

Writers Aloud

Episode 462

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

In this episode, writers reflect on how they discovered the form of writing that suits them best, including considerations such as financial reward, social pressure, personal inclination, and why it's important to let actors be rude about your play. Jon Mayhew gets the ball rolling, revealing how his fascination with urban fantasy has its roots in his childhood.

Jon Mayhew: One of my favourite stories was *The Borrowers*. I have this real memory of my primary school teacher reading *The Borrowers* to us, and it was a hot summer afternoon, I was in what would be called Year Six now. And I can remember he had this really deep Welsh voice and his voice rolling over all the names of the characters.

But the idea that these creatures could live under the floorboards and borrow things and make their lives from them, that fascinated me. And that kind of went on as a teenager, I think I moved more into more overt fantasy, I loved *Sword and Sorcery*, I loved all the Tolkien stuff and Michael Moorcock, all of his *Eternal Champion* stories fascinated me. Conan, all of those really, but they were more overt worlds. Science fiction worlds as well, they all fascinated me as well, so I always come back to that idea of urban fantasy.

RLF: Although Mayhew moved away from urban fantasy with several historical adventure books, he is seeing his old interests starting to re-emerge in his work.

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Jon Mayhew: I still like to write strange stories, horror stories, stories about things hidden in plain sight. And recently I've come back to this with the urban fantasy that I'm writing at the moment, which is a modern setting. The series' title is *Dead Means Dead*. It works around the adventures of a specialist funeral director who basically, his job is to go around putting the undead back into the ground, so vampires and zombies and ghosts and things.

He encounters them and returns them to their graves but only if they've recently disturbed a funeral or a grave. He doesn't bother with vampires that are thousands of years old, because they're not his jurisdiction. And it's very much set in a modern London, and he works with the police and it's a different kind of story but in lots of ways it is going back to what I originally wrote when I wrote the *Mortlock* series.

I've just brought it up to date really and I'm kind of tempted to bring some of the characters, I haven't dropped some of the names in, that are in *Mortlock* into this series as well, so I'm wondering whether actually the two will dovetail at times. The thing I love to do is just write about that strangeness and about unusual things that happen in the corner of your eye when you're not quite looking, and that's what writing is for me.

RLF: Laura Hird says *her* love of short stories also began early in life, helped by input from an enthusiastic teacher.

Laura Hird: My mother used to always read a lot to me when I was a child: Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Burns, Robert Browning, a lot of poetry. We had an English club at school, I don't know if they still do that sort of thing, but we'd make up plays and things, they'd take us to the theatre, take us to the cinema, and this teacher introduced us to...or introduced me and my friend to, Scottish fiction of the time, that I wasn't aware of. A collection called *Lean Tales*, which featured short stories by Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Agnes Owens, and to the poetry of Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead.

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And it was a revelation, I didn't know, that there was modern writing about Scotland. It was all sort of historical stuff that I'd been reading. I think up to that point, as far as I can remember, my only sense of there being a modernish Scottish writer was Muriel Spark in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and that was just through the film.

That was probably about the most recent Scottish writing that I was aware of. But I loved it, and there were so many great Scottish literary magazines around at the time, as well as *Cencrastus*, *Chapman*, who I think are still going. And, you know, these people were writing about a Scotland that I recognised, not about you know, highly educated people or highly privileged people.

It was ordinary lives; it was James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, and Agnes Owen's brilliant stories about families, working-class families.

RLF: But it was while she was studying English at Middlesex Polytechnic that Hird received one of her most valuable lessons on the short story.

Laura Hird: There was a creative writing module to the course as well. And although this didn't focus so much on your classic short stories, it was a great way to learn about them. You know, to look at the form you're writing for, look at who your market is that you're writing the story for; study the word count; the length of paragraphs, the length of sentences, and write a story specifically for a particular kind of magazine.

And the magazine they asked us to do was a women's magazine. We were to write a short romance for a women's magazine. And, you know, a lot of people in the class thought, *God, that's below us!* Although they'd never written...they'd never tried to write a story in their lives. So we all produced a piece and the editor from *Bella* magazine came and read the stories and slated us all because we hadn't done what we were supposed to do.

