SATURDAY

ISSUE №141 | 8 JUNE 2024

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Another Blind date wedding!

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WHOLE LOTTA HISTORY

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Smart shot

The best pictures taken on phones

Matteo Fagiolino

Beautiful Innocence, 2020
Shot on iPhone 11 Pro

As a portraitist and wedding photographer, Matteo Fagiolino likes to reflect his subjects' personalities in his work. This photograph was taken after the first Covid lockdown ended, at the beach at Torre Pedrera, a town on the Rimini riviera in Italy.

"It was a summer afternoon after months of social distancing," he says. "It had been so long since my whole family had spent the day together, it was a breath of fresh air for everyone."

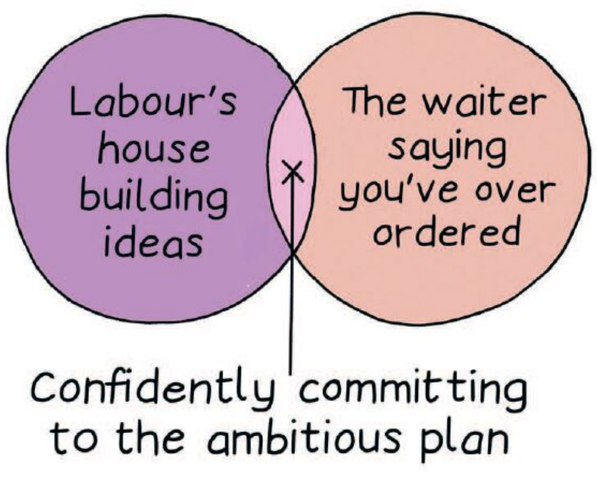
Fagiolino's brother came, along with his two children - Andrea, in the foreground, and Alice. "He is a very calm boy, she is a very determined girl, and I can see precisely these aspects of their character by looking at this image, especially in their eyes."

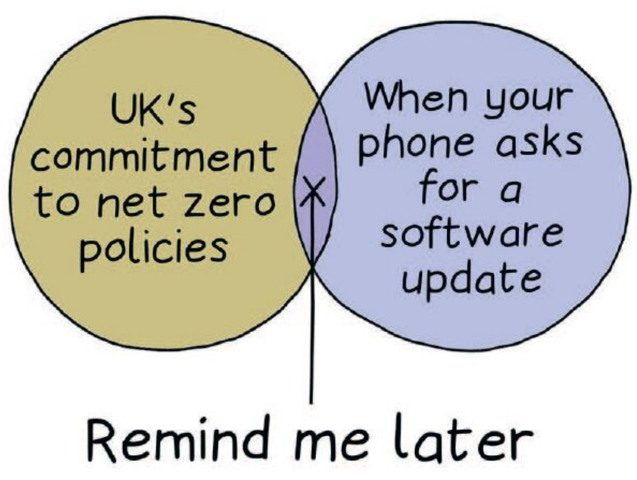
While the children were playing in the sea, "the sun began to set and warm their faces, and I noticed their expressions reflected in the water," Fagiolino says. "I got out of the water and ran to get my iPhone before the light got too dim."

Four years later, Fagiolino says the image reminds him of why he loves photography so much. "Every time we see a photograph, we strengthen the memory of that moment in our mind. I hope that people looking at this photo feel the same tranquillity I felt that afternoon. It was a moment of peace in a difficult time."

Grace Holliday

Edith Pritchett A week in Venn diagrams





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The journalist on throwing up at school, his admiration for aid workers, and not being there for President Bush

Q&A

Clive Myrie

Interview: Rosanna Greenstreet

MARK HARRISON/CAMERA PRESS

Born in Lancashire, Clive Myrie, 59 studied law before gaining a place on the BBC's journalism trainee scheme. He became a foreign correspondent, winning a Peabody award in 2017 for his reporting on the plight of the Rohingya, and the David Bloom award in 2018 for his coverage of drug cartels in Mexico. In 2009 he began fronting the BBC News and in 2023 he was named RTS Network Presenter of the Year. Since 2021 he has hosted Mastermind. Clive Myrie's Caribbean Adventure is on BBC Two and his memoir is Everything is Everything. He is married and lives in London.

When were you happiest?
Whenever I'm with my wife and I'm not preoccupied with work.

What is your earliest memory?
Throwing up on my first day at primary school.

Which living person do you most admire and why?
Your average aid worker, wherever they may be. Any human being doing good by helping others, while putting themselves in harm's way.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
Impatience.

What is the trait you most deplore in others?
Cruelty, bullying, selfishness.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
Being called upon by President Bush to ask him a question at a press conference when I wasn't there. He called my name ... and there was no response!

Describe yourself in three words
Understanding, generous, humanistic.

The closest I've come to death? Coming under attack while reporting in Iraq

What do you most dislike about your appearance?
My cheeks, they're very full.

Who would play you in the film of your life?
Sidney Poitier.

Who is your celebrity crush?
Juliette Binoche.

Which book are you ashamed not to have read?
Anything by Proust.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?
A tennis player.

What is the worst thing anyone's ever said to you?
The usual racist shit.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?
Hard-boiled sweets.

What does love feel like?
Amazing, all-consuming, overwhelming.

What was the best kiss of your life?
The first snog with my wife, Catherine.

Which living person do you most despise and why?
Too many to mention.

When did you last cry, and why?
Watching the South Korean film Past Lives. I was on a plane and weeping uncontrollably.

What is the closest you've ever come to death?
Coming under attack while reporting in Iraq.

What single thing would improve the quality of your life?
Time.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?
Surviving this world.

What keeps you awake at night?
Other people's suffering.

How would you like to be remembered?
As a decent bloke.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?
Be kind and do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

'Everything I own fits in a backpack' Lasse Stolley at Berlin-Spandau station

Experience
I live on trains

As told to Daniel Dylan Wray

I'm 17 and since August 2022 I have been living on trains. I grew up in a village in the north of Germany. I enjoyed travelling to Scandinavia with my parents and going on nature tours, and was also interested in computer programming. I taught myself how to program during the pandemic and decided that was what I wanted to do for my job.

After graduating from secondary school in summer 2022, I was set to start an apprenticeship as a software developer. Unfortunately, it was cancelled a few weeks before it was due to begin. I needed a new plan at short notice.

I had seen a TV report a few weeks earlier about someone who lived on a train. I could not get the thought out of my head. I loved the idea of having the freedom to travel anywhere in Germany every day. A few days later, I bought my first BahnCard 100, which offers unlimited travel on Germany's national train network - the junior pass cost €2,664 (£2,290) back then. On 8 August, I set off and boarded the first train.

My family were very sceptical at that point. They were worried I wouldn't be able to get enough sleep at night, that I would be alone and that it could be dangerous. They were still sceptical for the first few months, when hardly anything worked out. I would get tired and stressed from planning it all, and struggle to sleep, so I often returned home to my parents. But now I have it figured out, they're really supportive. I have so many new experiences; life is extremely varied and every day is different.

I have the freedom to decide where I go every day, and can visit my friends who live all over Germany. They also travel on the trains a lot - while they don't live on them like me, we often arrange to travel together or to meet up. I actually have much more contact with friends than ever before, and also have interesting conversations with other travellers on the train. I feel anything but lonely.

I pick my night train and wait for it to swing me across Germany as I sleep

I've done this for more than a year now. When my first BahnCard was going to expire, I upgraded my pass to first class, which costs €5,888 for someone under 27 like me. This also lets me eat all the food I want in the Deutsche Bahn guest lounges at train stations - stuff like croissants, muesli, wraps, focaccia, soup or cake.

My typical day involves arriving into a city between 6am and 8am on an overnight InterCity Express train. I'll go to the railway company's guest lounge and eat breakfast. I'll then have a quick wash in the bathroom, or go to the local swimming pool to shower.

Afterwards, I look at the day's train departures and choose a destination. Even though I live on trains, I spend a lot of time exploring the outdoors. During the day, I might go hiking in the mountains, visit a city or go to the beach on the Baltic Sea. It depends on the weather. I love hiking in the Alps, especially in summer, and exploring new cities. I particularly like being in Berlin. The city is full of variety and there's always something going on.

At some point, I will pick my night train and go to the station. Then I'll eat dinner in the Deutsche Bahn lounge and wait for the train which swings me across Germany while I sleep.

I'm a software developer at an IT startup and work about 10 hours a week. The great thing about my job is that I can choose my own working hours. It's not a problem if I don't work for a day or two. I use my time travelling on the train to work, so the job fits quite well with my lifestyle.

Living on the train means I have to do without some things that I used to take for granted. I don't have privacy. I have also had to reduce my possessions so that everything I own fits into a 30-litre backpack. But the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

All in all, taking into account general living expenses, my lifestyle on trains costs less than €10,000 a year. That sounds like a lot at first, but it's very cheap compared with the costs of renting an apartment.

The original plan was to do this for only a year, but I have enjoyed it so much, I've decided to keep doing it. At the moment, there's no end in sight.
Lasse Stolley

Do you have an experience to share? Email experience@theguardian.com

Portrait: Gene Glover

Dining across the divide

Can breaking bread bridge political differences?

Zuhura, 40 – **thinks SUVs cause potholes, are selfish and should be banned**

Bob, 76 – **says owners of large cars are already penalised: they pay more for tax and fuel**

Interview: Zoe Williams

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: KITTY DRAKE

- *Bob, 76, Portishead*
  Occupation *Retired, former IT director*
  Voting record *Conservative in the last general election, but stood as an independent councillor, believing independents are better on local issues*
  Amuse bouche *Has a model railway, but is more interested in cars and motorsport*

- *Zuhura, 40, Oxford*
  Occupation *Campaign director*
  Voting record *Labour, Labour, Labour*
  Amuse bouche *Lived on a boat for seven years with a cat called Captain Fishfingers*

For starters

Bob Zuhura was a very pleasant lady, she wasn't in any way aggressive or argumentative.

Zuhura Bob was a nice, pleasant, ordinary person. I thought he would be quite patronising and smarmy, and he wasn't either of those things.

Bob I don't normally eat at midday, so I had a child's portion of gammon and chips, and an ice-cream.

Zuhura I had a mushroom on sourdough, fish and chips, and a slice of cheesecake. Bob went for the gammon, which I thought would be quite funny if he was gammon-y. But he wasn't.

The big beef

Bob She was adamant that large cars should be taxed very highly to deter people from having them. My view is that if people make them, and people buy them, then that's fair enough.

Zuhura I think SUVs are the most selfish thing in the world. It's like a certain group of people are eating five times or 100 times as much cake as everybody else. If you take the axle weight of a Range Rover, that's an extraordinary level of damage. Everyone goes on about potholes, but the thing that's causing the potholes is these cars. I think they should be banned completely except for people who need them for work.

Bob I live next to a school, so I see exactly what she says: every day you see the mums coming in with a 4x4 containing little Jonny. Is that the best car to use for that journey? Probably not. But SUV drivers are paying more now. They're very expensive, taxed at a higher rate and use more fuel. Her view was that wasn't enough and they should be taxed out of existence.

Zuhura He agreed they were selfish, but mostly from an engineer's point of view. I did try to push him – you agree they're not great, but you don't think we should have any policy on this?

Want to dine across the divide?
Scan here to apply

He kept saying, "It's not democratic, it's not democratic." I also saw a man who really loves cars, who associates them with freedom. Whereas I see them as an impingement on freedom.

Sharing plate

Zuhura I did at one point mention the "C" word. He immediately picked up on it and said that he definitely agrees climate change is happening and it's getting worse. But he's kind of a techno-optimist. He also thinks the UK isn't really that responsible. I think it's very convenient that climate change denial has gone from "the science is wrong" to suddenly being, "OK, maybe it is happening but it's too late to do anything about it."

Bob I don't dispute there's climate change, but there has been since the world started. My question is whether humans can control it, because I don't think they can. I don't think we have that power. I think we have to be doing more to work with the climate as it changes, rather than try to change it ourselves, backwards.

For afters

Bob I don't think she recognised how much things have improved, with things like pollution. You don't get the fogs you used to. In the 70s, you could get completely lost, you couldn't see in front of your face. The younger ones in society just don't know what that was like.

Zuhura We did talk about air pollution. He thinks it's not that bad compared with what it used to be. I think that's a bit of a cop-out. If you know it's still damaging people, why not make it better? He doesn't have grandchildren, and I wonder if that relates to his stance on green issues. Deep down, he thinks it's not going to be that bad and he's not going to be around to see it.

Takeaway

Zuhura There was a very lovely man sitting in front of me in many ways. I stayed twice as long as I'd planned to. But at the end of the day, when I think about that view on climate change, I think, "Eurgh, really?"

Bob She wasn't what I expected. I thought it would be more of a dyed-in-the-wool leftwing person. But she wasn't. She was a very nice lady.

Bob and Zuhura ate at The Harrow Inn, Swindon; harrowinnswindon.co.uk. Want to meet someone from across the divide? Go to theguardian.com/different-views

Photography: Sam Frost

Flashback

Broadcaster Angela Scanlon on being a redhead, the power of clothing, and learning to love herself

Interview: Harriet Gibsone
Main portrait: Pål Hansen
Styling: Andie Redman

1989 I was furious to get my sister's communion dress

Born in County Meath, Ireland, in 1983, Angela Scanlon is a broadcaster and writer. After a stint as a personal shopper in Dublin, she started presenting on RTÉ and wrote for women's magazines, before hosting programmes such as Robot Wars and The One Show, competing on Strictly and publishing memoir and self-help book Joyrider. She lives in London with her two daughters and her husband, the Irish tech entrepreneur Roy Horgan. Scanlon hosts Virgin Radio UK on Saturdays and Sundays.

I look absolutely knackered. A sugar crash. It was my first holy communion and a big old day, not least because at communion you get to go around with your little paw out asking everyone for money. The lead-up to it was all about the dress, which is quite the thing to say, considering it should have been about God.

I am one of four girls. My eldest sister is 18 months older than me and I remember her getting her communion dress and it being this magical moment. I was furious to find out that I was getting her hand-me-down. I thought if I had to endure the humiliation of wearing a dress that had already been seen in the local church, I was going to do it my own way. I said to Mum, "I will only wear it if I can style it with black shoes instead of white, a little silk handbag and a flower headdress." It sounds frivolous and shallow, but I was quite serious about feeling like myself, about style and identity, even then.

Aside from the exhaustion, I also look quite intense and serious. I was, and still am, a sensitive human. Even though I loved a good party, I was very tuned in to everyone else's feelings: was everyone OK? Are all my extended family happy? Sometimes if we had guests over I would hide in the bath. I wasn't equipped with the language to understand what was going on, but now I see the upside of that porousness, which is that I connect with people immediately. I look into their souls. But I hate it when people do it to me. It's a real violation!

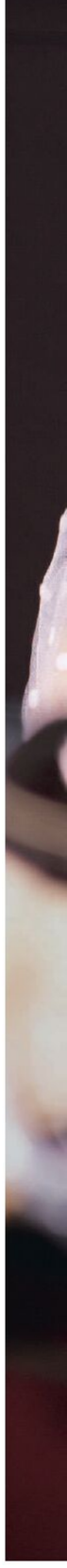
At school I was always quite bright but the teachers' reports made it clear that I was cheeky and lively. My attention span was short and I was a distraction in class. If I were on a ship, I'd be the one causing the mutiny: there was a healthy disregard for authority and while I wouldn't say I was naughty, I didn't treat teachers as if they were friends. There was this one poor man who had a mostly bald head with a curtain of hair he must have shaved. During his class I noticed he had a piece of tissue stuck on a shaving cut. I got everyone in my class to make tiny balls of tissue and throw them at him. Very problematic, looking back. I thought I was charming and twinkly but I was clearly a brat.

Having red hair was tricky in my teens. As a child, I thought it made me special – three of my sisters had red hair so we got a lot of attention when we went out together, as if we were a travelling circus. As I got older, I started to believe it wasn't the type of thing boys liked; the option tended to be blondes or brunettes – red wasn't in the mix. In the 90s and early 00s, there was an unhealthily singular ideal of beauty. Magazines were covered in tanned blondes like Britney. I didn't fit into that glamazon, sexy archetype and I wasn't allowed to dye my hair – although there were many times where I was heavily into fake tan.

Aside from the hair, I struggled with the transition from girlhood into adolescence. There were friends who were thrilled about breasts appearing and all those other rites of passage, but I felt the complete opposite of excited. I didn't want whatever came next. To some extent, I am still not sure I do. Puberty seemed to happen overnight: I was very into Irish dancing but I got an injury, and when I stopped I suddenly started to develop a new body. It was a confusing, lonely time.

Having a job in the media didn't enter my head as an option when I was growing up. I watched a lot of Friends and RTÉ, but my life was very outdoorsy and TV was this glamorous, otherworldly realm. Instead, I got into fashion, and in my 20s I was a stylist and a personal shopper. When a broadcaster needed local fashion experts to talk about the Oscars, the woman I assisted suggested I go on and talk. The terror and adrenaline of that first live TV experience could have put me off, but instead suddenly everything made sense. It was what I wanted for the rest of my life.

By the time I started doing TV properly I was 30, so I had more of a solid sense of self than I did in my 20s, when I was much more keen on seeking external validation. I was



HAIR: MAURICE FLYNN. MAKEUP: EMMA RANKIN. ARCHIVE PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF ANGELA SCANLON

2024 The critical voice that has always driven me has not magically disappeared but I am less governed by it

compared to Alexa Chung a lot at first, which I found odd as she was more fashion-oriented and an It Girl. She was very on the scene, which I never really was.

Over those years working in London I built a life where I was self-sufficient and independent. I worked incredibly hard, put a lot of pressure on myself, and had developed an allergy to needing other people, which I now know is an unhealthy mindset.

Motherhood detonated all that. At first I was terrified. I thought it might change everyone's perception of me and my career would disappear overnight. But when my daughter arrived, I realised I would need a lot of help from others and it became a catalyst for change.

Holding this teeny baby version of myself in my arms, I realised I had to address the relentless whipcracking I had been doing for so long internally. I didn't want to pass that on to my daughter - the little compassion I had for myself and the always striving for perfection but obviously falling short of the mark. Motherhood helped me re-engage with the childhood version of myself.

The term self-love is bandied around a lot - it's this thing we should all strive for, a miracle you can conjure with a warm bath and a face mask. While that is important for women and mothers, self-compassion is what really changed my life. The critical voice that has always driven me has not magically disappeared but I am less governed by it. I am still someone who feels everything deeply, but that quality is something I've learned to like. Being sad or overwhelmed was a prospect that really frightened me, and I denied those big feelings for a long time. I didn't realise that by throwing water on the bad emotions I was stopping the good ones, too.

As for my fashion choices, I still like to express myself. When I got married I wore black shoes in a nod to my rebellious six-year-old self. The one who wanted to stand out and be her own person. I also had a dramatic crown headdress as I walked down the aisle. It felt like this full-circle moment. Just like at my holy communion, I still believe in the power of clothing. It's something that can give you joy - even if it doesn't look like it from my expression.

The Ginnetts can choose the cutting height of their Miimo, allowing them to keep a natural look with longer and wild areas of grass

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARSHA ARNOLD

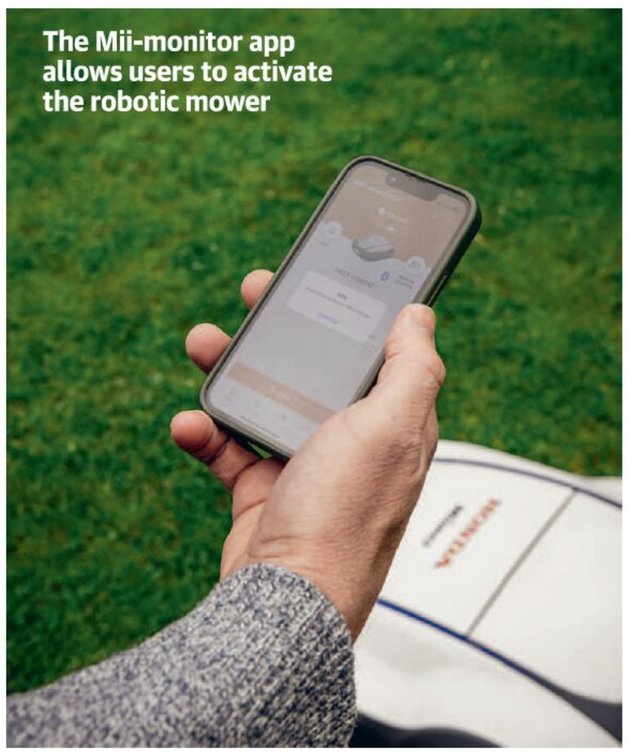
‘It’s the perfect eco solution’: our week with a robot lawnmower

When Fiona and Tom Ginnett moved into their home, their garden was a total wilderness. Now it’s been tamed, they’re turning their attention to pain-free lawn perfection, says Leila Latif

Fiona and Tom Ginnett are not afraid of a bit of hard graft. At their wedding, their friends gave speeches about how the world’s two hardest working people had found each other. And in the years since, Fiona, a former fashion designer, and Tom, a landscape architect, have more than lived up to their reputations.

They’ve had two daughters, Margot and Remi, founded Holte, a thriving kitchen design company, and moved into a house with a sprawling garden, in Catford, south-east London – a real fixer-upper, to say the least. Happy as they’ve been to put in the hours, there’s only so much time in a day, so extra help is always welcome. For the Ginnetts, it came in the form of a robotic lawnmower, the Honda Miimo, which they spent a week trying out on their new lawn. It proved to be as much of a grafter as the rest of the family.

Renovating the house and tackling the garden, described by Tom as “an overgrown wilderness”, was no easy task, and initially “gardening” was just about clearance and management. But once a lawn had been created, it was ready for Miimo’s magic touch – and the robot set to work trimming the grass, creating beautiful curves around trees and wild areas, and even dodging the somewhat unpredictable pomeranian, Marcel.



The Mii-monitor app allows users to activate the robotic mower

The robot’s effectiveness was something of a revelation, particularly for Fiona who admits to having been rather sceptical. “The Miimo is so surprising. It’s hypnotising and totally beguiling. You completely fall in love with it and it’s a funny joy to watch it pootle around.”

While their lawn was being kept in shape, Fiona and Tom used the extra time to catch up on work, play with their daughters, or enjoy an alfresco glass of wine.

Getting ready for Miimo was straightforward. The robot had to be charged in its docking point, and a boundary wire buried in the garden to help guide it. As all models in the new Miimo range come with Bluetooth connectivity, Tom downloaded the Mii-monitor app to his phone to control his. Then off Miimo went, leaving the family to sit back and watch someone else doing the hard work for a change.

“Now Miimo has taken over the lawn, we can focus on other aspects of gardening that we enjoy,” says Fiona, who found it a relief not to have to lug a traditional lawnmower around. “That might be building a bit of fence, planting, pruning – it’s creative and fun.”

Having a Miimo also means that owners don’t need to worry about returning from holidays to find their grass has had a growth spurt. The Miimo Live models include technology that lets people run them remotely. And no need to worry about picking up the clippings – Miimo automatically disperses them back into the lawn, another time-saver.

The Ginnetts both grew up in the countryside with plenty of outdoor space. “Watching your parents pushing a lawnmower used to feel like a sign of summer,” says Fiona. “But now, when I think of all the things taking up a parent’s time, surely mowing can come off the list. With the Miimo, I could take a moment on the app, then dedicate the time I’d have spent mowing to the children.”

The new Miimo range includes models for every type of garden – from a small plot in town to a spacious country spread. They can cope with inclines and offer various features, from sensors to help avoid obstacles to height adjustment. Some are Alexa compatible, so they respond to voice commands – start cutting, pause, return home. You can even check when the next run is scheduled.

Although Fiona and Tom lead busy lives, their design backgrounds mean they refuse to compromise on aesthetic or eco-friendly credentials. The idea of paving over part of the lawn or replacing it with artificial grass was an absolute no-no. “It’s so ugly and not environmentally friendly,” says Fiona. At the same time, they didn’t want their garden to be neglected because they were short of time, so having a robot mower made sense. They were even more taken because they could programme it to steer clear of wildlife areas, something Tom is passionate about. “My professional experience has informed the desire to let some things be natural and allow space for wilderness. There are various plants, traditionally considered weeds, that are good for the bees and butterflies.”

The robotic lawnmower’s sensors help it to navigate obstacles

‘The Honda Miimo is totally beguiling. You fall in love with it and it’s a funny joy to watch it pootle around’

To help keep lawns in tip-top shape, Miimo uses real-time weather data to select the best times to mow – it’ll avoid cutting in heavy rain, and will cut less during long, dry spells. It’s also quiet so it won’t disturb you, your neighbours or the wildlife!

With Miimo’s help, the garden the Ginnetts have in mind, blending tended lawn with wild zones, is becoming a reality. For Fiona, as well as the joy of watching her robot pal “patrolling the grounds”, she loves that Miimo runs on electricity rather than petrol or diesel. “It’s the perfect eco solution.”

For this energetic couple, working up the momentum to start another task is never too difficult, but even they are taking great pleasure in having more time to enjoy the home and garden they’ve created. As Fiona puts it: “I smile every time I look across the garden and see Miimo out there grafting away.”

To find out more about how the latest Honda Miimo robotic lawnmowers could transform your lawn, go to honda.co.uk/miimo

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Miimo

‘WE’RE THE ONLY FOUR PEOPLE WHO KNOW HOW THIS FEELS’

When Girls Aloud lost their fifth member, Sarah Harding, to cancer three years ago, it was her dying wish for

them to tour without her. Now, 22 years after they first formed, the biggest-selling British girl group of the 21st century are doing just that. *Michael Cragg* sits in on their raw, raucous rehearsals

Cheryl has a wind problem. We're meeting at rehearsals for Girls Aloud's comeback tour, standing in what will later become the Gift Wrapped Kitty Kat VIP Zone – essentially a pit next to the stage named after a ludicrous lyric in their equally ludicrous 2004 single Love Machine. It's Monday, the tour starts on Friday, the band only performed a first onstage run-through yesterday and everyone is on edge. Cheryl (formerly Tweedy, but now professionally just Cheryl) is joined by her bandmates – Nadine Coyle, Nicola Roberts and Kimberley Walsh – on two lightly battered white leather sofas surrounded by empty Coke cans, dozens of sparkly high-heeled boots and, intriguingly, four motorbikes.

It's not nerves that are causing the wind issues, but an overzealous industrial fan being aimed inside a 10ft billowing red skirt being tested on stage by the band's stylist Victoria Adcock. "Less wind," Cheryl shouts between furtive puffs on a vape. No one listens. "LESS WIND!" she bellows again in her thick geordie accent. (Ironically, a week after we meet, on tour in Dublin, Cheryl's skirt will fail to inflate at all.) The look is for the band's performance of Sexy! No No No, another brilliantly bizarre hit that still sounds as if it's been beamed in from pop's future. As the shiny red material continues to inflate, Roberts has noticed another issue. "Unless we're pushing it down it's going to look like we're fucking toilet roll covers," she says, to much amusement from the other girls (despite all now being in their late 30s and early 40s, everyone still refers to them collectively as "the girls").

I suggest maybe a dancer could emerge out of the tent-sized skirt like a weary festival-goer. Cheryl tries to laugh while scoffing a salad. "We've still got a few days left to do that," she adds. It's Roberts's turn to bellow: "LESS WIND OTHERWISE IT'S GOING TO LOOK LIKE A TOILET ROLL COVER." Finally, with their views heard, it's left to Walsh to refocus them: "Let's do the interview, and then we'll look at this situation."

The band are preparing for one of pop's most unlikely comebacks in a boiling hot studio in Elstree, north London, usually reserved for Strictly Come Dancing. It's unlikely because as recently as 2018, Cheryl, former X Factor judge, solo star with five No 1 singles and L'Oreal-sponsored nation's sweetheart, replied with a determined "It's not going to happen" when asked about a reunion. In 2013, a previous comeback had ended in public acrimony after Coyle claimed that she'd been blindsided by the rest of the band's announcement that they'd split. Rumours swirled of a rift between Cheryl and Coyle (rumours which were recently reignited in the tabloids), but today the pair seem completely at ease in each other's company, laughing and chatting on their sofa during the interview to the point where Walsh lightly admonishes them with a motherly "Girls!"

There's a far more concrete and tragic reason why a reunion seemed unlikely. There should be five women, not four, squashed on to the two white sofas discussing wind machines. Five women proudly sporting their own band's new merch as old dance routines come flooding back. Five women revelling in a record-breaking legacy – the biggest-selling British girl group of the 21st century, with 20 UK Top 10 singles in a row – that turned 00s pop on its head via a coterie of audacious pop masterpieces married to an exciting zero-fucks-given attitude. In August 2020, however, the band's firebrand Sarah Harding announced she had breast cancer; in September 2021 she died aged just 39.

The girls found out about Harding's illness via their manager and long-term collaborator Peter Loraine. It was coming up to 20 years since Girls Aloud were created via ITV's short-lived 2002 talent show Popstars: The Rivals, and plans were under way to mark the occasion. "We hadn't set a tour in place, we were just thinking about what it could be," explains Cheryl. "Then Peter said, 'I've spoken to Nadine, now I'll speak to Sarah.' But when he came back for the next chat he brought us the dreaded news that actually Sarah was unwell and this wasn't going to be possible." In an instant, all the Girls Aloud plans went out the window.

"There's a bigger sense of togetherness now than there was before," says Roberts when I ask if Harding's death has brought them closer. "We're all relying on each other," adds Cheryl. For Walsh, there was a united sense of grief: "We're the only four people who know how it feels. And know her the way we know her." Coyle, often the band's most pragmatic member, looks down. "It's the oddest thing that she isn't here. We had a bit of a moment earlier because we saw some footage of us together and it's just the weirdest, most tragic ... " She trails off leaving Roberts to add: "It's unbelievably shocking."

After Harding's diagnosis, the five girls had sleepovers, watching old Girls Aloud clips and talking reluctantly about a future without her. There was one thing she was keen they should do: go on tour. "She said it to me, but at that time I just wanted her to stop talking, honestly," says Cheryl. "It was painful to hear her knowing what was coming. It was bizarre. How do you have that conversation? It felt wrong." Roberts sighs: "Your heart's breaking for the person asking you to go on and do it." "And you know she would have loved this," Cheryl continues.

IS IT TRICKY TO RETURN TO DANCE ROUTINES CREATED FOR TEENS? 'I THOUGHT THEY'D TAKE IT EASY ON US. BUT NO'

"I keep expecting her to burst in," adds Coyle in her glorious Derry accent. "With some tale of woe, like a horse ran in front of her and then this happened and this happened and she had to rescue it." Everyone laughs. "She always had these amazing tales; getting from A to B, she'd have A to Z happen in between." The reminiscing continues. "She'd always have loads of bags. She'd have multiple hats, books, glasses and water bottles. Loads of trinkety bits."

Cheryl reaches into her vast handbag and pulls out a small drawstring bag containing a smooth white stone inscribed with "you are loved" on one side and a feather on the other. It was a gift from Harding before she died. "I thought they all said the same thing," smiles Walsh. "Mine says 'love'." Coyle's says "hope". Roberts – always portrayed in the tabloids as the miserable one – starts to laugh. "She brought a pouch with these stones in and we all picked one and I was last and mine – and this is hilarious – says 'smile'." Everyone erupts into a joyful cackle.

I spend the day watching the tour preparations; the mood ricochets between joy and sadness. At one point, I wander into a dressing room that hints at the future spectacle, with red and black latex catsuits and reams of shimmering gold sequins. Near the stage, a burly man in overalls is attaching rigging to the fake motorbikes. It's a big, silly, glorious, important pop show. But then you notice there are only four water bottles on the edge of the stage and the sense of loss bubbles up again. During an earlier run-through of the full set, the band perform the Motown-esque Brit award-winning chart-topper The Promise. As the chorus ends, the music cuts off and the girls turn their backs to the small audience of managers, PRs and their 10-strong, all-male dance troupe. Harding's raspy, full-throated voice sings "Here I am, walking Primrose / Wondering when I'm gonna see you again" not once but twice, a pin-drop silence emerging between each word. When the band turns around, they're all in tears.

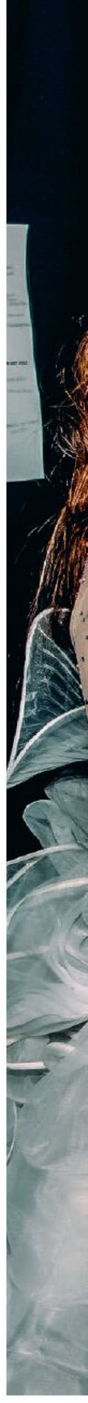
"We're cried out," Walsh says later when I mention how beautiful it was. "We want to go through the emotion now so we can be strong [later]," adds Cheryl, whose mascara is still streaked down her cheeks. "You know what's going to kill me? Looking out and seeing the audience looking sad. I can't handle it. I cannot deal with that."

"We're not trying to pretend we're not doing this without her – we feel that loss massively, on stage and in every song that we do," continues Walsh. "I really hope that we've done a good job of making her presence felt."

GIRLS ALOUD WERE NEVER SUPPOSED to last two singles, let alone two decades. The format of Popstars: The Rivals – forming a boyband and a girlband before pitting them against each other in a race for the 2002 Christmas No 1 – seemed geared towards a victory for the grinning mannequins One True Voice. Though they were lumbered with a hopeless ballad in the shape of Sacred Trust, it was still assumed they'd take the spoils. What no one had banked on was that Girls Aloud's debut single, created like all their subsequent singles by outre hit factory Xenomania, would eschew the usual obvious cover – though East 17's Stay Another Day was mooted at one point – in favour of the careening, drum'n'bass meets surf guitar mashup Sound of the Underground. Released on 16 December 2002, it spent a month at No 1.

A sign of the band's unvarnished spirit arrived early. "We covered the boys' single and did it better than they did, which was just a slap in the face," laughs Coyle. There were plans to put their version of Sacred Trust on the Sound of the Underground CD, thereby eliminating the need to bother with the other one at all, but the label put a stop to it. When I mention One True Voice's parenthesis-heavy second single, Shakespeare's (Way With) Words, Cheryl looks confused. "Second single? I didn't even know they had one."

