

Aaron Vallance — I dish4theroad

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Aaron Vallance's writing at his website I dish4theroad has twice been shortlisted by the Guild of Food Writers, not bad for someone who admits to having great difficulty doing his English homework at school. I first became aware of Aaron's website through Curry and Kneidlach: A Tale of Two Immigrant Families, co-written with Shahnaz Ahsan, and I've followed him ever since. A visit to London gave me the chance to meet Aaron in person.

Aaron: Hi, I'm Aaron Vallance. By day, I work as a doctor in the NHS as a child psychiatrist in a community service, but by night, or at least weekends and holidays. I moonlight as a food writer. I live in London and I'm originally from Manchester, but after taking a few years to get used to London life, very much embraced London.

Jeremy: I would have thought being a doctor in the NHS would be a full-time occupation. What got you into writing about food?

Aaron: Good question and not a straightforward answer. Sometimes I do scratch my head at times and wonder how on earth I got to do food writing alongside my medical career. I think that's not least because, going back, at school, English wasn't a particularly good subject for me. I didn't really enjoy writing. What I did enjoy, and I think it was particularly formative for me then, and in many ways still now, is the evenings, the night times, when my dad would read bedtime stories.

These were really precious moments, which I really enjoyed. We'd go through a whole series, as I say. Wonderful books, Lord of the Rings, often several times, or Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea trilogy. I didn't necessarily enjoy writing or even reading that much. I really enjoyed stories. I think that's kept with me for all these years.

It wasn't until many years later ... There's a bit of a medical link ... I was on my medical elective placement in Tonga in the South Pacific.

Whilst there, I would email back to family and friends, just tales of what I was up to or my impressions of the work or life out in Tonga. And I just really enjoyed writing — and they seemed to enjoy reading. Then that spurred me on to try and write a book and at that point, soon after I'd qualified as a doctor, writing a book alongside 100-hour weeks on the wards, wasn't so conducive. I did take about two or three years to write the book. Ultimately, it wasn't published.

That love of writing just completely grabbed me and found I got a rush, whenever I'd just sit down, and I would spend hours, just loving the process. That was something which I think was within me a bit like a genie in a bottle, or ready to come out many years later. Around that time, I'd moved to London, and discovered ... I loved food, loved eating. Obviously, London is such a diverse city, and I really enjoyed just experiencing all types of food from the varied diasporic communities in the city, which I then also read about food and restaurant reviews.

Then I discovered such things as food blogs. There was definitely a penny drop moment, when I was sitting in a restaurant in South London and the sunshine was shining through the windows. I realised that firstly, I just love food and secondly, I love writing. Actually, it's very hard to write a whole book whilst working in the NHS. Writing discreet blog posts, well, that's something that I thought maybe I can give that a go.

My blog, one dish for the road, came about, and I've just enjoyed writing. It's been a real privilege to be able to continue to do it alongside the day job.

Jeremy: I think I first came across your writing with one particular post, which was Curry and Kneidlach. I think most people are familiar with curry. Not so sure about kneidlach. Can you just, first of all, tell me what kneidlach are, and then we'll talk about the story?

Aaron: Kneidlach are dumplings cut with matzah meal, and traditionally schmaltz, which is chicken fat, and they are very much in the Ashkenazi or the East European Jewish tradition. It's something which growing up both my mom and my grandma would make every Friday night. It's particularly a tradition of the Shabbat or the Jewish day of rest to have your chicken soup and your Kneidlach.

There's still quite a lot of variety in terms of how people prepare kneidlach. My grandma's were always on the hefty size. Some kneidlach might bob about ... Quite often the light and airy kneidlach is seen as best, but not for me. I prefer those big heavy dumplings and they're the ones I grew up on and really enjoyed eating.

Jeremy: What have kneidlach got to do with curry?

Aaron: That's quite a long story. [laughter] I can start at the beginning.

Jeremy: As briefly, as you can because I know there are lots of other stories I want to talk about.

Aaron: I guess in terms of, of this story of Curry and Kneidlach, which I co-wrote with Shahnaz Ahsan, who's now a phenomenal published writer ... In some ways, it's actually two stories. The first story is how I came to meet Shahnaz. Then the second story is actually the back history of our families.

It was a time when I started dabbling a bit with social media, particularly Twitter. Then just out of the blue, I got a message from a Twitter friend saying there is a supper club being hosted quite close by; would I like to come. I was booking my tickets for the supper club ... and there is a Bengali supper club called Tiger Kitchen ... I was just messaging the chef of the supper club saying, "Oh, I'm really keen to come. It sounds fantastic. I've never even been to a supper club before but I do work as a doctor. I'm not quite sure sometimes what time I can get from my busy clinic."

Then Shahnaz came back saying, "Oh, you're a doctor, and your surname as Vallance. This is a bit of a stab in the dark. Do you have any connection with Dr Vallance who worked in Manchester in the 1970s?" It was a bit of a thunderbolt from the blue, to be honest, because it's obviously not something I've been expecting at all, or, particularly, having any connection with my grandpa, who was a very traditional, Orthodox Jewish man who was very much, dedicated to the Jewish community. He was the president of our synagogue. Having some message referencing him in relation to a Bengali supper club; I couldn't quite piece together the connection.

