

6 FEBRUARY 2022

The Observer Magazine

Under their spell:
the magic of word games
Starry starry nights:
dark sky festivals
'I trashed my ex
on social media'

The
many
lives of
Adeel
Akhtar

From sleeping in a van to walking the red carpet: how actor Adeel Akhtar became film's everyman

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The Observer Magazine



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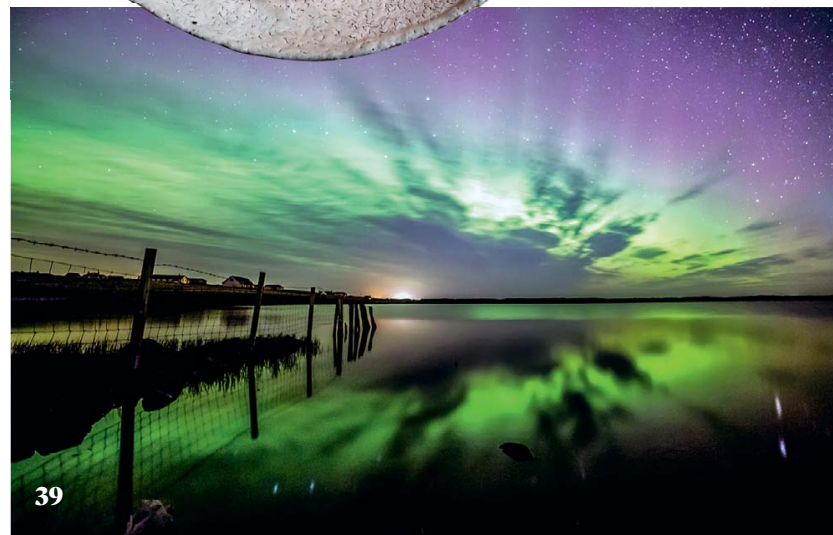
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Contributors

Sarah Cresswell is a photographer specialising in portraiture. She launched her career shooting Lily Cole, and more recently shot the NHS's Better Health campaign seen on billboards throughout the UK. See her images of our cover star, actor Adeel Akhtar, on p8.



A regular contributor to the *Observer*, *Guardian*, the *Times* and many others, and the author of the cocktail book *The Spirits*, **Richard Godwin** is

also an insufferable Scrabble opponent. Last September, in a game with his mum, he played PESTLING over two triple word scores for 149 points. Here, he writes about our ongoing love affair with puzzles (p21).

Megan Nolan is a columnist and author of *Acts of Desperation*, published in 2021 and shortlisted for the *Sunday Times*/Charlotte Aiken Trust Young Writer Award. She is currently at work on her second novel, set between



London, where she now lives with her cat Miso, and her home city of Waterford, Ireland. This week, she writes about her illogical fear of being alone in the dark (p12).



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Cover image Sarah Cresswell



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Eva Wiseman

IVF for same-sex couples is a chance to rebuild families



🐦 @evawiseman



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

Nowadays students have been more or less neutered by being sacrificed on the altar of consumerism, but in the 60s there was a wave of campus rebellions, most famously in 1968 when the students of Paris 'almost succeeded in detonating a social revolution'.

The *Observer Magazine* of 8 October 1972 wondered 'should the movement be seen as the inevitable response of white-collar apprentices to overcrowding, poor facilities and bleak prospects? Or as gross ingratitude by a pampered younger generation?'

Maureen McConville started her investigation in what was then West Germany where 'the university system was years ago damned by a group of British academics as 'anarchy coupled with professorial tyranny'. Part of the criticism was that students spent so long at university in Germany. One caption showing a young couple marvelled: 'So many years are commonly spent studying that some 16% of students

are married by the time they actually finish their courses.'

But reforms were afoot and they were bitterly contested. 'To the average student the draft law's real purpose is ruthlessly to shorten their studies, turning them upon the world with half an education and restoring the university of leisure to the elite. "If that law is passed," said one, "we'll have to store facts and give up thinking for ourselves."' Eat your heart out, Gradgrind.

Of course the younger generation were rebelling against more than their parents' authority. 'To listen to them,' said one, 'you'd think the Third Reich was just a big mistake! They can't bear to think of it.'

'What gives an odd twist to the conflict,' explained McConville, 'is the fact that most students depend largely or wholly on their parents. About a quarter of them actually live at home.' Today, that's mostly because of the huge financial burden and that doesn't look like changing. But we'll always have Paris... **Chris Hall**

It feels, sometimes, as though the path to equality is not just rocky or steep but, instead, a Mario-style platform game where there are crocodiles lurking in the gaps and certain blocks are designed to explode when you step on them. An example: for all this country's smiling efforts at inclusivity, for all its rainbows hurriedly printed on hoardings and coffee cups, the barriers preventing female same-sex couples from having a family are as high and wide as ever.

For those who have avoided the haunted roller coaster that is fertility treatment in the UK, either by luck or choice, here are the facts: the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) guidelines state that funded access to IVF in England is available to women "who have not conceived after two years of regular unprotected intercourse or 12 cycles of artificial insemination (where six or more are by intrauterine insemination)".

So, if a woman in an opposite-sex relationship tells her GP they have been "trying" for a baby for two years they can access NHS-funded IVF treatment immediately. If a woman in a same-sex relationship tells her GP they have been "trying", through whatever turkey baster means necessary, 80% of local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs choose how to delegate NHS funding in England) still require them to have up to 12 rounds of IUI to prove they can't get pregnant (an irony traditionally glossed over politely).

