

Writers Aloud

Episode 417

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 417 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, in the first part of a two-part interview, Alexandra Benedict speaks with Doug Johnstone about taking up writing at the age of three, her enduring fascination with dark and disturbing themes, the role of place in her creative output, and how synaesthesia has influenced her use of unusual sensory details in her writing.

Doug Johnstone: Alexandra Benedict is a prizewinning writer of novels, radio drama, scripts, short stories and poetry, specialising in speculative fiction. She has had four novels published to critical acclaim, most recently *The Christmas Murder Game*, published by Zaffre in 2021.

She's written one novel and nine audio stories within the *Doctor Who* canon and has also co-written audio drama with her partner, Guy Adams, including *Arkham County*, a horror drama for Audible based on the work of H. P. Lovecraft, and *Children of the Stones*, an updated BBC Radio 4 version of the 1970s television series.

Before she embarked on her writing career, Benedict was an indie punk singer-songwriter, as well as a composer for film and TV. She also acted in short films and on stage, both professionally and with community theatres. She lives in Kent with her partner, their daughter, and their dog, Dame Margaret Rutherford.

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So Alexandra Benedict, hi, how are you doing?

Alexandra Benedict: I'm very well, thank you, hi!

Doug Johnstone: So glad to be talking to you today about your writing and your life and your writing life, because I feel like we're kind of kindred spirits in a way, a little bit. You've talked in the past about being genre fluid, you've written across so many genres and on different formats as well, different forms of writing, and I've got to come to all that as well: like audio books and the novels and the short stories, and the poetry and the music and the performing and everything else.

I don't know if we've got enough time to be honest, but I read somewhere that you were writing at a very early age, like you were writing stuff as at the age of like three and three or four or five, really young. Is that right?

Alexandra Benedict: Yes, I started writing stories, probably three, as soon as I could start writing at all. I was following the oral tradition, mainly, but I also, I wrote them down as well, and was writing really dark, odd poetry by five or six. There's some extant examples of very strange poetry about ghosts and deserted houses, it explains a lot I think about my later writing.

Doug Johnstone: So you were into the dark stuff and the ghosts very early?

Alexandra Benedict: Yes, I don't remember a time when I wasn't. And my mum said that from a very, very early age, it was all the spooky things that I got into very early on. She couldn't quite understand why, because she isn't, my dad isn't definitely.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, who is this little changeling in the nest?

Alexandra Benedict: Yes, exactly. 'Changeling' has been used quite a few times, particularly by the Irish side of my family.

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Doug Johnstone: I'd take that as a compliment, why not?

Alexandra Benedict: I thought I would, yeah.

Doug Johnstone: And so did you always want to be a writer then when you were writing, because I couldn't really have pictured what a writer was at that age — did you already have a clear idea?

Alexandra Benedict: Yes, from four I wanted to be a writer, I also wanted to be an actor and a musician and singer. So I had quite lofty ambitions from a very early age. And I determined at the age of four I *would* be a writer and I would go to Cambridge. I was a very serious little person.

And so I made a plan about how that would happen. Which is quite cute now when I think of my four-year-old self, and I've got a two-year-old now, a two-and-a-half-year-old, and the idea that in a year-and-a-half time she could be making a plan to go to Cambridge is *actually* terrifying.

Doug Johnstone: What if she comes to you and says, 'Mummy, I want to go to Oxford'!

Alexandra Benedict: I'd say, 'That's absolutely fine, my darling, do whatever you want, but maybe consider another university as well, just to keep your options open, my darling!'

Doug Johnstone: But then that plan actually worked. You did go to Cambridge and you studied English there, right?

Alexandra Benedict: I did, yes. My plan worked.

Doug Johnstone: So did it work exactly according to the plan?

Alexandra Benedict: Well, in that I got in and studied English, but my plan had been to go and to join Footlights and to do acting there. Because

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lots of my heroes from when I was very, very young were comedians who had either gone to Cambridge and Footlights, or been to Oxford and the Fringe.

And that combined with falling for the works of M. R. James when I was very young and knowing that he was Provost at Kings College Cambridge, That focused my ambitions on Kings, but I didn't join Footlights because I was discouraged by someone there, and I got ME very early on. So I didn't do acting either, so it didn't go *quite* to plan. But then plans are subject to change, alterations.

