



## Untold Stories

*Alan Bennett*

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*Untold Stories, Part 4: A Common Assault* contains two more reminiscences from Bennett's life and an essay on the class system, read by Bennett himself. *A Common Assault* describes an incident in Italy when he was mugged, and found himself trying to give a statement to the police in bad Italian. *The History Boys* harks back once more to Bennetts time at school, and shows how the raw material of experience was eventually transformed into the highly-acclaimed stage play *The History Boys*. *Arise, Sir...*, finishes on a light-hearted note, in which Bennett muses on the Honours List in typically iconoclastic mode.

## Untold Stories Details

Date : Published 2005 by Faber and Faber Limited (first published 2001)

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Author : Alan Bennett

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## From Reader Review Untold Stories for online ebook

### Alyson says

I enjoyed the first chapter very much with the story of Bennett family and upbringing. The remaining chapters were mixed. The bits on art left me cold. The final chapter on his illness was interesting. Disappointingly not as amusing as his monologues or plays.

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### Lazarus P Badpenny Esq says

With his usual mixture of pathos and humour Alan Bennett returned with a follow-up to the hugely successful 'Writing Home'. This new book included more diary extracts, writings on the theatre, art, close friends and a touching memoir of his parents. Without doubt, the best book of 2005.

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### Gary Fowles says

Great big door stop of a book, containing various bits and bobs that Bennett has written over the years. There are diary entries, eulogies as well as some pages about the theatre and his work within it. Best of all are the two pieces that top and tail the book; An Average Rock Bun, which covers the period when he was diagnosed with cancer and Untold Stories where he delves into his family history. Witty and moving in equal measure.

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### Pamela says

Thank you, thank you, thank you Alan Bennet for including this anecdote in your memoir:

2 February: A letter from a reader comparing her WW2 experiences of evacuation with mine. She was sent to Grantham and says that Alderman Roberts, Margaret Thatcher's father, was thought to be in the black market and that Maggie used to hang out of her bedroom window and spit on the other children." page 305-306.

And that is exactly what she did to the country. I remember as a child chanting "Thatcher, Thatcher, milk snatcher" when, as Education Secretary, she ended the free milk program for elementary school children. As PM she continued her assaults on the underprivileged while boosting the coffers of the Hooray Henrys.

Untold Stories is a potpourri of Bennett's memoirs, anecdotes, musings on art and architecture, poets and poetry, commentaries on historic monuments, plays, movies, and actors, some more interesting than others. For me I particularly liked his wartime, family, and hospital experiences. This is a tome you can dip in and out of without losing the thread.

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## Cecily says

Second volume of semi-autobiography, augmented with excerpts of diaries from the last 10 years and background to various plays and TV programmes. Lots about his mother's depression and his puberty - the intimacy of revelations perhaps reflecting that he had cancer when he wrote it and maybe thought he wouldn't live to see it published. Also, he's not afraid to show himself in a bad light - eg when he was sometimes unsympathetic to the plight of his parents and other family members. Some desperately poignant observations, which make you want to keep reading. However, in the historical (non-diary) sections, the frequency with which he repeats himself (often within a page or two) and swaps, seemingly arbitrarily, between present and past tense is infuriating and distracting.

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## Mark says

Currently almost half-way through and, to be honest, it's a toss-up as to whether or not I'll get much further. Friends who I write letters to always say that my letters are like Alan Bennett and, having only seen the "Talking Heads" monologues and other Alan Bennett pieces on TV and having read the "Talking Heads" scripts, I've always taken this as a compliment. Having now read the appalling "Smut" and now some of this compilation, I'm not so sure! What a bl\*\*dy joyless b\*stard!

Apologies for the language, but it is necessary to convey the frustrating tedium of this book. It has been quite painful reading, as I recognise myself all too clearly in Bennett's young self, agonising over his sexuality and looking ahead to a life devoid of loving, intimate human contact, walking the streets in a sublimation of desire, (although my walks were taken in the very early morning and with the express purpose of calming myself, in preparation for the inevitable round of bullying at school and the added intention of focussing my mind on the motorway, which ran through the little village I came from and which represented escape and freedom. At the time it only ran as far as Blackburn - hardly the yellow brick road!)

But Bennett absolutely martyrs himself on the altar of his sexuality and sexual inadequacy. I would hope that I temper my more downbeat stories with rather more humour than Bennett shows here. I'm presently struggling through the diaries. With all the people that Bennett knew, you would have thought they would be full of amusing anecdotes but, really, if I have to read about ANOTHER visit to some flipping church and its marvellous burial crypt, I dare say I'll fling the darn book across the room! He also wears his learning like a trophy, taking pleasure in some little literary whimsy or simile that you need to be an Oxford don to comprehend. Now I know how my sister used to feel when I used "big words" that, to me, with my grammar school education, were commonplace but to her were just "showing off"!

