

Writers Aloud

Episode 453

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome to *Writers Aloud*, the RLF podcast about writing from the Royal Literary Fund.

In this episode, three Royal Literary Fund writers share their reflections on the link between writing and the world beyond the desk. Starting things off, we have translator Rosalind Harvey discussing the parallels she has found between practising yoga and developing a regular writing habit.

Rosalind Harvey: 'A Yoga Mat of One's Own.'

While I have worked on other people's books for many years in my job as a literary translator, it is only in the last two or three that I've started seriously to write my own material from scratch. In the first lockdown, I realised I could no longer ignore the growing host of post-it notes on the wall in my study, with scribbled-down ideas, reflections and links, snippets that demanded, increasingly loudly, to become more than just snippets.

As I gathered these together, and added them to other bits of writing I've been making in notebooks for a while now, I felt a practice emerging. It's still not fully formed, and will doubtless evolve over the next few years and months, but at the moment it's fascinating to me to chart it as it develops, as well as to chart it in comparison to the development of another practice of mine that also emerged during lockdown, a yoga practice.

These two practices, I believe, have more than a little in common. I have done yoga in some form or other for quite a while, attending classes semi-

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regularly for the past ten years or so, enjoying the feel of various stretches and poses ironing out some of the kinks in my muscles, appreciating how having a fixed appointment with a group of relative strangers helps get me out of the house after a day spent typing at my desk.

I never did yoga at home though, partly due to a lack of space; when I first started doing it, I lived in small flats with minimal floor space. But even when there was room, yoga felt like something I went elsewhere to do. It was compartmentalised, not connected to how I lived or to my domestic routine in any way.

I did yoga in almost the same way that I did the food shopping. It was something on a to-do list to be crossed off, which brought me a vague sense of satisfaction after completing it, but was quite separate to my sense of self. I didn't have any equipment, not even a mat, I used to just use the mats at whatever yoga studio I attended, and so it was easy not to think about yoga when I was home.

Once lockdown hit, however, there were no more yoga classes. By this point, I did have my own yoga mat and a few other bits of kit: some blocks, a strap, a blanket. And after a recommendation from a fellow translator, I started following a particular instructor online, whose videos were accessible, easy to follow, and rarely longer than thirty minutes.

Coincidentally, thirty minutes is also often touted as being a do-able chunk into which to fit one's daily writing practice. Google 'Write for thirty minutes a day', and there are countless articles on how to make this manageable writing schedule work for you. I had always found this instructor's style somewhat saccharine, but in that strange period of the first lockdown, which unfolded without the consolation of the so-called 'Support Bubbles' for people living on their own as I was, starting my day, doing yoga with a friendly instructor on a screen became a way to feel a little less alone, not to mention a little more limber, and I embraced her sweet earnestness wholeheartedly. In those particularly bleak days,

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early on in the pandemic, when we couldn't see or connect physically with other people, when we weren't sure of anything, the act of rolling out my yoga mat on some mornings became an immediate way to quiet and calm my thoughts, even before I'd started the practice.

I'm not going to pretend it was every morning. A practice doesn't have to be every day to feel or to count as regular, something which also serves as consolation to me as a still-developing writer. At around the same time, I was discovering that if I was going to take this writing thing seriously, I would need to do the same as I was doing with yoga, make space for it in my day.

Just as I had gone to yoga classes for years, but never until the pandemic really taken it seriously, so I had taken notes for several years towards a piece of writing, but hadn't ever integrated that note taking in any real sense into my working week.

I started writing more, in part to deal with the difficulties of lockdown, and to try and put into words many of the doubts I was feeling. One of the reasons people do exercise is to prevent aches and pains in their bodies. This is why I didn't really appreciate the value of yoga when I was in my twenties. I didn't have any aches or pains then, I recall somewhat ruefully, in my forty-first year.

And although we clearly cannot extinguish the possibility of death, or eventual physical decline, through yoga or any form of exercise, it is possible for us to stave off some of time's effects and to feel, for the brief period that we are on the mat, that we are calm, in control of our bodies and our breathing and able to bolster ourselves against ageing, to feel powerful in our legs, arms and hearts.

And so perhaps it is also possible for us to extinguish doubt through writing, at least temporarily, whilst we are on the page or until something else comes along to complicate our thoughts on a particular matter.

