

Writers Aloud

Episode 473

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

This episode explores how place relates to writing. Starting things off, novelist and short-story writer C. D. Rose recalls how a search for a bench dedicated to the writer W. G. Sebald on the UEA campus in Norwich had a haunting impact on him.

C. D. Rose: In the summer of 2022, I found myself in Norwich, a city in which I had once lived for nearly a decade but had not returned to for over five years. I'd been reading *My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is* by the Norwich-based writer Paul Stanbridge, a book which – among many other things – describes a memorial to the writer W.G. Sebald located in the grounds of the University of East Anglia, where Sebald had taught for many years, and where I was staying.

Being a great admirer of Sebald's work, I was surprised that I hadn't known about the memorial, and that I had never chanced across it when walking around the campus where I had once studied. Following the hints in Stanbridge's book, I googled the memorial and found it mentioned, on a UEA page, with a picture. The memorial wasn't a blue plaque, nor a statue or sculpture, but quite simply a wooden bench, of circular form, around a copper beech tree.

A mere bench seemed almost dull and somewhat too obvious for such a unique writer, but – on reflection – Sebald *was* a wanderer (his most well-known book, perhaps, *The Rings of Saturn*, is subtitled *An English*

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Pilgrimage, and recounts his journeys on foot around the East Anglian coastline), and every walker needs a sit down from time to time. A simple wooden seat on the edge of a wood near a small lake came to me to seem a fine memorial after all: a quiet place to remember a quiet man, and a quiet writer, one whose work moves slowly and gently, only to reveal its intensity after the reader has traversed a number of byways and digressions, crests and dips.

Looking at the online picture, I thought I recognised the spot and decided to visit. My instinct had been partially right — almost immediately I found the place I remembered, though instead of the bench I had read about, engraved with a few lines from one of Sebald's own poems, the one I found was a rickety little thing leaning against an undistinguished common lime. It offered scant support to any walker, and certainly bore no inscription. I carried on.

A university campus has an odd melancholy when out of term. The place was largely deserted, and burnt brown by the scorching summer. Earlier in the season there had been a few proud graduands, begowned, with their Sunday-best-dressed parents in tow, seeking a good spot for a photo which would grace the family mantelpiece for years to come (their own memorial), but now there were only a few postgrads shuffling around uncertainly, having emerged blinking from the shelter of the library as if surprised to find themselves in a physical world, and the occasional lecturer enjoying the peace or shirking the pressures of school holiday childcare.

On walking further away from the buildings, the place grew downright eerie. The striking architecture of the UEA campus (which includes Denys Lasdun's 'ziggurat' residences and Norman Foster's hangar-like Sainsbury Centre gallery) compounded this effect: the serried ranks of empty flats, offices and lecture theatres, their glass and concrete blached and gleaming in the bright sun, lent the campus the air of some kind of research institute where an experiment had gone horribly wrong, leaving none behind.

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I headed away from the built environment toward the University Broad and found a number of benches. I noted each one, and its inscription: 'In memory of all the happy dogs that have walked here', 'father, husband, and friend', a breezy 'Enjoy the view'. There were other memorials: a tiny plaque at the foot of a spindly birch recorded the dates of a man born the same year as me, and who passed away a decade ago. Another, a scratched plate of utilitarian stainless steel now entirely overgrown, commemorated a former librarian. But of Sebald and his bench, I found nothing.

A campus security car hovered around and I considered asking the driver if he might know where to find what I was looking for, but when I approached he scowled at me then drove slowly off, as if in search of a more interesting intruder.

Further down, on the edge of the water, a small tree was festooned with badly printed photographs held in transparent plastic document sleeves, two or three My Little Ponies, a gaudy bracelet, some felt-tipped poems: a memorial to a girl who must have died way too young. I didn't want to know more, and moved on swiftly.

I followed the path around the broad and came across a small crowd of teenagers sitting at a table in a clearing, blasting music from a phone and chattering away. They noticed me and their voices dropped. I thought of approaching them and asking if they knew of a copper beech near here with a bench around it, but recognised myself, a lone middleaged man approaching a group of kids in a wood, and rapidly thought better, and headed off in the other direction at speed.