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And it was such a good lesson. It's like, you know, don't get above yourself, every piece of writing has its own structure, has its own rules. And although you can go way off cusp, you know you've got to focus.

RLF: Other writers take a more circuitous route to arrive at the form that fits them best. Mary Colson, for example, started out as a scriptwriter before discovering where her talents lay.

Mary Colson: Initially, when I started to admit to being a writer, I thought of myself as a scriptwriter. I wanted to be part of the theatre world; the world where the lights dimmed and the curtain rose and you had that delightful feeling, that frisson in your stomach, you thought, *Oh, this is it!* And I started to write lots of different kinds of scripts from interconnected monologues or duologues or even full scripts, full play-length scripts. I was very good at titles, not always so good at finishing them. Two of my earliest influences in terms of script and theatre were Eugene O'Neill and Michael Frayn.

They have nothing in common culturally, personally, other than gender, but what they share is a mastery of language, O'Neill for emotion, Frayn for comedy. I thought I was going to write a wonderful British play, a great taut emotional drama, and when I did my MA, when I was about thirty, I discovered that I could write comedy and actually that was where my true genre was.

So what I thought I was starting out as writing I didn't end up doing or I haven't done yet.

RLF: Yet although comedy is a strong thread in her work Colson is reluctant to pigeonhole her writing.

Mary Colson: I think the truest genre for any writer is the one you need to write in at any particular moment in order to tell that story you need to tell.

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So I think of myself first and foremost as a writer, I don't particularly like categories or divisions or labels in any sphere of life, and particularly in writing it feels like a very crude marketing driven thing. If you're a writer, you're good with words, you hear their inner music. Most of the time now, I'm a nonfiction reader as well as a nonfiction writer.

I've got a comic novel on the go, a couple of children's novels, script synopses galore, a comedy western set in Milton Keynes, a TV drama about an adult with Asperger's syndrome, a film script about the 18th-century bromance between John Newton and William Cowper. At the moment my main focus is writing a comedy memoir about a cycling trip that three friends and I took last year.

That voice demands first person and that voice demands a comedy voice. I don't know what the next story will be, but I trust that the right voice will come and emerge when it needs to.

RLF: Rick Stroud also found his way to comedy by a somewhat circuitous route.

Rick Stroud: I'm a filmmaker, I've made films, and I always thought that I wanted to make action films. Men in action, was what I'd say to my friends, and I discovered quite late in my career that I'm very, very good at doing comedy. And since I have become a writer, which happened eight years ago, I've gone back to liking writing about action, except that I can now bring a sort of – if this doesn't sound too pretentious – a sort of feminine slant on action, so it's not just men charging up and down firing at each other, but it's as much to do with the emotion. And I think I'm making myself better and better at seeing the subtext. What I thought of as the action-adventure genre, which as a filmmaker, I loved doing shots of...I once did the blowing up of a train, stuntmen flying up in the air, flames, and blank rounds being let off. I was in sort of thirty-year-old heaven. But I've discovered that the genre is much more complicated than that, and I think it's partly through discovering comedy. And I believe

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that you can't be great in any creative field, whether it's acting or writing or directing, unless you have got a sense of comedy, which will give you a feeling for irony.

RLF: To Stroud, genres are often more complicated than they may initially appear.

Rick Stroud: It's easy to think of a thing as, *Oh, well, this is that sort of genre A, genre B, genre C*, but in fact those genres are much, much more complicated. And I'm at the moment rereading, because I have to interview her sometime in the near future, I'm rereading all of Donna Tartt, and it's very difficult to pin down what genre she's writing in, because on one level, the three books she's written are murder stories; on the other hand, they are Jamesian wanders through a complex social milieu, very, very different. And at another level, they are comedies. And I think the same applies to Proust. In the end, there's no such thing as true genre, we, as writers, find our way into what we think is a genre. And actually, as we're writing it turns into something else, and the interesting thing in other art fields is that Picasso said, when he starts making a picture, it always... the picture takes over and becomes something else. And a film editor, who I know, who's written a very good book about filmmaking, said that you think you're making the doomy love story, what you didn't realise is you're making the action-adventure film, and it's only when you've got all the negatives that you can suddenly see the film you're making, and I think that that applies to writing, you think you're writing the doomy love story, and in fact you're writing something completely different.

