

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 406

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**RLF 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 406 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second part of a two-part interview, Andrew Greig speaks with Doug Johnstone about historical fiction, his fascination with Scottish culture and its many guises, nearly dying of a brain cyst, the death of ambition, and relief of being an onlooker not a player, and coming full circle back to making music. You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode, number 405.

**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 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,

# Writers Aloud

novels and nonfiction, he lives in Edinburgh and Orkney with novelist, Lesley Glaister.

**Doug Johnstone:** Well, you talk about what strategies to employ after that initial burst of autobiographical...

**Andrew Greig:** You get two or three books on that if you're lucky...

**Doug Johnstone:** One of your strategies is historical fiction. It might still be autobiographical, but you've moved into historical fiction of various different kinds. What was the thinking behind that? Or was there thinking? your most recent two novels are in the 1500s?

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, you're going back four-hundred-and-fifty years. There's a Scottish part of me that disapproves of historical fiction. It doesn't seem serious, I feel I should be writing about now and only now, which I think is ridiculous.

But I do have that prejudice, and historical fiction, it sounds so worthy and dead, but I just found, about those books, that I wanted to uncover, look more closely at my country, my culture, Scotland. And I'd done that in the more contemporary novels and the nonfiction books, but I realised that I had to go further back even past the Enlightenment, which was the groovy bit of Scottish cultural history.

That's the bit I related to as a philosopher as it was cool, we were ahead of the game and we were thinking cool and interesting thoughts. And David Hume is one of my absolute heroes. But unfortunately the real *manure* upon which the growth of the Enlightenment is predicated is the Scottish Reformation.

And I kind of knew it was sitting there, but it sounded so dour, a grim affair of men with beards saying 'No!'

# Writers Aloud

**Doug Johnstone:** Men with beards saying, ‘No!’

**Andrew Greig:** *No, ye cannae do it, ye mustnae do it...*

**Doug Johnstone:** Yer not allowed!

**Andrew Greig:** And then I remember my father, ma faither, he was a particularly *Scottish* kind of atheist, and he admitted he was a Presbyterian atheist.

And I remember asking him in his seventies what he actually *meant* by that. I knew what he meant in a way, emotionally, and he explained that though he disliked the Church and he disliked authority figures of all sorts, he had to give credit to the Scottish Reformation and the Church of Scotland for two things.

One was its value it gave to literacy for men and women, boys and girls; day one of the Scottish Reformation every parish had to have school for boys and girls. This was unique, no one was doing this in Europe, not for girls. And the argument was very simple, boys and girls had equal souls, souls of equal weight.

This mightn’t be reflected in the social life but in God’s eyes they were exactly the same. And underlying that comes this underlying egalitarianism, which again, my father was a bloody-minded person, who really had no trouble in thinking *Nobody’s better than me and I’m no better...* you know, in God’s eyes, we are all Jock Tamson’s bairns and that. He meant it.

And my father – his dad was a leather worker, he was a working-class tradesman’s boy – and he became a doctor, then a surgeon in his own lifetime, which he was pleased about and proud about. But he was definitely most at ease in the company, in Anstruther, of fishermen and joiners and plumbers and electricians, people who did useful things with their hands.

# Writers Aloud

That wasn't anything he was putting on, he *meant* that, he felt he knew them and trusted them, because he knew and liked very much his father. Anyway, the point is that the Scottish Reformation gave us literacy and the means for literacy. Robert Burns would never have been a writer had he been born in England. He wouldn't have had the depth of education that he did.

And the second thing is this underlying egalitarianism that is a very Scottish bent, but it doesn't always come out pleasantly and a part of the point of literacy was so you could read the scriptures and make up your own mind because you couldn't take the authority from the church, from the minister, from the bishop, the landowner, even the king; they're just *people*.

And the Church of Scotland was very clear about that, they are just people, and I thought, *Well, I believe that. That's one of my fundamental values, so let's go a bit deeper into the Scottish Reformation...* and discovered it was a pretty hellish time and dangerous time to be alive. And this was all while Brexit was brewing up and the idea of society divided down the middle and things were becoming extremely politically unstable, led by very dodgy leaders, just suddenly thinking, *Oh yes, of course*.

