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Phillips, Robert. "Interviewing' Mr. Larkin." The Courier 24.1 (1989): 33-47.

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VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1989

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
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VOLUME XXIV

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“Interviewing” Mr. Larkin

BY ROBERT PHILLIPS

The following commentary contains quotations from letters of Philip Larkin to the author, a letter to George Plimpton, and portions of a published interview with Mr. Larkin. They are used with permission of the Estate of Philip Larkin, and Mr. Plimpton. The Larkin letters and drafts of the interview are now part of the Robert Phillips Papers in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University.

When asked what he thought he looked like, the late Philip Larkin replied, “A balding salmon”. He did not have great self-regard. He was overweight, he stammered, and he had poor eyesight. He was nearly deaf, and he had very little hair. Further, he was appalled at the thought of having to “pretend to be himself”. Consequently, he avoided television cameras, classrooms, and poetry readings. He prided himself upon his privacy and perhaps even upon his uncooperativeness. Like A. E. Housman, he was a Romantic born out of his age.

This enigmatic man wrote some of the best poetry in the English language of the twentieth century. His work had a lasting effect upon readers. After that of Sir John Betjeman, Larkin’s verse was probably the best-loved of any contemporary poetry in the United Kingdom. When his last single collection, *High Windows*, was published in England in 1974, it sold 6000 copies within three weeks. His posthumous *Collected Poems* was published on 10 October 1988, and the first printing of 10,000 was over-subscribed on publication day. There have since been two more impressions, with a total of 22,000 copies sold within three months. During his lifetime Larkin attributed his popularity to the fact that he so often wrote about unhappiness: “Most people are unhappy, don’t you think?” he asked. Once he remarked of his poetry, “Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth”.

After Betjeman’s death, many assumed that Larkin would become the Poet Laureate. But he told his friend, the novelist Kingsley Amis,

that he once dreamed of receiving it—and woke up screaming. The truth was, he had stopped writing poetry in the last decade of his life. He inscribed another friend's copy of *High Windows* with the words, "A few last creaks from an old gate". When he died on 7 December 1985 from cancer at age sixty-three, he was hardly in his poetic prime. Knowing now that he would have held the post only a year, it seems a pity that he did not take on the Laureateship and receive the glory. On television news the day he died, a British commentator announced, "And now, after the break . . . the man said to be the best Poet Laureate Britain never had, dies in Hull".

Larkin disliked giving interviews almost as much as he disliked giving readings. But he did relent on a few occasions. I was fortunate enough—or unfortunate enough, given his waspish temperament—to have conducted what was perhaps his last interview.

For years I had wanted to write a small book about his poetry. I never did. But I decided to put what I knew of his work to use, and came up with the notion of an interview. Accordingly, I approached the editors of *The Paris Review*, on whose masthead I've found my name for some years, and in whose pages the celebrated series of literary interviews, "Writers at Work", appears. They were enthusiastic to go ahead if Mr. Larkin would agree to cooperate. They reminded me, however, that he wasn't called "The Hermit of Hull" for nothing.

I wrote Larkin on 21 August 1981, testing the waters. Were he to reply in the affirmative, I was prepared to go at my own expense to Hull, where he lived and worked as University Librarian. The reply, signed "P. A. Larkin", came on 29 September of that year. On the letterhead, after his name, paraded the following degrees and honors: C.B.E., C. Lit., M.A., D. Lit., D. Litt., F.R.S.L., and F.L.A. He wrote:

Personally, I think I have been interviewed far too much already; I always say the same things, and it must be getting very boring by now. However, *The Paris Review* series is of course known to me, and I can see I should be in good company.

Two points: in the event of my participating, I should like the interview to be conducted by post. You will get much better answers that way. And secondly, as I have no agent,

I am bound to ask whether one gets paid for it, and if so, how much?

