Writers Aloud

Episode 397

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 397 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in 'Three Little Things', the writer Michael Bond, and our host Julia Copus speak about three objects that have a special significance in Michael's writing life and Michael passes on three of his top writing tips.

Julia Copus: Welcome to another episode of the *Writers Aloud* 'Three Little Things' podcast series from the Royal Literary Fund in which we talk with writers about their work and writing life through the medium of three objects that have particular significance for them. We also ask our guests to offer up three pieces of advice that might be a help to you in your own writing journey.

Today's guest is science writer, Michael Bond. Michael began his career as a science journalist and for six years was senior editor at the *New Scientist*. He writes about human psychology and behaviour, and is particularly interested in the many ways in which we are influenced by our social and physical surroundings; how the people that we are with and the places we know affect what we do and think.

Among his publications are *The Power of Others*, which won the 2015 British Psychological Society Book of the Year Award. The book we'll be discussing today is the fascinating *Wayfinding: The Art and Science of How We Find and Lose Our Way*, published by Picador in the UK and by

Harvard University Press in the States under a different title, *From Here to There*.

The book explores the processes of human navigation, how our brains make the cognitive maps that keep us orientated and how in turn our interactions with landscape affect both our memory and cognition. Michael lives in a cottage on a farm in Hampshire with a cat called Cecil.

So how are you and Cecil doing today?

Michael Bond: Well, it's a very quiet day in the cottage, and Cecil has spent the last half an hour on my lap, which is actually not very helpful as a writer, but he's gone off somewhere now.

Julia Copus: He may be back.

Michael Bond: He probably will be.

Julia Copus: Yeah, we have had cat appearances in previous podcasts.

Michael Bond: Well, it's quite difficult to get him to vocalize, so, he'll be a silent presence.

Julia Copus: Even better. Now Michael, one of the reasons that I was so keen to talk to you is that I think of myself as someone with quite a poor sense of direction. I do think it's improved a bit, but I remember some years ago, and I was trying to think this morning when it was, I think it was around the year 2000 or early 2000s, a TV program where they tried to find the best orienteer out of a fairly random group of ten members of the public or something like that.

And I remember that it was won by a woman who had been teased by her family and friends for having such a rubbish sense of direction. So I'm just wondering whether you feel that that self-assessment of our own sense of direction is always reliable.

Michael Bond: I think self-assessment does seem to be reliable because you learn through life whether you are good at finding your way or bad at it. And so if you ask someone whether they think they're good or bad, their answer probably reflects their ability. But the other thing to remember is that these things are not set in early life necessarily and it is possible to improve, and your experience growing up and as an adult, and where you live and things like that, they do affect it. So, if you've been told you are not much good, don't lose hope, would be my advice.

Julia Copus: Yeah. I don't think they asked this woman how she felt about her own sense of direction. It was just that she said she had a reputation, so maybe she kind of played up to it or something, I don't know.

Anyway, your passion for this subject comes across very strongly in the book. And you just said something there about early life and you talk about how we learn to navigate as children. And part of the way that we do that is by this kind of aimless wandering about and exploring, and not being afraid to take wrong turns and so on.

So, first of all, I suppose many parents nowadays are less comfortable about allowing their children to wander about in that way than perhaps in previous generations. But my specific question is, how do you think the pandemic might have affected this sort of learning for young children?

Michael Bond: Well, the one reason over the last thirty years that children haven't been allowed to roam as freely, is traffic. And parents are just understandably reluctant to allow their children to wander around where there are cars, but during the early lockdown stage of the pandemic, there wasn't so much traffic.

So potentially children would've had an opportunity to wander and to roam more freely. I don't know whether that happened. Of course it depends on where you live, if there isn't anywhere to roam, or if you live in an apartment block on the sixth floor and it's difficult to get out, being confined, you know, people are not very good at being confined.

