Writers Aloud

Episode 465

RLF INTRODUCTION: We've all heard the stories. The Harry Potter manuscript turned down by multiple publishers. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* spurned by several presses before it found a home. Rejection comes with the territory, as far as writing is concerned. But knowing this often doesn't make it easier when it happens to you. In this episode, four Royal Literary Fund Fellows share their experiences of producing projects that haven't worked out. Starting things off, we have Sheena Wilkinson sharing her take on being knocked back.

Sheena Wilkinson: The day I signed my first book contract, about thirteen years ago, after years of writing, submitting, and being knocked back, I remember looking at my firm signature, the confident slope of the black ink, and thinking, *That's it. That's the signature of a real, official writer. No more rejection. Hooray.*

Any writers listening will be shrieking with mirth. If you haven't already switched off, thinking, *Why would I listen to such a naïve eejit?* let me tell you now: I have had many more rejections since being published than I ever had on the road to that first book deal.

And they hurt. They hurt much more. Because before publication writing was my hobby. A hobby I loved and took seriously and invested a great deal of time and effort in, but nonetheless, it was a smaller part of my identity, of what I presented to the world, than it is now. And I knew enough to know that rejection was part of that journey. Real writers got rejected. I knew I was in good company. But *then*, I thought, they got their

lucky break and after *that* it was all champagne and glowing reviews and prizes all the way. The road *to* publication might be paved with rejection and set-backs but the road *after* publication was surely paved with festival dinners and film deals. Yeses all the way!

Oh, what a lot I had to learn. Since my first novel came out in 2010 I have had the glowing reviews, lots of lovely awards – *yay!* – and plenty of yeses. But my god, there have been nos. A lot of nos.

One night, at a literary festival in 2016, I was invited to the festival dinner. It was a delightful crowd of editors, writers, festival programmers, awards co-ordinators — the usual sort of literary festival folk. This dinner was at the end of a week where I had had some sort of rejection *every single day*. And looking round the table, at these people I was going to have to smile and chat to for hours, with a brave smile glued to my face, I counted four people who had personally rejected my work that week, and three writers – my peers – who had been successful where I had failed. Maybe one of the reasons rejection hurts more when you're established is that it can feel so much more personal, even if it isn't.

I've had a moderately successful career. I've won awards at home and abroad, and been shortlisted for some wonderful honours. But for every prize there has been a passing over; for every contract there has been a year spent writing a novel that didn't sell. Make that two years and two novels.

Of course, as I tell people in author talks, rejection is part of the writing life. Sadly that doesn't make it easier to take. Being a novelist means I have an overactive imagination and am given to doom-suspecting and worst-case-scenarios. What if I never get another book published? What if I've lost whatever ability I thought I had? What if I have to get a normal job?

A couple of months ago, having given up on my novel on submission, I was trying to explain this to my husband, who was sympathetic and

obviously, if he could, would give me all the book deals in the world, but sadly he can't, and also he might be a wee bit biased. In the middle of my tearful ranting I almost didn't hear the 'ping' of an email. But there was a 'ping' and the email from my agent, instead of being headed *No news yet* or the dreaded *Hello* which is how she heads really bad news, said simply *Offer.*

Rejection hurts. *No* is nasty. But oh how much sweeter it makes the *Yes* when it comes.

RLF: Sheena Wilkinson there. Many writers may not have a bottom drawer these days. So many of us work on computers that the idea of stacks of manuscripts may even sound quaint. But I'll bet most of us still have the virtual equivalent: folders of work that have never seen the light of day. In this next segment, author, copywriter and creative writing tutor Kim Curran lifts the lid on some of her projects that are yet to find their way to readers.

Kim Curran: If my bottom drawer were a physical place, rather than a digitised folder living somewhere in the mysterious Cloud, it would be overflowing. One of those drawers that gets jammed and eats bits of paper when you wrestle it open. Where notes you wrote years ago get stuck in the splinters of the drawer above, never to be seen again. I have started many, many more stories than I have finished. And while I frequently tell other writers 'you must finish everything', it's advice I rarely follow myself.

