

THE  TIMES

PLUS **CHRISTMAS
GIFT GUIDE**

M ZINE

09.11.24

WAKEY WAKEY!

**WHY EVERYTHING
YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW
ABOUT SLEEP IS WRONG**

CHANEL



09.11.24

The CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



301 GIFTS
for all the family

5 Caitlin Moran Help! My husband needs a makeover. **7 Spinal column: Melanie Reid** I have life envy. **9 What I've learnt** Actor Lennie James on the racism he faced growing up. **12 Cover story The science of sleep** Why so many of us experience trouble sleeping. By Tom Whipple. **20 Our children are going to go blind, but we don't dwell on it** How one family responded to a devastating diagnosis. By Tom Whipple. **26 'Staying young-looking is a daily battle'** A TV presenter reveals the cost of being on screen. **30 My £600 lesson with the orgasm coach** Will the earth move for Jane Mulkerrins? **36 'In the river, the pain went'** How fishing helped *The Crown* star James Murray cope with the death of his baby. **43 Eat!** The easiest Spanish recipes from Brindisa. Plus, the best tapas bars and restaurants. **54 Confessions of an auctioneer** The former chairman of Sotheby's on life in the art world. **61 The big gift guide** More than 300 ideas. **84 Giles Coren reviews** The Blue Stoops, London, and the Mason's Arms, Oxfordshire. **90 Beta male: Robert Crampton** I'm making glacially slow progress in my German lessons.

FAB FIVE: WINTER SCENTED CANDLES



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The Alchemy blends amber with smoky tobacco (rituals.com)



BYREDO, £70
Symphonique is woody and spicy with notes of ginger and clove (byredo.com)



SALT & STONE, £50
Saffron, cedar and jasmine from an eco LA scent brand (saltandstone.com)



DIPTYQUE, £68
Sapin smells of fresh pine, cedar and patchouli (diptyqueparis.com)



ACQUA DI PARMA, £75
Bosco captures the aromas of fir and eucalyptus trees (acquadiparma.com)

CHOSEN BY MONIQUE RIVALLAND

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A GIFT FOR YOUR SENSES



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CAITLIN MORAN

I've reached that tricky point in my marriage – trying to smarten up my husband

Saturday, 8.30am. We're on a dog walk. It's the kind of golden, late autumn morning that makes it feel like the year is belting out *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*, as it goes out in a blaze of glory. It really could not be more beautiful.

I, however, am preoccupied.

Finally: "Pete – marriage is a difficult balancing act, isn't it?"

He flinches. "Oh, God. What now?"

I continue: "Sometimes, it's hard to know what to do with a piece of information. On the one hand, it could be something that – temporarily – emotionally crushes someone. But on the other hand, it could be, in the long run, information that would help us both."

"I'm about to be crushed, aren't I? What," he asks, "is on your mind?"

I take a deep breath. "Before I begin, I should say that my love is eternal; I accept you absolutely how you are. *Namaste*."

"Just... say it."

I pause. "You have three jumpers that really have to go. You look awful in them."

He starts laughing – in shock.

"I look awful?"

"Well, no – you look lovely, as always. But the jumpers – they're a... *bad entourage*. You shouldn't be hanging around with them. They're dragging your average down. By association."

He's still laughing.

"Two of them have shrunk, one has a hole under the arm, they're all too bobbly for my Lakeland bobble remover to shave back into respectability, and burgundy isn't your colour. Additionally," I say, deciding to seize the moment, "you've got a couple of trousers that don't pass the Bechdel test, either. Because I keep talking about them with my female friends. They're... *tatty*."

"I'm really busy at the moment – I don't have time to audit my wardrobe."

"Don't worry!" I say. "I will joyously do this. I'll just go through everything, and put the sartorially disloyal items on what we can refer to as 'the Death Pile'. And then, obviously, because marriage is a democracy, you will be allowed to save one item from the Death Pile, to wear on... special occasions."

"Allowed? What do you mean, allowed?"

"Well, I'm away for a whole week in December – so wearing would be allowed then. You could absolutely fill your boots. Wear them in bed, if you want. Really get the time in with them."



'Your jumpers are just not where we are right now,' I tell Pete. 'They're the jumpers of a man with a much smaller kitchen'

"Do my jumpers offend you this much?" Pete asks. "My jumpers?"

"They're just not..." I cast around, "where we are, right now. The house looks too nice. There was no point in getting that kitchen extension if you're going to wear those jumpers in it. They're the jumpers of a man with a much smaller kitchen. They've turned into," and here I cast around, to try to contextualise where these jumpers are, in 2024, "gardening jumpers?"

I can see Pete is a bit... hurt by all this. He's seeing this as an attack on himself – rather than, in the most pressing case, an attack on one jumper with a neckhole so worn and distended, it looks like its perineum needs stitching. I'm being cast as an aggressor here. And that's not the situation at all.

"This isn't a Me v You thing," I explain. "It's the Circle of Life. In every relationship, there is a Collector and a Cleaner. A Hunter and a Gatherer. In this relationship, you are the Gatherer. You bring things into the house – records, magazines from 1982, things you find in skips. Jumpers. And nature found an exquisite balance by pairing you with me – a Hunter, who hunts out the items whose lives are coming to an end and pops them in a binbag. I offer merciful release. I am Kali. I am Freya. I am Anubis. I am needed. Indeed, in Slavic mythology, the goddess of death is called Morana, who uses winter..."

"They're my jumpers," Pete says, simply. "I have them because I like them."

Hmmmm. This is a difficult point to parry. As I have been aware from the beginning, this is a subject that has the potential to emotionally crush – which is not my intention. I simply want Pete to look as smart, hot and non-bobbly as possible. I want him to look like a comfortably well-off, middle-class man whose wife sighs, "You look amazing," when he comes down to breakfast.

And this wife cannot say that while her husband is wearing jumpers with cuffs so frayed, they look like flapper fringing.

This seems like a complex and slightly dangerous explanation-alleyway to go down – so I throw my dice of last resort:

"I think... they make the dog sad."

We look at the dog. She takes this moment to roll in fox poo, with her legs in the air. Pete looks at me.

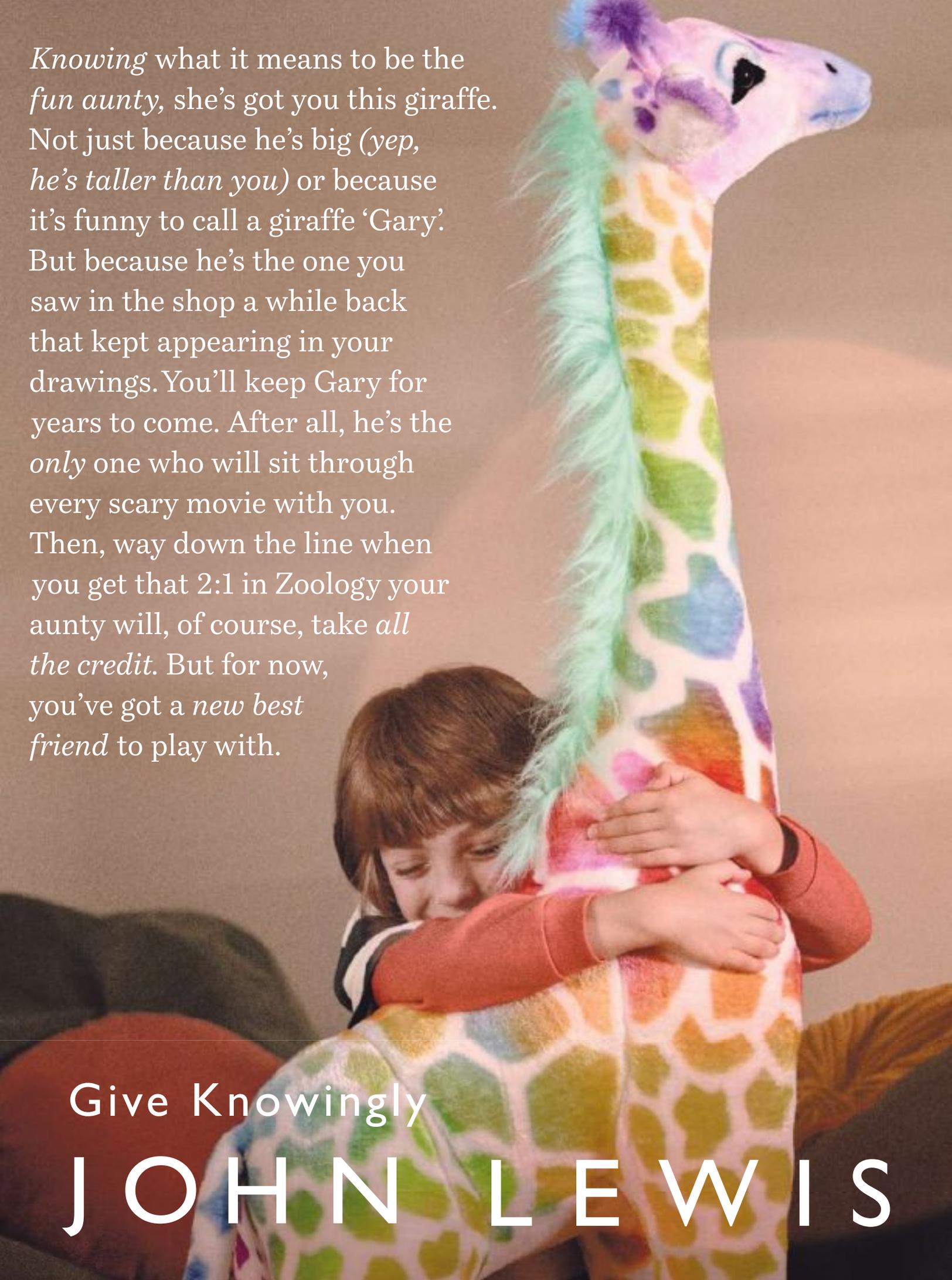
I know I have lost.

"I think I'll keep the jumpers, thanks," he says, giving me a consoling pat on the back. ■

Knowing what it means to be the *fun aunty*, she's got you this giraffe. Not just because he's big (*yep, he's taller than you*) or because it's funny to call a giraffe 'Gary'. But because he's the one you saw in the shop a while back that kept appearing in your drawings. You'll keep Gary for years to come. After all, he's the *only* one who will sit through every scary movie with you. Then, way down the line when you get that 2:1 in Zoology your aunty will, of course, take *all the credit*. But for now, you've got a *new best friend* to play with.

Give Knowingly

JOHN LEWIS



SPINAL COLUMN

MELANIE REID

I still get hit by raw envy – of young women, dressed up, free, confident. They're players



Some things in your head never quite heal. People suffer all kinds of terrible, lasting trauma and learn to rebuild and thrive again, as I have tried to do myself. But however hard-nosed and rational you may be about what's happened, there are always chinks in your armour.

Chris Hoy, in his powerful book about his terminal cancer diagnosis, suggests trauma can actually cause physical scar tissue on the brain, structural changes, thickening. I'd never heard it expressed that way. It is, as he says, a really helpful image, explaining why you can be damaged for a long time, sometimes for ever.

I think I've done pretty well, for the most part, to get over what happened to me, to accept this compromised life of mine and find happiness in small things. But I can still get hit by moments of piercing hurt, usually when I'm least expecting it.

Raw envy, I think it comes down to. Random moments when I see people – always healthy people – doing things that I used to do, stuff that I think I've buried for good, but haven't really.

Jealousy is too strong a word, too biblical. It's more like a thump of yearning, a brief sharp ache of desire that catches me unexpectedly. Fleeting moments when I'm overwhelmed by the sense of, that was me. It happens out of the blue.

The other day, in a village car park, I glimpsed a couple of women in the act of

heading out on a run together, striding out like old friends, companionable, relaxed, hips a bit stiff at first, loosening up over the first few metres. I don't hate them or resent them because they can and I can't, but I am unable to prevent the pain of loss.

On the cruise I went on, back in the summer, I remember making my way to dinner down one of the long, cabin-lined corridors. Some distance ahead, a young couple came out of their room, happily gladragged for the night out. She had a clingy dress and a lovely figure; he was lean and smart. He put his hand in the small of her back to guide her and she swayed towards him, a moment of sweet intimacy which, little did they know it, pierced the wistful heart of a paralysed old woman, trundling far behind them in a power chair. The joys of two bodies, this too is lost.

Then of course there are horses, a lost love I've managed to lock away pretty successfully behind steel gates. But sometimes... Driving the other day, I slowed to pass a couple out hacking. I don't mind seeing ponies; it's the tall, blood animals, the potential competition types, that are hard for me. I find myself checking them out covetously, evaluating their tack, how relaxed their riders are in the saddle. Eating them with hungry, jealous eyes. That was me.

Sometimes, it's more gentle envy. One evening I stopped the car to watch my neighbour giving jumping lessons to her daughter. Mother and daughter on grey ponies, cantering in circles, strikingly

backlit by sun, the light catching their flowing tails so they looked faintly magical. Unicorns at play. I watch and yearn.

Away from the country, in the city, I remember a tiny cameo that penetrated my defences and caused a flash of desire. Everywhere on the shopping streets you glimpse young women, dressed up, looking good, and it's that simple way they lift their shoulders and shake their long hair, that free, feminine, confident gesture. They have allure. They're players.

And then, bizarrely, there's the office, a place I've been only twice in 15 years, once at the beginning with an occupational therapist to realise it just wasn't going to be possible again, and then recently to meet some Times readers. When you've been working from home for as long as me, you'd assume the strange joys of mixing with your own tribe are long dead and buried.

But newsrooms, however they try to stifle them with conversation-killing screens and modern working practices, are addictive places. They house messy, funny, clever and deeply irreverent journalists. Some of my life's golden ages have been spent in the camaraderie of shared ideas, demanding work and wicked laughter.

And being there again, amid old mates, the envy pierced my heart. Fragments of lost life. ■

*@Mel_ReidTimes
Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010*



Knowing what you're like with your clothes, your dad hasn't bought you any since that wool vest when you were five. But then he found this brand, and knew that what it stands for would mean a lot to you. Because it's designed by a care-experienced artist. It goes without saying you'll love how much *good* it's doing. And in a few months, at that gig, someone will ask where you got this sweatshirt from. Then you'll realise that your dad is *kinda* cool after all. *Ish*.



A product range made by and with care-experienced talent. All profits will be donated to the Building Happier Futures fund, part of the John Lewis Partnership Foundation.*

Give Knowingly

JOHN LEWIS

What I've learnt Lennie James

Actor Lennie James, 59, grew up in south London. After his mother died, he was taken into a children's home with his brother and was fostered at 15. He is best known for his roles in Guy Ritchie's *Snatch*, *Line of Duty* and *The Walking Dead*. He won a Bafta in 2021 for *Save Me Too*, which he also wrote, and now plays the lead in BBC One's *Mr Loverman*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and their three daughters.

The Rolling Stones and Posh and Becks came to watch us filming *Snatch*. Madonna was around a lot because she and Guy were dating. Guy was lapping it up, mostly in command and control of it, but not always. It was the one time when I've worked on something and realised that history was happening in my presence. The [number of] actors who wanted to be in *Snatch* but couldn't was ridiculous.

It wasn't easy being a black kid from south London who had no real sense of the acting industry. There are barriers now and there were barriers then.

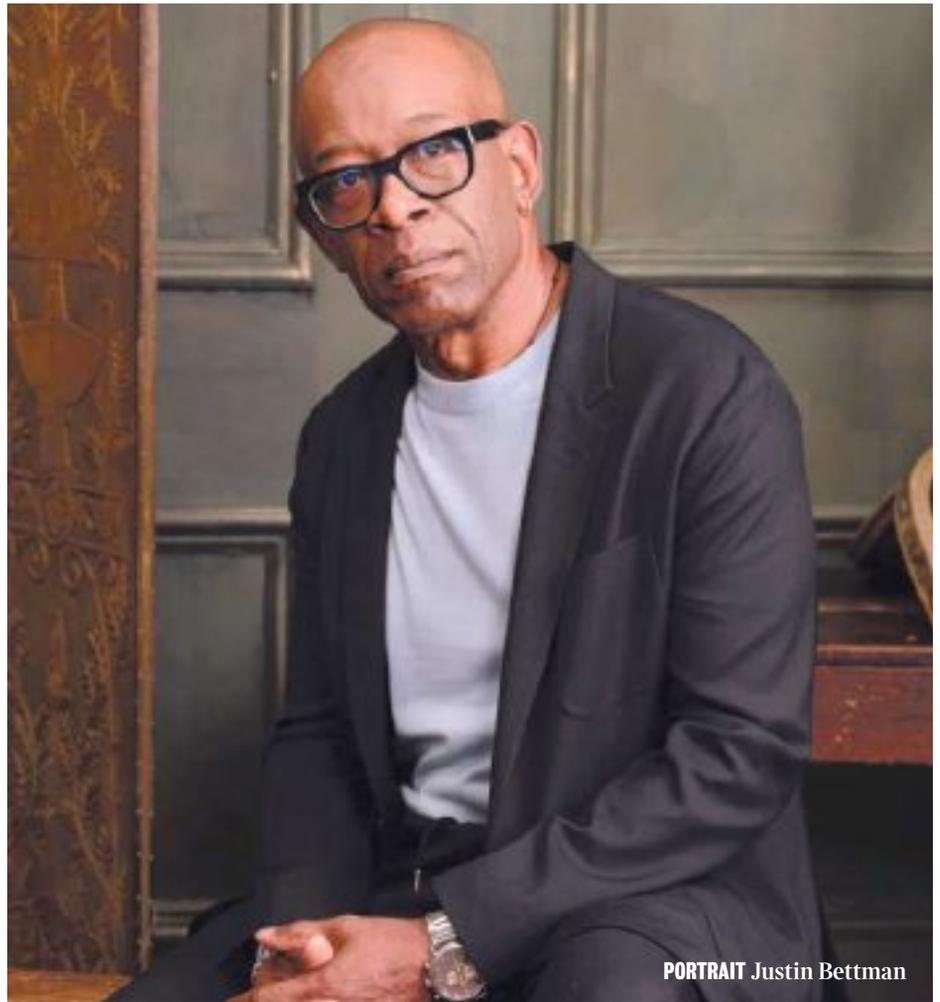
To be called the n-word by a police officer wasn't unusual. It was their description for us. When we would go out on a Friday night, we were told by our parents and the kids' home, "Have a good time. Be safe. Watch out for the police." It felt like the police were out to get us. They were like a gang. Their behaviour was straight-up racist. For young black kids of my generation, the police and skinheads had much more in common than separated them. If that's shocking, then people haven't been listening, because it's been repeated over and over for generations.

I have been a dad for much longer than I haven't been a dad. I was a father at 23. It's something I've always cherished and worked really hard at. I didn't grow up with someone in that role for me. Some psychiatrists or psychoanalysts would say that has spurred me on to make sure that I was there for my daughters, and why fatherhood has been so defining for me.

There were 17 other kids in the kids' home. It was five years at a crucial point in my life. There are some residual leftovers from it: privacy and time on my own are important to me, and I lock bathroom doors. The fact that we were together in the home has solidified how close I am to my brother and how important that connection is.

My foster mother wasn't looking to replace my mum. She was looking to guide me in a way that my mum would have wanted. My foster family has been a constant in my life. Although we're not blood, we are family.

Having more working-class actors is an important conversation. Now, it's harder to get into the industry than it was back then. Given the circumstances at the moment, I don't think I would have gone to drama school. I'm not sure I would have got in.



PORTRAIT Justin Bettman

'My foster mother wasn't looking to replace my mum, but guide me in a way she'd have wanted'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

Guy Ritchie was a flash geezer who had the world at his feet. He was a bit of a rock star. At times he navigated that in a brash way, and at times he was just enjoying himself and being a provocateur. It was interesting to have a front-row seat. **I don't think the care system is fit for purpose.** We were lucky: we were in a good children's home where they did the basics really well. I don't believe that the system at the moment is doing the basics right. The resources given to it are shrinking, not growing. I don't think it's taking care of society's most vulnerable and needy kids. **It was important for me that my kids were Brits and were Londoners.** America was offering possibilities for at least ten years before I went. But I had a young family. **Bernardine Evaristo is fantastic.** She went

to drama school, so I think she likes actors. When she came down to visit us when we were filming *Mr Loverman* [an adaptation of her book], she was a real cheerleader for the production. It was the first time she had been on a television set.

