

**A803\_1**

**Creative writing and critical reading**

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## Introduction

This free course, Creative writing and critical reading, explores the importance of reading as part of a creative writer’s development at the postgraduate (MA) level. You will gain inspiration and ideas from examining other writers’ methods, as well as enhancing your critical reading skills. A diverse range of examples will cover the genres of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and scriptwriting. You will be able to listen to professional writers discussing the creative process in relation to their reading habits. You will also have the opportunity to apply the insights you have gleaned to your own writing, by producing a short creative piece in your chosen genre.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [MA in Creative Writing](http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/qualifications/f71).

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

* understand the importance of reading as part of a creative writer’s development
* engage analytically and critically with a range of literary and media texts
* recognise how critical reading supplies writers with inspiration and ideas
* understand through writing practice one or more of the genres of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and scriptwriting
* engage with postgraduate modes of reading and writing practice.

## 1 About critical reading

Start of Figure



**Figure 1** Reading as a critical reader

[View description - Figure 1 Reading as a critical reader](" \l "Session1_Description1)

End of Figure

It is impossible to be a good writer without being a good reader first. But what do we mean by ‘good’? Writers go to books for various reasons, whether for guidance and inspiration, or to understand something better: about writing, life, or both. Perhaps the key to ‘reading as a writer’ – in other words, reading with a writerly eye – is being able to understand a text as its constituent parts while still appreciating it as a whole.

Reading the work of a variety of different authors is invaluable for expanding your awareness of what a text can be and do. Reading provides not only inspiration and useful exemplars – of methods, subjects and styles – but also a context within which to develop your own voice and individuality as a writer. This kind of critical reading and thinking will enhance your practice of creative writing; the more you learn about how texts operate, the better equipped you’ll be as a writer.

Reading as a writer, also known as ‘critical reading’ or ‘close reading’, involves analysing how a piece works and how an author achieves particular effects. For instance, when reading a short story, you might consider how the writer uses elements like point of view, tone, and structure to generate tension or create a compelling ending.

Think about why the author made certain choices in their piece, and what the outcomes of those choices are. Remember: texts are not simply given. They are the result of countless decisions on the writer’s part. Some of them might be instinctual and might not seem like conscious decision-making to the writer, but a great deal of them will also be the result of painstaking deliberation. We might not be able to know an author’s personal intention, but we can analyse what effect their choices have on us.

## 2 Reading and creative writing

Start of Figure



**Figure 2** Once upon a time …

[View description - Figure 2 Once upon a time …](" \l "Session2_Description1)

End of Figure

In this first activity, you will reflect on how reading a particular text influenced or inspired your own creative writing. (Or, if you choose the genre of scriptwriting, you may reflect on how viewing or listening to a particular work of film, stage or radio influenced your writing.)

Start of Activity

**Activity 1 (writing activity)**

Start of Question

First, think of a particular text or media work that has influenced you as a writer. What aspects of it relate to your own work? For example, you might consider a certain poem sequence to be an influence on your approach to the sonnet due to its use of regional dialect and nontraditional form; or you might feel that a particular film was the example that inspired you to write a script featuring three ‘acts’, each showing the same events from a different character’s point of view.

Jot some notes on this topic in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

Start of Question

Drawing on your notes, now write a short critical reflection in prose (around 500–750 words) in the box below, relating your chosen text or media work back to your own writing and reflecting on what you can take from it as a writer (whether positive or negative). Be as specific as possible within the length limit.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](" \l "Session2_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## 3 Reading as a writer

In this section, you will engage critically with one or more texts or a radio play in order to practise close reading. You can choose from the following genres:

* Option 1: Fiction
* Option 2: Creative nonfiction
* Option 3: Poetry
* Option 4: Scriptwriting

## Option 1: Fiction

When reading a novel or short story critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

* point of view
* character
* style (including rhythm, sentence structure, imagery, idiosyncrasies)
* voice or tone
* structure
* plotting
* themes.

For instance, if thinking about a writer’s style, you might keep an eye out for recurring habits and traits. How long are the sentences? Is there a noticeable rhythm to the prose? Does the writer use a lot of simile and metaphor or are they more sparing? And what possibilities do these present for your own prose?

As another example, you might take a thematic approach, looking for how other writers treat themes similar to those that you’re interested in. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach to their subject matter? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? Whom do the ideas in the text seem to belong to (the narrator, or one or more of the characters)?

Start of Activity

**Activity 2 Fiction**

Start of Question

Now read this extract from the beginning of a novel: [Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children (2008)](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=Salman%20Rushdie)

Here we are introduced to a first-person narrator reminiscing about his life. Consider the following questions:

* How would you describe this writing style?
* What are its chief characteristics (e.g., sentence structure, language choice, and imagery)?
* How would you describe the tone?
* What kind of relationship do these stylistic choices strike with the reader?