Doug Johnstone: Yes. So you weren't doing any acting there, but were you writing, were you writing stories or poetry, what sort of things were you coming up with in your English classes?

Alexandra Benedict: Well, sadly because studying English at Cambridge, there's no creative writing component whatsoever, it's about studying language and literature. So I was doing quite in-depth research into all of literature from 1300 to the present day written in English. So it is very broad strokes while going into depth, and learning technicalities of writing and effect and theory. And I stopped writing almost completely when I was at Cambridge.

So up until that point I'd been feeling, *I'm going to be a writer, I'm doing this*, and then it just stopped. And it wasn't until after I'd done my Masters at Sussex in Twentieth-Century Literature after Cambridge, that I then started writing again.

I needed to not be in an academic context in order to write fiction. Which is interesting, and not unusual, but I'm glad I did it in order to be able to situate my own writing within the context of English Literature.

Doug Johnstone: Sure. So you mentioned M. R. James, I'm going to come back to that, obviously, later, but was it always still in that kind of area, of

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speculative and supernatural and ghost and horror? I mentioned at the start, you do switch a lot across a lot of genres. But you also mentioned that the first thing you ever wrote was dark and weird, so that's basically your genre, I feel like. Has it always been like that all the way through, so when you were back to creative writing at Sussex?

Alexandra Benedict: I think even if I tried to write something that was light it would change to something dark quite quickly, and I quite like that. Even if I'm writing something, a short story maybe for a magazine, and it's not specified as either being crime or horror or noir or anything in that area, there would be an undercurrent running through it.

So I've written what some people would call fantasy writing and others would call magic realism, but it's still got darkness running underneath it, it's apocalyptic or it's dystopic in some way. So I can't get beyond my past darkness, it's just there!

Doug Johnstone: But I read somewhere that – you mentioned you had ME at university – and I read somewhere that when you were very young, you were ill as well. I wonder if that's...do you think that's...this is not a psychiatrist's couch situation, but that seems to me if you were ill at a very young age that that might have had something to do with your predilection for the dark?

Alexandra Benedict: I think it's definitely connected. I had meningitis when I was two and remember very clearly being in a fever state and soldiers climbing the walls like ants, when I was hallucinating. And being alone. I remember the lumbar puncture. I remember being blind and deaf during that and afterwards. So I think that early, traumatic stuff like that can't help but impact on the way you perceive the world or at least process it.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. I was interested because your first novel came out in 2013, but you were having short stories published by that point, weren't you?

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Alexandra Benedict: Yeah.

Doug Johnstone: So in sort of various different places. So I'm always interested in how writers get to that stage because that's what aspiring writers are always asking us, isn't it, about *How'd you get your book published?* But it's a much longer journey than people think, I think.

Alexandra Benedict: Oh, it's such a long journey, and while I say that to writers who are at the beginning of their path, that it's exactly that, it's a path, it's a journey, there'll be ups and downs, I don't think anyone truly believes it, they think, *Oh yeah, sure, sure, sure.* But yes, I had, well, it was a poem, I think was my first published work, and that came second in the National Love Poetry Competition.

Doug Johnstone: Okay, a love poem.

Alexandra Benedict: It was a love poem, but involved a motorway bridge and people plummeting to their deaths.

Doug Johnstone: Of course it did, Alexandra!

Alexandra Benedict: Yeah. So it *was* a love poem. And as I say, even the love poetry or romance would end up with some kind of disaster. I also had some short stories published in journals online and in print. I co-wrote a no-budget film that got a best independent film award at the London Film Festival. I just did lots of different things, trying things out because that's how you start, is any way you can.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah. And were there unpublished novels before the published one, like most people have; experiments that are in a drawer forever?

Alexandra Benedict: Very much. My experiment in my drawer was called – it's extremely pretentious, it was literary, well, magic realism really –

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and straight after my Masters in Twentieth-Century Literature, I wrote, *The Madness of Minutiae of an Undercover God*. Yeah.

Doug Johnstone: You can just see that on the table at WHSmith now.

Alexandra Benedict: Yeah, that's going to go in all the supermarkets, isn't it? It's not very good in itself, there's some occasional good phrases, but it is just not a good book. But also, as an agent wrote back to me and said, 'Neil Gaiman is about to release a book that is about gods existing in this world, and I think your one about gods in an English model village may be subsumed into *American Gods*, and not get noticed'; which I thought was a nice way of putting it.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, fair enough. So the first novel, *The Beauty of Murder*, came out in 2013. You did that classic thing, writing about what you know, your own life and a time-travelling serial killer.