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Both yoga and writing are all too easy to put off, to procrastinate from; I frequently find my brain arguing: *But if I take half an hour out of my morning to do yoga, then I won't have enough time in the day to work.*

Or, if it's the evening, *I'm too tired now, and I have to make dinner, clean the house, prepare for the morning.* The arguments for not finding space for writing can sound just as compelling: *If I sit down to write, it will be hard and I might produce something mediocre, or bad, or not quite what I want, or nothing at all.*

Since, for me, writing as opposed to translating is still a relatively new practice, and hasn't yet had the shine taken off it by such mundane things as deadlines, rejections, and competition, it doesn't quite feel like work in the way that translation has done for some time, and yet I still find myself arguing with my own brain about when and how often to do it.

Both practices, for me, come out of the same need, manifested differently, to undo knots, to work through tension: the tension built up over a day sitting at a desk, and the tension that builds in the mind when one is uncertain or uneasy about something. One manifests in the body, the other in the mind, which is of course just a *part* of the body.

Yoga and writing help me to loosen or articulate a kind of inchoate anxiety I often feel I hold in my body. This is sometimes physical, due to not having moved or sweated enough to keep my limbs and joints healthy and release any cortisol that has built up due to stress. But it's sometimes mental, due to there being a mush of worries in the mind, that have not been fully explored.

They sit just beneath my consciousness, a squat toad of angst without a calming pool to swim in.

It would be simplistic, perhaps, to say that writing can get rid of worries or solve problems that are causing us anxiety, but for me, writing can start

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to iron out some of the tangles of anxiety, allowing me to see more clearly what it is that I am worrying about, which often has the effect of releasing at least some of the tension from my grip.

Sometimes the tension that is left over is just the physical memory of an anxiety that I have held in my muscles, and yoga can help to release these last remnants. Yoga teachers love to say, ‘The emotions are stored in the hips.’ I remember scoffing at this when I first heard it years ago, only to later be astonished at how often I would end up weeping quietly during a particularly powerful releasing pose in a class.

I haven’t yet had a cathartic weep after a writing session, although I guess it’s early days. I used to run, but can no longer do so due to painful knees and lower-back issues. I loved running though, the simplicity of it, the fact that you don’t need any equipment aside from a good pair of trainers. You just put on your running shoes, leave the house and immediately you are doing exercise.

I love swimming too, although swimming involves faff, you have to be prepared enough to have a bag ready packed with your costume, goggles, etc. and actually get to a pool. Yoga is similar in that it does involve some kit, a mat, a loose comfy outfit, but you don’t always have to get to a class. If you develop an at-home practice as I did, you can do your yoga right there in your living room, as long as you have enough space. Although I realise this isn’t the case for everyone.

It involves movements that don’t come as naturally to a human being as running. You have to learn what *Downward Dog* is, how to support your neck in a headstand and whether you need to use a block in *Supta Baddha Konasana* pose. And for this reason, it somehow feels more like writing; it’s not natural, but it can become so. And when you know enough poses and are in the middle of a practice, you can go into a sort of flow state, just as when you’re deeply involved in writing something.

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Yoga teachers also often talk about *just showing up at the mat*, in which I hear the echo of the instruction to writers to *just show up at the page*. It's this space-finding aspect of both practices that I find the most interesting. In the same way that developing a yoga practice can provide you with a temporary, clearly demarcated space in which to carry out your practice, even if this involves nothing more than sitting still and focusing on your breathing for ten minutes, so finding a seat on a train with a view out of a window and opening your notebook can give you a temporary, clearly demarcated space in which to write a few sentences.

When I first started writing in addition to translating, I found myself migrating around the house. After around 3pm, when I felt unable to continue working on someone else's book, I would move to the dining room downstairs, where all of a sudden the light and the energy were different. I sat on a different chair, worked on my laptop rather than at the ergonomic yet complicated setup of laptop plus large external screen, separate mouse and keyboard.

And I saw through the window a slightly alternative view of the houses across the road, a reduced strip of the sky, but more of my green and purple buddleia plant. This shift of no more than a few feet downward somehow afforded me the sense that I was somewhere else, that I had changed roles slightly, and that I now had a little more time, an hour, sometimes two, in which to create, and to create my own words rather than hanging my own on someone else's.

