

ALL EARS



# ALL EARS

MICHAEL HOLDEN

*Illustrated by*

ANDY WATT



ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD  
London House  
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road  
Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2LL  
United Kingdom  
www.almabooks.com

*All Ears* first published by Alma Books Limited in 2007  
Copyright © Michael Holden 2007  
Illustrations © Andy Watt 2007

This book is published in association with Guardian Books.  
Guardian Books is an imprint of Guardian News & Media Limited.  
The Guardian is a registered trademark of Guardian Media Group plc.

Michael Holden and Andy Watt assert their moral right to be identified  
as the author and the illustrator of this work in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either  
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,  
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business  
establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in Jordan by the National Press

ISBN-13 (HARDBACK): 978-1-84688-038-4  
ISBN-10 (HARDBACK): 1-84688-038-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any  
form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording  
or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent,  
hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the  
publisher.

*For Mum & Dad*



## INTRODUCTION

There's nothing dignified about listening to other people's conversations, but modern life has made it unavoidable. It wasn't something that I set out to do, but it wasn't till I did that I realized just how much there was to hear. If you live in a city, and especially if you don't drive a car, then the conversations of strangers are everywhere. They're like static. There is no need to skulk about to collect them: you just need to tune yourself in. And there's nothing shameful about it either. In the contemporary climate of global-surveillance hysteria, the action of simply noting down what is said around you because you like the sound of it is comparatively benign. If people think they aren't being listened to on some level in the twenty-first century, then they're just not paying enough attention.

*All Ears* was born partly from a desire to highlight how unusual and unscriptable everyday conversation can be, and partly because I wished people would just shut up. Like most of us I have made conversational

currency of things I've heard other people say. When we meet, such disclosures are often the prelude to the more routine components of conversation. What we are perhaps less conscious of is that the stuff we stumble across and relate by chance can be a lot more interesting than the things we set out to try and say.

The idea to start collating this material came from a radio presenter, who suggested – after an exchange of overheard anecdotes – that I wear a wire with the intention of recording broadcast-quality sound bites to play back on his show. This quickly proved unfeasible. Given the technology of the time, it would have required a proximity to the subject that would risk detection, and the kind of placid acoustic environments seldom found in everyday existence. Nevertheless, I kept rough written records of some of the things I heard, resurrecting and embellishing them verbally when the opportunity arose.

Three years after the abandoned radio scheme, a newly launched magazine, *Good for Nothing*, offered me a column without specifying what the content would be. The caveat for this unlikely moment of editorial freedom was that it would be unpaid. 'Earwiggling' – as it was then known – began appearing monthly in the winter

## INTRODUCTION

of 2003. At this time I had a job that required a total of four hours of peak-time commuting each day. Where previously I had been striving to block out ambient sound, I set aside my headphones and listened in. My reluctant proximity to hundreds of other miserable travellers was rendered marginally more bearable by detailing it in print. And the chatter was always there, you didn't have to go out of your way to find it.

After three months events took an altogether more serious complexion when the *Guardian* expressed an interest in carrying the column. The fact that they were willing to pay for it too overrode the loyalties I felt to its initial publisher, so I moved on. What was worrying was that the new 'All Ears' column would be weekly. Whilst you'd have to be wilfully reclusive not to overhear something halfway interesting on a monthly basis, doing it every week would be a different matter. My fear was that I would be forced by the terms of my contract into making conversations up. Instead, the more I listened, the more I heard. You have no idea what you're tuning out until you let it in.

In much the same way as governments justify their eavesdropping as a "wartime measure" conducted for the good of democracy, I embarked on a covert campaign of

my own in pursuit of the weekly deadline. Not that you have to try too hard. Where careless talk once cost lives, these days life seems to consist of little else. That said, I could never have done it without the mobile phone.

Mobiles have rendered what was once private horribly public. The discretion that came with making a call at home, at work or in a phone box evaporated in the 1990s. Medical matters, marital strife, threats, disclosures, promises and a tidal wave of bewitching trivia were all there for the taking. As well as destroying what was left of public discretion, the mobile also provided a valuable alibi for the practising eavesdropper. Lingering about aimlessly is still viewed with some suspicion and can cause people to clam up, but if you clamp a dead mobile to your ear and act like you're listening, then nobody pays you any heed.

The other benefit of the technology is that it offers another means to record what you've heard. I soon discovered that even if you sit next to someone with a pen and paper and start writing, it never occurs to them that you might be writing about them. But there are always situations where writing just isn't possible. When this happens, I phone myself up and leave a message describing what I've heard.

