



# Literary Voices

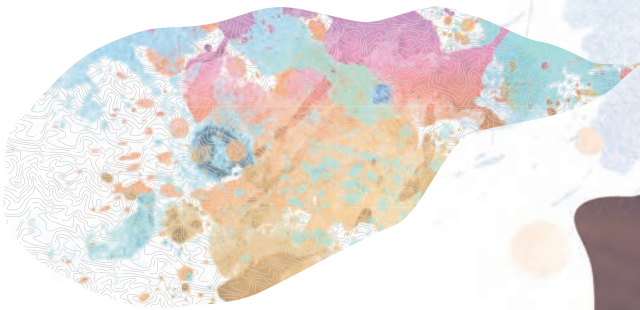
An exploration of the inner voices  
of writers and readers from the  
medieval period to the present day

# Literary Voices

Voices play a central role in the way we write and read literary works.

Many authors are inspired by voices: real and remembered, inner and imagined. Some report 'hearing' the voices of their fictional characters, but the role this plays in the creative process has been largely unexplored and is little understood.

Readers also encounter voices through literature. Do you hear your own voice as narrator? Do you imagine different voices for different characters? Do you ever imagine these characters saying things beyond the pages of the book? Understanding how we encode and process voices in literary works raises further questions about how we create interpersonal relationships with imaginary beings; how we posit some kind of consciousness behind, and expressed by, a voice in a book. As concept and experience, then, 'literary voices' are certainly more complex than appearances might suggest.





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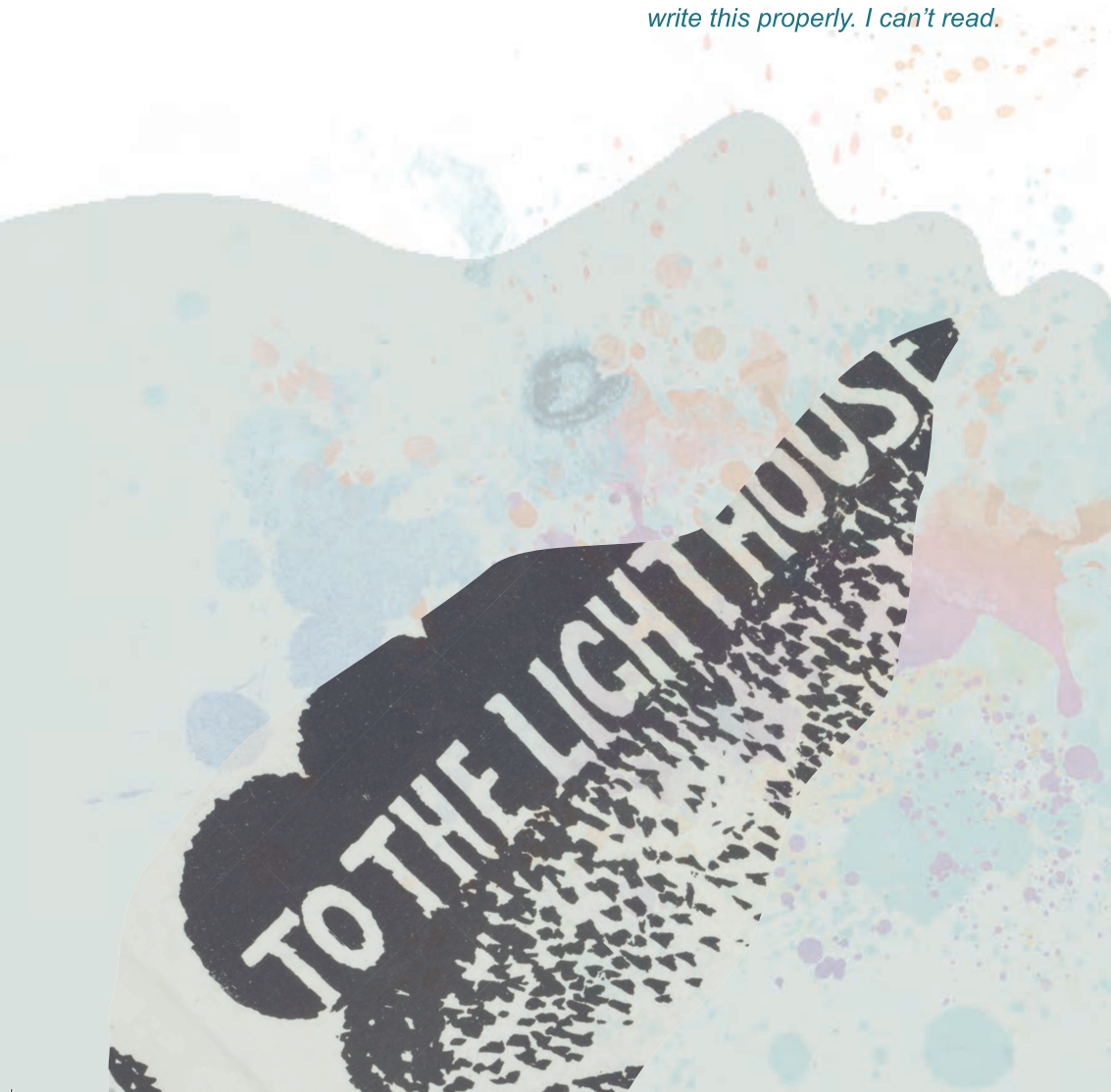