It was a wild time. On paper they were managed by Popstars: The Rivals judge



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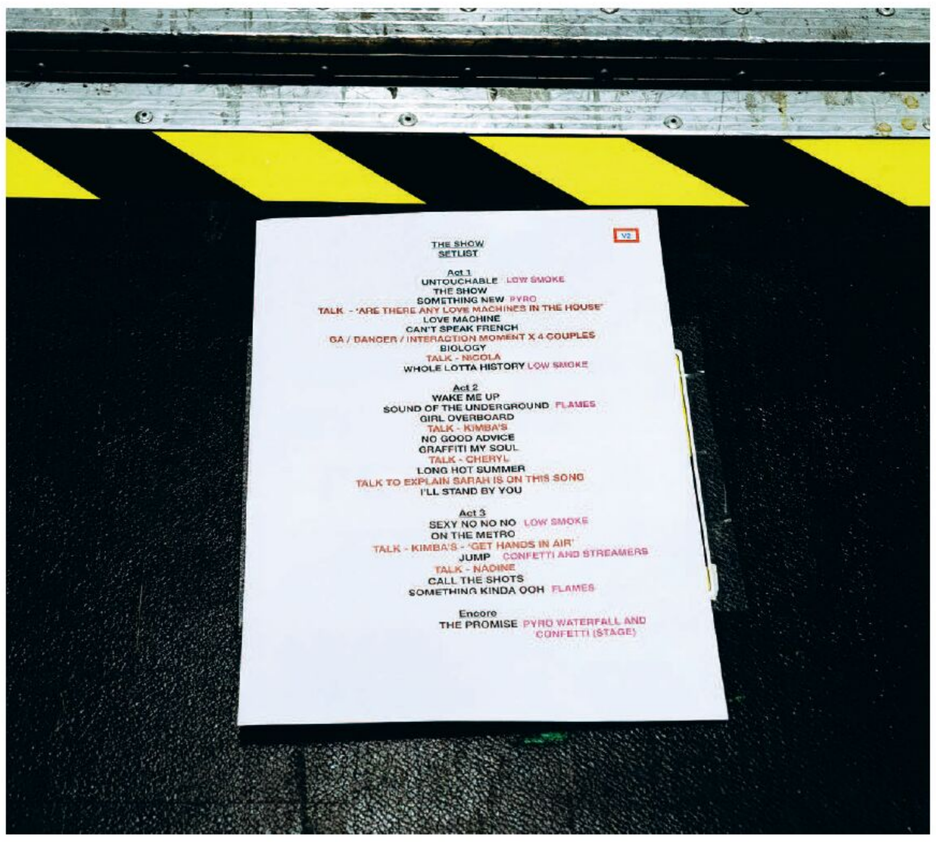
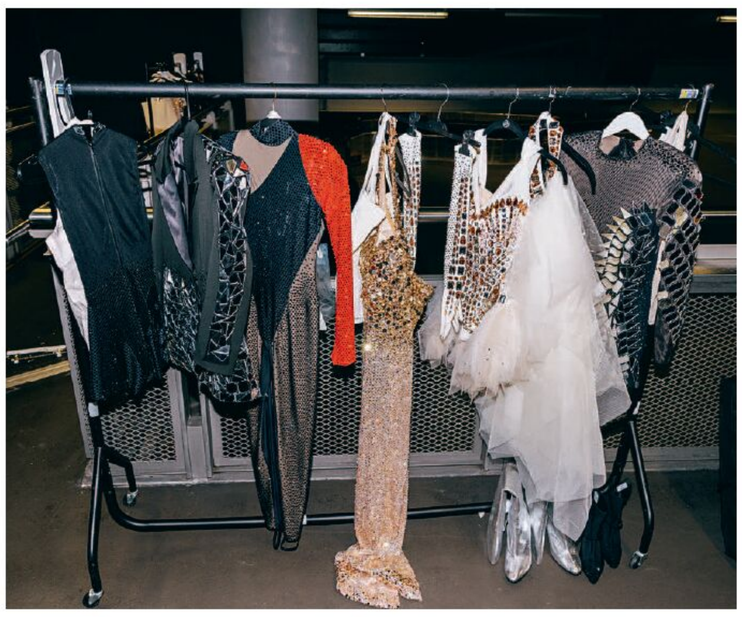
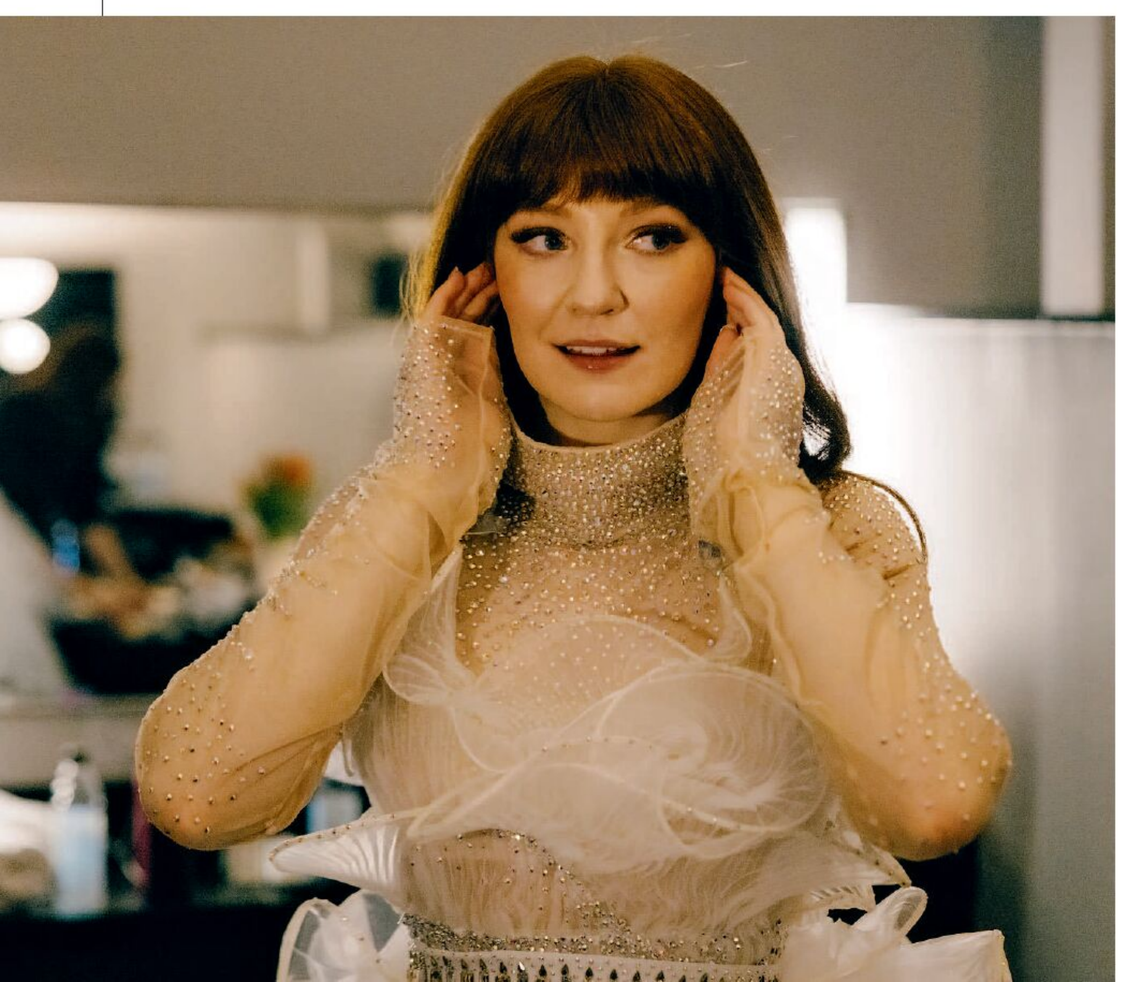
Clockwise from left: Nicola Roberts, Cheryl, Kimberley Walsh and Nadine Coyle; Cheryl in her inflatable skirt; Coyle gets ready; some of their costumes; Walsh limbers up; Roberts in costume; a group hug backstage in Dublin







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Louis Walsh, but they were essentially left to go it alone. "We didn't have a manager," Coyle confirms. "We were a new band one day and we were No 1 the next week. It was like the horse had bolted through the gate before we really knew ... "

"How to put the saddle on," Roberts says, completing the analogy.

"We didn't know anything about each other or the industry," Coyle continues. After all being moved down to London from around the nation to live in a converted former mental asylum, they also didn't know anything about paying bills. At one point, their electricity was cut off after a year's worth of warning letters were ignored.

The lack of stage school sheen gave them a raw edge; catnip not only to pop fans looking for more grit in the slipstream of the sugary-sweet Steps and S Club 7, but also to the tabloids and celebrity magazines. "We weren't being like, 'Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir,'" says Coyle, who by this point has removed not only her shoes, but also her socks, and is applying a thick painkilling gel to the soles of her feet. "We were more ourselves, and it meant that we could be genuine. We didn't conform to the pop princess image that everybody assumed we would conform to." Cheryl, who would become a fixture on the tabloid front pages, looks thoughtful. "I don't remember myself as her," she says. "I feel sad for her sometimes when I look back."

There was public bullying too, mostly aimed at Roberts – the youngest of the band, just 17 when they started – who was called a "rude ginger bitch" by Busted's Matt Willis and derided in similar terms by Radio 1 DJ Chris Moyles. "[That] changed my personality," she says. "I'm not as big a character as I probably should be because I've tried to protect myself." Coyle looks appalled: "We need to change that Nicola, we can't be having that!" she says.

"It's traumatising," adds Cheryl, as angry as she'll sound all day. "People don't realise the impact they're having on another human being. A young girl. They should be embarrassed of themselves. They wouldn't get away with it these days."

The band did attract some more welcome press attention, specifically from the NME at a time when the pop v indie wars were still raging. With each rule-breaking single – be it No Good Advice's new wave strut, or Biology's flagrant disavowal of pop structure, or Call The Shots's pensive glitter-bomb – they started to fall in with the "cool" indie crowd. "They were in with us," corrects Cheryl. "It was fun. It was a big compliment, especially when Arctic Monkeys covered Love Machine [on Radio 1's Live Lounge in 2006]. It's a big show of respect." (On the tour's opening night in Dublin, a bunch of flowers will be left in the band's dressing room from the ultimate beacon of rock authenticity, "your fan, Bono".)

It was a world Harding relished. "She's the one that would drink whisky neat out of the bottle at the NME awards," smiles Cheryl. Coyle remembers seeing a picture of Harding from that awards show and being "almost starstruck looking at her".

Harding wasn't the only one who enjoyed the party lifestyle. I remind Coyle of a story she told me about being injected with muscle relaxants to aid a monstrous hangover while rehearsing for ITV's musical monstrosity Greasemania. She looks shocked: "Wait, did I openly tell you that?"

"That was pretty epic," laughs Walsh. "You looked green." Roberts, meanwhile, remembers one specific moment on GMTV. "Me and Cheryl had come straight from the club and she fell asleep live on TV. During the interview." There's a cackle of laughter. "We were young," adds Walsh. "We couldn't miss out on all of it."

Clips from Greasemania, as well as an odd early appearance on Blue Peter where the girls were dressed as frumpy nurses throughout history (complete with bonnets), have recently been rediscovered and celebrated by the various irony-slathered, nostalgia-fuelled Hun Instagram and TikTok accounts. "Sweet

With Sarah Harding, above second from right, in 2002 after they won Popstars: The Rivals; and their last tour as a five in 2013

baby Jesus I saw that recently," laughs Cheryl of the band's Florence Nightingale runway show. "I nearly had a heart attack."

Cheryl, it turns out, is quite a fan of TikTok. "Cheryl is the queen of TikTok," confirms Roberts. I assume she's referring to Cheryl's comedic talents as displayed on the official Girls Aloud account, in which they'll jump on seemingly any trending topic. "No, if you could only see the private TikToks that she makes and sends to us, they're incredible."

The voice of their long-term creative director Beth Honan booms out of the speakers announcing a return to the stage. It's time to practise being hoisted into the air, not only for the show's opening in which they'll descend on platforms to the sounds of pearlescent single Untouchable, but also straddling those massive motorbikes during bolshie rock stomper Wake Me Up. Roberts looks uneasy. "I'm really terrified of heights." Ah. "Two tours ago they got me a shrink, and it just didn't work." As the rest of the band get ready – Cheryl swapping her beige fur-lined Crocs for heels – Roberts takes a deep breath. "This is the bit that feels like my heart's going to fall out my ... " and before she can finish she's ushered towards the stage.

The first run-through on the flying motorbikes seems to go off without a hitch, unless you count Roberts never once opening her eyes and, when they land, the front wheel of Cheryl's bike precariously perching on the not-quite-wide-enough runway that juts out from the stage. Weirdly, no music is played, so the band rely on Honan keeping time and intoning lyrics such as "Was it just the margaritas or are you lookin' at me?" like modern poetry. When the song is finally played for the next run-through, Roberts doesn't bring the microphone to her lips, choosing instead to grip the handlebars for dear life.

They also rehearse certified banger Something Kinda Ooooh, a breakneck dance-pop romp featuring the gloriously nonsensical line "jumping on my tutu". (At one point, Cheryl and I get into a minor disagreement about another lyric in the song involving a map; I'm convinced it's "should have come with a party map so I know where the night will take me", whereas Cheryl, AKA a person who sings on the actual song, is convinced it's "body map". Later, I email Girls Aloud songwriter Miranda Cooper who confirms Cheryl is right and I am wrong.) The performance is frenetic, with the 10 male dancers – whom Coyle had described as "old enough" when I'd enquired about their ages for journalistic purposes – pushing and pulling the girls in all directions. Earlier, I'd asked them about how tricky it's been returning to dance routines initially created for teenagers. "I thought it was going to be, 'Yeah, let's take it easy on them' ... But no," says Walsh, who will later lean on my shoulder to heave herself up off the sofa with an exhausted "I'll be fine once I get going."

In the band's cult 2006 fly-on-the-wall documentary, Girls Aloud: Off the Record a young Cheryl says that she couldn't imagine herself as "a 30-odd-year-old singing Love Machine". Now she's 40: here we are again. "In Cheryl's defence," Roberts jumps in, "when you're that young, it's very hard to see that far in the future."

Do they think attitudes towards women ageing in pop have changed in the last 20 years? "I don't care if they have or if they haven't," Coyle states firmly. "We're going to do what we want, and they can either like it or not. It's up to them. People are always going to have a problem, it's just not our problem." Walsh has been pleasantly surprised by the reaction of her friends outside the band. "I have a lot of women in my life now, school mums and things, and they'll message me like: 'This is so inspirational what you're doing.' Being able to be that for some people is incredible. Just by getting up and doing it."

We talk briefly about Madonna and what people expect female pop musicians to do after a certain age. "Die," says Cheryl. "Wither away." Once again, Coyle won't be drawn into any outside distractions. "See, don't ask people what they would like you to do – just do it! Asking people is your first issue."

Besides, there's no time for all this. As well as the arena tour, the girls are headlining Brighton Pride later in the summer and have an O2 Priority show at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire on their schedule. "That will be amazing," says Walsh. "A more intimate vibe. I went to see Kylie do a similar gig and it was great."

"It will be fun," smiles Cheryl. And after that? "Who knows what's next. We're like sisters now, so it never really ends. We've laughed, we've cried, we've cried laughing. It's been really fun."

While the stage is being set up for some more aerial acrobatics, I ask Roberts about those last few days with Harding. She remembers a sleepover at Soho Farmhouse where Harding insisted they watch every episode of Off the Record – highlights of which include Cheryl moaning her way up a hill in Greece, Roberts drunkenly covering the Cheeky Girls, and Harding crashing a race car. "We were like: 'Why are you making us relive this?'" she remembers. "We were all sitting with our hands over our eyes, just cringing, and Sarah was laughing away. She had a strange way about her where she didn't show any inhibitions. She was so human and in herself."

Roberts looks at the empty stage. "She was completely free up there. Zero inhibitions. She was so alive." ●

Girls Aloud will perform a Priority Gig exclusively for O2 and Virgin Media broadband customers at O2 Shepherd's Bush Empire on Tuesday 2 July

DAVE HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES

THE PEACE KEEPERS

Military service for 18-year-olds is a key Tory election pledge. But in countries with conscription, opting out comes at a heavy cost. From a 99-year-old Briton who refused to fight in the second world war to a 20-year-old Israeli imprisoned by army generals, conscientious objectors from around the world tell *Michael Segalov* why they took a stand

Merve Arkun in Turkey
and (left) Peter Hathorn
in South Africa

'The apartheid society I lived in was offensive to the core of my being'

Peter Hathorn, 63, Cape Town, South Africa (overleaf)

The society I grew up in was one of the most bizarre and institutionally racist environments ever to exist. Every aspect of life was stratified along racial lines, puritanical and repressive. Our Durban suburb was all white, save for domestic workers. I went to a whites-only school. At the liberally minded University of Cape Town in the late 70s, barely a single academic or student was a person of colour. Sexual relations across the colour line were prohibited, punishable by jail time.

At that time the African National Congress was a banned organisation, engaged in an armed struggle. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. South Africa's army was fighting a war in the north of Namibia and southern Angola, and was integral to maintaining the apartheid state, long before it was deployed in Black townships in South Africa to quell uprisings. It was largely a conscript army of white men called up at 16. Failure to comply came with a prison sentence of up to two years, after which you could be enlisted again.

I went to university to defer military service, then decided to refuse it. From the late 70s, a small number of conscientious objectors in mainstream churches had voiced strong objections to apartheid and resisted participating in an unjust war. They had a profound impact on many of us. My opposition to serving was purely political: the apartheid society I lived in was offensive to the core of my being, and after graduation in 1983 I wrote to my prospective unit informing them of my decision. After my court martial date was set, I spoke to students, other conscripts, campaigners and church groups, explaining my stand. I was sentenced to two years in prison and dishonourably discharged from the army.

Stepping through the wooden doors of Pretoria's notorious "hanging prison" was daunting. It's where people were brought to be executed, including many apartheid opponents. The warders were racist towards Black inmates and hostile to me. I felt fortunate when, after three months, a judge halved my sentence. I was released in early 1984, as the End Conscription Campaign was spreading and increasing numbers of conscripts were refusing to join up. We used innovative political methods – striking posters, musical and cultural events, a nationwide fast – as well as conventional rallies.

When I was conscripted again, the maximum sentence had been increased to six years in prison. Thankfully, a lawyer made a strong case that as I had already been discharged, my reconscription was illegal. Faced with a complex legal fight, the army backed off. That was to my great relief: I didn't fancy having to decide whether to face a further six years in jail.

'This war proves that violence is not the answer'

Einat Gerlitz, 20, Tel Aviv, Israel (above)

Through most of my teenage years, the idea of military service barely bothered me. As an Israeli Jew, preparations start early. Some kids at school were excited to fight. I thought I'd just serve my time in a non-combat, educational unit, helping teach children and soldiers: keep my head down, get it over with. Then, in 12th grade, I found climate activism. We organised nationally as a group of high-schoolers – Israelis and Palestinians. I started to understand the concept of occupation: that while we all lived in the same place, our realities were worlds apart. So much of what I knew was thrown into question.

I had been raised to believe that military service wasn't only an obligation, but my duty. Those who didn't do it were selfish and ignorant. The more I learned about the refusenik movement, the more certain I became. Yes, I could take a quiet job. Some people look to other types of exemption: for physical or mental health reasons, or because of religious beliefs. Instead, I decided that I wanted to refuse, publicly. It's a once in a lifetime chance to have your voice heard. Enlisting into the military is so central to Israeli life that refusing forces society to take notice. Facing time in prison to make your point carries weight in a culture that values sacrifice.

I contacted Mesarvot, a network supporting refusers. A lawyer helped me through every stage. During a volunteering year after high school, I had to go before a committee tasked with deciding whether I was truly a conscientious objector. In Israel these tribunals are made up primarily of military generals who draw a distinction between political and pacifist reasons for refusing. For me and many others, these are intertwined.

I was summoned to a military base. As a teenager, it was hugely stressful: they tried to trip me up and undermine me. I explained I was a pacifist who campaigns against all violence, and was told terrorists and criminals had me to thank; that my refusal put my family in danger. My request for an exemption on conscientious grounds was refused. I had no idea what would happen next. You can be jailed, released, then conscripted again on repeat. Some have spent years in prison. In the end, I was sentenced four times, serving a total of 87 days, before I received an exemption. After an arbitrary period of imprisonment, the military decides you have suffered enough.

I knew it would be complicated with my family, but deep down, I understood they would always love me. That's a privilege not all here are afforded. I received messages thanking me for my stance, but strangers would also tell me I am selfish and deluded. Twice in prison, girls screamed at me: "Traitor, you need to die." But mostly I had interesting conversations with the others detained.

This teenage choice will be with me my whole life. But I'm proud of what I did. Contrary to what some Israelis might think, I refused because I care deeply about this place and its people. Because I believe things can change. This war proves violence is not the answer. To think you can fight your way to peace is delusional.

'As a woman, you're expected to give birth to sons who are willing to fight and die for their country'

Merve Arkun, 34, Aydın, Turkey (previous page)

Women aren't conscripted like men into the Turkish military, but I'm still a conscientious objector: military service harms our whole nation, and I want my opposition to be heard. Over 10 years ago, I was a student at university in İzmir and heard of a Kurdish deserter arrested after running from the army. Many Kurdish young men won't serve, despite the conscription laws: they face discrimination and abuse inside the military, while the Turkish government wages war against their people. This man was placed in military prison – I went to visit him every week and we became close friends. We spoke for hours about his experiences and ideas. These conversations affected me deeply. I also became close with his wife, who had been left to support his

family and children. I saw first-hand how conscription affects not just men but women, too. I started to see how national service is part of a wider militaristic culture. For me, being a conscientious objector means not just refusing to serve, but opposing the wider system: gender-based violence and abuse of women, discrimination, rape and sexual assault. I came to see that the macho military is at the heart of all of this. And as a woman, you're expected to give birth to sons who are willing to fight and die for their country.

In Turkey, men must serve at least six months, but those with money can cut that time. If you refuse, there are repercussions: fines, imprisonment and human rights violations. And the impact is felt long term. It's illegal in Turkey to hire a man who has failed to complete his service. Access to education is restricted. Refusing to pay fines on principle means you're unable to have a bank account; otherwise the funds will be confiscated.

We don't know how many objectors there are, whether Kurdish, anarchist, communist, LGBTQ+ or religious opponents. People don't feel comfortable to declare their position openly. I know people who have been forced to leave their jobs and homes. My partner is also an objector. He has faced investigations, criminal cases and financial penalties. We live in a small city and try to hide all this from our neighbours.

When we travel through Turkey as a family, we are often stopped by armed police. Identity checks see him flagged as a draft evader. Our son is six now – it's terrifying. We are trying to raise him in a peaceful way. I don't want to send my children into the army – to see my son fight, maim or murder. A woman might not be conscripted, but I want my opposition on the record.

Enlisting is central to Israeli life, says Einat Gerlitz (left), so refusing to do it carries weight. Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal (above) was politicised by a military coup against the Thai government in 2014. Bill Galvin (below) began protesting in college, at the height of the US war in Vietnam

PREVIOUS PAGES: ALICE MANN; RENA EFFENDI. THIS PAGE: MICHAL CHELBIN; MATHIAS DEPARDON; JASON ANDREWS. ALL FOR THE GUARDIAN

'I'm terrified. But if nobody stands up, change will not come'

Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, 27, Bangkok, Thailand (left)

The Thai conscription system is over 100 years old. It's a strange process. When a man comes of age, he can volunteer to serve. Otherwise, at 7am on a specified date, he must present himself at a recruitment centre and pick a card at random. Select a red card and you're forcibly conscripted. A black one and you're free to go.

There is a lot of unfairness about conscription: those with money find ways to get around it. The higher your level of education, the shorter your term. There's corruption, too. As a Buddhist, I oppose all forms of violence, but my opposition to the military is also about the danger it poses to all Thai citizens. Since the 30s, our elected governments have constantly been overthrown by military coups. The one in 2014 politicised me. I was 18 and I declared publicly that I would be a conscientious objector. Education will solve our conflicts, not brainwashing people into supporting violence.

The law allows me to defer my service while studying – and until now I have been in higher education. I've had to report once a year at the recruitment centre to confirm this: I arrive with a sign reading #EndConscription to express my opposition. This year, I can postpone no longer as my studies are over.

For 10 months last year, I enrobed and ordained as a monk, to further study Buddhism. Ideally, I would still be there. But as a monk I would have been exempt from serving and this didn't sit right with me. I want to tell my country *why* I object, not have my religion shield me. In fact, the military have even suggested other ways I might quietly avoid conscription. My case, if I refuse publicly, will generate attention, which they wish to avoid. I want to make it noisy.

On 5 April, I went to the military conscription centre in Samut Prakan province. I refused to pick a card. I wasn't arrested on the day, but I know there will be consequences. In the coming months, I expect the police at my door: I'll be charged, tried and sentenced to up to three years in jail. Some people here are arguing I should also be charged with disturbing the peace of the country, which comes with a punishment of seven to 15 years. I'm terrified. But if nobody stands up and shows they disagree, change will not come. It's unlikely I'll be let off lightly – I'll be made an example of to stop others following. Now I wait, prepared for the worst.

'I felt an urgency to do anything I could to stop the war'

Bill Galvin, 74, Washington DC, US (left)

During the first world war, conscientious objectors were treated awfully in the US; imprisonment and abuse were common. In 1940, as the country geared up for another conflict, some churches came together to demand better protection for pacifists. The Center on Conscience and War was founded. I've been involved with it my whole life, supporting those navigating the process.

While there is no conscription in the US today, there is still draft registration for most 18-25 male residents and citizens: you're forced to sign up to a database from which you could be conscripted, should the government desire. I help people object to their inclusion. We also support people who become objectors while in the military. Recruitment targets young men from poor and rural communities with few other routes to education, healthcare and opportunity. They're sold a dream that doesn't stack up. Warfare and violence often leads to moral injury. Suicide rates among military personnel are at their highest since records began.

I graduated high school in 1967, the height of the Vietnam war. Lots of my classmates were drafted. I was going

to college, which allowed me to defer conscription. I was active in the Presbyterian church and planned on joining the ministry. I learned that to follow Jesus I must oppose all war or violence. We organised vigils and rallies. I travelled from North Carolina to the huge November 1969 anti-war march on Washington. While in college, I applied to be a conscientious objector. There was a written application: what do you believe? Why?

In 1971, my hearing was held in front of a draft board, six men in grey suits. All had served in the second world war. They weren't sympathetic and my application was denied, which was devastating. I made appeals, none successful. I prepared to face up to five years in prison. Thankfully, by this stage in the war, a draft lottery had been introduced. I lucked out and was never selected.

Meanwhile, I was training to be a minister, but stopping the war remained my priority. Alongside four others, I poured concrete over railway tracks leading from a factory producing 6,000 bomb casings a day for anti-personnel weapons to be used in Vietnam. At that time I felt an urgency to do *anything* I could to stop that never-ending war. For that, I'm a convicted felon.

When I objected, American wars were being fought in plain sight. Vietnam was the first time we had cameras on the battlefield. We saw body bags and devastation. Now, reporters only really see what's happening first-hand if embedded with troops, under their eye. Often, we don't know where our soldiers are, or what they're doing. Our income taxes go to the military, while roads crumble, schools fail and healthcare costs are through the roof. We should stand with Jesus and the early church and say no to violence. No to war.

Oleg Sofyanik (above), from Crimea, in front of the former Berlin Tegel airport, now a refugee camp, where his family are. Mikita Sviryd (below) fled to Lithuania when he deserted the Belarusian army. Timothy Tyndall (right) joined a British volunteer medical service in the second world war

'I spent three years in a psychiatric hospital, drugged alongside maniacs and murderers'

Oleg Sofyanik, 60, Marhanets, Ukraine (above)

I used to live in Crimea, but left in 2020 after years of being persecuted by the FSB, Russia's security agency, for opposing the illegal occupation of the peninsula. I was born in 1964, under Soviet rule, and raised in Sevastopol. Early on, I became a dissident: listening to western radio I realised the Soviet regime was criminal. As a child, I delivered leaflets criticising the government. My first encounter with the KGB was at 13 - they searched my house, confiscated my things and warned me off.

Back then, military service was mandatory for young men: two or three years. Those who refused, or deserted, were punished. It was necessary to have completed your service to pursue a career - failure to serve meant nobody would hire you. I tried, in my teens, to seek political asylum in the UK and America, but to no avail.

The first attempt to conscript me was in 1983. I was a first-year engineering student when, after various medical checks, I received my call-up notice. I presented myself alongside thousands of others at a central military base, from where we would be selected for different deployments. My hope was to be sent to Afghanistan - there, I could escape my unit and cross a land border to freedom. Instead, I was selected to serve in the navy's Black Sea fleet. So I hid in the base as other recruits left. That night, before anyone noticed I was missing, I scaled the perimeter fence and ran away, staying with relatives to plan my escape from the Soviet Union. Before I could get out, police appeared at their door. I'm pretty sure a relation ratted me out. I was arrested, detained and returned to military command, then ordered to conscript again. Again, I ran away, this time from a bus station while being moved to another base. I intended to head to Moscow to seek asylum at the Italian embassy. But the military was already on to me.

I spent a week in military prison: my cell had no bed, so I slept on my jacket. I was then returned to the conscription office. This was my final warning: run away again and I would be locked away for years. Still I refused to take my military oath. I was isolated from the other conscripts and sent to a psychiatric hospital. Here, a sympathetic doctor told me he would lie and diagnose me with a mental illness so the military would excuse me. I spent five months as an inpatient.

In April 1984 I was relieved of military duty and returned to Sevastopol. But my new medical history prevented me finding much work. The KGB constantly harassed me. In the mid-80s, I made various failed attempts to escape the Soviet Union, even jumping off a cruise ship at night with an inflatable dinghy, hoping to cross the Black Sea to Turkey. After a night on the open sea, I was picked up by the coastguard and imprisoned. A court ordered me to a psychiatric hospital, where I spent a further three years, drugged alongside maniacs and murderers. Let's just say that was difficult.

Today I live in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk oblast, under heavy Russian attack. Recently I've been to visit family in Berlin, but my civic duty is to be in the war zone, not in prosperous Europe. I'm a lifelong pacifist from Ukraine, but Putin's merciless and evil war is an unavoidable reality. The primary objective of the pacifist movement here must be to stop Russia's ruthless violence. I'm a man of peace, but what choice do we have? Putin is demonic - intent on destroying the Ukrainian identity. Even pacifists must resist him. All those serving in the Ukrainian military and dying are his responsibility. I plan on going to Russia this spring with a pacifist mission to defend the rights of political prisoners and objectors who have the courage to stand up to Putin. It's dangerous, yes, but I've been through so much: prison and death no longer scare me.

MAX SHER; TADAS KAZAKEVIČIUS; LYDIA GOLDBLATT. ALL FOR THE GUARDIAN

'What should a person of peace do in the face of Nazism's wickedness? I played my part, just not with guns'

Timothy Tyndall, 99, London, England (left)

My father was ordained in 1913. During the first world war, he was a volunteer chaplain on the western front. He received a Military Cross in the Somme, and a bar to the cross in 1918. Afterwards, he became a parish priest in Birmingham, interested in the growing pacifist movement. Dad rarely discussed the horrors he witnessed at war. As the years went on, he became convinced about pacifist ideas. From the youngest age, I agreed with him.

War had broken out again when I started at public school. We dug trenches to hide in, should bombing start. When old boys were killed in the fighting, their names would be read out at evening prayers. All the boys attended Officers' Training Corps to prepare us for military careers. All the boys, except me. I refused. There was a brief attempt to try to ostracise me for my decision. If I close my eyes now, I can still picture the changing room at school where one boy tried to bully me. After a few days, however, it petered out.

During the first world war, 16,000 men objected. Some were allowed to do civilian work of national importance; others served in a noncombat corps. Those who were refused objector status were imprisoned. By the time war was declared against Germany in 1939, there was a clearer process. The vast majority of the nearly 60,000 objectors were rapidly put to other work, given dispensation to contribute peacefully.

In 1943, aged 18, I went to a tribunal in Bristol to make my case as a conscientious objector. My outlook was shaped by all I'd learned of the last war. Millions lost their lives, and for what purpose? In front of the panel, I had to present three letters to evidence my case. My uncle took me and sat at the back, watching. The panel wanted to be sure it was my decision alone. The chair asked me explicitly: "Are you making up your own mind or simply copying what your father did?" But strangely, when the moment came, I wasn't required to argue.

I went on to join the Friends Ambulance Unit. Set up by Quakers in the first world war, it was a volunteer medical service operating behind the lines, taking the wounded off to receive treatment. The idea was that pacifism couldn't just mean withdrawing from duty, remaining absent. It had to be a visible, active alternative in the midst of war. Its 1,344 members acted as medical orderlies during the blitz, and wherever medical support was needed: Scandinavia, the Middle East, mainland Europe. After my basic training, I set sail for China in 1944, serving the unit in humanitarian schemes, returning in 1947.

I never encountered much opposition to the choice I made. Few talked about their war afterwards. We were keen to get on with our lives, and for many it wasn't an experience to be relived. I made my choice informed by the first world war. What we witnessed in Germany in the early 1940s was, of course, an altogether different evil. What should a person of peace do in the face of Nazism's wickedness? It throws up complex questions. I never considered my choice a criticism or judgment on another's decision to serve. I understood why allied governments acted as they did; why others fought. My view remains that in moments of conflict, it is important that a voice of conscience is heard, even if not followed by the majority.

On returning home I learned to live with my decision not to fight. I've no good reason to believe I made the wrong choice. I played my part, just not with guns. Eighty years have passed since I objected. Wherever I look, it's the same old story. It makes me profoundly sad. When will we learn that war begets war? Violence always begets violence ●

'If I'm sent back to Belarus I'll face a very long prison sentence or the death penalty'

Mikita Sviryd, 21, Vilnius, Lithuania (left)

Rural western Belarus is where I used to call home, but for the last two years I've lived in Lithuania. I'm a refugee here, having deserted the Belarusian army. If I'm sent back to Belarus I'll face a very long prison sentence or the death penalty: the president, Alexander Lukashenko, signed a bill introducing capital punishment for harming national security and for treason.

Mandatory military service in Belarus lasts 18 months. As a kid, I was not interested - not for any moral or political reason at first, but from hearing stories of how poorly new recruits were treated. The alternative, though, was prison time, so I decided to just get on with it. My first month was spent in training. Every Sunday, we had an hour of "education" - mostly it was political, for instance, about how anyone protesting against the Lukashenko presidency is a fascist. We would be shown Russian and old Soviet films, often about the second world war.

This was before Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but we participated in joint military exercises with Russia. It was strange: our army depots had brand new combat kits. We were told it was for training, but we had only ever used very old equipment before. I was with this same unit when Russia's invasion started. We were helping the Russians load ammunition at the time. The Russians left the next day.

After the invasion, everything changed. We were shown extreme Russian propaganda programmes: how in Ukraine Russia was fighting Nazis. It was intensive brainwashing, and it worked. About a third of those who weren't pro-Putin before were converted. I wasn't.

I was sent to man checkpoints around an airbase close to the Ukrainian border. Here, there were 20 or so Russian fighter jets; our job was to wave missile deliveries through. Then we were moved to the Lithuanian border, where we were instructed to find civilian clothes for a later mission. With these in my possession, I realised I could attempt to run away. On the evening of 26 May 2022, I packed a rucksack with these clothes, my documents and anything I had of value. I also grabbed a pair of night vision goggles. By 3am, I was on watch, alone. When I was sure nobody was awake, I got up and ran. I sprinted through the woodland towards Lithuania, changing into my civilian outfit. I've no idea how long I ran for. Then I saw a car, told the driver I was heading to see my grandma, and hitched a lift.

I've been in Lithuania for nearly two years now. For the first six months I was forbidden to work by law, and now nobody wants to hire me without documents. I applied for political asylum, but this was denied. My first appeal was also rejected - now I'm waiting for the result of another legal challenge. I'm terrified, and am barely sleeping. The only people I am in touch with from home are my parents. They don't understand why I've done what I've done. Of course, I still love them. They are ordinary Belarusian people who have bought the propaganda. I don't know if or when I'll see them again.

TO THE ZOOM

Naomi and Deej met on a virtual Guardian Blind date in 2020 – and today, they'll be saying 'I do'. *Hannah Moore*, who played Cupid, tells their lockdown love story. *Portrait: Pål Hansen*

THAT SATURDAY MORNING BEGAN chaotically. Naomi Clark had been out running and fallen over, miles from home. She limped back and arrived, flustered and sweaty, just in time to log on to Zoom for her blind date.

She was ravenous, but in the rush had run out of time to order the takeaway Vietnamese summer rolls she had planned to eat in front of this stranger.

She clicked open the call and there was Deej Phillips, her date, beaming back at her. He held up the meal he was about to tuck into, and guess what? He had gone for the same – summer rolls.

"I think we're soulmates!" Naomi said, laughing.

A nervous pause.

"Is it too soon to say?" she continued.

Deej: "It was quite forward."

This may seem a strange way to go on a date, until you learn that this was April 2020, a time when everything was happening via a screen. Plus, this wasn't just a regular blind date, but a Guardian Blind date – and every awkward moment was being recorded for a special edition of the Guardian's Today in Focus podcast.

Naomi was in her flat in east London and Deej was 4,500 miles away, holed up in a hotel in Nepal, where he'd been making a documentary. The two of them, locked down so far from each other, gazed at each other's pixelated faces on computer screens.

In Kathmandu, a heavy thunderstorm was brewing and soon the rain was pelting on the roof of Deej's hotel – a converted former palace, where he was now the sole resident, staying in the honeymoon suite.

"You're so damn privileged," she teased him.

Their conversation flowed, from jokes about her favourite vegetable (aubergine) to sharing heartfelt reflections about their families and past relationships.

"In the last six months or so I've really started to think it would be nice to be in a relationship and the things that come along with it, like getting a dog and having kids," said Deej.

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"Honestly, I probably want a kid more than I want a girlfriend or a wife right now."

Naomi: "I have never ever had any man say that before. It's very refreshing."

That first date would turn into a deep love, taking them on joint adventures they couldn't possibly have imagined when they opened their laptops that day – cycling thousands of miles together, travelling the world and starting a new life abroad.

"It honestly feels like we've lived a million lifetimes together," says Deej, now 34. "These four years have been so rich in experiences and special moments. We are incredibly lucky."

And, as the person who set them up on that first date, I feel lucky to have played a part in their story. Today, I will be the MC at their wedding, and I will tell the crowd how it all began.

IN THOSE EARLY DAYS OF LOCKDOWN, it seemed impossible to imagine how any of us could form new relationships. For single people, opportunities for serial swiping, Tuesday night dates at the pub and magical in-person chance encounters were suddenly extinguished.

I work as a producer on the Guardian's daily news podcast, and though dating is far from our normal remit, I thought it important to understand how this societal shift was affecting people. My editors let me conduct an experiment: I'd matchmake our listeners and record them having their first dates over Zoom. We would provide them with a food budget, so that they could share a meal virtually, and after the date ask them a series of questions about how they thought it had gone.

I took inspiration, of course, from the Guardian's long-running Blind date column, which has been matchmaking readers since 2009 and has led to at least five marriages (and several Blind date babies). During the pandemic, it also pivoted from in-person meals to being online only, which Sarah Hooper, the column's matchmaker at the time, says allowed her greater freedom to create unlikely pairings – though not necessarily ones that would last.

"Mentally, where people were at, there was such a weird disconnect from real life," she says. "So these dates felt more isolated and perhaps less like there was the potential for it to be something more. But that was what made it interesting. We were able to set up our first international date, in Paris, because everyone was online. In that one, she was keen and he was treating it as like a therapy session with her."

Being online gave people intimate access to each other's home lives – sometimes uncomfortably so. Hooper says: "I remember one where they ended up meeting the entire family because she was locked down back home. So it became this super-sped-up date."

I didn't know what to expect when we put out the call for listeners to take part in our experiment. But, as it turned out, we weren't short of applicants – about 50 people wrote in from across the world, from twentysomethings who, pre-pandemic, had considered dating something of a daily hobby, to a 68-year-old who had been single for decades. Some were simply lured by the promise of a free takeaway. Many, sweetly, said they hoped we would find them "the one".

I had long phone conversations with many of them to get a sense of who they were looking for and, crucially, how entertaining they would be on air. By mid-April, I had selected our five pairs.

I remember telling colleagues about Deej and Naomi – how both had radiated energy and a relentless determination to make a positive impact on the world. She had just lost her job in the tourism industry – a casualty of the pandemic – and turned that drive into an exhausting schedule of volunteering, cycling miles around London every day delivering food parcels for the charity Made in Hackney, and coordinating her local Covid Mutual Aid group, alongside studying for her master's degree and training for a marathon.