Jot down your thoughts on these, or any other elements of the piece, in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 2 Fiction](" \l "Session3_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## Option 2: Creative nonfiction

When reading a work of creative nonfiction critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

* style (including rhythm, sentence structure, imagery, idiosyncrasies)
* voice or tone
* structure or organising principles
* plotting
* themes
* use of rhythm, simile and metaphor.

For instance, if thinking about a writer’s style, you might keep an eye out for recurring habits and traits. How long are the sentences? Is there a noticeable rhythm to the prose? Does the writer use a lot of simile and metaphor or are they more sparing? And what possibilities do these present for your own prose?

As another example, you might take a thematic approach, looking at how other writers treat themes similar to those that you’re interested in. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach to their subject matter? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? How do they let other people’s voices in: do they use quotation, allusion, dialogue, or any other strategies?

Start of Activity

**Activity 3 Creative nonfiction**

Start of Question

Now read this extract from a creative nonfiction essay: [Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, ‘If he hollers let him go’](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=Rachel%20Kaadzi%20Ghansah).

Jot down the things that you notice about it, ranging from its technical aspects to whatever strikes you as interesting, in the box below. What are the distinctive features of Ghansah’s style and how do these contribute to her overall voice? What effects do you have?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 3 Creative nonfiction](" \l "Session3_Discussion2)

End of Activity

## Option 3: Poetry

When reading a poem critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

* voice and tone
* structure and form; layout on the page
* imagery; subject matter or theme
* development or progression over the course of the poem
* diction; figurative language; use of multiple registers (styles of language)
* use of repetition, rhythm, rhyme
* subtext, or what isn’t explicitly said.

Think about the decisions behind the making of the poem. Why did the author write it, and why was it written in this specific way? In other words, why has the author employed these elements in the poem – what effect do they have?

As another example, you might take a broader approach, looking at how the author treats a particular theme or subject matter. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? In what other contexts can the poem be placed – stylistically, formally, historically, socially?

Start of Activity

**Activity 4 Poetry**

Start of Question

Now read the following poem: [Fleur Adcock, ‘A Surprise in the Peninsula’ (2000 [1971])](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=Fleur%20Adcock)

What do you consider its key qualities or elements? What effect do they have on you as a reader? Jot down your thoughts in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 4 Poetry](" \l "Session3_Discussion3)

End of Activity

## Option 4: Scriptwriting

Reading critically as a scriptwriter involves ‘reading’ performances. With a notebook at hand, you should watch and listen to as much work as you can, particularly in the medium in which you want to write (film, stage or radio plays). Reading as a scriptwriter also means immersing yourself in the scripts of dramatists, looking at the ways in which drama is constructed and learning how it functions.

Reading a performance involves analysing a film or play, focusing on particular narrative elements. But you can also assess the semiotics of the drama – what is perceived as meaningful in the seen and heard aspects of performance; how some elements are repeated; how small objects, images, and parts of the set can come to signify meaning on several different levels.

When reading a performance and/or script critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

* characterisation and back story
* dramatic actionvs. exposition
* structure; scenes; the handling of time
* dialogue; voice over (if any)
* use of stage directions, actions, sound effects
* types of set and use of props
* planting information with a later pay-off; subtext.

Start of Activity

**Activity 5 Scriptwriting**

Start of Question

Now listen to this excerpt from a radio play, which consists of its final scenes, and then read the transcript of it either by clicking on ‘Show transcript’ or by accessing this PDF: [The Day Dad Stole a Bus transcript](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=The%20day%20dad%20stole%20a%20bus%20transcript).

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 1 Péricles Silveira, The Day Dad Stole a Bus (2016)

[View transcript - Audio 1 Péricles Silveira, The Day Dad Stole a Bus (2016)](" \l "Session3_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Consider how the writer achieved a resolution to this play. Were you confused or did you feel confident about what was happening, even though you had not listened to the preceding scenes? Jot down your thoughts on these, or any other elements of the piece, in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 5 Scriptwriting](" \l "Session3_Discussion4)

End of Activity

## 4 Writers on reading

In the next activity, you will listen to members of the Creative Writing course team at The Open University talking about their critical reading habits and strategies. Is there anything you can take from their approaches and apply to your own reading?

Start of Activity

**Activity 6 (listening activity)**

Start of Question

Listen to the first audio, which features Ben Masters, Derek Neale and Sally O’Reilly.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 2

[View transcript - Audio 2](" \l "Session4_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Then, listen to the next audio, which features Jane Yeh, Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 3

[View transcript - Audio 3](" \l "Session4_Transcript2)

End of Media Content

Jot down any of the ideas discussed that interest you, or your thoughts about and responses to these discussions, in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

End of Activity

Transcripts for these audio recordings are also available here:

* [Audio 2 transcript](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=Audio%202%20transcript)
* [Audio 3 transcript](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/olinkremote.php?website=A803_1&targetdoc=Audio%203%20transcript)

## 5 Writing in practice

In this final activity, you will have the opportunity to apply the insights and approaches you have gleaned from ‘reading as a writer’ to your own writing, by producing a creative piece in your chosen genre.

