

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 463

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

‘Publish and be damned’, or so the saying goes. To many aspiring writers, the idea of holding your book in your hands is the height of ambition — it certainly was for me when I spent my twenties writing unpublishable work, saving a dusty bottle of champagne on a shelf near my desk ready for the day I finally got a literary agent. But for those of us who have crossed that rubicon, the experience of sending your words out into the world can be unexpected and sometimes challenging.

In this episode, Royal Literary Fund writers share their memories of publication and some of the things they learnt from this.

First up, Mary-Jane Riley reveals what no one told her about the experience of seeing her work in print.

**Mary-Jane Riley:** Being published: It’s a rollercoaster that never ends, with the highest highs and the lowest lows. It’s a slog, one word at a time, one more word. Ten minutes of writing and then — then something enjoyable. It’s hands flying fast across the keys as the words spill from your brain and down your arms and into your fingers. It’s a long game. A *very* long game.

My first published book, *The Bad Things*, was digital-first in the days when mainstream publishers were discovering ebooks were here to stay and could be very profitable and that they’d better jump on the bandwagon.

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I was awake at midnight on the 27th August waiting for my book to magically appear on my Kindle. And it did, in all its glory with *my* name on the cover. My name, my book, my dream fulfilled.

And then the crippling anxiety leapt in. Were people going to like it? Would they pick holes in it? Was anybody actually going to read it? What were the reviews going to be like?

My first bad review. One line, one soul-destroying line. Which also gave away the plot. I read it over and over again. I obsessed over it. I talked endlessly about it. Until it was eclipsed by other, much better, dare I say, glowing reviews — and not all from my family. Nowadays I can happily pass over the one star given for it not downloading properly or for the ‘language’ within.

And the marketing. Before being published, I had visions of a big publicity team behind me, pushing the book into delighted booksellers’ hands. No. It was just me, arranging interviews on local radio, in local newspapers, writing blogs, tweeting, holding competitions with my husband picking winners out of his hat.

During all this of course I was writing the second book, for which, thankfully, I had an idea and the semblance of a plot. I was also answering questions about my writing — where did I get my ideas from? (No idea.) How many hours a day did I devote to writing? (Er...two hours on a good day? With several breaks?) How many copies had I sold? (No clue.) Was I earning as much as J. K. Rowling? (Er, not quite.) So how much *was* I earning? (Is it any of your business?) Could my aunt/sister/brother/friend/acquaintance have a free copy? (Um, no.) Could I give a talk to this book group and I wouldn’t mind would I that they’d be scoring my book out of ten at the meeting? While I’m there.

But then there were the old university friends who got in touch having read my book. There was being wined and dined by other friends who

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knew how hard I'd worked for a publishing contract. And my family who was overjoyed by my success. And the sheer delight of seeing my book on the shelf of my local library.

But no one, no one can prepare you for that bubble of euphoria when you hold your published book in your own hands for the first time.

**RLF:** That was Mary-Jane Riley. Although the process of putting a book out into the world is long, often spanning several years, one day marks the official dividing line between manuscript and book. This day is known in the book world as the pub day, not because it involves going to the pub (although, of course, that may be the case) but because pub is short for 'publication'.

This day is often a cause for celebration, but it may not play out quite as we might imagine. Beth Miller remembers how the reality of her first pub day contrasted with her expectations.

**Beth Miller:** While I was writing my first book, I had the usual fantasies about being published. A massive bestseller, obviously, with a ginormous advance; a literary prize; being invited on to *Desert Island Discs*.

But above all was the glorious image of Publication Day. I'd be woken by flower deliveries. My husband would present me with a champagne glass full of – I don't like early morning alcohol – tea. Then I'd head to the local bookshop to pose for photos next to a large tabletop display of my books. My agent would take me out for lunch, and in the evening there'd be a glittering book launch, awash with champagne, which I'd be ready for by this point, with gushing speeches from my publisher, surrounded by doting friends.

Should be do-able, right?

My first novel came out in 2014, and there was indeed a book launch

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a few days before publication, though the first shock was that I had to organise and pay for it myself. I was disappointed too when my publisher sent apologies, saying she wished she could come but alas, had a clashing event. The night of the launch I watched in fascination as she live-tweeted an old episode of *Jeeves and Wooster*. However, at the launch there *was* champagne (prosecco) and gushing speeches (mostly given by me) and people were lovely and I signed books.