I wasn't writing about Brexit by the back door, but let's say the atmosphere of it, the culture and the live issues that were kicking around all the time, allowed me to reanimate what it was like to be around in 1570/1580. And the country's being ruled by series of regents, four of them, and they're all murdered within twelve years, people are being hanged, drawn and quartered, burned to death, cos they were early martyrs, for stuff that people really cared about, and in fact it made Brexit seem like a play park.

You think it's tough now, it was a lot tougher then. But it was so interesting it was like watching the birth of the Scottish psyche and I think we're still like that. We have the love of disputation and the argumentativeness and bloody mindedness.

# Writers Aloud

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, the flyting.

**Andrew Greig:** The flyting, that whole thing about arguing as being a positive value. Whereas in many other cultures, particularly you might say an English one, you try to avoid difficult topics when you might disagree and argue with each other; it's not *polite*. Whereas the Scottish thing rather seeks these kinds of rough flytings. Also because there was a really exciting interesting time where the key places were St Andrews, which I knew really well from childhood and youth, and Edinburgh, which I knew from all the years I spent here.

And to walk down these streets as they are now and *so much* of it is still there. And it made me realize that was not a time when things happened in black and white, it happened in colour. And those people were as modern in their minds, in their lives, as we are. They were the most up-to-date people on the planet.

And that keeps you away from thinking, *Well, they're just old fashioned, or they were primitive or they didn't know what's going to happen, so they're just ignorant. Because we know what's going to happen in five years' time...* no we don't! So there was a kind of mixture, it was about the past and it is set in the past, but I'm hoping when I wrote it, it's the past as lived from within it.

You don't know what's going to happen, they don't know what's going to happen. And it was also surprising the amount of jokes in it. I was amazed how most of my characters, despite the deadliness of what's round about them, they take the piss a lot, they're sarcastic, they're sardonic, they actually tell jokes and they wind each other up and they try and get off with each other. They're like *people!*

**Doug Johnstone:** The characters in it, basically, are based on real people. Did you decide early on that that was the route to take and not just invent a whole cast yourself?

# Writers Aloud

**Andrew Greig:** I haven't the imagination. I've never had much imagination for making stuff up. That's why, again, so much of my books are based on versions of myself and people I know. What I did decide to do quite early on though, instinctively, was to not write about the people at the very centre of power. I'm interested in someone who has the point of view... who's at the edge, the edge of the fringe but just enough connected.

Scotland was a small country and in the streets of Edinburgh and surroundings, you would pass John Locke, you just did. So my character's father sold him a writing case, which I totally believe, I was at his shoulder when he was selling it (knocks the writing case).

You know, there was, it wasn't Jamie Saxt, James VI, but it was somebody who knew somebody who was connected to him, and who he would bump into William Farrar, real person, who's my narrator. He did know Jimmy Saxt as a member of a poetry-writing group, which of course I really plugged into, that's great and I could imagine the kind of vanities and the delusional stuff that goes into that. Some of them are quite good!

**Doug Johnstone:** You mentioned, going back a bit, the idea of the Scottish idea of egalitarianism. That just reminded me, just when you said that, I wanted to not forget to talk about *Preferred Lies*, your golf book, and egalitarianism in golf because I recently re-found golf, having played it as a kid.

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah. So a lot of Scottish kids do.

**Doug Johnstone:** So yeah, I grew up in Arbroath obviously big golfing country. I used to play it all the time as a kid. And everyone I knew played it. It was cheap.

**Andrew Greig:** It's what the laddies did.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, it's what we did.

# Writers Aloud

**Andrew Greig:** A few women did, but essentially the ‘loons of the toon’, as my father would have put it, the ‘loons of the toon’ played gowff.

**Doug Johnstone:** That’s right. The point you make in that book is that outside of Scotland, it’s seen as an elitist sport.

**Andrew Greig:** Very much so, expensive and elitist.

**Doug Johnstone:** And there is obviously elitism in Scotland in it now as well, but I grew up thinking it was like sport for anyone.

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, absolutely. It’s just a normal thing to do. The bank manager played it and the joiner played it and they played against each other in direct competition and the better player would always win. You know, it doesn’t matter who you were, your social rank was *not the point*.