SET STYLING: AUSTEJA GOKAITE. STYLING: MEL WILKINSON. HAIR AND MAKEUP: SOPHIE HIGGINSON

'I HAVE TO BE HONEST AND SAY SHE DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THE TYPICAL GIRL I WOULD GO FOR'

Meanwhile, Deej was in Kathmandu to direct and shoot a documentary about how communities were surviving amid a catastrophic cycle of flooding and drought caused by the climate crisis. I thought they would be a great match.

But first we had four other dates to eavesdrop on, beginning with Jayson, a journalist in Hong Kong, and Harry, a TV producer in London, who opted to spend his £30 food budget on takeaway cocktails. By the time the date started (4pm in the UK, 11pm in Hong Kong), Harry was gloriously sloshed and the next hour or two proceeded in a joyful mess of flirty jokes, a one-man Sonny and Cher rendition and a special showing of Jayson's homemade lemon meringue pie.

Another pair, Len and Titus, were dazzled by each other's looks and sporting prowess – her muay thai boxing and his climbing – and agreed to meet up for a board games night once lockdown was over. "He's cute, funny and smart," she said. "A hot secret nerd, which is exactly my type."

Sadly, Sam and Jennifer's date was seriously glitchy by comparison – and not just in terms of the Zoom connection between their homes in Los Angeles and London. "The proverbial butterflies stayed firmly in their cocoons," she said afterwards.

Last, Butho and Mally, our couple in Scotland, bonded over their love of music, even though her playlist consisted only of horror soundtracks, and they seemed so relaxed in each other's company that it didn't matter when her housemate interrupted the date by "swinging a ladder around" the room. They gave each other a solid eight out of 10, which regular Blind date readers know means "we had a nice time, but we're never likely to see each other again".

And then it was Deej and Naomi's turn.

"I HAD NO EXPECTATIONS," says Deej, adding that the date "was just something interesting to do, because it was a very sad time, quite lonely".

Both had been happily single for several years, after coming out of long-term relationships and insist they applied for the date on a whim. When Naomi found out Deej was so far away she was pleased, realising that slimmed their chances of ever meeting in person.

"I thought: well that will be perfect, because I'll never have to worry about having to stay in touch, any feelings developing, having my heart broken," says Naomi, now 36.

And Deej, who thought his "type" was women with darker hair, hadn't expected to find himself physically attracted to Naomi – a fact she now ribs him about.

"I have to be honest and say she didn't look like the typical girl I would go for at that time," he says. "After getting to know Naomi, I quickly realised how silly this 'type' preference was."

He scored her eight out of 10. She gave him full marks.

Over the next couple of months they kept in touch via WhatsApp, their conversations veering from wholesome to flirtatious by the sentence:

Naomi: "Stepping up my home grooming regime and attempted my first waxing. Painful but surprisingly effective. I feel like I could handle anything now."

Deej: "I'm very glad I don't have to do it! Would be interested to see how much it hurts though."

Naomi: "OK so we will give you a little summer wax. Then you will know."

Deej: "How was your weekend?"

Naomi: "Woke up to my seedlings having hatched, very exciting! Took a little old lady called Hilda for a very brief trip to the bottom of her block for a tiny walk and some air. She gave me a KitKat for my troubles."

For his birthday that May, she bought him foods he had mentioned he liked – a particular brand of peanut butter, fancy chocolate – and they talked for ages on the phone.

When restrictions lifted in Nepal that June, Deej booked a flight to London. The next day, he and Naomi met for their first in-person date, in Regent's Park. When a thunderstorm broke out, it was the perfect excuse to find shelter, and they headed home together.

"I cooked us dal and rice, and she ended up staying the night," he says. "From there, we spent a lot of time together. We were in a Covid bubble and would alternate between her place by Old Street and my place in Bow. Very weird circumstances to start a relationship, during a pandemic."

But Deej wasn't planning to stay in London for long – he aimed to move to India as soon as restrictions would allow, to connect with his mother's side of the family there and continue making documentaries.

"So, I thought, I guess I'll just enjoy this for however long it lasts," says Naomi.

As the months went by, their lives became intertwined. They spent their days together, out on their bikes, or working side by side on their laptops; they met each other's parents and built a large group of joint friends. In 2022, they moved to Kerala, south India. The first few months weren't easy – the flat they rented was dilapidated and needed repairs; both were working long hours, and missing their friends and family – but seeing how calmly Naomi navigated everything new made Deej fall even more deeply in love with her.

"She was up for adventures and happy to rough it while we went to unusual places. I was looking for someone who was up for these kinds of experiences and I found someone I'm now struggling to keep up with."

On Christmas Day in 2022, Deej proposed near his mum's house in southern Spain, with a family heirloom ring passed down by his maternal grandmother.

"She said no about 20 times in disbelief, before she finally said yes. We then walked to my mum's place, where my nan and auntie were getting ready for Christmas Day, and Naomi showed her ring hand to my then 90-year-old nan and she almost collapsed to the floor crying. That set me off."

Their wedding is going to be a festival in Devon, with a humanist ceremony, outdoor games, a picnic, bake-off, yoga and forest bathing. Guests are encouraged to dress flamboyantly, and there will be dancing in the forest glade until late in the evening.

"We are pretty inseparable now," says Deej, "and although things aren't always perfect, we know how to have a magical time together. We love the same things about the world and exploring it together. I love the way we move through time together by foot, bike, running or swimming."

This spring, they relocated back to London, but everyone knows that will not be the end of their adventures. Deej is continuing his film-making, highlighting climate issues across the world, and Naomi works for a responsible travel company based in India. Wherever they end up, they will find fun.

"Her curiosity and excitement for the small things is endearing. She's beautiful inside and out," says Deej.

And if they ever want to reminisce about that first date, they've got the podcast to listen back to, he says. "Pretty much everybody says that is the best meeting story they've ever heard." ●

Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

Nicole Louie got married knowing she didn't want children and that her husband felt the same. Then he had a change of heart – and she began to question everything

WORLDS APART

Illustration: Andrea Ucini

I REMEMBER EXACTLY when I decided to forgo motherhood. It wasn't a conscious decision, but it happened all the same. I was six and had just been given a new doll. It was a doll with an appendage in the form of a belly – if pressed in, then pulled out, the piece would detach. One side was a full moon, the other was flat. Inside the cavity above the doll's pelvis was a tiny baby. I traded the baby for a pencil and the doll for butterfly stationery. On one of the sheets, I wrote what I wanted to be when I grew up: banjo player, pony trainer, story maker. Mother was not one of them.

Then came the teen and young adult years moulded by the women around me – my mother, grandmother, stepmother and the female friends who had chosen names for their unborn babies. No woman I knew rejected motherhood, so I inched closer to that life in total darkness with only my intuition as a guide. Suspecting the road ahead would be miserable, I imagined dying alone in a decrepit house without anyone noticing for days.

Stereotypes of women without children in the media hadn't helped. You know the ones: the crazy cat lady, the sorrowful barren woman, the selfish child-free woman, the overambitious career woman, the child hater, the pitiful spinster, the immature woman, the incomplete woman, the cold-hearted woman, the unnatural woman and so on.

Only in my mid-20s did I question childlessness as a destination. But the questioning didn't come naturally to me; it surged out of love for someone else. Now that I was married and my intent not to have a child would also shape my husband's future, it felt urgent to understand why I longed to live that way for the rest of my days.

On the winter solstice of our second year living together, my husband and I were in our flat in Lund, and I was alone on the windowsill, just inches from our bed, watching the snowfall. Eyes swollen almost shut, arms wrapped around legs and head buried into knees, I sat, my mind stuck in one endless loop as I asked myself the same question again and again: *Do I want to become a mother?*

I was no longer sure of what I wanted or didn't want and I started doubting what had brought me to that frozen archipelago in the first place. Outside, a total whiteout swallowed the landscape. Inside, my husband had just revealed a newfound wish. He wanted to become a father. What about what I wanted? I kept prodding the emptiness in my womb.

At 26, I still had not met a woman who intended to circumvent motherhood. Not a single one. How was that possible? And how was it that I felt scared, yet compelled, to follow that dimly lit path?

When I could no longer feel the cushion beneath me, I got up, opened our bedroom door and returned to the living room. I found my husband still sitting on the red sofa. His

eyes were swollen, too. He reached for my hand as I sat beside him, gazing at our pictures on the wall. We interlocked fingers.

Feeling his openness, I then rested my head on his chest.

"This caught me by surprise," I said.

"Same here."

"Have you been wishing for a baby for long?"

"No. Not for long."

"I don't know if I want a child."

He said nothing but tilted his head slightly to meet mine, so I continued.

"Right now, it feels like ... " I stopped, worrying I'd hurt him if I said it.

"Like what? I can take it, Nic," he said.

"Like trying to grow a third arm."

The sharp edges of my words shut us both into silence for a while.

"We should go to bed," he muttered.

"We will. It's just that ... " Scraping my last trace of energy, I tried to finish the thought.

"I need time to figure this out."

"I'm not going anywhere, *amor*," he said, bringing me back to his chest.

There and then, I remembered why I had crossed to his side of the world: I felt the most loved I ever had held within the curve of his arms.

I HAD BEEN AT THE HEIGHT of my discontent at being a 23-year-old who still lived with their mother when I met Erik – a charming, introverted and erudite Swedish cellist. Through an online forum about movie soundtracks, we slid into each other's DMs and started video calls that lasted for hours. Very quickly, we entered a secret space that made us forget we were in different hemispheres, and we knew we wanted to be together. So we kept reaching for it. In the spring of 2008, after he visited me in Brazil three times in less than a year, I boarded a plane to Sweden. Fifteen months later, we married in the ruins of a castle. Just the two of us by a lake, reciting the vows we had written the night before, blessed by the mountains.

On that winter solstice, Erik and I had been watching a movie about a grief-stricken man who had to learn to care for his daughter after his wife died and I had noticed him crying. I knew which scene had hit a nerve: the one where the man consoles his little girl and realises that his bond with his child is stronger than the bond with his wife. Comforting Erik in my arms, I stayed silent. So did he. No words were needed.

There had been signs before, subtler ones. But I had brushed them off, certain that the case was closed. We had talked about it from day one, the first time we heard each other's voices and talked about all the big things in life, including families – the ones we came from and the one I didn't plan to have, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. He asked me why. I told him that I wanted a different way of life. I then asked how he felt about parenting and he said he had never felt strongly about it. At the time, I interpreted this as a confirmation that he didn't want children either.

Since that first call, we had spoken a lot more about parenthood but rarely had we discussed it as a real possibility. "Oh, they look so tired," we'd say after spending time with our friends with kids. "If we had children, there's no way we'd be flying overnight to Helsinki for a Bruce Springsteen concert," we'd say on our way to the airport. Or maybe I was the one saying it, and he was the one listening? I was no longer sure.

There was never any paper agreeing to this, but in my mind it was an agreement from the start. So now I told him I didn't understand what was happening. Why had he gone to such lengths, literally moving across the world several times, to be with me when he knew I wanted no children? Did he conceal his true wish, thinking I'd change my mind? Did he believe back then that he would never want a child, so we'd be fine?

Life, of course, is in no way that simple. I had changed a great deal in those three years. Wouldn't it be only fair to accept that he had changed, too? We both sobbed when he admitted that the desire to become a father, though not there when we met, had since crept into his mind and grown bigger and bigger until he no longer knew how to expurgate it. It wasn't his fault. It was nobody's fault. But realising that we now wanted such different things was devastating for both of us. He felt guilty and conflicted, and I felt forced to reconsider something I thought was already settled.

I held him close until the movie was over. Was our marriage over, too?

That was the night my mind started spiralling as I watched the snowfall from our bedroom window while he sat alone on the red sofa in our living room. The snowfall would stop by springtime; the spiralling wouldn't.

MANY TIMES THAT YEAR, I examined motherhood from different angles, imagining it could be a positive experience. I was an educated woman in my late 20s married to someone I loved, trusted and respected, and who reciprocated my feelings. I lived in a cosy flat in a modern, secular country that supported new families in many ways. My husband, who did his fair share of household chores and cooked better than I did, wanted to become a father and had pledged to be hands-on in all aspects of parenthood. He had even mentioned he'd be up for being a full-time stay-at-home dad if I wished to prioritise my career. These were not circumstances in which my mother or grandmother ever found themselves.

I tried to imagine someone who would be "the product" of our love, "the glue" that would keep us together and "the legacy" we'd leave behind. I thought about how watching someone grow so closely could be a journey filled with endless tasks but also with immeasurable moments charged with bliss. I thought about the daughter of a friend of ours who had come to our house, and when I offered her the ice-cream and cookies I had bought for her, thinking that's what a three-year-old would want to eat, she asked me for cucumber and plucked leaves from my basil plant. Would we have one of those cute cucumber kids, too?

'Not having a child doesn't make you less of a woman,' my mother said. 'If I'd had the chance, maybe I'd have chosen the same'

Still, whenever I tried to envision what it would be like to bring another human being into this world and become half of the duo meant to raise, protect and love them unconditionally until death did us part, I felt no inkling of interest or excitement to move in that direction. Not once.

The peaceful days we spent attending to our work and each other were everything to me. And I was happy with things exactly as they were. But Erik was older. Twelve years older. So my 28 was his 40. His clock was ticking, while I just wanted to make time stop.

At my local library I had searched for months for books about women without children. There were a few, and as happy as I was to get my hands on them, they ended up being like fireworks that brightened my dark sky only for a moment – dense with traumatic miscarriages, stillbirths and abortions written in torturous technical terms, filled with numbers but no insights about what it was like to have no children by choice or circumstance; melodramatic testimonies that made motherhood sound like the only thing worth living for; and anti-natalist books on the verge of referring to children like the plague. They were too academic, too dogmatic or too radical. I had no use for any of them.

I Googled "famous childless women". The results seemed endless: Dolly Parton, Oprah Winfrey, Stevie Nicks, Billie Holiday, Maria Callas, Helen Mirren, Katherine Hepburn, Billie Jean King, Eva Perón, Carmen Miranda, Yayoi Kusama, Coco Chanel; Mother Teresa!

Running a new search to narrow the results down to female authors, my mouth hung open as I read the names on my laptop screen: the Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Zora Neale Hurston, Edith Wharton, Octavia E Butler, Elizabeth Bishop, Gabriela Mistral, Hilary Mantel, Bernardine Evaristo, Arundhati Roy and more.

All this time, they had been there, lined up on bookshelves like an army of goddesses, and I had not noticed. I had been walking around thinking I was following a secret path unknown to all humans before me, when in reality some of my favourite authors had been-there-done-that many decades, even centuries, ago. The only way to redemption was to read their books back to back. One by one, I reread them, this time with new eyes. I felt less lonely. And, for a while, that was all I wanted.

IN THE TWO YEARS SINCE that first night by the window, I had told Erik I didn't want a baby and Erik had repeatedly said he wanted me more than a baby. At first, all seemed well enough, but I gradually sensed a deep sadness in him. The sadness extended into withdrawal and I didn't know how to bring him back.

Longing for a resolution and assuming the reason for our marital discontent was the limbo state of not knowing if I'd change my mind in the future about having a child, I started considering permanent contraception options. One made available about that time was Essure, a non-incisional birth control system that used small devices to block the fallopian tubes.

My mother, Yara, came from Brazil for a visit. We exchanged tales about her life before and after my birth as we strolled through the botanic gardens and picnicked at the Sofiero Palace. On her last day, we took a train to Karen Blixen's house in Denmark. Blixen is the author of the memoir that inspired one of my mother's favourite movies, Out of Africa. Diagnosed with syphilis soon after her wedding, she never had children. We took pictures of each other under her apple trees and Mom wrote her a note and pinned it to a message board.

At some point, sitting on a bench next to the cathedral and sharing a ham and egg salad sandwich, I mentioned that I was considering going through a procedure that would permanently implant a birth control device in my body but that I wanted to do some more research after reading about a campaign by women who reported

LINDA BROWNLEE/THE GUARDIAN

side-effects the implant was having on their health, sex life and ability to work.

"What kind of side-effects?" she asked.

"Skin rashes, joint pain, fatigue, hair loss and in some cases perforation of the uterus."

"Oof … It sounds dangerous. Why would you risk any of it?"

"Because I'm tired of trying to convince myself I want to have a child."

"What's the latest from Erik on this?"

"He said he no longer wants a child."

"Doesn't that alleviate the pressure?"

"I don't believe him."

"Why not? Why would he lie?"

"He's not lying. He's sacrificing his wish to have a child to be with me."

I had grown up hearing my mother list all the ways in which she sacrificed herself for me: to feed me, to shelter me, to send me to the best schools and to university, and to allow me all the privileges she never had. I could acknowledge them and be grateful for them. But I also knew where that road led: to resentment on both sides. And I was terrified that one day Erik and I would have a conversation ending with him saying he had given up on fatherhood for me because he loved me and that he now regretted that decision.

After a long silence, my mother asked for my left hand. I laid it over hers. She flipped it and started running her fingers across my palm. It took me a second to understand what she was doing.

"This is the life line. Yours is long, see? It curves around the ball of the thumb and ends at the base of the palm. This is the heart line: yours splits in two. See the split here? Up to here, it could be Erik. After that, who knows? Your head line is long and curved. You're creative, a dreamer, someone who adapts easily to situations, a sponge that picks up and retains emotions from those around you. You must learn to shut your body to other people's energy."

"I want to shut my body to sperm," I said.

We both laughed. "Look, *fifi*, you may feel that having a procedure that would stop you from having a child is a good idea, and maybe it is. Not having a child doesn't make you less of a woman and had I had the chance, maybe I'd have chosen the same. I understand that not having to think about this any more can seem like a relief. I'm just not sure that will be the case. You are only 28 and a lot can happen that could change how you feel. You could both be happy without a child; you could break up; you could meet somebody else. If you are certain you don't want a baby now, use contraception, but give yourself time to let life happen to you. If you feel this way five, 10 years from now, try something permanent, but why shut a door you are not using?"

After she left, Erik and I agreed that the way forward was for me to believe him when he said that I was the family he wanted and that if I didn't want to become a mother, a life without a child was right for us. There was no need to undergo risky procedures. We would be fine. We would go back to each other. But wishful thinking wouldn't be enough to glue us back together.

We moved to Ireland, where I could communicate easily, as I never really got beyond the basics in Swedish, and started working as an in-house translator right away. However, as a cellist in a country with fewer orchestras, Erik had to travel back to Sweden for freelance work,

'Women without children lined up on my bookshelves like an army of goddesses': Nicole Louie in Dublin

which meant we spent weeks apart. Despite our best efforts, 2015 was destined to be the last leg of our journey side by side. After eight years, we reached the peak, saw the abyss and came crashing down. I stayed in Dublin and he went back to Lund. Once we signed the divorce papers, our life paths disentangled.

AFTER THE BREAKUP, illness struck me like never before. I'd wake up being sick and go to bed with a raging fever. Bedridden, I'd devour books and movies about writers, philosophers and travellers without children – they were the only antidote to my hunger for purpose.

Then I sought them out in real life so that I could ask the burning questions in my brain. For the next four years, I met women from all over the world without children of their own. Among them was the first Turkish woman to climb Everest, a Peruvian anthropologist who fought to have a tubal ligation and a British nurse who values her solo time above all else.

They were complex and captivating. Their answers were varied and nuanced; their reasons for not having children were never the same, nor were the ways they lived their lives or derived meaning. Nothing I heard matched what had populated my mind about lives that didn't include motherhood. And I felt ready to start writing my own book. For six weeks, I let memories of their journeys and mine rest on the pages and just when I started to think I was flying, I hit a wall.

Erik. How was I to write about Erik? Which parts should I reveal or conceal?

I pondered whether I should call, send a letter or an email, or do anything. Our last contact had been in November 2018, when he wrote to say he wished to sell our flat in Lund and I sent him the paperwork. How was I to start a conversation with him after a year and a half? Not knowing what else to do, I returned to his Instagram account, shame and all. The only window left open to his life. A picture posted three weeks earlier showed him sitting on the grass next to the most heavenly baby girl. And she looked a lot like him.

A father. He was a father of a baby girl now. He always wanted a girl. My legs weakened.

I surrendered to a dizzying array of emotions – I was rejoicing and grieving, not only for Erik but for his family, which had been my family, too. I was happy for them and sad I had lost them. There was space for it all in me.

What stayed with me was an enormous sense of gratitude and relief. My instincts were right: he wished for a baby; I didn't. Freeing each other's paths for the versions of ourselves that we truly wished for – he a father, me a writer – had been the right thing to do ●

This is an edited extract from Others Like Me by Nicole Louie, published on Thursday by Dialogue at £22. To order a copy for £19.80, go to guardianbookshop.com

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CULTURE

LET'S TWIST AGAIN

The macabre minds behind cult comedy Inside No 9 gear up for its grisly end

As Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith close the door on the grimly hilarious Inside No 9, they and their collaborators from a decade of darkness discuss how it was all done – and whether there will be one final twist

Words: Daniel Dylan Wray

A CREEPY Tim Key stuffed inside a wardrobe, a miserable Diane Morgan on a pedalo, a sozzled Tamzin Outhwaite in a karaoke booth, and a corrupt David Morrissey in a football referee's dressing room. Along with trains, call centres, alpine chalets, caravans and even an escape room, these are just some of the memorable scenes and settings from the nine series of Inside No 9. With slightly less pleasing numerical symmetry, the show now finally draws to a close this week after, not nine, but 10 years.

Over that period, the show's writers and creators, Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton, have conjured up 55 standalone episodes spanning dark comedy, gothic horror and Pinteresque drama, all signed off with what has become a customary plot twist. Loaded with guest stars that have included everyone from Jason Isaacs to Peter Kay and Jenna Coleman to Sophie Okonedo, the show has proved always unpredictable but consistently compelling. The result of this run, according to the show's producer Adam Tandy, is "unprecedented": it is now BBC Two's longest-running current comedy.

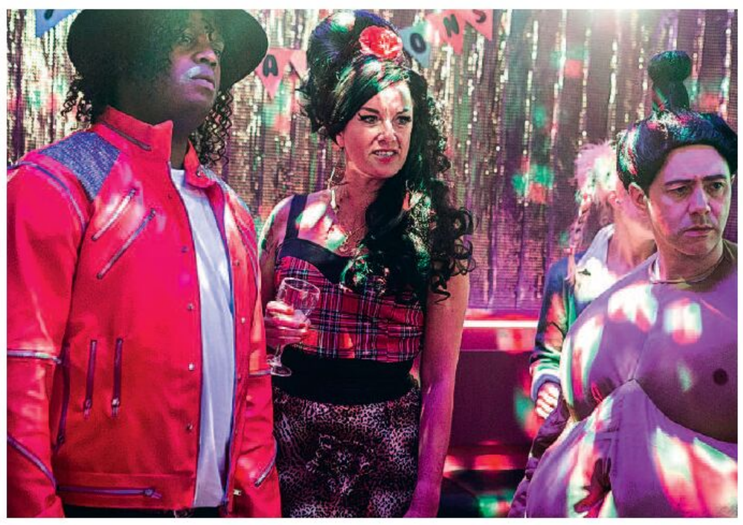
While the Bafta-winning show still feels like a distinctly unique offering, going hard against the grain of trends and tropes, its influence is still evident. The Duplass brothers' 2017 US anthology series Room 104 – set in room 104 of a roadside motel with each episode spanning thriller, comedy and horror – feels heavily indebted to it, while numerous other horror-tinged anthology shows have popped up in its wake, such as The Terror, The Haunting and Dimension 404.

The boundary-pushing series came to life almost on a whim. "The show happened by accident," recalls Shearsmith. "We went for a meeting at the BBC about what we thought would be the third series of [his and Pemberton's dark comedy] Psychoville and then they said: 'So what's next?' It was like: 'Oh, they don't want Psychoville.'"

The pair had been discussing the idea of anthology programmes and decided to pitch that on the spot. "We always liked the idea of doing something like the Play of the Week," says Pemberton, of the ITV show that broadcast weekly plays in the 1950s and 60s. "It felt very retro but in being so retro it felt fresh, because that style of programming had fallen out of favour." Shearsmith adds: "We thought: 'Let's get back to that sort of telly – a kind of Tales of the Unexpected show where we get a different story every week.'"

It was a format they had been warned off doing for years by executives, being told it was hard to build a loyal audience by changing things up for every episode and possessing no continuity. "We'd always been told, even through our sketch show writing years in The League of Gentlemen, that you need to have something [in the show] that comes back," says Shearsmith. "Something that is not resetting each time. So it felt like a hard sell but we just slipped into it because the BBC trusted us by then."

"We weren't sure whether we should be in all the episodes," remembers Pemberton. "We were nervous of it looking like a vanity project. So in series one we dipped out of one episode each but the feedback from fans was that they missed us, so we decided: why are we doing ourselves out of a job? We've been in every episode, except one, since." Of the 50-plus episodes they have both appeared in, they have played everything from calamitous art thieves to



Dressed up to the nines (Left) Pemberton and Shearsmith with guest stars Daniel Mays and Daisy Haggard; (right, clockwise from top) David Morissey and Ralf Little, Javone Prince and Tamzin Outhwaite, and Jane Horrocks and Nikki Amuka-Bird; and (bottom) Sheridan Smith, Tom Riley and Joel Little

grizzly serial killers, a comedy double act, coppers, doctors and drag acts. "No one else would cast us in all these great parts, so we have to write them ourselves," says Shearsmith.

Aside from stretching their own acting muscles in various roles for the show, they have also managed to pull from a huge pool of talent over the years. "The characters [they write] are so well defined it seems they can seduce any actor," says Guillem Morales, who has directed 15 episodes of the show. "Those scripts are a gift for character actors," says the Olivier award-nominated actor Jane Horrocks, who appeared in the episode Cold Comfort in 2015. "For me, it's the most interesting sort of television when you're coming up with different stories each week; and in this age of television where everything seemingly is about murder, it's so nice to see stories that have a bit more imagination to them."

When Simon Callow, the celebrated thespian, was approached he knew nothing of the show. "I'm not a huge television watcher," he tells me. "I'd never seen it but it was a wonderful script, this spooky Christmas episode set in a church. And the moment I said to anybody: 'I've been asked to be in something called Inside No 9, the response was always: 'It's the best thing on television.'" Maxine Peake was such a huge fan that she had been patiently awaiting an invitation for years when she guested in series five. "I was a bit like: why haven't I been asked yet?" she laughs.

There is universal praise from everyone I speak to about working with Pemberton and Shearsmith. "Proper people in an industry where there are a lot of tosspots," laughs Charlie Cooper, the This Country star, who appeared in recent episode Boo to a Goose. "They are masters of that 30-minute TV format," says Tandy. "I don't give them notes because they don't need them." Morales says that what they have managed to create with the show is incredibly special. "No one tells them what to do. There's no executives making decisions. That's very rare – and in the landscape of TV, it is an extraordinary oasis."

And much of this is done economically. "What strikes you when you get cast is they hardly have any budget," says Daniel Mays, who plays a hapless kidnapper in the 2022 episode Kid/Nap. "They have to do a huge amount with very little." Morales echoes this. "I never felt I had the money to do whatever I wanted," he says. "But we always had freedom. Real, true, creative freedom. And that is priceless." Episodes that do a lot with a little include Tom & Gerri, set exclusively in one grimy flat based on Shearsmith and Pemberton's own days on the dole living together, as well as The Stakeout, which features the pair in a single police car for the entire episode.

Pemberton thinks such limitations have forced greater creativity. "Our lack of resources meant our invention had to be sharper," he says. "When the streaming platforms came in, you saw incredible budgets everywhere but I'm very happy we didn't suddenly come into lots of money and therefore reduce our creativity. Also, doing more experimental episodes like [the live Halloween special] Dead Line and [fake gameshow] 3 By 3, you could only do with scheduled broadcast television."

Dead Line was a landmark moment. Not only did Shearsmith and Pemberton pull off a live episode – one set in the supposedly haunted Granada studios – but they also managed to convince the public that they had botched it. As the broadcast cut to a holding screen and a voiceover declared technical difficulties, Pemberton, Shearsmith and the rest of the episode's cast were besieged by paranormal spirits. It was a rare example in which audiences switching off (the episode lost a fifth of its viewers during its staged fault) was viewed as a success. "We did our false transmission breakdown and all hell broke loose," recalls Shearsmith, who was live-tweeting during the broadcast to keep up the pretence it had been a disaster. "We were thrilled people thought it had gone wrong."

The episode's director, Barbara Wiltshire, remembers huge pressure and a weight of responsibility to pull it off. "My overriding feeling was: don't fuck it up," she recalls. "And don't let people think this is the one terrible episode – because they had all been so brilliant up to then." She hadn't even told her loved ones about the premise. "At the end of the live transmission, I turned over my phone and my partner had texted me saying: 'I'm so sorry, call me when it all dies down', thinking it had all gone horribly wrong. I felt incredibly guilty and cruel about putting them through the pain of watching it unfold."

Playing with, and undoing, conventional forms of television has been a central part of Inside No 9. One episode [Mulberry Close] in the new series is told entirely from the perspective of a doorbell camera, while Horrocks's episode, in which she plays a volunteer at a Samaritans-like helpline, was shot and presented entirely through CCTV cameras. "It really added to the creepiness," she says. "Like a real CCTV camera, you're not aware you're on it, so you weren't performing to a camera. That's what I loved about it; it was just capturing little

'No one else would cast us in all these great parts, so we have to write them ourselves'

SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN/BBC; GARY MOYES; ADAM LAWRENCE

Guest who? (Right, clockwise from left) Hattie Morahan, Jaygann Ayeh, Rory Kinnear, Shearsmith, Bill Paterson, Helen Monks, Kevin Eldon, Tanya Franks, Pemberton and Marcia Warren; (below, l-r) Jenna Coleman, and Nicola Walker; (bottom, l-r) Vinette Robinson, Adrian Scarborough and Dorothy Atkinson

moments that didn't require massive acting because it was just people doing their job in an office."

There have been some adventurous ideas that have not got off the ground over the years, though. A musical proved too tricky, while one instalment set on a ghost train – "like an anthology within our anthology" according to Shearsmith – was deemed too extravagant and more like a feature film. Tandy's desire to have an episode set in space never quite materialised either, nor did repeated attempts to feature Ian McKellen, whose diary just couldn't quite align with the show's schedule, despite his interest.

For Boo to a Goose, filming on location on a train proved to be "the biggest thing we've ever attempted", according to Tandy. "All the scenes with us getting on and off the train and on the platform were done around a real train that was running to a timetable," says Mark Bonnar, who starred in the episode. "It ran every 10 minutes and they could only hold it for a couple of minutes, so we had to be fully prepared to get on the train, do a bit of acting, get off, and then the train would pull away."

As the series concludes, talk of favourite memories and episodes is inevitably thrown around (spoilers ahead). "There are so many magical moments," says Tandy. "Like shooting the final scene of The 12 Days of Christine." That episode, which concludes with Sheridan Smith's character realising she's been experiencing her life flashing before her eyes as she lies dying in a car crash, is a universally beloved one. "When we edited that scene and watched it back it was just like, wow," recalls Morales. "I cried. We all cried." Even the actors themselves struggled to get through it, such was its emotional punch. "It all got a little bit too much," recalls Tom Riley, who stars opposite Smith in the episode. "We were all supposed to be the ones calmly helping send Sheridan off to the other side, but we had to hold it together."

However, one person's masterpiece is another person's turkey when it comes to this show. "Fans hate some episodes and love others and that's brilliant," says Pemberton. "Because it means we've done our job and they aren't just these homogenised lumps we're putting out every week where you can't remember the differences.

"We do some extreme things," he adds. "Like the commedia dell'arte episode [Wuthering Heist] or the Shakespearean iambic pentameter episode [Zanzibar]. Some love it, some hate it, and we're delighted by that."

While each episode is different in terms of premise and genre from the others, the unifying thread is the last-minute twist – one that is usually a very dark reveal. Take 2018's To Have and to Hold, an episode that, on the surface, is exploring a tired and stagnated marriage in a suburban terrace but that reveals a captive hostage being held in the family basement, where in turn one of the family becomes imprisoned. Or at the end of The Riddle of the Sphinx, where a man is forced to consume the body of his long-lost daughter. "That was quite hardcore," laughs Tandy. "But you find a way of managing it so that it doesn't become too extreme." That same episode, centred on the setter of a cryptic crossword, also had some typical Inside No 9 fun with the format: the very same crossword featured in the episode

'It's been quite momentous ending the show, but we're not being taken out back and shot'

appeared in that day's edition of The Guardian.

The plot twists were never intended to be such a focal point, according to Shearsmith. "We never set out to do a series that was going to become as known for the twists as Inside No 9 now is," he says. "That slightly annoys me because sometimes people think that's all it's about. But come and sit in a room with us and see how much it's about the journey of getting there and the storytelling. I think people sometimes don't realise that."

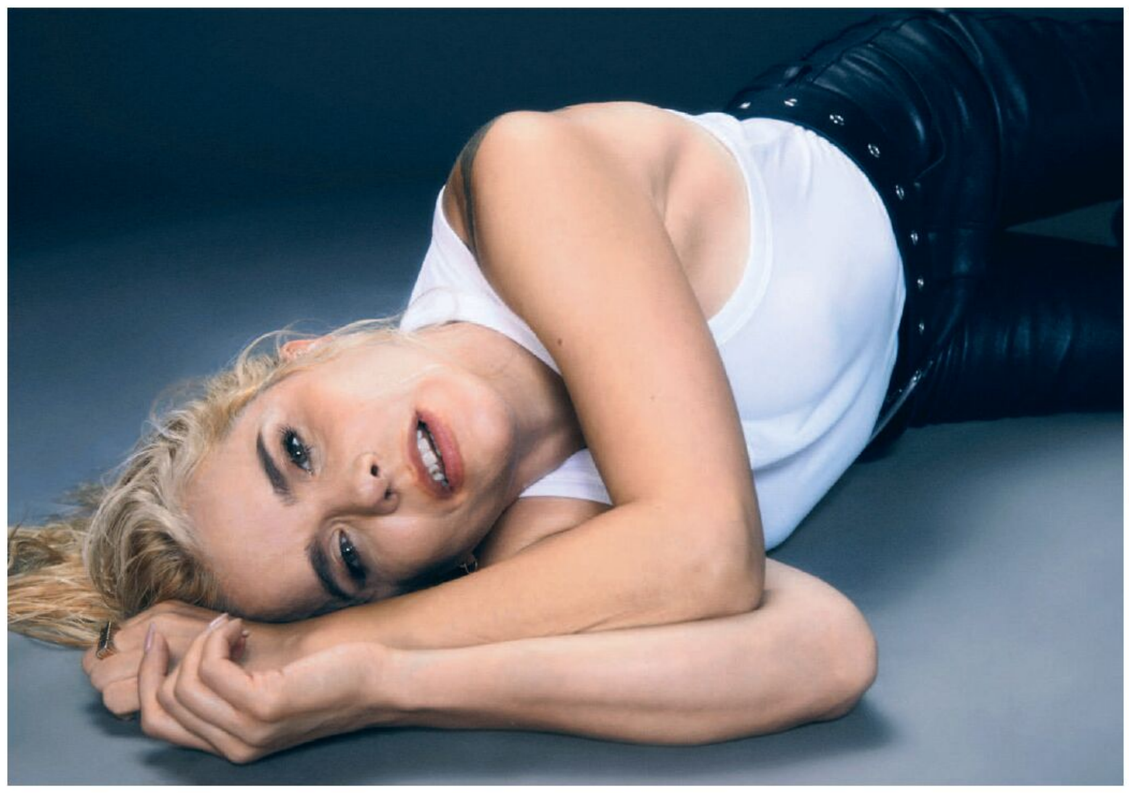
The contents of the upcoming final episode remain secret, but as the show comes to an end, is there sadness in the camp? "It's been mixed emotions," says Shearsmith. "It's been quite momentous but it's not like we're being taken out back and shot."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the play-like structure of the TV show, a theatre run is now booked for early 2025 for a special instalment titled Stage/Fright. And this summer Shearsmith and Pemberton are heading to Shanghai to catch the world's first immersive theatre production of Inside No 9, which is hugely popular in China. (The first eight series have been viewed more than 100m times, according to BBC Studios, which is producing the Chinese stage show.) The immersive production is based on three episodes of the TV show, delivered by local actors and directors in part on a 360-degree stage encircling the audience, who sit on rotating stools.

"We don't know what the future holds but we're ready to move on," says Pemberton. "We've been so lucky. Not many people have these opportunities. Inside No 9 has been a whole lifetime's showreel of what we can do. There's a sense of great pride in what we've achieved."

The final episode of Inside No 9 airs on Tuesday. Inside No 9 Stage/Fright is at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 18 January to 5 April 2025.

BBC; JAMES STACK; SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN



YAN WASIUCHNIK

HONEST PLAYLIST

Paloma Faith

The singer hates a certain James Blunt megahit and feels empowered by Chaka Khan, but which Aussie bard does she think wrote the best song of all time?

The first single I bought
Especially for You by Jason Donovan and Kylie Minogue, on cassette from Woolworths, with the contents of my piggy bank.

The song I do at karaoke
I Will Always Love You by Whitney Houston. I love karaoke. I think it's one of my favourite pastimes. Everyone says: "I'm not going to karaoke with you. You're a singer!" but I don't sing well at karaoke. It's like permission not to sing, but still release all that power and emotion.

The song I inexplicably know every lyric to
Every road trip I did as a kid had Tracy Chapman's [self-titled] first album, the one with Fast Car on it, on rotation. I know every word of every song on that album.

The best song to play at a party
Growing up in Hackney, there's a specific dance that everyone does every time Candy by Cameo comes on. Only Londoners understand what I'm talking about. If you're at a party, you can spot the Londoners. Everyone else is looking around going: "How come you all know that?" That's basically every party I've ever been to.

