Writers Aloud

Episode 471

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

Can you teach writing? Certainly from the number of creative writing courses that have sprung to life in the decades since Malcolm Bradbury took Ian McEwan off to the pub on Monday afternoons at UEA, it would seem so. But what are some of the tried and tested techniques that seasoned writers turn to when they need to keep their work on track?How do published authors keep producing quality work or knock indifferent prose into shape? In this episode of *Collected*, four Royal Literary Fund fellows take us inside their creative process, considering some of the techniques and influences that have shaped their craft. Starting things off, Pamela Scobie shares how living in the midst of a story and taking copious notes helps her bring projects to fruition, even when they seem to have their own ideas.

Pamela Scobie: I seem to be writing three submissions simultaneously. My anecdotes are appropriate to all of the titles, while my best opening lines fit only one. Help!

When I have a project going, it's with me all the time. If a thought comes while I'm out, I add it my shopping list. I never have a pen (the house is full of them, in cahoots with the seven pairs of spectacles), so I pinch a free one from the bank.

At this specific moment, I'm watching football with my chap and writing

up today's ideas in my diary. I jot casually, so as not to disrespect the Match. I still feel embarrassed at calling myself a writer, so I don't scribble in a conspicuous manner in case I seem to be giving myself airs.

As a child, I loved the smell of the newsagent's, and used to save up for a two-and-sixpenny pad in which to inscribe spells and later on Great Works. Then, as now, each one ended up dog-eared and cannibalized, a landfill of to-do lists, with the occasional felicitous but unplaceable phrase. I still send beautiful blank books to writer chums at Christmas, and they do the same to me. My late partner Tony wrote every draft of his poems in moleskin-covered A4 volumes, so his thought processes are still evident today. By the time I've completed anything, I've forgotten how I started.

I whacked out my first plays on an old typewriter. The team left me alone while I worked through ideas, lager, fags and cheese sandwiches. I didn't do many drafts. Now that I have a correcting facility, I correct all the time. A play turned into my debut novel. I added a few passages of description and a few 'he said's and 'she said's; it was done in nine days. Or so I thought. My editor put me straight. On the strength of its publication, I bought an Amstrad. I researched while watching daytime telly with Mum, and worked on the creative stuff after bedtime.

My latest novel is trying to be Part Two of a trilogy. I wrote Part One to entertain Tony, who was the inspiration for my hero: Sid Malone, piss artist, poet and private dick. Without that incentive, it's hard to keep focussed. Poetry I write on the hoof, and usually know by heart when I type it up. Sometimes I share my ideas with a chum, who unfailingly puts her finger on whatever weakness I've been trying to ignore.

Starting a new piece of writing is a bit like having a secret lover. Nothing is settled. The relationship is too new to declare. Yet I walk around smiling, as if I've swallowed an amulet. I know that I'll have to face the world's judgement some time, but for moment, it's the having it to do that makes me feel alive.

Now then. Which bits of this am I keeping, and which will go into 'Inspiration'…?

RLF: That was Pamela Scobie. New projects may feel like nascent love affairs, but most writers know that there's a time when the going gets tough. Even if we pour our heart into a project, it may end up being little more than a word salad. At such times we may have to be ruthless with ourselves and our creations, as Sonia Faleiro explains.

Sonia Faleiro: When I was in my late twenties I moved from Delhi to Bombay, drawn like everyone one else to the energy and ambition that was synonymous with this vibrant city by the sea. I was a journalist by profession, and used my job as an excuse to nose around everywhere. I was drawn to the city's subcultures and spent many hours interviewing hijras, sex workers, and gangsters.

One day, I came across a dance bar. It was a Bombay institution like no other. Tiny, dingy and smoky it was full of girls dancing to Bollywood music. The audience of men showed their appreciation by throwing money in the air. The atmosphere was electric.

Bombay's dance bars are sometimes compared to strip clubs, but in fact the women are always modestly dressed and only ever dance. Many of the women found refuge in the bar, having escaped forced marriages or abusive relationships in their little villages. In Bombay they lived by their own rules. They were independent and free.

Their courage struck me as profile-worthy and before long a major publisher had signed me on to write a book on dance bars. I interviewed hundreds of people. I lived with the dancers and travelled with them. *That's the hard work done*, I thought.

Wrong.

That was the easy part.

After I wrote the first draft of my book I was taken aback by how it made no sense at all. There were too many characters. The narrative wasn't clear even to me. What was the story I was trying to tell? I was a thorough reporter and a capable writer, but I didn't yet know how to write a clean and simple text.

I deleted all 100,000 words and set out to try again. I wrote another 80,000 with equally little success. I had produced another word salad. Two years passed.