## INTRODUCTION

Within weeks of the *Guardian* column appearing people began responding to it, often prefacing their remarks with “You’d better not be writing any of this down”. But the burning issue from most of the people I met was and continues to be whether the conversations are made up. My response to this is a resounding “no”, though I never feel that people really believe me. I knew at the outset that once I started resorting to fiction, then the gig was effectively up. In fact the whole point of the exercise – as far as it can be said to have one – is to demonstrate the abiding principle that truth is always stranger than fiction. My stock response to enquiries about the veracity of the stories is that if I could make up dialogue like that I would be working in Hollywood rather than mooching around launderettes in East London hoping someone will say something. There are embellishments and compromises in the name of editorial expediency, but the real business of it, the quotes and the language that people are moved to question, is always as true as my methods allow.

This is abundantly clear in the ‘Clock on a Stick’ story (page 59). If I sat at a computer for the rest of my life, I doubt I would be able to imagine anything quite so vivid and unlikely as what those men said at a

pedestrian crossing on a summer's afternoon. The only problem I ever faced in acquiring anecdotes was when I spent long periods of time working from home. You get the odd one in the closed circuit of your local haunts, but the big game dwells further afield, and you must take steps to hunt it down.

Some places are more fruitful than others and, from a winning combination of duration and proximity, public transport consistently comes out on top. The agonizing pace of the average bus journey is such that someone invariably says something in person or over the phone to someone else, whether it's of any interest or in a language you speak is another matter entirely. Railways, the source of the original "I'm on the train" mobile-phone cliché, remain a happy hunting ground. Airport departure lounges are the eavesdropper's equivalent of a January sale. Galleries, though arguably offering a less varied range of subject, are good because you are free to stand very close to other people without appearing odd – though some of the better conversations have come from the staff of public buildings, rather than the public themselves. Restaurants and cafés are full of people talking far too loudly. Indeed, the more people are paying to be somewhere, the louder they seem to be.

## INTRODUCTION

Last in the hit parade of consistently chat-ridden locales is the public house. If you know of one nearby that boasts the kind of clientele who think nothing of striking up conversation with complete strangers or simply argue loudly among themselves, then so much the better.

So while the broad patterns of existence afford us access to a whole universe of unsolicited detail, to get the best of it – and certainly to get a good story every week – you might need to amend your behaviour within it. Ordinarily I would instinctively seek out a table or seat in any venue as far away as possible from anyone else; now I sit near the noisiest people I can find. I have missed my stop on buses and stretched out drinks far beyond their intended lifespan; I have had to tell people I was genuinely conversing with to shut up for a minute, and followed strangers on mobiles down streets that led nowhere I meant to go.

Doing something for a living ought to stop you from wondering why you're bothering to do it, but in fact the reverse is true. The more I listened, the more I found myself wondering what it was that I was hoping to hear. I think the reasons I got so wrapped up in it – and it has become a kind of conditioned reflex that functions beyond the requirements of publishing – are

twofold. Firstly, it's exciting. It adds a layer of espionage to the everyday and, like fishing, after periods where nothing happens the smallest bite becomes intoxicating. Secondly, I still believe that there are things in the spontaneous speech of strangers that tell us something about ourselves that the media – no matter how determined it might seem in its quest to beguile us with “reality” – does not deliver. Exactly *what* it's saying I have no idea, but I'm certain that it's there.

The moment which I dread and crave in equal measure, when the whole business folds in on itself in some ghastly postmodern collapse, is when I overhear someone talking about something they have read about me overhearing. Then, maybe, it will be time to stop, and I can imagine that we have instigated a thriving culture of benign surveillance where we listen more carefully to each other, look less intently to the media for entertainment and inspiration, consider more thoroughly the possibilities of what we are already saying, and say it nonetheless.

– *Michael Holden, August 2007*

ALL EARS



## Dog Death

Marooned in one of those unfeasibly long yet remarkably calm queues that are now the defining characteristic of air travel, time passed more swiftly thanks to a couple who were reminiscing over previous holiday disasters.

Man (in his mid-thirties, a bit careworn and visibly distressed by the memories he was resurrecting) “They never even told us the dog was sick.”

Woman (aghast) “No!”

Man “They’d said it was old is all, and it needed some medicine. But when we got there it was obviously dying – it smelt like death, dog death. They should have put it down years ago, but couldn’t bring themselves to do it. It was asthmatic, rheumatic and had cysts that you had to rub cream into. It breathed like it had a punctured lung, and every breath sounded like its last.”

Woman “That’s so wrong.”

Man “Completely unnecessary. My first instinct was to put it out of its misery, and just say it had died while we were there, but there was a big note on the fridge.”

ALL EARS

Woman “Saying ‘Don’t Kill the Dog!’?”

Man “No, it was more like a list, a few pages of A4 about what to do with all these medicines, which vet to call if it took a turn for the worse. Very thorough. The implication, I felt, was that they were saying, “We’ll know if you killed it.”

Woman “So what did you do?”

Man “Looked after it. Made it as comfortable as possible. Obviously it did detract from the beauty of the location somewhat, but I grew to like it. It was a good holiday in some ways.”

Woman “How was that?”