Los Angeles slightly scared me. It seemed a bit too much for me. I had been avoiding chancing myself there. [I moved] partly because I was doing all right here, but other people were making assumptions about the type of work I wanted to be doing.

My wife and I had our first kiss in a rehearsal room, in rehearsals for a play that I had written for her.

I have said no to acting roles after thinking, do I want my kids to see me doing this?

Of all the things I do, being their dad is probably the most important. ■

All episodes of *Mr Loverman* are available on BBC iPlayer



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THE BIG SLEEP PARADOX

WHY YOU'RE ZONKED OUT

It's not what you think

Tom Whipple
photographed
by Jay Brooks



Tracker watches, smart mattresses, bed robots – sleep is a booming industry. And if you get a good night's rest regularly, you're likely to be slimmer, happier and healthier. So why are we getting worse at sleeping, not better? Times science editor Tom Whipple, above, investigates (after his long nap)



Back when commercial sleep trackers were new, Simon Kyle, from Oxford University, decided to conduct a study. He gave wearable devices to people who already had sleep problems and told them he was going to see how their performance in the day was affected by their sleep the night before.

He knew and his subjects knew just how important sleep was. By this time – 2018 – good sleep had already joined diet and exercise in the holy trinity of a healthy lifestyle.

Study after study had shown how sleeping badly affected our health, both physical and mental. It impaired both day-to-day and long-term cognitive performance. Poor sleepers got fatter, sadder, sicker and stupider. So it was not surprising that “eight hours” had become the new “five a day”.

Six years later and we now have watches, eye masks and rings that have been repurposed to log sleep. We can put phones under our pillows to listen out for sleep apnoea, and smart mats under our sheets to track our tossing and turning.

Then there are the remedies. You can buy weighted blankets to put above you and (for £3,000) temperature-controlled mattresses for below – heating and cooling to match your core body’s requirements for each cycle of sleep. TikTok influencers promote the “sleepy girl mocktail”, a (supposedly) sleep-inducing drink that very much lacks the now *verboten* but more traditional sleep inducer – alcohol.

It is easy to mock. Something our ancestors did without thinking has become app-tracked, app-controlled and very, very lucrative. Yet our behaviour makes sense. The data is clear: better sleep means better lives.

That too is what Kyle found in his study. Each morning he gave the participants the sleep score from their tracker. Then throughout the day he asked them how they were getting on.

The results matched exactly what you would expect. Those with the lowest scores were less alert, had impaired function, lower mood and increased sleepiness. All their fears were true.

Except, there was a very big catch. The sleep scores they had been given weren’t real. It was all in their mind.

Sleep is important. This is incontrovertible. Sleeping badly has been linked to heart disease, strokes, diabetes, obesity, dementia – and almost any other modern disease you care to mention. How much of what we are doing to improve

it, though, is helping? And is our anxiety about it becoming counterproductive?

In 1989, the actress Helen Mirren explained her morning routine. “I always set the alarm for an hour before I need to get up,” she said. “If my chap is here, we make love... Then, half-dozing, half-awake, I reconstruct my dreams. Some are good while others are profoundly disturbing.”

The same year, Ruby Wax was also interviewed about her day for the A Life in the Day feature in *The Sunday Times*. “These people who start their day with some lemon juice, muesli and bran – who are they?” she asked. “They’re not part of my world. Neither is 6.15am. I have no idea what 6.15am looks like.” She didn’t so much wake up, she said, as gradually emerge. “This morning was typical. I got up a few times before the real thing.”

Twelve years later, Gordon Ramsay’s answer was different again. “I remember walking into the kitchen absolutely shattered one morning. The chef said, ‘How long did you sleep last night?’ I said, ‘About five and a half hours.’ He said, ‘Too long.’ He went on to say that by the time I was 60 I would have wasted 20 years of my life. I’ve slept less since then.” At the time he was interviewed, he complained he was often awoken by his two-year-old daughter, “playing ding-ding-daddy with my willy”. He had taken to wearing pants.

They are all very different. But if you read some of the more recent answers, you notice a commonality – something they largely lacked before about 2005. This quality might best be described as reverence. For today’s respondents, sleep isn’t something to be defied but deified. Not indulged but improved. Sleep is there to be protected, logged and nurtured.

In 2021, the actor Orlando Bloom was featured in the same column. “I have a smart ring sleep tracker and the first thing I do is look at the app to see if I’ve had a good sleep and check my readiness for the day.” Then he takes some “green powders” and “brain octane oil” – what would Ruby Wax think of that? – before going to bed in time to ensure eight hours. “I’m happy, and so is my sleep tracker.”

Since the turn of the century, sleep has become serious. It has done so, in part, because sleep is indeed serious. For some conditions, poor sleep is clearly a cause. For others, it can be a useful symptom. For many, it is both. “Mental health problems have increased over the past decades, and I think that’s probably tracking to the changes in sleep,” Kyle says. Sleeping badly can lead to depression. Being depressed can lead

to staying inside. Being inside means you lack the light exposure or exercise that leads to good sleep.

Sleep has also become serious because, at least anecdotally, we are getting worse at it. “The level of complaints seem to be in part an expression of our modern living,” Kyle says. Maybe, he says, it’s a consequence of how we use technology to extend the day – at the same time as working in buildings that extend the night.

We work indoors. We use artificial light in the office, then in the home. Day and night are smushed into an endless crepuscular existence. Yet this existence is also superstimulated. “We live,” Kyle says, “with endless incoming streams of sensory information.”

But something else has happened too. Tonight, if you want to sleep better, not only can you buy the right trackers, tonics and tinctures (magnesium foot spray? Pillow mist?), you can also follow sleepfluencers or “sleepmaxxers”, who give their tips for optimising unconsciousness. And why not? Good sleep is great. These new social media stars are, to an extent, what Michael Mosley was to diet or Mr Motivator to lurid Lycra and bouncing around. Except they’re not quite the same. You can motivate yourself from couch to 10k or from cheeseburger to bean burger. Can you motivate yourself asleep?

As anyone who has lain awake at night counting the hours left before an important day knows, you cannot worry yourself into better sleep. You cannot think your way to eight hours. To catch 40 winks, you have to pin them down without seeking them. Sleep creeps up on you when you aren’t looking. Today, though, a lot of us are looking.

“People contact us who are quite obsessed with sleep,” Kyle says. “They become preoccupied with the measurements of sleep and the feedback.” Sometimes, people have simply got it wrong. “People seek help because they experience having a sleep problem, not because, necessarily, they’ve objectively got a sleep problem.” When Kyle and his colleagues measure them properly, often they find they are sleeping fine – yet their lives are blighted, apparently, by insomnia.

And that’s related to what he really found in his study, which concluded that people who had worse sleep scores went on to have worse days. Because the catch was, the sleep scores he gave people were randomly generated. They were a lie. Yet the consequences of the lie were real.

In 2017, a year before he published his study, Kelly Baron, from the University of Utah, wrote a paper. Increasingly, ➤

Sleeping badly has been linked to heart disease, strokes and dementia

HOW MANY HOURS DO YOU GET? *In bed with the A-list*

Jennifer Aniston

'My one key tip is to sleep with my phone at least 5ft away. That's helped tremendously. I also do a quick meditation before bed.'



Michelle Obama

'I'll wake up at four in the morning. My internal clock just clicks and I'm up.'



Helen Mirren

'I set the alarm for an hour before I need to get up. If my chap is here, we make love... Then I reconstruct my dreams – some good, some disturbing.'



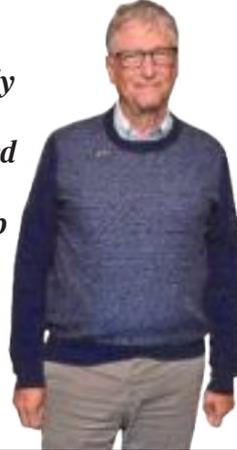
Jennifer Lopez

'Sleep is like a little time machine – you come out a younger person than before... That's what a good night's sleep can do for you.'



Bill Gates

'Back in my early Microsoft days, I routinely pulled all-nighters. I wasn't as sharp operating on caffeine and adrenaline.'



Chrissy Teigen

'I can't sleep without being overly full. I take two hard-boiled eggs to bed and eat them when I randomly wake up. It used to be beef jerky, but I'd wake up too puffy.'



Renée Zellweger

'I'm a night owl who gets up early. I get busy at midnight. I used to move the furniture around or do laundry.'



Martha Stewart

'I am an insomniac. I wake up so early and hope the New York Times has posted its next crossword puzzle.'



Gwyneth Paltrow

'At 7.30 or 8pm, I start my whole bedtime ritual. I sleep with mouth tape and earplugs. No light, no sound and I like [the room] cold'



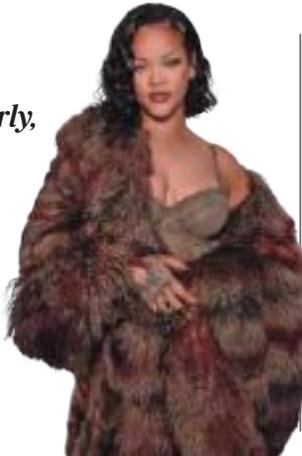
Elon Musk

'I've tried to sleep less, but even though I'm awake more hours, I get less done. The brain pain is bad if I get less than six hours.'



Rihanna

'Even when I get home early, which means before 1am, I binge-watch TV. I only sleep three or four hours a night.'



Madonna

'I definitely don't understand people who sleep 12 hours a day. I see that as the supreme indulgence.'



colleagues had seen a different sort of problem in their sleep practices. The paper cited a few examples.

There was the 40-year-old man given a sleep tracker by his girlfriend who claimed he had light and fragmented sleep. He complained of cognitive difficulties – but only occurring on days when his tracker showed fewer than eight hours.

There was the 27-year-old woman complaining of numerous problems, all related to her poor sleep. When, eventually, she was monitored in the laboratory, it turned out her sleep was great. “The patient asked, ‘Then why does my Fitbit say I am sleeping poorly?’

“We just saw a variety of patients where it seemed like the devices were making their sleep worse,” Baron says. “They were overly fixated on the devices.”

Baron is not against sleep trackers. She likes sleep trackers. Patients like sleep trackers too, she finds. “People enjoy the wearability, but changing sleep is a lot harder than identifying poor sleep,” she says.

For a minority, however, sleep trackers aren’t helping. “There are still some individuals who are overly intensely monitoring their data, and really determine how they’re going to feel for the day based on what the number says,” she says. “There’s an element of anxiety and trying to hack the best night to gain the advantage. It’s almost like a competition.” She came up with a term for this new condition: orthosomnia.

She is currently formalising an orthosomnia scale, with colleagues in Norway, for use in clinical practice.

Sleep matters. Russell Foster, the director of Oxford University’s Sleep and Circadian Neuroscience Institute, can point to many studies that demonstrate its importance. One of the most telling, for him, is also one of the simplest. It concerns memory. There is lots of research that shows you remember things better if you get a good night’s sleep. This particular study, though, investigated whether the loss of memory was uniform – if it affected every topic similarly. It didn’t.

“The tired brain remembers negative experiences but forgets the positive ones,” Foster says. Everything becomes nastier when you are sleep deprived. “Which may be why there’s such a strong connection to depression and psychosis. One’s whole world view is altered when you’re tired.”

He welcomes a population that has woken up to the importance of being awake, that is no longer asleep to the benefits of good sleep. He also understands

that, in some ways, we have misunderstood precisely what it is that is important.

“There is a massive amount of anxiety – of unnecessary anxiety. Sleep is a very changeable thing. It changes as we age. It changes depending on what’s going on.”

He recalls giving a talk once. A member of the audience came up to him afterwards complaining that, according to his app, he “didn’t get enough slow-wave sleep”. “He said, ‘I’m quite worried about this. I set the alarm for three o’clock in the morning and wake myself up to check on my app how much slow-wave sleep I’ve had.’ That’s what these damn things can do.

“It should be about embracing the sleep that we get. And we’ve got to stop stressing about it.”

Why, though, do we stress at all? We don’t worry about other essential activities. Why isn’t sleep automatic, like breathing? And was it always like this?

We can’t know for certain how we used to sleep. But we can make educated guesses. In the early 2010s, some researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles, visited what is, for anthropologists, the closest thing we have to a time machine.

They went to observe hunter-gatherer tribes, who live like we used to. For 1,165 days, in the savannah of southern Africa, the forests of Bolivia and the bush of east Africa, they collected data. Across three years of campfires and camping out, they logged sleep times and wake times. And they were surprised by what they found.

Contrary to what some had assumed, members of these tribes weren’t going to bed and rising with the sun. They might not have had electric lights or alarm clocks but, like us, they would stay up. Some would chat around the campfire. Others – parents might sympathise – used the time for logistics. Preparing food. Getting arrows ready for the next day’s hunt. Planning.

Between three and four hours after dusk, they were ready for bed. They then spent about 7-8.5 hours in bed and 5.7-7.1 hours asleep. If anything, they slept less than their observers. They also varied a lot. A later, more detailed look at one of the tribes, the Hadza, found that many were what we would call restless sleepers. Some frequently got up in the night, had a smoke, dealt with a crying baby, then returned to bed. There was no evidence they were concerned if they didn’t get their eight hours.

This is a preoccupation of Foster’s. He doesn’t like to put a number on sleep. “There is no one optimum duration of

sleep,” he says. “Between six hours and ten and a half, or even eleven, can be in the healthy range. And by telling people they’ve got to get seven or eight hours, that can be rather stressful.”

But there was something else of interest that the anthropologists noted, one way in which the sleep of these tribes was not at all like ours: they did not have a word for “insomnia”.

Going to sleep is, on the face of it, a terrible thing for an animal to do. Evolution has created in humans an exquisite organism that can move, sense its environment and protect itself. Then for a third of its life it just incapacitates itself.

While our ancestors in those hunter-gatherer societies slept, they were at risk of attack from animals or enemies. They were vulnerable. They were also not doing anything. They weren’t eating or reproducing. They were just snoring in front of a campfire. This is baffling. Surely any human that had the genes to sleep less would thrive. They would be the ones attacking rather than being attacked, reproducing rather than snoring. Surely natural selection would rapidly select its way out of sleep. Yet it hasn’t. And it hasn’t in any animal we know of. Why do we sleep?

Foster doesn’t think there is any mystery to sleep. We live in a world in which there are, for animals, really two worlds. There is the world of light and the world of dark. These worlds are so different that you can only really optimise for one. Once evolution chooses for you – making you nocturnal or diurnal – then everything else follows. You become active in your chosen world, you become inactive in the one to which you are poorly adapted and then, during that period of inactivity, your body performs all its other essential maintenance functions.

Others, including members of his department, disagree. “We haven’t yet found any animal – even insects – that don’t show some sort of sleep state,” says Linus Milinski, part of a group researching the fundamental reasons for sleep. “If you think about it, that’s quite ridiculous.” He simply does not see how this can be explained by light-dark adaptation. “Sleep is so bad, in terms of survivability. You can’t respond to dangers. And, even worse, you can’t reproduce.

“If there were any animals in the past that developed the ability not to need sleep, we should today see loads of those animals.” But we don’t. “In neuroscience, what it comes down to is that we think there must be some sort of repair that

‘We saw many patients where their sleep devices made their sleep worse’

SLEEP INC *The cost of 40 winks*

Oura ring, £499

This smart ring has been worn by Prince Harry, Mark Zuckerberg, Gwyneth Paltrow and the England football team. The ring's infrared sensors track your heart rate, night-time movement and time spent in REM, light and deep sleep. It gives you an overall "sleep score" each morning based on these measurements and recommends how to improve it.
johnlewis.com

Moonbird breathwork device, £159

Hold the Moonbird breathing coach in your hand and breathe in when it expands, then breathe out when it contracts. These calming breathing exercises are supposed to help you relax and fall asleep. A sensor tracks your heart rate and shows you analysis in an app.
moonbird.life

Lumie Bodyclock bedside lamp, £229

This lamp wakes you up gradually with a brightening "sunrise" light in the morning. It is bright enough to read by at bedtime, but has been designed not to emit blue light (which keeps you awake). The Bluetooth speakers can play 20 wake-up and sleep sounds including crickets, tree frogs and birdsong.
johnlewis.com



Somnox sleep robot, £465

As you cuddle this bean-shaped robot in bed, it measures how quickly you are breathing and moves up and down to match your breathing pace. The robot gradually starts to move at a slower rhythm, which is supposed to help reduce your breathing and heart rate and help you fall asleep. It also plays relaxing rain and whale sounds.
shop.somnox.com

Withings sleep analyser, £129.95

A pad which slips under a mattress and tracks your sleep. It links to an app and gives in-depth analysis of sleep cycles, heart rate, snoring, plus a "sleep score". It can detect sleep apnoea.
withings.com

Eight Sleep mattress cover, £3,999

Mark Zuckerberg is a fan of this sensor-filled system that goes under your sheet and tracks



The Prince of Wales with his Whoop tracker and Prince Harry wearing an Oura ring

body temperature. It heats up and cools down throughout the night to keep your body at an optimal temperature in each sleep cycle. It was created by a husband and wife team, and for couples it can make one side of the bed warmer and the other colder. If it detects snoring, the mattress base automatically elevates your head to reduce snoring without waking you.
eightsleep.com

Whoop tracker, £229

Prince William wore this fitness tracker when he cheered on England at the Euros in the summer. Whoop sits on your wrist and analyses your sleep, stress and steps. It tracks sleep quality and stages and suggests what time to go to bed and wake up based on your recent sleep patterns, sleep debt and naps.
healf.com

SnoozeBand sleep mask, £59.99

A wraparound light-blocking sleep mask with built-in speakers for listening to podcasts, audiobooks or music in bed. Shuts off the audio after a set time.
snoozeband.co.uk

Respire sleep strips, £48

Place these sticky strips over your lips when you get into bed. They prevent breathing through your mouth in your

sleep and encourage nasal breathing instead. This is supposed to help stop snoring and bad breath.
uk.respire.com

BedJet fan, from £289

A nozzle blows warm or cold air directly under the sheets. For couples who like to sleep at different temperatures, the fan can make half the bed hotter and the other half cooler. Can be programmed to heat up when you're waking up or going to bed.
bedjet.com

Philips sleep headphones, £183.99

Biosensors in these earphones detect when you're drifting off, and make the music or podcast you're listening to fade out to silence. They also monitor your sleep quality and mask background



noises in the bedroom. The extra thin earbuds are designed to stay put in various sleeping positions.
kokoon.io

Anwoon sleep sound machine, £358

Plays 24 soothing sleep sounds – from thunderstorms to rain and brown noise. A built-in diffuser puffs out essential oil mist for up to ten hours.
ninelife.co.uk

QuietOn sleep earbuds, £250.49

These noise-cancelling earbuds claim to be the smallest in the world. They block out the background noises that can disrupt sleep and are designed to be comfortable for side-sleepers.
healf.com

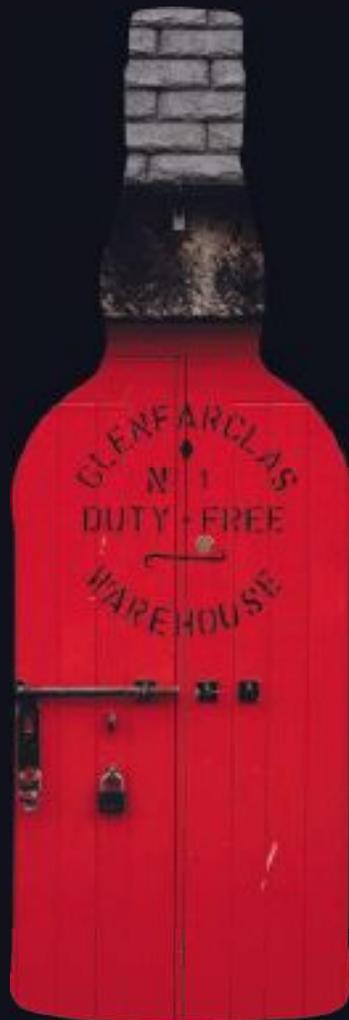
Georgina Roberts



Eight Sleep's founders, the husband-and-wife team Alex Zatarain and Matteo Franceschetti

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goes on during sleep that we really can't do without – and that for some reason we have to be unconscious for it to take place. We just don't know why."