Then it transpires that Shahnaz had heard his name, even though she's never met him. She's from Leeds, she was born in Leeds, but her

mother and her family were in Manchester. It turns out that my grandpa Reuben was their family GP.

That in itself is not a reason why Shahnaz should know though, because I don't think I would remember the name of my parent's GP when they were growing up. The reason why it was known in her family was because her family over the decades had talked about him as a very important part of their lives. And not least, there'd been a really tragic episode in the family history, where Shahnaz's uncle was brutally murdered in a racist attack in a school playground, even when he was only 13 at the time.

My grandpa, as their family doctor, did what he can to try and help provide that support for the family. One of the things that he ... particularly a project, which I remember him talking about when I was growing up ... was sending young people and families who were going through tough times or living in areas of deprivation. He set up a project for them to have holidays by the seaside. It turns out that Shahnaz's mom and some of her family actually went on holiday that was arranged by my grandpa.

I don't know, but even in the years after he got to the family, his son was a GP who would often do home visits and I think even when the family moved from Manchester to Leeds, where Shahnaz was born, he was still talked about over the years. That's how it came to Shahnaz's mind when she saw my surname, which is I guess, not the most common of surnames, and then I say I was a doctor, and she just asked the question.

Jeremy: It is an astonishing coincidence is not the right word, but it brought the two of you together in a really interesting way.

Aaron: Definitely. I think both of us were quite gobsmacked when we made that connection through Twitter messaging. Then it was only the next day that I then went to her supper club that she hosted, and I was just incredibly touched when introducing herself, she actually introduced the story as well, because I think obviously to her it was quite an incredible situation too. I think just there's so many different levels to it, because there's the coincidence but also almost the surprise element. These are, I guess, the connections of two families from very different communities.

The other aspect to it is it was a story I didn't know about at all, so it was just incredibly moving for me to hear this story of my grandpa. He died over 20 years ago, but he was such an important person in my life growing up, and in all the families. To hear a story almost from the past like this was just so touching.

Jeremy: It's also interesting that your family and her family shared so much in the way of immigration, coming to England, bizarre stories of being shipwrecked. If I hadn't read it, and if I didn't know you, I'd think you couldn't make this up.

Aaron: Even though the communities are very different communities, there's so many aspects that they share in terms of experience of immigration, of hardships, of resilience, of really endeavouring to do the best for the children. And obviously, how much food is also part of the story as well.

Jeremy: That story could easily have been fiction, but in a lot of your other writing, it's two for one. You do fiction to introduce a restaurant review, which I don't think I've ever come across before. How did you get into that?

Aaron: I think originally, in my first few pieces, I just thought I'd just play around a little bit by introducing a bit of dialogue or narrative just to inject a bit of humour into proceedings. For instance, there's an early piece where I just imagined a piece of dialogue between two Victorian diners mulling around what the scores on the doors hygiene rating system is about. Then, in terms of then using more extended fiction, I think that first arose when I went to a restaurant in Tooting in South London.

The restaurant was called Plot and that referenced, I think, a real commitment to local sourcing of food, to produce from allotments. The word plot just amused me, and I thought, "It'd be quite fun to play on the word a bit, and maybe let's make the restaurant review a piece of fiction effectively." I did find I really enjoyed writing it. Then, I think since then, I've dabbled in the use of fiction and narratives. Sometimes, it's in conjuring up family stories and family memories. Then, other times, I've realised I can also use that to also relate to other people's stories.

For instance, the chef-owner of a restaurant called Nandine in Camberwell in South London. The chef, Pary Baban, was able to give

some of her time to be interviewed around her family story. I decided to write the piece, not as a straight interview or even just a description of the story, I thought I'd write it as a piece of creative writing from the perspective of the recipe, which is a Kurdish recipe called Helka doshâw or Eggy Dates.

It's a piece of fiction about how the recipe migrated from Kurdish Iraq to Camberwell, South London. Of course, it's as much a gateway to actually tell Pary's story and a story of her escaping from war and persecution and her family migration story to London. Again, it's a real privilege to be able to tell someone else's story. I think fiction can play a really important role in really highlighting stories or themes.

Jeremy: It's interesting, telling the story of a recipe. You've also told the story of a shipping container that ends up as a restaurant. It's an interesting approach to giving life to these stories.

Aaron: Again, I go back to as a 12-year-old sitting in the back of English and really struggling writing my essays, and I can't think how in earth I got to a point where I'm doing creative writing.

Jeremy: I'm intrigued because it does sound to me as if writing about food is for you a relaxation almost. It's hard work, but it's relaxation from the day job. I just wonder whether in the day job, especially over the pandemic, have you seen food as something that helps people overcome difficulties and anxieties, or does it create more anxiety for people?

