Writers Aloud

Episode 459

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

In this episode, three Royal Literary Fund writers share their reflections on the wonder and value of reading.

Starting things off, we have prolific children's writer Michaela Morgan revealing some of the insights she has gleaned over her career bringing poetry to prisoners, school students and community groups.

Michaela Morgan: 'The Power of Poetry'.

I am an author and a poet, and I am also a Royal Literary Fund Fellow offering my help for those who'd like a little assistance with their writing. You might think to yourself: 'Hmm…Well…you know I'm not sure *a poet* is going to be very helpful.'

Is poetry helpful? Is it practical? Is it useful? What *can* we say about poetry and its potential to help?

Well, I will start with the simple truth — poetry has power. And it has appeal. It has relevance and it *can* help in many, many ways — both profound and practical.

We've had a tendency to put poetry on a pedestal — to hold it as somewhat removed from everyday life. This has happened partly because of poets, partly because of schools, partly because of history and accident.

This has given the poet and poetry something of an image problem. Both can be seen as somehow outside of everyday life, above ordinary life — irrelevant in other words. Elite. Effete.

I sometimes wonder how this situation happened: because babies love poetry and things poetic — sounds, rhythms, chants, songs. So do children. I visit lots of primary schools and I can tell you that children are grabbed by poetry straight away. They listen attentively. They join in exuberantly. They imitate creatively.

In primary education, poetry can be cross-curricular. It can be used to introduce a topic, to round off a topic, to reflect on a topic. For creativity it is *hugely* enabling. Children are keen to have a go at writing their own or a class poem. Editing, revising and improving a poem is a less daunting task than editing a longer piece of writing so poetry writing helps develop wider writing skills.

Poetry is empowering and inspirational — and, on a practical level, poetry and poetic techniques can hone writing. At primary school, poetry is employed — and enjoyed.

Something happens at secondary schools. Here, poems are ignored — or they are *studied*. I've got nothing against studying poems — it just depends how you study them. A reading, an enjoying, an exploring, a discussion — all fine, but Billy Collins, the much-admired American poet and ex-laureate sums it up. When we are 'taught' poetry we too often torture it:

> [we want] to tie the poem to a chair
> and torture a confession out of it
>
> […]
>
> to find out what it really means.

We are presented with a poem and our aim is somehow to subdue it. To master it. Reduce it. Hack away at its mystery and find a clear cut, fully analysed, easily presented explanation of it. Maybe in bullet points.

The effect of this on a person reading the poem can be unfortunate. There's a feeling that poetry is difficult, challenging, tricky. The poem is reduced to a puzzle, a code we have to try to break. Teachers (and readers) are uneasy with the fact that poems can be elusive, enigmatic, open to a multitude of reactions.

In real life these aspects of poetry appeal to us. We often turn to poetry when comprehension defeats us and we need support, companionship, understanding of ourselves and our situation. You may remember the scene in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* when the eulogy contains Auden's 'Funeral Blues'. The poem begins 'Stop all the clocks' and ends:

I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

What a punch that packed! People who had never heard the poem before, who had no suspicion that they were affected by poetry, left the cinema and wanted to look it up and find it and read it and share it.

When we need some help to enable us to express ourselves, we often turn to poetry. It turns up at all the big life moments, births, funerals, falling in love, weddings. At such occasions a poem is often given a guest spot — either a well-known one or one penned by someone involved. They can be truth-shining or lighthearted. One of the favourite love and marriage ones is the John Cooper Clarke one called 'I Wanna Be Yours'.

At funerals we have the Brian Patten poem 'How Long is a Man's Life' to ask the important questions on our behalf and to offer consolation. When people are in extremis, losing their minds or losing their lives, they often reach back into their memories and come up with snatches of song, pieces of poetry that they learned in their youth. Those involved with trying to

reach dementia sufferers find poetry is often nestled into the memories of their patients. It clings on while other memories evaporate.

I learnt poems as a child; and I understood them gradually over the years. They settled and grew in my mind. It was many years ago at my primary school when we had to copy out a poem starting 'I come from haunts of coot and hern[…]'. I had to write it out in my best handwriting. It was, in fact, merely a handwriting exercise. It was all about the 'look'.

So I drew a little border of what I thought were coot and hern. I thought 'coot' and 'hern' were probably flowers, so I did a border of flowers and leaves all around it. Clearly, I had no great literal understanding of the poem, but it still had an effect on me and lives with me to this day.

Men may come and men may go but I go on for ever.

I now know it's from 'The Brook' by Tennyson, the poet laureate in Queen Victoria's reign. For inner city northern working-class children in the sixties it might seem an unlikely choice. Irrelevant? Outdated? No. Poetry reaches across the divides.

