

11 AUGUST 2024

# The Observer Magazine

**Heal thyself**  
Home medical tests  
are on the rise. But  
do they really work?

**Recipe for success**  
Meet the former  
prisoner turned  
cooking sensation

**Ask Philippa**  
'How can I stop  
my sister wasting  
good food?'



**'I was  
pushed  
to the  
edge'**

**Actor Naomi Ackie  
on strength, anger and  
the role that brought  
her fame – but stretched  
her to the limit**

**WITHOUT  
COCOA  
FARMERS  
WE'D BE ALL KIT,  
NO KAT**

**breaks  
FOR  
GOOD**



**SCAN  
FOR  
MORE!**

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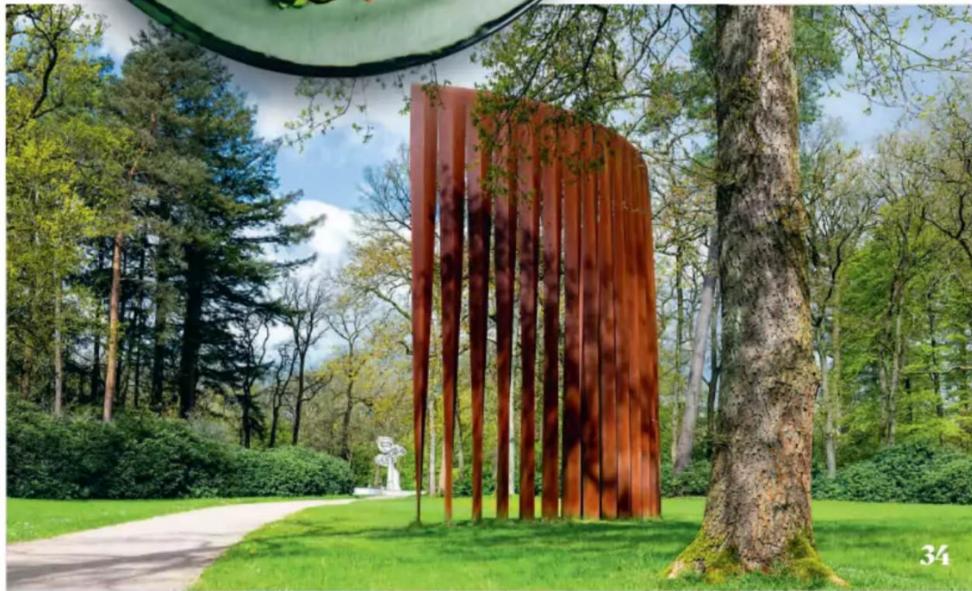
**KitKat**

# The Observer Magazine



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## Contributors

**Eiko Ojala**, who illustrated our at-home testing story (p12), lives and works in Estonia. Working mostly in digital media, he draws everything by hand. Eiko works closely with light and shadow to form his minimalist images, and tries to combine craftsmanship with wit.



**Hayley Campbell** is a journalist, broadcaster, and author of the book *All the Living and the Dead*, which explores our attitudes towards death. For this issue, she interviews our cover star, Naomi Ackie (p8). 'On one of the hottest days of the year, we both sweated profusely while talking about rage. It was refreshing to chat with someone so honest and funny.'



Former *Matches* style editor **Chris Hobbs** is a freelance still life art director for brands like Bicester Village and Aspinal of London when he's not writing about food or editing shopping pages for the *Observer*. For this issue, he curates our homeware edit featuring the hottest new colour combo (p33). He is rarely seen without his dog, a pomeranian, Monty.



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Cover image Simon Emmett

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# Eva Wiseman

## At last things seem to be looking up. But is it really OK to hope?



@evawiseman



### From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

In 1968, modest greengrocer-navigator Alec Rose reflected in the *Observer* on what drove him to undertake a perilous round-the-world trip on his boat, *Lively Lady*, with only his teddy bear, Algy (pictured), for company.

A shy, solitary child, Rose dreamed of 'far-off places'. Like the racing pigeons he loved, 'I seemed to have the travel bug,' he wrote. He worked as a market gardener, then a greengrocer, while saving to buy his first beloved boat, *Neptune's Daughter*. When his marriage broke up, Rose even took to sleeping aboard, but the craft wasn't up to the vast distances he dreamed of. He swapped it for *Lively Lady*; soon after the pair came fourth in the 1964 *Observer* Trans-Atlantic Race.

On 16 July 1968, after more years of saving, Rose left Portsmouth (his 'very efficient' second wife, Dorothy, minded the shop). That evening, stuck barely beyond the Isle of Wight on a windless night, 'I had some

supper of cold ham, tomato, lettuce and brown bread and butter,' he wrote. 'It was not until then that I began to feel alone, utterly alone.'

Rose's mood and the wind picked up and on 26 August, not without dramas, *Lively Lady* crossed the equator. He and Algy 'toasted Father Neptune in a hot whisky'. It took until 15 December to reach Hobson's Bay in Australia, where his son, Michael, greeted him with champagne.

The article ends there, but after 354 days at sea, during which time Rose's voyage captured the public imagination, an estimated quarter of a million people watched him arrive home in Portsmouth (you can see it on YouTube). 'He seemed a bit dubious about the size of the reception that was planned,' Dorothy said, 'and I told him that if he would do these silly things, he must expect it.' 'I just felt it was my personal affair and really interested no one else,' Rose said with typical understatement.

Emma Beddington

I have this terrible feeling, this terribly dangerous fluttering feeling that I believe is called "hope". The sun isn't helping. After weeks of rain, of flat white skies and grave afternoons, the weather is finally perfect. Obscenely so. We have a bunch of sweetpeas on our table that smells of golden syrup and the kitchen scene in late morning is so gorgeous I can only look at it out of the corner of my eye. Blackberries creep across the path outside, imploring us to eat them, and when we do they taste precise and correct and barely stain our clothes at all. Things are not all bad right now is what I'm saying; things are almost good.

Like looking at sweetpeas, I read the news with one eye closed. Yes there is horror, gradations of agony and hell. But in among the pain there are moments of magic, like Simone Biles flying, actually flying in feats of artful greatness, and, on the other channel, signs of real change. Could it be, dare we dream, that Kamala Harris might become president of America? A woman who is firm on abortion and reproductive rights over a man who takes credit for overturning *Roe v Wade*? It makes me feel hopeful, which then makes me feel terrified.

There's been a 14-point rise in those feeling "upbeat" since the UK's election took place. Polling found that only 31% of voters were optimistic about the country before the election, with 43% actively pessimistic. After Labour got in, sentiment flipped, with 45% now optimistic about the country. And while this new government is far from perfect, their speed in confirming the NHS workers, teachers and junior doctors' pay rises feels straightforward, and positive.

At home, too, a slow breeze of optimism has entered my family's houses: every month that passes since my sister's stem cell transplant stacks itself silently, bravely, on top of the last, a brittle tower of hope. You know that feeling when a butterfly lands on your wrist, like, you daren't move, or speak in anything above a whisper? We don't know quite what to do with ourselves.

It's much easier, much more comfortable to expect the worst. There is great pleasure in mockery, and huge relief in pessimism. Far better to plan for the worst and then, of course, you win whatever happens, whether the best or the awfully expected. Far better to despair. Sure, you live only half a life, looking backwards, wearing wipe-clean tracksuits in a gamut of blues, better for hiding stains, but – it is simpler that way.

Besides, expressing hope is, unfortunately, embarrassing. *Babies* are hopeful, not grown adults. Babies look at, for instance, a clean spoon, and their eyes widen, their mouths open, they shiver with glee. A train? Euphoria. Appear suddenly from behind your hand with a smile and some insane rhyming phrase? Do not get me started.

Dogs, too – dogs, if they once, for example, found a piece of fried chicken beneath a bench, then they will drag you to that bench every day for the next eight years, just in case. This is hope, enduring, facile, empty. Grown adults however, we are meant to be wiser, more cynical. Partly because we've been burned before. We can all

remember the last time we allowed ourselves a morsel of hope, perhaps at work, perhaps from politics, perhaps when attempting to manipulate a loved one, only to find ourselves promptly ejected from that fantasy and dropped down to earth with a painful thump.

So the impulse is, when dabbling once again in hope, to rein it in. The impulse is to take oneself by the shoulders and shake firmly, to look in the mirror and yell, "Stop that now you stupid bitch."

But! Do you remember when Sarah Palin, campaigning in 2010, asked Barack Obama supporters, "How's that hopey changey thing working out for ya?" In retrospect I sort of get her appeal – camp, a bit cheeky. Anyway, a few years later Obama responded. "All that hopey changey stuff, as they say? That was real... It's still there. Even in the midst of this hardship. But – it's hard."

I guess it shouldn't take a president to explain to me that hope isn't just the simple drag of a dog to a possible treat, but also a kind of work, a kind of struggle. Apathy and despair beget apathy and despair, and sometimes they keep us frozen in the state where only bad things happen. Whereas hope, even just a splash, can lead to us investing more than just dry little dreams of the future we want – it could mean, or engaging in politics, or mobilising our communities, or just acting nicely in pursuit of delight. Yes pessimism feels delicious, but it's a vice, and should therefore be indulged only in moderation.

You know, I think I'm going to go for it. I'm going to lean into it, towards this awful light, and try to temper the fear with action, however mild, and try to help myself believe that change is possible, and good things are coming. I'm going to look straight at the sweetpeas. What's the worst that could happen? ■

### One more thing...

Deep into the school holidays now, and my four-year-old has not broken character for weeks. He's the dragon, **Carl**, from a new cinema adaptation of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, but his owner is Elsa (*Frozen 2*, played by me) who must discover him in a baby unicorn's nest, again and again. If that sounds confusing, try adding the

complication of Elsa trying to meet three deadlines and also being a cow.

I've signed my daughter up to do baking classes at **Bread Ahead**. Not only will she be out of the house for an entire morning, but she will return competent in both cheese buns and chocolate rolls. Next year: plumbing lessons.

I love how rattled the Republicans are about Democrats calling them 'weird'. But what other description fits a group of people obsessed with children's genitals, birth rates, women's toilets and taking kids' books away? If the cap fits...



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# This much I know

Naomi Klein, writer, 54

Interview **MICHAEL SEGALOV**  
Photograph **ADRIENNE GRUNWALD**

**Politics was always** woven into family life. My father was a war resister, deserting the US military so as not to serve in Vietnam. My grandfather was fired from Disney for union organising. These ideas shaped who I am.

**At five years old,** I convinced my childhood best friend to eat a tulip. She got very sick. I wasn't trying to hurt her. I just thought it would be fun.

**My first piece** of published writing was at 12. It was my bat mitzvah speech, about anti-Black and anti-Arab racism in the Jewish community.

**I ran towards danger** for a while. I took risks in my reporting: in Baghdad, 2004, our hotel windows smashed during

a nearby explosion. A year later, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, I was in a major car accident. These events shook me into questioning my recklessness and I changed course.

**So many of my ideas** get lost forever. I fill notebooks with scribbles, but my handwriting is terrible. I must type them up before it all becomes illegible – there's a two-week window.

**Fascists terrify me.** I'm scared whenever we get whipped up in a mob and don't think for ourselves. That's how the updated far-right is drawing people in. It's extremely dangerous.

**I love it when** words fail me. Rural British Columbia is home, a beautiful part of the world. Here, I pick animals over people. I see wild creatures often, and gasp; their beauty leaves me speechless.

**Parenthood has made** me more emotionally literate. Supporting my child navigate the stormy waters of their feelings, gave me the tools to help myself.

**Let go of your** self-consciousness, believe me. I regret not doing so sooner. People are less concerned with you than you might imagine. I wish I'd wasted less energy caring about what people thought.

**So many of my ideas get lost forever. I fill notebooks with scribbles, but my writing is terrible**

**Relationships go** through cycles, whether romantic or friendships. Don't panic when things feel tough; give people space to feel and work through it.

**Those moments** where we forget ourselves entirely have a magic power to release stress, abuse and grief. Iris Murdoch labelled it "unselfing". I find it jumping in the freezing ocean. Walking through a valley. Lying on paddle boards.

