

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 418

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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 418 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second part of a two-part interview, Alexandra Benedict speaks with Doug Johnstone about writing fiction and audio drama in the *Doctor Who* universe, co-writing works such as the Lovecraft-themed audio drama *Arkham County* with her partner Guy, and her sometimes stress-inducing habit of having many writing projects on the go simultaneously. You can hear the first part of this interview in our preceding episode number 417.

**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 Four 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

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theatres. She lives in Kent with her partner, their daughter, and their dog, Dame Margaret Rutherford.

So I want to talk about *Doctor Who* and about writing for audio. So you're a lifelong *Doctor Who* fan, right?

**Alexandra Benedict:** I am, yes.

**Doug Johnstone:** And you have been writing *Doctor Who*, you've got one novel, so *The Stone House* came out in 2016, right, which was a kind of spinoff of the *Class* show, that was a BBC Three series, and this was a world... I'm not a huge *Doctor Who* fan, I certainly was as a kid, but I haven't really reconnected with it as an adult so much.

But in research and chatting to you, I knew there was a big *Doctor Who*...a huge audience for this stuff, the fandom. But I wasn't aware of how much content there is out there...

**Alexandra Benedict:** Oh yeah!

**Doug Johnstone:** In terms of hundreds of novels and all the audio stories and audio books and all that stuff. And you've written something like nine different audio stories, I think?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Well that have come out. Yeah, I've written more, but they haven't come out yet.

**Doug Johnstone:** Right. Okay. So how did you get into this world, how did you manage to sneak your way in here, it sounds great!

**Alexandra Benedict:** Oh, and it is sneaking in, and this is how I always encourage new writers to go to conventions and things and conferences. I met someone through...I did a Women in Film and TV...I was on their mentoring scheme because I want to write for TV and someone on there

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happened to do filming for *Doctor Who Confidential*, and so she put my name forward to a producer and at the same time I'd met someone else who put my name forward to the same producer, because I just didn't stop talking about *Doctor Who*.

And so it was out of the blue I got an email saying, 'I've just read *The Beauty of Murder*. I know that you love *Doctor Who* and that comes through in *The Beauty of Murder*. Would you like to write a *Torchwood* audio drama?' And I'd listened to the Big Finish audio dramas since they came out, and have read the *Target* novels and the *Virgin* novels and anything that I could, really, to do with *Doctor Who* since I was very, very young. So to be asked to write for that world was probably one of the biggest moments of my writing life. Once you are *in* somewhere, it's so much easier! I'd never even thought of writing to them to say 'can I?', because I never thought I'd be able to, which is faulty logic in itself.

But, if someone recommends you then that's how you get in. But people need to know about you first to recommend you. And that kind of circular logic, locks so many people out, it's very hard. So I was very lucky to, as you say, 'sneak in' because I do feel it's like that, it's like I've found the spare key to the TARDIS, and I'm still hiding out there, because it's so big they're not going to find me.

**Doug Johnstone:** But there's a couple of things like, so when you get that email obviously your first answer is 'yes, of course I'm going to do this'. But there's a couple things that I'm interested in. So had you written anything for audio, for radio or anything like that beforehand, because that's going to be quite a steep learning curve, isn't it, so was it all panic stations?

**Alexandra Benedict:** It was, yeah. I'd written *Doctor Who* scripts since I was very young, since I was five. But I didn't actually know how to structure them or to do anything really. The producer, James Goss, who writes lots and lots for *Doctor Who* and is a *brilliant* writer, over all, novels and...he's fantastic. He was very good at knowing that I hadn't done this

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before, so giving a structure. So even things like: generally no more than four pages to a scene, to have about twenty-five scenes in a one-hour audio; just kind of things that are to hang a structure upon.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah. The sort of the shorthand things, that's the kind of stuff that's really useful.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Absolutely, completely. And he also sent scripts from recent audio dramas that were both related to that range I was writing for, but also other things. So I could try and assimilate some of the tips and then as I wrote it...and I didn't situate the characters well at the beginning, because in audio you obviously have to show the reader, without shouting it at them, where someone is, when someone is, what they're doing, who else is there, in the shortest amount of time and the fewest sounds possible.

And that takes quite a while to get used to, for it to be smooth rather than, okay, how can I say they're in this different room that's got a clock?

