

# Writers Aloud

## Episode 442

---

**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 442 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Alan Jenkins speaks with John Greening about winning the Forward prize, the moment he knew he would spend his life writing poetry, and the role of loss and death in his work.

**John Greening:** Alan Jenkins was born in 1955 in Kingston upon Thames and studied at the University of Sussex, which he's described as a happy experience. He spent much of his life in London, working at the *Times Literary Supplement*, where he was Deputy Editor and Poetry Editor until 2020, when he left to work on a new poetry collection and a study of H. Phelps Putnam.

His first book, *In the Hot-House*, appeared in 1988 from Chatto, who published most of his full collections, and was enthusiastically received: Edmund White in the *Sunday Times* suggesting that he'd 'rewritten Meredith's *Modern Love* with Verlaine's pen'. It was followed in 1990 by *Greenheart*, and four years later, *Harm*, which won the Forward prize for best collection.

Its successor, *The Drift*, described by Carol Ann Duffy as 'a powerful, erudite, sexy collection', was a Poetry Book Society choice and was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot prize. Soon after this, Alan Jenkins was

# Writers Aloud

made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, there was an American *Selected*, and in 2005 came *A Shorter Life*, the same year he received a Cholmondeley award.

Clutag Press brought out his collection, *Revenants*, in 2013. The year after came *Paper-Money Lyrics*, from Grey Suit Press, one of several chapbooks he's published in recent years. His preoccupation with the sea led to *Marine*, a collaboration with John Kinsella, published by Enitharmon in 2015. *White Nights*, a volume chiefly of translations from the French, appeared in America in 2018.

As editor, he's produced selections of Peter Reading and most recently of Ian Hamilton. He's taught creative writing in America and Paris and was poet in residence at St. John's College, Cambridge. Alan Jenkins is RLF Writing Fellow at City University of London.

Well, nice to be chatting to you Alan, here in London. Where and how did the poetry begin, would you say?

**Alan Jenkins:** I can date it almost precisely to my third year at school, at secondary school: it was a hot summer afternoon in a rather kind of airless classroom, and the English master read 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', T. S. Eliot. And, in some extraordinary way – this is going to sound probably mad – but I kind of knew what I was going to do, for the rest of my life.

I knew what my life was *for* in some way. I wanted to do *that*. I don't mean I wanted to rewrite 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' word for word like a character out of Borges or something, but I wanted to...I wanted to write poems, and I've wanted to ever since.

Now I know a lot of teenagers decide at some point that they want to write poems, and it's usually because of heartache or problems with their parents or one aspect of teenage misery or another. But I wanted to do it from that moment and never stopped wanting to do it.

# Writers Aloud

The wanting changed, and the understanding of what it is that I wanted to do changed, but not the actual...not the idea that I somehow was going to write poems. And that was what I was going to do with my life, whatever else happened and whatever else I did with my life, I was going to do that. So, you know, in a way it was an extraordinary feeling because life was sort of solved for me. It sounds...again, it sounds a bit crazy, but so many of my friends, really, not at that point – because I think very few of us had started thinking about it at that age – but later on, when I got to university and I was doing my university course surrounded by people who hadn't got a clue what they wanted to do, or what they were going to do when they left university.

But I knew, you know, I'd known for years what I was going to do. It all seemed to make things very, very clear to me that I was going to write poems. I don't mean I was going to *be a poet* or whatever that means, but I was going to write poems. And so everything else, whatever else happened was just going to be a kind of cover story.

**John Greening:** Did you ever tell the teacher that he'd had that effect on you, the teacher?

**Alan Jenkins:** I did many years later; I ran into him, of all places in Brighton, I'd gone down to Brighton for the day, long after I left university, Where...you know, I lived in Brighton while I was at university at Sussex. But I'd gone back to Brighton because it was a beautiful day or something, and I'd gone to get some sea air. And who should I run into but this chap, Charles Potter was his name, Charlie Potter.

**John Greening:** Is it the same one who appeared...there's quite a recent poem, a birthday poem, longish poem?

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes, 'Lines for a Birthday'.

**John Greening:** Yes. Wonderful poem.

# Writers Aloud

**Alan Jenkins:** And he's the teacher in that.

**John Greening:** Dantesque...

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes, he just returns in that poem as a sort of embodied spirit of teaching in a way. You know, I've altered, I haven't tried to reproduce, I haven't tried to characterise him or make him exactly as he was, in the poem, but I've tried to give him... I suppose what I've tried to express in that poem via him, is what he gave to me.

And anyway, yes I ran into him on the prom at Brighton, and I said 'Charlie', we greeted each other, he remembered me, he remembered who I was. And he said, 'Oh, I've seen you've been working at the *TLS*', and I said, 'Yes I have, that's right'.

