Writers Aloud

Episode 444

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 444 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the fourth in a series on the theme, 'How I Write', we hear from Royal Literary Fund fellows about their favourite places to work.

Virginia Woolf claimed that for a woman to be able to write fiction, she must have 'a room of her own' and five hundred pounds a year. But is a writing room always necessary for producing a book? In this episode on the theme 'How I Write', we talk to Royal Literary Fund fellows about their preferred writing locations.

Writing sheds have long been fashionable, with famous authors such as Joanne Harris even sharing descriptions of their garden hideaways on social media. Shahrukh Hussain can certainly understand the attraction.

Shahrukh Hussain: I have, after years of fantasising about it, a study in my garden, in my little mid-terraced garden, which was sold under the very grand title of 'garden studio'. And it's a kind of studio because it has windows and they open and it has glass doors and so on.

And I've had shelves put in it and it's got internet and heating and lighting, and it just really does feel like a little cottage in the forest. Especially in summer when all the plants grow over it and there's a wonderful rose bush that has rather tender stems, so they fall across the front and it looks quite picturesque.

So walking into it in the morning is very inspiring, it's really lovely. All the books that I happen to be working on at the time are on shelves there for me to reach into, and I just can pretty much get going as soon as I get in there.

I can be peripatetic, sometimes I outgrow the space for what I'm doing: so if I'm doing a screenplay or a TV thing or something that needs a lot of notes and a lot of different sections, then I spread out large sheets of A3 on the dining table and colonise that, so I suppose peripatetic, but within my sphere.

What it has done is made me quite reclusive, so I rarely feel the necessity to go out anywhere. I do my shopping online, so I save myself lots of writing time and, yeah, it's pretty idyllic.

RLF: Julian Turner, meanwhile, prefers to retreat to his basement for his writing activities.

Julian Turner: I go into my hibernaculum to write. I have a study which is in the basement of the house, which I personally chose when I came to visit the house many years ago, and imagined to be my study. It is a wonderful place in which to sit and think. There is a cellar window, which is usually mucky, but through which the beams of light come in if the day's sunny, and they come through fronds of ferns or bracken, which have grown up randomly in the well in front of the window.

There is a stove; when I light in winter, on winter days, I can turn the room into an extremely comfortable and warm place. There are pools of light from lamps, where in the darkness, the dimness of the gloom of the underground room, the little pools of light from the lamps around the room act as little worlds or micro environments in which the imagination can exist.

My reference books are all around the walls: there are dictionaries of all

sorts of things. Lots and lots of reference books that are concerned with words, the use of words in English. There's all the poetry books that I have, which is quite a large collection now, on one wall, the whole wall is covered with them.

And I go there often, to find a poem or find a phrase that I have remembered and which I want to use as one of my reference points if I'm writing a poem.

RLF: for Martina Evans, the rigidity of sitting at a desk in a particular room feels oppressive and has led her to seek out comfort.

Martina Evans: I like to write in bed and writing for me is very close to dreaming and reading. For some reason, I was incapable of writing a novel in bed, I had to get up and sit up and tie myself to the chair, and maybe that's the reason it was so difficult. But poems are very close to dreams and they always seem to be wrapped up in my reading.

So I'm reading in bed and the bed just gets covered in books. And I'm drinking coffee; I'm maybe drinking wine, lots of eating, cats. So there's this, I don't know...and I always feel like the bed is a kind of a ship. And it goes back to my mother again, because my mother was very busy. But the great place to be with my mother was, she liked to have a lie down.

She had very bad legs, varicose veins. And now I think about it, I think how hard it must have been for her after ten children, and how much pain she must have been in. But she loved to get into bed, and in bed was where she told stories, sang songs, she had an orange lamp, I now have an orange lamp glowing beside my bed.

RLF: Eleanor Drysdale found a similar solution by a process of elimination.

Eleanor Drysdale: I have tried every room in my house, and I'm like Goldilocks, the first one was too big, and the next one was too small.

Then the next room was too dark and the one after that was too light, and each time there's something wrong. And so I have now decided that my favourite place is my bed.