**Doug Johnstone:** Is that something that you have to be considering as well: the sort of sound design of what happens as well, is that something you have to when you're doing the script stage or not?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Completely. I was surprised by the extent to which that's required and it varies depending on which company you work for, but generally the writer gets to be very prescriptive about sound effects. So you always start with FX and what a listener will be able to hear, and what kind of room it's in that would affect the sound.

And I loved that because I can hear what's happening in my head really easily, so I get more of a control by getting out what's in my head. And I found that bit probably the easiest part of starting to write for radio, because I could hear it already.

**Doug Johnstone:** Sure. The other thing that strikes me about sort of stepping

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into that world is, you know, there's obviously constraints because you're writing about characters that you haven't created. So do you get given... because there's all sorts of different strands of course, you know there's *Rose Tyler* and *Torchwood*, you mentioned, various different *Doctor Who* things. And so do you get given a *bible* or do they have people, like some guy who just checks it and goes, 'No, twenty-five years ago this happened, so that can't happen', and stuff like that — how does it work?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Well, kind of, but also the people who write *Doctor Who* for audio dramas, they have their own internal bible. So I know an awful lot about *Doctor Who*, and I have watched so much about...I've seen *Torchwood* many times over, I've seen every *Rose Tyler* episode many, many times. So I've already internalised that information and there might be something that is a continuity issue or that there's a timing or dating or something that would contradict something that came out in 1967 and we've lost that programme. Or something like that where, if you go online, someone will have written about it. So someone will have, will have talked about a timing discrepancy.

So luckily the geeks of the world help you out for the trivialities, not that they would see them as trivialities...but the smaller aspects. Otherwise you probably wouldn't be doing it if you weren't an obsessive and well, I'm autistic, so I retain everything. So that's really handy when I'm going, *Okay, so how does this situate this story within the context of everything that's happened in Doctor Who since 1963, including the novels and all the audios?* And while that's not comprehensive, it's useful to be able to go into my vault for *Doctor Who* in my head, and have a wander in there.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah. And I guess that experience, I mean, because, you know, you said you built up a lot of experience writing for the audio world and *Doctor Who*, but then there's other things that you've done that I want to talk about as well. One of which was *Arkham County*, which I loved, I didn't realize you'd written that – and I've got an Audible thing, so I was like, *Oh, okay, I get to listen to that, it's great!* – which you co-wrote

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with your partner Guy, is that right? And it's obviously based on H. P. Lovecraft's world, effectively, but it's a sort of...how would you describe it, horror? How would you describe it?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Definitely horror. Yes. I've also...I changed lots of the characters and together we came up with more of an overarching world, that was our world meets Lovecraft, and set in the modern day. Yes, that was the best fun. And writing with Guy is just brilliant, it's so much fun. I love it.

**Doug Johnstone:** That's so good! I know a couple of other writers who write with their partners and I don't have a writer for a partner, so it's a world that I can't even comprehend it. But I mean, everyone seems to love it, so why not?

**Alexandra Benedict:** I just think it's brilliant.

**Doug Johnstone:** Is it like a sounding board, do you work as each other's sounding boards, is that how it goes?

**Alexandra Benedict:** We sit down and talk about it all through first, because we've written a few things together, including *Children of the Stones*.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, I want to ask about that, don't worry.

**Alexandra Benedict:** So we talk it all through and then we just pass it back and forth. So, ideally by the time we've given it in, nobody would be able to tell who's done what. We have a similar style in some ways, and each of us has different strengths, so we take on different parts. But you wouldn't be able to say, 'I wrote episode one and Guy wrote episode two'. We made sure we've both got something in every episode.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah. One of the things I really loved about *Arkham County* was that it reminded me of your earlier novels; you're not afraid

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of multi-stranded narrative. So I mean, we're going into lots of POVs effectively and getting lots of people's stories.

Is that something that's always appealed to you? It feels like a kind of... more like an almost Dickensian overview, I mean, it's not an omniscient narrator, but it's a bunch of different POVs, so it feels like that, you're looking to try and paint a broader world, if that makes sense.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yes, I *love* to be able to see something and feel something from other perspectives. So to be able to dip into other people's heads and know the way they observe and experience the world is fascinating to me. It also appeals to my ADHD brain where I'll get bored if I'm with one person too long.

