

**UNIVERSITY OF ROEHAMPTON**

**KEYNOTE SPEECH TO CREATIVE WRITING DEPARTMENT**

**MONDAY 23 MARCH 2015**

**BY LAURA BARNETT**

Thank you so much for inviting me here this evening, and allowing me to hear all the wonderful writing you've shared. I wish you all the best with your writing lives, and I can't wait to hear more from you all in the future.

So, writing. There's a story I'd like to tell.

Six years ago, my husband Andy and I moved in to a rented one-bedroom flat in north London: well, he wasn't my husband yet, but I had the feeling that one day, he might be. To most people - our parents, above all - this flat must have looked like nothing special. It was on the first floor, with no garden; a bedroom so small we could barely fit a bed in it; and an upstairs neighbour who regularly woke us in the middle of the night by smashing empty wine bottles on her kitchen floor.

But I loved that flat. I loved it because it was the first home we'd made together, and because on summer evenings, we'd throw open the front windows, and perch on the sill with a gin and tonic, and feel warm and easy and happy.

And I loved it most of all because of the view from the bedroom window. Again, to most people, this view would have seemed unremarkable. We didn't look out over woodland, or the river, or anything really other than the back of another row of terraced London houses, just like ours.

But I treasured that view, because there, stacked up like books on a shelf, were stories. Dozens of them, happening every day in front of me, to real people, and in real time. The old man who emerged from his back door at nine o'clock, whatever the weather, and sat on the same chair in his garden until evening. The girl of about my age, who seemed to spend hours in front of her bathroom mirror, just staring at her own reflection. The man with the white beard, bending low over a desk in his attic office.

Each and every one of these people was living out their own story: one that was both ordinary and extraordinary. Stories I could only guess at - and I did, imagining my own versions of who these people were, and what they did; and probably coming up with ideas so far from the truth, that were I to have met any of these neighbours - and I never did - I could only have been disappointed.

We left that flat a few months later, and our bedroom looks out over another view now - another London street, another set of stories. But when I think about what it is to write fiction, I think of that flat, that window, that view. Because, for me, to write fiction is to open a window onto the world - our very own window - and describe what we see. To write fiction is to project ourselves, in that miraculous trapeze act of imagination, into the mind of another: to step out of our own, limited world-view, and enter that of our character. To become, perhaps, that old man, sitting out on his step, wondering why that strange woman in the upstairs flat was staring down at him all the time. To become that girl, examining her own reflection, asking herself how it is that she got so old without even noticing. To become Napoleon, or an Irish jockey, or a woman from eighteenth-century India. Writing fiction, for me, is an act of shapeshifting, of curiosity, of shedding our own skin.

To be a writer, then, is to be something of a voyeur. We watch people; we listen to the way they speak, and to what they say; we store up experiences and save them, like museum specimens inside a glass cabinet, for the day we might just want to commit them to the page. We are the people who can't resist peeking in at strangers' living-rooms when they've left their curtains open. The people who sit on buses and trains, looking out, wondering how it is to live inside that woman's head, or that man's. Wondering how the world would look if we could only see with their eyes.

From this description, I'm aware that being a writer sounds a bit creepy. I don't mean we should all become peeping toms, or root around in people's litter bins, or spend the whole time eavesdropping on private conversations. There's a fine art to watching people without seeming like a crazy stalker - I tend to look away at the very last moment, before the other person has the chance to accuse me of staring. I'm also pretty good at having a conversation while listening to the one going on the other side of the room - although my husband might disagree. I'm sure you have your own ways of listening and observing, because this is so essential to what we do. It is in the act of looking that we learn to see

beyond ourselves - and that, for me, is what makes writing fiction so essential to our culture, to our sense of who we are, and who we want to be.

People sometimes say to me - perhaps they say it to you, too - that they don't see the point of fiction; that the real world is interesting enough as it is. When I meet these people, I tend to smile at them politely, and then get away from them as quickly as I can. Because they've so utterly missed the point. What could be more important than taking the time to *really see* others, to understand them, and to tell their stories?

For me, fiction writing is, above all, an act of empathy: an act of trying, with as much care and sensitivity as we can manage, to inhabit the mind of another. That's what keeps me going back to my desk at eight o'clock on a Monday morning, when it's raining and I'm hungover and I feel like I have nothing to say, and all I want to do is crawl back to bed. Because who else is allowed to get up in the morning, and decide who they want to be that day? What other activity - apart from acting, perhaps; but even actors don't usually get to *choose* their characters - actually allows us to inhabit another person's skin?

Another thing people ask me, when they hear I'm a writer, is whether I have any writing rituals. The first time I was asked this, I got a bit worried: I wondered whether there was some special practice I should have been doing, but wasn't, like only writing when there's a full moon, or in bare feet, or while burning some kind of special incense. The truth is, I don't do any of those things. I get up early; I sit down at my desk; and I start writing. Some days, the words flow, and I feel like I'm flying. Other days, I can barely finish a sentence, or a paragraph, and I just want to throw my laptop out the window. But in my opinion, the only ritual worth paying any attention to is that of finding the time of day that works for you - whether it's first thing in the morning, or last thing at night, or a half-hour snatched at lunchtime - and using it to sit down and write, every day, whether you feel like it or not.

And there will be days when you *don't* feel like it. I once interviewed the artist Maggi Hambling, who told me something brilliant on this subject. "Whatever mood you're in," she said, "you must take it to your art. If you're angry, you take it to your art. If you're horny, you take it to your art. If you're tired, you take it to your art." This applies so well to writing, too. If we all sat around waiting for inspiration to strike, in the right way and at the right time - on that full moon, perhaps - we'd never get anything done. I spent ten years writing book after book - three novels, in total; all those thousands and thousands

of words - before coming anywhere close to publishing one. Yes, getting published was important to me, as I'm sure it's important to you - we write for our readers, after all, whether real or imagined, as well as for ourselves. But being published is certainly not something I'm ever going to take for granted. Writers of all stripes have times when their reviews are good, and their books sell well, and times when they aren't, and they don't. But, for the most part, they keep on writing. Because all that really matters, ultimately, is the act of writing: of sitting down and putting words on a page, in whichever way works for you, and however we are feeling about what's going on in our lives.

Why do we do this? Because writing is a part of us. Because we are the ones who sit at the window, and imagine how it is to live out the lives we see framed there. Because we feel the urgent need to shape the world around us into a form that we can understand.

There's an advert I sometimes see in the back of newspapers, that makes me smile: perhaps you've seen it too. "Why not be a writer?" this advert says, as if it were something you might just wake up and decide to do one day, like learning German, or taking up flower arranging. You know, and I know, that that's not how it works. We write because we have to; because not doing it is inconceivable, and because the urge to construct narratives - to understand the ebb and flow of our own lives, and snare that chaos in the framework of time and sequence - is an innately human instinct.

In that way, I suppose, the urge to write is a kind of disease. I have it, you have it, and I'm sorry to tell you that there is no cure. But then, why would we want one, when the world outside our window is so rich and strange, and there are so many stories waiting to be told?

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