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# THE ARTFUL MIND



**Alison Larkin** Author / Comedienne

*Photography by Sabine von Falken*



# ALISON LARKIN

## AUTHOR / COMEDIENNE

Interview by Harryet Candee Photography by Sabine von Falken

*Alison Larkin is the bestselling author of **The English American**, an acclaimed comedienne, an award winning audiobook narrator, a classically trained actress who has appeared on and off Broadway and the mother of two teenagers. She lives in the Berkshires.*

*I first met Alison when we were in BTG's production at the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield, MA., (directed by Travis Daly), "Oliver Twist," a few years ago. I enjoyed watching her spring to life and felt drawn to her friendly nature, and especially, love her sing-song British voice that she can easily change at a heart-beat to a Southern bell accent. ... There is a reason for that.*

**Harryet Candee:** Your novel *The English American* sprang from your autobiographical one-woman show. It tells the story of an adopted English woman who finds her birth parents—and a whole lot more—in the United States. How much is fiction and how much isn't?

**Alison Larkin:** Like Pippa, the heroine of my novel, I was adopted from Washington DC as a baby and raised in England and Africa by loving English parents. Like Pippa, when I found my birth parents—who are also free-spirited, creative Americans—it answered key questions about myself that freed me up to go ahead and create a life I truly love.

However, while Pippa's journey in many ways mirrors my own, in many ways it doesn't. For example, I don't have a non-adopted sister, a Dad who works in the foreign office, a dog called Boris, a mysterious lover who e-mails me from Hong Kong or a penchant for Fig Newtons. The list goes on. In other words, it's fiction.

**Were you an outgoing child? Or were you shy?**

**Alison:** Both. I still am actually. I do like to chat with people when I am out and about, but my friendships are always one-on-one, and I need to spend time alone. I can't stand small talk and I avoid parties and large gatherings whenever possible.

**The English American was a Redbook magazine Book Club Pick of the Month and a Vogue magazine Most Powerful Book of the Season, and people love it. Why do you think it's been so successful?**

**Alison:** The "who am I, what do I want, what is my purpose" question is one we all ask, adopted or not. How much of us is nature, how much is nurture, and how much is individual choice? That's a universal question. Plus my publisher, Simon and Schuster, really got behind it. Plus it's got short chapters, and people don't have time to read long ones anymore. I was really thrilled when my book did well enough for us to be able to move to the Berkshires.

**Are you writing a new book? If so, what is it about?**

**Alison:** I just finished a new draft of my second novel. My new heroine is in her 50's and fled to America years before the story begins because of something that happened to her in England—we find out what during the course of the book. She's a witty, slightly eccentric Miss

Marple type, and she gets the love story, which is pretty epic, and directly affected by one of the secrets at the heart of the story.

**You were a classical actress and playwright in England. Soon after meeting your birth mother you became a stand-up comic in New York. How did that happen?**

*Alison:* A few weeks after meeting my birth parents, I stood up at a comedy club in NYC and said “Hallo. My name is Alison Larkin and I come from Bald Mountain, Tennessee.” The audience laughed. I didn’t have anyone else to talk to about what had just happened so I decided I might as well tell them. The beauty of stand-up comedy is that you can say anything you want, as long as you can figure out a way to make it funny.

**So what kind of things did you say?**

*Alison:* “I think everyone should be adopted. That way you can meet your birth parents when you’re old enough to cope with them.” And “The whole adoption agency thing is a bit of a lottery. You never know who you’re going to get as parents. I got lucky. Then again, if I’d been adopted by Mia Farrow, today I could be married to Woody Allen.” And “The key to dealing with a fear of abandonment? Date people you don’t like, so if they do leave you it doesn’t matter.”

**Your first one-woman show, which was a combination of stand-up and theater played to packed houses, received high critical acclaim on both side of the Atlantic. In the show you played yourself, your adoptive English mother, your southern American birth mother and yourself. What made you decide to write it?**

*Alison:* I couldn’t figure out a clearer way to answer the question, “Why did someone from a happy adoptive family need to find her birth parents?” Plus it gave me the opportunity to explore the differences between England and America through comedy.

