

# Writers Aloud



## Episode 405

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**R**LF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 405 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in the first part of a two-part interview, Andrew Greig speaks with Doug Johnstone about Sixties music as his gateway to poetry, his accidental success as a poet while failing to become a musician, how a poem got him a place on Himalayan climbing expeditions and the value he places on triggering emotion in his readers.

**Doug Johnstone:** Andrew Greig was born in Bannockburn in 1951 and grew up in Anstruther in Fife. Originally and perhaps primarily a poet, in the Eighties he climbed on a number of Himalayan Expeditions, which led him to writing prose accounts of those adventures, *Summit Fever*, and *Kingdoms of Experience*. This was followed by a number of novels starting with *Electric Brae* in 1992. His most famous work is possibly *At the Loch of the Green Corrie*, a wide-ranging personal memoir based around his friendship with the poet Norman MacCaig, including a quest to fish for him in Assynt.

His most recent novel is *Rose Nicholson*, set during the turmoil of the Scottish Reformation in the sixteenth century. His most recent poetry collection is *Later This Day* and was shortlisted for the Saltire Prize for Poetry. Author of over twenty books of poetry, novels and nonfiction, he lives in Edinburgh and Orkney with novelist Lesley Glaister.

Andrew Greig, hello, how are you?

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**Andrew Greig:** Hi, I'm doin awa', doin awa'.

**Doug Johnstone:** Good, good, good. So Andrew, it's quite hard, I think, to think where to start talking about your writing life because you're so diverse and various. You've done all sorts of things.

**Andrew Greig:** I have swithered!

**Doug Johnstone:** I've got a lifetime of swithering!

**Andrew Greig:** Yes.

**Doug Johnstone:** But your first love I guess, is poetry right, you were a poet first and foremost, weren't you?

**Andrew Greig:** I think that's the core of it, the first thing that really turned me on was music; I mean, it was the nineteen-sixties and in anyone of any sense and sensibility, that music was what got you, both the Stones and Beatles side of things and then the Dylan side of things, now with words and stuff that moved you, moved your pulse. And I wanted to be a musician.

**Doug Johnstone:** So was there much scope for music and poetry – because you grew up in Anstruther, Fife – was there much scope for that sort of thing in Anstruther?

**Andrew Greig:** No. We had to make it up ourselves, so we did; we were turned on by The Incredible String band in about 1967/68. And that got us all reading, amongst other things any name they happened to drop, and that's how I got to reading MacCaig who used to be in the Saturday Scotsman, and then I heard about Iain Crichton Smith and then Eddie Morgan. And then I heard about the Beat Poets, so I got into the Beats. And there was that wonderful series of *Penguin Modern European Poets* in translation, which a lot of people in my generation were turned on by, really nice little editions.

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So you're reading stuff from Greece, Hungary, France, Germany, Italy. These are the ones that turned me on most, and then the Americans. I wasn't terribly interested in Scottish culture, it has to be admitted, and I certainly wasn't interested in English culture. What really excited me was weird stuff from America and The Incredible String Band.

**Doug Johnstone:** It's an interesting time maybe because I guess Scottish culture wasn't as confident and certainly wasn't as much of a given as it is now I think.

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, I think it was a lot less confident. The one positive thing that was starting to happen when I was about fifteen was, the school started a folk club, Waid Academy started a folk club, and all the schools were doing it just about this time.

And that was the first place I ever played on the stage. And I had to learn to play the guitar in order to do my versions of Tom Paxton and Dylan of course, and some Beatles stuff, very badly. It was an outlet and it gave you an audience, and also I was in an audience and I started finding I loved some of this stuff.

Do you know Jeanie Redpath? – a very big deal in the folk circles – Archie Fisher brought her somehow to Waid Academy in Anstruther. I've still got the ticket, it was 2/6d . There was an extra charge because there was Archie Fisher and Jeannie Robertson [Redpath] and I'd never heard anything like it. This was seriously ethnic folk, the real deal that I'd not been exposed to. And I thought *This is very odd, but really something* — you recognize the authority when you hear it.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah. It's quite something to have that at your local school.

