

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax

English for Life in the UK

Episode 31 - Literature in the UK - part 1

September 2020

(Mark) Hello and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for intermediate-level learners of English and is produced by a group of volunteer teachers, from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we provide a range of support and advice to those in need and, particularly, to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. The aim of this podcast is to help anyone wanting to improve their English and, at the same time, learn more about life in this country.

Before we start today's episode, just a reminder that, at the moment, we are asking for your help to find out more about what you want from our podcast, what you .. how you think it could be improved, what you like about it, what subjects you'd like us to cover in the future. So, we have devised a survey which you can find on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

That's spelt s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x

You'll find the survey towards the bottom of the home page where it says "survey here". Alternatively, you can email us. We have an email address:

englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

And if you contact us, then we will send you a link to the survey or you can just tell us in the email, what you think. We'd be very grateful to hear from any of you. We know we have several hundred regular listeners and we would like to know what you think.

The website is also where you can find the transcripts - that's the written version - of these episodes. And we recommend that you first of all listen to the episode and then you listen and follow it in the transcript, at the same time. The transcripts are usually available a few days after the podcast becomes available.

So let's get on with this week's episode which is brought to you this week by Christine Sheena and myself, Mark.

(3 minutes:02 seconds)

(Music)

(M) OK. So this week we're going to look at literature in the UK and in the *Official Guide*¹ there is a section on authors and the novels, the books they've written. There is also a section on poets and poetry. So we're going to do that in two parts and this part

¹ The UK Government's publication "*The Official Guide to Life in the UK*"

episode will focus on the books, the authors and the novels and then the second part: we will look at poetry, and we'll do that in the following episode.

(Christine) So, we're going to talk about literature in the UK this week and Mark, I think you're going to start by reading us ... telling us what is in the "*English for Life in the UK*" syllabus - in the Handbook.² [*Official Guide*]

(M) I'm going to start with William Shakespeare, because that is obviously one of the best known characters - writers - from the UK So, Shakespeare was writing between 1564 and 1616. Sorry - those are the dates of his life - he was born in 1564. And he wrote 39 plays and over 150 sonnets. Now a sonnet is a poem - a poem, as I understand it, is a poem longer than 14 lines and counts as a sonnet³. And amongst the many famous plays that Shakespeare wrote I'm sure a number of our listeners will know "*Romeo and Juliet*" for example, or "*Hamlet*" or "*Macbeth*". There are lots of others.

Then, Jane Austen, writing in the 18th century⁴ and into the 19th century. Jane Austen is famous for a number of books: in particular, "*Pride and Prejudice*" and "*Sense and Sensibility*". Into the 19th century, and into the Victorian era, Charles Dickens is one of the most famous authors. Amongst his books we have "*Oliver Twist*" and "*Great Expectations*". Then, into the twentieth century, we had Sir Arthur Conan Doyle - a Scottish writer - who is best known for his stories about Sherlock Holmes. Then, later into the 20th century, Grahame Greene, who wrote a number of novels and the most famous ones of those are "*The Heart of the Matter*", "*Brighton Rock*" and "*Our Man in Havana*".

And then, coming up to date, we have J.K.Rowling who wrote the Harry Potter books, which have been printed and bought all over the world and made into many films. I'm sure a lot of our listeners know about them. So that's some of the ones that are mentioned there.

It also talks about the fact that, from the 1960s onwards, we've had something called the Booker Prize and the Booker Prize is given each year to an author and a book that has come out in that year, and a number of famous British writers - because actually the Booker Prize is not just for British writers - but there are a number of famous ones who have had - who have won that award. Amongst them - Salman Rushdie, a British Indian, who wrote "*Midnight's Children*", about children who were born as India became independent. And then, I think there are some other ones that I think we're going to talk about ourselves as well and some of them have won the Booker Prize as well. So that's the ... authors and some of the novels that are mentioned in the

² Christine is referring her to the Government's "*Official Guide*" mentioned earlier.

³ By convention, a *sonnet* contained exactly 14 lines and was written to a specific rhythm and rhyming pattern.

⁴ Dates from the 1700s are referred to as the 18th century, and 1800s as the 19th century, etc

"Official Guide" but I think we are going to choose a book ourselves, or an author and a book - for each of us, and talk a bit about them. Christine, do you want to start?

(7:55)

(C) Well, I do, I do - I'd love to start. I thought for a while about what to choose, because there's many British books that I love, but I've chosen "*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*" that was written by Mark Haddon. And it's a delightful book - it's written as though ... as a story being told by a 15 year-old⁵ boy with Asperger's Syndrome, some kind of autism. And so he writes in a very factual, literal way and it's a delightful story. It gives an insight into life of a school child and a school child with some special needs, but looking at society - modern society - generally. And the reason why I've chosen it for this one - apart from the fact that I love it - is that it is really quite an easy read, so I think it's a book that many of our listeners could manage to read.

