

Sally Penni:

Hello and welcome to Talking Law, I'm Dr Sally Penni, MBE, a barrister at Kenworthy's Chambers in Manchester, the Joint Vice Chair of Association of Women Barristers and founder of Women in the Law UK.

On this podcast, you'll hear leading barristers, judges, solicitors, managing partners and more, talk about their lives and careers within the legal sector.

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Before you meet today's guest, a reminder that tickets for the Women in the Law UK Annual Dinner and Conference in Manchester this November are on sale now. Please visit [womeninthelawuk.com](https://www.womeninthelawuk.com) for more details.

I'd also love you to watch my recent Ted Talk, where I discuss whether love can conquer hate. Please head to [Ted.com](https://www.ted.com) and search for Sally Penni.

Today I'm Talking Law with Ayo Onatade, a freelance commentator on crime fiction. Ayo writes articles, gives talks and serves as a judge for numerous crime fiction awards.

Ayo also works at the Supreme Court, and I asked her to tell me a little about her role there.

Ayo Onatade:

Well, what I am is a personal assistant, which basically means I look after judges, I run their diary, I run their life and get, make sure they're getting to court, make sure that they have their papers and do everything and anything they request. I started working here in a very, very roundabout manner. I am actually a civil servant and I've been a civil servant for far too many years to count, but I began working with judges back in 1997 when I became the then Master of the Roles, Lord Wolfs, Assistant Private Secretary. I, I then moved to become the clerk to Lady Justice Hale, as she then was until, until she was promoted to the House of Lords. But you know, we kind of like left each other for a bit. And, and I went on to clerk to the late Lord Justice Wall before becoming the clerk to the president of the family division initially and very briefly with Dame Elizabeth Butler Sloss just before she retired. I think I did two weeks with her or something like that. And of course Sumat Potter became the president. So I, I was working with him then luckily for me, a vacancy arose in the House of Lord's Law Lord's office where Baroness Hale had gone off to in 2004. And I applied - lucky me, I got the job and we began working together again. We then remained together until we moved from the house of Lords to the Supreme court,

Sally Penni:

Wonderful, whilst we're on Lady Hale those who have read the book, Spider Woman by Lady Hale, which came out this year or last year, I can't remember now.

Ayo Onatade:

I think it's was last year.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Well, I, I had an early copy so I can never remember.

Ayo Onatade:

So did I <laugh>

Sally Penni:

When it came out, I get the date wrong and then of course I've then listened to it since read of course by lady Hale, but people who've read that book will know that you get a, a very lovely mention in that book about your time working together. And she says, what a great assistance you were to her. But I, I wondered actually many of us find her inspiring. Was she inspirational to work for?

Ayo Onatade:

She was an absolute delight to work for. I mean, you know, people sometimes say, would you go back and work for anybody? If you could choose you, could you go back to work for any, all your work in life? And yes, she would be the top of my list. I would work with her again, in an instant. She was so inspiring. She used to make me laugh and to be brutally honest, I miss her terribly. She's the one, one of the few people that if they said to me tomorrow, 'oh, Lady Hale wants you to come back and work with her. I'll say, yes, I wouldn't even bat an eyelid.

Sally Penni:

Wow. Wow. And tell me Ayo, because of Lady Hale, you and I have known each other, but I know that you are quite playful with your hair. I've seen you with bright red hair before now you know, clerking with various justices, including Lady Justices. How did that go down? I went to Supreme court once with trainers on, and I was worried about that. Nevermind red, bright red hair which looked fantastic.

Ayo Onatade:

I think I can get away with it. And for me, it's a moral matter. It's one of those things that makes me stand out. So the comments that I normally get is, is say, wow, that is absolutely stunningly. Great. You know, that really suits you. And, and nobody has really said it's a bad thing to do. And yeah, you know, I like changing the color of my hair. I mean, I don't change anything else, but the color of my hair is the one thing I can get away with

Sally Penni:

<Laugh> well, I, I just love it, because I'm very much about people going to work as their full selves and, or how they are, it's been about being authentic. So I, I just love that. Now tell me aside from, you know, you call yourself a personal assistant but I know you do a lot more than that. If, if I was a young person thinking, 'gosh, this woman sounds interesting' and I'll come back to your sort of work outside of the law in a moment. Because you've got several qualifications yourself, haven't you, you know, just a

Ayo Onatade:

No, I, I actually, my first degree was actually a social science degree from the university of Westminster, but then I went, decided I wanted to go back to college again. And I actually did this while I was working with Lady Hale. So I was collect, you know, clerking during the day, go to college in the evening. And I did my master's degree and I did postcolonial and postmodern English literature. So it had nothing to do with the day job <laugh> yes, that's what I did at London, South Bank university.