And I said, 'More importantly to me anyway, I've been writing poems and publishing them for years, and it's all down to you.' And he looked a bit startled, I don't know whether he then felt, *Oh gosh, I wish that hadn't happened* or what!

**John Greening:** What tends to move you to poetry, people, places, books... ideas?

**Alan Jenkins:** Not ideas, I can rule that one out. I don't think really I've ever thought of poems as either dependent on, or a useful way of conveying ideas as such or what I tend to think of as ideas. Indeed, there's a wonderful story that you probably know, or some of your listeners may know about the French poet Mallarmé, the nineteenth-century poet Mallarmé, who was very, very friendly with the painter Degas, Edgar Degas.

And Degas and Mallarmé would get together quite regularly. And at one time, Degas came round to see Mallarmé in his apartment. And as they were chatting about this and that, Degas said, just sort of more or less out of nowhere, 'Oh, Mallarmé, tell me, have you any good ideas for poems lately?'

# Writers Aloud

And Mallarmé said, ‘My dear Degas, poems aren’t made with ideas, they’re made with words.’ Now it sounds like a very simplistic and obvious thing, but you know, to me it was all-important because it chimed with exactly the way I feel about the writing of poems. It starts and ends with words, with a phrase, with a tune, I call it that, a tune in my head that is made by words, not notes.

But that I know I have to find words for, that particular tune until it’s gone away, until I’ve done it, until it’s on...until the words are on the page and the tune is on the page. While it’s in my ear or in my head, I have to do something about it. And sometimes the tune will attach itself to, as you said, a person or a place, certainly, more importantly, I think for me, a memory, of often a remembered person, or a remembered place or indeed a specific object, an object that suddenly sort of swims up out of nothing, out of the unconscious.

**John Greening:** One or two incidents, your mother slipping into the river, you’ve mentioned a few times?

**Alan Jenkins:** Oh yes, certainly that incident in particular occurs through the work, through my poems, as I think you’ve obviously noticed. And there are one or two others, yes; I mean, that actually happened, and I was extremely small, and my mother and I were walking by the river one afternoon in Richmond, as we sometimes did, we often did.

I think this was even before I went to school, but even after I started going to school, we would sometimes head over to Richmond. We didn’t live that far from Richmond, and go over there for a walk by the river on a sunny afternoon, you know, after school, my mother loved it there, and I loved it there.

**John Greening:** And you write about it a lot, you come back to the Thames again and again.

# Writers Aloud

**Alan Jenkins:** Indeed, it's all from that moment when she...when I was so small and I watched her in a kind of frozen horror, slipping down the... it was a muddy embankment and we were walking on what apparently was a safe path, but she must have been distracted or missed her footing because the next thing I knew, she'd let go of my hand, she was holding my hand, she'd let go of my hand and I was frozen on this path watching my mother slipping rather in a panicky way down this muddy looking embankment towards the water, and of course it was an absolute horror for me; she stopped herself, she was able to grab...grab some weeds, tough riverside weeds on the bank and just haul herself back up rather, rather awkwardly and dust herself off, you know, and dust herself down as if nothing had happened. But I think it was a scary moment for both of us.

And from that moment on – I wasn't to know it, of course, at that point – but the river has always played a very important part of my life. Later on...it has always been a source of fun and pleasure and a beautiful place to be when I was a boy, you know, I loved it. And then, when I was of an age when I could understand how it worked and what you had to do, my father started taking me fishing in Twickenham and Teddington, where we fished in those days.

**John Greening:** Just thinking about that, you had those two early Chatto books, very distinctive covers they've got, *Hot-House* and *Greenheart*, how do you look back on those now?

**Alan Jenkins:** Oh, well, I'm glad you like covers, I was able to...Chatto were really fantastically good to me in those days, I was able to choose the covers myself. They would actually say, 'Is there anything you've got in mind for the cover of this?' and in both cases I had very, very strong something in mind. I knew exactly what I wanted on the covers of those books. And I was lucky enough to be able to have them.

I think there are poems in both books, and particularly in the first book, that I would now...you know, it's already...it's what, twenty-five, thirty

# Writers Aloud

years later, and I wouldn't now try to do anything about them, but I wish perhaps, that I had maybe written them a little bit differently or maybe what I'm trying to say is that I wish in some way that I could...I wanted to write them as it were in, you know, I wanted to do the poems that I wanted to do then, but knowing what I know now and being able to have...having that much more skill, or a little bit more skill in being able to convey what I hoped or wanted to convey. I mean, they're very...I would say they were quite rough and ready.

