



The Complete Talking Heads

Alan Bennett

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Alan Bennett's award-winning series of solo pieces is a classic of contemporary drama, universally hailed for its combination of razor-sharp wit and deeply felt humanity. In *Bed Among the Lentils*, a vicar's wife discovers a semblance of happiness with an Indian shop owner. In *A Chip in the Sugar*, a man's life begins to unravel when he discovers his aging mother has rekindled an old flame. In *A Lady of Letters*, a busybody pays a price for interfering in her neighbor's life.

First produced for BBC television in 1988 to great critical acclaim, the Talking Heads monologues also appeared on the West End Stage in London in 1992 and 1998. In 2002, seven of the pieces were performed at the Tiffany Theater in Los Angeles for a highly praised brief engagement, and in 2003 a selection of the monologues premiered in New York at the Minetta Lane Theatre. These extraordinary portraits of ordinary people confirm Alan Bennett's place as one of the most gifted, versatile, and important writers in the English Language.

The Complete Talking Heads Details

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From Reader Review The Complete Talking Heads for online ebook

Magdalena says

Alan Bennett is something of an institution in Britain, known for the way in which he can encapsulate a world of voices within a single monologue. The monologues that make up this collection were written for BBC TV in 1987 and 1988, and feature a number of well known actors including Patricia Routledge, Thora Hird, Julie Walters, Anna Massey and Bennett himself. While it might have been possible to distance oneself while reading these on the page, listening to them is quite another experience. There's an insular intensity that draws the reader in. You feel just a little bit dirty, implicated, and complicit as you listen to a range of confessions; stories of suppression, pretensions unhinged, and above all, a kind of pervasive loneliness that is almost too much to bear at times.

Most of the monologues contain just one character, and yet, by reference, there seem to be many more. For example, in the opening monologue "A Chip in the Sugar", there is Graham Whittaker, a middle aged man who lives with his mother. His mother, and her 'beau' Frank Turnbull, have no voice in the piece – it's all Graham's recount, but they are as present and real to the action as if they were there. We're in Graham's point of view the entire time, but Graham's mother is as tragic a character as Graham, and her excitement and loss moves the drama forward. Similarly, in "Bed Among the Lentils," Anna Massey's Susan has a transition which involves her husband, the parish ladies, and an Indian Grocer Ramesh. Each of these characters has life and depth, even as they exist only in the confessions of Susan.

Nearly all of the stories have a twist of some sort, usually in terms of character development. Susan discovers passion and begins to breathe a little bit deeper in her transition. Irene Ruddock, in "A Lady of Letters", changes entirely, as does Routledge's other character Miss Fozzard in "Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet". Most of the transitions occur slowly, and are handled with tremendous subtlety. Bennett uses the characters' perceptions to show what they lose and find in the course of each monologue. Many of the monologues are funny, showing up the pretensions and imaginings of ordinary people in unusual circumstances, such as Celia in "The Hand of God". Celia is both pompous and devious in the way she covets, helps, and befriends an elderly neighbour in an attempt to get hold of her antiques cheaply and then resell them. She is put back in her place when the odd picture of a finger she sells cheaply turns out to be a Michelangelo original sketch for the Sistine Chapel. Her realisation is both humorous and satisfying. Not all of the monologues are pleasant though. A few are chilling. Three in particular manage to combine both pathos and horror as they move away from the ordinary world of aging and loneliness into mass murder, child molestation, and torture. From the perspective of a single witness, you almost come to understand Wilfred's compulsions in "Playing Sandwiches", and feel Rosemary's humiliation and anger in "Nights in the Garden of Spain". The most intense of all, "The Outside Dog" takes the reader on a journey through denial and discovery, and although it's an eye opener, it's not at all easy to listen to. Nevertheless, this is heady listening. Alan Bennett is the master of the monologue, pondering a range of social issues with a deftness that few other playwrights could match. This powerful collection features some of Bennett's most famous monologues, performed superbly by actors that clearly have a deep understanding of the work. The combination of character development, a great eye for the minutiae of everyday life, and a theatrical sense of the absurd and tragic inherent in that life makes this an excellent piece of work.

Liz says

Really enjoyed this collection which was particularly good as an audiobook. The performances were excellent throughout. Although quite depressing there are also moments of humour, as I listened whilst out walking I found myself laughing out loud. I will definitely come back to this for a second listen.

Cecily says

Thirteen sad monologues, all with a twist. More happens in what is unsaid than what is said. Not a good idea to read too many in one sitting - moreish as they are - otherwise they meld a little too much.

Charlotte Burt says

A bit depressing at times but also very funny, in an incredibly dark kind of way. So very darkly humorous. These short stories were originally written as monologues for the BBC. I had them as an audiobook where they were adapted for radio. With some fabulous actors, the likes of Julie Walters, Thora Herd and Bennett himself bringing life to the words. Overall I found them a little depressing especially when you listen to more than one at a sitting.

Bionic Jean says

I'd seen a couple of these on TV, and wondered whether they would work on the page. But I was not disappointed. Alan Bennett writes with such wit and perception that I could often visualise a set piece without having seen it.

So true to life, but such poignancy.

I have mixed feelings about confessing to being tucked in a corner reading these while the rest of the family was glued to the Olympics.

Christopher says

Alan Bennett in his "Talking Heads" series assumes the task of the portraitist, a task which calls for honesty, empathy and style (for after all, it must be entertaining). He does all of these things fairly well, but the monologues lack excitement. There's a reason talking heads are the bane of any cinematographer, and while Bennett's attempt to revolutionize the medium is noble, it fails to completely hold the viewer (or in this case reader's) attention.

