

Writers Aloud

Episode 470

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

‘There is only one genre in fiction,’ writes Matt Haig in *The Humans*. ‘The genre is called book’. In this episode on the theme ‘My True Genre’, we talk to Royal Literary Fund fellows who reject or challenge the idea of classifying books by type, in their work. John Keay finds the concept of genre suspect, not least because the field he works in is often hard to define.

John Keay: I’m always a bit suspicious of this business of genres, and every writer having to conform to a particular genre, and feeling nervous about crossing from one genre to another. I do have a genre in the sense that I write nonfiction. I’ve never attempted to write fiction or imaginative literature, creative literature, poetry, and so on.

I’ve always been quite happy writing nonfiction, and I get enormous satisfaction from having managed to capture in a sentence or a paragraph exactly what it is I’m trying to say about something purely, so that maybe sounds rather mundane, but in nonfiction that’s as near to a sort of major boost / reward that you get, is having managed to express yourself really clearly.

But within this nonfiction and fiction thing there are all sorts of different kinds of genres and nonfiction obviously covers things like biography, history, travel, war books and so on. I don’t see any major problem about moving between these different genres and I’d like to think of myself as a writer, not as a historian or a biographer or whatever.

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RLF: The slipperiness of nonfiction came home to Keay when he found himself eligible to enter a prize for debut works, despite having published more than thirty books.

John Keay: I have just recently completed the nearest thing to a biography that I've ever written, and I was asking one of the people who runs the Biographers Club, I know they have a prize for first biography, I said, 'could I enter my book as a first biography', although it was actually my thirtieth book or something, but it was indeed my first biography.

'Yeah', they said, 'yeah'. And I thought perhaps that was a bit unfair because presumably the first biographers are usually in their twenties. And they probably have more need of the boost of winning a prize like that than I do. So I wrote this biography, but it isn't really a biography, it's more of a quest, it's about a man who may have invented his entire life story, and so the purpose of the book is to try and discover how much of what he wrote about was true, was factual, and how much of it was pure invention. And so it's a kind of biographical quest, but not really history, it's not really travel, although it certainly involves those things.

I have written books which are more straightforward histories, and also which are more like travelogues. And also written two, with my late wife, two encyclopaedias. I don't really see any difficulty about moving between genres, it's just, I think it's quite difficult to move between fiction and nonfiction.

If you get a name for writing histories and so on, no one's going to be particularly excited when you propose a novel, you're going to have to convince them that you could write a novel. And similarly, I imagine a novelist might have the same problem if he proposed writing a history. So you get typecast in a way by your publishers and by your readership and so on.

So it's quite difficult to make that jump from nonfiction to creative

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literature, but within either creative literature or nonfiction, I don't think genres are particularly important.

RLF: Fellow nonfiction writer Horatio Clare considers the difficulty his genre poses booksellers and marketing professionals to be part of its essence.

Horatio Clare: I've led myself to believe that I'm essentially a travel writer who writes children's books, but I think it's... I mean in my head of course I'm a novelist, I'm a Booker Prize-winning novelist, and I love poetry, and I think if I could be anything I'd be a poet. But in terms of what I actually do, I guess it's travel.

It's creative nonfiction, yeah, and travel's where I find my material. It's somewhere on the line between...well, it crosses everything: it's biography, it's place, it's nature. It doesn't particularly want to sit anywhere on a bookshop table. You can generally find my stuff in lots of different places in a bookshop.

And I guess *Running For The Hills*, my first book, which starts as a novel and ends as a kind of biography, having gone through a stage of memoir, is my sort of truest book. I guess if you only write one book, that's the one I'd write or that's the one I do write. And I do love to make it up, you know, I love to set a scene as much as the next person.

But I also started off thinking I was very unimaginative and really just took dictation from life. If you look at some of Dylan Thomas's poems, that's what he does too. But I do it in a more pedestrian way, I think.

RLF: Meanwhile, Ian Thomson also sees nonfiction as blurring distinctions with elements of fiction writing often sneaking in under the radar.

Ian Thomson: I work in this field called Creative Nonfiction that really accommodates a lot of sub-genres: the personal essay, travel writing,

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reportage, memoir, confession, anecdote, wiki page entries, notebooks, aphorisms, poetry, and why not, film scripts. So it's all a load of these things. The bottom line is that whatever it is that I write, it has to show literary potential; otherwise, it will be non-creative, nonfiction, it wouldn't be proper writing. And really, I teach this thing, Creative Nonfiction at the University of East Anglia, and I'm always asked what Creative Nonfiction is, and I always say, look, it's very porous, it can be a lot of different things, all the things I've mentioned here. But really, in the end, it has to be well written, it has to be good writing, it has to engage with the reader.

RLF: In Thomson's view, it is as though nonfiction is a rebellious craft, doing the opposite to what its name specifies.