I tried one more time. And as I wrote this third draft I realised that I was writing an entirely new book. In fact, the third book I had written so far.

When I started my fourth draft in year four of my project I decided it was time to be ruthless. I deleted virtually all the characters, scenes, and storylines that existed leaving one central figure. She was a nineteen-year-old dancer named Leela. Leela, I realised, would tell the story the way it was meant to. She didn't need anyone else.

It's quite natural to want to honour every single voice that contributes to or illuminates a story. But as writers our goal is to make people read our books. If we write unreadable books well then, who will read them?

On my fifth draft, and many hundreds of thousands of words later I finally had my book. I called it *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars.* When readers ask me how I wrote it I always tell them I actually wrote five books. And what they're reading is just the one.

RLF: Sonia Faleiro there. We may have control of the delete button, but writing can still remain a mysterious process. If we are going to succeed we need to stay alive to the promptings of the subconscious, even as we control and hone. Dreams can be a rich playground for unfettered creativity. Mark Blacklock tells us more.

Mark Blacklock: In the second line of the 1924 Manifesto of Surrealism, the poet André Breton offered a definition of the movement for which he was laying out a statement of intent: 'Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought'. In the second line Breton had described 'man' as 'that inveterate dreamer'. Over several paragraphs, after acknowledging his debt to Papa Freud, he had probed the privileging of wakeful reason over the logic of the dream, inverting the superiority of the alert mind:

> What I most enjoy contemplating about a dream is everything that sinks back below the surface in a waking state, everything I have forgotten about in my activities in the course of the preceding day, dark foliage, stupid branches. In 'reality,' likewise, I prefer to fall.

Perhaps here he was unconsciously evoking Alice, and her fall down the rabbit hole some fifty years earlier, a fall into a world that was very much dominated by stupid branches, lush or, just as frequently, dead foliage: Wonderland's leaves are either green or brown. When Alice awakes from her curious dream, indeed, her sister is 'gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face'.

Alice was written in the period immediately before the Freudian categorisations of the ego and id, when debate about the unconscious mind was no less lively among researchers in the emergent field of psychology. Reading her adventures through a Freudian scheme can nevertheless be irresistible to us now, so rich is it with symbols such as these.

Perhaps most tellingly, though, Alice's dream is in the end a shared dream, and a metaphor for literature itself. Alice's sister, having heard all from Alice, begins dreaming, 'of a fashion', herself: 'the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister's dream'. While she knows that should she open her eyes, 'all would change to dull reality',

she imagines how as an adult 'she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale'.

Dreams naturally lend themselves to fantastic narratives, but those stories that come after Breton, that manage the feat of assuming the logic of dream, and imitate its slippages and cadences without framing themselves quite literally as dreams, those that are more dreamlike in their essence, that embody the fall, those are the stories that most haunt our waking minds. Lucid or strange, containing content both latent and manifest, experienced by us, or by others. Because we *are* inveterate dreamers, and we must share the disinterested play of our thoughts.

RLF: Mark Blacklock, there. When all else fails, a deadline can have a wonderfully focusing effect. But in the literary world the expectation that writers will take a long time to finish projects still holds sway. Former journalist David Mark had to learn to adjust his approach to deadlines in order to keep his editors' faith.

David Mark: Apparently, if you listen very carefully, you can hear a deadline's song. It's sort of a whooshing sound, as it goes rushing by…

Yeah, there's loads of jokes about deadlines. I've learned some of them off by heart because they go down well at library events and when I give talks to the WI. Readers like to think of authors as being Bohemian and dissolute and slightly chaotic and I hate to disappoint them. I'm perfectly suited to the role of the ink-stained, absinthe-addled, scribe-for-hire. I do like to give people what they want. And my goodness, there's a reason why writers have the image that we do. Writers have a reputation for viewing deadlines as things to be avoided, or pushed back, or artfully skirted around. One can't rush the creative process, after all. Writing for a specific date? A specific word count? One might as well be working in a factory, shouldn't one, darling...?

If I'm honest, I can't help picturing most writers as if they were Barbara

Cartland, all voluminous frills and chintz, feeding treats to a handbag pooch and telling one's agent to buy them another three weeks' grace on the final chapters so they can try and throw off this terrible migraine before they have to fly to Mustique.

