

Writers Aloud

Episode 472

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

This episode is devoted to an interview with novelist, cultural historian, journalist, and lecturer Mark Blacklock. Author of novels *I'm Jack* and *The Emergence of the Fourth Dimension*, he teaches on the MA in Creative and Critical Writing at Birkbeck, but his talents extend in many directions as he started off telling interviewer Caroline Sanderson.

Caroline Sanderson: Mark, I'm somewhat in awe because although I've interviewed many writers, I don't think I've ever interviewed a writer who has been a winner on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* before! And I mention this because it seems symbolic of your incredibly eclectic range of cultural knowledge and interests.

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, my daughter, oldest daughter, the other day said, 'You tend to spend a lot of time on side quests', is how she puts it, in that sort of computer game terminology.

Yes, I have to confess that I am certainly a kind of intellectual magpie driven by curiosity and probably don't concentrate or specialise enough. And the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* adventure was along those lines. Yeah, it was basically during lockdown when the second winter lockdown came in, I felt myself becoming increasingly frustrated and bored and thought I needed to look for something exciting to do, a kind of caper or adventure.

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And I initially thought I'd try for *Pointless* because I'd been watching that a lot on telly. But the friend who'd agreed to go on *Pointless* with me didn't live in the same house, so you weren't allowed to apply for *Pointless* unless you were living together, and my wife, Katie, had no interest whatsoever.

So I had to think again and the applications for *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* were open. And then there was a sort of sequence of auditions over the phone and through the computer. And at each time, after each one, the producer who was auditioning – they would take the form of quizzes that were replicating the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* format – and each time the producer would say, 'Oh you've done well'. And I was thinking, *yeah, but this is never going to happen, right?* And then eventually he said, 'You've made it through'.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, I don't think you've anything to apologise for. I think if we ever have an RLF Fellows quiz team then you're probably top of the list. So you've talked about these 'side quests', so what point in your life did the desire to be a writer take hold of you?

Mark Blacklock: Pretty early, I mean, I trained as a...*trained!*... I *became* a journalist straight out of university; I didn't do formal training as a journalist. I've worked on magazines, but I had done some work experience with a local newspaper when I was sixteen.

So yeah, the idea of writing professionally had been there for that long, but I'm not one of those writers who used to write stories in notebooks as an eight year old, and I'm always slightly envious of those people. I read a lot; I started becoming interested in writing fiction probably in my early twenties, when I was already working as a journalist.

I set up a kind of writing group with a couple of friends who were doing the same thing. We became aware we were all writing short fiction and we would get together and read each other's stories and so it was around then, yeah, sort of late nineties.

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Caroline Sanderson: Yeah: that's a bit similar to me, and that you have this background in journalism and I know that you wrote for many different publications and still do on occasion.

I'm struck by reading that you wrote for *Bizarre* magazine, you seem to...there's a wonderful range of photographs of you on assignment on your website: being a human cannonball and bog snorkelling, I think, is something else. Yeah, so that's quite a range. But what do you think, in terms of when you look at your writing career as a whole, what do you think the day-to-day experience as a journalist, what does that bring to any kind of writing?

Mark Blacklock: Primarily, it was the habit of writing. I'm kind of unfussy, I'm perfectly happy to be edited, whatever. And I really admire editors and like what they have to say and take it on board and I think that comes from journalism, but more than anything, really, it's the habit of writing every day.

I can sit at a computer and write because that was the gig, right, that was the day job, and that comes from journalism. I think it's really useful you know when I'm supervising people in a scholarly environment: quite often people who are doing research and starting out in research careers can find it difficult to put the...actually get the writing done and that's never...I've never had that problem, and I think that's because it was something that I just did day to day as a journalist.

But also, research methods and techniques, my fiction writing has been quite heavily informed by the kinds of research that journalists do, that's been very useful.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? I think I find that too, having to produce words is useful. You mentioned a writers' collective that you were part of and I'm interested in that because it's quite an unusual way to get going, we think of writers as being on their own all the

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time and it sounds...tell us about that, sounds quite an unusual idea for a collective, a writers' group, really?

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. It was the closest I've ever been to being in a band, I don't play any instruments, so this was a way of doing that. It was inspired, loosely, by a Peter Cook joke that I think was in *Private Eye*: two people are at a party, one says to the other, 'I'm writing a novel', and the second one says, 'Oh, neither am I!'

And so we called ourselves Neither Am I because we were all failing to write novels at that point in time. We were...there were four of us, we were all friends, we were writing short fiction. But we were all involved in some way in the, in dance music, electronic music, and so we met through that, really.