**John Greening:** They're quite formal though, even from the start, there's rhyme and metre and they're....

**Alan Jenkins:** Yeah, there's rhyme, not so much metre, I mean, the metres are very, very, very varied, variable. I mean, there is some metre there's... as in a lot of English so-called 'free verse' – *English*, English free verse, not American free verse – but as in a lot of English free verse, there is a submerged iambic pentameter, there is a submerged iambic beat going on.

Not always pentameter obviously, because some of the lines are very long, some of them are very short. Edmund White, whom you mentioned, was very, very, very flattering...nice about the book, said to me when he first read them...he referred everything to music, Edmund, music was his passion really, and he refers everything to music.

And he said, 'Oh, you know, you have this way, you really drop a flat very beautifully'. And I didn't know that I'd been dropping flats, but I knew what he meant. And yes, I think what I meant...what I was really talking about when I referred to the tune that I hear, or heard, it was a very different kind of tune that I heard in those days.

Perhaps that's the kindest thing I can say about myself, I heard a different music and I tried to write that music. And now it would be a very different kind of music, and it *is* a very different kind of music. But I don't think...I'm not, as I say, horrified or too ashamed, there are one or two poems that I probably wish I hadn't published.

# Writers Aloud

**John Greening:** The music apart, Michael Hofmann said of your poetry, I'm not quite sure when he said this, but he said, you write poetry at 'a pitch of risk and candour one doesn't often see these days', is he right? And does it become more difficult to do that?

**Alan Jenkins:** He said that about *Harm*.

**John Greening:** Did he? Right, which was the next book after the two I've talked about.

**Alan Jenkins:** Which was my third book, yes. Now that was actually a comment he made about *Harm*. And I think...again, I was delighted and gratified that he heard that or had seen that and I was certainly aware that...again, you know, to use this music metaphor, I was hearing a different music when I wrote *that* collection.

And it was a riskier collection in the sense that I suppose I was just...I felt that I was walking more naked than I had done before. I was discussing or I was writing about things that were very, very acutely personal to me, that had come more or less straight...directly out of my own personal romantic history at that time.

**John Greening:** Yeats talked about sex and the dead being the only worthwhile subjects.

**Alan Jenkins:** Sex and death, yes.

**John Greening:** That may apply perhaps to your book?

**Alan Jenkins:** Well, yes, I suppose, possibly, in a way it would apply just as much to my first book. Certainly, you know, the death aspect, took up the sort of last third or quarter of the book, and all the poems in that part of the book were about my father dying, and my father's death. And it wasn't terribly personal. It certainly wasn't autobiographical, although it was thought to be.



# Writers Aloud

And I was read, or reviewed anyway, as if I had written about my own history and I hadn't. I'd written a lot about what I'd noticed going on among my generation, in my generation of young people, which of course, there was a lot of sexual liberation, and there was a lot of promiscuous sexual activity in my generation, and the people I was at school with, the people I was at university with in particular, and afterwards, and the people I first went to work with.

I don't mean they were all jumping in and out of each other's beds, but sexual liberation was something that I, at the time, thought of as a kind of...I mean it was clearly a boon, it was clearly a plus in so many ways, and I always thought of it as something that my generation had been given as a sort of sop, we had been given sex so that we didn't get politics. And suddenly you could have everything, including a lot of fun.

**John Greening:** You actually have fun with the poetry even when you're writing about bleak things. That's one of the things I like about your work, I mean, with the rhymes: the rhymes are very playful, and it's an important part of poetry that should be playful, I think, isn't it. *Harm* also enabled you to buy a boat I understand, is that right, tell us about that?

**Alan Jenkins:** It, to my astonishment and delight, won a prize. You mentioned it, and it won a Forward prize, *the* Forward prize, for best collection that year. And the prize, then, was to me, the very...handsome sum of £10,000.

I was able to do two things when I was given the Forward prize, I was able to put a deposit down on a tiny flat, and buy a share, not buy the whole boat, but I bought a boat with a friend.

**John Greening:** Seems appropriate there's a great maritime preoccupation in the book?

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes. I'm not a brilliant sailor, but I've always loved actual boats. I just love the feel of them and I love being on them.

# Writers Aloud

**John Greening:** And that comes out in the writing and it continues into the next book, *The Drift*, 2000, the imagery.

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes, probably even more so, I sort of let go on the boat thing in that.

**John Greening:** But there's also a kind of sea change, I think, in the writing in a sense, is it it uses big formal structures and there's a kind of objective seriousness, I think. Not that they weren't serious before, but you seem to go to a different level.