Sally Penni:

Wow. Well, my total hat off to you, cuz that is really very impressive for anyone working and studying <inaudible> but your love of learning really doesn't stop there. Does it? Because other people know you on Twitter as 'shorts, blog'.

Ayo Onatade:

Shots, blog.

Sally Penni:

Shots, blog. Yes. A crimes pre mag because you also blog, you love books. Tell me how you got into reviewing books, blogging about books being judged, an award for books. You love crime fiction. Yes. Where does that love come from?

Ayo Onatade:

Well, the love of books came from when I was much younger because my mum in her infinite wisdom used to drop us in the library on mainly on Saturday mornings with my older brother, my two sisters. And she would disappear off from going do shopping. I mean, she didn't want four young children under her feet while she was doing the shopping. So we would spend the day in the library while she went off and did what she did. And then she'd have to come back and collect us. And of course she then had to wait for us to finish reading the books we had. Cause we never wanted to take those ones home. We wanted to take new ones off, you hadn't read home. And, and then what happened the crime fiction came about because when I was 10 years old, I moved to live in Nigeria for 10 years of my life.

Ayo Onatade:

And my mother had, of course, 10, four children under the age of 10 on this flight by herself. And she gave me a book to read and it was the first Hercule Poirot The Mysterious Affairs That Styles. And I basically thought, you know, and as much as like most other young girls and I read my ways through, you know, Jane Eyre, What Katie Did Next, all that sort of stuff. But my love of crime fiction just grew and grew and grew. And I came back to the UK when I was 20 and when I, I just continued to read and then I had a very, very, very good friend who used to run a book shop in Covent garden, which was, is no longer there called Criming Store. And it was the one of the few bookshops that sold just plainly crime novel. So she introduced me to a lot more different authors and various things like that.

Ayo Onatade:

And I think I just got known. I, she, she was the one who introduced me to my editor who runs the Shots website and I run the blog and we, I just, that's good to ask, would I review this book or would I do so, you know, would I help out, you know, come to go to events? And I just slowly and surely I kinda like built up this reputation. And one of the things that I did when I was doing my MA, when I was doing my dissertation was I did it on crime fiction as social documents. So I got to interview authors who have since become very, very good friends, especially people like Val McDermaid the Scottish crime writer. Yes. And it was fantastic. So I've just continued to do that. And somewhere along the line, I kind of like graduated to kinda like occasionally giving papers, moderating panels and been asked to judge book awards. Which to this day surprises me.

Sally Penni:

Yes, yes. It's you know, it's really, really wonderful. Well, you know, we've got a book club, at Women in the Law UK, and we invite the authors onto our book clubs. And I have to say, we do love crime fiction on there. And one of our members is brilliant. Sian Darlington especially loves your recommendations. So I wonder if you can share maybe some of your top three favorite crime fiction books. I know it's hard cause I remember I've read some of the one you suggested previously, but at a push it can or let you have four.

Ayo Onatade:

What four books would I recommend? Right. I am going to go with my top two favorite crime novels, first of all. So since I've got four and those are Farewell, my lovely by Raymond Chandler.

And the Multi Star by Dashiell Hammett. I'm a big noir fan. However, if I'm going to pick another two, which I'm much more contemporary, I would say that you should read, which I really loved over the last couple of years is You don't know Me by Imran Mahmood, who is actually a criminal barrister,

Sally Penni:

Your barrister. Yes. He's on our list. Yes.

Ayo Onatade:

And I would also say Val McDermid's The Wire in the blood, however, a note of caution with The Wire in the Blood - it's quite gory. So if you do not like blood and gore, I will say give it a miss, but it's, for me, it's an incredibly well written book and it was her breakout book.

Sally Penni:

Wow. Tell me just whilst I'm on that subject, might you pen a book or you, are you enjoying be the reviewer too much and judging?

Ayo Onatade:

No, I keep on getting, I've gotta be honest. I keep on getting asked that question. I was gonna keep on saying, 'no, it's not going to happen'. And my, my reasoning for that is that I'm very much in awe of authors. I really enjoy research, but I'm more, a lot more academic in my thought process, which is the reason why I love writing papers about the genre. You know, I love doing that of research and standing up and talking and explaining how I see the genre changing and the new authors coming through and what they're writing about and you know, the elements of social policy and social history and crime novels. And my taste is too eclectic. So it'll be difficult for me to pin down what type of book I wanted to write.