The song I secretly like but tell everyone I hate
Susan Boyle singing Wild Horses by the Rolling Stones. She sounds so vulnerable and nervous, there's something really beautiful about it.

The song I can no longer listen to
You're Beautiful by James Blunt because it's terrible and didn't deserve the accolades it got. Everyone who was involved in the writing of it was so proud and they shouldn't have been.

The best song to have sex to
Believer by SYML, because it's deep and sensual.

The song I wish I had written
I think Into My Arms by Nick Cave is the greatest song ever written. It takes on many forms at different points in your life and was really profound for me when I'd had my first baby.

The song that changed my life
I'm Every Woman by Chaka Khan because it is all about how we need to not pit ourselves against each other and we're all the same thing. It gives you this empowering sense of sisterhood.

The song that gets me up in the morning
This awful song that my kids listen to on Spotify called I'm a Banana by Onision. They just come and ask for it and it gets everyone up and ready quickly because it's so appalling.
As told to Rich Pelley

Paloma Faith's debut book MILF is out now.

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London City Ballet was a daring company that boasted Princess Diana as a patron. Three decades on from its demise, it returns with a roster of global talent and a remit to revive brilliant lost works

Step change

Words: Lyndsey Winship

Christopher Marney recently received a very nice letter from Prince William and his wife. Thirty years ago, William's mother, Diana, a ballet lover and sometime dancer, had been patron of London City Ballet. That company folded in 1996 but Marney was on a mission to revive it. He sent the royals some photos of Diana with the original company's director, Harold King, "and they sent a lovely letter back, wishing me luck". Was that all? No offer of royal patronage? "I don't know about going down that route," says Marney with a faint smile. "I don't know if it's very us."

Marney's vision for the rebooted, 21st-century version of London City Ballet breaks from some of the more traditional ideas of the art form, as forged originally in the court of Louis XIV. He wants a company of dancers that reflect the present: a diverse lineup in age, ethnicity, experience and body type, and – in a discipline where adults are still sometimes called "girls" and "boys" – an environment that treats dancers like grownups. But at the same time, interestingly, it's a company that's purposefully staying connected to the past, with a specific remit to revive forgotten gems by genius choreographers and bring them back to life on stage.

It is brave to launch a new ballet company when the arts seem to be permanently in crisis by dint of a combination of funding cuts and inflation. But Marney is chipper when I meet him at the company's new HQ. The lift opens straight into the room, which makes it sound like a New York penthouse, but is a somewhat shoebox-sized office in a Victorian school turned community centre in Islington, north London. Pinned on to the fresh white walls are headshots of the company's inaugural lineup. It is testament to the respect Marney has in the industry and the solidity of his idea that top of the list, and a bit of a coup, is guest artist Alina Cojocaru, one of the world's leading ballerinas. The London-based Romanian was previously a star at the Royal Ballet and English National Ballet (ENB) and has danced on every major stage in the world.

Marney has picked up dancers who have left big companies for more flexible careers – ex-ENB principal Alejandro Virelles, the brilliant Cira Robinson, formerly of Ballet Black, and Joseph Taylor from Northern Ballet. There are dancers coming from companies in Spain, Denmark, the US and South Korea, and new talents, too. Eight of the 16 were chosen through audition; 930 dancers from all over the world sent footage (Marney watched it all), and 200 auditioned in person.

On the coffee table lies a pile of old London City Ballet programmes that

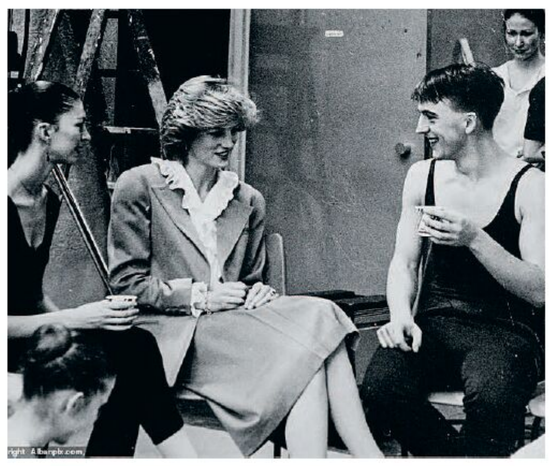
Marney bought on eBay, dating from the company's founding in 1978. Marney, who danced with ballet companies all over Europe and with Matthew Bourne's New Adventures, and was director of the Joffrey Ballet Studio Company in Chicago, could have set up a company in his own name, but he cringes a little at the thought. He loved the idea of bringing London City Ballet back to life because it had a formative role in his own dance history. One of the programmes is from the Queen's theatre in Hornchurch, Essex, where Marney saw London City Ballet perform in 1991, aged 11. At the time he was in the theatre's rep company, doing child parts in musicals and panto, but when he watched the ballet, "I realised straight away that was what I was attuned to, and that was my direction," he says.

He and his mum followed the dancers to shows in Basildon and Chelmsford – it's impossible to imagine quality ballet touring so widely now. Marney wants to offer something as accessible. He has six theatres signed up so far, plus a spot at Latitude festival and a tour in China, but he hopes to tour more, "not just with a diet of Swan Lake and Cinderella", but a much richer range of what ballet is, past and present.

Marney met Harold King when he was training and they kept in touch. "He had an impact," says Marney. This was after the original London City Ballet had closed because of mounting debts. Money, of course, is the crucial factor in making any of this happen. The new company's existence hinges on one anonymous Japanese sponsor, who provided the first funding, and a small circle of donors. Marney also went through all those old programmes and wrote to every sponsor and advertiser listed in them, about 60 in all. "I had two responses," he laughs, neither of which resulted in actual cash. The money is not enough to fund a full-time year-round company so they are having to be more agile, working on a six- to seven-month model, which suits some of the dancers who want to go off and do different projects.

The donors bought in to the idea of reviving lost works, and Marney's research suggests there is an audience for it. For the company's first programme, he is bringing back Kenneth MacMillan's 1972 ballet Ballade, in collaboration with MacMillan's widow, Deborah. MacMillan's pieces (Romeo & Juliet, Manon, Mayerling) are some of the most popular at the Royal Ballet, where he was artistic director in the 1970s, but Ballade was danced only once, on a foreign tour 50 years ago. The subject is Kenneth and Deborah's first date – they went to the cinema on Fulham Road – but Deborah has never seen it before. There was no video, so the ballet has been reconstructed from a written score in Benesh notation (written on a stave, like musical notation), which had been sitting on a dusty shelf at the Royal Opera House all this time. "It's fascinating," says Marney. "The score tells you not just the steps, but the intention, the looks between the dancers, the tempo."

'I want to get things right: doing it differently, and for this generation'



You raise me up
(Main picture) Kate Lyons and Juan Gil of the new London City Ballet; and (above, from top) Diana, Princess of Wales with the company's founder Harold King circa 1983; and LCB's 1995 production of Cinderella

They will also revive the Larina Waltz from 1993 by Ashley Page, a former principal dancer at the Royal Ballet and director of Scottish Ballet for a decade. It's a classical ballet, says Marney, but one that "really moves and eats up the stage". You might ask whether there's a reason these ballets aren't seen any more (perhaps they weren't that good in the first place?), but Marney says that it's just that choreographers fall out of fashion and there often aren't recordings, so it doesn't take long for pieces to be forgotten.

It's not just about the oldies, though. Marney's own 2022 piece Eve is on the bill, and he's commissioning a new work from Arielle Smith. The 28-year-old British-Cuban choreographer is very much the woman of the moment, recently making dances for San Francisco Ballet and English National Ballet that come laced with humour, theatrical instinct and strong female roles.

These days, the culture inside dance companies is something directors are taking seriously. Ballet has had more than its fair share of bullying stories and abuses of power, enabled by strict hierarchies that encouraged dancers to keep silent and know their place. That is changing. "I really want to get things right in the sense of doing it differently, and doing it for this generation. Running the company in a way that is supportive of everybody," says Marney. In his own career, "I didn't always feel I had much autonomy," he says. He's been putting together a code of conduct that the dancers will also feed into, "So that it's a space where everybody can feel safe and creative."

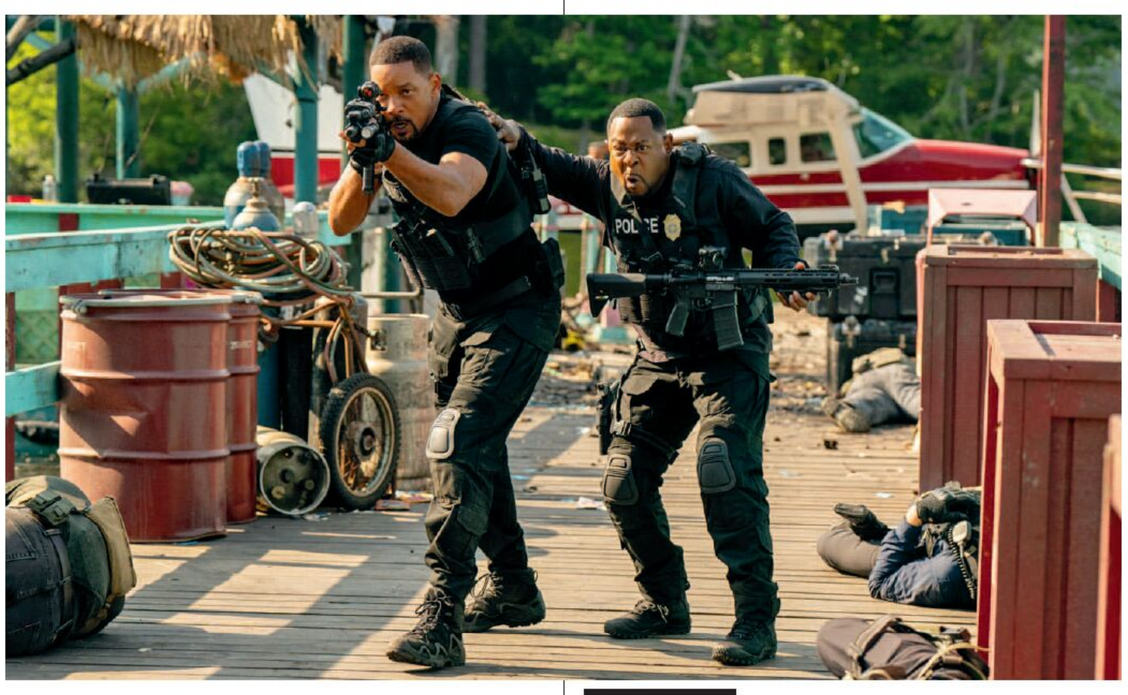
Now Marney just has to hope an audience comes to see them. "When I started I thought: Oh gosh, it's probably quite unpopular not to be doing 'new', but the response hasn't felt like that." There's enthusiasm from venues who can't host the bigger UK companies and who no longer present Russian touring companies since the invasion of Ukraine.

Marney hopes he'll be able to upend expectations people might have about ballet being "just tutus and a very long evening". "I think about my first impression of ballet and that is still why I do it," he says. "I remember not realising that people could be capable of doing that. I just thought, what extraordinary things are possible with telling stories that way, through dance."

London City Ballet is touring 17 July to 10 August; tour starts Bath Theatre Royal.

ASH; PETER TEIGEN; ALBAN DONOHOE/ALBANPIX

Out



Going out & Staying in

A cultural primer for the week ahead, whether you're out hobnobbing or in dunking Hobnobs ...

Cinema

Bad Boys: Ride Or Die
Out now
Will Smith and Martin Lawrence (above) are back, almost 30 years on from their first buddy cop outing, as Mike and Marcus, the eponymous bad boys. Treats in store include mafia hijinks, a frame job on Captain Howard (Joe Pantoliano), corruption in the Miami police department, and, naturally, plenty of wisecracks.

The Watched
Out now
Dakota Fanning stars in this supernatural horror written and directed by M Night Shyamalan's daughter Ishana and produced by dad. It continues the family reputation for atmospheric tales of the strange and unusual, as a bunch of strangers trapped in a forest find themselves observed by creatures unknown.

Rosalie
Out now
Snatching the title of cinema's best-known bearded lady from Keala Settle's character in The Greatest Showman is the titular heroine of Stéphanie Di Giusto's acclaimed drama Rosalie. Set in 1870s France, it is loosely inspired by the story of real-life bearded lady Clémentine Delait. *Catherine Bray*

The Matrix (25th anniversary re-release)
Out now
Can it really be a quarter of a century since Keanu Reeves limboed under a hail of speeding bullets? The future-facing actioner still feels fresh today, an ideas movie wrapped in a duster jacket of gnarly set pieces and a thudding industrial score. *Gwilym Mumford*

Gigs

Doja Cat
Sunday to 17 June; starts Manchester
After failing to sabotage her career with last year's Scarlet, which ditched the bright pop sound of 2021's Planet Her, rapper Doja Cat heads out on a huge arena tour. Her performance at Coachella, in a dress and boots both made of blond hair, suggests this should be a spectacle. *Michael Cragg*

Winterreise
Theatre Royal: Ustinov Studio, Bath, Monday to Thursday; 8-10 September
Ian Bostridge is the latest singer to perform Schubert's song cycle within a theatrical setting. Deborah Warner's staging will present it as the composer intended, so that every inflection of the music communicates directly with the audience. *Andrew Clements*

Espen Eriksen Trio With Andy Sheppard
Watermill Jazz, Dorking, Tuesday; Ronnie Scott's, London, 9pm, Wednesday
Eriksen formed his virtuosic trio back in 2007, but the arrival of UK sax original sharpened its edge in ways that have seen it compared to the great 1970s collaborations of Jan Garbarek and Keith Jarrett. *John Fordham*

Parklife
Saturday & Sunday, Heaton Park, Manchester
The ludicrously stacked lineup for this festival features everyone from J Hus to Disclosure to Becky Hill (below) to Four Tet. Elsewhere, there's excellence from the likes of perpetually returning girlband Sugababes, Scottish electronic wonder Barry Can't Swim and the inexplicable Horsegiirl. *MC*

Art

Alvaro Barrington
Tate Britain, London, to 26 January
This Venezuelan artist (work pictured above) follows in the footsteps of Robert Rauschenberg by mixing painting with assemblage, bringing it out of the frame and off the wall to merge art with life. His appetite for found items that he composes into poetic conundrums makes for a real feeling of freedom and inspiration.

Artemisia Gentileschi and Jesse Jones
Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, to 8 September
She gazes at you steadily beside the broken wheel that symbolises her torture. Baroque genius Artemisia Gentileschi paints herself as Saint Catherine, who survived attempted martyrdom, in her powerful self-portrait on loan from the National Gallery. Contemporary artist Jones also explores themes of martyrdom and female suffering in multimedia works.

Kiki Kogelnik
Pace Gallery, London, to 3 August
This Austrian-born pop artist put a subversive spin on the classic 1960s theme of space travel. Her male and female astronauts are multicoloured fantasy figures who float through paintings that explore desire and utopia. But there's also a fear of disaster and death in her art, as this show reveals.

Planet Ocean
The Box, Plymouth, to 23 February
Plymouth Sound is a deeply studied stretch of water. Marine biology was pioneered in Plymouth as long ago as the 1880s. So there is a strongly local as well as globally urgent feel to this exhibition about oceanography, sea life and the climate crisis, which includes everything from paintings to fish. *Jonathan Jones*

FRANK MASI/SONY PICTURES; SAM NEILL ; ALVARO BARRINGTON/SADIE COLES HQ/KATIE MORRISON

In

Stage

Lift 2024
Various venues, London, to 27 July
London's International festival of theatre consistently offers up a wild array of performance, art and dance. Catch The Land Acknowledgement Or As You Like It (Sat & Sun), a subversive exploration of cultural and political practice, or take a peek at L'Homme Rare (Wed & Thur), an examination of the body, gender and the European gaze. *Kate Wyver*

Museum of Austerity
Bristol Old Vic, Wednesday to 15 June
From English Touring Theatre, this dramatic installation lays bare the reality of austerity Britain. Audiences wear a "mixed reality" headset to see a holographic gallery that reveals what happens when state safety nets fail. *KW*

Eliot Smith Dance
Dance City, Newcastle upon Tyne, Wednesday; then touring
A double bill from the Newcastle-based company, featuring Duet (from 1964), by the great American choreographer Paul Taylor, as well as the striking solo Human, performed by Yamit Salazar. *Lyndsey Winship*

Bristol Comedy Garden
Queen Square, Bristol, Wednesday to 16 June
Josh Widdicombe makes his big stage comeback at this star-studded festival, which seems to have corralled pretty much the entirety of the British standup scene - Harry Hill, Simon Amstell, Sara Pascoe, Stewart Lee and so many more. *Rachel Aroesti*

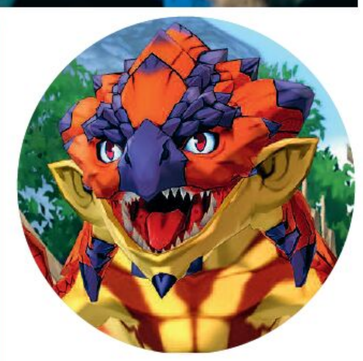
Streaming

The Boys
Prime Video, Thursday
In a world of superhero overload, this satirical drama (above) about an alliance of corrupt "supes" and the vigilantes who try to expose them blasts through the genre's stale ubiquity in style. This fourth outing sees Boys ringleader Billy Butcher rally his troops for what could be their final opportunity to defeat Homelander.

The Fall: Skydive Murder Plot
Channel 4, Tuesday, 9pm
In April 2015, Victoria Cilliers went skydiving in Wiltshire; her husband hoped the jump would end her life. Yet despite Emile sabotaging Victoria's parachute, she miraculously survived. This documentary series chronicles the two-year investigation that followed as police struggled to prove Emile's guilt.

The Truth vs Alex Jones
Sky Documentaries & Now, Thursday, 9pm
Conspiracy theories are now depressingly mainstream, thanks in no small part to the work of Alex Jones. This documentary chronicles the trials that resulted from his claim that the Sandy Hook school shooting never happened - proceedings that left him liable for more than $1bn in damages.

My Next Guest Needs No Introduction With David Letterman
Netflix, Wednesday
Chatshow veteran Letterman has successfully liberated the format from its late-night live slot and studio audiences, distilling his approach into a string of intimate chats with big stars, including latest guests Miley Cyrus and Charles Barkley. *RA*



Games

Monster Hunter Stories
PC, PS4, Nintendo Switch; out Friday
If you've always liked the look of Capcom's epic dragon-hunting series but felt too intimidated by it, this cartoonish and more family-friendly take on Monster Hunter (pictured above) feels more like Pokémon, and it's surprisingly good.

Taskmaster VR
VR platforms; out Thursday
If you've got a Meta Quest or PlayStation VR headset, virtual-reality Greg Davies might be worth dusting it off for. Fully embracing the silliness and stakes of the TV show, it looks like a British version of the hilarious Job Simulator. *Keza MacDonald*

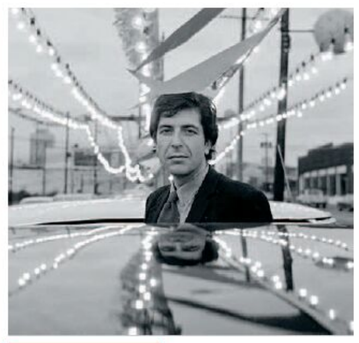
Albums

Peggy Gou - I Hear You
Out now
Containing one of last summer's biggest hits, house banger (It Goes Like) Nanana, expect South Korean DJ, producer and singer Gou's (above) debut album to soundtrack the next few months too. That Top 5 smash is joined by the 90s rave of 1+1=11 and the ludicrous Lobster Telephone.

Kaytranada - Timeless
Out now
The Canadian producer, whose work has graced albums by the likes of Tinashe, Alicia Keys and Craig David, returns with his first solo LP since 2019's Grammy-winning Bubba. Packed with his signature effervescent drum sounds and propulsive grooves, Timeless features PinkPantheress, Thundercat and Childish Gambino.

Tems - Born in the Wild
Out now
Since releasing her debut single in 2018, Tems has worked with Drake, Beyoncé and Wizkid, plus been nominated for an Oscar for co-writing Rihanna's 2022's single, Lift Me Up. Born in the Wild is her long-awaited debut album and features the emotionally raw single Not an Angel.

Charli XCX - Brat
Out now
Having cosplayed as mainstream pop on 2022's Crash to winning effect - it became her first No 1 album - Charli XCX (below) returns. Singles Von Dutch and 360 harness her passion for earworm melodies and spiky attitudes, while So I is a beautiful tribute to late producer Sophie. *MC*



Brain food

NFB
Online
Canada's National Film Board YouTube channel hosts more than 1,000 of their award-winning commissions, from bite-size educational videos on how everyday staples are made to films assessing the work of artists such as Leonard Cohen (pictured above) and Malcolm Lowry.

The New Garde
Podcast
Former fashion editor Alyssa Vingan hosts this insightful series delving into the secrets of the industry, as well as exploring latest developments with fellow writers and designers. Highlights include analysis of the business behind the Met Gala.

Chloe Petts' Toilet Humour
BBC Radio 4, Wednesday, 11.15pm
Comic Petts's first foray into audio documentary is a scatological treat. Over five episodes, Petts explores the funny and often fascinating history of toilets and what our choice of loo tells us about society. *Ammar Kalia*

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JAN THIJS/PRIME VIDEO; TONY VACCARO/GETTY; HARLEY WEIR

VISUAL ARTS

‘Language is an exclusionary tool’

Turner-nominated Romany artist Delaine Le Bas uses textiles and performance where words often fail – upending misconceptions about Traveller communities

Words: Marigold Warner

← The House of Le Bas 2023
An archival display, this installation of personal ephemera – journals, records, artworks and items of clothing – traces the artist’s relationship and collaboration with her husband, Damian Le Bas. Together, they question what it means to be an outsider, and their experiences of negative attitudes towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in the UK.

→ Talay O Puv, O Zeisko Tan Part 1 2021
Le Bas works from her home and garden – “the biggest space I’ve got” – in Worthing. She paints out on the washing line, experimenting with materials and textures with a bricolage approach. This work was made during the Covid-19 lockdown and evokes an imaginary universe and interconnection in a time characterised by isolation.

I’ve created a world, and it’s called Delainia,” says Delaine Le Bas, speaking ahead of the opening of her oeuvre-spanning Glasgow exhibition Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding. Working with textiles, sculpture and performance art, the British Romany artist has been making politically charged art for most of her life. “It starts with my birthdate [referenced in the title of the exhibition], but it’s still going on. I’m using the word ‘unfolding’ because one thing leads into the other,” she says. “I see my work as one whole big piece.”

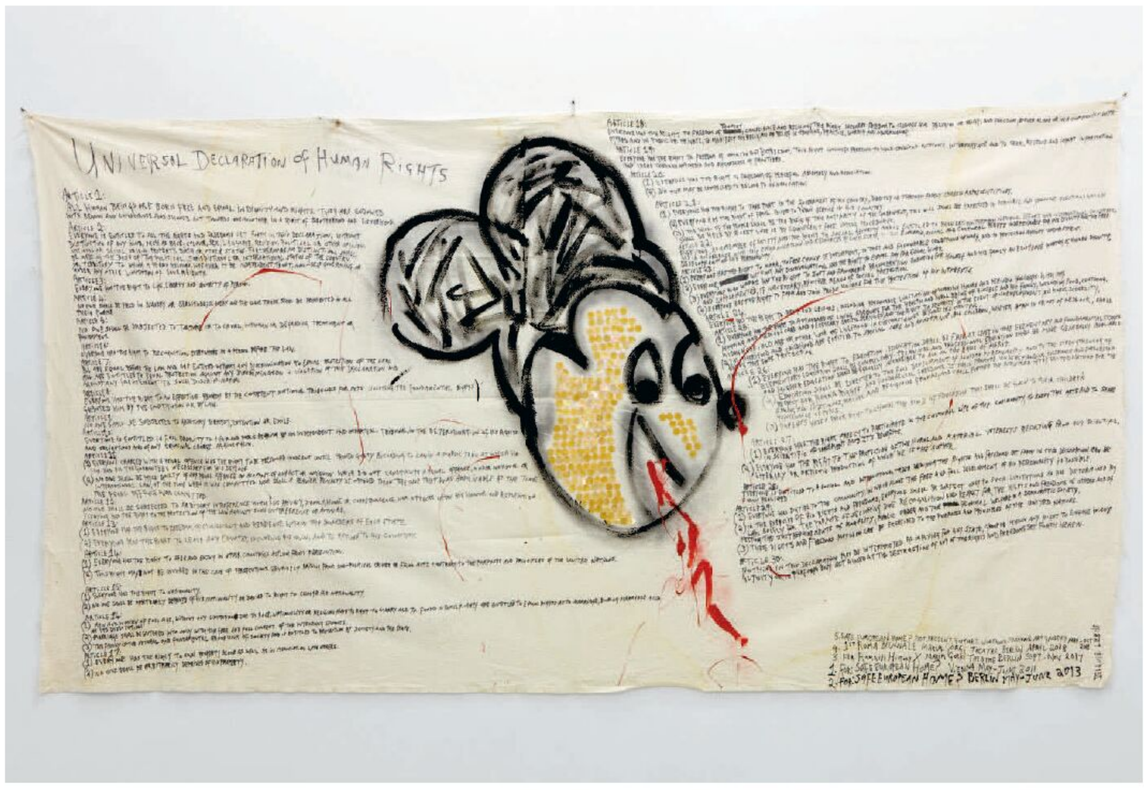
Le Bas’s tapestries, drawings, videos and costumes are tethered by recurring themes and motifs, relating to racism, feminism and untold histories. Her work addresses the exclusion of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people, incorporating graphic and linguistic symbols to comment on the historic and enduring discrimination and misrepresentation of these communities. This year, she is nominated for the Turner prize and the upcoming Glasgow show is an opportunity to see her work before the Turner nominees are showcased at London’s Tate Britain in September. In Glasgow, Le Bas will exhibit textiles and embroideries that span decades, alongside a new site-specific installation of a metal circus carriage. These pieces, old and new, form a constellation of woven, drawn, painted and sculpted fragments that resurface as part of new allegorical installations.

“I’ve always been politically driven,” says Le Bas. Born in Worthing in 1965, she was the only child out of five siblings to finish school. She joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when she was just 13, and adored punk bands such as X-Ray Spex. “It was the first time I’d heard someone speaking in any way about how I felt about myself in the world,” she says.

A lover of fashion and textiles, Le Bas was determined to go to art school. “The way you wear things sends out signals and messages,”

↑ Damaged Goods 2005
Stitched, printed, collaged and embroidered, dressed in feathers and studded with sequins, Le Bas's textile works are crafted out of everyday objects, often sourced at car boot sales and charity shops. Costumes are made from dresses, masks and kitsch toys, in a style that the artist has described as "precious yet reclaimed".

→ Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2013
This piece belongs to a wider installation titled Safe European Home?, made in collaboration with Le Bas's husband. The project, first presented outside Vienna's parliament in 2011, criticises the resurgence of far-right politics. This tapestry outlines all 30 human rights, scrawled round a sinister Mickey Mouse figure. "Too many people don't know what the declaration contains," she says.



↑ Witch Hunt 2009
Witches are a common character in Le Bas's works. "It relates to this idea of being on the outside, having visions, or the power to heal, and how that has been maligned," she says. Like many "outsiders", these women provoked hysteria and faced persecution for their otherness. In 2009, Le Bas produced an installation and book, using the witch figure to explore intolerance and misrepresentation.

she says. "I'm interested in how you can subvert the imagery on textiles, play with it and create other messages within that." She earned a place to study at West Sussex College of Design, where she met her late husband, the artist Damian Le Bas, also a Traveller, who died in 2017. She went on to Central Saint Martins, he to the Royal College of Art; they were married for 34 years and collaborated on several projects that confronted the demonisation of marginalised communities.

Found objects, knick-knacks, totems and embroidery are all central to Le Bas's world, as is text. The artist always carries a small notebook to jot down ideas. "Language is a massive exclusionary tool. It's used as a tactic to exclude and manipulate people," she says. Her performance and installation piece, Beware of Linguistic Engineering, explores how – from Thatcherism to Brexit – language has been weaponised in politics. "The language that has been used to describe people like me historically still dominates a vision of who I should be." she says. "That alone is a very powerful thing you're constantly up against."

This mixed-media approach is the ideal vehicle for Le Bas's compulsion to question, criticise and destigmatise. "I come from a community where [the amount of people] not being able to read and write is still high.

'The way you wear things sends out messages. I want to subvert the imagery on textiles'

It's a different set of ways of communicating," she says. "I want to have a conversation with as many people as possible; it's almost like creating lots of different doorways for people to be able to enter through."
Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding is at Tramway, Glasgow, to 13 October.

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY/DAMIAN GRIFFITHS; TARA DARBY/KAI DIKHAS FOUNDATION/DELAINE LE BAS; ALEXANDER CHRISTIE/YAMAMOTO KEIKO ROCHAIX

NEVER SQUARE

TOBLERONE

BOOKS

ESSAYS, FICTION *and* NONFICTION REVIEWS

They all fall down

Historians are terrorised for doing their work while the rightwing narrative gains traction with those in power. *Sathnam Sanghera* explores today's view of colonialism, and the dangers of denial

IN 2021, OLIVER DOWDEN, the then culture secretary, appeared at the History Matters conference organised by the rightwing Policy Exchange thinktank. He had recently urged museum curators not to "denigrate" British history, as if history were a fixed, fragile thing, akin to a faltering tower of Jenga, and not something complex, changing and robust, with fresh discoveries and new arguments forever changing our sense of it.

According to a report in the Times, he proceeded to talk about the risk of curators "being pushed around by unrepresentative campaign groups ... to remove our history, to remove statues and so on", thus equating history with statues when statues are not history: they just offer one view of a historical figure at one particular point in history – and propounding the peculiar idea that history is erased with their removal (our knowledge of Lenin and Hitler continues to grow without their statues).

Incredibly, the inanity had still not peaked. That moment came when Dowden, according to the same report, was asked what he would do if the mayor of London's Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm, which was set up, among other things, to put up a new memorial for the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, sought to remove statues of national heroes Winston Churchill and Lord Nelson. The then culture secretary answered: "I would happily chain myself to Nelson to stop him being removed."

Now, I've checked, and while some activists seem to have complained out loud that Nelson, who resisted the abolition of slavery, should not be glorified, I cannot find a single suggestion from anyone with power that Nelson's column should be pulled down. Moreover, in the three years since Dowden's strange offer to chain himself to Nelson, the Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm, which stated very clearly on being founded that it was not established to remove statues or monuments, has taken down precisely ... zero monuments.

Nevertheless, we still had a minister of state suggesting he would climb 160ft above Trafalgar Square to chain himself to a statue that was not under threat. In his defence, he was not the only person who succumbed to hysterical hyperbole during the "statuicide" that erupted around the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and which, in Britain, saw the likeness of slave trader Edward Colston being dragged by protesters into Bristol's harbour.

In the midst of a worldwide health crisis, the then prime minister Boris Johnson managed to carve out time to pen a column and issue a string of tweets in which he vowed to defy any attempt to move the statue of his political hero Churchill from Parliament Square (it had been graffitied but faced no real threat). Later, following a demonstration, the statue was observed being guarded by a sizable contingent of Metropolitan police officers, even though the protest was over and it was still under no threat of toppling.

Then there were the activists who turned up to guard a statue of the 19th-century novelist George Eliot. "I'm purely here to protect our history," one military veteran told CoventryLive, apparently unaware that Eliot was a supporter of the anti-slavery movement and that her statue was under no threat whatsoever, unless the country's army of Jane Austen fans had suddenly become dangerously radicalised in an entirely unexpected way.

Studying history should never be about instilling pride or shame; it should be about encouraging understanding

There's a risk, I realise, in focusing on these incidents, of implying that it's only those on the right who are inclined to excess when it comes to imperial history. This is not true. Topple the Racists, an online crowdsourced map of problematic statues and monuments, targets commemorations to former prime minister William Gladstone, which feels decidedly unnuanced, given that he opposed the slave trade, as well as defended it at times, while also benefiting from family wealth generated from it. Some of the estimates made for reparations are such colossal numbers that they stop being useful: it feels unrealistic to begin a conversation on the topic with the claim that Britain "drained" a total of nearly $45tn (in today's money) from India during the period 1765 to 1938, or the 1999 claim from the African World Reparations and Repatriation Truth Commission that $777tn would be suitable compensation for the enslavement and theft endured by Africa during colonisation.

But the crucial difference is that, in Britain, the left

Illustration: Pete Reynolds

has not been in power for more than a decade. In contrast, the right has in recent years had its arguments adopted by government and amplified by interlinked, opaquely funded thinktanks keen on culture wars, and the consequences have been serious. At least, it felt serious when, in June 2020, Gavin Williamson, then education secretary, rejected proposals to add more about Britain's involvement in slavery and colonial past to the history curriculum with the words: "We should be incredibly proud of our history." Studying history should never be about instilling pride or shame; it should be about encouraging understanding. We need only look to Ukraine for an extreme illustration of what can happen when imperial history and patriotism blur.

It also felt serious when, in February 2019, Brexiter Jacob Rees-Mogg referred to one of the darkest episodes in imperial history, the death of about 50,000 South Africans, mostly children, in British-run concentration camps during the South African war and claimed: "These people were interned for their safety." He added that "[t]he death rate was exactly the same as Glasgow", claims I can't recall being made by any historian in years of reading on the subject. Indeed, the consensus among imperial historians has long been that General Kitchener authorised the construction of "concentration camps" in South Africa with the intention of dividing the families of Boer commandos and severing their access to supplies, comfort and food.

These incidents demonstrate how imperial history is no longer confined to libraries, classrooms and tutorials. It plays out in frontline politics and on the front pages of newspapers, with imperial historians regularly being vilified and their work being wilfully misunderstood in public. What has been driving the government's involvement in this culture war? The Economist has suggested it does it simply because it comes easily – "As the pandemic recedes, the government will have to make choices about the future role of the state and how to steady the nation's finances, which cannot please both camps. How much easier, then, to put off such thorny decisions and play a little more Elgar." Tim Shipman of the Sunday Times has argued that some Conservatives see it as a way of appealing to voters who are leftwing on spending and public services but "culturally conservative". Meanwhile, historian Michael Taylor has proposed that historians are handy hate figures now there's not much to be gained from attacking the European Union: "After all, we cannot just hate Jean-Claude Juncker for ever."

I suspect that Conservative politicians have been motivated by a combination of all these factors, and behind it all lies a misunderstanding of what history is, and what historians do. British prime minister Rishi Sunak revealed as much when he was challenged in the Commons by the Labour MP Bell Ribeiro-Addy on the issue of reparations for slavery and replied that "trying to unpick our history is … not something that we will focus our energies on", seemingly not comprehending, or deciding not to comprehend, that "unpicking" history is exactly what all historians do.

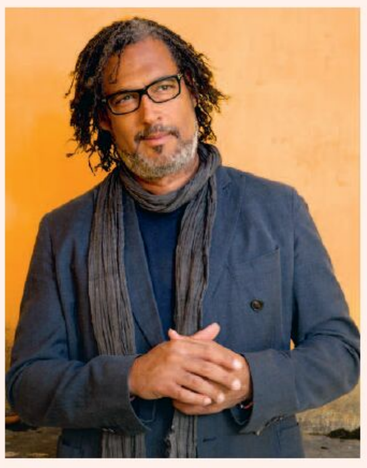
The impact of this culture war on individual historians has sometimes been devastating. It's a cause of national shame that one of Britain's most respected historians, David Olusoga, has to employ a bodyguard at some speaking events. I largely stopped doing events for adults for a period because the abuse had become routine. And then there is Prof Corinne Fowler, who co-authored a 2020 report for the National Trust on its estates' ties to the East India Company and transatlantic slavery and was subjected to a barrage of hate.

Her entirely measured report concluded that a third of the National Trust's properties had links to British colonialism, and, initially, the media reporting was reasonable. But then her account was condemned by cabinet ministers, and a gathering of MPs within the Conservative party, who call themselves the Common Sense Group, turned the spotlight on Fowler and her colleagues. In a speech to parliament, Rees-Mogg claimed the report denigrated Churchill by mentioning his home, Chartwell (the report recalls, factually, that Churchill was colonial secretary and voted against Indian independence). Despite the National Trust Act of 1907 clearly stating that the trust "may acquire property … for purposes of public recreation resort or instruction", the Daily Telegraph claimed that the Charity Commission could look into the National Trust on the grounds that the report was outside the trust's charitable remit.

From this point on, the onslaught expanded to Fowler's other research project, Colonial Countryside, a child-led history and writing project steered by historians. The book was the focus of several attacks, including inaccurate reporting in the Daily Mail that she wrote in her book that gardening is racist, and that her National Trust report was "error strewn". Another Mail piece, claiming Fowler had likened Japanese treatment of PoWs to British colonialism, provoked an avalanche of hate mail and threats. Fowler was denied the opportunity to respond in most of these articles. Senior government ministers and members of the "Common Sense Group" briefed against her, and she says the whole experience made her feel as though she was passing "through the valley of the shadow of death". Her safety was compromised; she occasionally needed to call the police and was, at times, unable to walk alone.

It feels absurd to have to say it, but it's not acceptable that historians should be terrorised in this way. Discussion and free speech are essential. But threats, wilful misrepresentation of people you may disagree with and intimidation are not. Equally concerning has been the intensifying enthusiasm among the imperially nostalgic to break the basic rules of conducting history in order to make their case. There are countless illustrations of the tactics employed, including the erection of straw men to attack, highly selective quoting, cherrypicking evidence, making false accusations and ignoring context. But, for me, the single most troubling development has been the denial of the clearest case of genocide in British colonial history, in Tasmania.