(M) That's great, Christine - I remember reading it several years ago and really enjoying it - finding it fascinating - and quite a different kind of book than I'd read for a long time.

(Sheena) I'd heard that the stage production was really fantastic, as well, so that might be around in the future, hopefully.

(C) I would hope so.

(M) Maybe we should say, that the theatre in the United Kingdom is a very important part of the artistic world and many good books are actually often turned into plays as well - as well as the plays, themselves. Sheena - tell us about your choice.

(S) OK - I have chosen Hilary Mantel - I can barely lift the three volumes of her work because they are very long and very detailed. However, I think they are, again, totally fascinating, because it gives you an insight into someone else's life and how they see the world and how the world is, for them. And they are all - they are told through the eyes - or the central character is Thomas Cromwell, who was very important in the reign of Henry VIII [the eighth]. He [Cromwell] became his [i.e. The King's] Chancellor; he became his right hand man⁶; and what's really interesting for me was that Thomas Cromwell, in history, was always regarded as I think, probably, a really brutal person, a really nasty character who did a lot of very bad deeds. I think what Hilary Mantel does: she explains his childhood, his marriage, his children, the people he works with, the people who he loves and who he is loyal to, and we see Thomas Cromwell's world very, very differently. And also, to use that word again, 'insight', we get insight - a real insight - into Henry VIII's character, and his different wives because this follows through from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, to Anne Boleyn and the beheading of Anne Boleyn, and then his third wife, Jane Seymour, and then finally, Anne of Cleves as well. And each of those marriages, those relationships are documented in real

⁵ It is common usage to state ages and other periods of time with the word "year" in the singular : eg. A ten year reign; a 15 year old, a 90 year old;

⁶ "right hand man" - an expression indicating a close and invaluable aide or assistant

detail and she really brings things alive - I think so much so, that when I finished - I don't know how you felt about this Mark, but when ... I knew Thomas Cromwell was going to be executed, but I was still so upset, I almost felt like a member of my own family had died - I was very bereaved by his death, because, over these books - I felt I'd got to know him as a real person.

(12:49)

(M) Yes - I know just what you mean, Sheena. Yes, I've read all three of them. I think they're fascinating - I mean, I am, to some extent, a historian, so with that as a particular interest - and I think she's absolutely brilliant at taking real historical events and then imagining the conversations that actually went on around those events. Absolutely brilliantly done.

(C) And it's so well researched. There's no ... I mean some historical novels I don't believe - but I completely believe this one because she has researched the detail so well.

(M) Absolutely.

(S) Yes - Fifteen years of work - that's how long that these three books have taken.

(C) Well - it shows.

(M) That's great.

(C) So what have you chosen, Mark?

(M) Well, I've chosen a very recent novel that won the Booker Prize - shared the Booker Prize last year. It's called "*Girl, Woman, Other*", and it's by Bernardine Evaristo. She was born in London, to an Nigerian father and a white English mother. She's written a number of well-received books but this particular one is outstanding. I hadn't read any of her others, but I decided to read this one when it won the award and I thought it was a fabulous book. It follows the lives of 12 women, in the United Kingdom; most of them black or mixed-race women, and it devotes a chapter to each one of them and it's everything from a teenager through to a 90-year-old. And it's their experiences of life in this - in the UK - particularly their experiences from the perspective of a black woman. And what I thought was fabulous about it was that it begins with the very first character who is a playwright and she's about to have her play performed for the first time, so you learn about her and what's going on with that play. Then, you are introduced to the other characters, and then in the final chapter, there is actually the premiere - that is the first performance of that play - and a party to celebrate it. And at that party, most of the other characters from the book appear - I just thought that was brilliantly done. I think you two have both read that - so Christine - what did you think of the book?

(15:45)

(C) Well, I think I share with you - what you said, really matches what I thought. I was just delighted by it - delighted by the different perspectives - and also by her actual writing - you know, the words she uses - some of her previous books were poems -

she is a poet. She's very ... she writes very well, in very, everyday language, but *rich* every day language. I just thought it was a delight. I know, Sheena - you and I went to listen to her, didn't we?

(S) Yes - just before lock-down⁷ - the week before lock-down.

(C) Yes, we went to see her talk in Huddersfield.

(M) So Sheena - what did you make of the book?

(S) Oh, I absolutely loved it as well - because again, I think the style is so easy to read, and I actually liked the idea that she uses - she doesn't use full stops very often. She writes really fluidly and I actually really liked that. That helped me to just read it quite quickly and get into the flow of the book, really easily. And then what I really liked, at the end, where all the characters have come together - even two of the characters who you would never think could ever have had some distant relationship - you find out they are related, which I thought was very clever - I think she's fantastic.

