

Writers Aloud

Episode 445

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 445 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Lesley 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.

Caroline Sanderson: Lesley Glaister is the author of fifteen novels and one Young Adult novel. She's also written short stories, poetry, and drama for stage and radio. Among many accolades for her work, she received both a Somerset Maugham, and a Betty Trask award for her debut novel, *Honour Thy Father*, published in 1990.

She's also won a *Yorkshire Post* Author of the Year award in 1993 for *Limestone and Clay*, and a Jerwood Fiction Uncovered award for *Little Egypt* in 2014. Of her writing, the *Independent on Sunday* once commented, 'Glaister has the uncomfortable knack of putting her finger on things we most fear, of exposing the darkness within.'

Lesley, that's certainly my experience of reading your work, that there's a heart of darkness and a vein of the macabre and damage. So when you look back on your considerable body of work, hugely varied as it is in style and form, what do *you* recognise as its hallmarks?

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Lesley Glaister: Well, there is that, yes, but funnily enough, it's not what I ever aim at, I never start a book thinking, *How dark can I make this or where can I take this that would be uncomfortable?* I usually start with some kind of...just a sense of humanity and relationships, and the relationship between people and what's happening to them, as well as the relationship between people and how it shapes them.

But I also have a kind of vein of humour going through, a sort of dark humour, or perhaps better put as a sense of the absurd. So, while there is darkness, I can't deny that, it's not the meaning of it for me. I think what strikes me about life, and what I like to see in any kind of art really, film and music and painting and literature and poetry, is that sense that there is a dark shadow underneath everything and there's a sense of fear.

But that there's a sort of triumph of the human spirit that despite that, despite the fact that we're all going to die, and awful things are happening and particularly awful things are happening now in the world, we can still have fun; we can still laugh; and we can still make relationships; and we can still make plans. So it's a kind of interplay of the dark and the light.

Caroline Sanderson: I see that, there's a lightness of touch and it's always leavened by, as you say, humour, and some optimism I think, as well.

Lesley Glaister: Yes, well, as I say, I do think there is this sort of *triumph*, that we do it, we can do it. And we can go through all of this, all the stuff we go through, and we can laugh, and we can hope, and we can cringe, and squirm at things that are horribly on that edge between laughter and tears and horror sometimes. I think that's a place...seems to be a place, an uncomfortable place, where I feel quite comfortable being in my...not in real life, but in my imagination.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, well, thinking about how you started writing, I think you've been writing since a child. I know you were a voracious reader and you wrote in a piece for the *Guardian* that you gobbled

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books hardly noticing or quickly forgetting the titles and the names of the writers. Was there a straight line from that to you becoming a professional writer yourself?

Lesley Glaister: Well it's very hard to unpick the beginnings of that because...actually, one of my earliest memories of reading...I can remember actually learning to read, I can actually remember seeing the black marks on a page becoming words.

I learned to read before I went to school, and I can remember my mum was putting her finger along a line of words and reading them and I was just listening to her and watching them and it was almost as if they started moving and then they started to mean something. And I think from that moment I've just felt that: I *love* words!

Caroline Sanderson: It's amazing you can remember that, I wish I could remember that feeling.

Lesley Glaister: Yeah, I can't remember it very well but I can just remember a sense, I think, you know, we all have different moments, don't we, where something happens? Something significant happens, and that was one. And another one was when I was a little bit older, and I read my first chapter book, which I was very proud of, a proper book, not a picture book, a proper book with chapters, and it was called *Seven Days with Jan*, and right at the beginning of I think the first chapter, Jan, who's a little Dutch boy, is the son of a market trader, and it's Christmas Eve, and he's in the market, and there's a description of a pyramid of tangerines wrapped in rusty paper on a stall in the cold with the streetlight shining on them.

That's how I'm remembering it; it might not be exactly like that. But I can remember at that moment thinking: *I want to do this, I want to make that, I want to make people see things the way I've...*and it wasn't just seeing them, it was feeling that moment. So wanting to write and reading were one and the same for me.