# Virginia Woolf

From her earliest journals to her most famous novels, Woolf's writings embody how creative work emerges through reshaping memories and capturing inner and imagined voices.

Woolf also heard psychotic voices, beginning after the death of her mother, when she was just thirteen. The voices returned at the end of her life. She wrote a final note to her husband, Leonard:

*I begin to hear voices and I can't concentrate... You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read.*





These voices, although frightening, were sometimes also experienced as a gift. In 1930, she wrote to her friend, the composer Ethel Smyth:

*As an experience, madness is terrific ... in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere dribblets, as sanity does.*

Woolf wrote in her fiction about such experiences, often indirectly. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), set in 1922 – the year of the first official report on ‘shell shock’ – Septimus Smith hears voices, but feels unable to communicate their message concerning the horror of war. His suffering is compounded by the ‘violators of the soul’ (his term for his doctors) with their biologicistic preoccupation with eating and rest for exhausted ‘nerves’. They refuse to listen to the ravings of a madman. So Septimus finally communicates his message by killing himself.

Woolf wrote of her next, semi-autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) that it laid to rest the obsessional voice of her mother, a voice she had heard daily since her death over thirty years ago:

*I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.*

In her autobiographical essay, ‘Sketch of the Past’, written near the end of her life, Woolf looks back and sees herself:

*Taking the breath of these voices in my sails and tacking this way and that through daily life as I yield to them.*

# Muriel Spark

Shortly after her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1954, Muriel Spark suffered a breakdown in which she experienced delusions and hallucinations, most likely as a result of malnourishment and taking what she termed 'the wrong sort of pills' as appetite suppressants. For a short while she became convinced that there were coded messages in the works of other writers (particularly those of T. S. Eliot), and saw the words she read forming into anagrams and crosswords for her to decipher.

After her recovery she resolved to write a novel about her hallucinations in which she could also 'work out a novel-writing process'. The result – her debut novel, *The Comforters* (1957) – has the protagonist Caroline Rose hear a typewriter and a chorus of voices narrating her into existence.

*'But the typewriter and the voices – it is as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us.' As soon as she had said these words, Caroline knew that she had hit on the truth.*

Muriel Spark, *The Comforters*

Caroline does not passively submit to these voices, and even as they throw her reality into question she challenges their right to control her. Much like Spark herself, Caroline ends up deciding to write her own novel about 'Characters in a novel' (which, as it happens, was one of the working titles for *The Comforters*). In this way, Spark used her hallucinatory experience as a creative prompt to explore the nature of plots and narrative, and the relationship between authors and their characters, while at the same time using fictional narrative as a way of addressing her hallucinatory experience.





