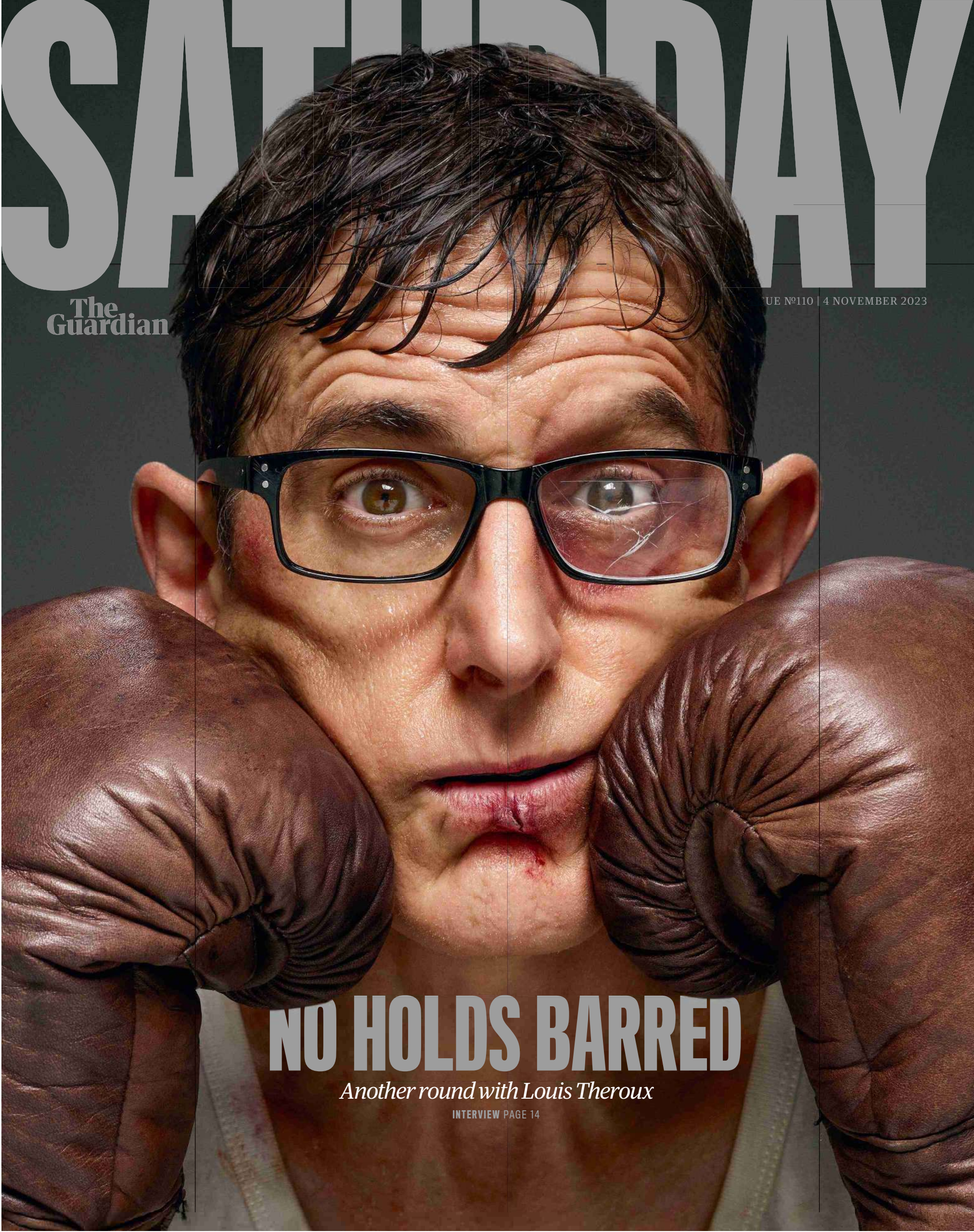
SATURDAY

The Guardian

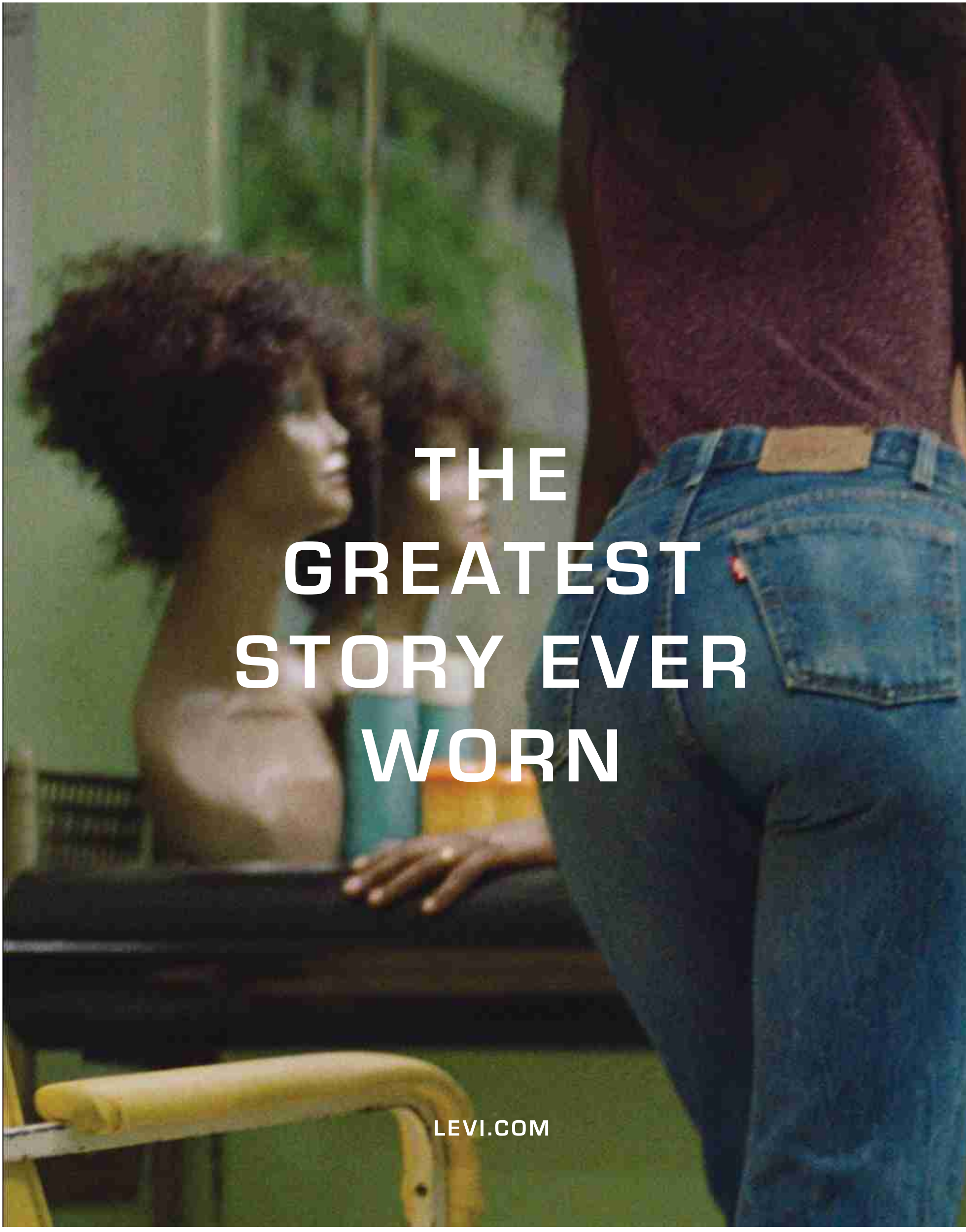
UE №110 | 4 NOVEMBER 2023



NO HOLDS BARRED

Another round with Louis Theroux

INTERVIEW PAGE 14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Smart shot
The best pictures taken on phones
Anthony Edralin

30ft High, 2018
Shot on iPhone SE

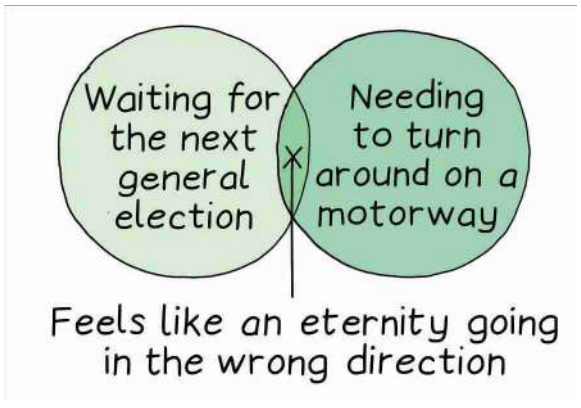
Before he became a professional photographer and videographer, Anthony Edralin worked for Sky TV. On the day this shot was taken, they had recently moved to new offices, and Edralin found himself staring out of the window waiting for something to happen. Then it did, in the form of a gaggle of window cleaners on cherry pickers.

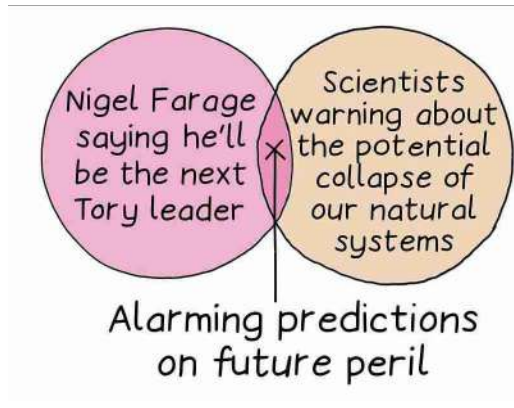
"It was a bit of a spectacle because we were so high up and it was odd to see someone standing in a 30ft-high window. An office environment can be a little monotonous, but the atmosphere changed slightly; there was a bit of a buzz."

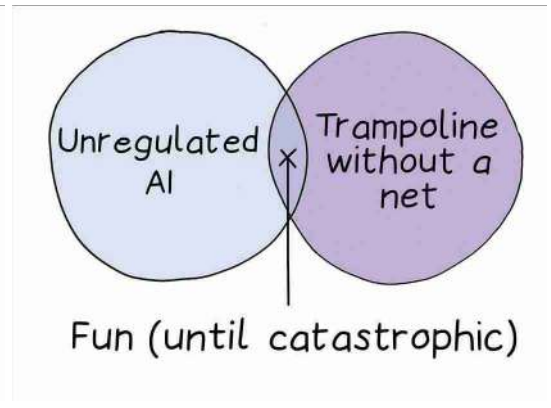
Edralin describes the cleaner in this photo as "a bit of a Jack the lad. I think he was looking at his phone, which put his body in this odd position. There are some great abstract shapes, and the fact that you can't see his face gives an air of mystery."

He hopes this shot shows that "fancy cameras aren't needed to capture an abstract way of looking at something. No matter the circumstances, there's an artistic angle to everything."
Grace Holliday

Edith Pritchett A week in Venn diagrams







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The journalist and presenter on her crush on Stormzy, a prison stay in Zanzibar and being told she was bland

Q&A Mariella Frostrup

Interview: Rosanna Greenstreet

RICHARD SAKER/THE GUARDIAN

Born in Norway, Frostrup, 60, grew up in Ireland and moved to London at 16. She worked in music PR and made her presenting debut on Channel 4's Big World Cafe in 1989. She went on to host TV and radio shows on arts and current affairs, including Radio 4's Open Book and Panorama. She co-founded the campaign group Menopause Mandate, and wrote Cracking the Menopause - While Keeping Yourself Together (2021). Her new podcast, with Peter Fincham, is Have You Seen?. She is married with two children and lives in Somerset.

When were you happiest?
During the first three months of the first lockdown. I was at home with my family and I was such a cliche: I was baking sourdough, making my own granola. It was an idyllic time.

What is your greatest fear?
Both my grandmother and my mother got dementia. My grandmother has passed away. My mother is in a home. Dementia is my biggest fear because it robs you of the very thing that makes life special.

What is your earliest memory?
From Norway, when I was a kid - I lived there until I was six. My father went to interview President Nyerere of Tanzania and came back with a box of exotic fruit - mangoes and pineapples.

What is your most treasured possession?
A beautiful Victorian paste brooch that was my Norwegian grandmother's.

Who is your celebrity crush?
I'm torn between Stormzy and Kevin Costner.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?
A foreign correspondent.

The best kiss of my life? Revealing it would be indiscreet and make headlines

What do you most dislike about your appearance?
The greatest thing about getting older is I don't worry about my appearance very much at all. A blow-dry is precious when you get to middle age.

What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?
The music journalist Paul Morley described me as bland.

What was the last lie you told?
I am always late and I make up pathetic excuses.

To whom would you most like to say sorry, and why?
I am mortified that we went into Afghanistan, promised to liberate the female population and, 20 years later, dumped them in a situation as bad, robbing girls of their futures.

What or who is the greatest love of your life?
My husband. He was late arriving, but we've now spent 22 years together.

What was the best kiss of your life?
I would not reveal it - it would be indiscreet and make headlines.

What is the worst job you've ever done?
I worked in a chicken factory in the Netherlands when I was 16.

When did you last cry, and why?
Reading a newspaper.

How often do you have sex?
Every Sunday morning.

What would you like to leave your children?
A sense of the world being full of possibility and it being in their hands to make it a better one.

What is the closest you've come to death?
I've had a few hairy scrapes as a scuba diver.

What single thing would improve the quality of your life?
A few zeros on my bank balance.

What has been your closest brush with the law?
In Zanzibar, my then boyfriend and I were arrested for illegally entering the country, which we hadn't. It was around the time of 9/11. We spent 12 hours in a cell in a prison.

SHOP THISMAS

Experience

I was alone in Antarctica for 70 days

As told to Isabelle Aron

It started with a half marathon, when I was at university in London in 2011. I then progressed to marathons and ultramarathons, doing a different event each year. I'd wanted to do something big for a while, but didn't know what. In the summer of 2018, someone suggested an Antarctica expedition. At first I thought: not a chance.

But the idea stayed in my mind. In April the next year, I ran the Marathon des Sables, a 156-mile ultra marathon in the Sahara Desert. I thought: if I can do that, then I can do Antarctica.

I decided I wanted to do a solo polar ski expedition across Antarctica. To get some experience, I did a two-week polar expedition training course in February 2020. We learned all the basics: how to camp in the snow, how to pull a sled and what clothing to wear. Later that year, I did a training course in Greenland.

Soon after that, I put my application in with an Antarctic expeditions and logistics company. You're on the ice solo, but they organise all the logistics and provide support and backup.

They rejected my first application because I didn't have enough experience. Instead, I broke it down into two trips. Phase one was 700 miles from Hercules Inlet to the south pole across Antarctica, which I started in November 2021 and completed in January 2022. That gave me enough experience to attempt phase two, which was about 1,100 miles, travelling coast to coast across Antarctica.

In October 2022, I flew to Punta Arenas, in Chile, where the logistics company is based. From there, it's a four-hour flight to Antarctica. I'd allowed 70 days, which would make it the longest unsupported solo one-way expedition across Antarctica.

I only had food and fuel, a tent, my sleeping bag, a repair kit, goggles, face masks, gloves and a medical kit. I only took necessities. I didn't even take a hairbrush – it took six weeks to untangle my hair when I got home.

Even if the visibility is good, you can't see much – it's a white horizon

The first few days were rough. The winds were about 60mph, and my sled weighed 120kg. I remember thinking: it's going to get easier. But it didn't. Even if the visibility is good, you can't see much – it's a white horizon. Without a compass, you could go in any direction. It's physically difficult, but it's also mentally difficult, as it doesn't feel like you're moving towards anything.

I was on the move for 13 to 15 hours a day and getting four to five hours of sleep a night. I'd melt snow in a pot on a portable stove to heat up my freeze-dried meals, such as pasta bolognese. I had a hot chocolate every day. On my first expedition, I craved sweets, so for this trip I took 25 pieces of Haribo.

It's amazing how you can get used to being on your own for so long. I had a satellite phone, which I used to call my partner and the logistics company every day to let them know I was OK. I also had voice notes from friends and family, which I listened to on hard days. I'd downloaded them before I left - they were poems, memories and stories. There was one from my 11-year-old niece. It was special to hear her voice. I had messages written in my tent, too. One said: "Remember to enjoy it." It's funny how many times I rolled my eyes at that.

Compared with my first trip, I found the conditions to be much worse. There was more sastrugi, ridges of hard snow caused by wind, and it felt colder. I was also pulling more weight on my sled, because it was a longer trip. As a result, I fell behind schedule. In the end, I covered 922 miles and fell more than 100 miles short of my goal. The last 40 hours were really hard. I fell over about 14 times every two hours.

Towards the end of my trip, the logistics company flew to pick me up. They had been waiting there for four days by the time I reached them. The relief I felt when I saw the dot in the distance was unbelievable. When I got to the plane, I bawled my eyes out. They handed me a cheese and salami sandwich, a cola and some pain relief.

It took me a while to be proud of what I'd achieved, because I had failed to reach my initial goal, but I've learned it's OK to move the goalposts. Antarctica is an incredible place. I don't agree with the idea of conquering somewhere. You treat places with respect and hope they'll allow you safe passage.

Preet Chandi

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

Portrait: Stephen Burke

John, 66 – **thinks taking immediate action to ban petrol cars is unrealistic**

Rachel, 63 – **argues that people are already dying because of global heating**

Dining across the divide

Can breaking bread bridge political differences?

Interview: Zoe Williams

- *John, 66, Uckfield*
  Occupation *Retired publisher*
  Voting record *Is a member of the Conservative party and always votes Tory, though had a period before he made money when he voted Lib Dem*
  Amuse bouche *John is doing an MA in Shakespeare studies at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute*

- *Rachel, 63, Brighton*
  Occupation *Social work educator*
  Voting record *Has voted Green since she moved into Caroline Lucas's constituency. Before that, Labour*
  Amuse bouche *Was arrested in 1981 for sounding the chimes on an ice-cream van: it wasn't allowed after 7pm but her shift didn't finish until 8pm*

For starters
John I was a bit shocked when she told me she was in a lot of the climate change protest groups. I've never spoken to anybody like that before. She was pretty extreme in her views. So we both knew where we were.
Rachel He was very friendly. He said: "I'm really happy to disagree with people, I just don't like confrontation." That set the ground rules.
John We had a selection of everything on the menu: in fact, there was far too much food. It was a very nice restaurant - I'll go there again.
Rachel I had a lovely stuffed aubergine and some cauliflower wings.

The big beef
John My position is that you'd have to be an idiot to deny climate change. It is happening, there's far too much evidence. But you have to correct it in an achievable way, a way people can cope with. You can't do what Rachel wanted, which is to change the world overnight, immediately ban petrol cars, immediately ban all sales of oil. That's unrealistic.
Rachel We were talking about the licence that was given for the new Rosebank field in the North Sea. He said: "It'll bring us in a lot of money and it'll only be instead of the oil we get from Saudi Arabia." I said: "We can't afford to have any new fossil fuels coming out of the ground, because that will just accelerate global heating." That is the argument of all climate scientists, including the government's own advisers.
John She must have mentioned that North Sea thing 10 times. She got very upset. Not with me! But she said: "Millions of people will die because we're doing this." And I think that's extreme. It's not realistic. I did respect her passion; you'd have to be not very nice not to. But you couldn't have much of a discussion about her beliefs - she just told you what they were. Again and again.
Rachel I did say to him that if you think about what's happened this summer in terms of the fires, and the floods in Libya, in New York, we can't say to the people in Libya that we need to go more slowly. Not when up to 20,000 people died. He did listen to what I had to say, and I listened to him, but I don't think he took my point. And I didn't take his.

Sharing plate
John One of my passionate beliefs is that food is too cheap in the UK. We agreed on that. We should have a very vibrant sustainable farming industry and we don't because the supermarkets, particularly the big four, drive down prices.
Rachel The quality of cheap food is very poor, and the way it's produced is unhealthy for the environment. However, most people can't afford to eat organic. This is about the divide between rich and poor - people like Rishi Sunak running around not knowing what to do with his millions, while other people are using food banks.

For afters
John We talked about political parties. I could have guessed by that time, but she was a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn. I said he was completely bonkers. She said: "That was how he was portrayed, certainly." And I said: "No smoke without fire."
Rachel I said I liked a lot of what Corbyn stood for and that, with the influence of the press, he didn't stand a chance. The conversation didn't progress after that.

Takeaways
John We entertained each other, but I've never known anybody get quite so emotional about political things.
Rachel He steered away from confrontation, and I don't like confrontation either. We went off on quite a lot of tangents. In retrospect, I would have liked to go into things in a bit more depth.

John and Rachel ate at Olive Grove in Brighton; olivegrove-brighton.co.uk. Want to meet someone from across the divide? Go to theguardian.com/different-views

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ADDITIONAL REPORTING: KITTY DRAKE

Portrait: Anselm Ebulue

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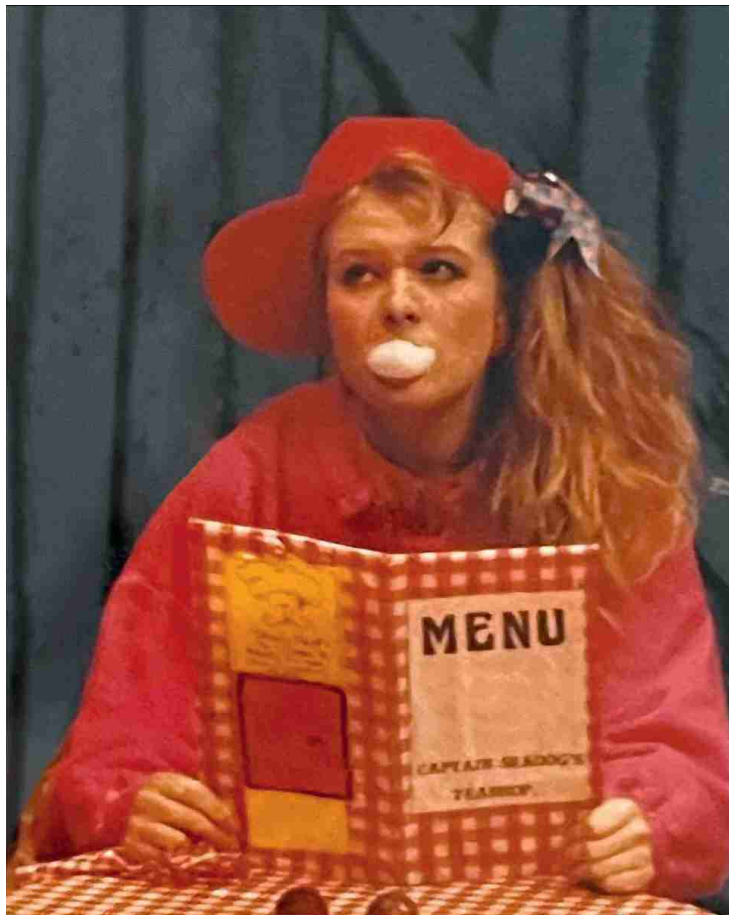
Flashback

Actor Ashley Jensen on making Billy Connolly laugh, her surreal life in LA, and finally getting lead roles in her 50s

Interview: Harriet Gibsone
Main portrait: Simon Webb
Styling: Andie Redman

1990 I was the cheeky wee Buttons type. I loved it



Born in 1969 in Dumfries and Galloway, Ashley Jensen is a stage and screen actor. Raised by her mother, Margaret, in Annan, she left home at 14 to study drama at the National Youth Theatre in London. After graduating from Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, Jensen got her first TV job in 1990, finding fame in 2005 with her Emmy-nominated role as the guileless Maggie in Ricky Gervais's Extras. Supporting parts in TV shows Catastrophe and Ugly Betty, and movies The Lobster and How to Train Your Dragon followed. Most recently, she has starred in Agatha Raisin and Shetland, which is now on BBC One and BBC iPlayer. She lives in Bath with her son, Frankie.

This photo was of a Christmas show at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow. I was 22 and performing in The Treasure of Wookimagoo. It's not one of your classic pantos – it was created by a Scottish writer called Bruce Morton, who also starred in the show – but the atmosphere was lively, with a full audience every night. My character was Shona, the cheeky wee Buttons-type. I loved every second of it.

Making people laugh was always something I enjoyed. It's an intoxicating feeling to command the atmosphere of a room in a positive way. Even before I started doing theatre I was a comedy-centric child and a keen observer of people. I'd do daft voices and put on little shows for my mum. At school I always felt like I was an outsider, but in a positive, eccentric way.

As I turned into a teenager I became aware I was never the best looking girl in the room, but I wasn't the plainest. There was an upside to being somewhere in the middle, and I was grateful I never had the pressure that comes with being beautiful. Instead of thinking: "Poor me. I'm not the prettiest person! I'll never be the lead!" I always felt sure of who I was and realised there were better parts to play. The supporting parts are the funniest ones, and much more interesting, too.

At drama school, my friends gave me the nickname Donald Wolfit – he was this old theatrical actor from a time when thick panstick makeup was all the rage. I loved to dress up, and could often be found painting freckles on my face or sticking a bit of facial hair on my chin so I could look like a man. My mum used to say to me, "Why are you dressing like that?" because I'd experiment with weird clothes. I carried a kettle for a handbag at one point, and I got Dr Martens shoes that I sprayed silver, dipped in glitter and stuck tartan bows on. I would be a bit goth one week, then a bit 1940s another – it was fun to skate around with styles and experiment with different versions of myself.

This photograph was taken pretty soon after I graduated from QMU. I was a theatre actor for 10 years in Scotland, doing tours around the country and at the Edinburgh festival. Most of the year was spent piling into a van, trekking off to a venue, setting up, doing the show, then driving somewhere else to do it all over again. We'd be performing in a little village hall, and bored children would be shouting "Fuck off! Fuck off!" at us, but we'd plough on. It was an apprenticeship into the industry and very character-building stuff.

I look at some young people that are elevated to stardom in their early 20s and I don't think I would have coped with it. I was very single-minded and focused, but acting was never about fame and celebrity. Even going on TV seemed a little bit out of my grasp. So it came as some surprise when one of my first telly roles was "Girl 1" in Rab C Nesbitt. A few years later I had the pleasure of playing the role of Billy Connolly's daughter in the film Down Among the Big Boys. There was one scene where he was walking me down the aisle at my wedding, and we spent a lot of time between takes together talking in the graveyard of the church. I got in that night and called Mum to say: "Guess what? I made Billy Connolly laugh! I was telling him a wee story about the milkmaid's badge in the Guides. He was pissing himself laughing!" I really felt like I had made it.

My career has been full of wee moments like that. I met Matthew Perry when I lived in Los Angeles. I thought: "Oh my God – you're Chandler!" And he turned to me and said: "Oh my God – I know you from Extras!" My first day on the set of Extras was similarly bizarre. I was dressed as a policewoman and doing a scene with Samuel L Jackson where I had to look at him and say: "I thought you were brilliant in The Matrix." I couldn't quite believe what was happening, but to me Ricky was just as big a star as any Hollywood

HAIR AND MAKEUP: SADAF AHMAD. ARCHIVE PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF ASHLEY JENSEN

2023 **Somehow I'd got to the point where I was sitting at an awards show with Glenn Close winking at me**

A-lister because he had co-written The Office. I spent most of my time thinking: "Oh Christ, Ricky's cast me. I can't let him down."

When I got my role in Extras I was told: "Ashley, your life is going to change for ever." While I doubted it at first, it ended up being true. That show allowed me a little more choice about the acting jobs I took. I got to live in Los Angeles for six years to shoot Ugly Betty and another sitcom nobody ever saw called Accidentally on Purpose. All of a sudden, I was going to the Golden Globes and getting nominated for an Emmy. I was "newcomer Ashley Jensen", even though I'd been going for 15 years! Suddenly my life was a flurry of stylists, limos and dresses – sitting there with someone painting my nails and doing my hair, and a security guard knocking on the hotel room door with diamonds for me to wear worth half a million dollars. I found it so surreal coming from my childhood in Dumfries, especially when the first part of my career was spent doing theatre in front of a handful of people and staying in a room above a pub that stank of beer. Somehow I'd got to the point where I was sitting at an awards show with Glenn Close winking at me.

After six years of Hollywood I came back to the UK with my face all in the same position – a remarkable feat for any woman in this industry. I was 38 by the time I went to America, and because I was predominantly playing comedy parts there was maybe not as much pressure to be perfect. Yet I still feel so saddened that we are in a society where women, especially, feel they can't embrace the wisdom of ageing. There isn't as much collagen in my face as there used to be, and I've got laughter lines and a tummy that's there because I've given birth to a child, but at least it all still works! I can walk and talk and see and hear. I'm in the middle of the menopause, and there have been times when I feel as if I am wearing someone else's costume, like I have completely forgotten who I am, which has been quite disconcerting. But I still believe it's an honour and a privilege to get old.

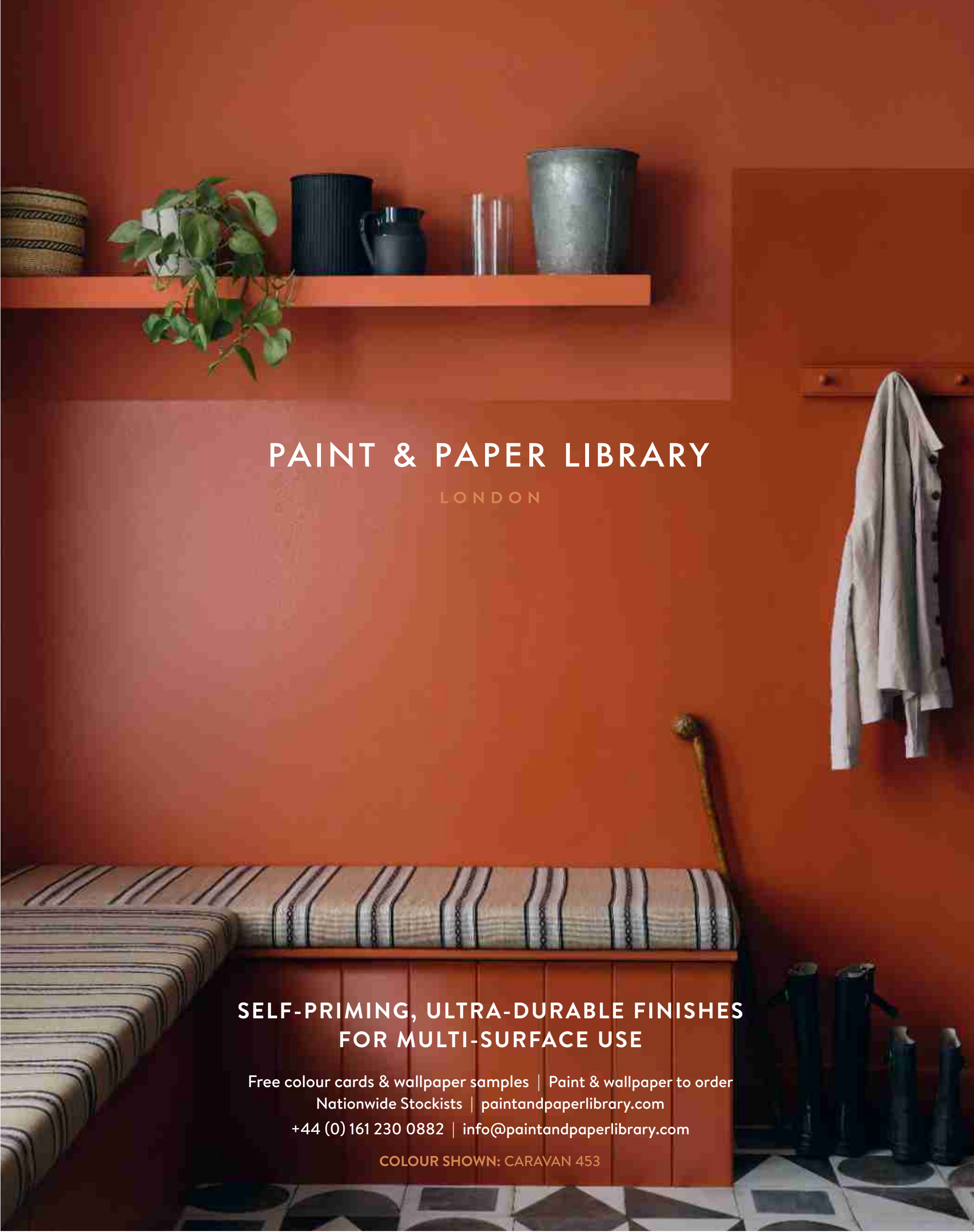
While my Scottish instinct is to think, "Don't get too carried away with yourself," I do feel proud of what I've achieved. It may have taken me until my 50s to get into the lead roles, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

‘IT’S NOT RUDE TO ASK A QUESTION. IT’S RUDE TO EXPECT AN ANSWER’

Louis Theroux’s signature mix of charm and cheek has made him one of the best interviewers in the game, with Anthony Joshua and Chelsea Manning among the latest to face a grilling. Will he take it on the chin when the tables are turned?

Interview: Zoe Williams
Portraits: Jay Brooks
Styling: Ameena Callender


REYES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LOUIS

Theroux wants to ask me something: "Are you not curious about my eyebrow?" We are technically in the last minute of our conversation, after which he'll go to the east London studio next door to be photographed. In fact, we'll talk for slightly longer, as I have yet to elaborate my theory that everything that went both right and wrong for generation X was, if not caused then certainly represented by him. "I'm not going to tell you now because you didn't ask," he continues, but he can't let it go: "Have you not followed me on Instagram?" (Actually I have, so I know it's alopecia. He's had it since January, and worries about it a lot, initially because it made his beard grow into a tiny and slightly lopsided Hitler moustache. Seriously though - you can hardly see it). "I would never ask that," I say. "Why?" "Because it's rude." "It's not rude to ask. It's rude to expect an answer." "OK, I don't know the difference between those things," I say.

He pauses, then demonstrates: "Can I ask you a question about your hair? And feel free not to answer."

"Sure."

"Do you dye it?"

"Yes."

"There. That wasn't hard."

He thinks he's proved his own point; he's actually proved mine: only Louis Theroux can interview like Louis Theroux. He never sounds rude, or cheap, or critical, and he often sounds a bit random, so subjects - faced with the combination of his total acceptance and a naive curiosity it would be churlish not to indulge - slip into the conversation like a warm bath. And maybe the inveterate liars among those subjects might continue to lie, and maybe some people, even at their most honest, are less interesting than others, but they always show themselves.

During a Q&A after a screening of the new season of Louis Theroux Interviews the following week, he makes a distinction between his documentary style - distilled in his very first work for camera three decades ago on Michael Moore's TV Nation, where he'd do breathtaking segments on, say, the Ku Klux Klan - and his encounters with celebrities, which this series include the boxer Anthony Joshua, Joan Collins, singer Raye, actor and rapper Ashley

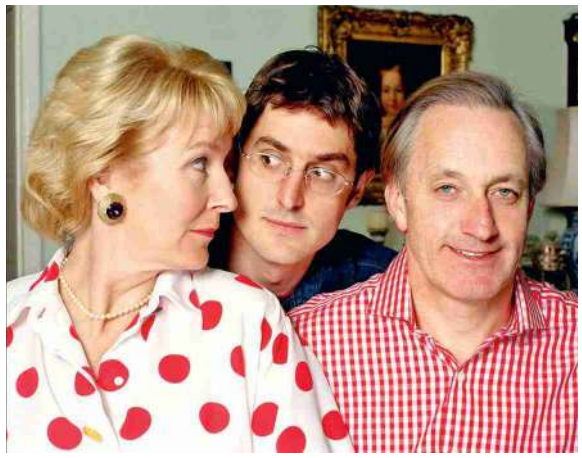
Walters, Pete Doherty and Chelsea Manning. His documentaries, he says, were "the easiest job in the world. If I turn up at San Quentin prison, I just say: 'What did you do? Why did you do that? Really? What's that man doing?'" He contrasts that with set-piece interviews with people like Chelsea Manning: "I own that occasion, I can't come across as cringing or anxious."

I'm not so sure. To my eye, Theroux alters remarkably little from one context to another, one era to another: whether as a speccy British nobody going behind the scenes in the porn industry in the late 90s, or an accomplished transatlantic somebody interviewing people who are objectively a lot less famous than him in the 2020s, his manner is unchanged. Completely non-judgmental, any self-consciousness camouflaged beneath comic self-deprecation, he is utterly intrusive but in a way that is charming, like a dog who bowls up and sticks its nose in your pocket. There's a lovely moment in the Anthony Joshua interview when Theroux asks, straight out, whether one of the world's best heavyweight boxers thinks he could beat him in a fight. Joshua says yes, he could, but not because he doubts Theroux's strength, just because he probably doesn't have a boxing IQ. It's not a revealing moment in the classic sense, because obviously Joshua could beat Theroux. But you see a lot of the boxer's character in his tactful, funny, considered answer, which you have to admit is what the whole thing's supposed to be about.

LOUIS THEROUX GREW UP in south London. His father, novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux, is from Massachusetts, and his mother is the British journalist, therapist and writer Anne Theroux. I actually went to the same primary school as him, a standard Wandsworth 70s state school that socialist boho parents sent their kids to before sending them private. "My mum was left-wing, a socialist," he says. "My dad was politically undefinable, a free-thinker, a literary novelist." "Yeah, I've heard of your dad." "You should be interviewing him, he's really interesting."

"I was taken out aged about eight or nine," he says of the school. "It was a big wrench. My recollection of primary school is that I was really happy there. And then

Theroux interviewing Christine and Neil Hamilton in 2001, below; and Stormzy in 2022



'I WASN'T HAPPY AT PREP SCHOOL AND WANTED TO FIT IN. I OVERCOMPENSATED, AND GOT NICKNAMED POSH CLAUDE'

I went off to this prep school, and I wasn't happy. I really wanted to fit in – I'm a bit of a people-pleaser. I thought, 'I can do this. I'll just copy what everybody else is doing.' And I think I overcompensated, and I got the nickname Posh Claude. Because I was trying so hard to be posh. It was definitely the unhappiest time in my childhood. Home life was fine. I just wasn't happy at school."

Theroux then describes a short story his father wrote called Children in this very equanimous way: "He's a bit of an anglophile, and he liked the idea of us learning Latin and getting a classical education. But at the same time, he's a working-class boy from Medford, deeply distrustful of authority, so he was conflicted. And he'd overhear us, all the kids, saying, 'Where are you going on skiing holiday? Oh, no, Klosters is rubbish.' Basically, he's got a story about a father putting his kids in private school and then being dismayed by them becoming little twerps, which I think" – a fraction of a pause, Theroux's comic pause deployment is fabulous – "may be founded in fact." There is something in the extensive chronicling, the soup-to-nuts transparency of the Theroux family, that must a) be hard to live with, and b) create an unusual tension between the public and the private.

Not only would very close readers of Paul Theroux's work know that he maybe sometimes thought his sons were twerps, they would also have a partial but legible account of the parents' marriage, which became more complete two years ago when Anne wrote The Year of the End. Detailing infidelities on both sides, it wasn't necessarily untypical of 70s and 80s marital turbulence – it was confusing; a lot of men and women who thought they were feminists had actually been forged in the patriarchal 50s – but of course it's unusual for it to be in the public domain. "Technically, in a strict legal sense, I believe they got divorced in 1993," Theroux says. "But they'd been separated from about 89, 90. My mum sometimes would joke that when we left home my dad thought, 'I'll do that as well.'" He had gone to Oxford by this time. "But here's the thing: they were very good parents, and even though there were ups and downs with respect to infidelities and definitely arguments, it was all within the bandwidth of normal – normal is a terrible word. But I guess the best way of putting it would be, I do feel lucky for feeling loved. I was in the lucky position of taking that for granted."