So it can have a poor effect on your mental health. So it might have worked both ways.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and I suppose there were stages weren't there, there were those stages when all the animals came out of the hillside and started roaming around the streets. That's when we were locked into our own houses.

And then there were stages when we were allowed out for our daily constitutionals. So I guess it would've changed over the course of the pandemic as well.

Michael Bond: I suppose the middle period there, when we were allowed out but the traffic hadn't returned, maybe that would've been the optimal time for an exploration, but yes, that confinement is not good in any way, really on mental health.

Julia Copus: Well, weirdly, I quite like getting lost. It's not something that I particularly worry about. And I started off by saying that my sense of direction wasn't very good, but again, I think that's something that's been a kind of family myth.

And I also think, this is something that we'll talk about later, that if I am sitting in a car with somebody else driving and my head's somewhere, somewhere completely else, I will not have a clue where I am. But if I have to do it myself, I'm in the driving seat, I'm pretty good.

But this thing about not minding getting lost. I suppose I have never been what you'd call properly lost; completely unable to find my way and I guess that must be very distressing. And in the book you do explain how, when that happens, panic makes us want to keep on walking, when in fact the sensible thing to do is just stop and stay in one place. So why do we do that, what happens when we give in to this urge to keep on moving?

Michael Bond: Usually we get more lost if we're in a wilderness place. So it's not a very adaptive behaviour. It's not a behaviour that's looks as if it's going to help us survive, but it does seem extremely common among people who get lost, who have been seriously lost in a way that they think they may not be rescued. And that goes for people who have been trained in navigation or trained in survival skills.

Julia Copus: Wow, so even if they know that's not the right thing to do, they might indulge in that behaviour?

Michael Bond: Yes. I actually, while I was researching my book, I managed to get lost. I wasn't trying to get lost, but I got briefly lost in an area of the forest in Northern Maine, when I was researching a story about a woman who had been lost and actually tragically died. It wasn't for much more than a few minutes, but I put down my compass and rucksack and map and GPS and everything, and started wandering around this area deep in the woods and lost sight of where I'd left them all.

Julia Copus: Oh no.

Michael Bond: And at that stage, I'd spent months researching this subject and spoken to a lot of experts and I did know a lot about what you were meant to do and how people reacted. And I reacted in exactly the same way: engulfed by this feeling of panic and started running around in a rather crazy way.Yeah.

Julia Copus: You see, I don't think I've ever been adventurous enough to go that far off grid, but we'll get onto more adventurous women at some point. First of all, would you like to tell us what your first object is, because I think it might shed a bit of light on how your own interest in this particular subject began?

Michael Bond: Yes, well, I wanted this object to be the Canadian Prairies, obviously stretching the rules a little bit. So I've opted for a map of part of

the Canadian Prairies, but the Prairies are relevant to me because perhaps the main theme of my nonfiction writing is about how people are affected by their surroundings, both social and physical surroundings.

And I spent several months on the Canadian Prairies when I was researching my first book, which was social history about how that area was settled by Europeans after the American Civil War. And more particularly about the journey of an ancestor of mine, who is an explorer and who spent a couple of years in that area and I was following his route. And it really struck me just from people I met there, how that very harsh environment, where you have long bitterly cold winters and very short summers, how that has affected people's mentality and outlook on the world. And so that experience was quite formative for me.

Julia Copus: So what is that like there, what is the climate and the lighting like in that area?

Michael Bond: So it's very flat, these immense horizons on all sides. And I was following this old trail which the early settlers, European settlers, had used from 150 years previously, and getting close to that trail involved following railway lines more than roads across the landscape.

So it was very still and quiet and I was there just as the country was coming out of winter into spring. It was a kind of great relaxing in a way, the ice was melting, migratory birds were coming in. But I just had this constant sense of this huger scale of the landscape.

And that has a profound...well, it had a profound effect on me, you know, just a little person walking across it.

