

Yarn, Natter, Blether

Four stories from the
Reading Friends programme

READING
FRIENDS



THE
READING
AGENCY

Yarn, Natter, Blether is a film created by The Reading Agency to share the stories of four participants involved with our Reading Friends programme: Ann, Brian, Elsie and Jane.

The stories were written by leading authors Vaseem Khan, Ian McMillan, Veronica Henry and Ifor ap Glyn. We have printed them in this booklet so you can read them, enjoy them, and share them with others.

Visit readingfriends.org.uk to view the film and find out more about the programme.

Making connections by sharing stories

At The Reading Agency we tackle life's big challenges of loneliness, social mobility, and health and wellbeing through the proven power of reading. Our work on Reading Friends ensures that people across the UK can read their way to a better more connected life.

Loneliness can have a devastating impact whatever age you are. It can be as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and can even increase the risk of heart disease, depression and dementia¹. But some communities are especially vulnerable, with a million people over 65 stating that they are always or often lonely². Trigger points such as bereavement, retirement, becoming a carer or declining health play a part, but whatever the cause loneliness is definitely a taboo subject: 92% of us think people are scared to admit they are lonely³.

Our Reading Friends programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, shows that reading can be part of the solution. It can connect people to start conversations, share stories and

enrich each other's lives.

Reading Friends has been developed with older people and is delivered by volunteers. By sharing stories in groups or one-to-one sessions, Reading Friends empowers and engages older people who are vulnerable and isolated, including people with dementia and carers.

The stories featured in our film and this booklet give a glimpse into the lives of four older people involved with Reading Friends. Yarn, Natter, Blether shows us that reading can be a powerful tool to bring people together. It also reminds us that everyone, whatever their age, has a story to share.



Karen Napier
Chief Executive, The Reading Agency

¹ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>

² Oxfordshire Age UK (2012) Loneliness - the state we're in p.13

³ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>

Ann's story

Life has a way of surprising you. The longer you live the more you discover about yourself. Who would have known that a girl born during the war, in a bombed-out East Anglian town, would become a northern lass, with a love of Scandi crime and a BA in Lust?

My earliest memories are of a dog, our dog, ears cocked, listening out for the Luftwaffe bombs. As soon as the first one would land he'd come racing in, scooting down into the Morrison shelter hidden under our dining table. Mother would shoo us in – me and my brother – and we'd sit down there, listening to the explosions, eating biscuits and drinking elderberry cordial, daring Hitler to do his worst. I'd listen to my Mum praying for my Dad, who was out there, somewhere, fighting the Germans. I never really knew him until he returned from the war. I was six years old by then. Even as a child I sensed he'd been through something terrible. He used to take me to the castle at the centre of Norwich, standing there proudly in amongst all the bombed-out buildings. There was a lovely teapot collection there that

always drew me in – there's something so English about teapots. I remember thinking: as long as we have teapots, those Germans can never beat us!

Years later, I went to Newcastle University, my first time in that wonderful city. As soon as our train came across the Tyne and I saw the beautiful All Saints' Church, I felt as if I'd come home. Sometimes you just feel a connection, with a place, a person, and for me that was it. I spent four years on a course they called Land Use Studies – hence my BA in LUST! There were sixteen lads on the course, and we spent a lot of time reading plays and playing cricket. I wasn't half bad at it. I eventually moved into a lodging house with a girl called Margaret. The landlord was used to taking in theatrical types, and they'd always



Ann with Reading Friends volunteer Alison

be around rehearsing and acting all luvvy. I think some of it must have rubbed off on me. I have a wonderful photograph of me, at my graduation, with a fur trim wound around my face, with all the lads from my course on one knee in a sort of chorus line on either side of me. I felt like quite the siren!

After graduating I ended up doing survey work for slum clearance projects in Gateshead – rewarding work, at least I always felt so. It certainly cemented my connection to Newcastle. In fact, I didn't go back to Norwich until a couple of years ago, with my daughter. A lot has changed – the old cattle market's gone, and so has Alice's Pantry, a lovely little café where my grandmother would buy me jam tarts as a treat to make up for all the wartime rationing. But some things are still the

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same – like Jarrold, a department store that's been there so long, I don't think even bombs could knock it down!

Vaseem Khan
Author of the Baby Ganesh
Detective Agency series

It is an early evening in early autumn

It is an evening in early autumn in Collyhurst and the shadows are lengthening as the days are growing shorter. Whose is this shadow?

It's that of a lad who is making his way down to the boys' club; other lengthening shadows join him and at times it seems like they are one big shadow, making their steady way down to the boys' club. His hands and face are cold because he washed them in cold water because there wasn't time to heat up that big black iron kettle but he doesn't care because he just wants to get to the club.

Yesterday these boys came to the Collyhurst Lads Club and boxed and played football and did some painting; sometimes they go to Ancoats Lads Club or Ardwick Lads Club. Tomorrow this lad here, the one this story is about, won't be going to the lads' club. He'll be off to the Rex Cinema, or as he calls it, the Bug Hut, to watch a cowboy film

with John Wayne in it. For these boys their lives are built around rhythms: the rhythms of family and school, of going to the cinema and playing in the yard and turning the gas mantle on and turning the gas mantle off.