I was now on the other side of the lake, where I was sure – given the only photographic evidence I had – my quarry could not lie, and indeed again I found nothing other than fishermen with their impromptu tents and fugs of dope smoke, a few joggers and dog-walkers, all oblivious to my presence.

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It was possible that the encounter with the guard and the teenagers had unnerved me, but I felt I was being watched, rather than being the one searching. I put this down to the number of sculptures which appeared, almost as if unconsciously summoned: an Antony Gormley figure stood on top of the library, surveying the park; a massive head (by John Davies), almost as tall as I was, stared out impassively; Leiko Ikemura's *Usagi Kannon*, a figure seemingly drawn from some composite mythography of woodlands waited for me at the edge of a clearing. (Later, I looked it up — it is a figure of the 'Rabbit Bodhisattva of Mercy', 'dedicated to the people and living beings who died and suffered losses' in the Fukushima tragedy.) Laurence Edwards' yet more unsettling *Man of Stones* appeared from behind some trees, an eight-foot figure freighted with some unidentifiable burden. A replica of Tatlin's Tower (a never-built Bolshevik rival to the Eiffel Tower, the story of which would have made fine material for Sebald) cast a long shadow in the evening light.

All of these, of course, were memorials, in their way, but not the one I was seeking.

I completed the loop and found myself back where I had started and saw a copse with an impressive copper beech. I was sure this must finally be the place, as if it had been there biding its time, waiting for me. I wondered how I'd missed it on the way out, but realised I had simply been facing in the wrong direction.

On entering the copse, I found empty crisp packets, dry leaves, and a black polythene bag of what I suspected was dog waste. Under the trees, there were ashes from a fire — an old one, surely: any flame would be far too risky in this heat. The wood was cool, though, in this blazing summer, not so thick as to refuse the passage of the breeze. A few trees promised, their copious skirts offering shelter, but I found no bench, no memorial. A squirrel darted, a lone magpie hopped, a rabbit fled, its white tail a warning ('You will find nothing here,' it said, 'Begone.') A dog, as inquisitive as I was, sniffed something intently until recalled by its owner.

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With the exception of the Dostoevsky house in St Petersburg and the Brontë Parsonage, visits to other writerly sites, while perfectly pleasant in themselves (the gift shop, the tea, the cake), have rarely illuminated the writer's works for me. This small expedition, though, while clearly failing in its objective, had left me with a different experience. In its way, it felt close to the spirit of Sebald's books.

A week or two after my fruitless search, I arranged to meet up with Paul Stanbridge, whose book had sent me off looking in the first place. I asked him about the bench, and the sequence in the book in which he, too, goes searching for it, and is vague about whether he found it or not. He smiled painfully. 'It was burned down by a student,' he said. 'Maybe ten years ago.'

For W. G. Sebald, the man who wrote a book named *On the Natural History of Destruction*, there could be no memorial better than one already gone, now ghostly, but a memory itself, recorded in books and untrustworthy photographs.

RLF: That was C. D. Rose. Memorials to writers may be one significant way that authors and places intertwine. But writing itself, even though it may speak beyond the grave, must take place in a specific location. The requirements writers have for their surroundings when they're working can be various and often quite exacting. Elizabeth Cook shares hers.

Elizabeth Cook: I have a perfectly good writing place at home, complete with bookshelves, filing cabinet, corkboard for images, and a view onto the garden. I keep a pair of binoculars on my writing table so I can look more closely at the birds outside. I am possessive of this space and reluctant to share it. But it is too cluttered; too full of evidence of incompleting projects; too distracting. Sometimes I need to go somewhere else.

A busy café can do. It can provide just enough visual distraction in the form of other customers to occupy the surface of the mind, leaving the

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deeper mind free to roam. It is best not to know anyone in the café. It is fine to interrupt oneself but it is not fine to be interrupted.

Occasionally I feel the need to go completely away for a couple of weeks in order to shake my work out of stagnation. To this end I have rented small places in Shetland, Bute, Co Cork, Northumberland. What I ask of these places is a basic level of comfort, a table to work at, and country to walk in. What I don't want is a social life or marvels of landscape, history, or art, plucking at me, asking to be seen.

