

Writers Aloud

Episode 474

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

Birthdays, Christmas, New Year — we often measure our lives in milestones. The writing life has milestones too, many of which have varying significance, depending on the character and fortunes of the individual writer. In this episode of *Collected*, Royal Literary Fund Fellows look back on some of their key moments, sharing what they meant to them. First up, poet Rebecca Watts remembers a publication day with a sweet aftertaste.

Rebecca Watts: Having a book published is a huge privilege. Packaged between a publisher's covers, your words have the chance to travel to places you might never personally reach. If the climate's right, they might even outlive you, resonating in the minds and hearts of readers not yet born. I suspect this grand idea of leaving a trace is what motivates many of us to persist with our projects: imagining a future moment when a poem or story or sentence we've written might delight, console, inspire or change someone, just as we've been delighted, consoled, inspired and changed by the books we've read.

Getting a book to the point of publication is nearly always less grand, and more haphazard, than this motivating vision implies. Writing the book in the first place is only the half of it; for many writers, the quest to find a publisher willing to invest in it can take longer than the writing itself. With poetry, the process is perhaps less clear cut, and more incremental, than with other genres — because it's typically only after a poet has

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published several batches of poems in magazines that a publisher will consider issuing a book. Consequently, by the time a poet's 'new' book appears, years (or even decades) may have passed since they made those poems. Reinhabiting the mindset that generated them, in order to edit and curate them into a collection, can be a strange experience. Added to which, if the book's well received and you're invited to read from it, you can end up spending more time voicing those old words than you ever imagined at the point of writing.

There *are* notional dates when books are officially 'published' — when snaking queues form outside yet-to-open bookshops, and venerated authors sit behind velvet tablecloths with shiny pens in their hands, ready to smile and sign. For most of us, publication day comes and goes, the fanfare ranging from modest to inaudible. But before it, there are many other days that carry significance for the writer. I remember clearly the day in 2009 when I received my first magazine acceptance by letter; and the day three years later when I was introduced to my future editor; and the day four years after that when my first book-length manuscript was accepted; and my first glimpse of the poems laid out like a book, in digital proof; and the day a small cardboard box arrived containing the first printed copies, which I was desperate and scared to open, in case anyone involved in the lengthy process had made some terrible mistake.

Perhaps more memorable than all that was the afternoon shortly before my official publication day, when my kind partner and assembled friends presented me with a large cake, bearing an exact replica of my book cover in royal icing on the top, and excerpts from the actual text printed on little strips of icing, scattered like loose pages around the base. I hadn't foreseen that. And so, before my little book of poems went out into the world, I had the opportunity to eat my words: a helpfully humbling act for any newly published author.

RLF: That was Rebecca Watts. Publication days are usually expected. Often they are in the diary months, if not years, in advance, given the

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glacial pace at which publishing often moves. But many of the most memorable moments in a writer's career come out of the blue: chance encounters, flashes of inspiration, lucky connections that give us the key to a story. Biographer Jeremy Treglown looks back on some of the biggest surprises of his career.

Jeremy Treglown: Before the biggest surprise, the second biggest. I'm in a video rental (that dates it), taking out an early Almodóvar movie. The student at the checkout looks at my card.

'Are you the Jeremy Treglown who edited Rochester's letters?'

I admit it.

'Really good book,' she says.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 1647–1680. In 1992 the biggest surprise also has a connection with that scandalous Restoration poet. I'm in Texas, doing research for two books simultaneously: a biography of Roald Dahl, commissioned by Faber, and one of Henry Green, a labour of love in several senses (and also a labour of war, but that's another story). Dahl was for a long time published by Alfred Knopf, whose archives are in the Ransom Center at Austin. So are those of John Lehmann, who published Green at the Hogarth Press.

I'm asked to talk to a small, prosperous audience of bibliophiles, mainly retired people living in the city's well-gardened suburbs. My topic, too specialised to bring in many donations, is how Green was persuaded to change his National Fire Service novel *Back*, in the middle of the Second World War, so that the central character isn't committing adultery. This was at proof stage. The printers were worried about national morale.

Introducing me, William Roger Louis mentions the Dahl project. But afterwards, over drinks, it seems at first as though Rochester is

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the main focus of interest. A cheerful former lawyer and political adviser tells me he came because he knew my work on him.

‘I collect erotica, mainly seventeenth-century. I thought you might like to come around one evening.’

But even in these surroundings, it’s the kind of invitation that can make one step back. But what follows produces two steps forward.

‘By the way, I knew Roald Dahl extremely well in Washington during World War Two. We were opposite numbers, him in the British Embassy, me in the White House. We saw each other pretty well every day. We shared girlfriends, for godssakes! Would you be interested in hearing about that?’