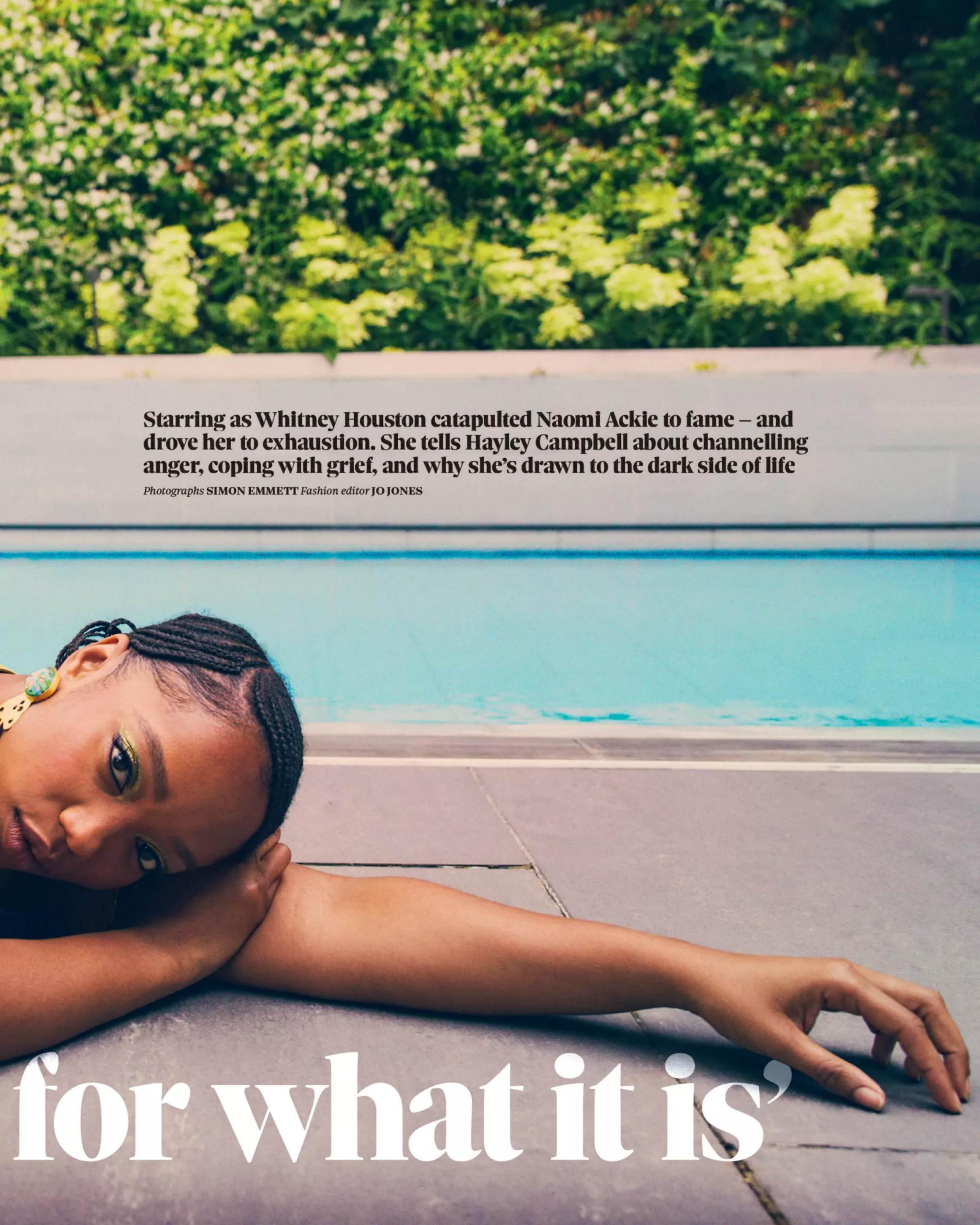
**Bridges were a** long-term phobia. When I was very young, our car broke down on one, mid-snowstorm.

**The next generation** is so much smarter than we are. They aren't making the same mistakes we did. ■

*Doppelganger* by Naomi Klein is published by Penguin at £10.99. Buy it for £9.56 at [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com)



**‘I see the world**



**Starring as Whitney Houston catapulted Naomi Ackie to fame – and drove her to exhaustion. She tells Hayley Campbell about channelling anger, coping with grief, and why she’s drawn to the dark side of life**

*Photographs SIMON EMMETT Fashion editor JO JONES*

**for what it is’**

**N**aomi Ackie flexes her biceps and growls at the café table – then laughs at how ridiculous she’s being. She can’t believe this is her current fascination, but it is: what her body is capable of when she gives it what it needs. “It’s funny with exercise,” she says, rolling her eyes, “because I used to do it just to try to be skinny.” The 33-year-old British actor is embarrassed she fought it for so long – not knowing about the mental and emotional power, the real release that physical strength can deliver. “I feel like I’ve got a lot of energy rolling around in my body. I observe a lot, and I see a lot, and I feel a lot. I don’t say everything, so I have to get it out somewhere.”

Ackie never saw herself becoming one of those people who wear their Lycra to work so as not to lose precious minutes getting changed; the ones brave enough to walk into the weights room and freely lunge in front of the beef-cakes. “I was scared for the longest time – I would sit by the machines. Now I really like the vibe of tapping into my masculine side, testing my strength and being around guys who are doing the same thing. It makes me feel grounded, and I cannot make good decisions if I’m not grounded.” This is what playing Whitney Houston in the 2022 biopic *I Wanna Dance With Somebody* taught her – a blockbuster role that catapulted her on to tube posters and into the spotlight.

“That role pushed me to the edge, to the point where I was like, I have to change something,” she says, “otherwise I will shrink within this job, within this body, within the world.” She played Houston from the age of 19 until her death at 48, sometimes both ends of that timeline in the same day. “I was away from home, isolated in Boston for like seven months, and hungry – I lost about 30lb to get to the shape of Whitney.” And, she was playing a real person who everyone loved: it scared her. “I lost a lot of myself, and not because of the art of it. It was to do with me feeling under pressure and trying to not be hated by the world – I was a catastrophic thinker, thinking I was never going to work again.”

In the six-month break she had between playing Houston and her next film, Zoë Kravitz’s directorial debut *Blink Twice*, Ackie found the gym and discovered her body’s inextricable link to her mind. Her turn as Houston saw her nominated for the EE Rising Star award at the 2023 Baftas, but it also took something from her. “It got me to such a rockbottom that it was a wake-up call. A job cannot mean so much that it steals my life’s joy. I was like, we’re gonna need to fix some priorities.” Two films later, during the 2023 Sag-Aftra strike which gave her four enforced months off work, she realised her pace wasn’t sustainable – not just in how much she was working, but the level of perfection she expected of herself. “I didn’t realise how overwhelmed I was all the time. I was just living in an overwhelmed, anxious space, solidly.”

There’s little trace of that exhaustion today in the woman sitting across from me in a Notting Hill café, surrounded by shopping bags. “I look like such a fancy lady, but,” she says, “it’s not true!” Those bags, she insists, are for work purposes. Ackie, wearing all black, looks vibrant. She says she’s in “soft-life mode” now. Still, she wants to talk about anger.

“Even when I was little I wanted to play characters that were big, large, and like – aaaargggghhh!” she screams, words doing no justice to the visceral thing straight from that gut that she wanted to portray. In *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* she plays a woman avenging her (serial rapist) lover’s death, Whitney Houston’s complicated life ended in an overdose in a bathtub, and *Blink Twice* leaves her drenched in blood. Not to mention the housemaid so traumatised by a murder in *Lady Macbeth* she is shocked into muteness. “We’re so conditioned to be well behaved, men and women – everyone is – but there is something very unique about being a woman and not even being able to recognise what anger is and how to channel it in a productive way. And I’m not talking about being productive so everyone gets along,” she clarifies, stabbing the halloumi on her plate. “I’m talking about being productive in a way that someone knows

Pool party: Naomi wears gown by [albertaferretti.com](http://albertaferretti.com); undergarment by [wolford.com](http://wolford.com); earring and ring, both [emefacole.com](http://emefacole.com); and sandals, [aquazzura.com](http://aquazzura.com). Previous pages: dress by [ilaoofficial.com](http://ilaoofficial.com); earrings by [fatmamostafa.com](http://fatmamostafa.com)



**‘Anger isn’t a bad thing. It’s super useful – it’s a motivator, an energy’**

the effect they've had on you, and you're giving them their shit back. It's only as I've gotten older I've realised anger isn't a bad thing. Anger is super, super useful. It's a motivator. It's a moving energy. It's an action energy."

*Blink Twice* is, certainly, a film about anger. It's also a satirical thriller about misogyny, manipulation, abuse, and revenge. Ackie plays a cocktail waitress who becomes infatuated with a billionaire tech mogul (Channing Tatum), and takes him up on his offer to join him and his friends at his private island for a party. Its working title was *Pussy Island*, to set the tone. On this tropical idyll – so Eden-like a snake enables its women to learn the truth – they are all dressed alike in virginal white dresses when they sense something is wrong, that maybe they're not having a great time after all, and are just pretending to be fine. "I really connected with the things that are being taken from them," she says. "Choice, autonomy, opportunities. Sometimes it feels like there are higher forces that are fucking up my shit. I get rageful!" While it plays on stories we have seen in the news – Jeffrey Epstein's private island, Little Saint James; all sorts of #MeToo tales – it is probable the film works at a frequency you can only hear if you're tuned to it. It is, in extremis, about the general bullshit that comes with being a woman.

I tell Ackie about the security guard. When I saw the film a couple of weeks ago, it was just me and him in the screening room – a nice middle-aged man whose job it was to make sure I didn't turn my phone back on and record something. When the film ended, he turned to me and said he didn't get it. Ackie cackles. "EXACTLY. Isn't that divide interesting?" Watched a certain way, it could seem like what happens in the film comes from nowhere. But tune in to the experiences all around you: women are close to boiling point already. "The whole film is about bursting," she says. "You know, having to smile through the pain, having to trick yourself into thinking things are OK. I think a lot of people know that feeling, because it's how you get by, and it's how you fucking survive."

Ackie was born in Camden, but moved to Walthamstow when she was five. Growing up with parents who had "real" jobs – her father works for Transport for London, her mother in the NHS – Ackie had no links to the film industry when she decided to be in it. "I was 11 and I said, 'I want to be an actor.' My parents were like: 'Wow, leftfield. Nay!' It really was like a lightning strike. I just went: that's what I'm gonna do." But Ackie's mother wanted her to take it seriously. "When I was younger, I was more attached to the idea of being famous," she admits. "I wanted to be the best actor so I could go on a red carpet and do premieres – or be in *Harry Potter*." Ackie laughs. "Mum was like, 'Why would you want to be famous? You should be an actor if you want to act.' She was very keen that I do it because I love it, that I study it, and that I become a master of a craft, but never aim for being a star for being a star's sake." She looks serious for a moment. "Mum was always a very wise woman. And, I think when I was younger, I understood it, but now being older?" Since Ackie entered the industry, that guidance has proved invaluable. Without it, Ackie says, "I would not have lasted... the amount of times you're told no, the amount of times you're told you're shit or you're not good enough, or the things you infer from being told no... If I had been aiming for just pure stardom, I would have given up a long time ago."

That reality check for Ackie came at 22, when her mother died – before getting a chance to see any of Ackie's successes. Her death caused Ackie to "lose" her 20s to a kind of sedated half-life in her grief, which she says she only began emerging from three years ago. "I was still in that kind of optimistic, everyone's gonna live forever, and everything's gonna stay the same, you know?" she says. "And as a family, we had dealt with the previous death of my little sister when she was seven months old. In my head, I was like, 'Well, if one person died in my family, that's it.' That was my deal with God. It was a true bargain with the universe." Ackie says that now, whenever she experiences happy moments in her life, they are twinned with the "gut-wrenching sadness" of the other side of the coin. "That doesn't take away from the happiness, and it doesn't take



away from the sadness – they're just existing in my body at the same time."

To this day, about once a year, Ackie announces to her family that she's going to quit acting altogether – it's such a routine now that her sister and father barely look up from the TV when she says it. But it comes from knowing that things can and do go wrong. And also, what a real job looks like: she approached acting with the same working-class attitude she was brought up with, believing this might not work, clinging to every safety net she had. At 27, she had been out of drama school for years, and could not catch a break. She was living at home with her dad, taking any job she could find on Facebook for cash: bar work, hotdog vendor, inflatable man (when I ask what this means she mimes walking like Frankenstein's monster, a bleaker version of a football mascot hired for a company party: "It was

so humiliating"). Meanwhile, Florence Pugh, her co-star in 2016's *Lady Macbeth* – Ackie's first feature film – had a career that was taking off.

"I was frustrated by the fact that there were no parts for young black women in the way that I wanted to play them. Like, I didn't want to play a best friend, I didn't want to play a single mum. I got to the point where I was below zero in my bank account. I couldn't see where this opportunity was going to come from. And then I watched *Batman*." She bursts out laughing, leans across the table, and assures me that she's going somewhere with this. "This is good, I promise."

She describes a scene in *The Dark Knight Rises*, where Bruce Wayne has been imprisoned in a pit that is open to the sky: to escape, he must climb out. He attempts to twice, and fails, thinking it's only a question of physical strength. But an older prisoner tells him the secret: he has to do it without the rope, because the rope gives him the option to fail. It's a lesson in strength of spirit.

**On song: (from top) as Whitney Houston; with John Boyega in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*; in *Blink Twice*; and with Florence Pugh at Paris Fashion Week**

"I watched that with my dad," Ackie continues, "and I said I think it's got a point. I need to withdraw the safety net." She moved out of home, and quit all of her

side jobs. "I gave myself a year. I was like, if I don't get a job this year, I'm done. I put up my hands. I accept defeat. I quit. I'm done. I will go back to school." Though she had previously had roles in *Doctor Who* and a handful of independent films, none of them had given her the security to move out of her childhood bedroom. Within four months of her self-set ultimatum, Ackie had booked *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* playing Jannah, a renegade Stormtrooper. Soon came starring roles in *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World*, Steve McQueen's *Small Axe*, and the Aziz Ansari sitcom *Master of None*.

I ask if catharsis is what she looks for in a role, given she picks so many dark ones. "No," she replies. "I don't think a job can or should be therapeutic, and acting is for other people; my job is to tell a story so they can feel it." Why, then, the pull toward pain and darkness? She thinks for a bit. "There is something cleansing to me about exploring characters who are really in their darkness, because we don't do it out in the open. It feels more intimate than a happy-go-lucky thing. That's just not been my life. I haven't had a happy-go-lucky life, and that's fine, that's what's inside me. It feels real, it feels robust – it feels fucking messy. I think I was so fake-positive when I was a kid," she says, "that my honesty has stepped into overdrive. I'm like: nothing is fine, ever. Sometimes it's OK, sometimes. Most of the time, we're all grappling with some level of deep trauma or pain. When I say I love darkness or morbid things, it's not because I'm really sad or twisted – it's because I see the world for what it is."

