

4 AUGUST 2024

The Observer Magazine



Creating a stink

Meet the people boycotting their water bills and risking legal action to bring an end to pollution

'We need to be seen'
The deaf actor taking Shakespeare's Globe by storm

Life after #girlboss
How women are doing ambition on their own terms

Nigel Slater
Chutneys, stews, puds... Making the most of plums

Ask Philippa
'How can I find love after my brother bullied me?'

Peace and relaxation? Yesssss please.

Book Happy with TUI-owned hotels
designed just for adults.



The Observer Magazine



28

In this issue

Up front

5 Eva Wiseman The fantasy lives of the “tradwives”. Plus, the *Observer* archive
7 This much I know Comic Ben Elton

Features

8 Up the creek If the water companies aren't up to the job, why should we pay them? Meet the campaigning refuseniks
12 Having it all After the girlboss era, today's women are reclaiming the right to be as ambitious as they want
16 Queen of the Globe Nadia Nadarajah on portraying Shakespeare's greatest heroines – as a deaf actor
20 Finding answers Jay Flynn, who shot to fame as a quizmaster during lockdown, opens up about his homeless years

Food & drink

22 Nigel Slater Sweet and savoury plum recipes, plus blackberry almond croissants
26 Jay Rayner A restaurant in Newbury that dishes up plenty of excitement. Plus, nostalgic chocolate and coastal wines

Fashion

28 Notebook Embroidered shirts for men and striped bags for sunshine days

Beauty

29 Cheek chic The new liquid blushers, plus an oil cleanser you'll covet

Interiors

30 Erotic review A “porno chic” home gallery in Milan that doesn't fail to titillate

Travel

32 Island odyssey Exploring the Cyclades, from tranquil Tinos to lively Mykonos

Self & wellbeing

36 Perfect harmony How to truly open up your ears to the sounds of the world

Ask Philippa

38 “Being bullied by my brother has ruined my chances of being loved.” Plus, Sunday with DJ Reggie Yates



16



22



32



30

Contributors

Writer, editor and teacher **Caspar Henderson's** *A Book of Noises* (Granta), was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize.



He likes running and singing, but not at the same time. He lives in Oxford and, this week, writes about listening to the world (p36).



Anna Fielding is a writer and editor. During her career she has written on a wide range of subjects, from flooded rivers to British cheerleaders.

She has also interviewed Hillary Clinton and Malala Yousafzai, among many others. This week, she interviews the water bill refuseniks who are demanding an end to the UK's sewage crisis, for our cover story (p8).

It was in his teenage years, driven by his inability to draw, that **Michael Clement's** photography journey began. His work captures the nuances of human emotion, offering insight into diverse realities and connecting with people he might not otherwise meet. His subjects range from musicians to politicians. See his work in our feature on p8 – and on the cover.



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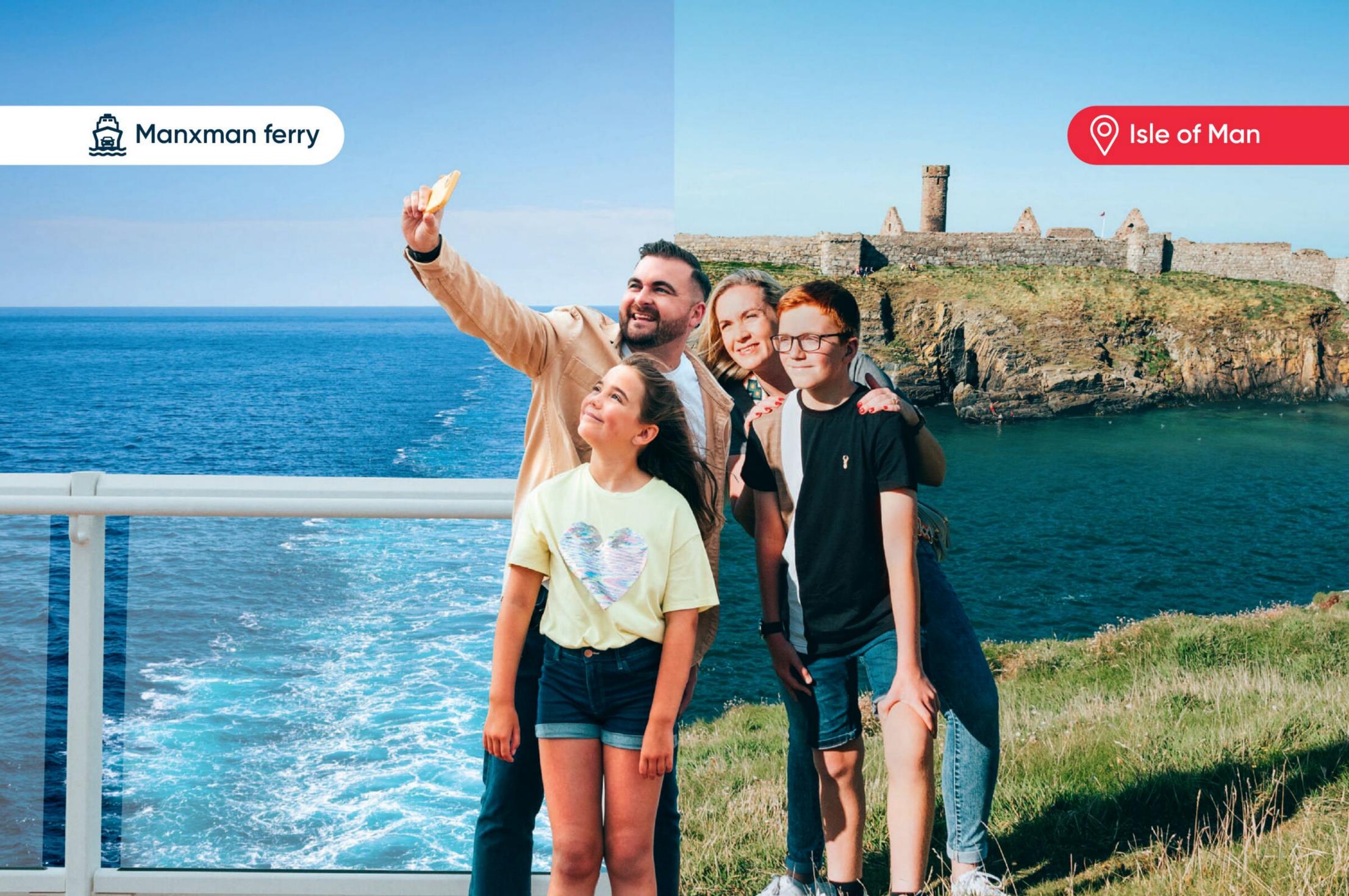
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Eva Wiseman

Why the siren call of the 'tradwife' fantasy is so compelling



@evawiseman

The problems with the rise of the “tradwife” are dense and many, from their fascist undertones to their regressive gender politics, but the one that is most unnerving, most irritating, and most difficult to articulate, is that they make this life look so bloody *delicious*.

Tradwives are women who live, online and sometimes in Utah, as idealised homemakers. They cook, clean, raise children, and then perform and document these tasks (tasks more often, of course, taken on by those living in poverty), gaining millions of followers and dollars along the way. Last weekend, the *Sunday Times* profiled Ballerina Farm, the brand name of Hannah Neeleman who is a Mormon dancer turned beauty pageant winner, homesteader, mother of eight and, with about 18m followers across Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, the undisputed queen of tradwives. She’s famous for baking pies, milking cows straight into her coffee cup and giving birth by candlelight before competing in the “Mrs World” pageant 12 days later.

Though men remain largely absent in the tradwife’s public-facing fantasy, Neeleman’s husband, the heir to an airline fortune, was all-too vocal in this recent interview – “We’re on His [God’s] errand a little bit,” Daniel said. “We’re on His errand a little bit,” she repeats. Neeleman’s life as depicted online, and that of her peers, is mesmerising, in that sinking, near-deathly way (“Come a little closer Eva, towards the light, can you hear the voices calling?”), but the tradwife I find myself watching the most is 22-year-old model, chef and mother Nara Smith. Her videos are *nutty*. In white couture, she explains that she is going to make, for instance, a grilled cheese sandwich for her toddlers and husband, before she starts to make the cheese *from curds*. The other day she made a glass of fizzy coke from scratch, in a sequined evening gown. It’s exquisite performance art and I love it, but it also occurred to me while watching her that I wouldn’t be surprised if the videos would, like an aestheticised Havana syndrome, cause brain damage to viewers due to undetectable radio frequencies. Inconclusive.

They are certainly having some impact: tradwives have been debated in every newspaper, magazine and on almost all the websites. Their origins can be traced to America’s religious “alt-right”, itself a reaction to progressive feminism, but even those of us who are pro-choice and pro-vaccines, and pro-women’s financial independence, find ourselves drawn to their videos, their spotless countertops, their muslined butter. This is because they speak to a real problem. It’s not the problem that one might think – that fewer babies are being born or that women have forgotten their rightful place. It’s that women’s domestic lives, today, are largely chaos.

Though it has been unbalanced for many decades, the pandemic threw this chaos into sharp relief. With schools closed and parents working from claustrophobic homes, not to mention loved ones dying, many women found themselves unravelling. Across the world they were collapsing, crying, drinking, unable to perform the roles expected of them, sometimes leaving their

marriages. Many recognised that while the seemingly feminist husbands appeared to have been sharing the domestic load, the wives still bore the weight of the home. Of childcare, of cleaning, of cooking, of marriage.

For all the rights they had gained at work, at home their feet remained firmly grounded in the 1950s. So these tradwife fantasies appealed immediately for their simplicity. Partly their simplicity of movement, partly simplicity of thought. Despite the focus on extreme fertility, it’s clear theirs are performances where the mother is also the child, their primary responsibility to bake a loaf of beautiful bread (then post it on TikTok). The image of a woman in rural America who spends an entire morning arranging a posy of wildflowers in a milk bottle, or afternoon brushing their hair in preparation for their husband’s return from work, offers a radical fantasy of a straightforward exchange of care, and a fairytale of security, all ambition, politics, reality and self swept neatly behind the sofa.

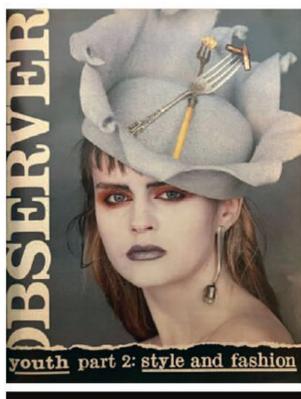
I find myself less interested in discussing their anti-feminist agenda and regressive subservience, or the white nationalist politics bubbling alongside their soups, and more aware of why their videos of nostalgic, wholesome comfort appeal to so many today. No doubt they are influencing some men and women in dangerous ways, pushing them away from “traditional medicine”, and from acknowledging the drudgery of child-rearing, and towards violent far-right views. But their hidden influence can be seen quietly awakening unsatisfied working women, feminists who would never dream of reducing their life to the size of a kitchen, but, after watching the tradwives’ performance of domestic labour, put down their phones and see the imbalance reflected in their own apparently liberated lives. ■

One more thing...

Footage of the Team GB equestrian star **Charlotte Dujardin** repeatedly hitting a horse with a whip during a training session has led animal rights group Peta to call for all equestrian events to be banned from the Olympics. But why stop there? Why are any animals used for sport? Perhaps this cruelty could spark a bigger conversation...

I’m loving **Elsbeth**, the new spinoff series from *The Good Wife* on Sky. We follow Elsbeth Tascioni as she acts as an outside observer for the Justice Department. The pilot reminds me of the brilliant *Poker Face*, starring Natasha Lyonne – both draw on classic *Columbo*, but add new character-led twists.

I’ve written a **short story**, which has been published this month in a lovely magazine called *The Fence*. If you don’t buy it to read that, perhaps you could be tempted by the compilation of readers’ most memorable celebrity encounters, including ‘doing a wee next to Derrida’.



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine’s past

Kicking off the *Observer*’s 1985 Youth Style Special, Vivienne Westwood was in typically combative mood, deploring the waning energy of the street. British style, she claimed, had started promoting ‘eccentricity for its own sake. We need to grow up and look around.’

Youth culture was in an identity crisis, ‘split into 100m fragments’ according to Peter York. Marketing was no longer directed at the 16–24 age group but their older siblings; moneyed 25– to 35-year-olds were the target of new chains, such as Next and Principles. ‘What has changed is the assumption that youth is something special, the only fount of spending money and therefore wisdom.’

Hype rarely translated into commercial support in an industry unwilling to risk supporting homegrown early-career designers. Rob Leach and Tracy Wingrove’s first collections were praised by *Harper’s* and *Vogue*, they explained, but the pair were soon left with ‘an empty order book,

financial embarrassment and disillusionment’.

The youth themselves were drawing inspiration from a new breed of magazines, particularly ‘style leader’ *The Face*. Launched with editor Nick Logan’s building society savings, it was glossy and ‘self-indulgent’, he explained, a magazine he himself would enjoy, but influential far beyond its 70,000 subscribers with its ‘ideas plundered throughout the trade’.

The *Smash Hits* recipe for success was song lyrics, full-colour pics and avoiding ‘tortured self-consciousness’ thanks to new writers (including one described as having ‘a haircut kept together by raw egg and orange juice’).

For light relief, comedian Ade Edmondson dressed up as Britain’s fashion tribes: the Hooray Henry, the Casual, the Gender Bender, the Headbanger, the Punk and the Normal. ‘Am I silly?’ he asked. Surely the easiest 1985 style question to answer. **Emma Beddington**



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Sainsbury's
Good food for all of us

Interview **RICH PELLE**
 Photograph **DAVID LEVENE**

I have a theory: if you have a happy childhood, you don't remember much of it. We lived in southeast London, not poor, but not well off. Dad was a lecturer, Mum had been an English teacher. I really don't remember much else.

As a child I wanted to be a soldier. Then I had an epiphany at nine. A sign appeared at school – the local am-dram society was putting on *Peter Pan*. I got a minor role, caught the bug and wanted to be an actor, until I saw a BBC Noël Coward documentary. What a life, to write funny plays for the theatre, I thought.

I often felt a one-man cliché in the 80s; I thought it was a time filled with pious comedians ranting about anti-sexism and anti-racism. Looking back, as far as I know, I was the only one.

The tampon routine was my most famous, about what the world would look like if men menstruated. You weren't allowed to advertise sanitary products on TV then. It was outrageous, patriarchal misogyny that female biology couldn't be referred to in an ad break.

