

# Writers Aloud

Episode 446

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**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 446 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode 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.

**Ann Morgan:** C. D. Rose's first book grew out of frustration with the publishing industry. Originally created as a website, the mischievous and satirical *Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure*, became so popular that it drew a publisher to approach Rose about turning it into a book. There followed two more novels, both of them built around books and stories that are not told or that somehow fail to be remembered.

When I spoke to Rose he started off by telling me how he began to write.

**C. D. Rose:** It's one of those things that I've always done, I mean, ever since I could hold a pencil, I've always written stories. So there's something impulsive about it there, about wanting to put words on a page. I have no idea where that came from or even if it's particularly unusual, or if most children are like that.

But later on, when I began writing *seriously*, it came from reading, particularly from the ages of about, I would say, from sixteen, seventeen, eighteen onwards when you're just discovering that wide world of

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literature there; you're moving on from children's books and finding all this wonderful, strange stuff that's out there.

Much as I loved reading and still do love reading, everything comes from the reading, it was kind of the response to it, somehow I had to write back or write around, or write *to*, a lot of the things that I was reading. Somehow, it felt like completing those books in some ways, or responding to them, and I never really knew how.

**Ann Morgan:** Sort of, in conversation with books?

**C. D. Rose:** I think so, yeah, and at some points it was just attempts to copy them, knowingly or unknowingly to...you know, your first writers that you fall in love with, you start writing bad copies of their work and then they get better and better and better until you manage to be able to throw them away.

So some of it was that, in a way that I never really knew what I was doing, I had no sense. think I'd probably started trying to write awful poetry at first, and then realised that prose was more what I was supposed to be doing. But it took me a long time to get it into any kind of work or shape or to work out...to put much together that was much longer than half a page or for it to have any discernible structure, and it wasn't actually only until I was in my mid-thirties that I really started properly writing seriously. And then it kind of fell into place, the way I wanted to write and how to do things, and I'm sure that was the outcome of long years of reading with occasional scribbling in the margins, either literally or metaphorically.

**Ann Morgan:** Yeah, I think that's something we have in common actually because reading's a big part of my life and my work as well, in that I do a lot with international literature and reading the world, and that's a big part of my work. And I found that after I did this project when I was thirty, where I read a book from every country in the world in a year, suddenly my fiction writing opened up.

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Prior to that, I'd tried for years to write fiction and written loads of unpublishable stuff and then suddenly having had this very intense exposure to these extraordinary stories from all around the planet, I found that my process and my imagination was sort of blown open almost and the possibility was blown open.

Was there anything particular for you that you read that you think was transformative or that really shaped you as a writer?

**C. D. Rose:** It's been different things at different stages and I hate to sound both a) obvious and b) pretentious, but honestly, one of the first works that really did it for me was Joyce's *Ulysses*, which I read aged maybe eighteen, nineteen.

**Ann Morgan:** Wow!

**C. D. Rose:** And I understood little of it or bits of it...bits of it were clear as anything and other bits were impenetrable, which is possibly still the way. But that was one of those great books that makes you think, *My word, you can do this, this is possible, and you can write like this and you can blow everything apart.* And even though I didn't get it all, it was that – even though obviously it's a really very carefully crafted book – the sense it gave me was of freedom and possibility.

So that was one and there were others. Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. I was lucky in that we had a family friend who was one of those people who was terrible in that he gave me books that were far too difficult for me when I was too young. So I was reading these things like that, reading the Calvino and the Eco, I remember when I was fifteen or something and just being amazed by it, by the playfulness, by the wit and the intelligence that was going into it.

From that...later on...so yeah it...and then Joyce came, it was huge. And

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then later on, well, Kafka obviously: I was a kind of a very intense early twenty-year-old, so you just had to read Kafka, which I thought was good at being intense. But now I look back at Kafka and I think it's so funny. So Kafka's always still there, and then Borges was the other one with that, again, with us following on from Eco and Calvino, it was very much that lineage.

The other huge writer for me was Angela Carter, who again I first read in my early twenties, who again had that richness of language and the working with traditional themes and narratives. A lot of the experimental stuff I was reading was all great, but what Carter gave to me was remembering to tell a really good story, you know, that's so important to me in many ways.

**Ann Morgan:** Now it's so interesting what you say about that impulse to write coming from responding to books or completing books in a certain way, or a conversation of a kind, because all three of your books are books about books, or around books in one way or another. In your first book for example, *The Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure*, is a hilarious overview of some lives of also-rans, or people who nearly made it or might have made it but for things being differently, as writers, and some really extraordinary, hilarious stories.