**Doug Johnstone:** How did the book about golf come about then, you’d been ill, hadn’t you?

**Andrew Greig:** I’d been very ill, yes. I had a colloid cyst in the base of my brain. I’d had it all my life without knowing it. Basically, it’s a kind of growth that is not cancerous and it floats around in the skull and eventually, sometimes gets stuck in one of the brain’s drains. And when that happens, the fluid pressure builds up in your brain and it starts being crushed against your own skull.

I of course didn’t notice what was happening, but when I was forty-something it did happen to me. I had had headaches, violent headaches for a fair bit of my life, and it was probably connected to that. But in this case, I was in a deep coma in Sheffield at my girlfriend’s and she was away. And luckily the lodger insisted on ordering an ambulance.

And so I was taken to the fortunately very good hospital there and this Mr Jellinek, my surgeon, he took a guess because normally for somebody in

# Writers Aloud

my condition it happens, it's noticed, it's picked up in infancy, when your skull is soft, it'll start to expand and they know what's wrong with you.

But the fact I'd had this hadn't happened, I'd lived this long, he didn't think it could be it. But he could think of no other...nobody knew anything about me, my wife wasn't there. He thought, you know, was I a junkie, had I been sniffing glue? They had no idea. But he took as he said a good guess and the first time in his life he got a police escort across Sheffield and he said, 'I'd always wanted to do that, because if he's got what I'm thinking he has, he's dying and I wanted to prep him up and get him into the theatre, soon as I arrive I can go in.' It's great, he told me this story later as you can imagine. And that's exactly what he did. So I had been seriously ill, I didn't die, my brain was reduced to about half its size by the pressure, and it slowly started to grow back a bit, it'll probably mostly come back to its real size.

I've got a shunt that bypasses this thing that's still in my head. He said, 'I could remove it, do you need your powers of memory and abstract reasoning in your job?' And I said, 'Well, kind of!'

**Doug Johnstone:** Don't most people?!

**Andrew Greig:** Don't most people? He said, rather flippantly but, 'Had you been a joiner, I might have taken the risk!' I hope he was kidding. But anyway, so he said, 'I think I'll just bypass it because I can't be absolutely sure I'm not going to do you damage. It's tangled up with your memory and your reason.'

To be frank, I don't think I've ever quite been the same person again. But then those major life events change you anyway, whether at a brain-trauma level or existential level it's very hard to say. But anyway, it left me very, very tired and very fragile. I thought I was made of glass. I had no stamina for living or being or feeling or *anything*. And I went back up to Orkney with my girlfriend, Lesley, now my wife.



# Writers Aloud

And I was watching these people on the golf course; like you, I used to play, but I played passionately as a boy, very competitively. Passionately from about ten to fifteen and then suddenly girls and guitars just drove golf off my thingy. And I was watching these people and thinking, *My God, I could do better than that!* I saw some hideous swings because I was quite good as a boy — and suddenly this terrible childhood yearning to be back on the golf course again.

So I started playing a bit, and then a bit more, and discovered this huge sense of joy and uplift, and have often felt my father with me in that, because he loved... he wasn't that good, he wasn't bad, he wasn't good; he *cared* for golf, he was happy on a golf course, but happy in a very Scottish way. You know, he was expecting to suffer and be humiliated and to be... you know!

Yeah, hard won pleasures. But it was a pleasure to him, but it wasn't a pleasure that made him laugh or be really relaxed. He took golf seriously, that's why he didn't like people talking on a golf course, 'We're here to play gowff, not chatter,' because I used to chatter and give him the benefit of my ideas and he said, 'No, you're here to play gowff not chatter.' I kind of know what he means.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, I kind of get that as well.

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah. So anyway, and again it was Lesley I'm pretty sure said, 'This is a really interesting thing for you. Why don't you try writing a book about it?' I hadn't written a nonfiction book since the Himalayan years. But I didn't have very much to say about it, but of course I started doing it.

It became an exploration of Scotland, Scottish geography, all these different golf courses I'd known in different places. It's the culture, the society, how easy is Scottish golf, it's probably uniquely different from golf anywhere else in the world, in the cultural stuff that comes with it. Its links to Presbyterianism, self-punishment, humiliation, honesty.

