

Writers Aloud

Episode 447

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 447 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Martyn Waites talks to Doug Johnstone about learning crime writing on the job, adopting a female pseudonym, and the joys of writing dialects.

Doug Johnstone: Martyn Waites was born in Newcastle upon Tyne. After working as an actor for several years, he became a writer and has written over twenty novels, most of them crime. He wrote the critically acclaimed Joe Donovan series, won the Grand Prix du Roman Noir for *Born Under Punches* and *The White Room* was a *Guardian* Book of the Year.

He also wrote eight internationally bestselling thrillers under the name Tanya Carver. Most recently, he has written the Tom Killgannon trilogy, set in Cornwall.

So, Martyn Waites, hi, how you doing?

Martyn Waites: I'm not so bad, how are you?

Doug Johnstone: I'm very well, thank you. So: I'm really interested...I guess...would you call yourself a veteran writer these days, you've been going — I've started this off well, haven't I!

Martyn Waites: You have, that's great, a *veteran*, yeah.

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Doug Johnstone: It's twenty-five years, right? It's twenty-five years I guess...

Martyn Waites: It is twenty-five years since I started, you know, so I suppose... Oh God, I was just going to say that terrible joke, you know, 'I'd have been out for murder by now'. But no, I mean, just thinking about being a veteran: I went to a party a few months ago with a younger generation, at least one generation younger, of writers.

And, you know, it was very much kind of, *Oh, look who's with us, is he still alive?* and so we went out for dinner afterwards. And it was very much kind of, *Make sure somebody's sitting next to him at all times.* You know, *We don't want him choking!*

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, it's like somebody cutting up your food!

Martyn Waites: *Check what he orders, cut his food up. And if he calls you 'grandson' and tries to give you 50p for sweets, just nod and say yes!* You know, it was that kind of thing and I just thought, *God, I've still got my own teeth!* I don't feel, I mean...I don't know, I still feel like: I know nothing, that every time I sit down to write, I'm constantly surprised by how little I know about doing it well.

I mean, that could just be me, other people who have after twenty-five years experience might have learned something. But no, it's just...all I see is how little I still know about it and how much I've still got to learn. I've managed to chance me arm for twenty-five years in the same business and it's the only thing I enjoy doing, sometimes! And it's the only thing that I'm kind of capable of doing.

So, the fact that I'm still here when there's a lot of people who I started out with who aren't; I don't mean they're dead, or some of them! But I just mean that it's not worked and they've given up.

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Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I get that sometimes where like, every time a new book comes out, I just think to myself quietly: *Still in the game!*

Martyn Waites: Exactly, it's just ...a few years ago I was having dinner with Mark Billingham and we both had new books out at the same time. And, it was just...he said...well, it was just when we'd had our books accepted by the publishers. And he said, 'So your book's been given the okay?'. 'Yep.' 'My book's been given the okay.' 'Yep.' And, he just said, 'Well, we've dodged the bullet again'. And it is...you know, it's kind of: *one day we're going to be rumbled; but not today!*

So yeah, I just think, I've just managed to have a semblance of a career for twenty-five years, just by keeping me head down and keeping at it really. But, it's when you think about the alternative of...I mean, I don't know what else I could do, I genuinely, literally, honestly, don't know what else I could do. In between writing novels, I've done other things, like you've done bits of journalism.

You see, all those things I'm not trained for, but you can just blag your way into. You know, I was the true-crime correspondent for *Bizarre Magazine*.

Doug Johnstone: That's a good gig!

Martyn Waites: It was a great gig, it was really well paid as well, and you know, I mean that was, it was the time when you could do things like that; I was a writer in residence in a couple of prisons, you know, and I ran workshops with socially excluded teenagers in Essex, of which there was no shortage. So I would just do things like this, and people would...word kind of gets around, that you do it, and you'd just get phone calls from it. So I guess that was...combining that with writing novels became my proper job for twenty-odd years.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. Were you writing for a long time before you were published? I mean, we're talking about the Stephen Larkin series, which

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were sort of noir-ish crime novels, about a journalist set in Newcastle where you grew up. And how did that come about, was it a long period of gestation?

Martyn Waites: It took about five years. Five years from me having the idea of the book to actually seeing it published. And it was just five years of learning on the job, it was the first novel that I wrote and it was the first thing that I had published, which everybody tells me now is really rare.

I think it was just pig-headedness on my part. I just thought, *No, I've written a book and it's going to get published.* And: 'Oh, well, we think it's not right.' 'Well, I think *you're* not right!' And it just kind of...but I did kind of learn while I was doing it. It went round, it had two agents and it went round, I think, every publisher going. The first agent that I sent it to...you know, it was just kind of getting the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* thing, and looking to see who would be interested in crime-fiction novels. So when I had some chapters together, I sent it to an agent who will remain nameless.

