



The Clothes They Stood Up In & The Lady in the Van

Alan Bennett

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From Alan Bennett, the author of *The Madness of King George*, come two stories about the strange nature of possessions...or the lack of them. In the nationally bestselling novel **The Clothes They Stood Up In**, the staid Ransomes return from the opera to find their Regent's Park flat stripped bare--right down to the toilet-paper roll. Free of all their earthly belongings, the couple faces a perplexing question: Who are they without the things they've spent a lifetime accumulating? Suddenly a world of unlimited, frightening possibility opens up before them.

In "The Lady in the Van," which *The Village Voice* called "one of the finest bursts of comic writing the twentieth century has produced," Bennett recounts the strange life of Miss Shepherd, a London eccentric who parked her van (overstuffed with decades' worth of old clothes, oozing batteries, and kitchen utensils still in their original packaging) in the author's driveway for more than fifteen years. A mesmerizing portrait of an outsider with an acquisitive taste and an indomitable spirit, this biographical essay is drawn with equal parts fascination and compassion.

The Clothes They Stood Up In & The Lady in the Van Details

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From Reader Review The Clothes They Stood Up In & The Lady in the Van for online ebook

Gina Rheault says

Two for one in this book:

The first part is quick and comic, mostly set in the now empty home of a burgled middle-class couple reads like a play. Details make it funny because you are reminded of all the funny little things, odd rituals, funny habit, little secrets, little notes and pictures one can accumulate in one's home. And it reminds you how times change and how easily you can be left in antiquity if you cling too closely to things that don't change: your old college books, sentimental clothes, wedding presents, and so on. A blessing it is to have children around to break them, perhaps? Quick and entertaining, like a good night out at old fashioned theater without leaving your house.

The second, "The Lady in the Van", is the basis for a movie of the same name. Its a series of journal entries about the true story of bag lady who lives in a van in the author's neighborhood and then in the author's yard, encroaching bit by bit over several decades until death clears everything away. I found it a little sad because the underlying story of many such eccentric single ladies who are deemed mad, and who die alone is the story of women who were not mad but lonely. And lonely because they were sometimes, how often I don't know, mis-diagnosed closet lesbians in an age that didn't allowed illicit lady passions to be imagined or to be acted upon. (See "Packed in a Trunk" and "Finding Vivian Maier"). For me this is a sad story which makes me think that one should look on the homeless and with compassion, as the author did. Double kudos to him for his kindness and for finding the good hearted humor to communicate the humanity in the life of Ms. Shepherd who lived in a van.

Donna LaValley says

The first story is fiction with interesting although stereotypical characters (that's okay; it never purports to be Great Literature) and an original, well-paced plot. The author is a playwright, and the reader can see how well this story would be done on stage. It was humorous and surprising, as the reader doesn't know where the next plot point will come from. The mystery of the odd, dastardly-thorough theft is solved in the end, and the couple, both stodgy English, sadly sexually repressed and dreary, each find their lives changed greatly after The Restoration. There is macabre humor for one, whose greatest enjoyment in the past becomes something like torture. I'd have given this 3 or 4 stars.

However, the second "story" is a non-fiction account of the author's relationship with a disagreeable, selfish, and increasingly filthy older woman. It's later determined that she was known to have mental "issues" and other problems. However, the author allows her (under what he hopes will be seen as charity) to first live in his garden shed, and then allows her to park her van in his front yard ... for 15 years. Although she sometimes says amusing things and reveals some charm as an eccentric character, there she is, annoying anyone who goes to the author's front door, throwing used toilet paper and dirty adult diapers out her van's door, and, as the author frequently asserts, the smell of her person and her van is a stench altogether unbearable.

Why would someone allow this dysfunctional, sad, smelly, difficult, elderly person to create blight in his

front yard for so long? Was it because he grew fond of her personally? No, if that were true, he'd have taken her into his home and seen that she received the care she so obviously needed. I think the answer is, he kept her for "material" for this story and for the columns he published, in which he sometimes quoted her.

Anyone reading this will suspect I'm way overboard, but I can put you in touch with many a person who has dated or married a serious writer and they will attest to a writer's ability to justify almost anything for good material. Sometimes, nothing is too sacred not - one's most intimate moments, nor the slow degradation of another, helpless, human being.

I would give "The Lady in the Van" no stars, and therefore my 2-star rating is an average for the 2 pieces.

Ed says

It's always a pleasure to read Alan Bennett's gentle, understated humor. Not that there weren't laugh out loud moments (one, embarrassingly, while I was in my doctor's crowded waiting room.)

Bennett's satires, including this and *The Uncommon Reader*, among others, contrast strongly with the more biting, bludgeon-like satires of Tom Sharpe, but there will always be place on my shelf for all their works.

Bennett is perhaps better known as a playwright. *The History Boys*, in both its theater and film form, is a favorite of mine. He wrote, among many other plays, *The Madness of George III*.

The other work in this book, *The Lady in the Van*, is a poignant true story of a mentally ill older woman who lives in a van she has parked outside Bennett's Camden Town house. He allows her to move the van into his driveway, where she stays for well over a decade. It is a touching story, and an interesting counterweight to the novella *The Clothes They Stood Up In*, which opens the book.

