

Writers Aloud

Episode 395

I**NTRODUCTION:** Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Episode Intro: Hello and welcome to episode 395 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the first part of a two-part interview, Lucy Flannery speaks with Catherine O'Flynn about internal monologues; making the leap into writing comedy; thinking as an important aspect of working; and the act of writing as achieving a balance between crippling self-doubt and alarming chutzpah!

Catherine O'Flynn: Lucy Flannery is an award-winning writer with credits in radio, theatre, film, TV, fiction and nonfiction. Her short play *Bear Hunt* was performed at the Ink Festival in spring 2022. She was a finalist in the Exeter Novel Prize, leads the *Get Playwriting!* and Script Lab courses at the Chichester Festival Theatre, and is a member of the Writer's Guild of Great Britain Audio and London Southeast Committees. Lucy was the 2020 writer resident at the University of Plymouth in association with Literature Works.

Her credits include: *A Business Affair* with Christopher Walken, *Like a Daughter* with Alison Steadman, *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *Tomorrow Will Be Too Late* and various magazines and anthologies. Her radio sitcoms *Rent* and *Any Other Business* are regularly repeated on BBC Radio 4 Extra. She's co-written two plays with Greg Mosse: *Poisoned Beds*, about the decline of the oyster industry in a south coast fishing town, and *Lydia and George*, which takes up the narrative twenty years after the end of *Pride and Prejudice*.

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She was the creator of Havant Literary Festival and a core writer for You, Me & Everyone, which has been confirmed by Arts Council England as the biggest crowd sourced literary art event in the UK. Lucy is now an RLF Consultant Fellow. I spoke to Lucy at her home in Havant.

Catherine O'Flynn: Hi Lucy. Thanks for talking to me today.

Lucy Flannery: Hello.

Catherine O'Flynn: It seems to me from the outside that you are a prolific, productive, busy writer; lots of projects under your belt, but it always seems like you've got quite a lot going on at one time. Does it feel that way a lot of the time for you?

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, I think it's famine or feast like most writers. Yes, sometimes if I stop and add it up, all the different projects in my head and all the different characters, it would be like some sort of sprawling epic like *War and Peace*. But fortunately they all live in their little compartments, so if you think of it as a kind of road, I can focus on number 11 and the bungalow, and while I'm focusing on number 11 and the bungalow, I can forget about the people in the big mystery, strange, sinister house at the end of the road and all that. I'm not sure how far this metaphor is going to stretch!

Catherine O'Flynn: That's a brilliant metaphor!

Lucy Flannery: Stretched to breaking point!

Catherine O'Flynn: I was listening to a podcast with you recently, and you said something about – actually taking it out context it sounds pretentious, but it wasn't pretentious at all – you said that writing's in your DNA and that a facility and a fascination with language has been with you for as long as you remember. I'm really interested in that, can you talk a little bit about your early memories of that, of how you began to be aware of that or your interest in language?

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Lucy Flannery: Yes, like many writers, I was a prodigious reader, but even before then I had an interest in stories in a way I can't really articulate. Even as a child I can remember processing stuff in my mind as if I was giving it narrative form and I thought that's what everybody did. I thought that's what thinking was. And then as I grew older, I realized that's not necessarily the case at all.

So I think that's always been in me, that seeing things from that writerly point of view: if I was telling someone the story of this strange trip to the supermarket and the row I just had in the car park, I'm always putting it in those kind of anecdotal terms. But possibly a little bit more, because everybody does that obviously; everyone sort of spins and then there's, 'and then you won't *believe* what he said!' you know, everybody does that; I think that's just a human attribute, but I think I've always taken it slightly one step further and that's the thing that makes me a writer. And yes I've always loved words; I've always loved puzzles and things like palindromes and everything. I'm not clever, I couldn't go on Only Connect and score lots of points. I occasionally get one and I'm incredibly, insufferably proud and smug for the rest of the evening. And it sometimes carries me over into a University Challenge and stands me in good stead.

But one of the things I do do is, I've always turned words backwards in my mind, and my son, who's also a writer, also does that. And again, this is something that I thought everybody did, you know, that kind of word play...

Catherine O'Flynn: So instantly you can just visualize a word backwards?

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, pretty much, up to about three or four syllables. After that I might have to stop and take a breath. I can see a gleam in your eye Catherine!

Catherine O'Flynn: I'm not going to start throwing words at you! It just

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seems to be one of those amazing superpowers. It's like: if only there was some way I could apply this, that would help the world.

Lucy Flannery: Superwoman! Yeah, that would be me; I could see me in a cape!

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah, either save the world or if it was somehow monetizable!

Lucy Flannery: Wouldn't that be wonderful? Yes, it's like spelling bees, isn't it, I know people in America or children obviously, win huge cash prizes. So if only there was some sort of equivalent for turning words backwards, and people found this worthy of attention! And gain!

