BAW Podcast - Prioritising Your Writing with Julia Forster

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**SPEAKERS**

Julia Forster, Nelima Begum

**Nelima Begum**

Welcome to the Being A Writer Podcast, Julia, how are you doing?

**Julia Forster**

I'm very well, thanks Nelima. How are you?

**Nelima Begum**

Very well, thanks. I'm excited to get stuck into this episode. It is the first episode of season three of this podcast, so I'm very excited to have you on. We've had a lot of writers say, or we've just seen that they've said prioritising their writing rather, is one of their goals for 2022. So it'd be great to get your thoughts on this topic and I'm going to jump straight in with the first question which is quite a big one. Why is writing a priority for you?

**Julia Forster**

Well, I think writing is a priority for me because over the years I've seen how transformative it can be. So by that I mean I think I've been able to turn pain into healing or chaos into order and move through difficult stages of my life and difficult emotions, challenging situations. Some of them have been great, like childbirth, but also painful. So being able to write about that and almost claim that territory has enabled me to mature so I understand that if I make time to write I'm making time to develop myself in a way. So I see that the more I prioritise my writing, the more I can understand who I am in the world.

**Nelima Begum**

Amazing. So it's kind of just it's been a support system in a lot of ways and it's seen you through lots of different changes in your life.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, yeah. And I would say that, actually, for me, and it's different for everybody. But for me personally. Writing and life are deeply interconnected and entwined. And I think when I when I've reflected a bit about why I prioritise writing, I think I've been reflecting that the to go hand in hand, so I don't I don't have a pre supposition about the kind of writer that I am. I let that writing and my life unfold. And then I'm becoming that kind of writer rather than I am. I self identify as a novelist or I identify as a poet or identify as a nonfiction writer, I identify as a human who writes

**Nelima Begum**

I love that. How do you prioritise your writing?

**Julia Forster**

Wow, well, this is really tricky. Yeah, it's it is because I think I've at times really struggled. if I'm completely honest to prioritise my writing and my reading. And I think that I've understood that it changes all the time. And so what might work one day may not work the next and indeed what might work one week or one month or one year. I might try it again the following week, month or year and it just won't work for whatever reason, and sometimes that can be really mundane. Sometimes that's more emotional, psychological or spiritual it's just the wrong place the wrong time of day. And so now I have this approach, which I like to call the micro bite size approach to writing but also to other aspects of my life because, and that is because I have two high school age kids who have several commitments both inside and outside of school. So I find myself moving them from place to place and picking them up, not having much time. Stretches of time to three hours of chunks of writing time are a very hard one. So I've learned to practice in much smaller, bite sized chunks. And I've also learned that there's a difference. There's different stages of writing. So the generation of ideas and of new work demands a certain kind of energy. And that might come more easily in the beginning of the day, whereas perhaps if I'm finishing off a poem to submit it to my writing group or to a competition or magazine, I can do that at the end of the day when my energy is low. And I might have a different kind of focus.

**Julia Forster**

So I think, and the theme for all of this is about self acceptance. This is what I realised yesterday was actually the more I can accept where I am, who I am right now, the easier it is to prioritise my writing so I'm not fighting against my circumstances or my lack. It's flipping that mindset altogether. And rather than seeing it as something that's a lack, I see it as something positive, like I've got half an hour but well, you know, I can do quite a lot in half an hour. And yeah, a friend once said that she really enjoyed reading a magazine while the pasta boils and I was like, that's a really nice length of time. Maybe there's a way of categorising time rather than in 10 minutes, 10 minutes or 30 minutes. It's like that's the pasta boils kind of edit chunk that I could do in that in that while the pasta boils or while the roast cooks...

**Nelima Begum**

I'm so adding that to my vocabulary! That's a really interesting way of looking at it and I like that you've kind of touched on this point where it shouldn't be a fight with yourself. You should kind of just go with the flow and take things in your stride and whatever works for you is the thing that you should be doing rather than trying to conform to someone else's timetable or routine because everyone's schedule is very different.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, exactly. We're all in. We're all unique. Every day is different. So yeah, there's a huge amount of, it sounds very trite, in a way, but I think a lot of these things are quite hard won. And the more that I reflected on it, the more that I began to see the patterns and the patterns were that there were no patterns, it changes. So yeah, I suppose that's where being really present to what's occurring is key. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