**Doug Johnstone:** Fair enough.

**Alexandra Benedict:** So I can then skip and get myself back to writing if I go into another voice.

**Doug Johnstone:** One final thing to ask about *Arkham County*...Stanley Tucci, oh my God!

**Alexandra Benedict:** I *know!* When we found out that it was going to be Stanley Tucci...*YES!*

**Doug Johnstone:** So good. Oh my God! That's hilarious...

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yeah, I know, and hearing him do it as it came through was a real joy. Going: 'Yeah! That's even better than I imagined you doing it. Well done Stanley!'

**Doug Johnstone:** Well done that man! He can probably act a bit, can't he?

**Alexandra Benedict:** I think he's alright!

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**Doug Johnstone:** He's all right, does okay! You mentioned there *Children of the Stones*. I thought that was terrific, your adaptation as well for the BBC.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Thank you.

**Doug Johnstone:** So I'm of an age where I knew the original on TV, it's kind of a landmark; a dark, weird thing for kids, effectively.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yeah, it's so strange, it's really horrible!

**Doug Johnstone:** So how did that...one of the clever things I thought was how this was reframed. It was a very 21st-century version of it, and the central character is sort of doing a podcast, so it was feeding...it was almost kind of meta, wasn't it? A little bit, because she's doing a podcast *about* weird things, that kind of thing.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yes, yes.

**Doug Johnstone:** Which I love as well, because I grew up with *Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious World*...

**Alexandra Benedict:** ...absolutely...

**Doug Johnstone:** ...all that sort of stuff: unexplained phenomena. So how did that come about, did you have...was it a contact through the *Doctor Who* stuff, or did you just pitch it, how does that work come to you?

**Alexandra Benedict:** That was through Bafflegab, the production company who made it. I had worked for them because they had heard my *Doctor Who* stuff and then asked me to adapt an M. R. James story. So I'd done that for them, which went out on Audible. And then he came to me and Guy and said, 'The rights are available for *Children of the Stones*. I'd like you to take them on.' And we go, 'O-kay! Wah! Thank you!' which was another one of those things, I didn't pitch for it.



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Usually with Radio Four, it's quite a drawn-out process where you get through various stages and pitch ideas and get through to shortlisted and then you have to write a lot more. But this was just, 'Can you do this?' and 'Here's some money'. So, I love *Children of the Stones* anyway, so it was a joy.

**Doug Johnstone:** This sounds like I've done this deliberately like a proper interviewer, but the thing that I loved about it – well, there's all sorts of things but it was so good – you mentioned in it quite early on about the idea of objects, inanimate objects, having ghosts, ghostly memories. It's the psychometry and the stone tape theory, which I was just like, *Oh, this is so good, this is exactly what Alexandra likes to write about.*

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yeah, it is. Yeah.

**Doug Johnstone:** So it's just totally in your wheelhouse, you were able to use that because obviously touching the stones takes the characters back in time. I thought *That's so good* — that must have been so much fun to write.

**Alexandra Benedict:** It was really fun to write and I didn't know that Reece Shearsmith would be one of the actors in it either. So when I found that out and how brilliantly he did it too. Brilliant. Yeah, I loved it, I'm very proud of that one.

**Doug Johnstone:** He was so good as well, he's so good, like he is in everything, but yeah, he was just absolutely perfect for it. So more recently, you're back in the novel game with – back in the game! – back in the novel game with *The Christmas Murder Game*, which just came out last year, obviously at Christmas.

It felt quite different, I think, from stuff that you had written before. I don't know how you feel but it's clearly a kind of homage to the golden age of crime — the locked room kind of thing. How did that thing come about, because that seems like a very...slightly tangential thing for you in terms of themes and topic.

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**Alexandra Benedict:** Completely! I was very lucky in that Katherine Armstrong, who at the time was quite high up at Bonnier Zaffre, I've met her at various conventions and conferences and things around crime writing, and she liked *Beauty of Murder* and *Evidence of Ghosts* and we'd talked about working together for a while, and she just rang me up and said, 'I've got this idea of a game at Christmas in a snowed-in country house, very Christie, but set now. And I want it to be clever and have lots of clues, and I really want you to write it for me. *Would* you write it for me?' It's a kind of dream scenario really!

**Doug Johnstone:** There's quite a theme going on here, Alexandra, people just phone you up and offer you amazing gigs!

**Alexandra Benedict:** Well, and I encourage that, for anyone listening!

**Doug Johnstone:** Any producers or TV executives out there?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yeah, just ask me, and I'll probably do it. So that was one of those, *Oh my God! Excuse me! Yes please. Yes, Katherine.* So, I *did* and what I loved is that I could do something slightly different while still...the geeky part of me that read Agatha Christie at seven and eight and consumed all of her works and every other Golden Age crime by the time I was sixteen. I could channel that part of me.