**Andrew Greig:** It was, as I say you just went up the road and it was in the music room, and we had incense sticks, we got as far as that, it was a fire

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risk, but it was really special. And you got to start writing your own songs and with your pals have an audience and try stuff out. And quite quickly people started doing bits of poems. I started doing bits of poems because I was no singer, and I learned that it was enough sometimes just to say the words.

**Doug Johnstone:** So was that with a musical backing?

**Andrew Greig:** Aye. Usually, yeah. So one of the other guys might play... somebody might play a bass and someone say tapping on the snare drum or something, because we knew people who could do that sort of thing. And so it gave it rhythm and it gave it an atmosphere.

So we did things like 'The Twa Corbies', which was nearly entirely an extended spooky instrumental, with two chords and a fiddler whod never been taught to play it until two minutes before we went on stage. But that was amazing because we were just chanting it and saying it and singing it and people *put up* with this.

In fact, I think we carried a lot of them with us, because it was 1967/68 and our teachers were starting to be into and interested in...I remember giving my teacher Leonard Cohen's first album — Alasdair Mackie his name was, a really fine poet in Doric Scots, and he was knocked out by it, said he had no idea there was anything like this.

So it was an atmosphere where things were possible and Scottish culture was a small part of it. I was only just starting to find out, I'd been there for a long time, because it wasn't really about when I was a child, we had Jimmy Shand, who I think is a fabulous musician. That was the first concert I went, to Jimmy Shand, when I was eleven, with my mum.

And the second concert was The Incredible String Band, which was a ; different kettle of fish. Well, they're both extremely Scottish. I think Shand actually is much underestimated he really swung. He never smiled, he

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was grim as anything, he made someone like Van Morrison look cheery, but he could really swing, he could play. And that was what was on the radio on the Light Programme. Mum would have it on the radio once a week, and occasionally she would get up and do some steps. She liked Jimmy Shand.

**Doug Johnstone:** That's interesting, going back to what you were saying about if you were reciting bits of poems over music. There's an interesting thing in *Scottish* folk, I guess, that is very closely linked with storytelling, storytelling culture like the Gaelic culture of storytelling. Now thinking about it, because you mentioned the Beat Poets, it's a similar thing to that isn't it, performance as part of it?

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, it made sense to us. If you had deficiencies, as I did, vocal deficiencies, it made sense to become more reliant on speaking and the music is a kind of atmospheric or a beat. And when I got to Edinburgh, quite quickly we started something called The Poetry Road Show, which is myself, Ron Butlin, Brian McCabe and a couple of musician friends.

And we did that around Edinburgh and in Stirling; *Sunderland* on one occasion. So that's what we were doing, was mixing the poetry in because that seemed a modern and natural thing to do.

**Doug Johnstone:** Doing my research for this interview, I saw a flyer for The Lost Poets, which is you guys with Liz Lochhead, so when would that have been, was that about that time or was that later?

**Andrew Greig:** No, that was fairly early '80, '79, was it?

**Doug Johnstone:** You looked quite fresh-faced to be fair.

**Andrew Greig:** No, we were fresh-faced. In fact no, I'm wrong. It was Poem '71 was the first time I met Liz. Who already had a booklet out, *Memo for Spring* [in fact this was Lochhead's first book], and the first time I met Brian McCabe, who also had a booklet out, *Goodbye School Tie*.

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And me and Ron had the odd poem published, but we were novices in comparison; and we just *really* got on and that was amazing — audience of 200 or 300 people. And neither of us, me or Ron had ever read before in public. I remember I was white and shaking, my fingers had gone white because the circulation had completely shut down and my hand was just trembling.

But it was also really exciting. And MacCaig was there, MacDiarmid was there; Sorley. It was an amazing thing. A guy called John Schofield who created our poetry road show; he impresario'd it and had over 3,000 people in Edinburgh University over a two-day weekend. *Stunning*. No one's ever done anything on that scale since.

But that led to my first book, something called *Seven New Voices*, which was seven of us from that year and then next year I did a book with Cathy Czerkawska, called *White Boats*, just me and Cathy, and that got me in the way of thinking *This is viable; it's not just a passing enthusiasm*.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, you're actually getting stuff out there as well, in print as well as the performance stuff.