Completely. And I think just also being really honest with yourself about what your circumstances are, you know, just life throwing curveballs at you. It's completely fine for that to happen. Whatever you can grab wherever you can write whenever you can put pen to paper. Totally fine and totally acceptable.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, and just a little thing to say I think here which is that I have let go of certain household standards, shall we say? (Laughs) And I reflected how in order to finish a full length novel, I think the phrase I used was I that the housework get to biohazard level like you would not, I could not do it all something has to give you know there's something about especially with things like novels and very long 80, 90,000 words thesis length. There is a final push and there is something about abandoning something, not forever. I did miss a few birthday parties. I did miss. I made sacrifices in order to finish. Yeah, so there was also something about standards dropping perhaps elsewhere in order to make that happen as well. And it's not forever. It's just for that period of time.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah, I think it's just emphasising that it is a temporary change. I think that's a really good way of looking at it. And it actually leads on really nicely to our next question in that, you know, has the way you prioritise your writing changed throughout your career? And is there any particular method or approach that you've decided to keep the same so I know, you've talked about how you're now very much into the bite size windows of writing or anything you can get? Has it always been that way?

**Julia Forster**

No, it hasn't. So I've written in a way I've written several books, some of them have never seen the light of day and the first I wrote was an autobiography and I think that was more about writing out myself. You know, they say don't know that many of the first books are heavily autobiographical. So I was at that stage, I was maybe 24 / 25 And I like to call this the inverse of a detox. So I went, so long story, which I'm gonna have to edit down, but essentially, I had an invite to go to Paris which kind of fell through. I still ended up going but instead staying with a friend from university and I was the worst houseguest ever Nelima (laughs).

**Nelima Begum**

Like biohazard level or worse?

**Julia Forster**

I drank a lot of coke. I drank a lot of coffee and I was also at that stage of my life a smoker only for a very short space, span of my early 20s. And I can picture myself now kind of hanging out at the balcony, smoking in between writing an obscene 1000 words an hour.

**Julia Forster**

Wow. You were bouncing off the walls! I was literally bouncing off the walls - I wrote over 8000 words a day for five days and I came back from that trip with 42,000 words.

**Nelima Begum**

What a lot of writers would do in a year!

**Julia Forster**

They were not they were not beautiful, beautifully crafted words by any stretch. But it really saw me over this initial block that I had of how does one even begin to write that amount of words? Well, there's your answer. I then came back to Earth and to my job and realised that I'd written part one of a two-part book. And in order to finish it, I did something altogether different and much more wholesome, which was that once a month, I packed my laptop and my laundry and I went back to my mum and stepdad's house in Bristol and I would spend the weekend writing the other half of the of the autobiography. So that was a much healthier...

**Nelima Begum**

A much more relaxed approach, and probably less pressure on you to do it that way as well.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah. And that worked really well at that was a stage of my life where I was single. I didn't have many obligations. And I could just take a weekend once a month to do that. And it meant that by the end of that year, I had an 80,000 word draft of an autobiography which I gave to a trusted reader. And she gave me some feedback, which essentially said all you know, it's great, but really who's going to, who's going to be interested in your life, which was kind of true. And it wasn't very well written. But it was that first draft. It didn't matter. It was more about I can write 80,000 words, and I presume having never run a marathon, that the first time you run a marathon, you're like, I can actually run them.

**Nelima Begum**

Of course, just knowing that you're capable.

**Julia Forster**

Right, exactly. So that was that was really I suppose the, what, the nursery ground for me is like learning how to walk. And then I got a commission to write a book, which was nonfiction and that was shorter, that was 30,000 words, but it so happened that during that period of time, I was able to work part time so one day a week for a year, I would go to the British Library and I would research so that was really well ringfenced and boundaried off. But it also happened that I got pregnant during the course of this commission which meant that when it came to writing up, I was in my second trimester, which luckily is the kind of point in pregnancy where you're really well supposed to be really alert and feeling energised, or adjusted and everything right so I had, I think a month to write no three months to write the book. So that was 10,000 words a month, which was a stretch. I found it very hard and I can remember really having to kind of prod my eyeballs to keep myself awake, but I did it. And then the third trimester was about editing, proofing, jacket design, acknowledgments. And then the due date of my baby happened to be the publication date of the book. It so happened that she was born two weeks late thankfully. So that had its own kind of energy and actually overlapped quite well. And, you know, I have since thought that there's quite a lot of similarities in terms of gestation of a book and gestation of a child in that way. And it can be quite useful metaphor to apply.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely parallels there.