Julia Copus: Yeah, that's so interesting what you've said about the immense horizons and the light changing and so on because I still have this theory that, and this is a very big generalization, but that there's a general difference in American poetry or that the lines are much longer and looser.

Michael Bond: The lines on the page?

Julia Copus: Lines on the page yeah, so each line in a poem are much longer than they are in UK poetry. I had this idea that these big open landscapes and the immensity of the sky and so on had an effect on that.

Michael Bond: How fascinating, it's a great theory.

Julia Copus: Yeah, I really think there may be something in it, and now of course we've started copying the Americans and to some extent, to a far less extent, they've copied us. So it's a bit more mixed up, but I do think it affects how you write.

I'm just looking now at your map of the prairies and some of the names are fantastic. I'm looking at a place called Smiley, Plenty, and then you've written in, is it Jackfish Lake?

Michael Bond: Yes, Jackfish Lake was marked by my ancestor, my great-great-grandfather whose journey I was following, so there were a few places which I had to guess really, where they were.

And so some of those names have persisted for a long time, but others I think have emerged more recently and often relate to the experience of the settlers; of those farmers. So Plenty, I didn't go through Plenty, but maybe that related to an area of particular fertility, I'm just guessing here, often names have a very close link to the…

Julia Copus: – Yes, to the actual experience –

Michael Bond: …Yeah, or the nature of the place, or the features of the place. Yeah.

Julia Copus: So we've also got Buffalo, and Swift Current, that's fairly straightforward.

Michael Bond: Yes, and of course in the 1860s, there would've been great herds of Buffalo roaming over those plains. And it was the Europeans who actually got rid of those, shooting them. That was another way in which the indigenous people suffered because that's what they relied on.

Julia Copus: Yeah, there's one called Primate as well, which interests me. I can't guess how that could have come about.

Michael Bond: Yeah, your poet's eye is good at picking these out.

Julia Copus: Very interesting names. We've got some strange ones in the South West as well. So I guess that ties up with a theme that you've returned to in your writing again and again about human behaviour and that interaction with the landscape.

And you talk in your book about our reliance these days on satnavs and GPS systems in general, and how that reliance can actually have quite a pernicious effect on our brains, because it can cause those parts of the brain that are needed for navigation, like the hippocampus, which I only know a very tiny bit about. Is it shaped like a horse?

Michael Bond: Yeah, like a seahorse, long body. Yeah.

Julia Copus: Yeah. So it can cause that to atrophy from not being used. Is there anything that we could be doing to prevent that, and if so, what would it be?

Michael Bond: Yes, there's always a danger of overstating that, I don't want to appear like a technophobe or anything because satnav has helped people immensely and is incredibly useful. And the effect on the brain is just that when we use, say, satnav to get from one place to another, and we rely on the full-on satnav experience, barking out instructions, we don't have to think about where we're going. Then the navigation part of the

brain in the hippocampus is silent. So we're not using those skills, those networks. And it's not a case that they atrophy and never come back. It's just like anything involving part of the brain, if we don't use it, then the brain diverts its resources to somewhere else. So I think, it depends how you use it, there are ways of using satnav that mean you have to pay some attention to where you are.

But, it all depends on what we want, if you want to go through life and you're not worried about that connection with your surroundings, and you're not worried about losing your way then you have no incentive not to use satnav. But if you are worried about retaining that map in your brain, if you like, or the capacity to constantly exercise that map, then it's a good idea sometimes just to turn that technology off and exercise that part of the brain and your attention skills.

In some ways, it is an aesthetic thing more than a cognitive thing, because if you have to pay attention to the world around you, which you do if you want to remember the route you are taking, then it does make you more aware of things. And it certainly allows you to remember that experience; remember the feeling of moving through the world and also remembering what you've seen.

And if you don't exercise your brain in that way, then you definitely will not have those memories and you won't have that experience. For some people that doesn't matter, but for others it very much does matter, but it's as much an aesthetic experience as a cognitive.