Sally Penni:

Mm. Interesting. If I come back to that well we've moved away from the day job, but I wonder very quickly just give us sort of any career advice. I want two sets of career advice, firstly, about if somebody is listening to this, because I'm concerned about, you know, access to the profession and progression in the profession and entrance. And so I wonder if you are a young person or a mature person, whatever, wanting to enter the profession and is thinking about clerking or assisting the justices. Yeah. Any career tips that you can maybe on reflection, you know, you've been clerking for a long time in a very experience. Any advice you might give to perhaps a young person thinking about the role

Ayo Onatade:

There is actually, and, and I'll say this, whether you are clerking for a judge or being a PA to a judge, or whether you're clerking for a barrister, there's certain things in my view, you need to be able to do you have to be able to multitask that it goes without saying you have to be proactive, think on your feet and not be afraid to get stuck in. But most of all, I think at the top of the list, I think that confidentiality and discretion need to be your watch words because you'll never gain the trust of whoever you are working for. If you don't have those.

Sally Penni:

Yes, that is fantastic. And then what about advice for authors? You know, maybe somebody thinking about crime, becoming a crime author.

Ayo Onatade:

That's slightly different. And what I would say is that if you, my advice to authentic and I, I have to emphasize, this is just my advice. It would be to write the type of books that you yourself want to read. Don't follow trends. And most importantly, read within the genre that you want to write about, because that gives you so much of an insight of the way in which different authors write about crime fiction and I'm using crime fiction as an example. And you, you kinda like widen your experience and your knowledge. Yes. So that would be my advice to authors.

Sally Penni:

I'm making a note now. And have you got a favorite fictional lawyer?

Ayo Onatade:

Ooh. Now that's a tad difficult.

Can I have more than one? Can I have more than one?

Sally Penni:

I'll let you off since, since you're in the Supreme court. <Laugh>

Ayo Onatade:

Okay. If I can have more than one, then I'd go for Mickey Haller who's the character, I mean, the Mikely is the Lincoln lawyer series.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Good choice.

Ayo Onatade:

And then I'd also go for Steve Kavanagh's Eddie Flynn. Now Steve Kavanagh is actually Irish and he was a solicitor. He only stopped practicing, I think within the last two years, but he's, he's kinda like a lawyer is actually American, but he's a very, he, he was a very, very, Steve himself was a very, very good solicitor. So I'd go for Eddie Flyn and Mickey hall.

Sally Penni:

All right. I'm writing, I'm writing both of those down good choices actually.

And Ayo tell me with the years that you've been studying and then the day job, and then I want to say a hobby, but actually you do it so well, it's another job. What do you do for your wellbeing? Because you will see from cases like prorogation and other cases, really how hard the justices work themselves or in the court field themselves, the judges. And of course you, what do you do for your wellbeing? Just to, just to make sure you are well, and I'm asking that question, not because I'm brilliant at it. I think we especially are the bar are quite bad at it, but how do you look after your wellbeing a wellness?

Ayo Onatade:

Well reading helps me relax quite a lot, but I also like doing things like, you know, going to museums, the British library, especially cause it's my favorite museum then followed by the V&A, but I used to run, but this thing called old age and, you know, injuries stopped me. And I'm trying to think that I should get back into doing that. But for me, mainly my wellbeing is being, trying to be sensible and know, know you've got to stop when to stop, when to chill out when to just, you know, lie down on the sofa and not do very much and watch sometimes mindless television

Sally Penni:

<Laugh> yes.

Ayo Onatade:

But

Sally Penni:

You can't, you watch, but you can't remember what you've just watched.

Ayo Onatade:

Exactly. But you and just chill out and also hang out with my family and my friends. Yes,

Sally Penni:

Yes, yes.

Ayo Onatade:

You always need to find time for them. I think you always, no matter what I'm doing, if sometimes if it's a toss up between doing something crime fiction related and doing something with my family, I think my family will always win out unless it's a commitment I've made kinda like months in advance and I really can't get out of it.

Sally Penni:

Yes, yes. That is such good advice actually, because you know, your family's always there. Work's not always there is it? And sometimes we forget, you know, when the late cases come in or the big cases that we're all conducting. That's such great, great advice.