And she said she loved it and she was going to represent it. I said, 'Great', so I've got an agent then. She said, 'Yeah', she said, 'if you just finish the novel. And then send it to me, and then we're away'. So I finished the novel, I was really excited about this by this time and I was living in an attic, in Clapham, at the time.

I was working in a pub, and I'd just done some commercials, so I didn't have to do anything else. I got the pub job just to meet people, because otherwise I'd have just been a recluse: because I ended up with long hair and a beard, and I found a beanie hat in the bottom of the wardrobe from whoever had been there before me. I had to put that on so that when I sat at the keyboard, my hair didn't just fall into my eyes. So I looked like a recluse.

So I thought, you know, get a haircut, go and get a pub job, just so you've

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got somebody...you've got contact with the outside world. And so, I did that, but all the time I was writing and I sent the agent this book when I'm finished. And I got this message left on the answer phone, in those days, and she just said, 'This is the worst book I've ever read and I can't represent you'. And so, you know, I thought, *Yeah, you've taken the coward's way out, you've left an answer phone message when you knew I wasn't going to be in.*

So I phoned her the next day and I said, 'What do you mean this is the worst', I said, 'this can't be the worst book you've ever read'. She said, 'Well, you and I clearly differ on that'. But I said, 'I've rewritten it, I've improved it'. She said, 'Well, you might think so'. So, you know, she just said, 'Oh, it's horrible and it's violent'.

I said, 'It's a crime novel, what do you expect'? And she said, 'Well, I'm not...' So I said, 'Okay, fair enough, so you're not my agent now I take it'. So I just went back to the *Artists'...the Writers' Handbook* thing and started at 'A' and just phoned people up again and pestered them into reading it.

And this editor then said, 'Well, I like it, but it's too long'. And I said, 'Take some of the things out?' She said, 'No, no, the writing is too long'. She said, 'You need to edit down the writing'. So I said, 'Well, show me what you mean'. And so she did, she edited a couple of chapters and I got them, I just looked at them and thought, *These aren't edited, these have just had a red pen gone through them.* And that was just kind of...I realised then about tightening up writing, you know, and that was...and she said, 'Right, if you can do the rest of that, then, we'll talk again'. So I did.

I sat there, you know, and I would, I would finish in...and I was working in this telemarketing company then, so I would finish there. Sometimes I'd sit in the pub for a couple of hours with me own red pen, just going through, and then I'd type everything up. It was about a hundred pages less at the end, the first novel, but it was kind of invaluable, because it was like, *Oh my God, this is how you edit.*

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Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I had some very similar experiences with my first editor at Penguin, it was exactly the same, and she bought the manuscript and then sent it back to me, with the edits. And I was absolutely mortified, and I was like, wait, you bought this, and then you're basically destroying it. But then as I went through it, I was like: *Yes, that makes sense, yes, I totally get what you mean.* It's weird when you get that lightbulb moment, you know, I've taught editing classes before, and sometimes people are just like, *What?*

And I'd say, 'Yeah, you can cut, like, I don't know, 20,000 words out of this, no problem.' And they just look at you as if you're mental, and then you show them and they go, *Oh right, yeah, okay, great.*

Martyn Waites: And yeah, it was a great lesson because they said straight, you know, I handed in and then I thought, *I'll not hear anything for ages.* And it was about a fortnight later, they said, 'We'd like to offer you a two-book deal.'

Doug Johnstone: Wow.

Martyn Waites: 'Could you write the second book in nine months?' And I thought, *Yeah, of course I can. It's taken me five years to do this one, no problem!* So, you know, that's what I did. I ended up in bed with nervous exhaustion.

Because I was doing the job during the day and then I was coming home at night, and I just had my first daughter then, so I would spend time with her. And then the second one was born as well, so spend time with the both of them, put them to bed, sit down at about half-past nine and start work. And then, I'd work through, till past midnight and then I'd be up at half-six the next day to go in and do this job that I hated.

Doug Johnstone: I'm interested because you said you were living in Clapham at the time, but obviously the books are set in Newcastle or

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around that area, it's where you grew up. So it's a place you knew really well, but I wondered if that distance was useful, if you were writing about it because you weren't there anymore?

