

Writers Aloud



Episode 448

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 448 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, 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.

'Procrastination is the thief of time', wrote Edward Young in his poem *Night Thoughts*. So how do writers overcome this temptation? In this episode, exploring the theme, 'How I Write', we hear from Royal Literary Fund fellows about their different strategies for dealing with distraction. For Cynan Jones, solitude and minimising social interaction are key to getting work done.

Cynan Jones: The process itself for me is one that I need to control quite belligerently: I write with no distraction, I tend to disappear, albeit in my own space, which ostensibly means the people around me have to disappear for a while and leave me alone, for days on end.

I don't communicate if I can help it. I think the important thing is that once you're in it, once you're in that process of writing a story, you can't have the excuse of anything else affecting you or changing your mood or making it more difficult. It is difficult, it can be difficult, so you have to take responsibility for all of that yourself and just focus on the story.

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I tend to be in bed very early when I write and wake up four or five o'clock in the morning. And then I essentially think out everything that I expect myself to write that day. But I don't get up, I see it all out, I play those pictures through. Then I get up, for some inexplicable reason eat marmalade on toast, drink a coffee and then sit down and write at about ten o'clock in the morning.

Quite often when I first start writing, I'll write for forty minutes, an hour, and then you'll be exhausted. But there's a point when you write and you don't even notice it's getting dark. Again, that intensity really is key.

RLF: Kevin Clancy is similarly averse to interruptions.

Kevin Clancy: For me, it really is releasing the unconscious, and when it's released I'm in another level of concentration and I do *not* want to be dragged out of it because it's enormously difficult to go back down there, until it's exhausted for the day.

So I make sure I protect it and I have to protect it in various ways: I don't answer the phone when I'm working; my wife has a code, if there's something urgent, she's the only person I will answer the phone to, but otherwise no phones. I also learned very early on never to open the post, because...this was in the days when the post came in the morning. Now you get it in the middle of the afternoon, but in those less progressive times, the post would often bring bills.

Bills would remind one that one was very short of money, or other problems would emerge through the post, so one would then feel impelled to deal with them at once, which meant phoning the bank or something like that...absolutely, completely destroys your morning's work, and that is not the way forward.

RLF: Karin Altenberg finds that she needs to prepare the space properly in order to do good work.

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Karin Altenberg: I need to tidy up around myself to create some kind of order before I can start writing. I need to do the dishes and tidy away stuff. And then I can start, then I can create a new chaos, a new kind of disorder, a new *mess*, where imagination can flourish, I suppose. And I try to find a place or space where there's a certain kind of timelessness that makes it easier for me to write.

Although I may write in the centre of London, the place where I write must be timeless. I also, with some of my books, I have started them in writing retreats in Italy. And that's been really good: to be in a beautiful landscape, obviously, but also to be part of a little knot of writers who are all there for the same reason, and turn up for meals and blink at the light. But it's that sense of, that we're all in it together, and it makes it seem less pretentious, perhaps, or less ridiculous an enterprise, the writing.

RLF: But for other writers, background noise and the proximity of other people can sometimes be an asset. Susan Barker found this to be very much the case when she was starting out as a young writer.

Susan Barker: I started writing in Japan at the time I had a full-time job, so I wrote mostly in the evenings and at weekends. At that time I really liked to work in coffee shops: all the people around me in the conversations were Japanese, so I could filter everything out and focus on my writing, but have that lovely hum of background noise. Because I'd just started writing and I was building up stamina to sit and write for an hour, two hours, it was really nice to be out in the world and around people as I was working.

I also used to consume huge amounts of caffeine, coffee, when I was writing and I was a smoker then so I would smoke as well. And I also used to write quite late at night as well, to the early hours at the weekend, like two or three, if I didn't have to teach the next day. And I really enjoyed that sort of lifestyle at the time, but now I don't do that, because it would just do me in, just staying up to the early hours writing.

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Now I'm completely different, in fact, after I returned to the UK to study on the MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Uni, I think I switched my writing routine around. So I would start quite early in the morning, about eight o'clock, and maybe work till lunchtime, and then have a break for an hour, and then work until 4pm-ish, and then sort of clock off for the day. So I kind of...that's the routine I've kept since then, so for the past fifteen years or so.

RLF: Fiona Shaw also likes working in public places. However, she admits that you sometimes need strategies to cope with intrusive influences.

Fiona Shaw: I always, when I'm working on a train, as I was this week, and as I will be, or I'm working in a café, which is what I intend to do tomorrow, I always take headphones with me, and earplugs, earpods, whatever, headphones, and an iPod, if necessary. I like working in public spaces because I like the surround-sound of it. I like the surround-sound on the train or in a café, but what I find really difficult is if you get somebody with a penetrating voice.

So at that point I put earplugs in and I've got on my iPod music that I only use when I'm writing, and it used to be probably called, 'Whale Music' or 'Sounds of the Sea', I don't...this isn't either of those things quite, but it's... and I have it on a loop and it just swells and dips and it doesn't intrude. If I listen to anything that's too specific, where the sounds are too specific, I can't write.