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, and I got paid by BBC radio. I got paid two, I think it was, guineas, for two poems; |I like the fact it was guineas, that's classy. No, honestly, in those days the fees were officially in guineas.

And it was guineas per half-minute and you learned to read really slowly. Well, we all learned that one quite quickly. Do the poem really slow. If you get over the half-minute mark it, they top it up to a minute. And similarly you get to a minute and a half, you're up for, so... there were things, a guy called George Bruce chaired that programme, a good poet, for years and years.

And the fact it was on the radio unrestricted, you know, it was just on Radio Scotland, really mattered, so my mum and dad could listen to it. Folk I knew in Anstruther would listen to it.

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**Doug Johnstone:** And so you were off and running as a poet really?

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, well I was actually getting an audience, getting paid, and no one was giving me a record contract. The band I was in, we kept playing and recording lots of songs and sending them to, to London, going down to London on a fish lorry trying to hassle a deal, but it never happened. But I did start noticing, you know, that I was getting poems out and then a book, and then my second book. And I just got to that point when I was nearly thirty and I realized I was unemployable at anything else.

I was thankful to be. My degree was not in Eng Lit, but it was in Philosophy, which meant I couldn't go into teaching. Otherwise, I might have weakened and been tempted to go if I'd done an English degree, it would've been so easy. I would not have been any good at it and it just would've been exhausting.

But there was a bunch of us, like Ron and Brian and Liz, who were quite clear, if at all possible – and it would certainly mean being poor – try to avoid having a proper job. And just do this thing, and if necessary broaden out a bit like Liz went into playwriting and Ron and Brian short stories and then novels, and I just stuck with poetry for some years, that's another story.

**Doug Johnstone:** Well, yeah. But interestingly, well there's this bit in your bio, which I absolutely love because after the poem 'Men on Ice', and you got this phrase saying, 'due to a misunderstanding of the metaphorical nature of poetry'...

**Andrew Greig:** It's true.

**Doug Johnstone:** You got invited on an expedition to the Himalayas, because it was a long metaphorical climbing poem. It kind of became a hit within the climbing community?

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**Andrew Greig:** Yes. Yeah. Right. That's exactly what happened. 'Men on Ice' was entirely metaphorical. It was about getting higher. It was the late sixties / early seventies, that was sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and philosophy.

These are all ways of turning yourself on, getting higher. And it just happened that the imagery and furniture of ice climbing just seemed natural. And my father's library was full of climbing books, you know, *Ascent of Everest*, F. S. Smythe, and I grew up reading these tales of adventure but I'd always been scared of heights and frankly danger, but when I met this guy in the pub in South Queensferry, he was introduced as a proper climber.

**Doug Johnstone:** So this was Mal Duff, yeah. And Mal was a proper climber?

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, an actual climber. And Mal had read amazingly, *Men on Ice*, because Pete Boardman, who was one of the leading British climbers of his day, had reviewed it in *Climber and Rambler*, and gave it a great review. Best review it ever had, because *he got it*.

I mean, it *was* about climbing but it wasn't, and similarly, that climbing is not just about climbing, it's about inner stuff, existential stuff. And he gave me such a good review that Malcolm had remembered it. So when we met, he said — 'Oh, you're the guy that wrote *Men on Ice*'; he said, 'Look, I'm going to the Himalayas in six months' time, why don't you come with us, it's the Muztagh Tower?' And I said, 'Oh yeah, yeah?' 'Karakoram, Himalayas'.

**Doug Johnstone:** And you just went, 'yeah'?

**Andrew Greig:** Well, yeah. I went, 'yeah', and then we parted on the pavement. I remember this and I never thought I'd see him again. So we shook hands and he staggered off into the night and so did I, and then about a week later he walked into...knocked on the window. Typical

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Malcolm, knocked on the window, not the door. Walked straight in and said, ‘It’s there if you want it.’ I said, ‘*What?*’ He said, ‘Muztagh Tower, man. I talked to the sponsor, he’ll pay for you. All you have to do is climb with us and write a book about it. And at that point I had to come clean and say, ‘I have not climbed anything other than Scottish Hills.’ I could do that, but nothing steep.