My drawer is full of scraps of ideas. Single lines like 'girl alone on spaceship', 'zombie roller derby'. Or rushed paragraphs that seemed so full of potential when I wrote them in the middle of the night, but are dull and empty upon the morning.

Some are ideas that set my head alight and had my fingers dancing for days. Thousands upon thousands of words of what I was convinced was to be my Best Book Yet. Only for the idea to lose me along the way, or

for me to lose the idea. Others are books I finished — fully finished and edited and polished, and submitted to publishers or agents, only for them to be 'not quite what we're looking for'. The saddest of my book orphans — fully realised and yet never destined to see the light.

One is a book that I had begun, only to find out that another writer was months away from publishing the exact same story. The exact the same story. And so it was abandoned, sent off to the wasteland of lost works.

I wonder, sometimes, how they get on in there. Those ghost hunters and spaceship riders. The aging detectives and dying girls. All those different ideas squashed together, like toys in a basement box.

I steal parts of them, sometimes, for other stories, other books. Strip the lines from them and then feel guilty, as if I've taken a handful of flesh from a living thing. Never steal from yourself, isn't that what they say?

Sometimes, I hear them calling to me. I promise that I'll return to them one day. That they're only waiting, not forgotten. Maybe the mercurial trends of publishing will turn and a theme that was 'over' will suddenly be the next hot thing and I can reach into that drawer and give a dead idea a kiss and bring it back to life.

Maybe there's a reason they're in there, hidden away like wild wives in attics. Too broken to be let out. Maybe their true fate is to end up burned in a trashcan, or crushed under a steamroller. Or whatever the cloud storage equivalent of that would be. Deleted. Forever.

At least for now, I know they'll never be lonely, as new ideas join them every day. Crammed in there, abandoned, if never truly forgotten.

RLF: That was Kim Curran. Even when projects do succeed in finding an audience, they may lose a lot along the way. Most writers are familiar with the prolific novelist and literary critic Sir Arthur Quiller Couch's

advice that you should 'Murder your darlings' as an author, sacrificing the bits you love most in order to make a piece of writing succeed. But this is often easier said than done, as David Mark reveals.

David Mark: I'm sitting in a meeting room somewhere in Marylebone. It's 2013 and I *definitely* brought the wrong coat. It's over in the corner: a big sweaty sheepskin affair. It got wet before I boarded the train and has tripled in weight. It's softly emitting fumes, like a compost heap on a July day. I'm expecting a little damp explosion before the meeting's done.

'I just think there's more life in him, David. The readers love him. And he's so *nasty*. You could leave it kind of opaque. Leave it unsaid, but with room for him to come back.'

I'm keeping the smile on my face, because I know that if it slips, I'm going to look like I really look, and nobody needs to see that. Jon is a bloody good editor, at a bloody good publishing house. He's worked with the best. So I have to listen to his suggestions and, where possible, actually act upon them. And if he says that I should rethink the killing of Detective Chief Inspector Colin Ray in book three of the McAvoy series, then, really, it's worth thinking about.

But here's the thing, Jon. I don't want to resurrect him. He's already dead, see. I've written it. I've written his last breaths and his sense of betrayal and I've focused the camera of my imagination upon his sightless eyeball as he looks up into the face of his closest friend and knows that he's been played. I've written it. It can't just be *un*written. He can't just come back to life.

I don't say this, of course. Instead, I talk about the artistic merit of his own redemptive journey and the emotional enormity of his unexpected death. I make it sound like I know what I'm talking about.

Jon's a considered sort of a chap. He leaves big pauses between his

sentences so he can think about what he wants to say and pick the correct words. In my world, this is quite the novelty.

'You let Peter May kill off Fin's old mate in the second Lewis book. Why can't I kill Colin?'

