

Writers Aloud

Episode 469

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

Where do *you* get your ideas from? If I had a pound for every time I'd been asked that question, I'd have...well, more money than I do now. Still, it is a mysterious business — the way many of us continue trying to write often in the face of rejection or, perhaps worse, indifference from the wider world. Why do we do it?

In this episode, four Royal Literary Fund fellows explore what it is that keeps them coming back to the desk. Getting the ball rolling, Nikki Sheehan reveals that questions are central to her desire to write.

Nikki Sheehan: I write because the stories I want to read haven't been written by anyone else. Or at least, this is what I tell schoolchildren when they ask me. And it's what I challenge them to do when they put pen to paper. It's not untrue as such, but it is just one aspect of the process. In reality, my writing often doesn't mirror the books that I enjoy reading, which range from poetry to bestsellers. Try as I might, I will never write books with the selling power of Jojo Moyes or the beauty of Ocean Vuong, because that is not who I am.

A more truthful answer, is that, like, Joan Didion, I write to find out what I think. To a non-author this may sound vague and pretentious, but within the act of writing, set quite apart from plot and characterisation, are the questions that bother me on such a deep level that I'm not aware of them until a book is finished. These questions are not of the 'What if'

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type. They're more the 'how can we live with' type. They're problems of the joy and pain of the human condition that cannot be answered except by living, or by writing other people living, through them.

These questions, which, for me often revolve around the limits of love and loss, can only be tackled from within a real life set up, and over hundreds of pages. And, even then, they cannot be answered, just turned and observed, a process not unlike the creation of shapes and patterns within a kaleidoscope; beautiful, dynamic, and always out of reach.

I don't write autobiographically, except where it is impossible not to. Write what you know is the crassest, but also potentially most useful maxim for writers starting out, as long as they understand that it applies to emotions, not to characters, plot or setting. Our emotional lives form the backbones of our books so, if we're not careful, they can turn into therapy for us and not be very entertaining for our readers. And, because the relationship I have with myself is the most intimate in my life, reading back my words, or speaking them aloud, can be excruciating, positive feedback worryingly affirming, and negative comments, unreasonably wounding. I strongly disagree with the variously attributed quote, 'I hate to write, but I love having written.' For me, the joy is in the act.

But, of course, I'm not thinking all of this when a story idea grabs me and I'm forced to drop everything and begin to write. I put down the words like I'm scratching an itch, and because I want to know what happens. Then I believe I light up – my demeanor changes – I set to the keys of my laptop with energy and purpose, because there is a story to be told, and I'm the one to tell it. In those moments, I am powerful. The rise and fall of armies and kingdoms, the laws of physics, the heart and even the colour of the sky, make themselves available to my brain through my fingertips. Then I am free on a scale that non-writers can't possibly understand. In becoming a slave to my story, I attain a level of agency that intoxicates and keeps me going. And that is probably why I write.

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RLF: That was Nikki Sheehan. For many writers, the urge to put words on the page starts young. School can play a big part in it: a comment from a teacher can be instrumental in encouraging or blocking a young wordsmith. With that in mind, Sheena Wilkinson picks out some of the people who played a formative role in her writing journey.

Sheena Wilkinson: Dear teachers at Cregagh Primary School, 1973–80 and Victoria College, 1980–87:

Do you remember me? Sheena Wilkinson? Frizzy hair, chatty, smart? Maybe not. I was a teacher myself for nineteen years and recall only a fraction of the thousands who passed through *my* classroom. Being the heroes of our own lives, we all *imagine* ourselves unforgettable.

You certainly were. Mr Thompson, interrupting lessons for games of 20 Questions. You quickened my thirst for general knowledge. Mr Farris, smoking a pipe at your desk, so that your face appears in my memory only through a grey haze. I'm sorry for being offended when you suggested that my story about four sisters owed something to *Little Women*. You were right, of course.

Mrs Jordan, my history teacher, thank you for making the past so alive. I'm sorry my diagram of a plague house was so gory in its depiction of people writhing in agony as their pustules burst. At least you could see I was interested. I think of you every time I open a history book — and you'll be glad to know I do that often, for research and for pleasure.

Mr Spence and Mrs Leathart. Thank you for believing me when I said I was going to be a writer. Thank you for your gentle critiquing of my efforts and for your forbearance in not calling me out on every influence — my lingering pony book phase; my Maeve Binchy phase. I knew it was time for *me* to leave the teaching profession when I wrote on a twelve-year-old's story: *this is tiresomely derivative*. Thank you for being kinder than that.