In the event, he says, "When they split up, I thought, 'This is different. This is a plot twist.' I felt fairly boring before that. Me being able to say to my girlfriend, 'I think I'm gonna go down to London this weekend and make sure my mum's all right,' put me in an unexpected caretakey role that felt pretty cool."

It's still tricky, though – two and a half memoirists in a family of four writers (Louis has written Gotta Get Theroux This and Theroux the Keyhole in 2019 and 2021; the second chronicler is Anne; Paul is half a memoirist in the sense that if you were poring over his work for autobiographical clues, you'd find them; only Louis's brother, Marcel Theroux, writes novels you couldn't say that about). Who's trespassing on whose memories, if everyone's at it? "I'm definitely not going to umpire that ethical conundrum," he says, decisively. Well, he wouldn't be allowed to umpire it … "Right, yes, I'd be on the pitch. OK, good. So I don't have to."

Never minding ethics, it makes sense of one thing: Louis Theroux's guileless, surely-you-don't-mind-telling-me-this-thing delivery. He has this foundational belief that is deeper than self-confidence: sooner or later, everyone's going to tell everybody everything.

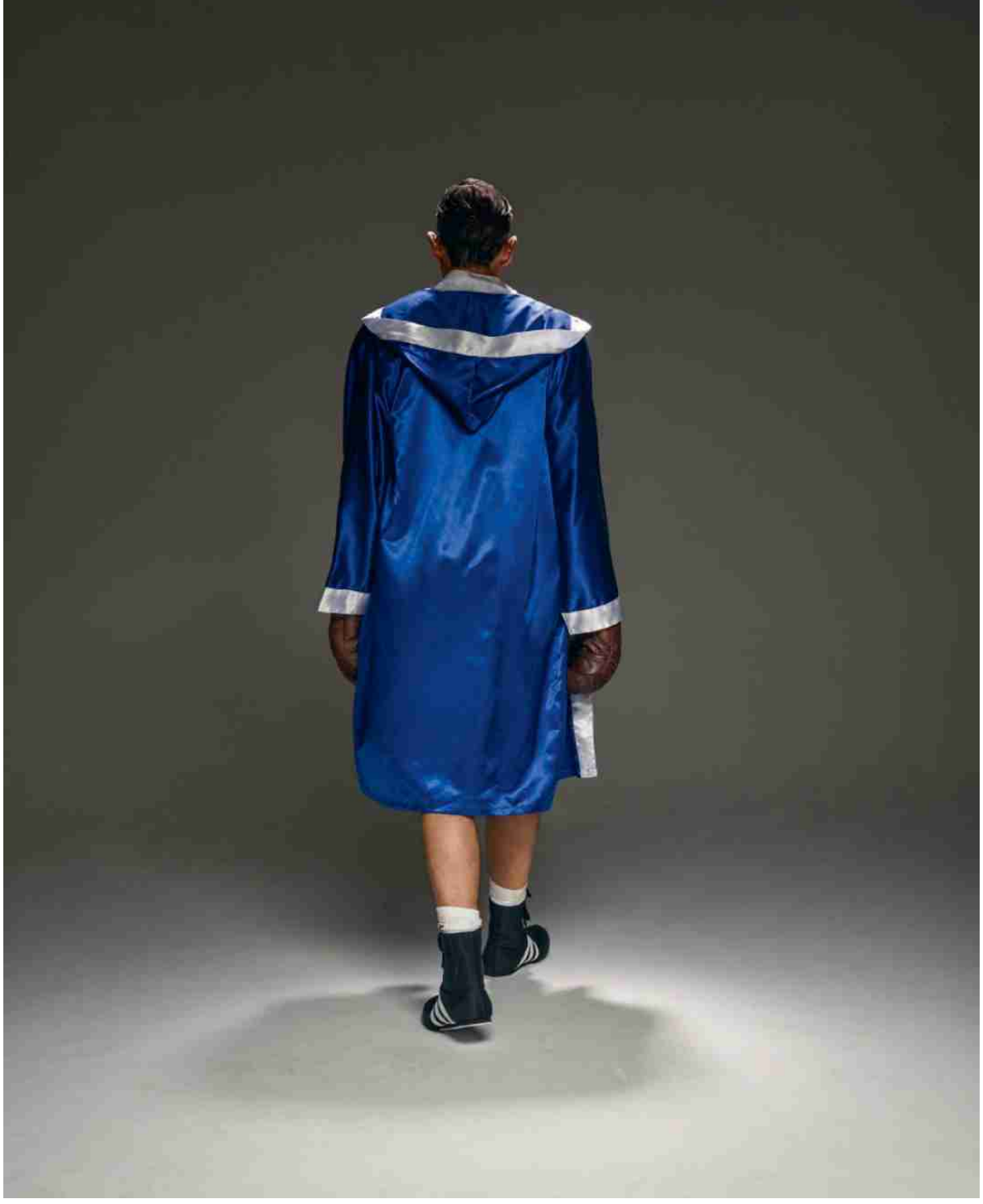
AFTER THEROUX FINISHED AT UNIVERSITY, he toyed with the idea of a regular career. "My parents weren't judgmental. I think if I had been gay, they might have even quite liked it, for example. But the one time I saw a bit of judgment, was: I saw a thing on TV about how hard the civil service exam is. I thought, 'I'm pretty good at exams,' and I liked the idea of taking a really hard exam, and a job that required that. So I said to my mum, 'I'm thinking about joining the civil service, there's this really hard exam.' And she said, 'No, I don't think that's for you.' That was like the bridge too far."

Instead, he went to the US, got a job assisting an artisanal glass blower, and, "had a period of writing down pensees in a notebook, got a letter from a friend in London and she'd started doing reviews for Time Out, and I had a pang of jealousy and almost competitive anxiety". He got a job on a weekly newspaper in San Jose, and by the time he was making films for TV Nation, that was pretty much the die cast – he had a peculiar gift for getting under the skin of subcultures, cracking open worlds with his charm that we definitely wouldn't have been able to enter without it, and may not have realised we wanted to.

This led to the BBC's Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends in the late 90s, fish-out-of-water explorations of misfit worlds: white separatism, rap, born-again Christianity. "It's a kind of travel, if I can put it a bit pompously. You're travelling through a world, it's rule-based and culture-based. And you can plot a little journey as you learn the words and practices, and discover the forms of honour, and the pitfalls and the self-sabotaging qualities. It often struck me that so many of the worlds I was looking at required you to adopt a new name, whether it was gangster rap, or wrestling, boxing to an extent: it's an identity that you're taking on. That makes it somewhat voluntary, and prevents the story from being overly ethnographic. Why are you laughing?" I'm laughing at the idea that "travel" would be too pompous, but "overly ethnographic" would be fine. "Let's say you were to do a story about the Amish. Because that's a culture you're born into, no one's really exercising a great deal of free will in terms of the practices. Your journalistic leverage in conversations like that – 'Why are you doing this?' 'This doesn't make any sense.' 'Have you ever thought about going back to the old way?' All of that has less merit in it. I think that's clear. Right?" Actually yes: there is a moral clarity to his oeuvre. He is very exacting about his terms of engagement: he can only ridicule people in arenas they've entered by choice, and he by and large, white supremacists aside, does it with love.

This is the bit that I think is the best and worst of generation X, as personified by Louis Theroux: that

JAY BROOKS/THE GUARDIAN. STYLING: AMEENA CALLENDER. MAKEUP/GROOMING: AMBER SIBLEY AT JOY GOODMAN. SAM TEAR/BBC; BBC/MINDHOUSE



we had this generationally heightened sense of the absurd, and it made a lot of discourse that was previously very tedious and cold suddenly very funny and warm. But it takes a civic toll when you don't take anything seriously: you're basically absent from the political sphere. The only Louis Theroux film I've ever found depressing is the one from a Miami Mega-Jail – there's another in San Quentin, and truthfully they're both pretty grim, but Miami was so brutal, so counter to any principle of decency in incarceration, that it simply didn't do justice to the injustice to see it handled in that trademark, non-judgmental way. I wanted someone to say, "This is wrong." "You wanted to see John Pilger in there?" Theroux asks. "Or Paul Foot," I suggest. "Paul Foot would be perfect, get him in there," he agrees enthusiastically, exploring the idea: "He'd be perfect, other than being dead. Even him dead would be better than me alive." I bet Theroux would be really fun in a meeting, and I bet you'd come out having decided to do it his way, having forgotten what your point was.

The much more ubiquitous talking point of that question – what are the hard limits of playful neutrality – was the Jimmy Savile interview of 2000. It was the starting gun of BBC Two's When Louis Met … series, and it was magnetically, spectacularly weird: Savile irascible but needy, Theroux feigning lack of control but actually in total control. It's very sinister to watch now, because Savile's impunity is so palpable, so sociopathic. Theroux, with his gentle curiosity and not-at-all-obvious conversational direction – Why didn't Savile have an oven?; Didn't he mind the years living with his mother because it meant he couldn't bring girls home? – drew out a man who had never had a relationship with a woman and didn't seem to have ever had any human feelings for one, except his mother. Theroux was basically showing us Norman Bates, which no one else had ever done. He does also ask Savile outright whether he's a paedophile, and gets the non-answer that we "live in a funny old world". In the end, there are some questions – did you rape and sexually abuse multiple women and children, and desecrate the dead? – which anyone can ask but only the criminal justice system can really nail down.

'IT WAS SURPRISING JIMMY SAVILE THREW THE DOORS OPEN AS HE WAS STILL VERY FAMOUS'

Nevertheless, when the truth came out about Savile, Theroux was haunted by it, and wished he'd taken one of the victims with him to confront Savile: he made a second film in 2016, speaking to victims and associates of Savile, trying to figure out what he and the rest of society could have done differently to get the truth out of a pathological liar. "I do think that 'in plain sight' idea can be overdone. It's like what they say about quiz questions. It's only obvious if you know the answer," he says.

That documentary made a huge impact on the whole concept of the celebrity interview, because, "Jimmy Savile threw the doors open – in a way that was surprising, because even though he was over the hill, he was still very famous. Then we did Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee – that felt OK, but maybe a little bit diminished because the doors weren't quite as open." Neil and Christine Hamilton became the subject of a police inquiry into a sexual assault accusation during the filming: they were cleared, but these 10-day interviews had set a new norm that chat wasn't enough, the viewer had to come away with some extraordinary hunch or insight, even if you didn't know what it meant. "Anyone at the top of their game is not going to say, 'Come and hang out with me for 10 days,'" he says. "And I was fine with it being defined as people who maybe weren't totally at the top of their game, although that wasn't quite how anyone wanted to position the series. 'Do you want to be part of a series that's about has-beens?' So then we're having to slightly pretend it's not about people who are off-the-boil. I shouldn't say that, because maybe Christine Hamilton will read that and think she was totally on-the-boil."

The other side-effect was, of course, that When Louis Met … made Theroux both award-winning and pretty famous, which alters the dynamic. It would be as if the elephants started showing off in front of David Attenborough. It'd be cute, but would it be their authentic self? "Actually, in certain ways, it's kind of helpful feeling a little bit known," he says. "It means that people upped their game a bit, they were a bit friendlier with me." In the last series of Louis Theroux Interviews … there's an interview with Stormzy that almost feels like actual friends role-playing an interview. "I'd never met Stormzy before," he says, "which gives the encounter a little frisson, a kind of realness. But the truth is, I had had friendly contact with him online, because I think I'd seen him wearing a Louis Theroux T-shirt in an Observer profile. Miranda Sawyer asked him about it in the interview, with understandable incredulity. And he said, 'Louis Theroux is a G.' And then of course, I was tickled beyond belief." I'm compelled to check whether Louis Theroux produces his own T-shirts, or whether there's a rogue agent out there. "No, no, I see no income from that. Am I a mug? Definitely in one sense, and probably in another."

He has a production company, Mindhouse, with his wife, Nancy Strang (they've got three children), which he introduces as his hedge against the possibility that TV ever has enough of him. "There's a sense of security that comes from being involved in programmes that you don't actually present. So if I took to YouTube or Rumble and started saying the Earth is flat, if I expressed my real views about geology, and the construction of the universe – is the irony coming across?" "Not on the page," I say. "Well, add it. If I came out and said something really weird on Rumble, and I was no longer viewed as brand-safe – something I'm not intending to do – I could still be involved in making programmes through Mindhouse. I've been doing this for 25, 30 years, there's no reason to think it'll end but that doesn't mean it won't." I like that he's scanned the horizon for any possible blot that would dent his popularity, and the only thing he can think of would have to come from the inside of his head; the only victim would be reason. He has the peace of a person who hasn't made any enemies, but can that be true? Goddammit, if I'd been Louis Theroux, I'd have asked him ●

Louis Theroux Interviews is on BBC iPlayer and BBC Two from Tuesday 7 November at 9pm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Nina Stibbe had heard about the menopause, of course. For years friends and family had bored her with it, endlessly banging on about joint pain and anxiety, hot flushes and feelings of bleakness. So why did she continue to pretend it didn't exist (and that it was the dog who'd weed on the sofa)? And once she finally saw the light, could pills and potions really help?

MY YEAR OF LIVING HRT-LY

Portraits: Abbie Trayler-Smith

ONE NIGHT IN NOVEMBER last year, my landlady, Debby, and I bumped into our neighbour Kate Muir – the women's health and menopause expert. As we strolled home, Kate was saying that lots of women desperately try to get along without HRT when they could really improve their lives by giving it a go, and Debby asked a crucial question: "Might a blob of oestrogen help with Nina constantly peeing herself?" and Kate said, "Yes, it's all part of it."

I had arrived in London, aged 60, the previous March, after 20 years in Cornwall, to have a sabbatical – from life there (and my marriage) – in the house of the writer Deborah Moggach, who wanted a friendly lodger to share the odd Charlie Bigham pie and peas in front of Succession or Happy Valley. Though Debby was a positive role model for the newly single older woman (herself freshly out of a short marriage), I can't deny I was all at sea. The soap I'd bought myself as a moving in gift smelled strongly of pork, and that upset me more than it should. The realisation that I looked silly in a trenchcoat was a blow, and chanting, "Oh God, oh God, oh God" under my breath the whole time didn't seem like a good sign.

After I'd been a few days in my new home, my friend Stella rang with news that the nurse at her GP surgery had been unable to find and remove her intrauterine device, and told her it must have fallen out at some point. "I'd know if something fell out of my vagina," Stella said, and I agreed. "Anyway," she said, "how's London?" I told her how earlier that morning my dog, Peggy, had picked up a chicken drumstick off the street and I'd had to fight her for it in front of a family on a bike ride, and slightly weed myself.

"You need to do pelvic floor exercises," Stella said.

"I know."

Soon I reacquainted myself with my old friend Misty (famous in our group for Freudian issues and inventing the bacon and egg salad). Misty was on a dating app for middle-aged culture vultures but couldn't find a man whose footwear didn't put her off. So far she'd had one who wore Crocs, one she dumped because he said Marilyn Monroe looked like Les Dennis and one who wore flip-flops year round. She was "out the other side" of menopause and confided that tofu gave her the horn. What about incontinence, I wondered. Yes, she'd had a few accidents, but fixed it via limited liquid intake and a no-caffeine rule. So I cut down, too, which seemed cruel because, honestly, tea was pretty much all I had.

Then I met up with a highly recommended friend of a friend. Rachel had recently left her husband of 30 years, listing his faults as "gloominess, speaking in burps, low-level hectoring, neuroticism about fridge temperature and constantly using the word vulva". I was glad to note that Rachel was much worse than me, weeing herself-wise, so much so that she couldn't bring herself to begin online dating and, out of courtesy to other passengers, sat on a carrier bag on the bus. One morning, over a Gail's coffee and bun, I watched her filling out a "When might you wet yourself?" questionnaire:

In bed – no
In chair – no
Laughing – yes
Sneezing – yes
Walking – sometimes
Running – yes
Do you ever wet your socks? – no

She said her answers confirmed her as "borderline incontinent". "Do you think it's the menopause?" I asked. "No," she said. And she wasn't worried because her friend Lyn Flipper had just recommended a programme of extreme pelvic floor exercises – continuous pulsing every time she did anything: going through a doorway, watching a play or looking out of a window. I started to do the same whenever I remembered, including the evening in June that I accompanied my son Alfred to see the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I dutifully clenched all through the support act (A$AP Rocky), after which Alf looked concerned and asked was I finding it too loud. "No," I said. "I love it – why do you ask?"

"It's just that you keep wincing."

IN AUGUST, ON THE SAME DAY the former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev died, my friend Fiona from Leicestershire could suddenly feel something bulging when she stood up or walked. My sister Vic, a former nurse, guessed it was a vaginal prolapse. Then, in early September, soon after a cloud formation resembling the queen appeared above Telford an hour after her death, I admitted to myself I was unsettled. Unable to enter a shop unless the door was already open, I found myself wandering about in a thin but long coat, buying expensive berries in paper cones, and one time a small tray of salad leaves that were still growing.

It's not as if I hadn't heard about the menopause. My Cornish friend Cathy Rentzenbrink had been boring me rigid on cliff walks for years, endlessly banging on about fluctuating confidence and joint pain, and with the medical fact that anxiety increases as oestrogen declines, etc. Ditto Vic, who had gone on HRT to combat feelings of bleakness and hot flushes so severe she thought she'd expire. It was just that, for some reason, I preferred Rachel's menopause denial. Rachel, who shaved her whole face every other day with a Bic (since her grandson drew her with an iPhone and a beard) and insisted her clearly menopausal symptoms – insomnia, new body odour (sugar puffs), twitchy eye, itchy skin, sensitivity to cooked onions – were all down to age.

Finally, using the most discreet Tena Lady pads available (Tena Silhouette Noir), Rachel was confident enough to start online dating, although her first date brought a small foam ball to the pub and habitually bounced it when she was talking. Her second, an Uber driver who pretended to be a lawyer, at least listened to her side of the conversation. Her third spoke mostly in James Joyce quotes and took her to Dublin for Bloomsday. It took a lot of pads, but still. Inspired, I bought my first-ever pack of Tena Lady (two-drop Discreet Ultra, the thinnest liner they do) from Boots, and as I made my transaction at the self-checkout, Alf took a photograph and posted it to his close friends list on Instagram.

ON HRT I DREAMED I HELD HANDS EROTICALLY WITH THE MAYOR OF GREATER MANCHESTER

In early October I had a Norfolk minibreak with my parents. It was my stepfather's first time away with an indwelling catheter. He remained dry as a bone, while my mother and I both had a few accidents. Added to which my mother experienced stabbing pains up her vagina, and when I got my phone out to make a note she said, "Please don't put my vagina in your book."

I told her at least three women I knew had "atrophied vagina". One said, "It just shut up shop." Another blamed her husband's recent erectile dysfunction because before that, he just "shoved it in once a fortnight and that kept it open for business". The third, aged seventysomething, fixed hers with some oestrogen.

Halloween turned me gloomy. Life was bad enough without crime scene tape everywhere. Old grievances came to the surface. I felt furious with Ian McEwan for inventing long-married, middle-aged characters who have sexual intercourse every morning, from behind, and then tea in bed together before starting their day. Where was the vaginal dryness or body odour anxiety? I wasn't alone. Rachel was annoyed that Kate Bush was back in the news, harking back to that awful, long outro on Wuthering Heights. Stella banned me from speaking to Uber drivers unless it was about the specific journey, and raked up the time our taxi driver masturbated to Like a Virgin on the way to a Greek airport. Even kind-hearted Misty had curmudgeonly moments, turning against still-life painters such as Giorgio Morandi for no reason, and was almost barred from her local Co-op for calling the produce "a pile of toxic garbage".

Later that month, my friend Fiona (with the bulging vagina) went to see a menopause specialist, was diagnosed with significant prolapse (bladder and bowel) and told there was a two- to three-year waiting time for corrective surgery. And my mother's intermittent stabbing pain got worse in the cold weather. Vic wondered if plastic transvaginal mesh might have been used for the surgical repair she had in 1990 when we all clubbed together for a two-position recliner and I upset her by reading Adrienne Rich poems out loud.

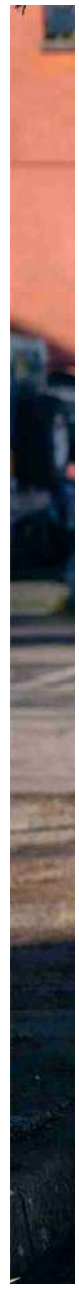
Back in Cornwall for a family Christmas, I caught up with old friends, cooked nice food, played games, watched telly and weed on the sofa.

ON BOXING DAY WE SET OFF for a walk. It rained so hard on Perranporth cliffs it was like being pelted with tiny cold stones. The sea below was dark grey with frothy breakers; we struggled along with our hoods up. Then the sky changed, it stopped raining, the sun came out and the scene transformed as if by some divine power. Skylarks began fluttering above the ploughed fields. All wonderful except I was in a two-drop pad on what was clearly a three-drop walk.

My friend Wendy came round for coffee and asked if the small pile of cushions in the corner were new. They weren't – they were waiting to be laundered, and I remembered for the hundredth time what Kate Muir said about oestrogen and resolved to make an appointment to see someone in the new year.

One morning in mid-January I got the train to Leicester for my appointment with Aly Dilks – menopause and HRT specialist. In preparation I filled out the Greene Climacteric questionnaire, which measures menopause symptoms. Scored 17 out of a possible 59. Vic accused me of "playing everything down" because I'd given myself 2 out of 10 for loss of confidence and she said, in her opinion, I was easily an 8.

Aly introduced herself and explained how my appointment would work. I don't know how it happened, or why, but I was suddenly crying, and without pausing Aly pulled a tissue from a box and handed it to me. "I don't know why I'm crying," I said. "People always do," Aly said. "Why?" I asked. "I think it's because someone's listening," she said. I was prescribed daily



ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH/THE GUARDIAN

topical oestrogen gel (made from yams, not horse urine) and a progesterone tablet to be taken orally.

Back in London, the next day, I was on the phone with Rentzenbrink when I saw Tariq Ali driving a Fiat Panda Eleganza indicating to turn left into a cul-de-sac near Kentish Town swimming pool, waiting calmly while a delivery driver made a tricky U-turn. Rentzenbrink (herself now taking testosterone) said, "If men feel like this all the time, we should congratulate them – it's a wonder they don't go round just punching everyone."

I started my HRT medication a couple of days later and, as if by magic, that night I had a romantic dream in which I held hands erotically with the mayor of Greater Manchester in front of some other people but we didn't care. A big change from my usual dreams (calling a person by the wrong name, devastating garden neglect, wandering about in an empty hotel). By the third or fourth day I was feeling quite nauseous and hoped it was because I'd been eating a lot of cheese but emailed Aly for advice. She replied that side-effects are common and usually soon resolve, and I could try inserting the capsule into my vagina at night instead of swallowing it.

When Rentzenbrink came to stay a couple of days later, I was feeling demoralised by the side-effects and said some negative things about HRT such as, "It's just not worth it" and, "It's not for me." Rentzenbrink told me to be patient and give it a chance, and reminded me that without her little patches, she might have stabbed her husband with one of the knives off their magnetic knife holder. And, sure enough, the nausea had gone by the time I next saw her and we had coffee with Rachel. I raised the subject of HRT. "Yeah, save your breath, I'm on it," she said and proudly displayed a patch on her arm. Later, privately, Rentzenbrink wondered if she might also be taking testosterone, to explain her surge in aggression, for example discussing the spectacle of Tiger Woods handing a tampon to another golfer during his comeback round. Rachel had called him a "childish, misogynist little cunt" and said she wishes he'd handed her the tampon because she'd have rammed it up one of his nostrils.

Nina Stibbe: 'In Cornwall I caught up with old friends, cooked, played games, watched telly and weed on the sofa'

In February a national shortage of tomatoes was in the news, also shortages of my progesterone. Added to which some newspapers were bemoaning the fact that 4,000 women were taking testosterone on the NHS as part of their HRT, for libido issues. They didn't compare this with the three million men a year who are on Viagra for the same thing. What would happen if there were a nationwide shortage of Viagra, we wondered. Misty thought half the women in the country would put up a cry of joy at not having to be penetrated by a pharmaceutically enhanced erection. Debby said it wouldn't be allowed (the shortage), Stella wasn't interested and Rachel said something so dark and worrying, I can't record it here.

Seeing the GP for a repeat prescription, she warned me pharmacies were struggling to stock HRT medication. Boots in Truro had just one pack of the oestrogen and one of progesterone, which I took. While the pharmacy assistant scrolled the manufacturer database for information on when new stock might be available, her colleague whispered to her, "It's pancake day."

"For real?" said the assistant, concerned.

"Yeah," said the colleague, "it's either today or tomorrow, I know that."

"Shit," said the assistant, "I need the ingredients. What are the ingredients?" Then, glancing up at me, said, "Yeah, so the manufacturer is out of stock. No clue when we'll have it again."

In early March, in Suffolk for a book festival, I had a spaghetti dinner with the writer India Knight and her agent, Georgia Garrett. I spoke at great length about HRT, etc. They seemed very interested, especially about how it has helped combat my stress incontinence, and then India's terrier puppy, Lupin, got up after weeing on the cushion next to me. And for the first time in a year I was able to say in all honesty, "That wasn't me."

By mid-March I was noticing improvements through my entire body and mind; I was no longer chanting, "Oh God, oh God, oh God" under my breath the whole time. I was delighted that Ian McEwan's latest was his best for a long time (my words), and started to call out, "Thank you, driver" on alighting from a bus.

Back in Cornwall later that month, on a cliff walk with Peggy, Rentzenbrink asked for an update.

"All good," I said. "I don't wet myself any more."

"Not at all?"

"Only when I laugh." ●

Went to London, Took the Dog: A Diary by Nina Stibbe is published by Pan Macmillan at £16.99. To order a copy for £14.44, go to guardianbookshop.com

Portrait: Richard Saker

LOST FOR WORDS

After Chris Kamara's playing and managing days were over, a broadcasting career felt like all his birthdays had come at once. But when the smiley, funny commentator legions of football fans loved suddenly found himself struggling to speak, he thought his life had ended. He tells *Simon Hattenstone* how he got his grin back

AS A TV FOOTBALL COMMENTATOR, Chris Kamara was a one-off. Sure, he knew a lot about the sport. But that's not why he was loved. No, he was loved for his smile and great roar of a laugh. He was loved for seeing the funny side of everything – most of all himself. He was loved for his unique Kammy-isms – for example, in one match report describing Tottenham Hotspur as "fighting like beavers". He was loved for the word he would frequently bellow from grounds where he was reporting back to Jeff Stelling in Sky Sports's Soccer Saturday studio. "*Un-be-lie-va-ble!*" or at times, "*Un-be-lie-va-ble, Jeff!*"

Best of all, he was loved for the things he missed. On one memorable Saturday in April 2010, Kamara was covering a match between Portsmouth and Blackburn. Stelling, then the show's anchor, said, "We're off to Fratton Park, where there's been a red card. But for who, Chris Kamara?" Kamara looked bemused. Most pundits would try to blag it, but not Kammy. "I don't know, Jeff!" he replied. "Has there? I must've missed that – is it a red card?' He stared down at the pitch, none the wiser.

"Have you not been watching?" Stelling asked. "What has happened, Chris?"

By now Kamara looked like a schoolboy caught truanting by his headteacher. "I don't know, Jeff!" His mouth opened wide, and he laughed and laughed. "I dunno. The rain must've got in my eyes, Jeff!"

Stelling told him to get his fingers out to count how many players were left on the pitch. Kamara's voice rose to a squeak. "No, you're right. I saw him go off, but I thought they were bringing a sub on, Jeff."

"As professional as ever, Kammy," Stelling said. "Cutting-edge reports on Gillette Soccer Saturday!"

Back in the studio, his fellow football pundits were in hysterics. Wonderful.

When Kamara was commentating, you knew it would be fun, no matter how dire the match. Then in 2019 something happened to the voice that had been his living for two decades. It slowed down, and he developed a terrible croak. He stumbled over words. His brain failed to make the intended connections. He sounded as if he'd had a stroke. Kamara was terrified, but hid it from everybody – his wife Anne, his two sons, friends and colleagues. He thought it might be the start of Alzheimer's disease. "It was like someone was talking through my voicebox. That would happen for maybe three hours a day, then my voice would go back to normal."

Did Anne say anything? "No." He smiles. "I was clever. I would talk in soundbites, short stuff. Getting involved in lengthy conversations was a no-no." For the hours he most struggled with his voice, he'd make himself scarce on his smallholding. "When my voice was really croaky, I'd keep my mouth shut, then talk when it came back." But it wasn't just the voice that had changed. "I was going down to the horses and sheep, and I started losing my balance, stumbling. Things I'd taken for granted, like using the wheelbarrow, all of a sudden I was teetering wi-th it."

It was easier for him to mask what was happening initially because football was cancelled at the beginning of lockdown. But before long the fixtures returned, and Kamara was back on television. And then he started to panic. "That's when the reports started to not be concise. I was jumbling up the words."

Kamara has just written a new memoir, Kammy: My Unbelievable Life. In it, he describes a match when he realised he was stuffed. He simply could not do his job any more. "My tongue felt as if it had swelled to double its size and was hanging out of my mouth. The famous Kammy smile had disappeared. I was sweating profusely. Hot, prickly heat spread on my back," he writes. That sounds terrifying, I say. "Oh, it was. Absolutely. I was at Barnsley that day and I knew on the way my speech was difficult." He rang an old friend who kept saying she couldn't make sense of what he was saying. He told her it was a bad line – one of many lies he told to cover up what was happening.

In the match, when Stelling came to

him for an update, he could barely speak. “My heart palpitated. I’d never known anything like it. It felt as if it was coming out of my chest. And I couldn’t get my tongue around the words.” He sounds traumatised just revisiting it. “It was so difficult. Jeff came to me and a goal was scored and I kept the commentary as short as possible.” Nobody on the team mentioned what had happened, so he thought he’d got away with it. “I thought maybe it’s not as bad as I think it is. No one said, ‘Are you OK?’ No one said, ‘What’s up with you?’ No one said, ‘Have you been drinking?’ Nothing. So I started to think maybe something’s playing with my head, so you just move on. And that’s what I did.”

In lockdown, he covered matches from the lower leagues in the north. When people did start to suggest he was struggling, he said it was because he wasn’t familiar with the players’ names, which was untrue. When asked a question, he’d say pardon to give himself time to process his thoughts and turn them into words.

KAMARA IS TALKING to me from his home in Wakefield. He looks the same as ever – big, jolly face, pencil-moustache and a grin like he’s just won the lottery. It’s only when he talks that you notice the difference.

The 65-year-old had an impressive but not starry career in football. He played more than 600 league games for nine clubs including Portsmouth, Swindon and Brentford. He started out as an attacking midfielder, then morphed into a tough defensive midfielder. He became the first English player to be convicted of grievous bodily harm for an on-pitch incident, after punching a player and breaking his cheekbone. It was very much out of character. Kamara, who had been racially abused earlier in the match, calls it the low point of his career. He never played at international level, and declined an offer to play for Sierra Leone in the 1994 African Cup of Nations (he qualified through his father).

It was something of a miracle that Kamara succeeded in football. He grew up in Middlesbrough in an age when the National Front was prominent and racism pervasive. The Kamaras were the only black family on the Park End estate, his father Albert one of the few black men in town. Albert was often falsely arrested by the police for crimes they knew he had not committed. If there was a problem on the estate, neighbours would often shout, “It’s that black family causing all the problems.”

As for Albert, he had no interest in football and only saw his son play once at school. Alan Ingledew, a football coach and mentor, took him on alternate weeks to watch Middlesbrough and Leeds at home. Albert insisted his son went into the navy, as he had done, after leaving school. He was still only 16 when he was spotted by Portsmouth’s youth team manager playing for the navy team. The National Front element of the Portsmouth crowd booed him however well he played. When he joined Swindon a couple of years later, he received death threats from Portsmouth fans and was given police escorts to the County Ground. He never let it get to him.

At the age of 36, he joined second division (third tier) Bradford City as player-coach. When manager Lennie Lawrence was sacked a year later in 1995, Bradford were facing relegation. Kamara, promoted from assistant manager to caretaker manager, made chairman Geoffrey Richmond a ludicrous promise. “I said blase-ly, ‘I’ll get us promoted’, never really believing it. But you’ve got to sell it to a chairman who’s just given you the job.” They went on a winning run, got into the playoffs and won the final to reach what was then the first division.

What were the highlights of his career? “When I was a kid it was my ambition to play for Middlesbrough and my dream to play for Leeds, so to achieve both was amazing. I won’t say *unbelievable*, but it was. Another highlight was taking Bradford out at Wembley for the playoff finals. I walked out as manager holding hands with my sons, who were mascots. It don’t get much better than that.” He was one of the first black managers in English football’s top four tiers. By winning promotion to the second, he became the most successful black English manager, a record that stood until Chris Hughton led Newcastle to the Premier League in 2010. In an earlier autobiography, Mr Unbelievable, Kamara said this reflected how few black managers had been given the chance to prove themselves. “There are still hardly any black faces out there managing today,” he says.

‘I did a show where I sounded like somebody who’d had 10 pints. I was ashamed that I’d got a speech defect’

The following season, he avoided relegation with a victory in the final match, and the season after he was sacked. In January 1998, he was appointed Stoke City manager, won one of 14 matches and was booted out. Kamara had been convinced he had a lifetime ahead of him in management. But it didn’t take him long to discover how fickle football chairmen were.

That’s when Soccer Saturday got in touch. It was a new show in a format that had never been tried – for what appeared to be good reason. Who wanted to watch a bunch of former footballers staring at a screen, and Kammy reporting from football with his head turned away from the match? But it worked – and became a football institution. “I said, ‘Are you sure?’ when they asked.” Why? “Because they were all legends.” He reels off the list: George Best, Rodney Marsh, Frank McLintock, Alan Mullery … “Great blokes. Bestie was the nicest bloke you could wish to meet. He really was. And they never made me feel inferior. They welcomed me into the fold and I was able to be myself with them.”

He pauses. “I always wonder what would have happened if social media had been around then. Would they have slaughtered me and said, ‘What’s he doing on there?’ like they do about some of the women these days?” Hold on, I say – there’s too much to unpick here. Why do you think you would have been slaughtered? “I didn’t have a glittering playing career like them.” Back then, he says, it would have only taken a few people to say he was incompetent rather than funny for his reporting career to have been over before it started. “It might have been too much for a corporation like Sky.”

Does he think the way women such as Alex Scott and Jill Scott are treated is pure misogyny? There is a long silence. “Erm … yeah. Yeah, in Jill’s case, and two reasons in Alex’s case.” Misogyny and racism? “Yeah.”

Kamara adored his years on Soccer Saturday. In 2000 he started to present the show Goals on Sunday (then Soccer Extra), analysing the previous day’s matches. He became a regular guest on the Soccer AM TV series as a maverick football interviewer, and his TV presence started to extend beyond football. He presented shows such as Ninja Warrior UK and Cash in the Attic, guested on Have I Got News For You and The Great Sport Relief Bake Off, and appeared as himself in Emmerdale and Ted Lasso. Then there were the ads – his presence gave an authenticity and basic humour to products such as aluminium doors and shampoo, and the controversial gambling ads. (In 2007, the Advertising Standards Authority cleared a commercial featuring Kamara and former footballers including Ian Wright and Lee Dixon after viewers complained it played on “male bravado and peer pressure” and could encourage young people to gamble.) Often all he had to do was say “unbelievable” and laugh. He even had a hit album of Christmas songs. Kammy had become an all-round entertainer, and was enjoying life to the max. Happy-go-lucky Kammy, without a worry in his head. Then the voice started to go.

The thought of doing match reports made him feel ill. On social media people were noticing something was wrong. Some said they were worried, others ridiculed him. After one appearance on his friend Steph McGovern’s show Steph’s Packed Lunch, one tweet said, “Before getting Chris Kamara to read the Autocue, somebody should have checked if he can read.” At a match between Huddersfield and Bristol City, on his way down the gantry steps his balance went and he was convinced he was going to fall. A steward told him it “reminded me of my old man”. The comment hurt him, but again he made an excuse: he’d slipped before and was now being extra careful. That night his friend and Sky colleague Tony Gale rang and said, “Are you OK, Kammy? You don’t seem your normal self.” Another excuse: he said he was working too hard and was tired.

Perhaps the worst occasion was when he went on The One Show to promote his second Christmas album. He could hardly get a word out. He couldn’t remember the name of the album or the songs on it. On the train home, the conductor, who he knew well, asked how he was doing. Again he couldn’t get his words out. “Oh, you’ve had one or two, I’ll leave you alone,” the conductor said.

He remembers doing a Christmas show with Paddy McGuinness when “I sounded like somebody who’d had 10 pints. People were talking about it. I thought, ‘That’s fine, I don’t mind that.’ Rather than them thinking I’ve got a speech defect, I’ll take that.” He pauses. “I was ashamed I couldn’t cope properly any more, and now I apologise to every single person in the world who has speech problems or neurological problems because I understand it doesn’t define who you are.” Now he says he’s ashamed that he was ashamed of his condition.

Does he think football culture is so macho that he found it impossible to admit to the vulnerability that comes with a brain condition? “Yes, absolutely. Dead right. And I’d never done it throughout the whole of my life, whether it be racism or injuries, you get on with it. That’s how I was brought up. That’s my mentality. You’re not a victim, you need to man up, and you don’t show your feelings to the public or teammates or managers. To anyone. It’s only getting this condition that has made me realise all those years I was wrong. *Totally* wrong.”

He became terrified of having to talk – offscreen as

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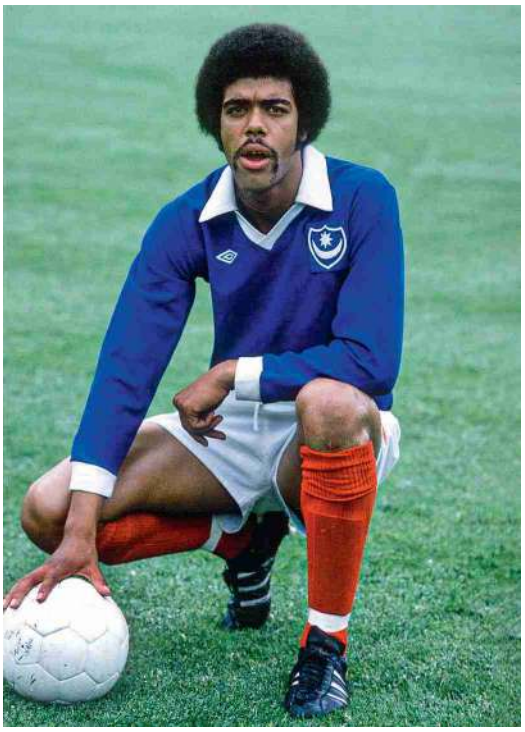

Clockwise from top left: playing for Portsmouth in 1977; celebrating Leeds' promotion in 1990; before and after realising he had missed a red card in 2010; with his wife Anne in 2022; Middlesbrough fans showing their support the same year; with Ninja Warrior UK co-presenter Ben Shephard in February

well as on. And all the time he was telling people nothing was wrong. The pretence must have been exhausting. "Well, it was playing with my mind. You go crazy. The first thing when you wake up is: can I speak today? If the delivery man comes to the door, can I talk to him? The old me used to have a laugh and a joke with him. Now I'm a bumbling old man who can't get his words out. My self-esteem was at its lowest ever point and that's when you think of crazy stuff in your head."

Kamara adored his broadcasting career, and he assumed that was done for at the very least. "Having played or managed for 24 years, to go into TV was happy days. All your birthdays have come at once. And all it required was for me to go on and be myself. Just go and have a laugh. So once that was taken away, it felt there was no me any more. It's stupid, but you think, 'Where have I gone? Where *is* he? I don't like the person I've become.' All those things go through your head."