Man “Well it put me more in touch with my own mortality.”

Woman “You don’t get that in Ibiza.”

Man “Oh, I dunno.”

## Poirot

On the occasion of the recent Champions League Final, having been elbowed out of my local pub, I found myself viewing the event on a wide-screen projector in the basement of what was in effect a modernized version of a 1980s “wine bar”. Unaccustomed to hosting such occasions, the venue had rigged up some low-rent form of satellite feed, which meant that the coverage was routinely interrupted by large pixelated blocks of digital interference, whining feedback and the occasional outright blackout. Needless to say this didn’t go down well with the more partisan members of the audience, in particular a group of three suited office workers whose annoyance turned to anger as the game went on.

Man 1 (speaking on behalf of the whole bar) “This is fuckin’ outrageous. Sort it out.”

Barman (in a French accent) “There’s nothing I can do. It’s not our problem.”

Man 2 (as the picture froze again into a mass of coloured cubes) “It’s like watching *Predator!*”

ALL EARS

Man 1 “It’s like fucking Ceefax!”

Man 3 (trying to calm things down) “Well it is raining. Maybe that’s the problem.”

Man 1 “It’s got nothing to do with the rain, it’s these pricks in ’ere, they dunno what they’re doing.”

Man 3 (to the barman) “Come on mate, there must be something you can do?”

Barman “I’m telling you, it’s not my problem, that’s just the way it is.”

It was then that the screen went off completely, only for coverage to resume moments later after a goal had been scored.

Man 1 (assembling his belongings and gesturing to his friends) “This is out of order, let’s get out of here.”

Man 3 “You sure there’s nothing you can do?”

The barman shook his head.

Man 1 “I’m off, and I won’t be coming back here for the World Cup, I can promise you that, mate.”

Barman (taking his life in his hands) “No? Well you won’t be winning that either.”

Man 2 (in an inspired retort) “Fuck off, Poirot!”

With that they left, and the game somehow ceased to matter.

## Bank

It was one of those occasions in a bank queue when things are moving so slowly that time appears to have no meaning at all. There were two tellers working, both engaged in transactions of such a protracted nature that one could only speculate as to what aspects of contemporary banking could be so agonizing.

Teller (having gazed at a screen for what seemed like fifteen minutes) “There’s no transfer direct from your Delta account.”

Man “No?”

Teller (having tapped at her keyboard for a bit) “No.”

The man then began to fill up the chute in the counter with an array of dog-eared bank books and weird-looking bags that bought an audible sigh from the queue. I looked down at the bench in front of me and saw that someone had carved “WHY ARE THINGS SO SLOW IN HERE?” into the wood with a ballpoint. The other teller was just staring at the other customer being served as though they were having a competition.

ALL EARS

Man “Have you got any of them cardboard tubes?”

Teller “Tubes?”

Man “For putting coins together.”

Teller “We only have the bags.”

Man “Bags?”

Teller (holding one up to show him what a bag is)  
“Bags.”

Man “I wanted the tubes.”

I was just considering what proportion of bank robberies were born out of frustration rather than greed when the second teller’s printer rattled into life and produced a form that she handed to her customer.

Teller 2 “Just sign that for me.”

The man then began to read what was evidently a detailed but commonplace form in its entirety. Tube man was now struggling to make a pen work. I tried to avoid sinking to my knees and weeping, and resolved to start putting money in a mattress instead.

## Kebab

That kebab shops are crucibles of human instability is news to no one. But at 8 p.m. on a weekday evening you'd think you'd be safe. Not a bit of it. No sooner had my shish hit the griddle than an obese man sporting immaculate state-of-the-art hip-hop chic rolled in and announced, "I need to charge my phone," in a booming, mid-Atlantic way. I assumed he was a regular customer – he had the figure for it. But from the look of bafflement on the faces of the staff this was a new one, even for them.

There was a silence, which the man exploited to further his case. "I was talking to a girl," he said, "when my battery ran out." "This is a kebab shop," said the cook. "Charge my phone," said the man.

Man (noticing a phone charger in a wall socket) "C'mon man, give me some power."

Cook (aware that the proximity of the charger undermined his position) "I can't do it my friend, I will lose my job. Ask the manager."

The manager had been at the back of the shop talking on a landline the whole time. He could see exactly what was happening and was in no hurry to get involved. To his credit the man waited a full five minutes for him to hang up.

Man (suddenly sounding reasonable) “I need to charge my phone for a minute.”

Manager (surrendering the moral high ground completely) “I can’t do that. You need to speak to the owner.”

Man “You don’t have enough heart in your chest to give me some power?”

There was no response. Then another customer, an early-evening drunk, waved a french fry at the man and announced with a giggle, “You’ve got a chip on your shoulder!” The man glared at him as though he might, quite literally, consume him for breakfast, and walked out of the shop. Idiots, I thought. You’ve lost a hell of a customer there.