

## Shelf Healing interview with Ian Evans. Transcribed by Lukas Montgomery

00:00:04

Rebecca Markwick:

A quick apology for some of the audio quality on this week's episode. There were some issues with our zoom recording, and so there maybe the odd moment where there's a little bit of cross talk that I haven't been able to edit out. Hopefully, you'll forgive us and enjoy what is a really interesting interview with Ian.

As a person who regularly gets their names said wrong, if you could say your first and last name, give your pronouns as well, then I won't pronounce your name wrong and other people will know who you are.

00:00:44

Ian Evans:

So I'm Ian Evans. So, pronouns: He or They is fine. I work in information studies in Teaching and Learning Administration

00:01:00

Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Ian Evans. Ian is the teaching and learning administrator for UCL's Publishing Masters and for the research students in the Department of Information Studies. It's a very full on job and Ian is the students first port of call for any and all course related issues. This is particularly important this academic year as all teaching is online. So, Ian is very, very busy this year. So thank you so much for coming on to our podcast.

00:01:35

Ian:

You're welcome. It's been a really different year hasn't it? Really full on, but it's nice seeing everyone on zoom calls and feeling connected to all the students again. The bustling, interesting people around is one of the nice things about the job; I've been missing that.

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Rebecca:

Yeah, I imagine so. The first question to get us started is nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

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Ian:

Yes, I do. I like to read as much as I can. I find I'm a bit addicted to the internet; like obsessively going through Twitter and things like that, especially with the news. And like Covid and Donald Trump and Brexit and the world's got a lot of news happening. So reading is good because it focuses me just on one thing. Instead of clicking through my phone, I'm actually just focused on a book which really pulls me out of day-to-day life. It's lovely.

00:02:23

Rebecca:

I find that something really good about books. You really have to focus on just that you can't - you don't get distracted like you do with your multiple tabs open on your computer.

00:02:33

Ian:

Yeah, that's right. So, yeah, it's not so much kind of a fantasy that I like to go into, but I like, you know, but it is fully absorbs me. So I'm look off in another world for an hour. That's really good.

00:02:46

Rebecca:

Talking of absorbing books: what type of books do you reach for when you want to improve your mood or feel better? Or just generally relax?

00:02:56

Ian:

Yeah, I like. I like everything, really. So I read a lot of nonfiction, so those subjects I'm interested in and then I've got a little son who's eight. So I read a lot of children's and young adult books of the moment. So some of these really good. There's, like great children's book, something often they kind of touch on adult subjects in a really nice way, because they have to explain it to children.

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Rebecca:

I find that sort of thing, you know that the absorbing nature of the nonfiction books could be quite a nice break, especially, it's in a really specialist topic is quite nice.

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Ian:

Yeah, yeah, that's what I need to get more into novels again. I used to read a lot, especially as a teenager. I really wanted to read like every classic novel, so I had a list and I'd tick them off. But then as I got older, I've got a bit, bit lazy about that much commitment. I think I was trying to prove a point to try and prove I could be intellectual. You know, read things that catch my eye now.

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Rebecca:

What's- that's always a really good way. I mean, some of the classic novels are really very, very long. Um, yeah.

00:04:08

Ian:

I got about halfway through *Vanity Fair*, and I remember it was very long in it, and it was good, but it wasn't quite holding my-

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Rebecca:

I've got a really old copy of *Vanity Fair*. It's from like 1873 and that's my excuse for not reading it, because it's from 1873. Not because I don't want to read it.

00:04:28

Yeah, back in those days I read like *Pride and Prejudice* and the classics, you know, loads of those are really good, like *Pride and Prejudice* is just really good, isn't it? It's so, it's still really modern and really funny and really sort of emotionally literate. It's really good.

00:04:43

Rebecca:

I love that book. Yeah. Is there a particular book that has profoundly affected you?

