that, that I just need to keep working away at until things...until you can see a way through it.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, a tangle, a tangle of threads, it's a really interesting way of talking about it. Because actually a lot of translators who I've spoken to will think about...will talk about it in terms of what they're doing for the reader.

But actually, for you it sounds like a much more internal...you know, almost like writing itself, you're finding your way to the story, to the finished product. Or is it, your reading is developing alongside the writing of it?

Jamie Lee Searle: Mmm. Yeah, I think so. Because we, as translators they often say that we end up being the closest reader because the amount of times you read through something and then you're finding these new layers to it.

I do think about the reader, particularly with the...once I get to the stages of the edits where I try and put the original out of my mind and try and think: *If I hadn't seen that, how would I respond to this text in its own right?* So that's the stage where I'm thinking more about the final reader, but I think in the earlier stages it is perhaps more internalised in terms of my finding my way through it.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I know you're a big fan of residencies and really

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immersing yourself in a text. Why do you think it's so important to be so submerged, so saturated with the author's voice in that way.

Jamie Lee Searle: I think it depends on the project, so I've had some where that felt much more necessary than others. One particular one that I did, it was published in early 2020, actually, it was published in the first week of lockdown, which wasn't ideal timing. It was called *The Great Homecoming* by an Austrian author called Anna Kim.

And I was very much immersed in that one for, I would say, a good year and a half at least, maybe two years before. And it was set in the Korean peninsula around about the time of the Korean War and the subsequent decades. And that was very much a subject matter that through translating German I hadn't come across before in anything more than a superficial way. So it was educating myself about Korean culture, finding out this background information about the war...there was so much to it that I really felt I needed to go away and just surround myself with it. I did a residency with the author, which was invaluable in terms of her sharing her experiences of Korean culture in a way that informed the translation for me. But also when I got to the editing stage, I did, I think, about five weeks in Vienna where I just rented this little flat.

Actually, I got a bursary from the Austrian Cultural Literary Foundation over there, but I barely saw anyone. I think it was February, it was freezing cold, it was just me and the book for weeks on end, and it was full on, but I think I needed it in a way because it would have been a very difficult book to do other things alongside. But equally I've had others where something's a bit more light-hearted, and then I can do that alongside other things in ordinary life.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, I mean, *The Great Homecoming* is an extraordinary book, isn't it? I really loved reading your translation of it. And I'm a big admirer of Anna Kim's work, in fact, she was my Austrian author back during my year of *Reading the World* project.

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Jamie Lee Searle: Oh, okay. That's amazing.

Ann Morgan: I interviewed her briefly over email for the book that I wrote subsequently, and she's a fascinating writer because both in that book, but also in the book that I read back in 2012, *Frozen Time*, translated by Michael Mitchell, she tells the sort of the backside of history in her work. She explores the stories that we don't comfortably...we tend to brush over or the sides of narratives that maybe don't fit with our image of how the world is: good and evil, bad.... What's so fascinating about *The Great Homecoming*, I thought was, it really complicates and muddies the rather polar story we have about North and South Korea and it's so problematic and subtle in that.

And to get a grasp on all the threads, because it's so much history that is so little discussed I think in the English-speaking world, it must have been a huge challenge, and to make it readable and immersive in the way that you do, it's really impressive.

Jamie Lee Searle: Thank you, I'm really glad you enjoyed it. There were definitely times where I did start to tear my hair out a little bit, just at the amount of layers there were, but in the end I felt...I felt pleased with it in the end, so that's really good to hear.

Ann Morgan: Fantastic. Now you talked there about working, doing a residency with Anna Kim, do you often work very closely with writers? I'm sure it must vary between projects, but what's your preferred way of working with writers, if you have a choice?

Jamie Lee Searle: I always like to have contact with them if they're open to doing that and if there are questions there. I think particularly with that kind of book, it was really necessary. I've had others where there's just maybe a few questions, but it's just really nice to be in touch anyway. I did a work by a Swiss writer who now lives in Iceland, a novel called, *Kalmann*.

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And it was one of the most enjoyable projects I've worked on; it was just a really quirky narrator. And the author was so helpful in terms of...there's certain elements in there about the Icelandic landscape, and it being a lockdown year, I couldn't at that time go unfortunately to Iceland myself and check things out. So I was very much dependent on asking him for those cultural details.

But that was a really enjoyable collaboration in terms of being in contact. Yeah, I think it's always nice to be in touch just because authors put so much work into these novels. And even if you don't have many questions, I just think as a translator, it is nice to establish that relationship because you are spending a significant period of time, six months perhaps or more, immersed in their work.

So having that personal connection as well, I find it really rewarding.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, and *Kalmann* is, you described it on your website as *Forrest Gump* meets *Fargo*, which is very intriguing. Translating humour is often held up as one of the most tricky things to do, how do you go about trying to carry humour across, and were there any particular challenges in terms of capturing the tone of that humour in the work?