Ian Thomson: I guess a characteristic of my genre, nonfiction, is that it sometimes tends to blur the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction. Of course, any piece of writing is necessarily a fashioning and shaping of events. I love the etymology of the word 'fiction' from the Latin, *fingere*: *to mould, to shape or contrive*. But we don't, I think, expect nonfiction to distort in the same way, let's say, fiction does. The truth is, of course, it does distort.

I'm thinking here of Edmund Gosse's Edwardian memoir, *Father and Son*, written when Gosse was nearly sixty years old, and it recounts all these conversations that had apparently taken place when Gosse, the author, was a prepubescent child. Had these conversations been made up? Of course they had.

To me, writers like John Donne, Montaigne, Sir Thomas Brown, Francis Bacon, and the experimental London novelist B. S. Johnson, were all in their different ways writers of nonfiction, of creative nonfiction. They wrote truth-telling essays, sermons, and verse of great literary distinction and craft in a way that mere journalism, say, cannot be considered creative nonfiction, cannot be considered literature.

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RLF: To Charles Boyle, the concept of genre is rather laughable.

Charles Boyle: Here's a genre joke that I suddenly remembered today. It comes from a film by David Hare called *Wetherby* that was made in the 1980s and I saw a few weeks ago. Judi Dench plays the character working at the British Library outpost in Wetherby, which is in the north of Yorkshire.

And she's giving a car ride to a man who enthuses about secondhand bookshops and develops a complicated theory about the people who frequent secondhand bookshops as being also the kind of people who might well be involved in serial murders. And at one point he turns to Judi Dench and he says, 'Do *you* like murder'? And the Judi Dench character says, 'Not really, but I prefer it to romance'.

I think genre is often less important to the writer than to everybody else involved in publishing, such as prize organisers, such as booksellers. Chain bookshops often label their shelves by genre: so you have fiction, and you have poetry, and you have self-help, and you have history, and you have politics.

And I myself have written in one or two of these genres. I've written some poetry and some fiction, and I've written a little journalism. I once had a column in the local newspaper, unpaid, which was entitled, *On the Boyle*. But at the moment, what I feel currently happiest writing fits none of those specific genres *at all*.

If I was asked to tick a box in a list of genres, I'd probably tick the box that says *none of the above*, or maybe the one that says *whatever...*

RLF: That said, Boyle recognises that cross-genre writing poses problems for publishers and can lead to books missing out on recognition.

Charles Boyle: There does seem to be a current...is fashion the right word? It's certainly a good time for cross-genre writing. I'm thinking about the

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books that often combine a bit of memoir, they are part-essay, they're part-documentary, they may even be part-fiction, they may even include visual elements. I myself am writing a book that's part-biography, part-travel essay, and most of it's, in fact, a kind of fiction set in the afterlife.

This, for me, is the kind of writing that I'm interested in reading, and also the kind I'm interested in writing. And for booksellers, it must be infuriating. I was at an event a few months ago, where a writer, a very good one, was reading from her book and at the end of the event the person who was introducing her asked her, 'Well, actually, your book, is it a novel or is it a collection of short stories?' And the writer turned to the introducer and said 'Well, it's kind of just *writing*, innit!'

Whether that particular book, that that writer was reading from, was labelled novel or short stories on the cover turns out to be quite important, actually, because I think with that book, the publisher found it not eligible for certain prizes because he hadn't labelled it a novel on the cover.

RLF: Short story writer Laura Hird finds herself frustrated by the hierarchy that often sees her chosen genre devalued or dismissed.

Laura Hird: A thing I've never understood about short stories is why people don't seem to respect them as much as they do novels; a lot of people seem reluctant to read short stories. And even a writer like Stephen King, the short-story collections he's written sell a fraction of the number that his novels do, even though it's a lot of the short stories that are made into films and things.

I'm not sure why people don't give them a chance. There's such a passion for them in places like Canada, but there are some great magazines. And when I first started writing poetry and short stories, you were only allowed to send it to one at a time. It was really bad patter if you were to send the same story off to several people and just waiting to see, one: if they responded; two: if you got the photocopied rejection slip; three: if they actually took the time to just write a little bit about the story.

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A place that was great for that, *Iron Magazine* used to be *very* generous. I don't know if they ever published me, but I used to send them *everything* because the editor used to always give really good constructive criticism and it meant so much.

And then, on the odd occasions that your work was accepted to be published, it was fantastic. And, my first main story that I wrote was to *Rebel Ink* magazine, after I'd been to see a reading there. And it was just luck that the editor, Kevin Williamson, was so encouraging about my work. He accepted the story that I sent and told me to send more; suggested magazines to send other stories to and agreed to publish my first novella and short-story collection. But short stories will always be my passion and I just wish more publishers would give them more time too.

RLF: Julian Turner shares Hird's frustration and laments the lack of recognition commonly given to poetry.

Julian Turner: Poetry is not well regarded. When books come out, they're not particularly noticed, or...people do not think well of the form. And that is a big sadness for me, because, I think in my mind, I probably like most poets, have a really heightened sense of the value of what poetry is. And I think this is a perpetual source of frustration for poets, because, I mean, think about Blake, who died in penury and without much acknowledgement of his skills.