But at least it was...I'm saying that as a joke, but actually it was set in Cambridge at university, so you were using a lot of your experience there. Again, coming back to this genre thing, that is a supernatural crime novel, would you call it, how would you describe it, would you even bother trying to describe it?

Alexandra Benedict: Well, the marketing and PR teams sat down with me and while they were trying to work out how to describe it, and so 'speculative crime' or 'speculative thriller', is what they came up with. But yes, it fits into supernatural crime — time travel is currently at least *supranatural*. Yes, I like to put strangeness into crime; as if crime wasn't strange enough in itself.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, I can imagine, that was published by Orion, right, so again, coming back to kindred spirits with me, I don't know how you feel, but I sometimes feel that big commercial publishers... I mean it is their job, but they do struggle to...because they want to pigeonhole you,

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they want you to be very similar to something else they already have or very similar to a trend that's out there on the market. And that doesn't strike me as that fits very well with your kind of writing?

Alexandra Benedict: No, not at all. It's very, very difficult. And I understand their issue is they don't quite know where to situate me. The book I'm doing at the moment has got...is metafictional crime, you know, that broad category. But at least Stuart Turton's come along and made that more of a category.

Doug Johnstone: That's true. Yeah.

Alexandra Benedict: And I think I partially got the deal from pitching the idea, was combining what Stuart Turton with whatever I said at the time. You know, our one-line pitch of: this with this means this. Stuart Turton has helped me in that way. Forged a path.

Doug Johnstone: I can remember I once did...my first deal I got with Faber and Faber, they bought a book and they said, 'Well it's a two-book deal, what's your other book?' And I didn't have anything, no ideas. So I just said, 'Oh, it's *Taxi Driver* meets *Restless Natives*'. And they were like, 'That's great', and then I wrote something completely different. But it's like, you just come...

Alexandra Benedict: It didn't matter.

Doug Johnstone: It doesn't matter.

Alexandra Benedict: They bought it.

Doug Johnstone: Yeah, they bought it, it's great, I love that. But it's weird how you spend a year or two years, a long period of your life writing something, and then you're supposed to reduce it to a single sentence for an elevator pitch, it's quite an odd concept.

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Alexandra Benedict: And it's a completely different skill. When I have creative writing students and clients, and I've also taught the MA in Crime Thrillers, that was at City University, and part of my job when I'm teaching that is writing synopses, elevator pitches, how to boil down your vast world of 80,000 to 120,000 words into maybe ten?

And I have to say, I know this isn't great in many ways, but it does help you to have a concise description of what you are writing, of holding that in your head so you come back to it to see if you've gone majorly off track, maybe.

Doug Johnstone: I feel similar, I know everyone hates writing synopses because they're a pain in the arse. But I quite like doing it at quite an early stage actually, just because it can help you clarify some stuff to get it on the page, and even though it'll change and what you end up writing will be completely different, usually. But it gives you some kind of a map that you can then go off-roading and leave behind.

Alexandra Benedict: Absolutely, I now write quite detailed plans, which then I can use as a synopsis for my agent or publisher. But I quite like having things in place and then inspiration comes while writing, and I can deviate and adjust the plan accordingly. But coming back to something that feels like the skeleton of the story is *really* reassuring for me.

I know some people don't work like that and I admire that as well. But for me, blocking out the beats that the story is structured upon really helps me.

Doug Johnstone: Just coming back to that debut novel, *The Beauty of Murder*, I thought it was really interesting, because it was set in Cambridge and obviously there was a time travel element to it, but what struck me, as something that actually writers are...I'm terrible at trying to work out what my own themes are, or the things that you keep returning to, until someone points them out to you and you go, 'Oh yeah, I do always write about that!'

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But the one thing is that, that sense of place and the idea of ghosts in a place, the physical buildings or whatever it is, or actual items, have a kind of memory and a kind of life that's gone before. That strikes me something that you have returned to again and again in your writing. Is that right?

Alexandra Benedict: Absolutely. I really connect with places and I really like to locate my books in places I know really well, so I can walk through them in my head and feel like I'm touching the walls so I can give descriptions that I find authentic.