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Caroline Sanderson: Intertwined? Yeah.

Lesley Glaister: And in fact, I love to read and I love to be lost in a book. So, I'm sure a lot of people who are both writers and readers will recognise that you sometimes...it's sometimes hard to get lost in a book because you're so aware of the writing. So what I really love is when I find something where I stop thinking about the writing and I'm just into it.

Caroline Sanderson: And it's the wonder of that!

Lesley Glaister: One brain has thought something and made it into black marks on a page, and then another brain is looking at those black marks on a page and making a world of it. I mean, that must be the most *extraordinary* technology *ever*, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: It's staggering, isn't it?! I don't think we...almost don't think about it...enough, you're completely immersed in something, and it's real, even though it's just being conjured by your head?

Lesley Glaister: Yes. There are a few characters in some of my books who have kind of crossed the line between memories of things in books and memories of real people. And I have to actually remind myself that that person doesn't exist. Wanda in *Easy Peasy*. I feel as if she is someone I know and she isn't, she never was.

But it is a funny...because there is a sort of membrane obviously, between all the memories that I can remember, from my life, and then all the memories I've got from my books. And then probably another membrane between memories from other people's books, but sometimes the things just...it becomes a bit permeable, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: That's indicative of how well one almost should know one's characters as a writer. You know, just as you say, you can barely remember who's real and who isn't?

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Lesley Glaister: Yeah. But it doesn't always work like that, and it's sometimes frustrating when the ones that I want to do that won't. And I don't know...I have no idea why that's the case, and I don't know why you can't force a character to become real. So what is the difference, what is it? I don't know. In fact, something I'm writing at the moment: I could *not* make the character I wanted to speak, speak; I could not make him be alive, and then I realised he was dead. And then someone else stepped into his place who took that part of the book, took that part of the story over, and just roared into life. I just find it a very mysterious process.

Caroline Sanderson: It's kind of alchemy, isn't it, but you have to get yourself into that space, I suppose, where those things can happen, or not happen.

Lesley Glaister: Yeah, or not happen!

Caroline Sanderson: Or not happen. So, I'd like to talk about your very first novel, *Honour Thy Father*, published in 1990. It's a short novel, but it packs quite a punch, almost literally, because it's domestic violence in it and murder and incest. And it centres around the lives of four sisters who live together into old age. It feels sort of in the, 'something nasty in the woodshed' sort of tradition, but as we were alluding to earlier there's a tenderness in the way that these lives have unfolded; but also just that growing regret really for lives not lived, which I feel is a recurring theme in your fiction as well. So I wondered how that, as a first novel, how it took shape in your mind?

Lesley Glaister: And it's a long time ago now, obviously, that I wrote it. But I had written two novels before, neither of which got published. But when I started writing this one — it's kind of slightly based, very, very partially based on some of my family. I hesitate to say that, given what you've just said about it!

Caroline Sanderson: Only partly based, yes!

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Lesley Glaister: And it's also based on a landscape where they used to live, which is in the Fens. Where it's incredibly flat and bleak and it's cut up by dykes, you know, water, canals; you can see for miles and yet you can't get there because it's all cut up. So there's a sense of openness and yet something about being trapped.

And it has been sea, that land, but yet it's miles from the sea now. So there's just a sense of strangeness about the landscape. And my mum's mum was called Millie, and she was one of a family and they were all called things like: Millie and Dilly and Maisie and Tilly, and they all had very similar names and there are lots of them, more than four.

And then there was one very weird brother who got into trouble, I think for stealing women's underwear off washing lines. One of the sisters killed herself, and some of the... think there were at least one, if not two, sets of twins. And it was just a very, very interesting family.

And so I just took that idea of that landscape and this big family of eccentric people living miles from anywhere, and the book spun itself really. It's the only book I've ever written where I've hardly rewritten anything. Just came out almost like a dream.