Catherine O'Flynn: Oh, maybe your day will come. Maybe one day there'll be some massive computer failure that means they really need people who can turn words backwards!

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, I'm sure it's only a matter of time!

Catherine O'Flynn: So you were saying that that sense of imposing narrative on the world around you was something that you were doing when you were young, perhaps to a greater extent than other people were, even though you might not have been aware of it. Were you one of those children who in the playground would be saying: *oh, this is what happened to me last night*, or was it more of an internal thing. Were you sharing those stories with other people or not so much?

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, a bit of both I think. I think there was always this kind of internal monologue going on in my head that was impossible to shut down. And yes, I did use to write stories from quite a young and precocious age, some of which were atrocious obviously, but some weren't that bad, for a six-year-old, seven-year-old. Yeah. So I've always had that thing of being very comfortable with a pen in my hand; being very happy with a notebook in front of me.

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And the other thing I always think about writing is, a huge amount of it for me personally – and I think for a lot of writers – is the thinking. I never actually, or very rarely do I, sit down and start writing something that I haven't thought about for a very, very long time, in some cases literally years. In fact, there's a quote, which I thought was Einstein and then discovered it's actually Charlie Chaplin, which is annoying, but you know, Charlie Chaplin's okay!

Which is, 'The real work was thinking, just thinking.' And I think, yeah, that is me, because it looks like I'm staring gormlessly out of the window, but actually I'm working because I'm turning something over in my mind.

Catherine O'Flynn: When you're doing that do you worry that, *am I actually just staring out the window?*, do you think, *no, I know I'm working, this is fine, this is a valid thing to do.* Because I find as a writer, it's quite hard sometimes to justify that thinking time and separating it from literally when I am just staring vacantly.

Lucy Flannery: Yeah, I think the staring vacantly is quite important because I think that's the other thing about *any* creative person: I think you can't constantly be outputting, you have to have some input as well. So I think it's really important to get stimulus from wherever you get your stimulus, be it books or theatre or telly, film or other forms of art or even things like football.

And also of course, when you're a writer, everything is copy. You know, it's just like the overheard conversations. I know it's an absolute cliché but it's true, they are *gold*, and little snippets of things in papers. I wrote a one-act play called *Bear Hunt*, which was triggered by something I saw about chatbots for people who'd lost their spouse and they were comforted in their grief by having this chatbot.

And what an extraordinary thing, that set off a whole trail of thought. And I wrote this really successful little one-act play, which really resonates with audiences I'm pleased to say. So you need the kind of gormless, vacant,

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vapidity I think, and have that input as well as the churning over. But it's all kind of part of the same process, I think, because at what point does just idly watching a film become, like, six months later, you suddenly remember something in that film, which triggers something else, which aligns with a bit of overheard dialogue, or a snatch of conversation you've heard, or an image you saw, and it all kind of joins together suddenly.

I'm fascinated by ideas because I remember sometimes literally where I was when I had such and such an idea for such and such a thing. And I remember once cleaning the bath and I was literally leaning over, and I thought isn't it extraordinary that an idea doesn't exist in one second and then the next second it does. And you can't explain that quicksilver; it's like alchemy.

Catherine O'Flynn: That's a very encouraging way of thinking about those sort of fallow periods, all those kind of cleaning-the-bath moments, that that idea could be just around the corner. So as well as the sense that it was in your DNA, writing, did you grow up in a literary household, were there books around when you were little?

Lucy Flannery: Yes, not many. We weren't affluent at all, so very few *bought* books, but that was quite nice because when it was my birthday, I got a book token and I got to go and choose books and that was always incredibly exciting.

But of course the library, which is such a huge part of so many peoples' lives; my mother was an avid library goer. I'm the youngest of five, so there were older sisters and a brother who were all also using the library, especially my oldest sister, who's also my godmother. She's tragically not with us anymore, but she was a huge influence on me, and she bought me some of the most formative books of my childhood really. I remember she bought me *Tales of the Greek Heroes* by Roger Lancelyn Green, for I think my ninth birthday, which really has been a lifelong influence on me. I've retold some of the Greek myths from the point of view of women and have enjoyed those stories in many forms over the years. And literally

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that seed was planted there by my oldest, my beloved sister Zita, who gave me that book and many others. That's just the most striking example. So yeah, I think, just having books around.

The other thing that struck me quite recently was that we had a lot of book club books, those hardbacks from the nineteen-fifties. And clearly they were just given to my family, I don't even think necessarily to my Mum. I suspect they were been given to my Grandmother who then passed them on to my Mum. So I've read a lot of these relatively obscure books, in quite nice, strong, hardback form and I can still see those covers, most of them had lost their dust jackets, but they had that very nice kind of round archway thing on the spine. It was very, very distinctive. It's always nice in a secondhand shop, sometimes you see them, it's like greeting an old friend.