# Charles Dickens

*Charles Dickens excelled in character; in the creation of characters of greater intensity than human beings.*

T. S. Eliot

For many, the enduring appeal of Charles Dickens's work lies in the characters that he created. This pleasure for the reader seems to proceed from the intense and vivid experience that Dickens had as a writer.

Dickens wrote of how he saw, rather than invented his stories. Characters and scenes came to him with unusual vividness, as if from a 'benevolent power', he claimed in 1841. Writing fiction felt to Dickens like a process of transcribing what was already presented to him. 'I don't invent it – really do not', he told his close friend John Forster. This may have involved listening to imaginary voices, too. 'He heard his characters actually speak to him', mentioned the Victorian psychiatrist Henry Maudsley, in 1876. Another Victorian man of science, George Henry Lewes, agreed: 'Every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him'.

The independence of literary characters was something Dickens felt to be essential:

*It is not enough to say [of characters] that they were this, or that. They must show it for themselves, and have it in their grain. Then, they would act on one another, and would act for themselves whether the author likes it or no.*

Memorable mannerisms of speech and expression help lend his characters such force. For many readers, to this day, it is his distinctive voices that make Dickens's fictional universe so compelling and recognisable. In the last decade of his life, Dickens performed these voices in sell-out public readings, across Britain, Ireland and America. While enlarging his celebrity, the readings contributed to Dickens's exhaustion and death, aged only 58, in 1870.

Throughout his writing life, Dickens was fascinated by ghosts, hallucinations and unusual mental episodes. Some of his ghost stories, such as 'The Signal-Man' (1866), suggest a close association between visions, voices and a character's disordered state of mind. What mattered was not whether ghosts truly existed but the powerful impression they made on the mind and body. As an astonishingly successful writer and performer, Dickens seemed to regard his own literary characters in a similar spirit.



Charles Dickens surrounded by the characters he created in *Dickens' Dream* by R.W. Buss. The Charles Dickens Museum.

# Samuel Beckett

In a letter to Alan Schneider in 1957, the novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett wrote that: 'My work is a matter of fundamental sounds'. This laconic statement has nourished a vast array of critical readings focusing on the sounds of words and the presence of music in Beckett's fictional worlds. However, undoubtedly the most ubiquitous sound in Beckett's work is that of the mysterious voices buzzing, murmuring or whispering within the heads of his characters. To borrow from the narrating figure in *The Unnamable* (1953), the narrative core of Beckett's dark universes seems to be 'all a matter of voices; no other metaphor is appropriate'.

A biographical encounter might be linked to Beckett's interest in inner voices. In 1935, acclaimed psychiatrist Carl Jung gave a series of lectures at the Tavistock Clinic in London. Amongst the audience was Samuel Beckett. In its preoccupation with voice – disconnected and disembodied – much of Beckett's work seems to have been influenced by what he heard there. In the third lecture of the series, Jung said that 'complexes' might:

*emancipate themselves from conscious control to such an extent that they become visible and audible. They appear as visions, they speak in voices which are like voices of definite people.*

Who is speaking, and to whom, is largely ambiguous in Beckett's work. Pieces such as *The Unnamable* (1953), *Not I* (1972), and *Company* (1979) not only raise questions about speaker and listener, but also the more fundamental question of 'why speak at all?'

In these works, voices often wonder at their own need to speak, and the characters hearing them show distress as they realise the impossibility of stopping these constant, often tormenting, murmurs. The qualities of Beckett's voices (alien, autonomous, without a recognisable source, and having aggressive or commanding contents) resonate with some people's experience of auditory hallucinations. Importantly, however, Beckett's work seems to explore the continuity between pathological and everyday inner voices, such as the relentless sound of our inner speech and thoughts.