**Julia Forster**

But then you know, with my third book, The novel that was very different again, because at that time in my life, my kids were one in three, they were very young. Yeah. And my time horizon Nelima, was measured. It wasn't by the time all 10 of plastic and boil it was, how, how long is it until my coffee goes cold? Because that's about as far as I can plan. If I can drink that cup of coffee, then I can do my next thing. So my time horizon was 45 minutes max. Again, that helped because I wasn't worrying about the future. I was just worrying about the present moment in a way that very young children, kind of, there's something about a maternal tuning, where you're always looking for hazard at that age, because there are so many hazards and so you have to be on the floor, literally with them.

**Nelima Begum**

Watching everything, of course.

**Julia Forster**

Right. Right. So that helped to break down the psychological thing of how am I going to write a novel to just I'm just going to take it hour by hour. And I'm going to enjoy this and I'm going to find a voice. I found a voice and that voice kind of wrote the book. So that again, was entirely different. And I've been reflecting that perhaps for people who have care, who have caring responsibilities, or maybe have chronic illness. Perhaps this is a mindset that's quite familiar whereby you have to somehow ringfence it and just stay in the moment. And it doesn't necessarily preclude creativity and it can sometimes give you that edge, that point of resistance, where you can be incredibly creative, almost despite everything else. And that's how it was, for me at least.

**Nelima Begum**

Yeah. I find it really interesting how throughout. I mean, just from what you've said, so far, you've quantified time very differently, like in different stages of your life. So it's not really ever a matter of looking at the clock or counting minutes or hours. It's just task by task, however much time you think you can give to something depending on where you're at in your life. So it now it's the pasta boiling time but before it was the temperature of the coffee. Really, it's just when you word it like that it's very, it's interesting to think about it in that way.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, and here I'm thinking a couple of things. One is, is it the Inuits who have hundreds of different words for snow? And I wonder whether for us, for me, I think a lot of deep time when I'm writing that when I'm truly in my flow, it's timeless because brilliant poetry, when I read brilliant poetry, there's something, there's something that's universal. It's ageless, is about that truth that that poet has captured. And so perhaps it's about seeing time, not as a resource, but as something that's infinite. And that sounds a little bit mystical, but perhaps we, as modern 21st century humans see time in a certain way, which is quite black and white or and what does it mean when time is measured by heartbeat rather than by, I don't know, an atomic clock.

**Nelima Begum**

That is poetry.

**Julia Forster**

Oh, thank you. I just leave that there to kind of drift off...

**Nelima Begum**

It's a mic drop moment!

**Julia Forster**

It is a mic drop! (Laughs)

**Nelima Begum**

You mentioned before that you were writing nonfiction during your pregnancy, but I know that you also wrote poetry as well. So when you're writing across different genres, with regards to how you work, does it vary depending on the project you're writing?

**Julia Forster**

Yes, I think it does. I think the common denominator is the mess. So it's always messy. And so the common denominator really is around the container that I'm pouring it into so for me, it might be like a cake tin or tupperware that I'm finding the edges for. So I think my filing system on my computer is really quite boundaried and I enjoy finding ways of delineating my different projects. So things like working titles will be common and quite liberating. And somehow segmenting these different genres into different folders, almost puts them into different filing cabinets in my mind. But there's something that's, I guess, the same in all of those different genres is that I'm the same writer. And the same kind of hard won trees trying to find their way out. And I think there's something that, I'm not sure about this, but there's something about the analogue way of working, which somehow frees me up. So by printing out, works in progress, whether that's nonfiction, fiction or poetry. Seeing the words on the page, putting them in different fonts, tricking myself into becoming an outsider looking into that piece of work a fresh think is, is really helpful in here.

**Julia Forster**

I guess this is where putting your work to one side for a month, two months, six months, and then coming to it new is really helpful. Because you're a different person on you when you take something out of the out of the drawer and look at it again. I think yeah, so feedback is something I think that's really important in terms of getting another point of view and that might be your own feedback. But it might also be somebody else and showing your work to others, I think is really crucial in order to incorporate another pair of eyes really. But I think I've always practice caution around how and when and who. And yeah, I think that that's almost a whole other topic. But yeah, it is important to bring that in in some way. I think.