And then your second novel is about a writer who goes to give a lecture series about a forgotten writer at a university. And then your third book, it's supposedly a collection of short stories by a forgotten European writer. What is it about writing around books that really sparks your imagination like that?

**C. D. Rose:** Again, I do suspect it might be that those formative influences of...that's why in particular I mentioned the Calvino and the Borges, which were very much about that. And I just love that stuff and that's never really left me. It's also about the power of fictional worlds and fiction and how writers do things.

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I know about writers, I know writers, I've also written other things about painters and photographers, and musicians. But writers I think I probably know the best, I know what we're like and what makes us tick and what motivates us and what doesn't. So that was always there, but then *The Biographical Dictionary*, the first book, was written in very specific circumstances which were: I'd done the dutiful thing when I started to take writing seriously, and I'd gone and done an MA in Creative Writing, which was all great.

And I was writing more and more, let's say, a more traditional, a more realist historical novel as part of that, which did quite well. And coming off the MA, I got picked up by an agent and publishers were interested and all that. And then I got dropped by the agents and the publishers before the book was ever published. And then I wrote a second one, also a realist historical novel, didn't get a look in anywhere, nobody was remotely interested.

So I got a bit...I mean, it is a curve you're going through, but I kind of curled up and licked my wounds and decided I wasn't going to write any more novels, I wasn't going to write any more books, I wasn't going to do anything. But, because I do write and because it's what we do, I couldn't stop writing, I couldn't give up altogether. And I found I was just imagining these tales about writers who'd been rejected or failed, who'd been lost for various reasons.

And there was just a number of them in my notebooks, very, very short stories. So I decided to turn it into a kind of self-defeating web project, I wanted nothing to – I was so cross at the time – I wanted nothing to do with publishers or agents or the literary world. So I set up a little website and began to post one of these stories, these very short stories, it was one a week. I was going to do one a week for a year and then delete the whole lot.

So that was where *The Biographical Dictionary of Literary Failure* came

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from. But after it actually got bizarrely popular, people really liked it. And then a publisher got in touch with me and said, 'Ooh, we think this should be a book'. And at first I was, *No, no, no, this is not a book, it's not, I don't want to write books anymore*. But luckily they were persistent, and eventually persuaded me, of course, that they were right, and so it became a book.

And then the second one that followed on from that, the idea was to write another volume of this, like volume two, but I didn't quite want to do that. I thought I'd kind of covered that area. But instead of looking at writers, it was about lost or forgotten books, of which we all know there are too many, whether they're our own or we all know some book which we think is fantastic and undeservedly neglected.

So the idea was to write about that and take the implied author of the first book, *The Biographical Dictionary*, to give him a real presence and to really make him a character in this second book where he goes off to deliver lectures about these great lost books.

And then the third one came out of that, because the Guyavitch character, the lost writer of the third book is mentioned in the second book. And I thought I'd gone as far as I could writing about imaginary books or describing books which don't exist. And I thought actually, here are some real stories, I'm not just going to talk about these stories, they're actually here. So you get the nine Guyavitch stories with all the necessary critical commentary on them.

**Ann Morgan:** It's really interesting what you do with your work because it is very playful. It plays with the line between reality and fiction; it's called 'Para-fictional' sometimes, isn't it? And actually, there's a lovely line in *The Biographical Dictionary*, where you talk about 'that curious and deadly 21st-century affectation: a desire for authenticity'.

And it seems like that's something you're really challenging with this

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work, because all of those books, particularly *The Biographical Dictionary* and *The Blind Accordionist*, it would be...you could pick them up and start reading them and take them at face value; assume that they were about real people who had lived, or that it was a genuine collection of short stories. Why do you think it's really important to push it, that, you know, to challenge that, to blur that in that way?

**C. D. Rose:** That's such a good question, because when I started writing these books, which was – when was it? – it was about a decade ago now, when I first started with this idea and I just felt a sense of mischievous fun about it. And when I was posting them, those early stories on the web, a lot of people did think these were real people, and some were amazed at how much research I'd done and the lengths I'd gone to, to discover all this. And I felt kind of gleefully wicked and naughty about it. And I still *do*, there is still just something purely mischievous about this. And yet there is also something, which does interest me about fiction's claims to reality, yet at the same time we know that it's not 'The lie that tells the truth'. It's a question that I honestly don't know the answer to and I'm still fascinated by about how...where we draw the line between fiction and nonfiction, and particularly this strange hybrid genre that's appeared over the last ten years, even though it's been around for a long time, called creative nonfiction.