It's boxing that's this lad's real love, though; the power of it, the strength of it. The bell going and the round starting and then it's just one on one, two boxers facing each other, two pairs of gloves moving, two pairs of feet almost dancing.

In the future this lad will grow into a man and he'll start to run boxing clubs rather than just going to them; he'll get the boys going into that same club he went to and he'll get them fit and toughen them up and then train them to be light on their feet and hard with



Brian with his daughter, Rachael

It's just one on one,
two boxers facing each
other, two pairs of gloves
moving, two pairs of feet
almost dancing.

their punches. If you walk past the club you'll hear the sound of punchbags being hit, of voices being raised just a bit, but not too much because discipline is what boxing's all about.

Further into the future, in the 1970s to be precise, this club will be demolished and they'll move to another premises above the Co-op on Lightbowne Road in Moston and success will come thick and fast as this man trains British, European,

intercontinental and world champions, while downstairs people buy bread and milk and sausages and collect their Co-op stamps. They sometimes look up and wonder what all the noise is.

Who ever knows when they're young what their life will be? This lad is on his way to the boys' club and he's looking forward to going to the pictures tomorrow to see John Wayne and he doesn't know he'll grow into somebody who'll train world champions who could knock John Wayne down the steps of the gym and all the way into the Co-op if they wanted!

It is an evening in early autumn, in the springtime of a life.

Ian McMillan
Writer and broadcaster

Elsie's story

Somehow the letter found its way to me. All the way from London. It probably came on the same train that we had, clickety-clack down the track in a dusty brown sack. I felt sick on that journey, but I needn't have worried.

I leaned out of my bedroom window, gazing at the rolling fields and the bright yellow buttercups, thinking how lucky we were to have been sent here. It seemed a million miles from home, where everyone walked around with one eye on the sky, watching, waiting ...

The postman was pedalling as fast as he could down the lane all the way to the farmyard, his black bicycle bouncing up and down. I could hear him whistling over the birdsong. I had no idea he was bringing something so important.

I got dressed quickly. I was too late to help with the milking, as usual. I was too lazy to get up at five. I preferred to lie in bed reading, absorbed in what Lizzie Bennet was up to – I'd

I preferred to lie in bed reading, absorbed in what Lizzie Bennet was up to – I'd borrowed *Pride and Prejudice* from the library in the county town when we went to get our ration books.

borrowed *Pride and Prejudice* from the library in the county town when we went to get our ration books. I helped in the evening instead, leaning my cheek against the cow's soft side as the milk hit the inside of the bucket.

My brother shouted up the stairs for me. He was up already. I was surprised how much he loved helping out on the farm. He never did much



Elsie with author Veronica Henry

at home, but something about being with the animals made him eager to please. I wondered how long it would last when we got back.

There was talk of the war ending soon. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Of course I wanted the fighting to finish, but part of me didn't want to leave Devon and go back to Raynes Park. I loved it here. The air was sweet, not thick with dust and the distant smell of burning. We didn't have to listen out for Doodlebugs, or dive under the dining room table. We had clotted cream with everything: breakfast, lunch, tea – or a spoonful just because.

In the kitchen, the table was laid out for breakfast. I could smell bacon sizzling on the range. There it was, at my place. The long brown envelope,

my name typed on the front in capitals. I looked at the post mark. Wimbledon.

I knew what it was. My heart thumped as I opened it. The farmer's wife smiled at me, eager to know what was inside.

We are writing to inform you that, further to passing the Eleven Plus examination, you have secured a place at Wimbledon Girls' Grammar School

I put the letter down and poured myself a cup of dark brown tea. This had been my dream. I had worked so hard for this.

But now I had received the letter, I wasn't so sure it was what I wanted after all...

Veronica Henry
Author, scriptwriter and journalist

Dechrau'r daith

Roedd seti'r bws yn dal gwres ola'r ha'
wrth fynd o Cerrig i Lanrwst -
ond dim ond dechrau'r daith oedd hyn;
o foelni Uwchaled at lwydni'r dre;
o fwrlwm petrus Nant Hendre Bach,
a 'stafelloedd hamddenol yr ysgol gerllaw,
at goridorau'r ysgol sir,
a llif hyderus Afon Conwy...

*

Roedd hi'n odyssey bymtheg milltir a mwy
o Cerrig i Lanrwst,
o fro fy mebyd at fyd yr iaith fain...
Nid oedd modd mynd nôl a mlaen;
rhaid aros, ddydd Llun tan ddydd Gwener, yn y dre –
merch un ar ddeg mewn lojings unig.
Mewn erbyn hanner wedi saith bob nos;
swpera hefo dynes nad oedd yn dylwyth,
wrth fwrdd lle roedd sgwrs ar rations
a hithau'n gwyllo'r bara a'r cig fel barcud;
yna noswylio; ceisio cysgu
rhwng cynfasau oer.
A gwichian tŷ diarth
fel sws nos da...