**Nelima Begum**

No, I completely agree. I think distance from work is, I just I don't think there are enough words to emphasise how important is sometimes because obviously as you said, we're always changing. You know, we're we're the same writer so but we always change throughout time and just having that month or so could give you so much perspective.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

So writing can be quite demanding at times in that it requires inspiration, time and space, etc. Do you feel like you're now in a place where you can happily find a balance between writing and then all the other madness that takes place in everyday life?

**Julia Forster**

Yes, I do. I think it's a daily practice. So I'm, I've, I think I've learned not to be complacent about that, that it's hard won, and that I don't rest on any laurels there. And it's interesting because I've realised over the years that writing isn't always about literally putting pen to paper. It's actually quite difficult to have original thought I have realised and so being in the world observing, talking to people, maybe engaging, just for a minute longer with someone that you bump into in the street, that in a way that's writing too and I think that the more I show up in the world, and have my eyes shiny and bright, the more that I show up on the page, and I suppose I speak someone as someone who identifies as, perhaps having sometimes a little bit of an avoidant trait in my personality, that it's actually quite an effort for me to put myself out there. But if I'm going to write, I'm going to expose parts of myself. So that takes daily practice. And I think them the more that I've come to understand myself, the better writer I've become. So the two go hand in hand.

**Nelima Begum**

Definitely. And I think it's also important to remember, I mean, this is something that I kind of learned only recently. It's not, it's not, so there isn't a proper structure all the time. And sometimes it's the everyday madness and chaos and things that pop up, that will actually inform a lot of your writing. experiences. So as you said, just things as you know, things as small as walking down the street and spending the extra minute with a person or anything else that pops up in between can really just shape the way you write and also inspire you in a lot of ways. Yeah, it's not a matter of confining yourself to a desk and that's it. Inspiration has to come in that moment. And that's the allocated time to write and feel creative.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah. Yeah. I think that's it. I think that being a writer is actually 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a part of who you are. And it's absolutely inextricably linked. And sometimes things will come up in my writing like this morning, I was just doing a little bit of writing and I'm sure a phrase came up that I had heard literally, I don't know, 20 years ago, but it popped up on the page. And it's almost as if there's that little storage system in the back of your mind some, people love to actually create file cards for that kind of thing. I don't I don't have that system, but things do go in and they do log and it's the micro observations, especially in poetry I find that I really enjoy recycling and finding homes for like 'You belong there. I knew you would come some. You found your little home!'

**Nelima Begum**

I like that you've touched on Being A Writer, just because you've played a massive role in helping TLC bring the Being A Writer platform to fruition. And you're also the facilitator of Write Club Plus - what is it about working with other writers that inspires you and does it shape the way you approach your own work?

**Julia Forster**

Oh, it's such a lovely question Nelima, partly because it allows me to mention my dearly beloved grandfather who passed away only nine years ago, and so he was my kind of, I guess, no, I don't want to say hero. What's the word, idol? He was my idol. I really did idolise him and he lived up in Scarborough in North Yorkshire and he ran the Writer' Circle in Scarborough and was chair of the Swanic Writers' School in a 60s. So he was an amazing facilitator of others writing he himself wrote six fiction books and had a very niche interest in postal history, which, unfortunately, I did not share. But I did share a love of writing and he had a column for 30 years, over 30 years in a magazine called Stamp Magazine, and he would write about his postmark collection. So I really learned at his knee, how to be a full time journalist and author which I did try for myself and realize it didn't suit me. I do not suit full time writing.

**Julia Forster**

But I think there was something about being in his presence three or four times a year as a child going into his office where I really soaked up that atmosphere of daily practice and of supporting other writers and so much so that by the time I was at university, I was actually reading manuscripts for a literary agent when I was in my third year. I don't know how that why didn't how that came about, but that's another long story. So I was already kind of open to reading others' works, and felt it to be a huge privilege and honour that someone would trust me enough to give them something that was in progress a bit like opening an oven before a cake has fully formed, and tasting it and saying, oh, a bit more sugar, a bit more flour, needs a bit longer, you know, what a privilege to be beckoned into that realm of creativity. So I've also over the years come to understand how that informs and inspires and energises my own creative practice seeing people be brave, seeing people be tender. Be honest about where they are, who they are, what they're writing about. It's a huge act of self disclosure at times and it truly is an honour, Nelima.