While I agree with the oft-stated premise that literary translators are writers, there is something qualitatively different about writing your own work, which I find is reflected in the energy I need to do both, and the energy each activity gives me. And I needed this new space, another room, a different chair, new light, to develop my writing, just as I needed a mat, and around thirty minutes each day to develop a yoga practice.

Last year when I started as a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow, I found

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I had new blank spaces in which to write: on the train, in unknown cafés, and in my hotel, which also became a new place in which to do yoga.

There's something almost too pat about the analogy I'm making here: the yoga mat a blank rectangle upon which you produce a series of movements that together make up a practice; the white rectangle of the paper, or Word document, upon which you produce a series of black marks or words and sentences that together make up a piece of writing.

But it's a little more than that, I think; it's developing an awareness that you have a space that you can always go to, to do your yoga or your writing. The mat and the page are physical spaces you turn up to in order to do your thing. But also conceptual spaces, or periods of time that you are aware of as possibilities, as places you have recourse to when you need to untangle something. Whether that be a knot of muscles in your neck after a day spent typing, or a knot of confusion in your mind after a day spent worrying or overthinking a problem.

Perhaps the time when an at-home yoga practice feels closest to a writing practice is when I choose not to find a video on YouTube to follow, a class that I hope might fit my mood or the particular aches or pains I'm feeling on that day, but instead simply move my body intuitively, no screens involved and transition from one posture to the next, finding what feels good, and making a practice up as I go along. The first method often feels easier, I don't have to think, just follow whatever the instructor tells me to do, and the movements and transitions are preordained. In a similar way, when I translate, the structure is there, and while of course we do *think* as we translate, there is a little less to think about.

When I write, however, it is more free form, a little scarier. I transition from one sentence to the next, finding what feels good, or what sounds good, and making the piece up as I go along. What results is a little messier, probably, a little more organic, and may well be terrible, but it is mine. I made it, and it is attuned to me more intimately than any book by another writer, or any class on YouTube ever could be.

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These two practices will probably always be linked for me now, in the way they help me process my way through difficult things, whether that be through scribbling something down that's happened in the day, or moving my body until I feel like I am strong or flexible enough to cope with the world. It always feels particularly satisfying when I manage to do both in one day.

A typical Thursday evening now often contains both some yoga and some writing. I finish my final RLF slot of the day, grab my overnight bag and yoga mat and head to my budget hotel down the road. After checking in, I make myself a cup of tea, do half an hour of yoga or some simple stretches, and then head downstairs to try and catch happy hour in the bar.

I buy myself a beer or a small glass of wine, find a seat near a window, order some food on a delivery app, and then settle down to eavesdrop, think, and write while I wait for my dinner to arrive. It's not a huge amount of time. Something between half an hour to an hour, depending on when my last student comes to see me, and how fast the restaurant is able to cook my meal.

But the point is that it is *my* time, a slot I have carved out for myself each week. And, like developing an at home yoga practice when all the gyms were closed, and my body was craving movement, it is a space I know I can return to, even when I can't get to a hotel. It may be that the energising thrill of writing wears off after too long, and it becomes more of a chore.

I'm sure that once I've published more original work and been held hostage by writer's block or the curious ambivalence of prizes, that it may feel less like stretching my mind and more like having it squeezed. But I know that as long as I can find a space where I can largely switch off from the outside world and either roll out my yoga mat or open my notebook, then I will be able to produce something.

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RLF: Rosalind Harvey there. While not all writers practice yoga regularly, many find going for a walk in nature is an important part of the creative process. In our next section, poet and nonfiction writer Garry MacKenzie shares what the natural world means to him.

Garry MacKenzie: Writers used to turn to nature as a symbol of permanence. In the twentieth century, people faced countless social and political upheavals, and it was tempting to portray the climate, the landscape, and the wild species which we live alongside as reassuringly unchanging. In the nineteen seventies the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney could argue that, ‘It is to the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity’.

Nearly fifty years on from Heaney’s statement, man-made environmental problems are undeniable and undermine the notion of nature as a source of comforting stability. The world is getting hotter, largely because of the burning of fossil fuels; microplastics have been found in the deepest parts of the ocean and in unborn babies.

Extinction rates are terrifyingly high, and climate change, drought, and rising sea levels will lead to mass migrations of species as well as people over the coming decades. How should a writer respond to this context? Is writing now an unnecessary luxury? People need the arts in order to help them make sense of the world.

