

Alys, Always
Reading Group Notes



The Story Behind *Alys, Always*

When the idea for *Alys, Always* came along (and it arrived suddenly and quite complete one spring afternoon as I sat in a garden watching my husband playing football with the children), I recognised it straightaway. I knew it meant business. *This could be interesting*, I thought as I hurried inside to get my little orange jotter. *I wonder if I can make it work.*

If things had panned out as they were meant to, would I have written a novel? Probably not. In my old life, the itch to write had been scratched, fairly satisfactorily, by my career as a journalist; and in any case I had no time. But in 2008 I was diagnosed with an auto-immune disorder affecting my optic nerve, and since then my sight has been balanced on a knife-edge, stabilised (mostly, not always) by handfuls of pills. I'd loved my work, but now I was losing that too. It was, in a way, a double bereavement.

I still needed to write. It was a sort of ache. Someone told me about a local creative-writing course. I hadn't attempted fiction since school, but I turned up one Thursday lunchtime, sick with shame and nerves. The room was half full: a yoga teacher, some retired ladies, a girl with plaits curled around



her ears like Princess Leia. Once I'd got over the embarrassment (what was I doing, sitting around, *making stuff up?*), I felt excited. Alive. Liberated from something. We weren't being taught as much as being given permission to think differently.

Suddenly stories were everywhere. In class, I wrote about motherhood, domesticity, GPs' waiting rooms: the current inhibiting boundaries of my world. 'Oh, Harriet,' said the tutor after a few months, 'I do wish you'd get out of the kitchen occasionally.'

When the outline of *Alys, Always* came to me in the garden, I grabbed hold of it precisely because it had so very little to do with my life. It was a chance – yes! – to be someone else for a change, someone who starts off powerless and gradually discovers she can exert some control over events after all. It was, I suppose, a peculiar kind of wish-fulfilment. So I wrote the book for that reason; and because it made me happy; and because (most mysteriously, most unexpectedly of all) I found I could.



For Discussion

- What does the Christina Rossetti epigraph lead us to expect in *Alys, Always*?
- ‘I do my best reading in cafés. I find it hard to read at home, in absolute silence.’ Why is that, do you think?
- Why does Frances take Polly’s umbrella?
- ‘Maybe it’s not really lying if you barely know you’re doing it. It should be true. It’s the way it should be, in an ideal world.’ What does this tell us about Frances?
- Is being a good listener a dying art?
- How does Frances feel about Alys?
- ‘Sometimes it seems we all live in the same places.’ What does Frances mean by this?
- ‘I’m always affected when I see people unable to gauge a situation.’ How are you affected in a situation like that? What do you feel?



- To what extent is *Alys, Always* about control?
- What is chasing Frances in her dream?
- What do you think of Laurence?
- ‘I understand people, their ambitions and desires, their fears and weaknesses.’ Is Frances right to be so confident?
- ‘I’m confused by the way this makes me feel: should I be gratified to see her go, or should I be offended that I’m unfit to use her things? It’s hard to know what to think.’ Why does this confuse the usually secure Frances?



In Conversation with Harriet Lane

Q The idea for Alys, Always came to you very quickly – where did it spring from, do you think?

A It was a combination of factors which had probably been knocking around in the back of my mind for a while. I heard (second- or third-hand) about someone who came across the scene of an accident and was asked by the paramedics to sit with the injured driver, who later died. Some time later, there was contact with the bereaved family. I kept thinking about this. There was something in it that really gripped me. The moment when I saw a story in it came, I think, when I put that fragment together with an atmosphere, the place Frances comes from, the place she wants to escape. The story then crystallised for me into: *what if a certain sort of person found herself in this situation? What might happen?*

Q Have the terrible problems you have had with your eyes changed the way you physically write, and if they have, has this changed your writing?



A No, thankfully I am still able to read and write without difficulty. I just need strong light or a large font. I suspect that as I've become more aware of what I have lost or have to lose, I've also become a more 'visual' writer than I might otherwise have been. Someone said that while reading the book she was struck by the quality of light in it. I thought that was interesting.

Q Do you like Frances?

A Ah, that's tricky . . . I do know that while writing the book I absolutely loved her company. Every day I'd spring out of bed thinking, 'Oh goodness, I wonder what on earth she'll get up to today.' She thinks and does the things I generally don't allow myself to, and I find that a bit thrilling. But, you know, she's complicated. She shocked me sometimes. Still, despite all this, I guess I feel for her. As a friend said to me, 'Well, look what she's up against.'

Q What aspects of Alys, Always are you most pleased with?

A I like Frances's voice. As soon as I found it, I thought: Oh, OK, this could be fun. I like her sharpness, her mercilessness. I'm also pleased with the slow reveal. I like that Frances's character is revealed incrementally (which is, after



all, the way we get to know people in real life: in stages, as different aspects of their personalities come into the light). Hopefully, this contributes to a general air of unease.

Q Silence or music while you write? If music, who do you listen to?

A I wrote *Alys, Always* in a garden, mostly, in the summer: no R3, no 6Music, just birdsong and distant traffic. But thinking about it, there is a piece of music that I'll always associate with the book: 'A Forest' by The Cure. It has a fantastic atmosphere: mysterious, uneasy, urgent. That summer I became obsessed with it (to my family's irritation). I suppose I used it to make myself feel a little tense and on edge before I started to write, or while I was mulling over ideas.

Q What authors do you admire and why?

A I get a real kick out of books that leave space for you to make up your own mind: where something dawns on you, perhaps, or where you realise that things aren't quite as straightforward as you imagined they were. I like the unsettling sensation of being made to question my initial assumptions about character or what I'm being told. So, books-wise: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Zoë Heller's



Notes on a Scandal, David Vann's *Legend of A Suicide*, Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*. And I keep going back to Patricia Highsmith and Shirley Jackson for the way they use quite plain language to create a powerful atmosphere of dread. You don't know exactly what's going to happen – but you know it won't be good.

Q What comes first for you – plot or character?

A I can't really separate them.

Q The last few questions are the type 'you're never meant to ask' – why not?

A When doing journalism, I always asked those questions! The nitty-gritty, the mechanics and rituals of writing: they're interesting, aren't they? They give you an 'in'. I used to love that series in the *Guardian Review* on writers' rooms. But some literary people are snobby (or superstitious) about that sort of thing. Frances is, anyway.

Q What's your most treasured possession?

A A portrait painted by my grandmother. It's an oil painting of a rather severe-looking woman in black, with a beaky nose. We call her Mrs Danvers. There's an atmosphere to it which I love. You just know there's a story there.



There's a family story that goes with it, of course, which is pretty good in itself. But the painting has a life beyond that, too.

Q What single thing about you would surprise us the most?

A I'm really nothing like Frances.

Q Does Frances change through the novel?

A I think that's open to interpretation. Does she change, or are different aspects of her personality revealed as events unfold? Over to you . . .

Q Any clues about your next book – any snippets for us?

A I have a few vague ideas, but I guess I'm waiting for the moment of combustion. For the last few years, I've mostly been working off the kitchen table, which hasn't been ideal, but I'm pleased to say I've recently rearranged everyone's bedrooms, and the upshot is that finally I have a study of my own, with a door I can shut. So this feels like a step in the right direction.



Suggested Further Reading

Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier

The Chimney Sweeper's Boy by Barbara Vine

The Talented Mr Ripley by Patricia Highsmith

The Ambassadors by Henry James

A Vicious Circle by Amanda Craig