**Alan Jenkins:** It's very nice of you to say that, I hope that may be true.

**John Greening:** Yeah, and there's lots of family in there, there's some lovely poems, a particular favourite of mine is one called 'Patience' about your grandmother. And that wonderful poem, 'Short Straw', could you tell us a bit about that?

**Alan Jenkins:** 'The Short Straw' is about my closest university friend, a man called Keith McCulloch, who I met on the very first day I was at university, you know, feeling a bit shy and sort of out of things and wondering how everything was going to work.

And, well, I was in the queue for a coffee or something in the common room at our college, our school. And I got chatting to this chap who seemed like...let's say he looked not like the common run of people who were milling about in the common room at that time, with all the sort of hippy hair and the velvet gear and all that, sort of seventies, the early seventies look of young people.

Keith was rather formally dressed and sort of much neater, neater kind of tenue, with short hair and a very, very sharp, and I would say almost hilarious but very pointedly ironic manner. And I just took to him, and he must have taken to me because we became I think, almost inseparable.

# Writers Aloud

We all shared a house and those were very happy times for me. Because I felt that I was learning as much from Keith in some ways, in very deep ways, as I was from any of my tutors. I don't mean that insultingly to my tutors who I think were absolutely wonderful and I look back on them with extreme respect, and love for some of them. But I was learning a lot from Keith too, just by being around him and talking to him.

**John Greening:** And that comes over in the poem, which is another elegy of course, because he died, he died soon.

**Alan Jenkins:** He died very, very, very young, at forty-seven, maybe forty-eight, it was an absolutely horrible, incurable disease.

**John Greening:** And the title is a quotation of something he said?

**Alan Jenkins:** He said, when he got his diagnosis...I was told this, his wife told a friend, and the friend told me that he'd been given this awful, awful prognosis: he was told he was going to die certainly before he was fifty. I think he was probably about forty-five, discovered he had this illness and he said, 'Oh, it looks as if I've been given the short straw'.

**John Greening:** It sort of carries on actually into your next collection, which is called, *A Shorter Life*.

**Alan Jenkins:** *A Shorter Life*, yes.

**John Greening:** That's in 2005. I think you said it was your favourite collection?

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes.

**John Greening:** Again, elegies, focus on your mother, especially that river fall, and the terrifying poem about Ian Hamilton.

# Writers Aloud

**Alan Jenkins:** Well, Ian was a sort of very, very significant person in my life. I mean, a really *profoundly* important person in my life in quite shadowy background ways: he was the first living poet whom I had read, in a little selection of his poems at the back of that very influential anthology, *The New Poetry*, the Alvarez...A. Alvarez anthology.

I devoured the book, you know, I read all the poetry in that book with some absorption. And I really absolutely loved the poems at the back, right at the back of the book, I think he was actually the very last poet in the book, included in the book.

**John Greening:** *The Visit*, was it, that was his big book?

**Alan Jenkins:** *The Visit* was his first book. That didn't actually come out until '71.

**John Greening:** Oh, did it not, right.

**Alan Jenkins:** But the poems in it had been appearing very, very gradually and sparingly throughout the sixties. And by the mid-sixties, he was a very... surprisingly influential figure. You know, he edited this magazine called *The Review*, which was famous at the time for its sort of stern judgments and extremely severe standards for what Ian and his cohort of fellow editors wanted poetry to be.

And they were pretty dismissive about people they didn't rate. So Ian had sort of made himself...I mean, partly through sheer acuity, he was a very acute critic. It was his criticism that really, I think, got him noticed before, long before, his poetry.

And he was a very acute, and I say sometimes very severe, critic. And this, I think, was felt to be a very important element at the time of poetry activity, poetry culture, if you like. So, when he started publishing poems too, I think it was inevitable that he was going to be...some people were going to be just as harsh about him as he had been with them.

# Writers Aloud

And then there were others, of course, who saw in his poetry a great deal of what his criticism had really been aiming for, and struggling to establish as a kind of standard for poetry: brevity, intensity, control, a certain amount of wit, mainly feeling, deep feeling, but accompanied by a deal of technical control.

Now these were sort of things that I realised were important to me in poetry, long before I was capable of realising it, if you see what I mean. Instinctively, I'd been looking for these things, I'm sure partly because I'd been reading Ian's criticism, I'd read some of Ian's essays and these were things that I realised that I wanted in poetry as well.

And then when I read these little poems of his at the back of the *New Review*, I not only found those qualities in them, I found them very memorable, very haunting poems, they haunted me.

**John Greening:** So you have this elegy for him in *The Shorter Life*, where you're waiting for him and he doesn't appear because he's in hospital or died.

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes.

