

Writers Aloud

Episode 467

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

‘Earth has not any thing to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty: / This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning.’ So begins William Wordsworth’s celebrated sonnet ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3rd of September, 1802’. There’s no question that a writer’s surroundings can have a profound influence on their work. But how do different people experience this? In this episode, four Royal Literary Fund Fellows play with ideas about how the world around them ends up on the page. Sarah Hilary starts us off, with her take on the writer and the city.

Sarah Hilary: I’ve written about cities all my life. My twenties, when I lived in London, was one of the few fallow periods in my writing life but of course I was busy absorbing the city, in all its shape-shifting, secretive glory.

When, in my mid-thirties, I returned to writing, I found this same city ready at my fingertips, eager to be put on the page. By then, I’d swapped the city for village life, snug in a countryside that steadfastly refused to give up its stories (there is something very ‘zipped-shut’ about a small English village).

Moving to Bristol felt like an act of rebellion. On a smaller scale than London, it is nevertheless built in the manner of all great cities: as a series of villages connected by streets and back alleys. Here I wrote my debut

Writers Aloud

novel but in common with the five novels that followed, *Someone Else's Skin* was set in London.

My books are often about loss, and fear, the illusion of safety. Contemporary London is filled with empty buildings, and lost people. I set out to capture the sense of a city which on the surface fizzles with life – everyone is always moving, except when the traffic brings them to a halt – while underneath it is scored with hidden people, and hiding places.

Writers are often told, 'Don't go wide, go deep'. London is wide certainly but undeniably deep. Built on plague pits, its riverbed once the site of sacrifice, its streets run under by rats.

Any old city is layered with history, packed with a blend of past and present, while the constant chaos of building work reminds us it teeters on the edge of the future, too. A writer doesn't have to stray far to relish these contradictions or to enjoy the metaphor presenting itself as a slice of medieval masonry abutting a sleek, steel edifice.

London is a great place for getting lost too and I've found getting lost is a wonderful way to start writing. Quite often I will take that unpromising alleyway between buildings, to see where it leads. And I love nothing better than finding myself in a dead end where a tree rebelliously grows from a forgotten patch of land, or where the foreshortened facade of a Georgian terrace bears half its original name, the other half lost to whichever disaster – natural or planned – destroyed the rest.

It is almost as if the city is offering the writer a gift in the form of these half-surviving slices of history — past, present and future. As for the people-watching, it is pure gravy: an ever-present prompt to fill your story with characters from every walk of life.

When writer's block threatens, find yourself a secret garden (the city is full of them) and sit and listen. Grab a cup of good coffee if you like, or

Writers Aloud

shop for a new notebook. Or simply walk and watch, soaking it all up for when you are back at your desk.

As I discovered when I was editing my third novel, London is a city of illusions. In *Tastes Like Fear* I had fulfilled a long-held ambition to write about Battersea Power Station, a place which had first captured my imagination two decades before.

I remembered it as an urban cathedral, dominating the skyline in that part of south London, its fluted chimneys stained by half a century's soot and pollution. And so I had written about it like this – larger than life – placing it at the heart of my story.

When I came to edit the draft manuscript, it occurred to me that a return visit was in order, since I hadn't seen the place in such a long time. As well as I did – where once it had dominated the skyline now it was dominated – by the new, ferociously glass-plated buildings around it. Its famous chimneys, I discovered, were in the process of being destroyed (they would later be rebuilt).

Yet from a certain spot along the Embankment, the power station looked whole, as if all four of its chimneys remained intact. It was a trick of the light, an illusion, like so much else in the city.

Standing there, I knew that in *Tastes Like Fear*, I would use this fact to take the reader right into the cracks that run across London — all the places you can be lost, and found.

RLF: That was Sarah Hilary. Away from the hustle and bustle of the big cities (and sometimes in the midst of them) many writers draw inspiration from the natural world. Wordsworth, after all, is probably more famous for his daffodils than for his descriptions of London. So how do writing and nature intertwine? Jini Reddy shares her perspective.