00:04:49

Ian:

Yes, I've got some books to show. Sorry, it's so big I could almost not pick it up. But this enormous book called *Jerusalem. Jerusalem*, I should say, by Alan Moore, so that, that had a huge effect on me. I'm a really big fan of Alan Moore. He's a graphic novel writer, he did famously *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* and all those, but he's a real proper philosopher who like, thinks a lot about serious philosophy and writes about it, which isn't as well-known as his comics and his film writing, but *Jerusalem's* amazing. So it's 3 huge books, and it's like an immersive experience where it's so long and so overwhelming. It's like going to another dimension for, you know, it's took to me about a year to read. I think it's kind of a fantasy about his, well I don't know if he actually believes it, but it's his theory about the workings of the universe and how yeah, humans, all exist in God's imagination and we're all part of the plan of building heaven and hell in real time. So every action that someone makes kind of contributes to the world either becoming more like heaven or more like hell. And there's like hundreds of characters went interrelating across generations. And then some of them die and come back as ghosts and then some of them you see the alternate dimension version of them. It's like insanely, insanely complicated. Yeah, by the time I finished, I really felt like it totally changed me. And I thought, like, I really have to be kinder and I think more about people. Look, things actually are really important, that was that was nice.

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Rebecca:

Because I haven't come across *Jerusalem* well and more, and I know him through *Watchman* and *V for Vendetta*. So I had a little Google when you mentioned *Jerusalem* and I have to read it, I have to. I need to find it.

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Ian:

It's very good, he did a similar among called *Prometheo*, which is a graphic novel. It's kind of similar topic where it's about how things in life we take for granted might actually be really important that that figures what that's easier to get into because it's a comic, but *Jerusalem's* probably it's probably better I think that's what sort of his masterpiece, I think anyway.

00:07:02

Rebecca:

Well, you've described it even better than you did in our emails. I need to read it now. I need it.

00:07:12

Ian:

You know, it's like the Bible, is like reading the Bible. It's like, really, really heavy for heavy philosophy.

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Rebecca:

So, you were profoundly affected by that. It wanted you to sort of just think about the world differently and be more kind to people. But are there any books that you kind of treat like comfort food that you return to over and over again?

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Ian:

Yeah, I've got loads, I'll grab some. So I really love this - John, John Higgs he's called, I read a lot of him. So he writes kind of pop culture books and popular history. So this one *Stranger Than We Can Imagine* is really cool. Get it lined up to the camera. That one's about the history of the 20th century and everything that happened in the 20th century. Sort of trends in thinking and yeah, it's really good anyway, that really, really exciting and then, this one I got recently *Watling Street*. So *Watling Street* just a really ancient street in Britain that's been here since Roman times and most of it you can still walk on, so he just walks the street and shows them you know what it was like in different eras and why it's important.

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Rebecca:

I love that kind of sort of nonfiction book, where they, like I said earlier, they focus on something very, very small and then give you loads of information and detail about it. Always find those-

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Ian:

Yeah I like that as well. That's probably similar to *Jerusalem* actually. It might be why I like both of them because Jerusalem's about how everything is much more important than you think. Then what was I, that was going to be Transformers. Yeah, I like a lot of graphic novels. Transformers, believe it or not. So I was really into Transformers when I was a little kid in the eighties, James Roberts has written these adult Transformers novels called *More Than Meets the Eye* and they're really good. They're probably the best graphic novel I've ever read. They're really, really deep, really emotional. He's sort of written it for adults. So he does loads of, it's a bit like kind of *Game of Thrones* where there's like, constant twists, and you just said I can't believe he did that with us like this. He's just done something really shocking. So it's loads like that and then the other thing I like is he's really thought about. You know, if you had a race of robots, what would that actually be like? So they, you know, they could modify their bodies, you know, essentially their genderless so they can present as male female or change it. And then, you know, if you were that kind of species, what, what would that be like? And so there's things like there's a dictator who's obsessed with people not being able to change their forms. So, like if you Transformers was change into a tank or whatever so, if you change into a tank, that means you have to be a soldier and you're not allowed to not be a soldier. So then there's like rebel groups who say, you know, I turned into a tank. I don't want to fight. I don't want to be a soldier, So there's all sorts of issues like that.