What happened was, as we got together to read ourselves, to read each other's work, we then found that the work was...we were all sort of gravitated towards certain themes, and we were basically mimicking celebrity voices, stealing the identities of celebrities and putting them into the stories.

A kind of concept grew around it, that we would then be anonymous and that the stories would be pirating or plagiarising the identities and the voices of well-known figures from cultural life, in often really unsettling and obscene scenarios and that amused us. So then we took it on the road.

We did a series of events where we would read in masks, with laptops, and we also self-published a couple of collections. In fact, I've got them both over there so I'll show you later. But essentially it was a DIY project; we just started sharing work as a way of encouraging each other to work, that took on an aesthetic and creative life of its own.

Caroline Sanderson: So both your novels, *I'm Jack* and *Hinton*, they're on the face of it, they're set in very different times, they're very different

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tones. They both make use of actual archival material and stories of real historical figures. And it's interesting given that we've talked about you being a journalist and having that grounding, that you like to play with how stories are told and who's telling them, because of course that's something we have to think about when we read anything.

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, absolutely. I became increasingly interested, I suppose...you know, partly coming out of *Neither Am I*, where we were playing around with identity and working with figures from real life. I started thinking about developing those ideas in my own fiction; as an academic, I had become, more aware of historiography, we'd call it in that world: the fact that stories and histories are themselves constructed because the source materials are all themselves inflected; we need to think carefully about source materials, something that's, you know, a current concern, right, in the age of proliferating disinformation.

But yeah, I became very interested in not only the materiality of source materials, but also the different inflections that they get, and the ways that we encounter them in different places. Particularly with *I'm Jack*, the first book, what I happened upon was a storytelling voice that was inherently, in its bones, unstable and unreliable, which was a bit of a gift for telling this kind of story, for looking at these kinds of formalities.

If you have a narrator who might be dealing in documents that...some of which are stable, some of which are unstable, some of which are true and false, it felt like that kind of narrator could then focus more attention on these kinds of documents. And also, there was a sort of practical bit as well: I was researching it and I was coming across a lot of original materials and at a certain point I thought, this should go into the text.

Essentially I realised that what I wanted to do was collage: by putting different registers of text or material, materialities of text into conversation with each other, you create these disjunctures, and in those fracture lines, I think the reader is invited to start to interrogate, to think more critically, or to imagine; it invites all kinds of answers that aren't necessarily linear.

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Caroline Sanderson: I think it's very stimulating and a nicely challenging experience for the reader. We've got passages in Wearside vernacular written and spelt phonetically as spoken, and we've got letters and witness statements and more. And obviously we're wondering all the time, about the veracity of everything and whether it's real and so on.

And I'm guessing, John Humble is this – you grew up in Sunderland, I think – so he was this kind of quite mythic figure and obviously you're familiar with that vernacular, he's a classic unreliable narrator.

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, absolutely. See, he was...the kind of myth was knocking around.

I was young when it happened, and so my memories of it actually happening are very, very vague. What happened was: West Yorkshire Police received a letter and then a tape, George Oldfield, the chief investigating officer, from someone claiming to have been the perpetrator of the murders of women in West Yorkshire.

Oldfield believed that these were from the real killer, that only the killer could have written these letters because they contained facts that only the killer could have known. Oldfield was incorrect on that, and they analysed the tape and they analysed everything, they analysed the handwriting, and got a really good read on the dialect and went up to Sunderland, where they knew it was from.

They were in a mad panic to try to find somebody and they interviewed basically everybody in Sunderland who fit the age profile, and particularly anyone who travelled. So my Dad was interviewed as a suspect, as were hundreds, if not thousands, of young men in Sunderland at the time, younger men, middleaged men.

Yeah, so I was kind of aware of it, but yet also became more interested in the story as I got older, because it was this myth that attached to Sunderland,

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and I'd moved away from Sunderland, but in that way, I think, quite a lot of writers at the beginning of their career start thinking about: *where or what are my stories, where am I from, what am I about?*

And also you mentioned the dialect, I just love the north-eastern dialect. I don't have much of an accent myself, but I just can tune into it, and really that was the fact that so much analysis was then focused on that voice, I realised I could reproduce that. That again creates a sort of immersive effect for a reader who's willing to go along with that.

Caroline Sanderson: We're going to talk about dimensions in a minute, but I love the layers because this man is a...the headline is that he's a villain, he derailed the investigation and almost certainly enabled Peter Sutcliffe to murder three more women because of how the investigation was sent down a blind alley, really.

What we then start thinking about is that, so John Humble is mimicking Peter Sutcliffe, you're mimicking John Humble, it's wonderfully sustained and it's chilling, but it's kind of weirdly empathetic as well, with this actually pretty pathetic man.