Some bargains with the universe do work, it seems. Ackie's upcoming schedule is impressive. After *Blink Twice*, there's *Mickey 17*, a science-fiction film directed by *Parasite*'s Bong Joon-ho. Then, an undisclosed role in the star-studded film adaptation of Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*. But this afternoon, she'll be back at the gym, harnessing all the power she has. "Underneath all of that insecurity and shame is a gritty, grounded human being who's super-resilient," she says. And all of this – the pain, the trauma, the struggle – feeds into her work. "Listen, life will teach. There's so many things I now understand in a deep way. I have access to the complexity of being a human being that I just did not have when I was 22. You think you have it – you don't have it. I think I have it, but 40-year-old me is gonna look back on 33-year-old me and be like, 'Bitch, you ain't had nothing,'" she grins. "And so on and so forth, until the day I die." ■

*Blink Twice* is in UK cinemas from 23 August



HAIR: JAMES CATALANO AT THE WALL GROUP USING VERNON FRANÇOIS; MAKE-UP: KENNETH SOH AT THE WALL GROUP USING VICTORIA BECKHAM BEAUTY; STYLING ASSISTANT: SAM DEAMAN; PHOTOGRAPH ASSISTANTS: PHIL BANKS AND LEE GRUBB. PICTURES: ALAMY; WIREIMAGE; PROD DB/ALAMY

# Testing times

**Since the introduction of Covid tests, at-home testing has become a part of daily life. Now, you can test for anything from fertility to liver function. But, are we left with more questions than answers? And what does it tell us about the state of the NHS?**

Words AGNES ARNOLD-FORSTER  
Illustration EIKO OJALA

A few years ago, I was in my early 30s, trying to get pregnant for the first time. Every morning I'd take the bus to work and sit, waiting, at the stop just outside my flat, next to a glowing ad for at-home fertility testing. I started seeing these ads everywhere: ads that weren't just for women or about making babies. From genetic cancer screening advertised on trains, to an array of tests available to buy from your local Boots, it seemed suddenly possible to identify allergies and intolerances, assess the health of your bowel or pinpoint vitamin deficiencies from the safety and comfort of your own home. The taglines for these tests ranged from "Your hormones, your way" to "Blood testing made easy" and "Knowledge is power".

I was precisely their target audience – and I was tempted. Trying for a baby is stepping into a great unknown and once you tick past 30 the public health and popular noise around conception changes from trying your best to avoid pregnancy to worrying you won't be able to conceive at all. I also have a history of mild to moderate health anxiety,

hovering on the edge of hypochondriasis. But I was sceptical that these tests might just cast the illusion of greater control, bodily autonomy and perfect accuracy; all while they flooded in to fill the gaps left by the NHS, particularly in the pandemic's uncertain aftermath.

For Dr Annette Plüddemann, a senior researcher in the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine at the University of Oxford, this recent boom in easily accessible and personalised medical care was driven by the pandemic. As people slowly stopped stockpiling Covid-19 tests, companies that once produced or distributed lateral flows had to diversify. In 2021, the company Newfoundland was set up. Partnering Acon, it became the UK distributor of the Flowflex rapid antigen test for Covid-19. It now also produces over-the-counter tests for bowel health, male fertility, vitamin D and influenza. If you can test for Covid, why not cholesterol?

Back in 2021, Niki Woods was experiencing extreme fatigue. She'd been to her GP repeatedly seeking an explanation and a solution. From her own research, she thought that perhaps her exhaustion was down to low testosterone levels, but her doctors were sluggish, sceptical and reluctant

to do the tests she wanted. And so she took matters into her own hands, buying a test that she could administer herself at home. The process was efficient and professional and the results were clear. As she had expected, her testosterone levels were exceedingly low. She returned to her GP, armed this time with evidence. The doctor referred her to the necessary specialist, who repeated the test and prescribed the required drugs.

Ever since having her Mirena coil removed four years ago, Rita Conry has had spotting in between her periods. She's spoken to endless doctors and nurses about it and had a few scans to check nothing sinister was going on. They managed to rule out anything serious, but still no one could offer an explanation. She thought maybe the coil had upset her hormones in some way and she at least wanted it investigated. After much frustration, a sympathetic friend bought her an at-home hormone test to measure her levels of oestrogen and progesterone.

Using a pin prick, Conry had to collect a small vial of blood and send it off to the company for testing. The results came back showing there was nothing wrong with her oestrogen or progesterone. While the spotting remains >



# Go with the slow



loaf

Beds, Sofas and Supplies for Loafers

› a mystery, the test had still served a useful purpose. Conry has a chronic illness and a long history of having her experiences disregarded by medical professionals. “As somebody who’s had lots of issues that have been dismissed, it feels like these tests are things that can bring you a lot of comfort.” She found the experience reassuring in a way her GP had never been.

Both women had slipped through the cracks of the NHS, deepened by decades of underfunding and cleaved by a system riddled with inequalities and power imbalances. At-home tests seemed to offer them an alternative. For Woods, a diagnosis and effective treatment; for Conry, something else ruled out and, more importantly, a service that took her seriously.

Conry’s “whole experience” was, she said, “amazing. You know, it’s all very techie, a really slick interface, all your results are clear to see.” This side of at-home tests is really appealing: well-designed packaging, bold graphics, well-designed software. But Plüddemann’s key concern about these tests is the science behind the scenes, their accuracy and regulation. “We should ask ourselves whether they are fit for purpose.” While the manufacturers have to ensure the tests work in the controlled environment of the laboratory, “regulators don’t require them to do a study in real-world settings”. In other words, when people actually use these tests on their own bodies, with all their various idiosyncrasies, unpredictable home environments and other illnesses, we don’t know how well they work.

**Tech companies have** already extended their tendrils into all aspects of our private, intimate lives and more and more people use technology to assess and analyse their own bodies. With watches and rings we track our heart rates, measure our steps and count our hours of sleep. Sociologists call this cultural phenomenon the emergence of the “quantified self”, a way of using technology and data to improve physical, mental, and emotional health. But while things like Apple watches and Fitbits have been around for more than a decade, this “explosion of tests”, as Plüddemann puts it, is “unprecedented”. We are now sick until proven healthy, our bodies under constant, fretful watch. More and more technology of self-surveillance is now at our disposal, but at what cost?

Unlike at-home tests, new drugs need to be trialled both in controlled, laboratory environments and out in the wild. This is because, according to Plüddemann, we are accustomed to thinking about clinical interventions – like medication – in terms of benefits and harms. But the idea that tests themselves might be risky is less widely discussed: “There’s no harm in taking a test, people think.” But while potential harms might not be as catastrophic as those from an untested pill, Plüddemann cautions that inaccurate results can do their own damage. False negatives might lull people into a false sense of security, false positives elevate health anxiety unnecessarily. “Test results have psychological impacts, too,” she says.

Even if you put aside any worries about accuracy, if you are anxious about your own health, with good reason or for no reason at all, these tests can only ever offer a brief snapshot of good news – you didn’t have that one thing, at that one time. There are always more tests to do, more things to rule out, and while modern medicine offers the illusion of certainty, even at its best it must accommodate shades of grey: results that sit on the margins, lumps and bumps that might turn malignant.

The proliferation of at-home tests is frequently touted as a solution to some of the health service’s ills. Newfoundland suggests that its products could reduce the pressure on the NHS “at a critical time” and cites a 2023 poll that showed almost a quarter of patients went to A&E because they were unable to get a GP appointment.

But for Professor Julia Newton, an NHS consultant and medical director for Health Innovation North East and North Cumbria, the companies who sell these at-home tests in pharmacies and supermarkets overpromise: “They’re not the future. Buying over the counter is not going to solve the massive problems that we have in this country.” This is partly because, as Plüddemann points out,

**‘We really should ask ourselves whether the tests are fit for purpose’**



the availability of these tests can in fact increase the number of people seeking their doctor’s help. They follow the packets’ instructions, making appointments to help them handle troubling or unsatisfying results.

“I think they serve the worried well, rather than the disadvantaged,” Newton says. “The cost of some of these tests would put off people from disadvantaged communities.” To be able to make use of these tests you also need to have a certain degree of knowledge about what might be causing the symptoms you’re experiencing. “People don’t understand why they need a test, so there’s a huge gap of knowledge and awareness that needs to be filled if people are going to be motivated to buy a test.” This was certainly the case for Woods, a menopause and wellbeing expert, coach and author, who due to her line of work was able to make a well-informed guess about what exactly might be the matter.

But there is a place for at-home tests. The opportunities they offer – to democratise healthcare, make it more accessible and affordable – are tantalising. And the NHS already makes use of at-home tests, but ones they provide, administer and analyse. The UK bowel cancer screening programme sends out home test kits to everyone over 50. Between 2021 and 2022, 68.9% of people returned their tests. The programme diagnosed 6,500 people with cancer and placed a further 12,034 people under surveillance. The NHS has also just started offering “do-it-yourself” HPV tests which allow people to participate in cervical screening from the comfort of their own homes and could boost the numbers screened in England by about 400,000 each year.

Some of the at-home tests the NHS delivers are made by private companies. PocDoc was co-founded by Steve

Roest, Dr Vladimir Gubala and Dr Kiran Roest, after Steve’s father experienced a catastrophic stroke when Steve was just a teen. Among other things, PocDoc provides “healthy heart checks”, which allow people to test their own cholesterol and receive the results within minutes. The process and technology was co-designed with the NHS and the service is integrated into primary care. Without these tests, the process of identifying and treating high cholesterol requires multiple in-person appointments and referrals. With an at-home “healthy heart check”, you take your own blood and get the results within seven minutes.

While this is easy and convenient, it also allows people in what Newton calls “historically harder-to-reach communities” to access potentially life-saving tests and treatment; people who the NHS have struggled to engage via conventional methods. We know the NHS is alienating for some people and we know that access isn’t equal, even though it’s free. Life expectancy varies by almost a decade across England, with people in more deprived areas twice as likely to wait a year for treatment than those in more affluent places, and as of 2020, two-thirds of black Britons believe the NHS gives white people better care. At-home tests offer one way to bridge these deep chasms in our welfare state.

As Steve Roest points out, cardiovascular health is a major and under-addressed public health problem. Anyone who has ever had a heart attack or stroke is supposed to be on a register and have an annual appointment to check their blood pressure and cholesterol levels. But on average, and according to Newton, only about 40% of people end up having that appointment. This leaves out a huge number of people who are at risk of future heart attacks and strokes. At-home tests, such as those provided by companies like PocDoc, allow the healthcare system to meet people where they are, whether that’s at home, in mobile clinics, at their mosque, church or community centre. Over the past year, PocDoc and the NHS have distributed over 6,000 tests and while the digital interface might be inaccessible to some, it’s easy and relatively cheap to train someone to guide people through the app or input data on their behalf.

These collaborations between the NHS and for-profit companies are not unproblematic. Over the last 40 years, the health service has increasingly outsourced healthcare provision to the private sector. Various UK governments have justified this expansion by saying it will improve care. However, there is as yet no good evidence to prove that the general trend of increased privatisation equates to better-quality services or a healthier population.

Whatever you think of privatisation, it is almost impossible to disentangle the boom in at-home testing – whether integrated into the health service or sold at supermarkets or pharmacies – from NHS scarcity. In a world of vast and expanding referral waiting times and overstretched GPs, is it any wonder people are looking elsewhere for their healthcare or that companies have occupied abandoned NHS territory? Criticise privatisation all you want, but in the current landscape, if these companies don’t deliver these services, they may sometimes not be delivered at all – and some of these at-home tests at least seem to be doing genuine good for society’s most marginalised people.

There is something else at stake. The rise of the at-home test suggests the border between what we do for ourselves and what medicine does for us is shifting. For some people – such as the worried, wealthy well – the renegotiation of that boundary and the expansion of over-the-counter tests could leave them healthier, happier, more empowered, able to circumvent the delays of the public sector, and take matters of their body and mind into their own hands. But for others, the future looks a little more troubled. Baked into this boom, and even into the state’s own use of at-home tests, is the tacit admission that the NHS as it stands does not serve some people. For those alienated by the health service – those harmed by its inequalities – the solution these tests offer does not improve the dignity, quality, or accessibility of primary care itself. It does not make GP practices and their staff more welcoming places – it outsources the issue. Medicine has its problems, so here, do it yourself. ■



# ‘Where would I be without those years in prison?’

**Jon Watts spent six years in prison, where he learned to cook. Now, at 35, he has legions of loyal fans, more than a million followers on social media and is about to publish his second cookbook**

A year or two ago, he isn't quite sure which, Jon Watts's father came to him with a well-intentioned suggestion. Watts, a social media star and private chef – with a popular debut cookbook already under his belt – had settled into a sustained period of professional success. “Dad said to me: maybe it's now time to stop chatting about all that stuff from your youth; to leave it in the past.” Watts junior found the prospect tempting. “It's really not easy to talk about it all,” he says, with a deep exhale. “And I'm in two minds about a shameful history being part of my identity for ever.”

Today, Watts is 35. The experiences he's about to share – of a violent conviction, years in a young offenders' prison, learning to cook and coming out the other side – take us back to his late teenage years. Watts could quite easily draw a line and move on: focus on his regular catering work, his second recipe book, published later this month, and his sprawling online following. He has more

than 800,000 Instagram followers to tend and 600,000-plus on TikTok, too. His uploads clock up views in the millions.

“But, honestly,” Watts concluded, “I couldn't do it. I've always been open and honest about where I've been. I think that's how I've succeeded. I've owned up to what I've done. And I see how much sharing what I went through helps people who hear. So, I'll keep telling it.”

First, though, his new book, *Speedy Weeknight Meals*, packed with easy-to-follow, affordable recipes, ready in 30 minutes. It's a departure from his early forays into recipe-writing. Watts saw himself as a cheffy chef. He certainly looks the part, sitting at the table in a London restaurant: white T-shirt and trainers, tattoos, a mop of curly hair.