I gave my *Friday Night Live* sparkly suit to Annie Lennox. She wanted it for a charity auction. I gave it to her on the condition that she didn't tell me how much it sold for. I did not wish to learn that Mick Jagger's toothpick got £200,000, while my suit went to the only person willing to pay for its dry cleaning.

I've cried over unrequited love and I've cried with family sadness, but I don't find I cry all that much.

Elton John once rang me up out of the blue and said: "Elton, it's Elton. I've always wanted to say that." Those were literally the first words. He was very flattering and wonderful.

I have a Medal of Australia, the equivalent of an OBE, for my service to entertainment. I've never been offered anything by the Brits. It doesn't bother me; I sleep very happily at night.

My material has changed as I've grown older. When I was young, I'd talk about being a student and trying to get laid. Through middle age, bringing up screaming toddlers. I refuse to do bits about how long it takes to piss at 65.

I have had conversations about writing another musical. There was a long talk with Cat Stevens; an approach from the Beach Boys; two wonderful meetings with Tina Turner who'd loved *We Will Rock You*. Honestly, doing another isn't something I really think about.

They don't make sparkly material like they did in the 80s. For the 2022 *Friday Night Live* revival, I had another suit made. It's just not the same. ■

Ben Elton: Authentic Stupidity tours the UK and Ireland from 23 August to 18 November. More details at benelton.live



This much I know

Ben Elton, comedian and writer, 65

A man with short, light brown hair and a goatee stands waist-deep in a river. He is wearing a khaki short-sleeved button-down shirt with two chest pockets, khaki cargo pants, and a black belt. He has several bracelets on his right wrist and a watch on his left. He is holding a fishing rod in his left hand and a red and white baseball cap in his right hand. The background is a dense forest of green trees, and the water is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery.

‘It’s just raw

‘I vowed to give the rivers back what they had given me’: actor and activist Jim Murray in Hampshire. Facing page: Katy Colley in Hastings

If water companies are failing to dispose of our sewage in acceptable ways, why should we pay them for the service? Horrified by the toxic condition of our rivers and coastlines, many customers are choosing to hit the private firms where it hurts. Anna Fielding meets some of the people refusing to pay their bills

Photographs KATE PETERS & PEROU

profiteering'



There are many of us across England and Wales who have opened our water bills and glanced at the payment breakdown only to be jolted into annoyed sarcasm. “Really?” you say to the water company’s logo. “I’m paying you to dispose of sewage, am I? And how is that working out for us all?”

In 2023, sewage spills in England increased by 54% from the previous year, according to the Environment Agency. A study also released in 2023 showed that enough raw sewage to fill 4,352 Olympic swimming pools was released from 30 water treatment works in one year. And yet shareholders must still be paid: analysis conducted by the *Financial Times* showed that UK water companies paid out £1.4bn in dividends in 2022, up £540m from the previous year. There are news items every day: swimmers are told to sign up for water-quality alerts; paddling children and triathletes contract vomiting bugs. Local Facebook groups – such as one for the River Severn, near where I grew up – share stories of vile smells and videos of strange froths. When I see talk online about its condition it feels like a personal affront: how could someone do this to my river?

For most of us, the direct debit leaves our bank account and we go on with emptying the washing-up bowl and flushing the loo, feeling powerless or just forgetting. But a number of people are looking at their water bills and deciding that they’ve had enough. That they won’t pay any more.

“We are paying for a service that we are just not getting; a service we absolutely have to have,” says Caz Dennett, founder of the Don’t Pay for Dirty Water campaign. “We don’t have a choice in creating the sewage in the first place and we don’t have a choice in who we take the service from. People are really aware that they’re being ripped off.” Campaigners such as Dennett see refusing to pay their water bills as the only way to do something.

“I would call it a developing and growing movement, because of the inherent injustice,” says Katy Colley, a founder of Boycott Water Bills. “As a people we are really wedded to the idea that things should be fair. And this just isn’t fair.”

Colley and her family run a campsite in Hastings. Her local water company is Southern Water and she has been withholding wastewater charges since December 2022. (Southern Water is majority-owned by the Australian investor Macquarie, which has been criticised for its stewardship of Thames Water and in July came under fire for awarding its chief executive a £183,000 bonus.) A friend had previously mentioned the idea to her, but she forgot about it until she was galvanised by a bout of E coli. It was summer and Colley and her family had been hanging out at the beach. “We were having a great time in the water,” she says. “And then that night I got ill. You wouldn’t wish E coli on anyone. It’s just awful. It really affected me. When my next water bill came I thought, ‘I’m going to do it and I’m going to complain at the same time. I’m going to see how far I can take this.’”

Colley found a group of withholders in Whitstable. They teamed up and launched Boycott Water Bills in 2023. So far more than 13,000 people have visited the site for advice.

One of the Whitstable withholders is writer Julie Wassmer, who ceased making payments in 2021, alongside friends, including Emma Gibson, a former Greenpeace campaigns manager, Green party councillor Steve Wheeler and then-Conservative councillor Ashley Clark. “We did so, not as a campaign, but as a group of committed individuals who wanted to make a stand,” she says. News of their action hit the local press and was amplified by Bob Geldof, who lives in nearby Faversham. Wassmer notes that since starting Boycott Water Bills with Colley, “We’ve been contacted by thousands of people from across the country, as well as other groups, such as Extinction Rebellion, and we now have boycott action in all 11 wastewater areas.”

*Jim Murray is an actor, known for playing Prince Andrew in *The Crown*. He began fly fishing some years ago, finding that it helped him after the death of his baby daughter in 2009. “Nothing had really helped me get through the trauma,” he says, “but fishing did, for whatever reason.”*



‘Like a good little citizen, for 15 years I paid – just for them to give it to their shareholders’

He started to become invested in the health of rivers, especially his local Hampshire chalk streams. “I vowed to give the rivers back what they had given me,” he says. “They saved me and I felt I needed to save them.”

Murray also falls into Southern Water’s catchment area and is currently only paying the supply part of his bill “because I genuinely believe we’re not getting the service for the wastewater part”. He has leveraged his celebrity to found the group Activist Anglers, create the podcast *The Last Salmon* and get into talks with Southern Water. “I am very clear with them,” he says. “Just because we’re talking doesn’t mean I trust you. It would be absolutely remiss of me if I suddenly gave up my activism and protesting.”

In Weymouth, Dennett’s water is supplied by Wessex, who typically bill six months in advance. “And, like a good little citizen, for 15 years I did that,” she says. “And then I just thought, ‘I’m not going to pay for this.’ I paid, in advance, for all those years only for them to take that money and give it straight to their shareholder.” (Wessex Water has just one shareholder, the Malaysian multinational YTL Corporation Berhad.) By late July this year, after two years of non-payment, Wessex served Dennett with a legal action notice for the total of her unpaid amount. She says she intends to defend her case and possibly counter-sue if she can compile the needed evidence.

Dennett has joined with Extinction Rebellion to make *Don’t Pay For Dirty Water* a national campaign. The group says their aim is to sign up 10,000 boycotters.

There are some who are withholding independently, without a group or campaign around them. Devon-based Imogen May is probably the best known. She has been withholding her water bill since 2019. In June, when her non-payments to South West water totalled £2,809, the company seized a stake in her home via the Land Registry (weeks after an outbreak of diarrhoea caused by a parasite in Devon’s water supply led to some customers having to boil their drinking water). “I am using this house,” she says. “I’m in a position of privilege and this is a tool. My children have their own homes now and I’m doing this on my terms. Unless people stand up and say no, this will continue.

“I swim in the rivers. I swim in the sea. And it hurts, what they are doing, what they are getting away with. It actually hurts.” She is currently deciding if she can risk the expense of going to court. There are, however, many stages a non-payer will reach before legal action or loss of property.

Domestic users cannot, by law, have their water supply cut off or restricted. Non-payment will escalate through several levels, starting with the reminder notices familiar to anyone with a bad memory, especially before the days of direct debit. The water company will then send a notice for each unpaid bill, giving the customer seven days to pay. That should be followed by a telephone call and then the debt will be passed to a debt-recovery agent. Then, says Citizens Advice, “The company can take you to court to get a county court judgement to recover the money you owe. You may then get a notice of enforcement from a firm of bailiffs telling you they are going to come round. If they come, they could take goods to sell to pay the money you owe.”

In practice, this can take several months. “To begin with, I didn’t even write to them and complain,” says Dennett about Wessex Water. “I thought I would just see how it played out and how long it took them to catch up with me.” However, her experience talking with non-payers around the country has shown that the timing and severity of the response can vary from company to company, “and sometimes how you are treated can even be down to the customer service rep you speak to on a given day”.

There are varying levels of engagement and various ways to make the process longer. The first level of disrupting the supply of what Dennett calls “free-flowing money” is to stop paying in advance and switch to monthly payments. Following that, some activists have chosen to cancel automated payments and to stop paying all or a portion of their bill. The most popular action seems to be to continue paying for supply, but withholding the wastewater charges. On their website, *Boycott Water Bills* say people



should complain to their water providers in writing. They continue: “Insist in your communication that while you are disputing this part of your bill they should not chase you for payment or refer your case to a debt-collection agency.

Not paying a bill can adversely affect your credit score and receiving a county court judgement will affect it even further. Those who have previously built up good credit, particularly those who own homes, could be more insulated from the worst aspects, but there will be an effect for everyone. Both *Boycott Water Bills* and *Don’t Pay For Dirty Water* acknowledge that refusing to pay can create difficulties. “Our advice is always not to risk your financial good

name,” says Dennett. “Don’t do this if you are in a precarious financial position.”

Each non-payer has a personal tipping point, but the main source of anger is that, as they see it, a stated service is not being provided – adequate sewage management – and that both the environment and public health are being degraded. “You look at how these water companies are run and you don’t just feel great about boycotting, you feel absolutely ethically OK,” says Murray. “The ethics are so barren and thin on the ground. The institution cares not one jot about the destruction it’s bringing on the assets, in this case the waters in the river. All it cares about is profit.”

“The water companies call us customers, but we’re not really – customers have the choice to take their custom elsewhere,” says Dennett. Because of the monopoly companies have, a bill-payer dissatisfied with the service from, say, Thames, cannot switch their supplier to Severn Trent.

Then there is the issue of where the money is going. Data released by the Labour party at the beginning of this year showed that the chief executives of nine water companies received a total of £25m on top of their salaries since 2019. “Money is just leaking out,” says Colley, referring to executive pay and shareholder dividends. And, while this happens, bills rise and infrastructure crumbles. “It’s raw profiteering,” says Dennett. For Julie Wassmer, “it’s infuriating that companies have been allowed to bor-

row irresponsibly, racking up debt of £60bn, while rewarding executives and shareholders over £70bn.”

There is some hope for change. This July, the Manchester Ship Canal Company won a Supreme Court ruling against United Utilities, allowing them to seek redress for unauthorised discharges of foul water. This is the first ruling of its kind and there is now potential for further legal action by the owners and users of waterways.

‘We have to stand up and say no: (left from top) Imogen May in Devon; Julie Wassmer in Whitstable. Facing page: Caz Dennett of Don’t Pay for Dirty Water

On 11 July, following the general election, Defra were quick to release a statement that promised, among other things, that new funding for infrastructure would be ring-fenced and can only be spent on upgrades benefitting customers and the environment and that nothing can be diverted for bonuses, dividends or salary increases. The money talked about by Defra included £88bn from water companies, but that also meant there would be bill increases.

In the raft of new legislation recently announced by Sir Keir Starmer’s government there is a new Water (Special Measures) Bill, which gives powers to levy criminal liability on water company heads for pollution, ban bonuses if environmental standards aren’t met and introduce a new code of conduct. There will also be powers to impose automatic fines for polluting companies and a requirement for them to install real-time monitors on sewage outlets.

To those who have been invested in the cause for a long time, the promises feel hollow. “The fact that water company shareholders refuse to invest any more money into their own assets should be plenty enough warning that there’s a serious flaw in the business model but, instead, toothless Ofwat insists on us, the customer, paying for these mistakes. Again,” says Murray. “The industry is a huge con and with Ofwat ruling over it, it will most certainly take the real threat of a national boycott to clearly show government that we’re not as stupid as they think we are and that we demand a fairer system.”

“The companies want to be allowed to charge customers all over again for infrastructure work they failed to do in the first place, while we customers are adamant they won’t receive a penny until they do what they were originally paid to do,” says Wassmer. “Let them go instead to those who profited from what has become not only a national, but an international, disgrace.”

For now, more and more eyes turn towards the practices of our water companies and the activists remain resolved and their bills unpaid: “They can whistle for it,” says Wassmer. ■

Do women lack ambition?" the *Harvard Business Review* asked 20 years ago, like a misogynist comedian wondering if women can be funny. But do we? Do I?

It's complicated. I internalised the gen X contempt for visible striving early and we joked about the one openly ambitious girl at school (she's now a CEO whose £3.2m pay package I read about this year; the joke's on me). My professional life started aimlessly, in a job I hated; I had two children in quick succession at least partly to get time off work. I was nearly 35 before I accepted and acted on my deeply repressed ambition – to write – then tackled it with a white-hot determination that came at real detriment to my personal life. Now 49, my work excites and challenges me, but I'm also conflicted. I'm constantly anxious, stressed and comparing myself unfavourably to my peers. My hips ache from all the desk hours; I wish I was fitter and had more time to read, garden and see friends. My slightly older husband has a better work-life balance and I sometimes look up from my laptop to see him heading off to do something fun and fulfilling and think: 'Is this really what I want, and if so, why?'

A new book, *Fair or Foul: The Lady Macbeth Guide to Ambition*, addresses those questions in a thought-

provoking set of reflections framed around, arguably, the most ambitious woman in the literary canon.

"Most of us at some point or another have a crossroads moment," says its author Stefan Stern when we speak. "We're faced with 'how much do I really want this?'" Stern has a lifelong obsession with the play and its exploration of ambition gone wrong. He chose to frame his thoughts around Lady Macbeth, he says, because she represents that dilemma most clearly.

He quotes from her first soliloquy, addressed to a vacillating Macbeth: "Thou wouldst be great, / art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it." "Those lines still make me shudder," Stern says. "That's the most difficult or the biggest challenge of all ambition: do you have to be a bit crazy, a bit unhinged?" It's something he's wondered himself throughout his life and the book examines that question for both men and women through a Lady Macbeth lens.