This latter point was rather a sticky one. For years *The Paris Review* had paid its interviewers, but not the interviewees. I approached George Plimpton, the editor, who took pause, then replied that Vladimir Nabokov had made a similar request and had been paid. Plimpton came up with a figure I could offer Larkin, and on 20 October 1981 I wrote a second time. Larkin replied on 10 November:

I am glad we can do the interview by post, and await your questions. In self-defense, I had better say that I don't promise to answer anything you care to ask, but I undertake not to plead the Fifth Amendment except in emergencies.

I proceeded to reread all of Larkin's work and compiled a list of eighty-one questions. On 28 November I mailed it. I also enclosed some clippings I thought would interest him—one on his friend, the novelist Barbara Pym, a second on another poet-librarian, Archibald MacLeish.

I did not hear from Larkin until 2 March 1982. I had begun to worry. But he then returned sixteen closely-typed pages with a covering letter: "Here at last is your interview. It has taken rather a long time because to my surprise I found writing it suffocatingly boring."

Immediately I went to work on those sixteen pages. I saw he had answered fifty-six of my eighty-one questions—not bad. But the answers rambled in all directions. I worked to establish a flow and continuity. At times I made his written answers sound more colloquial. I submitted five additional questions before sending him the reshaped interview. I also asked him to explain an allusion which at the time escaped me. He wrote back immediately, "I am a little dismayed by your ignorance of what I have written". I fired back, "After 86 detailed questions, I am dismayed that you're dismayed".

Next, he asked to receive three copies of the issue of the magazine when the interview appeared, claiming, "I have an aged bibliographer to support". I assured him his three copies and, holding my breath, air-mailed him the finished draft of the interview for ap-



Philip Larkin (Photo: Phil Sayer).

proval. My work on the interview being virtually finished, I wrote to ask if he would sign some of my Larkin books, offering to mail them along with return postage.

A long silence ensued. I kept wondering if Larkin were upset with my additions and changes. The silence, it turned out, had nothing to do with what I had done. Julian Barnes, a British novelist, had in recent weeks approached the London office of *The Paris Review* and suggested that *he* interview Larkin. They somehow cleared the project with the managing editor of the New York office, who agreed, "By all means!" Mr. Larkin, suspicious, took it upon himself to write to George Plimpton:

Mr. Barnes's enquiry suggests one of two things: either that *The Paris Review* has got its wires a little crossed, or that Mr. Phillips is misrepresenting himself. In the circumstances, could I ask you to confirm by return that Mr. Phillips is acting on behalf of *The Paris Review*? I will then disillusion Mr. Barnes, and the way would also be clear for you to send me my fee . . . which was to be paid on receipt of typescript. If Mr. Phillips is not acting for you, the situation becomes more complicated.

The managing editor, one Hallie Gay Walden, then wrote Larkin that she had "momentarily forgotten" that they had an interview with him already under way with Mr. Phillips—a confession I'm sure Larkin found less than flattering.

Larkin finally resumed corresponding with me on 5 May of that year and returned the draft interview. He had made additions and corrections in bright pink ink. There were no major changes. I was relieved. His letter did contain this curious reply to my request for his signature: "As regards autographing books, I try to limit this, in order not to devalue items already autographed for friends. But if you would like to send one book I will sign it for you." I thought this rather ungenerous, considering the extent of our shared work on the interview. Nevertheless, I posted *High Windows* to Hull. It was returned chastely signed, "Philip Larkin". Nothing more.

While preparing the interview for publication, I had written Larkin and asked him for a photograph. He replied that he liked Fay Godwin's photo, but did not himself have a print. His New York publishers did not have one on file, I discovered, but it had appeared on the jacket of one of his books. I had the jacket photographed, and sent one print to *The Paris Review* and one to Mr. Larkin. With the photograph, the typescript of the interview, and a facsimile page of Larkin's manuscript of "The Whitsun Weddings", the interview was ready to be considered for publication.

I have since heard that the submission was highly controversial when it arrived at Plimpton's office. Some of the staff hated what they saw as the pomposity and rudeness of Larkin's replies. Others thought it captured him to the nines. (I had deliberately left in his railings against me, for instance, which would have been easy to delete, but which would have robbed the piece of flavor and bite.)