Oh bugger, I said that out loud. I'm being whiny now. Petulant. He doesn't seem to get it. But how can I look Colin in the face knowing that I've already killed him? You can't just delete scenes like that and hope the character doesn't remember what you did to them! I mean, this guy lives in my head! He'll go spare!

'Well, it's your book and we want you to be happy.'

Oh brilliant. Emotional manipulation. Are we dating now? Oh, fine. Bloody fine. I'll resurrect him for you. But I think you're wrong.

He wasn't wrong, as it goes. Colin Ray is now the main character in a spin-off book, and provides an emotional and philosophical counterpoint to my main protagonist, rather like Jon thought he would. Well, fine, well done. But you don't have to live with the repercussions Jon. Not only did I kill him and then bring him back to life, I left him hung up in a cellar being forcibly injected with a Russian heroin synthetic called Krokodil. As a result, he's slowly rotting from the inside out. To kill him would be a mercy. Oh right, oh I see. Fine. Okay, Jon, maybe you do know what you're talking about. But you can explain it to him, he doesn't listen to a word I say.

RLF: David Mark there. The failure of a finished project or the loss of a favourite passage or image may be painful enough, but what about the days when the words simply won't flow? Ukrainian-born writer and journalist Vitali Vitaliev shares his thoughts on writer's block.

Vitali Vitaliev: As a writer of over forty years standing (albeit 'sitting' in

this context is more appropriate) and the author of sixteen books, I have good reasons not to believe in 'writer's block' — the term invented by lazy or talentless scribes to justify their own inactivity.

But I do believe in the *difficulty of starting*.

The difficulty of starting is in direct proportion to the amount of work that lies ahead: it is pretty hard to begin a column, yet it is almost impossible to force yourself into typing the very first line of a would-be book. And a compact paperback *Meditation for Writers* urging you on every page to start writing *today* doesn't help. Nor does the endless staring at a shelf full of your own previous books.

'You have done it before — so you can do it now.' 'Yes, but that was a long time ago. I was younger and stronger then.'

It took me almost two months of internal arguments, loitering, guilt and self-hatred before I was able to squeeze out the first line of one of my latest novels. And, believe me, it doesn't get easier with time, no matter how many books you have published already.

'The main thing for a writer is to learn not to recoil from a clean sheet of paper', said Ivan Bunin, a Nobel Prize-winning Russian novelist and poet. The key word here is 'to learn' showing that starting doesn't happen immediately, but entails a long and painful process.

It is important therefore to understand that while you are trying to force yourself to sit down at your desk, while you keep coming up with countless excuses for *not* working (emails, phone calls, cups of coffee, newspapers, walks in the park 'to freshen up', etc.) you are *already* deep in writing. Sitting down and putting words on paper (or onto a screen) is the last link in the long and torturous chain of the process.

It should never be easy to create *something* worthwhile out of *nothing* —

and this is exactly what writers do. According to Ray Bradbury, we first jump off a cliff and think of how to spread the wings later.

The paradox is that the moment you stop having panic attacks at the sight of a clean sheet of paper, or — in modern terms — a blank computer screen; the moment you stop struggling with your internal 'little devil' urging you to sit on your hands for yet another day, yet another hour — you lose your creativity.

I recently heard how a well-known writer suffering from a chronic 'writer's block', read impossible-to-start syndrome, was cured by an inventive shrink who forced her to write down one sentence the moment she woke up — while still in her pyjamas. What exactly the sentence was did not matter — it could be a total abracadabra — yet the writer discovered that it had helped her overcome the proverbial fear of a clean sheet of paper when she returned to her desk later in the day...

What can I say? Thank God for the deadlines! Without them, very few books would have ever seen the light.

RLF outro: That was Vitali Vitaliev, concluding this episode of *Collected*, 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 next time, in the second instalment of our 'My True Genre' series, we talk to Royal Literary Fund Fellows who work mostly in different forms to the genre they love most, examining the pleasures and pitfalls of keeping work to yourself, the perils of self-doubt and the influence of market forces.

We hope you'll join us.