

Writers Aloud

Episode 460

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

This episode features a conversation between two crime writers: interviewer Doug Johnstone and Marnie Riches. A graduate of Cambridge University, Marnie is now the author of more than nineteen books, including the *DS Jackson Cooke* series and *The Girl Who Wouldn't Die*. She has won multiple awards and sold more than 250,000 copies. But the journey to publication was not a speedy one. She started off by telling Doug about it.

Marnie Riches: I did begin my first novel, which never got published, it was terrible, but I did write my first novel in the summers when I was at university, and it was a novelisation of a twelfth-century epic Dutch poem about Charlemagne the Great.

Doug Johnstone: Of course it was!

Marnie Riches: Of course it was, and, er, niche. I mean, part of me would still like to go back and do that as a serious historical fiction project. Although I'm mindful of the fact that everyone in Europe might know who Charlemagne the Great is, but nobody in England knows or cares. But yeah, I did write, and I wrote this really *terrible* first draft of a kind of fantasy twist on this historical poem.

And it sat, I kid you not, it sat in a wardrobe for seventeen years. While

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I went off and did being grown up, you know, growing up basically. And then I came to it when my kids were small and I had been doing some property development on the side; you know, we'd move house like every two years or something.

And I decided that I was sick of my day job which I'd done for well over ten years as a professional fundraiser and I hated it; I was good at it but I hated it and I thought I want to do something creative. So I thought right I'm going to be a full-time property developer, and the property market crashed, and I didn't have any money anyway and that's when I started to write.

I needed a creative outlet and I was about thirty-five, certainly getting towards my late thirties by then and I wanted to be a children's writer because J. K. Rowling was all the go, I was reading a lot of children's fiction. So I wrote and I wrote and I wrote and, very quickly, well I say very quickly, within a couple of years, I got an agent.

Nothing I wrote middle-grade-wise ever found a home under my own name. I did however get a commission to write the first six books in HarperCollins *Time Hunters* series, which is for seven-plus year-olds and it's historical adventures. And then I realised actually that I liked the children's writing community, but I didn't feel I fitted in with them.

And I felt that my own reading taste...so by that stage I was reading quite a lot of scandi noir, and I was always the biggest fan of *The Silence of the Lambs*. And in fact, as a kid, I grew up reading things like *Jaws*, and anything I could find by Harold Robbins on my parents' bookshelf, and just lots of adult genre fiction. So I decided that actually, I think that my literary fate maybe would lie with crime fiction.

Doug Johnstone: And that was *The Girl Who Wouldn't Die*, right, in 2015?

Marnie Riches: Yes, that's right, yeah, and it won an award because by...

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and I'm not surprised actually, I read it now and I think, *God, this is actually pretty polished for a first book*, but obviously I'd had ten years experience.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, well, I'm going to come back to that in a bit, but I'm interested, you've sort of skipped over the fact that you wrote six books for kids. And I'm really interested in that experience, that's quite...I mean, we both know a lot of crime writers and I guess having your first taste of published writing as a children's author is really interesting.

And we both know writers who are a bit snippy about, that's the general consensus is like, oh kids books are really easy, that's why celebs get ghostwriters to do it. But obviously anyone who does it knows it's incredibly hard.

Marnie Riches: Yes, it is, it's a real skill, and I think it's the best training I could ever have had for being a crime writer.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, well what did you learn from that, because I mean, it's got to be...there can be no waste in a kid's book, right?

Marnie Riches: No, exactly. Well, yes, so, first of all you have to master the art of just minimising exposition. Which means that the pace is very fast in kids' books, and like you say, there's no waste, there's no flab, and the chapters are very short. So you have to be able to construct this world with incredible characters and a great sense of place. And it's told mainly through action and dialogue.

So obviously for crime writing, that self-discipline, you know, makes for a really good first effort. So yeah, I mean, in the years between that first attempt at writing and then actually getting published and having my debut come out, there's a wealth of experience that I can draw on. And my agent said to me, 'Well, why would you want to get published before forty, you would have had nothing to say?'

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Doug Johnstone: Which brings us nicely to *The Girl Who Wouldn't Die* and the George McKenzie books. So the first one, I mean, as a series, there's five books in the series, right?