Issue 84 of *The Paris Review* with the Larkin interview promptly appeared in the summer of 1982. Such speed is indicative of how pleased Mr. Plimpton was to have the piece, which he considered a coup. Some interviews, unfortunately, have languished in his files for numbers of years before seeing print, since he attempts to strike a balance among writers of fiction, poetry, and criticism, and between Americans and foreign writers, as well as men and women. The Larkin interview took up thirty-one pages of the magazine. I was pleased with it and wondered if Larkin was.

I never heard from him again. He did, however, write the magazine and request three more copies of the issue, and to make three nit-picking corrections he wished to incorporate if the piece were ever reprinted in an anthology. One was the deletion of a comma.

In 1983 Larkin collected his prose in a volume called *Required Writing*. I bought the volume, of course, and discovered it contained my Larkin interview intact. No one had asked my permission, or offered payment, although I found out subsequently that Mr. Plimpton's permission had been sought. It was one of only two interviews Larkin chose to reprint. Clearly, the piece did not displease him afterall.

The interview has since been reprinted elsewhere, and I find it quoted in essays and reviews on Larkin in particular and on modern poets and poetry in general. But perhaps no more surprising use of it could be found than in its transformation into a play. The British playwright Ron Hutchinson (author of "Rat in the Skull", "Babbit: A Marriage", and other plays) created a one-act, two-character play based on the interview. Incorporating lines from many of Larkin's poems as well as the interview and with live jazz music on stage, the play premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles on 18 October 1988. Its title was simply: "Larkin". It starred William Glover as the poet and, for the increase of dramatic tension, one supposes, Cristina Rose in my place as interviewer. The play, produced by Jessica Teich and directed by the playwright, received a favorable review in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Following are sample excerpts, representing a little more than a third of the entire interview. I have retained some comments on Larkin's poetry and career as a librarian, while for reasons of length I have deleted sections devoted to his fiction and to his extensive

involvement in the editing of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*. Those who are interested may wish to read the original interview in its entirety. It is most readily available in Philip Larkin's *Required Writing* and in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 7th series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986).



INTERVIEWER: Can you describe your life at Hull? Do you live in a flat or own a house?

LARKIN: I came to Hull in 1955. After eighteen months (during which I wrote "Mr. Bleaney"), I took a University flat and lived there for nearly eighteen years. It was the top flat in a house that was reputedly the American Consulate during the war, and though it might not have suited everybody, it suited me. I wrote most of *The Whitsun Weddings* and all of *High Windows* there. Probably I should never have moved if the University hadn't decided to sell the house, but as it was I had to get out and find somewhere else. It was a dreadful experience, as at that time houses were hard to find. In the end friends reported a small house near the University, and I bought that in 1974. I haven't decided yet whether or not I like it.

INTERVIEWER: How many days a week do you work at the library, and for how many hours a day?

LARKIN: My job as University Librarian is a full-time one, five-days a week, forty-five weeks a year. When I came to Hull, I had eleven staff; now there are over a hundred of one sort and another. We built one new library in 1960 and another in 1970, so that my first fifteen years were busy. Of course, this was a period of university expansion in England, and Hull grew as much as if not more than the rest. Luckily the vice-chancellor during most of this time was keen on the library, which is why it is called after him. Looking back, I think that if the Brynmor Jones Library is a good library—and I think it is—the credit should go to him and to the library staff. And to the University as a whole, of course. But you wouldn't be interested in all that.

INTERVIEWER: What is your daily routine?

LARKIN: My life is as simple as I can make it. Work all day, cook, eat, wash up, telephone, hack writing, drink, television in the evenings. I almost never go out. I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing of time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next; or there's my way—making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't mention a schedule for writing . . .

LARKIN: Yes, I was afraid you'd ask about writing. Anything I say about writing poems is bound to be retrospective, because in fact I've written very little since moving into this house, or since *High Windows*, or since 1974, whichever way you like to put it. But when I did write them, well, it was in the evenings, after work, after washing up (I'm sorry: you would call this "doing the dishes"). It was a routine like any other. And really it worked very well: I don't think you can write a poem for more than two hours. After that you're going round in circles, and it's much better to leave it for twenty-four hours, by which time your subconscious or whatever has solved the block and you're ready to go on.