And thanks to the laptop, that is where I really like to write. And I wake up in the morning and the first thing I do is I reach for my laptop, open it up, and carry on. And then I suddenly look at my watch and by now it's half past ten, and somebody's ringing on the doorbell with a delivery, and I'm still in my nightie, in bed.

And that's...it's very bad for the neck and shoulders, of course, and I do suffer from that, but I like it. I'm joined by my cat and my dog and sometimes a daughter and sometimes a husband. But it seems very warm and cosy and somehow private, and so that's what I like.

RLF: For Judy Brown, it's perhaps not so much about the character of the room itself as the fact of returning to the same place to write.

Judy Brown: I'm not somebody who can sit and labour at a desk for hours and hours, but I feel it's really important that the writing always has to be there, sitting on your shoulder, always kind of at the corner of the table. So that feeling that it's always this undercurrent running under what I do, works much better for me than thinking I'm going to spend six hours every three days.

I think this comes into two opposing things about writing for me. I think routine does really help, when my routine totally breaks down…the last year I was doing a lot of travelling and I having no routine at all, and I was finding it really difficult to embed this sort of thread in every day.

Vahni Capildeo says something really interesting about routine in an interview in *Prac Crit,* and she talked really beautifully about how images seem to flow more fluently if you know that you're going to return to the same place. It's a bit like tending the same plant for days on end, and I

think that nobody could put it better, but it's just a beautiful thing to say, and absolutely true, I think.

RLF: But other writers prefer not to work at home. Mick Jackson finds that leaving the house is essential to a productive writing day.

Mick Jackson: I'm lucky enough to have my own office. In the past I've worked in libraries and other places, but I like getting out of the house, I like getting up, having my breakfast, getting my bag and leaving my house behind. I've got plenty of friends who have an office at home, but for a variety of reasons, I like to leave my home behind, have that sort of process, that shift from domestic to work. And I've got, you know, a rather lovely, spacious office with all my stuff laid out.

And I think it's quite important to me in that I've got a visual representation of where I am: so I've got a big desk, with all my bits of paper and my pencils laid out and I know my way around that, I know which draft I'm working on and what I've got to work on next. So ideally, I would get down here quite early, I like starting work early in the morning, so if I need to be, I can be down here at seven o'clock in the morning and that's fine.

RLF: For Ray French, being on the move can be a very powerful creative stimulant.

Ray French: My ideal writing situation would be if I had enough money to constantly write on trains. When I lived in London I knew a very nice couple who lived in a basement flat in Camden, and the man was a musician and the woman was a singer.

They found it very difficult to get work done in their dank and dark basement flat, so what they would do, they would scour the internet for cheap offers on trains. It wouldn't matter where they were going, the point was how long they would be on them. So a particular favourite was to get a day-return from London to Edinburgh.

He would write and she would write songs, and it was so much easier with the movement of the train through the countryside. And that's something I've always found, I absolutely adore writing on trains: that sense of movement, the gentle chugging. It's probably psychoanalysts would say, something to do with that feeling of being back in the womb, being carried warm and safely through this world, without having to make any effort.

So actually, I would quite happily spend all my writing days from morning to evening, sitting on the train and writing at my laptop, occasionally pausing to look out at the passing scenery.

RLF: Ian Duhig is also an advocate of journeys for helping the creative process. He takes his inspiration from local surrealist artist Anthony Earnshaw.

Ian Duhig: I do have a fairly fixed routine, at least as far as the mornings are concerned. It involves some kind of a journey, which may be necessary for a practical reason, but if no practical reasons exist, I'm going to take the journey anyway.

My inspiration for these came from the surrealist artist Tony Earnshaw, who lived near me, who engaged in Dérive: which I've read has its origins in the Letterist Internationals and was defined as 'an unplanned tour through an urban landscape directed entirely by the feelings evoked in the individual by their surroundings'.

More honestly, it's just an aimless bus journey, more usually, where I sit in the top deck. I do pretty much all my writing on my mobile phone nowadays, which is also my portable library due to its internet access. The artist Abram Games, who designed the early BBC logos, also liked to work on bus journeys I discovered recently, which makes me feel a little less eccentric.

But I think it has something to do with the scene changing constantly, as with every change I make to a draft, I try to look at it with completely new eyes, and physically being in a new place helps with that process. I may well continue work throughout the day or into the night, but these morning journeys are the core of a successful writing day for me.