Kathryn says

Saw that the second story in this double feature has been adapted into a film starring Maggie Smith. Based on that, and my love of Bennett's wonderful book "*The Uncommon Reader*," I guess my expectations were too high. I found each story only mildly amusing.

Cricket Muse says

Not what I expected from the book blurb. I thought I was getting into a story in which a couple who have been robbed of everything--yes, everything, discover enlightenment having to start over. It could have been. Instead, *The Clothes They Stood Up In* took a strange sexually-laden turn and I flipped through hoping it would get back on track.

The Lady in the Van is based on Bennett's real life experience with a woman who did indeed live in a van in front of his house for several years. Such a strange story, it had to be true.

Bennett's *Uncommon Reader* is a much better choice of wit as a quick, satisfying read.

Barbara says

I had seen the movie, *The Lady in the Van*, and found it captivating. My brother gave me this book with two

of Alan Bennett's stories, *The Clothes They Stood Up In* (a short novel) and *The Lady in the Van* (a story based on a real experience from the author's life). So glad to have discovered this beloved British storyteller. He writes with humor, pathos, and so much quirkiness. Loved this book! (As well as the movie, with Maggie Smith in the role of the Lady). Highly recommend

David says

The first story is witty, funny, original. It could almost be a screenplay. The second is true, and also funny, but with the absurd hilarity involved when people are a bit crazy. They both deal with the topic of material possessions, and what they should or shouldn't mean to us.

Jamie says

Three stars for *The Clothes They Stood Up In*, and five stars for *The Lady in the Van*.

It's interesting how Bennett's fiction differs so greatly from his more essayist/memoirist style in the latter story. I suppose my preference shows in my rating.

Because I watched the 2015 film adaptation of *The Lady in the Van*, I couldn't help but impose my recollection of the film's cinematography and characters onto my reading of both stories. The Ransomes were, in my mind, embodied by the snooty couple that lived in the house across from Bennett's in the film. And perhaps *The Lady in the Van* read so much more richly because the film had stayed so close to it.

The story of the Ransomes felt a bit cartoonish, though quite fun to read with lots of quirky moments and funny supporting characters. It helps to remember the weight of the story falls less on the robbery than on the effect it has on Mrs Ransome's outlook on her life and marriage.

The Lady in the Van grabbed my by the heart and felt so very up-close and personal - perhaps because it's nonfiction, but also again perhaps because I saw the film and Maggie Smith and Alex Jennings are just so damn good in it and their portrayals guided my reading. In any case, I loved how Bennett writes so frankly of his own character in respect to Miss Shepherd, and how sharp his writing is. Miss Shepherd herself is so utterly wonderful, though I cannot truthfully answer that I would have been able to do what Bennett did for her.

I've now read three works by Alan Bennett this year and it's only the start of April. As much as I enjoyed *The Uncommon Reader* and *The Clothes They Stood Up In*, I'm now convinced that what I'm really after is Bennett's essays and, if possible, his diaries.

Happily, I've just discovered he's written at least three 600+ page volumes of essays: *Writing Home*, *Untold Stories*, and *Keeping On, Keeping On*. Thanks, Goodreads.

Angela Belt says

The epitome of slight. Slight concept. Slight narrative. Slight impact.

Diane S ? says

3.5 The first story "The Clothes" had a very likable woman as the main character, her husband not so much. Loved the tongue in cheek writing, Bennett is so good at that. Loved the message behind this one which would be a spoiler so I cannot share it. The second is actually a true story, and as stated in the introduction the woman is not very likable, though at times I felt very sorry for her. Anyway these are very easy stories to read and I liked them but than again I tend to like evverything this author writes.

Kwoomac says

Two stories, one fiction, one nonfiction. Both deal with our attachment to and need for stuff in our lives. Both told in a funny, poignant way. I really enjoy Bennett's voice.

A movie version of The Lady In The Van is coming out in November, 2015, starring Maggie Smith. Can't wait!

Sharon Williams says

Two short stories. The first one was just so very bland. The second one, The Lady in the Van...well, this is the first time I have ever said (written?) that the movie was better than the book. Much better.

WndyJW says

This was a rich novella about a repressed, long married, oh-so proper couple who come home from the opera to find their apt completely emptied of everything they own and the effect it has on them. The story is told with a light touch and gentle humor, but it does make one think... highly recommended.

Sheila says

Bennett is a British writer and a master of subtle irony, insight, and wit. I truly enjoyed reading these two short stories. The first one, The Clothes They Stood Up In is fiction and questions how important our possessions are. How they define us and our relationship to all the items we pack in our homes and lives.

The second story, The Lady in the Van is superb. Bennett becomes acquainted with an older woman who is living out of her van near his home. He is concerned about her and she eventually comes to park her van (it no longer runs) in his garden where she lives for many years. She is highly eccentric and private. The story

includes several vignettes of Bennett's conversations and observations of her. It is ironic that he almost learns more about her after her death (from a visit to her brother) than he did in all the time she lived in his garden.

Billie Jo says

Very British which makes the stories more matter of a fact and the response quite a bit different than one might see in the US to the situations presented. The introduction sets the reader to expect some enlightened thoughts on the relationship people have with their possessions, but unfortunately the stories are not that deep. Although I will say that in this case truth is stranger than fiction as if I had to guess which story was non-fiction I would have guessed wrong. A quick and easy read, but if you are not a fan of British writing you may want to pass.