Start of Figure



**Figure 3** Having a go at writing

[View description - Figure 3 Having a go at writing](" \l "Session5_Description1)

End of Figure

Start of Activity

**Activity 7 (writing activity)**

Start of Question

Choose one of the following four genres in which to write your creative piece: fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry or scriptwriting.

In your chosen genre, pick a single text you have read (or media work you have listened to/viewed) that inspires you. It can be the same text or media work you wrote about earlier, for the activity in Section 2 Reading and creative writing, or a different one.

Identify some element(s) of the text or media work that you want to try applying to your own writing. This can be anything – for example, point of view, diction, subject matter or theme, form or structure. Jot down some notes on this in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

Start of Question

Drawing on your notes above, write a short creative piece that makes use of or incorporates the elements you just identified. For fiction, creative nonfiction, or scriptwriting, aim for around 1000 words or 4–5 pages; for poetry, around 40 lines or 1–2 pages. You can complete this however you like – whether that’s using the text box below, a word processor, or writing on paper.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

End of Activity

## Conclusion

You’ve now come to the end of this free course, Creative writing and critical reading.

Reading critically should be a central part of your writing practice. Seeking out work by other writers that intrigues, inspires, or provokes you is not simply useful but offers a never-ending source of pleasure. Reading, like writing, is a lifelong activity.

A crucial step in reading as a writer is relating your reading back to your own writerly practice. However, try not to be too utilitarian about it. Don’t just limit yourself to books or media works that you think will be of immediate use to your latest project – reading as a writer involves following your nose and being open to surprise as much as it does seeking particular things out. In the end, reading widely and thoughtfully will help you develop your own personal aesthetic and voice.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [MA in Creative Writing](http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/qualifications/f71%20).

## References

Adcock, F. (2000 [1971]) Poems 1960–2000, Hexham, Bloodaxe Books.

Ghansah, R.K. (2013) ‘If he hollers let him go’, The Believer, October [Online]. Available at https://believermag.com/if-he-hollers-let-him-go/ (Accessed 14 May 2019).

Padel, R. (2002) 52 Ways of Looking at a Poem, London, Chatto & Windus.

Rushdie, S. (2008) Midnight’s Children, London, Vintage.

Silveira, P. (2016) The Day Dad Stole a Bus, radio play, BBC.

## Acknowledgements

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Fleur Adcock, ‘A surprise in the Peninsula’: from Poems 1960–2000, Bloodaxe Books, 2000.

Kaadzi Ghansah, R. (2013) ‘If He Hollers Let Him Go’, The Believer, October 2013. Copyright © 2013 The Believer and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah

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## Solutions

## Activity 1 (writing activity)

### Part

#### Discussion

Good writers are good readers. By analysing how something you have read has influenced your own work, you can see how important critical reading is to the practice of writing.

[Back to - Part](" \l "Session2_Part2)

## Activity 2 Fiction

#### Discussion

The tone of Rushdie’s narrator is comic and maybe even a little ironic. He is constantly interrupting himself and qualifying what he says. He immediately pulls us in with his exuberance, while at the same time raising questions about his reliability. The bustle and drama of his life is mirrored in the chaotic liveliness of the prose, with its long sentences and lyrical qualities. This is very much the opposite of a minimalist writing style.

The narrator’s voice is in some respects colloquial, but in a stylised manner. There is a jazzy improvisation and earthiness coupled with a pronounced literary flamboyance. It is a loud, generous style. Rushdie wants to indulge the reader and draw us in. The narrator’s tone is both playful and confessional.

[Back to - Activity 2 Fiction](" \l "Session3_Activity1)

## Activity 3 Creative nonfiction

#### Discussion

Ghansah’s prose has several identifiable characteristics. Note how in the first few paragraphs we get very specific, local details woven into factual reportage; how she effortlessly combines the personal and the journalistic (like when she moves from New York Times quotes to a personal anecdote about a party to illuminate her point about Chappelle’s popularity and appeal); how she juxtaposes stylistic flourishes with research and quotations threaded throughout the piece; and her frequent use of interpolation and parenthesis. She also likes to directly address her reader, so that we get the feeling of being in a personal conversation: ‘Say it with me now.’

All of these features help create a very principled voice – a voice that can permit different sides of an argument to have their space while implicitly suggesting the author’s own position. And often the suggestion of Ghansah’s position expresses conflictedness as much as self-certainty. This gives her voice a sincerity and authenticity that is embodied by her varied style.