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Rebecca:

That's really interesting taking sort of such a fun idea such as Transformers. I remember watching all of the cartoons you know when I was younger, having that idea and then just adding this whole extra layer on top that's really relevant.

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Ian:

It's very good. Yeah, so it's very good for like gender stuff like that. So also of course Transformers were a boy's toy in the eighties, so they they were all male characters in the eighties. Which, of course, was just because they thought, boys wanted to play with male looking characters. But the way he's written it, he's, you know, he's thought through so if you had a race of all male presenting robots, kind of essentially any romance, would be gay, so a gay relationship would be the norm because they all. So he's got a lot about how it's essentially a gay culture as well. Really interesting. Yeah, it's really, really good right here. James Roberts.

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Rebecca:

What is it about these books, do you think, that keeps you coming back? Is it the great plotting, or is it sort of more the comfort of returning to old friends?

00:11:05

Ian:

Um, it's probably a bit of both, actually. I like I like all of those because they're fully absorbing, so that kind of stops me wanting to be on my phone at the same time. That's really good and then I guess with Transformers it's, it's a bit that it's the nostalgia of something I was into when I was a kid that really imagined. It's probably a bit of both, but more the absorbance I think.

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Rebecca:

So I know it's- it's probably not the best question for the whole lockdown two moment. But do you read in a particular place or at a certain time in your day?

00:11:38

Ian:

Yeah, I do. At the moment it's all been thrown a bit by lockdown, actually, so I'm reading a bit less. Before lockdown it was mostly on my commute on the tube, so I really liked my commute because I'd have an hour to read a book in the morning and then another hour to read a book on the way back so I'd get two hours, sat down reading a book every day, which was lovely. I read in pubs quite a lot. If I meet friends because I've got a little son, so I don't have much time. So when I'm not at work I'm usually doing childcare. So if I do go out to see a friend though I really try and make the most of it. So I usually try and read, like in the pub before my friends arrive. If I can get there early.

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Rebecca:

So ordinarily, then that's a lot of reading you get to have every day. I'm quite jealous.

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Ian:

Yeah that's true, actually. Yeah, I suppose. Probably about two hours a day, time. It is good, isn't it? It's kind of me.

00:12:32

Rebecca:

I have to listen to audiobooks a lot now because I spend a lot of time driving to my different clients. So I have to listen to audio, which it doesn't have quite the same effect as sitting down with a proper book.

00:12:45

Ian:

I like audiobooks because, well, well hearing the authors voice is interesting or an actor's voice. I guess the thing I don't like is you don't get to imagine the characters yourself then do you you're kind of tied into their way of imagining the character, But sometimes I find audio books I follow the plot better, especially with like, old fashioned books where it's kind of a barrier to the language to get through. If you hear acted out it's kind of a lot clearer. You know, that line is supposed to be sarcastic or that line's a joke kind of thing, So that's good.

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Rebecca:

And we've already briefly mentioned this but how have the restrictions on movement affected the amount of time you can spend reading? It can't be easy, especially now with extra limits on journeys. Are you managing to read for that amount of time?

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Ian:

Yeah, it's restricted it quite a lot actually. I'm not reading as much. Probably just, yeah, I probably like read just sat on the sofa - after my son's gone to bed. I sort of read sat on the sofa for half an hour. Probably. It's probably gone down to about half an hour instead of two hours a day.

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Rebecca:

Have you found it really difficult to make that space for you to read and have you noticed sort of the difference in like you said you were only managing half an hour now, instead of your two hours, are you, are you missing being able to read that much?