**Julia Forster**

I mean, I think yeah, it's, it's amazing that we are now in a I feel at least we're in a period of time where we can talk more about vulnerability and talk more about our feelings in a in a way in which can be supportive and held. And I think the more that we can do that, the more we can write further into ourselves. And I say that from it, coming from a place where when I was starting out as a writer, I didn't feel those things. I didn't feel I could say why I wanted to say, and so I kind of stopped and that's to say that I stopped writing poetry. That's one of the reasons that I left poetry was I felt what I was writing wasn't really current, in a way. In fact, I now realise that perhaps it was the system that wasn't quite, not ready, but I think the poetry scene back in the late 90s, which was when I was coming into writing poetry just didn't really nurture writers in the way that they are held and nurtured now, a lot has changed in that time. So I think there's some there's something about being able to give writers a platform in a way that I wish I had had. And it's, I just want to add that it's not about age is absolutely not about age, because one can become a writer at any age. But when you're first starting out, it is so tender.

**Nelima Begum**

Of course you're I think you're at your most vulnerable when you're first starting out, right, because they can feel very isolating lonely at times.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, yeah. And, and so being able to create that kind of space has been just an honour, really, and to be a part of that has been wonderful.

**Nelima Begum**

Brilliant to have you on board and we're very fortuante to have you involved. I think that's my favorite thing about writing actually, is that just over the years seeing how it's so community building and how it really brings people together and encourages everyone to find their voice and share their voice with the people around them in a way that is just very open and welcoming.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, yeah. It's the art of hosting. It's interesting because back in the early 2000s I was a member of their shared office space and they were really big on this like the art of hosting it isn't ours, actually holding space for others takes takes care and I think the more well held spaces are and by this I mean, both in person and virtually, the more people can show up and be themselves and actually, that's the other thing that I think is around self acceptance is that when I'm really at my most joyful in my writing, it's when I'm fully myself and I'm not editing myself and I can just be in flow. So yeah, again, there's a lot we could say about that. But that's probably you know...

**Nelima Begum**

That's a beautiful way of looking at it. While we're still on the topic of community because I know it's such a big topic, is having a community or network of other writers a part of your own process? And are there times when you feel like you lean more towards being in a group rather than writing solo?

**Julia Forster**

So I realised that being part of a creative writing score, which I was I began writing while at university, I was part of a creative writing undergraduate course, which was one of the first, it wasn't the first and so is that the Warwick Writing School in the late 90s and as such, I was really used to writing in a workshop environment with others being given a prompt and scrolling away for 10 or 15 minutes and then reading out loud, getting feedback, which was terrifying but also incredible. And so I realised that that's what that's how I was set up was to write in community and I think at times I forgot that and I saw I had to labor over a laptop in a library all day. And I got a little bit lost. I'd say about five, six years ago, when I had to go writing full time and it just didn't work. It became... the word that I use is antiseptic. It was like there was nothing. There was nothing kind of festering around the edges that I could write against. There was too much white space and and so I've put myself now much more in the way of writing in communities. So I'm a member now of two stanza groups, one of which I've co founded here in the Dovey Valley in mid Wales. And I've joined a community of writers who meet in loft studio once a week they're called Shut Up And Write.

**Nelima Begum**

Love that - straight to the point! (Laughs)

**Julia Forster**

Exactly shut up and write Pomodoro technique so they'll write for 25 minutes, and then we'll have five minute chat and then another 25 minutes which I'm, I'm I'll try anything, and it's been working well. But there have been times where I've taken myself off on retreat, so either completely on my own in the middle of nowhere or somewhere like Gladstone's Library where I've written I think I've been there three or four times. But latterly, that hasn't worked. And I think, I think that's because I'm not really sure why it didn't work, but maybe it was because I was writing something to conform to the idea of the kind of writer I thought I should be. Which wasn't a very good idea...

**Nelima Begum**

No, not very healthy either....

**Julia Forster**

 So I think this is where the commercial imperative and impulse can sometimes override artistic impulse. People. That's what they do. Some writers are able to do that and form really well and can create beautifully commercial books, because that's the kind of writer that they are. So I'm clear that this isn't a judgment on on anyone's style, but for me, I have to write what I have. To write. And if that's a novel, then that's great. But actually, at the moment, it's poetry and that's what I'm writing. And so I think at that time in my life, I hadn't quite got to that point and I hadn't read Big Magic by Elizabeth Gilbert. So yeah, some books that have helped me along the way I think are on the Being A Writer bookshelf, in fact. Yeah, I would recommend taking a look at them.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. Interesting. I think I want to dive into your process a little bit more. So when you're having a moment of writer's block, or you're feeling overwhelmed, how do you kind of get into a different headspace or how do you deal with those feelings?