It was when he went to spend time with the animals that the darkest thoughts came. "You think you're a burden and the family will be better off without you. That came at the height of my condition, 18 months in, when I thought it was dementia. I didn't want to be a burden – I'd spent my life looking after them."

How serious was he about taking his own life? "Well, it was a thought. I wasn't thinking about *how* can I exit. You just think if anything happened, I wouldn't be upset about it." Eventually Kamara agreed to go to a doctor. First he was diagnosed with an underactive thyroid, then apraxia of speech, a neurological disorder that affects the brain pathways involved in producing speech. He was relieved it wasn't Alzheimer's, but his first thought was he would have to quit broadcasting. Even then, he couldn't bring himself to go public. He told himself he would somehow hold on till the end of the season, then quietly leave. Why was he so scared? "I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. I didn't want to be a victim." Kamara mentions this a few times while we talk. It becomes obvious that there could be nothing worse for him than to be pitied. "My hypnotherapist, Daniel McDermid, said, 'The day you start accepting your condition is the day you start getting better.' I said, 'Yeah, I accept that I'm getting treatment with you, but I can't go public with it. I don't want to be a victim.' He said, 'You'll be surprised' and he was right."

He told his close friend Ben Shephard, with whom he co-presented Ninja Warrior UK. Eventually he agreed to talk about his apraxia in an interview with Shephard on ITV's Good Morning Britain. "I came out and did it with him, and it was the best day of my life from then on." He was astonished by people's understanding, kindness and warmth. Finally, it made sense to his fans.

He did quit Sky. When Stelling announced Kammy's departure on Soccer Saturday, the anchor was almost in tears. Sky didn't try to convince Kamara to stay, but many other TV shows were only too happy to hire him. He made a powerful ITV documentary, Lost for Words, about his condition last year. Earlier this year, he appeared on The Masked Singer. Now he says he's got almost as many offers of work as he had before he developed the condition. A while ago one company told him they were going to have to speed up his voice for a commercial. "I said, 'Yeah, do it' but I was thinking, 'Is this what it's come to?' Now I don't worry. There's no hiding it. They know when they employ me it's not the old Kammy they're getting; they get the new one now."

When Kamara went public, he said as a broadcaster, he felt a fraud – he could no longer do the thing he was paid to do. Since then, he says, he has received such moving support. Never more so than at a Middlesbrough match that week when fans unfurled banners saying, "You're not a fraud. You're unbelievable, Kammy."

Now, he says, it's time for him to repay the faith and love that people have shown in him, by campaigning for others with similar conditions. "I want to talk about apraxia, make people aware of the condition and show sufferers that they can still live a good life, whatever struggles they face." But, he says, it's equally important not to sound glib: "I don't want people to think, 'You spent two years in denial and now you're saying be yourself and come out about it.' I understand all that, but I can only preach from experience. I got by because everybody rallied behind me and said, 'We don't care how you speak, you're Kammy and we love you.'"

The support made him realise how lucky he is. Not everybody has it, and some people have been far sicker than him and at a much younger age. "I'm going to do everything in my power now to help kids born with speech problems. In this country, if you've got verbal dyspraxia you'll get one appointment with a speech and language therapist, then probably have to wait six months or a year for the next one." Last month he gave a talk at the House of Commons to try to boost speech and language therapy support for children who need it.

Kamara is now doing everything he can to help others and himself. Earlier this year, he went to Mexico for experimental treatment that had never been used for people with apraxia. He says it has resulted in a big improvement. His speech is still slow and flat, but it's much more fluent than it was at its worst. It might lack the excitability of old, but some of the feeling is coming back. Crucially, he says, the brain has started to make the right connections again: even if the words take a while to emerge, the correct ones do come out.

I was told he'd be able to manage only 45 minutes speaking to me, but in the end he talks for an hour and a half, and by the end he's almost giddy with possibilities. "I was of the opinion the game was up. I could hardly string a sentence together. The passage from the brain to the mouth wouldn't work. I'd think of the words, but they wouldn't come up. Now that flow, that fluency, is there." He knows there's a long way to go, but he's delighted by the progress he's made. In My Unbelievable Life, he describes himself as back to 75% of what he was before the apraxia took hold. What percentage would he say he was at his worst? "At my lowest I was zero basically. When I was down with the horses and in the fields, thinking I should quit, thinking all these terrible things, I was an absolute zero. I look back and think: what an idiot. What an *idiot*! How could I have had thoughts like that? Ridiculous. But I understand a lot more about mental health than I did and I realise there's something nagging away, a part of you saying: why don't you do something about it. They're *ridiculous* thoughts!" He repeats the word vehemently, as if scraping away any last remnant of the notion.

Most important of all, his sense of joy in the world has returned. Would he consider live match reporting again? I expect him to pooh-pooh the idea, but now he seems to think anything is possible. "Well, if my progress keeps going, then yes!" And his face breaks out into a classic old-school Kammy smile ●

Kammy: My Unbelievable Life by Chris Kamara is published by Pan Macmillan on 9 November at £22. To order a copy for £19.36, go to guardianbookshop.com

A NEW DY

Margaret Wilkerson Sexton with her husband and children

NAMIC

As a young Black woman, racism made *Margaret Wilkerson Sexton* fearful and angry. Then she met her white boyfriend and things got ... complicated. This is what her interracial marriage has taught her about life

Portraits: Jessica Chou

I GREW UP A DARK-SKINNED CHILD in New Orleans in the 1980s when both racism and colourism were rampant. My mother was a light-skinned Black woman, and older girls at my all-Black Catholic school would ask me if I was adopted. When I said no, they would ask how then my mother could be so pretty and I could be so ugly. I was called ugly so often I settled into it; it became not so much a belief as an identity.

When I was 12, my mom and I moved to Connecticut, to a little town called Bethel where we were one of a handful of Black families. The white kids at school threw the N-word around liberally. By contrast, my mother was Ms Black Pride. She drove 30 miles out of her way to buy doughnuts from the Black-owned bakery; she introduced me to Alex Haley's Roots when I was seven years old. When Spike Lee came to New Orleans to screen Malcolm X, we went, then when the movie was released, we saw it three more times in the theatre. When I was in fifth grade, she pulled me out of my integrated school and enrolled me in an all-Black one. I pleaded with her to let me stay as I had some friends and familiarity there, but she refused. "They don't see you as equal," she said. Years later, I understood that she was right.

High school was better. It was still predominantly white, but "the minorities" - as we called ourselves - established our own group to feel safe. Dark skin wasn't as much of an offence in Connecticut; and, albeit slowly, darker-skinned women were being cast in television shows and music videos. Lauryn Hill had just released The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill. I had matured, gained a certain ease in myself. I went into college balancing the Black pride that had been planted by my mother, my more positive high school experiences and the wounds I had accumulated.

I met my husband in my third year of college. We went to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and ended up choosing the same foreign study programme in Trinidad. We would learn later that we'd had two classes together on campus, but we'd never spoken. There was a group of eight of us from Dartmouth on the trip, and we all lived in The University of the West Indies (UWI) at St Augustine's dormitory. Though we were in a country

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comprised primarily of people of colour, and though I'd assumed upon entering that I'd immediately meet my Trinidadian husband, our curriculum necessitated that the eight of us spend all our time together. For the first time in a long time, despite being in a country where whites were the minority, I was the only Black person.

I can't tell you how uncomfortable it made me. I was constantly on edge for any inappropriate comment, any slur, any indication that my white peers had internalised the hierarchy inherent in white supremacy. I felt out of control of my own worth. That feeling never quite left me, but after nights being hazed by the local UWI students and weeks of drunken shenanigans at Coconuts, a club in Port of Spain, I began to relax. I bonded with one of the three white guys and, after a few weeks, we learned that we both loved Tracy Chapman, and that his father and I had gone to the same school. We were both known in the group for our laughter and, in discussions about Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children or Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, we were drawn to the same side of the analysis. One night, there was a particularly long line at one of our favourite clubs. I had gone on the first bus and arrived earlier than him. While I waited, I bought his favourite, rum and Coke, and as soon as he walked in, I held it out to him. When we finished our drinks, he led me to the dancefloor. Tanya Stephens' It's a Pity was playing. I slipped my hand in his pocket, and all our other plans got cancelled.

WE STILL TALK ABOUT THAT NIGHT with nostalgia: the rum, the dancefloor, the youth. But if I was on edge before we started dating, I became chronically anxious after. I had a distinct fear that someone was going to discriminate against me in front of him and he would then view me the way society stereotypically views Black people. (Again, when my children were born, I feared that some white person would denigrate me in front of them, and I'd lose a sense of my own authority, the confidence I feel as their protector and guide.) If that were to happen, I knew he would stand beside me, help to defend me, but I worried that our power dynamic would be irretrievably altered because we would both know that of the two of us, one was viewed as more worthwhile. I worried I wouldn't be able to shake off how small that might make me feel. My boyfriend, on the other hand, was in the grips of young love; he didn't think about the racial dynamics at all.

We never did knowingly encounter discrimination in Trinidad, nor when we got back to college and spent the next year-and-a-half with our combined groups of friends – my tribe of Black women and his freshman year roommates, each a distinct ethnicity. It didn't happen when we lived in New York the summer after graduation, either. But we travelled to the Dominican Republic in the fall of 2004, and the thing I had feared came upon me.

I had a grant to work at a non-profit organisation that fought the racist laws targeting Dominicans of Haitian descent, who are typically darker than other Dominicans and, on the basis of their skin colour and origin, have been denied basic rights typically associated with citizenship. I remember reading about the issues before I arrived and feeling an instant connection with the victimised demographic. I wasn't completely healed, but I had come a long way and was excited to see how much distance I'd covered from the girl who prayed every night for her colour to turn. I was excited to see my progress effect real, concrete change.

I entered the country with optimism, but soon had a rude awakening. People often assumed I was my boyfriend's prostitute; they called him sir and looked at me with disdain; passengers on the local *guaguas* (buses) would scream *"Negra"* out the window. I took it as a compliment at first, then a Dominican friend sweetly informed me that it wasn't intended to be positive. My husband would respond with anger, but he'd also try to placate me, assure me that their ignorant opinions were a product of colonialism. He'd warn me that I'd only lower myself by paying attention.

And just as I feared, despite his anger and his affirmations, my confidence began to wane and our relationship started to change. I became jealous, paranoid that my boyfriend was going to begin to agree with the world I had inhabited. There were white girls who worked with him at his mobile clinic in Cojobal; there were thin light-skinned girls who looked just like the ones who teased me in New Orleans. I'd interrogate him about whether or not he was checking them out, whether or not he would prefer to be with them. I created arguments out of nothing, felt rejected, so I rejected him "back". Suddenly I was filled with anger. Yes, the anger was targeted at Dominican racism, colourist New Orleanians, white supremacy in general, but it was spilling out on to my boyfriend.

Things settled when we got back to the States, but the old familiar feeling of valuelessness that I had internalised had been dug up by my experience in the Dominican Republic. I pulled back a bit from my boyfriend. On the surface, and even fairly deep beneath it, we were close, but I never let myself be *completely* vulnerable. It wasn't that I was afraid he would hurt me directly, it was that I was afraid white supremacy would swoop in again and reduce me. I'd be levelled if I weren't prepared for it. Moments that should have been joyful – like waiting on an engagement ring when we'd discussed marriage; buying a new home with the prospect of racist lenders – turned gruelling. Some subtly racist act would occur – a white girl in our social circle explaining that another friend had high standards because he was only attracted to blond girls, for instance – and my husband wouldn't notice it. Or, in the name of soothing me, he'd attribute benign intentions to the offender, and a gulf would spring up between us. But we'd talk, and all my anger would be drilled down to fear, and then to sadness.

We got married and became parents, which cemented our bond. We were our own family now. At this point, society's judgment of one of us would be a judgment against us all. Language evolved – there began to be words like "microaggression". I remember when I was a middle-school student and the white kids made fun of me for my New Orleans accent. They'd speak to me in a warped, stereotypically Black manner. One day I worked up the nerve to talk to the vice principal about it. I told her what they were doing and I told her that it was racist. She asked me how it was racist if it was only about the way I spoke? What did that have to do with my colour? I was 11 then, and I didn't have the words to explain the correlation. I started to cry. Before I left her office, she scolded me for applying such an egregious description to a harmless schoolyard taunt.

I began demanding more from my husband. He may have had positive intentions in drawing my attention away from racial offences, from softening the intent of their source, but his reassurances were naive at best and harmful at worst. They implied that he didn't feel the slights viscerally, as deeply as though they were his own; if he had, he wouldn't have been able to miss one when it landed.

He learned well. I got older. I left my job as a lawyer to begin an amorphous writing career, and it actually worked out. I got published, and people actually wanted to read my work. I went to therapy. I became a more seasoned mom. I began to care less and less what people thought of me. In my 20s and even 30s I would have considered someone else's opinion about me to be impactful, but it became easier to shrug things off, to not let them kill my vibe. Racism had always been the exception to that, but why did it have to be? It reminds me of that Toni Morrison quotation, "If I take your race away, and there you are, all strung out. And all you got is your little self, and what is that? What are you without racism? Are you any good? Are you still strong? Still smart? Do you still like yourself? If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem." And that's a problem that, on an emotional, spiritual *and marital* level, has nothing to do with me.

My husband now works in diversity, equality and inclusion at a tech company; he leads the white anti-racist group at our children's school, not because I've forced him, but because he has tried to become as ingrained in the cause as he would be if it directly affected him. He is always challenging himself to do more, and it is harder and harder to confuse him with the system. It's still not perfect and never will be. But recently, a white reporter interviewed us about our relationship separately. Some of the questions were the same, and afterward my husband and I compared notes. She'd said something racist, he thought, something about the burden of being in an interracial relationship being harder on my husband because he was white. He'd corrected her, but he still had feelings about it. I remembered that she had implied something similar in my own interview. It wasn't that I hadn't noticed it at the time, but I'd asserted the actual truth and moved on. No part of it had lingered with me. There was no space for it between my husband and me ●

Margaret Wilkerson Sexton is the author of On the Rooftop, published by Oneworld at £9.99. To order a copy for £9.29, go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

MY ANGER WAS WITH RACISM AND COLOURISM – BUT IT SPILLED OUT ON TO MY BOYFRIEND

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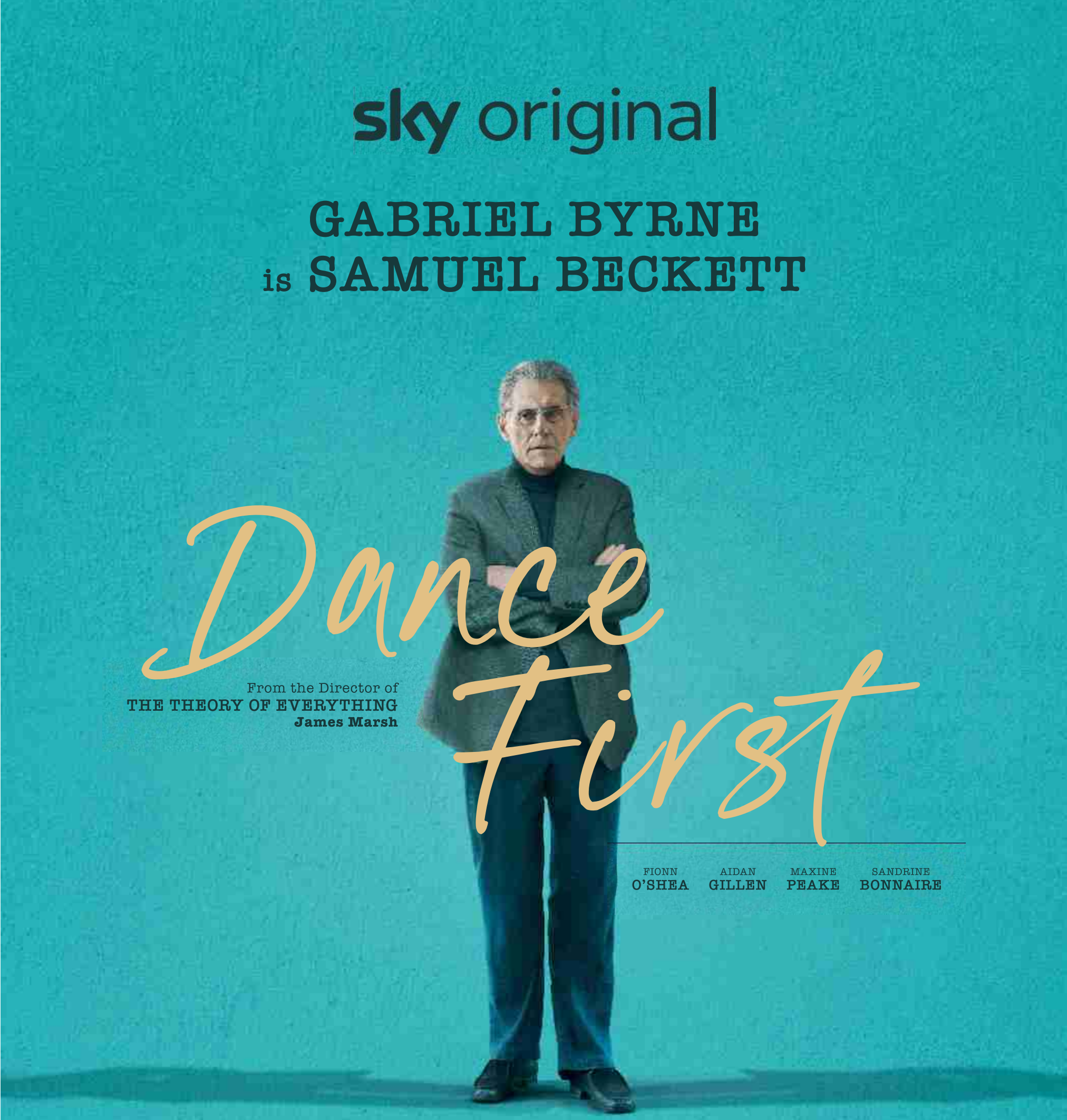

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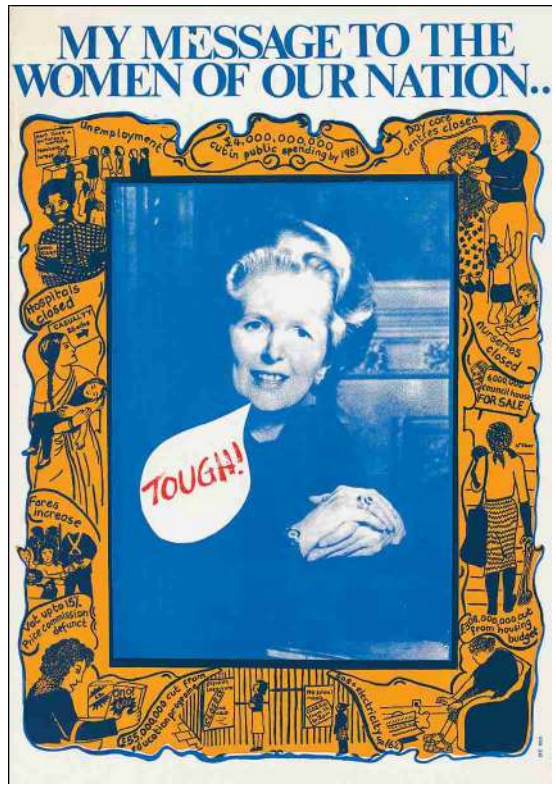
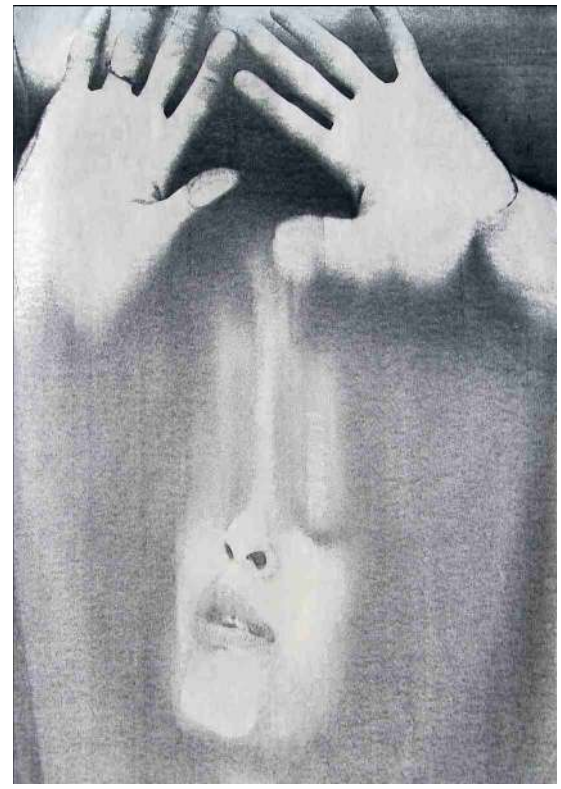
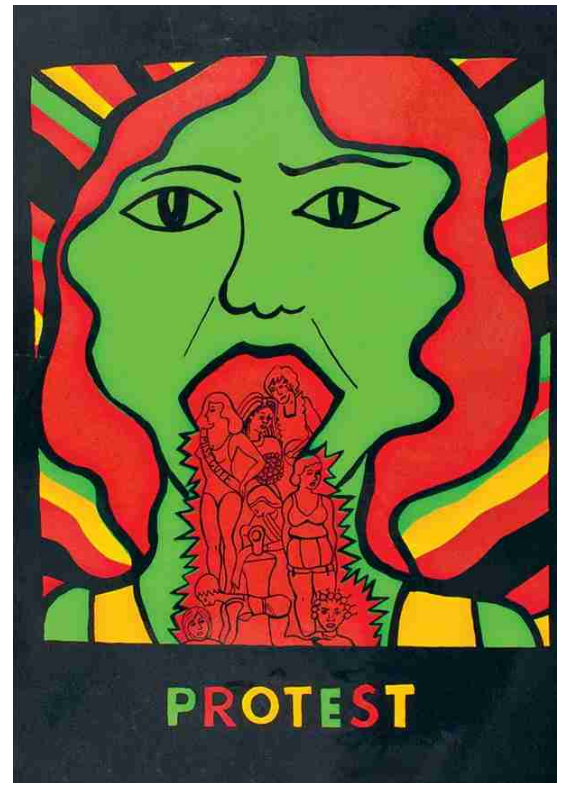




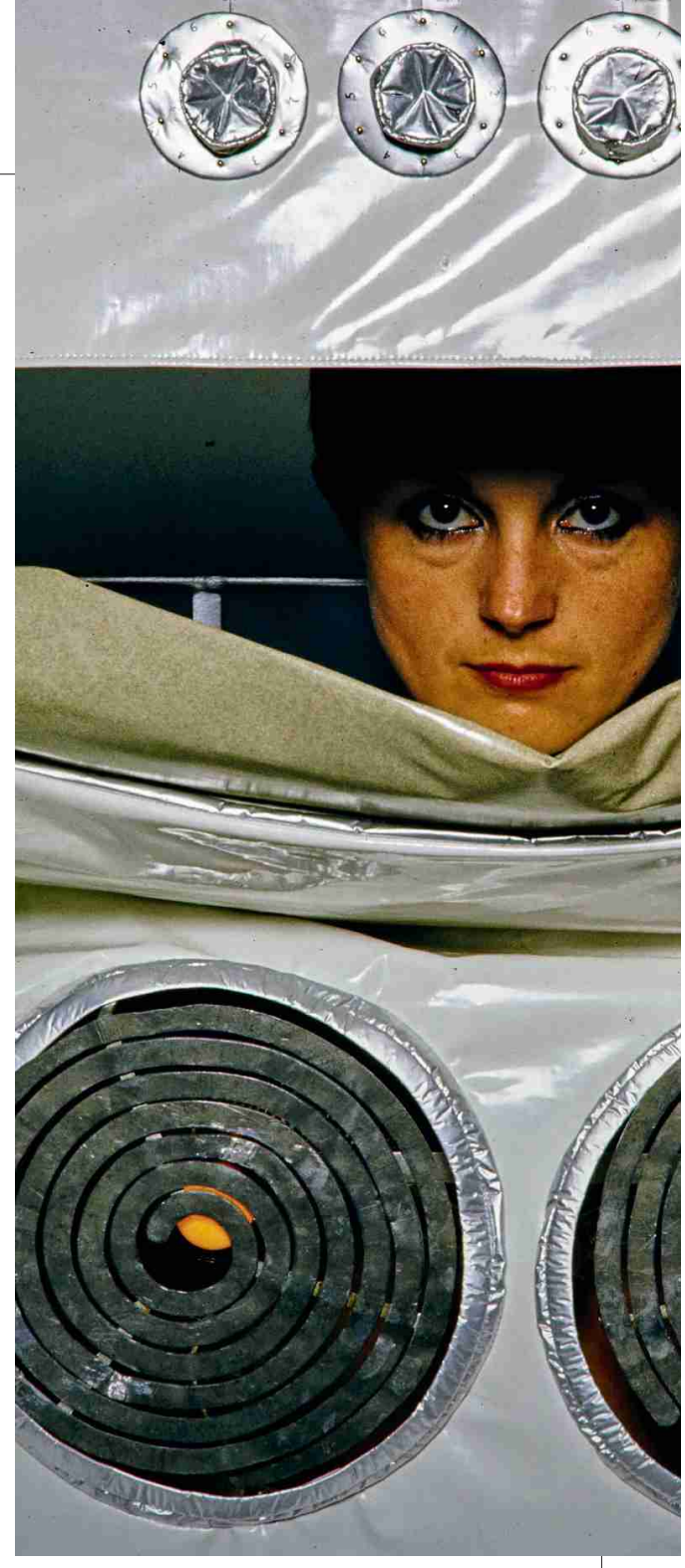
REVOLT! SHE SAID

The art that galvanised a generation



←Chila Kumari Singh Burman
Solidarity With Sisters, 1981
Burman curated the first UK exhibition of Black female artists, Four Indian Women Artists, in 1981 and helped establish the feminist magazine Mukti. This early work depicting South African women was created at a time when she was using screenprints to draw attention to issues often marginalised in mainstream news.

←Gina Birch
Three Minute Scream, 1979
The Raincoats bassist was a 20-year-old art student when she first screamed into the camera for this piece. She has since restaged the work at age 40 and 60. "As time has gone on I have felt more and more in my own skin, becoming the person I want to be," she says. "Empowered and able to express myself without fear, with humour and compassion."



ALISON LLOYD; SEE RED WOMEN'S WORKSHOP; ROSE ENGLISH/COURTESY RICHARD SALTOUN GALLERY; PENNY SLINGER/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY/COURTESY RICHARD SALTOUN GALLERY/BLUM & POE

Snubbed by the art world but with plenty to say, female artists across late 20th-century Britain created work on kitchen tables, in community centres, and at wild gigs. Now, a landmark exhibition at Tate Britain is finally giving these overlooked trailblazers their dues

Words: Skye Sherwin

THE FIRST TIME the Women's Liberation Movement landed in the imagination of the British public was 1970. Twenty-two million people watched the Miss World host Bob Hope on TV being flour-bombed by protesters, after he joked that he was "very happy to be here at this cattle market".

The next 20 years would see women invent equally headline-grabbing ways to call out the patriarchy. In Leeds in 1977, when police told local women to stay indoors after dark during the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper, protesters took to the streets to Reclaim the Night. When US nuclear missiles were stored at Greenham Common, Berkshire, in 1981, a group of Welsh women established a peace camp that would last for two decades. The night that Margaret Thatcher's government passed the notorious Section 28 law in 1988, banning the "promotion" of homosexuality, lesbian protesters abseiled into the House of Lords.

Yet most work done by female activists at the time did not have a big public stage. This month, Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK, 1970-90, will open at London's Tate Britain, and shockingly enough, it is the first major museum survey to look back at what happened as feminism gathered steam in the country. It packs in more than 100 artists and collectives who pioneered work touching on everything from equal pay to menstruation taboos, the goddess movement to sex work. On the lawn outside, meanwhile, you can literally chew over the issues in Bobby Baker's recreation of her 1976 interactive sculptural installation Edible Family in a Mobile Home, with a lifesize Mum, Dad and kids made from garibaldi biscuits and meringue.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, the murder of Sarah Everard and the threat to abortion rights across the world, the timing couldn't feel more urgent. It is also a reminder of what previous generations were up against. Marital rape was not recognised as a crime in the UK until 1991 and it was only in 1975 that a married woman no longer needed her husband's permission to get a bank loan. Maternity leave wasn't available to all working women until 1993, which meant that for many, getting pregnant meant losing your job. "It starts with a lot of disparate women getting angry, talking back and rising up," says the exhibition's curator, Linsey Young.

Women in Revolt! takes an expansive look at these rebel years that is less about landmark artworks than the collective energy. Away from the boys' club of museums and galleries, this energy percolated through experimental spaces for living and working, from women's co-operatives to traditional family homes, and saw women making innovative work in pioneering

← **Helen Chadwick**
In the Kitchen (Stove), 1977
This seminal feminist work, a sinister takedown of the domestic goddess cliche, was first staged by Chadwick as a performance for her graduation show in 1977. Chadwick and two other naked performers donned kitchen machinery to unnerving, sexualised effect.

← **Jill Westwood**
Potent-Female, 1983
Westwood had first started making wearable latex sculptures as an art student and later explored the transgressive power of "dom" personas and London's rubber fetish scene. This photo mimics the pose of James McNeill Whistler's painting Whistler's Mother, and was staged at home, which was "a shared short-life housing co-op with other artists", she explains. "Our lives were a constant process of artmaking and living."

→ **Margaret Harrison**
Banana Woman, 1971
Harrison's early satirical works draw on Playboy pin-ups and pneumatic comic-strip superheroes to skewer how women are objectified and consumed in visual culture. Later she began co-creating documentary projects exploring women's working conditions.

'The art market was nonexistent for people like us. The idea of doing things outside a gallery brought people together'

forms such as video and performance, manifestos and social schemes. "Most female artists had no expectation art institutions would pay attention, so they had to make it happen in a different way," says Young.

Margaret Harrison's journey is a case in point. A year after she joined the Miss World protest dressed as "Miss Lovable Bra" (wearing a black plastic chest with orange fur nipples), her first solo exhibition at Motif Editions Gallery in London was closed after one day on grounds of indecency. Its satirical drawings showed pin-up girls as obvious commodities. What riled the police, though, was her depiction of Playboy magnate Hugh Hefner as a breasty Bunny. "The art market was nonexistent for people like me," Harrison says. "The notion that you could do things outside a gallery brought people together."

After co-founding the London Women's Liberation Art Group and then the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, Harrison was moved to look "at people's material conditions". With fellow feminist lodestars Mary Kelly and Kay Hunt, in 1973 she began recording the experiences of female workers in a south-east London metal box factory to uncover the real-world impact of the Equal Pay Act of 1970, which had been one of the women's movement's key demands. Learning that the workers were scared to speak out in case they were sacked, they discovered how little had changed.

London in the 1970s is remembered for its grim living conditions and buzzing creative community, a time when off-the-beaten-track areas included Notting Hill and Camden Town; empty buildings might be squatted or turned into artists' studios. Collectives of women formed across the city, such as the Hackney Flashers, whose photographs captured working mothers' day-to-day lives in the East End, or the See Red Women's Workshop, who created agitprop posters for progressive causes and once rattled the National Front so much it trashed their print studio. "We did not see ourselves as part of the art world at all," the surviving members of See Red say today. The posters were sold at radical bookshops, and they recall spending a lot of time at the post office, sending out work. "We actively subverted our art school training that promoted the sole 'Artist with a capital A', who produced expensive signed prints," they explain. "All work was accessible and affordable, and authored collectively."

The exhibition has its share of breakout names from these years, such as Helen Chadwick, who turned fridges and ovens into wearable sculptures, or Kelly, whose installation Post-Partum Document chronicles the uncompromising reality of her relationship with her young son and is an acknowledged trailblazer (it caused a press furore when it was debuted in 1976 thanks to its inclusion of dirty nappies). But equally fascinating are the under-the-radar artists whose output has not always been preserved for posterity. "A lot of work has come direct from under beds and in cupboards," says Young.

In London, Harrison recalls "something creative happening around the corner all the time". Not so in Birmingham, where art graduates and new mothers Su Richardson and Monica Ross met at a baby clinic. At a women's art history conference in 1975, they joined forces with the artist Kate Walker, who stood up in the crowd and invited people to participate in a women's postal art project. Working at kitchen tables with whatever was available around the house, they produced work small enough to be mailed. By inviting friends across the country, the network grew, the works seen as a co-creation between sender and recipient. "Themes were repeated," says Richardson today. "[Such as] being caged in; invisibility as a wife and mother." The resultant works – crocheted sandwiches topped by flies, a chocolate box of breasts and lips – convey the sweet poison of "a woman's world". Young says that what survives "looks ratty and that's fine". It is a testament to how the women made the most of their limited resources, but a sign too of the decades of missing attention paid to female artists.

Gina Birch's 1979 Super 8 film Three Minute Scream, where the young art student simply screams into the camera, sums up the explosive outcry of these years. Birch found release not in the art world, where she recalls, "the boys

CHILA KUMARI BURMAN/VARDA AGARWAL; COURTESY GINA BIRCH; ESTATE OF HELEN CHADWICK/COURTESY RICHARD SALTOUN GALLERY, LONDON AND ROME; DR JILL WESTWOOD; MARGARET F HARRISON

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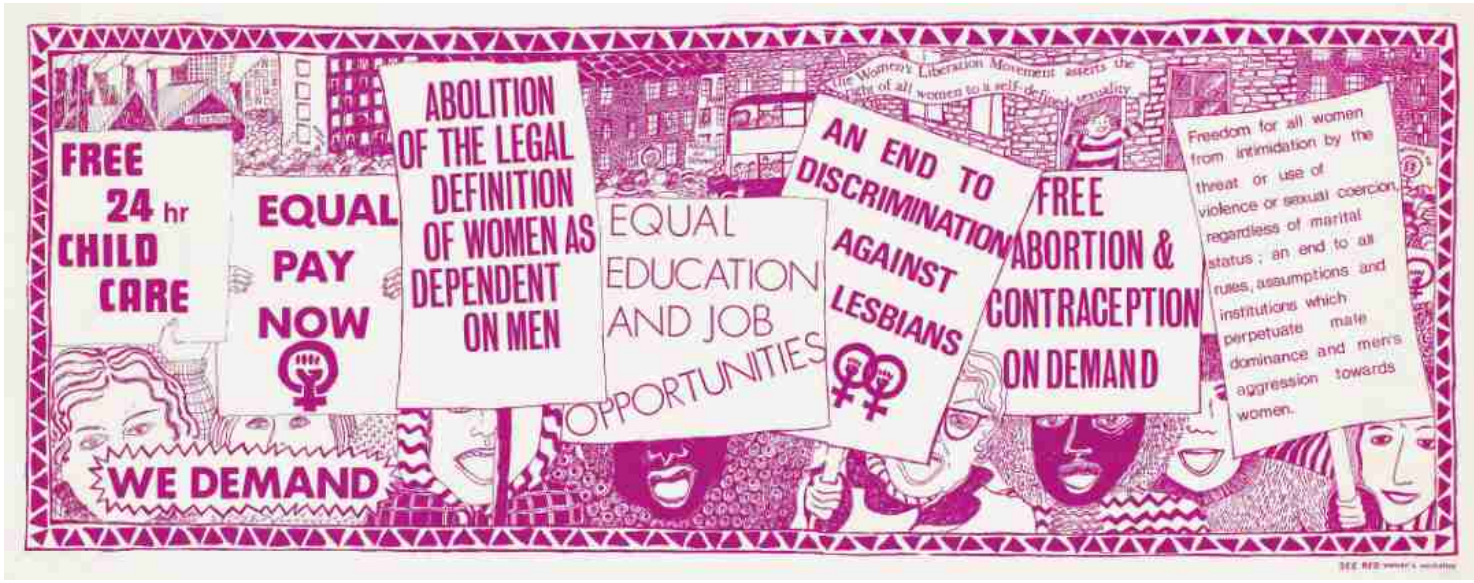


←See Red Women's Workshop, 1974-1990
7 Demands, 1974
See Red made affordable posters that questioned "sexist, racist and homophobic society". They began operating out of an empty shop in Camden Town, their first work depicting a green-skinned everywoman vomiting housewives and porn mag models. They followed that up with this design spelling out seven demands, including free childcare, and the abolition of women's legal dependency on men.

→Lubaina Himid
The Carrot Piece, 1985
With a suggestive unicycle protruding awkwardly between his legs, a white man tries to tempt a Black woman with a phallic carrot. She's not interested: her arms are already full with what she needs. Himid's painted plywood figures comment on white male presumption and gender relations, but also how white-run art institutions tried to woo Black artists with unappealing offers in the midst of 1980s identity politics.

could drink and talk with the tutors and the girls got talked to, judged and often fucked", but in punk music. She describes it as "somewhere I could really belong". Although unable to play an instrument, she formed the now much-revered band the Raincoats with Ana da Silva.

The female artists who emerged amid Britain's new music scenes get a special focus in Women in Revolt! Alongside the better-known names - Birch, Throbbing Gristle's Cosey Fanni Tutti or the collagist Linder - are unsung mavericks such as Jill Westwood. With her noise band Fistfuck, she reportedly peed on and beat willing audience members at wild gigs that crossed the bounds of art and life. "The events were conceived to put women in the position of power, to explore ritualised enactments of aspects of violence and intimidation," says Westwood. "[I was] exploring what it might be to occupy a role that can dominate, control, subordinate another … maybe all the things patriarchy does to us, women and men."

These many stories will unfold chronologically through Tate's galleries. "I wanted to show the reality of what it was like living in the UK," says Young. "It meant I couldn't take any licence with the truth. Feminist art by women of colour doesn't appear until later. A thematic hang may have hidden that." Feminism's white middle-class early days are notorious. In the 1980s however, with the rise of the British Black Arts movement, Black women who'd typically been lone figures at art school began establishing networks and staging shows that spoke of their experiences. On display was what the painter Claudette Johnson has described as "not portraiture", but "our humanity, our feelings and our politics".

A key organiser was the 2017 Turner prize winner Lubaina Himid, who'd initially studied theatre design but found few opportunities. "I realised I had to take the lead and create an audience-friendly space for myself and others," she says. "I sent type-written letters and A4 posters to art schools, community centres and art centres to find women who wanted to exhibit. We met in the house of my partner. It was always easier to maintain these networks if you had a kitchen to offer hospitality."

The women she assembled for formative London shows such as 1985's The Thin Black Line included the key figures Ingrid Pollard, Sonia Boyce, Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Singh Burman. Confronting marginalisation on the double front of race and gender, their art is a long-resounding battle cry, from Biswas's fierce, stereotype-defying painting of Kali as a housewife brandishing steak knives to Burman's Riot prints of 1981, which explored the social unrest provoked by tinderbox issues such as nuclear arms and police brutality.

Thatcher affirmed individualism with the infamous quip that there was "no such thing as society", but if anything, the exhibition reveals that group action was a powerful force for female artists in the 80s. The women's photographic agency Format Photographers documented the miners' strikes, anti-nuclear and anti-racism protests. Artists joined the camp at Greenham Common. Another of the show's under-exposed talents, Tessa Boffin, made elegantly raunchy fantasy photographs of a lesbian angel discovering safe sex: conceived at the height of Section 28 and the Aids crisis, they highlight the neglect of lesbians in sex education and treatment.

The show ends in 1990, when consciousness-raising radicalism was being outpaced by capitalism. There was no room for it in the big-money art market ushered in by Charles Saatchi and the YBAs, while property development put paid to the co-operative culture engendered in squats. The exhibition's concluding note is Kate Walker's Art of Survival, A Living Monument of 1987, which portrays the artist standing on a plinth, paint palette in hand. Women, Walker implied, can't sit back and wait to be commemorated, but must get on with the business of constant, engaged making.