Ayo, I remember when Lady Hale retired and were many of us there at her valedictory in the Supreme court and I was chatting recently with Diana Rose Queens Council. Oh, and <laugh> yes. She, it was wonderful seeing her again at the college and she was saying that was sort of the last big event before

COVID and she - bearing am I she's a regular appearer at the Supreme court - she'd never seen so many law justices and lady justices and court of appeal, judges and high court judges and retired Supreme court judges in one place.

Sally Penni:

And I must admit for a silk who appears there all the time. And she of course gave one on the speeches. And I was appearing not in silk as were one of the few, the room was packed and I had a huge imposter syndrome. I sort of arrived. I don't what I was expecting. Thinking 'crikey why on earth e have I been invited here'. And the one thing that made that better? Well, a few things was you arrived you know, gave me a big hug. I dunno if you could detect my imposter syndrome <laugh> and I wasn't even giving a speech. I know and knew everybody who was there and then suddenly I had a cup of tea and I, I was sort of, I was fine. I was so nervous thinking, oh my God, they've got the wrong SNY, but I, I wondered whether you ever get imposter syndrome yourself or whether you could detect it. You know, when people appear at the Supreme court, it, it was such a wonderful thing. And then I had a little groupy of people who were saying we love Ayo.

Ayo Onatade:

I think when I first started clerking and especially when I was with Lady Hale, I think I used to have kinda like this imposter syndrome, but then working with Lady Hale just made it so easy. And I quickly got rid of that. But the second time I think I got imposter syndrome was when I really started getting heavily into my, the crime fiction stuff that I did, because one of the things you've got to realize is that there are not a lot of ethnic minorities in crime fiction and in the crime fiction circle. Cause if you look at the authors, I mean, it's much better than when I started and I've been doing this for 20 plus years now, but when I first started, I first started blogging. I first started to go to events. I would sometimes walk into the room of over a hundred people and I'd be the only black person there. Nowadays, It's kinda like it, the, the wheel has turned. If I'm not there, people tend, I tend to get messages saying, 'Ayo why aren't you there'? And, and my response generally speaking is a couple of either a couple of things. 1 - I wasn't invited, I never actually go to things. I'm not invited to. 2 - I was invited, but I've got prior engagement. Therefore that's the reason why I'm not there!

Ayo Onatade:

So I've now lost any sort of imposter syndrome. I, I, I had either in the day of, or within my crime fiction life.

Sally Penni:

It's wonderful to hear, and of course, you know, one of the ways - certainly for me - I deal with it is, is having the knowledge, you know, 'oh gosh, if I'm the person who know's the brief inside out' or whatever it is I'm doing, whether it's a speech or a subject, mm-hmm, <affirmative>, that's a way for me to, to, to combat it. So it's really just wonderful just to hear it. Well, coming to the end, I need to have you back under some other subject I'm sure. Cause you're so brilliant and good for all of us. <Laugh>

Ayo Onatade:

Or you'll,

Sally Penni:

<Laugh> I'm wondering though, Ayo, is there a lawyer in you?

Ayo Onatade:

Well, no, I shouldn't say that. I really, I, I actually do like the law lots. I'm so pleased about where I work. I am interested in the law and I think my interest in the law and I, and I think this has also got to do with Lady Hale is my interest in the law mainly is within family law. But yes, I think at the time when I would have considered big doing in articles and stuff like that, I mean, cause I've got a diploma in law. That's another thing I've got, but I wish I never used it was of that time when it was incredib. I mean, it's difficult now, but it was even more difficult. Cause we're going back to the 85 ish when it was a lot more difficult for members of deaf minorities to get articles in chambers and stuff like that. And I just thought to myself, I really don't need the stress.

Sally Penni:

Yes,

Ayo Onatade:

Yes. So I kinda like walked away. In hindsight, do I regret it? Not really, but I kinda like keep my hand in, in other ways, like where, like I, I read a lot of judgements, you know, I listen to law programs and I I'm a big fan of law in action. So I keep my,

Sally Penni:

We all.

Ayo Onatade:

Yes. <laugh>

Sally Penni:

Yes. Well that, that's actually really fantastic. Well of course you could become a magistrate. I dunno if you'd be disqualified well,

Ayo Onatade:

Well, well

Sally Penni:

You know too much!

Ayo Onatade:

Well, let me tell you a, a very quick story. In my previous job, before I started working with judges, I actually dealt with the appointment of magistrates,

Sally Penni:

Right?