# Writers Aloud

My dad used to say, 'Etiquette is not an add-on,' and that's true, but golf is a very weird game. You're supposed to help your opponent find their *ball*, like it's your duty to see where that ball's gone and get them to it. It's your duty to not move or distract them in any way when they're doing their stuff.

**Doug Johnstone:** Of course it would be super easy to cheat in golf, but it's absolutely unthinkable. You're only cheating yourself.

**Andrew Greig:** Actually, it would be a sin. My father didn't believe in sin. He didn't believe in the Christian idea of sin, but he knew that if you're cynical that your soul would be imperilled. Even nowadays to accuse somebody cheating at golf, it's not like accusing somebody cheating at football or rugby, because that's normal, that's part of the game, it's part of being professional, but to say that about somebody about golf is still a really serious accusation.

And there are a few professional golfers of whom that accusation has been made and they never quite lose that cloud that hangs over them. Because they might have once shifted the ball or dropped it back in a place that was not quite where it was supposed to be. There's no other sport in the world that takes gamesmanship that seriously, and that interests me, because I wanted to write about Scotland, and about my father, and about not being dead.

I think that was quite a big thing. Being physically in the body and alive and the joy of timing because of all that work I put in, I still have miraculously good timing with a golf ball, and because of modern golfing I can whack it much further than I could when I was fifteen/sixteen, which is a nice feeling. I mean, not consistently but...

So it became a bit like *The Loch of the Green Corrie*, which in some ways was a warm up. It was a book of memory and salutation and Scottishness, Scottish geography in the most physical sense; and places, and cultures,

# Writers Aloud

and belief systems. And again, I didn't think there was a book in it, I thought there might be twenty pages, but it was actually quite hard work keeping it as short, as it isn't, it's probably about 300 pages.

I know that really connected to people. And my wife who hates golf because her father loved the golf course, and particularly loved the bar of the golf course, and he frankly neglected his family for golf. So she has no reason to like it, but when she edited it said, 'I can see why you wanted to write this, this is good, this is interesting.' And it didn't make her want to play it, but she could understand why it mattered to me, playing it.

**Doug Johnstone:** In passing you mentioned geography there and also outdoors. And obviously the sense of place is really huge in all your writing, but whatever kind it is. And you also mentioned Orkney, where you've been living on and off for quite a long time now.

**Andrew Greig:** Thirty-odd years.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah. And I just wanted to tie this in a little bit to your most recent book, *Later that Day*, poems. So there are some Orkney poems in there, and then there's also some New Zealand ones. You were on a writing placement I think?

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, we were on an exchange fellowship, but jointly, me and Lesley, were sent to New Zealand and we both went and we *loved* it. That was an outdoor world, outdoor culture. We had twelve weeks, we got a bit of pocket money to live on and they gave us a car to drive about North and South Island in. I loved New Zealand. We've already started a small savings fund to go back.

**Doug Johnstone:** I want to quickly mention one poem in the latest collection, 'The Old Codgers', that I love.

**Andrew Greig:** I love that too. Thank you.

# Writers Aloud

**Doug Johnstone:** It's got a really lovely sense of a life lived. There's this idea that we never thought we'd be these people, but we are.

**Andrew Greig:** We have become what we never thought to be: a bunch of old codgers getting quietly pissed outside the Ubiquitous Chip. Yeah. Wanting nothing other than...yeah, that's exactly the point, I am in that and I've just turned seventy. And you're in a different point of life, the poem describes ambition like a huge balloon bumping something through the crowd, just getting in the way and slightly, faintly ridiculous, abandoned who knows when. I'm at that stage in my life, I've written a lot of what I wanted to and I can carry on writing and nobody's stopping me, still get the money for it. But I have frankly no further ambition.

I don't network because there's nothing to network for. I'm seventy and I've only got maybe another book or two in me, I please myself. Because when I was younger, yes, I must have had ambitions; yes I did. Partly to make a living by doing what I wanted to do. And then you start hoping for a bit more: you think it'd be nice to get that prize, be nice to get this prize, be nice to get that job, that would help me. And that's all part of being in your thirties and forties.

**Doug Johnstone:** But you're still getting nominated for prizes now. That one [*Later That Day*] was on the Saltire shortlist.