"Too much of women's art has been hidden from view for far too long," says Richardson, who hopes the show's clarion call will resound with younger generations. "The most important lesson is how much can be achieved by women when we work together. It is women's strength to collaborate, we need to use it."
Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK, 1970-90 is at the Tate Britain, London, Wednesday to 7 April.

SEE RED WOMEN'S WORKSHOP; COURTESY LUBAINA HIMID/HOLLYBUSH GARDENS, LONDON

DIY collective Gob Nation brings the disparate likes of the Tubs and Ex-Vöid under its umbrella. With venues closing and cuts to funding, could its can-do approach be a new model for struggling musicians?

All in the family

Words: Emma Garland
Portrait: Antonio Olmos

"Benefit fraud," someone jokes when I ask what it takes to sustain a music career in 2023. I am huddled in a flat overlooking south-east London's Surrey Quays docks with a small cross-section of Gob Nation – the collective name for a universe of bands based mostly in these parts. If it weren't for the fact that they're made up of rotating combinations of the same dozen or so musicians, the 10 acts within Gob Nation would seem totally disparate. The omnivorous jangle palette of the Tubs' recently acclaimed album Dead Meat is a far cry from Sniffany & the Nits's maniacal punk debut The Unscratchable Itch, which is the tonal inverse of Garden Centre's guileless art-pop on Searching for a Stream. What they do share is a leftfield sensibility, lacerating wit and snotty attitude. Ask any of them to identify what holds it all together and the answer is unanimous: "banter".

"On a social level, it's hard to be in bands with people you don't get on with," says Owen Williams, who fronts the Tubs and plays various instruments in at least five other bands. "Even though we probably find each other quite annoying sometimes, because we're such a close group of friends we always end up picking each other."

"We have quite a specific sense of humour. Most of us are from south Wales and grew up in Cardiff," adds George Nicholls, who leads the "yacht rock-infused" GN Band, plays guitar in the Tubs and retro oddballs Suep, and formerly Joanna Gruesome – the beloved noise-pop outfit that first brought Nicholls and Williams together with bassist Max Warren and singer-guitarist Lan McArdle. They were bound by their differences even then: a bunch of 80s jangle enthusiasts making music that didn't slot into the duelling guitar scenes of the early 2010s; they were too abrasive to be twee and too poppy to be hardcore. "We wanted to be part of that DIY indie pop scene but we were also obsessed with being like, 'But we're *punks* as well,'" Williams laughs. "There was this weird tension where we were obviously into pop music but trying to ruin it all the time."

The designated "head honcho", Warren established Gob Nation in 2017 to release records and put on shows while living in Brighton – something he'd previously done in Cardiff under the moniker Reeks of Effort. A revolving door of auteurs, the bands are distinguished less by genre than by whoever's creative voice is to the fore. The Tubs make for easy listening, but Williams's neurotic lyricism steers them away from genre homage, picking at a range of misfortunes from romantic manipulation to groin rash. Josie Edwards whips up Sniffany & the Nits' already caustic sound into a frenzy of toxic femininity, while pub-rockers the TSG are boosted by the larger-than-life charisma of Taylor Stewart, who's like a Glaswegian Liam Gallagher. As well as sharing members, the bands are occasionally linked by overlapping motifs: a hardcore punk gesture in an Ex-Vöid song, a jangly riff by Sniffany & the Nits alluding to the Tubs. "It's like our personalities are merging," Williams says. "Which maybe is unhealthy, I don't know."

"A lot of us are just quite singular, critical people. And I think that level of harshness upon ourselves unfortunately translates into not really making friends with others," suggests Edwards, whose illustration work provides much of Gob Nation's visual identity through album art, gig posters and merch. "It sounds horrible, but we can't deal with being bored or with people that we don't find interesting. Someone said recently that we seem like a fucked-up family, and it's true."

'A lot of people give up on music because they don't have that community to fall back on'

When everyone moved to London in the late-2010s, Gob Nation became a way of organising projects that were already in motion. A one-stop label, promoter and digital TV channel, it developed into an autonomous machine powered by individual strengths. Edwards provides the design; Stewart directs music videos; Will Deacon (Garden Centre/Suep/PC World) hosts Gob Nation TV; Matt Green (the Tubs/Sniffany & the Nits) records many of their albums at his studio Head Cold; and Williams is launching a small press called Perfect Angel as an outlet for the collective's literature, poetry and lyrics. Then there's Warren, whose administrative

chops and "normal" personality keep things operational.

"For someone who's left his suitcase in America and forgotten his passport when we're supposed to play a festival in Spain the next day, Max is actually very organised," says Nicholls.

"If any of us go on tour we huddle behind Max," Edwards adds. "He has a much more natural way of connecting with the outside world, whereas the rest of us are too caught up in ourselves. Max can chill the fuck out. He can take his shirt off, listen to football on the radio, have a beer and go to bed."

Gob Nation straddles DIY and mainstream ecosystems. Some bands, such as the Tubs and Suep, are touring heavily with their eyes on signing to bigger labels. Sniffany & the Nits have developed cult appeal, catching the ears of Steve Lamacq and sharing bills with Screaming Females and Deerhoof, while the industrial electronic duo PC World and new wavers Lash move in firmly underground punk circles.

"There's a funny period where you're leaving the top of DIY to being at the lower levels of the music industry," says Warren. "In theory it's a step up, but in reality you earn a lot less money because suddenly other people's hands are reaching in. Ultimately we're treading water constantly, so if someone offers us money: yes please."

The collective's social structure keeps everyone in orbit, but the London rental market also forces them to live on top of one another in flatshares and guardianships. This makes it incredibly easy to start new projects (Sniffany & the Nits' debut album was written when its members were living in an abandoned care home in Sydenham, south-east London, during the pandemic; the Tubs's in a disused police station), but also encourages them to pull rank when things get tough.

Cities change rapidly. Venues shut, scenes fracture and people prioritise careers or families. "Which maybe is why we're still doing everything with each other - we can rely on that," McArdle offers. "Occasionally we'll lose someone to getting an actual job, but mostly everyone still wants to hang out and the best way to do that is to keep making music together."

As Conservative austerity and cuts to arts funding deplete opportunities for those who don't have financial support, the UK music landscape has become a binary of major label homogeny and dogged independence. Although not without its struggles, Gob Nation represents a self-sufficient alternative. "My vision for the future is I'd like people to have more ownership over the things they produce, and be able to facilitate culture," says Nicholls. "But we're not in that position yet."

For now, Gob Nation has found an equilibrium that keeps everyone afloat. "I feel so proud of it but I also feel as if we're getting away with something, like we're kids playing shop," says Edwards, citing a "frat house" bond that steels them against the outside world and traditional metrics of success.

"I think a lot of people just say: 'That's it, hype's gone, I'm not going to be a musician any more,' because they don't have that community to fall back on," Williams adds. "That's the nice thing about this group. We can stray a bit, but we always have something to come back to."

Who's who
The Gob Nation extended universe

1 **Lan McArdle** Vocalist and guitarist in Ex-Vöid, former vocalist in Joanna Gruesome

2 **Georgie Stott** Vocalist and keyboardist for Suep, Porridge Radio, Lash and the GN Band

3 **Taylor Stewart** Vocalist in the TSG, drummer for the Tubs, video director

4 **Max Levy** Vocalist and guitarist in Garden Centre, former vocalist of the Snivellers

5 **Josh Harvey** Keyboardist and vocalist in Suep, former Snivellers guitarist

6 **Max Warren** Bassist in the Tubs, the TSG and Sniffany & the Nits, former bassist of Joanna Gruesome and the Snivellers

7 **George Nicholls** Guitarist in the Tubs and Suep, vocalist and guitarist in the GN Band

8 **Josephine Edwards** Vocalist in Sniffany & the Nits

9 **Owen Williams** Guitarist and vocalist in the Tubs and Ex-Vöid; Sniffany & the Nits drummer; guitarist in Garden Centre; bassist in Porridge Radio and the GN Band; former guitarist and vocalist for Joanna Gruesome and guitarist in the Snivellers

10 **William Dante Deacon** Drummer in Garden Centre, and vocalist in PC World

Joe Barton's thriller Giri/Haji made him one of the UK's most in-demand screenwriters. He talks about the streaming wars, his triumphant return with The Lazarus Project, and why he's so wary of Hollywood

'Writers are like antelopes walking through a pack of lions'

Words: Fiona Sturges

When Joe Barton was at junior school, he and his classmates were set a project. After being put into groups and given camcorders, they were instructed to make an advert for toothpaste. "Everyone wanted to be in the advert, whereas I wanted to film it," says Barton, who at the time was gorging on behind-the-scenes footage of the Indiana Jones films. "All I could think to do was zoom in and out, and I thought: 'This is great, I'm really doing it, I'm making a film.' Then I was ill and off school for a week, and when I got back they'd refilmed it. So there I was, from day one, being fucking cancelled."

As a screenwriter, the 38-year-old Barton is now flying high, but cancellation remains "a theme". Despite glowing reviews, his 2019 crime thriller Giri/Haji and last year's teen witch series The Bastard Son & the Devil Himself were both terminated after one series. Then there was his firing from HBO's TV spin-off of The Batman, mention of which causes his head to drop into his hands. All of which makes the success of his time-travel drama The Lazarus Project, which returns for a second series this month, that much sweeter.

We are sitting with cups of tea in Barton's gleaming open-plan kitchen in Brighton where he lives with his partner, Alice, and their two children. Dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt revealing heavily tattooed arms, he is relaxed, funny and entertainingly sweary. Since his previous shows hadn't made it past one series, Barton assumed The Lazarus Project was "another one-and-done, so I didn't worry too much about how [the first series] ended. I basically wrote myself into a cul-de-sac. Then we found out we were coming back, and my first thought was: 'Fuck. Where do we go from here?'"

The series follows the fortunes of George (Paapa Essiedu), who is recruited to a top-secret organisation whose members regularly time travel to head off potential extinction events, from pandemics and terrorist attacks to nuclear war. At the start of the second series, we find George trying to assuage the damage caused by his decision to turn back time to save his girlfriend, Sarah (Charly Clive), who had been killed in a traffic accident. Barton compares the experience of writing the show to the scene in Wallace and Gromit's The Wrong Trousers where Gromit, atop a runaway toy train, is frantically laying down track as it careers around the house. "It's the most structurally complex story I've ever tried to do," he says, "and in the shortest amount of time. You're just trying to get ahead enough so that people aren't turning up on set with nothing to say."

For Barton, the pleasure of writing The Lazarus Project lies less in the big action set-pieces than putting characters through the emotional wringer and seeing how they cope. "I think everything I've done has been an attempt to 'Trojan horse' character drama into a bigger genre, even though it's the genre that gets stuff made." Barton despairs that when when he has pitched ideas for character-based dramas where "it's just people talking to each other", he has always been turned down. And so he has ended up burying the human drama in stories about time travel or teenage witches.

As a child, Barton always dreamed of being a movie director but, on completing a degree in film and TV production in 2007, he realised he had "no concept of how to go about it. But I knew I wanted to make stuff, and the one thing I could do straight away was write." His first project was a web drama called Freak, starring Georgina Campbell, after which came a feature-length video for the boyband McFly, which "was awful, just terrible", but enough to get Barton an agent. Next came writing credits on the police procedural Cuffs, Channel 4's sci-fi drama Humans, and Troy: Fall of a City.

But it was Giri/Haji, his 2019 thriller about a Tokyo detective who goes to London to search for his missing brother, that made Barton's name. His first original series, the show was critically adored and criminally underwatched. As it was a British/Japanese bilingual thriller going out late on BBC Two, he knew it wouldn't be a mainstream hit, which "allowed us to be more free with the choices we made. So we were able to include animation and even a dance sequence, which I think made the show what it was."

That dance sequence is part of a spellbinding denouement in which the characters gather for a final standoff in the rain on a London rooftop. The viewer expects an eruption of violence, but instead the cast slip into a dreamy slow-motion

Not your average Joe
(Far left) Barton; (left) behind the scenes on The Lazarus Project; (below) the dance scene from Giri/Haji

dance, shot in black and white. Barton knew it was a creative risk, which was why he hired professional dancers, overseen by the choreographer Liam Steel, to try it out before attempting it on set. "I remember the first time me and the director Julian [Farino] went down to the dance studios. Liam showed us the dance and I thought: 'Oh wow, it's going to work', and Julian just burst into tears." After a run on BBC Two, the series moved to Netflix; a few weeks later, it was cancelled. For Barton, Giri/Haji remains the high point of his career. "As a purely creative endeavour, it's my favourite out of all the series I've made," he says. "But it was also a failure because no one fucking watched it."

Barton says the streaming era has afforded him some great opportunities, although he believes the bubble is close to bursting. Citing The Spiderwick Chronicles and Nautilus, two series recently cancelled by Disney+ without being aired (the Roku Channel recently picked up the rights for The Spiderwick Chronicles in the US), he says: "It's completely unforgivable, what they're doing. The problem is that the industry is a creative endeavour that works within a huge capitalist system. And so you have all these artists and creatives, and then there are these other people who are there to make money. They are in the entertainment business maybe because they want to be adjacent to the glamour. I just think: 'Go and be a hedge fund manager; go work in the City.'"

To get a TV show made, he notes, requires compromise. "One of the first things you have to do is let go of the image of the show in your head because that will never exist. Part of the pleasure is bringing it to life with hundreds of other people, as it's a hugely collaborative medium. You shouldn't think it's all your vision, as that would leave you constantly disappointed."

'I replaced a guy on the Batman project, and then I was replaced with someone else. That's just how it works – it's brutal'

Barton's biggest professional disappointment came while working on the TV spin-off to The Batman film, a job he "genuinely thought would be life-changing. My agent was saying: 'This is the one. This is going to be huge.'" It was originally pitched by HBO as The Wire set in Gotham City's police department; Barton loved the concept but was later told that the cop show idea had been thrown out in favour of focusing on Joker. So Barton binned the script he had been working on for six months, drafted a new one and sent it off. "And one of the execs called me and said: 'We love it and we're so excited about this show.' And then I never heard from them again."

It is experiences like this that have made Barton wary of working entirely on Hollywood projects: "In those environments, the treatment of writers is very weird. You feel like an antelope walking through a pack of lions - they are just desperate to take you down. I replaced a guy on the Batman project, and then I was replaced with someone else. That's just how it works, and it's brutal."

In any case, Barton, who is in the process of launching his own production company, is not short of work. His new Netflix thriller Black Doves, starring Keira Knightley, has just begun shooting. Next year he will start work on a new version of Peter Shaffer's Amadeus, for Sky, and there's a series about a bounty hunter with director Michael Bay in the works (shooting was halted because of the actors' and writers' strikes). He has also written a sequel to the JJ Abrams-produced 2008 monster film, Cloverfield, which is yet to go into production and about which he regularly fields questions from Cloverfield fans on social media. He is often asked when it will be released, but says: "I only wrote it, so they don't tell me anything."

Reflecting on the ups and downs of his career, Barton concludes: "There's a sense you have to ride your luck, and you are only as good as your last series. Luckily, with The Lazarus Project and Black Doves, I've got a couple in the bank. All you can do is make the shows as good as you can and pray that people watch them."
Series two of The Lazarus Project is on Sky Max and Now on 15 November.

LUDOVIC ROBERT/SISTER/BBC/NETFLIX; SIMON RIDGWAY/SKY UK

NIALL MCDIARMID; TRISTRAM KENTON/THE GUARDIAN

Rich pickings

From Wodehouse to Wilde to Downton Abbey, the lives of the posh can be a grimly fascinating source of art, says playwright *Rory Mullarkey*. He explains why his latest work is inspired by Made in Chelsea

Sloanes under the hammer (Left) The cast of Mates in Chelsea; and (below) James Norton and Fiona Button in Laura Wade's Posh

It is 3am and I'm a committed socialist, so why am I about to begin my seventh episode in a row of Made in Chelsea? The show sees posh Londonites called names like "Binky" and "Boulle" cheat on each other, and then deny it in nice cafes. Of course, there's an element of human drama: romance (well, people cheating on each other), intrigue (which nice cafe will it be this time?), and mistaken identity (I genuinely still can't tell most of them apart), but this is hardly high-class stuff, despite being literally high-class stuff. So why do I love it so much that I've written a play about it? Well, theatre is the perfect medium for expressing tension and contradiction, and there's nothing more tense and contradictory in me than my love/hate relationship with these well-heeled cafe-dwellers.

Because it isn't just Made in Chelsea that has me questioning my left-leaning principles. Why do I, an avid protest-goer and workers' rights advocate, still anxiously await any info on a potential season two of Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story, in which a mad (but hot) King George III probably signs the 1799 Combination Act to crush the nascent trade unions? Why do I, a big decrier of hereditary privilege, still sob like a little boy when Matthew Crawley ploughs his sports car into an unfortunate delivery truck and dies, thus passing the heirship of Downton Abbey on to his newborn son?

The occasional motoring mishap aside, these are thoroughly comforting pieces of fiction: the weather is always good, the food looks nice, England (it is always England, sorry) seems at its greenest and pleasantest. It's a fantasy of privilege, supreme and untroubled. Come what may, the status quo stays strong. Is that why I like it? Am I secretly a Tory? Maybe a lot of us are. As much as I enjoy blaming things on Netflix and ITV, England's misty-eyed relationship with its ruling class has far deeper roots in its culture and history.

Nearly a millennium ago, a bunch of people in boats came over the water from France, except these guys weren't instantly detained and bunged unceremoniously into the nearest floating refugee prison. Instead they took over the country, and have been (largely) in charge ever since. Though most visible these days in comfort-TV depictions of the past, aristocrats still own huge swathes of the land, still sit unelected in the legislature, and the main one of them is the literal king of all of us. They won their power through rapacious violence, but summery stories of their twittish and hapless humanity, shapeshifting through the ages as privilege does, whether it's in the hilarious buffoons of PG Wodehouse or the cucumber-sandwich-wielding quipsters of Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, or even the bungling cheaters-and-forgetters of Made in Chelsea, still dominate the English imagination.

But what makes them so beguiling – in literature and in life? I think it's something to do with their freedom from consequence. These God-nominated scions of untouchability don't have to deal with the silly exigencies of modern life: not for them the monstrous childcare bill or fast-ballooning interest rate. Indeed, this is what makes the cast of Made in Chelsea so anthropologically divorced from the wannabe-influencers of Love Island: these people don't care if we watch them or not. Take the camera away and they'll just go drift around south-west London some more, cheating on each other and pretending to have forgotten because they were drunk. To them, it doesn't matter. They can be utterly themselves. Bertie Wooster, from Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster novels, himself a proud possessor of Norman blood, is the same. Cushioned always by his position in society and mothered by his omniscient manservant Jeeves, Bertie lives free of all true responsibility. He continually needs to be extricated from potential peril, and in the complexity of the extrication lies the joy of the plotting, but extricated he always will be. He is, effectively, a child. And who doesn't find children charming?

Don't get me wrong: Wodehouse and Wilde infuse their tales with a subversive political spirit, and their characters are charming, at least in part, because their creators are two of the most gifted deployers of linguistic wit and sparkle in the English canon. And the cast of Made in Chelsea are … not that. Frankly, the show these days doesn't even have particularly vivid characters. In much the same way that the Conservative and Unionist Party lumbers on, deprived of its headliner poshos like Boris Johnson and Rory Stewart but still slouching ever onwards towards an election loss that seems worryingly less inevitable than it should be, given that the government equivalent of cheating on someone involves promising to improve the lives of people, but making them much worse instead. Perhaps a lot of the population are charmed by these guys because they behave like children, but when you consider that in Newcastle upon Tyne, where I live, 40% of actual children are in poverty, living very consequence-heavy lives, it all seems rather unfair.

So why write a play about this world? Theatre is an age-old tool for exposing the follies and foibles of the wealthy and powerful, but there haven't been many shows about them recently. Although that's for good reason – the canon is full of plays about mainly white rich guys being venal and annoying – I couldn't help but feel we were letting them off the hook. That lack of scrutiny benefits them. And the Royal Court theatre, a

What makes them so beguiling, these God-nominated scions of untouchability?

Sloane Square mainstay with a weirdly monarchist name but a history of radical play-writing, felt like the perfect contradictory place to drag them back into the spotlight.

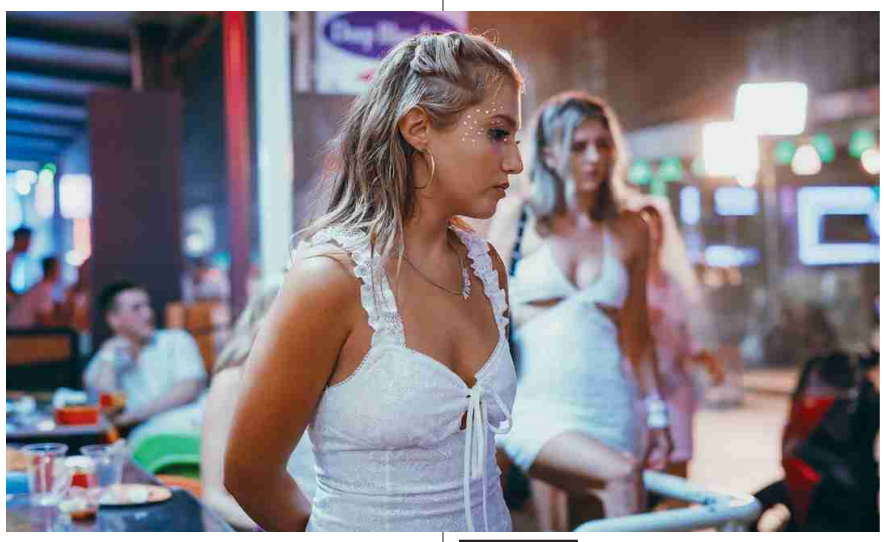
So what am I trying to do? Traduce the great geniuses of English social satire with avant-garde theatrical nonsense? The Importance of Being a Prison Abolitionist? PG Woke-house? Not quite. Mates in Chelsea isn't parody or pastiche. What I did instead was take the shape of these earlier stories, the well-made play, the pastoral farce, and fill it with the chaotic and violent content of our chaotic and violent times – if only to see what happened.

I made up a main character, Theodore "Tug" Bungay, himself a prevaricating aristocrat, and imperilled him by putting his family's castle on the line. It's about to be bought by an oligarch, a world I know a bit about through my other job as a Russian and Ukrainian translator. In some ways the post-Soviet elite, now regulars on the Chelsea circuit, serve as an interesting counterpoint to our own aristocracy, their money made in a semi-feudal political space more akin to William the Conqueror's than our own. With the investiture of Baron Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia, it's clear that in post-Brexit UK, aristocratic identity itself is now available for extremely rich internationals. But maybe that's OK: the toffs can shapeshift again, becoming, as Oliver Bullough suggests in his brilliant book, Butler to the World: How Britain Became the Servant of Tycoons, Tax Dodgers, Kleptocrats and Criminals, the Jeeveses to these new global Bertie Woosters. Even the change-resistant Tug Bungay? In Londongrad, no one can hear him scream.

Perhaps the last time the titled and entitled graced our stages in a major way was in Laura Wade's excellent Posh, in 2010. At the interval in that play, after we'd just watched 75 minutes of pseudo-Bullingdon boys harassing a sex worker and shouting about how much they hate poor people, a woman sitting behind me sighed wistfully to her friend, "It just makes you wish you were back at Cambridge, doesn't it?" After 13 years of Tory rule, are we coming to the twilight of the gods? And, whoever's in charge next, will they have the courage to make this a place that truly works for everyone who lives here? Or are we still too in love with the aristocratic idea of England to change it?

Mates in Chelsea is at the Royal Court: Jerwood theatre, London, to 16 December.

Out



Going out & Staying in

A cultural primer for the week ahead, whether you're out on the street or under the sheets ...

Cinema

How to Have Sex
Out now
The continental coming-of-age holiday is a rite for British teens every bit as sacred and messy as US colleges' spring break. In Molly Manning Walker's award-winning feature debut (above), a trio of teen girls experience the light and dark sides of drinking, clubbing and hooking up in Malia.

Fingernails
Out now
Taking the idea of love being based on chemistry to its endpoint, this drama takes place in a world where attraction and compatibility are literally calculated. Jessie Buckley and Jeremy Allen White are a "certified" couple, with Riz Ahmed the attractive curveball who might prove the scientists wrong.

London Korean film festival
Various venues, to 16 November
The biggest programme of Korean cinema outside Korea returns with more than 25 feature films and three nights of shorts, including the acclaimed Riceboy Sleeps by Anthony Shim, about a Korean mother raising her child in 90s Canada, and the thriller Dr Cheon and the Lost Talisman, based on the Korean webtoon Possessed.

On the Adamant
Out now
Awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin film festival, this stately documentary from the French film director and actor Nicolas Philibert follows various patients and caregivers at a psychiatric centre with a difference: the entire thing is floating in the middle of the River Seine in Paris. *Catherine Bray*

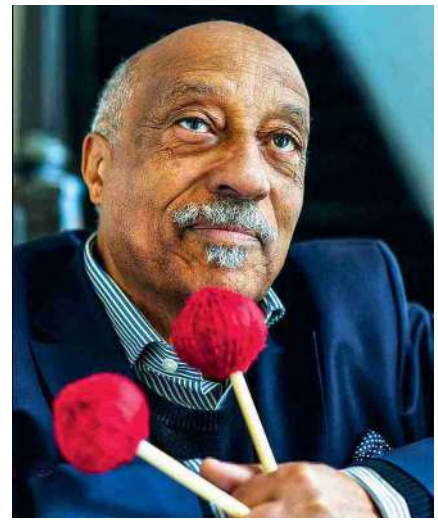
Gigs

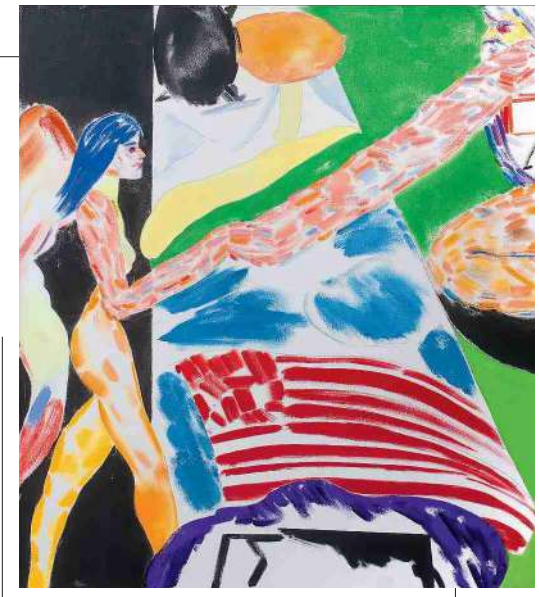
50 Cent
Thur to 21 Nov; tour starts Glasgow
What Up Gangsta hitmaker Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson III brings his the Final Lap tour to the UK. Celebrating the 20th anniversary of his game-changing debut, Get Rich or Die Tryin', expect a litany of hits, chest-beating machismo and a wide selection of caps. Support comes from Busta Rhymes. *Michael Cragg*

Little Simz
Sun to 11 Nov; tour starts Manchester
More than a decade into her career, 29-year-old Brit award-winning rapper, singer and actor Little Simz heads out on her biggest headline tour. Surprise-released at the end of last year, fifth album No Thank You found the north Londoner exploring mental health and the music industry. *MC*

The Nutcracker & Iolanta
Royal Albert Hall, London, Thursday
The Royal Philharmonic recreates the premieres of Tchaikovsky's final ballet score and final opera, first given as a double bill in St Petersburg in 1892. Vasily Petrenko conducts the second act of The Nutcracker before a semi-staging of Iolanta, with Maria Motolygina in the title role of the blind princess. *Andrew Clements*

London jazz festival
Various venues, London, Fri to 19 Nov
"Father of Ethio-jazz" Mulatu Astatke (below) is a fittingly open-minded curtain-raiser for the 31st London jazz festival, which spans genres, generations and cultures. There are more than 30 gigs, including funk icons the Headhunters, on Friday's opening night alone. *John Fordham*





Art

RB Kitaj
Piano Nobile, London, to 26 January
This painter who was part of – and helped come up with the idea for – the "school of London" was a contemporary of David Hockney, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach. His paintings (work pictured, above) ambitiously mix contemporary settings, pop immediacy and history. Is he ripe for rediscovery, 16 years after his death?

Women in Revolt!
Tate Britain, London, Wednesday to 7 April
This historical survey of feminist art in Britain from the 1970s to 1990 shows how conceptualism interfolded with activism in the era of Greenham Common. Artists include Ingrid Pollard, Mary Kelly and Lubaina Himid. It was an era when dangerous thinking produced brilliant work by Helen Chadwick and Mona Hatoum among others.

Artes Mundi 10
Various venues, Wales, to 25 February
The exhibition for the biennial Welsh international contemporary art prize takes place across galleries the length and breadth of Wales from Mostyn in Llandudno to Cardiff's National Museum. Artists include Mounira Al Solh, Rushdi Anwar, Alia Farid, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Taloi Havini, Carolina Caycedo and Naomi Rincón Gallardo.

John Craxton
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, to 21 April
Idyllic paintings of Greece by an Englishman abroad. Craxton was a talented postwar figurative painter who had an intimate relationship with the young Lucian Freud. But he found artistic happiness and inspiration in the sun-kissed islands of Greece where he painted young sailors, fishermen and sunsets. You can't blame him. *Jonathan Jones*

MUBI; RB KITAJ ESTATE/COURTESY PIANO NOBILE, LONDON

In

Stage

Paddy Young
Soho theatre, London, Thur to 11 November
Young had a stonking Edinburgh with his debut show Hungry, Horny, Scared, which milked laughs from his Scarborough upbringing and London's ridiculous rental market - catnip for anyone who spent their 20s in a freezing hovel with only an overheating laptop for company. *Rachel Aroesti*

Manic Street Creature
Southwark Playhouse, London, to 11 November
The Olivier-nominated Maimuna Memon brings her semi-autobiographical mix of theatre and gig to London after an award-winning Edinburgh run last year. Memon plays Ria, a musician trying to finish an album that charts the rise and fall of a troubled relationship. *MC*

Beowulf
Starts Byram Arcade, Huddersfield, Wed to 11 November
A promenade adaptation of Beowulf, adapted by five Yorkshire-based poets. Created by Proper Job Theatre Company, the show encompasses a 60-strong community choir and a Viking procession. *Miriam Gillinson*

BalletBoyz: England on Fire
Sadler's Wells, London, Wed to 11 November
Inspired by the book by Stephen Ellcock and Mat Osman, BalletBoyz amasses creative talent from folk to punk to jazz, including choreographers Russell Maliphant and Holly Blakey and musicians Kami Thompson and Cassie Kinoshi. *Lyndsey Winship*

Streaming

Culprits
Disney+, Wednesday
Of all the phenomena film and TV are determined to overrepresent, the heist has to be up there. This new series from director J Blakeson (I Care A Lot) is set post-robbery, as the top criminal crew responsible find themselves pursued by an assassin. Gemma Arterton (above) and Eddie Izzard star.

The Buccaneers
Apple TV+, Wednesday
Anyone who found the rollicking Bridgerton too staid will be all over this new YA-vibed period drama about a group of American teens invited to 1870s London for the match-making "season". It's an adaptation of Edith Wharton's unfinished final novel by comedian Katherine Jakeways.

Shakespeare: Rise of A Genius
BBC One & iPlayer, Wed, 9pm
It's been 400 years, but we're still not bored of the Bard. This three-part documentary - the "centrepiece" of the Beeb's celebration of Shakespeare's first folio - aims to unearth new insights with input from actors (Helen Mirren, Brian Cox) and academics (James Shapiro, Ewan Fernie).

Hullraisers
Channel 4, Thursday, 10pm
A second series for this (you guessed it!) Hull-set sitcom, which was originally developed by the city's No 1 comic ambassador, Lucy Beaumont. Now left in the hands of Caroline Moran (Henpocalypse!) and Anne-Marie O'Connor, it continues to chronicle the uproariously messy entanglements of besties Toni, Rana and Paula. *RA*

Games

Fashion Dreamer
Out now, Nintendo Switch
This Shibuya fashion simulator (above) is like a safe non-toxic version of FashionTok for style-conscious kids and teens (and, let's be honest, also adults seeking refuge from IRL judgment).

Football Manager 2024
Out Monday, PlayStation 5, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, Mac, PC, iOS, Android
Carry your addiction over from the previous season or start afresh with this long-standing king of football-management simulators. *Keza MacDonald*

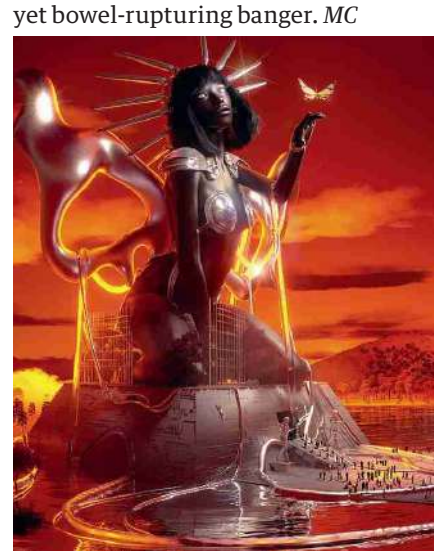
Albums

Kevin Abstract - Blanket
Out now
The erstwhile Brockhampton frontman releases his new solo album (above), the first since 2019's Arizona Baby. Sidestepping the hip-hop sound of his former band, the scratchier Blanket recalls Sunny Day Real Estate, Nirvana and Modest Mouse, scene-setting lead single Blanket being a two-minute blast of alt-rock.

Bar Italia - The Twits
Out now
Feted London-based trio Bar Italia, AKA Nina Cristante, Sam Fenton and Jezmi Tarik Fehmi, return with their second album of 2023. As with May's Tracey Denim, The Twits is a heady mix of post-punk, shoegaze, 90s alt-rock and grunge, delivered with interplaying vocals from all three.

Jungkook - Golden
Out now
With BTS on hiatus, vocalist Jungkook unleashes this debut solo album, featuring production input from Diplo and BloodPop. While recent Top 5 single 3D channels Justified-era Justin Timberlake, this summer's UK garage-aping Seven updates Craig David's sex-rota anthem, 7 Days.

Tkay Maidza - Sweet Justice
Out now
Australian singer and rapper Maidza (below) adds 14 more DayGlo slabs of top-tier R&B and hip-hop to her discography. Recent single Out of Luck, featuring Amber Mark and Lolo Zouaï, is all featherlight disco ball shimmers, while the Flume-assisted Silent Assassin is a playful yet bowel-rupturing banger. *MC*



Brain food

Escaping Twin Flames
Netflix, Wednesday
Following their series on the NXIVM cult, film-makers Cecilia Peck and Inbal B Lessner investigate another worrying organisation: Twin Flames Universe. Promoted as a community of singles looking for unique soulmates, former members (above) recount their indoctrination.

Ordinary Unhappiness
Podcast
Academics Abby Kluchin and Patrick Blanchfield host this fascinating series, viewing culture through psychoanalysis. For those looking for more in-depth theory, start with their episode on writing the "trauma plot".

Great Books Explained
YouTube
The host of Great Art Explained, James Payne, presents his new channel analysing the world's greatest works of literature in 15 minutes or less. We begin with the labyrinthine story and controversial afterlife of James Joyce's Ulysses. *Ammar Kalia*

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DES WILLIE/DISNEY+; MARVELLOUS

BOOKS

ESSAYS, FICTION *and* NONFICTION REVIEWS

‘Writing is how I metabolise the world’

Bestselling author of The Power Naomi Alderman talks to *Lisa Allardice* about her new techno-thriller, finding hope in the darkest of stories and why it is a writer’s duty to speak out

NAOMI ALDERMAN, author of the bestselling novel The Power, is just getting over Covid and feeling a bit wiped out. "But don't worry, I still seem able to talk for England," she says cheerfully from her home in north London, when we meet to talk about her new novel The Future. "I figured I might as well let people know that I'm an ambitious writer," she jokes of her punchy titles. Our conversation ranges from the Old Testament ("I like Genesis much more than I like Leviticus") to QAnon ("a new religious belief") and AI, as well as private griefs and the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East.

The 49-year-old describes herself as a "games writer turned novelist": she co-created the Zombies, Run! app, which has 10 million users, "to make exercise a bit less bloody boring". Just as she aims to keep people running, so she writes to keep people reading, taking the pacy, wildly inventive possibilities of gaming into her novels. Whereas Iris Murdoch used to write fiction in the mornings and philosophy in the afternoons, Alderman does books in the mornings and games after lunch – and she's currently doing an Open University MA in classical studies, for good measure. "My trouble is I'm interested in everything."

Tucked away off an arterial road, her Tardis-like home, which she shares with her partner, a pilot and software engineer ("we are both nerds"), is testament to her eclectic interests: a huge photograph of a forest covers two floors as you go up the stairs to a landing carpeted with artificial grass: "The only right place for fake grass is inside your house," she says. Instead of a mirror in the toilet is a framed quote from Kurt Vonnegut urging you "to please notice when you feel happy".

We begin in the book-crowded living room, with Alderman sitting cross-legged on the daybed, and move into her kitchen while she has her makeup done. She has arranged for a makeup artist ahead of the photoshoot. "You have to know what you aren't good at," she says practically. Pinned to the bookcase is a black and white photograph of Alderman with Margaret Atwood, her mentor back in 2012; Atwood is looking upwards in mock prayer. "I think she was praying for me to shut up," Alderman laughs. "If you are a writer is there any greater gift in the world?" she says of the mentorship. "It changed my life."

"Go big or go home," one of the characters says early on in The Future, which might be Alderman's motto. And the new novel is about nothing less than the end of civilisation. She doesn't do small-scale domestic fiction: "Woman picks up a teacup. Turns it over. Realises her marriage is lost," she croons wistfully. Alderman's women just smash all the crockery. While her first three novels – Disobedience, The Lessons, The Liars' Gospel – were more personal, they still tackled big questions of religion and sexuality; The Liar's Gospel stars Jesus as "an inconsequential preacher".

But it was her fourth, The Power, published when she was 42 and dedicated to Atwood, that set her career alight. A dazzling work of speculative fiction in which teenage girls are suddenly able to electrocute people at will, it won the Women's prize in 2017, topped Barack Obama's list of favourite books and was streamed as a TV series earlier this year, for which Alderman was one of the screenwriters.

With its message of female empowerment – young women taking revenge for sexual abuse into their own hands – The Power landed just as the #MeToo movement was gaining momentum. "If you hang out with Margaret Atwood long enough, you become a witch," Alderman jokes of its prescient timing. Now, after seven years, she is back with The Future, another spin on the ways in which power corrupts in a whopping eco-techno-thriller that brings together a bunch of Silicon Valley billionaires, a rewriting of Sodom and Gomorrah with chat boxes, a fundamentalist doomsday cult called the Enochites and a lesbian love story.

The idea came to her after reading a piece about the doomsday bunkers of the super-rich in 2017. She was immediately reminded of Lot in his cave – she thinks of her knowledge of biblical stories as a kind of "superpower": "I thought, I know exactly what this story is: it's a story of people who believe they can be the sole survivor," she explains. "That kind of intense selfishness that leads you to think you might be fine if there's a global environmental catastrophe. They need to know how that ends up, which is very badly. There is not a scenario in which you destroy the planet but are fine." As a writer, she likes to take the long view: "I am interested in the deep past, and then as far into the future as I can possibly look. I love the sense of perspective – it's the only scale where you can find some solace."