The Scott Monument really freaked me out and still does, real steepness I don’t like. I said, ‘I’m scared of heights and I’ve no experience of winter climbing.’ And he said, ‘Okay, you’ve got four months, you can train and I can train you through the winter.’

That was part of his income, was up at the Clachaig Inn, so he taught climbing and he basically taught me and I started running, something I had not done in my life and getting fit enough to do this. And it changed the course of my life, partly because it made me write a prose book, which I had no ambition to write — prose.

There had always been poetry or maybe music, but I discovered that I could do it and I had an audience and I got paid proper money. Because unlike poetry enough people would buy it and the publisher would give you money. I mean, you know how this works and ceasing...not ceasing to be a poet, but moving that as my primary thing into prose writing changed everything.

It meant I wasn’t as dependent on the Scottish Arts Council, and I wasn’t having to be student-poor all the time.

**Doug Johnstone:** I find your nonfiction stuff, the prose, fascinating because, you talked about reading these adventure books and of course what you’re writing is not an adventure book, there are elements of adventure in it. But it’s very much not that kind of book because you’ve mentioned climbing’s not just about climbing, in the same way that fishing’s not just about fishing and football is not just about football, and things like this.

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**Andrew Greig:** And sailing is not just about sailing, yeah.

**Doug Johnstone:** That's really... that's dear to me because I find that these things are very often disregarded as macho male pursuits or whatever without any thinking. And it's interesting that you studied philosophy actually, because that comes into all of your nonfiction stuff that you write, I think, doesn't it?

**Andrew Greig:** You noticed! I try and keep it out but it's in there, of course it is. Dougal Haston did philosophy at Edinburgh University just a few years ahead of me, my tutor there had been Haston's tutor.

**Doug Johnstone:** Was that a plan, when you said you were going to write a book about this Himalayan expedition, was that always a plan that it was going to be a different kind of book?

**Andrew Greig:** No, I thought I'd write a book about what happens. And it's quite good, it kept me away from my wildest speculations and more painful philosophising, because as I say I try not to philosophise.

I did find that watching people, learning to listen and observe and notice and pay attention and *be* with them, that if you did that, it moved the core of your attention out of yourself into other people, which is a far more interesting way of writing I found, and it's got more of a readership.

And of course you're always giving yourself away as you do that: the way you observe people, the way you react to them. Of course it's about me, but equally people, my friends, my climbing friends, still meet people who say, 'Oh, I read that, I read *Summit Fever* you were in, I thought you were bigger than this, I thought you were taller!' And they're identified: 'Oh yes, you're in Andy Greig's book!' but of course my book was only there because of them. So I think what I'm saying is nonfiction, I think, was a really good entrée into writing novels when I started doing that.

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**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, because those adventures if I can call them this, for want of a better word, are like an anchor for you, so it's not you...it's not 300 pages of you philosophising.

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, thank God. Yeah, absolutely.

**Doug Johnstone:** Which would be hard to take –

**Andrew Greig:** – it *would* be hard to take –

**Doug Johnstone:** – even from the best writer in the world! But, I think that is what I love about them is that they're an anchor in something real that then gives you moments and glimpses, out the corner of your eye at that other stuff.

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, that's exactly what... I didn't even plan that and I found out when I was writing the scene. Like when I finished *Summit Fever*, it'd been a long hard slog and it was about nine months, and the all the time I was writing I was watching this old man with a stick going up the Close, at Brewery Close, *infinite* pains he was doing with this kind of shopping bag, and he got slower and slower every month.

And I was watching him, thinking *That was like us at altitude, and what he's doing is like this mountain except he does it five, six days a week. And what he's doing is as hard and frankly more heroic than what we did.* And because I am as I am I put that in the book at the very ending of it.

It's not us on the summit or hugging ourselves when we got back down, it's this picture of this elderly man going tottering, he used to get to the top of the lane, turn onto the road...then pause for a while rocking and getting his breath back, and then head down and start on up again.