**Performances of yours have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for different organizations. Your latest show, *Alison Larkin LIVE!* previewed to a packed house at the Mahaiwe last May. Was that a benefit performance?**

*Alison:* Yes. I performed the show to raise money for the Montessori School of the Berkshires Scholarship Fund. Not many people know this, but they have a great adolescent program for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, which I felt deserved real support.

**So, how did you find your birth parents? Were you shocked by the success of actually finding them?**

*Alison:* It would take a novel to answer that question. Oh—wait! I’ve written one!

**Did any of your parents support your creativity?**

*Alison:* My English parents were very encouraging about my flute playing and singing and acting, but they were rather bewildered by my interest in writing. My birth parents had both worked with writers all their lives and they read some of what I’d written—in which I had very little confidence—and encouraged me, which helped a lot.

**I am just wondering, and this may not be a fair question, but do you consider yourself English or American?**

*Alison:* I consider myself an American with a British accent and a Brit with American enthusiasm levels. When I’m English I apologize for things I didn’t do. But when I’m an American I blame it all on you...



*Alison is joyfully at work! Photograph by Sabine von Falken*

**You’ve narrated over 100 audiobooks, many of them New York Times bestsellers. You narrated AudioFile’s best non-fiction audiobook of the year, *Consider the Fork* by Bee Wilson, and won several awards for your narration of your own novel, *The English American*. What are some of your favorite recent narrations?**

*Alison:* I’m delighted to have taken over for one of my favorite British actresses, Penelope Keith, as the new narrator of the Agatha Raisin mystery series by M.C. Beaton. And I’m thrilled to have narrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary audiobook editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Alice in Wonderland* and most recently *The Secret Adversary* by Agatha Christie, which are part of a new series of British classic audiobooks I’m narrating called Alison Larkin Presents.

**So Alison Larkin, also known as the English American, will be bringing the British classics to a new American audience! With humor no doubt?**

*Alison:* Yes! Jane Austen’s novels are often narrated with great earnestness, but they are actually very funny. Lewis Carroll and Agatha Christie’s novels are also full of humor. I am particularly excited to have the opportunity to bring the British classics to an American audience in a fun and accessible way.

**Are they available to download?**

*Alison:* Yes. You can listen to a sample and get a 30% discount if you order via [www.alisonlarkin.com](http://www.alisonlarkin.com)

**“We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.” Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. Why is that one of your favorite Jane Austen quotes?**

*Alison:* Because it’s true. Jane Austen is saying that if we listen to our own inner voice, instead of simply assuming that other people know better than we do, we’ll get the answers we need. *Continued on next page...*



Alison Larkin ...  
Just Get Me to the Theatre On Time....

photo: Sabine von Falken

**How did you get into the audiobook work?**

*Alison:* When The English American won an AudioFile Earphones Award, Tantor Audio, now a division of Recorded Books, told me that if I would commit to recording a certain number of books a year from them, they would set me up with a home studio and teach me the technical side of things. It's much easier narrating other people's books than writing your own so I said YES! That was in 2012. I've been doing it ever since.

**Who else do you record books for?**

*Alison:* Macmillan, Blackstone, Brilliance, Harper Collins, Random House, Dreamscape, Mind's Eye, Disney, Penguin, BMA and British Classic Audio to name a few.

**Back to acting. Your first solo show was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic. Everyone adores you for your wit and honesty and willingness to talk about things most people don't talk about. Would you want to still take on a serious acting role for a theatre production**

**here or in England, if offered one? That would mean bringing up your formal training skills and working with other actors. How would you feel about this?**

*Alison:* My last serious acting role was on Broadway in 1997, in a play called Stanley with the Royal National Theater, starring Anthony Sher. It was a four-month run and directed by John Caird, who directed Les Misérables. I loved the rehearsal period—but honestly, having to say the same lines night after night after night for four months was excruciating. I much prefer the freedom that writing and performing my own material brings.

Having said that, performing solo and recording audiobooks solo can be quite lonely, so I'd probably be open to working in a play again, especially if the script and part were really strong. And especially if I didn't have to leave my kids. Or the Berkshires. Or drive too far. Or spend too much time away from writing my new book.