Historian David Olusoga, below, has to employ a bodyguard at some speaking events; Prof Corinne Fowler, below right, has received threats



KAREN ROBINSON; GARY CALTON/THE OBSERVER

There, a government notice enabled British settlers, soldiers and police to kill with impunity Tasmanian Aboriginal people who attacked settlers, their property and their workers in defence of their land. By 1831, the British population had reached 23,500, and the sheep population about 1 million. The Aboriginal population of at least 8,000 had been reduced to between 200 and 300 survivors, who were deported to a detention camp on Flinders Island in Bass Strait. Despite the presence of people of mixed heritage, when Charles Darwin visited Tasmania in February 1836, he observed: "Van Diemen's Land enjoys the great advantage of being free from a native population."

There is no one single truth about the British empire, and there is nothing new or illegitimate about British historians wishing to justify and defend imperialism. Niall Ferguson and Jan Morris were among them. But a new generation of imperial nostalgics are going further than they ever did. While Ferguson, for instance, described how "the Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land were hunted down, confined and ultimately exterminated", characterising it as "one of the most shocking of all the chapters in the history of the British empire" and "an event which truly merits the now overused term 'genocide'", and while Morris cited the episode as the "cruellest" illustration of the fact that "empire was race", we now live in an era where bestselling authors try their best to absolve Britons of responsibility. Nigel Biggar's book Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning minimises the likely number of Aboriginal people killed, casts doubt on testimony of massacres and deflects from violence to "disease and inter-tribal war" as the cause of the rapid depopulation, all to conclude, "I do not think … that the British as a whole can be fairly blamed for what befell the Tasmanian aboriginals."

It's depressing beyond belief that imperial nostalgia has become so extreme that its advocates feel the need to deny killing that has, through the consensus of experts, long been accepted as deliberate and largely tolerated, if not condoned, by the empire's governmental and legal structure at local level. Tasmania is an episode that the celebrated art critic Robert Hughes has described as "the only true genocide in English colonial history", and it was employed as a case study by the lawyer Raphael Lemkin when he shaped the concept of "genocide" after the second world war. History is argument. But the arguments have to be based on facts. The arguments also have to acknowledge the overwhelming consensus, when it exists, among people who have studied the subject for decades.

Just last month, the Institute of Economic Affairs published a report that happened to back Kemi Badenoch's claims that Britain had industrialised without the help of colonialism and should therefore refute demands for reparations and tell former colonies simply to follow its example. Yet, when a specialist historian, Prof Alan Lester, pointed out in the Times how the evidence had been cherrypicked from outdated papers and bore no resemblance to the consensus among experts, the thinktank's response was a blog stating that he was simply "expressing the sort of crowd-pleasing opinions that he knows will go down well on [Twitter/now called X]". It has become highly unfashionable to say it, but the work of experts counts.

This is an edited extract from Sathnam Sanghera's introduction to The Truth About Empire: Real Histories of British Colonialism, edited by Alan Lester (Hurst). Sanghera is the author of Empireworld: How British Imperialism Has Shaped the Globe (Penguin).

Chris Stein and Debbie Harry in 1979

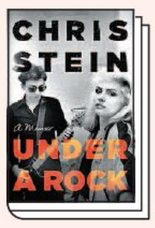
Sex, squalor and superstardom

The Blondie guitarist charts his drug-fuelled journey from young punk to pop pioneer

Alexis Petridis

MEMOIR

Under a Rock
Chris Stein
CORSAIR, £25



EVEN BEFORE he co-founded Blondie – who swiftly transcended their roots in the New York punk scene to become one of the biggest bands in the world, selling around 40m records in the process – Chris Stein had lived quite a life.

His father died of a stroke in Stein's first year of high school: thereafter, as his bandmate and former partner Debbie Harry notes in Under a Rock's introduction, his adolescence was spent "on a very long leash" in late 60s New York. By 14, he had gravitated to the bohemia of the West Village and MacDougal Street, intent on "falling into the final frontier of existential freedom, whatever that means". He became a hippy, acquired a set of friends with names like Mortician George and Action, formed a band who supported the Velvet Underground in the Warhol era, holidayed with friends in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury and took so much LSD that he ended up in a psychiatric hospital before his 18th birthday: after being discharged, he went to Woodstock, where he proceeded to take more LSD. Thereafter, he briefly flirted with Scientology and the Unification Church, colloquially known as the Moonies, and fell into the milieu of radical drag queens and sundry oddballs around Greenwich Village's Mercer Arts Centre, where the New York Dolls had a residency: his big pal was Eric Emerson, a heroin-addicted minor Warhol "superstar" and singer, obsessed with tattooing himself, who died in mysterious circumstances in 1975. Stein is one of very few people who could reasonably suggest that his life got a little less nuts after forming a hugely successful rock band.

In Under a Rock, all of this is related in a drily funny, but wilfully understated style – every sentence feels like a shrug. In fact, Stein's writing echoes the way he looked in Blondie: with the visual attention on Debbie Harry, the band's other members – clad in sharp 60s suits and mop top fringes, eyes frequently hidden behind shades – settled for embodying a certain so-what? New York cool, epitomised by a fabulous moment in the video for Heart of Glass: as the song's disco-fied pulse bubbles along and Harry sings about love being a pain in the ass, a bored-looking Stein stops miming guitar and holds up a mirror ball, in which bassist Nigel Harrison distractedly checks his hair. Maybe, in Stein's case at least, that kind of thing wasn't posturing: he really is as cool a customer as he appeared. There's something telling about the fact that, in her introduction, Harry professes herself "astonished" at the stories from his adolescence: the implication seems to be that he'd never told her any of it, despite the fact that they were a couple for more than a decade.

Equally, you wonder whether some of the book's nonchalant tone may be down to the fact that Stein seems to have been more or less permanently stoned from about 1965 to 2008, on weed, acid, coke, heroin, or methadone. His fairly phenomenal drug intake and the "sketchy" situations it led him into – he somehow managed to maintain a smack habit even while being treated in hospital for a rare and potentially life-threatening autoimmune condition – is rendered in the usual style. You could never accuse him of glamourising drug addiction: more than anything, he makes addiction sound like an irritation and a bore. "Crawling around looking for drugs," he avers, "is annoying and stupid."

He applies the same insouciant tone to Blondie's rise from the squalor of punk club CBGB to international superstardom: "In February [1978], Denis was released, and that, as they say, was that." Their ascendancy is bound up with Harry's burgeoning sex symbol status, but Stein seems blithely unbothered either by the overwhelming attention focused on her, or the preponderance of fans and journalists perving over his girlfriend.

You get a distinct sense of the band's combustibility, fuelled by drugs and personality clashes – at one early London show, Blondie's five male members exit the stage straight on to the street, brawling all the way – but less in the way of analysis of their music. Perhaps that fits. Blondie were a rock band, but they were resolutely focused on singles, rather than albums: in that sense, they were more spiritually akin to glam rock-era stars such as Slade or the Sweet than their punk peers, something underlined by the fact that most of their hits were produced by Mike Chapman, one half of the team that had piloted the careers of the Sweet, Suzi Quatro and Mud. They were blessed with a very keen pop sensibility – Stein elects to cover the Nerves' obscure 1976 track Hanging on the Telephone when he hears it in a taxi and notices the elderly cabby tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as it plays – and their run of hits between the aforementioned Denis and 1981's Rapture is one of the era's unequivocal joys. But only on 1978's Parallel Lines did they manage to make an album that maintained the standard of their singles from start to finish. They could be groundbreaking: a keen photographer and film-maker, Stein spots the music video revolution coming years before it happens; they picked up on hip-hop and its attendant culture early on, hence Rapture, technically at least the first

ALLAN TANNENBAUM/GETTY

hip-hop No 1 single. But their music tended to deal in sparkling sugar-rush immediacy rather than hidden depths – their 1978 hit Sunday Girl turns out to be about Stein and Harry's pet cat.

Incredibly, a combination of poor financial management and their continuing heroin issues meant Stein and Harry exited Blondie broke. Their five-storey Manhattan townhouse and collection of Warhols goes in the process, and so, eventually, does their relationship. More shrugging: "I was upset for a week or two … maybe you want more details but there aren't many." A late-90s reunion begins spectacularly – their comeback single Maria goes to No 1 in the UK – but swiftly devolves into an "incessant", and still ongoing, round of live shows in which the hits are dutifully banged out, and the release of largely ignored new albums, which Stein whips through at a quite astonishing clip, presumably on the grounds that he thinks no one is that interested. In the 21st century, he finally marries, starts a family and cleans up: in a distressing epilogue, he discusses his 19-year-old daughter's death from a drug overdose in 2023. "I thought that I presented my own drug experiences in a negative light to our kids," he writes, "but I'm racked with guilt that any discussions might have been misconstrued."

It's a horrible coda to a weirdly charming book. For all his shrugging, Stein emerges as genuinely likable – you could certainly never accuse him of pompous self-aggrandising, while the understatement never feels like aw-shucks affectation. He's also genuinely fascinating, above and beyond his rock star status. An early adopter of everything from the internet to the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, he occasionally seems more invested in making arty video shows for public access TV than being in Blondie, while something of the hippy era's penchant for the esoteric seemed to cling to him thereafter, not least a fascination with magic, particularly that of artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare. Stein could have gone on at greater length about some of this stuff, but then Under a Rock could have been longer generally. It's that rare thing: a music autobiography that leaves you wanting more, not less.
To buy a copy for £22 go to guardianbookshop.com

Mishal Husain and her mother, Shama

YAM G-YUN/THE GUARDIAN

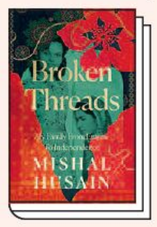
Divided inheritance

A spectacular family chronicle of partition

Dina Nayeri

HISTORY

Broken Threads
My Family from Empire to Independence
Mishal Husain
4TH ESTATE, £18.99



I have to pay a debt of honour and write something for him," Tahirah Butt says in a cassette recording made shortly after the death of her husband, Shahid Hamid, in 1993. "I keep thinking to myself, what can I do to make him come to life again?" The couple had occupied a front row seat for the partition that remade the Indian subcontinent, spectators to history. "I can hear him say … 'You owe it to your children, you owe it to your country, to write.'"

Tahirah never finished her memoir, but 30 years later, her granddaughter, BBC journalist Mishal Husain, has written something much broader in scope – a sweeping history of partition through the lens of her grandparents, all four of whom relocated to the new state of Pakistan: wise Tahirah; selfless, fiery Mary Quinn, the daughter of an Irishman and his much younger Hindu wife; Shahid, who trained at Sandhurst in the 30s and went on to set up Pakistan's intelligence service; and Mumtaz Husain, a doctor and eyewitness to the brutalities of 1947.

Having spent years reporting on the region, Husain's investigation into her own family's story was sparked by a gift, a piece of a sari from Shahid and Tahirah's 1940 wedding. Indeed, she began the project with a wealth of raw material: Tahirah and Mumtaz had left memoirs, while her mother's father, Shahid, had published his own "procession of memories", which was also an account of the fortunes of Muslims since the uprising of 1857. Mary's story was preserved in the "undimmed" memory of a sister, Anne.

To add to this, Husain unearthed a mountain of supporting evidence, from interviews to archival papers to private gems such as the detailed letters from a British military wife, Barbara Swinburn, to her mother.

The book weaves national and personal history into fine cloth. Mumtaz is by far the most poetic voice in the book and his love story with Mary is particularly moving. He calls her "the anchor and focus of my life". When Mumtaz's parents discover he has secretly married a Catholic, they're furious, having already promised him to his cousin Rahima. They shun Mary for years, walking past her to greet her children, vetoing all Rahima's other suitors, and telling the community that she was indeed Mumtaz's wife, "sacrificing the life of an innocent girl on the altar of a promise". Despite such pressures, Mumtaz protects Mary's faith in Muslim Pakistan. He placates her teachers, the nuns, saying he will convert, "if the light comes". He describes her letters to him while he's doing military service as like "having the contents of an entire river poured into your cup".

These personal narratives are seductively written, chock-full of precious contemporary snapshots: Mary's sister Anne got "spanked with a brush if I did anything wrong", at the convent, whereas saintly Mary was spared. Staff at the base where Mumtaz was a doctor raided the condom supply to make Christmas balloons, and found that, once deflated, "there was no mistaking what they were". Hungry medical students crossed to the Muslim canteen for meat and the Hindu one for halva puri. In one moving scene, soldiers of the 3rd Cavalry wept as their horses were replaced by tanks, kissing them and throwing their arms around the animals' necks.

The book also covers more well-documented history. Given that the primary sources are two Pakistani families, a certain reverence for Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League and founder of Pakistan, is unsurprising. An able diplomatic peer to Jawaharlal Nehru, Jinnah's challenges were far greater, given the politicking of "Britishers" who sided with the Congress party leader. It was fascinating to understand, also, that the man who is often held responsible for partition fought for a united post-independence India, supporting a 1946 plan that "allowed for provinces to group together on particular issues", thus protecting Muslim-majority areas from the rule of the national majority. This was rejected by Nehru, who preferred the idea of partition to sharing power.

Overall, Broken Threads is a spectacular achievement. It is an incisive and carefully researched historical account, and as moving and true a personal narrative as the one Tahirah wished to write for her husband. Though its literary merit is not entirely Husain's: Mumtaz wondered if his grandchildren would have time even to glance at the pages he wrote after Mary's early death. And yet, passages from his unpublished memoir give Broken Threads its most tender and distinctive voice. "Our homeland speaks to our most intimate memories, moves our deepest emotions," he writes. "Everything that is a part of it belongs to us in some measure. And in a way we belong to it too, as a leaf belongs to a tree."
To buy a copy for £16.14 go to guardianbookshop.com

High times

A psychiatrist's quest to understand addiction

Rebecca Lawrence

SCIENCE

The Captive Imagination
Addiction, Reality and Our Search for Meaning
Elias Dakwar
ALLEN LANE, £25

When reading a book, I like to understand something about the person who wrote it. The Captive Imagination is rich in words yet strangely elusive in overall meaning, and feels as though it has been written by several different people, at times interrupting each other. So who are these characters? Elias Dakwar is a professor and scientist in the US, but he is also a clinician specialising in the treatment of addiction, a philosopher, a lover of literature and language, as well as a human being striving to understand life's great mysteries. There is a sense of yearning throughout the book, as if it is a quest to find something; Dakwar invokes the fictional strivings of Don Quixote and compares them with the obvious desperation of the heroin addict. But he also notes that his patients often say: "I just want to be happy", and perhaps this is what he, too, is saying.

As a psychiatrist with the same specialism, I was drawn to Dakwar's vivid stories of patients and their different histories of drug use. They are clear, informative and also modest; Dakwar acknowledges the difficulties we have in helping people, given our limited understanding of both addiction and the human mind. He writes lucidly of brain-based models of addiction, while making it clear that they cannot fully explain people's experiences.

Dakwar explores the myths and misconceptions of addiction, as well as the science, and shows how the patient's experience is at least as important as what the latest research tells us. He describes in detail the use of ketamine given in combination with psychotherapy, and of the difficulties he has faced acquiring permission and funding to pursue his research into a treatment that itself suffers from being labelled a dangerous "street" drug.

Often, though, the lover of literature and philosophy breaks through these rational descriptions, making them less coherent. The impression is of a poet shutting down the scientist, and these sections were, for me, harder to read. This was not due to lack of interest, but perhaps the result of my not being able to share in Dakwar's subjectivity, in the same way that he describes each person's unique perception of the colour blue. His style changes, and he writes in longer, more convoluted sentences, as if trying to explain something that can't quite be grasped. In some ways, this may in itself describe addiction, which means "speaking toward" - perhaps he, too, is reaching all the time for the best words.

The Captive Imagination leaves some compelling questions hanging. Dakwar says that most people can use psychoactive substances without becoming dependent or experiencing problems - but do they? Human beings have used such substances for millennia - but should we? Dakwar has wide experience of talking with those whose drug or alcohol use have caused them problems, but it would have been interesting to explore the nature of substance use among ordinary, non-addicted people.

In one of the concluding chapters, Dakwar writes about ayahuasca, or "the tea", detailing his patient Carlos's experiences with it. But there is something quite different about Carlos. It doesn't always feel clear who is talking - Carlos or Dakwar. And, at a certain point, Dakwar indeed reveals that, while the story was originally an anonymised case study, its subject eventually declined permission for it to appear in print. The resulting portrait "goes further into fiction", even becoming "mythical". Dakwar replaces the name Carlos with a bold typographical dot. It's a mark of the experimental nature of The Captive Imagination, and will draw some in - but may lose others.

This is ostensibly a book about drugs and addiction; but perhaps it is more about the nature of reality and experience. At times difficult, often fascinating, it is an attempt to describe what might be deemed indescribable, in a way that is often more like poetry than science.

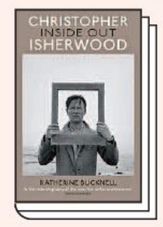
To buy a copy for £22 go to guardianbookshop.com

Courage and camp

The inner life of Christopher Isherwood

Lara Feigel

BIOGRAPHY



Christopher Isherwood Inside Out
Katherine Bucknell
CHATTO & WINDUS, £35

Christopher Isherwood was constantly pulled between the camp and the heroic. As a schoolchild, he went from military drills, emulating his soldier father, to doing square dances with his mother in her dresses. As a young man, he escaped upper-class England for 1930s Berlin with its drag acts and cabarets, but moved to the slums, wanting to join the workers he saw as the real heroes. Just before the war, he gave up politics and went to Hollywood, embracing the glamorous but rackety world of screenwriting. But he still needed the kind of challenge that he capitalised in his writing as the Test. He found a Hindu guru, Swami Prabhavananda, and tried out celibacy in his monastery just when he was finally within reach of the best gay scene he had ever encountered.

Katherine Bucknell's Isherwood isn't as camp as his previous biographer Peter Parker's but he is preoccupied by heroism throughout. The editor of his voluminous diaries, she is interested above all in his inner life: in how he negotiated being the son of a fallen war hero and of an anxiously loving mother who turned to him for the intimate conversations she was missing.

Bucknell is right to put his psychology at the heart of his work, where there's always an Isherwood figure, observing himself observing the world around him, as in the Berlin stories that made his reputation and sustain it now, especially in the form of Cabaret. With his mixture of camera-like objectivity and engrossed self-observation, he created a style that allowed him to capture the frenzied energy of 1930s Germany, where freedom and creativity collided fatally with authoritarianism, without losing sight of the oppressive Britain he had grown up in. His experiments border on what we would now call autofiction, but they have an engagement with the political context that feels broader than this category suggests.

The move to America might have provided an ideal canvas on which to combine the sweep of history with personal myth, but the American dream has a way of letting people down. Isherwood loved America precisely because he didn't belong and because no one else quite did either: "I feel free here. I'm on my own. My life will be what I make of it." He tried to write a novel about an addict saint and another about homosexuality, theorising camp a decade before Susan Sontag. His most successful work was probably A Single Man, a portrait of a middle-aged, gay college professor. Bucknell calls it the "masterpiece of his maturity", which is excessive praise. It combines a commitment to arch style with a curiosity about how matters of courage and daredevilry play out in a curtailed world. But his dependence on Mrs Dalloway indicates a tiredness in the novelist as well as the protagonist.

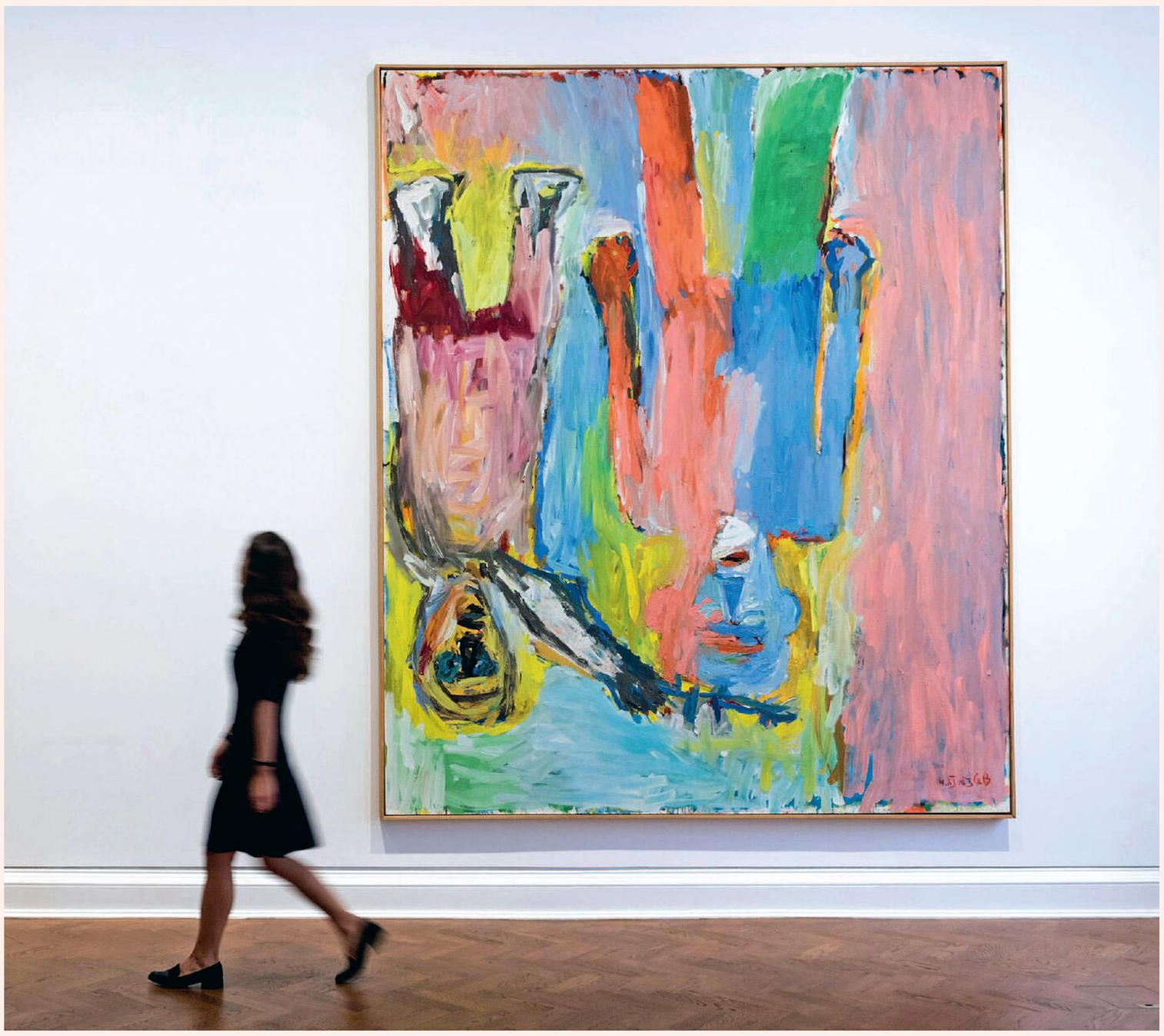
I'm still unsure if we need another expansive portrait of Isherwood. Bucknell's research is deeply impressive and her judgments astute, but there are so many minor characters and small shifts of allegiance that it's hard to keep track of the larger arguments. For the generations less familiar with him, a biography of this kind isn't the best way to bring the work alive.

Perhaps it's a book to flick through, savouring the images. There's Isherwood dancing with his mother, and there are the cars, which Bucknell revels in alongside Isherwood: his partner Don Bachardy's wine-red Corvair, Isherwood's black Volkswagen. They crashed them both. They skipped red lights, they parked illegally, and Isherwood continually drove drunk, falling asleep at the wheel. What was he doing? Was he revelling in his own louche camp, or heroically racing against death, outpacing his fears? He couldn't give up on heroism, even as he became a figurehead for the gay liberation movement and declared on TV that the real heroes acknowledged their cowardice. Perhaps Bucknell's achievement is to make so destructive a man determinedly appealing.

Lara Feigel is the author of Look! We Have Come Through! - Living With DH Lawrence (Bloomsbury). To buy Christopher Isherwood Inside Out for £29.75 go to guardianbookshop.com

Christopher Isherwood (left) with WH Auden in 1938

HULTON DEUTSCH/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES



Georg Baselitz's
The Crowning
With Thorns (1983)

Visions of chaos

The world is turned upside down in an experimental novel about art, observation and making stories

Lucy Atkins

STEPHEN CHUNG/ALAMY

Parade
Rachel Cusk
FABER, £16.99

RACHEL CUSK's repeated attempts to exterminate the novel while still writing one are genuinely impressive. Ten years ago, frustrated by what she called the ridiculous act of "making up John and Jane" she wrote Outline, followed by Transit and Kudos, a compelling trilogy in which the narrator, whose biographical circumstances seem to match Cusk's, reveals almost nothing about her life or feelings, and instead recounts the monologues of people she encounters. In an interview in 2018, after the publication of Kudos, Cusk told the New Yorker:"I don't think character exists any more." She then wrote Second Place about a detached, Cusk-like character who opens her glorious marshland home to a destructive artist. And now there's Parade, an icy thought experiment in which an unnamed narrator, whose scant biographical details map Cusk's, moves between nameless European cities, visiting exhibitions and thinking about artists.

The narrator's thoughts are woven with stories about various artists, all called "G". Among them is G, the famous painter who decides to represent the world upside down (he is surely based on the German artist Georg Baselitz). There's G, the major artist with a wild past, now trapped unhappily in marriage and motherhood and haunted by shame; or G the film-maker, who discovers that people are often "baffled or angered" by his work: instead of the "strange authority of the camera's prying eye", he offers neutrality, an "absence of what might be called leadership". The narrator, meanwhile, reveals almost nothing about herself. This artistic absence of "leadership" is central to Parade.

The novel is divided into four parts (The Stuntman, The Midwife, The Diver, The Spy), each of which examines the complexities of artistic identity. There are mini-essays on the relationship between art and subjectivity, art and madness, dreams, terror, violence, the female body, marital politics, mother-child entanglements. Sections have appeared in print elsewhere: a version of The Stuntman was a 2023 New Yorker essay; an iteration of The Spy appeared last year in Harper's Magazine. There is a definite feeling that the novel has been stitched together from vignettes, stories, articles and musings.

Early on, the narrator is violently knocked on the head by a stranger as she walks down a city street (Cusk has also written about this happening to her in Paris, where she now lives). The female assailant flees, pausing briefly to observe the pain and confusion she has created. The notion of the artist as an observer runs through Parade: the artist is a spy, hidden, invisible, effaced. The act of observation isn't straightforward though – nothing is with Cusk. The watcher/artists perceive the world upside down, at an angle, or partially, through windows or lenses. And the world itself is off-kilter: midwives are murderers, the child contains the mother, the storyteller offers not clarity, but confusion.

Intellectually, these thoughts can be exhilarating. Instead of plot or character development, Cusk offers a gimlet-eyed analysis of what it is to be the creator of a world in which nobody really exists, not even the creator. Novelists who question the point of novel-writing are hardly new, of course ("It's a bad habit, writing novels," Virginia Woolf once wrote, "it falsifies life"). What's odd is that, as with the Outline Trilogy and Second Place, this Cuskian narrator's voice – cold, detached, judgmental, excoriating – emerges as a dominant and distinctive energy, an individual. Has Cusk's attempt to expose "character" as an artificial construct – both on the page and in real life – failed because this voice feels so distinct? Or is Parade an acknowledgment that no matter how hard a novelist works to redefine the act of putting words on the page, those words will inevitably cohere into a shape that we, the ignorant, grasping reader, will insist on identifying as "character"?

There is no way to know because Cusk withholds cohesion. She makes no concessions to the reader's desire for clarity, or to the limits of our knowledge. Some thoughts feel true, a few are even funny (the narrator looks back on mothering "in a fatigued kind of amazement, like a retired general recalling past battles"). Others are puzzling and convoluted. This can be anxiety-inducing, but also infuriating. Occasionally, I wondered if a passage of tangled thinking was flawed, or perhaps even meaningless. Or was it simply a sign that I'd reached the limits of my knowledge – of art, obscure film, European literature, French philosophy? Destabilising the reader is, of course, the whole point: we are the dimwit victims, Cusk the clever assailant.

In the last section, the narrative "I" multiplies to "we", in vigil at their mother's deathbed. This "we" could be a mad and fractured self, it could be inclusive, universal – it could be both. The narrator notes that people expect "a storyteller to demonstrate his mastery and control by resolving the confusion and ambiguity of reality, not deepening it". This deepening of chaos is Cusk's artistic project here, and she delivers it coldly. No doubt she's pausing now to observe our pain.

To buy a copy for £14.95 go to guardianbookshop.com

In the company of men

Friends, fathers and sons in a fine-tuned debut

Olivia Laing

Going Home
Tom Lamont
SCEPTRE, £16.99

Téo Erskine has done everything he can to escape the force field of home: the weighty parental guilt trips, the dangerous enticements of a poker game with the old gang, the possible late-night glimpse of a long-term crush in a crowded pub. He has made it all the way from a tight-knit Jewish community in Enfield, north London, to the urban anonymity of Aldgate, east London. Further! "You might call it as far as Whitechapel, yeah," he tells a sceptical shopkeeper. He's a man in his 30s. He has a car. He can visit for a night or two and slope straight back to the liberty of the city.

He can, that is, until tragedy delivers the abrupt responsibility of a surrogate child: a two-year-old boy, "stomach stout and proud as a grandad at the beach". The presence of Joel – creative in his demands, avid for play, sleepless and shipwrecked by grief – pins Téo in place, trapping him in his own childhood home cheek by jowl with his demanding father. Vic is another lost and fatherless boy, pitched back into the insecurities of infancy by his failing body.

Téo's task is to manage this overload of responsibility, to winkle out its pleasures on the fly. And what pleasures they are. It's rare to read something that captures with such unsentimentality a child's range, their rapidly shifting obsessions, the quiddities of their language, their cunning wiles, the "busy managerial patter" of their games.

For years I've been keeping a running tally of convincing children in adult novels. Fox-obsessed Max in Esther Freud's Peerless Flats. Chatty, dyslexic Leo in AS Byatt's Frederica Quartet. The preternaturally articulate Thomas in Edward St Aubyn's Mother's Milk. Joel, with his "unreasonable eyes, toad's eyes … just gorgeous", is fully singular, tightly observed, expanding daily. He confides a secret about himself: "I grow."

This is the journalist Tom Lamont's first novel, and it has the kind of plot that feels fine tuned and long thought out. A lot happens in a small space as the narrative passes between Téo and Vic and their two closest satellites: the local rabbi, Sibyl, her faith wavering, and Ben, Téo's best friend. Ben is handsome, vain, arrogant, impossibly self-absorbed, something of a lost boy in his own right.

A sequence of small decisions has devastating consequences. People don't so much change as invert their personalities. Could a self-declared "greedy piglet" transform into a loving caregiver? The clockwork propulsion of events, and their domino tumble into crisis, feels a touch too authorially engineered. What saves the novel from being forced or formulaic is the depth of Lamont's engagement with his characters, and especially his capacity to situate them in a lived, firmly dimensional world.

Weather systems, from a child's tantrum to a passing burst of rain, are logged in sprightly, unexpected language briskly evading cliche. Cards get a "fertile, gummy feel from an hour's constant use". Mirrors "amplify the space and excavate new territory".

Sibyl aside, this is really a book about men. It's about male friendship and the dynamics between fathers and sons. Fatherless Vic struggled to nurture his own boy and now demands more devotion than can possibly be given. But Téo is generous enough to realise that he couldn't be the tender, elastic caregiver he manages to become without having had some kind of benign fatherhood modelled for him. Both men thrive in proximity to Joel, the energetic dictator of their household, drawing them into his infectiously animated relationship with the mundane. A stick, a splinter, a sofa cushion: each once-ordinary object has the capacity to amaze.

The relationship between Ben and Téo is explosive. They are mates, which is to say excellent at manipulating each other, quick to take umbrage, not above trading punches or ghosting one another. Their friendship is vested in football, poker, pills, pure lad stuff, yet they still nudge and chivvy each other towards openness and growth.

I can't say I loved the tidiness of the ending, but I've read Going Home twice now and I still don't feel as if I've tapped its power. Children seem to be more alive than adults, keener, less jaded, and this novel feels the same, pepped up and gorgeous, just bristling with life.

To buy a copy for £14.95 go to guardianbookshop.com

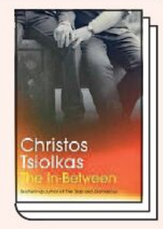
Paternal bonds in Going Home

A love for life

Desire versus devotion in a Melbourne romance

Neil Bartlett

The In-Between
Christos Tsiolkas
ATLANTIC, £9.99



Perry is a 53-year-old translator; Ivan is a 55-year-old landscape gardener. One is of Greek heritage, one Serbian. They are both in recovery from previous lovers, yet tonight they find themselves preparing for an app-arranged date in the suburbs of Melbourne. Will they find the nerve to fall in love?

Christos Tsiolkas's latest novel takes us on a journey that ranges not just across Melbourne but back into past landscapes of shame and forward into new territories of possibility. Its set pieces include a heart attack, a brilliantly quarrelsome dinner party, a night in a penthouse and a climactic visit to one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. All of them are vividly crafted. There's also quite a lot of frank and medium-filthy sex.

So far, so Netflix. What lifts the book to another level is not just the sensual polish of the writing but the structuring of the narrative. As well as leaping across years, the authorial camera repeatedly shifts from tracking the developing affair between Perry and Ivan to following incidental witnesses to their story: people in the background, entirely ignorant of the drama being played out right next to them. These digressions into the lives of strangers are always unexpected, yet perfectly placed; cumulatively, they situate the book's central intimacy within a provocatively unconcerned world, one rife with cultural complexity and as riddled with happiness as it is with tension.

Against this ever-shifting background, the title of the book acquires subtly interconnected meanings. As the gay sons of immigrants, Perry and Ivan live in between cultures; as gay men who have been entangled with heterosexuals, they live in between sexualities; as present-day, middle-aged gay Australians, they have to navigate a growing desire to fully commit to each other as a couple in a country that still lies halfway between its homophobic past and a future of potential freedom.

This is a warm and rewarding novel, spiked with the author's trademark eruptions – the clumsy gesture, the unacceptable remark, the calculated attack. However, Tsiolkas saves the best of his writing for last. In the sixth and final move of his authorial viewpoint away from his leading characters, he tracks an elderly married couple down a backstreet in a small town outside Athens, where the novel has moved for its radiant final sequence. They bicker and fuss, then disappear.

Although this old couple have different names, their well-worn devotion clearly evokes the legendary figures of Philemon and Baucis, the humble pair whose love is so strong that in the eighth book of Ovid's Metamorphoses they are granted a wish to be eternally united. In Ovid, the lovers become a pair of conjoined trees. Tsiolkas evokes the reality of lifelong devotion with a cinematic fade to black; as darkness falls on this couple, it becomes impossible to be sure "where one ends and the other begins". This trick somehow manages to combine classical mystery with echoes of the unforgettable ending of WG Sebald's The Emigrants.

As with Sebald, this turns a specific

MAYTE TORRES/GETTY

moment in history into something monumental. The effect is genuinely magical, and seals the final movement of the narrative without resorting to anything as banal as the promise of a happy ever after for its main protagonists. Instead, it reminds us that the true in-between is one we all share, the space between living and dying. For all its socially conscious and contemporary twists and turns, this unashamedly emotional novel is working on a very deep level, striving to embody in its storytelling the assertion that, regardless of culture or sexuality, in the end – and in the beginning, and in between – only love matters. In this endeavour, it triumphantly succeeds.
To buy a copy for £9.29 go to guardianbookshop.com

Complex affairs

A rich tale of migration, queer life and marriage

Claire Adam

Cinema Love
Jiaming Tang
JOHN MURRAY £16.99

Jiaming Tang's debut novel opens in China in the 1980s, at the Workers' Cinema in rural Fuzhou, a cruising spot for queer men. The cinema is described as a magical, almost utopian place, and the language Tang uses contributes to this dreamy, soft-focus vision. The men come to the cinema, he writes, "looking for love"; in the semi-darkness of old war movies projected onscreen for 10 hours a day, "men loved and loved and loved".

Bao Mei, the woman who works as the cinema's cleaner and ticket seller, also assumes the role of protector of the men's safe space: she turns away policemen as well as the confused and sometimes grief-stricken women who come seeking their husbands. She's been guided to the cinema by the ghost of her dead brother, Hen Bao, and it's perhaps Hen Bao's watchful spirit that keeps the cinema safe.

Two regular clients, Old Second and Shun-Er, begin a blissful love affair – and, for a period, happiness reigns. But Shun-Er, as we soon learn, is married. His wife Yan Hua's actions after learning her husband's secret propel us violently into the book's second act; the subsequent examination of her conscience provides the scaffold for the remainder of the story, all the way to its affecting conclusion.

The complexity afforded to Yan Hua's character is one of the novel's greatest strengths. As a new bride, she doesn't understand why Shun-Er isn't interested in sex, but she reflects that he "didn't have the desire to be a man" and that "it made you experience a different kind of love". She struggles to find a balance between generosity towards Shun-Er and a natural desire to centre her own life and concerns. "But what about me?" she asks herself. "What about my hurt?"

