Writers Aloud

Episode 468

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

This episode is devoted to an interview with crime writer William Ryan. The author of six novels, four of which he now self-publishes, Ryan has been shortlisted for numerous awards, including the Irish Fiction Award, the Theakston's Crime Novel of the Year, and the Crime Writers' Association's Steel, Historical, and New Blood Daggers.

He has also taught creative writing at City, University of London and the University of East Anglia and his *Guide to How to Write: How to plan, structure and write your novel* was published in 2021. But it took a while to come to novel writing as he started off telling interviewer Doug Johnstone.

William Ryan: I started off writing screenplays but I was a lawyer as well, but I didn't really enjoy the day job and so that was kind of a frustrating experience because everybody has been to the Robert McKee story lectures, so they, everybody knows, or thinks they know what a story requires; so a lot of what I wrote ended up being changed pretty dramatically.

And, so I didn't feel like I had very much control. And then... So I kind of put it aside for a little bit, and carried on being a lawyer, and then eventually I reached the end of the road with that, and had a period of time where I didn't have to be a lawyer, or be anything very much.

So I decided this was a good opportunity to give myself some space and

have a go at writing. I started writing about a detective in the Soviet Union and that was, kind of something which I really enjoy doing.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I'm interested in that impulse. So was there a particular spark, I mean you say you'd just run to the end of being a lawyer or working in that field?

Was there a tipping point where you suddenly thought, *I just need to actually get on with this now or I'm never going to do it*, that sort of thing?

William Ryan: Yeah, I do look back on it now knowing more about writing, and think that that was a slightly insane decision because certainly whenever I talk to students these days I say, 'Don't give up the day job!'; because it's good for you as well, writing's quite a lonely game, so it's good to have something else that you're doing that involves you interacting with other people and observing them, putting them in your novels.

Doug Johnstone: Scribbling away in your notebook! No I think... I had a similar, it was maybe not as high a level as you, but I had a PhD and then was working as an engineer for years in a day job that I hated.

And I just quit one day and I became a freelance journalist, although I didn't know what that involved. It makes me come out in a cold sweat when I think about it now. But it was one of the best things I ever did because I was suddenly writing for a living, although it was interviewing bands and reviewing books and doing anything that I could.

But it meant that I was taking my own writing seriously. And I think, for me, that was the kind of change…the shift in mind-set was hugely important. Actually taking yourself seriously as a writer and going I'm actually going to try and do this thing.

William Ryan: Yeah, and I think there's a great deal of satisfaction from writing, it's like...I don't think it's just from writing, I think it's actually *making* something.

Like even if you paint a wall at home or something, you stand back from it and hopefully think, *Oh that's a pretty good job*. So I like that aspect of writing. And I also like that unlike with screenwriting, you had a lot more control, and generally when editors got involved, they were focused on your vision of what the story should be, and trying to make it better, rather than on what their vision of the story should be.

That might just be the editor that I worked with and continue to work with, but it's been a very pleasant experience for me in that respect. But there are frustrations that go along with it as well, because it's not a very structured existence, or at least my existence isn't very structured, and it's not something that you can show up at the desk and say, 'Okay, I'm going to write five thousand words today', because some days you might write five thousand words; other days you might write fifty and they'd be a bad fifty at that.

It has its own stresses and strains.

Doug Johnstone: Sure. I'm really interested in...so you sat down and went, right, I'm going to write a novel and you thought immediately *1930s Soviet detective*; that's not something that would occur to me. Was it just a case of a period of time that you were really interested in?

Or was it that there was...I've heard you say before, you basically write the book that you want to read. Was that as simple as that, that you were like, I want to see this thing and I haven't seen this world depicted?

William Ryan: I wrote...I started to write another novel beforehand, I actually did a creative writing Masters up in St. Andrews. And it was full of poets and A. L. Kennedy, who was actually fantastic, and Don Paterson, who was an excellent poet. So they were very good on language and very good on the *prose* side of things. Not all of them were quite as good on the *story* side of things. And I started off writing a novel, which I think I was writing for them, more than for me, and I got about halfway into it, and I

thought, *You know what, I've no idea how this thing ends, and I don't care.* So I took a step back, and I'd become slightly obsessed with a Russian short-story writer called Isaac Babel, a few years before, and he wrote a collection of short stories called *Red Cavalry* that I thought would have made a fantastic movie, although a very expensive one, about the Russian Civil War.