Ayo Onatade:

So I, this was at the time when Lord Ivin was saying that they wanted more members of ethnice minority to be magistrates. So I twisted my twin sister's arm to become magistrates - to apply. She applied the

first time around. She didn't get through and was a bit despondent. And I said, no, no, no, no, don't worry about it. Do it again. The second time she applied, she got through and she has been a magistrate for over 20 years now.

Sally Penni:

Wow. Yes.

Ayo Onatade:

Actually,

Sally Penni:

Because actually people don't know, you know, magistrates can be, you know, anybody from anywhere. And yeah. Wow. and if people want to find that more it's available on various websites, aren't becoming magistrates.

Ayo Onatade:

She enjoys it immensely. And I'm secretly, I think I bottom me secretly jealous because I think in hindsight, maybe I should have applied, but at the time I, I don't think they would've appointed both of us cause we lived together at that time. That would be a bit difficult, but she, she enjoys it immensely.

Sally Penni:

Wow. I love that now. I, I know you've got a great range of fascinators and hats cause I've seen you wearing them and I'm wondering if you've been tempted to wear it. You know, in a big case to appear because of course people can watch the judgements. Now the hearings on the Supreme court website and yeah. And I know, is there one of the most visited attractions in London?

Ayo Onatade:

Well, yes. I mean, we are in a prime place. Cause of course on the one side we've got you know Westminster Abbey on our right. And then in front of us, we've got the Houses of Parliament and you know, we get people, we are so open. We always get streams of visitors, which is absolutely wonderful. And you know, the, our security guards are very good at drawing tourists in. And I think it's one of the reasons because you can take photographs in court. Cause you know, in places like the Royal courts of justice and the old Bailey photography is forbidden, whether the courts are sitting or not, photography is forbidden, but here at the Supreme court, as long as the court is not sitting, you can take photographs in all the public areas. So it's absolutely amazing. But would I wear a fascinator? Ooh. I just about managed to wear a hat at the opening of the legal year.

Sally Penni:

Yes. I know it was wonderful. <Laugh>

Ayo Onatade:

And I do enjoy doing it then. Any other time? I think you'd really have to twist my arm.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. All right. Well you still, you look, you look great. Great. In it, so it was, it was worth, it was worth a punt. And I did see actually, as we record this yesterday on the feed that Lord Reed was talking to some students from Oldham and the students are actually managed to sit in and observe a privy council case. And so they were on the feed and I do think it's a wonderful place for a reminder of the rule of law.

Ayo just before we go, I noticed that you're down to one woman in the Supreme court again <laugh>

Ayo Onatade:

Yeah.

Sally Penni:

They've all retired. What's going on. And Lord, Lord Reed says, he'd like to see a, you know, more diversity before he retires the clock is ticking, where have they all gone?

Ayo Onatade:

You can only appoint people who apply and you know, the more people and more women who apply the more chances they get to come here.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Spoken very well. And, and perhaps that's an advertisement for those suitably qualified. I know and, and otherwise I wasn't inviting anything controversial, but I just noticed that it was just lady rose or master rose. Who's a member of Gray's Inn you know, sitting and left. So I look forward to seeing more, more appointments. <Laugh> in, in due course

Ayo it's been wonderful talking law with you, you're an inspirational person in the main, and that it's fascinating hearing about the day job and your other job and the various hats that you wear. And so I hope certainly I've taken so much from this. I hope you've enjoyed Talking Law with me, Sally penny. It's been brilliant having you on.

Ayo Onatade:

It's been wonderful, Sally. I really, really enjoyed it. And you know, I don't often get the chance to do such fun, things like that. I mean, my crown stuff is fun, but this is, this is even nicer because, you know, you are just chatting and we've known each other. You said we've known each other for such a long time.

Sally Penni:

I know. I know. And I look forward to the next hair do, I'm just no, I'm dying line. Oh, can

Ayo Onatade:

You? Well, I'm actually going to the hairdresser on Saturday.

I will try, remember to take a photograph on Saturday after I've had my cut and done

Sally Penni:

Wonderful. Well, I'm going to do it before and after then. Ayo thank you so much for coming on this interview with me, it's been wonderful talking to you.

Ayo Onatade:

Thank you so much for having me, Sally. See you soon, thank you!

Sally Penni:

A big thank you to Ayo Onatade for Talking Law with me, Dr Sally Penni MBE.

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Before I go, just a reminder to get your tickets for the Women In The Law UK annual dinner and watch my Ted Talk at Ted.com

Thanks to our production team, Sam Walker and Michael Blades at What Goes On Media.
I'm Dr Sally Penni MBE, Bye for now.