The day before publication the book's publicist emailed to say they were very excited because the *Daily Mail* was going to print a review. I was torn, because while of course hoping for a glowing five stars, I knew I'd feel better if I could promote the book as 'hated by the *Daily Mail*'. Thus I woke up on publication day not with flowers but with a heavy dread in my stomach that the *Mail* had liked/hadn't liked my book.

I rushed to Smiths to look at the paper. The reviewer *quite* liked it, possibly the worst of all worlds. While in the shop I casually asked the sales assistant if they'd got my book in. Obviously I didn't say it was *my* book. In fact I pronounced my own name slightly wrong to put them off the scent. They had never heard of it, they said, but could order a copy to arrive by next week. I slunk home rather chastened, and spent the rest of the day checking my phone for broadsheet reviews, calls from Radio 4 or the Booker Prize. In the evening my family toasted my book with fish and chips, and that was the day I learned a valuable lesson in managed expectations.

Publication day for my most recent book – my eighth – was wonderful. I made no plans, other than a lovely half-hour online launch. My new publisher sent flowers – at last! – and I bought fancy doughnuts, and went for a walk. I turned my phone off, so, *Desert Island Discs*, that's why I didn't answer. Try me after the next book.

**RLF:** Beth Miller there. Alys Fowler's first experience of pub day was similarly underwhelming. Now, with many books under her belt, she has developed her own strategy and rituals for marking a book's appearance in the world.

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**Alys Fowler:** I had missed the post and had to walk down to the sorting office to collect my package. I tore open the box as I walked back and pulled out one of the stack of books. There in the middle of street I stood and stared at it. The midday traffic had slowed to a snarl and someone beeped their horn at me just as the traffic lights changed. I couldn't see what who it was, just the waving hand, so I waved the book back at them and then I walked home to eat lunch.

Later I got a text from friends asking what the book was that it was so interesting that I'd been engrossed in it in the middle of the street. And I felt embarrassed to say that it was *my* book. That it was actually *my* publication day of my first book. I can remember nothing else about that day. It passed, as days do.

I have written many books since then and I cannot remember much about publication day of any of these either. Occasionally a publisher will send me a bottle of wine or a bunch of flowers, but mostly it has been a bit of a damp squib of a day. Your publisher, or more likely the social media account manager at your publisher's, will congratulate you publicly and so will your mother (that is, if you tell her); and that's about it.

It is the start of the merry-go-round; but it is slow to get going and the music is still a little out of tune until it gets up to speed. The following weeks and months will hopefully be full of interviews, book reviews, festivals, talks and signings. If you are brave, and you must be, you will shout from the rooftops about your book. You will press it into the hands of strangers and send it off with hopeful notes to far-flung corners that it might find its home and its people.

But publication day, for me at least, will always be quiet and a little uneventful. And you too might well find yourself, as I have often, alone on this monumental day or even if you have company, a little lost as to what to do with it. I have learnt to take it off and indulge a little. The advance cheque always takes a little longer to clear than it should on that

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day, but as long as I have the means I take myself out for lunch. I buy someone else's book and I read it over dessert and coffee. I take a long afternoon nap. In the evening, I make a good strong cocktail, even if it's a Monday night, and I cook something a little decadent and certainly delicious. I draw a long deep bath and then I go to bed early. You need to steel yourself for the next bit, for all the whirlwind of promotion, but publication day is yours alone and the reward is to do as you please.

**RLF:** Alys Fowler there. Publication *can* feel like the end of a long process, but if you're lucky, it opens the doors to other opportunities. You might get media invitations or see your book reviewed in the national press. You could be asked to talk to community groups or students. You might be invited to take part in events with other authors. Literature festivals have become big business in recent years, with hundreds of writers appearing in the line-ups in towns and villages up and down the UK and across the world. Charlie Hill shares his view.

**Charlie Hill:** Shortly after publication of my first novel, and perplexed by the lack of interest that Hay had taken in it, I decided to put on my own literary festival.

It took place in the concrete back garden of a Birmingham pub where a friend ran a writers' group. Blissfully undeterred by our lack of experience, we cobbled together a programme consisting of a fella who had written radio scripts for *Dr Who*, someone who had been in *The Fall*, and a local poet I had recently met at a party. The role of host was filled by a Facebook friend, the author of a wordless novel consisting of 'the dates, times and duration in seconds (bracketed where the act was interrupted or unclimactic) of every act of masturbation in two lives'.