And I'm also tired of Bennett's incessant homophobia! The other night, I watched the film of "The History Boys" and at the end, when they are telling what becomes of them in the future, the main Gay schoolboy character, who has become a teacher, says, (words to the effect that,) "Although I don't TOUCH the boys, it's a struggle, which perhaps makes me a better teacher!" Oh, please! this is Bennett's philosophy all over; if you're Gay, you are bound to be at best a potential "kiddie fiddler" and self-denial is the price you have to pay for accomplishment in another area of your life and if I wanted to read such nonsense, I'd be reading the Daily Mail, not a book!

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## **Fiona says**

Bennett's life is always fascinating for me. This is a book I can dip in and out of as an occasional treat. When he writes about his family, there is so much to identify with as so much of their behaviour (e.g., not pushing themselves forward) and their experiences are so typically British.

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## **Sue says**

I read this over several months, dipping in and out.

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## **Hazel says**

This anthology includes diaries, essays and musings on events and personalities. I am more interested in the initial sections, *Untold Stories* and *Written On The Body*, which contain surprisingly poignant descriptions of his family life. I tend to forget that non-fiction writing can be as moving and feel as authentic as a good novel.

He flung open the door on Bedlam, a scene of unimagined wretchedness. What hit you first was the noise. The hospitals I had been in previously were calm and unhurried; voices were hushed; sickness, during visiting hours at least, went hand in hand with decorum. Not here. Crammed with wild and distracted women, lying or lurching about in all the wanton disarray of a Hogarth print, it was a place of terrible tumult. Some of the grey-gowned wild-eyed creatures were weeping, others shouting, while one demented wretch shrieked at short and regular intervals like some tropical bird. Almost worst was a big dull-eyed woman who sat bolt upright on her bed, oblivious to the surrounding tumult, as silent and unmoving as a stone deity. Obviously, I thought, we have strayed into the wrong ward, much as Elizabeth Taylor did in the film of *Suddenly Last Summer*. Mam was not ill like this. She had nothing to do with the distracted creature who sat by the nearest bed, her gown hitched high above her knees, banging her spoon on a tray. But as I turned to go I saw that Dad was walking on down the ward. We had left Mam at a hospital that morning looking, even after weeks of illness, not much different from her usual self: weeping and distraught, it's true, but still plump and pretty, clutching her everlasting handbag and still somehow managing to face the world. As I followed my father down the ward I wondered why we were bothering: there was no such person here. He stopped at the bed of a sad, shrunken woman with wild hair, who cringed back against the pillows. 'Here's your Mam,' he said.

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## **Andrew Harrison says**

This volume is a hodge-podge of diary entries, scripts, essays and reviews. While the writing is of

consistently high quality, few will find all of it interesting. The art crit, for example, did little for me.

The highlight was the opening extended essay; a vivid, affecting description of his family and early life. I also grew up as a member of the “respectable” working class, and I can instantly recognize the attitudes of his parents, especially his mother’s aversion to anything “common”. His mother and mine certainly had that in common.

The diary entries are for the most part witty and observant, though some verge on the dull. Why whinge about Classic FM? Just turn to Radio 3! The following are my favourite entries. It’s September 97 and the British people demand the Queen joins in the hysterical public grief after Diana’s death.

“The poor Queen is to be forced to go mournabout. I suppose it is a revolution, but with Rosa Luxemburg played by Sharon and Tracy.”

“HMQ to address the nation tomorrow. I’m only surprised Her Majesty hasn’t had to submit to a phone-in.”

Bennett's wit, wisdom and unstuffy prose are admirable: anyone who likes Bennett’s work will find much to enjoy here.

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### **Connaire Demain says**

a lovely read, one that you can't help but do in Bennett's broad Yorkshire accent. The stories about his parents are very moving as is his bowel cancer.

Some of the articles in the middle need some knowledge about just who these painters and writers are, but nonetheless are still great to read.

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### **Bob says**

The same stork that brought "The Banquet Years" delivered this as well - what a delight! I waxed enthusiastic about Bennett's "Writing Home" just a few months ago - look forward to more. Part of Bennett's appeal is that of the secondary talents of any generation, augmented, I don't doubt, by the fact that this is best I can hope for as well.

Moving to the completed list - as for the secondary talent remark, the more I read by and about Alan Bennett, the more I regard it as my own failing that I wasn't familiar with him before a year or so ago.