I wonder if as a male author, he felt any hesitation about this approach. Stern says yes, but the book is partly his attempt to rehabilitate the character. "The cliché of the scheming Lady Macbeth figure persists; any successful or healthily ambitious woman risks being labelled in that way by insecure men who feel threatened." In fact, Lady Macbeth demonstrates "a more sophisticated understanding of human nature and society than she is often given

credit for," Stern argues, and the questions the character embodies – is ambition a kind of derangement, and is it, actually, bad for us? – are as relevant now as ever.

Those questions resonate differently for women. Female ambition has often been considered unnatural and inappropriate (Stern highlights a "whole dictionary" of words used only for ambitious women, never men: bossy, feisty, pushy, shrill). In Lady Macbeth's famous "unsex me here" speech, Stern says, she expresses the need to discard femininity to do what needs to be done (he points to Elizabeth Holmes and her Steve Jobs-aping outfits as evidence that impulse persists). "It anticipates all these future discussions about how an ambitious woman should present herself to the world and conduct herself, and what the world will say."

Jennifer Romolini knows something about that. On her graft-fuelled rise through the ranks of noughties publishing and digital media to C-suite jobs and global recognition, Romolini encountered a great deal of gender-specific unease at her unapologetic ambition. Her new memoir, *Ambition Monster*, includes numerous examples of men with her kind of burning ambition being treated quite differently. "The ease with which men walked into jobs, walked through jobs, the amount of judgment and attention given to a woman's behaviour was entirely different," she tells me. "My behaviour was constantly monitored >

Smashing the girlboss myths

From Lady Macbeth to the 'shoulder-padded bitch', women who make it have always had to hustle harder.

But a new generation is claiming the power to be flexible about their ambitions. Can they really 'have it all'?



GIRL
BOSES

and criticised and my 'bedside manner' was a problem. The way I was behaving was not inappropriate *per se*, but it was inappropriate for what we understand a woman to be able to do."

Some of that criticism came from other women, one of whom describes her, with evident distaste, as "such a careerist". That tallies with the research findings of the author of that provocatively titled (and far more thoughtful than the splashy title) *Harvard Business Review* article, psychiatrist Anna Fels: "The women I interviewed," Fels writes, "hated the very word. For them, 'ambition' necessarily implied egotism, selfishness, self-aggrandisement, or the manipulative use of others for one's own ends."

It's a characterisation of ambition that also makes Viv Groskop, the author of *Lift as You Climb: Women and the Art of Ambition*, angry. Groskop is happy to be described as ambitious (her many achievements – books, radio, standup, TV, a podcast featuring the likes of Hillary Clinton and Margaret Atwood – are testament to that), but became frustrated by how ambition had "become owned by really terrible, self-interested people". The book was, she says, in part an attempt to reframe women's ambition as mutually supportive and compassionate and reclaim it from "bombastic" and dated clichés. "I think we recognise these tropes – the shoulder-padded bitch, the Queen Bee – but they are ridiculous and have no relevance to real life."

Their history is interesting though. After first-wave feminism, two world wars bringing women into the workplace and the pill, the "shoulder-padded bitch" of the 1980s was a watershed moment for female ambition. For Annie Auerbach, founder of trends agency Starling and author of *Flex: Reinventing Work for a Smarter, Happier Life*, it was "an embattled era of ambition", characterised by rocketing levels of female full-time employment, Helen Gurley Brown's *Having It All*, the film *Working Girl* and "women defiantly taking up space". It evolved through the girl-power 90s, emerging as the much-derided noughties #girlboss.

For all its superficial, Swarovski-coated vapidness, the girlboss era had a clear narrative that women could be ambitious without "unsexing" themselves and it did, I think, move the needle. A friend who has a big job in publishing says girlbossing made a real impact on her 20s; a much younger PhD student tells me: "It was never really a serious thing, more of a meme to us," but also says she and her friends "don't really care if we're seen as 'excessive' or 'unseemly'", which is surely at least partly a product of that course correction.

But the "you go girl" rhetoric felt simultaneously cynical and empty – it became another way for women to feel they were failing. Romolini is ferociously funny and righteously angry about her experiences at the sharp end of this "socially sanctioned #bossbitch bootcamp" and the way it was co-opted and exploited in organisations that often remained male-led: "I am complicit in selling a narrow, convenient, overinflated narrative about women and work that I am beginning to know is – at least in my experience – a lie," she writes.

By the 2010s, the post-financial crisis exhortations to grind and #leanin (Sheryl Sandberg's book of the same title was published in 2013) created, Auerbach says, a sort of "productivity porn, with relentless self-promotion... the only way to offset precarity". Covid was an inflection point of sorts, when mothers' unprecedented burnout and declining mental health provoked an existential reckoning, perhaps expressed most clearly around former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern's resignation in 2023.

We have come a long way, but I'm not sure exactly where we are. This feels like an age of ambivalence around ambition, especially for women; a time of #lazygirljobs, #softlife-girly and the reframing of rest as a radical act. "The girlboss is dead, long live the girl moss (lying on the floor of the forest and being absorbed back into nature)," reads one meme that hit hard. I feel that ambivalence and I see it around me. A self-described "recovering academic" is reassessing her attitude to ambition beyond that ultra-competitive environment; a senior civil servant has lost her single-minded drive since having kids, which makes

'I haven't given up. I've redirected ambition so I get what I really want'



her "a bit sad". A bakery owner I admire hugely says she started out "full of ambition and energy. I had to be a girlboss and ambitious with a new bakery and baby solo." Now she's drawn to the "soft girl life" and her allotment: "I no longer have any interest in scaling the bakery, calling myself the founder... I dream of homesteads and field bakeries." My absurdly talented friend, whose ambition was stolen by long Covid says: "I'm kind of glad, because ambition is meaningless."

It seems to me that much of the ambivalence I hear from women about ambition, and the appeal of anti-striving memes, comes from a sense of being failed by late-stage capitalist patriarchy. Because at no point in the evolving story of female ambition have we managed to demolish the structural barriers to women realising theirs. I hardly need to set them out, but 54 years since the Equal Pay Act we haven't reached parity, which aside from any cultural or biological bias toward women as caregivers, means it's still often economically sensible for them to become default primary carers in heterosexual relationships; we're also in an acute childcare crisis in the UK. "The 'soft life' is a pushback against the idea that successful women are resilient women," says Auerbach. "Resilience told us your value as a woman was to say yes, suck it up, be 'fierce', hustle harder. Society praises resilience, because then it doesn't have to change."

When aspiration hits the buffers of structural barriers, what often follows is burnout. Romolini experienced that as she struggled to achieve her ambitions for both motherhood and professional success, and so did founder and

writer Sharmadean Reid. In many ways, Reid was a girlboss archetype: she founded the groundbreaking WAH Nails salon and became the first Black woman in the UK to raise £1m in venture capital for her second entrepreneurial project, but the personal cost that exacted – anxiety, intense stress – prompted her to reassess hustle culture. She's coolly forensic about the way it exalts entrepreneurship and leadership: "We've had power bitch, we've had girl power, we've had girlboss, but they're all the same thing: it's a neoliberal self-actualisation through work or money... women have felt that they can be part of it if they go out and grind like everyone else." Stepping back from that to make personal changes and interrogate the stubborn societal barriers that stop women from acting on their ambition, without setting their whole lives on fire, has informed her book of essays, *New Methods for Women*.

Friends Tiffany Scott and Alex Morgan encountered those barriers, too, as they navigated early motherhood simultaneously in 2020. Scott works in recruitment, Morgan in higher education; both consider themselves highly ambitious and their conversations around how hard it was for the "unpaid work" of motherhood – the drudgery, the mental load – "not to completely derail your career" as Morgan puts it, became their Mambition podcast. What they mainly realised as they interviewed other mothers ("really successful career-minded people"), they tell me, was that everyone struggles. The motherhood penalty has caused 250,000 women to leave the workforce, according to recent Fawcett Society research. "I think people are turned off by 'having it all,'" says Morgan. "Because they realise how unfair it is."

But things are changing, working models in particular. Covid lockdowns might have precipitated an existential crisis for many working mothers, but their legacy has been a seismic shift in how and where we (well, some of us) work. A 2023 McKinsey *Women* report found women were actually *more* ambitious post-Covid; that's a product of the chink of light flexible working practices let in. For Reid, the emergence of flexible and hybrid models is "almost the equivalent of the pill... you

Life at the sharp end: (from left) writer and standup Viv Groskop; Jennifer Romolini, author of *Ambition Monster*; and entrepreneur Sharmadean Reid

really see there are alternative ways of working" (though, she emphasises, for many women these models of working are still not accessible).

Other things are changing, too: the UK gender pay gap is at its narrowest-ever point (91p in the pound) and shared parental leave is slowly becoming more common. Morgan mentions two friends who have taken it, including one who was the first in his engineering firm. That McKinsey report found men want flexible working as well as women; they've been pushed into roles that don't suit or fulfil them, just as women have.

Another positive trend that emerges from all my discussions is that we're defining ambition more, I suppose, ambitiously. Stern sees a shifting focus to "personal growth not career growth"; we have life ambitions, not five-year plans. "I haven't given up on ambition," says Romolini. "I've just redirected it so that I get what I actually want." "What about self-actualisation through creativity or personal development?" asks Reid. For Auerbach a life-centred, flexible way of working is "one of the most ambitious things you can strive for". Groskop describes a new "altruistic ambition" and I see that in Reid, who is trying to effect at least a "pinprick" of structural change by exploring new economic models and micro-revolutions.

Because ambition need not be a life-gobbling monster or an "illness"; it shouldn't have to destroy women, as it did Lady Macbeth. A friend says her gen-Z daughter and her female friends want, and believe they can have, family, leisure and fulfilling work without the sacrifices their mothers' generation made. I hope they're right. And I hope that the broader, bolder ambitions we're starting to express for our "one wild and precious life" will keep chipping away at everything that still holds us back. ■

The day before our interview, in a third-floor studio decked out like a 1990s school gym, I get a brief glimpse of actor Nadia Nadarajah in action. It's just gone 2pm, late in this unique production of *Antony & Cleopatra*'s third rehearsal week of four. Opening night is just weeks away, next door in the

1,500 capacity Shakespeare's Globe. Printouts line the walls: sketches of costumes; history factsheets; headshots of the 50+ strong on and off-stage team. Collectively, theirs is a grand ambition: to bring, for the first time, a bilingual English/British Sign Language production to the main stage in a major British theatre for a full-length run for deaf and hearing audiences alike. Its cast of 14 are split near equally between hearing and deaf. Those backstage, too, are working in both languages. It's no small feat.

"I always said," Nadarajah tells me, 24 hours later, "if we were to do a play like this, it would need to be 50/50 between a hearing and deaf cast. I wanted to develop a process where both languages were equal: not only deaf actors learning how to collaborate with hearing actors, but it working the other way, too."

Back in the rehearsal room, all present gather around their barefoot director, Blanche McIntyre. She's flanked by three BSL interpreters, here to keep dialogue free-flowing

between her cast and crew. Alongside design and tech staff are a set of specialists: sign language consultants and caption designers. After a short pep talk, the stage is set for a scene run-through. As Nadarajah – who is deaf and talks solely in BSL – performs, I watch on, the room in total silence. Without uttering a single sound, her Cleopatra commands the stage.

Now, we're sitting in a private room inside the theatre's administrative offices. Through its large window is a vista of the Thames, and, beyond it, the dome of St Paul's. Fresh from a photoshoot, Nadarajah has traded the patterned fashion for a T-shirt and dungarees. BSL is a visual language: we've rearranged the furniture to keep the sun's glare from eye lines. Nadarajah and I sit opposite each other, with Louise, our interpreter, to my side.

"With *Antony & Cleopatra*," Nadarajah explains, "you start with a clash of two cultures: the Romans and Egyptians. We're honouring that by introducing two languages to the show." The Egyptians will use sign, Romans spoken English. Rehearsals are trilingual: modern English, BSL, Shakespearean vocab. "Within the play itself, a character might become an interpreter, as they might in any multilingual situation, relaying information to those who need it. We're finding ways to cue that aren't verbal. With the help of captions, we want to show how these interactions would authentically happen in the world."

First came the translation process. "When I started acting," she continues, "I'd have to translate scripts into BSL on my own. It was exhausting." Not this time. Back in March, a group of cast and crew spent two weeks turning early 17th-century Shakespearean English into modern BSL. "Imagine," Nadarajah suggests, "translating Shakespeare into French, it's a long process: cultural differences, linguistic nuances. There's no perfect translation, as there's no Shakespearean sign language. Instead, we considered the meaning line by line before working out how we'd capture each in sign."

She picks one of Cleopatra's lines at random: "Grates me, the sun."

"Take that phrase," Nadarajah says, "Grates me is basically, 'That's annoying,' but we have so many different ways of expressing that in sign." She signs out a variety of wholly different gestures. "It's annoying; that's enough; not again; for goodness sake..." The list goes on. "We could summarise it, go literal, or be more creative. And then 'the sun' – meaning 'tell me everything, quickly' – also has its own set of options. It's the same for every line. A quick, short sentence can prove to be hugely complex. So many choices need to be made."

Once a sign translation is agreed, each needs logging. "I learned how to write in BSL," she says, "even though it's not a written language. We'll film ourselves signing >

'There is a fire in my belly'

When Nadia Nadarajah takes the stage at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre from tonight as Cleopatra, she will fulfil a longheld dream: to show others how far you can go as 'a deaf brown woman who uses sign language and doesn't speak'. She tells her incredible story to Michael Segalov

Photographs AMELIA TROUBRIDGE Stylist PIA AUNG



'I fell in love with Shakespeare': Nadia wears suit by lisou.co.uk; top by uk.maje.com; shoes by casadei.com; and jewellery by Phase (@phase.)



**‘So many
people
don’t know
about
our rich
lives and
experiences’**

› each line, before I make a written note.” Nadarajah opens a burgundy file folder, revealing her script inside. On one side of each printed page is the Shakespearean English, with contextual notes below it. Directly opposite, in her neat handwriting, sits its corresponding BSL.

Processes like this, Nadarajah explains, are key to forcing a rethink in how we see the work of disabled performers: “Yes, accessibility and representation matter, but I wanted to find a way to take interpreters, translation, captions and make them central to the process. Deaf people are involved in all aspects of this production. We’re all equal here, not an afterthought.”