The second part of the novel takes some of the characters to America, where they join other newly arrived immigrants eking out a hardscrabble life in New York. Bao Mei and Yan Hua have new husbands. With these reshuffled relationships, the stage is set to explore "different kinds of love" and to test the logic of the cultural norms of the time. Why is it, for example, that a man can openly beat his wife, but "let a man hold another man's hand" and "hell breaks loose"? Why is Yan Hua's "puppet" green-card marriage outwardly acceptable, even when "she feels nothing for her new husband", and when he makes advances towards her, she has to endure "the love-stench coming off his skin"? Bao Mei's unconventional marriage is portrayed as the most successful: she accepts her husband's queerness and finds pleasure in being useful, "a relied-on woman". Joyful, too, are the female friendships between women who take comfort in their gossip and companionship at the garment factory, "who refuse to love their husbands, and instead [choose] to love each other".

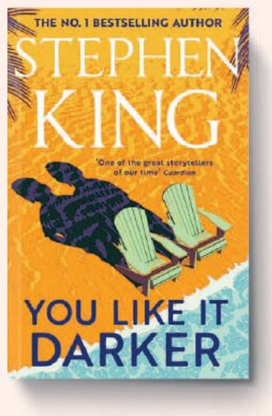
There is much to admire in this intricately plotted novel. The depiction of Chinese immigrant life in America is very well done: rich in detail, and with lovely flashes of humour. But I wondered, sometimes, whether Hen Bao's ghost was allowed too much power over Bao Mei. She welcomes his instruction and obeys him unquestioningly – it's almost as if he takes over both her voice and body, denying her agency and ownership of herself. And while the characters eventually acknowledge that the cinema was also a place of "betrayal", where married men "had to humiliate their wives to satisfy their desires", these realisations could have been further explored.

But these are minor complaints in an otherwise well-executed story. And it's a story with real heart: Tang shows genuine sympathy for each of his flawed characters as he carefully unpicks the moral complexities of their choices. Sometimes, as Old Second eventually concludes: "The only painless way to live was to dream in the past."
To buy a copy for £14.95 go to guardianbookshop.com

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

Science fiction, fantasy and horror

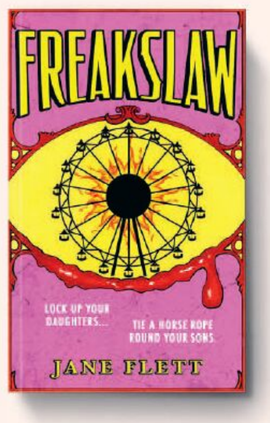
Short stories from Stephen King; Terry Bisson's final collection; magical deviants in a transgressive debut; and serious slasher horror. *By Lisa Tuttle*



You Like It Darker
Stephen King
HODDER & STOUGHTON, £25
This new collection of 12 stories opens with Two Talented Bastids, which questions how two ordinary guys from a small town in Maine managed to become famous almost overnight; one as a writer, the other an artist. They always denied any mystery but, after their deaths, the writer's son discovers a notebook that seems to explain the secret of their success. In the collection's afterword, King puzzles over similar questions: where do his stories come from? And why are so many of them concerned with dark matters? Horror stories, he writes, are "best appreciated by those who are compassionate" and in his stories he has "tried especially hard to show the real world as it is". Danny Coughlin's Bad Dream is about a man who feels compelled to find out if a murder he dreamed about is real. He discovers a body and tips off the police only to be suspected of the crime himself. Rattlesnakes looks at the later life of a character from King's 1981 horror novel Cujo, as an old man visiting Florida, where he's pursued by the ghosts of a long-ago tragedy. King is still the king.

Tomorrowing
Terry Bisson
DUKE, £13.99
The final book by this popular American SF writer, who died earlier this year, is a compilation of the monthly features he wrote for Locus (the genre's only trade journal) from April 2004 to July 2023. Inspired by "Today in History" columns in daily newspapers, Bisson imagined them written from the perspective of two centuries ahead. For almost 20 years he was dedicated to creating four micro-fictions every month. The result is a collection of pure, distilled science fiction at its best, perfect miniatures that combine social satire with prediction in stories surreal, disturbing, thought-provoking and hilarious.

Freakslaw
Jane Flett
DOUBLEDAY, £16.99
This debut novel by an award-winning short-story writer is set during a hot summer in the 1990s, when a travelling funfair called Freakslaw arrives in a gloomy Scottish town. A band of outcasts and deviants, some with magical powers, they swoop in and uncover the hidden truths of local people. Their targets include a boy repressing his desire for other boys, a girl obsessed with her studies, men who drown violent urges in drink, and their meek, oppressed wives. Gloria the fortune teller has a plan for revenge if the town folk turn against them. Her 16-year-old daughter, a contortionist and self-taught witch, doesn't care who gets hurt, so long as she has her own dangerous fun. A transgressive, inventive dark fantasy with believably complex characters.



Horror Movie
Paul Tremblay
TITAN, £19.99
The latest from the bestselling, award-winning author of A Head Full of Ghosts is about an experimental horror movie made by amateurs on a micro-budget in the summer of 1993, never screened; yet over the decades it becomes the stuff of dark legend. There are plans for a big-budget remake, with help from the only surviving member of the cast – "the Thin Kid" – who knows the whole, terrible story. Slasher movies are seen by some as kitschy fun, but this is a seriously disturbing novel, delving into the sacrifices art demands, psychological trauma and how monsters are made. Sometimes painful reading, it's also incredibly gripping, smart and scary.

THE BOOKS OF MY LIFE

Emma Donoghue

The Room author on adoring Alan Garner, inspirational Plath, and the wisdom of Terry Pratchett

My earliest reading memory
We had a big hardback of Hilda Boswell's illustrated Treasury of Children's Stories that had survived my seven siblings. For years, whenever my mother asked which bedtime story I'd like out of the Treasury, I demanded Pinkel and the Witch, a folk tale recorded in the 1850s. My mother was so bored of it she would beg me to pick something else, but she always caved.

My favourite book growing up
Noel Streatfeild's Ballet Shoes, which I realise now was not only about an alternative family (including all-but-spelled-out lesbian couple) but was probably the first thing I read that said you should follow your dreams, a message children get from all sides today but didn't so much then. Those penniless little tough cookies scrabbling to make careers in the arts were my role models.

The book that changed me as a teenager
I adored Alan Garner's Red Shift, a YA novel set in Cheshire in three different eras, which (without time travel or any such clunky device) suggests that the history of a landscape haunts that landscape. I suspect Red Shift is why I've ended up writing historical fiction.

The book that made me want to be a writer
Sylvia Plath's poems gathered posthumously in Ariel made me feel that putting the right words side by side was the most vivid satisfaction life could offer.

The book I came back to
Antonia Forest's series about the Marlow family; I breezed through the school novels first, then sought out all the others, and went back to them over and over for their engrossing and subtle exploration of human relationships in and outside the home.

The book I could never read again
I'm squirming as I admit that when I discovered Richard Bach's Jonathan Livingston Seagull, this allegorical fable of a seagull's spiritual evolution blew my tiny mind. I'm currently attempting my first animal novel, which I attribute to the lingering effect of Jonathan, Richard Adams's Watership Down and Robert C O'Brien's Mrs Frisby and the Rats of Nimh. I haven't managed to reread Jonathan because its westernised Zen feels too dated, whereas the other two still hold up as solid stories.

The book I discovered later in life
I stayed away from Herman Melville's Moby-Dick because I thought it would be unreadable, but when I went whalewatching in Boston I felt I simply had to try it, and it was utterly brilliant. (The trick is to skip the madder stretches.)

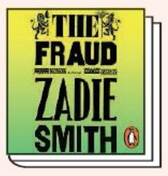
The book I am currently reading
Hervé Le Tellier's highbrow suspense novel The Anomaly. I'm having some trouble remembering who's who, but that kind of adds to the profound confusion of the sci-fi premise.

My comfort read
Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, full of wisdom and footnotes that make me laugh out loud. If I ever get a terminal diagnosis it'll be Terry I turn to in hopes of keeping the *timor mortis* at bay.

Learned by Heart by Emma Donoghue is published by Picador in paperback on 20 June.

Audiobook of the week

The Fraud
Zadie Smith
PENGUIN AUDIO, 12HR 26MIN

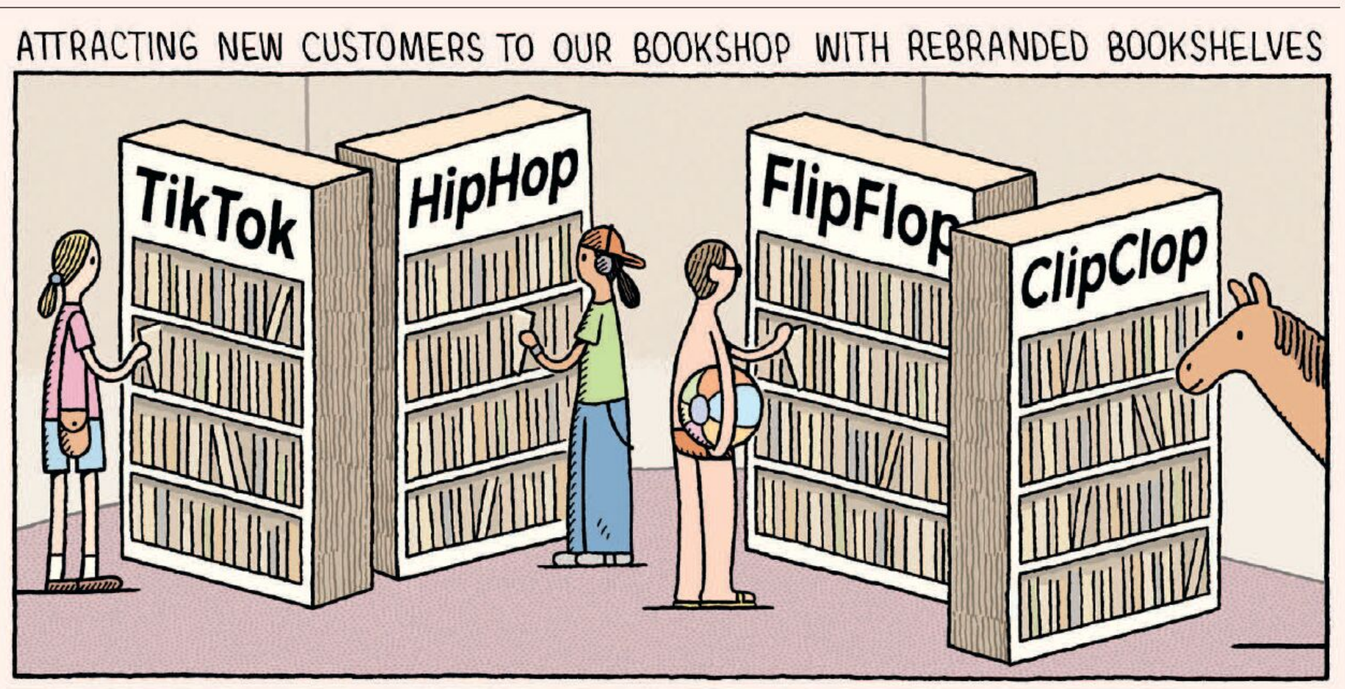


Zadie Smith's sixth novel is set in 1870s Kilburn, home to William Ainsworth, a real-life novelist of questionable talent, and his Scottish cousin and housekeeper Eliza Touchet. The Fraud moves between Eliza's time as a young widow, when, on moving in with the Ainsworths, she falls for William's first wife, Frances, and her later years spent looking down her nose at Sarah, the second Mrs Ainsworth, and obsessing over a court case that gripped Victorian London.

The case is that of the "Tichborne claimant", a butcher from Wapping who professed to be the lost heir to a Hampshire estate, claiming his inheritance after being shipwrecked on a boat bound for Jamaica. Many thought the claimant an impostor, though he had a defender in Andrew Bogle, an ex-slave from Jamaica who had worked on the family plantation.

Smith is the book's narrator: while her Scottish accent could do with some fine tuning, her reading is nonetheless exuberant and funny, making the most of the archly withering prose. The book goes on to follow Eliza as she attends the court proceedings with Sarah, and becomes transfixed by the figure of Bogle, whose stories of empire help her to see the world anew. "A person is a bottomless thing," she thinks as she watches him give evidence, simultaneously exposing her shallowness and her thirst to learn about life beyond her milieu. The "fraud" in the title doesn't only refer to the claimant, but the stories people tell themselves to justify their good fortune. *Fiona Sturges*

Tom Gauld



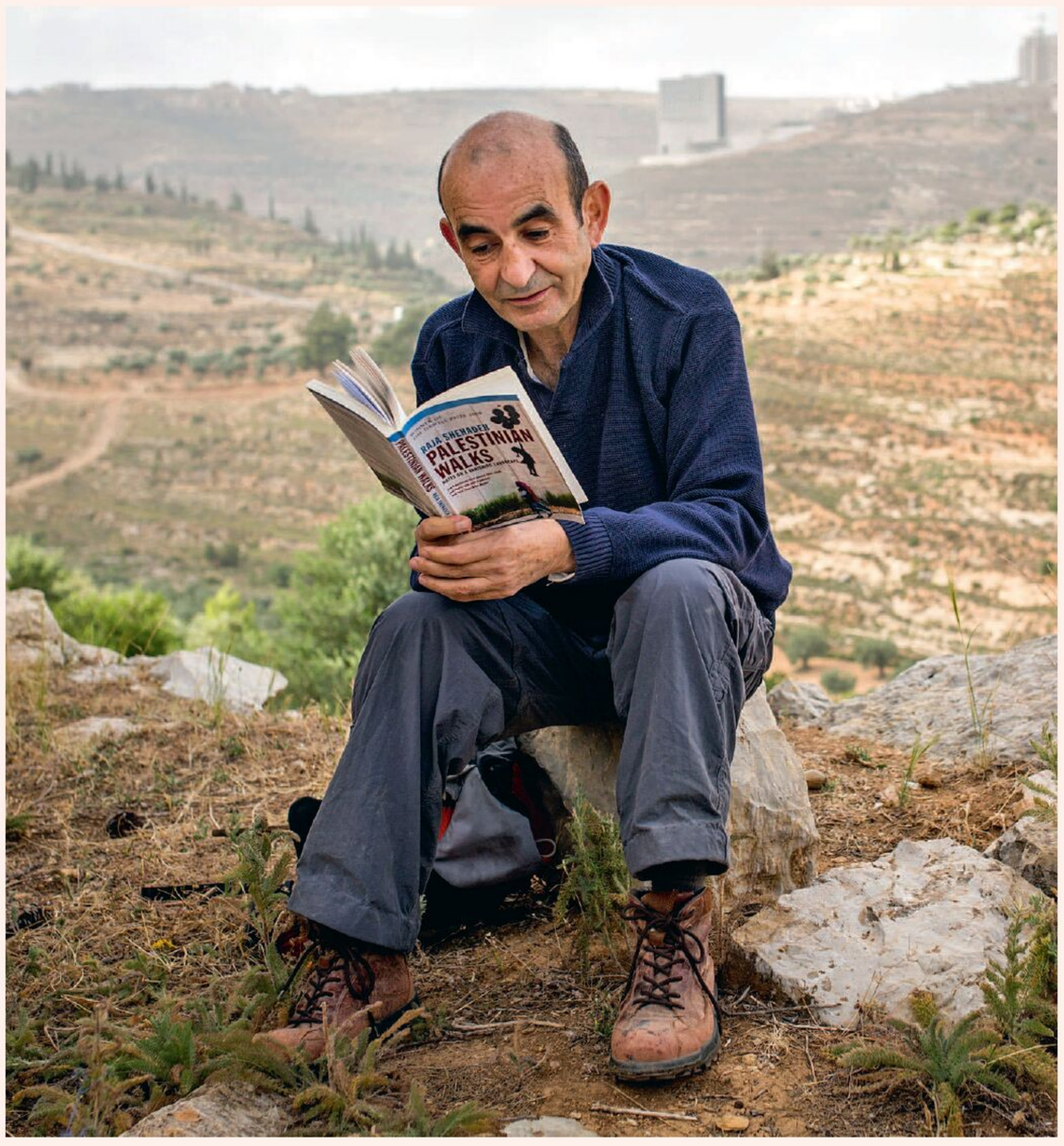
Further listening

The Bee Sting
Paul Murray
PENGUIN AUDIO, 26HR 10MIN
Heather O'Sullivan, Barry Fitzgerald and Beau Holland are among the cast narrating this Booker-shortlisted tale of an Irish family in financial crisis.

Because I Don't Know What You Mean and What You Don't
Josie Long
CANONGATE, 5HR 31MIN
Comedian Josie Long reads her short-story collection in which two teens believe they are witches, a mother-to-be travels through time, and a community WhatsApp group implodes.

‘All this solidarity from the world – yet nothing has changed’

The Palestinian human rights lawyer and author Raja Shehadeh talks to *Claire Armitstead* about his hopes and fears for his homeland, and finding a place of refuge amid the chaos of war



Shehadeh reads his Orwell prize-winning book Palestinian Walks outside Ramallah, in the West Bank, 2014

Raja Shehadeh is at his home in the West Bank city of Ramallah. In the six months since the start of Israel’s war on Gaza he estimates that he has not ventured further than 16km, which is a grim sort of house arrest for a human rights lawyer turned writer whose wanderings have underpinned his life’s work: to demonstrate the Palestinians’ deep relationship with, and entitlement to, the land of their ancestors.

“It’s a quiet existence, but it’s very confining,” he says, over video link from his book-littered study. “Travelling is dangerous, because the settlers are all over the place. And there are closures everywhere, which is a nightmare.” It’s not that he thinks that, as an eminent advocate and commentator, he is in any more danger than anyone else. “The Israelis are indiscriminate in this way … They just don’t care how well known I am or not well known. In so many places people have been killed and nothing has happened.”

In June, Shehadeh, who is now 72, will make his first long-range wartime trip to promote his latest work in the UK. Even for a writer who has made a specialism of slim, succinct books, this one is short. It is written in two parts, the first of which is based on a lecture he gave at a peace conference in Kyoto in 2016, explaining the history that brought the region to this pass. The second centres on the brutal reprisals provoked by the horrific Hamas attack on 7 October last year. The book is provocatively titled What Does Israel Fear from Palestine? Why, he asked in 2016, did Israel not take inspiration from South Africa’s journey towards the abolition of apartheid? His conclusion, eight years later, is damning. “The very high human and material cost of the war in Gaza proves that what Israel fears from Palestine is Palestine’s very existence.”

One irony of the current situation is that he now talks more with an Israeli friend than with anyone in Gaza itself. “I had some friends and colleagues in Gaza, who were lawyers and human rights people. And I got in touch with them in the beginning to find out what’s happening. But they couldn’t take it and left,” he says. On the other hand, his friendship with the Israeli psychoanalyst Henry Abramovitch, which was the basis of a 2017 book, Where the Line Is Drawn, is still going strong.

He sends all his journalistic writing to Abramovitch before submitting it to international news outlets, including the Guardian. “But when we meet, we don’t talk about politics, because it would dominate our conversations,” says Shehadeh.

Abramovitch is a university professor in Tel Aviv, which plays a key part in the first section of the book, as the Israeli city built out of Jaffa. It was from this ancient coastal town that Shehadeh’s grandmother was forced in 1948, and to whose lights she would point on evening walks hand in hand with her young grandson. “Her eyes were always on the horizon,” Shehadeh writes, “and by following her gaze I too learned to avoid what was here … I saw Ramallah and its hills not for what they were but as the observation point from which to view what lay beyond, which was the Jaffa I had never known.”

In an earlier book, Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape, which won the Orwell prize for political writing in 2008, he described a schism in his family between those like his grandfather and father, whose intellect and ambition took them to university and on to the professions, and the uncles and aunts who remained on the land, leaving their mark in the stone shelters they built to store their crops or shelter their sheep.

The six “sarhas” – rejuvenating rambles – of Palestinian Walks span 26 years, all painstakingly recorded in diaries that he writes in English and which now run into hundreds of thousands of words. On the first walk, shortly after returning from studying in London, Shehadeh was shocked by what he found: “It was as though the tectonic movements that had occurred over thousands of years were now happening in a matter of months, entirely redrawing the map.” On another, he had to rescue his nephew from a piece of unexploded ordnance that the six-year-old boy had picked up.

Even the house in which he now lives has historical memory embedded in its foundations. He built it with his American wife and walking companion, Penny Johnson, after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1995, which granted limited Palestinian self-governance over parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As a lawyer who had spent decades fighting for land rights on behalf of the dispossessed, Shehadeh was deeply opposed to the deal. “I decided that it’s going to be chaotic. So I’d better have a refuge and a place where I can retreat after the chaos of the outside. And so I started building.” The garden, he adds, “has been a saviour for me, because it’s a place I love. I sit outside and read and work in it. It has really saved me.”

From this “bubble”, he has been appalled to see the war unfold on television. But he has also been cheered by student protests across the world – particularly in the US, whose foreign policy he regards as a key obstacle to resolution. “You know, it has been great that there is such resistance to the Gaza war and the genocide.” he says. “But all the time, I’m thinking of the first intifada, when we also had so much support and solidarity from the world, and then it just fizzled out completely.”

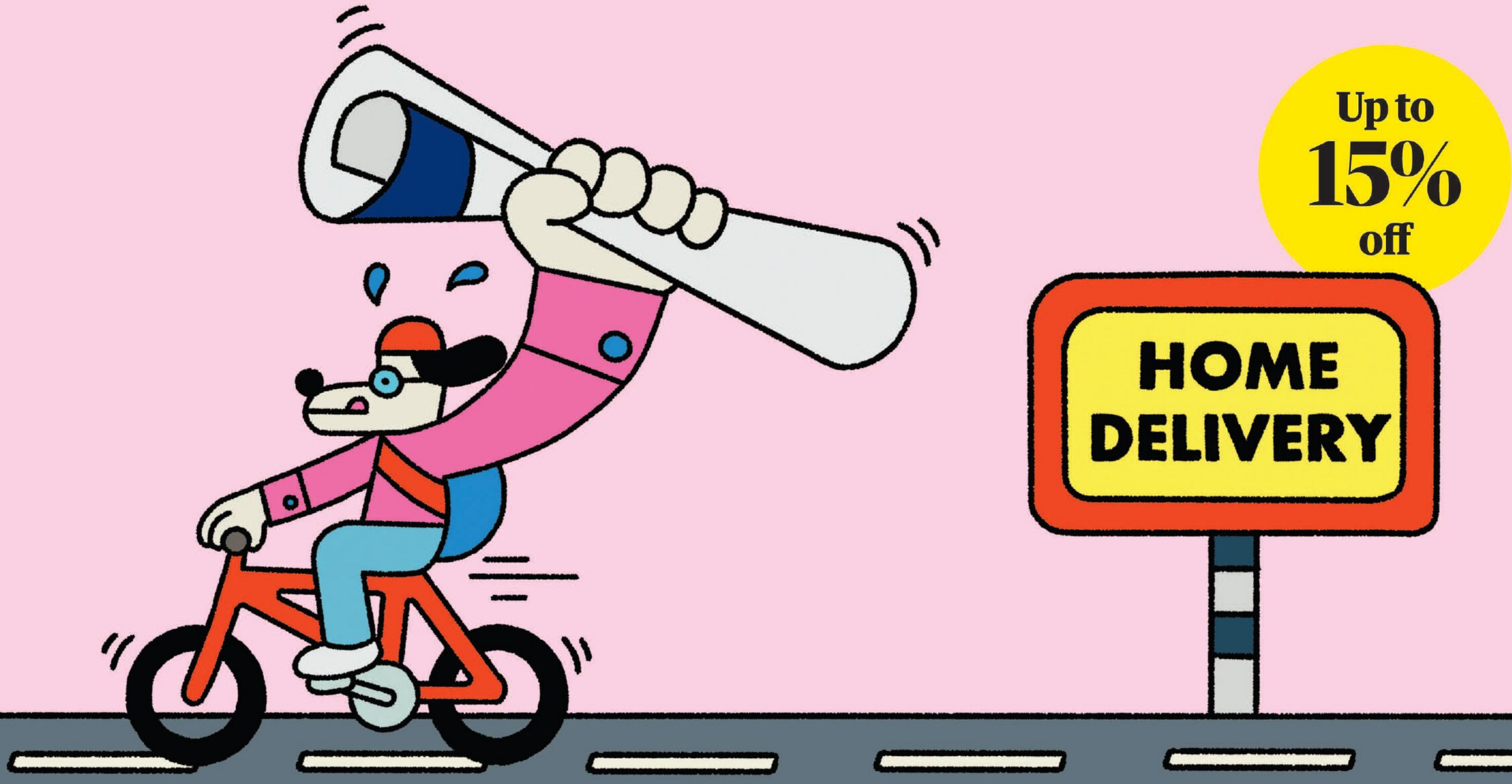
He hangs on to the idea that this time it may be different, “because now the young people are understanding the Palestinian case, not only for its own sake, but because it is emblematic of what is happening to them in their own countries. In America, and in Britain as well, the police are committing violence against them. And this is waking up so many people to their own situation.” But then he slumps back into a seasoned wariness about the possibility of a happy ending, pointing out that “with all this solidarity, and with all this vociferous support, nothing has changed. The Israelis are continuing to bomb everything, and the settlers are continuing with their action, only now with the support of the army.”

What would his father make of all the history that has passed under the bridge since his premature death? “He’d say ‘I told you so’,” fires back Shehadeh. But that won’t prevent him from doing his bit, sending his slim, piercing books out into the world. Early in the millennium he wrote a memoir of the 2002 siege of Ramallah titled When the Bulbul Stopped Singing, in honour of a songbird that is regarded in cultures across the Middle East as a messenger of peace and love. He is pleased to report that, in his garden at least, the bulbul is alive and well: “He wakes us up every morning.” Next spring he will add to his literature of reclamation through walking, in a collaboration with his wife, Penny, titled Forgotten: Searching for Lost Places and Hidden Memorials. It will take them back to the land, scratching around for all the stories that have not yet been told, in the hope of making a new and restorative sense of it all.

What Does Israel Fear from Palestine? by Raja Shehadeh is published by Profile.

ROB STOTHARD/GETTY

News travels fast, now further too



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THE BIG IDEA

Why we need to put death on the curriculum

Most British children experience bereavement, and schools should help them deal with it, writes *Tim Jonze*

MY DAUGHTER was two and a half when I was first diagnosed with blood cancer. I still remember the immediate instinct I had, as a parent, to shield her from the news for as long as I could. A small child couldn't possibly be equipped to handle something so difficult, could they?

It wasn't so long after that when, on a car journey back from the park, she asked me what happens when we die. It came completely out of the blue, much earlier than I had anticipated. "Shit," I thought, rapidly emptying my mind of the names of every Paw Patrol character in preparation to go somewhere deeper. There was no time for rehearsing flowery euphemisms; instead I found myself stumbling down a path that was surprisingly honest. Cue the tears and the massive meltdown.

Except – there were no tears or massive meltdown. Instead, there was curiosity, openness and lots of questions. My instincts had been wrong. Children *can* handle difficult things without getting upset, as long as they hear them in a safe and secure context.

According to Child Bereavement UK, 127 children lose a parent in the UK every day. By the age of 16, nearly all of us have experienced bereavement. And yet we are not being equipped with the tools to deal with it. In 2019, CBUK found that 90% of teachers reported that they lacked the necessary training, despite 86% acknowledging the need to address death in school. It's something charities such as Marie Curie are hoping to change – by campaigning for lessons about grief to be a requirement within the national curriculum.

Earlier this year, researchers at the University of Portsmouth invited children to share their own experiences of grieving and say how they might be better supported in the classroom. They concluded that there was an "urgent need" for improved training and resources to help students who had experienced the loss of someone close to them. Teachers can't stand in for trained grief counsellors, of course, but with an average of two children in every class affected – and NHS services beyond stretched – they can provide an environment in which a child feels comfortable exploring their feelings.

Parents, too, can learn from the research about how to speak about bereavement. For example, a child might be praised for "being brave" without an awareness of the pressure that puts on them. The Portsmouth study also showed how some children were confused by the expectation that they should feel sad, which fails to take account of the rollercoaster of different emotions grief triggers, or the way feelings might come and go at unexpected times. They concluded that if educators were armed with a better understanding of the dynamics of grief, and more helpful language – for example, "it's OK to feel however you feel" – children would benefit.

The actor Greg Wise has spent the last decade or so reinventing himself as a bit of a death and grieving expert. In 2018 he published Not That Kind of Love, a book he wrote with his sister documenting her dying months, during which he cared for her. When I spoke to him earlier this year he told me: "Kids are really open to talking about death. It's only us who go, 'Morbid! No, stop!'" He gave a good example of the mismatch between what we teach and reality: the fact that only 11% of people who receive CPR will survive. How strange, that we're happy to train children in how to save a life, yet squeamish about mentioning the most likely outcome.

In truth, then, it's not children who are scared of talking about death, but adults

In truth, then, it's not children who are scared of talking about death, but adults. The process of dying used to be dealt with in a much more hands-on way by family, friends and the community. These days, for many of us, it's been farmed out and shrouded in taboo. It's something Karl Ove Knausgård reflects on at the beginning of his six-volume autobiography, My Struggle: "The teacher who has a heart attack in the school playground does not necessarily have to be driven away immediately; no damage is done by leaving him where he is until the caretaker has time to attend to him, even though that might not be until some time in the late afternoon or evening."

Provocative, of course, but it points at a deeper truth: that we can't hide from death, not really. Not when a pandemic arrives out of nowhere (16,100 children in the UK experienced the loss of a parent from Covid-19). Or a news story involving mass death stays in the headlines.

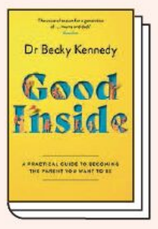
In 2022, when I spoke to the psychologist and parenting expert Dr Becky Kennedy, I asked her for advice on my own hard-to-discuss issue. By that point I had already told my daughter I had a "problem with my blood" to explain the frequent hospital trips and patches on my arms. But I hadn't mentioned the word cancer. Tell her, she advised – instead of beating around the bush, give her the long complex name (polycythemia vera), tell her what treatment you're on (at the time, blood thinners and venesections), reassure her that she can't catch it from you (so, think about what might worry you if you were the child) and reassure her every step of the way.

"When we don't give our kids the whole story they make up a story," she said. "Why is Daddy in hospital again? It never works out well. Whereas if you give concrete information then a kid can make sense of a situation and not have to generalise in a way that's inaccurate."

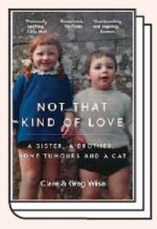
I'm relieved to have taken her advice; that she first heard this from me, and not out of the blue from another child in the playground. Often, it's not about *what* children know, but how they come to know it.

Further reading
Three books for a deeper dive

Good Inside
Dr Becky Kennedy
THORSONS, £14.99



Not That Kind of Love
Clare Wise, Greg Wise
QUERCUS, £9.99



Michael Rosen's Sad Book
illustrated by Quentin Blake
WALKER, £6.99

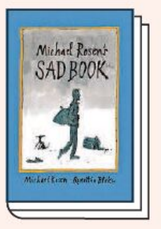


Illustration: Elia Barbieri

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LIFESTYLE

DOING A RUNNER

What happens when your other half is a fitness fanatic - and you're left holding the baby

Spending your weekends solo parenting while your partner heads out on another training ride? You're not alone. Meet the Lycra widows and widowers picking up the slack

Words: Rhiannon Evans
Photography: Gareth Iwan Jones

"He's treated like a hero when he does marathons," says Julia. "But once, while we were watching him cross the finishing line, my aunt leaned over and said: 'You deserve the medal, for doing everything behind the scenes, so he can do all that training.'"

From 5Ks to Ironman races, most people will have a friend, colleague or family member who is training for some kind of fitness challenge. The odd parkrun isn't enough to merit kudos these days – the bar is set somewhere around "triathlon". But what about the Lycra widows and widowers who solo-parent, fix bikes, sleep in cars while "crewing", and diligently stick chicken in the air fryer five times a day to support their sport-mad partners? Where's their "me-time" after they've done bedtime for the 11th day in a row because their partner has been out on a six-hour training ride?

Julia's husband Chris (not their real names) has run six marathons – he started when their children were two and five. "He runs five to six hours each week, after having been at work all day. And again at weekends when I need his help," Julia says. "I effectively become a single parent for four months while he trains."

It's not just the hours lost to training. "He once did an insane 100-mile run through the night," Julia says. "You're supposed to do it in a relay team, but he wanted to do the whole thing himself. He collapsed at the finishing line and was in bed for two days. There was a lot of, 'You're a bloody legend' from our friends. Meanwhile I had to do all the school runs and even serve him dinner in bed because he couldn't walk downstairs for days. And when he stops drinking on New Year's Day until the London marathon in April, it's just tedious."

Sarah Sanders can empathise. She remembers her husband Phil's first Land's End to John o'Groats challenge (an 874-mile bike ride that takes 10-14 days) in 2011 as two relaxing weeks enjoying time alone at home. But by the time Phil did it a second time, in 2021, they'd had two children and were camped out at her parents' house due to major building works at home. "That was a really difficult two weeks," Sarah says.

When training ramps up close to a challenge, things can be tough. "He will say: 'I probably won't be there for the school run or bedtime.' And you can feel a bit like a single parent for a little while.

"But I'm proud of him for doing what he does. He also raises money for cancer charities, because he lost both of his parents to cancer. So there's another reason behind it all." Phil is currently training for his first triathlon, a marathon, and the Dragon Ride (a Welsh cycling marathon).

"He's always conscious of how it affects family life," Sarah says. "I always say it's fine. But you do get to the point where you lose patience. And there's a little part of me that just wants to blame things on him. Because he's not there."

But the impact has positives on their family life – their children (now aged nine and four) are both interested in cycling and running. And the runs are key to Phil's wellbeing. "If he hasn't been out for a run or cycle, he'll start to get a bit moody," Sarah says.

Louise Woolliscroft often feels like her husband Colin's intense training regime takes over their lives. "The most challenging time was when he was working towards his Ironman in 2017," she says. "He was trying to lose a bit of weight and probably under-fuelling,

Ironman competitor Sarah Curtis with her husband, Kit Ingham, and their six-month-old daughter Lumi at home in Bristol and (previous page) in training

When training ramps up, it can be difficult. If the couple go on a weekend away, the bikes have to go too

and he was hangry for about nine months."

It can also stop Louise planning her own fitness challenges. She did a 60-mile cycle ride herself last year, but having both of them training was a problem. "I felt like the kids didn't get enough of our time," she admits. "So I'm now hesitant so sign up for anything. Colin says he will support me but I can't see the space for me to step into, whereas he just does it."

A recent study by sportswear brand Asics found more than half of UK women are dropping out of or stopping exercise completely, and 80% felt not having enough time was a barrier. Conversely, only 34% of men saw time pressure as a challenge for women.

10Ironwomen is a community set up to combat this gender sports gap. In 2018, 10 female friends set out to do Ironman Barcelona – it's now a movement of thousands. It was around that time that original member Sarah Curtis met her now-husband, Kit Ingham.

When training ramps up, and day-long cycle rides begin, Kit admits it can be difficult. If the couple go on a weekend away, the bikes have to come too. A wedding in Spain fell during peak training, so lots of organisation was needed to make sure it could continue unbroken.

"The build-up to the events can feel all-consuming," says Kit. "But when it comes to the culmination, it is amazing." He describes seeing Sarah cross the line of that first Ironman as super emotional: "I knew how much work had gone into it. I was in tears with her."

Kit sees his role as support, from "understanding and validating her feelings or insecurities" to fixing her bike. "It helps immensely that I'm behind the cause with her. By nature, I'm quite happy in a supporting role. I imagine if you were competitive yourself, it might not be so easy."

Now, the couple are adjusting to another change – their first child was born six months ago, and Kit is helping Sarah get back into sport. "I've allowed the turbo trainer [a static exercise bike] back into the living room, which I absolutely hate," he jokes.

Sarah is now considering a marathon. While their daughter's arrival has made training more complicated, she thinks it's more important than ever she continue to carve out that time for herself: "I think the guilt may be there but I'll always try to override it by telling myself it's really important my daughter sees me out there too, and it's not just Dad going out and doing stuff."

Sabrina Pace-Humphreys is an ultramarathon obsessive. As well as competing in races including the infamous Marathon des Sables in the Sahara, she set up the charity Black Trail Runners to increase inclusivity in the sport. Her husband Neil says it's easier now their two youngest children are in their teens. Sabrina will often leave home at 4am to do punishing runs before returning around 10am, often before their kids have even got out of bed.

How much does Sabrina's activism and training shape their lives? "Quite a lot," says Neil, with some understatement. "Before Christmas, I crewed for her doing the Winter Downs 200 [a 200-mile continuous race]. That was four nights sleeping in the car."

The logistics take time, too, he says. "It's the spreadsheet and the kit testing and everything else that people don't necessarily realise." Then there's the emotional impact afterwards. It's similar to Christmas Day, he says. And after it's all finished, she'll say: "What do we plan for now?"

For Neil though, ultimately there's only pride awaiting Sabrina at the finishing line. "That's what I signed up for," he says, "to support what she does."

If only there was a medal for that ●

MATCHMAKING GUARDIAN READERS SINCE 2009

‘What was I looking for? The perfect plus-one for my granny’s 80th’

Blind Date

Agnes
26, classroom leader

What were you hoping for?
A fun date with someone interesting.

First impressions?
A warm smile and kind eyes.

What did you talk about?
How passionate we are about our jobs. Healthcare for trans people. The magical Andrew Scott. Not being from London. Boycotting a certain fish and chip shop.

Most awkward moment?
I was 10 minutes late because I struggled to find the restaurant, but Tom was very gentlemanly about it.

Good table manners?
Very. We grilled our own food at the table (great fun!), and Tom did this so gracefully it made me question the truthfulness of his comment about being an average cook.