“The first recipe I filmed for social media,” Watts says, “was scallops with truffle and porcini. Who is going to make that at home?” Then, in 2022, a client asked him to cook a no-bake Terry's Chocolate Orange cheesecake. “I filmed it, but was reluctant to post it.”



**Stir crazy: ex-convict turned chef Jon Watts, whose recipe for Terry's Chocolate Orange cheesecake went viral**

Few processes; basic ingredients. “I posted anyway, and it went viral, single-handedly bringing me 20,000 new followers. It was the beginning of my rise.” There's a version in the new book. “I adapted from complex chef food to meals that people actually make. I'm not sure how many people in my position can say a large network of people cook three, four of their recipes every week. It's what I'm most proud of.”

His debut cookbook, a fancier affair, was published in 2023. A small publisher offered to print it, if he could bring in 500 confirmed pre-orders. He did the marketing himself, talking his way on to ITV's *This Morning* sofa. He demonstrated a proven internet favourite: Marry Me Chicken – a poultry dish with a creamy Tuscan sauce and novel backstory. It worked. “The book trended on Google. We sold thousands of copies.” Days later, he was signed by Bloomsbury. “I knew right away what this book would be: quick, easy meals that anyone can make. That's my focus. I've built a huge community: >



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> people who've never cooked, or people who have fallen back in love with food. They're grateful, send photos, and ask questions. It feels as if I'm having dinner with thousands of strangers every night."

They're also the sort of meals that might have appealed to his own busy parents when he was a kid. The family home was in Wantage, Oxfordshire. "Mum would cook..." – he picks his words carefully – "functional food. I'm one of five – second oldest – so there were seven mouths to feed. It was a jungle. Let's say I never looked forward to dinner. For her, understandably, just getting something on to the table was an achievement. And they didn't have much money."

Mum worked in a care home, dad was a laboratory assistant. "The recipes I'm writing now, I'd like to think, would be perfect for people in their situation." They're also dishes Watts himself might have grappled with early on in his culinary career. And he's ready, now, to come to that.

He was often in trouble as a teen. Nothing serious at first; detention-level. "To this day," he says, "I'm not sure why. I could never comprehend it. I felt misunderstood, and neglected." He trundled through school. Toward the end of year 11, a piece of paper was passed round his form room. The class were asked to write down their future plans. "Everyone had an answer: college, apprenticeships, work or sixth form. University hopes. I sat and stared at it, with no idea."

He left education at 16, feeling lost, with no direction. "I'd sleep in, drink in the park, you know: teen stuff. That's when I started down the wrong route." He picked up, then lost jobs: garage, warehouses, shelf-stacking. "Nothing was clicking for me. At 17 and 18, I felt unfulfilled, searching for a sense of purpose. I got into the wrong crowd. They were into drugs, both dealing and taking." Watts steered clear, "but the drinking, getting into fights, the violence, that was me. We had too much time on our hands."

He offers up an example. "In my late teens, I was walking down the street one evening, a car pulled up, and a bunch of blokes jumped out with weapons: baseball bat, golf club, knives." One of Watts's friends took a beating. "He spent two weeks in intensive care. It was like that, non-stop. Turf wars. Stupid, really. It became my purpose, and something to belong to. I had nothing else going on." Until, that is, legal proceedings beckoned.

"I was charged with GBH," Watts says. "It was June 2007, one night I got into a fight." Watts was 18, the other guy 24. "I didn't know much about him. I was quite drunk, feeling frustrated, with this pent-up anger..." There was an altercation. "This guy was friends with some nasty people. Life got tough quickly." Watts was arrested and charged. "I was on bail for six months, knowing I was going to prison." Awaiting trial, he had a target on his back. "There was a park at the end of the road where I'd hang out with mates. People would have to keep watch at the gates – if it was known I was there, we'd have visitors. One afternoon,

that's where I was sitting when a bloke I knew walked past.

"So, you're not dead yet?" he asked. "I should have left. Next thing I know, three guys arrive." Watts was pulverised. "My eye socket broken, my nose broken... I was anaesthetised in hospital as they put my face back together. It all felt normal at the time. I don't know how I'd cope with it all now. There's so much to lose. But back then, I felt I had nothing. I was at the bottom."

In February 2008, Watts pleaded guilty as charged: to GBH and the lesser charge of ABH (actual bodily harm), the result of a separate incident, a year prior. He was sentenced to six-and-a-half years, and sent to HM Prison Reading, a young offender institution. "There was no duvet in my cell the first night I arrived," he remembers. "The old windows, covered by iron mesh, were stuck open. It was January and freezing. I was wrapped up, shivering, waking up on the hour."

The next morning, Watts called his dad. "Now we know when you get out," Watts senior said, "you have something to work towards." It struck a chord. "In the months on bail," Watts says, "I'd already been shaken into wanting to sort my life out. To achieve things. Then in prison, I found routine and structure." Take the different prison regimes, which determine daily life. "When you go in," he explains, "you're on a standard regime. If you cause problems, you're relegated to basic. But if you're well-behaved, engage with education, don't get into trouble, you eventually get to enhanced: you'd live on a different wing, and access some perks, like wearing your own clothes." Plus, you could work and earn.

He picked up various jobs, before eventually landing on cooking. "First," he says, "I cleaned. Extra loo roll was a bonus. Then it was litter-picking across the site, which got me outside. Otherwise, the only regular fresh air was from short periods in the yard: concrete floor, razor wire upfront, in the shadow of the block."

Then came a gig in the kitchens. "It paid £11 a week," he says, "the highest rate. Plus you got more food." He had no passion for cookery, and the work didn't inspire. Breakfast prep involved packing paper bags with a cereal box, UHT milk, a slice of bread and a jam sachet. "Other meals didn't involve much cooking either. Lots of mince. Rice or frozen vegetables in packets."

**'It feels as if I'm having dinner with thousands of strangers every night'**



Inside story: from top, Jon Watts with Jamie Oliver, who gave him a job when he was still a prisoner; and a queue of keen punters at Jon's Streat Food stall in 2015

He kept his head down, even working towards his Duke of Edinburgh Award. Bronze, at first, complete with a night camping on the prison football pitch. Next came silver, then gold: he was the first person to be awarded that award while in custody, Brecon Beacons expedition yomp included. Watts used cookery to fulfil the award's required skill section. He switched the main prison kitchen for the officers' mess. "It's the best job in prison, cooking in the prison staff canteen: they had proper ingredients. I'd dice onions, make lasagne or shepherd's pie, and cakes. Food didn't interest me, but I was good at it."

Two and a half years in, Watts was signed off for day release. An early branch of Jamie's Italian was due to open down the road. "This was maybe their third site," he says, "back when they worked with lots of fresh produce." Watts had heard about Fifteen, Oliver's London restaurant which trained up chefs from scratch. "Reading Prison had tried to get someone in there before, but had failed. They didn't want people already in the justice system." Undeterred, prison staff contacted Oliver HQ. "Two days before the restaurant opened," Watts says, "the Jamie's Reading head chef came to see me and offered me a job."

Watts turned up for his first day eager to earn, but blasé. "Italian chef Gennaro Contaldo was in, demonstrating butchery, discussing ingredients. I walked into the walk-in fridge and faced this wall of herbs – I'd never seen them fresh. I opened a box: fresh mint. The smell smacked me. There was basil, rosemary, thyme... It sparked something. Until then, cooking was a task that I needed to complete.

From that day on, I've loved it. That's the only way I can put it."

For the remainder of his sentence, Watts grafted hard, six long kitchen days per week. The walk, door to door, was 10 minutes. Watts arrived at 7am sharp, the other chefs an hour later. "It gave me extra time to learn." Few of his colleagues knew of his situation. "They must have assumed I was antisocial, always turning down pub invites." Watts kept what he earned, saving up £10,000.

After serving three years and three months he was released on licence in April 2011. The money he had saved proved vital. Rather than be placed in a probation hostel, he rented a flat. He continued working at the Reading restaurant for another year, before being transferred to their St Albans branch. Six years later, in 2015, he left to set up on his own: a food truck, then private cheffing and event catering, before his online boom. With headlines dominated by stories of prison overcrowding, reoffending rates and crises across the prison estate, is he a broken system's poster boy?

"Yes," he accepts. "The young offenders system worked for me. I don't know where I'd be without those years inside. There are other people I know who were inside and are doing well. One friend is a property developer, with a lovely young family. He did five years for armed robbery."

Trajectories like these, he fears, have become increasingly rare. "I was still inside in 2010, when something shifted." It was the election of the coalition, then later Conservative government, after 13 Labour years. "You saw a change literally overnight. There were cuts: not enough staff; programmes disappeared; we'd spend more time locked in our cells. The system wasn't great before, but it just about worked, sometimes." In January 2014, Reading Young Offenders was closed. Today, it's a museum. "Those programmes I was part of were already a rarity. Then they vanished. People in my position today? I'm not sure they'd have the same chance. Yes, those officers who care still exist. But they're stretched further and further."

Watts regularly visits institutions like the one he served time in, delivering talks to the youngsters – when possible, while cooking. "There's a cycle that so often happens once they're out: these kids can't get a job because they haven't got an address. Can't get work or a bank account." The odds are stacked against them. "British reoffending rates are 75%. They're not given the support and opportunities I had. And with the state prisons are in, it would be easy for society to give up on young offenders. For them to give up on themselves. We don't go the right way about rehabilitation. With support and guidance, proper resources and effort, we could turn those rates around rapidly. My story is proof of what's possible." ■

*Speedy Weeknight Meals by Jon Watts (Bloomsbury Publishing, £20) will be released on 29 August*

# Food & drink

## Nigel Slater



@NigelSlater



### Chop-and-change recipes to soak up the season's bounty

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The summer is moving too quickly. I saw a basket of marrows, cobnuts in their frilly sheaths and fat heads of sweetcorn this week, a sure sign that autumn will be here in a heartbeat. This is the time of year I leave the shops with a panic-buy basket of summer greens and fruits, worried that this might be last I see for another year.

The fridge is looking bountiful, but it is stocked with vegetables and fruit that must be used quickly. Broad beans and long, climbing runners; broccoli and enough herbs for a summer's worth of salsa verde. I came home with two sorts of basil this week: aniseed-scented Thai basil and a huge bunch of Italian leaves that you could smell from 2m away.

The recipes I'm finding really useful

at the moment are those that use a large variety of vegetables – they help with the glut of good things – but recipes that are more of a blueprint than something to stick to rigidly. The sort of suggestions where you can chop and change the ingredients, replacing green beans with courgettes or broad beans with mangetout or sugar snaps, and where it really doesn't matter if you substitute blackberries for loganberries, or vice versa.

With such loose, easygoing ideas in mind, I made a coconut-scented pot of summer vegetables and a sparkling fruit sauce for any seasonal scarlet fruit. Dishes in which you can use different greens and fruits as the mood takes you and as the summer races on.

#### Summer green vegetable curry

The vegetables are interchangeable here. As different greens come into season, or depending on what you have in your basket, you can easily swap them for those on the list. *Serves 4. Ready in 1 hour*

**aubergines** 2, medium  
**groundnut or vegetable oil** 4 tbsp  
**broad beans** 250g (podded weight)  
**green beans** 100g  
**broccoli** 150g  
**curry paste** the recipe below or 4 tbsp of ready-made curry paste  
**spring greens** 150g  
**coconut milk** 500ml  
**limes** 2  
**Thai basil leaves** a handful  
**coriander leaves** a handful

To serve:  
**steamed rice or sticky rice**

For the curry paste:  
**chillies** 3, small and hot  
**garlic** 3 cloves  
**ginger** 1 small lump, about 40g  
**lemongrass** 3 plump stalks  
**coriander seeds** 8  
**coriander leaves** 75g  
**ground turmeric** 1 tsp  
**vegetable oil** 3 tbsp

Make the spice paste. First, remove the stalks from the chillies. Peel the garlic and ginger, and place in the bowl of a food processor, together with the chillies. Discard the tough root end and outer leaves of the lemongrass. Roughly chop the inner leaves and add to the other ingredients in the bowl. Add the coriander seeds and leaves and the ground turmeric.

Process the spices, herbs and aromatics to a thick paste, adding as much of the oil as you need or maybe a little extra. Scrape the paste into a small bowl using a spatula.