Poetry is more powerful than we realise. It etches itself into the memory. And it *can* help. It helps with understanding and expressing our experiences, our ideas, our emotions. It keeps us company in the most difficult of times — and it can help to improve our writing.

If you're a student and the Royal Literary Fellow comes along to offer help with your writing and that Fellow is a *poet,* is that poet going to be of any practical help? Or is that poet just the sort you may find wandering 'lonely as a cloud'…

Well, let's see…

What is involved in writing a poem? What's the process? Well, first

there's the generation and the gathering of ideas. The thinking it through, putting thoughts together, recalling, considering, researching, reaching a conclusion — all of these are going to help with *any* sort of writing. Accessing your thoughts, your ideas, your memories, your opinions is going to help with essay writing or *any* sort of writing. You may have to add extra elements — research, reading, info, facts, references; but the process of letting your mind wander around a subject until you can reach your own conclusion will be very valuable.

Then there is the finding of the right words.

Poems are often condensed, economical; they may have very few words but poets spend a lot of time finding the *right* word. The *best* word. Collecting words, selecting words — going beyond the first thing you think of. It's essential in a poem to find the best word and to put it in the best place.

Every word counts. The awareness of word choice and word placing is going to help in any sort of writing.

A poet is a word searcher — searching for the strongest word, the most apposite word, the clearest word, the word with impact. The poet is very aware of repetition. Repeating consciously to good effect can work well. However, accidental repetition can become tedious. It's important to find a varied and punchy way of expressing yourself.

Having thought through the topic and alerted yourself to words, what then? The typical process in writing a poem is to get your ideas (lots of thinking) and wondering, considering, comparing and then the writing starts. In my case, it usually starts with scribbling – and with the clear knowledge that this is notes, jottings, scribbles – a *rough* draft. Only after that does the fine work begin: the organising, the structuring, the shaping, the deletion of inessentials, the addition of detail.

A poem is dreamed and discovered, drafted, redrafted, honed and crafted. And those are skills that will transfer to *all* writing.

What else does a poet do? The poet usually reads the poem aloud. This evaluates how it sounds and what effect it has.

By reading aloud, you hear the rhythm, you feel the structure, you hear when something is inessential. You hear yourself failing to make an effect or wandering about the topic without force or point. You hear when you're going on too long and when you've repeated yourself. Reading aloud will alert the writer to many pitfalls — and help avoid them in the final draft.

Then, what about the technical things — the spelling, the punctuation, the grammar, the layout, the structure? Poems are highly worked and with their brevity and shape and repeats they can demonstrate language points painlessly. Take punctuation for example. Poets know the effect of punctuation — to offer a pause for...thought, or an emphasis of effect, a gathering of momentum, a shock or a question or a voice speaking, a quote. Choice of punctuation offers a pause for wonder or a dramatic insistence. And poets know the power of chunking text into shape. Thinking about the length of lines, the choice of words, the need for a new start with a new section, line space, paragraph. We know the importance of the introduction which will grab the reader's attention. Or the effective ending that leaves the reader satisfied, with a sense of conscious conclusion (not just a weary dwindling or a bald statement). We practice how to initiate or maintain flow, how to increase the impact of writing.

I am still learning. I always will be learning. My experience, my trials and errors, my own difficulties and discoveries can help others. Help them to glean tips, techniques, strategies, confidence for improving the power, the effect, the success of their own writing.

In my life, I have used poetry as an enabler, as an entertainment, as an education with all sorts of people, from nursery-school tinies to lifers in prison, and I know how effective it is.

When I started work with a particular group in prison, they were recovering addicts, and they shambled into the room not looking really alert or even alive (essential for writing). Not willing to listen or talk or focus or write. I started by playing them a recording of Maya Angelou reading her famous poem 'I Rise':

> You may write me down in history
> With your bitter, twisted lies,
> You may tread me in the very dirt
> But still, like dust, I'll rise.

It grasped their attention, shook them enough to wake them; helped them to step forward.

Poetry has power. Poetry has punch. Poetry will help you understand your own thoughts, feelings – and ideas – and it will help you to express them.

In my work as a Royal Literary Fellow I won't be asking students to write poetry — but I am sure that my experience of writing poetry will help me see ways of improving, honing — simply shining up their writing.

RFL: Michaela Morgan there. Reading can often be a spur to writing, sometimes quite literally. From *Bridget Jones's Diary* to *Clueless* many contemporary books and films remake the classics in the image of the world around them. In the following talk, Costa Children's Book award winner Jasbinder Bilan reveals which literary favourite she would like to rewrite.