Best thing about Tom?
He’s a great conversationalist and seems genuine in his care for other people.

Would you introduce Tom to your friends?
Yes - he is very likable.

Describe Tom in three words.
Warm, fun, attentive.

What do you think Tom made of you?
That my grilling skills aren’t the best, but hopefully that I made up for that by being a fun partner in conversation.

Did you go on somewhere?
We went to a pub for a pint after dinner.

And ... did you kiss?
We didn’t. We hugged goodbye! I think that’s what felt most natural to us.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?
Apart from wishing I’d been on time, I can’t think of much.

Marks out of 10?
8. Tom was a brilliant blind date companion, and I’m glad we were matched. There wasn’t much of a flirty vibe between us, but I still consider it a successful date and a fun evening.

Would you meet again?
I would like that.

Tom
25, NHS service manager

What were you looking for?
To meet the perfect plus-one for my granny’s 80th next week.

First impressions?
Agnes was really easy to talk to; I was quickly confident it would be a great evening in great company.

What did you talk about?
The restaurant gave us a little grill to cook the food ourselves, so there was quite a lot of focus on that. Theatre. Norwegian education. Trans healthcare.

Most awkward moment?
Pretending we were pleased with the photo the passerby took of us.

Good table manners?
Yes, she was really polite about my aversion to seafood. She could have told me to grow up.

Best thing about Agnes?
Agnes’s passion for her interests and willingness to hear about mine.

Would you introduce Agnes to your friends?
Yes, absolutely.

Describe Agnes in three words?
Warm, engaging, fun!

What do you think Agnes made of you?
I hope she enjoyed the conversation as much as I did - it definitely flowed.

Did you go on somewhere?
Yes, to quite a pungent pub.

And ... did you kiss?
We didn’t.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?
I had a lovely evening, it just lacked romantic chemistry. So I’d add that.

Marks out of 10?
8.

Would you meet again?
Not for a date, but definitely as a friend.

Agnes and Tom ate at Parrillan, London N1. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

CHRISTIAN SINIBALDI/THE GUARDIAN

TRUE STORIES OF OUR SEX LIVES

This is how we do it

'Since we've had an open marriage our sexual connection has become far stronger'

Isla, 38

On our second date, 11 years ago, I laid out two things: we have to be open to the idea of children, and we have to be open to being open in some form. I am queer and can't really define myself, so I couldn't see myself being in a closed relationship or committing to one person sexually. I think Benjamin was a bit taken aback by my directness but things grew organically. Today we're married with three small children.

Theoretically, we were open from day one, but in practice we didn't open our relationship until three years ago. Life was just so busy, and like every relationship, in the early days it was very sexually exciting and satisfying.

Opening our marriage didn't come from a place of difficulty, it just felt like a good time to do it. We wanted to come from a place of strength into this, as it can be a big challenge. Both of us are on the Feeld app to date other people, where it's all very transparent. I always make sure that Benjamin is comfortable that I'm going on a date, and that if the other person has a partner, they're happy with it.

Dating other people has added more excitement to the intimacy between Benjamin and me. Having babies threw my desire out the window for a long time. It's hard to work from home, where I also raise my children, then be a sex goddess in bed. But having an open marriage meant I could step away and feel like a sexual being to someone who doesn't see me as a wife, mother, houseperson. It's made me feel as sexual as I was before I had children.

Benjamin and I have sex once a week. We're constrained by time, but it is very passionate, and I realise how fundamental that is to the happiness and the stability of this relationship.

I can see that a little bit of distance creates a mystery that ignites intimacy. We have penetrative sex, and with Benjamin I can always orgasm through penetration. We are so connected, it happens every time. So even with the marriage being open, and with all these possibilities out there, the greatest sex is happening at home at eight o'clock at night while the children are asleep.

Benjamin, 43

When Isla told me she wanted an open relationship, I thought it was a bit unconventional, but I was also impressed. In those first few years, there was no space for interest in anyone else. But after having children, we started to explore what open means. Both of us go on dates with other people about once a month. I'll meet someone on Feeld, go for a coffee to see if we're attracted to each other, then talk about logistics or practicalities: assessing if it will be a safe interaction. If things align, I set up a second date that involves sex in some way.

We've both seen quite a few people. I think our sexual connection as a couple is stronger than anyone else's I know after 11 years together.

Over time in a relationship, you become very comfortable with someone, but it also challenges the sexual chemistry because there's not much left that's unknown. When you're parents, you've got this partnership and there's a job to do. That's a wonderful thing, but it's not a sexy thing.

Introducing other partners reminds me of the person I met before we took on these other roles. That's been a catalyst for our sexual connection. The sex that I enjoy the most is with my wife, which is amazing.

Ultimately, Isla and I would never put other people before each other. Our relationship is very passionate and engaged. With others, the sex can be all sorts of different flavours, whereas we have a physical connection and the emotional, loving connection. I know exactly where to put my body to turn her on, how to bring her to orgasm. I know the different strokes. It's not kinky and there are no fetishes or tricks – it's quite vanilla. But we just get completely lost in each other, and we both climax at the same time.

As told to Naomi Larsson Piñeda

Would you and your partner like to share the story, anonymously, of your sex life? Email sexlives@theguardian.com with a few words about what you get up to in the bedroom

Illustration: Ryan Gillett

You be the judge

My husband wants a manual car, but I'd prefer an automatic. Should he change gear?

Interviews: Georgina Lawton

The prosecution

Julia

I passed my test 14 years ago, but haven't driven much since – and only ever an automatic

Both my husband, Johnny, and I can drive manual cars, but we disagree over whether we should get a manual or an automatic for our first family car.

We have a nine-month-old baby, Rowena, and after years of not owning a car we have decided that we can no longer go without one. I feel strongly that we should buy an automatic, whereas Johnny thinks a manual would be better. His main argument is that it's far cheaper to buy a manual. Since we have just had a baby, money is tight. Looking at prices, there is a big difference (it's about £3,000 between a manual and the automatic car I would like) so I don't disagree with him there.

But I'm a new mum and value comfort and ease. It's also a question of confidence. I am with Rowena at home most of the time, but when I do want to drive, I don't want to feel like I'm trapped because I'm scared of my car. I passed my test 14 years ago, when I was 18, and since then I have only driven on and off, and always in an automatic, except once with a friend's car on a weekend away. I hated all the constant gear switching, and I don't want to go back to that.

Johnny says driving a manual is "like riding a bike – you don't forget", but I think I have forgotten. I would have to have lessons again and that would also be a waste of money.

We live in a big city. If we had an automatic, I would feel more relaxed as I wouldn't have the stress of constant gear shifting in slow traffic. Besides, our baby will often be in the car. I believe my sense of wellbeing and her safety are paramount, so if I'm not comfortable getting into a manual, I don't think I should be forced to do so just to save a few grand.

Though we would be sharing the car, Johnny would be driving it more: he will use it every day to commute, so he thinks he should have a bigger say. But my opinion counts as it's still a shared car. We share chores pretty well, but if I don't like the car, it will put the burden of driving on Johnny. If he's happy with that, then fine, but I know after a while it will grate on him.

The defence
Johnny
A manual car will cost us thousands less – and they are easier and cheaper to maintain, too

Most people in the UK drive a manual transmission car, so if we get one, we won't be in the minority. Julia thinks it's less modern to own a manual but that's not true. We don't live in the US or Australia, where manual cars are not that common. It's still really normal here.

Manual cars are easier to come by in the secondhand car world, too – it seems like there's always a good deal to be had. And now we have Rowena, I'm keen to save money where we can. The make of car we want will cost us thousands less in a manual than the automatic. Manual cars are also generally less maintenance than automatics, and you have greater control when you're driving.

I think it makes for a better driving experience. In my mind, you're not a "real" driver unless you can master a manual as well as an automatic. I know that's not strictly true but it's what my dad taught me when I was learning to drive, and it's just how I feel. Maybe it's a man thing.

I passed my test when I was 18, the same age as Julia, but as I have been driving non-stop since then, I don't really feel a lack of confidence. Julia is a very good driver and she wouldn't need more lessons, but I would be happy to take her out and refresh her skills before she hops in the driving seat.

I think she is panicking because her driving is a bit rusty, but that is an easy fix. It's not the end of the world if we have to get her a few lessons, and that would still be much cheaper than getting an automatic. Also, because I'm the one who will be driving it every day, Julia doesn't need to panic about it yet.

Yes, we would both have access to the car, but she wouldn't drive it much as she's still on maternity leave and would just use it at weekends and in the evenings. I would take her out, with Rowena, and build up her confidence when she's driving. Overall we would save thousands of pounds and it would be largely my car, so it just makes more sense to have a manual. To me it's a no-brainer.

The jury
of Guardian readers

Should Johnny let out the clutch?

Oh Johnny, is this really the hill you've chosen: "Real drivers drive manuals"? Right now, the primary concern is how comfortable and safe your wife feels driving the car and the autonomy she'll have. Don't make her rely on you to drive her around – that way resentment lies.
Tonia, 47

Johnny makes some valid points, but he lost me with the "man thing". Now that he has a baby, it's time to consider the feelings of his partner. The last thing she needs with a young child is worrying about the complexities of a manual gear box.
John, 67

It feels as if Johnny is brushing off Julia's worries. She should be able to take her child out on her own and feel confident doing it. It's unacceptable for him to limit her independence and freedom just to save a few thousand pounds.
Hannah, 27

I think Julia should brave a manual car. It will take probably two hours of lessons for her to get her confidence back, which will cost much less than £3,000. I agree with Johnny's dad: you're not a real driver unless you can drive a manual.
Bola, 32

Automatics are a lot smoother and more pleasurable to drive. You don't want to be stalling all over the shop with a baby in the car. Drop the cash, Johnny – it will be worth it in the end.
Mike, 62

THE VERDICT

Guilty Johnny has all the gears but no idea	4
Not guilty Julia's got the wrong end of the stick	1

You've heard the cases, now you decide ...
Scan to vote on this week's dispute, share your own, or be one of the jury

My daughter took her own life and I can't face talking to anyone about it

Ask
Annalisa Barbieri

A year ago I lost my beautiful daughter, 21, to suicide. It was totally unexpected and from the outside she appeared to be a kind, happy young woman. We knew she had anxieties about life and direction, but we never dreamed it was causing her so much pain. She did it while I was in the house and I discovered her. I tried but could not save her.

I struggle to control my grief. I would join her in an instant, but I need to be here to support my wife and my family. I wake regularly with nightmares of that day. I put on an act in front of people and go to work to distract myself. I sometimes want to scream to tell people what I'm feeling, but I can't.

I'm told regularly to see someone, and I've spoken to my GP, but I can't imagine what speaking with someone like a specialist can possibly do.

I'm seeking advice because I can't face talking about it with anyone.

I am so sorry to hear about your daughter's death. I can feel the pain and anguish in your letter.

I discussed your case with Dr Jo Stubley, a consultant psychiatrist in psychotherapy from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. She felt it was interesting that you are repeating what your daughter did by "letting everyone think everything is OK on the outside and not letting them know how awful you feel on the inside".

Stubley said: "Sometimes, when you lose someone, it's too unbearable to let them go and so you take them inside you. But what you're holding on to is the suicidal part of your daughter, and that may be stopping you from really being able to grieve."

Stubley and I discussed how allowing yourself to grieve may feel as if you are letting your daughter go. This is not uncommon. "To grieve her may seem like letting her go all over again, so it seems better to stay in a state of frozen grief," she said.

In your longer letter, it also seemed you were carrying a lot of guilt – that you had been in the house, that you didn't know, that you couldn't save her. "The terrible thing about guilt when someone dies by suicide," says Stubley, "is that there are those unfinished conversations and you think that if you could have just finished them, you could maybe have done something to stop the person."

When an emotion is so big it threatens to engulf us, it's tempting to try not to process it. Men can find it harder to express feelings of vulnerability. I wonder what you're afraid will happen if you do scream and tell people how you feel. Maybe it would help them help you?

Stubley thought you might consider listening to others who have been through what you're going through. It's important to know you can survive this and live through it and flourish without that being a betrayal.

"Maybe you need to read about [support and advice] before you hear about it from others," she said, and maybe after that you might be ready to talk to your wife and others.

You might find it helpful listening to Difficult Conversations Around Suicide, the podcast I did with Stubley.

She suggested looking at online support such as Sobs – Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, Calm (Campaign Against Living Miserably) and Cruse, and looking up local bereavement services. She also recommended the great free booklet Help is at Hand. Please take a small step today to get help.

If you would like advice on a personal matter, email ask.annalisa@theguardian.com. See guardian.com/letters-terms for terms and conditions

Illustration: Igor Bastidas

Elegant yellow Coreopsis verticillata 'Moonbeam' shares a window box with a 'Thumble's Variety' oregano, purple spikes of Salvia nemorosa 'Caradonna' and silvery Artemisia stelleriana

Box clever

Forget marigolds and busy lizzies: try something a little different in your window boxes this year

Words: Matt Collins

The window box could be considered the last bastion of the bedding plant. Public parks are at last relinquishing their impermanent blocks of double marigold and begonia in favour of perennial informality, yet the window box has seemingly escaped reform, hunkered on inaccessible ledges clutching armfuls of petunia.

Of course, there is good reason for this. With their shallow soil depth and exposed positions, window boxes require robust, low-maintenance plants, and traditional summer bedding has long fitted the bill. But these planters, however compact, are an opportunity for dynamic planting. They are rewarding spaces to garden in, particularly if you don't have any outdoor space, and can provide a vital resource for wildlife.

Even in a modest-sized window box, there is room for successional blooms, evergreen structure and ephemeral sparkle, and there is a surprising number of attractive, hardworking plants that will contend just as well with it spacial and environmental constraints as a pelargonium. If that sounds like hard work, bear in mind that perennial plantings can remain in situ for many years, rather than being laboriously replenished each spring.

But the other incentive is an important one. Many traditional bedding plants – double-flowering begonias, marigolds and busy lizzies, for example – are much-hybridised annuals bred for vibrant colour but which offer little or no accessible nectar for insects. Amid an increasing biodiversity crisis, window boxes can prove genuinely invaluable, impactful resources when planted with pollinators in mind, bringing forage to new and very often nectar-depleted arenas, particularly those that are street-facing. Even the rural village where I live has a deceptively barren high street – it's too narrow for street trees – and in places the pavements are entirely lacking greenery.

This was the motivation for installing my first window box last year, and the subsequent arrival of a bumblebee at the window was sheer joy: unexpected life inhabiting the roadside.

Which planter?

Window boxes come in almost every material – plastic, wood, metal, terracotta. Tastes will vary, but it's best to choose something that will last, withstand frosts and provide at least 25cm of soil depth. Plastic can tick these boxes, and tends to be readily available from second-hand sources, while "fibrestone" planters retain the earthenware feel of stone or terracotta yet weigh a good deal less, which can be handy. Most important is to secure the box firmly in place, with brackets, hooks or a retaining bar or cage along the window ledge.

Prep and planting

A common mistake with window boxes is to opt for drought-tolerant species and then neglect the requisite drainage. Though a container might be shallow, if it has no drainage holes and no layer of grit at the bottom, plants can end up sitting in soggy soil, which is fatal for dry-climate species. Add an inch of gravel or horticultural grit to the planter bottom before filling the remainder with a peat-free compost, leaving room at the top for another layer of grit, which will act as a water-retaining, weed-suppressing mulch. Raising a planter on rubber or terracotta "feet" will also increase drainage.

Superior sills: unusual plants to try in your window planter

For anyone looking to bring environment-minded dynamism to their sunward sills, what follows is a list of particularly robust and ever-giving plants suited to such conditions. They are divided into evergreens for year-round structural form and statement flowers for a long blooming season. Mixing the two can provide interest throughout the seasons. An 80-100cm planter of adequate depth will happily accommodate five or six plants of a one-litre pot size.

As the plants develop, snip foliage that is crowding adjacent plants, and cut back finished herbaceous flowers to encourage new blooms. During the growing season, feeding at intervals with an organic seaweed feed, diluted in a watering can, will restore nutrients to the limited soil. Increase watering in hot, dry weather.

Trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus')
Blooms April-June
Rosemary remains one of the very best structural plants for small containers. Durable, fragrant and attractively floriferous in spring, the cultivar 'Prostratus' (below) has the beneficial trait of trailing foliage. *burncoose.co.uk*

Myrtle spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*)
Blooms April-June
Evergreen euphorbias make fantastic container plants, given their drought tolerance and insect-luring flowers. The acid-yellow colours of compact *E. myrsinites* (below) will enliven a perennial scheme. *bethchatto.co.uk*

Hedge germander (*Teucrium* x *lucidrys*)
Blooms May-July
This hybrid teucrium (below) is surprisingly tough and woody for its height, with aromatic foliage and nectar-rich, pinky-mauve late summer flowers.
ballyrobertgardens.com

***Santolina* 'Edward Bowles'**
Blooms June-July
A cotton lavender cultivar with pale pincushion blooms in midsummer, 'Edward Bowles' (below) brings fine, glaucous year-round foliage.
hardysplants.co.uk

Festuca mairei
Blooms August
This robust, low-growing tussocky grass provides excellent shelter for overwintering insects and turns golden in autumn. Trim back in mid-spring for fresh growth.
barrettsbridge.co.uk

Sicilian chamomile (*Anthemis punctata cupaniana*)
Blooms May-July
Chamomiles are hard-wearing herbs with universally adored daisy-like flowers: cupaniana (below) brings silvery foliage and a compact habit ideal for the window box.
hardysplants.co.uk

Calamint (Calamintha nepeta 'Alba')
Blooms July-September
A mint-fresh aromatic herb (below) boasting an astonishing abundance of long-lasting nepeta-like summer flowers. *jekkas.com*

***Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam'**
Blooms June-September
Words cannot express how much I love this long-flowering, endlessly elegant perennial. Beloved of bees, it has light, finely cut foliage that doesn't smother other plants. *bethchatto.co.uk*

Keeled garlic (*Allium carinatum* ssp *pulchellum*)
Blooms July-August
Unlike many alliums, the narrow leaves of keeled garlic (below) make it a fantastic container plant, with pink flowers clustered on sturdy stems.
baileybordersplants.co.uk

***Origanum vulgare* 'Thumble's Variety'**
Blooms June-August
Talking of insects, oregano is an exceptional source of nectar for a range of butterflies. The yellow-green leaves of 'Thumble's Variety' also break up a predominantly green palette. *bethchatto.co.uk*

Artemisia stelleriana
Blooms June-July
This velvet-leafed member of the wormwood clan has proved a winner in my own window box, where I use it for underplanting the taller perennials with draping silvery foliage.
macplants.co.uk

Cupid's dart (*Catananche caerulea*)
Blooms July-August
This is an excellent cornflower-type perennial (above) bearing narrow leaves and lavender-blue daisies on graceful, airy stems.
shireplants.co.uk

***Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'**
Blooms June-October
As appealing to pollinators as it is to people, the Caradonna is a great salvia, offering long-lasting blooms in vivid violet colours.
crocus.co.uk

***Hylotelephium telephium* 'Purple Emperor'**
Blooms August-September
Purple leaves can add visual contrast to a scheme and the seductively maroon 'Purple Emperor' (below) is great for attracting butterflies and moths. *Hylotelephium* 'Vera Jameson' offers a low-growing alternative for tighter conditions.
claireaustin-hardyplants.co.uk

Spring bulbs
Bloom February-April
Planted in autumn, spring bulbs help lengthen the flowering window of a perennial scheme. Iris reticulata offers bold early colour, while the wild-looking *Tulipa sylvestris* and *T. turkestanica* (below) are among the tulip varieties that are most appealing to pollinators.
farmergracy.co.uk

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MATT COLLINS. TIM GAINEY, BOB GIBBONS/BOTH ALAMY; LEOLA DURANT/GETTY IMAGES; MARIA EVSEYEVA/SHUTTERSTOCK; GAP PHOTOS

I love a summer dress, but this season's two-piece is even hotter

Jess Cartner-Morley
On trends

It is a dress, but it is also – as a bonus ball – a top and a skirt which can be worn separately

You just can't beat a summer dress, can you? A summer dress is more than a frock: it is a flag of cheer, a totem of good times. It is the next best thing to bottled sunshine. Just to see it in your wardrobe lifts you on a rainy day, and when the sun finally shines, the one-and-done ease of a dress makes a great outfit effortless, leaving you free to go forth and enjoy.

Turns out I was wrong. There is something even better than a summer dress. Let me introduce you to this summer's hero: the summer two-piece. It is a dress, but it is also – as a bonus ball – a top and a skirt which can be worn separately. This makes it more versatile than a summer dress, and versatility is key if you want a leaner, harder-working wardrobe. So it is more than a dress – but it is also a better kind of dress, because a dress that divides at the waist is more amenable to sitting right on your specific body shape. A dress is often made or broken by whether the waistband sits right, and that depends on whether you have a long or short torso. With a two-piece, you can simply overlap the two pieces at the waist a little more, or a little less.

But first things first. Let's start with why the dress of two halves is more fun than a one-piece dress: it's simply because it looks cooler. Picture the scene. You spot a woman across the room in a nice summer dress. Then she moves, waves or turns round, and you spot a sliver of skin and realise she's not wearing a dress at all, but rather a top and a skirt that look like a dress. It's just that little bit more modern.

There are some fabulous dresses-of-two-halves around. The Ilana top (£50) by sustainable British brand Aspiga has a shirred neckline that can be worn on or off the shoulder, and a matching tiered Bea cotton skirt (£85) that turns it into a coord. The white polka-dot structured top by Mint Velvet (£99) is the perfect foil to its white polka dot maxi skirt (£129). Zara has a whole online section devoted to two-piece looks: my favourite is the ivory rustic strappy top with tassels (£29.99) and the perforated embroidered midi skirt (£49.99), which together have a pleasingly convincing bought-it-at-the-local-market holiday vibe.

But I really don't want to sound like an evil planet-destroying consumption enabler, tempting you with pretty outfits, so I'm now going to lay down my strict rules for the only circumstances under which you should buy a summer two-piece. Rule one is the diary date test: is there an occasion that's already in your diary – a real thing that you are actually doing – that you instantly want to wear this look to? Not an imaginary party or a fantasy date or an if-I-got-a-new-job, but a real thing in your real life. The diary date test is the best filter for whether the dress will be genuinely useful to you.

Rule two, that must be met before you buy, is specific to the dress-of-two-halves and it is this: you should only buy it if you primarily want to wear it together, as a dress. If you suspect you'd actually wear the top or the bottom more, then just buy that, otherwise you are spending over the odds just for the novelty factor of it being a matching set.

There is a two-piece for you, even if you are not a summer dress person. Two of my favourites are from M&S: the delicious Per Una waistcoat and shorts (blue and white, quilted, £39.50 and £35) and the M&S animal graphic print one-shoulder top and shorts (£19.50 each). I'm also very into this, as a wedding guest outfit – a lemon yellow linen waistcoat (£67) and coordinating trousers (£85) from & Other Stories.

By the way – we are saying coordinating these days, not matching. Matching sounds a bit formal and prissy, and these two-pieces are anything but. They have all the uncomplicated joy of a summer dress, but with a little more bite.

Turns out you can have your cake and eat it after all.

STYLING ASSISTANT: SAM DEAMAN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: SOPHIE HIGGINSON USING BED HEAD AND VICTORIA BECKHAM BEAUTY. FLORAL TOP AND SKIRT: NOBODY'S CHILD. SUNGLASSES: CUTLER

Photography: David Newby. Styling: Melanie Wilkinson

My sisters are home alone – in a house where little functions

Tim Dowling
On modern life

My sisters are visiting from the US. One has arrived ahead of the other, and I've left her in charge because I have to be away for one night.

Before I go I give her a thorough briefing: which key opens what; how to work the coffee machine. I walk her to the tube station where my second sister will arrive the next morning, and then walk her back, testing her on the names of the streets.

I don't mind – I'd want someone to do this for me – but it reminds me how many aspects of my daily existence require detailed instructions. Life seems pretty simple until I have to explain it to someone else.

"You must pull slightly as you turn the key," I say when we reach the house. "Because the door is warped."

"OK," my sister says.

I outline the recycling regime, teach my sister how to overcome the recently de-handled kitchen tap. I show her how to use the washing machine, but during the demonstration I do something that locks the door permanently.

"Oh well," I say. "I'm sure it will open at some point."

The next morning I'm up early to catch a train. I find my sister in the kitchen, failing to make coffee on her first solo attempt.

"The dog sometimes barks from outside in the night," I say. "Because it thinks the cat is on the other side of the flap waiting to pounce."

"OK," my sister says.

"Of course, the cat no longer waits on the other side of the flap," I say, "but the dog doesn't know that."

"This isn't working," she says, handing me the coffee filter. I examine it.

"You have overpacked the grounds," I say.

My wife and I set off at 9am. We have been on our train for about half an hour when I receive the first text.

"The dog whizzed on the hallway floor," my sister writes. "Not sure if that is normal."

"That is normal." I write.

Half an hour later I receive another text from her, explaining that my other sister is convinced she's on the wrong train from the airport.

"Call her," it says.

I call my other sister and tell her not to worry if the carriage display board isn't showing the correct station; it will flash up when the time comes.

"And if for some reason it doesn't stop," I say, "get off at Paddington, cross the platform and go back one."

"OK," she says.

When I came to the UK 30 years ago I was so overwhelmed I could barely function, let alone appreciate London's grimy splendour. As I looked out of the window of a car driven by the woman who would eventually become my wife, I noticed just one thing.

"All these 'To let' signs," I said. "How come no one has thought to deface them so they say 'Toilet'?"

I begin to wonder how much of my sisters' confusion is cultural and how much of it is of my making

"Because no one here is that stupid," my wife-to-be said. I thought: someone that stupid is here now.

What I'm saying is: I remember what it's like to be at sea in a foreign land, unable to make jokes or work a dishwasher. But I don't know which things I wouldn't understand if I were arriving here today.

My phone goes quiet for a while, but the next morning I'm woken up by a fresh text, asking for some pointers regarding the loo.

"No flush happening," it says.

"Give the chain four or five sharp pulls," I write. "If that doesn't work you'll have to get the ladder."

A few minutes later I receive another text that says: "Where is the ladder?"

At this point I'm beginning to wonder how much of my sisters' confusion is cultural – ie, based on an unfamiliarity with high-mounted, chain-pull toilet cisterns – and how much of it is of my making. I tried to fix the loo before they arrived, but I clearly made it worse.

I receive another text, which says: "Do you have rug cleaner?"

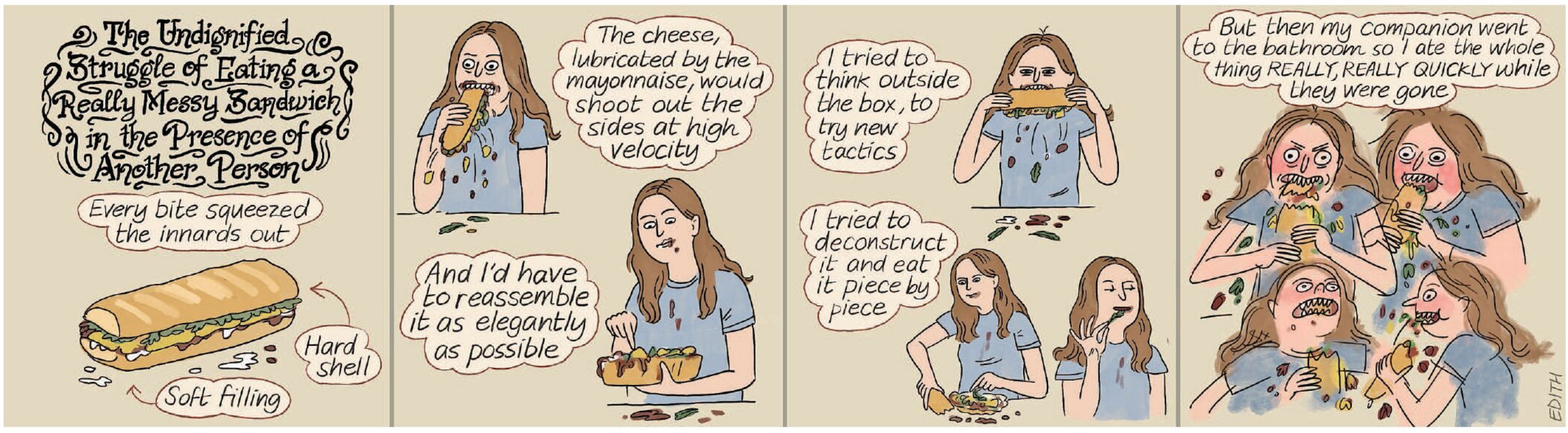
As my wife and I travel back the next afternoon, I'm worried about what I will find at home: two middle-aged American women huddled in one dark room while the alarm sounds and water jets from the hole where the kitchen tap used to be.

My sisters aren't even in when I get there: they're at some pub in the West End. When they do finally turn up they tell a long story about eating lunch in a cafe and then trying to pay with British banknotes from the early 1990s.

"Yeah, that won't work," I say.

"That's what the guy said," my sister says. "But he took 'em in the end."

Edith Pritchett **On millennial life**



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Minimally invasive glaucoma surgery

Mr Imran Masood is a Birmingham-based consultant ophthalmic surgeon, specialising in complex cataract surgery, plus complex and minimally invasive glaucoma surgery.

What is Glaucoma?

Glaucoma is a serious, progressive group of eye diseases, which can lead to blindness. Despite affecting 10% of over 75s in the UK[1], it's relatively unknown. It can be difficult to detect without an eye test as most people experience no early symptoms. Most cases are caused by an increase in eye pressure when the fluid can't drain adequately. Optic nerve damage is irreversible, so early diagnosis is crucial. Lowering the eye pressure is the most effective way to control glaucoma and the only treatment.

Glaucoma Treatment

The most common treatment for glaucoma is prescription eye drops. These may need to be applied up to three times a day, potentially causing compliance issues and limiting efficacy.

An alternative treatment is Trabecular micro-bypass surgery, which involves implanting micro stents into the eye such as iStent inject® W. These are microscopic 0.36mm stents which are implanted into the eye. The surgery is quick, safe and can be performed under needleless anaesthetic at the same time as cataract surgery. The stents help restore natural fluid outflow which, in turn, reduces eye pressure[2].

Imran Masood

A study has shown that 72% of patients who were treated with iStent inject® no longer needed to take glaucoma medication after 12 months[3].

A trabecular micro-bypass surgery case study

In 2019, Mr Imran Masood performed cataract surgery along with insertion of iStent inject® for David Corbett, 83, and his wife Diane, 78. Five years later, they find colours more vibrant, their night vision has improved, and they have controlled eye pressures off medication.

iStent inject® W

For more information on Glaukos and iStent inject® W, visit *glaukos.com/en-uk*

1. Glaucoma: the patient's perspective, by Claire Imrie and Andrew J Tatham.
2. Trabecular micro-bypass stent implantation during small-incision cataract surgery for open-angle glaucoma or ocular hypertension: Long-term results, by Tobias H Neuhann.
3. Prospective, unmasked evaluation of the iStent inject® system for open-angle glaucoma: Synergy trial, by Lilit Voskanan et al.

Confidence in heartburn control

Heartburn is a common condition affecting up to one in four adults in the UK[1]. For some, it's an occasional nuisance; for others, it can be a regular problem which interrupts day-to-day life. Pyrocalm Control 20mg Gastro-Resistant Tablets is the first branded omeprazole 20mg available over the counter without a prescription. It provides up to 24-hour confidence in heartburn control and is used for the short-term treatment of reflux symptoms in adults. Always read the label.

Visit *pyrocalmcontrol.co.uk* for more information.

1. Heartburn and Acid Reflux (Guts UK, 2023).
The reader assumes full responsibility for consulting a qualified health professional regarding health conditions or concerns.

Modern addiction and mental health treatment

The New Life Centre are a family-run clinic providing treatment for mental health conditions plus alcohol and drug addictions along with concurrent treatment of underlying mental health conditions. Set in the beautiful grounds of the 3,000-acre Broughton Hall Sanctuary in North Yorkshire, all their packages of care are bespoke, incorporating clients' needs and wishes for truly personalised care.

Visit *thenewlifecentre.com* to enquire about treatment programmes.

New Life Centre

Extend the life of your wardrobe

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Say 'cedar later' to the sneaky moth larvae eating your jumpers with ecoKiwi's range of natural cedar moth repellents.

It's now time to pack away your winter woollies with ecoKiwi's range of natural cedar repellents. Available in rings, balls and hangers, and now in small and large packs, there's an option for any wardrobe layout.

Just place the moth repellents among your clothes before packing them away, and the natural oils within the cedar effectively help repel the moths from laying their eggs. They'll last many seasons as you can 'refresh' them by giving them a light sand with the sandpaper provided.

ecoKiwi sell a range of other eco products too, including two sets of 100% soy wax candles – one scented, and a new aromatherapy set – aimed at deeper relaxation and hypno-birthing. They are a small company based in Bournemouth and currently all their cedar products are carbon neutral.

Scan the QR to buy online from their *amazon.co.uk* store or visit *ecokiwi.co.uk* to buy directly. Use code ECOKIWI25 to receive 25% off before 31 July.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

Complementary therapies can help to support your health and wellbeing goals – from weight loss and healthy eating, smoking cessation, pain relief and treating minor sports injuries to aiding relaxation and enhancing your general sense of wellbeing.

How can you be confident you are choosing a therapist you can trust?

CNHC's register of practitioners is approved as an Accredited Register by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care (PSA), a body accountable to parliament. This provides additional assurance that CNHC Registrants meet UK-wide standards of patient safety and service quality.

The register covers 18 disciplines: Alexander Technique teaching, aromatherapy, Bowen therapy, colon hydrotherapy, craniosacral therapy, healing, hypnotherapy, kinesiology, massage therapy, microsystems acupuncture, naturopathy, nutritional therapy, reflexology, Reiki, Shiatsu, sports massage, sports therapy, and yoga therapy.

By choosing complementary health practitioners registered with CNHC you can be confident that they are properly trained, qualified and insured.

Choose with confidence. Search for a practitioner on the CNHC's online Accredited Register at *cnhc.org.uk*

CNHC Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council

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● Tailored Treatment Protocols

Recognising that every patient is unique, we prioritise personalised care. Our multidisciplinary team comprises of leading specialists who collaborate to create bespoke treatment plans tailored to each individual's needs. Whether it's varicose veins, leg ulcers, or pelvic congestion syndrome, our approach ensures comprehensive care from diagnosis to recovery.

● Cutting-edge Technology

At The Whiteley Clinic, we harness the latest advancements in venous medical technology to deliver superior outcomes. From minimally invasive to non-invasive procedures, we employ state-of-the-art techniques to achieve optimal results with minimal discomfort and downtime.

● Award-Winning Excellence

Recognised for our unwavering commitment to excellence, The Whiteley Clinic proudly holds the title of 'Best Varicose Veins Treatment in the UK' by Global Health and Pharma for the fifth consecutive year. This esteemed accolade underscores our dedication to superior quality care and innovation in venous healthcare.

● Patient-Centric Approach

At the heart of our practice lies a dedication to patient well-being and satisfaction. From the moment you enter our clinic, you are welcomed into a supportive environment where your concerns are heard, and your journey to health is guided with compassion and empathy. We prioritise open communication, ensuring that you are informed and empowered to make confident decisions about your care.

Experience excellence in venous care today

The Whiteley Clinic continues to attract patients from all over the UK and from abroad. With clinics already open in London, Guildford, Bristol, Poole and Henley-on-Thames, The Whiteley Clinic is planning to open up a series of clinics all over the UK, making access to its specialist services even easier for patients.

For more information, please e-mail The Whiteley Clinic at **info@thewhiteleyclinic.co.uk** or visit **www.thewhiteleyclinic.co.uk**

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GUILDFORD LONDON BRISTOL POOLE HENLEY-ON-THAMES

Some of the UK's overlooked national parks score highly for beauty, wildlife and history. Here are our highlights in the less-famous five

Our quieter national treasures

Words: Roly Smith

Ask most people to name a British national park and they'll probably plump for the Lake District or the Peak District. But there are 15 parks in the UK, most of which receive far fewer visitors than those famous names. Here, we explore some of the best.

Northumberland

'Wild and lonely hills'

The great Whig historian GM Trevelyan once described his native Northumberland as "the land of far horizons", and there are few places left in England where you can gaze across great vistas of beautiful and uninhabited countryside with just the sounds of nature for company.

Northumberland national park has been described as England's Empty Quarter, and with only about 2,000 permanent residents within its boundaries, it is the most sparsely populated park in the country and one of the least visited. It covers 405 square miles of rolling moors and picturesque valleys, stretching from the **Hadrian's Wall** world heritage site in the south to the wild expanses of the **Cheviot Hills** on the Scottish border.

To get a taste of Northumberland's green wilderness, and what faced the unfortunate Roman legionnaires posted to this northern limit of their empire, it's worth visiting the site of the **Chew Green** marching camp, a short walk from Alwinton.