Martyn Waites: Well, you're right about putting distance between where you're writing and where you're setting it because I don't think I could have done that if I'd been living in Newcastle then still. You need that kind of quiet to recreate the place that you're talking about. You know, rather than actually being there thinking, *I'm going to go down and have a look at this tonight. And this is where I'm going to set this there. Right, okay, I'm going to just sit and write*, rather than, you know...it's like you need that distance to actually be able to sit and put that down and understand it more; recreate the city or the environment in your own mind.

And also, I chose Newcastle because I didn't think it was particularly well represented at the time, because you had...I really didn't like British crime fiction, I hadn't found anything that I'd really enjoyed at the time in British crime fiction or that I saw in contemporary British crime fiction, the way that I was excited by what the Americans were doing at the time, which was: there was a sense of realism about it.

There was a sense of, I recognize this world that they're writing about, that people like James Lee Burke or Sara Paretsky or...I'm just looking at the bookshelves to see who else, you know, who was just starting at that... Walter Mosley and people, you know. And it was kind of, I recognize this world that they're talking about, even though I'm not in that country.

And I don't recognize the world that I live in, in British crime fiction at the time. And so I thought, wouldn't it be great if you can take that kind of regionalism that they're doing, and that noir sensibility and put it in a British regional setting. And that was another lightbulb moment.

I had that idea the same time as everybody else did at the same time. You know, it was just like John Harvey did it and Ian Rankin did it and Val did

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it. And it was like, *Oh, I'm not that original after all!* And I was just coming in on the tail end of them as well. You know, so it was kind of, *right, here's another British crime writer trying to transplant that American thing.* It was like, *Yeah, when I started out, I wasn't another!* It's taken me that long to be published. I thought it was quite an original idea, you know.

Doug Johnstone: And did you have no idea at the start that it was going to be a series? You were obviously a big crime fiction fan, and that thrives on the series set up or was it something that you always had in mind?

Martyn Waites: No, I always wanted it to be, and I think I overdid it a bit, you know, you've got to have the noir hero conventions, and I've since come to realize you don't need as many as I put in. You don't need a dead wife, and a dead son, and an ex-girlfriend who you're just about to get back with who gets killed in the first novel.

And I fell into every single trap and every single cliché for that with the Stephen Larkin books. But I've always said that I sometimes wish that the first three books had never been published because I was learning how to do this in public. You know, there was a kind of public record of me learning how to write.

And I don't think it was till the fourth one that I actually thought, *I think I've learned something here. I think this is a proper book now.* *Born Under Punches*, and *The White Room*, were the two books that I think I became a writer to write. Because, I wanted to write about the miners' strike, because that was something I felt had been misrepresented.

And I also wanted to write about Newcastle in the sixties, and the story of Mary Bell, who when she was eleven, killed two toddlers. Because that happened about half a mile away from where I lived, and you kind of grew up with that on the doorstep, literally. And also with what T. Dan Smith was doing to Newcastle in the sixties. It was kind of, a town planning noir with a child serial killer in it.

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Doug Johnstone: Is that how you sold it to the public? It's a town planning noir; they bit your hand off!

Martyn Waites: Exactly, I told my editor that and she just put her head in her hands.

Doug Johnstone: We'll keep that quiet, Martyn!

Martyn Waites: Yeah. And do you know, it was something that I just wanted to write. And after that, I reached a crossroads and I thought, *I either write a series and just be a crime writer, or I keep going with these clearly unprofitable, but critically successful books about the secret history of the Northeast.* You know.

And so I thought, *Well, I can write a crime series and I can put everything that I want into that and still make it, you know, enjoyable for me.* So I wrote...I created the character of Joe Donovan and wrote *The Mercy Seat*. And I did four Joe Donovan novels. I would have kept going had they been...had the publisher done a better job with selling them.

Doug Johnstone: It strikes me...because I those books are like, more like...because like you mentioned, *Born Under Punches* and *The White Room* were different, I guess, from the first three Stephen Larkin books. They were more about...I mean there were elements of historical fiction effectively in them, but also the social commentary you're talking about which is always in your writing. But that seems to have come in more, into the Joe Donovan stuff, you talked about race and things like that for the first time and...

Martyn Waites: Yeah that's it, because I wanted to use that not just as a platform, because I think if you do that you know you may as well be making a documentary or writing a piece of journalism; but you can't not be involved in politics, whether they're party political politics, or social politics, or racial politics if you're writing about contemporary issues, or contemporary people, because it plays a part in your life.

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Doug Johnstone: And then you became someone else, right, you became Tanya Carver, okay?

Martyn Waites: I did, yeah, that was...it started off as a kind of dare, really, you know.

Doug Johnstone: Really?