RLF: Retreats can often be a powerful spur for getting words on the page. Fiona Shaw found herself in a kind of paradise when she spent four weeks at Hawthornden Castle in Scotland. Although, she says, she's not sure that she would want to live that life forever.

Fiona Shaw: You had all morning to write. They not only bring you your lunch, they leave it in a little wicker hamper outside your door, and it's a very Scottish style of very home-cooked, but to-the-point, lunch. We were provided with a thermos of soup, which was delicious and hot. And you could choose a sandwich.

You could say whether you wanted a cheese or a ham or a tuna sandwich. So you got cheese or ham or tuna. It was never embellished with anything like a piece of cucumber, however, and you got a piece of fruit. And it was left for you silently, so you never...I don't think I ever heard the person leave it.

So you didn't have to talk to anybody. So, this provided what might be either a completely nightmarish or a really productive environment in which to work. For me it worked really, I became really productive and for that three-week period it was my perfect work space. It was heaven because it was both, other, it was away from my normal working life, but I could make it my own, it was entirely private.

And I did escape; I used to go off walking every afternoon in the Pentland Hills, or nearly every afternoon. Along, eventually, with a couple of other writers – and that was liberating – and come back and then write again. But I think I would have gone stir crazy if that was my life, if I was one

of those people who never had to work and could write all the time, that would have not...I would go mad doing that.

RLF: Sometimes the value of retreats can depend on the other writers attending them. An experience in the US led Tim Pears to wonder whether some of his younger colleagues might be slightly intimidated by the company they found there.

Tim Pears: I once went to a writing retreat in America, I was very fortunate, in New York State. And there were about twelve of us in this place, and we all had a room, which is a bedroom and a working room, in this what felt like a kind of huge converted barn. And I was on the bottom level, and I was writing away in my notebooks.

And ten of the other writers were all younger than me, and they'd all brought their laptops with them. And I would see them sometimes through a window or open door, hunched, *hunched* over their laptops. They always reminded me of Glenn Gould hunched over the piano and I thought, *They're gonna suffer later in life.*

But at the top of the house was an American biographer called Patricia Bosworth, a redoubtable older woman who worked on...she'd actually brought her typewriter with her. And she was bashing her work out, and she never stopped. There was this incredible sound of the typewriter keys, which kind of trickled down the stairs, it was a very *virile* sound. And I thought these poor younger writers, hunched over their keypads, they'd be daunted by this.

RLF: Being removed from your daily routine and environment can yield great creative benefits. William Palmer finds hotel rooms in foreign climes can be particularly inspiring.

William Palmer: I like hotel rooms actually, not English hotel rooms, because they're always ghastly, but odd hotel rooms in France. Or at a

table at...a friend of ours has a villa, overlooking olive groves on the hills outside Florence.

That's really chi-chi, isn't it, that is, yeah. One of my favourite spots last year was to write at a table at the back of a disused garage in France with an enormous Irish wolfhound sitting patiently beside me and a supply of beer from an ancient fridge. But even the most paradisal of places, or seemingly paradisal, are not always conducive to writing anything but work of stunning banality.

In the end, I think my favourite place was the little square table in the tidy bedroom in the first house we had, with my daughter asleep, in the next bedroom, usually, thank God. And I'd write into the night there.

RLF: Pascale Petit is also a big fan of writing abroad. Paris often provides her with the necessary solitude and opportunities for interactions with the natural world.

Pascale Petit: I write in absolute solitude, so I go there alone, and I avoid meeting people. All the time I'm trying to get into this special state that does come from not seeing anyone for weeks. And it feels dangerous, mentally dangerous, just to have the company of pigeons, for example. Last summer, I was in a room over a courtyard in the Boulevard Saint Germain in Paris, and I was facing this wall that was covered with vines that would wave in the breeze, it was very hot.

And, yeah, the pigeons were my only company. And I was very fortunate one day that I went out and I went for a walk along the Seine and I came back; something told me to go back at a certain moment, and I witnessed the pigeon's first flights, the little chicks that were in the nest. It's those kind of incidents that help me write.