Aaron: Oh, I think that's a really interesting question. I think all of the things I think we have learned or are starting to learn through research about the pandemic is just that no two stories are the same. Everyone knows how the impact has been really different for everyone. A lot may depend on circumstances, of course, before the pandemic, whilst people have had to adapt to the pandemic or the hardship or the challenges caused by the pandemic.

For some people, food is part of that story for better or worse. On the more challenging side of things, the rates of eating disorders have really rocketed through the pandemic. I know this locally where I work, but it's also borne out nationally too, by research. Again, that's quite a complex thing in terms of why that's the case, again various aspects to it. It probably is about the uncertainty that people face.

Of course, food is one aspect of life which people can control, and also is a reflection of their own inner turmoil as well when it comes to eating disorders. I think there's been that challenging side, but then on the other side, people have adapted by finding new pastimes by new activities. We know, again through research and just working on the ground, how important activity is because, of course, we've been in lockdown, so people working in some ways trapped in their homes. Yet, we know activity, structure, routine; it's really important for emotional wellbeing.

People turning to food and discovering that they enjoy cooking, or baking. Obviously, sourdough became a bit of a thing over the pandemic. But whatever it was, I think for many people it was one aspect of solace and support and connection. I think it had a positive effect, and I know also there have been a few of my own young people who come to clinic who also discovered baking, had been locked down, started to ease, to be able to share their food as well.

That sharing and giving also became another important aspect that gave meaning as well. I think food is such an integral part of our lives, and our relationship with food can be very positive or can be negative. I think the pandemic can sometimes exacerbate both those sides of things.

Jeremy: I think that's really crucial that it can be both a source of solace and a source of anxiety. Do you think that's an individual difference; that for some people it'll always be a solace, and for some people, it'll always be anxiety-inducing?

Aaron: For those cases where things were inflated one way or the other during the pandemic, it probably was the case that there was that predisposition there beforehand. I guess at a time of extreme, of challenge, it just exacerbated it, or people just adapted in whatever way that they managed during that time.

Jeremy: One of the things I like about your writing is you seem to find out-of-the-way places of quite different cultures. You said how much you enjoy the diversity of cultures in London. How do you decide which of several West African, Afghani, Caribbean ... how do you decide which ones are worth your going into and actually eating in?

Aaron: I do enjoy eating ... a lot of reading of food articles. Especially in the past few years, there's been a real burgeoning of food literature, particularly with a London-centric focus, I think through reading I've been fortunate to have them as sources of information, actually that food I've never tried before. I'd be really interested in giving that a go. Or there's a particular atmosphere or story behind a place. It could be for all sorts of reasons.

Jeremy: You mentioned that very early on, you wrote a book that was unpublished. Where's your food writing going now?

Aaron: It's something I do think about. Because I know, several years on, and that love for writing hasn't diminished in any way at all. At the same time I do love working in the NHS. It means a lot to me to be able to do that and being able to support and help families when it comes to mental health is something that is also really meaningful for me. Obviously, life is busy as well in terms of ... I've got my two boys and helping and supporting them and being a parent.

Trying to put everything together, I'd love to be able to do more, have more time to do food writing. I'm not quite sure how to go about that in terms of getting the right balance between that and the NHS work. I do always worry that suddenly the ideas will dry up or I'll lose interest. That's always a fear I have but I think just while I'm enjoying it, I'll just keep going.

Jeremy: I wonder whether ... Hospital food notoriously gets a very bad reputation. Certainly in England hospital food is not something you want to go out of your way to eat. I wonder whether you think enough is done not about food as medicine, but about food in well-being. Do we take enough notice of the role that food plays in people's well-being?

Aaron: Yes and no. I think traditionally we haven't, particularly since the British tradition in the past few decades I think has just been seeing food as sustenance rather than something to be enjoyed, celebrated or something which is connected with wellbeing.

I don't know. Might be that British traditional, stiff upper lip. You don't think about well-being so much as a thing. I guess I'm going back decades and making sweeping generalisations, but I think that's probably been part. That connection hasn't really been part of the British food culture. I think that's starting to turn in the past few

years, there has been more attention into nutrition, again, on lots of different levels. Whether it's the issue of obesity and that side of things, or on the other side, food poverty and deprivation and the significant proportion of children which are malnourished. It is getting more prominence. I remember as a medical student, going back in the 90s, nutrition didn't really have much of an impact on the curriculum. To be fair, neither did child mental health. I think we did probably one day of it in five or six years of medical training, but likewise nutrition was such a small part of the curriculum.

In the past few years, it's been more campaigning too, whether it's trying to increase nutrition on medical school curricula, or just talking about it on a public health level. Obviously there was Jamie Oliver, who had that initiative a few years back of improving nutrition of hospital food and school food.

I know even recently Saliha Mahmood Ahmed, who's a MasterChef winner going back a few years and is also a gastroenterologist. She has currently got a campaign of giving doctors proper nutrition when they're doing night shifts on the NHS. I think that connection is gaining more traction, but I think it's still quite a long way to go.

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