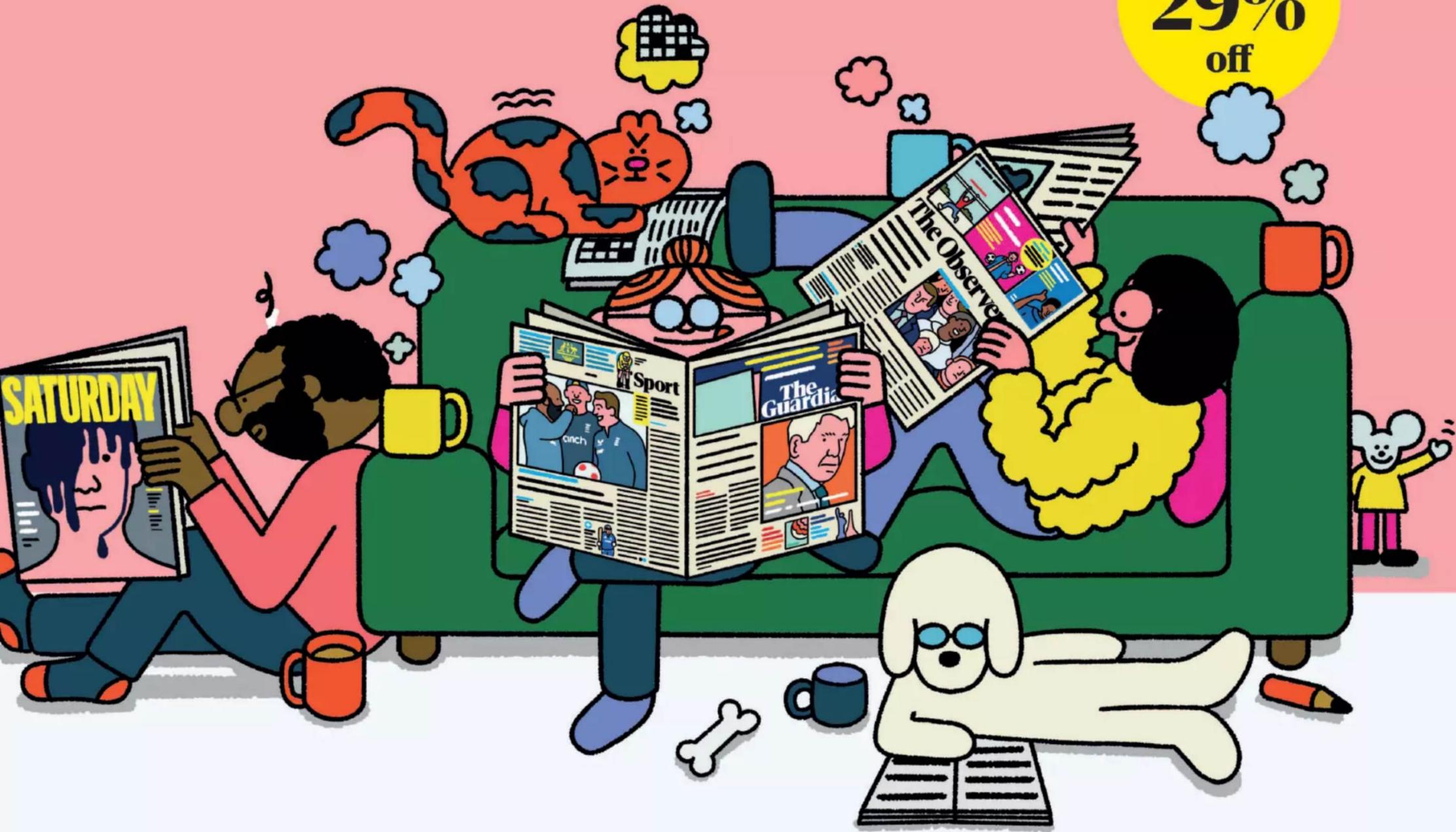
Cut the aubergines in half lengthways and then into slices about 1.5 cm thick. Warm the oil in a large, low-sided pan, then lightly brown the aubergines, turning them over when the underside is golden. If you cover them with a lid, they will take up less oil. Remove the aubergines and set them aside.

While the aubergines are cooking, cook the broad beans in boiling, lightly salted water for about 4 or 5 minutes. Drain them and, if you wish, remove



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## Food & drink

# Nigel Slater

### These are dishes in which you can use different vegetables and fruits as the mood takes you

> their papery skins. Set aside. Top and tail the green beans and cut them into short lengths (you'll be eating this with a spoon, so you probably won't want long beans to deal with). Trim the broccoli into florets, cutting any large clumps in half.

Put the curry paste into the aubergine pan and let it sizzle, stirring it so it doesn't burn. Lower the heat and stir in the coconut milk. Let the milk come to a simmer without letting it boil, then drop in the broad beans, green beans and broccoli and let them cook for about 5 minutes, until tender.

Shred the spring greens and add to the curry, along with the aubergine. Halve the limes and squeeze one of them into the curry. Keep the other for offering at the table for those who need it. Tear the basil and coriander into small pieces and stir into the curry. Serve with sticky rice.

#### Summer fruits in raspberry and elderflower

A simple, stunning summer fruit recipe that can be used as a blueprint for any fruits. To the raspberry and elderflower purée you could add mulberries, purple gooseberries, loganberries or tayberries as they come into season. *Serves 4.*

*Ready in 30 minutes*

For the sauce:

raspberries 250g  
elderflower cordial 2 tbsp  
mint 6 leaves

For the fruits:

raspberries 250g  
redcurrants 125g, or any other berries  
blackberries 150g  
cherries 250g

To make the sauce: put the raspberries in a blender or food processor, then pour in the elderflower cordial. Tear up the mint leaves, add them to the blender and process to a thick purée. Pour into a mixing bowl and chill thoroughly.

Put the raspberries in a bowl. Pull the redcurrants from their stems and add them, together with the blackberries.

Remove the stalks from the cherries and halve them, removing the stones as you go. Mix the cherries with the other fruits then stir the raspberry mint sauce over them, stirring gently to coat the fruits. ■



## Nigel's midweek dinner

### Courgettes, lemon and ricotta

Photograph  
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

#### The recipe

Using a vegetable peeler, cut 400g of courgettes into long, wide, thin ribbons.

Pour 4 tbsp of olive oil into a large mixing bowl, then season with salt and black pepper. Peel 3 cloves of garlic and crush them to a paste, then stir into the oil.

In a dry, shallow pan, over a moderate heat, lightly brown 3 tbsp of pine kernels, watching them carefully so they do not burn. Set them aside and return the pan to the heat.

Put the ribbons of courgette and their oil into the hot pan and let them cook for 6 to 8 minutes, until they are starting to soften and become translucent. Finely grate the zest from a medium-sized lemon.

As the courgettes start to colour lightly here and there, tear up a large handful (about 10g) of basil leaves and add them to the courgettes. Stir in the lemon zest, then squeeze some of the juice from the

lemon into the pan. Add the toasted pine kernels to the courgettes.

Divide 250g of ricotta between 2 plates or shallow bowls, then spoon the courgettes next to them. Pour any lemon and basil-scented oil from the pan over the ricotta and toss gently together. *Serves 2. Ready in 35 minutes*

- I often make this as a side dish, without the ricotta, for grilled fish. It works especially well with white fish, such as sole and plaice.
- You could crumble the ricotta and toss it with the courgettes if you wish.
- The flavours here are mild and gentle, especially if you use new, summer garlic. You could introduce some grated parmesan if you like.
- Instead of basil, use torn tarragon and mint leaves. To make a more substantial version, cook a handful of pappardelle in boiling, salted water, drain and toss with the courgettes and basil. ■

# Food & drink

## Jay Rayner



@jayrayner1

### A canteen-style Korean with big, nerdy ideas, Bokman is 'grin-inducing' for all the right reasons

#### Bokman

3 Nine Tree Hill, Cotham, Bristol BS1 3SB ([bokman.co.uk](http://bokman.co.uk)). All dishes £8.50-£24 Desserts £6.50-£8 Wines from £27

Over the years, I've come to love a pre-order. It wasn't always the way. For a long time, I considered the whole point of restaurants to be spontaneity. At home you usually know, hours before, what you will be eating. It's a matter of practicality; of ingredients bought and preparation begun. But you can push into a restaurant

without any idea what you'll be having for dinner. Then you get given a list. You choose. They bring. It's a miracle. But eventually I got swept up in the calm thrills of ordering in advance. There is still a list. You still get to choose. But the delicious anticipation, the thought that there is a nice, bespoke thing in your future, is extended.

This first struck me when I booked for Sunday lunch at the Lamplighter Dining Rooms in Windermere, almost a decade ago. It's not a fancy place. It rolls its eyes at fancy. Back then it looked like your nan's front room circa 1984, if your nan ran a B&B and regularly fed Sunday lunch to 50 people. The key was the roast. I had to get my order in for the whole table by 6pm the Friday before. Honestly, knowing that someone who attends to the essentials is sorting your rib roast before the weekend has really begun is a very sweet thought. That lunch was banging. I've checked. They still do this.

At Bokman, a knowingly rickety Bristol restaurant investigating the food of Korea, the pre-order item is a £20 tongdak or wood-fired roast chicken stuffed with sticky rice and served with dipping sauces and cubes of pickled mooli the white of cloudy ice. You have to say you want one when you book. It would seem rude not to. It means that whatever else happens there is roast chicken in my future. This is rarely a bad thing. In all other regards, Bokman, which opened late in 2019, is completely unlike the Lamplighter. The only people who would describe it as comfortable are those who have been on their feet for 12 hours straight and would pay good money to sit down on anything.

There are a few canteen-style tables crammed into the tiny downstairs space, surrounded by primary-school stools, and a counter in the window with equally arse-challenging bar stools. It is a room of elbows and dishes coming over your shoulder and shouts of, "Shall I clear those to make a bit of room for you?" You pass the equally tiny kitchen on the way to the loo and there, to one side, is a sight to inspire happiness: the backlit chicken rotisserie, slowly turning like the very best of Ferris wheels.

All of this suggests a bottom-up affair, but really this is all very much top down. The two chefs, husband and wife Kyu Jeong Jeon and Duncan Robertson, met while



**To one side is a sight to inspire happiness: the backlit chicken rotisserie, slowly turning like the very best of Ferris wheels**

**Small wonder: (from left) roast chicken; the dining room; perilla leaves stuffed with beef; Bokman salad; kimchi rice with pork; soft serve with cherries and with honey chips**

at the two Michelin star L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon in Paris, doubtless whipping inordinate amounts of butter into mashed potato and doing fiddly things with pristine langoustine. Later, they led the kitchen of a restaurant in southwest France to a Michelin star, before moving for a couple of years to Jeon's native Seoul. Finally, they brought their young family here to Bristol and opened on this steep hill just off Stokes Croft, with its huddle of indie bars, restaurants and cafés where oat milk wins out over something from a nipple every time, as befits a constituency with a new Green MP.

The menu is a tight and crowd-pleasing selection of their favourite things. Tonight, this includes a classic soy-braised short rib dish, a non-meat alternative of tofu with king oyster mushrooms and greens, and a seabass special. We start with a plate of aromatic perilla leaves, wrapped around minced beef and pork, then deep fried in a lacy, fragile batter of hot, cheery crunch. These are god-tier snacks, little pockets of joy, to be eaten as quickly as possible from the deep fat fryer, which is easy



because it's only about 5ft away over there. Dip them in the accompanying sweetened soy and mourn them when they are gone. There is the sturdy Bokman salad made with layers of Chinese leaf, toasted pine nuts, heaps of sesame seeds and a healthy ballast of toasted seaweed, lending a seashore waft to the plate. A mini cauldron of fat-grained kimchi fried rice comes laid with a frilly-edged fried egg. You can have this with shards of roasted pork belly – and you know I was always going to.

Then there is that roast chicken. It is a small almost spherical bird. The skin is dark and salty, and bubbled away from the meat over the breast. Down the centre is a gash, so you can get at the dense rice stuffing, wrapped around the sweet flesh of stone-in dates that have started to crumble in the heat. For £4.50 you can get a side of crisp lettuce leaves to be used as wraps so you can eat the chicken "ssam" style, with extra condiments. This includes their own gochujang, the salty, chilli-boosted bean paste that requires months of effort to produce. Making it is a profoundly nerdy, determined thing to do, which describes the whole enterprise. The kitchen has a laser-like focus on these few very good things.

The wine list is short and, this being Bristol in general and Stokes Croft in particular, is low intervention, which means cloudy, pungent and rarely cheap. Desserts include a matcha tiramisu. But there are also bowls of fluffy vanilla soft serve with various toppings. One is piled with "honey butter chips", much like giant Crunchy Nut cornflakes; another has syrup-drenched cherries alongside the whimsy of sugar-crusted gummy cherries, which always look to me like comedy testes. If this sounds childish, guilty as charged. Dessert at Bokman is childish, in all the right grin-inducing ways.

After dinner, take a stroll to the brilliantly Bristolian Turbo Island, which on its website describes itself as "an open-air social hub", a grand name for the area's organic and knowing chaos. Think abandoned sofas, fabulous graffiti art, impromptu bonfires and doubtless feverish arguments over plans for the revolution, when everyone can be arsed. After the advanced planning of a pre-order at Bokman, random debate with friendly strangers may just be what you need. ■

Jay Rayner's cookbook, *Nights Out at Home: recipes and stories from 25 years as a restaurant critic*, is available to preorder now. Visit [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com)

## Notes on chocolate

A 'vinyl' chocolate single hits all the right notes, finds Annalisa Barbieri



This is a story about listening to your inner voice. Fear not, this column has not become about life coaching. But it's all relevant. I got sent some chocolate this week, in the form of a record, a 7in 'vinyl' single. 'I think you can play it,' I gaily said. 'No you can't,' said someone who will remain nameless and fancies themselves an aficionado. 'Oh,' I said, feeling deeply stupid, as if I'd watched too much *Willy Wonka*. 'You can't play a chocolate record,' they added, 'because it'd ruin the needle.'

Subdued, I snapped into this thick disc of 70% cocoa chocolate and ate it. The chocolate maker (from 'bean to music' they class themselves), **Nadalina**, is from Split in Croatia, and the man behind it, and on the record, is Marinko Biškic, a former singer in a punk band.

What a silly gimmick, I thought.

But the idea that I might have been right (why make a disc out of chocolate otherwise?) niggled me until I contacted the British importers and said, 'Isn't it a bit misleading selling a chocolate record if you can't play it?' 'But you can!' they retorted and proceeded to send me a video of it. You need to set the needle to 1g and the anti-scale to neutral and obviously if the chocolate has melted in any way it won't play. You can apparently play it up to five times and then you eat it, label and all. I wish I could critique the music, too, but as discussed, I can't.

So the moral of this story is: trust yourself and be curious. This is an expensive way to eat chocolate (it costs £24 from [cocoarunners.com](http://cocoarunners.com)), but a) the chocolate is really good and b) what a fab present.

## Wines of the week

The latest grape varieties have eco credentials. Let's drink to that.