IUI costs anywhere up to £1,600 per cycle at a private clinic, meaning that with fees it's not unusual for a same-sex couple to have to spend £20,000 and a year in clinical care, monthly excuses to your boss so you can slip away mid-morning to lie dreadfully in terribly lit clinics, nurses asking you to, "Just pop your clothes on the chair," before being eligible for NHS treatment. The money – which represents two-thirds of the average UK salary, cash that straight couples might be using to buy a flat, or a car, or a series of marvellous "babymoos" in advance of the birth of the child they conceived on the sofa after watching *Normal People* – is boggling and disturbing, and inhibitory for most.

It's not the same everywhere in the UK. Throughout Scotland, which is centrally funded, all same-sex couples can have six donor insemination cycles followed by three full IVF cycles if needed. But in England, all 106 CCGs ration access to NHS-funded fertility treatment, with more than a quarter (the Fertility Network revealed) denying access to same-sex couples altogether. Just eight allow same-sex couples to have NHS-funded fertility treatment directly.

Fairness is so often an unhelpful word – a plate of dry meat, picked to the gristle. Especially when it comes to childbearing and rearing, when so many of us are in danger of breaking our necks looking over a shoulder at what our peers have got, and how, and how much, and how happily, and with what ease. But it is a fact that people are restricted from fertility

treatments depending on who they love and where they live, their postcode deciding whether or not a child will be born. These details, flagged by the Fertility Network and Stonewall, and couples like Megan and Whitney Bacon-Evans who plan to sue their local NHS over what they claim is "IVF discrimination", is not just unfair, but darkly telling.

Treatments that aren't seen as life-saving are all rationed on the NHS, but the arbitrary criteria at play here inevitably shows us something, something about who is seen to matter more. The wild costs of conceiving a child, the £20,000 investment required before they've even stepped foot in John Lewis's buggy department, means it's ruled out as an option for many same-sex couples. Which means fewer queer families, more discrimination for LGBTQ+ people, and less change. IVF is an opportunity to help people who want children but are having trouble conceiving; an opportunity that has the potential to promote equality and refocus our too-narrow ideas of what a family can be.

And wouldn't that improve all of our lives? Wouldn't it improve the lives of everybody, gay or straight, who has lived in a family, or is creating a new one of their own, or is deep in the slimy weeds of somebody else's; a move to broaden the image and expectations of what a family looks like? Its shape, its genders, the way it got here, the home it made.

Surely the traditional family unit has damaged as many people as it has supported – surely now is the time to invest in and celebrate families who are helping to show that the walls of that structure were not load bearing. That they can be knocked through and rearranged without the house falling down. ■

One more thing...

There's a scene in *Euphoria*, the dark teen drama, where Kat, lying depressed on her bed, is ambushed by self-help influencers. 'You're one of the bravest, most beautiful human beings,' says a blonde woman in a thong. Then, 'Every day you get out of bed is an act of courage,' says another. It's toxic positivity, deliciously skewered.

Fox's Tucker Carlson is livid that the **M&M characters** are to be restyled to promote inclusivity. 'M&Ms will not be satisfied until every last cartoon character is deeply unappealing and totally androgynous,' he said, outraged that the sweets were no longer flirting with him. 'When you're totally turned off, we've achieved equity.' It was extremely funny.

A moment to applaud **Jack Monroe** who, after highlighting how decreased availability of value products and price jumps for essentials has hit poorer families, has made statistics officials pledge to revise the way they calculate inflation.

This much I know

Paula Radcliffe, athlete, 48



Interview **RICH PELLEY**
Photograph **TOM WATKINS**

I had asthma as a kid and still do. I started blacking out a little at the end of training runs. Then, at 14, I was diagnosed with exercise-induced asthma by a brilliant doctor who told me, “This isn’t going to stop you doing any of your sport, you’re just going to have to learn to control it.” I have inhalers in pretty much every bag.

What makes me sad? Losing people I care about – I lost my dad in 2020. And hearing stories about kids who weren’t as lucky as my daughter, who beat cancer last year. I burst into tears when the doctor gave us the initial diagnosis, but she’s been so brave. The chemotherapy made her hair fall out, which was obviously difficult for a teenage girl. But she’s bounced back so quickly.

I could probably beat my kids in a race, but it depends on the distance. If it’s more than 100m, yes – any less, probably not any more. They’re getting faster all the time. I got funny looks when I was chasing them around the supermarket when they were younger.

The most famous person I’ve met is probably the Queen. I was awarded an MBE and was invited to lunch with about eight others at the palace. She was friendly, welcoming, genuine – an inspirational lady. I once saw Muhammad Ali sitting on the other side of an airport lounge. My husband was starstruck and staring, so Ali started jokingly punching the palm of his hand, then called him over and asked if he wanted anything signed.

I remember coming out of hospital in New York after giving birth to my son and being in a shop, looking for

a handbag. A lady looked over and started saying what a cute baby he was. When I looked up I realised it was Sarah Jessica Parker. She said, “I know you, you run the New York city marathon, we live on the route, my husband’s a big marathon fan.” I couldn’t believe it. I thought she was winding me up.