Marnie Riches: Yeah.

Doug Johnstone: Set partly in Amsterdam and partly in Cambridge, both cities you presumably knew very well? You'd been at the university and you studied Dutch and German.

Marnie Riches: Yes, I studied in Utrecht.

Doug Johnstone: And so, is it just that old case of write what you know, these were located, I mean these are not, I guess Cambridge is a bit familiar in the crime world, but I guess Amsterdam not so much, was it a case of, trying to think of what your USP was or just using it, drawing on your own experience?

Marnie Riches: Well, I'd become a really big fan of scandi noir around the time of starting to write that, so I was reading the Stieg Larsson books. Obviously, people slag his writing, but you can't knock the story, and I did really like his characterisation, even though there's been some criticism of his portrayal of Salander since.

And, you know, I was married to, and have remarried, the same half-Swede, so there was that interest in scandi culture, and I was reading Nesbø, Jo Nesbø, as well, and because I'd spent my year abroad in the Netherlands and I'd done this degree in Dutch and was quite steeped in Dutch culture, I wanted to write my own answer to the scandi noir boom and thought, well, why not set something in Amsterdam, because it's a place I absolutely love and it's really, really interesting because it's such a mix of sleaze and historical splendour, right in the heart of Europe, and it's a hub for transnational trafficking of all kinds. So I wanted my main character, Georgina McKenzie, to straddle the academic world of

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Cambridge as a kind of aspiring criminologist, and also work for the Dutch police, because she'd done an Erasmus year at Amsterdam University.

But Georgie's story is my story really, she comes from South East London, I mean, I had lived in South East London for a while, and she's mixed race at a time when cultural appropriation wasn't an issue, but the complete white-out in mainstream literature was. And I was really bothered about seeing more diversity in fiction.

And, you know, I'm white minority ethnic and wanted to have a lead character that reflected some aspect of my kind of bonkers family background. But Georgie's story is mine: I mean, she's on a rough estate, she gets bullied by the local feral youths who are highly involved in organized crime and drug dealing; but she's bright and she makes an escape to university and she has a fraught relationship with her mother and, you know, there's lots of meat in her, and the rest is all stuff I was interested in.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, well, you say the rest...and that's interesting because they very specifically these books tackle sort of issues about how women and girls are treated, like human trafficking is an obvious thing, and also sex work and also prejudice of other kinds. Like there's one book that's talks about the Roma gypsies and persecution of them. And it strikes me that, it sounds like it's issue-led but it's not, that just happens to be... you seem to be very keen to talk about these things but it's not like tub thumping, if you know what I mean, it's just basically exposing what's really happening out there.

Marnie Riches: Yeah, well, I think that if you look at the kind of themes that arise in the books, that's where a lot of crime stems from. Because if you think about the Roma that are portrayed in *The Girl Who Walked in the Shadows*, which is probably my favourite in that series, there's a real problem with pickpocketing rings among the Roma community, but it's because they are absolutely on the fringes of society and struggle to get paid work.

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And they're also, a kind of mobile population. So actually, it's the aspect of criminality that I was interested in. So kids being snatched and ending up being abused in organized rings, but if you dig a little deeper, which I always do, a lot of research before I write my books, then you can see the kind of sociological underpinnings of that criminal phenomenon.

Doug Johnstone: And I read somewhere that the books, that series of books, have become the kind of focus of academic study for people looking at representations of trafficking. That must be quite a nice vindication of all your hard work in the research and in the writing of these things?

Marnie Riches: Yeah, yeah, I get tagged into things where people go, *Look, I'm doing my PhD, here's a presentation using your books, for my PhD on blah, blah, you know, trafficking*; that was some years ago. I wish I'd made notes of the people who contacted me, you know, have some visual record or written-down record of these people that have quoted my stuff, because it is terribly flattering.

Having said that, when I do my research, I consult mainly academic articles. So that would probably be why they're reasonably accurate, because I don't want to look too much at primary sources when I'm thinking about terrorism, you know, Islamic fundamentalism. I've no interest in watching someone get decapitated, but I'm quite happy to read the academic overview of someone who has watched that footage.