RLF: Elanor Dymott, meanwhile, has little patience with requiring writers to stay in particular lanes. She found short stories were a way into novel writing.

Elanor Dymott: First and foremost a novelist, I got there by writing short stories. And I have read people say, 'No, no, no, no, no, the short story is a hallowed art form entirely, in its own right', to use that awful phrase. 'And

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should never be confused with writing novels, entirely different things. And if you write short stories, that's what you should do.' And I think that, well, for me, writing short stories was a way to writing novels.

I wanted to write novels, but started small. And my first short stories I wrote were standalone scenes, so really, really mini-stories. And then they got slightly longer. I read hundreds and hundreds of short stories and found out how many different types there are. At the moment, I'm reading a lot of Grace Paley, who is an incredible short-story writer, but is absolutely incomparable to...V. S. Pritchett.

There are so many different types of short stories out there. So I think in a way it's kind of crazy to say you should do either/or. And if you're a novelist you should, I mean obviously lots of novelists write short stories, but novel is my...if we're looking for a true genre, it's the novel because there's room, there's more room to move around in.

The novel, possibly, has less of a hardcore orthodoxy about it, it's more forgiving as a form. There are a lot more shapes and forms it can take, whereas the short story still, I think, is a little bit more hidebound in terms of what people say it can or can't be.

RLF: Mark McCrum, by contrast, considers himself something of a genre nomad, having travelled through several disciplines to arrive at the form that established his career.

Mark McCrum: I started with playwriting, I struggled with that, got a play on finally, it ran for six weeks. I wrote two more, which didn't go on, quite reasonably, when I read them now! And then I thought that the compromises involved were all too much. You had to fiddle around with your work *endlessly* to please possible directors and producers who knew better. And there wasn't enough *writing* for my liking.

So I moved on to fiction, nice, juicy paragraphs; initially I failed in that

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too. I had no idea how to write a novel really. There were some good bits, as one kind publisher told me, but overall no, didn't work. I was still, I realise now, too hung up on my own experience, I was still working that through. My 'I' character was me, it was probably therapy really. That kind, dare I say wise, publisher let me move on to travel writing.

That was a lucky break. I travelled widely and met people, other people with much bigger problems than mine. I slept in shacks in African townships. Worse, I spent a night at a backpackers in Brisbane. My pathetic English experiences faded into insignificance. I learned to listen and document other stories.

I learned to look and try and write about what I saw. I learned the truth of Chekhov's dictum, 'Don't tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint of moonlight on broken glass'. What were the names of all those South African and Australian trees? I had to look them up! And, a bonus for somebody who found plots difficult, there was a nice, ready-made structure: and then, and then, and then, and then, and then. The simplest structure, as E. M. Foster has it: you spooled out the cloth of the narrative as you lived it. Later back home, with help, you could cut it into a reasonable suit.

RLF: Yet even travel writing couldn't hold McCrum, and he proceeded on through ghost writing, before shifting back to fiction. This multidisciplinary experience, he feels, has enriched his work.

Mark McCrum: I like having work in several genres. It gives you a feeling that anything is possible. And a lot of the challenges are similar. You still have to show, not tell, in good nonfiction. And as a nonfiction writer who's turned to fiction, I get a definite buzz about not having to stick to the facts.

You're freed from that awful worry that a more knowledgeable reviewer is going to catch you out, on that tiny detail of Irish history that reveals

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you have no understanding of the whole. No, you've made it up and they can all go and stuff themselves. Also, you can go back to one of the genres you've tried before, maybe use your experience in other genres to inform your new work. A play I wrote now would be very different from one I wrote when I'd only written plays. And I think I'd do a travel book differently, too. I think it would be more plotted, probably. Certainly I'd put less in. On the other hand, I've reached an age where it's quite nice just to stay at home and make things up.