As Atwood likes to say, all dystopias "are a version of now" and it is not hard to spot the real-world prototypes for Alderman's improbably named tech tycoons Lenk Sketlish and Zimri Nommick. As with The Power, she would channel everything she saw on the news into her writing, but sometimes reality outdid fantasy, such as when Elon Musk challenged Mark Zuckerberg to a cage fight. "I wished I thought to put that into the novel," she says. "There is nothing I could come up with that would be as ridiculous as the stuff they actually do."

If the question at the centre of The Power is, what if women were physically stronger than men? The Future asks, is there a way out of today's omnicrisis, Alderman says, listing off the climate emergency, online abuse, increasing inequality and wealth disparity, national identity crises around the world, technology revolutions and the threat of AI. "Have I forgotten anything?"

In fact, when she began writing in 2017, the disaster scenario at the heart of the novel was a global pandemic. "I thought, we haven't had one of those in a while." By 2020 she had a first draft. "I was having fun with it. It was too glib. So I dumped it." Alderman has form here, having trashed 200,000 words of what would become The Power, and a hunk of her second novel The Lessons. "I now feel like every first draft is potentially just something I'm going to junk and then find some new way through."

On the second run, she set out to write a novel about the future that was hopeful: "I thought, God, nobody wants a pessimistic novel now and I don't want to write one. I would like to try and use my magical powers for good and write something where we can go, 'Look, there are ways out of all of this, things do not need to go from bad to worse. We have all of the resources, technological and economic and even social to fix it, if we just have the will to do it.'"

Alderman grew up in Hendon, north London, in the 80s and 90s. For an Orthodox Jewish girl who knew the

LUDOVIC ROBERT/PRIME VIDEO; BRAVEN FILMS/ALLSTAR; ANNA HUIX

names of all the Doctor Who companions off by heart, and studied English, maths and Latin A-levels (as well as learning Esperanto via a correspondence course), it wasn't always easy, she says, especially at a time when teenage girls were expected to look like Kate Moss. "There isn't anybody who was more uncool than me." Her father was a leading expert on Anglo-Jewish history, her mother an artist and graphic designer (her paintings hang in the hall), and Alderman was raised in an environment that was at once "very intellectually open and pretty fundamentalist", which is "very complicated".

Her uncle killed himself when she was 14, which had a profound impact on her father, and, as she has mentioned in a previous interview with this paper, she was also abused by a family friend. "Please do put his name," she urges. "Because it is not my job to keep his name a secret. And he's been dead for 30 years, which was the nicest thing he ever did for me." He was Sidney Greenbaum, a respected academic who was charged with the indecent assault of young boys in 1990. Her parents were horrified when they found out. "This is how grooming works: you don't just groom the child, you groom the parents, or in the case of Jimmy Savile the whole country," she deadpans.

She was relieved to escape to Oxford University, where she studied philosophy, politics and economics alongside Liz Truss. They were exact contemporaries, "but don't think from that that I know nothing about economics", she quips. She also encountered acts of petty bullying. "I was living in an authentic medieval building having some authentic medieval experiences of antisemitism." She was to later draw on her bumpy undergraduate years in her second novel, The Lessons.

After a stint as a PA for a children's publisher, she edited publications for an international law firm in New York. The shock of 9/11 led her to hand in her notice and return to the UK to take a place on UEA's prestigious creative writing MA, where she began what would become her first novel, Disobedience, about a rabbi's

Cover: Phil Fisk

From top to bottom: Zrinka Cvitešić as Tatiana in the TV adaptation of The Power; Rachel Weisz in the 2017 film of Disobedience; and Alderman with Margaret Atwood

daughter who returns to Hendon from Manhattan and begins an affair with a female friend. Published in 2007, in the wake of novels such as Zadie Smith's White Teeth and Monica Ali's Brick Lane, which showed London from different cultural perspectives, it was praised for its portrait of the Orthodox Jewish community and was made into a film starring Rachel Weisz in 2017.

Alderman had Jeanette Winterson's fictional account of discovering her sexuality in a religiously fundamentalist household, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, in mind while she was writing it. "I have had relationships with women, I am currently in a relationship with a man," she says now. "I like writing about women and if you write a lesbian relationship you get to write about two women. Also I think there's probably enough heterosexual romance out there."

But Disobedience was not so much a coming out novel as a breakup book. It marked the beginning of her literary career and the end of her faith. The minute she finished the novel, she thought: "'Oh, I think that's done now', in the way that you might about a relationship – like the woman with the teacup." While the realisation was sudden, the process of "unravelling and reknitting the self" was not. "It was the big event of my 30s." It has taken 20 years of therapy "to figure out how to put myself together again".

Alderman recalls a dream in which she was living in a house made of trees, with a canopy of leaves overhead but the roots were dead "and there was death travelling up the trunk". "Maybe you can take cuttings," her therapist suggested. "And that is what I've done. I think my life is full of cuttings," she says, giving more insight into the photograph of trees in her hall (Etz Chaim – "tree of life" – is also an important Jewish symbol, she reminds me). "I'm at really quite a peaceful place with it these days."

But the years since the publication of The Power have been difficult. The last time she had her makeup done was for the launch of The Power TV show in New York in March, earlier this year. Her mother was very ill in hospital back in London and her funeral took place on the day the show came out. "That's been my year."

Another "tough, private grief" that contributed to the long delay between novels was the loss of a number of pregnancies, a sadness she feels women should be able to speak about more openly. "It would be nice if we were able to say, 'I've just lost a baby' and people know how to respond, just as they know how to respond to 'My mother just died,'" she says. "But you end up not telling people because you're frightened that somebody's going to say something hurtful when you're just a single, raw throbbing nerve."

She believes it is a writer's duty to speak out. "The job is courage. The job can also be entertainment and there's nothing wrong with that, but if you are writing about real things, you've got to be as honest as you possibly can." Years ago, after seeing a performance of Noël Coward's Design for Living, she wrote down a quote and has pinned it above every desk she has worked at since. "If you are a writer you must write what you think otherwise you are a liar and a hypocrite," she recites from memory. She is infuriated by writers claiming they are being "silenced"; she continues: "If you have the luck to be a writer in a country where nobody gets imprisoned or tortured or murdered for their writing, it's an insult to the people who are suffering. And it is an insult not to use your ability to speak and say the things that might be difficult to say in other places."

One crisis Alderman didn't expect to be talking about was a new war in the Middle East. Four of her cousins have been called up to join the Israeli army. "I'm obviously devastated," she says of the conflict, and "repulsed" by the response of some on social media. "The number of people who seem to feel that they can tell the difference between children who shouldn't be murdered and children who if *they* die, that's legitimate. No children should be murdered. I didn't know that was controversial." She feels the international community needs to take more responsibility for past failures in the region. "I don't think anybody in Palestine or Israel right now is in an emotional place to be able to work towards peace and solutions. If your children are dying in the rubble of bombs, or if your children have been kidnapped or murdered by violent incursion, you're not in a place to come up with the way out."

She has already started working on a new project, partly about her mother's death, but also, being Alderman, about a strange new badger-sized animal that has appeared all over the UK. "Since Mum died I've just got so many words inside me that need writing," she says. "I have to be writing something every day because that's how I metabolise the world."

She also wants change. Where a dystopia makes readers feel "incredibly grateful" for the world in which we live, Alderman wants us "to feel slightly disappointed, which hopefully is a little motivator to do something a bit differently, to change something. Or at least think differently."

Does she feel hopeful that we can make these changes? "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it," she replies, quoting a famous Jewish saying. "Which is to say, we're not going to fix all these problems in my lifetime or yours or probably anybody reading this. But that doesn't mean that we're allowed to just down tools and sit in the ashes and cry. We've got to keep getting on with it." Or put another way, she adds: "I think there's a moral imperative to be hopeful because otherwise we are really fucked." The makeup artist hands her a mirror and she gives a megawatt smile.

The Future by Naomi Alderman is published by 4th Estate. She discusses her prize-winning novel The Power in a livestreamed Guardian Live event on 7 December. To buy tickets go to: membership.theguardian.com

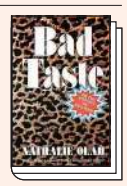
Victoria and David Beckham in France

A question of taste

Dissecting the cultural codes of the Instagram generation

Richard Godwin

SOCIETY
Bad Taste
Or the Politics of Ugliness
Nathalie Olah
DIALOGUE, £18.99



THERE'S A DELICIOUS MOMENT in the new Netflix documentary Beckham that feels destined to be replayed in sociology lectures. Victoria Beckham, in a tasteful white blouse, announces to the camera that she works very hard and is actually "very working class". Whereupon David pops in to ask what car her father drove her to school in. "Be honest." Victoria evades, avers and finally admits it. "In the 80s my dad had a Rolls-Royce."

Nathalie Olah, I suspect, would have a field day with this. Bad Taste is her update of Distinction, Pierre Bourdieu's classic 1979 inquiry into the tastes of Parisian intellectuals, retooled for the age of Instagram, Kinfolk magazine, Glossier makeup tutorials and the sort of minimally chic interiors favoured by the Beckhams, Britain's pre-eminent social voyagers.

Victoria is hardly alone in leaning on a working-class identity to tell a flattering story about where she came from and therefore how much she deserves to be where she is now. As Olah notes, in the popular imagination, "class" has become untethered from Marxist notions of labour and ownership and is now presented as more like a consumer identity. We also have the secondary definition of class, from "high class", connoting elegance, refinement, taste. "To have taste was to have class was to have understood the social codes enforced by the protectors of money and opportunity," writes Olah. If Victoria Beckham has transcended her working-class roots it is not through money but taste. In a 2022 Tatler article about "the new modern status symbols" (Teslas, rewilded estates, Ottolenghi spices) the Beckhams are praised as "masters of their meticulously crafted empires".

Olah proves an astute and acidic commentator on these codes, noting how trends for minimalist homes, luxe normcore, natural makeup and "clean eating" conceal unsubtle judgments on those who lack the time and means to, say, ferment their own kimchi or keep abreast of sneaker drops. In an excellent chapter on leisure (prompted by a disastrous Airbnb "experience"), she notes that time itself is the ultimate luxury, with life increasingly pitched as "a finite commodity that needs to be well spent". Hence: bucket lists, ultramarathons, 1001 Amazing Places You Must See Before You Die, etc.

Olah has her own class trajectory to bring to this tale. Born into a working-class family in Birmingham, she got into university, acquired highbrow literary tastes, found precarious work in the east London "creative" industries – but no financial security. One position involved filing the expense receipts of a wealthy magazine publisher who wrote "guerilla poetry" about the proletariat in Moleskine notebooks, worshipped Tilda Swinton and mocked female colleagues for their handbags and heels. It was a type she would frequently encounter: "wealthy and upwardly mobile but apparently keen to conceal their lucrative place in an exploitative economy through aesthetic choices of a more austere impression".

Olah argues that these distinctions matter, materially, more than ever. Employers under pressure to avoid explicit forms of discrimination place an ever greater emphasis on "cultural fit". Gig workers find that poor taste in music, dress or conversation means they don't get hired. Moreover, we have a whole generation of university-educated young people, adept at reading social cues but unable to access the wealth "hoarded" by more fortunate generations. Taste, in Olah's reading, is all they have (at least until some of them inherit). Olah conjures a peer group creating "small vignettes of respectability in the shabby corners of rented bedrooms" for Instagram and then being mocked for it. "It is nothing if not sad that they staked their place in luxury through the sharing of a bowl of picante olives."

The sections on housing are very good but Olah is on less solid ground when it comes to beauty and food. The fashions for "natural beauty" and for "clean eating", it is true, mask a good deal of snobbery. But biology surely has some small role to play in who we find hot or not; and whole foods simply are more nutritious than ultra-processed food. Throughout Olah depicts working-class people as passive victims, "told to conceal their desires and conform to a set of autocratic rules decided by those in power", which not only takes away their agency but expresses a strange lack of interest in working-class codes of taste.

There are other curious omissions. Olah chooses not to pay much attention to art, music, TV, film or literature and I'm not sure why. The book is clearly aimed at an American audience and draws most of its examples from a sort of bland mid-Atlantic Netflixland; Olah would have done better to follow Bourdieu's lead and focus on her own local specifics. Lord knows there is plenty to say about the English and taste. Moreover, I didn't believe her claim that she would like to live in a world where taste is a mere "facet of character", devoid of moral judgments. She's pretty judgy herself, as in her discussion of the endurance race Tough Mudder, "an event whose name I can barely bring myself to type". Horrors!

I was left wondering if these autocracies of taste are as influential as Olah thinks they are. Take food. The Guardian's restaurant critic is an unapologetic fan of Heinz spaghetti hoops, while the newsletter Vittles, the modern arbiter of urban foodie tastes, loudly champions working-class cooking. In progressive circles, moreover, I suspect it would be seen as gauche to mock someone for wearing the wrong trainers, but absolutely OK to rip them for enjoying Secret Cinema's immersive film events. Still, as long as you're conversant with the right French theorists and broadcast the correct opinions on social media, you're probably OK.

To buy a copy for £16.71 go to guardianbookshop.com

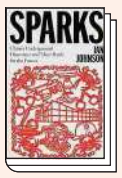
PIERRE SUU/WIREIMAGE

Acts of remembrance

The 'counter-historians' recording China's past

Amy Hawkins

HISTORY



Sparks
China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future
Ian Johnson
ALLEN LANE, £25

Those looking for horrors in China's recent past have no shortage of examples to choose from: the 1967 massacre of more than 9,000 people by Communist party cadres in Dao County; the starvation of thousands of prisoners at Jiabiangou, a labour camp in Gansu, in the late 1950s. For many, however, the struggle is being allowed to remember that such events happened at all.

Memory is a compelling and slippery topic for students of China. Books such as Tania Branigan's Red Memory have demonstrated how even people who lived through the Cultural Revolution struggle to make sense of what their memories are actually telling them. And the government demands total control over the official narrative: China's leader, Xi Jinping, has warned against "historical nihilism" and believes the collapse of the Soviet Union came about because people were allowed to question, and lose faith in, the party's version of the past.

Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson tackles this difficult subject via China's "counter-historians" who, through various mediums including documentary, fiction and even woodcuts, feel compelled to create a record of China as they see it.

Take Ai Xiaoming, a feminist scholar and documentary maker in her 70s, who has spent much of her adult life making films about topics that the authorities would rather people forget, such as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, where government failings contributed to tens of thousands of deaths. Her biggest project is a five-part epic about Jiabiangou. Ai interviewed Si Jicai, one of the survivors, who recalled eating the remains of his fellow inmates. For her efforts, Ai has been banned from leaving China, but remains undeterred in her film-making.

A more poetic title for Johnson's book might have been *jianghu,* which in Mandarin means "rivers and lakes", but can also refer to the righteous bandits who have historically populated ungovernable parts of the country. For millennia China's lush backwaters were home to rogues and hermits who refused to be governed by the emperor of the day. Johnson's skill lies in demonstrating the philosophical links between China's geography and its political and cultural landscape. Just like the *jianghu,* the counter-historians are stubbornly ungovernable. They are driven by a sense of morality rather than economic self-interest.

In fact, his book takes its title from a tiny magazine that had a short but heroic run in 1960, and is the subject of a film, available on YouTube, by renowned documentary maker Hu Jie. The magazine was published by a small group of students who had grown disillusioned with the failings of the Communist party. They were sentenced to decades in prison and, in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution a few years later, two were executed.

Despite their untimely ends, these student publishers had an outsized impact on later generations of historians. Johnson argues that the work of their devotees, including Hu, Ai and thousands of writers, film-makers and artists who question the state, will be difficult to extinguish. Beijing is estimated to spend as much on domestic security as it does on national defence, but still China's underground historians continue to work.

It is deeply satisfying to read a book about China that could only have been written after decades of serious engagement with the country. As the veteran China-watcher Perry Link put it recently, Johnson "writes entirely from the indigenous side of the seam". Better yet to consume the works of these Chinese counter-historians directly, and Johnson closes the book with a plea to readers to engage with his subjects.

After all, as Hu tells Johnson, China's previous historians "weren't afraid to die. They died in secret, and we of succeeding generations don't know what heroes they were ... If we don't know this, it is a tragedy."

Amy Hawkins is the Guardian's senior China correspondent. To buy Sparks for £21.25 go to guardianbookshop.com

A monument to Mao Zedong in China

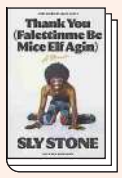
FRANK BIENEWALD/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY

Soul survivor

The highs and lows of a formidable frontman

Dorian Lynskey

MEMOIR



Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Again)
Sly Stone
WHITE RABBIT, £25

In 1964, 21-year-old Sylvester Stewart of Vallejo, California talked his way into a job at San Francisco's KSOL radio and adopted the hipster alias Sly Stone. "*Sly* was strategic, slick," he explains in his peculiar memoir. "*Stone* was solid." You would have to say that most of his life has been neither sly nor stone.

For a couple of years at the end of the 1960s, Sly and the Family Stone were the world's most transcendentally exciting band: black and white, male and female, a show-don't-tell advertisement for the ecstasy of unity. Look up their 1968 performance on The Ed Sullivan Show and see Sly and his sister Rose shimmy like the future through the very white, very square audience. Yet within three years that dream was dead. Stone flew so high and crashed so hard that he became a living metaphor for thwarted hopes and foreclosed utopias.

Stone is 80 now, his health wrecked by decades of crack addiction. He hasn't released an album of new material since 1982; his comeback shows in the late 2000s ranged from disappointment to fiasco. So it's unclear how much of this book is his and how much is down to his seasoned co-author Ben Greenman. Stone's authentic voice flares up in his love of paradoxes ("[jazz] could be interesting even if it was boring") and wordplay: "Contradiction, diction, addiction." Perhaps due to his slippery conception of both time and memory, he is not a natural storyteller. His reminiscences of Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor and Stevie Wonder are strangely bland, bar his sharp assessment of Jimi Hendrix's aloof cool: "It frustrated me. It was like he didn't know what the world could do to him." Presumably Stone knew, but that was no protection.

The young Sly Stone was an outrageous talent. The group he designed embodied the 1960s' highest hopes. They were an everything band – soul, funk, jazz, rock – whose example psychedelicised Miles Davis and Motown. Stone himself was Prince before Prince. They wowed Woodstock. So what went wrong? Everything.

Stone seems to endorse the conventional wisdom that the mind-warping effects of fame and addiction mirrored the national zeitgeist. His 1971 album There's a Riot Goin' On, framed as a salty response to Marvin Gaye's What's Going On, was the sound of implosion. Notorious for blowing out shows (he blames shady promoters), he holed up in his Bel Air mansion, the paranoid patriarch of a disintegrating family. Bassist Larry Graham became convinced that Stone had taken out a contract on his life and took to checking beneath his car for bombs. Stone dismisses that idea but confirms one hair-raising rumour: his terrifying pitbull Gun did indeed kill his pet baboon and then have its way with the corpse. Alarmingly, Stone describes Gun as his "best friend".

Stone's career didn't collapse overnight. There's a Riot Goin' On shot to No 1 and his next two albums went gold. His 1974 wedding to actor Kathy Silva at Madison Square Garden was a media sensation, covered at length in the New Yorker. But the albums became less and less impactful before fizzling out all together. Stone complains that journalists were only interested in drugs and decline, but that's what happens when the music stops.

A cleaned-up Stone signs off with some watery opinions about politics and music – a wan conclusion to a frustrating book. Did he really meet Frank Sinatra one night? Is it true that he once interrupted a party by waving a gun while freaked out on angel dust? He can't be sure. "The details in the stories people tell shift over time," he muses, "in their minds and in mine, in part or in whole, each time they're told." It might have been more rewarding to play with his mysteries and evasions instead of trying to wrestle his life into a conventional narrative: let Sly be sly.

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

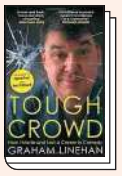
All joking aside

A talent lost to self-defeating obsession

Fiona Sturges

MEMOIR

Tough Crowd
How I Made and Lost a Career in Comedy
Graham Linehan
EYE, £19.99



When Graham Linehan was starting out as a comedy writer in London, he would go to see standup where he would upbraid audience members who were "talking or otherwise being rude". Once, while watching Noel Fielding and Julian Barratt's The Mighty Boosh in a pub theatre, a drunk man began shouting, so Linehan told him to "shut the fuck up". Later, the man followed him into the toilets where he smashed down the cubicle door. "Thankfully," Linehan recalls, "he'd expended all his energy on kicking the door in so I was able to see him off with the force of my terrified stare."

Wading into other people's fights has proved a theme for the co-writer of Father Ted and writer-director of The IT Crowd. A vociferous critic of the transgender rights movement, Linehan's views have, in recent years, cost him friends, his livelihood and, he claims, his marriage. But, despite having been given a verbal warning by police after a complaint from a trans campaigner, he remains uncowed. Tough Crowd is, then, his memoir-cum-defence statement in which he recounts his years making TV sitcoms before he was "perceived as toxic" and lays bare his grief at all he has lost.

The book speeds through his Dublin childhood, during which he reveals he was bullied at school for being too tall and that he lost his faith in God after looking up masturbation in his parents' encyclopedia; contrary to what Catholicism had told him, he discovered it was "perfectly normal". We learn how he began his writing career as a film reviewer on the Irish magazine Hot Press, where he met fellow Father Ted creator Arthur Mathews. Moving to London, the pair hawked their wares as a writing duo, cutting their teeth on the 1990s sketch series Smith & Jones.

Linehan's memories of making Father Ted, where he digs deep into the craft of comedy writing, brim with verve and charm. Rather than take the view of the Irish comic Dave Allen, who depicted religion as oppressive and cruel, Linehan and Mathews were closer in their outlook to Monty Python, who saw religion as "a chance for men to dress up in giant hats". The character of Father Ted had been dreamed up by Mathews when he was the warmup act for a spoof U2 band, The Joshua Trio, while Mrs Doyle was based on Linehan's mother.

But all charm evaporates in Linehan's exhaustive recounting of the past five years as an "activist", during which memoir is largely replaced by polemic. He is oddly sage-like on the early dangers of social media, though this doesn't prevent him from being hypnotised by the heated online exchanges between trans campaigners and gender critical feminists. In 2018, while lying on a hospital trolley, of all places, fresh from surgery for testicular cancer, he picks up his phone and posts a series of tweets "[nailing] my colours to the gender-critical mast".

The more he is abused for his opinions, the more entrenched and maniacal those opinions seem to become. Here, as on his Twitter page, he makes a show of misgendering trans men and women, and says he is stunned at his "inability to make people care about the daylight theft of women's rights, or the greatest safeguarding scandal since Rotherham, or the greatest medical scandal since thalidomide".

The final chapters, which detail the derailing of his plans for a Father Ted musical and a tentative foray into standup, find him simultaneously high on martyrdom and desperately lonely, his nerves "shredded", castigating ex-friends and colleagues whom he feels abandoned him by not joining in his crusade. "Each betrayal sits in my memory like crows dotted along a telephone wire," he says. Tough Crowd reads less like the story of a man heroically cleaving to his principles than a document of a peculiar and self-defeating obsession, a sad coda to a once towering talent.
To buy a copy for £17.59 go to guardianbookshop.com

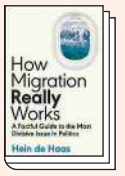
Home truths

Debunking myths of global migration

Daniel Trilling

POLITICS

How Migration Really Works
A Factful Guide to the Most Divisive Issue in Politics
Hein de Haas
VIKING, £25



Here's a question for you: since the last general election, has the British government been tough or soft on immigration? Depending on your political inclination, the answer might seem obvious – but the reality is more complicated. On the one hand, the Johnson and Sunak governments have brought an end to EU free movement and promised to deport unwanted asylum seekers to Rwanda. On the other, net migration – the difference between the number of people coming to live in the UK and the number of people leaving – reached a record high of more than 600,000 last year.

The paradox arises, argues the sociologist and migration expert Hein de Haas, because governments in the west – committed, as they are, to forms of economic liberalism – are constantly trying to balance three competing demands. One is to remain open to global markets, which requires a degree of immigration to fill domestic skills shortages. Another is to protect the rights of those immigrants who do arrive to work, study or settle. A third is to respect the wishes of citizens who wish to see immigration limited or even reduced.

The problem is that only two of the three can be fulfilled at any one time. Reduce people's rights to work or settle and you disrupt the smooth running of the economy. (Think, for instance, of the trouble Britain found itself in when there weren't enough lorry drivers to deliver goods the Christmas before last.) Advocating open borders, on the other hand, is widely regarded as political suicide. So what most governments opt for instead are symbolic crackdowns – often harmful and counterproductive – on certain types of immigration. Or as De Haas puts it: "bold acts of political showmanship that conceal the true nature of immigration policies".

De Haas's primary insight is to look at migration as a global phenomenon – and not just from the perspective of countries in the west receiving migrants from elsewhere. Although media coverage often gives the impression that we are living in an unprecedented age of migration, in which the world's impoverished masses are making their way to the west, this is not the case. Global migration levels have stayed remarkably stable since the second world war, with international migrants accounting for about 3% of the world's population. Refugees account for an even tinier proportion, at a relatively consistent 0.3% – a fact that De Haas suggests should make refugee advocates think twice about claims of a "global refugee crisis".

Yet while migration was once largely a case of Europeans making their way to the New World – and of the old European empires moving indentured workers from one colony to another – today the direction of travel has changed. More people are moving to the west, from a wider range of countries, than before. It's a shift, De Haas acknowledges, but neither unprecedented nor out of control. (In the US, for instance, immigrants constitute about 14% of the population – around the same as they did a century ago.)

Another, equally important part of De Haas's argument is that we should stop thinking of migration in terms of costs and benefits. Yes, immigration helps fill labour shortages, but it has little overall impact on labour markets, and the profits mainly go to employers. Yes, remittances help sustain communities back home, but their benefits are mostly cancelled out by the costs of people leaving in the first place. Instead, De Haas suggests, it's more useful to think of migration as a fact of life. The social and political questions it raises, therefore – over rights at work, or economic priorities, or national identity – are ones that concern us all. As de Haas puts it: "Any real debate on migration will therefore inevitably be a debate on the type of society we want to live in."
To buy a copy for £22 go to guardianbookshop.com

The Bibby Stockholm barge in Portland

FINNBARR WEBSTER/GETTY

JUANA MARI MOYA/GETTY IMAGES

Images of a family

A kaleidoscopic saga of love, memory and time spans the lives of women across four generations

Lucy Hughes-Hallett

Held
Anne Michaels
BLOOMSBURY, £16.99

THE CANADIAN NOVELIST and poet Anne Michaels is still best known for her 1996 first novel, the multi-award-winning Fugitive Pieces. That title could serve as a description of this new book, a novel made up of scraps of storytelling and essayistic fragments.

Towards the end of Held in terms of pages, but near the beginning in terms of chronology, we find ourselves in Paris in 1908, in very distinguished company. Ernest Rutherford, pioneer of nuclear physics, is dining with Marie and Pierre Curie. It is a hot summer night. The party moves out into the garden to take coffee by the light of a new-fangled lantern – an irradiated copper tube. Talk turns to Madame Palladino, the celebrated medium. Pierre Curie, who has been unable to prove Palladino is a fraud, says: "Science must never foreclose what it does not understand." There seems to be a correspondence between the eerie light and the equally strange idea that the dead might coexist with the living, remembering us as we remember them.

The Curies are peripheral to the main narrative, but science, hauntings and the way love complicates the linearity of time are themes that recur insistently in this episodic novel. If opened out and rearranged as a sequential narrative, its story would be a four-generational, female-centred family saga. First comes Helena, an artist who never fully trusts her own talent, whose husband is wounded in the trenches in 1917 and subsequently kills himself; then her daughter Anna, a doctor, who marries a Marxist hatmaker from Piedmont, now settled in Suffolk, but repeatedly breaks his heart by leaving to work in war zones; then their daughter Mara, another doctor, also duty-drawn to killing fields, but eventually choosing loving kindness over self-sacrifice; finally, another Anna.

These lives could have been the stuff of a century-spanning, continent-spanning epic, but Michaels chops them up and rearranges them to make something odder and more formally interesting – a kaleidoscopic narrative in which memories, dreams and supernatural visitations are as integral to the patterning as real-world events.

We are carried back and forth in time. Each section introduces new characters, different settings. Readers will pick up echoes. The lovelorn man called Aimo who is following the second Anna in Finland in 2025 (Michaels's time slippages allow her access to the future as well as the past) must be the child whose musician parents we saw being expelled from Estonia for thought crimes in 1980. The baby conceived when a Frenchwoman out collecting firewood in 1902 meets a photographer in the forest will become the first Anna's husband. At one level these tenuous personal links hold together the disparate stories out of which the novel is constructed. At another – the level of thought and theme – the links are stronger.

We begin by moving in and out of the dazed mind of a wounded soldier. He thinks: "We know life is finite. Why should we believe death lasts forever?" Pause. Line break. Asterisk. The narrator says: "The shadow of a bird moved across the hill, he could not see the bird." Pause. Line break. Asterisk. This is typical of the way Michaels works. She is a poet, and when writing prose fiction she still uses poetic strategies. The juxtaposition of resonant thought with telling image takes priority over character or plot.

Those first gnomic paragraphs initiate a pair of extended meditations plaited throughout the narrative. One is about mortality. The other, closely connected, is about photography and other forms of image capture. The first is couched in aphoristic dicta that sometimes seem profound, sometimes just obscure: "Truth, where regret begins, is a slightly paler shade of dark than defeat." I prefer Michaels's writing when it is more concrete; when she dwells, for instance, as she repeatedly does, on knitting. In the railway station at Brest-Litovsk an elderly female border guard searches a suitcase and hesitates over a baby's sweater, fine and lacy, its intricate patterns a code for love.

Held is full of lacunae – great gaps of time in which characters die or give birth or are exiled or despair. Like one of those elaborate knitting patterns, it is largely made up of holes and absences. Its stories are told in glimpses. It is for the reader to join the dots.

Mara likes reading books that "begin again at the middle, the way life so often did". Michaels begins and ends and begins again repeatedly. Around the central women other lives spiral. The lives of their parents and lovers, but also people far remote from them in time and space, appearing like the emblematic figures in the margins of a medieval manuscript: Darwin, circling his garden on a "thinking walk"; the priests who remained alone in Babylon after it fell, watching the heavens "until eventually, the stars and planets revealed a mathematical order".

Michaels is exceptionally open to the beauty of science. Readers are expected to understand what it means to say that "perhaps death was Lagrangian", to be familiar with the word "asymptotic" and to know about the "acoustic mirrors" – massive stone pre-radar listening devices set up along the English coast during the first world war. But Michaels's intellectual toughness coexists with a tender heart. This book is hard, but there is a great deal in it about love.

"Sometimes history is simply detritus," writes Michaels. Her book is an assemblage of truncated stories and floating ideas, but its fragmentation gives it flexibility and resilience. She demonstrates that fugitive pieces can make up a structure as strong and as meaningful as a finished monument.

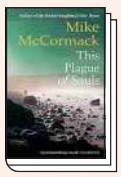
To buy a copy for £14.95 go to guardianbookshop.com

The homecoming

A haunting tale from the Solar Bones author

Erica Wagner

This Plague of Souls
Mike McCormack
CANONGATE, £16.99



Towards the end of This Plague of Souls, a familiar sound calls out to its protagonist, Nealon. The world is changing: some great alteration seems about to unfold. Nealon gazes at a television, waiting for information. "The signature tune for the news bulletin calls out. A brass fanfare over an electronic jitter snags beneath the peal of the angelus bell." So the close of this haunting tale calls back to the opening of Solar Bones, McCormack's previous book, in which the Angelus is ringing out on All Souls' Day: "the bell / the bell as / hearing the bell as / hearing the bell as standing here / the bell being heard standing here / hearing it ring out through the grey light of this / morning, noon or night". This staccato prose poem begins a narration of the life of Marcus Conway, a civil engineer gripped by a sense of loneliness and loss, reflecting on his past with hypnotic specificity. That novel, which won McCormack the Goldsmiths prize in 2016, was also longlisted for the Booker; it brought this remarkable Irish writer into the literary mainstream.

So This Plague of Souls chimes with its predecessor. As the novel opens Nealon is returning to his family home – a farm in rural Ireland – after a long absence. "Opening the door and crossing the threshold in the dark triggers the phone in Nealon's pocket," is the novel's opening line, in which action and a sense of the uncanny are immediately combined. An unknown voice, "male and downbeat, not the sort you would choose to listen to in the dark", speaks to him as if they are old friends.

Nealon wants to make himself some scrambled eggs, but "having his meals handed to him on a tray for so long has thrown him completely from the flow of these things". We finally learn he has been in prison on remand – but still, we don't know why. It doesn't matter: what matters is the intensity of Nealon's reflections as he gathers himself back into his life. McCormack's language is evocative, perfectly suited to the noirish atmosphere he builds throughout the book. "There is something coercive in the flow of the house, the way it draws him through it." External forces press against Nealon as he attempts to make sense of what has gone before and what is to come.

This is the house he grew up in, alone with his father. But he had not expected to return to darkness and emptiness: "So where is Olwyn? Where is she?" Olwyn is his wife, mother of his little son Cuan, both of them missing. Eerie flashbacks describe Nealon rescuing Olwyn from heroin addiction; his son suffered from nosebleeds, a small domestic drama made dark in Nealon's recollection of how, in clearing up the aftermath, he would sit "on the side of the bath in the small hours of the morning watching the water rise up over the folds of material before turning pink with his child's blood".

These memories make up the first third of the novel. In the second section, Nealon sets off at dawn for a nearby city where he has a meeting to attend. As in Solar Bones, McCormack displays his gift for describing landscapes and situations that might seem unlovely, but for the fact that they are loved by the author's observing eye. "He slows down for a newly resurfaced section of the road that runs through a neat little village. The approach is marked with traffic lights and the soft margin along its length is lined with a series of small lanterns. Like hallowed ground, Nealon thinks."

The novel's denouement sees Nealon readying himself for that meeting, one so immensely consequential it would be a shame to give any details of it away. Some momentous world event – Nealon refers to it simply as "this terror thing" – is unfolding as he prepares to meet his fate. It is here, in this final section, that the mysterious paths this novel has taken converge. And not just because we begin to reckon with what actually happened in Nealon's past, and what it might lead to, but because of the way in which McCormack makes everything connect. Little fragments of other lives we have seen – men working on a road, a woman thumbing through a catalogue – have a bearing on what is to come.

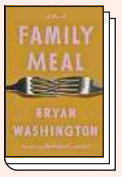
And then we hear the Angelus bell, a call to prayer and to good will. This is a strange novel, sinister yet hopeful, a descent into darkness that somehow manages to rise into a ringing light.
To buy a copy for £14.44 go to guardianbookshop.com

Sexploits and ennui

Twentysomething queer life, in a minor key

Michael Donkor

Family Meal
Bryan Washington
ATLANTIC, £17.99



As I read Bryan Washington's Family Meal, a quote from Toni Morrison kept coming to mind. Just after receiving the Nobel prize for literature, reflecting on her career, Morrison said: "I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was."

Washington's writing – the short story collection Lot, and an uncannily affecting debut novel, Memorial – achieves a similar effect. His eye is trained on the compromises, victories and ingenuity of Black, brown and queer characters and communities, but he never emphasises their supposed marginality.

Though written in his characteristic minor key, Family Meal continues this confidence and conviction. We find the same formal tendencies (moving between characters' perspectives) and thematic interests (food, interracial relationships and the ramifying effects of grief) as in his debut. The novel is concerned with the emotional development of three twentysomething queer men: Cam, TJ and Kai. Cam and TJ are estranged best friends who grew up together in Texas. As teenagers, they inhabited their "own universe"; when the novel begins, they've not seen each other for years. Kai is Cam's former boyfriend, whom Cam met after moving to LA.

Cam's voice is the first we encounter, and we quickly establish that it has only two modes: rebarbative or enigmatically reticent. Having returned to his home town of Houston after Kai's death, Cam is adrift. He's morosely working at a queer bar in the rapidly gentrifying Montrose "gaybourhood", living in his boss's cramped spare room and filling his days "boning everything in sight".

Writing sex is a notoriously fraught business. Washington, however, excels here. The recounting of Cam's messy sexploits as he dives into a world of polyamory, spandex harnesses, bathhouses and Grindr hookups is done with economy, wit and insight. Later on in the narrative, Cam's one-night stands have the delicious potential to "feel like a miracle … I'll think of a man … lanky, chubby, tall, hairy, smooth, softer, sharper, bald, older, straight-ish, queeny … and all of a sudden he's there."

These casual rendezvous can elevate Cam out of his ennui. And while he is metaphorically haunted by Kai's ghost, they realign him with the corporeal, too – with liveliness and the flesh-and-blood stuff of living. But, as the title suggests, this is a novel interested in feeding and nourishment, and there's often a troubling hunger in Cam's need for sexual connection. He has a bleaker desire for the "night [to] swallow [him] whole because it's something to fucking do". This desire is concomitant with a self-loathing manifested in Cam's asperity and detachment from those around him. TJ's surprise arrival at the bar one night, and his attempts at reconciliation with his old friend, shake up Cam's ways of being.

Subsequent shifts in perspective – first to Kai, then to TJ – fill the gaps in Cam's backstory. Sections narrated by TJ also mine the depths of the history between him and Cam, one of broken confidences and ambiguous affections. Washington shows great versatility in ventriloquising TJ and Kai's different tones and sensibilities. It must be said, however, that Cam's edgier, more hard-bitten worldview and his crackling sense of humour make him a far more intriguing character than the other two. As Kai

Bryan Washington

DAILEY HUBBARD

himself admits begrudgingly, Cam's "bluntness feels like oxygen".

Other aspects of the novel gave me pause for thought. My current bugbear is novels where some chapters are, for no good reason, just a sentence or paragraph long. Washington adopts this technique, and fluency rather than fragmentation would have helped to sustain emotional intensity in places.

But perhaps my biggest issue was the later trend towards mawkishness. Washington admirably works to show that his characters might not be irreparably marred by their previous trauma, but the tone towards the novel's end becomes notably platitudinous in feel. Characters about to embark on new relationships boldly vow that they'll "do the work" and "figure things out together". Arguably, after all the emotional upheavals, redemptive resolution – of sorts – is worthy and hard won. But I wished Washington had maintained his otherwise fine balance of sweetness and sourness until the very last morsel was eaten.
To buy a copy for £15.29 go to guardianbookshop.com

Dystopian dreams

Visions of crisis in a daring collection

Nina Allan

SHORT STORIES

Gunflower
Laura Jean McKay
SCRIBE, £12.99

In Laura Jean McKay's 2020 debut The Animals in That Country, a virus known as "zooflu" sweeps the world, giving humans the ability to intuit the thoughts of the nonhuman species with whom they share the planet. It won the Arthur C Clarke award for science fiction as well as a number of mainstream literary awards in McKay's native Australia. With her short story collection, Gunflower, McKay reaffirms her virtuosic ability to twist consensus reality into unfamiliar shapes.

Concern for the environment, the mind-altering perspectives of other life forms and the increasing effects of the climate crisis – themes that were central to Animals – are re-examined here. Those Last Days of Summer is told from the point of view of battery chickens, whose eventual fate we as readers are all too aware of, but which the hens themselves grasp only in glimpses through a shared mythology. Territory explores the world from the perspective of a community of "piggers" – wild boar hunters who chase their quarry in beat-up buggies – while Cats at the Fire Front is about a family who breed cats for their fur, an established way of life in this particularly queasy iteration of McKay's near future.

The protagonist of McKay's debut novel was characterised above all by her hard-bitten determination to survive, and it is this same resilience we recognise in Smoko, a story about class and social deprivation set entirely in the real world – about a group of women working at a local supermarket.

The harsh reality of working-class lives is highlighted also in Lightning Man, as a stressed mother of four waits anxiously to see if her husband will be awarded a contract with a travelling circus. Conversely, Ranging reveals a world in which all husbands – all men, in fact – have inexplicably disappeared from the face of the Earth.