Julia Copus: Yeah, aesthetic and also I'm wondering if it has a connection, I'm sure it must do, with mental health and depression, anxiety, if you don't have that connection with your surroundings, I'm sure that... well, both ways, I'm sure that could deepen mental states like depression. But also when you are depressed, you may feel far less inclined to engage with your surroundings. Do you think there's something in that?

Michael Bond: Yes, I do. And that is what happens when you have depression or anxiety. People tend to look inward very much and stop reaching out to the world beyond themselves, and that seems to be a symptom. But, the question is, I suppose, is it a way that could help you step out of that state if you were to try and reconnect to reach out to the world beyond you.

Julia Copus: You do suggest in the book that it might well be, and that strengthening those connections in the brain that do deal with what we're calling wayfinding, might be protective against, not just things like depression, but cognitive decline and may help to offset dementia.

Michael Bond: Yes, that part is quite speculative. The connection really is that people who develop dementia, particularly Alzheimer's, one of the very first effects of those illnesses is the atrophying of the spatial cells in the hippocampus that help us navigate. So people who are going through that in the early stages, they report feeling lost as one of the very first symptoms, or at least somehow dissociated from their surroundings or not remembering where they are, even in places that they know well.

There are a couple of neuroscientists who are exploring the idea that if you maintain those neural networks in your healthy adulthood, whether that acts as some kind of defence against dementia, but there's absolutely no evidence longitudinally, over people's lifetime, whether that can have an effect, but it is being explored anyway by some scientists.

Julia Copus: It does ring true with some of my own observations I guess: my mother-in-law at the moment is suffering from dementia and is now in a care home. And the other day she had wandered into a different room and I don't think she knew she was in that other room, but just lots of little things that she said suggest that she is lost and she asks actually quite a lot, *where am I?*

Michael Bond: Does she, yeah. Okay, that's interesting because there's a

metaphor there of being lost in the wild, being cut off from the world that you know, is as we've been discussing a terrifying experience. And that is probably the same feeling that people with dementia, your mother-in-law, might be experiencing, just that feeling of loss, not knowing where you are, even if you're in a room that should be familiar to you, that's going to be equally terrifying as something really important to human beings of having a connection with physical place that you are in, or it seems that way.

Julia Copus: Yeah. I found that quite moving in your book, your clear empathy with Alzheimer's sufferers; actually, she has vascular dementia. And you talk about the way that that desire to wander is a way of managing this shifting sense of space, you say something about nursing home design.

Michael Bond: Yes, there are ways to design places that help people who have problems with their orientation. There are guidelines in fact, but most care homes don't follow them. And so a lot of the corridors look the same, the rooms look the same; what you really want to help people is difference.

So you want different pictures or a bunch of flowers in one place. If everything looks the same, then the brain ends up thinking that you are in the same place, even if you aren't. And so variety which gives a richness to the surroundings is the way to help people.

Julia Copus: Yes, but what you say about protective ways of warding off that decline possibly ties up I think with your second object, which I just *love*, which is connected with someone who did just what you are suggesting. So tell us about this second object, Michael.

Michael Bond: So the second object is an old photograph of my great-aunt when she was eight or nine and my grandmother who was ten years older than her. The focus of this picture is my great-aunt, because she was

a great inspiration to me. She was born in India and then family were settled in Britain, but she in her early twenties moved to Canada because she had a great distaste for what she perceived to be this backstabbing and gossipy mentality of the social world that she was growing up in. So she went to find a new life and ended up marrying someone in Canada and becoming a breeder of racehorses and a very well known one.

Julia Copus: Oh, she sounds fabulous! You know, when you sent this to me, I assumed that the great-aunt was the grown up woman standing next to the donkey, but it's actually the little girl.

Michael Bond: It's the little girl on the donkey.