Nadarajah, who is 46, lives in Peterborough with a friend, part of its thriving deaf community. “Without it,” she asks, “where would I be? Not here at the Globe. I think I’d have a small life. Unable to communicate. A job that’s unfulfilling. The deaf community ensured that wasn’t the case.” She feels the same gratitude for the deaf network she grew up with in Luton. Nadarajah’s parents, born in Sri Lanka, set up in England as young newlyweds. She’s the younger of two siblings: mum and dad are hearing; she and her brother, both deaf.

“Luckily, at that time, Luton had a strong deaf community. We went to deaf clubs; there were schools with specialist units. For my parents, with two young, deaf children, being in Luton was a lifeline.” Two generations learned BSL in tandem. The children attended a deaf nursery. “My parents went to weekly sessions where deaf adults taught them to sign. Of course, at first, they were unsure what our lives would look like. But they saw how deaf adults lived and realised our futures needn’t be limited, and made us feel that was true.”

Nadarajah went to a mainstream primary school, then spent a year at a local secondary. There, she had a Communication Support Worker (CSW), tasked with helping make her education accessible. “But unless I was in a classroom learning,” she recalls, “the CSW wouldn’t be there. I was missing out on that socialisation. There were other limitations.” Take science classes. “The CSW wasn’t a scientist. Understandably, they didn’t have the subject knowledge to explain things to me in detail. There just wasn’t enough support for me to succeed.”

Before the end of year seven, she’d transferred to a deaf-specific boarding school in Berkshire. She flourished. “A lot of deaf schools have closed,” she says. “Now, lots of people think sending deaf children to them is not a good idea. But I had a great experience.” Not that her five years there were challenge-free. “The teachers wanted everyone to use speech,” she remembers. “I tried, but my speech wasn’t brilliant. When you can’t hear, it’s hard to pick up the nuances of spoken language: how you make specific sounds or the intricacies of certain letters.” Even assessing how loudly you’re talking can prove complex. “Deafness is a spectrum. My brother speaks well and uses a hearing aid. These don’t work for me. I’ve never felt the need to speak. I can’t learn to hear, but a hearing person can learn to communicate visually. Why is the burden on me?”

Nadarajah is fluent in seven languages. There’s English, BSL and Auslan (Australian sign language) picked up from time spent living and studying in Adelaide: midway through her degree at the University of Hertfordshire, her parents moved to Australia, where she completed her undergrad. Nadarajah learned American Sign Language (ASL) while travelling in the US. “Then after finishing my degree and qualifying as a teacher, I met a French guy.” When she was 25, they married and moved to Paris, where she learned French and French Sign Language. She later spent three years teaching on Réunion Island, which has its own Creole. Of course, she learned to sign that as well.

While in Paris, Nadarajah searched out ways to learn French, both signed and spoken. “I heard about a local deaf-led theatre company,” she says, “the International Visual Theatre. I went to see one of their plays, *The Vagina Monologues*, and I loved it.” The production was entirely deaf-led. “It was beautiful. They had their own theatre in central Paris; a respected programme curated by deaf artists that attracted mainstream audiences.” She’d never seen



anything like it. “There hadn’t been opportunities for me to be involved in theatre when I was younger.” But this deaf theatre “was a whole new world. They ran courses and evening sessions, and offered me a place. It wasn’t that I wanted to be an actor, just something fun to do on the side.”

In 2009, at 31, and recently divorced, Nadarajah returned to the UK. Soon after, she went to see a production put on by Deafinitely Theatre, a deaf theatre company that had formed in her time away. She was introduced to their artistic director. “They were looking for someone with an Asian background to help with an upcoming project.” She did two weeks of research and development. “I fell in love with the work; they told me I had talent and potential. From then on, I’ve had a fire in my belly.”

It was here at the Globe that Nadarajah had her first professional part. Ahead of the London 2012 Olympics, the theatre was producing 37 plays in 37 languages – one, *Love Labour’s Lost*, in BSL. “I hated Shakespeare,” she admits, “because of my experience at school. My education had failed me. I’d been taught Shakespeare through speech,

and hadn’t understood it. There’d been no attempt to use sign language to help: it’s hard to grapple with straight from the page. I’d shut it out.” Reluctantly, Nadarajah auditioned. She landed the part.

“Through that process,” Nadarajah says, beaming, “I fell in love with Shakespeare. I thrived while translating; for the first time I understood his stories to be universal.” Nadarajah couldn’t simply muddle through any section: the intricate translation process saw her contend with Shakespeare’s characters with an intimacy few speaking actors require. It shows, she believes, in the performances deaf actors give. “I do think having to turn the text into sign language is a gift,” she says. “It helps me peel back the layers, forcing me to explore the emotions at the heart of the play. That was as true for my first show here as it is with *Antony & Cleopatra*.”

She packed in the teaching to act full-time, unsure if the work would prove regular. Certainly, there was little access to training. “No drama school had proper provision for deaf actors.” Through Deafinitely, funding was applied for to run twice-monthly workshops for deaf performers led by experts and professionals. “We covered monologues, ensemble, physical theatre, clowning. I was obsessed. I’d skip social events, birthdays and weddings to be there.”

Her worries were misplaced – she’s booked and busy: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet* at the Globe; *As You Like It*, twice. “I did projects with the National Theatre, the Royal Exchange Theatre, the Royal Court and Bristol Old Vic.” Developing deaf writers, she’s certain, is key to transforming the industry. It’s why she’s in the final stages of penning a play for the Edinburgh Fringe. “So many people don’t know about our rich lives and experiences. Too often we’re presented in a patronising way. Why not write our stories ourselves?”

She’s done some TV work, recently – a part in *The Vampire Academy*. “But in 2024,” she argues, “theatre is way ahead of film and TV when it comes to deaf people. Theatre gives you freedom to take risks. In TV, there’s a reluctance and an old-school mindset.” Change, she hopes, is coming. “There are two new TV series coming out next year, plus a feature film, with major deaf characters and storylines.” She points to *Strictly*’s Rose Ayling-Ellis as a pioneer. “I’ve been acting for 16 years and have seen the pool of deaf actors grow. Certainly, white deaf actors. The number of Black deaf actors is on the up. But Asian women? The list is tiny. Each time I perform, I hope to inspire others and see it grow.”

Increasing mainstream representation – and advances in medicine – Nadarajah fears, come with risks. “There’s so much value,” she says, “in the culture that deaf community has created over centuries. We have to keep that alive and

‘Few of us are visible. It’s important to be seen’: (from top) in *As You Like It* at the Globe; in *Hamlet*; and with J August Richards in TV’s *Vampire Academy*

pass it on to the next generation, even as we fight to make the world more accessible.” She’s proud of her community’s traditions and customs. “Yes, improved accessibility will make life easier, but the deaf community contracting and diminishing until it one day disappears worries me. I want a world where I can go to the theatre at any time; where deaf actors can perform any part. For all disabled people to have equal access and opportunity. But also, for our community to retain what’s so valuable.”

All of this, she says, keeps that fire in her belly blazing. “I don’t know how many people there are like me out there: a brown woman, who uses sign language and doesn’t speak. What I do know is that few of us are visible. It’s important for me to be out here, to be seen.” So many deaf women, she believes, have their potential limited. “Whether it’s their family, education or society, many of us are left feeling like we can’t. Not offered the access, support and opportunities. I want to say to them: you can. The door is open. And just like my parents encouraged me to live life without restrictions, I want other parents of deaf children to see me succeed and know their kids can, too.” ■

Antony & Cleopatra runs from 4 August to 15 September at the Globe Theatre, London (shakespearesglobe.com)

Questions of life and death

During lockdown, a virtual pub quiz became a lifesaver for thousands of people. But when Jay Flynn, its

On the Victoria Embankment in central London, there is a bench overlooking the River Thames. Jay Flynn, the 42-year-old quizmaster who ran online pub quizzes for hundreds of thousands of people during lockdown, knows it well. It's where he slept rough for the best part of the two years on the streets of the capital.

"I wasn't an alcoholic, I wasn't a drug addict. I was just the pure definition of a homeless person, which is a person without a home," he says. "My mental health struggles were what led me to that point. I'd gone through a relationship breakdown, I'd fallen out with all of my family and, in my head, I was becoming a burden on my friends. I felt my only option was to end my life – or choose to live on the streets."

He spent two years living on the streets after becoming estranged from his family following a series of events that began with the sudden death of his grandfather when Flynn was still a teenager. He had helped to raise him in the absence of his dad. Another difficult moment came later when he chose to open up to his mother about the sexual abuse he had suffered at the hands of a family friend when he had been nine years old. She told him he was lying.

Over the course of the two years he spent homeless in his 20s, he often considered suicide. Each time he did so, he would remind himself that he had no form of ID on him and no criminal record, which meant it would not be easy for the police to identify him. He would force himself to think about the emotional impact his death would have on the people who found his body. "That's what stopped me; that empathy with my fellow humans."

Flynn is speaking to me today from Tenerife, where he is on holiday with his wife, Sarah, and seven-year-old son, Jack. "I'm sitting here on a balcony," he says, looking over the edge of it as he loses himself in the darkest moments of his life. "And if I went over there now – which I'm not thinking about doing – but if I did, who's got to deal with the aftermath? It's not fair on those people, to suffer that, for my personal decision."

It was this sense of empathy that would inspire him to create Jay's Virtual Pub Quiz, more than a decade later, at the beginning of the pandemic. "It allowed me to understand what people were going through, isolated on their own during lockdown," he says. "I was there for them, because I've been through it. I know what loneliness is like."

Flynn initially created the quiz merely to replace his own local Thursday night pub quiz, after hearing that all the pubs and restaurants were about to be shut down by the government. "When Boris announced the pubs were going to be closed, I instantly went: 'Hang on a minute, where's my Thursday night gone?'"

At that point, few of the people in Flynn's life knew about his past. But they did know how much he loved pub quizzes. For years, he'd run various pubs in Darwen in Lancashire, hosting many quizzes in the process, before getting a job as a

'I've been through it': Jay Flynn sitting on the bench in Victoria Embankment where he slept homeless for two years – it now has a plaque paying tribute to him



quizmaster, opened up about his years of being homeless, he found answers to the hardest questions

car salesman shortly before the pandemic began. Getting together with his friends to quiz was the key social outing of his week and he knew a whole community of pub-quiz teams out there would be feeling equally bereft.

"We're a very competitive nation – quizzing is up there with other great British institutions like fish and chips," he says. The camaraderie of the pub quiz is like an addictive drug to loyal players. "Most quiz nights, it will generally be the same group of people going head-to-head every week."

That Saturday, he wrote a message on Facebook, suggesting an online pub quiz on the following Thursday night. He confined the post to friends only and forgot about it. But on Monday morning, he received a message from a stranger, enquiring about the quiz – and realised 700 people were planning to turn up. Somehow, the post had gone out publicly.

By the time lockdown was imposed that evening, thousands of people had declared they were coming to Flynn's quiz. The following day, the media got wind of the story about the "accidental quizmaster", and that figure exceeded 100,000. By Thursday, Flynn says, about 200,000 people in teams had turned up to play.

Afterwards, participants who were isolating alone wrote to him, thanking him for giving them something to look forward to. "If you had to write a guide to surviving a lockdown, I don't think doing an online quiz would have been high on anyone's list," he says. "But people loved the idea. I gave them a reason to not be on their own."

Flynn remembered finding an old radio when he was homeless on which he could listen to his favourite DJ, Chris Moyles. "Chris wasn't talking to seven million people. He was just talking to me. And I think, from the responses I got, people felt that, too – that I was just talking to them." He thinks the fact that he wasn't a celebrity and his quiz wasn't very slick helped people who were struggling with the new normal of lockdown to connect with him. "I was just a normal person in their living room. And for an hour, they could forget about what was going on in the world."

He decided to carry on hosting free pub quizzes twice a week throughout the pandemic, while fundraising for charities. "I thought: 'I've got a platform here that I could use to do so much good.' It became a community. It was like: the pub came online for a couple of hours a week."

Lockdown passed in a blur. Juggling creating the quizzes with looking after his two-year-old son, while Sarah, an NHS administrator, was at work was no mean feat. "I didn't really stop," he says.

The charities connected him with celebrities such as Stephen Fry and Gary Barlow who made guest appearances to support his fundraising efforts. At one point, Sarah opened the door to find him on a pre-quiz Zoom call with Rick Astley. "She walked in and said: 'That's Rick Astley – you're talking to Rick Astley!'" he recalls. He tried to play it cool, but she found it too surreal and walked straight out again.

Like the 300,000 other workers who had started new jobs in March 2020, he discovered in April that he didn't qualify for the government's furlough scheme. But luckily his viewers also started donating enough money to him



via the crowdfunding platform Patreon for him to be able to get by and carry on quizzing.

This led to some negative comments. "People said I had dishonest intentions and that I wasn't to be trusted, which really hurt, because I was trying to do the best I could in the situation I was in," he says.

Despite raising hundreds of thousands of pounds for charity, he began to think about giving up the quiz. He had never begged for money when he was homeless and he didn't like the feeling he was doing so now. "I'd walk around London looking for loose change or bits of food, but even though I was really low and had no self-esteem, I didn't do anything illegal. I didn't sit on a street corner begging, I didn't go around stealing food from shops."

Luckily, he says, a packet of custard cream biscuits cost just 20p, so he told himself even a few discarded pennies were worth collecting. "For almost two years, I probably lived off custard creams. They are still my favourite biscuit today."

He was emaciated when a worker from the homelessness charity, the Connection at St Martin's, found him sleeping on his bench on Victoria Embankment and helped him turn his life around. When the charity first approached him, he had barely spoken to anyone for two years. "Talking to people for the first time was very tricky," he tells me, struggling even now to describe how isolated he felt. "Homeless people are perceived as drug takers,

thieves and beggars. Very few people in the world view homeless people as humans."

After six months of support, he was able to move into sheltered accommodation and get a job at a supermarket. It was remembering the life-changing impact the charity had on him – and how connecting with people at the charity had helped him to reconnect with the world – that gave him a renewed sense of purpose about his quizzes during lockdown. "It was like a lightbulb moment: 'I'm still here so I can make a difference to people in their darkest moments.' And I needed to continue to make that difference."

He decided to open up about his past to his fellow quizzers and challenge people's perceptions about him while simultaneously starting to raise money for the Connection. To his surprise, and great relief, his players didn't judge him negatively. "It made them respect me more."