Jamie Lee Searle: With *Kalmann*, it actually felt...it was quite swift getting into the narrator's voice, which surprised me because it isn't the kind of voice I've translated before. But there was something that was just so charming and...yeah, just charming and quirky about it that I actually felt like I'd found the voice quite quickly, in a way that just meant I could relax into the project and just really enjoyed it. The whole process was a real joy and I don't remember there being anything particular, it's just so well written.

And I think perhaps the elements of humour were more about the delivery rather than any particular wordplay that might have been complicated linguistically. So that felt quite a smooth process really. There was a novel

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I did probably a few years before that, that was very much, kind of a dark humour, which was more wordplay based and I needed to do quite a lot of intense thinking with how to convey things there. But again, I find those kind of creative challenges really enjoyable. But yeah, translating humour definitely isn't the easiest of things.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, now I know that for the last few years you've been writing, doing your own writing as well. I was wondering...it's something that often surprises me that more translators don't also write because I know many of our most famous writers in the world were translators: Borges, Goethe, many of the biggest, most internationally renowned writers are translated between multiple languages and it seems to me a kind of natural fit that if you're channelling other people's work in that way you would develop your own practice.

It was relatively...in your late thirties that you picked up your pen and decided to try your own work. What do you think stopped you doing it sooner? As a child, I think you said that you had been writing but what was it that stopped you and how did you get past that?

Jamie Lee Searle: I've asked myself this a lot over recent years, in terms of what created the shift. I did love writing when I was a child, but I would say I stopped even by my early teens or so, I was reading constantly, I think once I got into languages, so when I started learning German at eleven, I just became obsessed by languages and other countries and my plans for discovering them all and so on.

And I think once I started publishing translations...I knew a lot of other translators who did write and it's a question that translators are asked a lot. I remember I used to get annoyed and think, *Well, no, this is enough what I'm doing, why would I also have to write?* And I wonder now whether part of that was that I wanted to, but was afraid to. And I was kind of pushing that down and then kind of bristling at it when people asked me the question.

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And I don't feel by any means that everybody, that every translator, feels the urge or is suppressing an urge to do it, but in my case, I think that I may have been. And I think in terms of the shift of when that started to happen, so yeah, I think I was probably maybe about thirty-seven, thirty-eight, when I started writing my own stuff again?

And it was I think, predominantly the experiences I had living in Brazil, because that led to me journalling again for the first time since I was in my early teens. And the journalling just gradually evolved, more fictional fragments came in and it got to the point where I really realised that I wanted to try and write.

But I felt very afraid that I didn't have the imagination for it. I felt that the creativity was there because I know how I approach my translations, but I thought in terms of actually creating a plot, all of that kind of thing, I felt very daunted by it. But in the end the fear of not trying it became greater than the fear of giving it a go.

And then once I started it was just this incredible feeling of being in flow, I guess, of something else taking over my mind and just feeling like I would just be swept away with this. And I know it's not always like that when we're writing, that there's lots of frustrating moments...

Ann Morgan: I'm glad you said that.

Jamie Lee Searle: ...but the knowledge that...I think, you know, there was a little bit of beginner's luck there in the first story I wrote, I felt like I was in the flow for most of it, and it's only after that, writing subsequent stories, and working on my novel in progress, that I started to realise that there are many, many hours where I would just stare in frustration, but it just felt worth it for those moments.

Ann Morgan: Well, translating is more than simply converting a text from one language to another, isn't it? It involves, increasingly these days,

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I think, a great deal of other things: activism, networking, being part of other organisations. And I know that quite often translators, and that you too, are instrumental in bringing works across from other languages, by doing samples and sometimes by advocating for texts with publishers, and trying to find homes for them.

There've been a couple, in fact, there's been a project that's, that's been a success in this area for you, isn't there? *Blutbuch*, how did that happen and what did it involve to get that in English home?

Jamie Lee Searle: So *Blutbuch* is a debut novel by the Swiss writer Kim de l'Horizon, and in 2022 it won the German and Swiss book prizes which is really incredible. And it's a really incredible novel that looks at identity and those kind of intangible things that we inherit, so kind of things we carry from family: genders, stories, inherited trauma and so on, exploration of language.

The narrator's gender-fluid, and when I was asked to do the sample by the German publisher, I looked at the extract of the text and I thought, I have *no* idea how I can do this justice, because it's going to be in a huge creative challenge, but I felt incapable of saying no, because I just thought, why am I doing this, you know, why am I a translator if I don't do these things that excite me? So I said yes without knowing how to solve all of these issues in it.

And it's probably the most fun I've had translating since I started, it pushed me and challenged me. And then I had a feeling it was going to do really well, the original text. And then seeing it get nominated and win those awards, obviously very, very happy for the author.

And I started promoting it to publishers here, but by the time I'd even started that really, it picked up its own momentum through the prizes and the American publishers who bought it got in touch with me and asked if I would like to do the whole project, which obviously I jumped at.