So I started off with the book, and then I became interested in the writer, and he was executed in 1941...maybe 1939, just at the beginning of the Second World War. But when I started researching him, some people said he was still alive in a prison camp; some people said he died in 1956; some people said 1948, nobody really knew.

The access to information was very much controlled and it was a deliberate policy to confuse the population and the people who are connected with the victims of state violence. But there was a window of opportunity after the fall of the Soviet Union when we could see the records and we found out an awful lot about what was actually going on at that time.

A lot of that was from state records. And so suddenly, Babel became a lot more visible, and there was all this information about how the Soviet Union really worked at the time. There was lots and lots of prison records became available, interview records and internal documents. And so I had been, not with a novel in mind, but I'd been accumulating all this knowledge for some time.

And then I thought, *Actually, you know what, if you've got a detective* who – detectives are all about uncovering the truth, and trying to get justice for the victims – *that's somebody who's completely opposite with how the Soviet Union worked at that time.* So I thought that was a great starting place for a novel. I had this idea that he'd be Yuri Gagarin's dad, who was actually a carpenter. The first draft he was called Gagarin, and then I called him Korolev, because actually the guy who headed the space project in the

1950s and 60s was called Korolev. I was having a little bit of fun with it, and I wasn't taking it particularly seriously.

And it took on its own momentum, I think I'm going to do a podcast about how I use photographs a lot when I'm researching, so I found all these *amazing* photographs and actually I put a lot of them up on my website. And yeah, the Soviet Union was this incredible world, when you're writing historical fiction, it's often a little bit like travel writing you're taking somebody to this different place and in this case a different time and you're showing them this extraordinary world. And you're trying to bring it to life for them.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I loved that, I loved that bit on your website, in 'Korolev's world'. I spent a lot of time looking at all the pictures and it was really fascinating. But that got me thinking about how obviously you had done a huge amount of research into this time period and the place.

And I wonder, because historical fiction is always a kind of tightrope walk, isn't it? You're creating a whole world in a different time, but you don't want to be hammering the reader over the head with your...the info dump, the famous info dump, of: I learnt this, so you're going to learn it too. I wonder if you're always conscious of that when you're writing these historical novels?

William Ryan: Yeah, very conscious of that, but I'm sure we've both read lots of Georgian and Victorian fiction: Dickens and Austen and all the rest, and those are aimed at people who lived at the time that they were written and we don't really need a massive amount of footnotes; now, the Soviet Union, there's probably a couple of things need to be explained from time to time, but there are ways that you can do that in a non-clunky way.

But I'm always... I aim it at somebody who lives in the time and place, you know as a writer I guess you choose where the camera points, and

you can point to things which are interesting for the reader. But the last thing you want to do is have three pages describing the internal power structure of the Comintern or whatever, because that's just boring.

Although that having been said, you know, there's bits of Lee Child where he goes off for two or three chapters talking about treasury bills, and you think, *That's a lot of research, Lee, but...let's get back to Reacher beating up people, please.*

Doug Johnstone: Yeah that's the MO.

William Ryan: So what do I know, obviously there's a reader who loves all that technical detail.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. So the first book came out in 2010, right, *The Holy Thief*, and was shortlisted for a whole bunch of awards. Did that create any pressure in your mind? Because, it's fairly...it was a nice splash to start off with, wasn't it?

William Ryan: Yeah, I think it was nice, but it was a little bit bizarre as well. And I think also I wasn't really very prepared for being a writer and I wasn't very prepared for the stuff that you have to do off the page. I don't think, I worked as hard as I think you do have to do these days at promoting the books and stuff like that.

So while it was lovely, I don't think it quite clicked in the way that it could have. Even though it was getting all these amazing reviews and getting all these shortlistings, and even though, you know, readers seemed to really enjoy the books, I don't think I was very prepared for it. I think it only really occurred to me like the day before publication that actually when you publish a novel you're exposing yourself to lots of positive feedback but also occasionally negative feedback.

But also you've kind of got to work it to an extent or you've got to, at least I think you do, I'm not very good at it still but...

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I don't think I'm very good at it either and I think deep in my subconscious somewhere, I think that, it's a meritocracy and if you write your book and then you put it out there and then people read it and they like it or they don't, which is absolutely ridiculous because it's absolutely about working the room and self promotion and all that stuff.