**Where did you perform as a stand-up, and who with?**

*Alison:* I was a regular at the Comic Strip and the

Boston Comedy Club in NYC, and at the Comedy Store in LA, and was in the line-up with Dave Chappelle, Rodney Dangerfield and Andrew Dice Clay, who introduced me the first night I appeared at the Comedy Store.

**How did you discover the Berkshires? When was that?**

*Alison:* Five years ago. When my kids were born, despite the fact that I had a busy career in LA, I couldn't figure out how to raise thoughtful, happy kids AND be in the entertainment industry. So we moved to New Jersey. Which was a mistake. I had highly creative kids and we were surrounded by people whose main goal in life was to land a steady job in a pharmaceutical company.

The crunch came when my neighbor, horrified that I had an Obama sign on my front lawn, came over to me and said "But Obama's an elitist! He went to Harvard," as if this were a bad thing. I had a friend who lived in the Berkshires who suggested I check it out. It was February and snowing. Everyone told me not to come up in February, so I came up in February. I felt something



Alison Larkin ...Made It to the Mahaiwe ...How lovely is this? photo: Sabine von Falken

shift when I got out of the car on Railroad street. Then I checked out the schools and Shakespeare and Company and Tanglewood and Butternut, and I knew I'd found the place I wanted to raise my kids. We moved to the Berkshires in 2010.

**You sing beautifully. Tell me about your DNA song, which has had over 10,000 views!**

*Alison:* I think the laws which currently prohibit adopted people and people conceived through anonymous sperm and egg donation from knowing the truth about their origins are hurting the people they were allegedly designed to protect, i.e. the kids who become adults. I wanted people to understand why I think it's appalling, and I figured the most concise way would be to write a song about it. So I did.

**Can you share some lyrics?**

*Alison:* "They say the genes count for a lot, and I'm not meaning Levi's, from 'Can you roll your tongue?' to 'Can you roll your eyes?' to 'Will you be a diabetic? Will you have a stroke?' When medicine can save a life it stops being a joke." Etc etc. Then "Every child born today deserves to know their DNA." You can get to it via my website or by Googling Alison Larkin DNA song.

**You're such a busy lady! Do you ever find yourself sitting quietly and just thinking, or would you be**

**bored by that? I would!**

*Alison:* I don't have time to sit much these days—I work constantly and have two teenage kids—but I do make time to process things, which usually happens when I'm walking or skiing or swimming in the Stockbridge Bowl.

**Apart from your kids, who I know you spend a lot of time with, what truly makes you happy, Alison?**

*Alison:* Traveling somewhere new, where there is a very different culture, like Hong Kong. Or it will, when I have time to do it.

Singing songs from musicals, or the 30's and 40's, and traditional Scottish and Irish music. Finding someone in the Berkshires who also likes to sing this kind of music would make me very, very happy, but so far the pals I've made like much cooler music than I. They're hip—I'm hop.

Other things that make me happy? Chocolate, other people's cooking, listening to music, silence, great poetry, swimming in the Stockbridge Bowl, looking at the sky and, to quote Dorothy Parker, although "I hate writing, I love having written."

**Are you searching for something to fulfill your life?**

*Alison:* I have wonderful kids, work and a life I love. What could be more fulfilling than that? A few more like-minded friends maybe. But there are only so many hours in a day.

**If you were to learn something totally new and fresh from the start, what would it be, and why?**

*Alison:* I'd learn to paint... not sure why.

**If you were to bring a handful of British people over to live in the Berkshires, and a handful of Americans to live in England, what important ideas would you need them to know beforehand? What would you tell them?**

*Alison:* To the Brits I'd say: "It's quite safe. No one's going to laugh at you. You can be yourself here." To the Americans I'd say: "If the Brits put down your enthusiasm or try to force you to conform to a more traditional way of thinking, get on a plane and come home."

**How can people get in touch with you, book you for an event, listen to your audiobooks or learn more about you?**

*Alison:* They can reach me through my website, which is [www.alisonlarkin.com](http://www.alisonlarkin.com). I'd love to hear from any of your readers; especially if they'd like to sing!

*Thank you, Alison! See 'ya later for tea!*