The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there. Another top-floor flat, by the way. I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. The first part of the evening had the second part to look forward to, and I could enjoy the second part with a clear conscience because I'd done my two hours. I can't seem to organize that now.

INTERVIEWER: Does, or did, writing come easily for you? Does a poem get completed slowly or rapidly?

LARKIN: I've no standards of comparison. I wrote short poems quite quickly. Longer ones would take weeks or even months. I used to find that I was never sure I was going to finish a poem until I had thought of the last line. Of course, the last line was sometimes the first one you thought of! But usually the last line would come when

I'd done about two-thirds of the poem, and then it was just a matter of closing the gap.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you write, and for whom?

LARKIN: You've been reading Auden: "To ask the hard question is simple." The short answer is that you write because you have to. If you rationalize it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience. It doesn't feel like self-expression, though it may look like it. As for *whom* you write, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen.

INTERVIEWER: Do you share your manuscripts with anyone before publishing them? Are there any friends whose advice you would follow in revising a poem?

LARKIN: I shouldn't normally show what I'd written to anyone: what would be the point? You remember Tennyson reading an unpublished poem to Jowett; when he had finished, Jowett said, "I shouldn't publish that if I were you, Tennyson." Tennyson replied, "If it comes to that, Master, the sherry you gave us at lunch was downright filthy." That's about all that can happen.

But when we were young, Kingsley Amis and I used to exchange unpublished poems, largely because we never thought they could be published, I suppose. He encouraged me, I encouraged him. Encouragement is very necessary to a young writer. But it's hard to find anyone worth encouraging: there aren't many Kingsleys about. . . .

INTERVIEWER: How did you come to be a librarian? Had you no interest in teaching? What was your father's profession?

LARKIN: Oh dear, this means a lot of autobiography. My father was a city treasurer, a finance officer. I never had the least desire to "be" anything when I was at school, and by the time I went to Oxford the war was on and there wasn't anything to "be" except a serviceman or a teacher or a civil servant. In 1943 when I graduated I knew I couldn't be the first, because I'd been graded unfit (I sup-

pose through eyesight), nor the second because I stammered, and then the Civil Service turned me down twice, and I thought, Well, that lets me out, and I sat at home writing *Jill*. But of course in those days the government had powers to send you into the mines or onto the land or into industry, and they wrote quite politely to ask what in fact I was doing. I looked at the daily paper (the *Birmingham Post*: we were living at Warwick then) and saw that a small town in Shropshire was advertising for a librarian, applied for it, and got it, and told the government so, which seemed to satisfy them.

Of course, I wasn't a real librarian, more a sort of caretaker—it was a one-man library—and I can't pretend I enjoyed it much. The previous librarian had been there about forty years, and I was afraid I should be there all my life too. This made me start qualifying myself professionally, just in order to get away, which I did in 1946. By then I'd written *Jill*, and *The North Ship*, and *A Girl in Winter*. It was probably the "intensest" time of my life.

INTERVIEWER: Is Jorge Luis Borges the only other contemporary poet of note who is also a librarian, by the way? Are you aware of any others?

LARKIN: Who is Jorge Luis Borges? The writer-librarian I like is Archibald MacLeish. You know, he was made Librarian of Congress in 1939, and on his first day they brought him some papers to sign, and he wouldn't sign them until he understood what they were all about. When he did understand, he started making objections and countersuggestions. The upshot was that he reorganized the whole Library of Congress in five years simply by saying, I don't understand and I don't agree, and in wartime, too. Splendid man.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the academic world as a *milieu* for the working creative writer—teaching specifically?

LARKIN: The academic world has worked all right for me, but then, I'm not a teacher. I couldn't be. I should think that chewing over other people's work, writing I mean, must be terribly stultifying. Quite sickens you with the whole business of literature. But then, I haven't got that kind of mind, conceptual or ratiocinative or whatever it is. It would be death to me to have to think about literature as such, to say why one poem was "better" than another, and so on. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe your relationship with the contemporary literary community?