The last mile of a marathon is easier than the couple of miles before it because you can almost see the finish. The

I could probably still beat my kids in a race if it’s more than 100m. Any less, then not any more

biggest dangers at that point? Lurching spectators – and dogs, of course. When you’re running on very tired legs towards the end of a long run, it’s hard to react to a loose dog and move yourself out of the way quickly.

The etiquette with needing the toilet during a run is probably try not to, but be prepared. If you can find a Portaloo in time, then that really helps. Obviously, it’s something that happened to me, but it’s not the highlight of my career.

Being the best in the world at something is a surreal feeling. But it’s very much a team effort, it’s not all down to me. You haven’t seen me on roller-skates! I think I’m definitely better at running marathons. ■

Paula was a team captain at last year’s RunFestRun, which returns 20-22 May. See runfestrun.co.uk

One of those days calls for one of these meals.



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It's Adeel

At 30, Adeel Akhtar was all but homeless,

Interview **ALEX MOSHAKIS**
Photographs **SARAH CRESSWELL**
Stylist **SABINA EMRIT HARPER**

Adeel Akhtar was living in a van, wondering if he should move back in with his parents. It was 2010. He had recently appeared in *Four Lions*, the Chris Morris satire, in which he plays a Muslim extremist who, in an uncanny set of events, blows himself up in a Yorkshire sheep field. The film had been successful. (The *New York Times* called it “stiletto sharp”). But it did not immediately become the career tipping point Akhtar hoped it might. So there he was: 30 years old, not well off, suffering after the break-up of a “messy” relationship, recording audition tapes from his van. The work had dried up, but he wasn’t hustling. Even when he got a gig, he sometimes wouldn’t bother learning his lines. “What is that?” he asks now. “Why would a person not apply themselves?” He shakes his head. “I don’t know. I suppose a not-nice way of looking at my younger self is that I was lazy.”

Akhtar does not seem lazy now. A few days before we meet, in a mid-market café near his south London home, he won Best Actor at the British Independent Film Awards, for his role in *Ali & Ava*, a Clio Barnard film about forbidden love. Akhtar plays Ali, a British Asian man – irrepressible, distressed, permanently on the edge of euphoria or breakdown – who falls for an older white woman. The film is set in and around the housing estates of Bradford, and across social and racial divides. At the awards ceremony, Akhtar praised Barnard for presenting ordinary lives as extraordinary, and for “looking at people who are traditionally overlooked”. This was important, he said, particularly for him, because, “I’m one of them.”

Akhtar has made a successful career out of channeling and elevating the circumstances of regular people, and of capturing the grace and power in everyday actions, even when those actions are questionable. When I ask him about being normal, he says plainly, “Well, I *am* that.” This is partly because of how he looks: the hangdog face, the dark eyes, a twinkly smile. But also because he understands that even in the smallest lives there are things at stake – a truth he holds dear. “There’s something that makes me realise that we need to see the world we’re living in as full and beautiful,” he says.

In 2017, he became the first non-white man to win a Lead Actor Bafta, for his role in *Murdered By My Father*, a TV drama about arranged marriage in which he is by turns tender and maniacal. (He had already been Bafta-nominated for *Utopia*, the Dennis Kelly drama.) He’s since appeared in a string of A-list films and television series: as a compromised doctor in *Sweet Tooth*, as brother to Kumail Nanjiani in *The Big Sick*, as a kindly neighbour in *Back to Life*, the Daisy Haggard comedy. It is likely you recognise him even if you aren’t part of the subset that already considers him a household name. When Haggard first approached him, she assumed he would be too busy to talk. “I ended up writing him a letter,” she told me. “I thought, well, it’s worth a shot.” When he said yes, she was amazed. On set he would “do all these lovely things and I’d think, ‘Oh, that’s gorgeous, I definitely didn’t write that.’”

When I ask Akhtar how he became all but homeless at 30, he veers off on a tangent that is difficult to follow but fun to listen to – he doesn’t so much answer questions as use them as platforms for thought. After a few minutes >



Fresh thinking: Adeel Akhtar wears shirt jacket and beanie both by Wax London; jeans by Levi's; trainers by Veja; and watch by Fabergé Altruist

now he's a Bafta-winning actor. Here, he talks about the beauty of ordinary lives



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The main event: (from left) in 2010's *Four Lions*; with Kiran Sonia Sawar in *Murdered by My Father*; with Claire Rushbrook in *Ali & Ava*; and with Daisy Haggard in *Back to Life*

► he rolls his eyes and says, softly, “This is all to answer why I was living in a van.”

“You’re getting there,” I reply.

“I’m getting there,” he agrees, adding: “Stories go on a bit longer than they should.”

Akhtar talks so much and so intensely that, at functions, his wife, Lex, will amble over to whoever he is chatting to and say, “He’s doing it again, isn’t he?” The actor Claire Rushbrook, who co-stars in *Ali & Ava*, describes Akhtar as kind and playful as well as “cerebral” and “complex” – someone who becomes easily lost in thought. (“It’s hard to pin him down,” she tells me.) Deep conversation seems necessary for Akhtar to understand the world in relation to the work he is making. When we talk in the café, and later while we stroll through a nearby park, he shifts quickly through various topics – Leonard Cohen’s views on grace (“I’ve been watching YouTube”), the “well of expression” to be found in New York, Zadie Smith on empathy – trying to find connections, which seems to me like a game he enjoys playing. Barnard told me, “He’s verbose and he’s funny,” adding: “His mind just moves into very unexpected places.”