RLF: And when you work in a café near to where you live, there is always the risk that you might bump into someone you know.

Fiona Shaw: I usually just wave, and don't even bother coming to say, 'Hello'. But somebody said in a rather...in a way that I thought, *Oh no!* to me the other day, somebody I haven't seen for ages, who said, 'How lovely to see you, next time I'm in and I'm not seeing a friend, you won't mind if I sit down and have a catch up, will you?'

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And I didn't say anything, but I thought, *I will say no, I will, because otherwise, I'll just...actually I'll behave badly as well, I'll be really rude.* So that's when I'm getting away from my desk, that's what I have to do. And what I also like about the public space of it is that the fact that people can see my screen means I'm not going to click on my email as much, though I do, or read the *Guardian*, or look at my eBay, whatever, I don't know.

Because I feel too embarrassed, I feel like it's clear that I'm not hard at work if I'm doing that, and everybody can see. So that when I talk about escaping my study, that's what I mean is, escaping all those diversions. When my kids were small and there was no internet, then it was a sanctum because it was where I went to write. And while I was in there writing, then that was my primary role rather than being a mother or a partner.

My kids have grown up and gone to university and through university, so I don't have...I don't need my study in that way anymore. And it's true, yes, it's true, it's become much more exposed and vulnerable space with the internet.

RLF: For other writers, the question of whether a view can be a hindrance or a help is a fraught one. Jane Draycott is of the opinion that a window with a good outlook is essential to her work.

Jane Draycott: I think the prerequisite is a window. I find it very difficult to write in a space where my eyes can't alight on some much more distant place. When you start to describe what you need to be able to write, it sounds very precious, but there's something very important about not imaginatively getting close feedback, from a close wall or a close bookcase. I think that has something to do with looking for the poem beyond yourself.

So, when you start to write, in your imagination, you're sort of looking out there, you're looking into a space imagining a street, a room, a space; and there's somebody already there, strangely, and you're sort of following

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that person who's already there, who in some sense must be your projected imagination roaming. And so a window seems very important in that sense. It seems to allow that imaginative travelling to happen more easily.

RLF: Julian Turner agrees that time spent staring into the distance can be very fruitful.

Julian Turner: I think that unfocused staring is very much a part of what creativity is all about. It's almost like one has to ready the mind for the moment in which a set of words will drop into it. And where do these words come from? I think they come from other areas of my brain, which are aiding me in my objectives of trying to be a writer.

My brain is always making helpful suggestions to me; running different kinds of scenarios; enabling me to see new pictures. And it provides the raw materials for every imaginary wandering that I undertake.

RLF: But other writers do not find views helpful; William Palmer deliberately shuts his out.

William Palmer: The writing day is usually the same, I mean, all writers' days are boring. People who say they produce, wonderful, 2000 words a day, or a miserly 300 words a day, it really depends how it's going.

I have a blind in front of the desk on the window, so I can't see anything. Because an awful lot of your day is spent, if you don't have a blind in front of the window, you've spent a lot of the time looking at the clouds passing overhead, or studying the habits of your neighbours across the road, if you have neighbours across the road. If you haven't, you look out at trees and birds and things, anything but writing.

RLF: Although Palmer admits that it's important not to get too precious about distractions.

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William Palmer: It doesn't really matter where you do it or your domestic circumstances because... Cyril Connolly came out with all that rubbish about the perils of the pram in the hall and all this nonsense. Well, Connolly never wrote anything except a few book reviews; these things don't get in the way of writers creating.

You can get a bit cold and heartless towards your family, but short of casting them out into the garden, you have to put up with them really, and they have to put up with you. What gets in your way is lack of nerve sometimes: that you disbelieve in yourself. All the outside nonsense comes in handy as an excuse for not doing your work.

RLF: A quote from a famous writer helps Mary Colson stay on track and find her rhythm when the temptation to waste time becomes strong.

Mary Colson: My office faces north, away from the streets and that's really important because for me I have to have absolute silence. When I was younger, revising for exams, I used to wish I could listen to the radio as I revised, and I never could. I can't have music on, I can't have any distracting sounds, I just need quiet. I have a map of the world on the wall, deliberately behind me; I ignore the world, literally and figuratively. I zone out.

I ignore books and papers and bills on either side, and I tune into the screen. I try and set myself a word count sometimes. I'll think, *Right, two thousand words before the first coffee*. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't. If I'm going through a particularly rough patch, or I'm going through a tricky point in a project, I think of Darwin, one of my other great heroes who said that 'A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life'.

When I think of those words of Darwin, I get a slight panic and a sense of...I suppose, guilt and I think, *Right, okay, best crack on*. So I get the frighteners on me, and I get my head down again. When I get to about

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two or three thousand words, if I'm really rolling, if it's all flowing, I keep going, and I can go on for hours at that point.

