Writers Aloud

Episode 466

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

Ann Morgan: When it comes to book sales, genre is big business. For example, according to Nielsen BookScan, 2021 was a bumper year for crime, sci-fi, romance, and personal development titles. Mind, body, spirit works alone netted UK booksellers 18.7 million pounds. It's hardly surprising then that many professional writers can find it easier to be published in popular categories.

But what if your desires don't fit with market forces? In this episode, we talk to writers who consider their true genre to be something different to the one for which they're most well known.

Like many Royal Literary Fund fellows, Alyson Hallett has been published in several fields; poetry, however, has her heart. She says this is because it is most profoundly connected to breathing and the body.

Alyson Hallett: I am a poet, that's at the heart of *everything* that I do, and I think there are numerous reasons for this. For me, poetry is the closest thing to being alive: with the poem you're necessarily working with the breath, with sound, with music, and with notation, because when it comes to writing, the empty space is as important as the word, it's the echo chamber. So if a word is a bell, the space around it is its echo chamber. And we're always working with phrases, so as a human being, I breathe: I breathe in, I breathe out, and that breath will have different

lengths, so when I'm nervous or scared, my breath will be short, when I'm relaxed, it can take a longer view. And what I *love* with a poem is the body of the poem necessarily echoes the body of the human being who writes and who hears. And I was thinking about this, I was thinking, with prose, the line goes from the left to the right, it's very orderly.

But I don't think like that, I don't breathe like that, I don't operate in such a regulated form. Now, of course, I can, and when I write prose, I will do that, I will obey the line length that's determined by the margins in my computer. But the core of what I'm doing has to reside with poetry.

Ann Morgan: For Hallett, poetry also contains the possibility of not knowing, making the writing process a journey of discovery.

Alyson Hallett: In that poetic mode, we don't need to know. And it was the French thinker, the great philosopher, Helen Cixous, who said that she called anyone a poet who knew how *not to know*. So she called this the 'second knowing'.

So whatever we learn, there comes a point when you let go of it, you release it and you come to a place of not knowing, which is not a place of ignorance. But that openness, that way of being curious, and unimpeded, that's what she referred to as almost the mode of the poet. And I *really* like that, and again, that's a political thing, it's a personal thing, you know, how do you come to something with an open mind again? It's not easy, you know, an open mind, an open heart. And for me, poetry is the thing that can keep me coming back to that. And I think maybe because we're working so much with paradox as opposed to didacticism, although there's room for didacticism; you know, I've just been looking at Baudelaire's 'Be Drunk', you know, the imperative, *be drunk*, very much like Rumi: be drunk on wine or poetry, whatever you wish. And poetry intoxicates, there we go, I'm a hopeless drunk, I'm a *hopeless* drunk, that's why I'm a poet. That's why poetry is my true genre.

Ann Morgan: David Kennedy agrees that poetry affords more freedom than other kinds of writing.

David Kennedy: I think about poetry virtually all the time, even when I'm not writing it. I'm fascinated by the idea of poetry as a particular way of behaving in language and in the world. Poetry, I think, can be seen as quite a radical activity, because it's not what people are supposed to do with their time. Kelvin Corcoran, in an interview with Andy Brown, says that the writing of poetry is about delighting the mind.

That's a view that I agree with. And the greatest reward, I think, for a poet is when readers experience the same delight that the poet did in writing a poem. This is why poetry readings are so important, because they enable the poet to meet his or her readers. Poetry readings can be as rewarding for the poet as for the audience.

When I'm writing poetry, I feel a tremendous sense of freedom. I can write about anything I want to, and I can be as formal or as experimental as I wish to. I believe that this freedom could have transformative effects on both poets and their readers; it's total freedom of expression. And also, writing poetry gives me tremendous pleasure.

In my writing career, there have been times when I've stopped writing poetry altogether, when I felt a need to recharge myself after a big project of writing poetry. So, for example, there was a gap of nearly eighteen months between finishing the Cézanne poems and starting to write new work. It's important to stress that stopping writing poetry doesn't mean losing interest in it.

And carrying on reading other people's poetry in these fallow periods is a kind of research in itself.

Ann Morgan: Kennedy finds that poetry also allows him new ways into the topics he works on in other forms.

David Kennedy: The writing of *Elegy* has opened up important critical research areas for me. I wrote a book on elegy for the *New Critical Idiom* series, and it was a great thrill to find that this was on the reading list for students at Harvard. I've worked on a Wellcome Trust funded investigation of online memorials for suicide victims, and I took the role of principal investigator for an *AHRC* funded international network, which explored new narratives of death. To go from the sublime to the ridiculous, I wrote a piece on celebrity funerals for the *Yorkshire Post* on the occasion of footballer George Best's funeral.