Jasbinder Bilan: When I was a young girl growing up in the city of Nottingham, I borrowed *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* from my local library and it became one of my absolute favourite books.

It was the book I read over and over and enjoyed late into the night with a forbidden torch. What I loved about it was the invitation to enter

another world and since I too had an enormous Victorian wardrobe in my bedroom, I could clearly see my name on that invitation.

The wardrobe in my room was so big that my ten-year-old self could easily get lost in it amongst the coats and the other wardrobe paraphernalia. I recall stepping into its musky darkness, closing my eyes and imagining the snow from Narnia landing on my eyelashes. When I'd blink them open on the count of three, I'd feel the *woosh* of the winter wind and a rather friendly Mr Tumnus waiting for me.

If I ever had the luck to be asked to rewrite a classic, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* would be the book at the top of my list.

In moments of daydreaming – of which there are many – I open imaginary emails or even letters asking if I'd like to write my own version of my favourite book.

In the early stages of writing, I take a sketchbook and begin doodling, sticking in images and write freely so I can draw my story to me as if it were floating out there somewhere and only needs to know where to find me.

This new version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* would clearly have the markers of C. S. Lewis' classic but it would be given a strong dose of my own children's author voice.

The setting would have to be somewhere fairly ordinary. Here's the synopsis: four siblings go to visit a crotchety old uncle who lives in a tower block. In one of the rooms is a loft-hatch which they all agree seems rather strange since the flat is on the top floor. The youngest sister, Avarni, decides that they should go and see what's up there. Once they enter the dark musty loft they crawl through on hands and knees towards a light and find themselves in a snowy Himalayan wilderness. The light, they realise, is the sparkle of a bright star which shines down

on a huddle of houses. As they make their way tentatively forwards, they meet a half-bear, half-human creature who seems to recognise them. He greets them by their names and tells them how relieved he is to see them because since they were last here things have gone terribly wrong. The demon-king has stolen the powerful emerald crown and the creature desperately needs their help.

In fact the whole of the mythical city of Alakapuri which lies on the other side of the mountains has been waiting for them to return.

So, dear listener if you'd like to hear *that* story, please press *play*!

RLF: That was Jasbinder Bilan. Whatever we're writing, or rewriting, for many authors the point of all the effort is knowing that our words will one day be read. With that in mind, in the following talk novelist, short story writer and nonfiction author Tom Lee presents a letter to his readers.

Tom Lee: I have to say, I don't think too much about my readers. A cruel person might say, 'that's just as well', with the strong and correct implication that there aren't too many of them.

What readers do I have, can I be sure of? Well, my wife used to read everything I wrote but she hasn't read my latest – not yet published – book because she suspects, rightly, that it will be very depressing. She prefers the old stuff. Then there's other family and friends, who have read my books and stories and essays, or at least pretended to, but they are reading them, at least partly, out of obligation.

Some writers talk about writing with an 'ideal reader' in mind, someone smart and with excellent taste, I assume, someone who understands what you are trying to do and respects it. I don't think like that at all, at least not consciously. I usually say that I write for myself, so perhaps I am my own ideal reader. And it's true that every day I start by re-reading whatever I am working on from the beginning – even if it's long – tweaking things, getting snagged on things that aren't working. Progress can be very slow.

I have overlooked some people here. There are three people who I think of as 'trusted readers', other writers who I have known for a long time and who I swap work with. They have been very important over the years, people who I became friends with in the first place because we like each other's writing and trust each other's opinions. Then there are editors, actual professional editors at magazines and publishers. I have been lucky here, too, people with a brilliant eye and ear, who you can rely on to make the work better.

The obvious way to measure your readership is in book sales and, like most writers of so-called literary fiction, I've learnt not to think too much about that. All I know is that my advances have been small and I've never received a royalty cheque. Do I care about that, about how many people have read my books? Financially, of course. Making money from your books means you can try and write more books.

But does it feel important otherwise, to be widely read? I tell myself not and I think on the whole it's true — I am writing for myself primarily, after all. But then it happens, someone – one of your readers, one of that elite crowd – gets in touch to tell you, unprompted and apparently sincerely, that they like what you have written, it feels great and I think — *who am I kidding?*

RLF outro: Tom Lee there concluding this episode of *Writers Aloud*, which was produced by Ann Morgan. There's more information about the writers we heard from today on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up in the next episode, prolific crime writer and novelist Marnie Riches talks to Doug Johnstone about her journey from a Manchester housing estate to Cambridge University and on to publication.

We hope you'll join us.