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Kindness is what I remember most from primary school. In a poor area, I was one of the few children with books in my house and aspiration in my heart. One June afternoon, someone – was it you, Mrs Brayshaw, or maybe Mrs Pakenham? – took the time to tear out all the unused paper in the class's exercise books for me to take home — piles and piles of wonderful fresh paper for me to write my own stories. They were *tiresomely derivative* too — Enid Blyton and Noel Streatfeild in those days. Thank you for not saying so. Thank you for not making me feel like a charity case as I gathered up the discarded pages, but instead like an artist claiming the tools of her trade. As a writer I've received many welcome grants but my first writer's grant, that first acknowledgement that I deserved patronage was that big pile of primary school exercise book paper.

I put it to good use. Recently I found a book of stories I wrote in 1979. It included a 'Note to the Reader'. 'Thank you for choosing this book', said ten-year-old me. 'You have made a wise choice.' *Where* did that confidence come from? Some of it was innate, some of it was certainly encouraged by supportive parents and a house full of books.

But some of that absolute certainty of my own worth, came from you, my teachers. Thank you. Always.

From: Sheena Wilkinson.

RLF: Teachers and others who know us well may be very influential on our creative process, but strangers can sometimes inspire deep reflection too. Phoebe Power discovered the truth of this when she had an encounter on a train.

Phoebe Power: A few months ago I was sitting on the train from York to Leeds, writing. There was a woman about my age sitting beside me, smartly dressed with highlighted blonde hair and impeccable make-up. For the first ten minutes or so of the journey, we didn't say anything. I was immersed in what I was doing; she was scrolling on her phone.

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Then suddenly she looked aside and turned to me. ‘Excuse me’, she said. ‘But I just have to ask. Are you writing in — a *journal*?’

I said yes, I was. ‘But how do you – I mean – I just have to ask – how do you let yourself write those things down without feeling self-conscious?’

She’d just been to visit her family, and was now on her way back to Leeds where she had a fast-paced job in accountancy. It had been a fraught time, she said — after Covid and the lockdowns, no one knew how to be with one another. There was so much unsaid, so much that could quickly ignite an argument.

‘There are things I can’t say, that I can’t talk about’, she said. ‘I don’t know — I saw you writing — and I thought — maybe, if I kept a journal — ’.

She spoke quickly and restlessly, in the way people do when they just need to get something out and be listened to. I hardly said a word as she poured out details of her family troubles, the stress of her daily routine and the sense of needing to write. As we drew into the station at Leeds she said: ‘Maybe this evening, I’ll start — I’ll get a notebook’. We got off the train, the fragile moment of intimacy between us dissolved and she disappeared among the tide of brisk professionals. Whether or not she followed through with her intention, I don’t know.

I am often asked what I’m working on, and this can be an embarrassment if I’m not engaged in a particular project. But it occurs to me that I do write, most days — if nothing else then in my journal. It helps me to sift my experiences, articulate what I’ve observed and formulate potential meanings. It’s a way of both self-understanding and reflection on the surrounding world, as well as a useful way of practising sentences, like playing musical scales. Best of all, it has the delightful low-pressure status of the total lack of an audience. No one else is going to read it — and there’s a glorious pleasure and freedom in that.

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And yet, despite the profoundly private nature of a journal, the act of writing confidently – writing anything – in public can send a strong signal of possibility to others. As Etty Hillesum wrote in her journal under the Nazi oppression of 1940s Amsterdam, ‘I must make sure I keep up with my writing, that is, with myself, or else things will start to go wrong for me.’ Writing is one means of survival.

RLF: Phoebe Power, there. Whatever the comments of people around us, most writers agree that you have to be single-minded to survive. In the end, the desire to write comes, first and foremost from within, as Alex Nye explains.

Alex Nye: I began by making a list: compulsion, habit, obsession, addiction, necessity, the desire for connection. Recognition. *I exist. I am here. Listen to me. I want to say this.* These are a few reasons why I write. Capturing and recording, embellishing the canvas of life. Never wanting to stop learning or discovering. A way of holding moments, like evanescent bubbles, before they burst and disappear. It doesn’t work though. They vanish all the same.