What is sleep? That is an easier question to answer than why we sleep. But only just. It is about molecular biology.

In the office next to Foster's is his colleague Aarti Jagannath. She studies the genetic and molecular pathways involved in our circadian rhythm, the exquisitely synchronised symphony of chemistry and biology that plays every 24 hours in every human. For our bodies to work we need the right materials, at the correct concentration, delivered to the right tissues and organs at the right time of day.

It begins with the master clock – with "clock genes" in the brain. These genes are the metronome of the body's circadian symphony. As genes do, they make a protein. The protein has an unusual function. Its job is to stop the gene that made it from producing any others. Once made, the protein prevents more proteins being made. Then it is degraded by other proteins. All this occurs with pretty impressive regularity. It takes, in fact, about 24 hours.

After which, the gene is free to make the protein again and the cycle starts once more.

Those clock proteins in the brain provide the beat of the body. But they are not the symphony. They are more like the conductor. Just as in an orchestra, different instruments come in at different times. "Your body needs to do something completely different during the day versus the night. What we study is: what are the workhorses that actually go off and do all this?" Jagannath says.

There are clock genes in every cell in the body, all controlled by the master clock. For instance, within the long DNA code that determines their particular function, one specific sequence of common genetic code is targeted by the clock proteins. These proteins latch on to this specific code to change what they do by night and by day – regulating the things these genes need to do when we are asleep and the different things they need to do when awake.

But just like in a metronome, the clock genes need to be set. The timing signal is not perfect; it is not exactly 24 hours. It will continue to tick on its own, but left to itself will slowly drift away from the true time and the cycle of light and dark. If you put people in a cave, without access to any natural cues, you find that the clock genes are generally a little slow, taking longer

Simon Kyle, professor of experimental and clinical sleep research at Oxford University



'We now live with endless incoming streams of sensory information'

than 24 hours to tick. People will get up a bit later and later each day.

So the master clock needs outside information. There are many cues that the brain integrates to tell us when to sleep and wake. When you eat, when you exercise, when you are stressed (about, for instance, not falling asleep) – all this can influence our 24-hour timing. Important also is simply the length of time we have been awake. When we are conscious, key chemical signals build up in the brain that drive sleepiness, and when we sleep the concentration of these chemicals drops dramatically. Caffeine in coffee blocks one of the receptors that detects these chemicals, which is why, temporarily, it makes you feel less sleepy.

But there is one cue that is most important of all – the key signal that "sets" our biological clock. If the circadian rhythm is indeed a symphony, this cue is the loudest instrument of all: the circadian equivalent of the cannon in the *1812 Overture*.

There are receptors in our eyes that differ from the ones you know from school – the rods and the cones. The rods and cones help us form images. But these other receptors simply measure brightness. They see the dawn and the dusk and set our clocks. Russell Foster was the scientist who did the pioneering work to identify these sensors in the eye.

To see why the sun, or its absence, could explain our current maladies, you could do worse than look in Jagannath's office. Her window looks out onto a

basement without windows. Foster's work in identifying photoreceptors in the eye gained him the Daylight Award, a prize awarded to both architects and scientists who work on light. His department, though – and they appreciate the irony – has almost no natural light.

They have tried to brighten it up with houseplants, Jagannath says. They failed. "The plants keep dying, which is quite depressing as well."

When sleep goes wrong, it is because the orchestra isn't playing at the right time. Maybe the trumpet is being a prima donna and playing its own solo. Instead of a symphony, you get a cacophony.

Sometimes, there are medical reasons for this circadian cacophony. The most extreme – and least resolvable – is total blindness, which means that the brain cannot receive the signals that tell it is day or night. These people are time blind. They live in a world of endless jet lag.

Kyle knows how complex sleep is. But you don't need to untangle its complexity to fix it. A lot of the time, all we need to do is make everyone pay attention to the conductor.

When he treats patients, Kyle begins by preventing them from sleeping. He tells these patients – all desperate for eight hours, striving for the sleep equivalent of five-a-day – that he will only allow them, say, five and a half hours.

During that allotted period they sleep – exhausted. And they learn something. "We expose them to the ultimate feared outcome, which is less time in bed." The next day, they are sleep-deprived but they get through it. And as a reward they are allowed a little more sleep, then a little more the day after. Gradually they approach a full night's sleep.

"People learn that not only do they experience deeper, consolidated sleep, but also that they can function with a limited time in bed. That challenges some of their beliefs." In this way, he deals first with the worry, then allows the sleep to follow.

Here, then, is the sleep paradox. If you teach people not to fear being awake, if you teach them to let go of their urge to sleep, they are more likely to catch that sleep. Sleep is really important and getting it right will make you happier, healthier and probably more successful. But you really shouldn't worry about it. Because that could well make it worse.

Now you just have to learn how to reconcile those thoughts as you lie awake beneath your weighted duvet and watch the bedside clock tick over once more to 4am. ■

Imagine you are the proud parents of four perfect young children. Then you learn that three will go blind. What would you do? This is one family's story



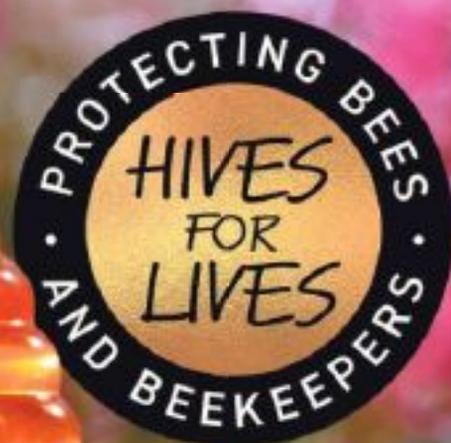
When the Pelletiers discovered three of their four children had a condition that would cause them to lose their sight, they made a bucket list.
Interview by Hilary Rose



Clockwise from left: Leo, 11, Mia, 13, Colin, 9, and Laurent Pelletier, 7, in Kuujuaq, Canada, to see the northern lights. Opposite: their parents, Sébastien Pelletier and Edith Lemay



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When Mia Pelletier was three, she struggled to see in the dark. If she got up in the night, her parents noticed that she bumped into walls and tripped over furniture. They thought it was odd and mentioned it to an optician, but Mia was their first child so they knew no

better. They tried not to worry too much. Over the next four years, as their family expanded to include Leo, Colin and Laurent, Edith Lemay and Sébastien Pelletier took Mia to a succession of eye specialists, who conducted tests for a variety of diseases and came up with a name: retinitis pigmentosa. When Mia was seven, they explained what that meant.

"She was home for lunch and talking about disabilities," says Lemay, who agonised with Pelletier over whether and when to tell their daughter. "I thought, OK, it's time. I told her, 'You too are going to have a disability when you're older. Your eyes might not work properly. You might go blind.' She looked at me and said, 'Oh, that's too bad.' And that's it."

A few days later, Lemay, 46, watched as Mia felt her way from her bedroom to the bathroom with her eyes closed, practising for when she would be blind. She listened as her daughter explained that from now on she would keep her bedroom superclean and tidy so that when she couldn't see any more she'd still know where everything was. Today, sitting next to Pelletier, 47, at their home in Montreal, Lemay recalls on Zoom that the experience was "gut-wrenching. Terrible. But at the same time she was focusing on the solution. She wasn't scared; she wasn't crying. She was like, let's try to figure this out. That gave us a lot of strength, because if she's not worried about it, why should we be?"

The couple know that three of their four children will one day go blind. Mia is now 13, Colin 9 and Laurent 7. The odds of them transmitting the disease to each child were one in four, but only Leo, now 11, dodged it. As Lemay puts it with a wry smile, if the chances are one in four, it's "pretty bad luck" that three out of four are affected. The deterioration in their eyesight is caused by a combination of genes making cells in the retina die little by little. The progress is slow and unstoppable, and by the time they get to their thirties or forties, all three will be blind. There's no treatment and no cure. At first Lemay and Pelletier railed against such powerlessness.

"You go to the ophthalmologist and they say, 'Good luck. Come back next year,'" Pelletier continues.

"You think, what can I do? Diet? Exercise? We just have to wait till they go blind?" Lemay says. "That's it?"

A specialist vision impairment teacher at the children's school suggested they

Mia on safari in Namibia



Laurent visits the eye doctor



Mia wanted to go riding in Mongolia. Laurent, for unclear reasons, wanted to drink juice on a camel

show Mia pictures of elephants and giraffes in books. "She told us to fill their visual memory," Lemay recalls. "She said, 'Give them images for when they go blind, that's the best thing you can do.'" Lemay had a better idea, which was to take the kids to see the real thing. Pelletier takes up the story, explaining that their vision will contract from peripheral to central, getting narrower and narrower.

"Essentially we wanted to show them big landscapes: deserts, mountains, steppes. We wanted them to have the widest, most magnificent views they could."

So in 2020 they formed a plan. They would take the children out of school, rent out the house and travel the world for a year. They budgeted \$200 a day (around £110) for everyone, and the whole trip would eventually cost them about \$70,000, but they would finance it with a windfall Sébastien had from shares when the finance company he worked for was sold. Edith had lost her job handling business intelligence and logistics for Cirque du Soleil when the pandemic hit, so she was free to go. But two years of lockdowns and travel restrictions meant their plans were repeatedly redrawn or postponed. They used the time to write a bucket list of countries they wanted to visit.

"Countries are a little abstract," Pelletier says. "The kids were like, 'What countries are there?' When we told Colin, who was five, that we were going to the other side of the world, he said, 'Where's the other side of the world?'"

So they reframed the question: what would you like to do? In March 2022 they gave up trying to make detailed plans, caught a flight to Namibia and made it up as they went along. No 1 on the list was to go on safari. No 12 was to eat with chopsticks. For reasons that never became clear, to him or anyone else, Laurent dreamt of drinking juice on a camel.

"The other kids were so excited when we were about to go on the camel," Lemay says. "They all said, 'Did you bring the juice? Did you bring the juice?'"

Mia wanted to ride a horse in Mongolia and learn to surf. Colin wanted to eat ice cream and sleep on a train. Leo, bless him, wanted to go to Japan to see Pokémons in the wild. Sébastien wanted to see Angkor Wat and Edith wanted to go hot-air ballooning in Cappadocia. Together, the family watched the sun rise over a mountain range and set over a desert. Two months in, a documentary maker clocked them on social media and spent six months filming them on the road. They thought it would be a nice memento for the children that nobody would ever really see. Instead the documentary, *Blink*, has been picked up by National Geographic and premiered at the Telluride and London film festivals. It will be shown in cinemas and streamed globally on Disney+. By turns heartwarming and heartbreaking, tragic and uplifting, it begins with an unnamed family walking up a slope, in the snow, in the dark. "Look!" one child says excitedly, pointing at the sky.

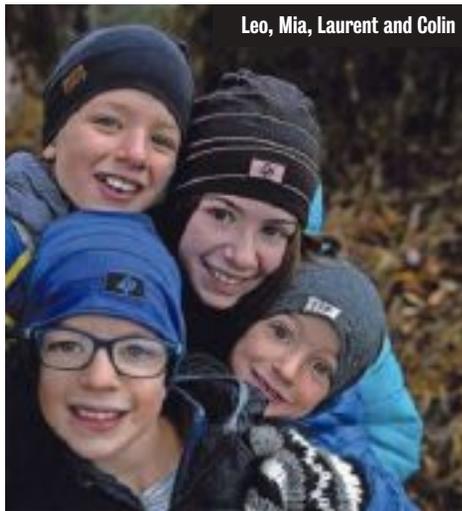
There's a pause as the northern lights flicker all around them. "I can't see anything," a small voice says.

"Look in front of you!" the first child adds excitedly. Another pause.

"We don't see them," another says.

"When you have kids," their mother says in voiceover, "you just want to imagine everything's going to be OK."

What follows is proof that it can be OK, but not quite in the way you might hope. The film shows the boys playing football in the Amazon basin with local children (No 33 was to explore a rainforest and no 15 to make friends in other countries). As the light starts to fade, their mother has to shout to explain where the ball is. Mia talks about the moment



Leo, Mia, Laurent and Colin



Colin with a new friend in Ecuador



Mia, Leo, Colin and Laurent on top of their camper van in Mongolia

she realised her vision was starting to differ from that of her friends: they could look up at the night sky and see stars.

"Stars," her mother says wistfully, "are the first things you say goodbye to."

The family spend Christmas in Cambodia and Leo's birthday in Nepal. They tickle each other in the desert and abseil down a waterfall. They spend a night stuck in a cable car halfway up a mountain in a thunderstorm and chant their times tables walking along a terrifying track in the Himalayas. Laurent wonders if maybe he'll be blind just for a little while and his mother says maybe and recalls him asking what it meant to be blind. "It's like if your eyes are always closed," she says. "I felt like I somehow ended his innocence." She sits on a sand dune with Mia, promising to describe sunsets to her when she can no longer see them. Mia reminds her that she'll still be able to feel the sand between her fingers, and sun and wind on her face.

Lemay and Pelletier talk about the bittersweet experience of showing their children wonderful things in the knowledge that one day they won't be able to see them. Mostly, though, the entire family radiates joy and excitement.

"We asked Mia, 'How do you live with this, knowing you're going to lose your sight?'" Pelletier tells me today. "And she

said, 'By living in the present moment. That's what I'm focusing on. Whatever happens in the future, I can't do anything about it. So I make sure to look at it as what I have, rather than what I don't.'"

The family marvel at the fact that having focused the entire trip on seeing things, what they actually came back with were intangibles: resilience, an optimism that things will be OK, unbreakable family bonds. Other people return from holiday with souvenirs; they came back with the knowledge that as long as they were all together, they could cope with anything.

But travelling with four small children is not for the faint-hearted. They were strict about packing light – no toys, no teddies, just a handful of clothes. They each took an e-reader, and the children got through more than 100 books each. They homeschooled them and continued the no-screen policy they operate at home. So yes, travelling the world can be chaotic but, as Lemay points out, so is home life when you've got four children: after-school clubs, playdates, music lessons, sports practice. On the road, she says, everything is simpler, because you're doing the same thing. "We just say, 'Let's go there,' and we go as a family. That's a great gift. How many people get to spend so many meaningful hours with their kids?"

They got back a year ago and found the children slipped back easily into their old routines. They talk about their future matter of factly. They've taken the children to try vision-restricting goggles ("They thought it was the funniest thing, so they always surprise us"), white sticks and the possibility of getting a guide dog. "For a kid," Lemay says, "getting a dog is something to look forward to, even if it's because you're going to be blind."

They've made a point of talking to people who are blind or visually impaired, people who have fulfilling lives and careers, so the children know that losing their sight isn't the end; it's a bend in the road. They take comfort from the resilience their children developed on the trip and their bond as siblings. Leo tells the others, "I'll be there to take care of you."

"As long as we're together," Lemay says, "everything is OK."

But Lemay and Pelletier struggle with the materialism of home life, the sheer quantity of noise and "stuff". They contemplate selling up and going back on the road, but know that family and roots are important too, that the children need to grow up surrounded by a network of loving grandparents and cousins and aunts. As for the possibility of a future treatment for retinitis pigmentosa, they're in touch with research teams around the world and open to cooperating with anyone, but they barely allow themselves to hope and certainly don't share those thoughts with the children. They don't want to give them false hope and leave them hostage to disappointment.

"We as adults worry and see all the challenges," Lemay says. "They don't."

"We're trying to give them the tools that, if and when it happens, they can go about their lives as naturally as possible," Pelletier adds. "They're not victims. It's not cancer. It's not a disease they're going to die from – it's a challenge they will have to face."

Lemay says her heart contracts every time she sees a blind person with a cane, or her children struggling in the dark. But if they knew that, or how much she worries about them, it would make them insecure. Instead, she has learnt to live with it, to accept it and to occasionally grieve alone with Pelletier, in private.

"We have hard moments and of course there are times when I cry, but we're a loving family. Most of the time it's hard to be sad when your children are so happy. You look around and see kids struggling, and ours are intelligent, resourceful and loving. They have so much more than so many other kids. It doesn't matter what life throws at them, they'll find a solution. They're going to be blind, but we don't dwell on that." ■

Blink is in cinemas from November 22

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What it costs to look good on TV (if you're female and 50 like me)

Fillers and non-surgical procedures, supplements and £100 creams – television presenter Paula Froelich, left, on the price of being an older woman on screen

work as a TV presenter for NewsNation, a relatively new American cable news channel based in Chicago and New York. Every weekday for an entire hour, I sit in the make-up chair in our Manhattan studio to be primped and preened so I am ready to co-host our entertainment segment or present my own weekly show, *The Scoop*.

On goes the foundation, blusher, lip gloss, eye make-up, false lashes. Next it's the hair tongs and hairspray. But this daily rigmarole isn't the only way I ensure I stay looking at the top of my game. Surgery, procedures, Botox, fillers, supplements, hormones, top-of-the-range face creams – I am 50 and I do them all.

The fact is that in my job I need to look not ancient. My network has not told me this, nor would it, but when I am sitting in the studio and the high-powered 5D cameras turn on and the many bright lights shine onto my face, I am aware of them illuminating every crevasse. In my line of work it's pretty hard to ignore the fact that our culture reveres youth and ignores, or shuns, women after they hit middle age. I see this in the parade of famous women, not a single one of them wrinkly or aged, whose lives I cover, and in my own enduringly glamorous female colleagues who present news, comment, weather.

Would I be on TV if I didn't go to such lengths to battle the onslaught of age? I'd like to think so. But along with every female broadcaster of a certain age, I won't forget the case of five female anchors, all over 40, who sued the New York news station NY1 five years ago because they felt they were being gradually "pushed off the air" due to their age. The women, who ranged from 40 to 61, eventually reached a confidential settlement with the station. They didn't get their jobs back.

And it is not just we presenters who feel the pressure. This summer I was at a dinner party in the Hamptons when a friend of a certain age – still a society staple but not getting as many invites as she used to – suddenly pounded her fist on the table and screamed, "I am invisible. Every woman over 60 is." It was all a bit awkward. We had been discussing the vagaries of traffic. Almost every woman at the table – there were 12 of us – appeared embarrassed at the time. But in the weeks after, most of them privately conceded that they too felt passed over, overlooked, not seen – despite the many surgeries they've had or the thousands of dollars' worth of outfits they've bought.

For us, it is no surprise at all that a new film portraying the inner turmoil of an ageing woman is a full-blown horror movie – a cinematic howl of outrage at the position in which we find ourselves. It's called *The Substance* and is a ghastly, gory tragicomedy in which Demi Moore,

61, plays an actress named Elisabeth Sparkle, who once won an Oscar but is now heading up a "Jazzercise" show (think Jane Fonda). She is wealthy, alone and about to be put out to pasture. The brutal TV industry is personified by an unctuous, preening executive named Harvey, played by Dennis Quaid. When he thinks Elisabeth is out of earshot, Harvey says things like, "We need young, hot – now! How long has the old bitch been able to stick around? She got an Oscar? For what? *King Kong*, the original?" Naturally, Harvey appears to be much, much older than Elisabeth. Quaid is 70.

As yet, no one has said anything like this to me either directly or indirectly, but it doesn't matter because, for me, the battle is there when I look in the mirror every morning or wrestle with my menopausal demons. In *The Substance*, Demi Moore's character makes a deal to take a potion that transforms her into a gorgeous, younger version of herself called Sue (played by Margaret Qualley, the doe-eyed daughter of Andie MacDowell). But there's a catch. She only gets to be Sue half the time. Every other week, she goes back to being sad old Elisabeth. The substance literally splits her in two. This premise might be fantastical, but women of my age are living our own version of it. Expensive creams and potions. Probiotics that swear to give you the bowels of a 20-year-old. Ozempic. It is the choice between acceptance or denial, resignation or rage.

In my first decade or so of adulthood, thanks to good genes and no thanks to my pack-a-day smoking habit, I skated by without having to confront this choice. But I was increasingly conscious that I shouldn't look "exhausted" on camera, and was Botox-curious. I succumbed during my thirties and became a true devotee in my forties. Now I receive jabs once or twice a year. In the past few years, things have amped up. I've had filler in my jaw to give me a stronger face profile and in my upper lip to get rid of the old smoking lines. I've added dabs to sculpt my cheeks.