*There is always something to listen to.*

Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett (right) on the set of his movie, *Film*, looking at a fish through a magnifying glass. Steve Schapiro/Corbis via Getty Images.







had a thing in consyence which sche had neu schellyd be  
forn y tyme in alle hyr lyfe for sche was an lattyd be.  
hyr enemy y deuyl. in mo<sup>st</sup> seynng to hyr schyl sche was  
in good heale hyr nedyd no confessyon. but don penaltys  
be hir self a loone a all schuld be for zowyn. for god is  
mcyful y now. And y for y<sup>e</sup> creatur of god tyme dede  
gret penaltys in fastyng bred a thyr a y<sup>e</sup> dede of al  
meo. w<sup>th</sup> deuylt yvero. saf sche wold not schellyn it in  
confessyon. And when sche was any tyme seke or dyselyd  
y deuyl seyde in hyr mende y sche schuld be dampnyd. for  
sche was not schreuyng of y<sup>e</sup> defalte. wherfor aft<sup>r</sup> y<sup>e</sup> hyr  
chyl was born. sche not trostyng hyr lyfe. sent for hyr  
gostly fadyr as q. seyde be forn in ful wyl to be schreuyng  
of alle hyr lyfe tyme as ney as sche wold. a when  
sche cam to ye poynt for to seyn y yung which sche  
had so long conselyd. hir confesso was a tytel to hastyne.  
a gan scharly to vnderstennyn hyr ex<sup>er</sup> ya sche had ful  
ly seyde hir entent. a so sche wold no mo<sup>st</sup> seyn. for nowt  
he myght do. And a noon for drede sche had of dampna  
cyon on ye to syde. a hyr scharp repyng on y<sup>e</sup> o<sup>th</sup>er syde.  
y<sup>e</sup> creatur went olt<sup>r</sup> of hyr mende a was wonderye  
veyd a labellryd w<sup>th</sup> spyrty half. jey<sup>nt</sup> om wekye a olde  
daye. And in y<sup>e</sup> tyme sche sey as hyr thollet deuelys opyn  
her molthyng al influmyng w<sup>th</sup> bremyng lolyng of fyr. as  
ye schuld a stallyd hyr m. Sum tyme rampyng at hyr  
on tyme thretyng her o<sup>th</sup>er tyme pullyng hyr a halyng hyr  
boyn myght a day. duryng ye forseyd tyme. And also y<sup>e</sup> deuyl  
ho cryed up on hyr w<sup>th</sup> grete thretyngs a bodyn hyr sche  
schuld forsake hyr appetynt hyr feyth. and denyng hyr  
god. hyr modyr a alle ye seyntes in heuyn. hyr goode w<sup>th</sup>  
hyr a alle good vices. hir fadyr. hyr godyr. a alle hyr  
frendys. And so sche dede. Sche stallynd hyr husband  
hir frendys and her olt<sup>r</sup>yn self. sche spak many a spuallys.

The Book of Margery Kempe records her mystical experiences. This page describes devils 'pulling her and hauling her about both day and night'.

# Margery Kempe

Experiences of divine revelation and inspiration have been highly valued across the ages, and many people today report hearing voices and seeing visions with a deep spiritual significance.

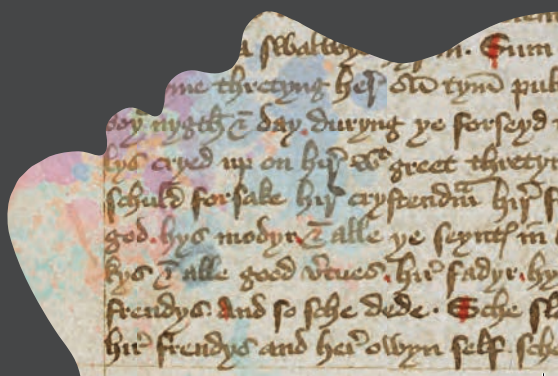
One of the most influential records of mystical experience within the Christian tradition is *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Written in the early fifteenth century, it is widely regarded as the first autobiography in English.

Margery's visions often involve more than one of the senses. The *Book* opens with an account of her suicidal despair after the birth of her first child, in which she experiences devils mauling her and shouting threats. She is cured by a vision of Christ as a handsome young man sitting by her bedside, addressing her as His daughter. Later, she describes a conversion experience of hearing music so sweet that she leaps out of bed, thinking herself in paradise.