By David Williams

@Daveydaibach

**Tesco Finest Floreal France 2023**  
£8, Tesco

I'm not sure I'd have written about Tesco's latest wine if it wasn't for the story behind it. Don't get me wrong: it's a perfectly decent light dry white, at a fair price, with gentle

melon, greengage and gooseberry flavours. But what makes it noteworthy is the grape variety, floreal, one of a few recently bred hybrid varieties created by crossing European *Vitis vinifera* grape varieties with wild Asian and American vines. Known as Piwi (short for the German Pilzwiderstandsfähige Traubensorten), they've been bred to resist fungal diseases. That means they require far fewer fungicide sprays, which, says Tesco, leads to an '80-90% reduction in the need for vine treatments, significantly lowering tractor usage, CO2 emissions, and soil compacting.'



**Breaky Bottom Seyval Blanc Cuvée Grace Nichols East Sussex, England 2017**  
Waitrose £35.99

It's still early days for the Piwis, with Tesco's the first to make it into a major UK retailer. But they are being taken increasingly seriously in a wine business

that is becoming more conscious of its own contributions to a climate crisis that threatens its very existence. Wines made from varieties such as cabernet blanc, solaris, souvignier gris, muscaris and regent will become much more familiar in the coming years. We're also seeing a reappraisal of hybrids such as the white seyval blanc, which was widely planted by English growers in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to its cold-hardiness. Long dismissed as second rate, winemakers such as Blackbook and Breaky Bottom have proved seyval can make some distinctive and genuinely fine sparkling wines.

**Le Professeur Marselan, IGP Pays d'Oc France 2023**  
£9.49, House of Town End

With more and more producers now working with Piwis and other hybrids, it seems likely they'll follow the same path to acceptance taken by the many familiar 'intraspecies'

crossings of two *Vitis vinifera* varieties created by vine breeders over the past century. Recent wines I've enjoyed from some widely planted crosses include M'Hudi Pinotage, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2020 (£17.50, Wine Society), a wonderfully rich, mellow-berried red take on pinotage, the 1920s Cape crossing of cinsault and pinot noir which aimed to bring the former's robust productivity to the fussy, hard-to-grow pinot; and Le Professeur Marselan, a sumptuous ripe black-fruited southern French red from the marselan variety that was bred in France in the early 1960s from grenache and cabernet sauvignon.



# Style



Buckle £15.99, [newlook.com](http://newlook.com)



Floral £159, [kurtgeiger.com](http://kurtgeiger.com)



Double buckle £55, [marksandspencer.com](http://marksandspencer.com)

# The edit Sandals

Edited by SAM DEAMAN



Buckled, bright  
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Denim £195, [bobbies.com](http://bobbies.com)

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street  
hero



Cross toe £60, [next.co.uk](http://next.co.uk)



Papaya £74, Ganni ([theoutnet.com](http://theoutnet.com))



Jelly £65, Melissa ([wolfandbadger.com](http://wolfandbadger.com))



Leather £155, [fairfaxandfavor.com](http://fairfaxandfavor.com)



Weave £80, [oliverbonas.com](http://oliverbonas.com)



Caged £110, [vagabond.com](http://vagabond.com)



Loupe £95, [dunelondon.com](http://dunelondon.com)



Rainbow £60, [toms.com](http://toms.com)



Studded £50, [schuh.co.uk](http://schuh.co.uk)

Editor's  
choice



White £139, [penelopechilvers.com](http://penelopechilvers.com)



Brown £185, [soeur.uk](http://soeur.uk)



Raffia £195, [russellandbromley.co.uk](http://russellandbromley.co.uk)

# Beauty Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto



## 10 of the best Remedies for uneven skin tone

In summer, skincare conversation centres heavily on SPF, suncreams and getting a glow. But for a lot of people susceptible to hyperpigmentation, this issue – essentially inconsistencies of skin tone – is the biggie. Hyperpigmentation mainly shows up in the following categories: unevenness, sometimes hereditary and sometimes a result of melasma, a condition often triggered by hormones during pregnancy; sun spots caused by overexposure to the sun; and inflammation – acne, burns, wounds – that has healed but left scars.

So how to treat? Laser treatments vary in efficacy and can be very expensive, so do your homework first. In the meantime, I'd recommend incorporating vitamin C, AHAs and retinol into your routine, but always use a decent SPF. Eucerin and UltraSun are worth a try. There are also serums that deliver impressive results: Murad's Dark Spot Correcting Serum remains one of the best. Byoma is brilliantly priced, but if your hyperpigmentation is really stubborn, try MZ Skin by Dr Maryam Zamani. She is one of the industry's most lauded skin doctors so her prices reflect this.

The purpose of these products is to restore evenness. None are skin-damaging "bleaching" creams and they don't include hydroquinone – of which, unless doctor-prescribed, my advice is always steer clear. ■

1. La Roche-Posay Mela B3 Serum £48, [lookfantastic.com](http://lookfantastic.com)
2. Bioderma Pigmentbio C-Concentrate £29, [sephora.com](http://sephora.com)
3. Naturium Vitamin C Super Serum Plus £27, [spacenk.com](http://spacenk.com)
4. Byoma Brightening Serum £12.99, [boots.com](http://boots.com)
5. MZ Skin Brighten & Perfect 10% Vitamin C Serum £250, [mzskin.com](http://mzskin.com)

6. Emma Lewisham Skin Reset Face Serum £85, [libertylondon.com](http://libertylondon.com)
7. Allies of Skin Mandelic Pigmentation Corrector Night Serum £98, [uk.allies.shop](http://uk.allies.shop)
8. Farmacy Honey Glow 17% Resurfacing Acid Serum £56, [cultbeauty.co.uk](http://cultbeauty.co.uk)
9. 4.5.6 Skin Max Glow-Getter Firming Radiance Serum £55, [456skin.com](http://456skin.com)
10. Murad Dark Environmental Shield £85, [murad.co.uk](http://murad.co.uk)



# Enduring love

A 1970s home has been renovated with designs built to last



Words HANNAH NEWTON  
Photographs PAUL RAESIDE

On the tiles: the concrete extension with red-painted steel girders. Facing page: stainless-steel units in the kitchen with a view of the galvanised steel staircase





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**F**or Danish architect Johan Hybschmann, a modern house was key to how he wanted to live. “Victorian houses are nice to look at, but I don’t want to live in one,” he laughs. “The idea of home is dated in the UK, period features are considered quality, but modern homes from the 60s and 70s, deemed perhaps ugly, are more suited to modern living.”

We are standing in his immaculate kitchen with his wife, Anita Freeman, a clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital. Their home was built in the 1970s and stands on a street in east London among a hodge-podge of Victorian houses and midcentury estates.

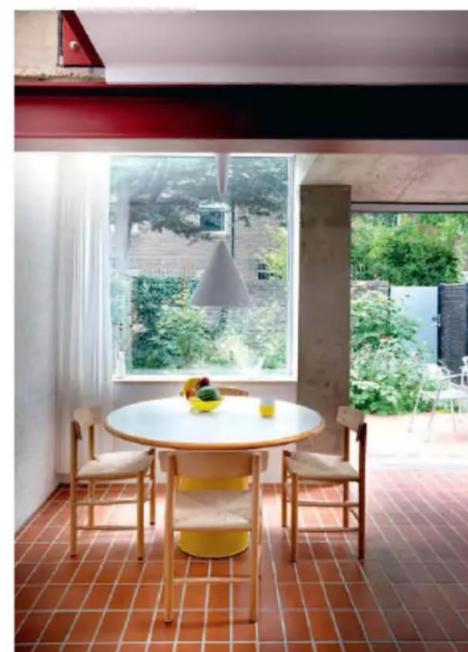
The couple are firm believers in owning only what you need, but ensuring it is the best you can afford. Anita was brought up by her grandparents in north London with very little and has a deep appreciation for everything she has worked for, while Johan, a director of Archmongers architects, grew up in Denmark, where he was taught to value brilliant design – and together they make a compelling team. “We are grateful for what we have and don’t take anything for granted. Trendy is a dangerous thing,” says Johan. “Buying something that is well made, that will last forever and can be fixed is what good design is all about.”

Their stainless steel kitchen is a case in point. Italian made, it is designed to withstand decades of battering and long nights of feasting. “It is robust,” laughs Anita, whose childhood helping her granddad in his pub kitchen, alongside her twin sister, instilled a familiar connection to the practicality and functionality of industrial features.

Their mutual appreciation of durable but beautiful objects continues throughout their home, which they share with Luca, their seven-year-old son. The ground floor is made from terracotta red brick tiles that flow outside, connecting the entire space from the front door into the garden. Thanks to Anita’s attentions it’s bursting with pink heads of echinacea. “I am in love with brick floors, they are indestructible. It’s like continuing the walls on to the floor,” says Johan.

Their colour palette is equally considered and minimal, the vermilion tones from the tiles tying simply with the primed oxide paint on the steel frame used in the extension and left exposed. “We like to be honest to the material and the structures,” explains Johan, who teaches at the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London. A galvanised steel staircase with a gleaming red banister leads to the first floor where original pine floorboards were recovered and restored, alongside the simple galvanised steel balcony rail.

Johan and Anita were the only people to put an offer on the house. “Even the removal men said, ‘What have you done?’” says Johan. The house was in a dire state with wires dangling from ceilings, decades of filth and generations of mice. They lived in it for a year before beginning renovation work. Then, inspired by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, Johan set



about introducing light into the split-level house. A new concrete extension was built on the ground floor. The garage was converted into a spare room and internal windows were introduced. Plasterboarded narrow walls which created a dark hall were removed, expanding the entire ground floor, and the sloped roof of the extension was planted with wildflowers to guide the eye from the sitting room on the first floor out across the green roof, into the garden and trees beyond.

The lighting, like the furniture, is

**‘I am in love with simple brick floors, they are indestructible. It’s as if you are continuing the walls on to the floor’**

**Outside the box: (clockwise from top) restored floorboards on the first-floor sitting room; the open dining room; Johan and Anita; the brick-floored garden; and the white-tiled bathroom**

design-led, chosen to elevate spaces unobtrusively, like the grey Le Corbusier spotlight positioned next to a Marcel Breuer Wassily armchair.

The third floor is laid with black gym rubber, a modest material that eliminates noise and is soft underfoot. In the two bedrooms, huge chunks of loft space were removed, unearthing the handsome original timber framework.

“In Denmark, there is not the mix of culture there is here,” explains Johan. “You have to conform. I got bored and wanted change, but I appreciate that some things they get right, like the idea that if you can afford it, spend money on good quality and design and it will outlive you.” ■

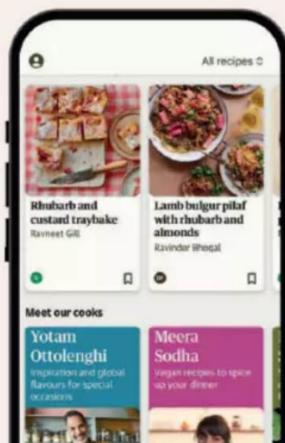
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**Feast**

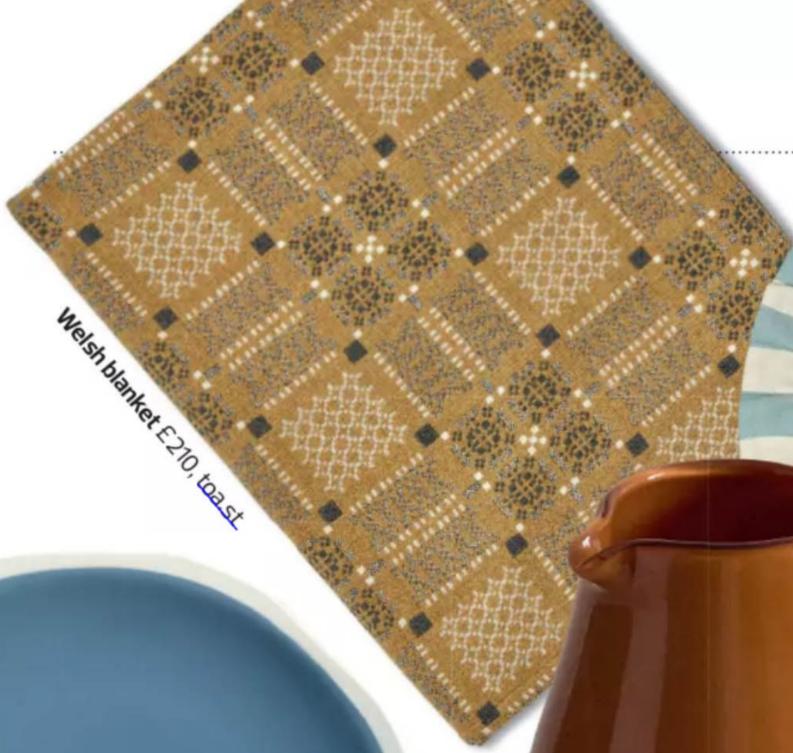


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Welsh blanket £210, [toast](http://toast.com)



Placemat £22, [ballandbarn.co.uk](http://ballandbarn.co.uk)



Lampshades £110 each, [rosiegore.com](http://rosiegore.com)



China plate £8, [johnlewis.com](http://johnlewis.com)



Jug £49.99, [zarahome.com](http://zarahome.com)

Lamp £85, [anthropologie.com](http://anthropologie.com)



# Two of a kind

Pair brick with cornflower blue for contemporary calm

Edited by CHRIS HOBBS

Hay clock £105, [selfridges.com](http://selfridges.com)



Fork £17.50, and knife £21, both [sabre-paris.co.uk](http://sabre-paris.co.uk)



Plant pot £12.99, [hm.com](http://hm.com)



Jarrold armchair £1,099, [made.com](http://made.com)

Blue 10 paint £45, [lick.com](http://lick.com)



Candle £155, [moro-dabron.com](http://moro-dabron.com)