[Back to - Activity 3 Creative nonfiction](" \l "Session3_Activity2)

## Activity 4 Poetry

#### Discussion

The following excerpt from an essay written by the critic and poet Ruth Padel provides answers to these questions.

Start of Quote

The detached, sceptical-formal part of Adcock’s voice has an amused moral authority; underneath, the poem is charged with danger. Here, we are in thriller territory: bad-dream-land, film noir. A territory of not-knowing, of being surrounded by danger as a ‘peninsula’ is surrounded by water. [...]

The voice through whom we see this world is as sinister as anything outside. What does this ‘I’, so alone and objective, so acquainted, apparently, with violence, and yet so in need of protection (which in gangland has a specific technical meaning), get up to in the day? What is ‘I’ doing here, what has this I achieved when it’s ‘time to leave’? [...]

[The poem’s] resonant first line is answered by the last: we move from ‘in’ (‘came in’) to ‘out’ (‘I drew out’). The only actual glimpse outside we ever have is through that ‘bullet-hole’. [...]

Most sentence-endings and closures come somewhere inside a line. Not all: ‘remained’, ‘map’, ‘moonlight’, ‘gone’ and ‘gift’ are sudden resting points in this confused sinister world which deprives you of that finding a pattern which rhyme represents. (Rhyme is traditionally paired with reason, but this poem is not going to hand you much of that.)

(Padel, 2002, pp. 135–7)

End of Quote

[Back to - Activity 4 Poetry](" \l "Session3_Activity3)

## Activity 5 Scriptwriting

#### Discussion

In Silveira’s play, there is a gesture towards the end-action of the play (with Dad’s coat), but also a sign of life going on after the play’s ending with the reference to playing hide-and-seek ‘tomorrow’. Also note the deft balance between dialogue and the narrator’s exposition, and how the characters are differentiated through the way they speak. Silveira uses relatively simple language to create authentic yet lively dialogue.

It helps to use a non-chronological or nonlinear approach like this in your critical reading of performance and script – for example, picking out how individual scenes start, how they end, how dialogue works in social settings, how monologues operate. Reading specific sections in isolation reminds you that a script has to have a structural coherence even in its smallest units.

[Back to - Activity 5 Scriptwriting](" \l "Session3_Activity4)

# Figure 1 Reading as a critical reader

## Description

This is a photograph of a person holding a book.

[Back to - Figure 1 Reading as a critical reader](" \l "Session1_Figure1)

# Figure 2 Once upon a time …

## Description

This is an image of a typewriter with a piece of paper. On the paper are the words ‘Once upon a time’.

[Back to - Figure 2 Once upon a time …](" \l "Session2_Figure1)

# Figure 3 Having a go at writing

## Description

This is a photograph showing a hand writing in a notepad.

[Back to - Figure 3 Having a go at writing](" \l "Session5_Figure1)

# Audio 1 Péricles Silveira, The Day Dad Stole a Bus (2016)

## Transcript

NAYARA

So Mr Augusto grabbed dad’s coat and tried to rip it off my body but I struggled, struggled as I’ve never struggled in my life. He ripped my dad’s coat but I was able to save it.

I don’t know how you ever recover from an experience like that.

JOSEF SUDEK

You know why Mr Augusto didn’t want you to get to grandma’s house don’t you?  You know the moment your dad sets foot inside that house he won’t remember who you are any more.

NAYARA

So if I find him I’ll try to keep him outside of the house.

JOSEF SUDEK

But for how long until he forgets you?

NAYARA

Mr Sudek aren’t you afraid of being forgotten?

JOSEF SUDEK

I’m just a photographer.  My photos will be there long after I’m gone.  Besides old age is the privilege of rocks and trees.

NAYARA

When my dad’s coat was ripped I realised something.

JOSEF SUDEK

What was it?

NAYARA

Stitched inside his coat was a secret pocket.  I reached in and found an old envelope.

JOSEF SUDEK

Have you opened it?

NAYARA

Not yet.  Everything else has vanished.  Dad’s memory was the last place where the village still existed.  There’s nothing left.

JOSEF SUDEK

You are still here aren’t you?  One thing about photography, it never tells the whole story but it helps to remember something that isn’t there any more.

NAYARA

When you’ve got no memories left, where do you go?

JOSEF SUDEK

I don’t know.

NAYARA

Is it all worth it?

JOSEF SUDEK

I guess the most pressing questions are naïve ones.

NAYARA

I took the envelope out of dad’s coat.  I tore it open and that was it.  Inside there was a photo of an old house and when I looked up [SOUND OF WATER] There it was.  I saw it being rebuilt, brick by brick, the same house as in the photo with the faded orange walls and an old wooden door and through the windows I could see there was someone inside.  I ran up there.  This woman, not so old, not so young, opened the door.