Our conversation turns repeatedly to race. In *Ali & Ava*, Akhtar’s character must confront racism that has been passed down generationally, which he does smilingly, as though it can be rebuffed through kindness. (In one scene he makes a joke out of being attacked with a sword: “It’s like fucking *Zorro* in here!”) In real life, Akhtar has sometimes taken a similar approach. “I’ve had some hairy experiences,” he says. “And now I look back on them and wonder how I was able to normalise it.” In 2002, he was arrested and detained at a New York airport; he had been on his way to enrol at drama school and was mistaken for a terrorist. Later, during “the van years”, he wore a long beard that was yanked by a passerby in central London, resulting in “maybe my first fight”. Once, Akhtar and his wife were travelling up an escalator and came toward a group of men, “and all that nonsense started” – expletives, slurs. “You know, just this terrible shit you hear.”

These were all experiences when “someone has done or said something”, Akhtar says. But nowadays he often finds racist events to be more subtle, a kind of casual racism, including “the feeling of walking into a situation where it’s less overt” but no less horrifying. He gives the example of going on a camping holiday with his family, “and we’ll be going to a particular place, and we’ll stop off at a pub somewhere, and... I don’t know if it’s me projecting my past experiences on to that situation, but there’s an...”

He pauses.

“An atmosphere,” I suggest.

He nods.

“An atmosphere.” Then he adds, kindly: “The majority of people are doing the best they can.”

Given he was once misidentified as a terrorist and held at a New York airport, it is a remarkable coincidence that Akhtar played a 9/11 hijacker in his first film role. (That film, *Let’s Roll: The Story of Flight 93*, came out in 2002, the same year he was detained.) But, since then, Akhtar has mostly avoided being cast as racial stereotypes. On the role of British Asian actors in current cinema, he says, “I think

we’re in an exciting time, aren’t we? You see more and more Asian faces in roles you wouldn’t have seen them in before. I think it’s slowly happening.”

“It’s not often you see a British Asian man playing a romantic lead,” I say, of *Ali & Ava*.

“No,” he says. “Sure.”

Akhtar accepts he cannot deny who he is and the way he looks. Nor should he be required to. “You want people to look at you and see your differences,” he says, of appearing onscreen. “And then you want them to stop paying attention to them,” so viewers can enter a space in which they can discover the attributes they share with his characters. It is Akhtar’s job to create that space, he says, when “you’ve sort of rejected the defined terms of how somebody expects you to be” and “scooped everyone in”. In this way, Akhtar’s roles are “about being Asian” and then “not about being Asian”, he says. This puts him at odds with other male British Asian actors, including Riz Ahmed, with whom Akhtar appeared in *Four Lions*, and Dev Patel, who have argued publicly that the “promised land” for brown-skinned actors is to play characters whose skin colour isn’t a factor of their casting. Akhtar thinks, Why shouldn’t that be a part of how he presents? Or, to put it another way: There should be no denial of anything.

Akhtar believes the film industry is at a point where Asian actors “can be afforded the space to do it all.” Ahmed is performing sci-fi; Patel is performing period drama. “We’re chipping away,” he says, though he admits: “We have to work harder to make it better. Maybe I just feel hopeful. That as long as we’re striving for it, it will happen.”

“Are you hopeful, generally?” I ask.

“My wife would say not.”

“Why?”

“Why? Let’s have a think. She’s the hopeful one out of the two of us.” Akhtar’s wife is a white woman from Putney, in southwest London. “Maybe it’s because of our experiences growing up, you know?”

Akhtar’s mother is from Kenya. His father is from Pakistan. They met at Heathrow airport, where they worked for a while. When Akhtar was young, the family settled in a village in Buckinghamshire, around 20 miles west of central London. “When we moved, when I was really little, I had stones thrown at me,” he says. On one occasion, his mother, who had witnessed an attack, stormed to protect him, nudging him behind her and using her body as a barrier. “I remember the look on her face,” Akhtar says, “of her trying to work out how to be herself in an environment that was essentially... I mean, who knows why they threw stones? Maybe it was because we were Asian. Maybe I’d had an altercation with one of the kids.” His mother’s response has stayed with him. “What is it like for somebody to open

their door and walk out into the street and suddenly the world they’re looking out on becomes inhospitable?” At the time, he remembers thinking, OK, this is never going to end. “There will always be this idea of her working out how she can best fit in. But when the hostility of a place is so ingrained in how you live your life, if the restrictions in which you’re living your life are habituated...”

“You come to expect it,” I say.

“A step further even,” he says. “There’s no expectation – there’s nothing. It just is.”

Akhtar thinks of his parents’ cultural assimilation as a creative act. “The creative endeavour it takes to come to a country, to have a thought about who you’re going to be, and then to endow that thought with your will – to try to *do* something – is like a novelist looking at a blank page,” he says. “But we never look at that as being a creative expression.” Still, he hasn’t always seen eye to eye with them. Akhtar describes his father, an immigration lawyer, as “quite a strict fella”. As a young man, it was drilled into him that, “You’ve got to be better than the white people around you. You have to work harder,” a mentality he came to reject. He later dismissed his parents’ attempts to impose an arranged marriage. For a time, Akhtar studied law, at his father’s insistence, but he soon realised it was making him unhappy. “There was a chunk of my developmental understanding that was not there because I felt I had to do this thing” – to be another kind of person – but

“you break out of that, and you re-enter the world, kind of through the back door.”