And how interesting it might be if some of those nonfictional works were fictional or vice-versa. I recently read a book by a guy called Benjamin Labatut called, *When We Cease to Understand the World*. It's the story of a number of 20th-century physicists, essentially. And I thought that it was a mixture of fact and fiction and that some of it was purely fiction.

In fact, I think he has admitted that some small parts of it are fictional, but I thought whole chunks of it were fictional, and I was actually quite disappointed, strangely, to find out that it was nonfiction; that nearly all of it was true, and there were only a few speculative parts, which is a kind of an odd response; I'm not quite sure why I had that response.

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But the other thing, and why I think this is an important question and why I sometimes genuinely worry about my own work, even though my own work is in the grander scheme of things, very marginal. But over the last ten years, we have seen this muddying of the waters between what is true and what is not.

And it kind of stopped being funny when you see people, I'm not going to name names because we all know who they are, but people saying things that are *patently* untrue and claiming that they are true and that's very different. I get no sense of mischievous fun out of things like that. So I do wonder about the ethic, genuinely, I wonder about the ethics of it sometimes.

**Ann Morgan:** I mean, nonfiction is such an odd term, isn't it, it's kind of a void, it's what it isn't, defining something by what it isn't, which is a very strange thing. And actually, I find the distinction is really quite artificial in many ways, in lots of other genres, in lots of other literatures around the world that distinction doesn't exist in quite the same way.

**C. D. Rose:** No, it doesn't, no.

**Ann Morgan:** So it's a really interesting thing, and at the same time, we have this real anxiety...as you say in that quote, for authenticity. Which I think can be quite harmful as well, because there becomes this desire for people to write what feels authentic to those commissioning and reading, which actually may not necessarily *be* that, and is not what fiction is, it's not, fiction isn't about presenting someone's experience exactly as it is on a plate. At least I don't think it should be, but there is a big mess going on with it in terms of sorting that question out. I think it is really important work you're doing, exploring those boundaries.

But also something else that I really enjoy in your work is that there is...although it comes, and you described, it came initially from a place of anger and mischief, but there is a real humanity in it, a real sense of



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connection and generosity in it, and I found it hugely heartening as a writer. I mean, reading *The Biographical Dictionary*, I found in some ways it felt like a portrait of many of the neuroses that we as writers go through, taken to extremes, and sort of thrown back to me, shown, you know, this is how we all feel sometimes, and it was almost a sense of *you're not alone*. And there was a lovely... in the final entry for Sara Zeelen Levallois, there's a lovely section where you say, 'The power of writing is one of the greatest things we have, whether it is read or not.' And you say that Sara's story should be 'For all those whose lives and work have come to nothing, let it be for all the lives we could live, of all the people we will never know, the people we will never be.'

And I think there's something really moving about that. And it would be so easy for a satirical work like this to be purely biting and purely funny and that's it, but you take it further than that. How did you make that happen, how did you get to that point?

**C. D. Rose:** It was as you say, that I realised quickly that if I was going to be writing fifty-two of these stories, to have every one be scathing mockery would wear thin, or it would appeal to the wrong kind of reader, or it would just come across as bitterness.

You were right to identify the anger and mischief of its initial impulse, which is, satirical and pungent in that way, poking fun at people. But, there are a few of the cases that are like that, but it would clearly wear thin very quickly. And also that there was this genuine sense of going back to what the point of fiction is, which we touched on before: fiction remembers that which was never remembered in the first place.

And I thought that was a really important point. Just a big example of that is, I recently saw an exhibition of the work of a photographer called Vivian Maier, I don't know if you've heard of this woman. She was an amazing street photographer in the US, mostly in Chicago and New York in the fifties and sixties into the early seventies, but never showed her work to

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*anybody*, anybody at all, and died penniless, completely unknown; had been regarded as a mad woman for the last few years of her life, okay? Now what happened was, a guy was searching...a few years later, actually many years later, a guy was in a garage sale, one of those clear outs they had, in which there was some of her stuff.