All of which, I think for a lot of...certainly people in the UK, it doesn't come naturally. I think one of the reasons that we become writers is we want to sit and make up imaginary worlds. Not go out and shout about how great we are, that's not a natural instinct and I find that...I agree with you, I find that stuff really...I was very naive about it at the start as well, I didn't really understand, and now I do understand, but I'm still reluctant if you know what I mean.

William Ryan: Yeah, it's interesting because I got the rights back to the Korolev books, so I now self-publish them on Kindle and my fourth novel, *The Constant Soldier,* as well. So I've got to advertise them. And occasionally I've got to plug them, which I guess is, I'm possibly slightly doing now.

And that's been interesting for me as well. But also when you self-publish, you actually get to see, on an hour-by-hour basis, how many books you're selling. So that's been a very curious experience. I would have probably been a bit sniffy about self-publishing beforehand, but now I've experienced it more, there's a much more direct connection between the reader and the writer. I'm not sure that I would go through the whole writing a novel from scratch and publishing it myself, although I might do.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, it seems like...I wanted to ask you about the self-publishing aspect, because, you've got the rights back to four books and you're self-publishing them. That seems to be a much more common thing happening now, that people are getting rights to old books back, and getting them out there.

But was it a steep learning curve for you? It strikes me that...I'm very wary about it because it seems like a lot of work and it is, that getting into that whole, you are becoming the publisher and therefore, you're the sort of head of marketing and sales and everything else instead of just being the writer. Was that a hard transition to make?

William Ryan: I think I could definitely be doing it better. I got a designer who works with a publisher called Orenda, I commissioned him to do four covers for me.

Doug Johnstone: That's why they're so beautiful. That makes sense.

William Ryan: Yeah, I gave him some ideas and then he ran with them. And he's done a really good job and they're very distinctive. Although I do now understand why publishers change covers from time to time. I've been looking at them for a year and a half and I'm thinking, *I wonder if I could change that a little bit?* So that was nice, to give those books a second lease of life and *The Constant Soldier* is now being published in the U.S. next year.

Doug Johnstone: Great.

William Ryan: So I'm hoping it's going to get a second lease of life over there.

Doug Johnstone: I wanted to...that was on my list of things to ask you about was *The Constant Soldier*. It's interesting you say that's the book you're most proud of. So it's set in 1944 in Germany, right? So this came on the back of the three Soviet-era detective novels.

And I was fascinated because I was trying to imagine pitching *The Constant Soldier* to an agent or a publisher and I think it would be – knowing what I know about the publishing industry – I think it would be quite a hard sell. Was it quite a hard sell, or did you...?

William Ryan: Well, it's based on some photographs that were taken by the adjutant of the commandant at Auschwitz. And a lot of them were taken in this rest hut for the officers and men who worked at Auschwitz, which was near a village called Parobka, and was called the Sola Hut. It's on the Sola River, which flows down towards Auschwitz; it's about twenty kilometres away. And because it's, you know, obviously killing people is stressful, the SS were very concerned about their psychological effects, and so all of these camps had these recreational facilities, bits where you could go and unwind, and that sounds *horrific*, but it was a whole horrific process, and so the Sola Hut was part of this. So the original version of the novel was much more of a detective novel, it was three German soldiers show up at this place, they're retreating from the Russians, and it's what happens in the hut when they arrive, almost like a country-house murder mystery, except set in this very strange building.

And then as I was writing it, that seemed like such an obscene story and setting, because I found researching it incredibly difficult. So then I thought, well, actually the much more interesting story here, for me at least, is how ordinary people made these series of decisions that take them from being, in the case of the man who put this album of photographs together, he was a bank clerk in a small regional bank, and how he went from there to being the adjutant to the commander of Auschwitz, who in turn had been...he started off as an apprentice confectioner.

And the commandant before him had started off training to be a priest. But they made these series of decisions, often not knowing or not necessarily thinking about what the next step was.

And then once you take one step, I thought *Actually, you're on that path and it's very difficult to get off*. I thought that this was a really interesting story that in fiction terms, people hadn't really looked at, although they had looked at it in nonfiction terms: there's a fantastic book by somebody called Christopher Browning called *Ordinary Men* about a police battalion in Poland just after the start of the Second World War and I thought *That*

guy, how did he go from being a bank clerk to being an integral part of mass murder? And then you've got these photographs...and there are no photographs – there's 128 images there – there are no photographs that you can identify as being Auschwitz, the camp.