And it was incredibly moving, and because of poetry, I was able to just write that as simply as I possibly could. And it spoke for itself. And that's

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what I gradually learned. Most events and people speak for themselves, if you *notice* properly.

**Doug Johnstone:** Well that's your...that's the poet in you coming out.

**Andrew Greig:** I think it is, yeah. It's not poetry in the sense of fancy language and vagueness. It's hopefully poetry that's the opposite, of just eloquent exactness whose meaning suggests itself; it arises in the mind of the reader, rather than the reader being told what I'm thinking.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, yeah, I think that the best poetry and the best writing is like that. That you're not...

**Andrew Greig:** You get the emotion, but you're not told what the emotion is, you're not being preached to. It's just: *This is the picture I'm showing you and this is what I see and this is what this person is doing*, and you know the reader feels something. It took a long time for me to have enough faith to not put in a footnote: *By the way, this is what we understand by this*.

**Doug Johnstone:** This is how you should be feeling now!

**Andrew Greig:** And you don't need to say that if you've done your job, you just have the image of the person, the circumstances, and let them walk on. How often it seemed like I ended up writing about my father – ma faither – probably because that was a more problematic relationship than with my Mum.

And the number of letters I get, say, about *The Loch of the Green Corrie* book, they're not about their fascination with *me* and *my* father, they're about *their* father and their relationship with *their* father. I find this thing so moving they say, because it reminds me of my dad, and he used to do that thing and this thing, and that's when I really realised that again, if you want to touch people, they touch *themselves*, if you give them the means or you open up, you give up somebody a bit, and the point is it's

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not about me, as Janice Galloway said, quite rightly, it's generally not about me even when it is about me. For a reader, it's about themselves, and quite legitimately. I don't feel offended *at all* when somebody writes to me about their life as they reflect upon it when they've read one of my books.

Well, that's wonderful, because I'm not asking them to get interested in me, genuinely. But I'm asking them if they start investing in their own life through the book, and people will write and say, that just changed my whole idea of how I always thought of my dad or my mum. It even happens in poetry: I got a letter from a guy, when I'd written *A Flame in Your Heart*, which is set in summer 1940, and I got a letter from a guy said I used to fly Phantoms or Jaguars – I've forgotten which – 'I was with the RAF – I was a fighter pilot until quite recently – and when I read your book and got to the end where yer man flies off into the white' he said, 'I broke down and blubbed like a child.'

And I thought — *Yes! I have made a fighter pilot blub like a child!* Because laughter's great, laughter's great, but even deeper emotion I think is when unbid moisture comes to your eyes, I know that as a reader. And as a writer, I'm so gratified when somebody said that bit made me kind of weepy, I couldn't help it. And particularly coming from someone with classic macho credentials, and same with the mountaineers, if I could move Malcolm and I could tell he was starting to choke up a bit when I'd do a song for him or read a bit that I'd written, I'd really managed to get to him or he'd managed to get to himself, which is more to the point.

**Doug Johnstone:** You mentioned *At the Loch of the Green Corrie* there, which is probably, I don't know how you think it is, probably the book you're best known for?

**Andrew Greig:** Probably.

**Doug Johnstone:** Do you want to just explain, if anyone hasn't read it, it's

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about you and going on a trip in memory of Norman MacCaig, who is obviously a big influence on you.

**Andrew Greig:** Yes. Okay. Well it is about Norman, but it's not about Norman obviously. And it's about me going on a quest for Norman though it's not really about that either.

I knew Norman reasonably well over many years. He was very helpful and he would give me recommendations to the Arts Council and helped me apply. I did readings with him and I *seriously* admired his poetry. He could be quite tricky, but I always really took to him. Anyway, the last time I saw him out in public, because he didn't go out much latterly, he'd asked me to go and fish for him in his favourite place in the world in... and I said, 'Where is that?'

And he said, 'Assynt'. I said 'I know it's Assynt, but whereabouts?' He said, 'Well, it has to be the Loch of the Green Corrie, only it's not called *that*'; typical Norman; 'but I should like you to go there and fish for me. So if you go to Lochinver and ask for a man called Norman MacAskill, *if* he likes you, he *may* tell you where it is.'