Had we discovered a gap in the market? For an event that made explicit the relationship between writing and idiosyncrasy and booze? Although small, our audience was enthusiastic and we thought we might be onto something. Either way, the festival ran for the next six years.

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Not that its trajectory was constant. We skipped happily through the Arts Council's annual hoops but enjoyed a more bumpy sponsorship ride with an investment bank looking to write-off their 'community outreach' budget. There were issues with daytime drinkers and Biblical rainstorms. The barstaff were suspicious of writerly types. After one successful do, hubris took hold. We expanded to two days and added a venue, invited students along to film us, invested in branded tees and bags; there were more paying punters than merch-sellers and film crew and merchant bankers that year, but only just.

The development of our programme was equally ad hoc. At first, constrained by both budget and contact book, we sourced guests from the more esoteric fringes of the literati. This suited me, but made little sense in relation to ticket sales. Gradually – and partly due to our commitment to decent appearance fees – we began featuring more recognisable names.

Writers are a funny bunch though, irrespective of their sales. We had a guest who asked to be paid with a bottle of whisky, someone read standing on their head. A panellist refused the offer of a cab from town and, indulging their affinity for psychogeographic exploration, walked two miles through unfamiliar streets, past abattoirs and stolen cars. Four days before they were due to appear, one headliner found themselves embroiled in an online furore involving pseudonymous praise of their own work and criticism of others. And bailed.

Was our venture a success? It's difficult to say. It finished because it was taking too much time and didn't pay enough. But we had fun and learned a lot, benefits I think the audiences shared. As the do took place at a venue only once-removed from Birmingham's inner city, we couldn't fail to be ahead of the diversity curve. And the last day was headlined by Joanne Harris who isn't best known for a wordless novel about masturbation. So, there's that too.

**RLF:** That was Charlie Hill. Whatever their path to publication and



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whatever kind of work they do, most writers seem to agree that the experience of seeing their work in print rarely goes entirely as they expect. With that in mind, Ian Ayris shares his biggest writing surprise.

**Ian Ayris:** I never meant to be a writer. I was in the bottom class of English in secondary school — a school I left at the age of fifteen.

For almost the next twenty-five years, I wrote nothing. I read loads – I always loved reading – but I wrote nothing.

Then, at nearly forty, pushing my two-year-old daughter in her pushchair, a voice in my head started telling me a story. The voice was sneery and swears, violent and aggressive. When I got home, I wrote the story down — with the aim of simply getting the voice out of my head.

I didn't have much idea about the internet at the time, but a quick search revealed several writing websites to which writers posted stories. So that's what I did. Within two hours, a publisher contacted me to ask if he could publish my story in an anthology he was preparing. He asked if I had any more stories he could look at. I said I didn't. I wasn't a writer. But over the next few weeks, I wrote three more stories — and the publisher loved them all.

After the fourth story was published, I thought I'd try my hand at writing a novel. The disadvantage I had in this endeavour was having no idea how to go about writing a novel. But what I did have in my favour was that I had no idea how to go about writing a novel — I had no school learning to unlearn, no restrictions, no conventions to adhere to.

I wrote a chapter at a time, not knowing what the next chapter would contain, or what place each had in a coherent whole. I wasn't looking to get published. I was just seeing if I could write something longer than a short story.



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Realising early on the huge scope of this undertaking, I emailed each chapter I finished to a writer mate of mine for some feedback, without realising he was sending each chapter I sent him to his publisher.

Six months after I emailed the final chapter to my mate, I received an email from his publisher offering me a contract for the book.

I'm not ashamed to say, I cried. They weren't tears of joy. They were tears of inadequacy and pain, and loss, each tear encasing words I'd never been able to speak. The book was carved from a place within me I'd been afraid of my whole life, with characters braver than me, more scared than me, closer to me than I ever realised.

Although I have been incredibly fortunate that everything I've written since has been published in some form — every acceptance is a surprise. Whenever a reader tells me how much they love my books and stories, I am surprised. Whenever someone buys a book or takes the time to leave a review, I'm surprised.

I never meant to be a writer.

The biggest surprise of my writing life is that I have a writing life at all.

**RLF outro:** Ian Ayris there, closing this episode, which was produced by Ann Morgan. If you'd like to know more about any of our featured writers, you can find them on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up next time, Charlie Hill speaks with Ann Morgan about becoming a better writer book by book, the value or otherwise of creative writing degrees, and knowing when to complicate the battle and when to sack off nuance.

We hope you'll join us.