I invested in £2,300 (\$3,000) of Fraxel laser treatment, which burnt off all the sun damage on my face. That took four days of hiding and another three of covering up. I have had two lots of eyelid surgery: one to correct increasingly droopy brows, the other to extinguish the puffy bags under my eyes. Those procedures cost me £8,400 – £6,000 to get the bags under my eyes micro-liposuctioned out and £2,400 to cut out the extra sag on my upper lids that was creeping onto my lashes.

If you must know, the experience was gorier than *The Substance*. As I left the room afterwards, I saw half my eyelids lying like fat, bloodied little worms on my doctor's tray. I was, quite literally, leaving parts of myself behind. It took only a week



Paula Froelich in New York, 2023



The day of her non-surgical facelift



In hair and make-up before going on air

I am not trying to drastically alter the way I look. I just need to look not ancient

to recover but, because my body scars as it ages, I have kept the reminders of that surgery – two purple lines that fit into the creases on my eyelids, so are hopefully quite hard to spot.

Then this year I went in for my first "non-surgical" facelift. It was less gory, but I was awake for the whole thing. It cost £3,800. I had semi-stalked Dr Jon Turk, a New York acquaintance who also happens to be a talented plastic surgeon, to procure one. He is the kind of doctor who will often have a famous

WHAT I SPEND ON LOOKING YOUNG

TWEAKMENTS

- £6,000** Eye bag liposuction
- £2,400** Upper lid surgery
- £3,800** Non-surgical facelift
- £2,300** Fraxel laser surgery
- £1,000 a year** Botox and filler

SUPPLEMENTS

- £150 a month** HRT
- £190 a month** Dietary supplements, including fibre capsules, probiotics, DIMPro and DHEA
- £150 a month** Marijuana gummies to aid sleep

SKINCARE PRODUCTS

- £228** Epicutis lipid serum
- £195** Epicutis Hyvia Crème
- £80** BeautyStat Universal C Skin Refiner
- £60** NassifMD detox pads
- £17** CeraVe moisturising cream

EXERCISE AND GROOMING

- £70 a month** Peloton classes
- £230 every three months** Hair cut and colour
- £120 every three weeks** Manicure-pedicure

person sitting in his waiting room, so I knew I was going to the best.

Still, I grimaced as he pressed a needle into my skin to place surgical threads in my face, along my cheeks and jaw before literally lifting it, marionette-style, until I appeared ten years younger – in less than half an hour. Thanks to an injection of the painkiller lidocaine, I didn't feel anything except Dr Turk pulling, prodding and poking, but it was disconcerting nonetheless. Until I saw the results. People would stop me afterwards and say, "Wow, you look fantastic. Did you get some sleep? What pill are you taking?" Internally, I'd be kvelling.

I am not trying to drastically alter the way I look. I am just trying to look and feel like myself again, not the exhausted, haggard and semi-psychotic version. It is not just on the outside that I am spending the money. I have availed myself of many of the "solutions" to

ageing that capitalism has provided. It's hard to ignore their existence. I am inundated on social media and Google with ads for things claiming to be cures for menopausal weight gain, mood swings and whatever other hellish ailment women over 50 must suffer.

Turning into a schizophrenic monster for lack of oestrogen? How about this patch? Dead between your legs? There's a cream for that. Starting to resemble the bearded lady? Try this at-home, totally safe spa-quality laser. Hate everybody and get depressed all the time? Take this happy pill. Thousands of dollars, several second-degree burns and just a few semi-psychotic flip-outs later, my kitchen and bathroom counters today look like something straight out of a nursing home.

Daily I consume an antidepressant and a birth control pill. But then I also take vitamin B, vitamin D, vitamin C, fish oil, allergy meds (another fun fact that comes with ageing: allergies to everything, it seems). I also take fibre capsules, two different probiotics, iron, a curcumin antioxidant, and something called DIMPro, which contains diindolylmethane (DIM), a compound found in cruciferous vegetables that is said to support breast, cervical and prostate health. I also take DHEA, which apparently helps the body produce hormones, including testosterone and oestrogen, among others. The total cost of these supplements, all recommended by my doctors, is more than £190 a month. And then there's hormone replacement (progesterone, oestrogen and testosterone), which adds up to another £150 a month.

Taking this number of supplements every day, I'm shocked I have room in my stomach to eat anything at all. But apparently I do, because I have gained 20lb and I can't seem to shed the weight no matter how many Peloton rides or juice fasts I try. My scales have been relegated to a corner of my bedroom I rarely visit.

Recently, my complexion hasn't looked so good, so I have upped my morning and evening skin regime to military precision. This starts with an oil cleanser by a laughably expensive skincare brand, Epicutis, which was apparently founded in a biotech research lab at Princeton University. Then I clean my skin again with a NassifMD detox pad, from a range developed by the Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Paul Nassif. I move on to a vitamin C cream by BeautyStat, founded by a "cosmetic chemist", called Universal C Skin Refiner, followed by an Epicutis lipid serum, said to balance the skin's microbiome. I hope it is doing something because a bottle of that costs \$250 alone.

In the morning I follow this with an Epicutis moisturiser called Hyvia Crème. Then, after doing the whole routine again at night, I drown my skin in a significantly cheaper CeraVe moisturising

cream. Then there's the £230 every three months I spend to colour my hair and the £120 mani-pedis every three weeks, which no self-respecting New Yorker could do without. As my Aunt Dee used to say, growing old ain't for sissies. But it also ain't for anyone who doesn't have disposable income.

Thanks to all these efforts, I can still put on a show. My co-workers don't recognise me when I take off my make-up after airtime and some employees in my apartment building don't recognise me when I get dolled up for a night out – although that doesn't happen very often these days as, thanks to hot flushes, I don't sleep very well unless I take a marijuana gummy or two before bed (monthly cost: £150). Which makes me tired by 7pm. These days I mainly frequent Manhattan restaurants during kids' and geriatrics' hour.

But at least I am honest about what it takes me to look my best. I've been a celebrity reporter for almost my entire career and I can tell you there aren't many famous women out there – or men – who haven't had a lot of intervention. What annoys me most of all is those who launch beauty ranges off the back of their supposed natural great looks when there is nothing natural about them at all. Look back at these women over the decades and you'll see how their faces have changed. The fillers, the Botox, the cheek and chin implants are easy to spot. Without being truthful about the thousands of dollars' worth of tweakments and work they have had, they are creating unobtainable beauty ideals for us all.

Would I go for the full facelift? Never say never. I have plenty of friends reaching their sixties for whom one is considered a must. In fact, you can't get an appointment in the clinic of any rated Manhattan surgeon at this time of year, because so many people are checking in to get "face ready" for the holidays. Pop into the luxury department store Bergdorf Goodman on 5th Avenue just after opening time at 10am and you will see plenty of shoppers wrapped up with hats and hoods that mask recent surgery. Women trying to relieve the boredom of being stuck at home while recovering from surgery. They'll be gone by 11am when the early lunch crowds start to appear.

So it is apt really that *The Substance* is a horror film. It depicts the bind in which we women find ourselves: the pressure we are under, the ghastly battle we wage daily with ourselves and the horrific ways in which we torture our bodies in the search for youth, success and acceptance. All to end with the inevitable: death.

I'm calling Dr Turk in the morning. And then my shrink. ■

@pfro

I sense he wants me
to scream a rhapsodic
‘YES!’



My £600 an hour session with an orgasm coach

The O-Man claims he can make women climax more intensely and more often, even from 5,000 miles away in California.

Jane Mulkerrins, above, fires up her laptop for a session, but did the earth move for her?







Reassuringly hard to find



CHAMPAGNE
POL ROGER

It's a drizzly Monday afternoon in Brighton and I'm lying on the floor of my flat, naked from the waist down with one leg up against the wall, while a bearded man in his thirties whom I have never met issues instructions at me, via Zoom, from 5,000 miles away.

First, he tells me to “stab” myself in the upper thigh with the business end of a large blue vibrator, then repeat the action on my other thigh, then my rib cage on either side, then my jaw. Eventually, he directs me to apply it to the more traditional, time-honoured region, watching me closely as his directions – and the large blue vibrator – audibly achieve the intended result. I am grateful that my positioning means while he can see me, I cannot see him right now. And that Carole, my 83-year-old upstairs neighbour, is slightly deaf.

The self-styled, Los Angeles-based “O-Man” claims to be able to make women orgasm more times, more intensely and for longer than ever – even (especially) those who have never been able to reach orgasm before. He estimates that he has worked with more than 500 women in the past four years – some, like me, remotely, but others in person at his apartment in North Hollywood – with prices starting at \$800 (£600) an hour, and that satisfied clients include “New Jersey housewives”, “the ex-wives of people who have made the most influential people in the world list” and even, he says, “somebody on vacation here who was a British MP who pretended she wasn't a British MP”.

Breathless reviews on internet chatrooms report double-digit, earth-shattering orgasms, both during and following appointments. And yet their technician is conflicted about his growing reputation. Fearing a backlash against his mission and methods – the idiosyncratic and self-taught “O-System” – from myriad sources, including the wellness community (“In spaces like wellness where you're saying something that could ruin a lot of people's narratives, I would rather prove that what I'm saying is right first”), this climax Jedi asks that his clients don't reveal his name (although he accepts that if a television show about him, which he says is mooted, comes off, his cover will be blown). We'll just call him M.

He works with couples, but mostly with individual women, and is robustly confident about his technique. He claims that 95 per cent of clients have multiple orgasms under his guidance.

Certainly, M appears to be doing more than his fair share to close the “orgasm gap”, the purported disparity in rates of orgasm between men and women.

Research this summer from a survey of 24,000 single Americans aged 18 to 100 found that men reported orgasms between 70 and 85 per cent of the time during sex, while women reported orgasms just 46 to 58 per cent of the time.

Given this gap, it is little wonder that the orgasm industry – or, to use the more coy, contemporary lingo, “sexual wellness” market, which is valued at an estimated £64 billion in 2023 – is booming. Billions of dollars of Silicon Valley start-up money is pouring into sex tech and developing products such as the world's first “smart vibrator”, the £165 Lioness, which records and transposes data from pelvic floor contractions to create graphs of women's orgasms (I tested it and proudly discovered that, while most women's are either a wave or a waterfall, mine resembles a tsunami), and more holistic offerings, such as the \$45 Libido gummies, “formulated to enhance sexual arousal

**HE CLAIMS THAT
95 PER CENT OF HIS
CLIENTS HAVE
MULTIPLE ORGASMS
UNDER HIS GUIDANCE**

and stimulation (female) or function (male) through natural ingredients that increase blood flow, naturally boost testosterone and alleviate stress”, by the Brooklyn-based company Maude.

Meanwhile, explicit sexual instruction has gone mainstream. The California-based sex educator Emily Morse offers “mindful masturbation” masterclasses on the same platform as Hillary Clinton teaches the Power of Resilience and George W Bush imparts wisdom on Authentic Leadership.

Such classes, while proliferating and growing in popularity, are not new. The late and gloriously ribald sex educator Betty Dodson, who flashed me, aged 90, when I interviewed her in 2020, began her radical Bodysex classes, in which she taught groups of women to masturbate to orgasm in her Midtown Manhattan apartment, in the early Seventies.

But M, 39, is not a sex educator or therapist or any sort of doctor but a former joke-writer for Joan Rivers turned personal trainer. And he believes, contrary to much popular messaging, that what is holding women back from brain-melting orgasms is not psychological, social or societal, is probably not stress, or tiredness or trauma, or shame or the patriarchy (well, not entirely), but simply our posture.

Our spines and pelvises are misaligned from modern life, he says, and our hips, hands and shoulders are tight, which means the muscles that control our orgasms are not “firing” properly. By rapidly realigning our joints – even remotely – he claims that he can make the earth move for us all.

Unlike many of his clients, I've never struggled in this department – I'm not bragging, that's just not my cross to bear – but I believe everyone can do better.

So, here I am, on my back on a Monday afternoon for the sake of science. “It's not an established science – yet,” says M. “But it always works.”

A couple of days before our scheduled session, and after some logistics-based WhatsApping (“Monday I'll be getting you off remotely”), we have a preliminary consultation over Zoom. M's apartment appears to be mostly an extensive home gym, where he trains people – in your standard strength stuff as well as all the sex. He has dark, wavy hair, a slightly nerdy manner and a beard, which he pulls at absentmindedly as he goes through the science of his O-System with me.

Orgasms are an involuntary muscle response, he says. I already know this, thanks to a very involuntary one I had once while sitting on a Power Plate to stretch out my glutes and hamstrings after a run.

For that involuntary muscle response to happen properly in the pelvic floor, he says, the other muscles have to be engaged, or “firing”, too. He explains about tonic and phasic muscles (the ones attached to your skeleton that hold you together, versus the smaller ones geared towards mobility; crucially, the pelvic floor is mostly phasic) and how phasic muscle imitates tonic muscle, so if the tonic muscle is stable, the phasic will be too.

He points out that men's quads and glutes (both phasic muscles) are generally stretched and worked during sex, whereas – unless they are on top – women's



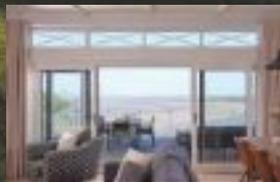
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often are not. In a passive, supine position – your basic missionary – our phasic and core muscles are just not firing.

Then, he says, there are all the other negative forces exerted upon women: our shoes (“High heels are the greatest enemy to a misaligned body imaginable”) and our bras, which strangle our rib cages and “push you into extension”, both of which give us tight lower backs and legs; our handbags, which cause our shoulders to creep up and crick our necks; and our desk jobs thoroughly wreck our backs, necks, shoulders, hips and legs.

We are all out of whack, posture-wise, and our wonky pelvises mean our pelvic floors can’t fire on all cylinders. M asks me to position my laptop so he can take a screenshot of me standing, side-on, facing two different directions. He then uses software to analyse the position of my shoulders and hips. He deduces that, on top of all the usual wreckage inflicted by sitting at a desk all day, wearing shoes and carrying bags, thanks to breaking my left shoulder several years ago, my right shoulder is compensating and is internally rotated, as is my right hip, while my left hip is externally rotated.

He logs off to go and plan the exercises we will be doing to correct my posture, loosen and extend my tight spots and “give you a bunch of the best orgasms you’ve ever had”.

M grew up in rural Illinois, where, he says, his early relationship with sex and sexuality “wasn’t good, because the first sexual experiences I had weren’t things that I chose”. He was subjected to abuse (he doesn’t want to go into details), but he believes it has informed his work now. “I wanted to be sure that I wasn’t hurting anybody,” he says.

He is neurodivergent. “I [have] ADHD, and there might be a little bit of autism too,” he says. “I’m not sure because they didn’t have tests for that then. And I have to be sure that somebody is having a good experience, and the easiest way for me to do that was to make sure that they wouldn’t stop moaning.”

He first discovered his O-System by happy accident when, in 2019, a woman he was dating complained that her hips hurt. As a personal trainer who also dabbled in a bit of recreational BDSM, “I was like, well, I think if I tie you to my ceiling and put you in a kneeling chair and then use a vibrator, I can release your back. And then I did that and her hips didn’t hurt, her back didn’t hurt and she came 20 times.”

He admits that even he doubted the implications of his discovery. “I’m like, it can’t be,” he says. “Is that it? Is it really just body positioning and muscles? And then I just thought, how am I going to get people to believe this?”

The woman in question posted about

him on a sex-positive Facebook group and urged other women to go and see him too. Then, during the pandemic in 2020, with Covid-ravaged Los Angeles in lockdown and nobody coming to see him, M used the time productively and formally developed his programme, the O-System, spinning his hobby into a paid-for service.

When he told his family about his new job, they didn’t speak to him for two years. “It would be easier to lean into OnlyFans because it’s an established career and you’re not spitting in the face of established science,” he says. His romantic life has not suffered though. “I date a lot of people,” he says.

M’s confidence, which can sometimes veer quite close to smugness, is tempered by a rebellious, revolutionary streak. “If everybody knew how to align their bodies and get themselves out of pain, which is a goal that I have overall, guess what happens to all these people that are charging women for all these different things that don’t work,” he says.

I like the notion that my much promised orgasms will not only be in

HE INSTRUCTS ME AS IF HE’S MY RUNNING COACH, NOT A STRANGER WATCHING ME ON THE INTERNET

the pursuit of science, but will also be striking a blow to the patriarchy and the capitalist machine.

On Monday afternoon, after watching one of M’s webinars that explains the positions I will be trying, I head home, close the curtains, charge up my largest vibrator – M has told me that in addition to its advertised purpose, we will be using it to loosen my joints and muscles – and Zoom in, trying not to think too hard about the fact that he will be watching my every, er, move.

We begin with me lying on the sofa, with my right leg bent up and pushing against the back of the sofa and my left leg down. This, I understand, is to correct my right hip’s internal rotation and create a more neutral position. M instructs me to use the vibrator to “stab” the front of my hip bone on my right, then my left side, then the tight band of muscle on the inside of my thighs, the outside of my quads, then my rib cage on each side and my jaw, to help relax my neck.

Eventually, he tells me to “get to it”, as if he is my running coach, not a stranger watching me masturbate over

the internet. While I get off to a decent jog and soon break into a sprint, I am struggling to, er, finish, and ask Coach if it’s OK for me to take a break. I’m concerned that I am doing something wrong. Or maybe I am the unicorn who is impenetrable to his methods?

No, says M, I’m not doing anything wrong, but my pelvis and hips are not stable enough on the sofa, so my deep core isn’t engaged.

He suggests I move to the floor and lie down with my legs bent up on the sofa, and a pillow under my bum to tuck my glutes in. This position, he says, makes my hips and pelvis much more stable, while lifting my glutes to engage them. Then there is more stabbing at my thighs and even my kneecaps with the vibrator before I am again instructed to “get to it”.

I am having a perfectly nice time, but still not producing the results I know Coach M is after. He tells me to hook my right hand under my right leg and pull it towards me. Rather than helping, this throws me off my stride, so we go back to my having both legs up on the sofa. As a writer, my hands, wrists and shoulders will be particularly tight, he says. Instead of moving the vibrator around, I should hold it still, between the palms of my hands and squeeze my glutes up into it. This tip does the trick – quickly, powerfully and for a very long time.

In the ever so slightly awkward moment afterwards, M asks for my review: was that orgasm harder and/or longer than usual for me? I sense he wants me to scream an overwhelming, rhapsodic “YES!” but I have to be honest. It was certainly intense and long, but I am happy to report that I have enjoyed similarly intense and long orgasms before, and recently. I didn’t hallucinate, as M claims some women do, start speaking in tongues or pass out, but yes, I assure him, it is definitely up there, in my top five for 2024. If he is miffed with my moderation, he is gracious enough not to let on.

We move on to me lying on my back, with my left leg up against the wall and my right leg “butterflied” on the floor, with my knee bent out. This position, M says, counteracts the internal and external rotation of my hips and creates a neutral position. That one works too. Very well indeed, in fact.

Afterwards, along with the usual sense of calm and benevolence that comes with a giant dopamine dump, my body feels looser and lighter, as if I’ve just had a good, hard massage. “It’s like physio, with a vibrator,” I say, cheerily.

“Some people legitimately ask: what’s the point of the female orgasm?” says M. “The point is that orgasm stimulates all the recovery systems in your body. You sleep better, it’s a mood-booster and a natural painkiller. It’s a superpower.” ■

‘The pain of losing our baby was unbearable. Fishing was how I coped’



Actors James Murray and Sarah Parish's daughter was nine months old when she died. He tells Alice Thomson how he found salvation in fly-fishing – and explains why he's now a committed activist, not just raising millions for new paediatric units, but campaigning to clean up our rivers



Jim Murray, 49, photographed in Hampshire by Kate Peters and, opposite, at home with his wife, Sarah Parish



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Murray on location as Prince Andrew in *The Crown*



With works that feature in his new exhibition, *Creatures of Light*, for which he sank dyed canvases in UK rivers



When the actor James Murray's daughter Ella-Jayne died suddenly at the age of nine months, he was overpowered by the weight of his grief. "I just felt this deep, deep sadness. The pain was unbearable. Therapy wasn't doing it for me; talking to friends didn't help with something that was impossible to comprehend. I was going under, sinking slowly then fast. It was all-encompassing and horrendous. Then I stood in the river and began to cast; fishing was the way I coped and where I found Ella-Jayne again."