He was a terrible tease, Norman, and he died and I was at his funeral service and obviously I knew I had to do this at some point: to go to find Norman's favourite place in the world. And it was about three or four years later when I finally got around to doing it with two friends. Again, typically me, I wasn't much of a fisherman anymore than I was much of a climber.

So I enlisted two people who were, the Dorward brothers, and we went there and we found Norman MacAskill and I eventually managed to – he was a bit of a curmudgeon – he eventually told me what it is and he circled the place. It was the Gaelic name, Lochan a Choire Ghuirrm — Loch of the Green Corrie everybody called it. He circled it on my map, and that's on the front cover, the pencil marks.

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He kept his pencil behind his ear, one of those details; he was a kind of man who kept a pencil behind his ear and he wore a tweed jacket *indoors*. He was sitting in his house and he just fished it out from behind his ear and he was a friend, fishing companion of MacCaig's; so basically we went there, we found the loch and we tried to fish it for three days. I don't want to have any spoilers about how it went, but I'll just say that apparently the fish there are *big*, but we eventually realized they were big for a reason, because almost nobody was catching them.

**Doug Johnstone:** You cannae catch them!

**Andrew Greig:** But it was a very special time. And what happened was I came back and wrote a piece about it for *The Scotsman*, which I was never satisfied with, it was about a thousand words and it was okay, it said what happened. And it was about four or five years later that my wife Lesley, having listened to me talking about it to somebody said, 'You should write a book about that', and it had never crossed my mind because I'd written a thousand words.

She said, 'I know that you say such interesting things when you tell me about MacCaig, about the art of poetry, about fishing, about Assynt and all these different things you're bringing in. Why don't you just try, go there again and write about it?'

So I did, and it probably is my best-known book because it's about...I put everything in there: serious illnesses, my father, my father's death, Norman – what he meant to me, he was kind of, sort of, father figure in some ways I suppose – the poetry that matters to me, all the dead people that I revered and the living, it all went into that, and my love of the Western Highlands; I'm an East Coaster absolutely by nature and temperament, but my soul was captured by the west from a very early age. We always went west in my childhood, usually Kintyre and then upwards further up to Ullapool and Lochinver. I just found that whenever I went fishing there in my mind, I'd go down the shed in the morning and just

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look at the photos and wait; some reflection, some memory would come, day after day after day. And I wrote that book in about nine months.

It just got bigger and then I went back again and met some more people who started...A. K. MacLeod's nephew, Angus John, who's a lovely person. And I found they insisted on being in the book imaginatively as it became from being a short book about Norman or fishing, it became a book about everything that I had to say in this life.

**Doug Johnstone:** So it's also, amongst the many other things, it's also kind of a book about male friendship.

**Andrew Greig:** It is. Consciously.

**Doug Johnstone:** Which is a very...it's a fairly unusual thing and quite a hard thing to write about, I think?

**Andrew Greig:** It is, absolutely. Yeah, you're dead right. I realised gradually...partly because of what people and reviewers told me, this is one of the things I keep writing about and I guess it is, because I like doing things with guys. Like when I'm up in Orkney, I go sailing with people, and I go fishing and I play music with people and between men, shared activity is our best way of doing.

You know that if you play in a band, you know what it's like when you look at each other and think, *Wow, that was really good!* Or though you'd never say this, *Wow, I love you, you're so good!*, or *That was so funny*. You get great waves of affection and you can do that because you are actually working together, rather than having to come out and say it.

You enact stuff. And so yeah, male friendship has been one of my big topics. I also happen to believe in the possibility of male/female friendships, again, not very common in Scottish Literature. So that first book of mine *Electric Brae*, was very deliberately inverting the orthodoxies

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of particularly the angry urban-centred, male-centred Scottish novel, where men and women can not meet other than in extreme drunkenness and unhappily. So I thought, *I'm going to write a book that's small town, country boy, because that's what I am. It's not going to be a city book. And there's going to be friendship, deep, meaningful thoughts, sometimes very painful friendships between men and painful friendships between men and women.* And where the women seem to be, by and large, running the show, because again, that was often my experience. I was just trying to write...some kind of, my form of, realism, but it was the first time I ever wrote a book consciously, with not quite an agenda, but a purpose.