So, it's partly me being a wimp, but also wanting to read from sources where someone's read countless primary and secondary source texts. And I can kind of magpie what they know and then put it in my storyline.

Doug Johnstone: And since those George McKenzie books, you've kind of branched out to several other mini-series, one of the things I want to talk to you about, and take you to task for is your incredible output of books by the way!

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Marnie Riches: Oh God, if you could see the wrinkles on the inside though!

Doug Johnstone: It makes all other writers absolutely furious with envy, but yeah, so there's three other separate little mini-series right? So how did each of these come about, there's sort of Manchester gangland books, there's Bev Saunders books, and then there's a Detective Jackie Cooke one. So, where are all these avenues springing from, where's it coming from?

Marnie Riches: Well, it's mainly springing from the fact that I've moved publishers quite a lot because, you know, it's financial reasons and otherwise. So the series, the Manchester Gangland series, *Born Bad*, HarperCollins asked me to write something about Manchester's Gangland because obviously I'm very familiar with it. I've grown up in Manchester, I've lived here for most of my adult life now.

I was down South for a bit, but now I've come back, so I can write authoritatively about it. And, you know, I come from a family that...I'm not saying everyone has a clean criminal record. So I know about the temptations, I can write from the criminal side with some authority. I'm not a criminal and I pay my taxes and my mum was a hard worker and stuff, but I do know about the plight of people that get roped into this stuff and why they do it. I'm not condoning it either.

But so anyway, so HarperCollins said, 'Right, do you want to be the Martina Cole of the North?' And I'm like, 'yeah'. So that's why I wrote *Born Bad* and then *The Cover Up*, but then, I got divorced, and I was struggling for money, and my editor then asked me to hang around for six months to see how the second book sold.

And I couldn't afford to, I needed money to keep the roof over our heads and to put food on the table for me and the kids. So I said, 'Look, I can't wait six months', they were intractable. I really wanted to write more of this series, but then I ended up having to move, and moved to Orion, where I'd got on very well with Sam Eades, who was a rising star there.

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And she wanted me to write something that was a little bit sexy and about a PI and set up North. But with a bit, with something that would appeal to psych thriller readers as well. So *Tightrope* was born and my PI Bev Saunders with her kind of sexual addiction and origami fetish came about. And that's set mainly in the footballer belt of South Manchester/Cheshire borders, which is Hale.

So I did those two and for a number of reasons they didn't sell particularly well. And then I ended up moving to Bookouture, because I'd written a manuscript out of contract, which went on sub, during the first lockdown and it was a terribly dark, serious...because, I do usually have quite a lot of tongue-in-cheek black humour in my books, and this had none of that. And I wanted to aspire to be, a really serious, big-hitting writer, I thought, *This is going to be my breakout book*. Me and my agent were really excited, speculative serial killer thriller, nobody wanted it!

But Ruth Tross at Bookouture said, 'Well, I love your writing, and I admire the cut of your jib, you're a really hard-working author'. So I was contracted to write the *Jackson Cooke* books, so this is a heavily pregnant detective sergeant who works in Manchester and again, there's a serial killer at the heart of both books so *All the Pretty Ones* and *The Silent Dead*. But I wanted to write about a detective who is a mother, and an older mother at that, and someone who is really having to struggle with paying the bills with a rather ineffectual husband. So this has been quite an interesting departure to do something that's very police procedural, but still with serial killers at the heart of it, because I'm really interested in them. And that's why I've got three mini-series.

Doug Johnstone: Well, you mentioned there about...there's a couple of things I want to pick up on there. You mentioned about serial killers that seems to be a kind of enduring fascination, not just for you, but for a lot of writers and for a lot of readers. And I wonder what you think it is about that that people are fascinated by, is it just the aberrational quality of it? Psychologically, what do you think it is?

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Marnie Riches: Well, I think it's a mixture of morbid curiosity, and people have always had that, which is why people used to go and watch hangings for entertainment, and a genuine interest in how somebody could be psychologically so different from them, and a thirst for understanding of what can make the wonderful human...the wonders of human potential so very grim indeed.