LARKIN: I'm somewhat withdrawn from what you call "the contemporary literary community," for two reasons: in the first place, I don't write for a living, and so don't have to keep in touch with literary editors and publishers and television people in order to earn money; and in the second, I don't live in London. Given that, my relations with it are quite amicable.

INTERVIEWER: Is Hull a place where you are likely to stay put? If so, have you as a person changed since the writing of the poem "Places, Loved Ones"—or is the speaker of that poem a *persona*?

LARKIN: Hull is a place where I *have* stayed. On my twenty-fifth anniversary, I held a little luncheon party for the members of my staff who'd been there as long as I had, or almost as long, and they made me a presentation with a card bearing the very lines you mean. *Touché*, as the French say.

INTERVIEWER: As a bachelor, have you sometimes felt an outsider? Or, like the speaker of your poems "Reasons for Attendance," "Dockery & Son," and "Self's the Man," have you enjoyed being single and remained so because you liked and preferred living that way?

LARKIN: Hard to say. Yes, I've remained single by choice, and shouldn't have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too, and so I suppose I am an outsider in the sense you mean. Of course it worries me from time to time, but it would take too long to explain why. Samuel Butler said, Life is an affair of being spoilt in one way or another.

INTERVIEWER: Is the character John Kemp in any way based upon your own youth? Were you *that* shy?

LARKIN: I would say, yes, I was and am extremely shy. Anyone who has stammered will know what agony it is, especially at school. It means you never take the lead in anything or do anything but try to efface yourself. I often wonder if I was shy because I stammered, or vice versa.

INTERVIEWER: Was your childhood unhappy?

LARKIN: My childhood was all right, comfortable and stable and loving, but I wasn't a happy child, or so they say. On the other hand, I've never been a recluse, contrary to reports: I've had friends, and enjoyed their company. In comparison with some people I know, I'm extremely sociable.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel happiness is unlikely in this world?

LARKIN: Well, I think if you're in good health, and have enough money, and nothing is bothering you in the foreseeable future, that's as much as you can hope for. But "happiness," in the sense of a continuous emotional orgasm, no. If only because you know that you are going to die, and the people you love are going to die. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever attempted a truly long poem? I've never seen one in print. If not, why?

LARKIN: I've written none. A long poem for me would be a novel. In that sense, *A Girl in Winter* is a poem.

INTERVIEWER: What about a play or a verse play?

LARKIN: I don't like plays. They happen in public, which, as I said, I don't like, and by now I have grown rather deaf, which means I can't hear what's going on. Then again, they are rather like poetry readings: they have to get an instant response, which tends to vulgarize. And of course the intrusion of *personality*—the actor, the producer—or do you call him the director—is distracting.

All the same, I admire *Murder in the Cathedral* as much as anything Eliot ever wrote. I read it from time to time for pleasure, which is the highest compliment I can pay.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever meet Eliot?

LARKIN: I didn't know him. Once I was in the Faber offices—the old ones, "24, Russell Square," that magic address!—talking to Charles Monteith, and he said, "Have you ever met Eliot?" I said no, and to my astonishment he stepped out and reappeared with Eliot, who must

have been in the next room. We shook hands, and he explained that he was expecting someone to tea and couldn't stay. There was a pause, and he said, "I'm glad to see you in this office." The significance of that was that I wasn't a Faber author—it must have been before 1964, when they published *The Whitsun Weddings*—and I took it as a great compliment. But it was a shattering few minutes: I hardly remember what I thought. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Can you drink and write? Have you tried any consciousness-expanding drugs?

LARKIN: No, though of course those of my generation are drinkers. Not druggers.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe the genesis and working-out of a poem based upon an image that most people would simply pass by? (A clear road between neighbors, an ambulance in city traffic?)