**Julia Forster**

Well, that's a really good question. I think I just mentioned that Elizabeth Gilbert. And in fact, I have been known to just type in Ted.com and then put into the search bar, inspiration. So Ted, yeah, I mean...

**Nelima Begum**

It's a really good fix!

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, it's oral storytelling, isn't it and it's our fingertips. So I have been known to do that. I've also been known to use tea and coffee medicinally dark chocolate, and there's something about getting up and moving away. From the space that I'm in and refueling. Because I think at times, I have forgotten that I have other body parts apart from my five fingers.

**Nelima Begum**

So being in other places in the house as well.

**Julia Forster**

So being embodied and whether that's going for a walk or a run, or being with friends going for a swim. And then I was in a ceremony with a friend of mine who who holds kind of ceremonies and she had said that one of her teachers taught her so I'm passing this on third hand. The moment that you stop being curious about being overwhelmed, is the moment you become overwhelmed and I've paraphrased that terribly. But staying in curiosity in relationship to being overwhelmed. But what's happening here? Why am I why am I feeling overwhelmed? I wonder what that could be. You know...

**Nelima Begum**

So interrogating the feeling at times. And also for writing, I guess as well. You should stay curious. Keep asking questions.

**Julia Forster**

Right. Yeah, so perhaps then if I had asked myself before, I'd written say 30,000 words of a novel that was trying to shoehorn into an idea of a novel. If I had stopped earlier and said, you know, this isn't working. I wonder why that is. I might not have, you know, gone down that road quite so far. And had to turn around and come back again. And, again, this is something that I feel very strongly that to me, failure is the wrong word. Because this is about experimenting with that. I don't see that as a failure. I see that as part of the process. But perhaps I put air quotes around it and call it perceived failure, but actually, that was a part of the process. Had I been more curious I think I perhaps would have just realised that sooner.

**Nelima Begum**

Is there a particular place or playlist or even a book I know you've mentioned a couple, you know, that sharpens your focus and motivates you to write?

**Julia Forster**

I have used music as a way in to writing so when I was writing, my coming of age novel, What A Way To Go, I would listen to the music of that era. And that helped to set my mind in that particular time in history. I do have what I call my family of books, which is you can see a bit by my desk, and they change all the time and I will reread so. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

It's such a writerly thing to do to have a stack of books on your desk.

**Julia Forster**

I know!

**Nelima Begum**

Occasionally, you'll shuffle them around, add some in and take some out depending on what you're feeling.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, that's exactly what it's like. And I have to say, if my bookshelf had a feeling, it would be overwhelmed because they are literally falling out books all over the floor. I do need to go pruning, I think. But I've, I've come to practice this thing of if I'm writing a book and I'm set on that book. It's like a committed relationship. If I'm in a committed relationship with a particular project, and I'm like, right, we're in this for the long haul. This is like the next two or three years. What I'll do is I'll clear that bookshelf out. And I'll be reading books that inspire me, and they'll begin to take up residence in that bookshelf. And I think that we write in conversation with other books. We don't write in a vacuum. We're always writing in conversation with our predecessors and with writers alive and dead. So I like to think that they're kind of having a conversation and I'm part of that in some way...

**Nelima Begum**

It's collaborative, yes, to lovely way of looking at it. What advice would you give to other writers who are struggling to prioritise their work?

**Julia Forster**

Accept where you are. I think self acceptance for me is the overwhelming theme of this conversation. I think that there's something about being resourceful there too. So if there's a sense of frustration that I only got half an hour a day if that, so the more resourceful you can be with that. That will then underpin your feeling of resilience, because it's, for me, it's a bit like learning to light a fire while camping, which I actually have never done, but I went camping for the first time last summer, and I felt so resourceful, really, to be in the middle of nowhere for two days, the absolute middle of nowhere, and there was something I felt so resilient at the end of that it because I've been resourceful with the resources that we had to hand for that camping trip.