Mark Blacklock: Yeah. It became...what I found was that doing the voice made me empathise more and more with him. There were also a couple of things during the research: as I was saying, I used some of the kind of journalistic sort of research approaches and tried to contact various people involved in the case.

And one of the people I contacted was the barrister who defended Humble, when he went to trial. And his response when I asked him would you be willing to discuss him, and particularly I wanted to know what he was like, he just sent back a single line message saying, he was not at all interesting, he was a hopeless alcoholic.

And I thought, that's...come on, you know, that's his *defence!* And the more

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you know, the more read about it...apparently as a young man Humble had been poorly, very poorly, treated by the police and had a bit of a grudge against the police. He'd never anticipated that what he did would cause quite the sort of sequence of effects that it did, and it was terrifying for him.

It was reported in his trial that he'd attempted suicide at the time, and I found the report in the *Sunderland Echo* of him throwing himself off the Wear Bridge. It wasn't a kind of spurious suicide attempt; he was genuinely at the time tortured by what he'd done. So it was impossible not to kind of empathise with the guy, no matter the crimes had been had ended up being so...causing such horrific consequences.

So that there was this tension which ultimately becomes quite productive creatively, but I was very conscious as well of the kind of ethics of doing this, these grossly misogynist crimes. Again, however much I was empathising with Humble on the other side of it, you have to also empathise with those whose lives were disfigured. You have a bit of a duty of responsibility there.

So it became complicated and the way I thought it was reasonable to deal with that, I didn't feel that it was appropriate for me to do anything other than to report verbatim, how this had affected the victim. So I included a passage that was a sort of transcript of one of the victim's mother's responses to Humble's arrest. And that seemed like the best way for the collage to incorporate that.

Caroline Sanderson: It's interesting in the sense that in the course of my work, I look at quite a lot of true crime that's published, and most of it is not nuanced in that way. So I always find it fascinating to come across a book, which is, and there is some very fine True Crime writing, and I guess you perhaps wouldn't describe this as that quite.

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, it's interesting where it gets shelved in bookshops, right, because it isn't True Crime.

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Caroline Sanderson: It's a novel.

Mark Blacklock: It's a fictionalisation of a true crime. There are some incredible True Crime books, some people approach it very differently. Gordon Burn would be my kind of touchstone on that. I've never read anything quite as disturbing or distressing as *Happy Like Murderers*. It's just...but it's an astonishing accomplishment. And the way that Burn deals with that by approaching it with some of the techniques of the novelist: by thinking very, very carefully about how he approaches everything, by being forensic, that all kind of really informed it.

But yes, I was also at the same time thinking, there is always something prurient about our interest in true crime; we can justify it by saying, 'Well, I'm interested in what are the most terrible things people are capable of, and how can that be the case, and I need to know'. And we are driven to be – some of us! – interested in these very, very extreme-case scenarios in human experience, but how to tell them?

Caroline Sanderson: How to tell them? I think a lot about the dichotomy between the words *fiction* and *nonfiction*. As a nonfiction specialist I find that constantly frustrating as well, that people think of them as in total opposition. So when we think about books like *I'm Jack* and *Hinton*, which we'll talk about in a minute, I feel they're books that bring the two things together in a really interesting way.

Mark Blacklock: I hope so!

Caroline Sanderson: I think so. Let's talk about *Hinton*, which I think was published on the first weekend of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. That's quite a blow for any writer.

Mark Blacklock: Indeed, it came out right on the first weekend and actually my publisher *Granta* is a fantastic publisher and there'd been quite a lot of work done to get the cover just right. So the fact that this cover was then not going to be seen by anybody was really upsetting.

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And of course you don't get to then launch a book and those kinds of things that are...they're kind of quite cathartic and celebratory because it's such a solitary experience writing them, and there's so much work that happens up to that point and then, it's meant to culminate in that arrival in the bookshop, and that didn't quite happen.

So it felt a bit stillborn, but one then focuses on what the work is and was I pleased with it as an aesthetic object and as a piece of work, and yeah, ultimately, I'm just really glad it *was* published, I suppose.

Caroline Sanderson: Let's talk about it properly now and give it some oxygen that it lacked back in 2020 when it came out.

So I mentioned the subject matter of *Hinton*: it's a novel about Charles Howard Hinton, a theorist of the fourth dimension in space. Now, I know this has long been a fascination of yours. Is it possible to give listeners a brief account of what it is and why you're so intrigued by it?