I thought the books I read and enjoyed and admired, let's call it roughly the Kelman School, I thought, *That's not the world that I know.* And I thought, *No, but I do know a world and this is why I want to write it. And it'll be almost diametrically opposite of that.*

**Doug Johnstone:** So this is *Electric Brae* you're talking about?

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, *Electric Brae*, and again, that's male friendship. But also passionate friendships and non-sexual friendship as well between men and women are really big in that.

**Doug Johnstone:** You had a pretty reasonable writing career already as a poet and nonfiction writer, and this was your first novel; why *then*, and why *that* form? Did it feel like a big plunge or was it just a natural progression? I mean, you immediately just started talking about it straight on from your nonfiction...I wonder if it feels continuous in your mind or...?

**Andrew Greig:** I'd got nonfiction, because I wrote two books, *Summit Fever*, and then *Kingdoms of Experience* about the second Himalayan trip. And that got me used to sitting on my arse writing prose. And earning a living. And I really liked it, storytelling. And I'd never intended to write a novel; that hadn't been in my remit. And then I found myself – I was in Italy at my sister's – reading the journal I'd been keeping at that point

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– I've always kept journals – and I was reading, I thought, *This is pretty racy stuff!*

My personal life was fairly shambolic at that time, and it made me laugh, it made me feel upset and there wasn't much philosophy in it. What there was was just *human stuff* that was happening and I found myself imagining *Okay, if you change his name to that, I'll call him Jimmy, because he's anybody, and I'll change Anstruther to Peterhead or whatever and tart up that bit, and then that person there that reminds me of so-and-so...* because you could do fiction things. I'd never done this before, in my nonfiction books I've tried to be honest to what actually happened, but suddenly having the freedom, you could amalgamate two different people into one who was more interesting.

You start realising things about your characters you think you've recollected or created, who turn out to be quite other in what they want to be and do. So I remember discovering that one of my two crucial female characters was gay. And I thought, *Of course she is, that explains everything! That explains all that stuff back then and what happened then.* Ian Rankin said the same to me, he said, ‘You get to near the end of the book, decide who does it or it becomes pretty clear who's done it and then I go back and think I better change things. But then when I read it, it's so bloody obvious, I have to sometimes hide it –’

**Doug Johnstone:** – hide it more! –

**Andrew Greig:** – hide it more! What I'm saying was when I'd done my two Himalayan books, and I knew I wasn't going to do anymore, I was in the habit of writing prose at length and I'd nothing to write about, but I did have my journal and the opening scenes were from that. So basically it was my life with bells on. But because it's fiction you can make it more interesting and more condensed and more worth reading.

**Doug Johnstone:** I recognise that motivation when you mentioned



# Writers Aloud

reading the Kelman School and great though it was, it wasn't your own lived experience. I grew up in Arbroath, which is a similar small fishing town on the East Coast of Scotland to Anstruther, where you were, and that was what my inspiration for the first books I was writing, was the same because I wasn't seeing the world I recognised around me reflected in the fiction I was reading from Scotland, so it was just a matter of jazzing up your own life a little bit to reflect what you were actually seeing.

**Andrew Greig:** I think that's perfectly normal in the first couple of books, and then sometimes you have to find recourse to other strategies, I'm not quite sure what they are. I've always been fairly, nearly always been fairly, autobiographical and I don't feel ashamed of that. Most novelists say, 'Well, of course it's nothing to do with me or my own life', and I think that's the biggest lie they ever tell. I've always said, 'Well yeah, it is kind of, but it's my own life with lots of things that didn't happen I wish had happened, or more interesting bits that didn't happen to me.'

\*

**RLF outro:** That was Andrew Greig in conversation with Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Andrew on his website at [andrew-greig.weebly.com](http://andrew-greig.weebly.com). That's Greig spelled G R E I G. And that concludes episode 405, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee.

Coming up in episode 406, in the concluding part of this interview, Andrew speaks with Doug about historical fiction and Scottish culture, confronting his own mortality, and the joys of post-ambition. We hope you'll join us.

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