Pillow £599, [fermliving.co.uk](http://fermliving.co.uk)



Table £655, [earlofeast.com](http://earlofeast.com)

# Collected works

Europe's best sculpture parks and open-air galleries for a holiday with a cultural edge

Words ANNABELLE THORPE Photograph OLIVIER AMSELLEM



Modern masterpiece: find artworks by Braque, Chagall and Giacometti in the lovely gardens of Fondation Maeght, France

**1** **Fondation Maeght, France**  
Some of the world's greatest modern sculptors, including Braque, Giacometti and Miró, helped create France's most important art foundation, with the sun-drenched gardens hosting their works alongside those of Calder, Chagall and others. Mosaics, wind sculptures and fountains are dotted between the trees, with a courtyard dedicated to Giacometti and an exhibition focusing on Bonnard and Matisse (until 6 October). The beautiful hilltop village of Saint-Paul de Vence is close by; stay at Les Bastides Saint-Paul, a family-run hotel with a tree-framed pool. *Doubles from £113 room-only, [hotelbastides.fr/en](http://hotelbastides.fr/en); [fondation-maeght.com](http://fondation-maeght.com)*



**2** **Kröller-Müller Museum, Arnhem, the Netherlands**  
With more than 160 works, including sculptures by Rodin and Moore, the Kröller-Müller, one of Europe's largest sculpture gardens, is a great family day out. Kids will love the geocaching trail, which leads to a secret art treasure, with plenty of lawns for picnics and an open-air restaurant. Many of the works are child-friendly – kids can scramble over Jean Dubuffet's *Jardin d'émail* – and if it rains, the indoor museum has fine works by Van Gogh. Stay at the nearby Hotel Sterrenberg, which has a sizeable wellness centre. *Doubles from £163 room-only, [sterrenberg.nl](http://sterrenberg.nl); [krollermuller.nl](http://krollermuller.nl)*

**3** **Villa Celle, Pistoia, Italy**  
Considered one of the world's great collections of environmentally themed art, the Gori Collection rolls out across the Romantic-era park that surrounds Villa Celle, with 80 monumental works. Towering wooden installations, floating sculptures and intricate wire, metal and iron abstract shapes rise up throughout the park. Visits have to be pre-booked, with daily tours running at 10am or 2.30pm in September and October (closed on Sundays). Stay at Palazzo 42, an elegant boutique hotel in Pistoia's historic centre. *Doubles from £116 B&B, [palazzo42.it](http://palazzo42.it); [goricoll.it](http://goricoll.it)*



**4** **Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Art Park, Piedmont, Italy**  
Set among the vineyards that roll out across the Piedmontese hills, this privately owned sculpture park brings together large-scale works by seven artists, encompassing everything from benches made from fallen cypress trees to an outsize, algorithmically generated lizard. Free to enter, with footpaths and walkways leading through the vines to each of the sculptures, there's no café but the Osteria Imperfetta in nearby Guarene is a great spot for lunch (weekends only). Stay at Cascina Cortine in the same village. *Doubles from £160 B&B, [cascinacortine.com](http://cascinacortine.com); [parcoarte.fsrr.org](http://parcoarte.fsrr.org)*



**5** **Château La Coste, Aix-en-Provence, France**  
Set against a backdrop of Provençal vineyards, the 40 artworks include pieces by Frank Gehry and Tracey Emin. Andy Goldsworthy's *Oak Room* is a lattice of 1,200 pieces of Burgundy oak, while Louise Bourgeois's vast, muscular spider seems to skate across a shallow pool. There are two-hour guided tours three times a day (from €15pp). The Château has rooms, but they are stratospherically expensive; stay down the road at the lovely Auberge La Coste. *Doubles from £269 B&B, [aubergelacoste.com](http://aubergelacoste.com); [chateau-la-coste.com](http://chateau-la-coste.com)*

**6** **Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, Belgium**  
This is among the oldest al fresco galleries in Europe, with the original castle now a restaurant and shop, looking out over the 100 sculpture works that dot the park. It's free to enter, and visitors are welcome to bring picnics, but the exhibits shouldn't be touched. Stay at the Pilar, a hip small hotel in the trendy 't Zuid neighbourhood. *Doubles from £113 room-only, [hotelpilar.be](http://hotelpilar.be); [middelheimmuseum.be](http://middelheimmuseum.be)*

**7** **East Side Gallery, Berlin, Germany**  
History and art combine at this extraordinary open-air gallery that forms the longest continuous section of the Berlin Wall still standing.

More than 100 paintings cover the brickwork, with world-famous works such as Dmitri Vrubel's *Fraternal Kiss* and Birgit Kinder's *Trabant*, which seems to be breaking through the wall, alongside lesser-known paintings. Stay at the Hotel Indigo – a stone's throw from the gallery. *Doubles from £176 room-only, [ihg.com](http://ihg.com); [stiftung-berliner-mauer.de](http://stiftung-berliner-mauer.de)*

**8** **Museum of Underwater Sculpture, Ayia Napa, Cyprus**  
Musan is an underwater sculpture forest, with 93 artworks by Jason deCaires Taylor, including trees, plants and more figurative works. Visitors can access the submerged sculpture park by snorkelling, free diving or scuba diving. Stay at Mon Repos, a slick design hotel with all-white rooms around a central pool. *Doubles from £104 B&B, [monreposhotel.info](http://monreposhotel.info); [musan.com.cy](http://musan.com.cy)*

**9** **Vigeland Sculpture Park, Oslo, Norway**  
More than 200 works in granite, bronze and wrought iron by Gustav Vigeland, from avant garde installations to the vast *Monolith*. Free to enter and open every day, it's a great spot for a picnic, with an adjoining museum if the weather is cold. Stay at the elegant Saga Hotel. *Doubles from £102 B&B, [sagahoteloslo.com](http://sagahoteloslo.com); [vigeland.museum.no](http://vigeland.museum.no)*



**10** **Austrian Sculpture Park, Graz**  
Hop on the bus from Graz and bring a picnic to make a day of it at this vast sculpture garden. Free to enter, with plenty of space for the kids to run around, it features more than 80 works by Austrian and international artists, ranging from abstract shapes to metallic fractals, a concrete boat and a seemingly random heap of aeroplane parts. Erwin Wurm's *Fat House* – a lifesize cottage that looks as if it's been carved out of marshmallow – is one of the most unusual. Stay at the historic Palais Hotel Erzherzog Johann in Graz. *Doubles from £115 room-only, [erzherzog-johann.com](http://erzherzog-johann.com); [museum-joanneum.at](http://museum-joanneum.at)*

# Self & wellbeing

Illustration EVA BEE

## Are artists right to feel terrified of AI replacing them, or should they see it as an exciting new tool?

Words RUDI ZYGADLO

I'm standing on an eroding cliff edge. As it inches towards me, various objects teeter cartoonishly before disappearing into oblivion. One by one sculptures, paintings, books, buildings and other artefacts of human creativity are swallowed up. The erosion is accelerating, vertiginous, starting to give way beneath my feet. Stormy. Crashing waves. HD. Photo-realistic.

"Is that Land's End?" my partner asks absentmindedly as she looks at my screen. The prompt I entered into the generator was supposed to be an expression of AI vertigo, but I clearly need to brush up on my prompting skills because the image generated is not the apocalypse I had in mind. It looks more like an ad for a holiday destination starring Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer*.

I've been avoiding tools like this – they feel like a threat to my livelihood. Whether it's image-making, sentence-making, music-making or film-making, every day we wake up to some new AI-generated artefact. Give me a Stevie Wonder version of Big Yellow Taxi in 5.1 surround sound! Give me a sci-fi romcom starring Timothée Chalamet, Marilyn Monroe and Ye shot on 16mm! Scratch that – starring Marilyn Monroe and me!

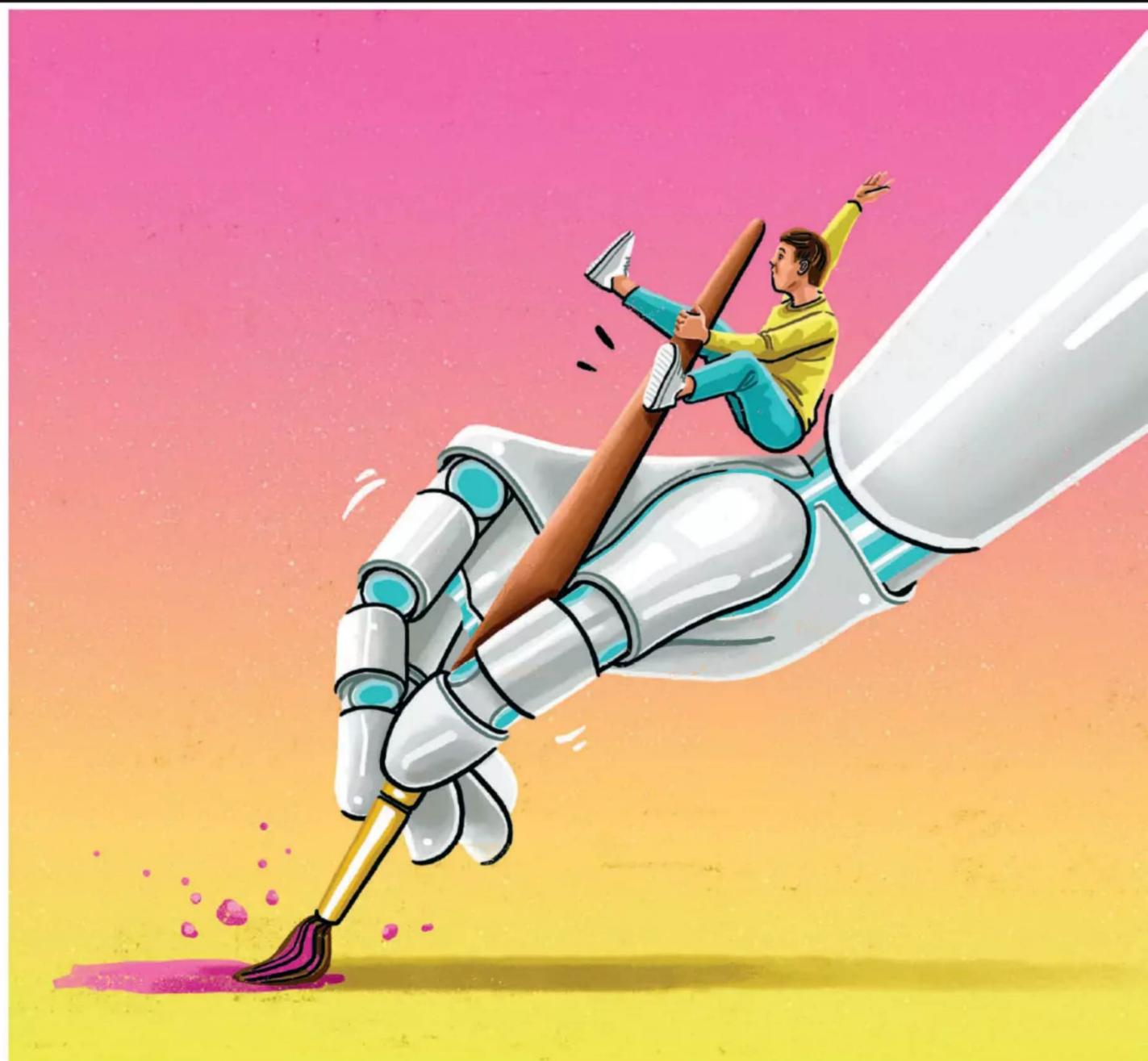
I don't know if these AI features exist, but would it surprise you if they did? They may seem quaint in five years' time. A symptom of my vertigo is a preoccupation with speculation. You spend so much time thinking about the future that the present feels primitive. It reminds me of the shot in *2001: A Space Odyssey* where the spinning bone tossed by the hominid jump-cuts 100,000 years to the spaceship. Now, substitute the bone for ChatGPT.

In 1964, Arthur C Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, predicted AI as the next evolutionary step: "[Machines] will start to think and eventually they will completely outthink their makers... I suspect that organic or biological evolution has about come to its end and we are now at the beginning of inorganic or mechanical evolution, which will be thousands of times swifter."

The artist at the mercy of technological advancement is a theme perfectly summed up in the Buggles song Video Killed the Radio Star... "They took the credit for your second symphony, rewritten by machine and new technology." What makes this technological leap so different from others (fountain pen to typewriter to word-processor) is that these were tools for artists – but AI is different. It may be the tool *and* the artist.

So where does this impending redundancy leave the human creative urge? Does it mean I need to churn out my best efforts before AI dominates the field? As a musician and writer, I always thought I'd get around to writing a book, a screenplay, another album. But what's the rush, I thought? It's a bucket list. Now I feel rushed, the goals archaic, even. AI has killed my bucket list!

I'm gloomy. I have many questions and few answers. I wasn't surprised that my grandmother didn't like



Brush with the future: 'Do I need to churn out my best efforts before AI dominates?' asks musician and writer Rudi Zygadlo

electronic musician Aphex Twin in the 00s, but I didn't expect that I'd be failing to keep up in my tender 30s. I need to speak to artists who are in lockstep with the technological vanguard to help me exorcise my malaise.

**Artist-musicians** Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst are AI veterans. They've been grappling with and educating people about it for more than a decade. The Berlin-based collaborative life partners birthed an AI baby to help them create Herndon's 2019 album *Proto*. I emailed them a cry for help. I asked if AI is going to kill the human artist. "No. Human artists will make works using AI and

**'We are still figuring out what AI is for. People are shaping it'**

works that will reject AI... Artistry is always evolving. We have to digest that many things that would have appeared virtuosic by 20th-century standards will be able to be generated in microseconds by an AI model. But a media file that sounds like a choir is not a choir. Culture will persist and evolve in

unexpected ways." Human artists will be fine, so long as we don't delude ourselves that the culture and media landscape are not about to change considerably.