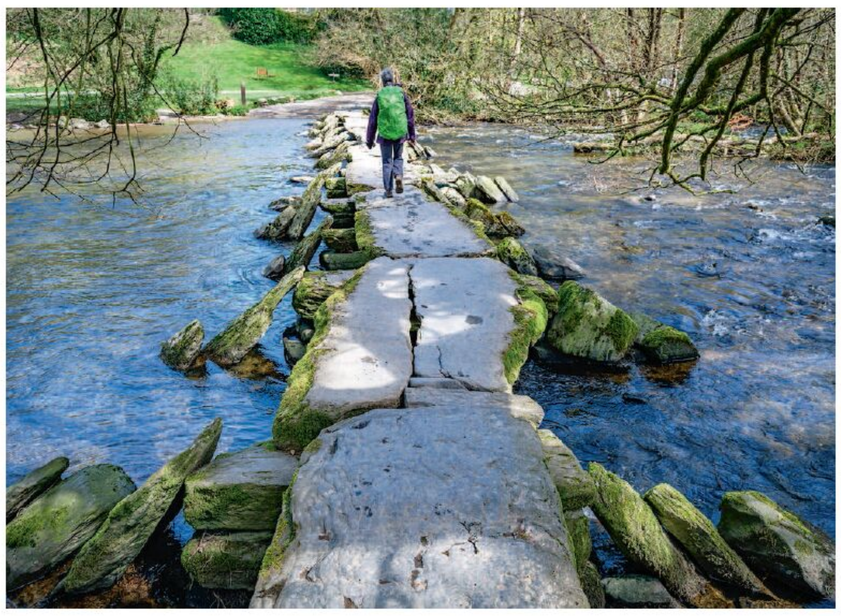
Built around AD80 on the Roman Dere Street, the camp was a staging post for imperial troops marching north. You'll need a bit of what archaeologists call "the eye of faith" to imagine what it must have looked like when thousands of legionnaires were encamped here, because all that is left is a series of low grassy ridges and ditches, best seen in morning or evening light.

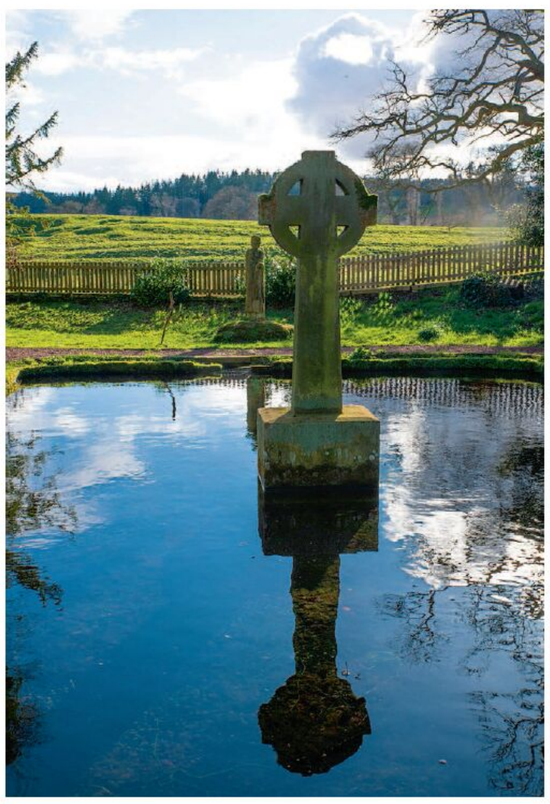
Of course, the Romans were not the first to frequent these wild and lonely hills. One of the most evocative places to walk in the footsteps of those first prehistoric pioneers is at **Lordenshaws,** at the foot of the Simsonside Hills above Rothbury. This is the best-preserved prehistoric landscape in the national park, featuring an iron-age hillfort and one of the finest collections of cup and ring rock carvings found anywhere.

Holystone, on the banks of the River Coquet near Harbottle, takes its name from its mysterious Lady or Holy Well. This tree-embowered pool with a much later Victorian Celtic cross marooned at its centre is thought to be an early Christian site where Saint Ninian baptised his converts. Ninian

DAVERHEAD, BACKYARD PRODUCTIONS/GETTY; STEVE TAYLOR ARPS, PETER REED, ROBERT BAUMANN/ALAMY

Among the highlights of Northumberland national park are the Cheviot Hills, left, pictured from Lordenshaws, and Lady Well, below, which may be an early Christian site of baptism





Beauty spots in Exmoor national park include Tarr Steps, above left, and the stretch of the South West Coast Path near Lynton's Valley of the Rocks, above. Twelfth-century Tretower Castle, left, in Bannau Brycheiniog

was a Scots-born saint credited with bringing Christianity to much of northern Britain, long before the later missionary campaigns of Saints Columba and Cuthbert.

It's a short walk from Bellingham (pronounced "Bellinjum") through glorious oak woodland to reach Northumberland's prettiest waterfall at **Hareshaw Linn**. This lace-like nine-metre cascade – "linn" is the local word for waterfall – is the perfect place to listen out for wood warblers and redstarts.

Of all Northumberland's villages, **Elsdon** has to be the most fascinating. Grouped protectively round its extensive village green, Elsdon has a 14th-century parish church dedicated to Saint Cuthbert, Northumbria's patron saint; a classic fortified pele tower dating from the days of the reivers (borders outlaws); and a perfectly preserved Norman motte and bailey castle at the grass-covered Mote Hills across the Elsdon Burn.
Where to stay The French-inspired Le Petit Chateau (doubles from £125 B&B) in Otterburn has 25 rooms, some with four-posters.

Exmoor

'Jagged rocks like the Isle of Skye'
Exmoor, with its plunging coombes, deep wooded valleys, and crystal-clear streams watched over by brooding moorland, is one of the most intimate and least-visited of our national parks. Among the best places to see what Exmoor looked like before agricultural "improvement" are the extensive commons, such as those at **Challacombe**.

There are no fewer than 12 bronze-age barrows (burial mounds) running north-west along the heather-clad ridge of Challacombe Common on the western fringe of the park. Collectively known as the **Chapman Barrows**, these now fairly insignificant mounds represent a linear cemetery for long-forgotten chieftains who lived 4,000 years ago.

The Valley of Rocks, west of Lynton, is an Exmoor oddity. This little dry valley running parallel to the coast is ringed by jagged outcrops of Devonian rock, and feels as if it belongs more in Skye or the Highlands of Scotland than sleepy Devon. This is especially so when you see the flock of bearded feral goats scampering across the crags.

It is believed to have been created by the coastal erosion of a former extension of the East Lyn River, which now meets the sea at Lynmouth. The valley retains some of its original character, but the addition of a cricket pitch and car park has robbed the area between the crags of some of the primeval wildness it once possessed.

The remains of some prehistoric hut circles have been found in the Valley of Rocks, but perhaps Exmoor's most famous claim to prehistoric fame is the **Tarr Steps** clapper bridge across the River Barle near Withypool. The 55-metre bridge has 17 spans crossing the Barle, and although it is certainly of an ancient design, it is known to have been rebuilt several times after the massive slabs were swept away by flood water.

A much gentler scene is presented by peaceful **Woody Bay** just along the coast from the Valley of Rocks. Once destined as a possible holiday resort, mercifully it is now a quiet backwater. The stream of Hanging Water runs down through thickly wooded cliffs to a lovely little waterfall that empties into the sea.

Seating only 33 people, **Culbone church** is thought to be the smallest parish church in England. It is unusually dedicated to the seventh-century Welsh saint Beuno. The original church probably dates from those Saxon times, but it has a 13th-century porch and a late 15th-century nave. The total length of the church is 10.7 metres and the nave is just 3.8 metres wide.
Where to stay Tarr Farm Inn (doubles from £180 B&B) is a 17th-century hostelry with nine rooms and award-winning food.

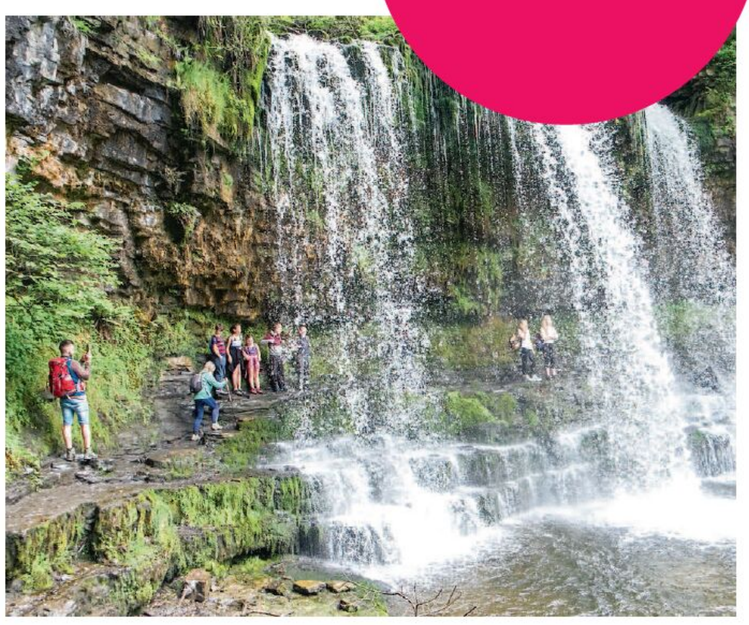
Bannau Brycheiniog (formerly Brecon Beacons)

'Legends, lakes and waterfalls'
Bannau Brycheiniog (the peaks of Brychan's kingdom) national park is the highest ground in Britain south of Snowdonia and forms the centrepiece of the 519-square-mile region formerly known as the Brecon Beacons.

The Bannau, as they are known locally, have been a vital lung and escape for generations of miners and their families in the former coalmining valleys of south Wales since the last century, and the vast majority of the park's 4.4 million annual visitors still come from there.

The Bannau's Waterfall Country in the limestone belt on the southern edge of the park is one of its lesser-known attractions. The series of eight waterfalls near the hamlet of **Ystradfellte** are the finest, including the beautifully named Sgwd yr Eira ("spout of snow"), which forms a dancing curtain behind which you can walk without getting wet.

Llyn y Fan Fach is a mysterious, hidden lake cradled by the huge sweeping precipices of Bannau Sir Gaer (749 metres), one of the highest points of the Black Mountain (Mynydd Du), in the wild west of the park.



Sgwd Yr Eira (Spout of Snow) waterfall, above, in Bannau Brycheiniog; below, Rothiemurchus forest in the Cairngorms

The legend of the Lady of the Lake concerns a young farmer's son from the nearby village of Myddfai who, as he rested by the rocky lake shore, was amazed to see a beautiful young girl emerge from the lake. He immediately fell in love with this vision of loveliness and vowed to marry the fairy princess. However, she warned the lad that if he struck her without cause three times, or touched her with cold iron after they were married, she would return to the lake. Inevitably, that's what happened.

Perched romantically atop a great limestone crag nearly 90 metres above the River Cennen near Llandeilo, the dramatic, broken-toothed silhouette of **Castell Carreg Cennen** dominates the skyline for miles. The earliest castle was probably the work of a Welsh prince, but the imposing ruins you see today were built by a later marcher lord named John Giffard as a demonstration of his wealth and influence.

Visitors can get an idea of the way in which a medieval castle gradually developed into a fortified manor house at the little-visited **Tretower Court and Castle** on the A479 near Crickhowell. At its centre is Tretower Castle, built around the beginning of the 12th century in motte and bailey style and eventually replaced by the existing circular stone shell keep. Next door is the magnificent Tretower Court, a fortified manor house famed for its exquisite woodwork.

The Bannau always seems to have attracted visionaries and eccentrics. Author Bruce Chatwin captured the essence of the hamlet of **Capel-y-Ffin** in the remote Vale of Ewyas in his haunting 1982 novel On the Black Hill, a story about two bachelor brothers that Chatwin wrote after a stay on a local farm.

Capel-y-Ffin was also associated with two more enigmatic figures. Inspired by visions of the Virgin Mary, self-styled Father Ignatius was a 19th-century Anglican monk who built a short-lived monastery here. The monastery, now a private house, was later the home of the controversial artist and typographer Eric Gill.
Where to stay The Bear Hotel (doubles from £149 B&B) in Crickhowell is a 15th-century coaching inn with restaurant and 35 rooms.

Cairngorms

'A cornucopia of wildlife'

Britain's largest national park is also the coldest, highest and one of the least visited. The 1,748 square mile park receives nearly 2 million day visitors a year, a similar number to Exmoor, which is less than a sixth of the size. So if you really want to escape the crowds, this is the place for you. The lofty central Cairngorm plateau encompasses more land higher than 1,000 metres above sea level than anywhere else in the country, and in winter is the closest Britain comes to Arctic conditions.

It's a bit of a trek to get there from **Mar Lodge estate**, the National Trust for Scotland's nature reserve, and should only be attempted by experienced hillwalkers, but the steely grey waters of **Loch Etchachan**, below Ben Macdui (Britain's second-highest mountain), give a real taste of the semi-Arctic Cairngorms. At more than 900 metres above sea level, Loch Etchachan is the highest lake in the UK, and chilly enough to put off any but the bravest wild swimmer.

The **Linn of Dee** was apparently one of Queen Victoria's favourite picnic spots when she stayed at Balmoral. It's where the infant River Dee is channelled through a narrow cleft in the rocks via a series of crashing waterfalls on the Mar Lodge.

If you are as lucky as I was on my last visit, you may witness glistening, silver-sided salmon leaping and twisting their way up the foaming waterfalls on their incredible, and ultimately final journey to their spawning grounds upriver. It's a sight to thrill the senses.

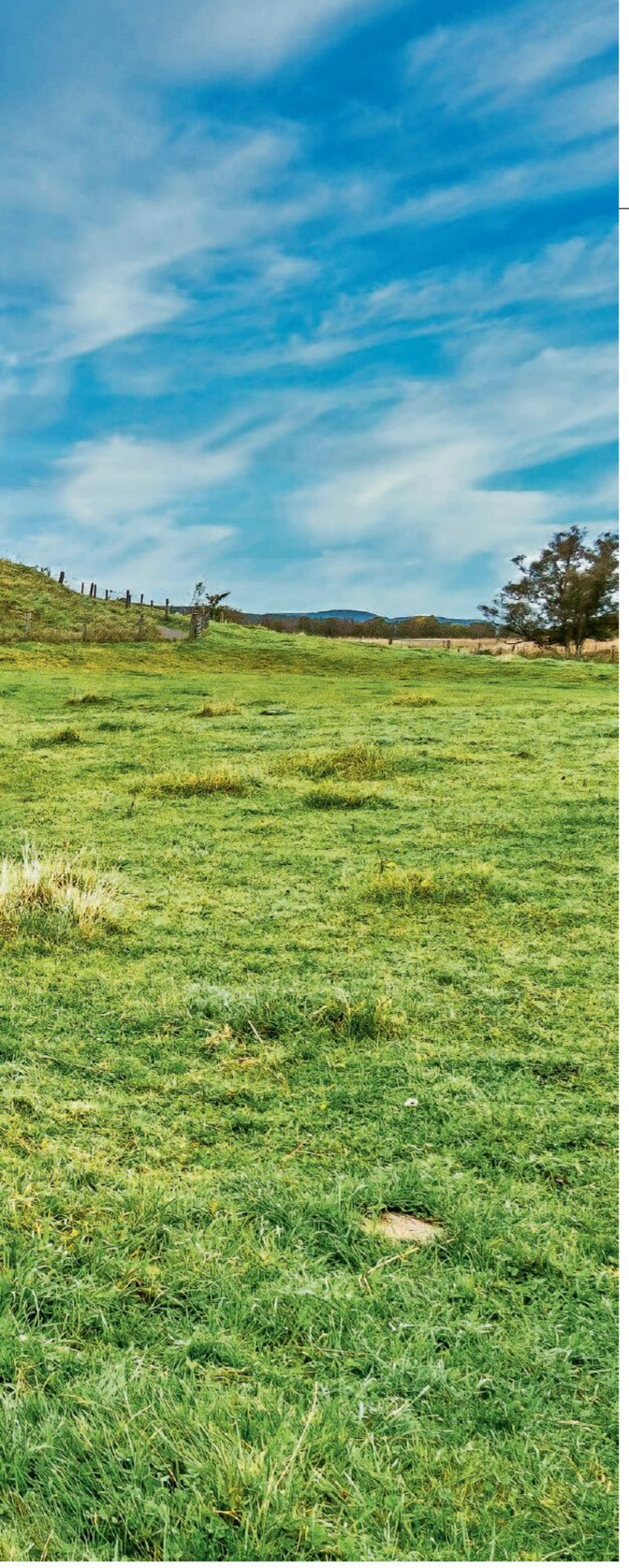
They call the massive, thick-trunked Scots pines of the **Rothiemurchus Forest** "granny pines", because some of them are more than three centuries old. And they are nothing like the spindly pines of the south: these venerable giantesses are what's left of the ancient Caledonian Forest, with wide, spreading crowns and a beautiful, salmon-pink bark that glows in the setting sun.

They are home to a cornucopia of wildlife, including the rare and elusive capercaillie (a Gaelic name that translates as "horse of the woods"), with its guttural, almost alcoholic-sounding, popping-a-cork call; the red squirrel, which finds a stronghold here among the protective "grannies"; and a rare finch, the Scottish crossbill, high up in the spreading branches.

The return of ospreys at **Loch Garten**, near Abernethy, is a great Cairngorm success story. They had been extinct in Scotland since 1899, but a Scandinavian pair was seen nesting atop a dead tree by Loch Garten in 1959, and the RSPB decided the best way to protect them from egg thieves was to use the public as watchdog wardens.

So it set up an observation centre about a quarter of a mile from the nest, but with a clear view of it, aided by CCTV cameras. There are now thought to be between 250 and 300 breeding

PAUL QUAYLE, JOHN BRACEGIRDLE, ALLAN HARTLEY, ISLANDSTOCK/ALAMY; STEVE GOACHER/GETTY



A Highland cow appears to be guarding 12th-century Castle Roy, left, at Nethy Bridge in the Cairngorms; Captain Cook's Monument, right, and an expanse of heather, below, in the North York Moors

pairs of ospreys in Scotland.

Although peaceful enough today, the straths, glens and corries of the Cairngorms were the scene of bitter warfare between the clans and the Hanoverian English Crown 300 years ago. This is vividly illustrated by the substantial hilltop roofless ruins of the **Ruthven Barracks**, alongside the B970 between Kingussie and Drumguish. Following the uprising of 1715, this former clan stronghold was converted into barracks for 120 troops and 28 horses in 1721, in an attempt to subdue the rebellious Highlanders.

Where to stay The Mountview Hotel (doubles from £120 B&B) in Nethy Bridge has 11 rooms and a restaurant for residents only.

North York Moors

'A purple sea of rolling heather'

The high shoulder of the North York Moors, midway down the east coast of Britain, is usually among the first to be hit by winter snowstorms as they funnel down the North Sea from the Arctic. But in late summer, the bleak expanse of the high moors is replaced by a royal-hued purple sea of rolling heather - the finest display of this hardy moorland plant in the country. Heather moorland covers about 35% of its 554 square miles, and was one of the main reasons for its designation as a national park in 1952.

A good way to appreciate the topography of the North York Moors is to stop at the convenient layby on the A169 Malton to Whitby road, where you get a grandstand view of the heather-fringed **Hole of Horcum**. This 120-metre-deep cauldron was created when springs welling up from the hillside gradually undermined the slopes above, eroding the rocks.

Mallyan Spout, near Goathland, is the highest and prettiest waterfall in the national park, and a short walk from the village. This 21-metre slender cascade in the West Beck is carpeted with lush mosses and lichens, and set in deep ancient woodland.

Meanwhile, **Farndale**, which is surrounded by some of the wildest moorland in England, is renowned for its springtime display of wild daffodils. The three-mile walk between the two hamlets of Low Mill and Church Houses on the banks of the River Dove is a delightful stroll through those golden-trumpeted harbingers of spring.

In his guide to England's Thousand Best Churches, author and Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins characterises **St Mary's Church** in Lastingham, near Kirkbymoorside thus: "Some churches are a challenge to the faithful. Lastingham is a challenge to the faithless."

The mainly 11th-century building is remarkable for its unique, cell-like crypt, which has two Romanesque aisles, a chancel and an apse. Whatever your religion or lack of it, it's a place where it seems the very air you breathe is redolent with ancient sanctity.

Although he is usually associated with the seaside town of Whitby, the 18th-century round-the-world explorer James Cook is most prominently commemorated in the 18-metre high sandstone monolith of the **Captain Cook's Monument** on Easby Moor, above his birthplace at Great Ayton.

The Cook family moved to Great Ayton in 1736 and James went to school in the little building that is now the Captain Cook Schoolroom Museum. The explorer's original cottage in Bridge Street was dismantled, shipped across the world to Australia - perhaps Cook's most famous "discovery" - and rebuilt in Melbourne in 1934.

Where to stay: The Fox and Hounds (doubles from £129) in Ainthorpe is a 16th-century inn offering 10 bedrooms and a restaurant.

Roly Smith's latest book is Short Walks to Curious Places (Conway/ Bloomsbury, £20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com

Readers' travel tips
National park trips

Winning tip
Legendary chasm, Peak District

My favourite walk features two wonderful sites: Lud's Church and The Roaches. The route offers a captivating blend of natural beauty and historical intrigue. Lud's Church is a deep, moss-covered chasm, rich in legends and a tranquil escape into nature. Nearby, the Roaches are dramatic gritstone ridges with panoramic views. The area's geology and lush greenery make it a paradise for walkers. **Everly**

Pembrokeshire beaches

When visiting the Pembrokeshire national park be sure to visit Stackpole, with its beautiful coast, wooded valleys, lily ponds and walking trails. Then venture down to the wonderful beach at Barafundle Bay. We love to visit the beach with a picnic on a warm summer's evening. **Jan**

A scramble up Tryfan, Eryri

Rain, sun, or snow, there is beauty everywhere in Eryri. Yes, there is the big one, Snowdon (Yr Wyddfa) that everyone wants to conquer but there is also Tryfan. You won't find a cafe, signpost or train on this 917-metre peak, just a scramble up a "path" of your choosing. There's an incredible view and, if you're feeling brave, a jump between the two rocks of Adam and Eve (Sion a Siân) at the summit. **Dan**

A quiet corner of the New Forest

Take one of myriad paths among the ponies on Rockford Common, just outside Ringwood. Within a couple of minutes of leaving the car park you will be on your own and able to wander for hours while enjoying the smell of the gorse and the wide, open views across the common. **Tracy Jordan**

Borrowdale bus, Lake District

Travel on the open-topped bus from Keswick to Seatoller and take in Borrowdale, passing through the "loveliest square mile in Lakeland" according to Alfred Wainwright. For true peace and quiet, walk from Mungrisdale to Bannerdale Crags and Blencathra while admiring those brave enough to take on Sharp Edge. **Katharine**

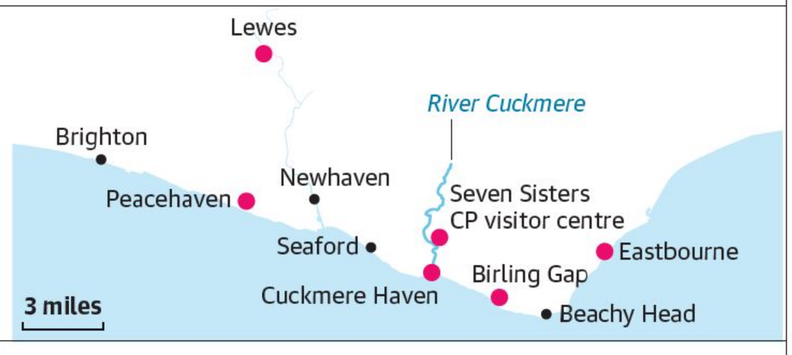
To enter our readers' tips competition and see the terms and conditions, visit theguardian.com/readers-travel-tips (you must be a UK resident to enter). The week's best tip, chosen by Tom Hall of Lonely Planet, wins a £200 voucher to stay at a Coolstays property. This is a selection of tips: see more on our website

coolstays

A trio of newly restored farm cottages within Seven Sisters country park offer visitors a 'totally immersive' South Downs experience

Magnificent Seven

Words: Joanne O'Connor



From the pebble beach at Cuckmere Haven, it's a steep climb up a well-trodden track to get up on to the cliffs but the reward is one of the most exhilarating views the British coast has to offer – the dazzling white chalk faces of the Seven Sisters stretching into the distance. I have seen these cliffs in sunshine, mist and rain, from above, below and from the sea, and they never fail to make my heart beat faster. Below us lies the Channel, a soft milky blue this morning, the hazy shape of a ferry fading into the horizon like a ghost ship. Behind us is rolling grassland as far as the eye can see.

These are the "blunt, bow-headed, whale-backed Downs" that Rudyard Kipling conjured so vividly in his poem Sussex, written in 1902 when he was living with his family in nearby Rottingdean. Kipling would still recognise this landscape, "half-wild but wholly tame", but it could so easily have been a different story.

Ten miles west of here is Peacehaven, a sprawling cliff-edge development of bungalows, built on land that was parcelled up as cheap housing plots after the first world war. Fearing that a similar fate lay in store for the rest of this coastline, a group of local campaigners founded the Society of Sussex Downsmen in 1924 and raised the money to buy 200 hectares (480 acres) of land between Seaford and Eastbourne from a building syndicate. The land was then handed over to the National Trust. Kipling's poem was used as a call to arms in one of the fundraising pamphlets.

Today, the white cliffs and downland come under the protective umbrella of Seven Sisters country park, one of the last stretches of undeveloped coast in the south-east. Three years ago, ownership of the park was transferred from East Sussex county council to the South Downs national park authority, bringing another layer of protection and some much-needed investment. About £2m has been spent so far upgrading the visitor centre, managing the chalk grassland to improve biodiversity and converting three 19th-century farm cottages into self-catering accommodation – the first of its kind within the park. We are going to be the first guests in one of the newly renovated cottages.

While the rest of my family settle in, I've arranged to meet ranger Lawrence Leather for a quick tour of the country park. It's a sunny bank holiday weekend and the visitor centre, cafe and car parks are heaving. We turn off the main coast road and bump down a steep slope in the Land Rover, Lawrence pointing out egg-yolk yellow cowslips nodding in the grass and a buzzard taking flight.

He tells me this chalk grassland is one of the most important habitats in the UK, where more than 30 different species of plant and insect can be found in one square metre. "The priority has been to rest overgrazed grassland in summer to encourage the return of wildflowers," he says. This in turn supports an astonishing array of plants, insects and birds, including bee orchids, adonis blue butterflies and skylarks.

We stop to admire the camping field and recently refurbished camping barn, which sleeps up to 35 and has just reopened with brand-new kitchen and bathroom facilities. Previously, visitors wanting to stay overnight in Seven Sisters would have had to camp or book into one of the five B&B rooms available at Saltmarsh Farmhouse, next to the visitor centre. The new cottages mean a different kind of holiday is now possible.

Lawrence drops me off at the garden

Water meadows and a meander in the River Cuckmere, left, as it nears the coast; chalk downland is home to species such as adonis blue butterflies, right

COLDSNOWSTORM AND PAUL MANSFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY, BOTH GETTY; DANIEL GREENWOOD, SAM MOORE, BOTH SDNPA

The Seven Sisters cliffs and Cuckmere Haven from the Seaford Head path, which passes a terrace of coastguard cottages

gate of Redshank Cottage. In a sheltered valley behind the cliffs, it's the largest of three flint cottages that make up the Foxhole farmstead, which is believed to date from the 17th century. The cottages have been designed to offer a "totally immersive South Downs experience" and to this end, no cars are allowed in. Guests have to leave vehicles at the visitor centre a mile away, and luggage transfers are available at the start and end of their stay.

Nor are there TVs, dishwashers or washing machines. What there is though is something far rarer: total peace and seclusion with no road noise or street lights, and a sense of complete escape from the outside world. Redshank sleeps six, and has a wonderful farmhouse kitchen with a long pine table, a cosy sitting room with woodburning stove, board games, binoculars and lots of maps and books, and three comfortable bedrooms with views on to a secluded back garden or towards the Downs.

From the cottage it's a 10-minute walk along a paved path to the beach at Cuckmere Haven, where the River Cuckmere meets the Channel. The walk takes us past shallow lagoons where a white egret and a solitary heron stand sentinel. Their stillness contrasts with the steep banks that lead up to the cliffs, which are alive with dozens of tiny rabbits, darting in and out of their warrens.

The South Downs is the UK's newest national park, designated in 2010. It's also the most populous – and one of the most popular. On a warm Saturday afternoon the beach is busy with picnicking families, rucksack-laden schoolchildren on Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, walkers passing through on the South Downs Way and day trippers in search of the perfect Seven Sisters selfie. One of the perks of staying on site at such a popular beauty spot is the "after hours" access. As the sun starts to dip, the beach begins to empty, and it's hard not to feel a little bit smug knowing that we will shortly have this magical place to ourselves.

Up early the next morning, we're happy to be the first people up on the clifftop; it's just us and a handful of free-roaming shetland ponies. It takes just over an hour to walk the length of the Seven Sisters, over the rollercoaster dips and brows of the cliffs, with the sea to our right and the wind at our backs.

The chalk was formed under an ancient sea when dinosaurs still roamed the Earth, and is full of the fossils of tiny marine creatures. As well as geological layers, there are layers of human history visible too, from second world war pillboxes to the coastguard cottages perched above Cuckmere Haven, playing a game of dare with the rapidly eroding cliff edge.

By the time we get to Birling Gap, our legs are heavy and our boots covered with chalk dust. The Coaster bus that runs between Brighton and Eastbourne stops here, so we catch a ride back to Seven Sisters visitor centre. After a pub lunch in the village of Litlington, we walk back across the marshes to our cottage, catching sight of a hare streaking across the grass at full pelt in the late afternoon sunlight.

Later, we step outside to take a final look at the stars. The South Downs national park is a designated international dark sky reserve, which means light pollution is kept to a minimum, and on a clear moonless night, the stars feel so close you can almost touch them.

Accommodation was provided by Cuckmere Cottages: Kestrel sleeps two from £175 a night; Redshank sleeps six from £225 a night (two-night minimum), cuckmerecottagesandcamping.co.uk

Renovated cottages at the Foxhole farmstead in Seven Sisters country park

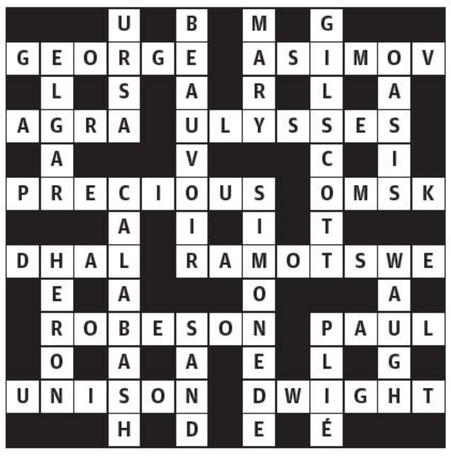
Puzzle solutions

(puzzles on page 78)

Answers to quiz
by Thomas Eaton

1 *Post Office Horizon.*
2 *Lake Baikal.*
3 *Jimmy Stewart.*
4 *Brazil.*
5 *Harold Wilson.*
6 *Harry Potter.*
7 *Zebra.*
8 *Jorvik Viking Centre.*
9 *String quartets (number written).*
10 *Birds that migrate to the UK from Africa.*
11 *Agony aunts.*
12 *French language newspapers outside France: Canada; Belgium; Algeria; Senegal, Canada and Luxembourg.*
13 *Businesses that featured on Dragons' Den.*
14 *Titular fictional men: The Invisible Man; The Music Man; The History Man; The Third Man; The Quiet Man.*
15 *Depicted on £5 notes: Winston Churchill; Elizabeth Fry; George Stephenson; Duke of Wellington.*

Answers to Weekend Crossword
by Sy



The kids' quiz

Molly Oldfield

This quiz answers questions posed by children – will you get a better score than your parents?

1 Osian, 8, asks: how do we make paper from trees?
A Paper is made from leaves dried for a long time
B The tree gets broken down into a mushy pulp, which is spread out flat and dried, making paper
C The tree is shaved with an incredibly sharp knife, and these shavings are neatened into paper
D There is a tree called the Paper Tree, which grows ready-made pieces of paper

2 Nova, 6, asks: why are some plants poisonous?
A No plant is poisonous! Anything growing naturally is good for you
B Plants become poisonous when they haven't been cared for properly
C Because they were planted by an evil witch
D To protect themselves from getting eaten

3 Eloise, 5, asks: why can we see the moon if it's not a light?
A It is a light! The moon is burning all the time
B The rock the moon is made of glows powerfully
C The sun's light reflects off the moon's surface
D It's made of cheese, which shines in the dark

4 Edko, 4, asks: how deep can you dig down into planet Earth?
A About 12 metres down
B About 12,000 metres
C About 1,200 metres
D About 120,000 metres

5 Esther, 6, asks: how many cows are there in the world?
A Between 1 billion and 1.5 billion
B Between 1 million and 1.5 million
C About 15 trillion
D About 150,000

ILLUSTRATION: HENNIE HAWORTH

Answers (no peeking!)

1 *B. First the tree gets chopped up into little chips, then these chips are softened into a mushy pulp by using chemicals that break down the fibres or by grinding them with machinery. This pulp is then washed, bleached, spread out flat and dried, making paper.*

2 *D. Plants can't run away from potential predators, so some have become poisonous for self-defence. This puts animals off munching them!*

3 *C. The moon doesn't create its own light, but reflects light from the sun off its surface, which is why we're able to see it. The moon is bright enough that you can see it during the day or night, as long as it's in the right part of the sky.*

4 *B. The deepest hole humans have managed to dig is the Kola Superdeep Borehole in Russia, which is 12,262 metres deep – deeper than Mount Everest is tall.*

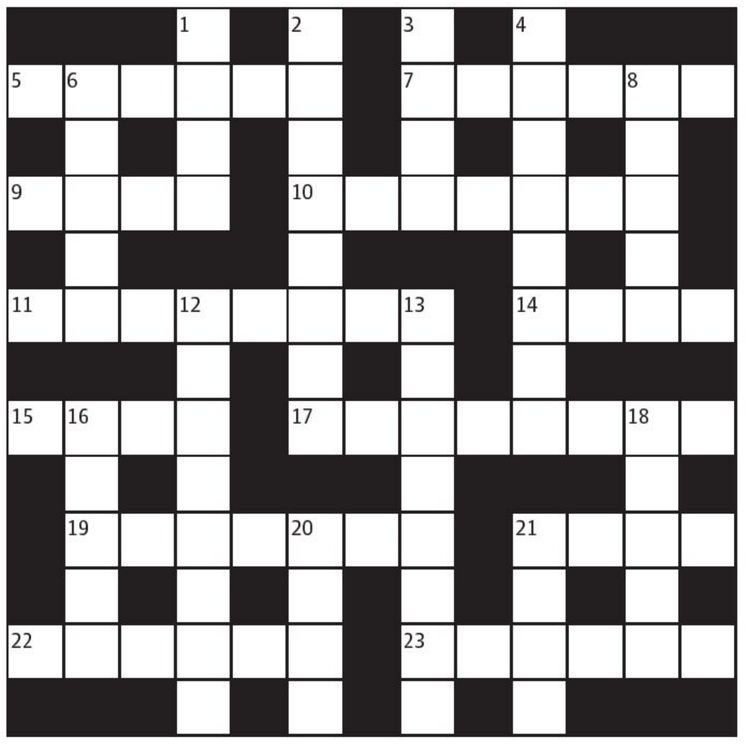
5 *A. According to the US Department of Agriculture, there were about 1 billion cows in 2022, but the Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates there are closer to 1.5 billion cows worldwide! That's a lot of cowpats.*

Molly Oldfield hosts Everything Under the Sun, a weekly podcast (and book) answering children's questions. Does your child have a question? To submit one, scan the QR code above

Scan the code to send Molly a question for a future quiz

Weekend crossword

Sy



Across

5/20 19th-century French author, otherwise known as Amantine Dupin (6,4)
7 Isaac ....., prolific author of science fiction, including I, Robot (6)
9 Indian city, home to the Taj Mahal (4)
10 Poem by Tennyson – or a novel by Joyce (7)
11/17 Alexander McCall Smith's Number 1 ladies' detective? (8,8)
14 Russian city known for its many universities (4)
15 South Asian dish made with lentils (4)
17 See 11
19 See 21
21/19 American singer and activist, and a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance (4,7)
22 Trade union representing primarily public sector workers (6)
23 ..... D Eisenhower, soldier and president (6)

Down

1 The Latin for bear (4)
2 See 13
3 There's Something About ....? (4)
4/16 Jazz musician whose revolution would not be televised? (3,5-5)
6 Edward ....., composer whose works include the Enigma Variations (5)
8 Rock band featuring the Gallagher brothers (5)
12 Vine whose fruits are used as gourds (8)
13/2 Author of The Second Sex (6,2,8)
16 See 4
18 Mark and Steve ....., twins who played cricket for Australia (5)
20 See 5
21 Ballet movement in which knees are bent and body still (4)

Solutions to Crossword and Thomas Eaton's quiz *page 77*

Quiz

Thomas Eaton

1 Computer Weekly exposed which scandal in 2009?
2 Which lake contains about one-fifth of the fresh water on Earth's surface?
3 Which actor flew combat missions in the second world war and Vietnam?
4 Grupo Globo is a media giant from which country?
5 Which 20th-century prime minister won four general elections?
6 What phenomenon was launched by Bloomsbury on 26 June 1997?
7 The quagga is an extinct species of which mammal?
8 Which attraction is built on the site of the Coppergate archaeological dig?
What links:
9 Beethoven (16); Brahms (3); Haydn (68); Elizabeth Maconchy (13)?
10 Cuckoo; house martin; nightingale; osprey; turtle dove; swallow; swift?
11 Ironside; Kurtz; Raeburn; Rayner; Sanders; Stoppard?
12 La Presse; Le Soir; El Watan; Le Quotidien?
13 Gripit; Reggae Reggae Sauce; Skinny Tan; Tangle Teezer; Trunki?
14 Griffin; Harold Hill; Howard Kirk; Harry Lime; Sean Thornton?
15 Houses of Parliament; Newgate prison; Skerne Bridge; Salamanca?

Stephen Collins

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