**John Greening:** Going back to the elegies, I see you've written a lot of elegies, what is it about the elegy that appeals? There's a very strong tradition in English poetry particularly, isn't there?

**Alan Jenkins:** Look, I mean, to be a bit personal about it, when a poem is sort of brewing for me, or when I feel that there's a need, I want and need to write a poem, it's usually because of something I've lost.

I mean, Ian...I'll say a little bit more about Ian, if you don't mind, because his criticism was important to me and his poems were very haunting to me, but then I got to know him and I got to know him really by the sort of accident of going to work at the *TLS*. We got on and I was in awe of

# Writers Aloud

him, but at the same time just extremely taken with him as a person, as a companion, a lunch companion.

And he obviously didn't...he wasn't too alarmed by me and, and we started meeting on a pretty regular basis. And we'd have drinks in the evening and sometimes dinners and lunches went on over the years. Until that very, very, very last sad occasion, yes, when we'd arranged to have dinner one evening.

And I went to the appointed place, our usual place, and waited and waited and waited and he didn't turn up. Sure enough, eventually I came home, I realized that he wasn't going to show, came home and then it was only an hour or so later that I got a phone call from his wife, now a widow, to say that he had died that very evening, that very night.

He had been taken rather suddenly into hospital that afternoon and had died the same night.

**John Greening:** It's a very fitting tribute, the poem you wrote.

You've answered my question really, about time at the *TLS* because obviously it contributed. I was going to ask did it contribute to or interfere with your writing life? It obviously did contribute to, but any day job is a problem if you're trying to write, of course, particularly if you're surrounded by books.

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes and no, to write poems you do not need to sit all day. And I don't mean, physically, you don't need to do that, obviously you don't need to do that, but I don't understand this business of having all that time and freedom.

**John Greening:** Hanging around the park as Larkin used to say...

**Alan Jenkins:** Hanging around the park, you know, having all the time

# Writers Aloud

and freedom in the world, who needs that to be able to write something? I think the opposite has helped me: that not having all that much time and feeling a pressure, in the opposite sense, of having to get something down or get something done, when it was so pressing that it had to happen.

**John Greening:** I want to leave time to talk about *Revenants*, which came some years after *A Shorter Life*, but you suggested to me that it's important to you, this book, a very, very fine book from Clutag Press. Much concerned with Englishness, it seemed to me.

**Alan Jenkins:** Yes. As you said, it was published by Clutag, which is a very, very delightful set up in Oxford, run by a poet called Andrew McNeillie. And he'd done a pamphlet of mine, he'd done a chapbook of mine called *The Lost World*. And he just, I think, over a drink on one occasion said, 'Look, would you consider doing a proper, a whole book with us?', a more solid sort of thing. And I said, well, I'd like to because some of the poems that were in the chapbook have...I wasn't necessarily expecting them to, but they had sort of had taken on a bit of a life of their own.

And I'd gone on writing poems in a similar vein, which is very much the vein of Englishness, and I think I'd been trying to look at questions of Englishness as both a myth, a literary myth, if you like, or a cultural myth. I don't think you need to reflect on it too long to realise that a lot of it has been created by England at war.

The English myth can't do without our military history, our military glories, if you see them in that way. I found this something that I was compelled to write about.

**John Greening:** Just want to ask: what about other genres or novels or drama, anything like that. Is that something you have produced or not produced?

**Alan Jenkins:** I've never produced either a play or a novel. I never fancied

# Writers Aloud

my ability to. I was desperate to be involved in some way in the theatre when I was really young. That seemed to just...it fell away a bit, faded away of course, when I started writing poems.

It's sometimes been said to me, in a friendly and encouraging way... people have said to me over the years, 'You really ought to write a novel. Your poems are so novelistic.' And I think, well, it's nice of you to say that because I know you mean to pay me a compliment. But actually you're not paying me a compliment, you're just saying you really only can be bothered to read novels and you don't much care about poetry. It's a double-edged compliment for me.

**John Greening:** Finally, do you have a favourite quotation about poetry?

**Alan Jenkins:** Yeah, I've probably got two or three, but I think the briefest and the most piercing is something said by, of all people, Jean Paul Sartre. He said, 'The poet is someone who refuses to use words.'

✧

**RLF outro:** That was Alan Jenkins in conversation with John Greening. You can find out more about Alan on the Royal Literary Fund website. And that concludes episode 442, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 443, Jamie Lee Searle tells Ann Morgan about unpicking books layer by layer, overcoming the fear of writing, and the practicalities of the creative life.

We hope you'll join us.

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF, please visit our website at [www.rlf.org.uk](http://www.rlf.org.uk).

Thanks for listening.