Hm, I would. Very much so, in fact. My Dahl investigations have been foundering. The writer’s widow is against the project and has warned friends and relatives off it. I’ve had some breakthroughs, particularly among Dahl’s schoolfriends and US publishers, and the crucial years of the war have led to a hilarious interview with Isaiah Berlin — which, again, is another story. But Creekmore Fath was both a voluble source in himself (‘I guess I wasn’t brought up well as to keeping secrets,’ he confessed) and an opener of doors. Through him I met Claudia Marsh, widow of a powerful media magnate who became a father-figure to Dahl and for whom in the late nineteen-forties and early fifties the young, then rather aimless ex-RAF officer acted as a picture dealer.

There have been other biographers of Dahl but because I was the first, I interviewed people who didn’t live to help my successors. No intermediary was more surprising, though, than the Earl of Rochester.

RLF: Jeremy Treglown, there. It may be delicious to look back on career highlights and lucky breaks. But the writing life is well known to have as many lows as highs. Rejection is often at the heart of some of the most painful of these, as author and journalist Jini Reddy recalls.

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Jini Reddy: How easy it is to wax lyrical about the character-building attributes of rejection when you are surfing a wave of success. How bitter the pill when you are not, when rejection turns you into a ghostly shadow in the world of publishing, the author others secretly invoke as a cautionary tale, of whom they whisper: ‘Thank God it’s not me!’

How many authors have known the publishing industry as friend and, if not foe, then as an amplifier of insecurity and feelings of failure? I would reckon a great many. Unless, of course, you are the young, wildly successful debut author, yet to fall off your pedestal.

Of course, what a published writer experiences in the way of rejection is really nothing compared to someone who has no foothold in the industry and for whom success remains eternally just out reach.

My very first attempt at narrative nonfiction sits in a drawer gathering dust. It is a hopelessly clichéd travelogue and doesn’t deserve to see the light of day. I went to India to research it in the months following my father’s sudden death. When I returned I began to write the book. And then my sister died, and I kept writing.

I sent the manuscript to agents and publishers, and I was feverish with hope. But I received rejection after rejection after rejection, each more painful than the last.

Had I not suffered enough with back-to-back bereavement? I thought bitterly. Was I not due success? Hadn’t a clairvoyant once told me I would be an author? It had been a dream I’d harboured for as long as I could remember. To say I felt hard done by was putting it mildly.

But really, I had no bravery as a writer and I resorted to the aforementioned clichés and superficial observations. However, writing the manuscript that never saw the light of day gave me an excuse to retreat from the world, to heal and to write myself out of heartache. Perhaps that was the purpose of this particular writing journey. But still the rejection was wounding.

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I *refuse* to preach about the character-building attributes of rejection because that is to deny a great unfairness that exists in life. Rejection isn't always about a lack of talent, of not being 'good enough', of needing to hone and polish one's ideas, to clarify intent and purpose, edit and re-edit — though that may well be the case.

Rejection is also about doors slamming in your face purely because the person doing the slamming holds a world view or a life philosophy that differs vastly from your own. But as the author Saul Bellow is quoted as saying to the *New York Times* in 1985, of rejection: "They teach a writer to rely on his own judgement and to say in his heart of hearts, "To hell with you.""

Of course rejection also stops us from developing monstrous egos and encourages us to develop self-compassion. Failure, I say, to anyone feeling the hurt of a giant "Thanks but no thanks", sucks. It's terrible. It's demoralising. I also tell them it's not the end. Cry, let go. Life goes on. You do your best, but you can't control the outcome. Oh, if only I could take my own advice!

In more dramatic, tearful moments, I liken myself to a kayaker, battling against the current, hoping I'll make it to dry land. Either that or I reckon I'll get so exhausted I'll keel over and let the waves push me out to sea, where I will be lost, metaphorically speaking, forever. There are no half-measures when is one is obsessional about a vocation.

But when I'm feeling measured and sane, I know that rejection is a cue for me to either doggedly redouble my efforts or back off entirely. Sometimes it is only after the (fruitless) redoubling of efforts that we come to see that the backing off is the healthiest and wisest course of action. To sit within that empty space post- (perceived) failure and allow ourselves to just 'be' takes enormous courage. But in that space, what American philosopher Charles Eistenstein calls 'The Space Between Stories', the new is birthed. It is where ideas and inspiration are seeded.

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I try to remind myself of this as I dwell, uncomfortably, in that in-between space between past success and success anew. In other words, I have faced rejection too recently to be equanimous about it. That space engulfs me, and within it I am listening, dreaming, conjuring, and hoping.

RLF: That was Jini Reddy. Recent rejections may be particularly painful. But historical knockbacks often still sting. Guinevere Glasfurd looks back over some of her battle scars from the querying trenches and reflects on what she's learnt from them.

Guinevere Glasfurd: Rejection is to writing as Richard Osman's novels are to the bestseller lists: seldom apart. Let me set out my stall from the off. I'm not proud. Short stories; a novel that took two years to write; funding bids, residency applications — I can unhappily say I've had all manner of work and ideas rejected.