Is human performance replaceable? Or is AI in fact inspiring more human modes of performance? "We like to raise the example of DJing as a reason for hope here. In most cases, DJing is very, very easy to automate. But there are all kinds of reasons why people go to see DJs perform – to meet other people, to celebrate someone, to take a break from looking at a screen."

And what about my malaise? "As veterans of AI vertigo, it gets better. You just have to ride out the uncomfortable part of the trip. Perhaps the best analogy is the nausea one initially feels when eating a magic mushroom. The mind-expanding part will follow if you make peace with it." This does resonate. The AI revolution has felt uncanny and hallucinatory at times. Battling against a mushroom trip is never a good idea. Is it time to extend an olive branch?

I also contacted artist Rachel Maclean for AI counsel. Her latest work, *DUCK*, explores themes of paranoia, authenticity and reality, through the cyphers of 1960s icons Marilyn Monroe, Sean Connery's James Bond and JFK. Maclean acted all parts and used deepfake

technology to transpose their faces on to hers.

She is keen to point out that “aside, from the deepfakes, *DUCK* is in many ways a conventional film, one I wrote, scripted and directed.” Text-to-image models, on the other hand, she says, are “totally incredible in that the AI has a sense of creativity. You work with it like a collaborator.” She is currently making a series of AI-generated paintings about motherhood, using a model trained on Old Masters’ paintings. “We’re in this sweet spot at the moment,” she grins mischievously. “It is fallible. People come out with eight fingers.” But in a few months, I warn, they’ll produce five-fingered people, won’t they? Maclean is a circuit bender: “I’ve been looking into capturing the models that produce eight fingers and encouraging them to continue making that error.”

There are unexpected truths to be found in the imperfect images of mothers and babies she has been generating

with AI. The limbs are fused and you can’t differentiate between the bodies. “This is what it feels like to be a mother, more so than a conventional depiction of motherhood.” I confess, that does sound exciting – to collaborate with an entity that thinks differently to humans, innovating the artform as well as the way in which we see our

## What’s the point in panicking about AI? It’s already on its way

species. But it also compounds my fear that human craft, certainly in digital media, will disappear. Are we becoming redundant? “The exciting thing about this technology,” says Maclean, “is that people are still figuring out what it’s for. Its use-value becomes apparent by people shaping it.”

A couple of weeks ago my partner, a freelance writer, was offered two – two! – jobs from companies offering to pay writers to teach AI how to write better. The brass neck! Why don’t they give you some rope with which to hang yourself, I said? But it’s a job, she said, and it might be interesting. So is my belligerence helping anyone?

Interviewing those at the techno-cultural vanguard, including Herndon, Dryhurst and Maclean, has given me some sense of peace. I realise that I have been hanging on to 20th-century notions of art practice and the cultural landscape, one where humans spent months and years writing, painting, recording and filming works that defined the culture of our species. They provided meaning, distraction, wellbeing. A reason to exist. Making peace may mean letting go of these historical notions, finding new meaning. While digitally generatable media is increasingly becoming the domain of AI, for example, might performance and tactile artforms, such as live concerts, theatre and sculpture, be reinvigorated?

“A screaming comes across the sky,” writes Thomas Pynchon at the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Captain “Pirate” Prentice watches an inbound V2 vapour trail on the horizon. Having considered what it would feel like were the bomb to land directly on his head, instead of fleeing or making calls, he collects some tropical fruit from his greenhouse. What’s the point in panicking? It’s already on its way. People like AI researcher and decision theorist Eliezer Yudkowsky are comparing the threat of AI to nuclear war. It’s the new apocalypse. I can see a vapour trail on the horizon. But what can I do? Run for shelter, take up arms? Humans have survived apocalypses before. I guess I’ll pick bananas. ■

Follow Rudi Zygadlo @rudizyga. His latest single, F\*\*\* AI, is on Spotify and the music video on YouTube

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## Séamas O’Reilly

Finding someone to look after our toddler all day and night is a big ask. Would she ever forgive us?

@shockproofbeats



We were back in Ireland for a wedding last week. My brother-in-law Darragh was marrying his girlfriend Emilie in a lovely ceremony in Dublin, meaning we had to source a babysitter for our kids when every single family member within 100 miles would be attending said wedding with us.

Miraculously, our friend Mary stood up to the plate, offering to take both kids to her mum’s house in Wicklow, keep them occupied with her own kids for the whole day, and preside over the communal sleepover that followed. She was offering 24 hours of free childcare out of the goodness of her heart, and to say we were grateful would be an understatement.

I’d go so far as to say I love my children, but I am under no illusion as to the task involved in keeping them occupied for 24 hours. The difficulty mainly lies with our daughter, a bright little two-year-old sunbeam who makes us smile

a thousand times a day, but who’s also so clingy that even moderate lengths of time spent away from us leave her incandescent with fear and rage.

She didn’t sleep through the night once in her first 22 months of life, and even now still regards that practice as a non-essential luxury. We kept a close eye on her for the week before the day itself and cringed with mounting horror as she steadfastly refused to sleep. Family meetings were arranged, in which it was decided that, if she didn’t improve for the next two nights, we couldn’t in good conscience paw her off to our friend, and would take shifts minding her for the entire wedding, a prospect neither of us relished.

Thankfully she slept well the next two nights and we went ahead with the plan, forewarning Mary there was a non-zero chance this task would destroy both her life and our friendship.

In the end, we spent the wedding receiving photographic evidence of our daughter at her sunny

best, happily playing all day, and falling asleep a solid 30 minutes earlier than she ever does for us. She slept through the night without incident, and forgot we existed with an alacrity that was almost insulting.

On returning a full day later, she barely acknowledged us, ensconced in the bosom of her new family and greeting us like work friends from a vaguely remembered summer job. Suddenly, the trepidation we felt as bearers of a difficult child was replaced with a fear that we were the problem; a pair of feckless, uncaring parents written by Roald Dahl, whose bright-eyed Matilda could only ever spread her wings in another, more loving, family.

I tried to explain this to Mary, who with a slight frown and tilted head, betrayed a sense she may have sugar-coated just how perfectly our daughter had behaved. ‘Eh, she was grand,’ she said, no doubt fearful we’d ask her to repeat the favour again, ‘but let’s not go nuts.’

# Ask Philippa

## My sister buys posh food, but most of it ends up in the bin

@Philippa\_Perry



### Sunday with...

Roasts and walks, but no javelins for Fatima Whitbread

**A perfect Sunday?** It's nice to get out in the garden among nature. I love listening to the birds, pottering with my plants or picking up Red Robin leaves from the hedges. As a former athlete, I do a lot of wholesome work on wellbeing and the mind.

**What's for lunch?** I like my Sunday roast: crunchy, fluffy potatoes, lashings of gravy, lots of vegetables and a lovely big fat pudding. Or I'll cook fish or pasta with my son. He's 26 and still lives at home. I can't get rid of him! I'm not complaining, I love his company.

**Sundays growing up?** I was abandoned as a baby, then I spent 14 years in children's homes. That's why I'm advocating the importance of rejuvenation for the care system sector.

**What were those days like?** When I was in children's homes, we'd have a sit-down Sunday dinner. We'd pray the Corona man would come round and we'd have Tizer, limeade or cherry aid

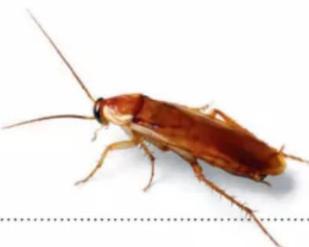
with our lunch. You could hear him ring his bell as he came by.

**Sunday exercise?** Lots of challenges: I did the Everest Base Camp. I've signed up to do the Bay of Biscay and Pyrenees. I'm also a member of the London Marathon walking group. I walk a marathon in under six hours, so it's a 14-minutes-a-mile pace. That's pretty fast.

**No javelins?** Not for a long time. I'm coaching a young heptathlete, so still involved.

**Sunday on I'm a Celeb?** The cockroach crawling up my nose was an iconic moment. I was stuck in my head for 40 minutes. When it came out, it hit the ground and keeled over. I put him in a bottle, brought him home, and the British Museum put him in resin. When I do keynote speaking, the adults want to see my medals, but the kids want to see the cockroach. **Rich Pelley**

To vote for Fatima in this year's GoCardless Just Giving awards, visit [page.justgiving.com/justgiving-awards-vote](http://page.justgiving.com/justgiving-awards-vote)



**The question** My sister spends a significant percentage of her modest income on expensive boutique groceries from farmers' markets and other high-end food stores. "To each their own" is my view. Fancy foods make her happy and that's great. She doesn't spend her money on cigarettes or lottery tickets, etc. And she only occasionally buys alcohol or goes to restaurants.

The thing is, a lot of the food she buys ends up rotting and getting tossed in the bin. This has been going on for years. Fancy cheeses, fancy ice-cream, yoghurt, crackers, bread and all kinds of organic produce rots in her kitchen. She literally wastes well over £1,000 every year on food she never eats. It's tragic, but what's worse is that she often complains about not having enough money to spend on other priorities. I don't think she's aware of how wasteful she is when it comes to food.

I wish I could talk to her about it, but whenever somebody criticises her constructively, or even makes a casual suggestion, she feels like she's under attack and things get tense and awkward. Ultimately, I'm trying to help her, but also help the environment in a small way. Should I broach the subject or just mind my own business?

**Philippa's answer** The financial and environmental implications of your sister's habit, particularly the wastefulness of unused food, appears to present a valid concern. And yet, reading between the lines, I sense this may not be the main issue here. I am picking up a superiority in your tone that is coming over to me as possibly patronising. Sounds like you've got a know-all stance going on. If I'm right, and I might not be, such an entrenched position would be irritating to your sister. If you threaten people's dignity by moralising at them, you will not persuade them. This is a lesson we have all got to learn.

I don't think your dilemma is about food waste. If you are really worried about the environment, why not start with the enormous amount of food thrown away by supermarkets after the end of each day?

So what is the real problem that you have in your relationship with your sister? You say she often feels attacked when you try to apply constructive criticism. The way you talk about her gave me the impression that

she might feel you show her more disdain than respect. She has probably told you she doesn't want any more of your "casual suggestions" and perhaps you are now applying to me about how to cross that boundary once more. Am I standing in for a parental authority to appeal to, or for you to get more ammunition for this veiled attack? I think you are denying that your constructive criticism is an attack, but I'm unconvinced.

Your question is, "Should I broach the subject with her or just mind my own business?" I'm not sure this is the

### Stop this scrutiny and turn your focus away from judging her

right question. Questions you might ask instead are: What am I feeling towards my sister and how do I want to feel? Do I feel threatened or uneasy that she knows about fancy food and I just eat ordinary stuff? Do I feel somehow threatened by my sister, because perhaps she seemed to be more highly regarded by our parents or by people in general?

Do I need to somehow get my sister to be wrong so that I can seem more righteous? Am I taking the moral high ground over her because there is some enjoyment for me in making her seem nonsensical and thus making me feel a little bit more worldly-wise? How much of an old sibling rivalry is bound up in how I am thinking about my sister and her behaviour? Do I want to demonstrate I am the better sibling? Do I want her to acknowledge that I am superior to her?

You may feel you want to dismiss my questions, but don't do that. Write them down, spend some days thinking about them, or maybe discussing them with other people who have worked through their sibling rivalry – or even a therapist.

The way you notice that she doesn't drink too much or go to too many restaurants is like you are scrutinising her behaviour – like a teacher passing her in those subjects and failing her in grocery shopping. I don't think your goal should be to change her habits, but to stop this scrutiny and turn your focus away from judging her. Be more curious about yourself: how you do this, the motivation behind it and what purpose it serves you. Perhaps, then, your sister's shopping habits can be her business and maybe she won't feel so judged and your relationship with her may even improve.

Communicate with your sister from a place of love and support, not criticism or judgment. When you know that old sibling rivalries are not rearing their head, maybe then you could both have a discussion about living more comfortably and sustainably. You might learn why more expensive organic food is better for the planet and she may take on board some of your wisdom. People tend not to listen unless they themselves feel heard. ■

⇒ Write to us: If you have a question, send an email to [askphilippa@observer.co.uk](mailto:askphilippa@observer.co.uk). To have your say on this week's column, go to [observer.co.uk/ask-philippa](http://observer.co.uk/ask-philippa)

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Online

**Kate Atkinson:  
Death at the  
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**The stage is set. The players are ready. By night's end, a murderer will be revealed...**

Join the award-winning author as she introduces the latest addition to her bestselling crime novels featuring Jackson Brodie. Death at the Sign of the Rook is Atkinson's brilliantly plotted and supremely entertaining tour de force that pays homage to the masters of the murder mystery genre.

**21 August**  
7pm-8pm



Online

**Tim Minchin:  
You Don't Have to  
Have a Dream**

To mark the release of his first non-fiction book, Tim Minchin will reflect on how it's never too late to put something beautiful out into the world.

**5 September**  
7.30pm-9pm

In person and online

**Bernardine Evaristo:  
Mr Loverman**

Ahead of a BBC adaptation of Mr Loverman, join the Booker-winning novelist, live in London and online, to revisit her novel.

**26 September**  
7.30pm-9pm

Online

**David Nicholls:  
A life in writing**

Join the author of the much-loved One Day and You Are Here for a wide-ranging conversation about his career in writing.

**8 October**  
8pm-9pm

In person and online

**Adrian Chiles: Live in  
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The beloved Guardian columnist will bring a comforting blast of humour and warmth with his new collection of Guardian columns.

**10 October**  
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