Fifteen years after his daughter's death we are wandering along the chalk streams of the River Itchen in Hampshire on a clear October afternoon and Murray is pointing out a heron and an egret. Grayling are hanging in the clear waters and six cygnets drift towards us as the sun slants through an oak branch. It is easy to see why he now appears so relaxed.

Fishing, Murray believes, saved his life. The poet Ted Hughes, he thinks, felt the same – its soothing repetition slowly allowed them to heal. Even the most cynical, urban person who thinks it's all woo-woo nonsense relaxes surrounded by nature, Murray insists. "It's restorative in a way therapy wasn't for me. At first, I had a visceral, biological need to be near the earth and howl."

The sea, I agree, feels relentless with its pounding waves, but this stream is just meandering along its way. "It's calming. There is a spirituality around the river and fishing and the ceremony of it."

Murray has played everyone from Stephen Hart in *Primeval* to Prince Andrew in *The Crown*, but his real passion, he says, has always been fishing rather than acting. "Actors say we are great horsemen or swordsmen to get a gig, but I really can fish," he says. He even did

'I felt guilt about fishing. Then I realised, whenever I was in the river, the pain went



Murray retrieving a canvas

his audition for the role of Prince Andrew while fishing on the Middle Dee in Scotland. "I filmed my audition on my phone between breakfast and putting my waders on. I probably looked quite posh. Amazingly, they loved it."

He and his wife, Sarah Parish, are known as a powerful acting couple. They first met on the BBC drama *Cutting It*. Parish is now starring in the new BBC drama *Curfew*, playing DI Pamela Green, and has been in *Industry*, *WIA* and *Broadchurch*. Murray is best known for his stiff upper lip role as Colonel Neil Harding in *Masters of the Air*.

For years their lives seemed blessed as they garnered awards for their myriad roles, being photographed on red carpets and going to premieres. But the death of their first daughter changed their perceptions of life and what mattered most. Now they have both become campaigners, raising £5 million for the Murray Parish Trust for paediatric facilities in southern England and, for

Murray, championing the plight of the salmon who helped to restore his faith in life and the conservation of their rivers.

"If you strip back all the layers of the drama, the trauma started with the birth," says Murray, as we potter along the stream and over the water meadows. "We knew a few days before that our baby's heart wasn't beating properly, but it can be something innocuous. Then Sarah had an emergency caesarean. One minute I was holding my wife's hand; the next they went to give Ella-Jayne to me, then realised she wasn't breathing."

The nurses tried to sound calm, Murray says, but he could see them making calls. Consultants arrived and his minutes-old baby was whisked off. "I thought, this isn't good. They dripped out information about a weak heart, but after going home shattered and terrified, I googled it and immediately guessed she had a rare syndrome called Rubinstein-Taybi. It manifests with congenital heart issues. She had big thumbs and wide toes and was very hirsute, with dark hair, which were all traits."

The two actors felt they had to pull themselves together as Ella-Jayne spent five months in the intensive care unit in Southampton. "Eventually they allowed her home. It wasn't orthodox – she couldn't feed herself – but we needed to learn how to cope on our own, so we returned to our remote part of Hampshire and battened down the hatches."

It's amazing how quickly new parents adapt to a devastating prognosis, Murray suggests. "It gave me faith in what humans are capable of. We soon stopped grieving for the child we thought we would have – she was adorable and beautiful, just different. We knew that



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our life had changed for ever, that we couldn't spontaneously jump on planes any more and act in any film. But we didn't know she was going to die; we thought, she will be a special needs child and we will look after her."

They had four glorious months at home with her, according to Murray. "She had never developed enough muscles to swallow but suddenly on the last day of her life, she guzzled a full bottle. We were ecstatic; the future opened up. We put her to bed; in the morning we went to her cot and she had passed away in the night. My wife says, for a lot of living things, just before they die there is a burst of life and that's what we like to think happened to Ella-Jayne. It was her thank-you."

The couple were quickly engulfed by the funeral and the memorial. "Hundreds of people came, of course, because it's such a unique death, losing a nine-month-old. I did the eulogy, but we had plane tickets to leave the next day. I wanted to escape. It was a very cloudy time; I still don't remember much."

For weeks, Murray says, he flailed around. "Friends of similar ages were having babies; they didn't know what to do or say to us. People said, you deserve a holiday; the last thing we needed to do was lie on a beach. So we went to Cambodia and Vietnam and volunteered to work in orphanages with sick children. It was the best thing we could have done, as it immediately put our pain in perspective."

But the return was brutal. "The euphoria was displaced by misery in this damp home without our baby and the reality of a new life. I started to go under and only fishing helped, so I started to fish more. At first, I thought I was being indulgent; I felt guilty. Then I realised, whenever I was in the river I felt peace and the pain went."

Murray still sometimes thinks about Ella-Jayne when he fishes. "The river is the place I come to sort out any problems. Sometimes I think about her at the age she would be now, but I have no idea how great her needs would be as a teenager. Would she be in a wheelchair? Would she be able to talk or understand us? In a way, she is frozen at the age she died, as our baby."

Their daughter Nell was born ten months after Ella-Jayne passed away. "The idea of getting pregnant and having another baby was so drenched in caution and worry that the joy of that news was not there. We couldn't breathe while Sarah was pregnant, then Nell was premature and it was dramatic, but I'd say we are pretty resilient as a result."

Nell, now 15, knows all about her older sister. "I used to say, when people asked how many children we had, 'Two but we lost one,' to honour Ella-Jayne's time on

With his wife and their daughter Nell, 2019



'Nell is fabulous and helps us raise money. She is very aware of her big sister'

earth. But increasingly I felt it was putting people in an uncomfortable position. So, now we just say, 'One.' Nell's completely fabulous, we're a great family together, she knows the charity well and helps us raise money. She is very aware of her big sister."

Ella-Jayne still comes and goes in Murray's dreams. "Sometimes I get upset and that's important. I lost my mother when I was 20 and she was at the age I am now, 49, and I think about her too. I feel in the prime of my life while she was at her end." Murray was there when his mother died. "She died at home; I was at university in Manchester. She had lung cancer. It's a horrible way to go, slow and painful. She was a formidable northern woman with an incredible sense of humour. When she was told she was paralysed by the cancer, it hit me like a freight train, but after a brief pause she just said, 'At least it won't hurt when I shave my legs now.' That was her way of coping. I went off and had a cry privately. We both knew she didn't want to see me upset. But it was bleak."

When you have dealt with the death of two family members, you realise people speak about the dead a lot for a short period of time and then they are put away in a bottom drawer, Murray says. "They are brought out on special occasions if you are lucky. We romanticise them, of course, especially if they die young. But bottling that love, I don't think that does you good. I think we fear crying as it seems a sign of weakness, you're vulnerable – but it's a shame. So now I stand in the river

and have a good blub. There is no better place to do it."

Surprisingly, Murray says he hated fishing when he was a small child. He started with mackerel fishing in north Wales in the Seventies.

"I went there for holidays. My father had a part share in a fishing boat and he insisted my brother, sister and I went out on it as crew in the lumpy Irish Sea. We acted as his factory processing line, cutting them up. I got incredibly seasick with all the blood, guts, diesel fumes and seagulls. It wasn't pleasant. Then we would sell them to people coming off the beach in torrential rain, which was no fun at all. But my grandfather recognised I was a bit gentler, and he took me fly-fishing on our local reservoirs in Macclesfield. It all began there."

As we wander along the banks, stooping under willows and wading through mud, it's clear Murray needs to keep moving. "I'm a restless person. I don't find it easy to sit still and that's why I love fishing. I'm always looking at the shadows, making a new cast, deciding which bait I need, which line, what leader. Do I need a wet fly or a dry fly? Should I cast over there or here? Fishing is completely absorbing. It's the perfect combination of relaxation, excitement and happiness."

Then there is the casting, he says. "It's so rhythmic, like a dance. It's all about timing. You become unconsciously competent and its very mindful. You always catch a fish when you are least expecting to, when you are in a state of flow, and the moment a fish is on the line is exhilarating."

Murray's grandfather taught him how to cast by getting an old tyre and tying a piece of cotton wool to the end of a rod. "He said, 'Call me when you can land the fluff in the tyre.' I loved fishing with my grandfather but it's really a solitary experience – even if you go in a group, I never feel competitive. It's just the river and you when you are out there."

Murray soon caught his first trout. "They are the gateway fly fish. When I moved to London from the north to try my luck as an actor, there were some lakes in Syon Park in Brentford and I gravitated to them. Then I discovered salmon fishing and the axis of my life tilted towards rivers. I have been obsessed ever since, a salmon junkie. Even when I am acting, I always pack my rod. I sometimes take jobs to be near great rivers. I have worked in Romania and Bulgaria and I take my gear and find a beautiful mountain stream."

Salmon fishing, like hunting, shooting and polo, is undeniably a posh hobby and financially inaccessible for most, I suggest. "I agree, it feels privileged. You need to

Continues on page 53

CRACKING WITH A CUPPA BUT CRAFTED FOR COMPANY



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**THE
EASIEST
SPANISH
RECIPES**

Garlic and chilli
prawns, page 48

The woman behind Brindisa on the UK's Spanish food boom

'Back then, manchego didn't exist. It had no name'

Thirty-six years ago Monika Linton returned to England after spending almost half a decade living and working in Catalonia. It was time, she had decided, to introduce the British to the superior products she had come across there: creamy sheep's cheeses, silky Ibérico hams, fat anchovies.

Three decades ago, however, our understanding of Spanish food was based on what we ate on holiday. And given that most Brits in the late Eighties went to coastal resorts, this was more likely to be a full English by the seaside than a plate of spicy gambas in Madrid. And we all thought that if you wanted spectacular food in the Med, you didn't go to Spain, but to Italy or France.

"Spain was still very foreign," says Linton. "Most British people just went to the beach there, drank a lot of beer and maybe ate a bit of paella and didn't venture inland. Lots of the restaurants catered for the tourists by serving mostly Anglo food – fry-ups or fish and chips."

It is not often that you can credit one person with introducing us to another nation's cuisine but that is exactly what Linton has done via her specialist supplier company, Brindisa. Many cities in the UK now have at least one credible Spanish restaurant. In supermarkets you can buy great Spanish products, from juicy anchovies in the tinned fish section to blocks of creamy manchego on the cheese counter and bottles of extra virgin olive oil.

Brindisa supplies ingredients to some of the country's best Mediterranean restaurants, including the River Café, Bibendum and Jeroboams. As well as its own retail shop, there are six Brindisa tapas bars, which celebrate their 20th anniversary this month and include the chef and fellow Spain evangelist José Pizarro among their alumni.

Which is what makes it all the more difficult to believe how Linton's first pallet of produce was received when she brought it over from Spain in 1988. "I had with me a selection of sheep's cheeses, but they were totally unknown," she says. "People said to me, 'Do sheep even make cheese?'" Today ingredients such as pimenton paprika, Ibérico ham and padron peppers are covered by protected designation of origin laws, but back then these hadn't been established. "Manchego didn't exist," says Linton. "It had no name."

She felt attitudes towards Spain were changing. It joined the European Union in 1986 and Barcelona hosted the Olympic Games in 1992. "I just had a hunch," Linton says. "We were on the right side of a lot of good luck."



Now able to bring produce to the UK without restrictions, she next began importing some of Spain's greatest hits. She was the first person to bring over Spanish ham on the bone and the first to get permission to display it like this out of the fridge. By the early Nineties, Sainsbury's had begun stocking tins of Brindisa's oak-smoked pimenton paprika. Linton was and still is the sole importer of Spanish tuna, sardines and anchovies from the small artisan company Ortiz.

Chefs, restaurants and shops were soon queuing up to buy Linton's products. She sold to Fortnum & Mason, Harvey Nichols and Selfridges. The food writer and former chef Simon Hopkinson loved the Páramo de Guzmán, a sheep's cheese cured in olive oil. Rose Gray from the River Café bought anchovies and pine nuts. Mark Hix ordered jamon Ibérico.

Chefs and visitors to Brindisa's

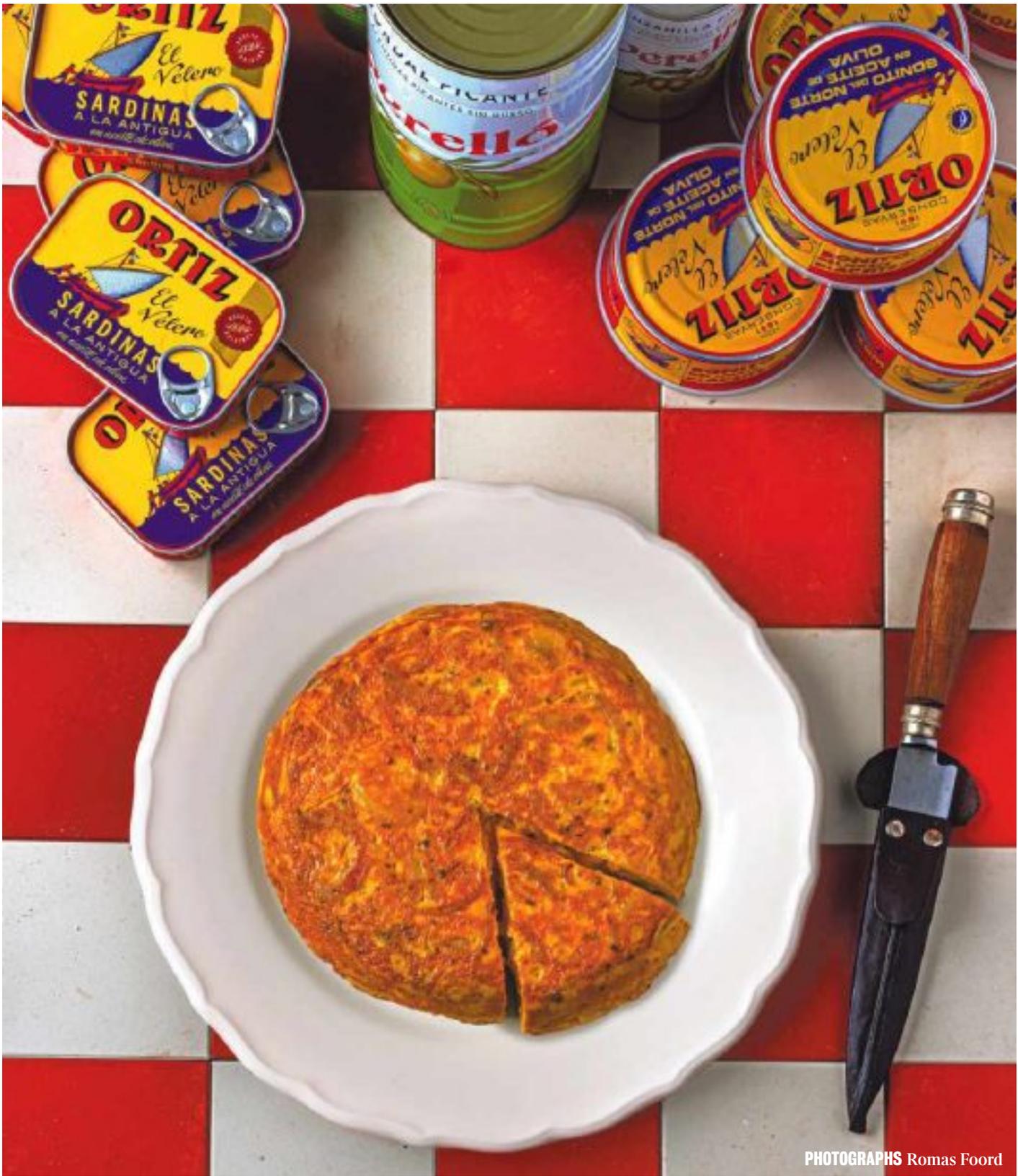
warehouse were desperate to get their hands on Linton's enormous 2kg tins of juicy green Gordal olives from the small Spanish producer Perelló, which had been founded in the Sixties by Gaspar Perelló and his wife, Maria Ribó.

Over the past ten years, Perelló olives have become something of a cult item among millennials, who strategically display the empty bright green tins. Their obsession with them is parodied on social media and Linton has even seen customers with Perelló tattoos. The company is now owned by Linton. "It's funny because we really had to persuade the people we bought it from to sell the olives in a smaller retail tin," says Linton.

Brindisa still faces challenges. Now that Britain has left the EU, small producers struggle to export their produce through Linton. "They have more costs on their side and so do we," she says. "We are spending about £500,000 more a year on paperwork and customs agents than before." Unpredictable weather, flash flooding and catastrophic heatwaves in Spain are also driving up prices.

But that hasn't dimmed Britain's love affair with Spain. "It's a relationship we don't have with any other country's cuisine," says Linton. "If you'd told me that 30-odd years ago when I was struggling to convince people about the cheese, then I wouldn't have believed you." Long may it continue. **Hannah Evans**

brindisa.com



PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord

TORTILLA
Serves 4

- 250ml olive oil
- 1 large onion, sliced into half rings
- 1kg potatoes, peeled and cut into thick slices
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 7 large eggs

1. Heat 3 tbsp oil in a large frying pan. Add the onion and cook gently for at least 30 minutes until all the water has been drawn out of them and they are soft, golden and very sweet. Lift out with a slotted spoon and drain over a bowl. Leave the oil in the pan.
 2. Add the rest of the oil to the pan. It should be 2cm deep and hot enough that a small piece of potato sizzles. Add the

potatoes, season and cook very slowly for about 20 minutes, moving them around regularly from the middle to the edges so they cook evenly. It doesn't matter if a few break.
 3. Once the potatoes are a light golden colour and tender, take the pan off the heat, lift out the potatoes with a small sieve and drain. Once drained, put the potatoes in a clean bowl. ➔



Pan con tomate,
page 48

Eat! BRINDISA



4. Measure about 4 tbsp oil from the pan and put in a 28cm nonstick omelette pan.
5. Beat the eggs, season and add to the potatoes together with the onions.
6. Heat the oil in the omelette pan. Pour in the tortilla mixture and cook gently over a medium heat. Move it about to make sure the potatoes are evenly distributed, then leave to cook for 10 minutes. When the base is sealed and light golden, remove from the heat.
7. Place a large plate over the top of the omelette pan. Turn the two over together so the tortilla lands on the plate, cooked side up. Slide the tortilla back into the pan, uncooked side down. Cook gently for 5 minutes. The tortilla should be just firm but creamy inside. Slide onto a plate to serve.

GARLIC AND CHILLI PRAWNS

Serves 4 (page 43)

- 20 tiger prawns
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 5 cloves garlic, sliced
- 2 tsp crushed chilli
- A pinch of sea salt
- Finely chopped parsley, to serve
- Crusty bread, to serve

1. Remove the heads and shells of the prawns, but leave the tails on.
2. Heat 2.5cm olive oil in a frying pan. Once the oil is very hot, add the garlic and chilli. Sauté briefly, then add the prawns. Cook on one side for 90 seconds, then turn over and cook for another 40 seconds. Take the pan off the heat.
3. Scatter with sea salt and chopped parsley and serve immediately with a hunk of crusty bread.

GAZPACHO

Makes 8-10 portions (page 46)

- 1kg ripe tomatoes, cut into large chunks
- Half a cucumber, peeled and cut into large chunks, plus extra, finely chopped, to serve
- 1 medium onion, cut into chunks
- 2 cloves garlic, cut in half
- 100g bread, 1-2 days old so it absorbs the flavours, cut into chunks
- 2 tbsp sherry vinegar
- 200ml olive oil
- Pinch of cumin
- 200g ice cubes
- Fried bread, to serve

1. Put the tomatoes, cucumber, onion and garlic in a bowl. Add the bread, vinegar and 100ml olive oil and put in the fridge for a few hours so the flavours infuse.
2. Add the cumin and ice cubes and begin to blend with a hand blender, slowly



adding the remaining 100ml oil, until you have a creamy soup.

3. Pass the gazpacho through a fine sieve and serve with fried crunchy bread and some finely chopped cucumber.

PAN CON TOMATE

Serves 2 (page 47)

- Handful of ripe beefsteak tomatoes (Spanish Barbastro are best)
- 2 slices of day-old bread with a good crust
- 1 clove garlic
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Good-quality extra virgin olive oil

1. Blitz the tomatoes in a blender.
2. Toast the bread and rub with the garlic. Spoon the tomatoes on top, season with sea salt and black pepper and add a liberal glug of extra virgin olive oil to serve.