Martyn Waites: Yeah, the publisher was, you know...I went to see my old editor who was now, very high up in the different publishers and just said, 'What are you looking for? I'll do it'. And he just said, 'We want a real high concept female thriller writer like a British Karin Slaughter or Tess Gerritsen.'

So, you know, it's the acting thing, you always say, 'Yeah, I can do that', because you can learn afterwards. You know, you can learn to be a high concept female thriller writer.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. If you're a freelance of any description, your answer to everything is *Yes!*

Martyn Waites: So I said I could do it, and that became *The Surrogate*, which was obviously under a female pseudonym, Tanya Carver. But I kind of looked at it as, as say, like the old Pulp Fiction writers: who I think there's only Lawrence Sanders still around now from that generation. Where they do a crime novel one week, and a romance novel the next, and a pirate book after that, and then a porn book, a soft porn book, all under different names.

And I just looked at it in that way, I thought, *Well, this is...I'm writing this book under this name, so I'll write as this person. And these are the things that, you know...*and I knew when I was veering into Martyn territory and when I was veering too far away from Tanya territory.

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Doug Johnstone: Interesting.

Martyn Waites: And, you know, so I couldn't explain how, but I just got the feeling that *This is not right, no, no, go on, take that back again, that's a Martyn book, and that's not what we're writing here!*

Doug Johnstone: But they were really successful, right, it was eight novels, as Tanya Carver, and so they were more commercially successful, but they were also more into horror, if you like: they were thrillers, but there's an element of horror in them as well. Which...you've always been a huge fan of horror, right?

Martyn Waites: Oh God yes.

Doug Johnstone: So I just wondered if that was conscious when you sat down as Tanya Carver, that you're like, *Well I've done this noir thing and now I'm doing these thrillers, and I'm going to try and make them slightly more into the horror genre.*

Martyn Waites: Well, yeah, because you would think that crime fiction and horror would be streets apart, because one is the ultimate rationalist novel: you know, something, a crime, has been committed and we have to find out who and why did it. You know, that's the old...and it's rationalist and you can't say, 'Oh, ghosts did that'. No, they didn't, no, no, people did that because they had something to gain from it.

I lived in Hertfordshire by this time, so I'd just go for a drive and just find these really bleak places and think *This screams crime novel*, or you're almost in M. R. James territory with some of it. So it was kind of the place that suggested itself at first. You know, like where the climax of *The Surrogate* happens, is...it was kind of a real desolate place, and I mentioned that somebody who'd been helping me with some of the research and she said, 'Oh yeah, I went to a funeral there, on the beach.'

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Yeah, I'll bet you did! And it just kind of became that, and it was later on, it was just kind of, pushing different buttons: I was like, *Oh, there's a big abandoned house, clearly it should feel like a haunted house.* And that was... it just kind of crept that way, I think, this much more horror and gothic kind of approach to it.

Doug Johnstone: Is Tanya Carver dead now, are you ever going to go back that way, or how do you feel about it?

Martyn Waites: Well if you'd asked me a couple of months ago I'd have said, 'I'll never go back to Tanya Carver'. But I was having a chat with somebody the other day and we were just talking about the Tanya series and I was saying, 'Oh, it's dead and gone, that's it, as far as I'm concerned', you know, that was a closed chapter.

And then the more that we were talking, I thought, *Do you know, I think I might have an idea for another Tanya book.* And I thought *Ooh, it might have to be kind of initials now because I don't think the climate is right for me to be a Tanya.* So it would probably be T. A. Carver or something, but then, and it was just kind of not from the series, but I just thought with the kind of concerns or the way that the narrative would be skewered, it would be better as a Tanya novel than a Martyn novel.

Doug Johnstone: Okay, but meantime you've been writing the Tom Kilgannon books, right, so *The Old Religion* came out in 2018, that was the first one, right, it's been three. And these are kind of folk horror and also kind of crime novels at the same time, so it feels like a kind of culmination of everything that's gone before a little bit. How do you feel about it?

Martyn Waites: It is sort of the ultimate Martyn Waites book, you know, if anybody's been keeping track; you know, I pitched *The Old Religion* as 'Brexit Noir meets the Wicker Man'.

Doug Johnstone: Surprised that wasn't on the front cover!

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Martyn Waites: Well, I know, who would fail that? I was interviewed on Radio 4 about it and they loved it, you know, that ‘Brexit Noir meets *The Wickerman*’, brilliant! *Oh yes, that’s what we’re going with for this feature!* and so I started using that all the time after that. And in the end, my editor just kept saying, ‘Judge your audience a bit better, not everybody you talk to is Radio Four, you know’.