Since lockdown ended, Flynn has carried on hosting quizzes twice a week online and once a week on BBC Radio 2. To date, he has raised £1.4m for charity and received numerous accolades for his efforts, including an MBE and the Point of Light volunteering award.

His memoir, *The Quizmaster*, went straight into the best-seller lists when it was published in May and now, on that bench in Embankment, there is a plaque that honours him, funded by the people who played his quiz during the pandemic. "Number 3, Riverside View," it reads. "This bench was home to Jay Flynn from Jay's Virtual Pub Quiz. He proves you are not alone and there is always hope."

He and Sarah still live in Darwen, in the same house, and he goes to a local pub quiz every Wednesday night with friends. He has also reconciled with his mother, who is "dead proud" of him and his achievements. "I've got a very good relationship with her now. We're probably stronger than we ever have been."

Reflecting now on what his experiences during the pandemic taught him, he says: "For me, I think it's that we all need to keep an eye out for each other, we all need to find that sense of community."

He looks out over the balcony in sunny Tenerife, and tells me he believes in the plaque his players wrote. "People fall into dark places when they feel there is no hope, but what I have learned is that there is always someone, somewhere, that can pull you out of the darkness." ■

The Quizmaster by Jay Flynn (Hodder & Stoughton, £22) is out now. Buy a copy for £19.36 at guardianbookshop.com. For more information about the Connection at St Martin's, go to connection-at-stmartins.org.uk

If these issues affect you, contact Samaritans on 116 123

'People loved the idea. I gave them a reason to not be on their own'

Food & drink

Nigel Slater



@NigelSlater



It's summer so time to plump for plum puds and chutney

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

Of all the summer fruits, it is the plums on which I gorge. I cannot get enough of their crimson and gold skin and sweet, giving flesh. Their juice, sticky as honey, is the very best of all to have running down your chin (save, perhaps, for the perfectly ripe greengage, which is a fleeting treat and a nightmare to track down, even for a plum fiend such as myself).

The fruits do end up in the kitchen, too, as the luscious base for a sugar-crusted pie, the filling for puff-pastry turnovers and the middle layer of a trifle, held between sponge and vanilla custard.

Plums also make a fine chutney. They introduce sweetness to balance the onions and vinegar, soften the edge of the chillies, lending a silky texture to the

preserve. I made plum chutney this week, hot with chillies and flecked with raisins and yellow mustard seeds. I added a few apricots to the pot, introducing an even deeper fruity note (I have the chutney in mind as an accompaniment to a truckle of cheddar).

But there is more and this is the preserve that will be scooped up by jagged shards of a broken poppadom, stirred into steamed rice and slathered into the layers of a ham sandwich. In other words, a workhorse of a condiment, lending its fruity heat to all manner of occasions.

There have been a couple of plum puddings on the table already: a plum fool using stewed Victorias and custard,

as well as cream and an impromptu dessert with cake crumbs and ice-cream. Both were made with a stew of plums and spice that contained star anise and chopped preserved ginger. I know of no spice that is so comfortable in the company of a plum, whether in the form of ground ginger in a plum cake or as the warm and translucent addition of preserved ginger. The syrup from the jar is a useful ingredient to have around, too, to trickle over vanilla ice-cream or to stir into a jug of cream.

Plum and apricot chutney

The character of a chutney can change over time. I like the fresh heat of a newly made batch but, over a few weeks, the hot and spiciest notes will mellow a little to produce a more rounded chutney. I sterilise the jars by washing them thoroughly, then pouring boiling water into them from the kettle. I leave it to cool, then pour it away and dry the jars with a clean tea towel. They are then ready to fill. *Makes 3 x 250g jam jars. Ready in 2 hours.*

plums 450g
apricots 350g
onions 350g
raisins 125g
light muscovado sugar 250g
crushed dried chillies 1 tsp
salt 1 tsp
yellow mustard seeds 2 tsp
cider vinegar 150ml
malt vinegar 150ml
cinnamon stick 1

Cut the plums and apricots in half and remove the stones. Put the fruit in a stainless steel or enamelled saucepan. Peel and roughly chop the onions and add them to the fruit.

Stir in the raisins, muscovado sugar, crushed dried chillies, salt and yellow mustard seeds. Place the pan over a moderate heat, add the vinegars and cinnamon stick and bring to the boil.

As the mixture boils, lower the heat to a gentle simmer, then partially cover with a lid and leave to simmer for an hour or so, giving the occasional stir to stop the chutney sticking.

When all is soft, remove the cinnamon stick and spoon into sterilised jars and seal. The chutney will keep in a cool place for several weeks, although I do keep mine in the fridge. >



Stone love: plums with ginger crumbs and ice-cream.
Facing page: plum and apricot chutney



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The Guardian Bookshop

Food & drink

Nigel Slater

I know of no spice that is so comfortable in the company of a plum as ginger in all its forms

Plums with ginger crumbs and ice-cream

Layers of gorgeousness here, with softly stewed plums gently spiced with star anise and cloves, delicate ginger crumbs and cold vanilla ice-cream. You could make your own ginger cake, of course, but you don't need to: a shop-bought ginger cake is good here, too. Serves 4. Ready in 40 minutes

For the plum layer:

plums 12, medium sized

caster sugar 80g

water 250ml

star anise 2 whole flowers

cloves 4

preserved ginger 3 lumps, in syrup

syrup from the ginger jar 4 tbsp

To finish:

ginger cake 250g (the darkest you can find)

vanilla ice-cream 250ml (4 loose scoops)

You will also need 4 glasses or small jam jars

Wipe the plums, then halve them from stalk to tip. Pull out the stones and put the fruit in a stainless steel or enamelled saucepan. Sprinkle with the sugar, then pour over the water. Drop in the whole star anise flowers and the cloves and bring to the boil. As the mixture starts to bubble, lower the heat to a low simmer. Finely dice the ginger and stir into the plums, together with the ginger syrup, then set aside.

Crumble the ginger cake into large crumbs (it is probably best to do this by hand, so you don't process them too finely), then divide them between 4 glasses, jars or bowls. Spoon the fruit over the crumbs together with some of the cooking syrup, then place a ball of ice-cream on each.

Stewed plums on brioche

Toast 2 thick slices of brioche and, while still hot, spoon over some of the juice from the stewed plums, above. Let the juice soak into the toast. Arrange a few of the stewed plums on top of the toast, then flash under a hot grill for 4 or 5 minutes until the plums have just started to caramelize. Watch carefully, so that the brioche doesn't burn, then slide on to plates and serve with thick yoghurt, labneh or buttermilk. ■



Nigel's midweek treat

Blackberry almond croissants

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

This is the moment to celebrate all the summer fruits, to catch them while they are at their very best. And this is a delicious and very easy treat.

First of all make the frangipan by beating together 80g of **butter** and 80g of **caster sugar** until creamy. It's best to do this with a food mixer. Keep going until you have a light and creamy mixture.

Break an **egg** into a small bowl, beat it with a fork, then add this to the butter and sugar mixture, beating all the while. After a minute or so, add a few drops of **vanilla extract**.

Next, stir in 80g of **ground almonds** and 50g of sifted **plain flour**.

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Slice 2 large **croissants** in half from point to point. Place all 4 halves, cut side up, on a baking sheet. If there is any doughy middle, tear it carefully out and discard it.

Fill each hollow with some of the frangipan mixture, then push about 6 or so **blackberries** into each half of the cut croissant, depending on the size of the fruit – and the size of your croissant.

Place them in the preheated oven and bake for about 20 minutes until the frangipan is risen and slightly cracked on the surface. A fall of sifted **icing sugar** on top of each is rather lovely.

◆ A serrated bread knife is the most effective tool for cutting a croissant in half.

◆ Blackberries are just one of the many suitable fruits to press into your frangipan. Halved and stoned cherries, raspberries, blackcurrants and gooseberries are ravishing alternatives.

◆ Gilding the lily, but a little cream would be glorious here to mop up the flakes of crisp croissant.

◆ Once made, the frangipan mixture will last for several days in the fridge. ■

Food & drink

Jay Rayner

@jayrayner1



For a thrill-packed, all-action, dazzlingly exciting night out, head straight for Newbury. Honestly

Goat on the Roof

1 Bridge Street,
Newbury RG14 5BE
(01635 580015;
goatontheroof.co.uk).
Small plates **£3.80–£9.50**
Bigger plates **£9–£18**
Desserts **£4–£7.50**
Wines from **£29**

I might as well get my second apology to Newbury in now. It's more than warranted. Back in 2011, I was asked to contribute a short piece in support of a favourite cheese. I chose emmental. I said emmental was "at first sight, the Newbury of cheeses: it's solid, workmanlike, but very, very dull". I went on to say that this shouldn't

be misunderstood; that, just like Newbury, emmental is a reliable and important workhorse, but by then the damage had been done. "Historically, possibly Newbury was dull," the outraged chair of the Newbury Society told the BBC. "But it's changed a lot in the past two years."

Spool forward five years and I am booked to perform one of my brilliant shows in Newbury. As my agent said at the time, "Why the hell couldn't you have been rude about Slough? They're used to it." So, I posted an apology to Newbury. Shockingly, some suggested it was motivated by a mercenary desire to flog tickets. As if. Though happily it did sell a few tickets. Anyway, it's time to say sorry all over again. Because seated in the crowded dining room of Goat on the Roof, a terrific, wine-led restaurant overlooking the River Kennet in the centre of town, it feels like being in a cross between *fin de siècle* Paris and Renaissance Venice. Or at least the closest thing Berkshire can offer in 2024. It is a romping wave of bubbling chatter, clinking glasses, laughter and impressive food. And all at 6.30pm on a wet Tuesday.

Goat on the Roof is the brainchild of Patrick Vaughan-Fowler. He started his career with Louis Latour, worked as a sommelier in London and ran a local pub, before coming across this banking hall turned Japanese restaurant. He opened a wine bar upstairs, installed a long counter for eating at, bistro chairs and tables, and hung the walls with paintings of goats. A lot of goats. I ask him where the name came from. "I was drunk in Portugal once," he says, as if that explains everything. The wine side of the business manages the neat trick of being serious, without taking itself too seriously. The list runs to about 130 encouragingly priced bins, only a handful of which break three figures. It wanders Europe, much like a Georgian gentleman on a dizzying Grand Tour. Worry not. The staff know this list. Tell them what you like. They'll see you right. We have a 2021 Se Canta Colombard-Gros Manseng from the Côtes de Gascogne for £39. It's grassy and fresh and tastes of high summer.

As to the food, prepare yourself for a tableside speech involving words like "local", "seasonal", "foraged" and "you're a good person for eating here". Perhaps the last one is only implied. It's one of the curious elements of



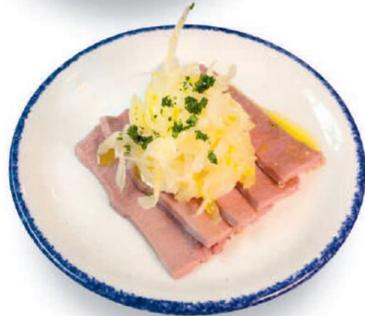
A savoury doughnut is filled with a whipped and hyper-smooth chicken liver parfait, which oozes out as if it were caramel sauce

Let the good times roll: (from left) chicken liver doughnut; Patrick Vaughan-Fowler and Sam May; tomato salad; fish Gilda; beetroot with goat's curd; brisket; and meringue

the modern restaurant experience that you first have to receive absolution for choosing to spend your money on a nice time out. Let's just accept that the chef, Sam May, cares about his ingredients. This is a good thing. The kitchen then takes all this local stuff and turns it into a wanderlust of small and medium plates, which romp about the world much like the wine list.

They're especially good at glossy, emulsified dressings. There's a skewer of a quail's egg with a liquid yolk, a mushroom, a radish and a shiny bead of cherry tomato that you are encouraged to take in one mouthful. There's another of scallop, salmon and a smoky piece of haddock. Both come under a slumping and herb-speckled lawn-green sauce. Marmitey crispbreads accompany a rough and raging dip of locally made 'nduja, and there's a plate of crunchy fermented vegetables, the right side of festering, with a mayonnaise giving us a full horn section of wild garlic.

From the specials, there are slices of a delicate halibut sashimi, dribbled with herb oil, and partnered by



separate quenelles of grated beetroot and horseradish, so you can mix your own bespoke-strength condiment. There's also a savoury doughnut filled with a whipped and hyper-smooth chicken liver parfait, which squeezes its way out of the centre as you cut in as if it's auditioning to be caramel sauce. On the side is a pot of sweet-sour rhubarb compote. And if you're reading this and not now making a quiet, helpless, keening sound, like a shivering kitten needing a hug, really, how were we ever friends? Even if you're not a meat eater?

Brisket is slow-cooked for 48 hours, then served in room-temperature slices with a cooling heap of smoked mascarpone with the pleasing autumnal tang of bonfire. Impeccable tomatoes lie atop a poky salsa verde; golden cubes of potato are so crisp more than one trip through the fryer had to have been involved and they loiter on a mess of tomatoes and garlic mayo. We have salt-baked beetroot on a mound of snowy goat's curd with chilli and black garlic, and a brick of slow-cooked pork belly with vinegary chimichurri to show the soft fat who's boss. Each dish is a couple of simple ideas, brought together with good taste. If I was being picky, I'd whinge about the thin crackling strips with the pork belly, rather than a full-on crunchy slab. But then I'd remember I am still trying to make friends with Newbury, and shut up. Because this cooking is not just smart and thoughtful. It's also well priced, like they really want your business. Everything is in the low teens or below, apart from a steak which gets to a lofty £18. Nothing dull about that.

We finish with loops of torched Italian meringue, topped with strawberries and basil, and a chocolate mousse with both caramel and a hit of coffee. We spoon these away while talking wistfully of the choux bun, encased in the thinnest of crisp craquelin and filled with a sharp lemon curd. It's a lemon tart re-engineered as a ball. It's an orb of dessert cleverness. This chatter is lubricated by a lightly sparkling Les Chants Jumeaux dessert wine from the Loire, because we have now given ourselves to Patrick's wine list. I wander back to the train station, dwelling upon how poor a judge of character I had once been. Had I found excitement in Newbury? Or had it simply been there all along? ■

Jay Rayner's cookbook, *Nights Out at Home: Recipes and Stories from 25 Years as a Restaurant Critic*, is available to preorder now at the guardianbookshop.com

Notes on chocolate

There's a 50s tuck box vibe to this solid block in brown paper, says *Annalisa Barbieri*

I feel I talk a lot about tuck boxes. This is maybe because, ignoring conveniently the dark side of them, I do fetishise boarding schools. This was fuelled early by Enid Blyton's St Clare's books.