The title story could similarly be classified as feminist science fiction. Gunflower is set in the years after the 2022 overthrow of Roe v Wade, where abortion remains legal in only a handful of US states. A ship sailing under an Icelandic flag has been repurposed as a floating abortion clinic. The Gunflower is crewed entirely by women, and the treatment they offer can only be taken when the ship is in neutral waters. Joan, a professor of law, is 44 years old and unexpectedly pregnant. She can afford to have her pregnancy terminated in a "friendly" state; instead, she opts to go aboard the Gunflower to highlight the crisis facing those less fortunate. When all communications are lost with the mainland, the crew initially believe the ship has suffered a systems failure, before fearing that they have been sabotaged. Sailing into a storm, Joan begins to see their predicament as a metaphor for her country's toxic politics: "I thought: *I've come so far from home to get access to my body*. I thought: *if this is America, there is no America. Has there ever been?*"

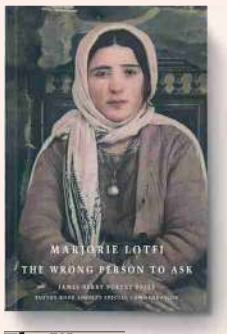
Although Gunflower wears the narrative trappings of future dystopia, there is very little in it that is not already happening in our uncertain present. Twenty Twenty, her take on the recent pandemic, is equally chilling, and all the more compelling through being told from the perspective of a family of Covid-deniers. This is a peculiarly discomfiting story, which like Those Last Days of Summer, achieves its effect through placing the reader in direct opposition to the protagonist.

I was particularly delighted by the formal risk-taking in this collection, with vignettes and odd snippets of contemporary mythologising sitting alongside longer, more conventionally plotted pieces. These flash fictions are as powerful as the longer stories. Gunflower is a book of and for our time, and as readers we should pay careful attention to what its singularly talented author has to say to us.
To buy a copy for £9.29 go to guardianbookshop.com

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

Poetry

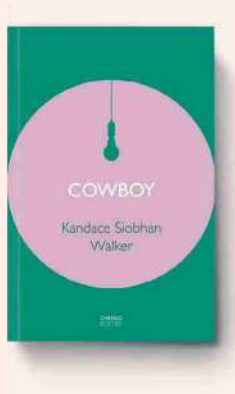
Dreams of belonging; wartime courage and struggle; the funny side of millennial life; and the many shades of grief. *By Rebecca Tamás*



The Wrong Person to Ask
Marjorie Lotfi
BLOODAXE, £10.99
Lotfi's imagistically rich debut collection moves from her childhood in Iran, where her family were uprooted by the revolution, to her youth in America and her current home in Scotland. Lotfi is sensitively attuned to the painful dislocation of self that can come from moving between different nations. Again and again her radiant language turns over the loss of family intimacy and identity caused by political upheaval and violence: "Ask about Ameh, her arms around my skinny frame, / or how I can have forgotten Farsi and the sound / of her voice bidding me each night to let the day go." Lotfi's book mourns these losses and separations, while at the same time rendering the possibilities of a capacious, multifaceted sense of belonging: "And what is home if not the choice – / over and over again – to stay?"

School of Instructions
Ishion Hutchinson
FABER, £12.99
This visionary work of memory, elegy and loss captures the experiences of West Indian soldiers who fought for the British in the first world war. The collection weaves together the terrors of war with the terrors of imperialism, using dizzyingly original language and impactful rhythms to create a tapestry of suffering, courage and struggle: "Frostbitten mud. Shellshock mud. Dungheap mud. Imperial mud … Caliban mud. Cannibal mud." These experiences filter into the book's second narrative, the life of Godspeed, a schoolboy living in Jamaica in the 1990s. Hutchinson subtly outlines the ways in which colonial force is perpetuated by language, English culture thrust into young minds with its own kind of violence. The collection sings of those who "have no memorial who are perished as though they had never been", reanimating their lives within the vivid fabric of poetry.

Cowboy
Kandace Siobhan Walker
CHEERIO, £11
This debut is hilarious, moving and dazzlingly new. Running through topics as varied as love, gentrification, neurodivergence, gender, queerness, death, life in the internet age, low wage jobs and capitalist exploitation, these poems create a gloriously sharp picture of modern millennial life and struggle: "Communism was cool again, Instagram was attractive. / Students were in occupation. Sad boys were novelties, / sad girls aspirational." Walker's greatest strengths are her beautifully odd imagery ("Nighttime's religious core is wherever you / touch me; I'm absolutely dolphins. I'm molten") and the mordant, painfully dark humour of her poetic voice. Cowboy marks the entry of a significant and exciting new voice into British poetry.



Housebreak
Shareen K Murayama
BAD BETTY, £10
A book of many griefs, personal and intimate as well as political and societal. The poet's loss of her mother, first to dementia and then to death, is explored with arresting dark humour and piercing clarity: "I tell myself I'm not going to write another dead mom poem. / Nevertheless she arrives, promptly. In a care home fisted with careless bags of food or a spam musubi. / A comfort offering in reverse." The book also addresses the trauma caused by hate crimes against Asian-Americans during the pandemic. Yet in the face of pain and prejudice, it remains fierce and bristling with life: "I have faith in folktales, like my grandmother's story. / Anyone could be saved or eaten. Their tongues cut out."

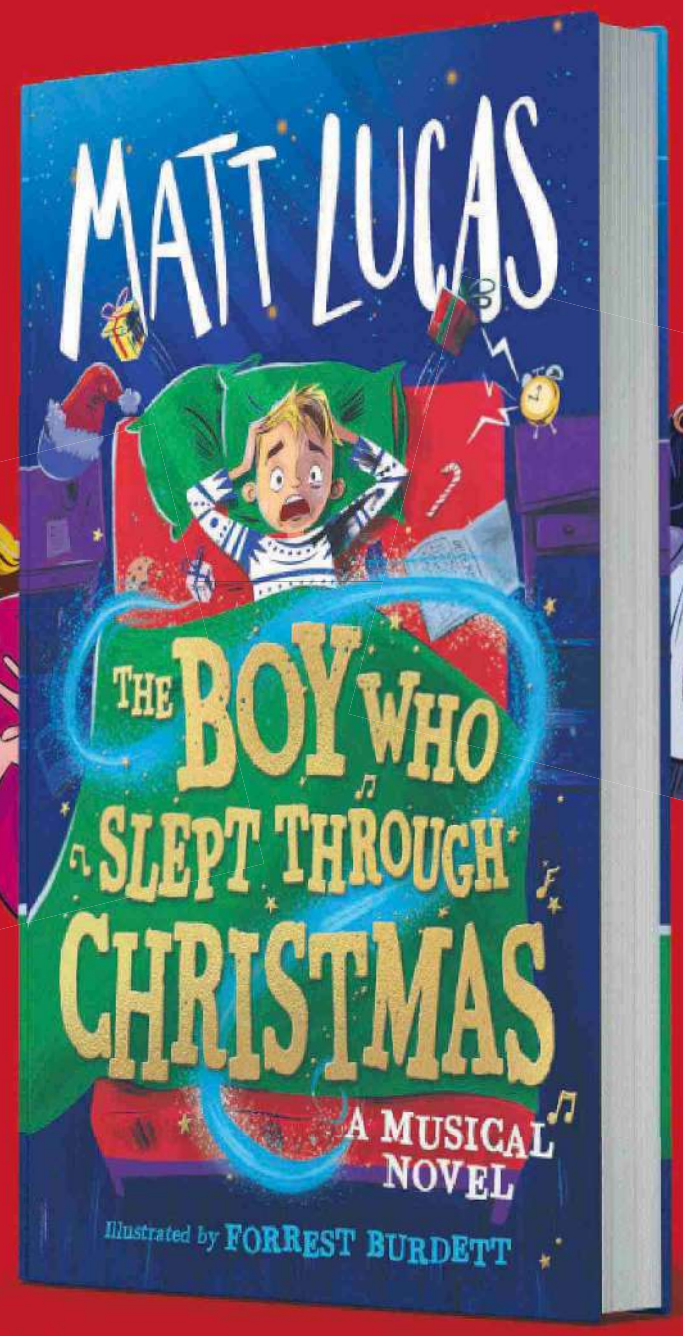
THE ONE-OF-A-KIND MUSICAL NOVEL BY

MATT LUCAS

'Such a good laugh'

★★★★★

Reader review



'It's great fun!'

★★★★★

Reader review

'Simply brilliant'

★★★★★

Reader review

'A funny, touching and entertaining story'

★★★★★

Reader review

OUT NOW

Farshore

Sex marks the spot

Inspired by the life and work of sexual scientist Jan Gay, Justin Torres's latest novel dives into the hidden backwaters of queer history. He tells *Ryan Gilbey* about finding his voice

JJ GEIGER

It is morning in Manhattan, and the 43-year-old novelist Justin Torres is lying in bed, head propped up on one hand. He uprooted to the west coast of America a decade ago to teach English at UCLA, but was out late last night partying with friends from his old New York days. "I'm not even dressed yet," he says in a sleepy croak.

The sight of Torres video-calling amid rumpled pillows feels apt given that his new book, Blackouts, is narrated from a clammy bed. The novel leads the reader through the hidden backwaters of queer history: in its hunt for buried cultural treasure, sex marks the spot. Torres has been surprised on his book tour to see it stocked in airport shops ("There are so many penises in it!") and was not anticipating its release into today's book-banning world. "That wasn't on my radar at all," he says. "I was thinking more about self-censorship. There's an impulse for queer art to present itself as respectable and de-sexed, and I don't want to be part of that."

In the novel (fictional) queer elder Juan Gay is confined to his death bed in a remote desert sanctuary, where he is nursed by a nameless twenty-something narrator. Juan bequeaths to the younger man his papers about the (real) lesbian writer and sexual scientist Jan Gay, whose groundbreaking interviews with queer people in the 1920s and 30s formed the basis of the 1941 two-volume report Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns. Blackouts represents a reclamation of her work, which was given scant credit by the report's author, George W Henry. It also contains splinters of biography, some of it real – including Gay's connections to Andy Warhol and the anarchist Emma Goldman – and some fabricated. Torres interlaces Gay's life with the memories and fantasies that Juan and the narrator exchange.

This patchwork narrative is starkly dissimilar from Torres's autobiographical 2011 debut, We the Animals, which concerned the feral upbringing of three boys born to a white mother and Puerto Rican father in upstate New York. (It was adapted into an ethereal 2018 film.) That first novel, though fragmented, had a rhapsodic energy coursing through it whereas Blackouts is continually being interrupted by archive photographs, illustrations and assorted ephemera.

"When you're researching, you're trying to fill in the gaps in the archive," says Torres. "There's this impossibility of making a clear narrative when it comes to histories that have been suppressed. It's fascinating but it can also be frustrating. I wanted to capture that in the reading experience." Frustration, he points out, has its own kick. "It's kind of kinky, right?"

The book's most striking feature is the inclusion of pages from the Sex Variants report, which Torres has mischievously redacted, transforming them into erasure poems. Select words and phrases are left untouched to create new meanings; language that was formerly judgmental has been rehabilitated, even sexed-up. The black bars concealing lines of text suggest a peep show or the venetian blinds in a film noir.

"I felt I could return some sexiness to the text itself," Torres explains. "The people who spoke to Jan Gay volunteered all this information about their sex lives, then it got reinterpreted and overlaid with the pathological language of the time; it was turned into evidence of disease. So it was exciting to make it lyrical again."

There's no avoiding the fact, though, that it has been a long time coming. "My second book was due many, many years ago," he winces. What happened? "I didn't feel commensurate to the attention I received after We the Animals. I wanted to stretch to become a different kind of writer." Different how? "As a person, I've always had a dark, dark sense of humour. But I was so sad and earnest on the page."

As Blackouts developed, the book absorbed material from his unfinished second novel, Yesterday Is Here, a tale of two hustlers in different eras, and the character of Juan evolved into a device by which Torres could critique his younger, greener self. As the narrator spins tales of carnal adventure, Juan chips in to question, say, the dubious use of flashback or voiceover. "That's me teasing," Torres smiles. "If there's not humour in some way, I don't know that I'd want to do it any more."

Another lesson he learned from We the Animals was how to deal with intimate autobiographical material in the public arena. "I was so broke and lost when I wrote my first book," he sighs. "The publicity people were, like, 'This seems as if it has lots of overlap within your life. Are you OK to talk about that?' I said, 'Sure!' It didn't occur to me that this would be the primary focus of every conversation about the book."

That debut ends with a fictionalised version of a traumatic incident: his parents' discovery, when he was 17, of his private journal, which catalogued his fantasies and desires. (He has called it "the baby steps of a fiction writer".) Torres had long known he was queer. Though he struggled with his sexuality in his teens, his future was far from hopeless: he had won a fellowship to NYU. He has conceded, though, that anyone who came across his journal back then "would think this was a troubled mind. And that's exactly what happened." His estranged father, a macho cop, dragged him to a psychiatric hospital, which is where he learned that the journal had been pored over by his entire family. "If you're going to have a meltdown, if you're going to throw furniture around the room, if you're going to cry and really let yourself go … don't do it in the evaluation ward of a psychiatric hospital," he said in 2012.

He wasn't suicidal when he was committed, but that changed once he got out. He took an overdose and ended up in a coma, a sequence of events that he has now bestowed on the narrator of Blackouts, who even voices some of the lines Torres has used in interviews – such as how he felt weirdly proud to be placed on an adult ward because he was "too mature for juvey".

With Blackouts, he has protected himself a little better. "I knew there would be this confusion between my own biography and the narrator's, so I decided to play with the ambiguity." Both have a compulsion to misplace their possessions. "It's *incredible* how good I am at losing things," he says.

He lost a chunk of Yesterday Is Here by leaving his laptop on a train. An earlier and more traumatic loss clearly haunts these subsequent ones. When I ask what happened to those feverish scribblings that were discovered by his parents, he turns the question over in his head. "I don't know," he says eventually. "It was such a dramatic rupture between me and my family; it's a kind of scar, that sense of betrayal. I have a lovely relationship with my mother now but there's something there that can't be healed. Early on, I asked for the journal to be returned to me and it wasn't. And the fight around that was so immense that I let it go."

Earlier, when we were discussing the subject of queer archives, Torres confessed that he has no intention of leaving his own papers behind. "It's probably why I delete everything all the time," he says now. "Because I've seen what happens if you don't. That journal was an archive of my interiority that I left, and which was found." He glances away, the morning light striking the side of his face. "If I delete it, then nobody can use it against me."

Blackouts is published by Granta.

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The Telegraph

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THE BOOKS OF MY LIFE

Dolly Alderton

The journalist and author on rediscovering Ted Hughes and finding comfort in cookery books

My earliest reading memory
Central Library on Holloway Road in London. My mum used to take me when I was little and it was my favourite place. Apparently the first time I realised you have to return the books, my bottom lip began to wobble and my mum took them for another week to avoid making a scene.

My favourite book growing up
Milly-Molly-Mandy. The books are about a girl who wears a pink and white striped dress, lives in a thatched cottage and eats twice-baked cheese-filled jacket potatoes. A lifestyle I aspired to both then and now.

The book that changed me as a teenager
The first book that made me cry – Love Story by Erich Segal. I think it made me realise the simple fact of how stories can move us.

The writer who changed my mind
Jonathan Safran Foer's Eating Animals. I read it when I was 24 and it completely changed the way I thought about consuming meat and fish.

The book that made me want to be a writer
High Fidelity. I didn't know that books could be that funny while being that truthful about love. I met Nick Hornby and told him that it was a huge inspiration for my new novel about heartbreak. He didn't seem to mind. I'm sure everyone who has ever written a book says that to him.

The book or author I came back to
I completely disengaged from Ted Hughes when I studied Sylvia Plath at uni, in the same way I'd unfollow a best friend's ex-boyfriend on Instagram. I've since returned to his poetry with a more open mind.

The book I reread
Heartburn by Nora Ephron. I find new meaning in it with every year I get older. I give it to anyone with a broken heart.

The book I could never read again
I had a secret Mills & Boon habit in my teens that I'm not in a great rush to resume, but you never know. I contemplated it in the lockdowns.

The book I discovered later in life
The End of the Affair. I didn't read any Graham Greene until I was 30 and I fell in love with his writing.

The book I am currently reading
Jordan Stephens' memoir that's out next year – Avoidance, Drugs, Heartbreak & Dogs. It's like a song and a screenplay and a story all in one. It is brutally honest as well as poetic. I'm totally beguiled by it.

My comfort read
I have a rotation of books that all sit in the same place on my shelf in case of an emergency. They include the first two instalments of Bridget Jones's Diary by Helen Fielding, Nigella Lawson's How to Eat, Home Cooking by Laurie Colwin, A Year in Provence by Peter Mayle, One Day by David Nicholls, Love, Nina by Nina Stibbe and anything by Nora Ephron. Each copy feels like an old friend.

Good Material by Dolly Alderton is published by Fig Tree on Thursday.

Audiobook of the week

Big Beacon
Alan Partridge
SEVEN DIALS, 7HR 53MIN

It is 2021 and Alan Partridge's career as a BBC TV presenter has come to a screeching halt. In the middle of a belligerent television discussion on BBC One's This Time, he had gone off-script, leaving his producer apoplectic. Partridge decided to pre-empt his removal from the show by announcing his resignation. "It's a shame to be leaving the BBC at a time when most of its senior roles are finally being given to supporters and donors of the Conservative party," he notes. "But leave I must, or rather left I have."

Big Beacon is the third memoir from Alan Partridge, written by Steve Coogan with longstanding collaborators Neil and Rob Gibbons. In the prologue, our protagonist explains, in excruciatingly Partridgean detail, how the book "employs a daring structure known as a dual narrative". While one of those narratives reveals his attempts to resuscitate his career, the other sees him "spurn the world of broadcasting for a more humble life spent restoring a dilapidated lighthouse". And so, after leaving Norfolk and "emigrating" to the Kent coast, Partridge goes into battle with locals outraged at his renovation plans.

Since it's impossible to read Partridge without hearing his voice in your head, this is a book best enjoyed in audio where, courtesy of Coogan, his pompous pronouncements and warped self-analysis take flight. In Big Beacon, Partridge is in his element, which is to say swimming against the tide and convinced of his reasonableness in an increasingly bewildering world. *Fiona Sturges*

Tom Gauld

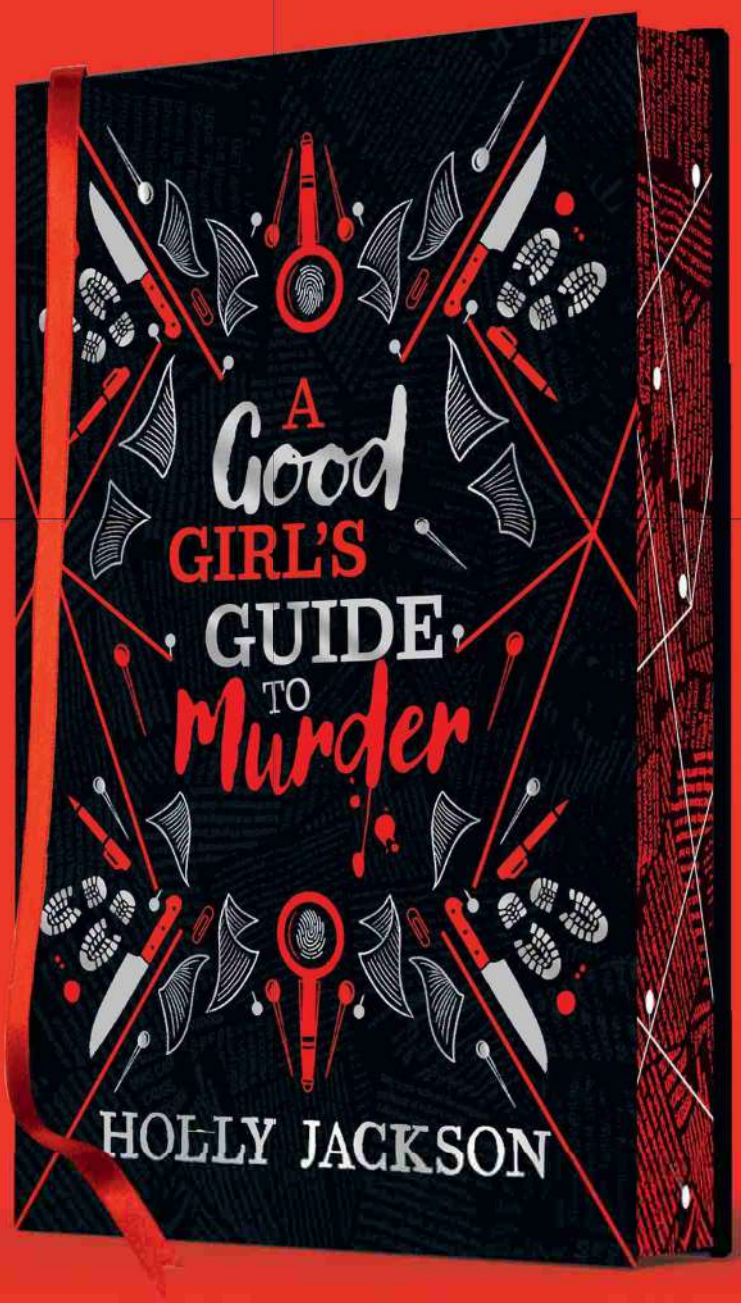
Further listening

Julia
Sandra Newman
GRANTA, 14HR 21MIN
Louise Brealey narrates Newman's novel, which retells George Orwell's landmark novel Nineteen Eighty-Four through a feminist lens.

A Spy Among Friends
Ben Macintyre
BLOOMSBURY, 12HR 30MIN
This gripping account of the Soviet mole Kim Philby, who gave up British secrets during the cold war is read bythe actor Michael Tudor Barnes.

KATHERINE ANNE ROSE/THE OBSERVER

The No. 1 *Sunday Times* bestseller



'One of my most favourite books'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Couldn't put it down'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Must read'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Brilliant'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Omg! The twist'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Addictive read'
★★★★½
Reader review

'You don't want to miss this'
★★★★★
Reader review

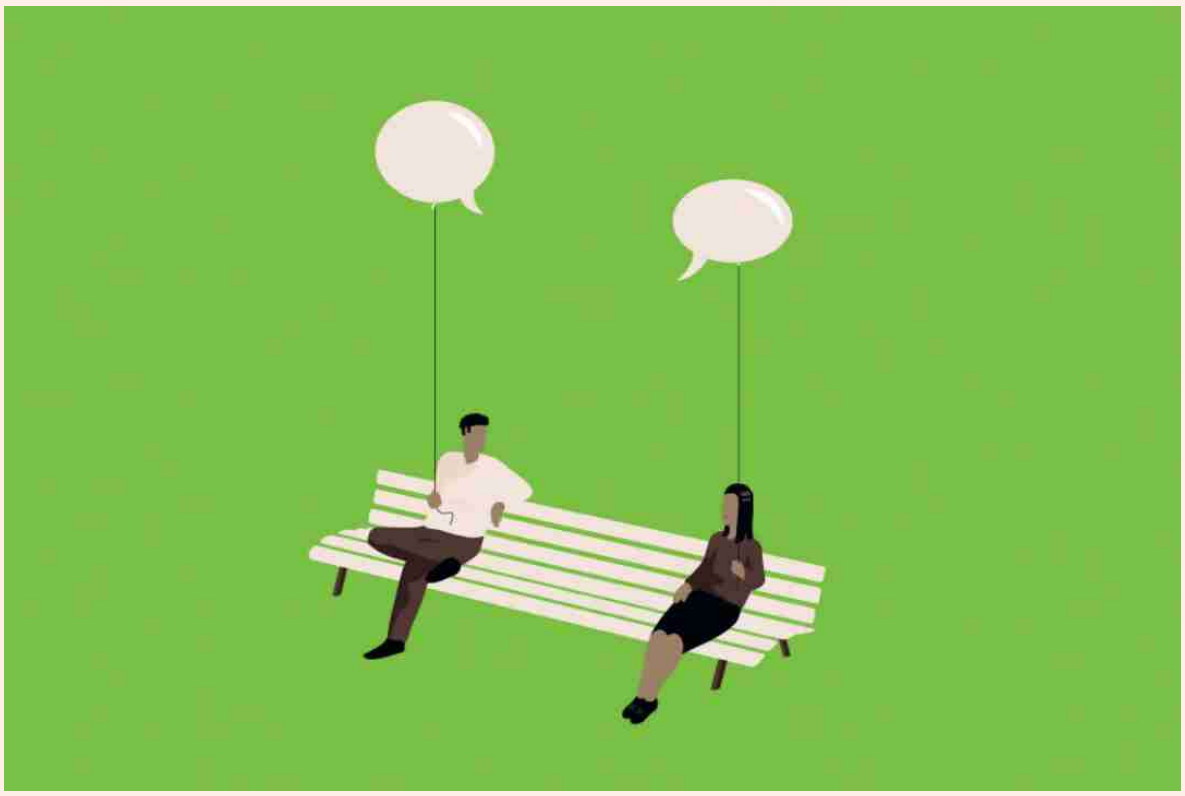
'You need it'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Captivating'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Every person has to read this at least once in their life'
★★★★★
Reader review

'Incredible'
★★★★★
Reader review

OUT NOW



THE BIG IDEA

Why we should spend more time talking to strangers

We focus on friendships, but encounters with those we hardly know are vital too, writes *Sophie McBain*

THE STRANGER struck up conversation on a delayed flight between Florida and New York. We were both struggling to entertain our toddlers, and we commiserated awhile. After the children fell asleep, he told me he'd recently left the Mormon church. He said he missed the community and the certainty he once felt. He was still figuring out how to raise a child without faith: for example, would I say there was a heaven if my daughter asked, even if I didn't fully believe it?

Maybe it feels more natural to speak intimately with a stranger on a flight, when you are both uprooted and disoriented, not quite sure if it's night or day or where the sun should hang in the sky. Maybe it's more natural for your mind to turn to existential questions when you're hurtling through the atmosphere at great speed, held up by forces you can't fully understand. For a few hours we talked about fear and loss, and I later thought that while this kind of intensity is discouraged, maybe such subjects are actually best explored with someone completely unfamiliar to you, who sees the world quite differently.

Once on solid ground again, the man told me he'd actually had a lot of life-changing chats with strangers. He was inspired by the cognitive scientist Laurie Santos, whose course on the science of wellbeing, the most popular in Yale's 300-year history, is now available for free online. Santos teaches that the pursuit of happiness is often counterintuitive. The things we think will make us feel happier – acing exams, securing a dream job, buying that dress – usually don't, but small habits can make a big difference. One of them is talking to strangers.

While we tend to focus on our close relationships, psychologists have noticed that even what they call "minimal social interactions" can make us feel happier and more connected. One study found that people who had a brief chat with their barista, or simply made eye contact and smiled, felt happier and experienced a greater sense of belonging than those who treated the human being in front of them as an extension of the coffee machine. A 2014 paper poignantly titled "Mistakenly seeking solitude" found that people who were instructed to talk to fellow passengers on Chicago public transport felt more positive about their commute than those who didn't.

The researchers observed that we consistently underestimate how much we will enjoy speaking to a stranger, and how much a stranger will enjoy speaking to us – which they demonstrated when they, somewhat remarkably, replicated their Chicago findings with commuters in London. We assume that among strangers it's best to stick to small talk, but when people in studies are instructed to go deep with someone they don't know, they surprise themselves with how enjoyable – and unawkward – it is.

And yet modern life is organised to reduce these encounters. It has become easy to avoid speaking to anyone unfamiliar. You can work from home or commute with your headphones in and eyes fixed to a screen; you can use the self-checkout or order almost anything via an app. We're herd creatures who have become antisocial. With our smartphones in hand, we're forever reachable and yet perpetually remote from one another, distracted by our devices.

We tend to approach strangers differently now: the internet has made it cheap and effortless to speak to new people in far-flung places, or to speak to hundreds of strangers at once, and it has helped those who would have otherwise felt desperately isolated find their tribe. But there's a cost to building a community remotely while you live among total strangers. One charity survey found that one in five people have never spoken to their neighbours, and one in five say there is no one in their neighbourhood, beyond their immediate family, they could call on for support.

Because we don't properly value minimal social interactions, we aren't fully recognising what it means to lose them. But I think we feel it. One recent survey suggested that 7% of people in Great Britain report chronic loneliness. Another report found the same proportion say they don't have a single close friend. It's a predictable consequence of the erosion of community spaces, the closure of libraries, community centres and pubs, but it also suggests that despite our online hyper-connectedness, many people are struggling to build social bonds that feel meaningful.

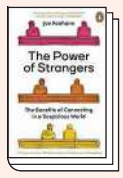
When people talk to more strangers, this isn't only good for them as individuals, it's good for society at large. Studies show that an effective way to combat prejudice is to bring people together and get them talking: it is easier to demonise difference from a distance. For all the panic about online echo chambers and filter bubbles, the evidence suggests that our biggest echo chambers still exist in our offline lives: we tend to only hang out with people who see the world similarly to us. And yet the internet is not the best place to meet strangers who might alter your perspective or change your mind. Not only do algorithmic feeds expose us to polarising extremes, but we seem to react with greater hostility to people we disagree with when we interact with them online rather than in person. Researchers have found, for instance, that people are more likely to dehumanise someone they disagree with politically when they read their opponent's views than when they hear them talk. In other words, in a divided world, one kind thing we can do for one another is find new ways to talk, in real life.

I feel lucky that as a journalist I speak to more strangers than most. These include people who have moved or surprised me, taught me something new or made me see life differently. But when pressed, most of us can identify a cast of strangers who have touched our lives in profound or intangible ways.

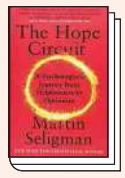
Encounters with strangers can be a humbling reminder of the vastness of the world and of each other, the impossible-feeling truth that each one of us contains an entire universe of inner life and a singular perspective, that as a species we have an incredible capacity for kindness, cruelty, courage and creativity.

Further reading
Three books for a deeper dive

The Power of Strangers
Joe Keohane
PENGUIN, £10.99



The Hope Circuit
Martin Seligman
JOHN MURRAY, £16.99



Letter to a Stranger
Colleen Kinder
ALGONQUIN, £15.99

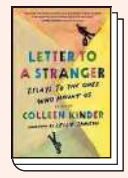
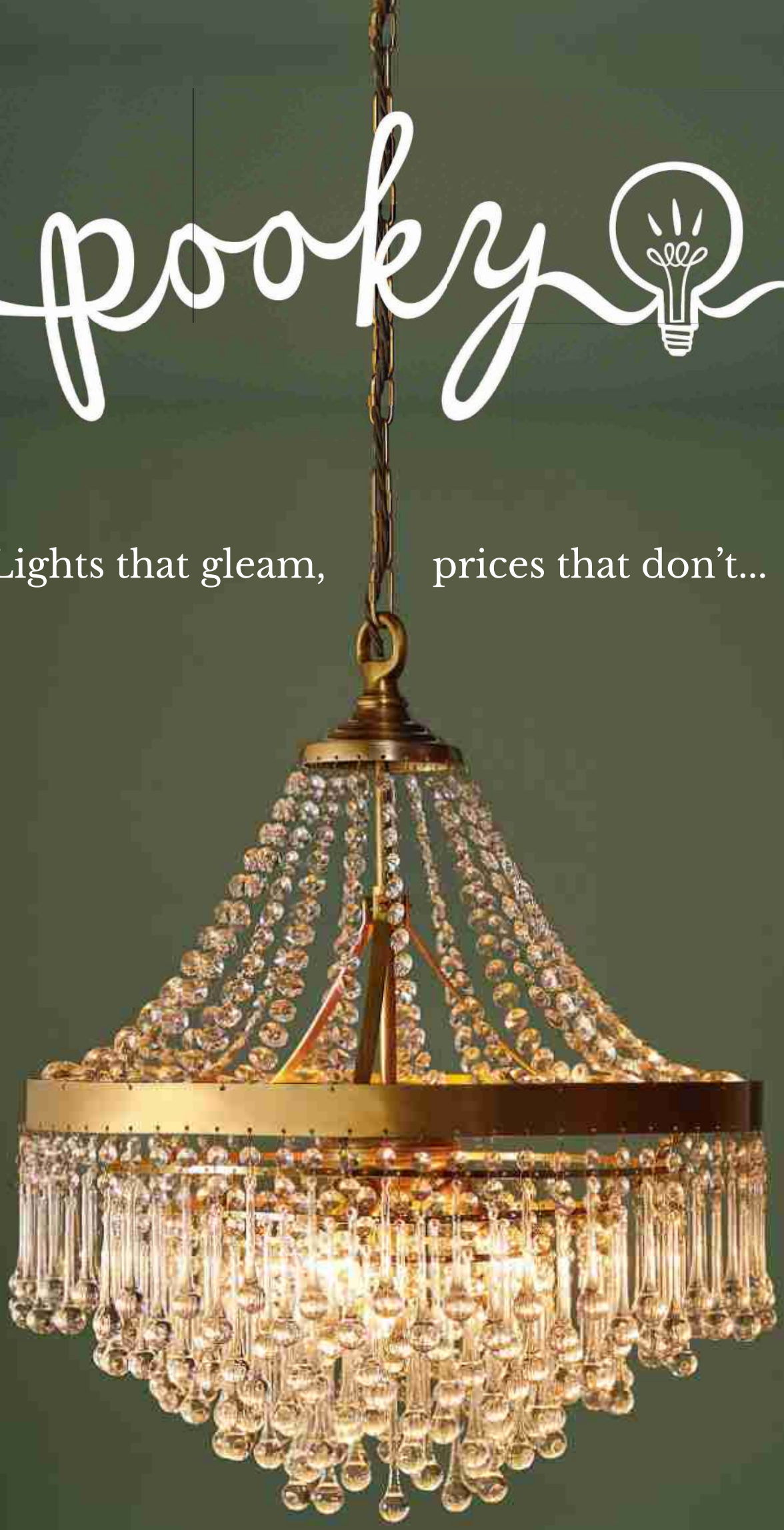


Illustration: Elia Barbieri

pooky

Lights that gleam, prices that don't...



Shop Chandeliers at Pooky.com

LIFESTYLE

WIN AT WINTER

The best coats of the season for style and snugness

Long beige teddy coat
£84.99, HM.COM
Long brown wool coat
£270, COS.COM

The days of throwing on a puffer jacket for every occasion are over. This season's more structured coats can project your personality as well as keep you cosy

Styling: Melanie Wilkinson
Photography: Tom J Johnson
Words: Jess Cartner-Morley

The right coat will make everything better. It will keep you warm, obviously, but it is so much more than that. It is a comfort blanket for your soul on days when the cold dark troubled world out there feels like a lot. It is your trusty, hard-working winter sidekick, faithful through rain or shine despite the fact that you sling it on a peg without a backward glance the minute you get home.

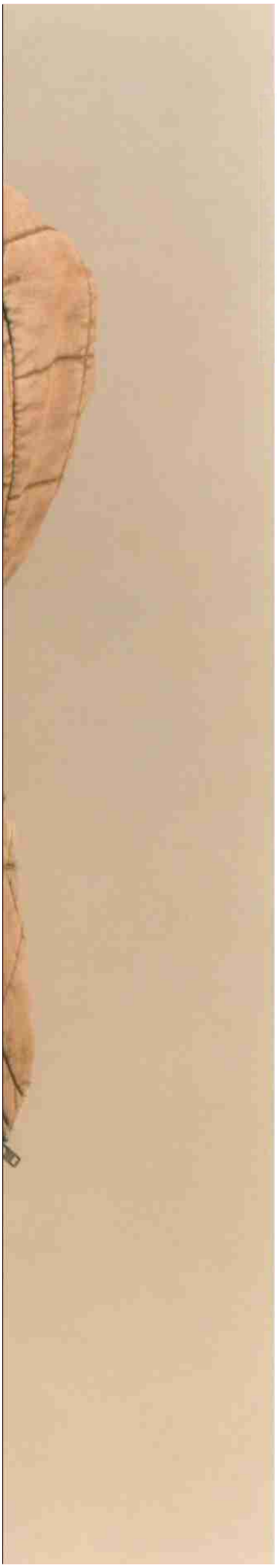
The excellent coats and jackets on these pages will keep you warm – none of your sleeveless coats or your flimsy dusters here, you will notice. But – just as importantly – they all have personality. Before you've said a word, your coat should announce that someone interesting just walked into the room.

You want a coat that you will love for a good many winters, not just one, so we do not concern ourselves with quick-change trends here, but only in underlying shifts of the tectonic plates of style. The key news is that the puffer coat, which has become a uniform everywhere – from pavements to coastal paths, commuter trains to clubs – is being replaced by a smarter, more structured coat.

Smart need not mean staid. A longline tailored coat not only gives an elegant line to whatever you throw it over, but instant poise and presence. A cosy, fluffy coat greets you like a hug and a smile in the morning, and emanates cheerful vibes to all you meet. A boxy, hip-length jacket is versatile across the colder seasons and radiates dynamic energy, even if you are two coffees short of it yourself.

Alfred Wainwright (OG hiker – look him up kids) said: "There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing." Likewise, there's no such thing as a bad winter, once you find a great coat.