Caroline Sanderson: It definitely has that quality as you read it.

Lesley Glaister: Yeah. And then I went on an Arvon Foundation course. And I was very frightened of going, because although I'd been sending work out, I'd never really shown anyone any of my writing, and I'd never really talked about wanting to be a writer. And I felt very shy about it and also really...I was very unconfident, partly because I didn't want...I felt if somebody read it and didn't think it was good, then that was my whole reason for being, smashed.

Even though this was all quite submerged, nobody who knew me then would have known this. Anyway, I did go on this Arvon Foundation

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course and one of the tutors was Hilary Mantel and one was Claire Boylan, and it was just wonderful for me because I really made a big leap. It really changed my life, going on that course.

When we were doing exercises and then reading out, which I was *utterly* terrified of doing. I realised that actually when I was reading, people were listening and properly listening, and something was happening. And I remember Hilary and Claire looking at each other at one point when I was reading something, and I wasn't sure, you never know, quite know what anyone else is thinking. But I just felt, maybe I can, maybe it is working. And then at the end of the week Hilary said...sort of took me aside and said, 'Would you like me to introduce you to my agent'. And of course, having tried to get things published before and tried to get an agent and had no luck, I said, 'Yes — please!'

And then actually we became...Hilary and I became friends after that and she was just very, very helpful and supportive. So I have a particular fondness for *Honour Thy Father* because I feel it's where I learnt...I found my voice properly.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, wonderful story of Hilary Mantel, the late great Hilary Mantel's advocacy for your work.

Lesley Glaister: Yeah. I know. She was a really good friend and help.

Caroline Sanderson: It's interesting, because I imagine were you publishing *Honour thy Father* today, it might be dubbed Domestic Noir or maybe Gothic Horror, but from what you say about the novel it doesn't sound as if you were conscious of what genre it was at all?

And I feel like that un-attachment to genre, if I can use that slightly cumbersome word, has continued throughout your career. The feeling of not wanting to be pinned down and this idea that when you try and strive to write a particular thing, it doesn't work.

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Lesley Glaister: That's right, yeah, yes, I mean I do it...I write because I love writing. I've got a certain number of people will always buy my books and I get nice reviews and things, but I feel I've never taken off. And both my agent and my publishers have actually tried to put their finger on why that is, and there have been a couple of times where I've actually been asked: can you try and write crime, because there are elements of crime in many of my books.

Or, could you make it more like a psychological thriller, could you just step further in that direction? And I have on a couple of occasions tried to do that, but I don't know, I don't want to write for the sake of writing, and for the sake of getting published.

It sounds a bit precious, but I want to write because I want to write what I want to write. And that does defy any specific sort of genre category. So yes, and I have been lucky enough to always get my books published, not to huge acclaim, but to enough acclaim to keep me going. But the reason I write is not for that, the reason I write is because I'm just driven to do that.

Caroline Sanderson: And it feels wrong for a writer to smooth down their uniqueness just for the sake of shoehorning it into a genre. I mean, of course, publishing is a business and it is about sales, it's about selling books and so that's the rub really, somehow as writers we have to try and do both?

Lesley Glaister: I don't think there's anything wrong with it, if you want to do it. I mean, I know people who have decided to write, you know...

Caroline Sanderson: 'This is my new direction.'

Lesley Glaister: Yeah, yeah, and I'm going to write that kind of book. And I can see that there's probably a certain amount of satisfaction in learning how to write a certain sort of book and then writing that book for an

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audience, for a particular audience. And I'm certainly not saying people shouldn't do that, or there's anything lesser about doing that. It's just not what I want to do.

Caroline Sanderson: So, I think it would be appropriate at this point to talk about your novel *Little Egypt*, published almost twenty-five years after *Honour Thy Father* in 2014, so it's quite a jump. But there's an interesting connection between these books, in that in the acknowledgements to *Little Egypt* you write that you used the Society of Authors Somerset Maugham award to visit Egypt and the result, eventually, was this novel. So tell us about that.