Catherine O'Flynn: So I'm going ask you more specifically in a moment about comedy writing, but could you just tell me: what was your path into writing from enjoying it as a child; what was your path initially into writing as a career?

Lucy Flannery: Well, I always wanted to be a writer, but I didn't really think it was for the likes of me. So I went off and got a job and got a career. I worked in local government, and through my twenties I was increasingly frustrated at not being able to write. I did write, but I just didn't write anything formally; I used to write very, very funny letters to family members and friends, masterpieces, some of them really, they should have won an award!

And that's how I scratched that itch. And then, I used to do – people often do this – I was like the workplace clown, I was always writing silly skits and joke memos and going around and everything, which everybody found hilarious, or they told me they found was hilarious. They probably found it quite irritating! And then it got to the stage where I was thinking: *Well, if you're serious about this, you ought to do it! You ought to actually put your money where your mouth is and do it.* And also I kept getting promoted

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and I thought, *There'll come a time when I won't be able to afford to give up a proper job, so really I've got to just jump* – and I don't recommend this to anybody, certainly not now, these are perilous times – but I did actually just jack it in and go for it, because I felt that was the only way that I was going to make it work for me, I had to demonstrate to myself that I was that serious. And I gave myself two years and I think it was just coming up to almost the second year and I got my first writing contract. So I was really lucky, really incredibly lucky it was right place, right time.

My very first job was actually in TV, which is weird, writing an episode of a sitcom, that doesn't really happen now, it barely happened then, I still can't really explain it. I think at the time they were just aware that there weren't that many women writers around. And I think the producer just decided to give me a go because they were effectively running a writers' room on a longstanding very popular sitcom. LWT, if you remember that far back, London Weekend Television on a Sunday night, *Family Affair*.

Around about the same time I got picked off the slush pile at Radio Four. They had an intake of new producers just started and I think they divvied up the slush pile between them. That was like their first terrible job, to clear all the scripts that had come in.

And I was just very, very lucky to connect with someone who read my script and thought it was funny and contacted me. And we took it from there. So that's how I started off. My first proper credit was in TV sitcom and then my second credit was I had a series, they commissioned me for a pilot initially, then they reviewed it and said, *Yes, we're going to take it to a series*.

We went to four series with that and I won an award. So, how incredibly lucky was I and how blessed, fortunate to connect with all those people and a wonderful cast and everything. Yeah, absolutely great, but a very strange path: most people in comedy, they start off doing the one-liners for *Week Ending* and *Newsjack*, that kind of thing. And then they gradually build up a portfolio that way.

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I've never been successful, I've never really tried, but I have occasionally had a go at sketch writing and it's not something that I can do really or not do well, not do well enough. So it doesn't work for me. So I was just very, very fortunate that that kind of avenue opened up.

Catherine O'Flynn: That's incredible. What I found really interesting about what you were saying there was that thing of writing funny letters to family members and things like that. I think that's really under-appreciated or under-acknowledged as a route into writing, because sometimes when you're doing writing events and people say: *How did you get into writing, how did you find your voice?* or whatever, and I think so often people don't actually think: well, you've been writing, and maybe you've been writing really hilarious emails to your friends for years, or maybe you've just been honing your storytelling tales, talking to pals at work on a Monday, but we do that don't we and I think...

Lucy Flannery: Yes. And of course what's really nice now is I think Twitter is providing a platform, especially for women, to be very, very funny. And there are actually stories of women getting publishing contracts because their Twitter feed is so hilarious and they've got such a unique take on the world, that it's been spotted, which is lovely.

How lovely the gatekeepers are seeing all this talent around and finding alternative ways into the industry, I think that's wonderful, really wonderful. But you're right, looking back I can see that I was honing my craft. Although I wouldn't have said that at the time, I wouldn't even have understood the term at the time I think, but yes, I used to...I didn't send the first draft off, I'd send off the third draft when I'd really refined it, to get every last juice of clarity out of whatever it was I was wringing dry there. So yeah, I was learning how to put funny prose together.

Catherine O'Flynn: Yeah. I think that's totally valid, people totally undervalue that part of themselves, but it's really valuable. And so you started off with comedy and you said you didn't start writing gags or

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doing sketches, you were writing scripts. What was it that drew you to comedy, was it just watching it on telly, growing up loving it, or were you just naturally a funny person or was it more a love of comedy watching?

Lucy Flannery: Well, I think I'm hilarious, obviously! Yes, I have always enjoyed comedy. I've always really, really liked comedy, but I never, again, really thought of it as something that *I* could do. I did once in the stand-up craze, think I might have a go and then I took two aspirin and laid down in a darkened room for half an hour and came to my senses!