I have a very early memory of being encouraged to make marks on a page. I was five years old, at school, and we were learning the alphabet, drawing the letter ‘A’: capital, then lower case. In the act of moving the pencil, a powerful moment of recognition arrived. ‘This is it. This is what it’s all about.’ A eureka moment, but one of intense deep personal pleasure, as if I’d found the crock of gold. It was a visceral experience I’ve never forgotten. There was magic or alchemy in it. I had translated one thing into another thing. I was so delighted with my efforts that I embellished the letter with little flowers to celebrate how pleased I was.

A year later we moved house, and I changed schools. I still remember the shameful moment of humiliation when my new teacher called me to the front of the class, pointed at my exercise book, looked at me sternly and said, ‘Stop scribbling on your writing.’ What had been celebrated and accepted in one school, was punished in another. It didn’t take away the

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joy though. As an adult I now realise that decorating the letters was my way of celebrating the pleasure of making marks on a page, of writing.

Writing, for me, is a compulsion. It grips me at certain moments when phrases or fragments arrive in my head. It is also a necessity for my mental health and well-being. I did make one unsuccessful attempt to give up writing, to attempt to 'fit in' to the norms of society, by training to become a teacher. I drove to work and back every day, and obeyed the dictates of the school's curriculum, and every day I mourned what I had given up until eventually I realised I had to give in. I had to write again. It wasn't a career choice. It was a question of survival, of being who I am.

When early humans made marks on a cave wall tens of thousands of years ago, they were celebrating what they saw, what they loved: they were communicating their powerful emotional response to the world. When an eighteen-year-old girl etched the words 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs' on the walls of a Gestapo jail, she was following the same compulsion. It's a compulsion we all feel, to make a mark, to leave a sign. It comes back to this: that joyful moment of recognition, of declaring *I am here. I exist. I write therefore I am.*

RLF: That was Alex Nye. The desire to write may come from within, but it often depends on our eagerness to understand others.

At root, it is an act of profound empathy, as Sarah Butler explains.

Sarah Butler: I write to make sense of the world.

I write to try and understand things I don't understand.

I write because I love stories.

I write because I love words.

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I write because when I write I feel like I'm at home.

I write because I'm curious.

I write because I'm nosey.

I write because I'm interested.

I write because it changes my mind.

I write because I might change someone else's mind.

I write because I can't not write.

Writing is an act of empathy. As is reading. All the novels I have written have been about people far away from me — whether that's in terms of age, gender, class, race, world view. It is a delicate and fraught act, stepping into someone else's shoes, inhabiting their minds, but it is, ultimately, why I write. To understand. To see differently. To build my own empathy and, I hope, that of my readers. My second novel, *Before the Fire*, is about a seventeen-year-old boy, living on an estate in North Manchester, who gets involved in the riots of 2011. I wrote it because I was so angry about the representation of young people in the media during and after those riots. I wanted to follow a single story – not to represent all young people and all rioters – but to trace a single, unique narrative that leads to the riots as an act of resistance against the homogenising narrative of feral, broken youth that was being bandied around that year.

There is an ongoing debate about cultural appropriation in writing — do we have the right to write people other than ourselves? Whilst I am passionate about increasing the diversity of the voices and stories that are being heard in our society, I am with almost every other writer who stands up for the right to write whatever we want to write, as long as we do so with 'passion, strength and care' as Stella Duffy puts it. I'm

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with Hari Kunzru, who argues ‘Attempting to think one’s way into other subjectivities, other experiences, is an act of ethical urgency’. And I echo Aminatta Forna’s advice to her creative writing students: ‘Don’t write what you know, write what you want to understand, write from a place of deep curiosity about the world’.

In 2017, I wrote a novella, called *Not Home*, in conversation with people living in unsupported temporary accommodation in Manchester. I was worried about the ethics of representing these people’s lives and so I worked hard to do my research, to interview people with lived experience and ask them to read and comment on drafts of the book. I remember one man coming up to me and saying ‘that book. I love that book. It’s spot on’. All that work made worthwhile. The book is used by a charity as part of their local and national campaigning to improve conditions for people living in unsupported temporary accommodation — what a privilege to be a part of that.

RLF outro: Sarah Butler there, bringing to a close this episode of *Collected*, which was produced by Ann Morgan. If you’d like to know more about any of our featured writers, you can find out more about them on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up next time, Royal Literary Fund fellows explore the limitations of trying to pigeonhole creative work.

We hope you’ll join us.