Lesley Glaister: Yeah, well, yes, I was, as you mentioned, I was lucky enough to win the Somerset Maugham Award for *Honour Thy Father*. In fact, I remember Hilary ringing me up and telling me, secretly, before when I shouldn't have known, she was on the judges, she probably helped with that!

At that point, I had young children, three young children, and simply wasn't in a position to go off with a knapsack on my back, as I imagine Somerset Maugham imagined his probably male writers doing, when they'd won the award, if indeed he knew anything about the award, I don't know.

But I did take a trip to Egypt with a friend, and I've always been fascinated in the iconography and just the stuff, just all the ancient Egyptian stuff, and the beauty of it; and the names of the gods and the goddesses, and the deep layers of history and mystery of ancient Egypt. And I always had sort of a Cleopatra kind of fantasy thing going on.

So, going to Egypt on this trip, really set me off and made me think, *Yes, I have an idea for a book*. And, something happened when I went into one of the tombs, just extraordinary, where you go, it looks like it's just desert: dull, dry, bare, rocky. And through a tunnel, into this space, which is just

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full of these *amazing* paintings that were painted thousands of years ago that are bright and almost like the paint's still wet.

And there was just something that happened to my brain. They're lit up, obviously, so that you can see it. But I remember just, I was so sort of gobstruck that I ended up staying there and then realised everyone else had gone, and went out, but it was almost as if when I was in there, it was almost as if they were moving they were so alive.

I think partly I was not very well, I had a bit of a fever; anyway, I felt very spooked and dashed out. But I knew then that there had to be some kind of scene, something like that in my book. But then years later, I was sitting on a train that had stopped the way they do: when, I think it's points failure or something — which strikes me as funny in a way, because it's like, it's lost, the train has *lost the point of this*, it can't remember where it's going, it doesn't care anymore!

Caroline Sanderson: So true!

Lesley Glaister: Anyway, it happened to stop near...and I don't even know where in the country this was, but it was near...I could look across to what looked like it had been a really grand house at one time, but there was railway line on one side and there was industrial estate. And I somehow knew that this had something to do with my Egypt idea, and I don't know if I am imagining this or if I imagined it at the time or if it's true: but I felt as if I saw a face at one of the windows, just a, like a, pale smudge. And I just knew...and I immediately knew that there's an old woman in that house and she's the same person as in the Egypt story. And it was like a germination of ideas, and that was a *long* time after. And it wasn't until I had that, the two ideas together, that I was able to start writing *Little Egypt*. But even then, it took me years and years and years.

Caroline Sanderson: Novels are so long in the gestation sometimes, aren't they, and you can have one idea, but as you say, until the right way of

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doing it comes to you, or the right pairing idea, which could be years, but then suddenly you recognise it as being the, you know, the missing link or whatever it is?

Lesley Glaister: Yes, but that, that recognition, is what I find very mysterious.

Caroline Sanderson: Really mysterious.

Lesley Glaister: Because why should me looking out a train window at an old house suddenly rekindle the Egypt...and there's nothing...there's no obvious connection between them.

Caroline Sanderson: But there's something about the writer's brain which just does that, doesn't it?

It pairs the most unlikely things. I so enjoyed reading *Little Egypt*, and it's sort of got a kinship with *Honour Thy Father* as well, hasn't it? You've got another set of twins, Isis and Osiris, and they're trapped in a house, which is falling down around their ears and looking very much...spending their days looking back on events a long time ago.

Lesley Glaister: Yes, and I was unaware of that, actually, until after I'd finished writing *Little Egypt* and then I began to think, *My goodness, this is in some ways, it's a similar story.* It's a more developed story.

Caroline Sanderson: They're very different novels as well.

Lesley Glaister: They're very different, entirely different. But there's just... there is something about that. And I don't know why, I don't know why. I think sometimes writers have this sort of...a certain shape, or a certain kind of, almost like a watermark in paper, in their imagination will sometimes float through, or...