Writers Aloud

Jini Reddy: As a travel and nature writer, the great outdoors has been both canvas and inspiration for my work. In fact, I've written two books which involve journeys into natural landscapes, *Wanderland*, and *Wild Times*. Of course, writers have long crafted entire careers that revolve around wandering in wild places, be they urban or rural. Look at the seventeenth-century poet Basho, who roamed Japan alone on foot and was inspired by oneness with nature. Or Wordsworth and his rapturous odes to the living world. Then there's the contemporary writer Robert Macfarlane who has drawn inspiration from mountains, ancient paths and uncanny landscapes.

Until recently the chroniclers of nature, at least in the West, have largely been white and male. Thank goodness the world is changing and writers such as South Africa's Sicelo Mbatha, author of *Black Lion: Alive in the Wilderness*, Nina Mingya Powles, from New Zealand and of mixed Chinese-Malaysian heritage who wrote the critically acclaimed *Small Bodies of Water*, India's Sumana Roy, author of *How I Became a Tree*, and others have crafted nonfiction narratives relating to nature and landscape from deeply refreshing perspectives. These are not solely focused on the specifics of flora and fauna, but bring wider, compelling and timely issues of identity and belonging into the mix too.

Fiction that grapples with environmental issues is more popular than ever. Whether an elegy to a lost world, a rallying cry or a spine-chilling thriller, literary lovers of the planet are well served. The plight of trees, most poignantly the redwoods of California, gave *The Overstory*, Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning opus, its soul. In *All Over Creation* Ruth L. Ozeki creates a protagonist of Japanese-American parentage who, upon returning to her farmer parents' home in Idaho, becomes involved with activists intent on exposing the dangers of genetically modified potatoes. And Cameroonian-American writer Imbolo Mbue set her second novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, in a fictional village on the African continent, one in which children are dying from toxic chemicals in the water and oil spills have ruined crops. We humans are a part of nature, so it's hardly

Writers Aloud

surprising that environmental concerns and evocations of the natural world feature in the work of so many writers from diverse backgrounds.

For me, away from the page, time spent in nature also features as a practice, a form of meditation, a way of centering myself before I sit down and put words on a page. Many a woodland walk or a bike ride to a nearby wetland has been followed by a moment of inspiration, or the solving of a conundrum, writing-wise. I listen to bird song, I gaze at the moon on a clear night, feel the breeze on my face, stroke the bark of a yew tree, inhale the scent of fig leaves in the woods, and watch for the grey heron to appear in my local wetland. Nature is a grounding force that compensates for the polarising world in which we live and draws me back, time and time again, to my authentic voice.

RLF: Jini Reddy, there. Disconnection from our surroundings and those who people them can be a common theme in writing. Indeed, for many, the impulse to put words on the page grows out of a desire to conquer loneliness. With this in mind, Marnie Riches shares her thoughts on the writer as outsider.

Marnie Riches: Character is the beating heart of any good novel. Emotional investment in a protagonist or antagonist or in a relationship between main characters is what propels the reader through a novel and makes for a satisfying reading experience. It's the thing that inspires loyalty in readers, bringing them back to subsequent books after they've formed an attachment to a hero or heroine in the first story in a series. It's that which impels the reader to pass on word-of-mouth recommendation of a standalone novel, in a market saturated with slickly packaged standalones. Character drives plot and can influence the narrative voice.

To draw our characters meticulously well, we must first observe real people closely. How do they react to their surroundings, to each other, to changes in their circumstances? Yet we can't get *too* close to them. To reproduce life faithfully on the page, laying bare its flaws and beauty,

Writers Aloud

its tragedies and triumphs, the writer has to maintain critical distance from the muse. The writer *must* become the outsider. But do we become the outsider in order to write, or are we already outsiders, and that's *why* we write?