Incidents with the natural world help me to get into the special place that I need to be to write. I like the room to be light and airy. I switch the

internet off, especially the email, because sometimes I need to browse the web to research something, but the emails in particular. And if I do have a pause where I put it back on, I feel guilty.

But more than that, I feel that I've compromised myself, I've compromised the poem and its chance to be born, as it were.

RLF: Other writers prefer company, particularly when it comes to certain stages of the writing process. When she comes to edit, Alyson Hallett will often take herself to a café.

Alyson Hallett: I like to go out, so I'll maybe write at home, and then I like to go to a café. And where I'm living at the moment, I like to go...there's a supermarket nearby, I won't say which one, but I like going to their café, it's really down to earth, and basic. But I love to write in the morning, and then I'll get up, and I'll walk there. It's about a mile and a half across the fields, and I'll have a cup of tea, and sometimes a scone.

And I'll sit in the café and edit, surrounded by people with their shopping, and children, and old people, and all walks of life. And that of course fades away when I get into the work, but, I don't know, it helps me move into another stage of being able to see what I'm working with.

And I usually prefer really nondescript cafés, I don't particularly like working somewhere very trendy because there's too much to look at and listen to. I like to go somewhere with a Formica table and that's really basic and often quite cheap. That suits me perfectly when it comes down to the editing.

RLF: Libraries can also be fertile writing ground. Jane Draycott finds that the presence of reminders of previous greats can be a spur to productivity.

Jane Draycott: Yeah, libraries. There just aren't enough public free spaces where you can go freely, that is, not paying, but also 'freely': sort of

anonymously. You can go anonymously, sort of fly free in your head and wear clothes you hope no one will recognize you in. You just go scruffily to a library and do things very freely there. So I think libraries are wonderful, wonderful spaces.

There just aren't enough public open spaces where you can just go and do apparently nothing, they're very precious. Because I'm in Oxford quite often, and I'm lucky enough to be able to go and use the Bodleian Library, sometimes I go and sit in there under the portraits of the great writers as a way of making myself write as best as I can.

It's a sort of idiotic bar-setting for myself, that if I went and sat under the portrait of Pepys, I can't possibly write anything...you know, it's a way of stopping myself being lazy and complacent about those first drafts or the quality of what I'm producing.

RLF: For Rick Stroud, it's the company of living writers and his peers at the London Library that are most valuable in helping him get down to work.

Rick Stroud: I like to not write at home, because I find that's too difficult. I spend a lot of time, if I'm at home, looking out the window, making cheese sandwiches, doing what I think we all do, which is go around to the stationery shop to buy some drawing pins or pencils or pencil sharpeners. So I go to the London Library every day, where I'm in a milieu that is writerly.

There are a lot of professional writers in there, and we all know...I think all writers suffer from the same insecurities and worries about their work, and we all know that we all do, so we can all tease each other about that.

And what I like to do, I mean, on the absolute day to day level, is I'll spend maybe two or three hours writing anything that I can as a sort of warm-up process, and anything that I can includes writing emails or writing my diary, and I write using a lot of electronic devices: I've got an iPhone, I've

got a wonderful writing tablet called a reMarkable, and I've got an iPad, and I have a laptop, and I have a pen, a Montblanc pen, and paper.

And the most important bit of the warm up process is to write my diary, and I write that always in ink, and it ends up at about three or four sides of Moleskine and by the time I've done that I feel I'm ready to start opening the books that are part of the research and making notes on my reMarkable.

RLF: Perhaps a room of one's own isn't always necessary for writing, although I'm sure most authors wouldn't turn down the modern day equivalent of five hundred pounds a year.

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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: Shahrukh Hussain, Julian Turner, Martina Evans, Helena Drysdale, Judy Brown, Mick Jackson, Ray French, Ian Duhig, Fiona Shaw, Tim Pears, William Palmer, Pascale Petit, Alyson Hallett, Jane Draycott and Rick Stroud. You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 444, which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 445, Leslie Glaister speaks with Caroline Sanderson about the mystery of why some of her characters roar into life while others don't, pays tribute to Hilary Mantel as a friend and mentor of her work, and argues that the heart of her fiction doesn't only lie in darkness, but also in the triumph of the human spirit.

We hope you'll join us.

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