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Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, you've said that this novel also took a long time to write because, again, you were trying to make it into something that your, at that time, long-time publisher...make it into something that you thought that they would like. And eventually you did part company with them because the sales weren't what they wanted and that must have been hugely disappointing. And that's a very difficult part in any writer's career, but I think you also decided to see that as an opportunity in your career as well, a sort of freeing, and I think you started teaching at that point as well.

Lesley Glaister: That's right, yeah. I had always been teaching a little bit and doing bits of writing for radio sometimes to boost to my income, and actually the radio because I enjoyed doing it. But I did...it was a bit it was a difficult moment for me when I was dropped from, it was Bloomsbury, because...not because they didn't like the book that I'd written but because my sales hadn't been good enough.

And it was very hurtful and it's a difficult period for me, but I found that it didn't make me want to stop writing; didn't do anything except make me feel quite...I don't know, determined to carry on. And then it was just at the beginning of the time when lots of independent publishers were springing up, partly in response to the Net Book Agreement, which meant the way that books were sold changed and the way that writers were paid changed, and it just changed the ethos really.

And there was also a sort of change when...other books had done this, but I mean, it felt particularly around the whole Harry Potter phenomenon. When publishers started to see that actually they could make huge amounts of money, bucketloads of money on the next new thing.

And it felt as if writers like myself and lots of sort of midlist – as we were called – writers fell out of favour because we were just jogging along, writing our books, having our modest sales and our modest receptions, and maybe winning the odd prize, but never really breaking through.

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And lots of people, like myself included, were kind of dropped gradually. And at the same time, lots of little independent publishers started springing up, and it felt as if they were publishing...they really believed in the books that we were writing. And of course it meant that there wasn't the financial reward because there weren't the big advances that you used to get from mainstream publishers, which meant people like myself had to find another way to make money. And for me that was increasing my teaching and that became a much bigger part of my life.

But I don't think it was...I mean, actually in some ways I felt it – as I say, as you said – I felt it quite freeing, it means I can...I will just write what the hell I want, and I don't know...sod them!

Caroline Sanderson: I mean, riskier for independent publishers in terms of, it's not guaranteed profit, but of course, in recent years, we've seen many small independents publish prizewinning novels.

Lesley Glaister: Exactly, yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: And, you know, the risk in inverted commas, that they've taken has really paid off because they deal in quality above all, it's so interesting. So since then you've been published by several small indie publishers, including Salt, a publisher of *Little Egypt*, and also Sandstone Press, who brought out your most recently published novel *Blasted Things*, so they've become a happy home for you by the sound of it.

Lesley Glaister: Yes, very much. I feel, you know, I feel totally...I don't know, somehow it feels more like me to be publishing with a little independent publisher, yeah.

Caroline Sanderson: So in a way to return to my first question about the hallmarks of your work, whenever they're set, what do you think will always be the preoccupations that thread through your work?

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Lesley Glaister: I don't know because I don't, as I say, I don't set out with any preconceived idea, if I want to write something different, I will, if that's what comes.

Caroline Sanderson: Good!

Lesley Glaister: I feel as if the one I'm writing at the moment is funnier; I enjoy reading humour and I'm a fairly humorous kind of person, I think.

So I feel as if there's something of that, that I can feel something growing in me that wants to be funnier; but, humour is a difficult thing to force, so I would never force it. But it's always going to be about the bright side of life and hope and things, and then the flip side, of disappointment and darkness and fear. There's always going to be that, because that is how it is.

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RLF outro: That was Lesley Glaister in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about Lesley on her website, lesleyglaister.co.uk. And that concludes episode 445, which was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 446 C. D. Rose speaks with Ann Morgan about blurring the lines between fact and fiction, being persuaded to write a book, and finding ways to commemorate geniuses whose work is never discovered.

We hope you'll join us.

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