Miguel says

Trata-se de um conjunto de monólogos curtos, escritos e produzidos para televisão. Gosto muito deste autor, tem uma maneira única de falar sobre as pessoas, apanhando-lhes o lado mais frágil mas também o mais risível. Com um humor subtil mas muito afiado e implacável, Bennett fala de pessoas que, por várias razões,

são ou estão pouco apetrechadas para a vida que hoje se vive. Para além deste profundo sentido da humanidade, Bennett capta como ninguém os tiques e as misérias que habitualmente identificamos como características dos ingleses.

Sue says

After my last book I complained of characters not developed. Well, here is a textbook example of developed characters. I unwittingly arrived at the perfect antidote to the Feel Good book.

Talking Heads is a collection of monologues which were originally written for BBC television, the first group in 1988 and a second group in 1998. Since that time they have found life as radio broadcasts, in live theater, and as a published collection. I listened to the audio book. It's hard for me to imagine a better way to encounter these devastating portraits because the impact is all in the words and the voices. Not so incidentally, those voices are from some of Britain's finest actors. [I accidentally checked "paperback" when I entered the book and can't figure out how to change that.:]

I thought several times of Thoreau's phrase "leading lives of quiet desperation." These twelve flawed souls lay bare the circumstances of their inner and outer lives. There's the nubile actress absorbed in her career, which she fails to notice has become soft porn. And the woman whose son mismanages the considerable assets she inherited from her deceased husband, forcing her to live with her stiff upper lip in a boarding house.

The six monologues from the second group are equally poignant but they are much darker. I was fascinated to realize after the fact that the second group was written ten years later. There's a pedophile trying and failing to reform; the wife of a serial killer obsessed with the cleanliness of her house; a podiatrist with a foot fetish serviced by a middle-aged unmarried woman. I find myself liking some of these flawed people, grieving with them.

In April I went to a reading by David Sedaris, who always recommends another writer or book to his audiences. That is when I heard about these twelve devastating, and occasionally comic, stories.

Milt says

short and tart tales. haute sorbet to interleaf among other reads

Emma says

I studied the first set of Talking Heads as an A level text, 11 years ago now, and decided to re-read them recently. If anything, I enjoyed them more the second time through.

The first set of six monologues comprises Susan, the vicar's wife, in Bed Among the Lentils; Graham in A

Chip in the Sugar; Lesley in Her Big Chance; Muriel in Soldiering On; Miss Ruddock in A Lady of Letters; and Doris in A Cream Cracker Under the Settee. Each of the narrators is ignorant as to what they are revealing to the audience. Each of the narrators ignorant as to the truth of their situation. There is most definitely a melancholy feel to the monologues, a sadness that pervades. The narrators strike the reader as lonely, some of them because they are genuinely alone, others because they feel alone despite being surrounded by family.

I have never before read the second set of monologues. It comprises Rosemary in Nights in the Gardens of Spain; Miss Fozzard in Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet; Marjory in The Outside Dog; Wilfred in Playing Sandwiches; Celia in The Hand of God; and Violet in Waiting for the Telegram. If anything, I found these darker than the first, they deal with amongst other things child molestation and murder. Again, there is a naivety to the majority of the monologues, the narrators failing to recognise their own predicament.

All these monologues are beautifully written, Alan Bennett is a genuine master of the written word. I would love to have seen these performed on stage.

Thaili says

3 stars

"So if you get the heroine saying, 'I don't suppose I shall ever be happy', then you can bank on it there's happiness just around the corner. That's the rule in novels. Whereas in life you can say you're never going to be happy and you never are happy, and saying it doesn't make a ha'porth of difference. That's the real rule. Sometimes I catch myself thinking it'll be better the second time round. (Pause) But this is it. This has been my go."

This was my summer reading for my senior year of high school. For my AP Literature class. I guess Mr. Hernandez wanted us to read something not well known so that we wouldn't have available analyses or summaries for it. He knows what the savages do. Anyways, sadly for me, yes, there was no analyses of the stories online and i needed them because this book wasn't totally easy. It takes time to understand some stories. And once I read the summaries that I could find my doubts turned legit. Like, yes, this character was gay, I totally knew it.

Bennett knows the Human. It's obvious enough and that's why this book didn't get a lower rating. The stories hover on interesting. There weren't any that I hated, there weren't any that I loved although I could easily pick out my favorite one. The character's are just extremely realistic and it's kind of disappointing that there wasn't a teenager in the collection. I would've loved to see Bennett's take on one of our personas (i'm almost eighteen). Yeah, the book wasn't spectacular. It wasn't horrible either. So I think my rating makes sense to me considering these variables.

George Hebenton says

Ive reread these numerous times. My first encounter with them was turning the tv on midway through one of these monologues and becoming totally engrossed in it. Mr Bennett has such a knack of spooling you in, revealing his characters and his treatment of the older characters and their turn of phrase seems so genuine. He makes the characters so real. Superb. Read and then watch the DVDs !!

C.J. J Richardson says

Enjoyable read from start to finish. Alan Bennett is a genius. Wish I could write like that.

Georgia says

Variable. Repetitive.

David Jay says

I can go either way with Alan Bennett; sometimes he is brilliant ("The History Boys") and sometimes he completely misses the mark ("Habeus Corpus"). This book is a collection of 12 fairly long monologues, peopled by wonderfully eccentric & human British characters. They are funny & heartbreaking & gorgeous. Some, "Bed among the lentils" & "A lady of letters," are sublime,