BUTTER BEAN AND CHORIZO STEW

Serves 6-8

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 200g lardons, dusted with paprika
- 1 cooking chorizo hoop, sliced
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 2 red peppers, chopped
- 1 x 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 100ml red wine
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- Black pepper
- 2 tbsp fresh oregano, chopped
- 2 large jars butter beans, undrained

1. Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the lardons, chorizo, red onion and peppers and sauté until they start to brown.
2. Add the tomatoes, 400ml water and red wine to the pan. Stir well and bring to a gentle simmer. Add the garlic, a grind of black pepper, 1½ tbsp oregano and the butter beans with their brine. Stir again.



Bring back to a gentle simmer for 5-10 minutes, then serve, scattering the rest of the oregano on top.

PATATAS BRAVAS

Serves 4

- 400g potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 500ml vegetable oil

For the salsa brava

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- Half a large onion, finely chopped

- 1 carrot, finely chopped
- Quarter of a leek, finely chopped
- 1 garlic clove
- Pinch of dried chilli flakes, plus a bit extra, to serve
- 500g tomatoes, chopped and grated
- 1 tbsp tomato puree (optional)
- Pinch of sugar
- Pinch of salt

1. First make the brava sauce. Heat the oil in a pan. Add the onion, carrot, leek, garlic and pinch of chilli flakes. Cook very slowly for 25-30 minutes, until the vegetables are

soft but not coloured, stirring occasionally.

2. Add the tomatoes, then simmer over a low heat for an hour, stirring frequently. If your tomatoes aren't very ripe, add 1 tbsp tomato puree to help the flavour. Remove from the heat and blend. Season to taste with sugar and salt.

3. Boil the potatoes for 10 minutes. Drain and leave to dry.

4. Heat the oil in a deep pan until it's hot enough that a small potato sizzles. Deep-fry the potatoes for 3 minutes until golden and crunchy. Drain and serve with the sauce and a sprinkle of chilli flakes. ➤

Cardiff to Cordoba: Monika Linton's 22 favourite Spanish restaurants

The Brindisa boss picks her top places to eat in the UK and Spain



6



8

UK

- 1. Sabor Counter, London** The immediacy of the chef skills you get sitting at the counter is impressive and the cooking is incredible. saborrestaurants.co.uk
- 2. Lurra, London** I love the peace and quiet of this elegant place. lurra.co.uk
- 3. Mountain, London** The cross-fertilisation of Wales, the Basque country and Balearic Spain is fascinating. I spend a lot of time in Stackpole, in Pembrokeshire, Anglesey and Menorca. mountainbeakstreet.com
- 4. Pulpo Negro, Alresford, Hampshire** Near my family home and a favourite. Excellent food and service. This is an oasis of great cooking in the English countryside. pulponegro.co.uk
- 5. Hispania, London** For a really traditional Spanish experience. hispanialondon.com
- 6. El Gato Negro, Manchester** Funky space, good energy and great good. elgatonegro tapas.com
- 7. Bar 44, Cardiff** The menu here is forever creative. It's colourful, eclectic and delicious. grupo44.co.uk
- 8. José, London** A corner tapas bar on Bermondsey Street with lots of va-va-voom. josepizarro.com

Spain

- 9. Elkano, Basque country** They serve the most incredible turbot in the world. restauranteelkano.com
- 10. Es Molí De Foc, Sant Climent, Menorca** Our local Menorquin rice restaurant. esmolidefoc.es
- 11. Restaurante Barrera, Alonso Cano, Madrid** Faultless cooking of handselected traditional house recipes served in a space



10

that feels like home. Many of its recipes feature in my book. 00 34 915 94 17 57.

- 12. Taberna del Gourmet, Alicante** An energetic, fast-paced and well-balanced menu with a lot of vegetables. latabernadelgourmet.com
- 13. Nou Manolín, Alicante** A crazy packed venue with little space but incredible food and dynamic service. grupogastronou.com
- 14. Pez Vela, Barcelona** A superb restaurant and bar by the beach. The rice dishes are a must – we share the same rice estate. grupotragaluz.com
- 15. La Mar Salada, Barcelona** A sunny Catalan restaurant. Expect outstanding dishes including amazing vegetables. lamarsalada.cat
- 16. El Mercat, Barcelona** This is funky and informal. It's Spanish market food at its best. elmercatrestaurant.com



18

17. La Cova Fumada, Barcelona Go to this local family-run bar for a completely down home bar session. 00 34 932 21 40 61.

- 18. El Café De La Opera, Madrid** It's a light space, in an incredible location with an elegant menu. elcafedelaopera.com
- 19. El Invernadero Restaurante, Madrid** Top-notch veggie food with one Michelin star. elinvernaderorestaurante.com
- 20. Pampin Bar, Santiago de Compostela** Book for stunning Galician tapas with pace. pampinbar.com
- 21. Anaco, Santiago de Compostela** Seriously excellent. This is a smart restaurant with superb Galician ingredients. anacosantiago.com
- 22. El Churrasco, Cordoba** Set in an old merchant house, this is the place to go for incredible meat with multiple other menu highlights. elchurrasco.com ■

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THEY'VE ALL GOT GOOD ALIBIS

A missing dessert and a family sleuth out to save Christmas... meet the first three suspects in this delicious festive mystery



Gamma

The matriarch

The ever-observant grandmother, Gamma is usually in charge of making dessert. Relegated to cranberry sauce duty this year, she's clearly not pleased about it. Could her frustration have pushed her to sabotage the showstopping dessert, making her the prime suspect?



Steve

The devoted cook

Steve has been preparing the family feast for two days straight, taking pride in every dish. His love for cooking is unmatched, but has it blinded him to the chaos all around? When the dessert goes missing, all eyes turn to Steve, who discovered the empty box. Could his dedication to the perfect meal have led him to claim the dessert as his own?



May

The rebel

May is looking to unwind over the festive period. She's not one for holiday traditions, and her carefree attitude raises suspicion. Did May sneak away with the dessert to inject some excitement into her otherwise subdued Christmas? Her rebellious streak makes her a suspect to watch.



David

The detective

Meet the investigator who always felt a bit apart from the festive chaos. This year, the disappearance of the Waitrose No.1 Red Velvet Bauble Dessert thrusts him into action. Tasked with solving the mystery, David navigates his way through a web of secrets, half-truths and suspicious behaviour. With a sharp eye for detail, he's determined to uncover the culprit. Will he crack the case before Christmas dinner is ruined?

Look out for more suspects next week...

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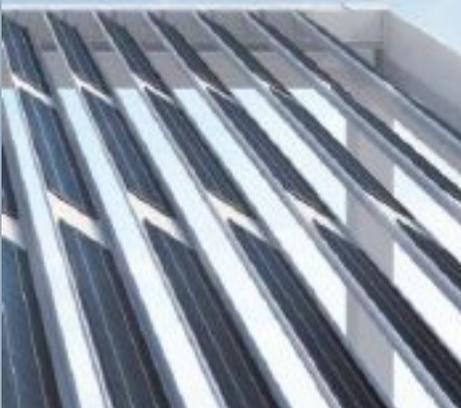
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be part of a club. Some of the waters are inaccessible but it is getting better. You can go online on apps and websites and find what's available. It starts cheap and goes up."

The kit, he says, is the same. "You can spend as little or as much as you want on waders. I began with cheap gardeners' ones. Salmon don't reside in ugly places, so it is a great way to see the cathedral of nature." It took Murray two years to catch a salmon in Scotland; since then he has branched out to Norway, Iceland and Canada.

Now, though, he is battling to save the salmon from extinction. "They have always been hard to catch, the fish of a thousand casts, dependent on whether they were in the mood. But they are under threat of becoming extinct. At first it was just a rumour they were in decline, but now we know they are in mortal danger. The plight of the salmon in Britain is becoming critical. If we ever catch one, it's vital they are released."

But it is also the fishermen, he says, who are the only ones who seem to care about the fish. "We are the first responders so we are crucial, which is why I set up the Activist Anglers group. We need to start monitoring and testing the rivers. Angling is the biggest sport in the world but fly-fishing is only about 15 per cent – in other countries it's not elitist, children do it. In New Zealand, America and South America, anyone just grabs their rod. You can catch pike on the fly – I caught a 16lb one on the Test – but our own rivers are increasingly bereft of fish."

Over the years, Murray has seen English and Scottish rivers clog up and choke. "The Wye is the worst. It's in what CS Lewis called the golden valley but it is now polluted and dying from the waste from intensive poultry and cattle farming. It used to be the best salmon river in England, then the salmon stopped spawning."

Chalk stream salmon, he says, are deemed the white rhino of the fish world. "They are now officially recognised as endangered. Two million years ago during the Ice Age this island and Europe were covered in ice, but the south coast wasn't and the chalk streams became like a Noah's ark for salmon. So, these salmon could be one of the oldest living species in England, but they are in dire straits."

The peculiar problem for salmon, Murray explains, is that they live in both the rivers and the ocean. "They are facing myriad pressures. In the sea, it's climate change; their food source is becoming scarce; industrial trawling snares them. In the rivers, it's sewage and farming. The water companies say it was ever thus, but it's got worse as we've had more rain and more pollutants in our water system. Then there are the salmon farms in the seas around the coast. All the detritus and the

'The Wye used to be the best salmon river in England, then the salmon stopped spawning'

crap that comes from filling a circular net with tens of thousands of genetically modified fish that you are also treating with chemicals to get them to grow and keep them alive is going to produce a lot of waste that goes to the bottom of the ocean and kills everything."

Sea lice are another big issue. "They attack concentrations of flesh in fish farms. The juvenile salmon swimming out to sea and spawning fish coming back have to swim through these blooms of lice. Then there are the escapee farmed fish that, every time there is a storm, slip through holes in the net. We call them frankenfish. They decimate the DNA strain of the fish stock around the world by breeding with them, destroying thousands of years of evolution."

This is why Murray refuses to eat farmed salmon. "I eat trout, which is the lesser of the two evils; occasionally I will eat line-caught Pacific salmon. But there are issues with so many fish. We need to eat less – and better."

Now Murray has an exhibition in London of the paintings he has created on salmon rivers. "I've always loved painting too; it's the same feeling of being in a state of flow. You are just in the moment – time, sense, purpose ebb away."

The professional art world, he suggests, is even more ridiculous than acting. "There's lots of bullshit but people seem to like my paintings." He decided to use his artistic talents to create extraordinary compositions of rivers using canvases that he sinks in rivers. "I found a canvas that wasn't too heavy or flimsy that lasted two months in the river – the winter season of a salmon. I pre-dyed them with natural dye and I experimented with salmon rivers. I got all sorts of colours and degradation. We lost a few in the storms. I enhanced them a little and cut them into shoals."

Ted Hughes, he says, provided him with the title of the art exhibition: *Creatures of Light*. "It's the last stanza of his fishing poem *That Morning*: 'So we stood, alive in the river of light/ Among the creatures of light.' Hughes got it."

He'd like to give one of his paintings to the King. "I sank one canvas in the Dee when the Queen died. I painted the Royal Standard of Scotland on it. I'm giving some of the proceeds to Fish Legal and the Atlantic Salmon Trust, so I can broadcast the story of their demise."

As our walk comes to the end in the twilight, I ask Murray with his myriad campaigns and his painting, how he has any time now for acting. "I wish the acting was just my hobby, but it's my livelihood.

It's my bread and butter and I do love it," he says. "I just have to find a way to fit it all in. I am about to start a BBC drama that I think will be called *Wild Cherries* – a series that explores the dysfunctional one-percenters living behind expensive gated communities with their children all going to the same private school. A murder happens, of course. I'm cast as a toff quite a bit at the moment."

His role as Prince Andrew in the last two seasons of *The Crown* doesn't get much more posh and toffy. "I almost feel sorry for him now, but I did a lot of research on him – he is the master of his own making. It was great fun playing him as he was a bit of a clown and I don't often get to play the jester."

More recently, though, he says, he's had a lot of military roles, "men in positions of authority and power which is interesting". It certainly is when you've spent time with him, as Murray seems so unassuming and nurturing. "Well, I'm about to play the South African field marshal Jan Smuts." He laughs and instantly switches into a clipped Afrikaans accent. "I'm a character actor, happy to do anything."

And what about his wife? Would they act again together? "Like all good marriages, it's probably best to keep work and home separate. Sarah doesn't fish – she's a homebody who likes to read and garden. She lives and breathes acting and has been on the stage since she was two. That's what she finds relaxing." He doesn't feel it matters what you do, but everyone should have a hobby. "Now we have the phone to distract us, which is sad as we used to invent ways of getting off our arse and spotting trains or doing carpentry, and that was more therapeutic than mindlessly scrolling."

In Murray's case, he knows he thrives having several plans, projects and hobbies spinning at a time. "I think a lot of actors are like that – there is an engine you can't stop. It might also be about past trauma, losing Ella-Jayne, the need to make the most of life. In this little epoch there is a lot of change in the air, and you can ignore it or do something, I find myself in the middle of rivers, feeling I have to do something. Other actors can go to Ukraine or protest about politics; my things are fish and helping children like Ella-Jayne." ■

Creatures of Light, supported by Bremont and Chivas Brothers, is at the Royal Watercolour Society in London from November 15-17 (royalwatercoloursociety.co.uk/jimmurray.art)



James Stourton, 68, photographed at home in Dorset by Tom Jackson



SNOBS, SCANDALS AND DODGY DEALS

My life in the London art world

The former chairman of Sotheby's, James Stourton, reveals the dark secrets that have put the capital at the centre of the global art market. Interview by Rachel Campbell-Johnston

The art world can put up a fabulously snooty front. Any financially lesser mortal soon finds that out. Step over the threshold of a grand auction house, take a casual wander round an on-trend white cube, and you become a subject for punctilious appraisal. “Might I help you with anything?” the flawlessly pedigreed youngster (maybe a ducal godchild, perhaps a pop star’s son) at reception inquires... Like finding your way to the exit, they mean.

What lies beyond the immaculately polished veneer? Affable smiles and Savile Row suits can serve as a front for all sorts of back-stage shenanigans. The deal must come first and foremost otherwise fortunes slide, as recently reported (and insistently denied) rumours concerning the finances of Sotheby’s might indeed suggest. Now James Stourton, formerly the chairman of this blue-chip auction house, prides open the doors of the huge antique armoire into which the darker secrets of the art trade have been stuffed.

He rummages about, examining anything from old master paintings to contemporary canvases. Furniture, impressionist masterpieces and porcelain, an antique head of Apollo, a trove of Roman silver, a stuffed shark tumble out. And alongside this eye-stretching host of objects, the equally eye-stretching stories of the characters who sell them – “clever amateurs, scholarly specialists, brilliant émigrés, grandees with a flair for dealing, knowledgeable stallholders, Cockney traders and a fair sprinkling of rogues” – are told. The book that results, *Rogues and Scholars: Boom and Bust in the London Art Market 1945-2000*, presents a gossipy account of the capital’s art world and explains how it manoeuvred its way to the centre of a massive global market.

I meet Stourton at his weekend cottage, a few miles from Shaftesbury in Dorset. He must be 6ft 6in-plus and, being of aristocratic descent to boot (his home is adorned with ancestral portraits and prints of some sprawling family pile), he embodies the lofty grandeur of Sotheby’s, for which he worked from 1979 until 2012. For the last six years of his career he served as UK chairman. He was rarely out of a suit, he says, which is why he now sports one as seldom as possible. Dressed in a beige polo shirt and beige chinos, he collapses his long, angular frame into a seat in the conservatory, which, tacked onto the end of his beige-stone 17th-century house, offers views down a freshly mown lawn towards the banks of the River Stour. “The Stour rises,” he informs me, “from Stourton, whence my family came. So, in aboriginal terms, this is my sacred river.”

Stourton epitomises the art world about which he writes: its urbane sensibilities,

refined tastes and sophisticated intellect – not to mention its ceremoniously cultivated snobberies. But he is happy to take a poke behind the scenes. Gone are the days of the “cosy monopoly” when, as one crusty old Christie’s director put it, “there was something ungentlemanly about making too much money”; when office juniors, charged with opening the post, were advised that “anything with a foreign stamp should be put in the bin because it only meant trouble”.

A new art market was born in London at 9.30pm on October 15, 1958, Stourton says. “Auctions before that had been long, wearisome, 500-lot affairs, starting with old masters and ending around teatime with bedsteads.” But Peter Wilson, who had just been appointed chairman of Sotheby’s, changed that. Charged with the dispersal of the Goldschmidt collection of impressionist paintings, he made the radical decision to hold an evening event, to make it black tie, to put movie stars in the front row. Most radical, this sale was to be of just seven pictures. “It was a raging success,” Stourton says. “This was the first time that a picture sold for £250,000 at auction.” At the end, the “mink and diamond-dappled audience” stood up, cheering and clapping as if at the climax of an opera.

That first “event auction” ushered in a new era. Even the late Queen would be tempted to attend a sale. “Sell at Sotheby’s

One furniture dealer had 30 workmen creating ‘antiques’ from old bits of wood

and get to meet the royal family,” ran an excitable New Yorker headline. The British art market was off, with Sotheby’s and Christie’s running neck and neck, as aggressively competitive as Pepsi and Coca-Cola. And “a large part of the fun of the story”, Stourton says, was the melange of people it involved. The grandees who saw it as “a glamorous alternative to the corporate ladder” – such as Patrick Lindsay, “a dashing figure who would land in his Spitfire on country house lawns”, or Richard Green, “the grand dealer for people who are not grand but have money”, who had so much credit with Sotheby’s that the auction house felt it necessary to insure his life – were just the top of the pyramid.

Below was a vast crowd of traders. They ranged, Stourton explains, from “the extraordinarily clever, usually Jewish émigrés – who, coming over before the war, brought stringency, languages and Mitteleuropa knowledge to the art market” – to the Brighton runners: agents who, operating from this coastal outpost’s



Lady Clementine Churchill at Sotheby’s in 1958

once antique shop-crammed Lanes, went by names like Fingers, because they had lost most of them. Stourton recalls the time that “Big John” pulled a massive silver bowl from his bag to show a London dealer. “Is it hot?” the dealer asked. “Lukewarm,” Big John replied.

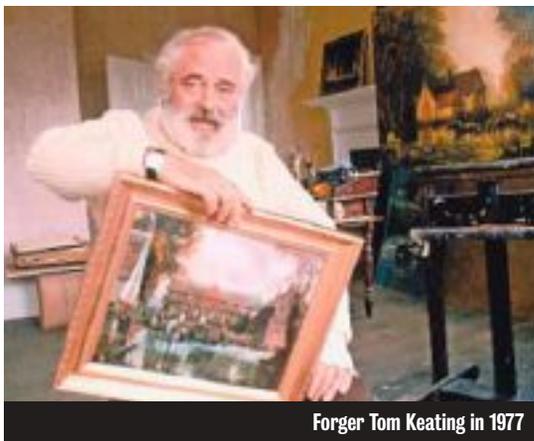
Does that mean that the art world became less about appreciation and more about avarice? Which is your favourite picture, Richard Green was once asked. “A sold one,” he replied. “Art for art’s sake is really awful rot,” declared Wilson, the Sotheby’s chairman.

“Art dealers,” the celebrated critic David Sylvester once wrote, “buy and sell portable objects that can easily cost more than a castle or two. They survive by outwitting some of the world’s most cunning and ruthless manipulators of wealth, and they also know how to charm the old rich – key sources of supply. When they deal in the work of living artists, they shape the careers of some of the most charismatic and paranoid individuals of their time.” Little wonder, then, that they “tend to sail dramatically close to the wind of commercial ethics and sometimes the law”. Behind the Christie’s façade, declared the critic Brian Sewell in 2011, ran two economies: “the upstairs theatre of the sale room with a suave director playing auctioneer, and downstairs the black economy of staff so poorly paid that they depended on the tips and bribes that came their way”. Dealers would offer him a fiver, he said, to ensure their pictures got into a certain sale, to change the placing in catalogues or tweak attributions.

Stourton is anxious to impress that the art world is not all about backstage deals. “For 30 years, really from the end of war until the mid-Eighties, when America began to take over with the big-ticket items, the London art market was by far the most successful in the world and the one that retained the greatest expertise,” he says. “I don’t want to give the impression that we veered from one scurrilous affair to the next. But the bigger the department, the more money was involved, and so the



Mark Rothko's *Untitled (Yellow and Blue)* at Sotheby's in 2015



Forger Tom Keating in 1977

more the potential was there for problems," he admits. "There are not many scandals in European porcelain," he adds.