The bad news invariably arrives as an email. But be not fooled: it can come in many other guises besides. Take the tweed-jacketed man in charge of a newly built arts venue, who looked at me askance when I asked about room hire for a possible creative writing class — 'Would it be something they might be interested in promoting too?', I had the temerity to ask. 'Oh, you're a *writer*?' he replied, with ill-concealed disdain. He took me to the window and motioned to the street outside. 'I could throw a stone, *in any direction*, and it would hit a writer, *like you*.'

An odd way to say *No*, but *No* it was. And so that was the end of it and of any plans I had to run creative writing classes by the sea.

At least he spoke to me. The worst rejections are the ones made of silence. A peculiarly ironic form of literary ghosting, that. Rejection, in truth, is everywhere and is largely unspoken. It exists in carefully curated circles that fence off and fence out.

Over time, I got better at rationalising it. Or so I thought. So let me present

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Exhibit A: the meltdown I had when a publisher I had been successfully published by decided not to buy the foreign rights to my next book. A book I thought was a perfect fit for them. Even typing this now, several years on, still carries the pique of what I felt that day — first bewilderment, then despair. *There was much they liked*, came the gist of their reply, *but couldn't I have written a book more like my first?*

No book pleases everyone. No two readers think about a book in the same way. Some will love it. Others not. But that's okay. That's as it should be.

We're often taught to think of rejection as a chance to reflect, to revisit the work, edit and redraft. Sometimes that is what is required, but sometimes it is not. Being rejected may also form a moment when something else becomes clear: that this *is* your work and it *is* what you intended. And just because someone rejects it, it doesn't mean the work is flawed, it just isn't for them.

So, my book wasn't what that particular publisher wanted. With that sudden, difficult uncoupling came the realisation that that publisher wasn't for me anymore either. Key editorial staff had left and they had shifted their focus to other genres of fiction.

A book is not just a book. It is the product of months, likely years, of intense work. Somehow through the chaos of life, a book gets written. *Your* book is written. Some may say *Yes* to it, Others, *No*. Of course, it was painful to have that book rejected. A reason why dejection feels so obviously to be rejection's twin. But there was nothing shameful about it or that I could have done different. Rejection sometimes helps you to understand the writer you are.

RLF: Guinevere Glasfurd, there. It's a difficult path, this writing life. For many of us, the ability to share experiences both good and bad is essential to survival, drawing us onwards when the going gets tough. But nothing can take away from the precious moments — those milestones that stand

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out in our memory as being instrumental in making us the artists we are. Rebecca Colby rounds off this episode by sharing some of hers.

Rebecca Colby: One of my most treasured moments as a writer happened in 1975 when I was seven years old, long before I ever dreamt of becoming a writer.

It was the end of first grade and my teacher, Mrs Sweet (who was as lovely as her name implies), called me to the front of the entire student body. She had a gift for me. It was *The Big Golden Book of Poetry*, edited by Jane Werner Watson.

But let's backtrack for a moment. First, let me tell you why she gave me this gift. Several months earlier, I entered her classroom as a new student, having moved from a nearby village in the middle of the school year. Unlike her current students, I didn't know how to read. And unlike today's classrooms, she didn't have a teaching assistant to aid her. For the rest of the year, she dedicated extra time every day to teaching me to read.

She spent months working with me and gave me the best gift ever — the joy of reading. The poetry book was just the icing on the cake — a gift to acknowledge how much I had improved over the course of the year. So, while receiving the poetry book is one of my most treasured moments as a writer, that event was actually the culmination of many treasured moments under Mrs Sweet's tutelage. However, it is the landmark event I cite as the day my lifelong love of words, books and poetry began!

One of my other most treasured moments happened more recently, in the spring of 2022. My agent had sent my latest manuscript to an editor, and she came back with a prized response. The editor wanted to acquire it.

But again, a bit of backstory first. When I wrote the manuscript, I was in a bad place. I'd made the mistake of falling for a friend, who could only ever be a friend. We made some cherished memories and I managed to break

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my heart in the process. One of my favourite memories together occurred in the midst of a snowstorm. We dashed down hills on sledges and built a snowman. There we were, two mature adults in our fifties, sliding like children and rolling snowballs. Nothing could ever erase that afternoon of pure happiness from my heart.

It was from the combination of that happy memory and the pain of my subsequent heartbreak that my next book was born. I poured my feelings out on the page, as tears streamed down my face.

When my editor read the manuscript, it made her cry too. Then when she shared it with her team, they cried. This was the moment in my writing career I had waited for — the moment my words touched others at their core and they'd been unable to hold back their emotions. The moment I'd tugged their heartstrings.

The manuscript has not been published yet but my hope is that it tugs many more heartstrings in time — in a good way, of course.

RLF outro: That was Rebecca Colby, bringing to an end this episode of *Collected*, which was produced by Ann Morgan. There's more information about the writers we've heard from today on the Royal Literary Fund website.

And that concludes the first ten years of this podcast! We'll be back in 2025 with a new, improved format and team of presenters.

In the meantime, we wish all our listeners a happy Christmas and many meaningful milestones in the new year.

Thanks for listening.