Ekphrasis is, broadly speaking, writing about art, and many of my own poems are ekphrastic. This fascination led me to write a book-length critical study of ekphrastic poetry, which also explored ekphrasis in other cultural genres, such as film and television. I'm interested in writing about art that goes beyond mere representation, and I want to know what art is now, and what poetry is now.

Ann Morgan: In terms of the amount she's published, Amanda Dalton is aware that, on paper at least, she looks like a playwright. Poetry is however, also her literary form of choice.

Amanda Dalton: Poems came first, with plays following close behind, and I realise I've written twenty-four plays and only two books of poems, so if we're judging by weight, it would be plays, or if we're judging by money, it would be plays.

But I think it's poems; poems perhaps matter most – I was going to say– because I'm lazy. I like reading things that are complete and short. Maybe that translates to my writing as well, I get bored with myself, I think, when I write too many words. I love miniature worlds; I like the white space around the edges.

I actually want to challenge the idea of genre. I was thinking the other day: perhaps we're post-genre now? I really love writing that mashes it

up. I was reading the book, *300 Arguments*, by the American writer Sarah Manguso, and one of her aphorisms in there was concerned with the idea that we don't have one way of writing or one voice, and that actually, like character, voices depend on interaction with the world, and I think it's a little bit the same with genre.

And the more we're in a world that is mashed up, and fast moving, and where things blur, perhaps we're in a world where our old ideas of genre become redundant.

Ann Morgan: Trish Cooke, by contrast, feels most drawn to playwriting.

Trish Cooke: My true genre, I think, is a playwright. Although I write children's books and short stories for adults and eventually want to write more for adults, most of my writing, I think, starts off with dialogue, with character, and so playwriting is something that I think is where my heart is. I started off doing performing arts, so storytelling has always part of that; improvising through drama has always been part of my storytelling technique and so script writing definitely is where my centre is.

Ann Morgan: Yet, while many writers feel very confident working in the genre that appeals most to them, for some this can be a source of self-doubt. Martina Evans found herself bowing to external pressure when she prioritised fiction over poetry early in her career.

Martina Evans: I was torn for a long time between poetry and fiction. I felt obliged to write fiction because I think there was pressure around me to write fiction because that was more important or that would earn more money. And in a sense, this feeling people had that you've started – I'd written one novel and there was a two-book deal and then a third novel came along – that you'd keep writing novels.

And I think I was younger then and I was more inclined to go along with people. But after a certain length of time, I found myself suffering because

it seemed poetry was all I wanted to write and I was getting further and further...there was less and less time for poetry. So, in the end, I had a kind of epiphany on the road to Damascus, and realised poetry was all I wanted to write.

I think it's because it's what comes naturally to me. And I think sometimes people are mistaken because they think poetry is some kind of easy thing; that's because it's short, that less time goes into it. It's not like that at all. Because I think, actually, many poems I've written, I know that they've been germinating for years.

You know, I might draft something, think something, come back to it. An example of this would be when I started to write poetry, again, it was unexpected, again, it was a bit like Saint Paul and the road to Damascus. This sudden excitement, and it's a bit like a drug, once you've tasted it, you keep wanting to go back to that feeling.

But it came out of the death of my father, and I started writing poems. And I wrote many poems about my father, and they just didn't work. But while this was going on, what often happens when you're writing, while you think you're doing one thing, something else is happening. I was writing other poems, and some of these got published.

Ann Morgan: Even when a poem is published, Evans sometimes feels doubtful about it. Nevertheless, she enjoys the freedom that poetry gives her, even if works can take years to complete.

Martina Evans: The first poem that got published was accepted for a magazine called *Celtic Dawn* and I was invited down to where the magazine was organised and run out of a castle in Thame in Oxford by the wife of one of the Bee Gees, Dwina Murphy-Gibb, and I met Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees and all sorts of famous people when I went down on that day and the very first poem that I had published, 1989, was 'There's a Snake in My Bed' and I often worried afterwards that it was just the title

that got me into the magazine, but it got me started.

So I thought, *Oh I failed to write that poem about my father*, and then about eight years later I was in Waitrose doing my shopping, when the poem about my father came out on the back of an envelope. So you could say it took maybe ten years in all, or not. So poems can take a long, long time, a lot of thinking, a lot of thought. The *speed* of a poem is very, very interesting, because it does some really interesting things with time.

A poem can have this lightning-quick, almost like synapses, joining and separating and tell something incredibly complicated very swiftly and musically and without a wasted word. That kind of excitement was so amazing to me, fiction really felt very plodding. And I do think the other reason I found fiction hard was I was writing with my ear, and it was quite lyrical and they often turned out to be a little bit too short for the publisher or the agent's tastes.