He finds a box of, I think, a couple of dozen undeveloped reels of photographic film, has no idea what it is, buys it dirt cheap, goes home, develops these pictures and finds out they are just amazing photographs really capturing the life of those times. It's stunning photography, but this woman had died completely unknown and now she's gone on to have a name and he did some research and found out about her, okay.

So she's gone on to have a name and there are exhibitions and books available of her work even though she died unknown and in penury. But what that means is for every Vivian Maier, who is rescued from oblivion just by that *chance* of some of her work surviving and being discovered, and then managing to find the right person to transmit it to a wider audience, for every one of those, that almost certainly...it certainly means there are other great works, whether photographers or painters or writers, who have written brilliant work or made great paintings, which have just got completely lost. Now, how can we ever know about those if not by imagining them?

So that's what fiction does and what the three books of mine really try to do, try to imagine, or remember that which was never remembered in the first place, which I do think is an important case.

**Ann Morgan:** Quite maddening in a way, really!

**C. D. Rose:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Ann Morgan:** Yeah. Now you also write short stories. How different is the short-story form for you from writing longer-form fiction?

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**C. D. Rose:** The secret is I always...and I only write short stories and the three books presented as they are, I regard them all as collections of short stories, which have been put together as novels. I mean, the first one is...it has that completion about it, but it's actually fifty-two very short stories. The second one, which is accounts of *Who's Who When Everyone is Someone Else*, is accounts of these books, and I wrote the sections which were the books first, aware that they had to be self-contained elements, and then strung the rest of the narrative which links them all together around that.

The third book, *The Blind Accordionist*, calls it, I've joked about this, it's a collection of short stories pretending to be a novel, pretending to be a collection of short stories. But the key part...the main part is these nine stories, which again, I wrote first, and then worked all this kind of critical apparatus: the foreword and the afterword and the footnotes, and the explanations and the bibliography around that. So for me, it's always been about the short form, and so I don't really know how to write a novel.

**Ann Morgan:** You do...your books do have a kind of...they do reward a careful reader because actually there are cross references between stories and in *The Biographical Dictionary*, for example, there are texts that pop up between...certain entries get referred to in one...someone stumbles across a copy of one in one and then its author is then profiled ten entries later.

So you do...there are clever connections that lead to, give a sense of something building or something growing towards something that's greater than the sum of its parts, I think. Yeah, I see what you mean, they are interconnected short stories, but there is...I don't know, it feels of a piece as well at the same time.

**C. D. Rose:** Yeah, I do like that idea of building connections between them, however slight, tiny references, to give them some of that kind of overall structural coherence.

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**Ann Morgan:** And you've also edited an anthology, *Cities: Birmingham* and also a collection of short stories called *Love Bites*, short stories inspired by a punk band, a Mancunian punk band. What was that experience like, working as an editor, how did you find that?

**C. D. Rose:** First of all, I loved it, I loved it, I love working with...that was mostly...I think the Birmingham book was deliberately all emerging writers. The Buzzcocks book was a few slightly more established writers and a lot of emerging writers, and I love it; I love reading the work and editing it and shaping it into a whole and seeing the thing come to life, I love it.

On the other hand, there is the more practical aspects of being an editor, which means a bit of horse trading sometimes: there are people who you might want in an anthology who you can't get, but then for some other reasons there are some things you might be less wanting to get in there, or trying to get the thing to read like a coherent whole, and working with other editors as well, so there's that.

You have to be able to relinquish control. Whereas the great things about writing short stories, particularly novels to a certain extent, is you are – we all need editors, of course, and publishers – but, I've had pretty much, I would say ninety-eight per cent creative control over those books. With an anthology or an edited collection, you have to let other people do things that might not have been your choice, that was the learning experience of it for me, but...but mostly I...

**Ann Morgan:** So if in a hundred years time, a literary scholar, perhaps someone sort of in the mould of the writer of *The Biographical Dictionary*, the hero of your second book, finds a C. D. Rose novel, what would you like them to make of it?

**C. D. Rose:** Firstly, I'd be delighted that the thing still exists in a hundred years time. And I honestly think that would be enough if it's still there,

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let them make of it what they will. But that idea of permanence and persistence I think is a wonderful one, and it would be wonderful to know that a century on it still exists somewhere.

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**RLF outro:** That was C. D. Rose in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about C. D. Rose on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 446, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 447, Martyn Waites talks to Doug Johnstone about learning crime writing on the job, adopting a female pseudonym, and the joys of writing daleks.

We hope you'll join us.

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