**Andrew Greig:** Well it was, that was a surprise, I'm very pleased it was published now but I don't go out of my way to chase things. Before I'd be anxious when a book came out and is it getting enough publicity, can I meet so and so, see him, get them to review it? Basically, I've become in my old codgers poem, and all my friends have become, onlookers not players, and I look at young people and they are players in a way that I'm simply not, and that's a great relief.

**Doug Johnstone:** You mention, you've got one or two or three or however many books left in you. Are you writing something now, what are you working on? Are you in a fallow period waiting for the muse to strike?

# Writers Aloud

**Andrew Greig:** Well, I'm resting. The Rose Nicholson book took me about four years. And at the time I wasn't sure if I was up to it. My wife says it's my best novel and I'm pleasantly satisfied with it.

So it does lead on naturally towards the end, to another book called *Padua*, where the guys actually go to Padua, as I said, a long time ago. And that was the book that I was commissioned to write, a novel called *Padua*, about these two guys going to Padua. They never actually go there.

So the book still opens a possibility in fifteen years' time, for reasons I don't yet know, they will go to Padua, when Galileo's lecturing mathematics and Phillip Sydney the poet is there. And Bruno who thought he got that post makes a disaster move of going to Venice to be a private tutor and getting burned at the stake for heresy, and they were all there at *exactly* the same time.

And so the material is great and I've been to Padua two or three times now and it's really lovely. It's one of the lesser-known cities, and there's quite a Scottish history, on anatomy. It is got the earliest anatomical theatre in the world, in Padua. And there's a lot of Scottish people connected to that amongst them.

So I could write that, but it's an awful lot of work and I don't know if I'm up to it. I brought out that new book of poems, which I was pleased to do. Mostly what I've been doing, apart from resting, is finishing a second CD of songs with my friends George and Richard and John, that I was literally with in my class at school.

So it's a Fife thing, and we go to Harrington, again we have no ambitions. We spend hours in the studio getting our songs right. In the end of the day, we'll probably just give them to pals. But there's so much laughter, you know what it's like when you're making music.

It is essentially a laughable thing with real love and affection. These people who accepted you when you were an eejit and fourteen, as you accepted

# Writers Aloud

them. And you've got nothing to prove any more to each other and all that's left is affection.

**Doug Johnstone:** So you're back to play music again after all this time?

**Andrew Greig:** Yes, I am and I play music and do gigs, under a poetry hat or say if I'm promoting a new novel. if there's any way I could possibly build a song into it, like *Fair Helen*, that novel, there's a ballad that goes with it as well, 'Fair Helen of Kirkconnel Lea'. So I always did that, whether on the banjo or the guitar, I would sing that.

And it was great because everyone was there and they couldn't get out without causing embarrassment. And it works, I wouldn't do it if I honestly thought...I'm prone to embarrassment, but I can tell it works, music works on an emotional level. Words can, but music is a physical thing and you feel it about in your... here, just under your ribcage, and it's the most direct form of human communion that I know of.

And it's a joy and a pleasure and a game, essentially it's a game. It's a great game, and it has lots of spontaneous bits and screw ups and all kind of things go wrong. But when it goes well, it's just the best thing. And so that was in my beginning, but I have to say that was never my talent to the degree I could build a life around it.

But I've got to this point to in my life now that I can...well, yes, I suppose indulge in it, but I wouldn't do it if I honestly thought I was making an embarrassment of myself, I'm easily embarrassed. I know if Lesley said, 'Really Andrew, I think you should drop that number or just don't do it.' I couldn't do it then, but she says, 'No, that was all right, that worked.'

**Doug Johnstone:** You've got the vote of approval.

**Andrew Greig:** Yeah, I am still dependent on a few key people's approval, but as long as I don't see pain on their faces and people laugh or they hum

# Writers Aloud

and sing along. You know when you've moved people and music is still the most direct way of moving people.

**Doug Johnstone:** Well I honestly think that's a great place to finish. You started and ended on music, so that's fantastic.

**Andrew Greig:** We did, yes. And my end is my beginning.

**Doug Johnstone:** Okay, Andrew Greig, thank you very much.

**Andrew Greig:** Thank you, Doug. That was good.

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**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 406, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 407, Ann Morgan speaks with Julia Copus about her significant three little things. We hope you'll join us.

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