When he began acting, Akhtar came across the idea that you could reach viewers “who have had similar experiences and say, ‘You are in the world. You are seen.’” The characters of Ali and Ava are based on real people. To prepare for his role, Akhtar listened to audio recordings of a Bradford man whom Barnard had wanted to create a character out of. “Clio calls it ‘bio-non-fiction,’” Akhtar says of their approach to making *Ali & Ava*. (Both parties are aware the term “sounds like a washing detergent.”) “These are real people,” he continues – with real lives. But “we’re not just fictionalising it. We’re going to elevate it to a point of beauty.” Barnard developed the film with Akhtar in mind from the outset. “It kind of began with him,” she told me. “We built Ali together.” In the film’s early stages, Barnard and Akhtar talked and talked, and then talked some more. “A lot of in-depth, really careful thinking,” Barnard said.

This seems to me like the Akhtar I meet. At the end of our conversation, having spoken for hours, he frowns and worries, “Was that a slog?”

Truthfully, I say, “Not at all.”

“I sort of went off piste a little bit,” he says.

Then he starts talking about something else. ■

Ali & Ava will be released in UK and Irish cinemas on 4 March

‘We need to see the world we’re living in as full and beautiful’



Before I go to sleep

Megan Nolan always dreamed of living on her own in a lovely home. But now terrifying thoughts keep her awake at night. Here, the author wonders why she's so scared of the dark

Photograph **ROO LEWIS**

I live by myself in a good place, the best sort of place a woman like me could imagine. In fact, it's all I did imagine for years on end. I rent rather than own it, but that's no hardship. I've never felt any particular angst to own property, which is just as well since I live in London, a place where I could no sooner get a mortgage than a giraffe. Owning a home has always felt more like a burden, like an end to things, to me, than it has felt like comfort. I did always dream, though, of renting somewhere beautiful and living alone there – and now I do.

On the days I spend here without anyone else, I wake up at 8.30 and feed my cat. I watch her eat her disgusting, stinky food with satisfaction, glad I'm able to keep another creature beyond myself alive. I make coffee and wander about the flat a bit, wiping surfaces, washing tomato-laden pots. I go for a walk or to the gym, and then I work. I write. I send emails. I complain or speculate about everything I'm doing constantly to my friends. For lunch I blitz the vegetables in the fridge into a soup, or else walk down the road to the pub for a sandwich, and come back and work some more. I gaze adoringly at the cat. It becomes evening and I might drink a glass of wine, sometimes a bottle. I cook dinner and eat it in 13 minutes while watching *MasterChef*. I read for an hour. I work a bit more. Sometimes I watch a film. This is the life I have designed for myself, the life I never thought I would be so lucky as to have. Then it is time to sleep.

In my comfortable bed I read more and turn out the light and within 15 minutes I hear a jolt, a metallic clank outside in the garden. I reassure myself it's just an animal. I try to sleep again. I drift off. Then there is the apparently unmistakable noise of the back door being jostled. I fly upward in my bed like the girl in *The Exorcist*, thrust into the air what feels like 2ft from pure fright, and once there and awake I keep completely still. Now, finally, it is happening. The comeuppance for my too-blessed life, for my choice to live alone. Something terrible is taking place. Another soft click from the direction of the front door. Now my entire body is flooded with adrenaline and my mouth arid.

I try to recall through my panic the things I have done to mitigate the chances of an attack: the locks all double bolted, the keys taken out and placed far away so that if a person smashed through the glass they couldn't easily open them. When I was terribly afraid one night I took a small sharp knife and hid it in a secret place accessible from where I sit in my bed. I can take it out without making much noise. There is another creak from the hallway, and I silently retrieve the blade from its hiding place and hold it in one hand and my phone in

the other. I sit there like this, rigid with conviction and terror, for more than an hour. No thoughts pass through my head in this time apart from keen listening for the next noise and what direction it comes from, strategising my escape. Can I be sure they are coming from the area I think they are, or could they be coming from both sides? Is it wise to lock myself in a toilet? Am I strong enough to break through that window if necessary?

Eventually, I accept that I am too frightened to move to check whether someone is outside my bedroom door one way or the other, and that the elapsed time means that it is unlikely they are there. I put the knife back in its place and turn on the two lamps on either side of my bed, and a podcast so that it might sound to somebody outside that there are several people in this room. I lie back down and practise some breathing exercises to try to sleep. It's now perhaps 4am and I have lost half of my allotted rest. I am useless and angry when I wake up, aware of the absurdity of my fear and that I have allowed it, by indulging, to ruin my day.

This happens two, three, sometimes four times a month. Twice as many times as that I am woken in the middle of the night with dreams that somebody is entering my window or sitting on my bed, terrors which are both more and less intense because they are unconscious, but which mean just the same that my sleep is robbed and fragmented, my body feeling as if it has been through a battle when it wakes in the morning.

I have always been what could kindly be described as “nervy”. I panic inordinately, reacting with huge exaggeration to ordinary aural surprises. Sirens, shouts, my boyfriend gasping, “Oh my God!” when he looks at his phone (Spurs were down one nil). Ghost trains, even the most comically amateur, were not something I could tolerate as a child. When I hear a fox rustling in the garden or see a flash outside in the dark – the light of my own bathroom – the momentary fright I get is so ludicrously powerful, and so physically so, that the rest of the night spirals. But why? Why am I like this, so susceptible and easily overwhelmed? Do I truly believe it's likely that a prowling man is going to break in through my window to hurt me?