There was always clear justice in Blyton's books: you do good and you come good, you do bad and, well, you're forgiven because you're sorry and promise to do better. This was justice, and reflection, often lacking in the topsy-turvy real world. And then there were the tuck boxes, brimming with implausibly paired goods, such as sardines and tinned peaches and birthday cakes, that defied delivery services to arrive intact and raring to be sliced into greedily.

I thought of this as I got a Heist postal service delivery of its Spanish Almond Caramel (how

exotic this would have been in a 1950s tuck box). A thick – 190g – brick of a chocolate offering. It's wrapped in brown paper, of course, and inside is a Peruvian cocoa, milk chocolate-covered caramel bar studded with toasted Spanish guara almonds. It's one of those bars you really need a knife for, don't tell matron, and once breached this bar will ooze its Welsh cream-based caramel.

On a warm day it might benefit from being placed in the fridge for half an hour before consumption.

It's very sweet, be warned, but a delight for those of you who usually rear up at my darker recommendations.

It would make an excellent present (at £12 a bar), for yourself, if your child is going off to university next month. Or even just back to school.

Wines of the week

Just like us, there are some wines that really do thrive by the sea.
By David Williams

@Daveydaibach

Southern Right Sauvignon Blanc, Walker Bay South Africa 2023
£11.45,
ND John Wines

Grape vines, like people on holiday, love to be by the seaside, and an inordinate number of the world's best wines are produced near or in some cases directly overlooking the sea. The thing the vines love most about the coast is ultimately the same as what leads us to the beach: the sea regulates the temperature, taking the edge off extremes of heat and cold. That helps ensure a slower, more even ripening of the grapes, preserving acidity and ultimately producing more balanced wines. It's an effect that has become all the more precious since the climate crisis, with growers all over the world seeking out coastal sites, such as South Africa's Walker Bay, the source of such luminous, vibrant, pristine sauvignon blancs as Southern Right by deft producers Hamilton-Russell.

Domaine Saint-André Maritime Rouge, IGP Pays d'Oc France 2022
£12.49, House of Townend

The most famous maritime winegrowing region in the world is arguably also the world's most famous wine region: Bordeaux, where the black-fruited depth and power of the wines

is leavened and given focus by a certain Atlantic coolness. No wonder so many of the better examples of wines made from Bordeaux's grape varieties are from coastal sites such as Bolgheri in Tuscany, Margaret River in Australia, and Hawke's Bay in New Zealand. The proximity of the vineyards to the Étang de Thau lagoon in southern France also seems to have brought plenty of lift and life to Domaine Saint-André's very drinkable, aptly named Maritime rouge. It's made from merlot, a variety that doesn't always show its best in the heat of the Languedoc, but here works very well indeed.

Viñático Negramoll, Tenerife Spain 2019
£30.86,
Strictly Wine

There are some wines where the coastal influence is even more direct. In Colares, on Portugal's Atlantic coast, the vines are planted directly into the dunes and the long-lived wines,

small in production, have a distinctly salty tone that gives them a savoury drinkability. The style of dry sherry known as manzanilla produced in Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Andalucía is also famous for its saline-iodine tang; grab a bottle of Equipo Navazos I Think Manzanilla en Rama NV (£13.95, 37.5cl, thewhiskyexchange.com) to have with shellfish and feel that complementary salty seasoning. I also get a pronounced whiff of the sea in the wines of the ocean-breeze-buffed Tenerife, not least the exquisite red made from negramoll: a wine as graceful light and airy as a great pinot noir, but with an elemental Atlantic drama all its own.



Style Notebook

Edited by JO JONES & HELEN SEAMONS

Trend watch Embroidered shirts



Elevate your holiday wardrobe with an embroidered shirt. It's something you can wear for ever – and is far more elegant than a lairy tropical print

Ideally, this is a piece you buy straight from the maker (maybe while on your hols). Look for artisan labels like slow-fashion brand **Kardo** (see picture, right), which uses traditional techniques, including Shibori and Chikankari embroidery and collaborates with handloom-weaving communities throughout India.

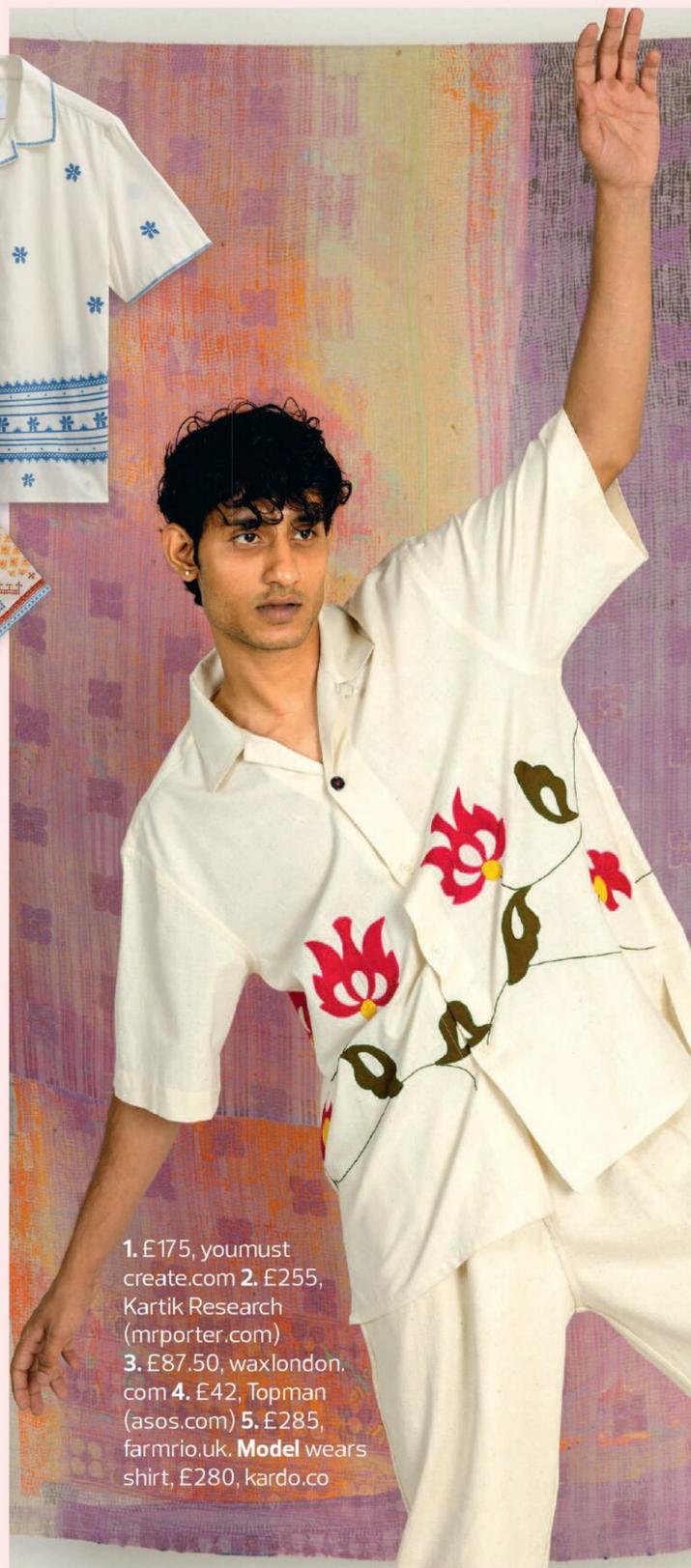
Similarly, Kartik Kumra's Delhi-based label **Kartik Research** aims to put forgotten Indian crafts back on the fashion map. The LVMH prize semi-finalist counts Lewis Hamilton and Kendrick Lamar as fans. Find his shirts at

Selfridges and Mr Porter.

B Corp certified label **Farm Rio**'s all-over embroidered beauty (5, above) from its unisex edit was poised to drop into sale at 50% off as we went to press.

Wax London's embroidered shirts included a rose design, palm tree and a vintage-look blue daisy (3, above). And **Steven Stokey Daley** offers a selection of one-of-a-kind upcycled tablecloth shirts in his Orange Label collection via his website (ssdaley.com, from £375). Current styles include trailing greenery and florals.

If you're so inclined, follow his lead and have a go with a pattern from emporia-fabric.co.uk (£18) and scour Etsy and eBay for vintage embroidered tablecloths to use as your fabric.

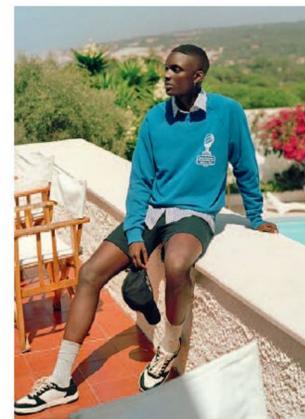


1. £175, youmustcreate.com 2. £255, [Kartik Research \(mrporter.com\)](http://KartikResearch.com) 3. £87.50, waxlondon.com 4. £42, [Topman \(asos.com\)](http://Topman.asos.com) 5. £285, farmrio.uk. Model wears shirt, £280, kardo.co



And... action!

Ahead of the new sequel *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*, Tatty Devine is launching a collection inspired by the original film. Necklace, £75, tattydevine.com



Scandi style

Les Deux's new edit unites wardrobe essentials with streetwear. Sweatshirt £110, shirt £110, and shorts £30, lesdeux.co.uk



Take it easy

Toast's nightwear collection comes in a palette of chalky hues and roomy fits. Robe £145, and pyjamas £125, toa.st

Five of the best

Get into the holiday mood with a cheery striped beach bag



Weston Jute £35, Bloom & Bay (johnlewis.com)



Pink slouch £15.99, newlook.com



Recycled £36, east.co.uk



Green stripe £39.95, marksandspencer.com



Gelato £75, The Jacksons (fenwick.co.uk)

Beauty Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto

The new liquid blushers make beauty into art

Unlike powder blushers that can easily go down the 80s soap star route, liquid blushers leave a natural flush that blurs the lines between the blush and your skin. A soft, subtle effect – like a Turner watercolour. Back in the day, however, liquid blushers didn't work on darker skin tones – I remember seeing my liquid blusher disappear into nothingness on my skin. Now they are better formulated, and many have skincare benefits. A perfect way to wear blush in the heat.

1. Hourglass cosmetics Unreal Liquid Blush £38, hourglasscosmetics.co.uk
2. Rare Beauty Soft Pinch Liquid Blush £22, spacenk.com
3. Vieve Sunset Blush Balm £21, vievebeauty.com
4. Anastasia Beverly Hills Blurring Serum Blush £30, cultbeauty.com
5. Glossier Blush Cloud Paint £22, sephora.co.uk

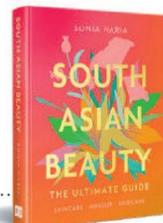


I can't do without...

An oil cleanser that brings new life to lacklustre skin

Victoria Beckham Beauty Daily Oil Cleanser
£60 victoriabeckhambeauty.com

I constantly remind people (myself included) that skin is a living, breathing organ that shifts and changes – for better or worse – depending on what is happening externally and internally. So what's your cleanser like? Because that is the foundation of skincare. Can a good cleanser totally erase the impact of external and internal factors? No. Can it play a key role in how everything plays out on your skin? Absolutely. During a recent busy spell, I noticed my skin was lacklustre. I kept using my cleanser, one I had long been very happy with, and my skin still looked grey and dead. So I shifted to Victoria Beckham Beauty's Oil Cleanser. Created with super facialist Melanie Grant, it combines olive fruit oil with antioxidants and fatty acids to break down dirt, makeup and sunscreen and give the skin a gentle but thorough cleanse. The difference to my skin was immediate. The grey tinge disappeared and suddenly my skin was smoother (the brand's lactic acid exfoliating cleanser is also great). Many deem oil cleansers greasy. This isn't. All the best oil cleansers are made in Asia (this was made in Japan). Cleansing oils are also great for massaging the face. It's a ritual that stimulates blood flow, reduces puffiness, releases tension and gives your skin a wake-up call. Which is exactly what this excellent cleanser did.



On my radar

Beauty tips and products from southeast Asia

Turn up the volume
Fine and thinning hair will benefit from this Indian-inspired fenugreek and black seed conditioner, which repairs damage and increases hair volume. **Fable & Mane Volumizing Conditioner, £30, fableandmane.com**

Healing powers
This facial massage tool incorporates Kansa, a metal alloy that has long been used in Ayurvedic practices and is believed to have healing powers, to lift, sculpt, decongest and smooth the skin. **Maui Double Sides Dome, £63, maulirituals.com**

Essential reading
When a beauty director with decades of experience writes a book on beauty, you pay attention. This one covers skincare, makeup and tricks and tips for South Asian skin. **South Asian Beauty by Sonia Haria, £25, waterstones.com**



Sex in the city

A designer's home in Milan, packed with erotic touches and eccentric clashes, celebrates 70s disco culture

Words ANNA BISAZZA Photographs HELENIO BARBETTA



Fasten your seatbelts. Maria Vittoria Paggini wants to challenge your perceptions, taking you on a riveting journey through Casa Ornella, her part-home, part-gallery in Milan. For the second year in a row, the exuberant interior designer has given her apartment a complete makeover, unveiling it during Milan design week. Her home is in a 1930s residential building in the canal area of Navigli. And her theme? Porno chic.

“Despite the proliferation of nude figures, as you can see, the house doesn’t want to be pornographic. By normalising these images I almost want them to disappear, inviting viewers to move beyond exposed bodies,” says Paggini.

The show begins in the living room under a circus-inspired ceiling that draws the eye upwards. The space is animated by curtains covered in childlike illustrations, handpainted by the artist and designer Michele Chioccolini. He stayed in the apartment for a week and while he was there drew on bedsheets that Paggini later transformed into drapes by adding trimmings and velvet. Also in the room are a sculptural light installation, rounded minimalist sofas and parquet floors painted in black and white. What’s her guiding principle? “I go with my gut feeling. And the more distant I feel from a given object in terms of aesthetic, the more I want to use it. I love

‘I love exaggerating contrasts, taking them to an extreme’: (clockwise from left) the bedroom with a mural by Damiano Groppi; the bathroom; black and white stripes in the sitting room; reflective surfaces in the kitchen; and Maria Vittoria Paggini



exaggerating contrasts, taking them to an extreme. Everything is a challenge.”