They were great, both of them, my grandmother and my great-aunt were wonderful people, but I've picked out my great-aunt because – she wasn't a writer – but I found her quite inspirational because of the way she just went out into the world, and she had an extraordinarily adventurous life. In-between her Canadian adventures, during the Second World War she drove ambulances in Berlin, towards the end of the war.

Julia Copus: Wow.

Michael Bond: And previous to that, she was part of an aerial reconnaissance team taking photographs and had to pitch out of an airplane over France at one stage. So she was like that all her life and whenever she came back to Britain to visit us, it was like a travelling circus, things happened when she was around.

Julia Copus: I love people like that. Her name was Crystal, which ties in with that clear-sighted look at the world.

Michael Bond: Yeah, she was very clear about what she wanted to do and I stayed with her after my time on the Canadian prairies, I spent some time with her after that. And then when she sadly died, she wasn't feeling well

and was eventually diagnosed with cancer. At that point, at the diagnosis, she decided, well, that's it I don't want to suffer this. And she passed away very soon after that, you know, which was tragic, but at the same time, that was very much her. And I suppose she's an inspiration for me as a writer, because I think it's important as a nonfiction writer to get out into the world and, you know, touch sides with people and different places. And she very much did that throughout her life. Yeah.

Julia Copus: Well, I think that's lovely that you were influenced by this strong inquisitive woman from your past. So in the book you explain the different methods for plotting a journey and you call them egocentric and allocentric, so I've obviously thought about what I do and I definitely use landmarks, although they're very often manmade landmarks, so, the post box or the Spa shop or things like that. But I do also say, I guess it's a mixture for a lot of people, 'left' and 'right', 'behind' and so on. Yeah. And I guess most people, certainly in this country, are similar.

But you also do talk a bit in the book about – this is so interesting – an Australian Aboriginal language. I don't know how to pronounce out this, Guugu Yimithirr.

Michael Bond: I can't pronounce it either.

Julia Copus: We'd have to ask them, I guess. So they use only geographic or cardinal directions like north, east, south and west.

So they might say, for instance, a spider is crawling up your southeast leg or something like that. Could you briefly just describe these two different approaches to navigation and say something about Guugu Yimithirr and what affect that language has on the speaker's sense of direction.

Michael Bond: So the two types of navigation that you were describing, allocentric and egocentric, the main difference is the egocentric, if you navigate that way, then you pay particular attention to how objects relate

to *you*. So if you get to the end of a road and you turn left and then you walk, say, a hundred metres and you then turn right at a particular landmark, a postbox or something, that sequence of local landmarks and combinations of left and right, it amounts to, in a way, a set of instructions, which is an extremely effective way of finding your way through a place, if you can remember those sequences. The allocentric way is where you take a step back and imagine yourself as part of a wider landscape and you see the place you're moving to as a bird would, effectively, so through a bird's eye view, and you might pay more attention to landmarks that are very far away, perhaps a hill in the distance. So you build up a picture of landscape on a grander scale, and how different areas might fit together. And that can be effective, particularly if you are going to take shortcuts between one area and another because in your idea of your map, you can see how that works with your mental map, and that enables you to do that in the physical world. So most people use a combination of those two, but the indigenous Australians we were talking about, if you live in a landscape where perhaps there aren't many local distinguishable landmarks and there are just great distances, then those, the cardinal directions, north, south, east, west, which will help you travel a long way in a particular direction, then that's going to help you more than that local memory sequence.

So if you grow up in that kind of environment, then you are going to be much more aware of where north is, for example, or where south is. And so that language will seep into your everyday way that you understand the world.

Julia Copus: It must be quite nuanced though, because as you were talking, I was thinking, well, my husband Andrew is definitely, you know, he uses more of the cardinal way of navigating.

He looks up and out a lot more than I do to the wider landscape. And actually, I feel slightly inferior. I feel that that is a better way of doing it.