So even if I'm describing seventeenth-century Cambridge, it's very easy to imagine seventeenth-century Cambridge because modern-day Cambridge, you could be walking down a path and feel like you're in any time between the fourteenth century and the present, in certain areas. It connects you very viscerally to the past in its stone.

So to be able to write about places that I have connected with, I can touch into the past much more easily and feel well...I don't believe that there are ghosts in the walls, but I believe that places are a container for our own haunts. So if I go back to a place where I've had something horrible happen, then I am thrown right back into that memory.

And I think the idea that that kind of haunting of memory remains, is fascinating, so yes I do return to it again and again in different ways, or also that we are our own buildings, we are our own haunted houses, is something that I like to explore.

Doug Johnstone: Yes. That brings me neatly – it's like a nice segue – brings me neatly to talking about *The Evidence of Ghosts*, which was your second novel, I mean, it's right there in the title — Ghosts. But there's a couple of things going on in that with echoes of the first novel, one is, the fact that the central character is a mudlarker, is doing mudlarking.

So finding old things on the shores of the Thames in London, and then

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also the thing that I loved most about it was the funeral director, Frank – I’ve written a series of books about funeral directors now, so that pricked up my attention, but yeah – so the funeral director, Frank, who sees ghosts – I hate this question! – where did the idea for that come from, because it’s so smart in this idea, like, just what you said, about how we haunt ourselves, I thought it was really fascinating.

Alexandra Benedict: I love ghost stories, always have done, and I got the idea for *The Evidence of Ghosts* because the main character, Jonathan, started chatting to me and so I asked him questions; and that was how that world started to come through, it was basically as if I was having an interview with my main character.

So I thought that was one of the...when you say ‘Where do ideas come from usually?’, usually it’s ‘Well, I don’t know really’, but that one was... he just popped up and started *chatting*. And he’s really lovely, I really like Jonathan, I miss him. Yeah.

Doug Johnstone: That’s fair enough. And are you going to return to him, are you going to write more about him?

Alexandra Benedict: Well, I think in the pragmatic sense that there are readers who want more and I’d love to write more, but you have to sell quite a lot for publishers to want to continue something. And I most certainly have not, so I’m writing a script of it at the moment.

Doug Johnstone: Oh, are you? Okay, cool.

Alexandra Benedict: So at least I get to spend time with Frank and Jonathan and Maria, and explore their world even if nobody else ever finds out about it.

Doug Johnstone: Well, that’s the other thing that I found fascinating about that book was Maria, who was born blind, but then had her sight return,

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but then was wearing a blindfold and so she's effectively a blind character in the book. And I mean, you've spoken very eloquently about, you know, using the senses in language and you, I believe, have synaesthesia, right? — Which is the mixing up of the senses.

And that seems another thing that you come back to a lot in all your writing, is that using the other senses, the many other senses. And is that a deliberate point in this book, that you were going to have this central character who was using the other senses and not sight?

Alexandra Benedict: Yes, it came from...I went to a lecture that was about people who were born without sight, who then through technological advancement are then able to see, and how traumatising that is and how difficult that is for the brain to connect the senses in a different way. Because those pathways haven't been forged from the visual side of things. And having synaesthesia means that I connect to the senses in a way that is unusual.

So I wanted to harness that, really, and as a challenge to have a character's POV, who doesn't use sight, who is experiencing the world through other senses, whether that's through the five dominant ones that we know about, everyone knows the five senses, or all the other...the internal ones, the proprioception and all the ones that are difficult to say.

They're about an internal sense of balance and our placement within the world, we sense lots more than we realize. So it felt like a challenge and it felt like it would pick up on my own biases as well. And when I'd do a check through, I would find that something had slipped through that was based on visuals.

So it was an interesting point as well as really wanting to represent *her* well. And while I wasn't blind for very long, I felt a kinship with her, that I understood a tiny, *tiny* part of her experience.

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RLF outro: That was Alexandra Benedict in conversation with Doug Johnstone. You can find out more about Alexandra on her website at akbenedict.com. And that concludes episode 417, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 418, in the second part of this interview, Alexandra speaks with Doug about writing in the *Doctor Who* Universe, co-writing with her partner and juggling multiple projects.

We hope you'll join us.

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