With no clear signal of period or place, this home is meant to disorient and feel strange. “While often designers tend to be bound by rules, matching elements to create fluid spaces, by choice I go in the opposite direction. I see it as freedom to dip into my imagination to fully expose my character and soul.” To create the right ambience, a 1970s disco classic is playing and there’s a bottle of bubbly ready to be opened.

The foot-shaped rug draped over the sofa and on to the floor, “as if it were usable art”, is by Tatiana Brodatch. “She was already part of the project, because



the wallpaper I created for the study uses the images of her nude plasticine bodies, reworked into a graphic setting. In one of our meetings, I saw her drawing of the foot and was immediately attracted to it, because I’ve always had this awkward reticence about showing my feet. I guess it’s my own way of getting over it!”

At the centre of the apartment, the dining room with its flowery, 70s-style chairs is flanked by the entrance, the dressing room, the kitchen and the bathroom, all behind custom-made doors in mirror, fluted glass and chequered wood. The long, narrow kitchen continues the disco theme with a neon LED lamp accentuating the predominantly pink

hues. Pierre Frey fabric adorns sliding panels that conceal shelves. An Egyptian pharaoh lamp from a flea market sits next to a double induction hob. Push-open cabinets in slated wood and mirror encase everything else. The photograph of Barbie, among others in the home, is by Alberto Alicata, who collaborated with Mattel to recreate iconic fashion shoots.

“In this house, every time you turn around you notice a different detail,” she says, “particularly through the reflections from small and large mirrors or through actual holes in the walls.” Owing to the number of elements, it’s easy to think Paggini randomly assembles unrelated items. “I work a lot on instinct, but my choices are reasoned following a balance of my own. I know exactly where to raise or lower the volume.”

Probably the strongest clash and yet the most beautiful scene is viewed when peeping into Paggini’s bedroom from the circular hole in the study wall. Her grandmother’s embroidered bedspread and floral curtains are offset by a stunning mural by Damiano Groppi. Perhaps there is no clash and erotic figures, homosexual images and grandmothers’ embroidery are natural bedfellows after all.

During design week, more than 10,000 people lined up to get a taste of Paggini’s eccentric aesthetic. “I’m very happy that this year’s theme had such a positive response. It could have gone wrong in so many ways: be labelled as trashy or excessively hardcore. Instead, it appealed to people of all ages and, more importantly, they understood the underlying playfulness I wanted to convey.” ■ mariavittoriapaggini.com

Blown away

Culture, beauty and ancient history – the Cyclades archipelago has it all. But hang on to your hat...

Words **HARRIET GREEN**

A woman crawls, slowly – very, slowly – along the pavement. She’s wearing kneepads. Before her walks her husband, carrying a red candle as tall as himself. On the main steps to the church of Panagia Evangelistria, we pass two more people proceeding on hands and knees. But this is not a surprise: we are on the island of Tinos, outside one of the holiest sites in Greece. If we’d come in August, there’d have been many more pilgrims crawling uphill, over 800 metres, all the way from the island’s main port, in sweltering heat.

The church they’re inching towards is a neoclassical marble beauty with wedding-cake decorations of blue and red. Inside, black-cloaked priests chant in candlelight and clouds of incense. Even for the irreligious, it’s a moving experience to see pilgrims, many of them now in tears, queueing to kiss the holy icon, said to have been discovered after a local nun had a vision from the Virgin Mary.

Tinos, in the Cycladic archipelago, is a rugged isle with zigzagging Bronze Age terraces and ornate dovecotes left by the Venetians. The northern wind, known as the *Meltemi*, is our constant companion. It whips at our hair and threatens to wrench the doors off our tiny rental car. But we come to love the wind, because it keeps the intense summer heat at bay and lends a wild, untamed beauty to the landscape.

When we arrive at our hotel, it takes two members of staff to wrestle the heavy sliding door open against a 60mph gale. We are staying at the Odera, the first boutique hotel on the island. Tucked into the turquoise cove of Vourni beach and accessed by a long and rough dirt track, it’s been designed to minimise its impact on the landscape.

It would be easy to spend our whole stay here, enjoying the hotel’s gorgeous spa, eating Greek salad at the beach bar and watching goats frolic in nearby fields. The view is spectacular: intense blues of sea and sky speckled every few hours by a distant ferry tracking the horizon.

But Tinos has much to explore. We book a guide: the charming Zaf Gkyzis, who grew up here, has a passion for the place and seems to know everyone. He takes us to explore a few of the 60 or so villages on the island. First is Volax, perched on a hilltop and famous for basket-weaving and its other-worldly lunar landscape. We lunch in a simple taverna by the sandy beach at Kolymbithra. Kardiani, in the mountains, has brightly painted doors, marble fountains and sweeping views. The old port of Panormos is full of tempting seafood restaurants overlooking the harbour. And perhaps most impressive of all is the largest village, Pyrgos, built during the 18th and 19th centuries, when the quarrying of white and

green marble brought great prosperity. The whole village glistens. The cemetery is packed with tombs of exquisite beauty. Even the bus stop is a kind of grand marble temple. The celebrated sculptor Yannoulis Chalepas used to live here. His house is now a museum and the tradition continues with several sculptors working in the village.

Always, the wind is with us. At the top of a hill outside the village of Isteria we stop to admire windmills – elsewhere on the island we have seen them converted into homes. Gkyzis says something about this, but we can hardly hear each other. “Don’t make a house in a windmill,” he says again. “They are put where they are for a reason!”

All week, we feast on Tinian cuisine at family-run tavernas: lamb with lemon and orzo at Horeftra in the hilltop village of Kampos; shrimps on the grill at the beachfront Like Salt; stuffed vine leaves and beetroot salad at Botilia in the centre of town – sipping piney mastika liqueur and watching the cats that seem to rule the island. After five days, I feel we’ve only scratched the surface. I long to return to the villages – and to swim at Vourni beach one more time. But it’s time to move on, with a ferry to Mykonos.

After the tranquillity of Tinos, the party island is a jolt – all club music and glitzy boutiques. But there are ways to get the best of Mykonos. If you get up very early you can wander the quieter streets of the old harbour, known as Little Venice, before the cruise ships arrive.

And you can discover another side to the island by heading just a few kilometres inland, away from the coast. At Rizes (translated as “roots”), an organic working farm by the peaceful village of Ano Mera, we eat lamb cooked on a wood fire, and explore the chicken coops and vineyards. “We are a home: expanded to welcome visitors, but still a home,” says owner Nikos Zouganelis.

Dinner is very different. Deos is a glamorous new hotel and restaurant owned by the Daktylides family, who were among the very first hoteliers on the island. Chef Ilias Maslaris delivers a fantastically creative interpretation of traditional Greek cuisine, which we enjoy from a sweeping terrace overlooking Tinos, Syros

and... Delos, the reason we’ve come to Mykonos.

The tiny island of Delos is a Unesco world heritage site first settled in the third millennium BC. It can be reached from other islands, but the 30-minute ferry from Mykonos is faster and more frequent (€25pp return from the kiosk at the harbour). >

The wind keeps the heat at bay and lends a wild beauty to the island



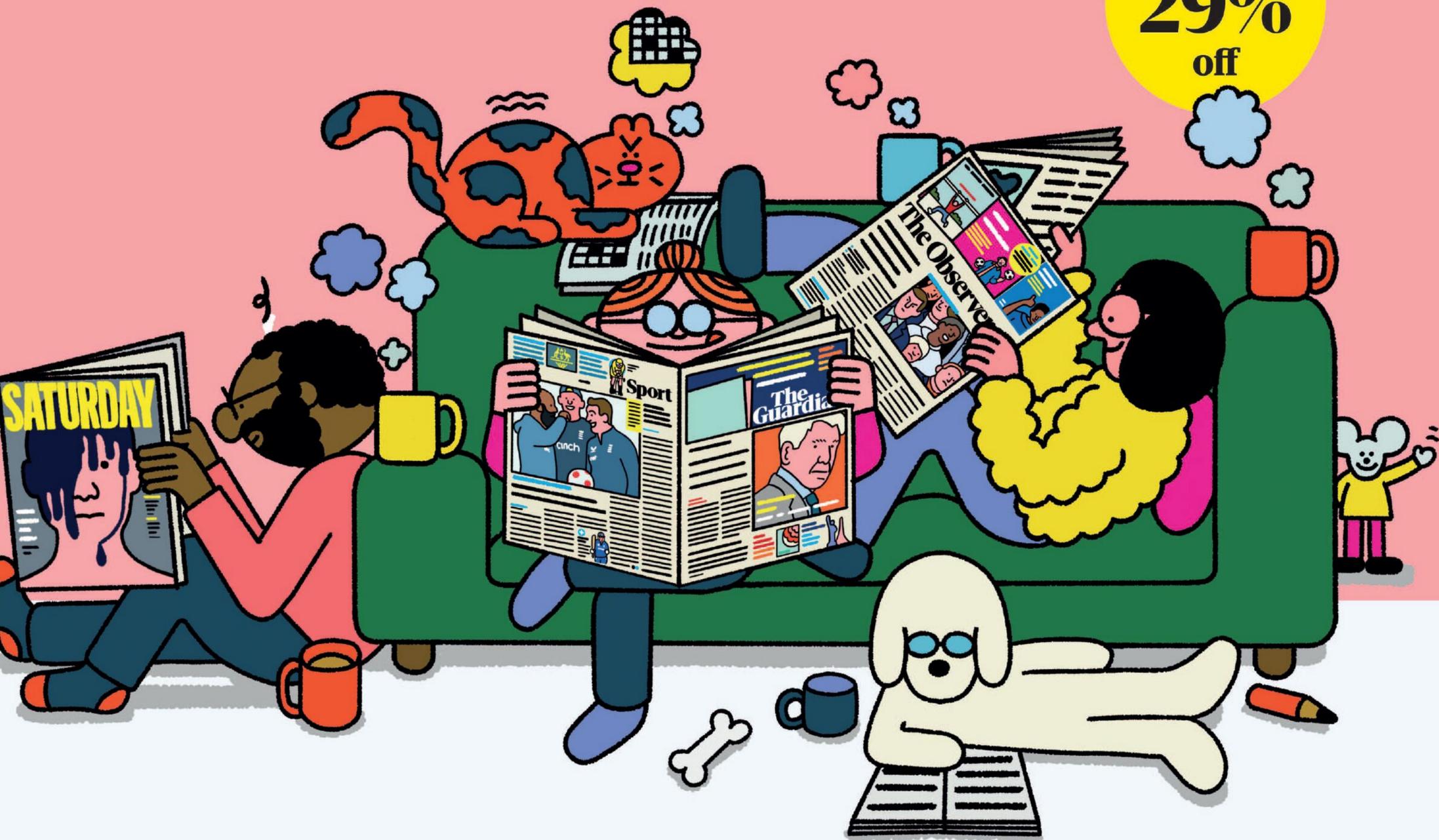
Island life: (clockwise from right) the village of Kardiani on Tinos; pilgrims at Panagia Evangelistria; Horeftra taverna; and Odera hotel



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› Relatively small numbers of people bother to take this journey. Today, Mykonos draws more than 2 million visitors a year. Just 120,000 visit Delos. But for most of recorded history, Mykonos was a mere satellite of wealthy, sacred Delos where, according to Greek myth, Leto gave birth to Artemis and Apollo. From the 9th century BC, pilgrims from all over the Hellenic world gathered here to worship.

Arriving at Delos at the location of the original sacred port, we find a vast archaeological site. Here, a cosmopolitan city – under the Romans, a freeport – buzzed with merchants, bankers and shipowners from across the Mediterranean. In 2019, Antony Gormley conjured a ghostly sense of their presence by studding the island with his lifesize, standing, iron bodyforms.

There's precious little shade here – be warned, if you come in high summer – and there's an overwhelming amount to look at: remains of temples and altars, wall paintings and mosaics, sculptures, an amphitheatre and wonderfully preserved homes that stretch across the 1.3 sq mile site. Happily, we have another guide, Roxani Spithouri, to navigate us through the highlights from the Sanctuary of Apollo, to the Avenue of the Lions, via the House of Cleopatra.

We could have spent hours here. We have explored only a tiny part of the site on our morning visit, but the midday sun is beating down and we could really do with that cooling Tinos wind. We make our way to the ferry and step onboard. ■

Doubles at the Odera in Tinos from £232 B&B, oderatinos.com. Guided Tinos tours with Zaf Gykis (trippy.gr). Doubles at the Ambassador and Avaton hotels in Mykonos from £151 B&B, myconiancollection.gr. Both hotels can arrange guided trips to Delos. Daily ferries to Mykonos and Tinos run from Athens' Piraeus and Rafina ports



'There's much to explore': (clockwise from above) fishing boats off the coast of Mykonos; the pretty town of Pyrgos, on the island of Tinos; feasting at Deos; and the ruins of Cleopatra House on Delos

Jewels of the Aegean

Three more unspoilt islands in the Cyclades for a peaceful stay



Folegandros

An hour's ferry ride from Santorini, Folegandros has just three villages and sandy beaches that are blissfully lounge-free, many accessible by boat

from Karavostasi port. The medieval main town is set 200m above sea level and is one of the oldest and most picturesque in the Cyclades – a cluster of cottages wrapped around bougainvillea-draped squares. Stay at the Anemi, an elegant design hotel. *Doubles from £168 B&B, anemihotel.gr*

Anafi

Its secluded location, 90 minutes from Santorini, has kept Anafi relatively tourist free, with sandy bays that are

often entirely undisturbed. Ideal for walkers, footpaths link the ancient city of Kasteli with isolated monasteries, while the island's sleepy capital, is an atmospheric tangle of alleyways leading



up to the ruined Venetian castle. Stay at Casa di Namphio, a stylish, secluded estate with just three suites and one villa. *Doubles from £88, namphio.com*

Kythnos

Three hours by ferry from Lavrio, Kythnos is almost exclusively visited by Athenians, who keep summer homes on the island. The island is most famous for Kolona beach, an unspoilt stretch of sand linking Kythnos to the islet of Agios Loukas, along with the



thermal springs that bubble up around Loutro village. Stay at chic Yfes, set on a hillside above Flambouria Bay. *Doubles from £145 B&B, yfeskythnos.com. Annabelle Thorpe*

Self & wellbeing

Photograph SARAH CRESSWELL

Tuning in to our 'auraculous' world has transformed my life – and could benefit yours, too

Words CASPAR HENDERSON

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that life without music would be a mistake. I agree, but I'd expand the frame to include a wide variety of other human and non-human sounds. For me, the world is often auraculous or "ear-marvellous" – full of noises, which, to cite Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "give delight and hurt not".