From a personal perspective, I have always felt like an outsider. At home and at school, I was bullied for being the odd one out — the poor kid at a rich kids' school; the well-spoken, bookish kid on a council estate full of youths, whose parents had taught them that learning was for losers; the goth among a gaggle of Wham fans. When I got to university, I easily found my people among the bookish. Yet, even there, where I felt the most at home, I found myself still, if not the outsider, then certainly the one on the fringes of things, looking in. Without realising it, I was observing the dynamics between individuals and friendship groups; recognising the difference between the classes, between alphas and betas and men and women.

Scroll forward by some thirty years of being an adult, and I now employ those powers of observation in my writing. If I want to create a character, I have a vast bank of memories of other people from which to draw inspiration. Like so many of my fellow writers, I am happily self-employed, rather than miserable, on somebody else's payroll. My income is irregular, unpredictable and from a variety of sources, but I bear the solitude and financial risk more gladly than being part of a team, where I am a square peg in a round hole.

Writers are not team players. We generally prefer to sit on the sidelines, stealing the show only when it suits us — in panels at literary festivals or at book launches. We are extrovert introverts. We are neuro-atypical, able to lose ourselves in research and imagined worlds, for months at a time. Whether it be through nature or nurture, we are on the outside, forever looking in and holding a mirror to the world.

RLF: Marnie Riches. Whatever its inspiration and whichever marvels it

Writers Aloud

depicts, writing must take place somewhere. So what makes for the ideal place to write? Playwright Peter Oswald was once writer in residence at Shakespeare's Globe. But is this his favourite setting for creative work? He spills the beans.

Peter Oswald: Just outside time (so not a place then, a state, that's cheating — but writing *is* cheating.) The doorway is a mug of tea straight out of Ceridwen's cauldron. The location, London in 1592 or Trieste in 1930 or Ravenna in 1315 or Chios in 800BC. Or Ireland *anytime*.

Probably you have been banished there, it's not clear, but anyway not worth risking trying to get back anyway.

The trinkets must be proven. Bad trinkets will destroy you, like when Oisín, after a thousand years in the Country of the Young, leaned down from his horse to give a coin to a beggar and the girth snapped and he was sprawling on the ground, instantly a thousand years older. But give the trinkets a chance to prove themselves, ie forget about them and then if the writing goes well, attribute that to the trinkets and then they have earned their place.

(I am writing this on a train.)

Don't get into an argument with the carpet. Just roll it up and carry on with the floorboards.

On a shelf there is a Tupperware box whose lid is an old unopened bank statement envelope. This is for catching flies and, above all, bumble bees; and releasing them out of the window. (Horseflies have to die.)

But these details are not to the present purpose, which is to describe the place itself, more than its fittings. It is, in fact, an island. Yes, you have been banished there, in a leaky boat crewed only by yourself and your innocence (such as it is). Actually you weren't exactly banished, just you proved yourself unfitted for worldly employment.

Writers Aloud

You have managed to stamp down on the native, and get control of the elemental spirits. But don't worry, the danger of you getting too arcane and highbrow is offset by various rebellions. (To be honest you have deliberately set these up yourself.) Coping with these insurrections focuses your mind to the point where you can do magic.

There are two things about the island that make it the ideal place for writing. One is that you have absolute control over everything. The other is that this means you have got to sort absolutely everything out. And you won't quite manage it, there will be loose ends, seeds of further uprisings. But this is good too. You can completely wear yourself out and sail off to the kitchen to think about death.

Because on your writing island, death doesn't function. It is surrounded by a sea called 'sleep' which is where dreams live, which is what you are made of. You can wreck ships but nobody drowns, not really, they wander around and just the thought that they might have lost someone forever makes strange music creep across the waters. That's what makes this writing place so perfect — the absence of death and time. Because 'ars longa, vita brevis,' as someone said a few lifetimes ago — since when a lot of good writing has been crammed in.

RLF outro: Peter Oswald there, bringing to an end 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.

Next time, Doug Johnstone takes a deep dive into the work and inspirations of novelist and creative writing tutor William Ryan.

We hope you'll join us.