It is probably important for a writer not to feel too comfortable a sense of belonging. A certain not-at-homeness gives an edge to experiencing which allows it to be seen freshly, free of assumptions. Unfamiliarity is good for writing, or at least it is good as a stimulus for writing. Travel can sometimes jolt the mind into a fresh-seeing. But in my experience, when actually committing words to paper, one does not want to be too interested in exciting new external objects with their invitation to physical exploration.

Once, when I lived in a small flat and was desperate to finish a piece of work which had taken up almost the whole floor, I rented (for very little) a room in a condemned house tenanted by a friend. I painted the walls white, set up table and chair and transported all my piles of paper. The room was a marvellous 'elsewhere' and it enabled me to finish that particular work. I would bicycle there first thing each morning and try to be at my table by eight. Then I would tiptoe up the stairs to avoid attracting the attention of the friend who had sub-let the room to me. He was a good and tactful friend and would be horrified had he known that the merest 'hello', or 'You're up bright and early', could upset the full and brimming bowl that I had brought to the day's work.

'The perfect place to write', said Goldilocks, 'is neither too interesting nor too dull; neither too familiar nor too strange. It is not too comfortable nor too demanding. It is a place where you are free from the demands, even benign ones, of others.'

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RLF: Elizabeth Cook, there. Writing may require tranquillity and minimal distraction, but inspiration often has different triggers. For Mark Blayney, there are few things more rich in stories than a city.

Mark Blayney: The city is a gift for the writer. First is the people-watching. A café on every corner. Watch who comes in, and who goes out. To our left a couple are about to split up. You can tell from the body language. Straight ahead, a work meeting, and one doesn't trust the other. Or is angling for more money. Or is being defensive, about something they've done wrong. To our right, two people who are about to become a couple. At least one of them doesn't realise this yet.

You can't help coming out with a scene for a story, or a poem, or an angle, or a different perspective. And we've only been here ten minutes — the coffee is still hot. Although, it does make me realise that being a writer is to be a professional stalker. Okay. Drink up. Let's go somewhere else.

Second is the architecture. Where I live in Cardiff we have Edwardian arcades — glass-roofed, echoing corridors, near-facing windows creating unusual reflections. Red and blue diamonds appear on the ground as the sun catches a bit of stained glass. Independent shops, violin makers, actors' agents, photography galleries. But hang on — there's a café. We have to go in here. 'What do you fancy?' 'No no, I insist.' 'Well, go on then.'

Okay. Our next one will probably have to be decaff. So yes, architecture — if you can make the bricks real, your story can be as unlikely as you like and there's more chance we'll believe it. Walk along any city high street and the trick is — look up. Because yes, we have knocked out all the ground floors and replaced them with soulless vacuous windowfronts. But gaze up — the first floor is always intact. The twentieth, nineteenth, eighteenth centuries, appear in front of you. How can you resist? 'No, no time for notebook — follow me round here, that's it — he's quite famous this guy, yes he always plays drums on the bins — pop him in the story.'

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Thirdly. The attack on the senses. Sound/sight/smell/taste/distraction/excuse me/can you spare/all aboard/watch out/ah bless you. Now. I know that's not for everyone. A writer friend of mine from the sanity of the country says if he has to go to Cardiff his legs go funny and he ends up clinging onto lamp posts. *That's 2 am on St Mary's Street*, I thought. It doesn't work for him, but it works for me. The rush of it, punctured with stillness and greenery. The river running right through the centre — I can cycle to the castle and then down to the bay, always urban but always by the water. Come and visit me!

The city surprises. Energises. Distracts. Appals sometimes. But never ceases to give material. It stays fluid, it's ever-changing. Sometimes this isn't good. 'The council have knocked down *what!?* Where's the bus station gone! Didn't this used to be a Himalayan kebab shop?' All material.

'Look — here's something else I wanted to show you. But first of all, let's go inside this café. Over there is a... Here is a... You won't believe it, but there is a... I need a new notebook. May I borrow yours?'

RLF outro: Mark Blayney there, bringing to an end 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.

Next time, Royal Literary Fund writers celebrate milestones in the writing life.

We hope you'll join us.