I read voraciously about Ted Bundy as an adolescent, the first of the iconic American monsters to catch my attention. I picked up Ann Rule's pulpy book, *The Stranger Beside Me*, at a school jumble sale and pored over it with appalled titillation. Sometimes he approached his victims in daylight and in public places, car parks and beaches, but his first few were women asleep in their beds – women in basement apartments like mine. I spent the subsequent 15 years consuming true crime with unattractive compulsion. There was *Unbelievable* in 2019, the Netflix show based on the true story of a serial rapist who broke into apartments and attacked his victims as they slept. He lectured one woman smugly about the inadequate safety measures which had left her open to his predation. The show sparked conversation among women about their terror of solitude, the exhausting knowledge of their own perpetual vulnerability.

All my life I have loved to walk alone at night. As a teenager making my first clumsy forays into pubs and partying, the walk home with my Discman was often the part I prized most. The processing and the narrativising were better than the experiences themselves. I take an admittedly thick and wrongheaded pride in the fact I feel no fear about doing this, that I don't let tragic stories – about women attacked in circumstances like those I willingly embrace – change my behaviour. I like to think I have mostly refused to let the potential evil of the world hamper my freedom.

This makes the sporadic paralysing fear which overcomes me in the safety of my own bed all the more humiliating and ridiculous. Message boards and articles describe women who keep muddy men's boots outside their doors to intimidate intruders, who sleep with hammers under their pillows, who tell nobody that they live alone and put male names on their delivery orders. They have intricate set-ups involving bells strung up to alert them if the window is jarred. I thought I was a different sort of person to this, one able to operate within reason, according to the actual likelihood of harm rather than intangible bogeyman, but it turns out I am not.

Does my submersion in true crime shows and books, in the extraordinary and rare stories of famous sadistic crimes, mean I believe they are more likely to happen to me than they are? Or is it that the knowledge of such things ever happening warps us; that they could take place even once in the history of humankind, that it is possible for a person to enjoy another's pain to this degree? Maybe that knowledge stretches the mind to encompass more oblique danger than it can accommodate; more than logic can successfully deny.

Beyond the literal, material sadistic intruders I fear when I am in my spirals, there is something bigger and more difficult to define. They suggest a mass of malevolence and ill fortune of which they constitute only one small part. In my waking life I do not believe that someone is going to break into my home as I sleep and commit acts of violence against me. In the moment, something else is taking place. It's the feeling of all future disaster encroaching in the indifferent calm of the dark, my thoughts unfettered in the pre-dawn hours turning invariably to death.

In our irony-exhausted culture it feels almost laughable to say it plainly, but I'll say it all the same: night is when I really burrow down into the knowledge that everyone I know is going to die. Sometimes I consider them one by one, every person I love and the different ways they might go, which circumstance I could learn to bear, which ones would drive me mad. It's a lonely and ultimately inconsolable despair to find oneself wading through in the wee hours. Perhaps it's

I put the knife back and turn on the lamps by my bed

easier to focus on an errant creak, the possibility of intrusion. Perhaps, too, this is why the feeling of my boyfriend in bed beside me is such an efficient remedy. Not because he can fight off monsters any better than I can, no offence to his prowess, but because it is easier to disbelieve the truth of death when I can hold on to some other creature who is living and beautiful and

strong, someone so bright and apparently infinite that it would surely be impossible for them to ever die.

I have become worse rather than better since beginning this relationship. When I was always alone I rarely reached such high pitches of fear. I rarely noted my solitude at all; there was no other way to live. Now that there is one, now that nights alone are mostly optional, I struggle. I say goodbye to him on a Sunday evening, dread filling my chest, and I know that if I asked, then he would stay or I would go with him, and I have to forge agreements with myself not to do so. I battle as I always have done between the force of my need for others and the force of my disgust towards dependence. I suspect I will have to grapple with those competing interests for the rest of my life. I can't accept that I need another person to do something as basic and necessary as sleep.

Instead, I push through on the nights I am alone and afraid. When sleep evades me totally I wait until dawn comes, slip on my headphones and walk out into the streets. There, no matter how early it is, I see that life exists, cyclists and bedraggled revellers and the train station coffee shop setting up. I listen to music or to a podcast about something amazing, something that happened in a place I've never been to but could travel to one day if I really wanted to.

I am glad that wandering outside is where I feel safest and happiest, because here I'm reminded of how much I love the world and the people in it and everything I don't know about them, and that whatever fear I feel on my own is only a kind of proof of how strong that feeling is. On these mornings I am filled with the sure knowledge of the ongoingness of things and how miraculous that really is, and that knowledge is just as real, or even more so, as the knowledge of endings which comes in the dark. ■

Acts of Desperation, by Megan Nolan, is published by Vintage at £8.99. Buy a copy for £8.09 at guardianbookshop.com

A wide-angle photograph of a coastal village in Greenland. In the foreground, several small, colorful houses (red and yellow) with dark roofs are built on a rocky, sparsely vegetated hillside. Some houses have white window frames. A clothesline with colorful laundry is visible in the lower left. The middle ground shows a frozen body of water with patches of ice and snow. In the background, a range of large, rugged mountains covered in snow stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

Breaking the ice

Words **MICHAEL SEGALOV** Portrait **MAGALI DELPORTE**

In 1965, Tété-Michel Kpomassie left his village in Togo for a new life in Greenland, swapping sunny beaches