Rust quilted coat
£188, FREEPEOPLE.COM



Quilted

Shiny khaki
£59.99, MONKI.COM

Vintage Barbour jacket
£55, HEADLOCK.CO

Burgundy organic cotton
£160, KOMODO.CO.UK

Cream waterproof
£79.99, MANGO.COM

Fleece and quilted
£75, MARKSANDSPENCER.COM

Checked
£109.90, UNIQLO.COM

Brown recycled polyester
£192, EVERLANE.COM

Lightweight pale pink
£169, UK.RAINS.COM

Navy blue insulated
£150, FINISTERRE.COM

Black belted
£250, GANT.CO.UK

Black quilted with shearling collar
£348, RAILS.COM

Bomber jackets

Denim
£35.99, BERSHKA.COM

Purple oversized
£140, ANTHROPOLOGIE.COM

Navy wool
£119, MASSIMODUTTI.COM

Taupe lightweight
£129, HUSH-UK.COM

Petrol blue
£240, CARHARTT-WIP.COM

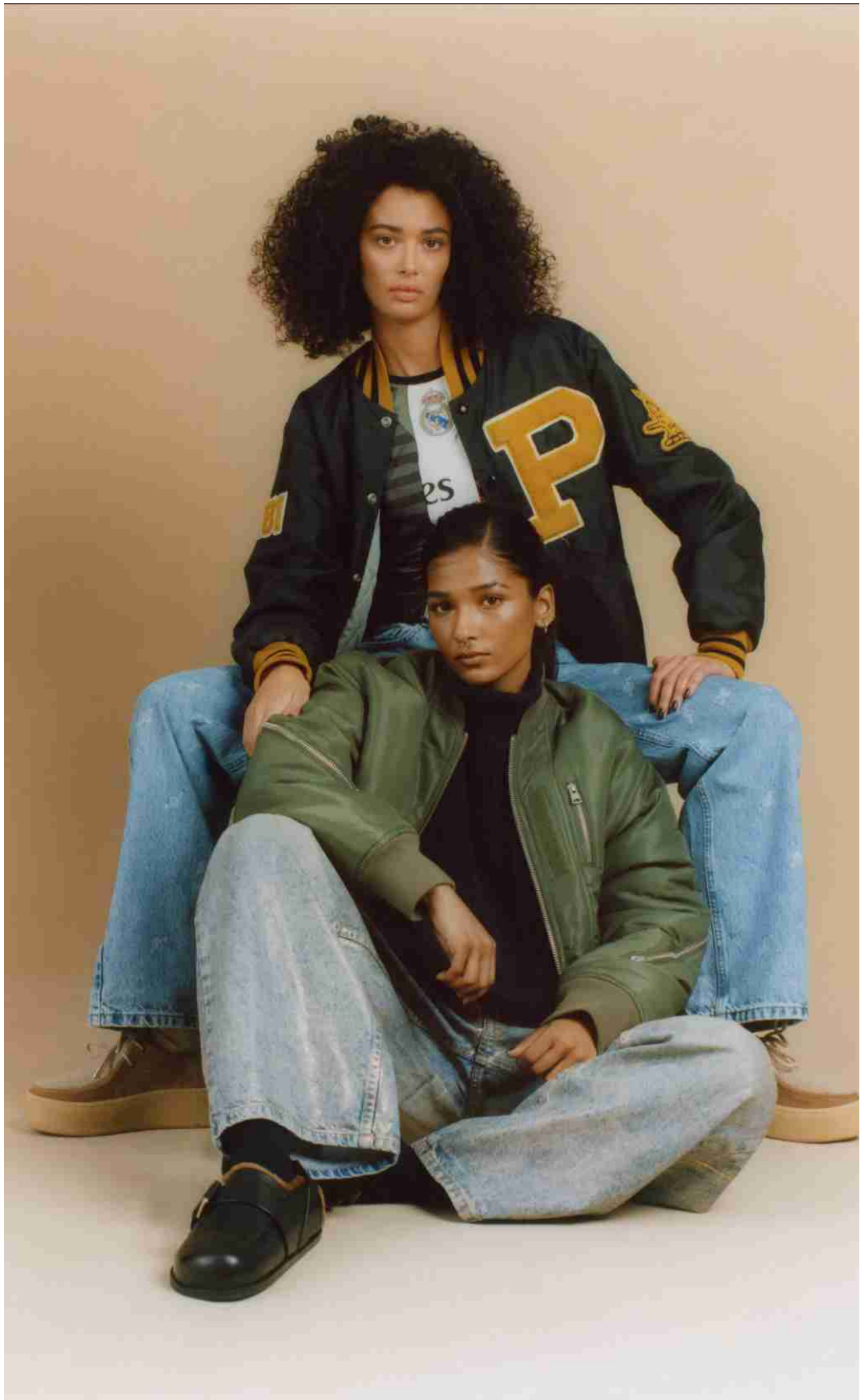
Khaki oversized
£89, WEEKDAY.COM

Pink vintage
£31.50, THRIFTED.COM

Cream textured
£290, ESSENTIEL-ANTWERP.COM

Black and green 1990s
£75, BEYONDRETRO.COM

Pale grey
£63, NEXT.CO.UK



Dark green varsity bomber
£69.95, GOLDSMITH VINTAGE.COM

Green oversized bomber
£299, ALLSAINTS.COM

Long coats

Yellow check
£320, BODEN.CO.UK

Shiny black trench
£339, ALLSAINTS.COM

Red wool blend
£90, RIVERISLAND.COM

Lilac recycled wool
£339, BAUKJEN.COM

Green trench
£189, ALIGNE.CO

Caramel boucle
£79.99, ZARA.COM

Waxed coat
£140, WEEKDAY.COM

Green check
£89, JOHNLEWIS.COM

Tan shawl collar
£159, PHASE-EIGHT.COM

Full-length grey
£299, ARKET.COM

A longline tailored coat gives an elegant line to whatever you throw it over, plus instant poise and presence

Long charcoal wool coat
£149.95, GOLDSMITH VINTAGE.COM

Short tailored

Almond faux fur
£120, FRENCHCONNECTION.COM

Navy peacoat
£99, MARKSANDSPENCER.COM

Pink textured
£100, OLIVERBONAS.COM

Brown check tweed
£175, STORIES.COM

Black and red dogtooth
£64, NEXT.CO.UK

Black corduroy
£200, ASPIGA.COM

Brown wool
£295, BALZAC-PARIS.COM

Golden brown teddy bear
£59.99, RESERVED.CO.UK

Grey wool blend
£54.99, HM.COM

Faux leather aviator
£99, MONKI.COM

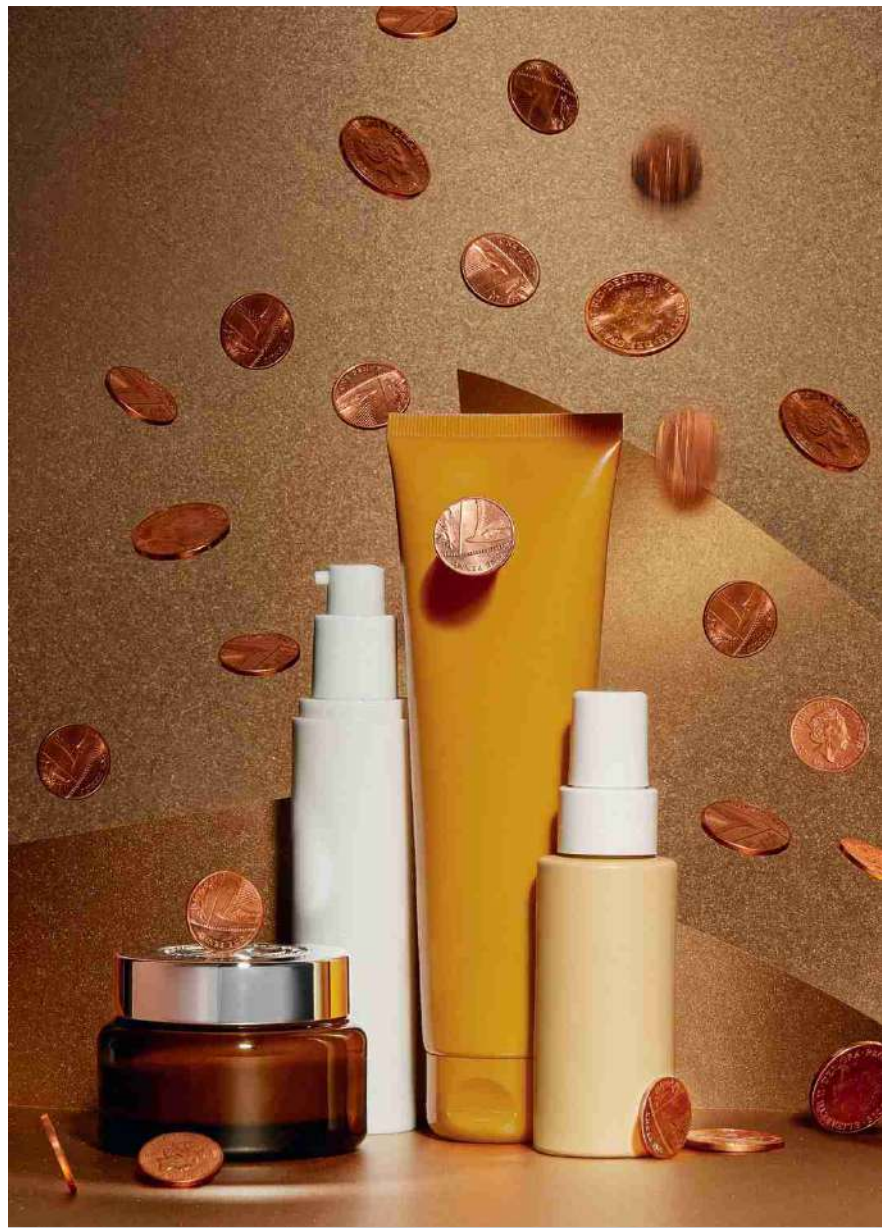
Short grey wool blend coat
£199, MASSIMODUTTI.COM

Short green fuzzy wool coat
£189, ARKET.COM

PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT KIERA SIMPSON **STYLING ASSISTANT** SAM DEAMAN **MAKEUP** SOPHIE HIGGINSON USING CHANEL **HAIR** SANDRA HAHNEL **MAKEUP ASSISTANT** SHA LI **MODELS** RITTIKA AT MILK AND IMAN AT SELECT **PAGE 63** RITTIKA: DENIM SHIRT, £120, BALZAC-PARIS.COM. JUMPER, £29.50, MARKSANDSPENCER.COM. SKIRT, £75, HUSH-UK.COM. BOOTS, £495, RUSSELLANDBROMLEY.CO.UK. HOOPS, £15.99, ZARA.COM. IMAN: VEST, £65, AND SKIRT, £95, BOTH COS.COM. SHIRT, £115, WITH NOTHINGUNDERNEATH.COM. BOOTS, £64.99, MONKI.COM. RINGS: MONICA VINADER.COM. RATTAN ARMCHAIR, £595, OLIVERBONAS.COM **PAGE 64** JACKET AND JEANS, MOTHERDENIM.COM. TOP, £155, REISS.COM **PAGE 65** BLAZER, £87 AND TROUSERS, £55, NEXT.CO.UK. KNITWEAR, £99, WHISTLES. COM. SILK SHIRT, £89, ARKET. COM. EARRINGS, £65, ASTRIDAND MIYU.COM **PAGE 66** RITTIKA: JUMPER, £295, OMHU.CO.UK. JEANS, £59.99, MANGO.COM. CLOGS, £295, MEANDEM.COM. EARRINGS, £65, ASTRIDAND MIYU.COM. IMAN: TOP, £230, BY RENATA BRENHA FROM MATCHESFASHION. COM. JEANS, £235, AXELARIGATO.COM. MOCCASINS, £245, RUSSELLAND BROMLEY.CO. UK **PAGE 67** BLAZER, £159, AND TROUSERS £87, BOTH ARKET. COM. JUMPER, £109.99, AND SHIRT, £35.99, BOTH MANGO.COM. LOAFERS, £295, RUSSELLAND BROMLEY.CO.UK **PAGE 68** RITTIKA: DRESS, £89.99, MANGO.COM. BAG, £295, COACH.COM. HOOPS, £125, CAROUSELJEWELS. COM. IMAN: JACKET, £69, AND JEANS, £65, BOTH NOBODYSCHILD.COM

Colder weather is coming – and with it, richer winter skincare

Sali Hughes
On beauty



I'm not even a face-wash lover and I'm over halfway through the bottle. It's a great purchase

The seasons this year seem to me to be working a good two months in advance. I'm already in coats and reaching for richer winter skincare. I've barely resisted, since some fantastically good and affordable launches have me excited.

Japan's bestselling skincare brand, Curél, is now available at Boots and Sephora, and I can't recommend it highly enough if your skin is sensitive in the colder weather. The brand is designed around the Japanese principle of double cleansing and double moisturising, and while the latter may sound like a faff, Curél's **Deep Moisture Spray** (£19.50) makes layering up a two-second job.

For double helpings of moisture and hydration, just mist over the cooling lotion before applying your moisture cream as normal, then top up (even over makeup) whenever skin feels depleted. Very easily irritated skins, like those with rosacea, will appreciate the no-touch application and high glycerin content.

There are three very good and fairly priced cleansers in the Curél range, but if you're a facial wash lover, save your pennies and head instead to Garnier for what I believe is – against stiff competition – its best and most bargainous launch this year.

Garnier's new **Hydrating Deep Face Cleanser** (£6.99) is everything one needs in a rinse-off cleanser – that is, it cleans away any traces of makeup-removing oil or balm cleansers before bed and refreshes and revives clean skin in the morning.

Thorough and skin softening, the vegan formula, rich in hyaluronic acid and ceramides, works fast and rinses off easily without the use of sulphates. And unlike many others, it leaves my dry face feeling comfy and calm. I'm not even a face-wash lover and I'm over halfway through the bottle. Full marks – this is the lowest risk skincare purchase you'll make all autumn.

I've spent much of this year cursing Soap & Glory's decision to discontinue its Sugar Crush exfoliating body lotion. But thanks to Dove, I can move on with my life. Its newly reformulated **Pro-Age Body Lotion** (£7) uses olive oil to moisturise, glycerine to hydrate and, crucially, lactic acid to de-flake dry shins and noticeably reduce any upper-arm bumpiness, which is common throughout the year but typically at its worst in winter. It smells better than many others of its type and is slurped up thirstily by my poor, weather-weary limbs. And it's always on offer somewhere.

Anita Bhagwandas
Trends on trial

Is using a straw to apply foundation and blusher a good idea?

The hack
Using the end of a straw to contour your face.

The test
I try to keep an open mind before trying these beauty hacks but, honestly, this one truly baffles me. Even if you're somebody who "contours" regularly – using foundation, concealer, blush and darker contouring product or bronzer to create more shadow and depth to the face – this makes zero sense.

The method? Instead of using a makeup sponge, fingers or brush to apply your products, you use the end of a straw. Why? Despite spending an hour watching people doing this on social media, I have no idea. But I try it while on holiday in the US – the straws, like the food, are bigger here, so it doesn't take as long as I thought it would.

Before long, I'm dotted with "circles" of base products, which makes me look as if I've contracted some kind of medieval plague – or Cheerios. Then I blend it out with my makeup brush and … it looks exactly the same as it would have if I'd applied it the regular way. Like so many TikTok beauty hacks, this reeks of: "What's the stupidest thing I can do in order to get likes on social media."

The verdict
Don't do this. But if you want to try contouring, perhaps try a translucent bronzer product (such as Merit Bronze Balm) as a foolproof entry point – and stay away from the straws.

Photography: Martina Lang. Illustration: Edith Pritchett

MATCHMAKING GUARDIAN READERS SINCE 2009

'He graciously looked away when the feta cubes in my cocktail nearly fell on my face'

Blind Date

Tim

30, sports PR executive

What were you hoping for?
Honestly, I didn't come in with any real expectation. I was really just hoping for a kind and friendly face and no awkward conversations!

First impressions?
Attractive, trendy, smiley. Lovely earrings!

What did you talk about?
Fitness. Travel. Life in London. Our respective origins. The conversation flowed, and I still feel as if I have a lot to ask. That's a good sign, no?

Most awkward moment?
Not one, to be honest. I think she had a fish bone stuck in her teeth at one point but she dealt with it very well.

Good table manners?
Absolutely.

Best thing about Katherine?
Katherine is so down to earth and grounded. She seems to have an adventurous spirit, which I respect (she ordered a cocktail with feta in it). We also seemed to have a lot in common.

Would you introduce Katherine to your friends?
For sure.

Describe Katherine in three words.
A beautiful person.

What do you think Katherine made of you?
I think she enjoyed the evening and our chat, and I hope she felt a positive vibe.

Did you go on somewhere?
We didn't because we stayed in the restaurant for more than three and a half hours!

And ... did you kiss?
A little peck on the cheek.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?
That it had carried on.

Marks out of 10?
A wholehearted and honest 10.

Would you meet again?
Yes, please.

Katherine

28, assistant to art collector

What were you hoping for?
Not to get roasted in their Q&A.

First impressions?
Impressed. After my story about my 10-minute bus journey, Tim revealed he had travelled from Birmingham.

What did you talk about?
How to eat oysters. Swimming/running psychotically long distances. Wine that doesn't give you a hangover.

Most awkward moment?
Walking in opposite directions at the end even though we were going to the same tube station.

Good table manners?
Flawless! Tim translated the menu and graciously looked away when the feta in my cocktail nearly fell on my face.

Best thing about Tim?
Seems at peace with himself and can pick a good jacket.

Would you introduce Tim to your friends?
They wish!

Describe Tim in three words.
Uplifting, adventurous, curious.

What do you think Tim made of you?
Alarmingly active.

Did you go on somewhere?
Just awkwardly back to the restaurant to take the selfie.

And ... did you kiss?
Two on each cheek, very civilised.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?
I would have met the chefs: I think we were both more seduced by them!

Marks out of 10?
8 - I had a great time.

Would you meet again?
If I had a mountain of Greek food, Tim would be my phone-a-friend choice.

Tim and Katherine ate at Kima, London W1. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

SONJA HORSMAN AND GRAEME ROBERTSON/THE GUARDIAN

TRUE STORIES OF OUR SEX LIVES

This is how we do it

'The TikTok algorithm figured out I was gay before I did'

Evelyn, 36

When I fell in love with Katia, I was married to a man. I was 34 and had never even kissed a woman. I thought I was straight, which now seems extraordinary to me, but it's amazing how much you can repress. When I had sex with men nothing felt glaringly wrong, but any initial sexual desire I felt would fall off a cliff two months into the relationship, after which point sex became an obligation.

I assumed that all straight women fantasised about other women while they were having sex with their male partners. When my friends told me they actively enjoyed sex with their husbands, I thought they were lying to me. Looking back, I was confused.

Katia and I shared an office, and I gradually became aware that I was following her about with my eyes every second of the working day. She has very beautiful muscular arms, and she wears a lot of sleeveless shirts. The TikTok algorithm figured out I was a lesbian before I did: all I did was watch queer reels on repeat.

Eventually I plucked up the courage to tell my husband I was gay.

After my marriage unravelled, I invited Katia to join me for a one-on-one night out to a queer rave – quite a pointed hint. We ended up in her bed, and she took the reins because I had no idea how to have sex with a woman. For the first few weeks of our relationship, I was too embarrassed to even try to finger her in case my technique was all wrong. Katia and I have been together for two years now, and I have honed my skills by copying all the amazing tricks she tries on me.

I take antidepressants, which makes it trickier to reach orgasm. With my ex-husband I didn't even try to address that issue. Katia has been very tender and reassuring about my difficulty climaxing. She came up with the idea of incorporating a vibrator into our sex sessions to get me there, which is something my male exes would have felt too insecure to suggest. In many ways I feel like I am having a wonderful second puberty: I'm aroused all the time and, at last, my body is not a total mystery to me.

Katia, 32

I always found Evelyn very gorgeous, but I had her labelled as my "straight married co-worker". It gradually became apparent that she was not entirely straight, though. All her attention was directed at me in the office, and there was this unmistakable softness in her eyes when she looked at me.

My self-confidence was very low at the time. I was recovering from a breakup and had almost given up hope of finding someone. It felt quietly miraculous, having Evelyn look at me like that. I probably wore more sleeveless shirts to work than was strictly necessary.

The first time we had sex was surreal. We were both so jittery our nerves were shot, so there were no big climaxes. I knew it was her first time with a woman, and I was happy to take the lead. She is a natural and picked things up with extraordinary speed.

Generally we start sex off with an extended kissing session. We begin sitting up, facing each other in bed. We can easily just kiss for an entire hour, but at a certain point the clothes come off and our hands will migrate downward. It's almost like a challenge of will power: how long can we prolong the kiss before one of us puts a hand between the other's legs? It's never clear who will give in first.

We have added a vibrator to our routine, to make it easier for Evelyn to reach orgasm. In the first few weeks of our relationship I had a little nagging insecurity, worrying that I had lost my touch. But then she told me about the medication. My goal is to make Evelyn feel as good as she possibly can, and if a vibrator helps, I say bring that sucker out. What I love about the sex is the opportunity to be close to Evelyn. And I still can't really get over her boobs. I plan to commission an artist to do an oil painting of them.

As told to Kitty Drake

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

Illustration: Ryan Gillett

You be the judge
Should my boyfriend show more appreciation for the gifts I gave him?

Interviews: Georgina Lawton

The prosecution
Lua
David says the table runner I bought for him in Nicaragua 'hurts his eyes'

I brought back several gifts for my boyfriend David from recent trip around Central America, but I feel they were unappreciated. I got him a gorgeous pink, orange and blue table runner, handmade by women on a farm in Nicaragua.

I also got him some scented candles for our bedroom, a faded red leather backpack, a woven bracelet and two cushion covers from Costa Rica with a colourful bird print on them.

David is quite a simple man: he doesn't do a lot of crazy colours, but he has had a visceral reaction to the table runner in our flat. He says it's "a bit much" and suggested we put it in the study room instead of on our dining table. But it's a table runner - the clue's in the name - so I said no and put it on our table.

He's made a few comments - he says it hurts his eyes and he can't concentrate on his dinner. I told him to stop being so ridiculous, but I am a little hurt.

The bracelet I got him has also remained unworn. He says he's grateful but it's not really "his style", so it seems that was a waste of money. I've seen him use the backpack, so I'm happy about that. When it comes to the cushion covers, David said they were "very interesting", but in the same breath mentioned that we already have some and don't need to change them. (And I do admit, the cushions' pattern is overly vibrant).

I went away for four weeks on this solo travel trip and thought he'd be happy to get some funky gifts from Central America. Our flat needs an update too. We've been together for three years and I have slowly been working to make his clothing and decor tastes a little more adventurous.

David could show more interest in that, though. I'd love for him to come up with alternatives. He could even be a bit more vocal about why he *doesn't* like something. I wouldn't be offended, but he tends to avoid conflict and disagreements. He will slyly avoid saying what he really means, which is not super helpful.

The defence
David
It's not that I hate the gifts, but I feel that Lua bought them for the flat, not for me

It's not that I hated Lua's presents, it's just that I don't think they are in keeping with my personal style, or what we've got going on in the flat.

The table runner Lua brought back from her travels was honestly really garish, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I just quietly moved it to the study after she presented it to me. She didn't like that, and it soon returned to its original position.

However, it sort of raises the question: was the table runner a present for me, or for us? It seems Lua wanted to buy it for the flat, so I wasn't going to have much of a say about its position either way.

The same goes for the cushion covers. Lua needs to admit that she saw them abroad and thought, "Oh, they will be lovely for the flat", not, "This will make a nice gift."

I'd actually be fine with putting the cushion covers on now - I concede they were a very thoughtful idea and definitely a step-up from our old, stained navy ones. I think I just needed to get used to the brightness of them.

Apart from the house stuff, I was very grateful for the backpack as my laptop fits it perfectly. It's 100% my style, so that was a gift I loved. Even though it's not something I'd usually wear, I'll give the woven black bracelet a go because I love Lua and I want her to know I appreciate her.

I know she thinks I'm a bit passive when it comes to expressing how I feel, but I don't want to offend her. I will just sort of avoid saying anything negative from now on because, for one thing, it's really difficult to tell someone you don't like something they have bought for you.

When it comes to the decor in our flat, it's probably accurate to say that I am very averse to change. I like things to stay the same. However, I have reasoned that because I don't suggest any alternatives, it's fair enough for her to come in and change things without asking for my approval each and every time. I could be a bit more involved, I suppose.

The jury
of Guardian readers

Should David show more appreciation for the gifts Lua bought him?

Lua is using the idea that these are gifts as a way to justify purchasing them. If you buy someone something they don't want or like, it's an imposition. Perhaps next time Lua can find a gift that will bring him joy rather than something that she hopes can change him.
Thomas, 32

Lua is disingenuous suggesting that brightly coloured homewares were gifts for David. She bought impersonal items that she thought he should like, even though they weren't to his taste. The backpack was a hit because it was aligned to his style. One thoughtful gift would have been enough.
Elaine, 51

David is willing to wear the bracelet, bless him. I imagine Lua wanted to share some of her solo trip with her partner - a lovely gesture. But most of her gifts weren't even really for him. If they were, he'd get to choose where that garish table runner lives. Not guilty.
Carly, 37

Lua bought the gifts for herself, not David. But if he's going to complain about how she decorates the flat, he needs to share an opinion in the first place.
Bryony, 25

Come on, Lua - no one buys cushion covers or a table runner for their live-in partner! The backpack was great but perhaps you should respect the fact that David has different tastes.
Joanne, 57

THE VERDICT

Guilty Why look a gift horse in the mouth?	1
Not guilty David is present and correct	4

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

My friends are getting into debt but won't rein in their lifestyle. And I feel embroiled ...

Ask
Annalisa Barbieri

I have a friend who has experienced a truly awful year with her husband. They have been put through it and are now in high levels of medical debt. They have a nice lifestyle, which they finance with credit card debt. My partner and I generally have a much easier life than they do, but money has been a little tight for us, too, recently. I have had to cancel trips and say no to eating out as my partner recently lost his job and we simply don't have the income right now.

I always feel very awkward about this as our financial situation is undoubtedly easier than theirs, and I am not at all comfortable with taking on debt. When I recently cancelled a trip with them they made comments such as "just put it on a credit card," and were not very happy.

I don't want to claim our situation is anything like theirs and I want to show my love and support for them, but I equally don't want to take on debt to keep up with activities they want to do. Can you help?

I'm sorry your friends have been "through it" and that your partner lost his job. It sounds like you both have a lot to deal with. You didn't mention how long you'd been friends but I wonder if this is a new thing and perhaps your friends, rightly or wrongly, want to live life a little after a medical scare?

I went to UKCP registered psychotherapist Lisa Bruton. We both spoke about how there is often a culture whereby people allude to money but don't directly talk about it. And this is often because money can stand in for other things in relationships (love, status, attention etc). Bruton said: "Ideally friendships can survive transitions and changes in circumstances and it sounds like your friendship is going through a bit of a transition."

She also said that in friendships and relationships we have to allow for differences: "Your friends seem happy to build up debt while you feel differently from them. It's not about becoming like each other, but allowing for differences."

The debt isn't yours, and debt isn't catching unless, if you pardon the pun, you also buy into it. What does debt mean to you? Are you worried that they might ask to borrow money? Or that their ability to put things on credit cards says something else about them?

I wonder if, in saying that you refuse to put things on credit cards, you are worried that it sounds a bit judgmental about what they're doing? I think it's good that you've been honest so far about why you weren't able to do things - rather than making up excuses - because then they know what they're dealing with.

Bruton also wondered if there were other things you could do, that didn't involve so much money, or indeed any money at all. Or at the very least a way you could control the expenditure more easily. When I was very broke, going out to eat, as one example, was a nightmare as it was almost impossible to budget. Even if I restricted what I ate or drank there was that dreaded "let's split the bill" at the end of the night and I'd end up supplementing others. So, I'd have people round to mine as that way I could budget.

Bruton adds: "Showing love and support doesn't have to mean spending money. It feels like, to you, showing love and support means mirroring behaviour." But it doesn't have to, and in fact that's not what friendship is about.

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

Illustration: Igor Bastidas

18+

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
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Dividing your plants is a good way to conquer the urge to buy new ones

Alice Vincent
On flowers

One of the more charming oddities of gardening is that the more you do it, the fewer plants you have to buy. Some of the most proficient, experienced and, well, elderly gardeners I know will proudly exclaim that they can't remember the last time they bought a plant – yet their gardens look fantastic.

It's a twisted logic that novice growers struggle to understand and less-new-ones aspire to. Buying new plants, especially snazzy, in-bloom, ready-to-roll numbers from the garden centre, is a habit many of us shrug off after a few years. Once things get established, there's a kind of challenge to garden as frugally as possible.

Lifting and dividing plants is a big part of this. After a certain period – two or three years for some perennials, half that for others – plants get large enough to cut into chunks and grow each chunk (or division) on as a separate plant elsewhere in your plot.

Not only do you get new plants for nothing, you get new plants that you know thrive in your soil and are of the same variety that already exists there. Another sometimes hard-to-swallow horticultural truth is that gardens look better when they have a smaller plant palette on repetition than when they include one of everything. Dividing plants helps that along massively.

Gardens look better with a few plants on repeat, rather than one of everything. Dividing helps this along

It's important to do this when plants are not actively growing. For plants that have flowered in the summer, the following spring is a good time, especially if the previous autumn was wet, because the plants will be about ready to put on a growth spurt. Autumn also works, as many plants are cruising towards dormancy.

Whenever you do it, make sure you allow enough time to plant your divisions after making them; letting them hang around and dry out makes it difficult for them to grow on well.

It is easy work, if physical and messy. If you're inclined towards an immaculate lawn I'd suggest laying a ground sheet. Take a trowel or a spade, depending on the size of the plant you are uprooting, and carefully loosen the soil around the crown, giving some allowance for the root ball. If your plant is in a container – and has been for some time – you may need to throw some heft behind it. Try to get beneath the root ball to lever it out of the ground, then put on the ground.

If you have two forks, placing them back to back through the crown of the plant, or through the rootball as it lies on its side, is the traditional way. Some are more stubborn than others: I've taken a pruning saw to certain ferns without any lasting damage. Digging a hole for the new plant before you divide can help with a swift transition, and don't forget to water it in well.

Gynelle Leon's Houseplant of the week

Sea urchin cactus

Why will I love it?
The *Astrophytum asterias* is one of my favourite plants; I find its form intriguing and beautiful. It is a flat barrel cactus without the typical covering of spines. Instead it is adorned with a rare feature: a tiny speckled tuft of hairs. Its allure is amplified by large yellow flowers, with orange throats often dwarfing the plant itself.

Light or shade?
It thrives in bright direct/indirect light.

Where should I put it?
Welcome your sea urchin cactus into your home by placing it on a south-facing windowsill or a brightly lit nightstand.

How do I keep it alive?
Astrophytums are notoriously prone to root rot. To avoid this, plant in free-draining cactus and succulent soil and make sure your planter has a drainage hole. During its growth period (April to September) water weekly, and then from October to March refrain from watering. This period of dryness mimics its native desert habitat, ensuring longevity and summer blooms.

Did you know ...
In the vast expanse of southern Texas/Mexico desert, these cacti stand alone, their solitary cylindrical and star-shaped forms adding to the natural beauty of their surroundings.

SHUTTERSOCK; PRICK LDN

Bad wine, rain and daytime TV: I must be back on the road

Tim Dowling
On modern life

The band I'm in has a run of dates, our first shows since the summer: Exeter, Bristol, Cardiff. I am eager to play again, but I'm not looking forward to the first five songs of the very first gig, which is about how long it takes me to find my feet on stage. Up to that point it feels as if I've invited a bunch of people to come and watch me lose a tennis match.

"How was that for you?" says the guitarist afterwards.

"The sound was good," I say. "I heard all my mistakes clearly."

The show in Bristol goes better, because we rejigged the order of songs in a way that addresses my frailties as a musician. My biggest mistake comes well before the gig, when I copy out the setlists inaccurately, so the drummer's list is not quite the same as the bassist's, or indeed as mine.

That night it takes a long time to find our hotel, deep in an industrial estate near the nexus of the M4 and the M5, apparently with access to neither. Its all-night lounge is the sort of facility you'd expect on an oil rig – plastic chairs, bright lights. The accordion player is already at the bar.

"You're not doing the setlist tomorrow," he says.

"Fine," I say.

"What d'you want?" he says. The woman behind the bar looks up and smiles. I want to say: your least worst wine. But we are staying two nights in this hotel, so it's wise to be diplomatic.

"How about that one?" I say, pointing to the shelf behind her. The woman reaches for a bottle of white bearing a picture of a hummingbird approaching a flower.

"Not that one," I say, a little too quickly. "The one next to it."

But the one next to it is four inches back from the edge of the shelf, just beyond the woman's grasp. She stands on tiptoe, but her fingers only brush the label. She stretches, to no avail.

"I'll just see if we've got any out back," she says, and disappears, seemingly for good. We stare at the bottle on the shelf for a while.

"I could reach that," I say.

Next morning I open my curtains to a rain-sodden view of a giant food distribution depot and a roundabout, a scene that replicates itself into the distance in every direction. We don't have to be in Cardiff until the afternoon, but there do not appear to be any local points of interest to visit.

Instead I lie on the hotel bed watching Ainsley's Good Mood Food on ITV. In this episode, Ainsley Harriott is visiting an award-winning beach cafe. "I'm looking forward to tasting one of your famous crab sandwiches!" he says, doing a weird thing with his hands like he's wiping two imaginary windows. In the ad break I try this move out in the mirror, but my version lacks insouciance.

We reach Cardiff by 3pm, and at 8pm we take the stage for the final gig of the weekend. The audience is in high spirits, but also attentive, which I find unnerving. Between songs four and five they listen to me retuning my banjo in rapt silence. I think: I must try to engage them.

During the ad break I try out Ainsley Harriott's moves in the mirror. My version lacks insouciance

"Did anyone else see Ainsley's Good Mood Food this morning?" I say. This elicits no response beyond mild bewilderment. Perhaps the TV schedules are different in Wales.

It is past midnight when we reach the hotel on the roundabout in the giant industrial park. The atmosphere in the brightly lit bar is just as soulless. We sit and discuss mistakes we made, musical and otherwise.

"Would we drink more red if I paid?" I say.

"I think we probably would," says the fiddle player.

I go up to the bar alone. The woman smiles at me.

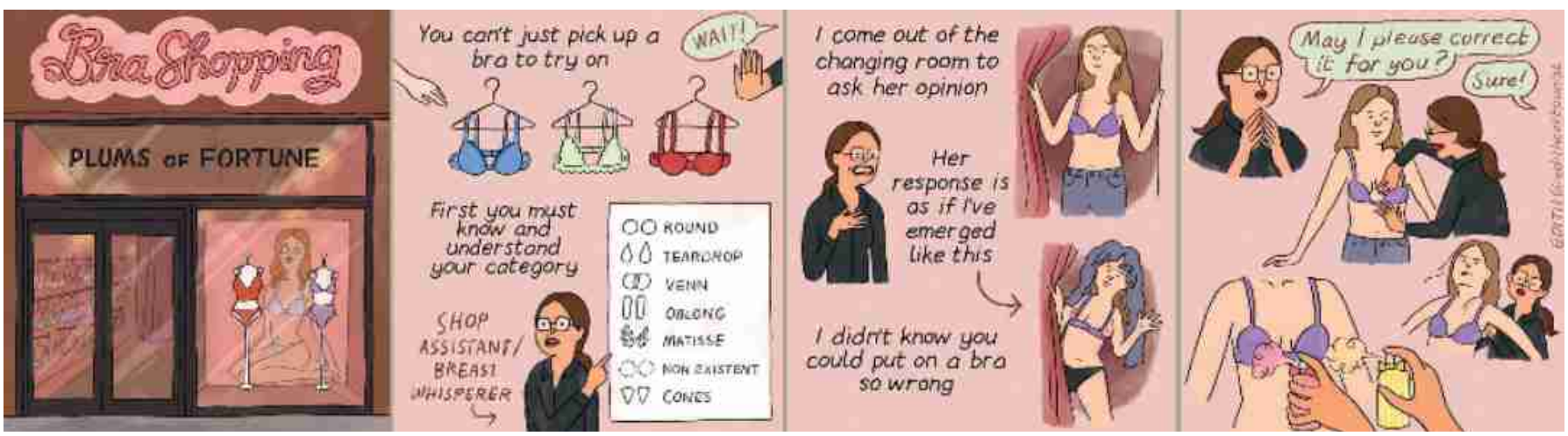
"Could I have that bottle of red, please?" I say.

"Certainly," she says. It is, I realise, the same bottle as the night before. It is a different woman, but alas she is even shorter than the previous one. On tiptoe, her fingers are not even close to making contact. I am ready to try the wine with the hummingbird on it.

But the woman picks up a bottle of rosé and, holding it by the neck, attempts to bat my bottle from the shelf. She knocks it into some other bottles which teeter off the edge, but she hammers them back in place with her rosé. The sound alone is hugely alarming. Finally, she succeeds in bouncing my bottle against the back wall. It falls off the shelf, and she catches it.

"There you go!" she says, beaming. "How many glasses?"

Edith Pritchett On millennial life



Vegan checklist

With awareness of the benefits of a vegan lifestyle on the rise, we've selected an array of food, drink and complementary products that are proud to contribute to an ethical and cruelty-free world. Choose to make a lifestyle change today – give some of these a try

Read more online! Visit *checklists.co.uk* and follow @checklistsocial

Win a skincare hamper from Plenaire

Worth £175!

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checklists.co.uk/win/plenaire

Plenaire are an independent British beauty brand committed to transparent and relaxed beauty practices, placing self-care on par with skincare. This thoughtful, female-owned brand are B Corp certified, carbon neutral, vegan, cruelty free and use 100% recyclable packaging.

Use code CHECKLIST at *plenaire.co* for 20% off Plenaire products until 19 November.

Plenaire

Introducing Growers Garden Broccoli Chips – a delicious innovation capturing hearts and taste buds

Growers Garden started with a commitment to sustainable farming and a desire to reduce food waste. Dedicated growers, spanning across the picturesque landscapes of Scotland, realised a simple truth – not all vegetables are created equal. Those imperfect veggies – the 'swipe-lefts' – deserve love just like their supermarket-ready counterparts. After many late-night debates and lots of hard work, Growers Garden Broccoli Chips became a reality.

The secret ingredient? Fresh broccoli – the number-one ingredient and star of the show! Offering a healthier alternative to traditional snacks, they're perfect for everyone, from health-conscious individuals to those who are gluten intolerant and vegan – even those trying to encourage their kids to eat more greens!

Martin Peel, managing director of Growers Garden, said: *"Our growers are incredibly innovative, constantly seeking new ways to improve their farming practices and explore new markets. The journey to launching our crisps hasn't been easy and we struggled initially to find a manufacturer. However, thanks to our incredible growers and staff, we've risen to the challenge and proudly produce our crisps in our own facility as well as manufacture for other household names too!*

"We're thrilled to offer an exciting new range that customers have long been crying out for."

Growers Garden offer a range of flavours – whether you crave the classic Original, enjoy a touch of Chilli heat, prefer creamy Sour Cream & Chive or want to indulge in a Cheesy experience, they've got you covered with gluten-free goodness.

Growers Garden

Embrace the future of snacking – it's green, it's vegan, it's crunchy and it's delicious. Shop now at *growers-garden.com* and use code BROC10 for 10% off your first order.

Win a Coco Caravan chocolate bundle

Worth £100!

Enter here

checklists.co.uk/win/cococaravan

Can vegan chocolate be better than regular chocolate? *"Most definitely"*, says Jacques from Coco Caravan. *"Keeping it free from refined sugars and dairy means that it's all about the cacao, the chocolate itself."*

Jacques has been in the world of cacao for over 10 years, making small batch bean-to-bar chocolate. This year's big standout is Coco Caravan's 50% Oat milk chocolate – with sublime cacao from Piura in Peru, creamy oats and topped with some crunchy cacao nibs.

The Coco Caravan chocolate factory and cacao bar is open on Fridays and Saturdays in the centre of Stroud.

Check out the range at *cococaravan.co.uk*

Image credit: Nettie Atkisson

COCO CARAVAN VEGAN CHOCOLATE

New in: VEGAN Happy all-weather-robes and camping coats – only £75

Check out these gorgeous new robes from VEGAN Happy Clothing. Designed with love and in two gorgeous colours: aqua with cream sherpa lining and stone with pale blue sherpa lining.

This is not just a robe, VEGAN Happy Clothing are using theirs as daytime coats too, they almost feel like you are wearing a comfort blanket wherever you go.

Choose from some gorgeous reverse logo designs too, if you want to add any extra flair to this already gorgeous robe that is. Messages include 'Devoted to Kindness', 'VEGAN Happy Original', and 'VEGAN VIBES', or blank back if you prefer to leave it clean.

The robes are 100% vegan and waterproof, and made with love by VEGAN Happy Clothing. They have other robes in their store too and hundreds of other gorgeous items, perfect for keeping warm and dry during autumn and winter, whatever the weather, and of course, perfect for Christmas gifting. Feel free to shop for Christmas now and return in January 2024 if there is any need.

VEGAN Happy has been established for over five years with 10% or more of profits donated back to animal rescue and activism.

VEGAN Happy

Use code WINTERSHIP at *veganhappyclothing.co.uk* for free shipping on all orders. Follow @veganhappyclothing

Looking for low-carb, keto, low-sugar, high-fibre foods that taste delicious?

All 8Foods snacks, breads and desserts are always gluten, dairy and refined-sugar-free, never contain any fillers, additives or preservatives, and are uncompromisingly tasty.

8Foods are an award-winning British brand on a mission to offer incredibly moreish, truly healthy, low-carb snacks and breads perfectly suited to the low-carb or keto lifestyle.

The team are passionate advocates of a low-carb, nutritious diet, and create products that they hope will inspire and empower customers on their quest for boundless health and wellbeing.