So I like to explore those kind of psychological differences, and it's worth noting that I did do some psychoanalysis at university in my final year.

I studied some Freudian and to a certain extent Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, on quite a superficial level. I've not got a PhD in the stuff, but I've always had an interest in how the mind works, and certainly how the broken mind works.

Doug Johnstone: This sort of chat makes it sound as if these are very dark and brooding and almost depressing books that you're writing. But actually you mentioned earlier, there's a hint of dark comedy, right, in most of what you write, I think?

Marnie Riches: Yeah, yeah.

Doug Johnstone: And, I'm really fascinated by that because I sometimes get that as well. Sometimes people read my books and say, 'Oh, I really love the black humour in it', and I'm like, 'Oh, was it funny?' I'm not ever sure. Well, I think everyone's different. Are you very conscious of that when you're writing, or is it just part of your personality that kind of seeps into the situations, the characters that you have?

Marnie Riches: Well, it's funny you should say that, I mean, I do think that even...my own experiences of growing up on a rough estate and really, really struggling with violent attacks from kids and poverty and all sorts of grim stuff. There's always been *terrific* humour, at home, in my family, you know, between my mum and my auntie, they'd just sit round

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the table when I was a kid, both in the direst of circumstances, and they were kind of drinking strong tea and smoking numerous cigarettes and just *laughing* like drains.

And I tried to write much straighter books with *All the Pretty Ones* and *The Silent Dead* with DS Jackson Cooke. And then people say, 'Oh, there was some lovely lighter moments in this that made the dark stuff really, you know, really palatable, really good, really enjoyable, I laughed out loud at this' and I'm thinking *There wasn't anything funny in that*. I'm just like, what exactly made you laugh about that story?

But obviously it seeps in without realising it because I find it really difficult to stay serious for long.

Doug Johnstone: Well, one of the things I think, maybe in my writing, maybe this might be the case for you, but if you set up your characters to be like real people, you know, to be like real people with all the flaws and real attitudes, then if you put them in a kind of awful or crazy situation, then they can't help but see the ridiculousness in that situation and therefore make a joke of it.

Or at least it's that juxtaposition of: this is horrible, but also I'm a real person, and this is like...so it's like, you're talking about your mum and your aunt sitting around the table, you know, actually having a laugh about these things that are really terrible.

Marnie Riches: Yeah. I don't think I could write a book, certainly not a contemporary book, without humour in it.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, so at the same time as all these crime novels, you've also just knocked out a couple of historical fiction books as well, as Maggie Campbell, like you do, just in your spare time!

Marnie Riches: Maggie, named after me Nanna.

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Doug Johnstone: Yeah, yeah, so these Nurse Kitty books, they're sort of set, just postwar, in the start of the NHS. How on earth and where did that come from?

Marnie Riches: Well, see, when I was growing up my mum was always an avid reader and she got me into the library, from, you know, as soon as I could read, well probably before that, I used to probably go and look at picture books. And she was an avid reader of historical sagas and she burned through three a week.

She'd just go and stock up and she'd have this massive pile of like, Catherine Cookson, Maeve Binchy, and all these kind of bodice rippers and women in shawls on, wearing clogs, on cobbled streets on the front. So I'd grown up with that, and that's why when my editor at Trapeze said, 'Well, you're saying you're skint, do you want to do a contract on the side, writing some historical sagas?'

I leapt at it and as I was writing *Nurse Kitty's Secret War* and then *Nurse Kitty's Unforgettable Journey*, I'm waiting for my edits back on the third one that doesn't have a title yet, I thought *By god I absolutely love doing this*.

Doug Johnstone: Great. I think you sometimes need that, you need like a palate cleanser almost, trying to just do something different and it reinvigorates your writing in other areas as well, right?

Marnie Riches: Yeah and I've just started your speculative...your sci-fi book and so I'm guessing for you again that that's the palate cleanser?

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, absolutely. Just, it's such a new experience and it kind of makes you see what you were doing before and through different eyes, I think, right?

Marnie Riches: Yeah.

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Doug Johnstone: So I'm interested in your process then, are you very regular? Do you sit down at the same time every day at the desk and bash the words out? How do you get on with it?

