

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 cliché 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.