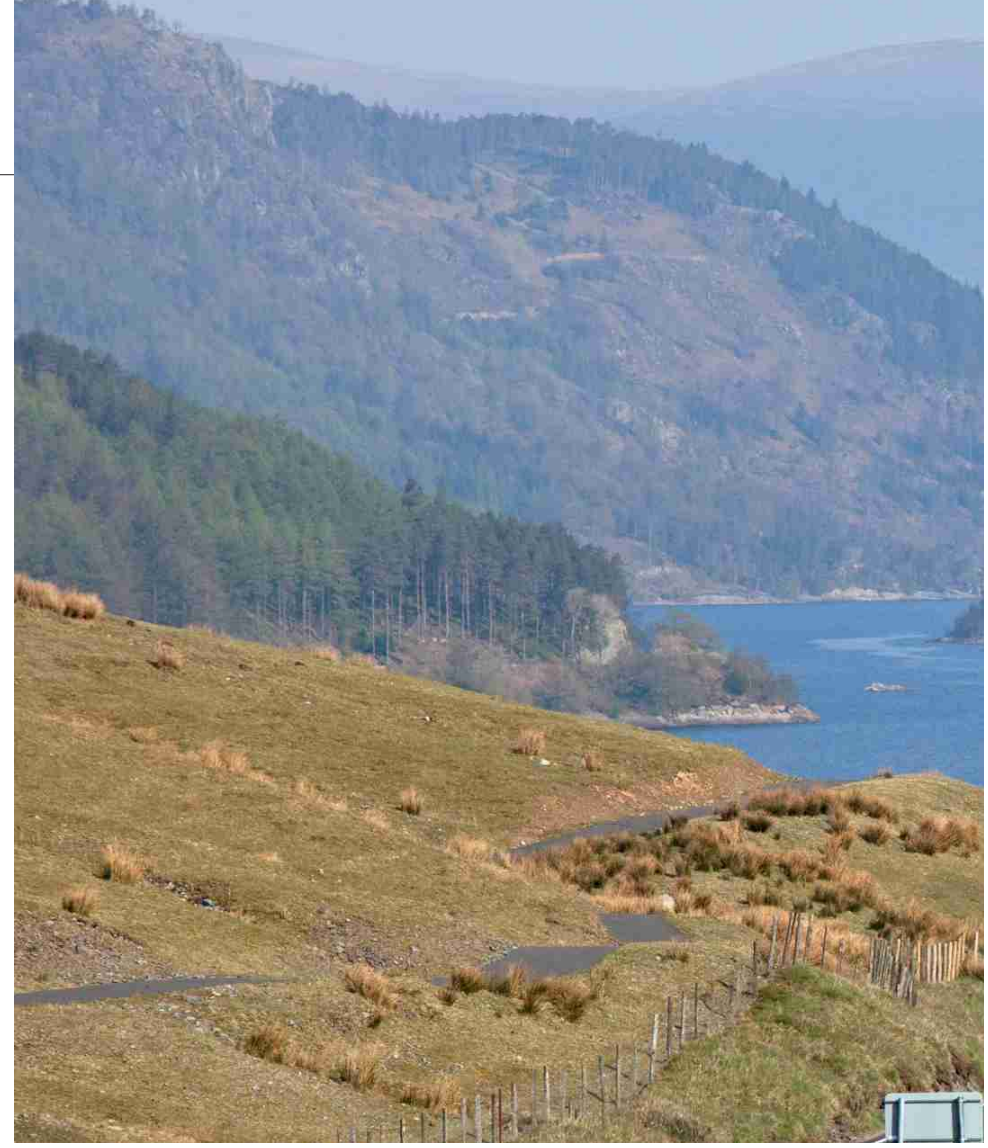
8 FOODS Boundless Life

Use code KETO20G at *8foods.co.uk* for 20% off your first purchase. Offer ends 31 November.

From Inverness to Land's End, our slow travel expert picks 10 of the best bus and (overleaf) train trips for taking in the UK's beautiful countryside

Better bag a window seat ...

Words: Phoebe Taplin



In the gloom caused by the loss of many rural bus services and Rishi Sunak's shameful rollback of environmental pledges, there has been one gleam of (green) light. The bus fare cap, now set at £2.50 across England, will run until 30 November 2024. The cap doesn't apply to buses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but there are still some reasonable fares, so here are 10 great sightseeing routes across the UK.

Busway A from Cambridge to St Ives, Cambridgeshire

The world's longest guided busway leaves Cambridge railway station every 20 minutes (hourly on Sundays) and rattles through the sights of Cambridge with glimpses of the Round Church and River Cam; an unlimited day ticket costs £4.40. The journey's appeal is partly in the novelty of running along concrete tracks, where the driver doesn't need to steer. Flat fields and fens, with the odd church or windmill, are sandwiched between the city's medieval colleges and pretty St Ives an hour later, with cafes such as the River Terrace for tea.

There's a stop at Fen Drayton nature reserve, just before St Ives, for walks around lakes and russet reedbeds and, on winter evenings, murmurations of starlings swirling through the sunset sky. Elegant Duke House B&B (doubles from £160 B&B), close to Cambridge bus station, has individually furnished bedrooms and locally sourced breakfasts. *thebusway.info*

The Cambridge busway runs on unusual concrete tracks to the market town of St Ives

Bus 37 from Aviemore to Grantown-on-Spey

This 45-minute bus ride from Aviemore railway station through the Cairngorms offers mountains views, evergreen forests and village cafes. There are Highland cattle grazing around the ruined walls of Castle Roy and even the odd red squirrel darting through roadside treetops. It's a useful bus route for linear hikes along the Speyside Way with a stop at the Osprey Centre Road End for a birdsong-filled walk through the woods around Loch Garten and the chance to spot crested tits among ancient Caledonian pine trees. Grantown-on-Spey has plenty of places to warm up, including the little museum and nearby Garth hotel (doubles from about £105 B&B). Buses run hourly Mondays to Saturdays, four a day on Sundays; return tickets £6.50. *stagecoachbus.com*

Bus 555 from Kendal to Keswick

This 90-minute journey through the Lake District is one of the UK's most spectacular bus routes, running alongside four famous lakes with views of the surrounding fells. The number of waterbirds on Windermere doubles around this time of year as wintering ducks and grebes fly in from Scandinavia. Some of the trees around misty Rydal Water turn fiery orange as winter approaches and the slopes of Helvellyn are cloaked in autumn copper or dusted with snow.

The cafe at Wordsworth Grasmere offers tea and fruit scones with locally made jam. Visitors who arrive by bus at the poet's former home, Dove Cottage, with its half-wild garden-orchard and the new museum next door, get 20% off. YHA Ambleside and YHA Keswick (private rooms from £50) are both open during the winter and very close to bus stops along the route. *stagecoachbus.com*

Bus 402 from Coleraine to Ballycastle

This route from Coleraine station offers a dramatic hour-long tour of windswept moors and romantic clifftop castles along Northern Ireland's green Causeway Coast. It stops in Bushmills, famous for its distillery (tours from £15), and near the Giant's Causeway itself, with its public footpaths and a visitor centre full of legends, geology and natural history.

Ballycastle Backpackers has double/twin rooms (from £70 B&B) and the Marine Hotel next door has doubles (from £80 room-only). Ballycastle's Ursa Minor bakehouse does outstanding coffee and croissants. Buses run every 30 minutes (hourly on Sundays), single £7.60. *translink.co.uk*

X93/X94 from Scarborough to Whitby

Rolling through the North York Moors, these buses pass bracken-carpeted woods and bronze age burial mounds. They leave Scarborough station every 30 minutes and take an hour to reach Whitby, offering views across moorland to the wild North Sea. They stop at Robin Hood's Bay, with its steep winding lanes and Cove cafe for tea and handmade cake. Towards the end of the bus ride, there's a great view down the River Esk to Whitby harbour.

Dramatic Whitby Abbey, full of celebrated myths and histories from Abbess Hild to Dracula, is offering 20% off entry for visitors arriving by bus,

JULIAN EALES, RAYMOND BOSWELL/BOTH ALAMY

The Kendal-Keswick route, left, runs past four famous lakes. The Sheffield-Bakewell route stops outside Chatsworth House, right. The scenic route from Newcastle to Berwick takes four hours and takes in the fishing village of Craster, below

bike or train. Tudor Bagdale Hall, with tiled fireplaces and four-poster beds, is two minutes' walk from Whitby bus station and has a midweek two-nights-for-one offer most weeks until March 2024 (doubles from £200 B&B).
arrivabus.co.uk/north-east

CH1 from Cromer to Wells-next-the-Sea

With huge views over tidal marshes to the sea, the Coasthopper bus is perfect for accessing the wild Norfolk Coast Path. The salty expanses around Blakeney are a crucial site for migrating birds in autumn, and home to the biggest grey seal colony in England. Thousands of pups are born here each winter and there are boat trips to see the seals most days from Morston Quay (£20/£10 adult/child).

The Coasthopper leaves every half an hour (hourly on Sundays) from Cromer's bus interchange and takes roughly an hour to reach Wells-next-the-Sea, where the Globe Inn serves Norfolk seafood and wine from the excellent Flint vineyard (doubles from £120 B&B).
sanderscoaches.com

Bus 5 from Bangor to Llandudno, Conwy

Along the coast of north Wales, beside the tidal Afon Menai, the views from bus 5 encompass mountains, moors and sandy beaches. A day ticket for the area, covering bus journeys from Chester to Pwllheli, costs £5.90. From the village of Abergwyngregyn there is a lovely late-autumn walk up the wooded valley to Aber Falls, two miles upstream.

Ten minutes' stroll the other way is the Aber Falls distillery, which recently launched its first single malt whisky (tours £12.50). In Llandudno, the fabulous Dylan's restaurant and upmarket St George's Hotel (doubles from £99 B&B) are both less than five minutes' walk from bus stops.
arrivabus.co.uk

Bus X18 from Newcastle to Berwick-upon-Tweed

This is another epic route that is extraordinary value for £2.50. It leaves hourly from Newcastle's Haymarket bus station and two buses a day go all the way to Berwick, an almost four-hour journey. North of Amble, the bus runs beside the River Coquet and stops near craggy medieval Warkworth Castle, which has new interactive trails for 2023 and 20% off for visitors arriving by bus.

The X18 winds slowly on past towering Bamburgh Castle and views of beaches and islands, including castle-topped Lindisfarne. There are flocks of waders at Budle Bay, curlews in stubbled fields, and cows roaming through marram-grassed sand dunes. The Walls in Berwick (doubles from £105 B&B) is a welcoming B&B in a Georgian townhouse overlooking the Tweed with the option of Craster kippers for breakfast.
arrivabus.co.uk

Bus 218 from Sheffield to Bakewell

Miles of moor and tor, rocky edges and patchwork fields make this a classic Peak District route, but it has other attractions too. Leaving the city, through vibrant Sharrow Vale, the bus stops at Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet museum with its massive waterwheels and steel furnace. Until early evening, it also stops outside the gates of stately Chatsworth House, where a Christmas market, a light trail, and 24 rooms full of sparkle open today.

Crossing an old stone bridge into Bakewell, the biggest town in the Peak District, the bus ends in The Square, almost outside the Bakewell Pudding Shop. The imposing Rutland Arms (doubles from £120 B&B), a few steps away, has 32 refurbished bedrooms and the famous puddings on its menu.
tmtravel.co.uk

The open-top Land's End Coaster takes passengers all round the western tip of Cornwall for £2.50

Land's End Coaster

This open-top circular bus ride from Penzance via St Ives around the western tip of Cornwall is incredibly good value for £2.50 for a single fare (a day pass costs £7). The whole journey takes a couple of hours and runs through downland dotted with tin mines and stone circles, passing rugged cliffs and fairytale St Michael's Mount. Daffodils start flowering from December in the west Cornish fields, along with palms and camellias in subtropical gardens.

There are cafes and seaside art in St Ives, where the Tate offers Ben Nicholson's abstracts, Barbara Hepworth's bronzes and £1 off for car-free visitors (£10.50 adults, free for kids). Penzance is packed with great places to stay and eat, including the characterful Artist Residence (doubles from about £140 room-only), serving fresh Newlyn fish. For lunch on the go, it's hard to beat picnic-ready slices of socca from the Cornish Hen deli.
firstbus.co.uk

Inside tracks
10 of the UK's most scenic rail routes

Belfast to Derry
This two-hour train trip gets seriously scenic after Coleraine, when it partly follows the coast and Lough Foyle. As it runs along Downhill Beach, the sands and turbulent ocean are just outside the window, with the domed Mussenden temple perched on the cliffs above. On through farmland and past views of craggy Binevenagh – a towering cliff on the edge of the Antrim plateau – it will offer views of wintering geese, whooper swans and waders on the shores of the lough.

Within Derry's 400-year-old city walls are excellent cafes such as Soda and Starch and engaging guided city walks (from £6). For rainy days, there is the new Derry Girls experience in the Tower Museum or, over the river, the Walled City Brewery for a taster-filled tour (£15). Next door, the Ebrington is a new hotel and spa in a former army barracks with glowing city views across the Peace Bridge (doubles from about £135 room-only).
Singles £14. On Sundays, a Day Tracker ticket gives unlimited rail travel across Northern Ireland for £9, translink.co.uk

Norwich to Lowestoft
This wild 40-minute railway journey, one of Greater Anglia's "Wherry Lines", glides out of Norwich and straight through the Norfolk Broads, past reedbeds, rivers and racing deer. Water birds can be spotted from the train windows across windmill-dotted marshland. The pink-footed geese that overwinter here fly past in huge V shapes towards dusk.

Near Haddiscoe station is the free-to-enter ruin of St Olave's priory, and the Bell, the oldest recorded pub in the Broadlands is nearby. A short riverside walk from Norwich station, by the church where Julian of Norwich was an anchorite, the restful All Hallows guesthouse (doubles from £80 B&B) is immaculate, friendly and great value.
£10.50 return or £12 for a Wherry Line Ranger ticket

Swansea to Carmarthen
Running beside the Loughor estuary and then the castle-flanked River Towy, this route offers glimpses of oystercatchers on the sandy shore outside the window, and cows grazing on the saltmarshes. In Swansea, the elegant Glynn Vivian art gallery, near the station, hosts the biennial Artes Mundi exhibition until February 2024.

Walkable Carmarthen is a great place for a foodie stroll round imaginative places such as Karm'en Kafe near the ruined castle and the veggie cafe in Waverley Stores with its homity pie and platefuls of salad. Almost next door, the veteran Falcon hotel has smartly renovated bedrooms (doubles from £120 B&B).
Day returns £12, tickets.trc.cymru

Manchester Piccadilly to Sheffield
The wooded Hope Valley line runs right through the Peak District past gritstone cliffs, reservoirs and viaducts. The local Community Rail Partnership suggests walks for all seasons from its stations, such as a 4½-mile hike from Grindleford through the ancient ferny woods of Padley Gorge, with beeches framing the waterfalls. After a climb on the glorious moors, the station cafe offers chip butties and tea in halves and pints.

If it's tipping down, interesting museums in Sheffield include the Millennium Gallery, five minutes from the station, with an easyHotel nearby (doubles from £35 room-only).
Advance singles from £4.70, northernrail.co.uk

St Pancras to Margate
High-speed trains run from London St Pancras to Margate in 90 minutes, through wooded downs and sloping vineyards. This route and the slightly slower coastal line from London Victoria via Whitstable both have their scenic charms. The coastal route crosses the Medway at Rochester, with views of the riverside Norman castle. Beyond Herne Bay, the twin towers of St Mary's church at Reculver can be seen rising from the marshy shoreline.

Margate is an ideal destination for wintry beach walks or sheltering from the elements in galleries and underground attractions such as the eccentric Margate Caves. No 42 is a new boutique hotel (doubles from £155 B&B) on Margate's seafront near the Turner Contemporary where every detail feels fresh, from Whitstable oysters and local artworks to a spectacular rooftop bar.
Advance singles from £11, 5-15 years £1, southeasternrailway.co.uk

Inverness to Thurso
Another monumental four-hour Scottish railway journey, the Far North line winds slowly past shifting vistas of estuaries, lochs and mountains, miles of deserted beach and rocks covered in cormorants.

The blanket-bogged Flow Country is easily reached on foot from Forsinard, where the old station house is now an RSPB visitor centre, with a surfaced trail through bird-rich lochans to a lookout tower.

In Thurso, the North Coast visitor centre has displays of Pictish stones and Viking shield bosses. Back in Inverness, there are great places to eat, such as the riverside Mustardseed; the city's oldest hotel, the Royal Highland, is right next to the railway station (doubles from £76 room-only).
Advance singles £14.70, scotrail.co.uk

The Wherry Line from Norwich runs through Reedham, right, in the Norfolk Broads

ANZE FURLAN AND NICK BRUNDLE/BOTH ALAMY

The Belfast-Derry train crosses Downhill beach, left, near Coleraine. Carlisle Castle, below, is a 15-minute walk from the city's station

The Oxford-Hereford train stops at Worcester, above, with its cathedral on the banks of the Severn. The train from Southampton to Bournemouth passes ponies in the New Forest, left

Oxford to Hereford

This two-hour journey through the Cotswolds and Malverns passes meandering willow-bordered rivers, wooded hills and ancient orchards, and crosses four counties. There may be herons by the River Evenlode, swans on the Avon and fork-tailed red kites wheeling overhead.

Ten minutes' stroll from Worcester Foregate Street station, beside the wide River Severn, is the city's cathedral, with its Norman crypt, medieval cloisters and carved misericords. Orchard-ringed Ledbury makes a great winter base for exploring: the half-timbered Feathers hotel, one of the town's oldest inns, has 20 colourfully refurbished bedrooms (doubles from £100 room-only) and is a 10-minute walk from the station.

Advance singles from £14, gwr.com

Lancaster to Carlisle via Penrith

This speedy line, skirting the Lake District, is beautiful as well as fast. There are autumn views across fells and undulating fields with sheep and whitewashed farms. The North Lakes hotel and spa, a 10-minute walk from Penrith station past the rose-walled castle, has a decent-sized pool and cheerful restaurant with an open fire in the middle (doubles from about £140 B&B).

It's a 15-minute hop to the end of the line, where Carlisle Castle, surrounded by wooded parks, is a 15-minute stroll away through the city from the station and is offering 20% off to people who arrive by train, bus or bike.

Advance singles from £7.40, avantiwestcoast.co.uk, tpexpress.co.uk

Glasgow Queen's Street to Mallaig

Scotland's West Highland Line is one of the world's most spectacular rail trips: an epic five-hour journey along Loch Lomond and over wild Rannoch Moor. The scenery is endlessly engaging, especially in late autumn, when the bracken-bronzed hillsides glow. There are trackside waterfalls and pine-ringed, island-studded lochs all the way to the west coast.

From Glenfinnan station, passengers can tackle a rocky hike under the huge curving viaduct that features in the Harry Potter films, or stroll to the National Trust visitor centre, free and open all year, with a winter cafe serving soup and hot drinks.

The rail theme can be continued with a night in a 1950s carriage at Glenfinnan station (twin bunkroom £50).

Advance singles from £26.60. Until March 2024, Scotrail is offering off-peak fares all day

Southampton Central to Bournemouth

Trains between Southampton and Bournemouth take in miles of the New Forest, where ponies wander through gold birches over winter-browned heath. At Brockenhurst, 20 minutes in, there are hire bikes at the station for exploring level trails such as the disused railway line to pub-rich Burley (from £22 a day).

Bournemouth is turning the Lower Garden into a free festive light trail again from 17 November, and the Village hotel (doubles from £60 room-only) is offering 10% off with a train ticket as part of Southwestern's reward scheme.

Advance singles from £4.10, southwesternrailway.com

The Mallaig train from Glasgow runs over Horseshoe Viaduct, right, near Auch

Readers' travel tips
Favourite bus routes

Winning tip

Shetland

Take the No 6 bus from Sumburgh airport to the Viking bus station in Lerwick for a dramatic introduction to the islands. You start by crossing the runway itself, then you travel along the backbone of Mainland. Unless the sea mist is in, there are glorious views of the coast and inland hills before you descend into the relative hustle and bustle of Lerwick. **Emma**

Highlands

The thrill of reaching Ullapool starts when you leave Inverness and cross the Kessock Bridge over the Moray Firth. An exhilarating journey through coasts, mountains and moorland lies ahead. Loch Glascarnoch is a desolate spot surrounded by peaks. The bus then winds its way through gentler, forested terrain along Loch Broom and the pleasures of Ullapool. **Kenny**

Northumberland

The 477 leaves from Berwick to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The timetable alone is a wonder, based on when it's actually possible to cross the tidal causeway. A visit here is always memorable, bright and sunny or windy and wet, splattering through the sandy road across the sea. **Gillian**

Dorset

The No 50 Purbeck Breezer runs between Swanage and Bournemouth past the beautiful beaches of Studland Bay. From a child's perspective the best thing about the No 50 is that it goes on a boat: the chain ferry that plies the harbour mouth between Studland and Sandbanks. The return trip at sunset on the upper deck made us laugh out loud: it was like being on a rollercoaster. **Jenny Lunnon**

Eryri (Snowdonia)

The Sherpa'r Wyddfa in Eryri was a brilliant way to get easy access to the many starting points of the various routes up Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon). The circular route takes in Caernarfon in the north and Porthmadog in the south, travelling through Llanberis and Beddgelert along the way through spectacular scenery. **Sarah**

To enter our readers' tips competition and see the terms and conditions, visit theguardian.com/readers-travel-tips (you must be a UK resident to enter). The week's best tip, chosen by Tom Hall of Lonely Planet, wins a £200 voucher to stay at a Coolstays property. This is a selection of tips: see more on our website

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A two-day adventure by rail offers iron age hill forts, Offa's Dyke and a pub straight out of The Archers

How far to the pub? The White Horse Inn, Shropshire

Words: Kevin Rushby
Photography: Joel Redman

Eleventh-century Clun Castle, above, is at the halfway point of this two-day walk on the Shropshire Way. Clun also provides rooms and beer at the White Horse Inn, left

Start Craven Arms railway station
Distance 21 miles
Time Two days of walking, five hours a day
Total ascent 1,030 metres
Difficulty Moderate

The walk
Craven Arms to Knighton, via Clun

The brief is simple. A two-day hike with a railway station at either end and a pub with rooms in the middle. No need to carry much, just a change of clothes, some lunch and water. I don't want a circuit; I want a straight yomp across magnificent countryside with an evening in front of a log fire and a shiny array of real ale pumps.

I am under strict instructions from my partner Sophie not to be too ambitious. "We want the perfect weekend walk," she says, "not an SAS survival course."

I hide my notes: 1,500 metres of ascent is not going to happen.

"Maximum 12 miles a day," she says. "Small hills and lovely weather."

Finding the right location proves a challenge. Many of Britain's rural railway lines have an unfortunate lack of stations (the UK once had about 9,000, but there is barely a third of that number left). The York to Scarborough line is typical: there are now only two intermediate stations in all its glorious 42 miles, down from a peak of 17.

But if railway stations have been badly hit, pubs have fared even worse. Figures for the third quarter of 2022 show UK closures running at 50 a month, part of a long-term decline, despite plenty of evidence that communities with a pub tend to prosper, economically and socially. Our walk then, if I can find it, might play a tiny part in supporting some vital rural institutions.

In the end I settle on a line that has kept its stations, and even a few "request stops". The Heart of Wales line runs 121 miles from Shrewsbury to Swansea, with an impressive 32 jumping-off points in between. How the route has survived all the attempts to close it is a tribute to local determination - and perhaps the fact that it passes through several marginal parliamentary constituencies. There is even a footpath that loops in and out of touch with the line, enabling a whole host of possible weekend trips.

I decide to stick to the eastern end of the route, however, making the trip practical as a weekender from many major British cities.

Having embarked at Shrewsbury, we leave the train at Craven Arms, a good starting point as it lies on the Shropshire Way. This 200-mile figure-of-eight trail has Shrewsbury at its centre, and we're on the southern loop. We head west out of town into steady rain, following the distinctive "buzzard" waymarkers across fields, then up into Withins Wood, where there's an iron age hill fort.

For a few minutes the rain stops and there's a sudden deluge of sunshine that raises thick mysterious mists among the trees. I brace myself. This is the kind of moment when the dreaded term "Tolkeinesque" can leap out, but fortunately the rain returns, saving us that embarrassment.

Soon we spot the ghostly outline of Clun Castle through the clouds. The little town of Clun has punched above

The 21-mile route includes a stretch of Offa's Dyke, right

its weight for centuries, being both a river crossing and an overnight stop for Welsh drovers heading for the bright lights of Birmingham and London.

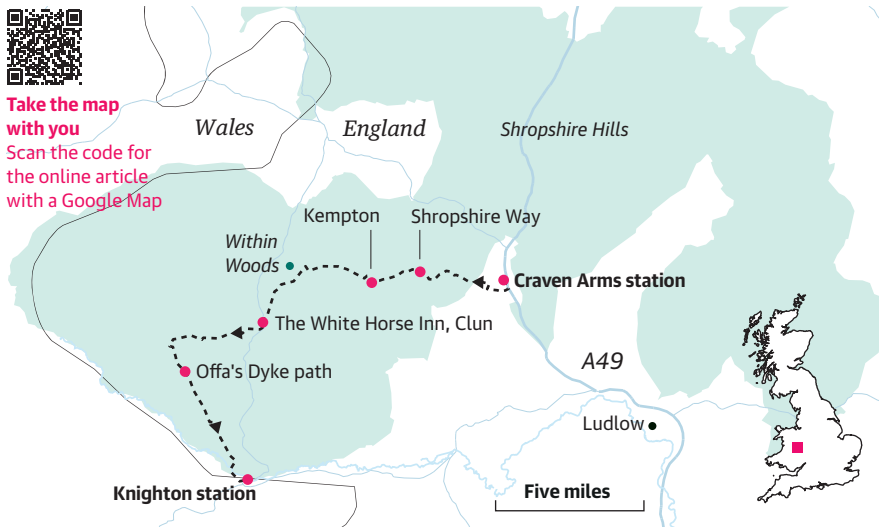
In the not-too-distant-past, Clun had 14 pubs. Now there are two, but that is still two more than most British settlements of this size (about 700 people). In ancient times this was the land of Eadric the Wild, who rebelled against William the Conqueror and reportedly married a supernatural enchantress whom he met in the nearby woods, presumably during a Tolkeinesque bout of mistiness.

Not that any of this impressed AE Housman, who declared Clun one of "the quietest places under the sun". There's no disgrace in that, we decide, wandering along the main street, meeting no one except a happy soul who helpfully shows us to the pub, pointing out the town's astonishingly rich collection of doorknockers.

We arrive, a bit bedraggled, at the White Horse Inn, a welcoming and friendly spot for our stopover.

Next morning the rain has stopped and we head down across the 13th-century packhorse bridge and up to St George's church, a huge edifice for a small town, with a fascinating graveyard. The playwright John Osborne is buried here next to his fifth wife Helen (who was the Observer's arts critic). Retracing our steps, we head for the castle. There's a frill of ruined stonework on a mound and some earthworks out in the fields, relics of its last military engagement – when Owain Glyndŵr besieged it in the early 1400s. Since then not a lot seems to have happened, although I imagine it gets busy during the Green Man festival every August.

Back on the Shropshire Way again, we cross fields and start to rise up a long beautiful ridge towards the Welsh hills. The grassland is spangled with the brilliant yellows and crimsons of waxcap mushrooms and the hedgerow trees become increasingly gnarled and windswept. This is magnificent upland walking and it feels like we are treading back a few centuries, not least because we are entering some very dark clouds. "I asked for small hills and good weather," says Sophie. "But I'm not complaining. I love it."



At the high point we meet Offa's Dyke and turn south along that footpath, following this classic route across high rolling countryside as the weather deteriorates into a wild storm. Sadly we don't see much of the view. On every hawthorn berry shivers a pearl of rain and the sheep stand staring at us in sodden disbelief.

I reckon Offa's Dyke path is one of the finest in Britain and this section one of the best. Barns have been built on it, access tracks bulldozed through, and septic tanks inserted, but there are places where you can still appreciate the magical madness of the eighth-century Mercian king's folly, if that's what it was. No one really knows why it was built. Through ragged holes in the clouds we see it ahead, clambering up the hillsides. In places the ramparts rise eight metres from the ditch below.

We roll into Knighton as darkness falls, just in time to jump on the train back to Shrewsbury. I am a definite convert to weekend pub walking between stations: two good days out with dinner plus pints in between, and almost no luggage. Perfect, even without lovely weather.

The pub

The White Horse bar is in the centre of Clun and a satisfyingly cosy place to break a two-day hike. We sit in a corner and wonder if we have fallen into an episode of The Archers. Everyone appears to know everyone. People buzz in and out. This is the kind of pub where someone enters and their favourite pint is poured before they ask for it, and is probably one of the (excellent) ales brewed on the premises. Osborne used to be among the regulars. Local legend has it that the original Angry Young Man's home alcohol delivery was larger than the pub's. (His former home, the Hurst, has become a writer's retreat.)

The rooms

Rooms at the White Horse are plain and simple, but our bathroom features something very welcome to any walker, a hot bath. Food comes in ample portions and breakfast provides good fuel for the next day's walking. *Doubles from £90 B&B, whitehorseclun.com*

Puzzle solutions

(puzzles on page 86)

Answers to quiz
by Thomas Eaton

1 *Apple.*
2 *Why is the sky blue?*
3 *Julian (the Apostate).*
4 *Amplifier/speakers.*
5 *Niger and Congo.*
6 *Author's copyright.*
7 *Willow.*
8 *Luton Town (first player to do so).*
9 *Fastest animal: in the sea; in the air; on land.*
10 *Historic sites in Delhi.*
11 *UK blood types (by percentage of donations).*
12 *Elements named after capital cities: Copenhagen; Stockholm; Paris (from Latin names); Moscow.*
13 *Psycho shower scene: Marion Crane; Norman Bates; composed music; blood.*
14 *Peace treaties that ended the first world war.*
15 *Inspired titles of Joan Didion nonfiction works: Slouching Towards Bethlehem; The White Album; Miami; Salvador.*

Answers to Weekend Crossword
by Sy

The kids' quiz

Molly Oldfield

Scan the code to send Molly a question for a future quiz

This quiz answers questions posed by children – will you get a better score than your parents?

1 Hannah, 6, asks: how did the first king and queen in England get to be the first king and queen?
A A witch cast a spell so people believed they were the first king and queen
B A medieval couple found a crown under a tree, and were voted king and queen
C Athelstan became the first king by ruling England's kingdoms of the time
D A contest for who could lift a heavy statue decided the first king, in 10AD

2 Jeannie, 9, asks: why does a pig have a curl in its tail?
A Pigs with curly tails have descended from special ancient pigs from China
B Straight tails are more likely to get injured
C Farmers carefully bred them like that
D Scientists and farmers aren't entirely sure!

3 Seoyeon, 8, asks: what is the hottest country in the world?
A Mali
B Indonesia
C South Korea
D Peru

4 Sam, 4, asks: what causes a ship to sink?
A Flooding
B Collision with an object
C When its bottom scrapes on the ground or rocks
D All of the above

5 Arthur, 9, asks: why do octopuses have three hearts?
A They are big so they need more blood
B Their blood is not good at carrying oxygen, so they have to pump more of it
C They have a heart each for the head, body and legs
D Because they have a lot of love to give

Answers (no peeking!)

1 *C. England used to exist as lots of separate kingdoms. The first to call themselves king of England was Athelstan, grandson of Alfred the Great. He was crowned in 927. His coins and documents started to describe him as "king of the English" and "king of Britain", the first in the history of England.*

2 *D. There is no clear reason yet why pigs have curly tails – scientists and pig farmers have lots of varying theories.*

3 *A. Mali is the hottest country in the world with an average yearly temperature of 28.83C over the past 20 years. This doesn't sound super high, but it's an average of day and night temperatures all year round.*

4 *D. A ship might sink for many reasons: it floods and becomes too heavy to float; it crashes into something; it scrapes the ground; it is badly designed; or the captain makes a mistake.*

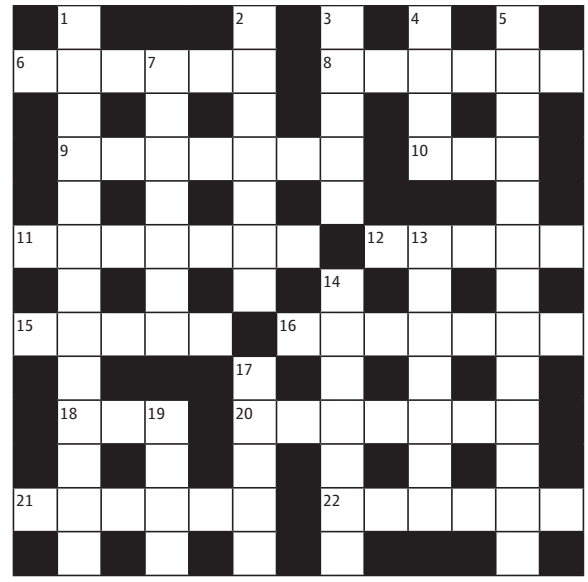
5 *B. Octopuses have blue blood. It isn't so good at carrying oxygen so the octopus needs to pump a lot of blood around the body quickly. With three hearts there is one to pump blood around the body and two to pump to the gills.*

Molly Oldfield hosts Everything Under the Sun, a weekly podcast (and book) answering children's questions. Does your child have a question? To submit one, scan the QR code above

ILLUSTRATION: HENNIE HAWORTH

Weekend crossword

Sy



Across
6 Ian ....., author of the Rebus novels (6)
8 Thomas ....., US pioneer of electronic technologies (6)
9 Chris ....., MP who resigned as Tory deputy chief whip after groping allegations (7)
10 River flowing through Dundee (3)
11/3 Sir ...., ceramic artist (7,5)
12 ..... Monsoon, character played by Jennifer Saunders in Absolutely Fabulous (5)
15 Welsh peninsula reaching into the Bristol Channel (5)
16 Frederick ....., author of The Day of the Jackal (7)
18 Polish national airline (3)
20 Family on whose story Succession is said to be based (7)
21 Asiatic wild ass (6)
22 Planet whose rings so fascinated WG Sebald? (6)

Down
1 US publisher owned by the 20's News Corporation (13)
2 South Korea's third city (7)
3 See 11
4 Eartha ...., singer who made a hit out of Santa Baby (4)
5 Extraterrestrial beings who invaded Santa Mira, CA, in 1956? (4,9)
7 Scottish peninsula which ends in its eponymous Mull (7)
13 1981 German film set on a submarine (3,4)
14 ..... Gump, character played by Tom Hanks (7)
17 Any one of several characters from a Belgian cartoon franchise by Peyo (5)
19 Country that's bordered by Benin, Ghana and Burkina Faso (4)

Solutions to Crossword and Thomas Eaton's quiz *page 85*

Quiz

Thomas Eaton

1 In 1976, Ronald Wayne sold his 10% stake in which company for $800?
2 Rayleigh scattering gives the answer to what childhood question?
3 Who was the last pagan emperor of Rome?
4 What does a Marshall stack consist of?
5 Which two African rivers each give their names to two countries?
6 What legal protection dates to the 1710 Statute of Anne?
7 Which tree's bark is known as "nature's aspirin"?
8 Pelly Ruddock Mpanzu went from non-league to Premier League with which club?
What links:
9 Sailfish; peregrine falcon; cheetah?
10 Humayun's tomb; Qutb Minar; Jama Masjid; Red Fort?
11 O 48%; A 38%; B 10%; AB 3%?
12 Hafnium; holmium; lutetium; moscovium?
13 Janet Leigh; Anthony Perkins; Bernard Herrmann; chocolate syrup?
14 Versailles; Saint-Germain-en-Laye; Trianon; Sèvres; Neuilly-sur-Seine?
15 Yeats's The Second Coming; 1968 Beatles album; Florida city; smallest Central American country?

Stephen Collins

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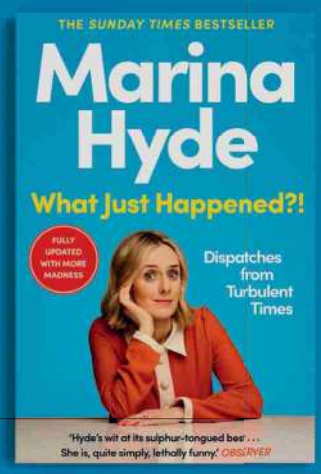

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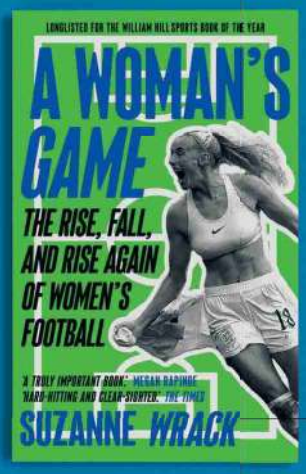

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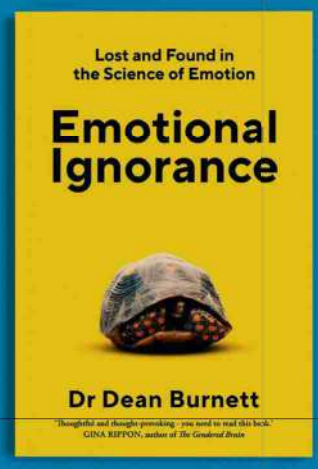

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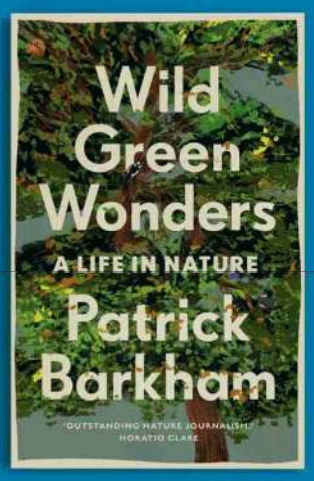

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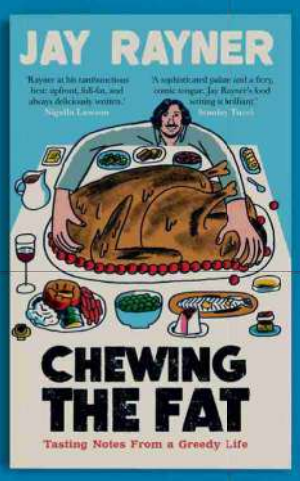

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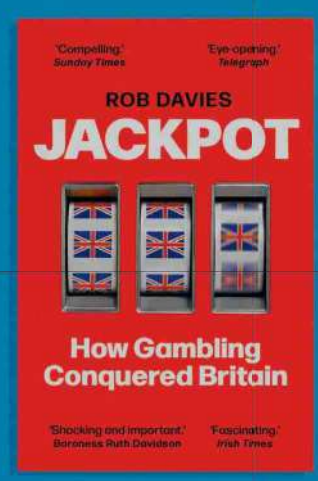

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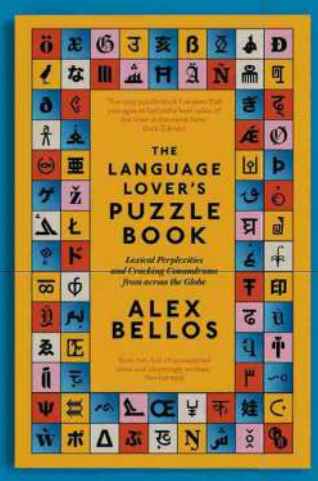

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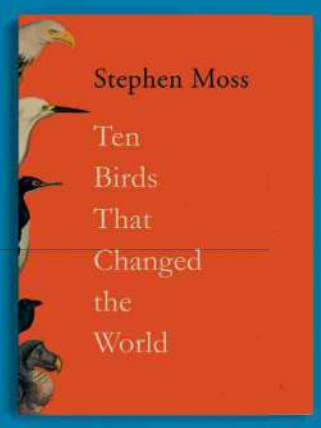

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