From storytelling to sculpture, art isn’t just entertainment or escapism. It provides stories about how we relate to each other and to the world around us. Paying attention to these stories can shift our priorities, helping us to live in a rapidly changing environment. Society is in urgent need of new narratives, beyond the pretence that the Earth’s resources are infinite and that it’s essential to preserve business as usual.

I’m drawn to writing which situates humans as one animal among many, with obligations towards other creatures. A great example is Aminatta

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Forna's novel *Happiness*. Even in scenes which take place in central London, the reader is drawn out of a purely anthropocentric viewpoint and led to reflect on the bonds which connect us with other species as well as with other people.

I'm fascinated by Barbara Gowdy's novel, *The White Bone*, which centres on the needs and priorities of a group of elephants and imagines an entire culture for them based on ecological studies of elephant behaviour. And I love the poetry of Thomas A. Clark, which meditates on such ordinary, beautiful occurrences as birdsong, branches shaking in the wind and the sound of water.

In Clark's poems, the human self seems to dissolve into a greater whole. I don't think there's a single rule for how a contemporary author should write about nature any more than there's a single rule for how the work should engage with society. But if literature has a role to play in creating new ways of understanding our relationship to the world around us, and forging a new culture fit for the coming decades, then writers should be humble, open to the intrinsic worth of other beings.

They should embrace nuance; landscapes are complex interactions of weather, geology, species' populations, predation, decay, pollution, and many other factors. Evidence of human intervention for good and ill can be found everywhere on earth. To assume nature's unchanging stability is no longer an option.

RLF: That was Garry MacKenzie. Finally, family life can provide a challenging backdrop against which to work. Crime writer and former journalist David Mark shares his perspective on trying to strike a work/life balance.

David Mark: I'll get the disclaimer out of the way first: I'm very fortunate, I'm not moaning, I don't want you to think I feel sorry for myself, or aggrieved, or that charitable organisations should be holding telethons and fundraisers to draw attention to my plight!

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I get to write books for a living, and that makes me intensely happy. I'm dangerously close to contentment. However, I have quite a lot of children, my partner brought three to the party, I brought one, and we decided that making one together would be a good idea too. Then we got cats and a dog and moved to the countryside.

There's no rural bus service, the kids go to school ten miles away. My partner goes to university forty miles away. My nearest Tesco is twelve miles in one direction or thirteen the other. My youngest is at nursery, but not every day. So let me introduce myself: I'm David Mark, full-time novelist. I publish two books a year, I'm not quite sure how.

This morning, I awoke in my daughter's bed; she'd decamped from hers and climbed into mine, and I'd been slapped and nut-punched into submission, retreating to her tiny little cot bed. She woke me again at six, demanding porridge. I have some edits to work through on my latest book, they were due back last week, but my editor is a pleasant sort, who doesn't bug me unless she really has to.

But today simply has to be the day I get them done. As such, I've driven into the nearest town three times, depositing and collecting teenagers. The youngest has declared herself too ill for nursery, she appears to still have the energy of a spring hare on Red Bull, and the administrators are chasing me for the cost of a school trip she didn't go on, but which we'd agreed to.

This afternoon I have to work out whether it's financially more sensible to drive an extra eight miles to the slightly cheaper petrol station to fill up the Ford. But I can only do that provided the multimillion-pound publishing house remembers to settle the invoice I sent them three weeks ago. And if they don't, well, something will turn up.

I've recently agreed a new contract with my publishers. They're expecting two books from me before the end of the year. I'll definitely write them.

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The first job will be trying to find the email that contained my original proposal, because I sent it a year ago and can't actually remember the plot. I have my ideas while driving, which is why I often find myself a hundred and fifty miles from home with no memory of how I got there, having followed a good idea all the way to Hull.

I'm being interviewed for a magazine later. They'll no doubt ask me about my writing routine and how I find the time to produce critically acclaimed, if commercially middling, novels. I'll give them a glib answer, because the truth is, I don't know. But I do know that the four year old just started crying, and is running around the dining room wearing just her knickers, and appears to have snapped the top two feet off the yucca plant. Still, I'll get to the edits eventually.

RLF outro: David Mark there, concluding this episode, which was produced by Ann Morgan. There's more information about the writers we heard from today on the Royal Literary Fund website. Next time, Royal Literary Fund writers explore the ethical, mental and emotional challenges of writing about real people and situations.

We hope you'll join us.