Or if not that, mine your ever-increasing experience of people and their foibles. I'm glad I travelled when I did, though, it does broaden your mind; stretches you. I would recommend swapping genres, if you're feeling a bit stuck.

RLF: For other writers, practical financial considerations have a strong influence on genre choices. Rukhsana Ahmad, for example, found her early career shaped by a number of commissions.

Rukhsana Ahmad: Although I started out as a short-fiction writer, as a short-story writer, and had some grand designs to be a novelist, I was prevented from becoming one by a succession of commissions from radio and theatre, and my own blocking of myself, if you like.

I feel fiction is a splendid area of work because it gives you so much autonomy, so much control. You are the god of that universe and you can do whatever you like with it, within reason, of course, within reason, you don't want to lose your readers. But it gives you the scope for complexity, it gives you the scope for layering, it gives you the scope for going anywhere you want to in the world, unlike theatre, which has been my great addiction.

And for me, the addiction of theatre is the immediacy, the fact that you're working with other people. I love talking to people, I love collaboration, and so I've enjoyed doing the theatre work as much as the story writing or the fiction.

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RLF: The sociable aspect of certain forms in what can often be a lonely career can also be a factor in determining the kind of work a writer does. In Marcy Kahan's case, the collaborative nature of drama and the multiplicity of voices it involves were very appealing.

Marcy Kahan: I was instinctively attracted to the dramatic form because it requires a multiplicity of contradictory voices. It might have been Tom Stoppard who said that 'Writing plays is the only polite way of disagreeing with yourself in public without being carted off to a lunatic asylum.'

So I think that that cacophony of voices, that multiplicity, is a way for me to capture and to make sense of the world. Another reason I'm attracted to drama, and this is a very, very important part of my life, is that it's collaborative. And I love feeling that I'm creating the blueprint for an event that another group of people are going to work on, and then a third group of people...there's going to be an audience, an audience for it. It's like a form of architecture, or a form of cooking where you're cooking the kind of definitive feast. You have a kind of army of chefs and the actors. I've never used this analogy before, I'm not sure that it holds up, but I love being in the room with the actors and watching them interrogate the play, inhabit the characters, question the play.

In radio, this tends to be an extremely concise process. In theatre you usually are asked to go away; you're asked to disappear for a week or so and then come back, and Alan Rippon once said, that's so that the actors can be rude about your play. They need to be rude about your play in order to own it themselves.

RLF: But the role of serendipity should not be underestimated. Essayist Chris Arthur credits chance with a great deal of responsibility for the sort of work he does.

Chris Arthur: I never set out to be an essayist, I wonder if anybody ever does, Montaigne excepted. It was something that I stumbled into by

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accident, not design. My first encounter with essays as a reader pretty rapidly sparked the realisation that this was the form that I wanted to write in. It simply seemed to fit what I wanted to say far better than the poetry or the fiction that I'd been engaged with, up to that point.

Essays just felt right. It was a bit like meeting someone for the first time and knowing instantly that you're going to get on with them. Essays have about them something of the happy accident, something unplanned, something serendipitous. And I like what Seamus Heaney says about poetry in this regard because I think the same thing applies to essays.

This is from *Preoccupations*: Heaney says, and I'm quoting now, 'A poem always has elements of accident about it, which can be made the subject of inquest afterwards, but there is always a risk in conducting your own inquest. You might begin to believe the coroner in yourself rather than put your trust in the man in you who is capable of the accident'.

I like that idea of putting your trust in your own capability for accidents. And I guess all writers, whatever their genre, need to ensure that their inner coroner is kept in check.

RLF outro: Chris Arthur there, concluding this episode of *Collected*, which was produced by Ann Morgan. The other writers featured in this episode were Jon Mayhew, Laura Hird, Mary Colson, Rick Stroud, Elanor Dymott, Mark McCrum, Rukhsana Ahmad, and Marcy Kahan. There's more information about their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up next time, writers share the inside track on the experience of getting published.

We hope you'll join us.