LARKIN: If I could answer this sort of question, I'd be a professor rather than a librarian. And in any case, I shouldn't want to. It's a thing you don't want to think about. It happens, or happened, and if it's something to be grateful for, you're grateful.

I remember saying once, I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: it's like going round explaining how you sleep with your wife. Whoever I was talking to said, They'd do that, too, if their agents could fix it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you throw away a lot of poems?

LARKIN: Some poems didn't get finished. Some didn't get published. I never throw anything away. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Your introduction to *All What Jazz?* takes a stance against experiment, citing the trio of Picasso, Pound, and Parker. Why do you distrust the new?

LARKIN: It seems to me undeniable that up to this century literature used language in the way we all use it, painting represented what anyone with normal vision sees, and music was an affair of nice

noises rather than nasty ones. The innovation of “modernism” in the arts consisted of doing the opposite. I don’t know why, I’m not a historian. You have to distinguish between things that seemed odd when they were new but are now quite familiar, such as Ibsen and Wagner, and things that seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like *Finnegans Wake* and Picasso.

INTERVIEWER: What’s that got to do with jazz?

LARKIN: Everything. Jazz showed this very clearly because it is such a telescoped art, only as old as the century, if that. Charlie Parker wrecked jazz by—or so they tell me—using the chromatic rather than the diatonic scale. The diatonic scale is what you use if you want to write a national anthem, or a love song, or a lullaby. The chromatic scale is what you use to give the effect of drinking a quinine martini and having an enema simultaneously.

If I sound heated on this, it’s because I love jazz, the jazz of Armstrong and Bechet and Ellington and Bessie Smith and Beiderbecke. To have it all destroyed by a paranoid drug addict made me furious. Anyway, it’s dead now, dead as Elizabethan madrigal singing. We can only treasure the records. And I do. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Have you any thoughts on the office of poet laureate? Does it serve a valid function?

LARKIN: Poetry and sovereignty are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united in this way, in England. On the other hand, it’s not clear what the laureate is, or does. Deliberately so, in a way: it isn’t a job, there are no duties, no salary, and yet it isn’t quite an honor, either, or not just an honor. I’m sure the worst thing about it, especially today, is the publicity it brings, the pressure to be involved publicly with poetry, which must be pretty inimical to any real writing.

Of course, the days when Tennyson would publish a sonnet telling Gladstone what to do about foreign policy are over. It’s funny that Kipling, who is what most people think of as a poet as national spokesman, never was laureate. He should have had it when Bridges was appointed, but it’s typical that he didn’t—the post isn’t thought of in that way. It really is a genuine attempt to honor someone. But

the publicity that anything to do with the Palace gets these days is so fierce, it must be really more of an ordeal than an honor.

INTERVIEWER: Your poetry volumes have appeared at the rate of one per decade. From what you say, though, is it unlikely we'll have another around 1984? Did you really only complete about three poems in any given year?

LARKIN: It's unlikely I shall write any more poems, but when I did, yes, I did write slowly. I was looking at "The Whitsun Weddings" [the poem] just the other day, and found that I began it sometime in the summer of 1957. After three pages, I dropped it for another poem that in fact was finished but never published. I picked it up again, in March 1958, and worked on it till October, when it was finished. But when I look at the diary I was keeping at the time, I see that the kind of incident it describes happened in July 1955! So in all, it took over three years. Of course, that's an exception. But I did write slowly, partly because you're finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time.

INTERVIEWER: For someone who dislikes being interviewed, you've responded generously.

LARKIN: I'm afraid I haven't said anything very interesting. You must realize I've never had "ideas" about poetry. To me it's always been a personal, almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs—wanting to create, to justify, to praise, to explain, to externalize, depending on the circumstances. And I've never been much interested in other people's poetry—one reason for writing, of course, is that no one's written what you want to read.

Probably my notion of poetry is very simple. Some time ago I agreed to help judge a poetry competition—you know, the kind where they get about 35,000 entries, and you look at the best few thousand. After a bit I said, Where are all the love poems? And nature poems? And they said, Oh, we threw all those away. I expect they were the ones I should have liked.