But when you were talking about being able to take shortcuts, I think I can probably do that better. So I probably am using a bit of both. And the other thing that occurred to me is that the cardinal method has fewer words. I mean, so they can't just use north, east, south, west because directions need to be more nuanced than that.

Michael Bond: Yes, if you didn't have a sense of magnetic north or you didn't have a compass then they will be useless; it's really a question of having a system that is going to apply to your life. I mean, sometimes if that can be aligned with the prevailing winds, for example, the Inuits' traditional way of orientating in the Canadian Arctic, the Inuit people there, they pay particular attention to the shape of the ice flows, which are influenced by the prevailing winds. And they have particular names for these different kinds of wind.

So they're not so much interested in north, south, east, west. They're more interested in the direction of prevailing winds. Yeah. And that's going to help them more.

Julia Copus: How brilliant. Well, going back to the language thing, I think your wider interest in language in the book is very clear.

And you do point out that many of the metaphors that we use for our emotional states relate in fact to location. For example, 'I was lost and now I'm found', 'I feel more grounded now', 'I'm all at sea', 'I feel very at home here' and so on. Given your awareness of those sorts of metaphors in our language, people won't be surprised to hear about your third choice of object.

Could you tell us what that is and why you chose it?

Michael Bond: This may sound very dull, my third object is a dictionary. But not any dictionary, the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, which is particularly good at offering alternative descriptions or slightly unexpected ways of describing things. I find it much more useful than a

thesaurus if I'm struggling to find an alternative word, just because of the way it's written.

Julia Copus: So how do you use it in that way?

Michael Bond: So I find it more useful than a thesaurus because – well, obviously being a dictionary it doesn't give you an alternative word – but it explains, it describes the word, the meaning of the word in just an interesting way, more interesting than most dictionaries.

I could give you an example at random, I've got my copy here. And if I just open it here, okay, so the word 'derelict' for example: 'Something voluntarily abandoned, especially a ship abandoned on the high seas'. I mean, that just immediately gives you something else, doesn't it?

Julia Copus: Yeah, it does. I want to use it for poetry now.

Michael Bond: Yeah! Let me just give you another one.

Julia Copus: Please.

Michael Bond: So I open it at a different page, 'Leprechaun', there we go: 'Leprechaun': 'A mischievous elf of Irish folklore, usually believed to reveal the hiding place of treasure if caught'. So, I mean, not that you necessarily want an alternative word for 'Leprechaun', but it just allows you to think in more creative ways than simply replacing a word.

I actually got this tip from John McPhee, the American nonfiction writer who's just written dozens of books; great books about all kinds of different subjects. This is one of his tips. So I can't claim to have come up with this myself, but I just find it incredibly useful, this *particular* dictionary.

Julia Copus: I will be getting hold of a copy for sure. On the page that we have copied for this podcast, there's a lovely picture, it looks like it's

pronounced *Heala*, it's spelled G isn't it, but I'm not very good at phonetic alphabet, but it might be pronounced *Heala* Monster or *Gila* Monster, and it says: 'A large orange and black venomous lizard'. And I *love* the added information, 'a related lizard and the Latin for that is, *H. horridum* of Mexico'.

Michael Bond: Who knew!

Julia Copus: Exactly, who did, I just hope that I never meet one. So you use a dictionary a fair bit in your own writing?

Michael Bond: Yeah, I do, I find it helpful. It's also a nice distraction, which as you know, all writers love distractions.

Julia Copus: Yes, and especially the famous writer's block. That's going to be a thing of the past I think if you get a hold of a copy of this dictionary, and we are not being funded by them are we!

Michael Bond: Other dictionaries are available!

Julia Copus: Indeed. What about the rest of your writing practice? Are you a lark or an owl, do you prefer to use a pen or do you write on screen; that sort of thing?