**Julia Forster**

So, being resourceful with what you have at your disposal, whatever that means to you. And I think noticing how different spaces and places can invoke a different energy also can really help sometimes it's not so much about you, it can be about your environment and sometimes just turning your desk through 180 degrees or trying a different now things are opening back up coffee shop library was the one of the most unusual things I realised when I wrote my autobiography. I didn't mention when as long as as well as drinking a huge amount of coffee, I was doing that in a bar in Paris that played awful Europop like really loudly on a massive television screen.

**Nelima Begum**

I'm astounded as to how you managed to write this autobiography. (Laughs). Everything is pointing towards difficulty and you came back with a you know, a complete work.

**Julia Forster**

It's about tension, actually, it's about of opposites. If if you want to block something out, you're going to try really hard to block that out. And then there's that hyperfocus that I think comes with that and I don't know if it will work now but it worked then. And that surprised me. And being back in a community of writers and writing alongside other people. I think I would have said misguidedly I'm not one of those people or I always write alone. Actually the minute I start saying things like that, I'm like, oh, I think I might check my thinking here because I'm changing all the time. There's something about that flexibility as well. But the headline is just to accept where you are, and start each day afresh.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely. I like that you've kind of touched on how important it is to just be open to change and experimentation as well. Which is also key. What kind of resources do you turn to to help you write and what would you recommend to our listeners?

**Julia Forster**

I think that the main resource is feedback. I've mentioned that already about not being in a vacuum. Trusted readers, trusted groups, peer groups. So here, you know, I'm just remembering being in Write Club yesterday and being around a community of writers who were writing at the same time with mostly with their cameras off but I felt accountable and I think there's something about being in community and being alone at the same time is also possible nowadays. But there's something about feeling part of something bigger, which I think can be incredibly helpful.

**Nelima Begum**

It's a beautiful way to round off. So what we've started doing in recent episodes is just rounding up with some quickfire questions. So these aren't as heavy. It's kind of just a moment to just speak. You don't have to think about it too much. And there are just a few. So, if you could envision your perfect writing space, what would it be?

**Julia Forster**

Well, I'm building one now, I'm building a cabin.

**Nelima Begum**

Doing in real time, oh my gosh!

**Julia Forster**

IRL!

**Nelima Begum**

I love that! A cabin sounds lovely. What would you tell the Julia Forster who was just starting her writing career? So pre Paris and coke and coffee? Maybe don't do those things?

**Julia Forster**

Yeah, I think I would tell her, don't take yourself too seriously. But it's okay to take your writing seriously. The practice of writing seriously.

**Nelima Begum**

Ok, how have you prioritised your writing this week? So far? Because this this has been recorded on a Monday.

**Julia Forster**

Well, I have gone for a run with friends and I've swum in a river at about minus three. No, I'm exaggerating, three degrees. Temperature was maybe minus three. Here we go. You know, that's about the body right? And I'm not just 10 fingers. So that's prioritising writing. And then I've also just gone to the final Writing Hour with Clare Shaw and Kim Moore, which was really beautiful. So the other thing that I've done, and this, I feel I particularly wanted to share was I bought a copy of The Realto where I submitted my poems 24 years ago, and I'm gonna resubmit this year because I got rejected.

**Nelima Begum**

That's lovely. That's a landmark right there. But it's come back around full circle.

**Julia Forster**

Yeah.

**Nelima Begum**

What are you writing at the moment if you can share?

**Julia Forster**

I'm writing a pamphlet of poems.

**Nelima Begum**

Beautiful. What's the greatest piece of writing advice you've ever received?

**Julia Forster**

This came from a mentor, about five years ago. We've not touched on mentors, but that can be another form of feedback and support. And they said to me, Julia, do not observe yourself to a standstill.

**Nelima Begum**

Ah... What would your number one piece of writing advice for others be?

**Julia Forster**

I think, here, I would paraphrase Art & Fear. A book that Aki Schilz recommended to me. But I would say ask yourself what your what your writing wants to express through you. And then the task at hand is to listen really exquisitely and deeply in stillness, and then get to it.

**Nelima Begum**

Lovely, and I'm going to bring it home with the last one. What does being a writer mean to you?

**Julia Forster**

Oh, I think being a writer means to me to be all of myself. Like completely all of myself. All of the quirks the idiosyncrasies, the things that I find funny, embarrassing. All of that, all of that and to show up on the page.

**Nelima Begum**

I think my heart's going to burst. That's so lovely! This was such a brilliant conversation. Thank you so much for joining us. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak to you.

**Julia Forster**

Thanks, Nelima. Thank you so much for your lovely questions.