But yeah, it’s set in Cornwall, because I moved down to the South West a few years ago. And started going to Cornwall a lot, and again, it was just somewhere that spoke to me. There’s something dark and primal about Cornwall, and you can feel it when you’re there. And so I thought well, I’m going to try and tap into that and so that’s when it veered into folk horror completely.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, did you find it interesting writing in a sort of rural setting as opposed to urban? It strikes me...it seems absolutely obvious that that’s a great place for horror and crime because I’ve written about remote places in Scotland as well. And it’s like...it seems so obvious that other people don’t see it, do you know what I mean, it just seems like that’s tailor made for that kind of weirdness?

Martyn Waites: Oh, completely, I think people are starting to recognize that more now. But I think it was just always...it was one of those, those kind of boundary, I would say unspoken, but it was spoken quite a lot, really, that, you do the noir stuff in the city, you do the cosy stuff in the country, and it’s just not that at all.

I mean, the countryside is...the rural areas, it’s red in tooth and claw. It’s the perfect setting for horror and for crime. I mean, *The Grave Diggers Song*, the third one in the series, it just kind of confronts the far right trying to appropriate English or British folklore as the kind of golden age of the past, you know, to try and recreate that.

So, I’ve got characters playing as Punch and Judy in it. And there’s the Mari

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Lwyd, the skull horse that goes from door to door, you know, just things that when you actually put them in a horror novel and they don't look out of place; you put them in a crime novel and suddenly that becomes interesting, I think.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. You've also, finally, eventually written for *Dr Who*, right, because as a kid you were massively into...I guess we'd better call it pulp culture: like comics, science fiction, horror, all that kind of stuff. You were always a massive...

Martyn Waites: What d'you mean, *as a kid*?

Doug Johnstone: Well, okay, and now. You're a huge *Dr Who* fan, so how did that come about? You've written a couple of audiobook stories, right?

Martyn Waites: Well, audio plays really.

Doug Johnstone: Audio plays, right, okay.

Martyn Waites: Yeah, it's for a company called Big Finish who've got the BBC license to do spin off media in audio. So what they do quite brilliantly is, as soon as the Doctors finish on TV or all the characters finish on TV, Big Finish signs them up and keeps the stories going.

So I've been working for Peter Davison, the fifth Doctor and his original companions, and it's just been an absolute blast, I want to keep going, I've said when Peter Capaldi or if Peter Capaldi does Big Finish – you know, this is probably why I haven't heard from them about it! – I have told the producers 'I will kill to write for him'.

But you know, it was just...and then it was just...when I wrote the daleks one, the first, I was sitting at the laptop and the first time I wrote the word *Exterminate*, it was...I just thought that's...it was the first scene really, and I just wrote *Exterminate* and I just had to get up and dance around the room.

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I texted Jamie, my wife, because she was away somewhere, and I said, 'Guess what word I've just written?' And she just said, 'Does it mean, to kill, by any chance?' 'Yeah, could do!' And that was it, I couldn't work for the rest of the day because I'd written...that was just it, I thought nothing is going to top the fact that I've just had a dalek say 'Exterminate', so that was, yeah...it was just such a fanboy thing.

Doug Johnstone: But that sort of thing's great, I never really understand people who are snobbish about genre or about high and low culture. I never really understand the distinction between these things, do you know what I mean? My favourite writers are ones that are like you, that'll basically say... someone says, 'Do you want to write this thing?', you go, 'Yeah!', and give it a go because I don't understand how some people may think, *Well, this is high art or low art* or whatever, it's all just stuff you've made, it's all just being creative, right?

Martyn Waites: Absolutely, I get and have got and will continue to get really annoyed by that. And I think it's just...it says more about the person who's saying it than it does about the work itself. But, yeah, I do get annoyed about that, the whole high and low culture approach. Because, there are only two kinds of writers, there's good ones and bad ones.

And you shouldn't even dismiss the bad ones, because you can often learn, if you're learning to write, just as much from the bad ones as you do from the good ones. And it's one of those things, it's like politics, you start in the centre and you go to the left and the right, then the far left and the far right. And eventually you meet back round at the back where they're just really horrible and nasty.

And I think it's the same with writers, you start middling writers, these are the very good, the very bad, and they meet round somewhere, you just think, *I don't know if this is awful or a work of genius*, so you can never be too quick to judge, I think.

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RLF outro: That was Martyn Waites in conversation with Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Martyn on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 447, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 448, in the final part of our series on the theme 'How I Write', Royal Literary Fund Fellows reveal how they cope with the urge to procrastinate, touching on issues such as background noise, the usefulness of deadlines, and the perils of having a room with a view.

We hope you'll join us.

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