00:14:00

Ian:

Yeah, my time's a lot more restricted now because I play the guitar as well and then I've got I've got one of these drum kits with rubber pads, you can play with them headphones on. So when lockdown started, I thought, you know, practice drums a lot and I play the guitar more. Maybe I could read a bit more, but this is not really happened, really. I kind of like, work has bled into my free time a bit because we're busier. You've always got the computer on at home, and you don't have the hard divide between work life and home life. I need to make time. I think it has affected being able to read, but I think it would be good for my mental health if I was reading more. Try and get back into it.

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Rebecca:

Do you have any recommendations for books that help improve sort of your mood and your mental health?

00:14:46

Ian:

Yeah, I haven't read many self-help books and things, but this guy I really like actually, my friend Felix recommended this guy, called Oliver Burkeman. This one's really good. *How to Become Slightly Happier and Get a Bit More Done*. So this this is really good. What he's done is he's gone through loads of famous self-help books and, like different philosophies like Stoicism and Buddhism and things and he's kind of so he kind of gently teases them and sort of says what's good about them and what might go wrong about them if you were to, to, kind of unbalance to one and not others so that's really good on its really practical is well, because he doesn't tell you have to change your whole life. He just does very simple things, like just make this tiny change and see what happens. There's a bit achievable. Then this was the one I read first *The Antidote*, this is about the positive thinking craze. So especially in America, like positive thinking is like a huge thing isn't it. Everyone was always going on you have to be positive all the time. So this this one is he makes the case that that's a bad idea. And if you constantly think positive, you're kind of setting yourself up for disappointment and you're also avoiding kind of cues. So like, you know, maybe you're feeling down for reasons, and you should actually ask what those reasons are.

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Rebecca:

Sounds like it might be particularly relevant for the whole second lockdown thing. Not trying to be overly positive.

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Ian:

Yeah, it's good. He has an interview with an astronaut, where he's talking about how you kind of make a space launch as safe as possible. And he's saying, like you don't you don't positive think at all you actually like, think very carefully about everything that could go wrong and then actually write down what the answers do. So he's saying positive thinking is like the worst thing you could do because it's just like avoiding, avoiding danger and pretending danger doesn't exist, is what I mean. Yeah, that's good, he writes really easily, he writes in *The Guardian* sometimes and other papers. He's like, really easy to read. He's quite wise but I find it actually does affect my life, reading him.

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Rebecca:

I think that's what everyone hopes for really, isn't it to find a writer you can really click with on topics that you find interesting that's easy to read and that you can sort of use in your everyday life, regardless of whether it's a fantasy book or a self-help book or poetry or graphic novels, which we always love.

00:17:20

Ian:

Yeah, I think I probably prefer things that, uh I like things that are very deep. I like the language to be easy ish I suppose, so there's not a barrier to get into it.



00:17:31

Rebecca:

Amazing. I'm going to pop all of those books that you've suggested and talked about into the show notes so that our listeners can find them and give them a read. Well, thank you so much for coming onto Shelf Healing

00:17:46

Ian:

You're welcome, it's really nice to talk and thanks for the invite.

00:17:48

Rebecca:

I really enjoy chatting to you on. I think it's so important that we get lots of different people onto the podcast because everyone's lives are busy and stressful in their own ways. And everyone has their own opinions on what books are good. Any new book like I really now, I have to go read *Jerusalem*. You know, I would never have known that unless you agreed to come on to our podcast. I'm really grateful that you did.

00:18:11

Ian:

Ah fantastic! Thanks very much. Yeah. Appreciate it and lovely to talk to you.

00:18:15

Rebecca:

Yeah, thank you very much. That's it for this week. I hope you've enjoyed it and from all of us at Shelf Healing. We hope you have a very happy Christmas and a lovely New Year. I'll be back next week on the fifth of January with our first episode of 2021 with Dr Rhada Modgil. Music for our podcast by Nicholas Patrick and thanks to (Lukas) Montgomery, who does all of our transcripts for the Shelf Healing podcasts.