I thought I was a novelist, growing up that's what a writer was, somebody who wrote books. And I had many an unfinished draft, first draft of an appalling first novel in various bottom drawers. And I couldn't do it. And in that time that I was describing when I was getting frustrated with myself thinking: *Well if you're serious about this, why don't you get on and finish the damn thing, why don't you do it, why don't you?* And it literally was – this is going to sound, again, like the most appalling cliché – but I did have a light-bulb moment when I suddenly thought: *Actually, I could write comedy and I could actually write, specifically, drama rather than people talking. And other people can say these words that I'm writing, rather than me just writing it down and people read them. Maybe I could do that.* And that was literally quite life changing, but it hadn't even occurred to me before that that was something that I could do.

And once I saw that, that's what gave me the impetus to actually get on and jack in the job and go for it. And as I said, I was really, really fortunate. Also I should mention that I sent material off to a few comedians at the time. And looking back, I think: God, I go hot with shame, how appalling it was really! And the only person who wrote back was Lenny Henry, who bless his heart, he wrote me a handwritten note back. Which was incredibly encouraging and saying: this was good, this was good, this needs more work, good luck. And I thought: *What a sweet person, incredibly kind, that this random woman that contacts you out of nowhere, and you've taken the trouble just to come back.* I'd love to meet him one day, just to say: thanks

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so much, that meant a lot to me, that really did mean a lot. Yes. So I did have a light-bulb moment and I did suddenly think: *Oh yes, I can actually write drama and scripts rather than the novels.*

And now I *can* write novels, but I had to go through that long, long process first, not that it was like an apprenticeship, but that absolutely was where I was at, absolutely. And if I hadn't had that long, long experience and that refinement of that particular area of craft, I certainly wouldn't be able to write novels now, I still would be rubbish. Hopefully, I'm not rubbish anymore.

And it's like theatre, I came to theatre incredibly late and again, it was just this absolute belief I was not clever enough. You know, I wasn't intellectual enough, I didn't have the education: the formal education. It wasn't again, for the like of me. And again, of course, I found actually I could do it, I could, it was all right, I could actually do it.

Catherine O'Flynn: You must be brave to take on those challenges, because it can be overwhelming that sense: like, this isn't for me. First of all giving up your job the way you did, so there's that blend of self-doubt and self-belief, I guess, that you're constantly grappling with...

Lucy Flannery: And isn't that true of every writer really: crippling self-doubt and alarming chutzpah is what gets you through really. You have to have a bit of both, I think, and try and keep the scales relatively level.

Catherine O'Flynn: Absolutely. So who were your comic influences when you were writing your funny letters and not necessarily thinking *I'm going to write comedy*, but what were the sort of comedy things you'd see on TV and you'd think, *I wish I could do that* or *I love that*?

Lucy Flannery: Well, going back to childhood, I used to really enjoy sitcoms. And obviously as I got older, Monty Python, you can't escape that I think. And I had to watch it with a very disapproving parent in

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the room. To this day, I can still hear my mother: ‘Humph! Well, it’s just ridiculous isn’t it? That’s not funny, it’s just ridiculous!’ And always having to get past that.

And then when I was writing my funny letters, things like *The Young Ones* and the great Rick Mayall and *French and Saunders*, all those really terrific things. And again, I think that was part of it, that suddenly it wasn’t old men looking like they were playing snooker in bow ties and everything, doing these mother-in-law jokes in working-men’s clubs, the air blue with cigar smoke, kind of thing.

So I think that was part of the Rock & Roll then of the eighties and that anyone could do stand-up. Although, as I said, I couldn’t do stand-up clearly! It was part of the thing of: oh yes, actually maybe comedy is something that I can do.

Catherine O’Flynn: As you say, watching Monty Python with a disapproving parent: I remember my dad used to go out to the pub most evenings and I would always be really really trying to chivvy him out of the door on nights when *The Young Ones* were going to be on, because I knew he’d hate it and I wouldn’t really be able to watch it with him in the room. So I’d always be like: *Oh it’s about time for the pub!* And then anxiously checking he wasn’t coming back too early. There’s nothing more painful than watching comedy with someone who doesn’t find it funny, it’s excruciating.

Lucy Flannery: Except possibly watching *Top of the Pops* through the nineteen-seventies with some parents who were appalled, because I go right back to Glam Rock!

And they’re: ‘Look at the state of that!’, but it was great, it was great to be alive.

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Episode Outro: That was Lucy Flannery in conversation with Catherine O’Flynn. You can find out more about Lucy on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 395, which was recorded by Catherine O’Flynn and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 396 in the second part of this interview, Lucy speaks with Catherine about creative phases, live theatre and adapting the classics. We hope you’ll join us.

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