'When I stepped off the ship, everyone didn't know if I was a real person': Tété-Michel Kpomassie, photographed today, recalls arriving in Greenland in 1965. Left: the frozen sea

for icy fjords and spiced food for boiled seal. Now, at 80, he's planning to retire to his 'spiritual home'

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1 red onion, peeled and diced
2 garlic cloves, peeled and finely chopped
300g pack prepared stir-fry vegetables
227g can pineapple slices in natural juice, drained, cut into chunks and juice reserved
2 tablespoons tomato purée
2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
1 tablespoon sweet chilli sauce
2 x 250g pouches wholegrain rice or brown basmati rice

Method

1. To make the sauce, in a measuring jug, mix together the pineapple juice, 75ml water, tomato purée, vinegar and sweet chilli sauce.
2. Heat the oil in a large frying pan or wok and fry the pork, onion and garlic for 4-5 minutes. Add the prepared stir-fry vegetables, the sauce and pineapple chunks. Cook for 6-7 minutes or until pork juices run clear.
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The warm living room of Tété-Michel Kpomassie's otherwise neat Parisian home has a coffee table in the middle of it piled high with keepsakes – a mountain of black and white pictures, letters and handwritten diaries. It's an archive of one remarkable man's intrepidly adventurous and unconventional life to date. Balanced on top of the overloaded files and folders sits a tattered book, its pages faded. On its cover is a portrait of an Inuit in a sealskin jacket, standing next to an icy shore. The title reads *Les Esquimaux du Groenland à l'Alaska* (*The Eskimos from Greenland to Alaska*). It's a 1947 work of nonfiction authored by French anthropologist Robert Gessain.

Decades may have passed since the day Kpomassie first set his teenage eyes upon this image in his native Togo, but the 80-year-old remembers the precise moment as if it had happened just minutes before. How could he not? What he found inside has, since that day, consumed him entirely, shaping every chapter of his own story. He ran away from home at 16 to embark on an epic cross-continental mission that delivered him to Greenland, the world's northernmost country. He was the first African man to set foot there. The adventure resulted in a travelogue, return visits and countless speaking invitations, and, more recently, a rather acrimonious divorce. Now, his very own sealskin jacket hangs by the door to his home in pride of place.

Quite what an academic study of Inuit peoples was doing on the shelves of a small Christian missionary bookshop in 1950s Lomé remains a mystery. Kpomassie stumbled across it while recovering from a tree-top run-in with a snake. The only explanation he can think of, after years of contemplation, is that finding it was his destiny – an undeniable consequence of some predetermined fate.

"I picked it up, not understanding the words in front of me," Kpomassie says, his eyes lighting up as he recounts that morning. "But the man on the cover was smiling right at me. We had a connection, an exchange." Intrigued, Kpomassie bought the book, sat on the beach and devoured it from cover to cover. Once finished, he read it again and again.

"From the minute I completed it," he says, "I never stopped thinking of Greenland, my country. It was resonating inside me. I don't understand it. But a magnet was pulling me, so I packed my bags and left, in secret."

The journey which followed is barely believable. If it weren't for the artefacts laid out in front of me, I might question whether it was a fairytale dreamed up in his mind. It was a trip that saw him traverse Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mauritania and Senegal. There were brief stops in Morocco and Algeria, before he finally disembarked a boat in the south of France. From there, his voyage through Europe was facilitated by the endless kindnesses of strangers and, in particular, the generosity of Jean Callaut – to whom Kpomassie's own book is dedicated. Callaut was a Frenchman who soon became an adoptive father to the young traveller so far from home. "When people heard my story," Kpomassie says, "each was certain they were dealing with someone very determined. But if they hadn't helped me, be in no doubt, I'd have found another way."

Just before noon on 27 June 1965, the boat Kpomassie had boarded in Copenhagen eight days earlier docked in Qaqortoq, a small town in southern Greenland. Eight years had passed since he'd first said goodbye to Togo. And, finally, Kpomassie – now aged 24 – had arrived in his new home.

"It was fantastic," he says, all smiles. "From the ship's porthole I could see all the people gathering at the harbour waiting for our boat to arrive." In the hull were supplies, namely coffee and alcohol, that locals had been waiting all winter for. Little did they know that on board was also a surprise of another kind.

"I took my time to step out," he continues, "uncertain of how people would react to seeing me. I suspected none would have met a black man before. When I did, everyone stopped talking, all were staring. They didn't know if I was a real person or wearing a mask. Children hid behind their mothers. Some cried, presuming I was a spirit from the



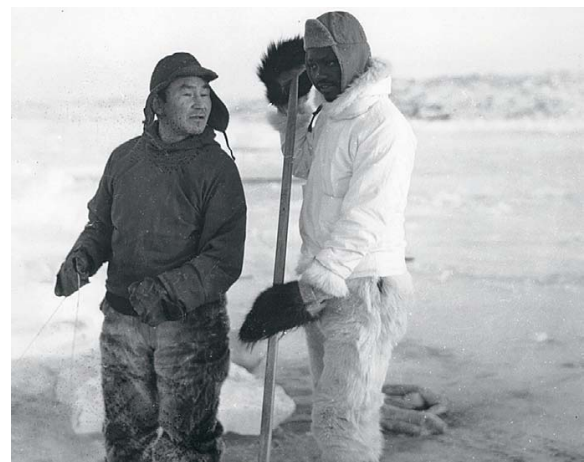
mountains." One woman, he later learned, yelled "hand-some" in his direction from the crowd.