Latest "firmly in the zeitgeist" sighting is his early 60s satirical revue "Beyond the Fringe" being mentioned in Stephen Davis's "Old Gods Almost Dead" history of The Rolling Stones as a cultural event of parallel significance to Muddy Waters' 1958 tour of the UK with the Chris Barber jazz band.

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### **Nick says**

Is there anyone on Earth who could find it in their heart to dislike Alan Bennett? Certainly there must be few in England, since Bennett has become such an undisputed National Treasure that he (or someone pretending to be him) makes regular appearances on the Radio 4 impressions show Dead Ringers. This must be because

he has projected such a consistent image of himself over so many years through his plays, public appearances and interviews. 'Whimsical' is the inevitable adjective, but we could add self-effacing, wry and witty. A couple of other qualities emerge through this patchwork quilt of an autobiography, made up of a few extended memoirs, some (heavily edited) diaries and some essays on art and other writers. One of them is honesty, not the honesty that delights in self-revelation (Bennett's shyness is clearly not just an act) but the honesty that forces out occasional confessions simply because they are necessary for us to understand who Bennett is and the stories he is telling about himself. Because Bennett makes us aware that these confessions do not come particularly easily to him, they seem more valuable. You feel privileged to be given insights into the world of someone who is a very private person with a very public persona.

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### **Margaret says**

I feel a great affection for Alan Bennett, at least the one he offers up in these periodic collections of ephemera. He seems the kind of mildly eccentric, vaguely comic figure you might find lurking around the periphery in a novel by Trollope. (Though I wouldn't find him there myself - I can't bear Trollope, his obsession with the minutiae of life in small cathedral towns drives me mad.) He spends much of his time puttering around London on his faithful bicycle; making daily observations in his diary, the tone of which suggest someone who is slightly disengaged, and not at all unhappily, from the mess and struggle ("living," he says elsewhere, not without some pride, "is something I have managed largely to avoid"); and indulging what are apparently his two favorite pastimes when not writing - visiting historic religious sites, the older and more decrepit the better, and consuming sandwiches al fresco in hedgerows, fields and deserted churchyards with his partner Rupert. He's like something out of *Wind in the Willows*. It's hard to imagine just how he got through the years with *Beyond the Fringe* and the three other outsized and exceedingly messy personalities involved in that, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and house genius Jonathan Miller; they didn't remain especially close after, I don't think, although Miller apparently lives nearby and occasionally stops when he's passing to chat over the front gate, a wonderful image in itself. ("He asks me what I'm reading. It's actually re-reading, and telling him he would hate every page I show him James Lees-Milne's *Through Wood and Dale*. I ask him what he is reading and he shows me *The Origins of the Final Solution*. I say to him we would each of us derive more benefit if I were reading his book and he mine...") But when you watch the film of *FRINGE*, you realize how much of the writing was Bennett's and how cleverly he found a performing niche for himself amid the baroque flourishes of the others, somewhere between a dotty old professor and a psychotic schoolboy. There are very few genuine English eccentrics remaining, not in this true, slightly 19th century sense, and I suspect England is the poorer for it.

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### **Thomas says**

Parts of this were fantastic. It got kind of repetitive. Bennett could have left some of the stories untold.

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### **Patrick Neylan says**

This book won't do anything to tarnish Alan Bennett's reputation as one of Britain's best writers, but it is only this reputation that allows him and his publisher to get away with such a lazy offering.

Bennett thought he was dying of cancer, and this was his way of rounding up his best unpublished work.

However, at the time of writing this review Alan Bennett is very much alive, so the reason for rushing this book to press in this format no longer applies. You've got time now Alan. Go back and do the job properly.

The writing, of course, is excellent. The autobiography (or, more accurately, the biography of the Bennett/Peel families) that takes up the first third of the book is fascinating, warm, touching, funny and poignant. But it stops rather abruptly, leaving Bennett set for a dull career in higher education. And yet, a few years later, he is on Broadway. How did that happen?

And in a story that is so closely focused on Bennett's family, his brother Gordon is mentioned so fleetingly that he seems like Trotsky to Alan's Stalin. Was there a family falling-out?

Then the book lurches into an interminable section of diaries. Friends who read it all tell me there is some good stuff in there, but there was just too much. Yes, I know Bennett is a master at making the banal fun, but there's a limit. Hire an editor, Alan.

And then there are the lit crits and presentations. They are mostly good, but they miss something when shorn of their contexts. So the pieces on 'The Lady In The Van' or 'The History Boys' don't mean much if you haven't seen the shows. Again, some explanation (or an editor) is required.

The same sloppy approach mars the photos. Several people appear with no explanation of who they are, and they don't appear in the text. Maybe George Fenton and Lyn Wagenknecht are so famous that they don't need any introduction. They certainly don't get any. Yet other characters are described in great detail in the stories, and their appearance is deemed important - so why not show their pictures? Bizarrely, there is a picture of an empty chair in a back garden, labelled simply 'Yorkshire'.