Oh – you’ve arrived just in time.

She resembled the photos I’d seen of my grandma.

He’s waiting for you. Been there in the yard all afternoon. Refused to come inside even for lunch.

I ran around the house and when I got to the back yard I saw my dad sitting there on the swing.

Hey – hey I’m here. Sorry I’m late.

Then he rubbed the only eye he could see with.

What’s wrong?

DAD

School – they called me half blind.

NAYARA

Hey – hey look at me.

DAD

They’ve broken my camera.  They made fun of me.

NAYARA

I grabbed the broken lens from inside my bag.

NAYARA

I know what you mean.

DAD

Did they make fun of you too?

NAYARA

That’s why we need to be brave and face them.

DAD

What happened?

NAYARA

It’s a long story.

The lense is ruined but the camera still works.

Can I swing with you?

DAD

If you want to.

NAYARA

We talked like we’d never talked before.  It lasted the entire afternoon - the last afternoon with my dad.  Then the sun began to set on the horizon, started to get dark.

MUM

Time to get inside.  It’s getting dark.

DAD

Can’t we stay a little longer mum?

MUM

Time to get inside.

DAD

I wish we could spend more time together.

NAYARA

We will.  I’ll come back tomorrow.

DAD

You will?

NAYARA

You bet ya!

DAD

That’s great.

NAYARA

Are you ready to get inside?

DAD

Actually no.  My mum will be mad with me if I don’t have dinner.

NAYARA

So we walked together and before he entered we both stopped as if we had one last thing to say but we just looked at each other.  And then he gave me a clumsy hug and went inside.  I had no place there.  I said goodbye to my grandma and then as I was about to leave -

DAD

Hey, wait.  Stop!

NAYARA

I turned around.

DAD

I like your coat.

NAYARA

Thanks

DAD

Is it yours?

NAYARA

Actually no.  Here – you can have it - as a gift

DAD

That coat is too big for me.

NAYARA

It’s my dad’s coat

DAD

Oh I see

NAYARA

He’s always bragging he’s the most awesome guy around

DAD

He sounds fun.  You can tell me more about him tomorrow.  Maybe tomorrow we can play hide and seek.

NAYARA

I didn’t have time to answer.

I guess there’s no memory that couldn’t be immortal if only for a moment.

I’m still here. I’ll guard your memories dad.

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# Audio 2

## Transcript

BEN MASTERS

Hello. I'm Ben Masters from the module team. I'm joined today by Derek Neale--

DEREK NEALE

Hi,

BEN MASTERS

And Sally O'Reilly.

SALLY O'REILLY

Hello.

BEN MASTERS:

And so we're going to be talking about reading as a writer and what that might entail. So I thought we'd just begin by talking about some of our reading habits, what we read, when we read, and that kind of thing. Sally, if you want to get us started.

SALLY O'REILLY:

Yes. I've always been a keen reader ever since I was a child and quite a collector in what I'm interested in reading. And it has been since I was small the cliche of reading cereal packets, as well as actual published prose. I like novels, short stories, creative nonfiction, pure nonfiction, all sorts of different reading-- perhaps not as much poetry as I might like, because I think poetry can really inform prose. And the way that language is used by poets is often something which prose writers can really gain from. It's possible to feel quite overwhelmed, I think, by the huge array of books that are out there and that are constantly being published. But if you follow your own leads, if you have your own sort of interests that you're following through a particular piece of work that you're doing, you can perhaps form your own pattern, which gives a shape to that great mass of words that's out there which you could potentially be reading.

BEN MASTERS

I think it's so true what you say. I haven't read many cereal packets. But in terms of diversity and also the fact that I think writers are always readers, really, we're always reading. Or certainly, personally, writing and reading go in tandem for me. I'm always doing both. But also, I think that kind of sense of eclecticism-- so just to take kind of a snapshot in time, at the moment, I'm reading different things for different projects. So for instance, I'm reviewing Michael Chabon's new book for the TLS. So I'm kind of reading that with a kind of a critic's eye. And then I'm also reading or rereading some Salman Rushdie for some planned nonfiction projects. And then, as all writers I'm sure do, I've got kind of a pile of to read, with no kind of motivation attached to it. But I've got Zadie Smith and Ali Smith's new books piled up. But then also, I think it's good to be dipping into nonfiction stuff as a fiction writer. And also, obviously as a creative nonfiction writer, this is going to be kind of key to your kind of readerly diet. But at the moment, I'm kind of dipping into a sports biography of Kobe Bryant, which is very different to the other stuff that I'm reading, and also a history of 1970s cinema, which is Peter Biskind's Easy Riders and Raging Bulls. And those kinds of things I find are a very different kind of reading. It's kind of dipping into the index, being led by subject matter more than necessarily thinking about kind of form, which I might go to the more kind of literary things for. So I think that kind of sense of diversity is something that is really healthy for a writer to kind of keep at the front of their mind when they're reading and not to become too kind of targeted with their reading. Derek, I wonder if you've got anything that you want to kind of add to that.