(M) Yep [yes] - I agree.

(Music)

(17:40)

Language Support

(M) So, this is the part of the podcast where we choose an aspect of the English language that has been ... that is related to the episode that we've been listening to. And today, given that we've been talking about different novels and different authors, we thought we would talk a little bit about the different styles of telling stories in novels. So I guess, I would say one of the most common ones is the first person narrative, where the person who is telling the story is actually the person is the main character in the book. So the main character in the book is telling the story and they are telling it in the first person and they would say "I did this I was doing that, then something happened to me " and so on, like that.

(S) Christine's book was a first person narrative - I think the story was told from Christopher's point of view. Is that correct, Christine?

(C) That is correct - just exactly that. He writes it - he notes down what he sees and so - for example, I'm going to quote a page:

"I only know three people who do little circles instead of dots over the letter 'i' and one of them is Siobhan, and one of them was Mr Loxley who used to teach at the school, and one of them was Mother"

so he's speaking from his point of view: "I".

And the next paragraph is:

"And then I heard Father opening the front door, so I took one envelope from the box"

and so on.

⁷ a short way of referring to Covid-19 restrictions on movement and gatherings.

- (M) Yes - that's good. What about other styles? Have we got some examples?
- (S) Well - again Mark, I am thinking of your book - most of those stories from those different women were written in the third person. Is that right?
- (M) Yes - it is right.
- (C) Is it? Do you know - I was so surprised when we were talking about this. I just looked at the first story - Ama's story - and it's written in the third person - that means it says
"she walked along the road, past St. Paul's"
- (S) Yes - and that's interesting - because she was, probably, actually - the writer, Bernadine Evaristo, was probably talking about herself because she really, her character, Ama was based on her own life, wasn't it? But she told it as if she was another person she was describing - she was talking about - didn't she?
- (C) But she's writing very much in the present tense -
"Ama is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her city; a few early morning barges cruise slowly by, to her left is the nautical-themed footbridge, with its deck walkway and sailing mast pylons to her right is the bend in the river"
- Most novels or novels are often written in the past tense but this one certainly wasn't - isn't.
- (S) That's probably why we all - we three - found it so easy to read and enjoyed it so much, because it's like happening and you are there and you are part, witnessing the story, aren't you?
- (C) And even though that extract that I read was written in the third person - it's very personal - it's very it's quite an intimate book and so it feels like a first person narrative. Yes - so most books are written in the third person - with either the person's name - or he or she, or they ... do this, did that ... Some are in the first person like "*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*" which I've just read out, but sometimes people use the second person - in other words, they say: "you" - "you did this" - and Hilary Mantel, if I remember rightly, she sometimes ... the narrative is written from the point of view of Cromwell and sometimes she talks - she writes "you". It's very much a second person narrative - sometimes it's first person and sometimes Thomas Cromwell is talking about himself, but instead of saying "I", he says "he" - so it is quite confusing and quite interesting - very interesting.
- (22:58)
- (M) So - just to clarify - when we're talking about books being written in the first person or the second, or the third person: this is very like the way in which we use verbs in the English language, in every day usage. So the first person is the equivalent of "I" - that's the first person singular in a verb, and then, of course, you can have the first person plural which is "we". Much less common in a book. The second person is "you" and that can be either singular or plural, but as we say, is pretty rare in terms of the writing of a book or a novel. And then, the third person, singular can be either "he, she or it" and then the third person plural is "they". So again, for the writing of a book,

most commonly the third person - it will be written as "he did", or "she did" and so and so, or "is doing" something.

I hope that's been useful - some quite difficult concepts in this episode, so don't worry if you didn't understand them all. And the transcript will include references to the books that we have talked about and the transcript will be available on our website within a few days and that website just to remind you is:

www.stuagustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

Just to be clear - the "*saint*" at the beginning of that is actually abbreviated to just "st". And we also have an email address :

englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

We would love to hear from you and we would encourage you also to fill in the survey that's available on the website or that we can send you by email. That's it for this week. Thank you for listening, and we'll be with you with the second part of "Literature in the UK" which will look at poetry in a few days time. Goodbye for now.

(Music)

Book References:

Bernadine Evaristo, "*Girl, Woman, Other*", published by Hamish Hamilton, 2019

Mark Haddon, "*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*", published by Jonathan Cape (UK), 2003

Hilary Mantel Trilogy:

"*Wolf Hall*" (2009), "*Bring Up the Bodies*" (2012), "*The Mirror and the Light*" (2020), all published by Fourth Estate.