And it's a challenge to write something that is in some ways cosy, but that has some kind of edge and darkness running underneath it. And it gave me an opportunity to write in a different way, which I really liked; it feels like both a beautiful writing exercise and a way of getting across other sides of me.

**Doug Johnstone:** You mentioned earlier on, you do sort of fairly substantial planning, but this must have been...I mean, plotting wise, did you have all this nailed down, you must have done I would've thought?

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**Alexandra Benedict:** I did, yeah.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, because it's intricate to say the least. It's like a beautiful, you know, like a beautiful Chinese puzzle or something, I just thought it was so *smart*. But that was something where I was reading it thinking, *Yeah, she must have had this all worked out beforehand*.

**Alexandra Benedict:** I did, I had an exhaustive plan in place before I had... well, I had the first and last line written because that's what I tend to do before I have anything else. But yes, there was a sixteen-page plan. With how it all intersected and the themes that would be coming through. I wrote the sonnets, the poems are the clues, and I wrote that before I started the actual writing as well.

**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, and it's worth saying if anyone hasn't read it, that there's games within the game in the book as well, because you've got, like, word puzzles and anagrams going on in a sort of metafictional way. And also the thing that made me laugh out loud was the acknowledgements are a word search, which I just thought was the best idea. I mean, it's a great book, but that made me laugh so much. I was like, *Oh, that's so cool, oh my god, I wish I'd thought of that*.

**Alexandra Benedict:** It's really good because then you don't have to worry about the wording either. You just put the names in. It's fun. So...it solved many things.

Yeah. I don't, I don't quite know how I suddenly got the idea that it would be really fun to put in anagrams of things that the reader would spot. But it's probably the thing that people have liked the most, which I'm not sure what that says, but people really like looking for it.

So I'm writing another one at the moment, and that's got word games within it as well. And it's really fun to work out how to try and work those anagrams in without them standing out too much, which is not easy.

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**Doug Johnstone:** Yeah, yeah, I can imagine. You mentioned that you're writing another one just now. I mean, I read somewhere that you always have several projects on the go at once. Is that how you like to have it, you like being able to dip into various things or how does it work?

**Alexandra Benedict:** I generally have about five or six different things going on at once. So at the moment I'm in the middle of writing three commissioned short stories, two radio scripts, the next Christmas mystery and a few other novels, that I've got, that are always bubbling away. That's not the most I've had on, or the least, but that's quite normal for me; I need to have lots of different things going on, otherwise my brain starts being too hyperactive.

**Doug Johnstone:** Do you need to spend a lot of time on one in a rota or is it literally day to day: one day, one thing, one day, another thing? How do you decide, do you just panic until the deadline's really almost there?

**Alexandra Benedict:** Yeah, that one. Yeah, deadline.

**Doug Johnstone:** That sounds familiar.

**Alexandra Benedict:** And obviously when there's lots of different things, there's lots of different deadlines, which means my adrenaline is in a bad way. And I have high blood pressure as a result of permanent stress but I also don't quite know how to not be like that. Partly because I'm neurodivergent and it's how my brain works. But it'd be good to try and marshal that rather than just lurch from deadline to deadline.

**Doug Johnstone:** And is there anything else that you *haven't* been asked randomly to do, with a random phone call, that you would love to do? Let's just try and manifest it, put it out there in the world!

**Alexandra Benedict:** Oh, brilliant, that's a great idea. I really want to write for TV. I want to write *Doctor Who* for TV, obviously. But I also would like to have original series and adaptations of my crime novels on TV.

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**Doug Johnstone:** Great, that's going to be happening a couple of years now. Now that we've said it out loud. Someone's going to...

**Alexandra Benedict:** That's the way it works, isn't it? It will just seem to go...*pop!* I won't have to do anything.

**Doug Johnstone:** That's definitely how this business works! Listen, Alexandra, it's been absolutely brilliant talking to you. I think that's been really fun. I've really enjoyed it. I hope you've had a good time.

**Alexandra Benedict:** Oh, I have pretty much. I've laughed a lot.

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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](http://akbenedict.com). And that concludes episode 418, which was recorded by Doug Johnstone and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 419 Ian Ayris shares the important role that stories have played as companions during dark times, and Elizabeth Cook explores how losses sometimes become gains.

We hope you'll join us.

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