*

Nôl a 'mlaen yr euthum yn wythnosol,
nes dwyn rhyddm newydd i 'myd;
ac aeth boreau Llun yn llai o rwyg,
am fod un cymwynaswr gen i
ar y bws i Lanrwst bell,
a'i groeso mor barod a'r tafod tocynnau
a weindiai o'i beiriant.

Ac roedd yntau, (Gwilym Jones, conductor)
yn fodlon ymdroi ymhen y daith,
cyn i'r bws fynd ôl am Cerrig.
Prynai sawl panad i hogan unig
ac roedd blas y sgwrs yn aros
ymhell ar ôl gwagio'r cwpan,
a'i ail-soseru - tan y tro nesa'...

*

Daeth amser imi ddilyn yr afon i'r môr,
a'r tro hwn 'doedd dim dychwelyd i fod,
wrth fwrw gwreiddiau'n araf, ger y lli,
ac arfer â thonnau parhaus yr iaith fain...

Ond wrth wynebu troeon yr yrfa,
deuai atgof weithiau
am y bws erstmalwm o Cerrig i Lanrwst,
yn tuchan drwy'r gêrs
wrth slywio'i ffordd heibio Padog;

deuai atgof am fy nghymwynaswr gynt,
Gwilym Jones, a'r bws ar fore oer
â'i ffenestri'n angerdd i gyd.

Ces i deligram ganddo, cofia,
y diwrnod priodais dy dad;
a bûm innau yn ei g'nebrwng yntau
i gynnig rhyw goffâd amdano
ac am fendith yr holl baneidiau
a g'nesodd fy nghalon gynt...

*

Mae trigain mlynedd a mwy
ers 'mi ddechrau trigo fan hyn,
yn sŵn y môr, ymhell o sŵn y nant.



Dwi wedi hen gyrraedd -
ac eto heb adael chwaith;
mae'r hen fro â'i afael ynof o hyd.

Roedd y bws er stalwm
yn mynd o Cerrig i Llanrwst -
ond mae'r siwrnai yn parhau...

The journey's beginning (Translation)

The seats still held the last warmth of summer,
as the bus went from Cerrig to Llanrwst.
But that was just the journey's start;
from the bareness of Uwchaled, to the grey walls of the town;
from the hesitant gurgle of Nant Hendre Bach
and the relaxed classrooms of my school nearby,
to the corridors of the county school
and the River Conwy's confident flow...

*

It was an odyssey of fifteen miles or more,
from Cerrig to Llanrwst;
from my native area and childhood home
to the shrill world of the English tongue.
There was no means to travel back and forth,
I stayed from Monday to Friday in town –
An eleven year old in lonely lodgings.
You had to be in by half seven each night
for supper with a woman who was no relation,
at a table where talk was on rations
and she guarded the bread and meat like a hawk.
Then to bed, searching for sleep
between cold sheets.
And a strange house's squeaks
were my goodnight kiss.

*

Back and forth I went each week
'til my life took new rhythm
and Monday mornings were less of a rift,
because I had a benefactor
on the bus to far-off Llanrwst;
his welcome as willing as the tongues of tickets
that he wound from his machine.
And that kind man, (Gwilym Jones, the conductor)
would willingly tarry at the terminus
before the bus turned back for Cerrig
buying many a cuppa for this lonely girl.
The taste of our chats would linger,
long after the cup was emptied
and back on its saucer - 'til the next time...

*

And it came to pass that I followed the river to the sea,
and this time there would be no return,
as I slowly put down roots near the strand,
and grew used to the constant waves
of the shrill English tongue...

But as I faced the twists and turns of life
I would sometimes recall
the bus long ago from Cerrig to Llanrwst,
grumbling through the gears
as it wound like an eel past Padog;

and I would recall my former protector,
Gwilym Jones, and the bus on cold mornings
its windows blank with condensation.

He sent me a telegram you know,
the day that I married your father;
and I attended his funeral too
in memory of the conductor,



but also in thanks for those cups of tea,
the godsend that warmed my heart...

*

It's sixty years and more
since I made this place my abode,
with the sea in earshot, but far from the streams of my youth.

I've long since arrived here,
but in some ways never left;
my native area has a grip on me still.

That bus long ago
went from Cerrig to Llanrwst -
but my journey still goes on...

By Ifor ap Glyn
National Poet of Wales



Jane with poet Ifor ap Glyn

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For making Yarn, Natter, Blether

Reading Friends is a nationwide programme developed by The Reading Agency with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. The programme connects people experiencing loneliness by starting conversations through reading. Reading Friends is delivered in partnership with organisations across the UK.

www.readingfriends.org.uk

The Reading Agency is a national charity that tackles life's big challenges through the proven power of reading. We work closely with partners to develop and deliver programmes for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Reading Agency is funded by Arts Council England.

www.readingagency.org.uk



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