Mark Blacklock: Yes, it was the subject of my PhD research as well. I basically encountered the character Charles Howard Hinton in Ian Sinclair's first novel, *Whitechapel Scarlet Tracings*, in which Hinton and his father James appear. There's going to be some overlap here because in that novel, in Ian Sinclair's novel, him and his friend in the novel, Joblard, have become obsessed with the Ripper murders in London, Jack the Ripper, and so they're researching that. And Charles Howard Hinton's father, James, became one of the suspects in those inquiries.

So I then...I was doing an MA at this time, and I started reading around, and discovered Charles Howard Hinton's bizarre books published in the late nineteenth century, which speculated that space is not limited to three dimensions, but there is in fact a fourth dimension of space. So we don't just have length, breadth and height, but there is another thing, truth, some people have called it, that kind of exists all around and folded into the other dimensions.

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And simply that as humans we don't have the sensual apparatus to perceive it. And this idea became very popular in the late nineteenth century, because it was given...it jumped the bounds of specialist mathematics, where it was perfectly fine to think in geometric terms to say, okay, we're going to allow another axis in this spatial manifold.

We're going to speculate that there is a fourth axis and do our sums that way. And it can be really useful to do that because you can then solve stuff with four dimensions, bring it back to three, and you've fixed it. But then it jumped the bounds of just geometry, when spiritualists got hold of the idea and started thinking that maybe ghosts and the phenomena that were experienced in séances were explainable because they were coming from the fourth dimension of space.

It gets this whole kind of imaginative expansion in the late nineteenth century and then it ends up in lots of early science fiction. It excites me because it's a very catalytic idea; it prompts loads of imaginative thought, it just takes something from one field, move it into another and see what happens.

Caroline Sanderson: So appropriately in *Hinton* as well we have an eclectic cocktail: archival letters and diagrams even, and children's drawings, and a short story, is it invented or not, we're not quite sure, integrated within it, and then also a compositor's note from you, or purporting to be from you, and I'm just going to read a little bit of it because I think it's so interesting for this conversation.

'Hinton scholars are a rare breed the stalking of fringe historical figures across the sparse scholarly highlands is not encouraged in the contemporary academy, where collaboration, meetings and synergies are favoured over selfish airs in crusty archives. We're required to justify our existences before panels of our peers by confecting shared interests. For those of us who decline to justify our existences to ourselves, attempting to do so for others seems a doubly redundant operation.'

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Then you write, 'I was warned off this material because there will be no one to speak to about it they said, no one will be interested'.

As writers, I think we constantly worry that no one will be interested. I know, as you've said, side quests, a lot of your interests and preoccupations lie on the fringes and in the extremes of human experience. Do you worry about that, or is there power in the niche, and do you write on regardless, I guess is what I wanted to ask you?

Mark Blacklock: Great question. Yes.

Caroline Sanderson: I thought you might say that!

Mark Blacklock: Yeah, definitely. I've tried to take myself closer to the mainstream, and it just doesn't work for me. I don't think either formally or...it just ends up being bloodless. I can't say why is it that those kind of fringe, as you say, more fringe activities are more interesting to me as a writer.

I can't put my finger on that, I wouldn't care to analyse myself too closely in that regard. I think, ultimately, I'm a formalist and I'm interested in anything that attempts to reshape existing forms in some way, no matter how small or large.

And that's really what...that just excites me. Perhaps I'm just a novelty freak and I just really like stuff that's slightly new in shape and form. So yeah, but to return to the kind of heart of that question, I did try to write a really straight book, I *wrote* a really straight book, a kind of a spy thriller. And I don't think it's worked.

And the next one is going to go again into something formally a lot weirder because it excites me to work in that way and to push at those formal boundaries. So initially I conceived of the Humble, of *I'm Jack*, as I say, both a collage and to some extent a kind of a document of...a kind

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of form of *détournement*, this idea that the Situationists had, that you can subvert the real by adopting the formalities of something that's already in the real world and representing it in a fictionalised way.

And so I guess *détournement* is something that's got deep under my skin as an idea, and I've used that in a couple of different ways. And actually, in *Hinton* it was used not really to subvert, but as something more sincere, and that got a little bit distant from that.

But I think that kind of approach to seeing material as malleable and taking either voice or character, taking elements from the empirical world and shaping them for reuse in fictional contexts, I think will probably always be there. God, that sounded convoluted, didn't it! That, and then, yeah, and then extremes, extreme mindsets probably also, because they're always interesting.

RLF outro: That was Mark Blacklock talking to Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about his work on the Royal Literary Fund website.

This episode of *Collected* was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up next time, Royal Literary Fund Fellows explore the link between writing and place.

We hope you'll join us.