This is not so much one book of untold stories as three incomplete books. Bennett didn't think he would have the time to complete them. Now he has, so he should.

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### **Catherine says**

I love the last two words!

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### **Kevin says**

I was so surprised by how much I enjoyed this book. I didn't know much about Alan Bennet before but found his story very interesting and beautifully written. Some of the detail on art was a bit dry but I skipped those bits.

An uplifting experience, loads of bits to read out and remember.

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### **Philip says**

Untold Stories by Alan Bennett is something of a pot pourri. It starts with an autobiographical exploration of social and family origins, and then moves on to include occasional pieces on travel, architecture and art,



copious diaries from 1996 to 2004, reflections on previous and current work and essays on contemporaries, educational experience and culture. The fact that it all hangs together beautifully is a result of its author's consummate skills, both linguistic and perceptive.

Untold Stories takes its title from the autobiographical sketch that opens the book. Alan Bennett was the physically late-developing child of a family in the Armley district of Leeds, a northern English industrial city. His father was a butcher who owned two suits, both of which smelled of raw meat. His mother was the supporting pillar of the household, but was also prone to bouts of depression. As a child, Alan Bennett seemed to dream less than most. Perhaps he is still less than able to admit the breadth of his flights of fancy. "With a writer the life you don't have is as ample a country as the life you do and is sometimes easier to access." This sounds remarkably like *e e cummings*, a character that would not usually be linked with someone as apparently domesticated as Alan Bennett.

But reading all of Untold Stories, the reader is repeatedly struck by how much of the eventual content of Alan Bennett's perceptive, witty and perspicacious writings has its origins within the four walls of the family home. Many of the values, assumptions, attitudes and standpoints, whose apparently unquestioning adoption by his fictional characters lead the listener to question them, arose from a wider family that feverishly tried to be mundane but, like all families, never achieved that goal. The family was, after all, made up of individuals, each of which had his or her own reality alongside unresolved and often shared misgivings. Thus, immediately, a writer has several lifetimes of real and imagined material.

Alan Bennett, perhaps by virtue of having at least potentially crossed some of the chasms of social class that so profoundly divide British society, seems able to comment, often with no more than an occasional word or phrase, on those tentative but agreed assumptions that make us what we are. "Minor writers often convey a more intense flavour of their times than those whose range is broader and concerns more profound."

But this, despite the authenticity of his flavours, is no minor writer. Not for a moment would anyone wish this writer's passing, but there is no doubt that Alan Bennett's work will live on, probably grow in stature as its ability to comment on the changing Britain of the twentieth century develops a sharper focus.

Essentially Alan Bennett comes across as a conservative type. He dresses and even looks like a 1950s schoolboy, visits churches to describe architectural details of selected tombs in Betjemanesque prose, probably doesn't indulge in fusion cooking, shuns recognition, inhabits the inner city but is perhaps never quite at home there. But then there's the anti-establishment side, the satirist, the overt homosexuality and general anti-bigwig mentality. And all of this from a First at Oxford. "But taste is no help to a writer. Taste is timorous, conservative and fearful. It is a handicap. Olivier was unhampered by taste and was often vulgar. Dickens similarly. Both could fail, and failure is a sort of vulgarity, but it's better than a timorous toeing of the line."

Untold Stories is a long read, but one which offers a simple yet sophisticated joy from beginning to end. Alan Bennett revisits topics he has written about in the past. *Miss Shepherd*, *The Lady In The Van* is here, as are his early plays and *Beyond The Fringe*. So are *Talking Heads* and *The History Boys*. But throughout he selects and applies language with much wit and humour to offer apparently ephemeral perspectives on everyday life, perspectives that on reflection are anything but shallow. He is a man of taste, as revealed by his regular revulsion with Classic FM, but he is also an enigma because he keeps listening to it.

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## **Laura Dzelzyte says**

It's a very easy read. Humane and sentimental at times, yet providing utter pleasure.

Alan Bennett has written this autobiographical book when he was diagnosed with cancer in 1997, so naturally it's full of reflection on the past.

I loved the description of his shy working class parents and his father's sartorial preferences: "He had two suits: "my suit" and "my other suit" being the one he wore every day, "my other suit" his was best." I also enjoyed rather sarcastic if not candid account of his aunties, who were striving to raise above their class.

To me this book was a chapter of quintessentially British way of being. Or more precisely - quintessentially middle England.

And easy and pleasant read and very visual, yet the staging at the National Theatre and later in West End, directed by Nadia Fall, to my mind, was less successful.

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