I think this is kind of very important because you're talking about things like marketing. My first novel was about teenagers and I think it got slotted into the wrong category as well because I was writing a poem and poetry, thankfully, has not been...you don't have sections like: fiction, nonfiction, creative nonfiction, biography, autobiography, fiction, metafiction. A poem is a poem and that's what's wonderful, because that's freedom, it's the oldest form there is.

Ann Morgan: Novelist Jon Mayhew also second-guesses himself when he ventures into other fields of writing.

Jon Mayhew: I've tried writing poetry and I never really have the confidence to sort of tell myself it's any good. I'm always very tempted to show someone my poetry and say, 'Oh, you know, what do you think of this?' But I don't know. I like it, it satisfies me. I did actually take some of it out and perform it at a fringe event at the Chester Literary Festival and it was fairly well received but, again there's that nagging voice in the back

of your mind telling you that, that it's no good. So I keep my poetry to myself generally.

Quite frequently I get asked to write articles and that's something I find quite a challenge actually. There's all the research for a start, I quite like researching historical events, things like that, I quite like researching strange things, but factual articles sometimes I find difficult.

And I suffer terribly from imposter syndrome. So the moment I have to write an article down, I kind of feel like I'm not qualified to, and I don't have the knowledge, and I really shouldn't. And so maybe that's kind of holding me back a little bit on there. I don't know.

Ann Morgan: Some writers choose not to share their work in certain genres. Nonfiction author Claire Harmon, for example, derives satisfaction from being an unpublished poet, although she says being an unpublished novelist is less pleasing.

Claire Harman: The books I've published have all been nonfiction works. The books I haven't published have all been books of poetry and novels. So I've got...rather like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, I've got this other side running along. And I don't want to say which one's which, whether Jekyll is the published side and Hyde the unpublished side, but I certainly always wanted to be a poet, and I have always written poetry, and I've had very, very few poems published, and actually I now just don't care if I'm an unpublished poet. I rather like, in fact, I *very much like* being an unpublished poet. I've also written a couple of novels. I don't like being an unpublished novelist as much as I like being an unpublished poet. But it's cool, I'm cool with it, it's fine.

And I'm a semi-published short-story writer, so we can see me going up through this chain of being here in a rather dodgy way. You know, very-much-published nonfiction person, somewhat-published short-story writer, not-at-all-published novelist, and completely unpublished-and-

loving-it poet.

So I carry on writing poems, very slowly sometimes, you know, occasionally something will just come out and surprise me. But other times I can just tinker with a poem for years and it's always there to be adjusted. Then it gets finished and I don't do anything with it, and I'm very, very satisfied. I write certain ones that are very obviously rambunctious, almost light verse, I work a lot on them. I wouldn't want anybody to read them; I write ones that are very personal; again, I wouldn't want anybody to read them. But the fact that they've emerged and needed to be written and have been written and have been tinkered with and made as good as they can be satisfies me *incredibly*. It's a world in which one can experiment with language and with rhythms and words. And it's like a sort of workshop, so I'm tinkering with my own language, my vocabulary, my feelings, all the time, and it doesn't need to be exposed.

Ann Morgan: That doesn't mean to say that publication doesn't bring certain benefits, as Harman found when one of her few poems to make it into print won a major award.

Claire Harman: I think I've had probably about eight poems now published altogether over the years, and one of them then won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem of the year, which actually was the most surreal experience of my life, I think, standing on the stage of the Royal Festival Hall and thinking, *Oh my goodness, I've published a poem that people have recognised*.

I mean, out of this tiny little body of poems, it was only four poems at the time that I published, I didn't even know the Forward Prize for a single poem existed, and suddenly I was on the shortlist because the *TLS* put me in for it, and then I won the thing. So that was like a sort of magic wand of recognition.

So I've had the most recognition I could possibly have had on the smallest

conceivable publishing history, which in itself is the kind of tip of a not-very-large iceberg of private writing. So I've had the most gratification one could possibly...what more could one want? I couldn't want anything better than that, so hooray! My true genre is the one that has given me the most satisfaction and has bothered the reading public least. Nobody has to like them, they don't have to be good, they don't have to be frequent, I can write terrible poems and I'm not going to be criticised for it. It's the perfect way to be a writer.

Ann Morgan: Claire Harman there, concluding this episode of *Collected*, which was produced by Ann Morgan. The other writers featured in this episode were: Alyson Hallett, David Kennedy, Amanda Dalton, Trish Cooke, Martina Evans, and Jon Mayhew. There's more information about their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up next time, four writers reflect on how their relationship to their surroundings affects their work.

We hope you'll join us.