His book, however, openly addresses all sorts of dodgy shenanigans: the illegal auction rings, for instance ("A ring involves a group of dealers clubbing together to avoid bidding against each other at auction and then selling off the object later in a private 'knockout', often held in a local pub after the sale," he explains), or, on the other side of the coin, "taking bids from the chandelier", which means that the auctioneer pretends to have a bidder in the room so that he can run the price up.

Behind the "calm, effortless double-breasted gentlemanly assurance" of an art world that, in the past, survived by selling pictures to one generation and buying them back from the next, lay a frequently chaotic mess. Stourton recounts a story involving a 19th-century English landscape. The experts had no idea who it was by. "It's a real bastard," cried one. "Give me a Christian name," another said. "Lawrence" came the reply. So "by Lawrence Bastard" was printed in the catalogue.

But there were darker sides too. "The art market has at the very least its fair share of charlatans, chancers and rogues," Stourton says. They would resort to any number of tricks to secure a sale. David Somerset, then the heir to the Duke of

Beaufort and hailed as the most handsome man in Britain, seduced a Marlborough Gallery secretary so that he could find out what was happening behind the scenes.

Even this newspaper proved capable of resorting to dodgy behaviour. When it emerged that Titian's great work *The Death of Actaeon* was to go up for auction, a press officer was dispatched to Fleet Street to hand around the release. "He started with *The Times*," Stourton says, "but the paper, feeling rather proprietorial about the story, kidnapped the press officer so that no other newspapers would find out."

On a more serious level, there were outright crooks. Frank Lloyd, one of the founders of the Marlborough Gallery, once the most influential and disruptive gallery of its day, had predatory instincts, a ruthlessly orientated business attitude and an amoral streak. "I collect money, not art," he declared. When one buyer wavered about purchasing a Francis Bacon because his wife wouldn't like it and because it might not match the decor of his house, Lloyd replied, "You can change your decor, you can change your wife, but once you own it you won't want to change this Bacon." According to the story, the collector divorced and redecored.

When Mark Rothko died in 1970, leaving almost 800 paintings in his estate, Lloyd – in collaboration with his accountant, who also happened to be Rothko's executor – negotiated a phenomenally advantageous deal whereby he would pay \$1.8 million for 100 works, with interest-free payments to be spread over 12 years. The deal, challenged by Rothko's daughter, developed into one of the art market's most sensational scandals. Lloyd was found guilty of tampering with evidence and fined an enormous sum.

The fake is another market flashpoint. The furniture dealer John Hobbs "was a swashbuckling rogue", Stourton says, "not happy unless living on a knife edge". Hobbs got his restorer to create, or at least substantially recreate, "antiques" using wood from old pieces that he had picked up cheap at auction. Eventually, the restorer (who had at one time employed more than 30 workmen) spilt the beans to *The Sunday Times*. "Most people think 18th or 19th-century craftsmanship is dead, but we've been doing it here."

It was a *Times* reporter, Geraldine Norman, who from the late Sixties for some 20 years did most to bring transparency to the market, Stourton believes. Repeatedly exposing its "four-faced villains", she dented what she described as "the aura of invincibility and respectability of the upper echelons of the trade". When she scooped the story of the forger Tom Keating, who was knocking off fake Samuel Palmers in his workshop, she found the public to be firmly in the forger's camp. "There is something that appeals to

the anarchic strain in all of us about the 'experts' – those pompous connoisseurs who are always putting us in our place – being taken for a ride," she wrote.

Has the art trade cleaned up its act? Money laundering regulations came into effect across Europe to govern the sale of works of art on January 10, 2020. "It was undoubtedly a much freer world before compliance," Stourton says. "Once compliance came in, compliance was king. But the structure of the art world has changed radically with the advent of the internet." Traditional old master dealers survive, but the contemporary has taken over. Art has become a brand and it attracts a different audience. Art galleries have become less like clubs and more like supermarkets, the late dealer Leslie Waddington suggested.

Stourton bows out of the story with the rise of the Brit pack. "Never in the history of British art has an artist who initially set out to prove that he did not need the art establishment so comprehensively seduced and disrupted it," he writes of Damien Hirst. But who makes most money for doing what? Stourton gives Hirst's dealer, Jay Jopling, equal credit with the artist for the creation of that totemic shark. It was Jopling, he explains, who put up the money for and organised the making (down to the catching of the shark) of a piece that Hirst had merely sketched. Yet with Hirst's 2008 *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* sale at Sotheby's – in which, bypassing the dealers, he sold direct to the public – the artist's disruption of the art market was complete.

Changed, but different, it goes from strength to strength. "Selling art is about selling dreams," declares Stourton. "People buy it for reasons that are beyond measure." The financial speculators will always be there. The aesthetic collectors will co-exist alongside them. Is the contemporary a solid investment or a swelling bubble? Nobody can predict with any accuracy. The ebullience of recent decades may appear to be on hold as high interest rates and inflation affect collectors who see art as a financial asset. But although, when the market dips, it tends to freeze, this does not necessarily mean that prices drop: just that people pause in their trading, hanging on for a hoped-for upturn. The contemporary markets may currently be looking faintly lacklustre, but no doubt it will pick up again and thrive, and with it the scandals. The bandwagon rolls on. "But the world I knew and loved has gone for ever," Stourton says. ■

Rogues and Scholars: Boom and Bust in the London Art Market 1945-2000 by James Stourton (*Apollo*, £30). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK P&P on orders over £25. Discount available for Times+ members



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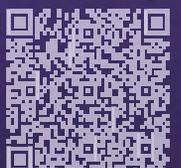


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Page 71



Page 81



Page 67



Page 72



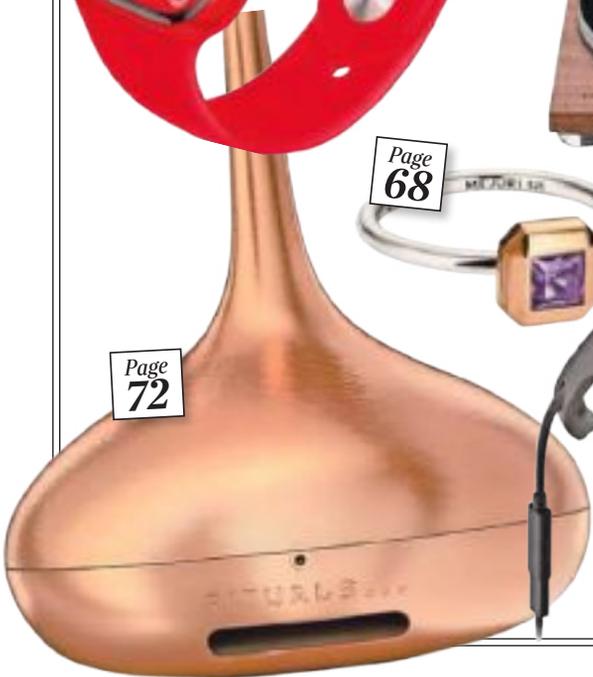
Page 82



Page 78



Page 74



Page 72



Page 68



Page 78



Page 77

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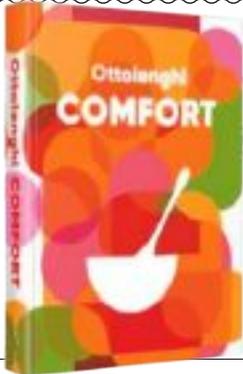
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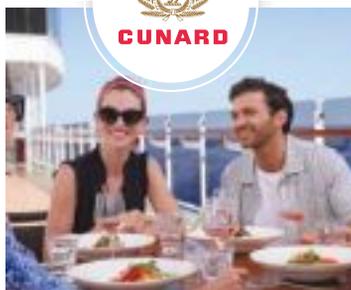
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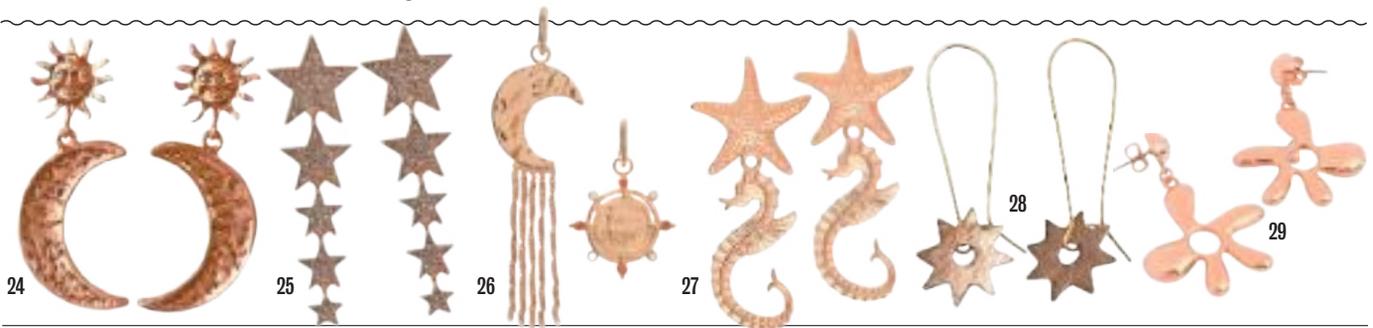
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FOR MEN 63. £295, hermes.com. 64. £185, uk.saintavoir.com. 65. £300, ramsdensjewellery.co.uk. 66. £52, twojeys.com. 67. £70, anchorandcrew.com. 68. £245, gucci.com. 69. £405, [Le Gramme \(selfridges.com\)](http://LeGramme(selfridges.com)). 70. £135, tillysveaas.co.uk. 71. £275, tillysveaas.co.uk.

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Salt and pepper mills, £60 each, addisonross.com

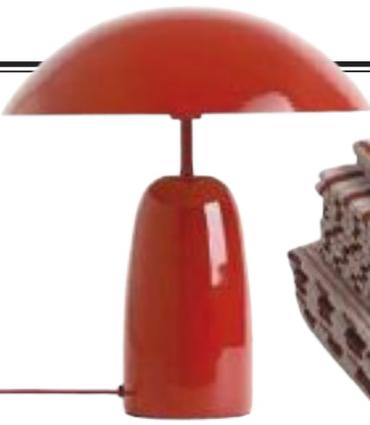


Portable pizza oven, £379, uk.ooni.com



Cast-iron frying pan, £199, Staub (busterandpunch.com)

HOME



Metal table lamp, available in four colours, £59.99, hm.com



Cotton towel set (two bath, two pool, one hand), £309, shopbaina.com



Mandarin, cinnamon and tonka bean scented candle, £55, neomwellbeing.com



Velvet bubble chair, £399, urbanoutfitters.com



Glass dinner plates, £12.99 each, and bowls, £7.99 each, Nanushka (zarahome.com)



Seventies-style mohair velvet dining chair, £189, cultfurniture.com



Handpainted Hongwu pot, height 16cm, £95, oka.com



Damier wool blanket, 200cm x 130cm, £141, Maison Deux (smallable.com)



Handmade velvet cushion, £111 each, opalahome.com



Storage baskets, £59 for set, Ferm Living (endclothing.com)



Bow coupes, £180 for two, Maison Balzac (farfetch.com)



Mugs inspired by macaron colours, £79.95 for six, Staub (harrods.com)



Terracotta pomegranate diffuser, £60, uk.smnovella.com



Storage jars made in Malawi from empty wine bottles with handcarved mahogany lids, £45 each, Qasa Qasa (glassette.com)



Bang & Olufsen portable Bluetooth speaker, £259, bang-olufsen.com

FOR HER



£95, [adidas.co.uk](https://www.adidas.co.uk)



Initial pendant,
£110, [otiumberg.com](https://www.otiumberg.com)



AirPods Max, £499, [apple.com](https://www.apple.com)



Fragrance diffuser, £115,
[rituals.com](https://www.rituals.com)



Salad servers, £26.50,
[oliverbonas.com](https://www.oliverbonas.com)



Smartwatch, £124, Samsung
([ourfriday.co.uk](https://www.ourfriday.co.uk))



£250, Acne Studios
([mrporter.com](https://www.mrporter.com))



Ring, £275, [gucci.com](https://www.gucci.com)



£385, [rixolondon.com](https://www.rixelondon.com)



£260, [hush-uk.com](https://www.hush-uk.com)



Scented candle set, £66,
[malinandgoetzi.co.uk](https://www.malinandgoetzi.co.uk)



50cm mirror ball, £99,
[mirror-balls.co.uk](https://www.mirror-balls.co.uk)



£375, Coach ([flannels.com](https://www.flannels.com))



Dyson Airwrap
hairstyler, £479
([johnlewis.com](https://www.johnlewis.com))

FOR HER



Cashmere sweater, £145, jigsaw-online.com



£235, Rouje x Missoma (uk.rouje.com)



20-piece dinner set, £235, fromourplace.co.uk



Suede tote, £125, cos.com



Mohair beanie, £45, cos.com



£45, Doiy (fredaldous.co.uk)



Gin, £36.95, Electric Spirit Co (masterofmalt.com)



Gypsy Water bodywash and lotion, £90, byredo.com



Macarons, £51 for 18, laduree.co.uk



Microcurrent face lifter, £49.95, geske.com



£150, finisterre.com



Espresso maker, £75, cup and saucer, £30, mymokahome.com



Tumblers, £25 each, theconranshop.com



£52, Moët & Chandon (harrods.com)

FOR HIM



Suntory Hibiki Japanese Harmony blended whisky, £74.95 (masterofmalt.com)



Razor and magnetic stand with Gillette blades, £160, Bolin Webb (fortnumandmason.com)



Suede moccasins, £315 Birkenstock 1774 x Filson (birkenstock.com)



Portable tabletop fire pit, £99, Mesa (solostove.com)



Lambswool crew neck in three colours, £129, barbour.com



Extra virgin olive oil from Tuscany, £30, citizensofsoil.com



Aesop Moroccan Neroli shaving duo, £67, aesop.com



Ultralight camping air mat, £94.99, Flextail (valleyandpeak.co.uk)



Indoor/outdoor slippers, machine washable, £60, voited.co.uk



Walnut Bluetooth turntable, £499, TEAC (selfridges.com)



Tom Ford Ombre Leather eau de parfum, £86.40, boots.com



Bluetooth speaker with Spotify Tap, £55 each, ikea.com



Talking Heads: 77 box set, £115, store.talkingheadsofficial.com



Lightweight, foldable kayak in a box, one-minute assembly, £683, eu.orukayak.com

FOR FITNESS LOVERS



Garmin waterproof smartwatch, £179.99 (johnlewis.com)



Ultrahuman health tracker ring, £327.99, healp.com



Waterproof trainers, £155, saucony.com



1m-long bench with weights and kettlebells, £829, solofitness.co.uk



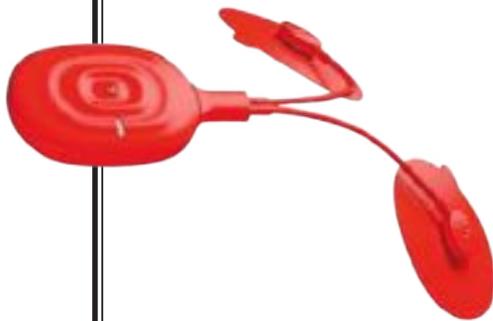
Set of two padel rackets and balls, £240, Pucci (farfetch.com)



Static smart bike, £1,199.99, zwift.com



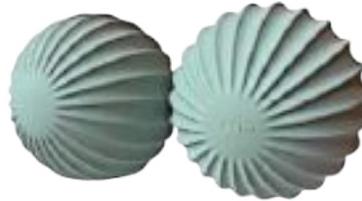
Smart Swim 2 goggles with heart monitor and built-in display, £229, formswim.com



Therabody PowerDot TENS muscle recovery system, £175, boots.com



2kg wood and stone dumbbell set, £125, inti.fit



3kg weighted Pilates balls, £40 for pair, ampwellbeing.co.uk



Elion Paris leather boxing gloves, £99, made4fighters.com



7lb hand weight, £88, freepeople.com



Go Air Sport earbuds, £29.99, jlab.com



Adventure backpack, £55.99, Salomon (sportshoes.com)

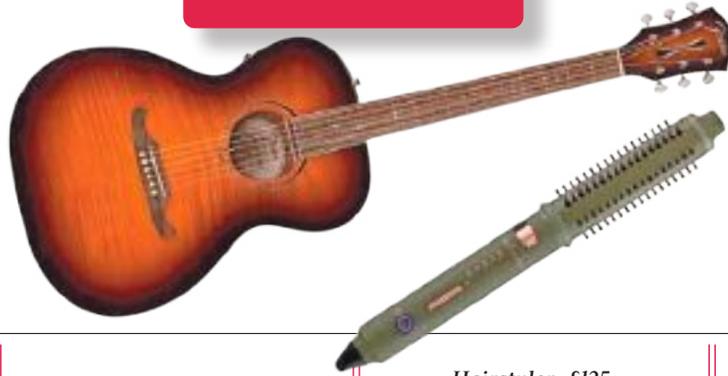


Portable massage gun, £149, pulsio.co.uk

FOR TEENS



Lamp, £22, Mr Maria
(endclothing.com)



£175, Fender (musicroom.com)



Hairstyler, £125,
mdlondon.com



Bluetooth, USB and
CD jukebox, £499,
libertygames.co.uk



Cashmere balaclava, £94,
carolinegardner.com



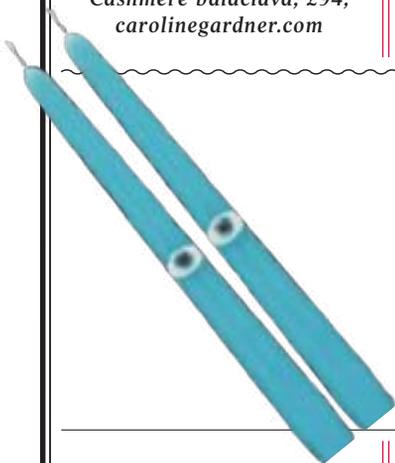
£139, Patagonia
(urbanexcess.com)



£54.99, crocs.co.uk



Mini body creams, £25,
Sol de Janeiro (sephora.co.uk)



£24 for two, Anna + Nina
(smallable.com)



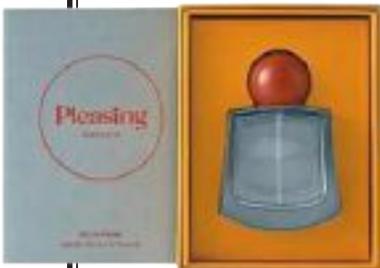
£67, zazzle.co.uk



£69.99, lego.com



£45, Stanley (johnlewis.com)



Rivulets eau de parfum,
£75, from Harry Styles'
pleasing.com



£109, zara.com



PlayStation handheld console, £199.99, argos.co.uk

FOR TEENS



Uefa Champions League football, £30, Adidas (jdsports.co.uk)



£170, ugg.com



Fiddle leaf fig and pot, £69, beardsanddaisies.co.uk



Ilford 35mm film camera, £39.95, amazon.co.uk



£285, Ganni (coggles.com)



Anti-acne LED face mask, £299 (currentbody.com)



£135, missoma.com



Top, £95, Peachy Den (libertylondon.com)



Gaming chair, £90, ikea.com



Pioneer smart DJ controller, £139, amazon.co.uk



Curve Case face palette, £20, madebymitchell.co.uk



£45, uk.stussy.com



Wireless earphones, £99, nothing.tech



Cashmere mittens, £36, blackandbeech.com

TECH



Sony compact camera for vloggers with 20mm lens, 4K ultra HD, wi-fi, Bluetooth and touch screen, £494.96, johnlewis.com