DEREK NEALE

Yeah. I think I've always thought it's really important to read about the sort of books you want to write. So you read novels if you want to write novels. You read short stories if you want to write short stories. And similarly, with creative nonfiction, you read memoirs if you want to write memoirs or biography. And knowing the field is one thing. But more important, I think, is reading in the direction you want to write will give you leads, will give you a route to follow so you can actually follow these leads. And those leads will read you towards a writing sensibility. You'll build your own writing sensibility. And that's how I read. And I would say also that it's newspapers and literary journals feature quite a lot in this reading, as well.

BEN MASTERS

I suppose we should also talk a little bit about the physical activity of reading and what we actually do, in terms of marking things or taking notes or kind of committing stuff to memory. Personally, I tend to read with a pencil behind my ear. I think people have different attitudes towards this. But personally, I scribble in all of my books, unless they're particularly valuable, but not many of them are. So I'm kind of always annotating and underlining. And sometimes, it can be quite unhelpful because just my favourite books, it tends to just be almost 300 pages of underlining, because when I'm reading kind of Bello or Nabokov or Dickens or Zadie Smith or something like that, I tend to be doing a lot of underlining. Sometimes, it can seem like gibberish. It's just exclamation marks and "wow" and sometimes things that are less kind of repeatable. But I find it actually very useful, because it might sound quite crude or base. But I find those things are the things to return to. So it's more like just putting down a marker. And then I come back to those things with a sense that I know that book was particularly interesting in how it kind of dealt with different voices or how it had a kind of peculiar rhythm that I found really interesting or great imagery. And then I can go back, and I find those things marked down. I've also developed a kind of code that I think I started doing at A-level, when I was marking up my set text for exam, where I essentially just put letters inside of circles-- so "s" for "simile," "m" for "metaphor." Before, it was just a way of denoting things. And I just kept doing that. And I find that really useful for when you're reading for particular things. Derek, you were talking about looking for dialogue or something like that. Then I'd know exactly where to find it, because I've got this kind of shorthand, which every writer can develop their own shorthand. And I just think that that kind of stuff's important because it can sometimes just be a gut reaction. But I think when you return to that stuff, you get a sense of what matters to you as a writer, because they're the things that you mark up, whether it's that you actually think something's not done very well or something's just particular impressive. That, in itself, when revisiting it becomes a kind of self-analysis, self-reflection. And so your readerly sensibility starts to develop your writerly sensibility in that way.

SALLY O'REILLY:

Oh, yeah. That's really interesting. I think one of the things just when you are talking about is I don't know if it's something that happens to me more as I get older. But partly, I think it's really useful to do that just so that you retain what you read. I know that books that I read in my teens have stayed with me, like I was a very keen George Orwell reader in my teens. And I can remember almost everything I read of his novels and essays at that time, whereas a book I read for a book group two years ago, maybe it wasn't such a good book. It has gone. So I think that this habit of using some mechanism to pin things down is actually really important just as a reader, not necessarily even that you're going to use that in your own writing, because it's a way. As you said, I really like the thing about the similes and having a sort of code for yourself to draw you back into the book when you open it again. But what I do is I tend to use Post-It Notes with page references. And then I can take them out afterwards and then use the page references, which I'll make a note of. And also, I use notebooks while I'm reading. Occasionally, I'll just stick Post-Its randomly into a novel I'm really enjoying and then go back and look in a quite kind of unstructured way at what it was. Why did I put that Post-It Note? It's kind of a little clue in the novel. When I'm reading nonfiction, then I'm much more focused, because it tends to be usually for research towards my own writing specifically so that, for example, if I'm reading for my novel, which is set in the Restoration at the moment, I might be reading a Christopher Hill book. And I might be really wanting to know about the Fifth Monarchists, a particular group of dissenters who believed the Second Coming was going to follow the great plague and the Great Fire of 1666-- really interesting group of people. So I'm reading acquisitively to try and get everything I can get out of a particular text about this one group of dissenters in a period when there were loads of different groups and it's very confusing. Another point about reading fiction for fiction is I was reading an interview with Martin Amis the other day. And he was saying that he thinks he's better now at almost the technical craft elements of writing a long narrative, like how to get somebody across town. And I was thinking, that's exactly what I'm still reading for is often how to start a chapter and literally how to get somebody from A to B, even across a room. Sometimes, you find that this unwieldiness creeps into your writing. And there's so much that you can leave out. And the book I'm reading at the moment, the Blue Flower by Penelope Fitzgerald, is brilliantly elliptical. And she leaves out so much. And yet what remains is so vivid, like a little tableau that she sort of strings along and compels you to read on. So the two sorts of reading are quite different. But I think the connection is this desire to hang on to some of it when the reading is done.