It's all people singing on the side of a hill, nurses collecting blueberries in the woods. If it weren't for the uniforms, these could have been British soldiers and British WAFs or whatever they were called, auxiliaries. And they were having a good time.

It's just that what they're doing when they're not here is something truly terrible. That for me was the really interesting thing. I think what happened for these men and women, who were involved in Auschwitz, and there were six or seven thousand, I think, very few of whom proportionally faced any sort of justice.

They lost their moral way, and I think that was what the story was about was somebody who had made some mistakes, but was trying to find his way back to some sort of moral rectitude. That, for me, was a really interesting story, but I'm not sure it was what the publisher was anticipating. And it didn't quite fit in with what they were looking for.

And then, even though it was getting these amazing reviews, it didn't...it wasn't something that they really got behind and that's... So we ended up parting ways and I got the rights back, which was nice.

Doug Johnstone: I think what's fascinating about looking at this sort of...in the scope of your writing is that obviously, there *are* correlations between *A Constant Soldier* and the Captain Korolev books, because, it's about ordinary persons trying to assert their own morality in an environment, in a society, which is in chaos or deeply oppressive, and that kind of...I think that still follows through a little bit with your most recent two books, right?

Because *House of Ghosts* is written during the First World War, although it's not actively a war novel, but it's at that time, and then the most recent one, *The Winter Guest*, is set in Ireland during...while the civil war is going on in Ireland and I wonder what it is that attracts you to these ordinary people in chaotic environments?

William Ryan: I think that period between 1914 and 1945 is pretty interesting historically. My next novel is set in the Spanish Civil War –

Doug Johnstone: – Of course it is! –

William Ryan: – on the fascist side. So kind of...but again we have these versions of history and they tend to be written from a particular perspective, but actually when you look at things, certainly when I was growing up, we had a version of Irish history in Ireland which is different from the version that was told in Britain, and I guess because I was educated briefly in the UK, I got that version as well.

And they're quite different. And, if you looked at that period, in 1920, 1921, there were terrible things happened on both sides, but you don't hear about them from the side that perpetrated them. So it's...actually, the British are much better at looking at that than the Irish were. We are re-evaluating some of the things that happened and being a little bit more open and honest about it, at least in the South.

Because I went to school for a bit in a large house that had belonged to an Anglo-Irish ascendancy family, that after the War of Independence had been bought by some Benedictine monks and turned into a school, but their daughter had died in an ambush, an IRA ambush, she was shot by mistake and as a result they left the country and I think that it wasn't just that they left but there was a little community of protestants built up around the school, who also felt as though they had to leave after the War of Independence as well.

There was a certain amount of ethnic cleansing went on. That's quite a controversial word, but people certainly felt less welcome than they had before the War of Independence, after the War of Independence, if you weren't a nationalist and you weren't part of the majority religion. And in some places, there was a policy of burning the big houses in particular.

I think twenty/twenty-five per cent of them were burned. Some of them were for military reasons because they were often the houses that could be used by military forces as a base. And a lot of them were burnt during the Civil War, not in the War of Independence. But there was a kind of pattern of behaviour, or pattern of experience.

A lot of people felt as though they were not safe. But I felt like this was a different version of the past, and a more complex one, and one that I... I like looking at history and thinking *Well, this is what we think, but we need to have a little bit of a closer look at how this all worked.*

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I was going to ask...it feels like you're almost re-evaluating these times and places in your fiction, is that safe to say?

William Ryan: I think, we tend to have a version of history that is very black and white: that's good, that's bad, but real life is often grey. And if you think about it a little bit more carefully, it, we're all on the same page that the Nazis were evil. But how did so many people get sucked into it and how has Germany changed so completely since then? I don't think that people in Germany with that experience would follow a demagogue like Hitler, I think that would be exceptionally unlikely because they've had that experience, and they've seen how easy it is to be led along that path. Most other countries have not had that experience, and maybe we're more vulnerable than we think. And so that, for me the interesting thing is, yes, Nazis, the Holocaust: completely and utterly and terribly evil, but there's a more interesting story in there, which is: *How did ordinary people get caught up in it?*

Doug Johnstone: Sure. I think in talking about your work, there's a danger of making it sound, because there's really heavy themes involved, and...