Bang & Olufsen HI00 headphones with immersive sound, £1,299, bang-olufsen.com



Samsung Galaxy A04s, 4GB RAM, 6.5in screen, £105.99, amazon.co.uk



Audio Technica Bluetooth earphones, £39.99, hmv.com



Vive immersive VR glasses, pair with phone or VR controller, £499, vive.com



ArcheFly cupping therapy multifunctional massager, £159.95, selfridges.com



Ray-Ban Meta Wayfarer smart glasses, £299, meta.com



Sourhouse sourdough starter warmer, £129.99, souschef.co.uk



aGO hangable, portable fabric speaker, £54.95, notanotherbill.com



Dr Rock massage gun with three speeds and heat levels, £360, selfridges.com



Oclean electric toothbrush with travel case, £69.99, oclean.co.uk



Stoov rechargeable hot water bottle, £89.99, uk.stoov.com



Apple MacBook Air, 15.3in, 8GB + 256GB SSD, £1,177.99, ourfriday.co.uk



Apple Watch series 8 with red aluminium case, £314.99, ourfriday.co.uk

TECH



Dreamegg Sunrise white noise alarm clock, £67.99, amazon.co.uk



Nothing buds with auto bass enhance and up to 30 hours of playback, £129, nothing.tech



Ruark Bluetooth radio with DAB, DAB+ and FM tuner, £239, shop.ruarkaudio.com



Smart water bottle with temperature and reminder alarms, £90, selfridges.com



Apple iPad Air, 13in, 128GB, £626.99, ourfriday.co.uk



Limited edition Nikon Z fc camera with designs by Herbalbony, £1,229, nikon.co.uk



Electric essential oil diffuser, £49.50, oliverbonas.com



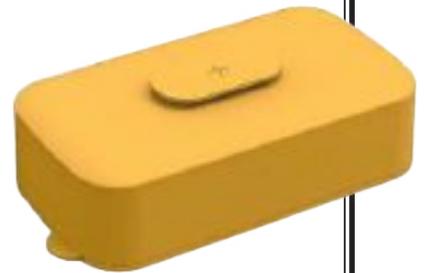
Smart trackers for your keys and wallet, £54.99, tile.com



Samsung portable HD projector, £599, johnlewis.com



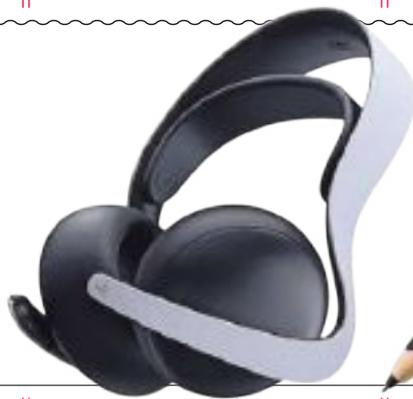
Ember mug. Maintains a drink temperature for 1.5 hours, £149.95, uk.ember.com



Charger and phone signal blocker, £84, from Marie Kondo's stolp.com



Sonos waterproof, drop-proof portable Bluetooth speaker, £179, sonos.com



Sony Pulse Elite wireless gaming headphones, £129.99, argos.co.uk



Staedtler jumbo EMR stylus for digital writing and drawing, £41.83, amazon.co.uk



Briiv air filter made using natural materials, £329, briiv.co.uk



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Tortoiseshell bangle dog leash, £51, thegoto.com



Dog bowl (in two sizes), from £27, lecreuset.co.uk



Pet Crocs (in three sizes), £44.99, crocs.co.uk



Car seat bed, £59.99, fuzzyfunny.co.uk



Rope toy, £21, Oyoy (heals.com)



Reversible dog jacket (in three sizes), £40, Hackett x Hugo & Hudson (hackett.com)



Pet cone, £24.90, julibeas.com



Dog bed, from £155, loaf.com



Personalised bandana, £22, pineandbear.co.uk



Peamutt Butter, £2.49, petsathome.com



Fefé dog fragrance, £83, dolcegabbana.com



Waterproof dog suit (in seven sizes), £82, thegoto.com



Treat jar, £23.50, oliverbonas.com



Ouai Fur Bébé pet shampoo, £28, theouai.co.uk

FOR KIDS



Ben Stokes cricket set, £29.95, Gunn & Moore (playwiththebest.com)



Kids' digital camera, £39.99, Camkory (amazon.co.uk)



First Go balance bike, £175, banwood.co.uk



Mini ping pong table, £199, uk.cornilleau.com



Water bottle, £21.95, gromitunleashedshop.org.uk



£102, Jelly Mallow (mytheresa.com)



£60, johnlewis.com



Space and planetarium projector, £25, FAO Schwarz (selfridges.com)



£32.39, Krash (amazon.co.uk)



£17.50, saltrock.com



Nintendo Switch Joy-Con controllers, £69.99, store.nintendo.co.uk



Bracelet beading kit, £12.95, cottontwist.co.uk



Alien costume, £18.99, zara.com



£65, Stella McCartney (mytheresa.com)

FOR LITTLE ONES



£40, jellycat.com



Dinosaur basket, £70, laredoute.co.uk



Rocket workbench, £59.50, [Classic World \(kidly.co.uk\)](http://ClassicWorld(kidly.co.uk))



Digital camera, £56, [Hoppstar \(kidly.co.uk\)](http://Hoppstar(kidly.co.uk))



Baby walker, £68, [Scoot & Ride \(naturalbabyshower.co.uk\)](http://Scoot&Ride(naturalbabyshower.co.uk))



Sequin crown, £12, mimiandlula.com



Snow boots, from £30, next.co.uk



High chair, £245, stokke.com



Bandana bibs, £22.49 for three, fabelab.dk



Arm bands, £12, uk.sunnylife.com



£140, minirodini.com



Sensory bottle, £12, [Petit Boum \(smallable.com\)](http://PetitBoum(smallable.com))



£69.95, [Kid's Concept \(scandiborn.co.uk\)](http://Kid'sConcept(scandiborn.co.uk)) ■

Eating out

Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON, GREG MOSS

‘The Mason’s Arms is gorgeous – open fires, nooks and crannies – with cooking right out of the top drawer’

The Blue Stoops, London/The Mason’s Arms, Oxfordshire

‘**O**h, I could go a pint of Double Diamond right about now,” said literally nobody, ever. Certainly not since the beer that “works wonders” was discontinued in 1996, long after falling into mockery, shame and disrepute.

First created in 1876 by the Midlands brewery Allsopp & Sons, by 1958 Double Diamond “Burton Pale Ale” had become the bestselling bottled beer in Britain and soon after that started to be served from the keg (a pressurised tin, rather than a beer barrel) in British pubs. This, for people like the Campaign for Real Ale, was the exact moment that *everything started to go wrong*.

It was a time of fags and darts and men only in the public bar, smoking Woodbines and talking about birds and the Munich air disaster while tanking up on the first of the fizzy mechanical beers, in this case from taps marked with two glowing red and orange Ds. But there was Watney’s Red Barrel too, and Skol (also an Allsopp brand) and Harp, created in 1960, which “stayed sharp to the bottom of the glass”. Like that was a good thing.

But then in the 1970s and 1980s came the big European lagers, the Heinekens and the Hofmeisters, and by 1996 it was

all over. Last batch of Double Diamond brewed; no tears shed. Except by Prince Philip, whose second favourite pint it was said to be (after a nice Boddingtons).

So it was no surprise to see the late duke’s step-granddaughter Laura propping up the bar (well, sitting in the dining room) when I dropped into the Blue Stoops on Kensington Church Street for a pint of the first Double Diamond to be sold in a pub for 28 years.

It’s here because the five-times great-grandson of the founder, Samuel Allsopp, a former fund manager called Jamie, has decided in his post-City years to get the family beer business out of the deep freezer. He’s been going back to 300-year-old recipes, has a pale ale, an India pale ale (IPA) and a pilsner out, as well as the Double Diamond (reframed as a modern “session” IPA), and has now, obviously, opened a pub, the first new Allsopp’s boozery in 90 years. It is modelled on the original Blue Stoops in Burton-upon-Trent, where his five-times great-grandfather is said (at least by his own website) to have brewed the first ever IPA, in a teapot, in 1822.

This Blue Stoops is not in Burton-upon-Trent, however, it is in Notting-upon-Hill. Because otherwise you wouldn’t get London’s most instantly recognisable chef, Fergus Henderson, and his equally unmissable wife, Margot, dropping in for a jar, as they were when I went in last week. Or Laura Lopes (née Parker Bowles), brother of my mate Tom and daughter of your Queen



The Blue Stoops
 127-129 Kensington
 Church Street, London
 W8 (020 7123 7929;
 thebluestoops.com)
Cooking 7
Beer 8
History 8
Score 7.67
Price Pint and
 a pie, £30
The Mason's Arms, left
 Clanfield, Oxfordshire
 (01367 604600;
 masonsarmsinn.com)
Cooking 7
Interior 8
Location 8
Score 7.67
Price Pint and
 a pie, £30

Camilla, chomping on wild mushroom tagliatelle and Old Spot pork chops with her children (I've no idea what they ate, I just said a quick hello, but I'm putting the dishes in for atmosphere). Or even, let's face it, me.

You wouldn't have had Charlie McVeigh, founder of the Draft House pub group, consulting on the development either, or Lorcan Spiteri of Caravel (himself scion of a great catering family) devising the menu. And it wouldn't have been simply heaving with wealthy friends of mine – old school pals, Groucho muckers, hacks, toffs – having an absolutely marvellous time.

But, crucially, not spending an awful lot of their vast hordes of money on the food. Because the headline on the Blue Stoops for me is that it is very good and not very expensive. After a pint of the Allsopp's pale ale (delicious) and a pint of the IPA (delicious) and a half of the Double Diamond (delicious – have you noticed that I think all beer is delicious and thus there is no point asking me what I really thought of any of it?), I slopped over to the cosy dining room and flopped into a comfy booth with my old pal Sam Pearman (owner of lots of pubs but not this one) and my cousin Linda Agran – who swiftly flipped the booze focus to an elegant chardonnay – and we got down to ordering.

We had a pile of excellent Carlingford oysters with shallot vinegar (£4 each), anchovies on toast with a very Fergus-y parsley and shallot salad on top (£8)

and then a slightly fancier fish-on-carbs construction involving an inch-thick girder of confit potato supporting a row of plump mussels, like those photos of workmen eating their lunch on construction sites high above New York in the 1920s, all drenched in a rich, foaming velouté (the mussels, not the workmen).

Then braised Hereford rib cap, rich and chocolatey, with wet polenta (£22); a nice bit of cod on pepperonata and chickpeas with aioli (£22); and a really wonderful chicken, leek and black trumpet pie, the fungus giving crunch and autumn heft to the filling, the crust brown and mottled and buttery for smashing into the juices, and an absolute steal in this part of town, or anywhere, at £21.

The chat was loud, the music was swing, the vibe was retro, the food was good, the beer and wine were terrific, the bill was modest and the whole thing was, in short, like London pubs never really were, despite what anyone says, until about last Tuesday.

Sam, whose Cubitt House group operates such terrific London pubs as the Barley Mow in Mayfair, the Princess Royal in Westbourne Grove and the Grazing Goat in Marylebone, told me he had a look at this place for himself when it came up. "But it's a bit small," he said, leaning back, stretching his own 6ft 4in frame, cracking his knuckles and spreading his wings along the back of our booth. "You know, for the sort of thing we want to do. But it's perfect for this."

And he's right, it is a brilliant little pub trying out great new things and an excellent spot from which to relaunch an empire.

And speaking of empires, Sam actually has two. Because there is a Cotswold-based wing as well as the London HQ, consisting of the excellent Double Red Duke in Clanfield, Oxfordshire, and now the 16th-century Mason's Arms, right across the road from the DRD, which Sam initially bought, "because I had my eye on its car park", but has also turned into something special, if not entirely unheard-of in these parts: a bang-on-the-money modern country pub which is folksier than the Duke, more muscular in the menu, and thus even more my sort of thing.

Weary satirists might call the style "Notting-Hill-on-the-Wold", but after a trip to the Stoops (and many others) it's getting hard to say who is aping whom. Can you tell an urban pub in the country from a country pub in the city? At the end of the day, it's just a gorgeous old building with open fires, nooks and crannies, young staff, well-dressed punters with small, glossy dogs and cooking right out of the top drawer.

We went after a long local walk which took us quite spookily through the very heart of Downton (nearby Bampton turns out to have been the location for most of the village scenes in *Downton Abbey* and was full Americans in pastel-coloured rainwear taking photos of themselves in front of the church, shops, trees, cowpats etc), and tucked into a regal Saturday lunch spread.

Most of it came from a blackboard propped up for us on an ancient stone windowsill. There were more oysters (natives this time, at £5.50 a pop); half a pint of prawns in a pewter pot (£10); a venison sausage roll (£6); four chipolatas with a grain mustard sauce (£6); lush, dark, sticky fried pig's head in plum sauce (£8); a firm country pâté studded with cornichons and peppercorns (£9); and ceps on toast with roasted bone marrow (£12). Then an ox cheek pie (£20) with a moat of parsley sauce, half a roast chicken with onions and bacon from the main menu and a couple of brilliant smash burgers.

Alas, when I asked at the bar for a pint of Double Diamond by Allsopp's, they looked at me kind of funny and said, "What about a pint of Hawkstone by Jeremy Clarkson?"

"Clarkson?" I replied. "Not sure I know the family. Are they new to brewing?" ■



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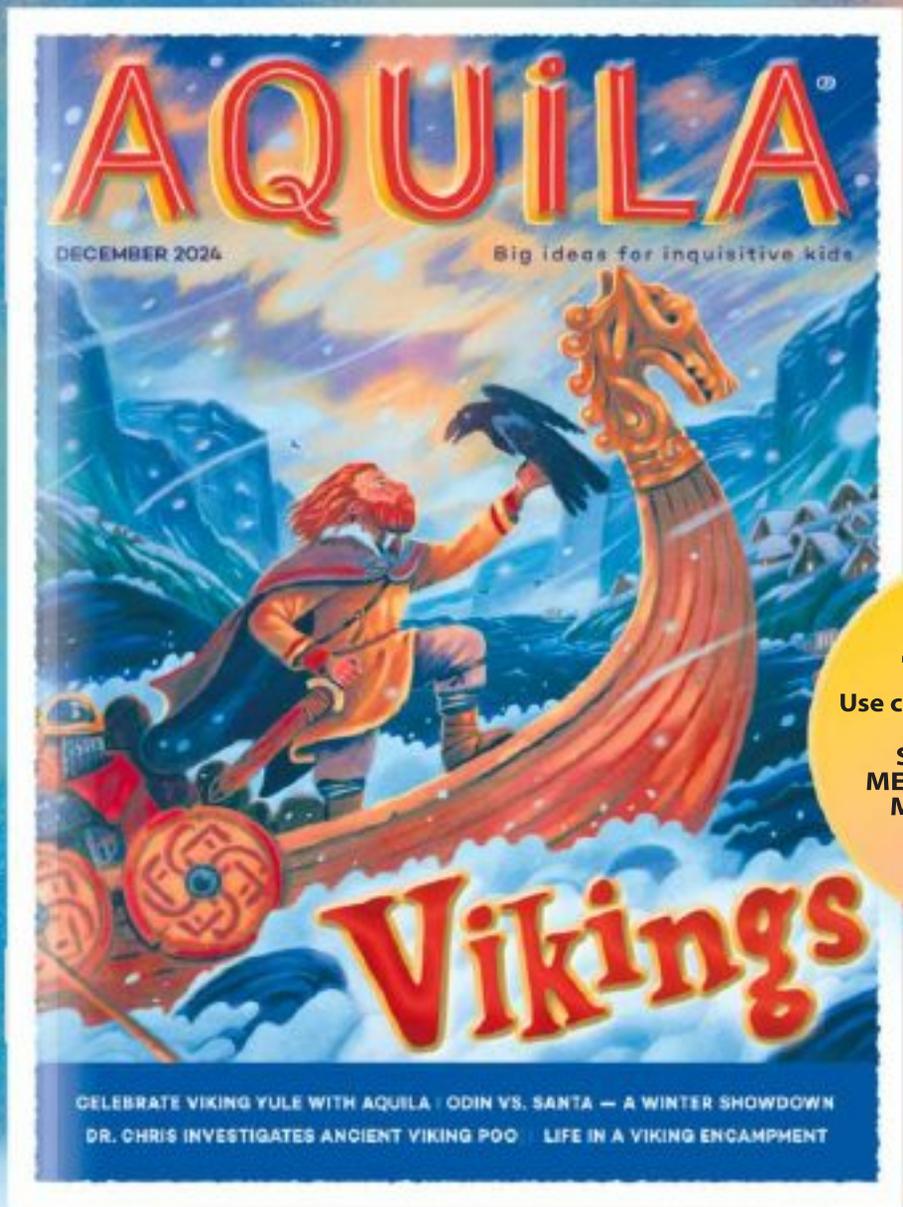
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Beta male

Robert Crampton

'I've had more than 50 hours of German lessons. I can barely string a sentence together'



DAN KENNEDY

I'm deep into my fourth term of German evening classes at City Lit adult education college in London. Having started in September last year, I've missed just 4 of 39 lessons: away in Barbados; away in Corfu; ill; couldn't be arsed. I've now had a shade over 50 hours of small-group German teaching. Time to take stock.

Well, I can't speak German, not even close. If bilingual is ten, fluent is seven, conversational is five and schoolboy is three, I'm about level two: pidgin. I can barely string six words together.

On the plus side, when I do manage to string six words together, glacially slowly, those words are in the right order, the nouns correctly gendered, the grammar accurate. My evenings at City Lit aren't like learning via a user-friendly app, jet-hosing vocab around in the hope of comprehension. This is old school, building-block education. Do it carefully; do it right.

Most of us are hampered by never having been taught grammar in our native tongue. When the teacher, who is German, first mentioned something called nominative and accusative, everyone in the class bar one guy in his mid-seventies, therefore at school in the late Fifties/early Sixties, exchanged blank looks.

Another disadvantage is the class doesn't finish until after 9pm. There are just five of us this term, four middle-aged Englishmen and one young American woman. Guess what? She's a lot perkier than we are, especially in the final third.

I also get distracted by irrelevant details. We were doing furniture the other night. Working in pairs, we had to ask our partner where various items were in the diagram they had done of a living room. "Why no armchairs, Chris?" I kept asking. "And no table? Going for the minimalist style, eh?" Chris responded by pointing out the pot plant in my diagram would die if it stayed tucked away in the corner.

These exchanges did not take place in German.

Also, when grammar exercises broaden out into wider discussions, I'm an opinionated guy. I'm not going to stand mute on important subjects because I don't know the relevant words. We were doing comparatives and the question (in German) was, "Who are better: the Beatles or the Rolling Stones?"

"Well, you've got to define your terms more strictly," I replied (in English). "If 'better' means, 'Whom do you prefer?' that's just a matter of personal taste. If,

however, 'better' means 'more significant, musically, culturally, politically and so forth', there's obviously only one answer. It's like Don Bradman's batting average – it's the Beatles and the rest."

The same thing happened last spring when I was doing French with my daughter. We watched a short film about a mobile cinema the council had bought to screen movies in the remoter parts of its department. It was real footage, made as a feelgood promotional tool by the bouffant-haired mayor interviewed at the end. Afterwards the class were supposed to comment. I stayed silent.

Eventually, the teacher asked for my view. "Massive personal vanity project," I said in English. "Waste of public money."

I get asked quite often why I'm doing an evening class. Everybody pays lip service to the notion of lifelong learning, self-improvement and whatnot, yet even so I can hear the subtext: why are you bothering to trudge into central London? Why not just do it online?

Two reasons. One, I love the romance of City Lit, people gathering from all over London and beyond to learn (women toting cellos, men trying out the tango) and then dispersing. It's heartening, hopeful and occasionally consequential on a global scale, as when a young man called David Jones, soon to change his surname to Bowie, studied drama there in 1965.

Second, you may be familiar with the football cliché, "Yeah, but can he perform on a freezing Tuesday night at Stoke?" This macho mockery is usually aimed at skilful yet most likely cowardly fancy dan foreign imports unfamiliar with the rugged side of our national sport. Well, slogging to a class (also on a Tuesday night, albeit not in Stoke) is my way of proving I'm not called Francesco and I don't wear an Alice band.

Anyone can swan about at home on Duolingo, putting a streak together. But can you grapple with the dative case? Irregular verb endings? After a day's work? In an austere, brightly lit classroom? With only a rushed chicken teriyaki from Itsu beforehand to sustain you? Can you, under those circumstances, do a solid job for the gaffer?

Whoever the gaffer may be in this context. I may have taken the analogy too far there. But you take my point. There is huge satisfaction in being the guy who keeps on keeping on. ■

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