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# Audio 3

## Transcript

JANE YEH

Hi. I'm Jane Yeh, and I'm here today with Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon.

JO REARDON

Hello.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Hi there.

JANE YEH

So I guess let's start by talking about your reading and/or viewing habits and how they relate to your own writing practise. Jo, maybe you could talk a bit about scriptwriting in terms of the different kinds of reading and viewing or listening you might do.

JO REARDON

Well, I work mainly in radio, writing scripts for radio, but the principles of script writing apply whatever medium you're working in. So I will watch a lot of TV. I love a good soap opera. I love a good crime drama. But I also watch a lot of films. I listen to radio plays a lot and read scripts. One thing that actually is really important is to read scripts, because particularly if you're writing for stage, you need to understand how it looks on the page because it's part of the presentation, and that will convey itself to the way the actors will interpret it. So you really do need to understand that, the written script on a page. But I think anything-- like any writer, you read as a writer. I read novels. I read poetry. I think poetry has quite a lot in common with script writing in terms of the concise nature of the storytelling, if you like, and the use of abstract and specific images that can convey ideas. So I read a lot poetry too. So I read everything, really, and everything feeds into it.

JANE YEH

Siobhan, what about you in terms of-- and obviously, your speciality is poetry, although you write in other genres as well.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Yes. Well, a bit like Jo, I read across several different kinds of material. I find non-fiction feeds well for me into poetry, so I'm addicted to things like New Scientist, National Geographic. I'm ashamed to say I'm addicted to The Economist magazine. But I'm generally coming at those kind of articles looking for something else in them, maybe a lexicon of words I wouldn't normally use myself but that feel up to the minute or that feel like they might dovetail into my own thoughts. For instance, I'm writing poems at the moment involving cows, and a few sheep and horses, but mainly cows. And I was fascinated to find recently that cows' gall bladders sell for thousands and thousands of pounds. So that's the kind of detail. I might be finding in the non-fiction, and it might wind its way into a poem. Obviously, I do read collections of poetry as well. My favourite thing to do is to read the full collection maybe over a few days, from start to finish if I can because poets do shape their collections. There's a sort of experiential thing about it, almost like going into a gallery, an artist's exhibition. They shape that exhibition. The same thing with a book of poetry, I think, in the main. So I try and read it for the pure pleasure of it first, and usually I'd be turning down some pages to come back to. And when I go back to those particular poems, I try and delve into, why did they arrest me? What stopped me in my tracks? Often, it's I'm asking, how did they do that? How did that poet achieve some kind of pressure? Was the shape of the line? Are they doing something interesting with the voice? And at that point, I usually try and find that poem if I can recorded. Often, poets record themselves, and they might put it up on Vimeo or on YouTube. And then, other times you can find poets on Poetry Archive or the UCD poetry archive. So yeah, I'm reading all around, a bit like Jo.

JANE YEH

Jo, so in terms of reading a script, what is it that you're looking for or thinking about it?

JO REARDON

Well, I think, actually, just picking up on something Siobhan said about reading entire collections of poetry, you have to read an entire script in one go. I don't think you can just pick it up because it's meant to be performed in one go. So I'm always looking for how a piece is structured. That's very important to me, particularly in terms of-- because I don't mind saying that structure in the terms of drama is something I struggle a little bit with. So seeing how other people have done it really helps me to see that three act structure, the rising climax, the conflict, and then the resolution. And it really helps to read-- you've got to read the whole script in one go to be able to see that, or listen to a radio play, or watch-- it's different if you're watching serial drama, obviously, because that's broken down into episodes. But one thing I'll also do is be alert-- and Siobhan was talking about reading non-fiction texts. And I'm always alert to watching documentaries I like because you can get to hear how people speak, how people really do speak in real life. Because dialogue in drama is not conversation in the way we would normally think of it, but it can help you to hear how real people speak, if you like-- interrupting each other, pausing, not finishing a sentence off, not really saying what they mean to say, or sometimes being very honest about what they're saying. So I think also those non-fiction elements on screen can help as well. So I'm looking for that. When I'm watching something or reading something, I'm looking for how, usually, it feeds into the storytelling, character, structure elements for me.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

That's interesting what Jo says about structure, and I think it really rings true to me in looking at poems also, because we've all got a lot to learn about how other people do things. Are they good at beginnings? Where was that poem beginning? Because often, in an early stage of a poem-- I don't know if you find this, Jane-- you may write a stanza that's not the beginning of the poem that you lop off afterwards. And so it's interesting to look at, where do other people begin? Also, endings. How are they ending their poem? And I think this applies to drama. How do you finish a play? Where do you finish? Do you finish before the real end? Do you imply an ending? And the same thing applies to poetry. I had a review of one of my first collections which said, and she's addicted to the conclusion type ending. So I was disgusted. But of course, when I looked back, the person was being true and being honest. And so I learned how to do a different kind of ending, or several different kinds of endings. But again, I look to my peers to see what they're up to. And of course, we're all magpies as writers, so this is partly what we're reading for. What can we learn to bring back into our own practise? What feels right for the zeitgeist of the moment we're writing in?