It is really about getting into that rhythm, and I feel sometimes like a sort of one-woman amateur orchestra, where everyone's tuning up, but not terribly well, when I first start writing in the day. And gradually we all start becoming more of an ensemble as the day progresses.

RLF: Colson says, however, that deadlines create a very different dynamic and help build a sense of urgency.

Mary Colson: If I'm writing to commission, there is an absolute deadline, so I'm much more time-pressured. So I probably write differently for those days. If I'm writing on one of my own projects, that alone feels like a luxury sometimes. If it's a speculative piece or a long-standing script that I'm working on, and I really indulge in those days when they come.

And I can spend up to twelve or even fifteen hours at my computer thinking about character, plotting, words. I never sleep very well after a good writing day; it's not just the haze from the screen that's awoken my hypothalamus, it's the fact that I don't actually want to leave that story. My body's tired, my brain is too, but there's part of my mind that wants to stay with that story and doesn't want it to finish, I somehow want to stay with those people. Because to be perfectly honest, I spend so much time with them they're like family.

RLF: Michael Bywater is a similar fan of deadlines.

Michael Bywater: The great thing about short-form writing, which is what I mostly did for many years: as a columnist on *Punch*, on *The Observer*, on *The Independent on Sunday*, as a sort of medium to long form – the word I'd use is 'essayist', because it sounds better than 'hack' – the deadline is great because they say it's got to be in at three o'clock, and actually, you know that it really *does* mean it's got to be in at three o'clock.

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You also, after a bit, get to know how quickly you can do it in. And the pressure of the deadline actually frees you up: you can't delay typing anymore, you can't delay getting it done. And I suspect that the difference between people like me and the people who may be telling the truth when they say, 'I'm at my desk at a quarter past seven', is that they impose their own deadlines, and it's just as easy for them as it is for me.

Somebody said to me, now you've got to do a two and a half thousand-word essay on whatever it is, and it's for the comment page and we need the copy in three-and-a-half-hours' time. I think most people would be scared witless. From long practice I think, *Yeah I can do that, that's fine*. And what I do is I go straight...absolutely, without hesitation, straight out of my room, make a cup of coffee, look up things on my iPhone on the internet, because I know I don't need three and a half hours, I actually need two.

The deadline is a great, great help, and whether that's a personality type or whether it's just an innate idleness or fear, or procrastination. I was going to set up a website with Rowan Pelling, call it 'The Procrastination Project', wonderful idea. We haven't done anything about it yet — because there's no deadline!

RLF: For those looking for help with distractions online and elsewhere, an increasing number of apps and tools is available. Jane Rogers has tried several of them out, including the intriguingly named 'Tomato Method'.

Jane Rogers: This was invented by an Italian sociologist when he was a student who observed about himself, the fact that he found it very hard to get down to work when he was studying, and decided that the human brain can only concentrate for a maximum of twenty to twenty-five minutes.

From this he developed a whole methodology, which involves working in bursts of twenty-five minutes, and it's called the Tomato Method because

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in Italy the most common form of timer that you use in your kitchen is shaped like a tomato. And what he would do is he would put the timer on and set it for twenty-five minutes, and he would work for twenty-five minutes and then allow himself a five-minute break.

And he divides the day up into these chunks of twenty-five minutes with five-minute breaks, and then after you've done four lots of twenty-five or something, you get a half-hour break. And this is one of many, many methods of dividing up work into small, manageable chunks, and I suppose they're designed to help people focus their attention.

But also to make them take screen breaks, which obviously are much needed to rest your eyes and stretch your body. And I suppose they're also motivational, so that when people, particularly students, are sitting there contemplating an entire day, stretching ahead of them when they're supposed to write an essay, they can instead say, 'Oh, I'm going to do twenty minutes and work really hard, and then after I've done my four chunks of twenty minutes, I'm allowed half an hour when I can check my emails or go on Facebook or whatever'. I have to say that I tried it for about half an hour before giving up in despair, because at the end of twenty minutes I'd be in the middle of something and didn't want to stop, or you need a toilet break at a time when you're not supposed to stop, or the doorbell goes or the phone rings, and perhaps on some level also it brought out a slightly rebellious spirit where I just thought, *I really don't fancy doing this at all.*

RLF: Strategies for dealing with distraction seem to be as varied as the writers who use them, although perhaps sometimes procrastination is not always a bad thing.

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That was an episode of the *Writers Aloud* podcast, produced by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. The writers featured in this

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episode were: Cynan Jones, Kevin Clancy, Karin Altenberg, Susan Barker, Fiona Shaw, Jane Draycott, Julian Turner, William Palmer, Mary Colson, Michael Bywater, and Jane Rogers. You can find out more about these writers and their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes episode 448 which was recorded by the *Writers Aloud* team and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 449, we take a poetry break with Karin Altenberg and host Julia Copas.

We hope you'll join us.

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Thanks for listening.