He didn't have a group of fans gathered around him in the latter years of his life, but, and he did work every day, all day, at what he was doing. But, we're only just now, two hundred years later, beginning to understand what he was getting at. And how lonely is that, having to be unacknowledged, really, that you're on your own, really, pretty much, and you don't really have peers to talk to about it, because what you're trying to say is unique for everyone.

Everyone who writes is trying to say something unique, because we're all

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different. So there is no one to share it with, in a way. So you combine the two things: that what you're doing is essentially, a very lonely activity, and then that you're not going to really have an audience for it in a way that is rewarding or satisfying unless you're very lucky, unless other people really do take to you in your lifetime. So you combine those two things and you add it to the fact that people don't really notice now what poets say. It is all a very sad situation.

RLF: Nevertheless, Turner recognises that poets may bear some responsibility for their genre's poor status.

Julian Turner: To some extent we're responsible for that, having had not much to say, really, essentially. And I do think that needs to change, I think poets need to take their subject matter more seriously, really and be more relevant to more people. But at the moment, there isn't a mechanism for enabling audiences to connect easily to poetry.

The means that we're promoting at the moment for that, like poetry slams and performance poetry, they're good in themselves, but they lack the gravitas, really, sometimes, that you need, that poetry really does need to add to the mixture. So yes, we're in a bit of a mess, it seems to me, and one of the things we really lack is people, good critics, you know? There aren't that many good critics around who can see and value what's being produced.

And there's a bit of a confusion as well of, what is good poetry. I think those sort of standards are changing, so we're working in a chaotic system which doesn't have very good sets of guidelines and things. None of which helps the situation.

RLF: For Marina Benjamin, the key lies in finding the spark of passion that will ignite a project.

Marina Benjamin: My spiritual home or true genre is memoir. And I've arrived at that through a more straightforward nonfiction. I find

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that I always seem to find a source of passion for my subject in my own experience. And that's the way I can hook into it and mine it. So the first time I attempted to do that, I think, was rather self-consciously in *Rocket Dreams*, which was a sort of elegy for the end of the space age, but also a childhood memoir.

And I don't know if everyone would read it that way, but when I look at it, I see it as a homage to the 1970s, to a particular way of thinking and being in the world and particular attitudes to nature and a particular cast of optimism and pessimism about the way things were going. So ostensibly, it's about the imaginative escapades of the space age that by that time, when I was growing up, had already been grounded.

So instead of imagining that we'd be colonising Mars, there were floating colonies in near-Earth orbit, instead of encountering aliens, it was the great era of fantasising alien abductions, instead of trashing the Earth in favour of moving elsewhere, we got Gaia, or perhaps more obscurely, we got Noetics.

And those, I suppose, rather little-known areas of where the space age came home to land or came back to roost really interested me because I thought that they informed the culture of the 1970s. I thought the Space Age was woven into it in ways that hadn't been explored and that I can access by remembering the cast of mind of my childhood.

RLF: Like Ian Thomson, Benjamin believes that blending and blurring lie at the heart of the most successful nonfiction narratives.

Marina Benjamin: I think there are lots of writers who are working this kind of blended-narrative groove, and also even mixing it up with autofiction. I think it's a very exciting time to be in this area, it's very experimental form, and it has attached to it adventures as bold as any that you will find in fiction.

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The challenge, of course, is to make sure that there's artistry involved in the expression of memoirs, so that it's not just a recording of events. There's a real delving and scratching around for story, and then the writing of that which needs to be crafted, I think, in a way that is compelling and pulls you along in the way that you would expect a novel to pull you along.

The best of these memoirists are like novelists, experimenting very bravely with form. They'll use fragmented voices, broken timelines that mash-up fact and fabulation, memory, supposition and speculation. And really, in many ways, I don't think there's been a better time to be a nonfiction writer.

RLF: Michael McMillan goes further, claiming that the best genre writing always contains an element of the new.

Michael McMillan: One is aware of genres in terms of writing: theatre, fiction, poetry, and on some level one respects these kind of boundaries and the different kind of rules and regulations that exist, and on some level I don't respect them, because in some sense the approach is very similar.

There are distinctions made between these genres. So for instance, I began as a playwright, and then I've morphed into theatre writer or theatre maker. And now I look at my practice in terms of making work, and that can be in terms of curating, in terms of theatre, in terms of writing essays.

One of the interesting things about genre, if you look at music for instance, and you can apply this to art as well, is that in the repetition, sometimes music emerges through repetition, always in the new repetition, there's something new emerging. So throughout different genres, always new things emerge; something emerges. And that is what is exciting about testing and pushing the limits of what genres are and is, because something new always emerges.

RLF: Michael McMillan there, concluding this episode of *Collected*, which

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was produced by Ann Morgan. The other writers featured in this episode were John Keay, Horatio Clare, Ian Thomson, Charles Boyle, Laura Hird, Julian Turner, and Marina Benjamin. There's more information about their work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Coming up next time, four writers discuss the knotty question of craft and technique.

We hope you'll join us.