Michael Bond: Well, if I'm out researching a book then I'll use a lot of long hand just in a notebook. But then the actual writing process, yes, on a screen I'm afraid to say, nothing particularly fancy about that. But I have a little writing cabin, which is a converted cowshed just down the river from my cottage, so that's my daily commute.

Julia Copus: That is very interesting. So you live on your own, I mean, not on your own because obviously Cecil is there. But it's still useful for you to go somewhere else to work.

Michael Bond: Very, very much so, yeah. Even that six/seven minute walk, that journey somehow brings me into a different head space, I suppose.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and a different physical space too.

Michael Bond: Different physical space. Yeah, do you have the same?

Julia Copus: No, but you are adding grist to my argument that I need to have this.Yes, if I get a writing grant, that is what I will spend it on, I think. So thank you for that.

Michael Bond: You're welcome. I recommend it.

Julia Copus: Definitely. Now, before we let you go, it would be fantastic if you could offer us three pieces of advice that you think might be useful to pass on to someone who's interested in writing a nonfiction book or just writing in general. Three things that you wish that *you* had known, when you started out, perhaps?

Michael Bond: Okay. First, I should just say that I would advise anyone to ignore ninety-nine percent of the advice they hear because often you hear things like: *You should always read your writing out loud,* or Y*ou need to be writing a thousand words a day*. I've always had a lot of this and found a lot of it not at all useful, so everyone's different, but having...

Julia Copus: Yeah, and also maybe anxiety making, so counterproductive in that way.

Michael Bond: Yes. I don't think I've ever written a thousand words in a day. I'm pretty slow. So yeah, as you say, it can be anxiety making if you're not making those targets, but everyone has their own speed or way, but I guess three little things that have been useful to me personally, the first one is learning to be an observer, a good observer. I mean, to listen to people you are interviewing or watching events without prejudice; not to

filter anything through your own perception or your own understanding of the world, try to… I'm sure you are good at that as a poet.

Julia Copus: Well, that is very good advice for interviewers as well, of course, yeah.

Michael Bond: Exactly. And secondly, I think you can never have too much information. I never start writing, and this is different for everybody, but I never start writing until I've got as much information as I can have about a subject or a person and just wait, because once you start writing you start to put your view and spin on things and the more you can delay that, I think the better, maybe the more honest the treatment of the subject.

Julia Copus: Yeah, so that's connected, I suppose, to the first.

Michael Bond: Exactly, it's connected to the first. And thirdly, a lot of nonfiction writers come from journalism, which is what I did, from science journalism. And I have learned that being a journalist, particularly a science journalist, doesn't help you become a writer because I found that in my journalism, a lot of it was about putting information out there, presenting information and magazines – whoever you write for – they have a particular house style, and it's really about informing people, particularly in science, explaining difficult subjects. But when you come to write books it's a whole lot more; that the actual sentence is valuable, not just for the information it contains, but for the rhythm, what it's like to read that sentence. So I think it's the whole aesthetics of writing is not something you necessarily learn in journalism or I certainly didn't.

Julia Copus: So I would like to respond to that by saying that it seems to me that what wayfinding is really about is, what it is to be human in this world. And that's exactly what, well for me anyway, what poetry is trying to do too.

So the human need for, in your case, a sense of place and direction, and

it's a fascinating mix of slightly different disciplines: history, neuroscience, and psychology.

So Michael, thank you so much for talking to us about your fascinating work.

Michael Bond: Thank you very much, Julia. I've really enjoyed the conversation and I've learned from it.

Julia Copus: Me too.

*

RLF Outro: That was Michael Bond in conversation with Julia Copus, you can find out more about Michael on his website at www.michaelbond.co.uk. And that concludes episode 397, which was recorded and produced by Julia Copus. Coming up in episode 398, Anna Wilson speaks with Carolyn Sanderson about wild swimming, the benefits of a child's eye view, and her recent memoir.

We hope you'll join us.

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF, please visit our website at www.rlf.org.uk.

Thanks for listening.