The *Book* is shaped by Margery's conversations with the Lord, often described as visitations while she is praying or contemplating, and by experiences in which she sees not only with her 'ghostly' but also her 'bodily' eye, entering into a dramatic spiritual world where she participates in Biblical

history – assisting at Christ's birth, or making Mary 'a hot drink of gruel and spiced wine' to comfort her after His death. She is sometimes terrified by demonic visions, often grotesquely sexual. She repeatedly describes too her mysterious 'cryings', the physical mark of her divine inspiration, and her weeping, often evoked by images of holy things, is compulsive, public, and extreme: 'krying and roryng', breaking out however much she tries to contain it.

Margery's cryings are the voice of vision. They seem in part to reflect the ineffability of the divine, the impossibility of fully articulating visionary experience in language. Yet *The Book* remains a unique record of inner life that continues to speak vividly across the centuries.





# Eliza Bowes

*Though they say she was not, I imagine her quiet.*

*As a clean petticoat or placket.*

*As the dry aqueduct  
of the heart.*

*Polite.*

*Less so the warders - those whose words  
authoritative, swart  
abducted her aloud.*

*An imbecile of moderate grade.*

*I imagine her safe in the silence of retreat  
in the soft restraint shirt  
they put on her.*

*Look at the swathe of it.*

*Look at the sleeves, sewn shut.*

*In which her own hands must have faltered, felt for one another, fallen quiet.  
Each in its holt alone and lithe.*

by Gillian Allnutt

# Gillian Allnutt



Gillian Allnutt is an English poet and recipient of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 2016. She is author of nine poetry collections, including *Lintel* (2001), *How the Bicycle Shone* (2007) and *wake* (2018).

She wrote this poem in response to the story of Eliza Bowes, exhibited alongside a 'soft restraint' shirt (right) in *Hearing Voices: Suffering, inspiration and the everyday* (Palace Green Library, Durham, 2017).

Eliza Bowes – an 18 year old girl from Houghton-le-Spring – was committed to the Winterton Hospital, Durham's county asylum on 18 August 1914. On her admission, she was described as a 'moderate grade imbecile' and noted to be noisy, restless, and continually crying. Eliza was hearing voices, which were calling her names. She also had epileptic fits, which became more frequent over time. Eliza died at Winterton on 2 October 1915, from pneumonia.

In a reaction against increasingly harsh and restrained methods of managing patients in asylums, there was a move towards moral treatment during the nineteenth century. Strait jackets were often replaced with 'strong clothing', like this shirt. Such garments allowed movement but were thick, padded, and heavy whilst also enclosing the hands within the sleeves. In 1888, George Savage said of the use of strong clothing in Bethlem Asylum, of which he was superintendent: 'The limbs are all free to move, but the hands are enclosed in the extremities of the dress, which are padded ... There are no strait-waistcoats, handcuffs, or what may be called true instruments of restraint in Bethlem.'



Photograph of soft restraint shirt.  
© Andrew Cattermole Photography.

# Writers' inner voices

The idea that writers 'hear' the voices of their characters is a common one. Some writers even go as far as to claim that the characters that people their narratives seem somehow to write themselves: that they, the writer, are a mere conduit for voices that appear to have lives all of their own.

But what does this actually mean? What is it like to hear the voice of a character when writing – a voice that's not intrusive or unpleasant, but which also somehow 'belongs' to someone else?

As part of a long term partnership with the Edinburgh International Book Festival, we surveyed and interviewed authors in order to find out more about exactly how it is that writers and storytellers experience the presence, agency and voices of the characters they create in their work.