The thing is, I've been a journalist since I was seventeen years old. And newspapers have a very different approach to deadlines. They're not advisory. They're not a suggestion. And the people in charge aren't nice, well-raised bookish people who understand that you're doing your best and will have the pages in their inbox just as soon as your fingers thaw out sufficiently to type the climax. No, news editors don't care. If a news editor has told you they need 600 words on the upbringing of a city councillor you've never heard of, and they need it before 6pm, and it's currently 5.53pm, and you're picking your children up from after-school club in seven minutes, you say 'Yes'. And you find a way to meet that deadline. If you don't, you get shouted at. Shouted at a lot. And your reputation goes through the floor. Now you're unreliable. You're too bloody slow. You're too busy faffing about making your intros sound pretty when you should just be playing it straight and bashing out some paragraphs. This is an industry where there is no higher praise than being known as somebody who can be relied upon to not only polish a turd, but roll it in glitter.

Book editors are different. *Would six months be too soon? We can push it back, if necessary.* Six *months*? Bloody hell, I was thinking Monday!

The different ethos took some getting used to in the early days of my book career. I'd been to London to see my editor and he'd gone through some of the parts of the book that he felt needed some work. I nodded. Agreed. I changed them on the train on my journey back North and sent them across the next day. I got an email back through my agent. The editor was 'a little dismayed' that I'd made the amendments so swiftly. He'd hoped I would take some time for a 'full and considered rewrite'. But had he read them yet? I asked. No, he hadn't.

So, lesson learned. Now I make the changes swiftly, and then send them over in a month. Then everybody's happy.

Oh, incidentally, what's the difference between a writer and a large cheese pizza? The pizza can actually feed a family of three.

RLF: That was David Mark. For others, the best techniques involve not so much focusing on the nuts and bolts of writing as reframing our understanding of our craft. For Thomas Bunstead, this came through sifting some of the many metaphors commonly attached to the work of translation.

Thomas Bunstead: The best advice I ever received as a translator is not a piece of advice as such but rather a framework to understand the translation process.

Because translating novels – which is what I spend most of my time doing, Spanish ones – while rarefied in certain ways and doubtless a privilege, can also feel messy, and is intensive, and a 300-page book might take you four or five months to get through, and at different moments but also sometimes the *exact same moment* you have to find your meticulous, painstaking self *and* also your soaringly inspired self; because of such push-pulls, the process seems to spawn a lot of metaphors.

Translation, when we ask the etymologists, because it comes from the Latin *trans*, meaning 'across', and the past form *latum* of the verb *ferre*, 'to bear' — is an act of bearing across.

Then again, in classical Latin, translators were 'turners', their activity conceived of as being *vertere*, or 'to turn' foreign expressions into not-foreign expressions.

Translation is a drag act, according to Amanda DeMarco: just as a drag performer's character is hyperbolically gendered, to the point of

grotesqueness — a drag queen is as glamorous as a supermodel, while also highlighting the repulsive falseness of mainstream conceptions of female beauty; similarly, the *translator-king* must swagger through this story with an unflagging self-assuredness, while winking at the egomaniacal violence of their posture.

Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee. Thou art translated.

So many different holders – you have only to witness the mushrooming of degree-level translation courses of late – is in itself testament to people's need for some kind of holder, proof in turn of the exactingness of the task.

But the metaphor that's been working for me lately, that's been working *on me* to produce the kind of calm that comes with good advice, is from Margaret Jull Costa, translator of the likes of Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa and — oh, just all the really demanding and amazing Spanish and Portuguese writers, really.

She has described translation as – here it is – 'creative writing in reverse'. Mmm. *Creative writing in reverse*. Okay. What does that mean?

Well, she goes on to say, and I quote, 'whereas writing starts as largely an *unconscious* process that becomes, with editing, more conscious, translation – because you start with someone else's words – perhaps goes from conscious to unconscious with the editing process. The more you read and reread a text, the more it becomes…part of your *unconscious* mind'. Close quotes.

There is practical advice buried in this. Read, and re-read — and, since I was lucky enough to do some close-text work at Margaret's feet when I was starting out, I know that in her case that is followed by reread your re-reading and then reread that and then print it all out and start the rereading process once more… Conscious to unconscious.

But, as Jull Costa goes on to say:

> On the other hand, to contradict myself entirely, translating is also often a largely unconscious process, in that you read the words in the original language and, if you're lucky, they appear in your mind in your own language, in what does seem to be an unconscious fashion.

…*also often a largely unconscious process. Also. Often. Largely*…unconscious. Well. In other words, how *has* that just happened?

You read the original, you know what idea you want to express, and the mind pauses briefly in a place where neither language really exists, before coming down in the language of translation.

RLF outro: Thomas Bunstead there, 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, Mark Blacklock talks to Caroline Sanderson about side quests, textual collage, the possibilities presented by the unreliable narrator, and his longstanding fascination with the fourth dimension.

We hope you'll join us.