JANE YEH

Jo, did you want to talk a bit maybe about the zeitgeist in terms of reading and viewing practises?

JO REARDON

Yeah. I think it's really important in script, actually-- I think particularly if you're writing for theatre, which more than the other mediums may-- perhaps to some extent television as well these days with the way drama-- TV drama is changing. But it's very of the moment. It has to reflect life as it is now. Theatre is about what is happening now. And even if a classic play is revived, it's normally revived because it has some relevance to today, not because for the sake of it. Because some plays are very dated and they won't ever be seen again. So I think when you're writing for Theatre, that's something I'm very aware of, and that's why I do go-- you've got to go to Theatre a lot. If you write for the Theatre, you absolutely have to go and go to different types of Theatre, so not just somewhere like the National Theatre in London, but also the smaller fringe theatres that are perhaps showing more exciting, more diverse work. Got to be aware of it because to know where your writing fits in, to know where you fit in. So I think that's very, very important.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Yeah. Once again, I'd have to agree on the poetry side because if you're not reading contemporary poetry, you will not be tuned in to what's actually going on. So I always find a good thing to do is to ferret out one or two or three magazines where some of the poems speak directly to you and you think, yeah, I'd actually quite like to write like that. That might be a magazine I eventually might submit to. And if you keep up with those-- and you can keep up with so many of them online now-- you get a sense of what people are doing. You know, again, as Jo says, how your work might or might not be fitting in. And it's really part of taking yourself a bit more seriously as a writer as well.

JANE YEH

Jo, did you have anything you wanted to add to that.

JO REARDON

I think the same, that idea of speaking-- about being aware of what's happening in contemporary writing you just mentioned in poetry, Siobhan, is also actually relevant to radio, because radio is changing all the time. You think it isn't, and you might listen to a radio play and think, oh, It's the same old thing churns out year on year. But actually, I think recently there have been quite a lot of changes on the hearing-- the key thing we're hearing a lot more is a lot more diverse voices, I think. And so I think what's really quite exciting, I think, about the way it's going is that there might be more opportunities to be much more of the moment in terms of what you're writing about. So that's what I'm thinking about at the moment with something I'm working on. But also, I was just thinking while we're talking as well, I go back to the old stories, so classical stories, again, which can help with structure. So I'm working on an idea at the moment that is based on Euripides' play Alcestis just in terms-- and it's got a lot of relevance today because it's about women who don't have a voice, who are sidelined. And I'm trying to find a new way to update it. But constantly, classical plays, and I think from-- and also reading things like The Odyssey can give you a very good idea of a journey for a character.

JANE YEH

So were there any other points that you wanted to make in terms of your reading habits and your own writing practise?

JO REARDON

Well, the one thing I think is really important is you have an idea, and whatever you're writing, you have an idea for a story or something. You think, how shall I write this? Should it be a short story? Should it be a novel? I think in script it's really important. Is it going to be a Theatre play, a radio play, or a screenplay? And some stories just do not fit a screenplay, or they're more suitable to stage. And I think, if I can just say my-- I did do a lot of commissioning work in Theatre, and quite often we'd be sent scripts which were completely incompatible with Theatre. They should have been a radio play or a screen. So you really need to think about that. I've got an idea at the moment that I know isn't going to work anywhere other than stage. But I'm just thinking about how to do it because it's a smaller idea. It's quite a political, with small p, idea. So to me, that's very important. If you're writing script, you need to know where your story fits before you start.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

For my part, I would say that, even though you're reading as a writer, it's important to retain the excitement and pleasure of the reading. And for me, that often occurs most when I'm reading something that has a very particular voice. So for instance, Anna Burns' novel Milkman. You have to almost hear it in your inner ear in the accent in which Anna Burns speaks but surrounds people living in Northern Ireland, for instance. Luckily, I'm from there, so I can hear that on my ear. But I think the way she writes it, it conveys to any reader. And that is a journey, an imaginative journey into a set of language and phrasing that you come away from inspired, even if you're never going to do exactly that. But the fact is it's the excitement of the inspiration that you take away back into your own writing.

JANE YEH

Great. I think that's a good place to stop. And thank you both so much again, Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon

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