Marnie Riches: Well, in the beginning when I was fresh, for many years, I used to sit at my desk every day and aim to write two thousand words a day, seven days a week. And I still do that, and then when I've handed in, I'll have a good two or three weeks off.

As I've got further into the process and have more books published, I find it harder to...I remember Erin Kelly saying once that nowadays she likes 'having written', and I've got to that stage where I've lost the kind of adrenaline rush and euphoria of that first draft process and now it feels more of a slog, and I do frequently get writer's block.

And I think part of what's made it more difficult lately, certainly the last year or two, I've been struggling with kind of menopausal, perimenopausal, brain fog, which has made concentrating harder. And when you're not doing so well in your career, and you're writing good books that readers love, but they're not necessarily selling in huge quantities, sometimes you get demotivated and that can also impact on your focus. But if you stop me from writing, I'll be very miserable indeed.

Doug Johnstone: I'm not going to do that, Marnie. I'm not going to stop you from writing!

Marnie Riches: No, but you know, you know how it is. I do think that your fortunes in the book world can really affect your own output and your focus and motivation. So it's important to be a disciplinarian.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, it's not necessarily, well, for me it's not necessarily sales, but just the confidence of the backing, like the solid backing of a publisher or someone. So you know that if you go out on a limb or if you try something new, or if you want to do something that interests you that actually they're going to be behind you. I think that makes a difference.

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Marnie Riches: Well, absolutely, yeah. I mean, publishing's a business at the end of the day and the books have to balance. And there's this horrible notion of 'fast track' where if you haven't sold so well it shows up on Nielsen's Bookscan. The beauty with eBooks is that they can be re-promoted at any point, as my agent reminds me on a regular basis when I go to him needing counselling and pastoral care.

But yeah, it's a business and it's a kind of big meat-grinding machine, the publishing business, at the more commercial end. And editors really care that good books get out there that readers love, but, the nature of the game is that the literature is necessarily homogenized. So if you read one commercial psych thriller, it's more or less the same as any other commercial psych thriller, I think. There are some people at the top of the game like C. L. Taylor – Cally Taylor – and Lisa Jewell, and Tammy Cohen, who, you know, their writing's nice, and they're the leaders in their field because they do it particularly well.

But as you move down the field to the mid-list authors, readers want to read homogenous stories. And that's not saying they're not good stories, but they are homogenous, and if you're the type of person that wants to be quite colourful in their writing and not kind of, beige and mass market, you're a bit in trouble, you have to, you know, I have to behave myself. And my task with my books is to make sure that they're not anodyne and saccharine.

Doug Johnstone: So, a final question then, I'm kind of scared to ask, given your productive output, but I mean, you must have about, what, eight books on the go at the moment? Where are you, what, are you the kind of person that has lots of projects at once, or are you a single book at a time person?

Marnie Riches: Well, I am currently out of contract. For the first time in many years for both genres, I'm writing nothing. Which, you know, I handed my final in-contract manuscript in at the end of December,

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just before the Christmas break, and I'm waiting to see what happens with my Bookouture series, because for once I've thought *Don't rush into something, let's see where this goes sales-wise*.

And I've written a sample that is going out on sub but apart from that, and I've got several synopses in play, but my agent is in the process of trying to renegotiate contracts or negotiate new contracts. So for the first time in a long time, I'm having a bit of a hiatus and doing more teaching and I'm just reading as much as I can.

I'm a very, very slow reader, I have to sound things out in my head. So, you know, I'm a step away from being a mouth-breather. But yeah, it's quite nice to down tools because on several occasions over the past couple of years, although I always endeavour to write something really as good as I possibly, possibly can, I've come to the brink of burnout on a couple of occasions because I've taken on too much.

So at the moment I'm waiting to see where the future lies for me in terms of writing this year, it's down to my agent now. The ball is in his court.

RLF outro: That was Marnie Riches in conversation with Doug Johnstone. There are more details of Marnie's work on the Royal Literary Fund website. This episode was produced by Ann Morgan.

Next time, William Ryan shares insights into how he writes scenes, Lauren James talks about how she writes and Menna van Praag tackles deadlines.

We hope you'll join us.