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But that is, like you said, it's such a big part of it. It's not just doing the translations, it's being in touch with the German publishers or Austrian or Swiss publishers and having those relationships really. So *New Books in German* that I mentioned earlier do such an amazing job of bringing together translators, the English language publishers, the German language publishers, and it's everything working together really, because I don't think a publisher will ever take something on just based on one person's endorsement or opinion. But it's when you've got a network of people that are working towards the same goal, and I really wanted to see this book brought into English and for the author's voice to reach other readers. And I very much wanted to be the person to do that as the translator. But even if it hadn't have been me, I would really have wanted to see it come over here.

So there's a huge amount to it, I would say translating itself is probably a few hours a day, the rest of it is connecting with people. And I love that about it, because I find I need the balance in my work that just translating or just being me in the computer day after day, I would find too isolating. So it's the conversations with other people, it's going to the book fairs and events and working on things together that makes it all exciting.

Ann Morgan: And part of that is mentoring, isn't it, you mentor a number of other translators. What does that involve?

Jamie Lee Searle: I started offering mentoring at the beginning of 2020, when I had a writing residency postponed due to the pandemic. And it was something I'd been thinking about doing for about a year before that. I had really benefitted from mentoring at the start of my career.

So the British Centre for Literary Translation and the Translators Association had a mentoring scheme, which is now...there's now the British Centre for Literary Translation together with s, the National Centre for Writing. So my mentor was Lynn Marvin, and we worked on a particular text together, but she also just gave me a lot of guidance and tips about starting a freelance literary translation career in general.

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And I just think that that's the thing, it's not just about having somebody there who can critique a translation for you and give you encouragement in terms of how you're approaching it from a linguistic / stylistic point of view. It's very much about the whole world of literary translation. And if you want to start doing that as a career or part of a career, I think it can feel very, very confusing from the outside.

And when I started doing it...I mean, when I moved to London for my MA, I had no contacts whatsoever in the publishing world. So it was very much just trying to meet as many people as I could. I did lots of internships back then, asked lots of questions. So what I try to offer with the mentoring, it's helping people to figure out what kind of working life suits them as a person. Because we're all so different, we all have different personalities, different work rhythms, different ambitions, and there's no one size fits all with it.

So I like to try and help people figure out: what their ideal working day would be, how much of that would be translating, what do they want to balance it with. And then, using that as a foundation, then kind of offering tips. So for example, a lot of people, early career translators, get quite disheartened when they spend a lot of time on pitches, so pitching books to publishers that may not be taken up.

Because pitching is kind of a needle in a haystack thing, really. I have on occasion pitched things, but very rarely over a course of fifteen years. And what I find more rewarding is building relationships with German language publishers and doing samples for them.

Because that way you're getting the experience, you're doing the work, you're getting paid for it, and it can sometimes, hopefully, lead to a commission to do the whole book.

Ann Morgan: That's really practical though, because I think this is something that I often...when I've mentored other writers, this practical

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side is, is something that's often overlooked, I think, and actually, similar to you, what I often tell people is, it's important to be honest with yourself about what you need.

So, people need different levels of stability, they need different rhythms, some people are completely comfortable with the idea of not knowing what money is coming into your bank account from one month to the next, others need to have a regular base level of income and that's okay, and you can find a way to do that.

But, you know, it's kind of being honest with yourself about what you need rather than cleaving to this romantic image of what the creative life involves isn't it? I think that's really important to be practical and sort of honest with yourself in that way.

Jamie Lee Searle: Yeah, and it's an ongoing process, really, because what suits you at a particular time may not suit you in three, four years time. So I find I've needed to constantly shift the way I construct my working life in order to make sure it's still working for me in a way.

The other nice thing with mentoring is that when I work with somebody for a while and get to know them and their work, it then means that if a publisher approaches me for a project that I don't have the capacity to do, I then have the confidence to recommend somebody that I've been working with, knowing that they will do a good job. But also feeling that I'm helping pass work to other people, so that's been a nice thing about it as well.

Ann Morgan: What is it about translating that you love and that makes it the thing that you enjoy spending so much of your time on?

Jamie Lee Searle: I think initially it was my awareness that there were so many incredible German language books, and books in other languages therefore too, that weren't reaching English language readers.

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So I felt that I wanted to play a role, however small, in helping to bring more into English. And then I think once I actually started doing it...it's the capacity for *learning*, I think, about the world, because I've learnt so many things that I probably wouldn't have encountered if I were doing something different.

Just, you know, each book has this whole new world in it. It just constantly surprises me, I think, and I like that surprise element.

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RLF outro: That was Jamie Lee Searle in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Jamie on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 443, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 444, in 'How I Write', we hear from Royal Literary Fund fellows about their favourite places to work, taking in everywhere from garden sheds, libraries and cafés, to trains and foreign hotel rooms.

We hope you'll join us.

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