Here are some of their responses:

*It is like I'm sort of writing in her head... just behind her eyes or something, or I'm up in her head so I can hear her voice...*

*They do have a separate existence from me [...] It's akin to the feeling of your baby kicking; they are a part of you and yet quite literally not a part of you and something 'other' at the same time.*

*My characters need to feel separate for me to hear their voices, which also means that when I'm trying to 'put words in their mouth' instead of listening they often talk back.*

*...sometimes what I thought was a minor character appears and starts to speak and I realise they've become important and inserted themselves into the plot*

More information about the Writers' Inner Voices study can be found on our website: [writersinnervoices.com](http://writersinnervoices.com).

You can also follow us on Twitter: [@writersvoices\\_](https://twitter.com/writersvoices).



# Readers' inner voices

Readers often describe vivid experiences of voices and characters in a manner that has been likened to hallucination. Little is known, however, of how common such experiences are, nor the individual differences they may reflect. Systematic studies of experiences of reading, in fact, are few and far between. In 2014, Hearing the Voice collaborated with the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the *Guardian* in order to investigate how readers hear (or don't hear) the voices of characters when they read.

Over 1560 people participated in the study online.

1 in 7 reported having vivid auditory experiences of hearing voices while reading (similar to hearing someone speaking in the same room).

A significant number also reported experiences (in different sensory modalities) of characters being present even outside the context of reading. We call these experiences 'experiential crossings'. We coined this term to refer to instances of characters and voices being experienced outside the context of reading; a phenomenon that as far as we know has never been studied either in psychological or narratological research. In some cases this was described almost as an echo of prior reading experiences, with

auditory imagery re-emerging in a particular context or scenario, but in other accounts it appeared to shape the readers' style and manner of thinking – as if they themselves had been changed by a character.

For instance, readers reported that the way in which characters talked in a novel started to influence their way of thinking or talking; or that characters have become voices narrating or commenting on their lives:

*If I read a book written in first person, my everyday thoughts are often influenced by the style, tone and vocabulary of the written work. It's as if the character has started to narrate my world.*

What's your experience of characters' voices when reading? Do you ever hear, see or have other sensory experiences of characters in fiction?

# Hearing Voices

*Hearing Voices: Suffering, inspiration and the everyday*, the world's first major exhibition on voice-hearing, was held in Durham, UK from November 2016 to February 2017.

The exhibition was a collaboration between Durham University's Palace Green Library and Hearing the Voice – a large interdisciplinary study of voice-hearing funded by the Wellcome Trust. It was produced in close partnership with voice-hearers, their families and allies, who were involved as contributing artists, co-curators and advisors.

The material in this pamphlet draws on the *Literary Voices* section of the exhibition, and explores the inner voices of writers and readers from the medieval period to the present day.

Enjoy the wider virtual exhibition – including interviews, podcasts and images – online at [hearingvoicesdu.org](http://hearingvoicesdu.org), and join the conversation on social media with the hashtag #HearingVoicesDU.

Our thanks to the Wellcome Trust's Provision for Public Engagement for making it possible to share these materials with the world.

Hearing Voices exhibition website:  
[www.hearingvoicesdu.org](http://www.hearingvoicesdu.org)

# Hearing the Voice

Hearing the Voice is a large interdisciplinary research project that aims to provide better understanding of what it is like to hear a voice that no one else can hear.

Hearing voices is an important aspect of many people's lives. It is an experience that can be distressing, but also positive and meaningful. Our project examines voice-hearing from a range of different perspectives, including anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, history, linguistics, literary studies, medical humanities, philosophy, psychology and theology. It involves researchers from all three faculties of Durham University, along with voice-hearers, clinicians and academics from national and international partner institutions.

In addition to shedding light on the relations between hearing voices and everyday processes of sensory perception, memory, language and creativity, we are exploring why it is that some voices (and not others) are experienced as distressing, how

they can change across the life course, and the ways in which voices can act as important social, cultural and political forces.

Hearing the Voice is funded by a Wellcome Trust Collaborative Award in Humanities and Social Sciences until 2020.

Hearing the Voice website:  
[www.hearingthevoice.org](http://www.hearingthevoice.org)

Connect with us on Twitter:  
[@hearingvoice](https://twitter.com/hearingvoice)