William Ryan: Ah, but they're page-turners!

Doug Johnstone: They *are* page-turners, that's the thing. And quite often with a theme of a seam of dark humour running through them, and there's elements of spy thriller involved, and also, like, you know, I see them quite often compared to locked-room mysteries, which makes me wonder sometimes if people understand what a locked-room mystery is?

But there is a certainly, there is an element of it which harks back to the sort of golden age of mystery writing, Agatha Christie and all that stuff. And I wondered, because there's so much going on, there are elements of these things...are you consciously trying to mash up all this stuff or are you...is it just, that's what your style is?

It's going to be a little bit locked-room, it's going to be a little bit spy thriller, it's going to be a little bit historical; and how does it work?

William Ryan: Well, I think with the first three Korolev novels they were more straightforward police procedurals albeit in a kind of a very different environment and then I think *The Constant Soldier* was more of a straight historical.

But I think with the *House of Ghosts* and with *The Winter Guest,* I was having a little bit more fun. And, basically I chucked in the kitchen sink, and I quite liked... I have a very, very soft spot for Georgette Heyer who writes these regency romances. And I'm not proud of it, Doug. It's...you know, we all have guilty secrets!

But I quite liked that and I thought *Well, why don't I chuck that in?* And I like, I really like spy novels, I'm a devotee of John le Carré and Eric Ambler and Mick Herron more recently, and Len Deighton. And I thought *Well,*

you know, I'm going to have a little bit of spy fiction in there as well. And then, the ghost stories, I think my editor was quite keen that there was a ghost element, I thought, *No problem!*

Doug Johnstone: Chuck it in there!

William Ryan: And then yeah, I think *A House of Ghosts* in particular is quite tongue-in-cheek. But at the same time, it's got some serious things. Humour is very important in crime novels, you've got to have little jokes going on, because if you're in a very serious situation, it's not very long before somebody makes a joke. Because, it's how you diffuse the tension and how you avoid looking directly at the very difficult situation that you're in.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I find that with my, the series that I'm writing at the moment, the Skelfs series, who are funeral directors, it's like they deal with death every day, and so when you pitch it to someone, they go, 'Oh, that sounds really depressing', and you go, 'No, no, it's funny, there's black humour in it!', and they go, 'Okay, I'll take your word for it'.

One of the other things that you have written: you've got another book out there, a guide to how to write. So you've done some teaching and stuff like that, but this is...that's through the *Writers & Artists Year Book*, right, or through the Writers & Artists?

William Ryan: Yeah, they asked me to do that and I thought it would be really easy to do; it was not!

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, because I've done teaching on and off, since I was published. And I find, this is maybe just my own hang-up, but I struggle with it sometimes, we all have a kind of imposter syndrome, but I sort of think, *What am I doing up here standing telling you how to write, that seems ridiculous?* I don't know, to write a whole book about how to write, I think would be very daunting, wouldn't it?

William Ryan: It was, and I wrote another little thing with Matthew Hall about writing crime fiction for your master classes. Yeah, so it's a bit of a nightmare because also you're aware that everybody writes in a different way.

You're not so concerned about the students reading it, you're concerned about other writers reading it and saying, '*What?*'

Doug Johnstone: What's this guy on about?

William Ryan: And also because, the reason why we all write in different ways is that there's a little bit of magic that you can't really describe in a book.

There are things that happen in your subconscious, there are things that happen when you sit down in front of your laptop or your blank piece of paper and characters start doing their own thing, and that's great. You can't really explain that, you can't really legislate for it or say, this is how you do it because that's not how it works.

But there are some things, and I think, that book is not too bad because it takes you through all the different stages and shows you the basic three-act structure that most novels, not all by any means, follow. And, yeah, teaches you a few things. The bit in the middle is the tricky bit.

And that's just understanding that you need to make your central character's life really difficult. If you're stuck, you just come up with another obstacle or challenge or problem that needs to be dealt with.

RLF outro: That was William Ryan talking to Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about his work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

This episode of *Collected* was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced

by Ann Morgan. Coming up next time, Royal Literary Fund fellows discuss their motivations.

We hope you'll join us.