Among my earliest memories as a small child is the sound, on a summer evening, of a peal of church bells echoing off the hillsides around the village in Hampshire where my grandparents lived. Over the years since then I have been intrigued by sounds of almost every kind – though I do exclude a few, such as some of those in the genre of music known as "noise", which a friend says he finds soothing, but which I find about as welcome as putting my head in a buzzsaw.

A few years ago I went to see a flock of knots (birds in the wader family) flying inshore over mudflats off the Norfolk coast. The birds flashed in and out of view as they wheeled and turned in synchrony. It was a wonder to see, but more than the sight it was the sound made by thousands of pairs of fluttering wings as they came overhead that amazed me.

That sound is hard to describe. It was a little like the roar of an aeroplane propeller, without the noise of the engine driving that propeller. And it was a little like a bull-roarer – one of those ancient musical instruments, sometimes known as aerophones, which have sacred associations in some traditions. But it was gentler, deeper and more powerful than either.

The experience made me feel completely alive and present. It also got me thinking about just how little I actually knew about the natural and human history of sound and its supposedly darker twin, noise. I decided to investigate a little deeper and started to research the science and culture of sonic wonder as far as I could.

Start near the beginning. About 13.7bn years ago, after the Big Bang, acoustic waves reverberated through the superhot and superdense medium. The cosmos rang like a bell and the peaks of the acoustic waves became a focal point for what later became galaxies.

The intergalactic void is silent, but some black holes project very deep notes – in one case B flat 57 octaves below middle C – into the surrounding plasma as they turn. And in some planetary systems circling distant stars, the soundless paths of their respective orbits are in ratios that can be expressed as almost perfect musical fourths, fifths and octaves. Our own solar system is full of noises, too. On Mars, the sound of the wind, recorded for the first time in 2021, is more desolate than the sound of any frozen desert on Earth.

When it comes to sonic beauty and diversity, however, nothing else discovered so far rivals the sounds of the living Earth. A dawn chorus circles the entire planet



'Light travels up to 900,000 times faster than sound, yet our brains often process sounds more quickly': Caspar Henderson

continuously as daybreak sweeps from east to west and birdsong begins across each continent and island in turn. Meanwhile, in the global ocean a vast front of tiny clicks and pops passes at 1,000mph from east to west as phytoplankton begin to synthesise and release tiny bubbles of oxygen to the surface. All the while, the tides – pulled by a Moon that is falling, ever so slowly, away from the Earth – push and suck on rocks and beaches, making sand swish and pebbles clack.

Sound travels faster and further underwater than it does in air, and many of the creatures that live beneath the waves have evolved to take advantage of this. Before

Their ability to sing is one reason for birds' success

humans disrupted the seas with noise pollution, the songs of baleen whales would have carried across entire ocean basins through what is known as the deep sound channel.

However, humans should not be underestimated when it comes to hearing nature's soundscape. Our ears can

sense tiny variations in air pressure: the quietest noises that a healthy young adult can detect will move the eardrum by less than the diameter of a hydrogen atom. And our hearing is quick as well as sensitive. Light travels nearly 900,000 times faster than sound, yet our brains typically process many sounds more quickly than sights. This is why sprinters at the start of a race react faster to a starting pistol than to a visual cue such as a flag.

Researchers are increasingly finding that sound is also an important means of communication for thousands of species of fish and other marine organisms, and may play an important role in the ecology of coral reefs.

On land, some of the biggest and smallest animals are among the most attentive to sound and the most adept at using it. African elephants can identify tiny changes in frequency and feel subtle vibrations in the ground, too, thanks to exquisitely sensitive touch cells in the soles of their huge feet. They can sense the thrumming of heavy rain on the ground as much as 80 miles away.

Bats that weigh no more than a coin can scream at up to about 138 decibels, the same volume as a jet engine. The reason we're not deafened is that the noises they make are far above the upper end of our hearing range. They avoid deafening themselves by contracting the

muscles of their middle ears in exact synchrony with each call, relaxing them just in time to hear each echo.

Birdsong is a frequent joy for millions of people. A blackbird giving it everything on a dark night in February when I'm putting out the bins is, for me, a guaranteed boost, but what do the songs do for the birds themselves? The ancestors of all songbirds evolved from common ancestors that lived in Australia tens of millions of years ago. Their ability to sing may be one of the reasons for their success: they now account for about half of the roughly 10,000 species of bird worldwide.

The song of the nightingale is, to steal from the poet Louis MacNeice, "crazier and more of it than we think, incorrigibly plural". Among its European names, the Finnish satakieli – "hundred voices" – may be the most appropriate. Their brains can process sounds about 10 times faster than ours, enabling them to follow complex

sequences of different tones where we hear only a blur.

I've always loved listening to music, but I have found that taking part on a regular basis in actually making it, even as a total amateur, has delivered benefits I could scarcely have imagined. For almost a dozen years I have sung with a community choir. Superficially, there are paradoxes in what we

Making music has delivered benefits I couldn't imagine

do. We have an excellent leader, but there is also a sense of radical equality. We try quite hard – and we improve, a little – but we don't take ourselves too seriously. It's about making a noise, but it's also about learning that making a better noise is in large part about listening more closely.

Over the years, we have sustained each other through hard times, separation and loss. Recently, one of our longest-standing members died. It was totally unexpected, because he had seemed to be perfectly well. We sang at his funeral, and listened to a few recordings, including one from a series of conversations during the Covid lockdowns. In the recording, he made a fundamental point: "It's about the harmonies."

Every now and then when we sing together in the choir, the harmonies lock almost perfectly into place and the overall sound seems to become brighter, richer and fuller. It is as if the space between is filled with warmth and brilliance. There is a sense of flow. My body seems to glow as it resonates. The writer Diane Ackerman likens the effect to having a massage on the inside.

It's not just community choirs like mine. Singing together, whether in harmony or unison, can benefit both young and old. The Singing Mamas, a grassroots movement across the UK that includes young mothers, medics, musicians, teachers and others, work together to improve wellbeing through singing. For later life, projects such as music-therapy cafés, in which the elderly are guided to sing and play musical instruments, can offer joy and better outcomes. Following a pilot study, a number of these will unroll across Greater Manchester from October, involving more than 1,000 people living with dementia.

Singing with others is fun and good for you. It is a surprisingly direct way to connect both to those immediately around you and to the awesome, sonorous, and occasionally harmonious cosmos – and its symphony of noise – of which we are a part. ■

A Book of Noises: Notes on the Auraculous by Caspar Henderson is published by Granta at £16.99. Buy it for £14.95 at guardianbookshop.com

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Séamas O'Reilly

Demanding dreadful nursery rhymes; among my daughter's gravest crimes

@shockproofbeats



My daughter slumps in the crook of my arm. She's so tired she keeps rolling her head on to my shoulder and rubbing her eyes with tiny fists. But those fists are clenched with determination. We are in her bedroom and she won't sleep until she gets her story so, to delay this further, she rejects every book in our house, save for one: a bumper compendium of nursery rhymes designed explicitly to test my patience.

She must know I don't like this book, both because I am a learned and sophisticated man and because I show her every other book beforehand. She glides right past her old favourites, made from thick card and showing animals or vehicles with paws, bumpers, ears and headlamps made from different strips of material – Velcro, cotton, laminated card – solemnly intoning that this puppy or that bus cannot belong to her because it's too scratchy,

soft or shiny. Those are real literature, even if I do wonder about the salience of teaching two-year-olds that they should know, intimately, the texture of an animal's mouth or a bus's exhaust pipe. None of which matters as she just wants me to read a 200-page volume of every nursery rhyme you've ever heard of.

There are about eight good nursery rhymes, and this book has 150. You already know the main bangers, I'm sure. The gory splendour of Jack & Jill or Humpty Dumpty, the crab canon joy of Row Row Row Your Boat or One Man Went To Mow. I'll admit a fondness for child-endangerment lullaby Rock-A-Bye Baby or body horror classic There Was a Crooked Man, but more often I find myself baffled by rhymes I've never heard of, and from which I can mine little enjoyment. The fact is, almost all nursery rhymes are utter doggerel and I loathe them. Few make sense and some don't even seem finished. Take the following: I see the moon/ The moon sees

me./ God bless the moon/ God bless me. Setting aside the fact that pairing 'moon' with 'moon' and 'me' with 'me', doesn't even qualify as a rhyme, are we to believe these 15 words did everything their writer set out to achieve? Are we to imagine them, spent from their exertions, popping a quill back into its inkpot, blowing on the page and crying, 'Darling! I've done it again?' Worse than the offensively short ones are the longer versions of those you only know the start of. Oranges & Lemons isn't great to begin with but one fears its lesser-read final couplet, 'Here comes a chopper/ to chop off your head,' spoils even those meagre joys.

And yet it's catnip for my daughter, who dozes pleasantly around her 23rd couplet about, I dunno, making treacle so nice it conjures weasels, or the thrill of eating cherries off a plate. I am glad of her sleep, but judgmental of her literary leanings. That's not my daughter, I sigh. Her tastes are too basic.

Ask Philippa

My big brother used to beat me up. Now I'm scared of being loved



@Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

DJ Reggie Yates on good eggs and healthy ice-cream

What's for breakfast?

I turned 41 recently. It's amazing how good you can feel if you just make a few tweaks. I was a big English breakfast guy before. Now I'll just throw too many eggs into a shakshuka because Eddie Abbew says to eat a lot of eggs.

That fitness guy? Yes, I'm from a Ghanaian family. If you ask any British Ghanaian, they'll tell you how much they love Eddie: he reminds all of us of someone in our family. We've all got an older Ghanaian guy who shouts a lot, but has your best interests at heart.

Sunday rumours? A lot of people think I have a new baby because the *Daily Mail* reported it. I put a picture of my new nephew on Instagram and... voilà.

What does Sunday feel like? Being a teenager again, with school in the morning. Now it's about having to be a grownup, and serious about getting ready for the week ahead.

Sunday lunch? Nothing can replace a roast – I just don't have as big a pudding as I used to. I make my own healthy ice-cream with sweetener, protein milk and powder. A pint of ice-cream is only 250 calories and 30g of protein. I sometimes have three a day.

Do you work? Sunday and work don't mix. I used to present a morning BBC Two children's show, *Smile*, with Fearne Cotton. Sometimes I'd go out on a Saturday night and do the show without having slept. Then I presented the top 40 on Radio 1.

A Sunday playlist? I love my music, but I don't give a crap about the charts. It's hilarious that I used to host it. I'm not interested in what my 21-year-old niece likes. My theory is that if it's good music, it finds good ears. But I won't be playing Taylor Swift in my house anytime soon. I'm an adult. **Rich Pelley**

The new series of the Reggie Yates Podcast is out now



The question My parents are both deceased. I have an older brother and neither of us have partners or kids. From when we were very young all the way through to adulthood, my brother regularly beat me up. My parents saw nothing sinister in it and said it was just normal rough play between boys, but I strongly disagreed. Eventually, the physical abuse stopped, but emotional abuse continued and he criticised everything about me, including my appearance, what I was doing with my life, and my partners. My parents never challenged him and even suggested I deserved it.

After my parents died, my brother was adamant he wanted a continued relationship with me. He has no partner or family of his own and has never sought one. The one-way flow of criticism in our relationship did not stop, so eventually I ceased all contact with him.

My problem is that I am still alone. Physical contact makes me uncomfortable. My parents were never physically demonstrative and the only experiences of touch I had were beatings administered by my brother. I feel that now I am in my 50s it is too late to change what has happened to me or to start again, but I don't want to die alone and unloved.

Philippa's answer Thank you for sharing your story, I'm sorry that all this happened to you. During childhood we go through our most formative experiences – the ones that imprint the belief system we live by. It's tough if that system means that deep down and instinctively you feel physical contact to be potentially dangerous and fear close relationships as possibly humiliating, painful and unsupportive. It isn't surprising that the physical and emotional abuse you suffered at the hands of your brother, and the lack of support you had from your parents, have left deep scars – scars that affect your relationships and your self-worth. But it's never too late to start work to transform your life. You cannot change the past, but you can change the hold it has over you.

We are formed in relationships, so the good news is that we can re-form with another relationship. A new, deep and important connection can reset your belief system. When you experience a long-term relationship

that is supportive – when you learn to feel cared for by another person – it can change your view of yourself and of the world. This can help you become vulnerable with another person, which is the basis for intimacy.

What is this re-forming partnership and where do you find it? It's the relationship that it is possible to have with a psychotherapist. Long-term therapy, which is what I believe you need, is rarely available on the NHS, so you will need to invest time and money in your recovery. Then, even if you can afford it, it is tricky to

It's never too late to start work to transform your life

find the right therapist. It's not so much the type of therapy you choose that counts as much as how good a working alliance you and your therapist can make together. Go to a reputable website, like psychotherapy.org.uk, pick out a few local therapists and contact them. If you like the sound of them, go for an exploratory chat and ask them how they believe they may be able to help you. Go for the one your gut says will work best. I think it is important to meet at least three before you make your decision. You need someone who understands the concept of deeply embodied beliefs that have served you well, but are now outdated. You need to feel they could be capable of really knowing you and that, in time, you would be able to learn to trust them.

A cheaper alternative to one-to-one therapy, or another source of help you can have alongside personal therapy, is group therapy and/or a support group. Search online for local groups. Connecting with others going through their own psychotherapeutic journey can provide comfort and understanding.

I think it is healthy that you have estranged yourself from your brother, but it would be good to create a "chosen family" – a support network of friends who respect and care for you and you for them. These relationships can provide the emotional support and companionship you need: therapy groups and support groups are a great place to start looking. Engage in activities that bring a sense of purpose and fulfilment, whether that's through work, volunteering or pursuing interests you've always wanted to explore. These areas are also places where you may find your chosen family.

Your feelings of loneliness and concern about the future are valid, but they do not have to define your future. You can find a path to a more fulfilling and connected life, and it's never too late to seek change and to strive for love and happiness. Keep your focus on where you want to be, rather than on your worst fears of where you could end up. This makes a bigger difference than we might think. ■

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