Of course, the Arctic climate and landscapes he encountered as he moved through the country were total opposites to those of Togo. And he was intrigued by the cultural differences, too. "The way each place treated children struck me early on," he recalls. "In Togo, kids were treated as the subjects of their elders, with strictly enforced hierarchies. In Greenland, meanwhile, parents obeyed their young." In the book he later wrote, Kpomassie examines and contrasts the customs of his two homelands, looking at their respective treatment of the elderly, rituals for hunting, prayer and death, as well as familial structures and non-monogamy, which in both places was markedly different from modern European ways. And then there was the food, the intensely spiced dishes he grew up eating were a far cry from the boiled seal he was served up night after night, and raw fish eaten straight from the ocean.

In time, however, Kpomassie came to consider the two nations' similarities which, in his mind, also bound them together. Doing so helped him see his own desire to leave Togo in a different light. "I left because at that time I had been made to hate my culture, because of what was happening in Africa," he says. When he left Lomé, the country was still under French colonial rule. "Christians tried to

Love in a cold climate: (from top) Tété-Michel Kpomassie with his two sons in Greenland on an early visit; huskies pulling his sled; and learning to ice fish

'A magnet was pulling me, so I packed my bags and left, in secret'



convert my father," he says. "African names were banned and we were forced to take Christian ones before being admitted into schools."

What Greenland promised, Kpomassie hoped, was a life free from this violence, where traditions and customs were left to thrive. "The problem was, I discovered that Greenland was also a colonised country," he says. "Its culture was already being diluted by European influences. They worshipped their sea god, but here missionaries undermined local beliefs, too."

It was only in the northernmost places he visited that >

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► Kpomassie would find the freedom he'd been searching for. If anything, he was disappointed by what he found at first in the south. "There were no igloos, no hunters or huskies," he says. "Everyone was always drinking beer and coffee, and buying Danish food from the department store. After eight years of travel and thousands of kilometres, it dawned on me that arriving in Greenland was only the start of my journey. Because when I asked my hosts where the Inuit igloos and seal-hunters were, I was told to go to the far north."

It was only up there, as autumn and then winter settled in, when the country and its people were plunged into a seemingly endless polar night, that Kpomassie felt he'd truly arrived. "When the first snow falls," he says, "You see the real Greenland. With the temperature dropping rapidly and, the sea freezing up, that's when Greenlanders become the kings of their country. Outsiders vanish, age-old knowledge prevails. It's that liberation I loved the most." Under the aurora borealis, as far from Africa as he'd ever been, Kpomassie at last found his light.

Today, Kpomassie lives in Nanterre, a historic suburb to the west of Paris. Despite being more than 50 years his junior, I struggle to keep up, with both pace and conversation, as we make our way to a nearby restaurant for lunch. As it transpired, Kpomassie tells me, his first pilgrimage to Greenland wasn't permanent. Only 18 months after arriving, he reluctantly returned to Togo, to share his stories with his compatriots and the family who'd long presumed him dead.

"At first," he says, scanning the wine list, "when I came back from Greenland, I wanted to throw my diary into the sea. I did not want to write a book." His experiences felt private, almost sacred. "In fact, I didn't even want to leave, but I couldn't get the right boat at the right time to head further north. So I toured 16 African nations giving talks. I wrote the book. I somehow got married in France and had two children. But all the while I knew where I ultimately needed to end up."

More than 40 years have passed since his book was first published in French. Since then, there have been a further 22 editions in 10 languages. A new English one arrives this year, with Portuguese and Mandarin versions in the works, too. No doubt its longevity can be attributed to Kpomassie's skilful storytelling, but it's by no means the only reason his work has stood the test of time. While many similar travelogues from decades past, written by "explorers", now feel dated – Eurocentric, patronising or exoticising of their subjects – Kpomassie's couldn't be more relevant. The kinship he felt with Inuits on that first visit saw the publication of a literary work that was well ahead of its time.

Since then, Kpomassie has returned a further three times to Greenland, his most recent visit as a lecturer with a Norwegian cruise liner back in 2007. This September he'll make one final journey to his adoptive nation, where, at 81, he intends to live out his remaining years. Through all the decades since, this has been his plan, he says. Unfortunately, that's why last year he and his wife of 46 years – the mother of his children – divorced, going their separate ways.

"I was married for a long time, but sadly our separation became inevitable," he says. "She knew from the beginning that Greenland is the most important thing in my life." The deal, he says, was always that they'd one day swap their comfortable life in France for a retirement spent hunting in the shadow of Greenland's mountains. At some stage, Kpomassie's ex-wife – now a grandmother – not unsurprisingly, changed her mind. It created an irreconcilable gap. "Now, she wants to spend her retirement visiting Rome, Florence, Venice," he says, a little indignant. "From the offset I was honest about where my heart was. We'd always agreed to go together. I understand, of course, that her wishes changed. But mine haven't."

And what do his children make of it all? Well, they're not hugely impressed. Kpomassie thinks his big mistake was telling them his intentions in the first place. "If I'd told my family as a 16-year-old, I would never have left Togo," he says. "Everyone would have tried to reason with me, to stop me. Now my sons are doing the same, but that's not what I want. My children admire me, but they are afraid,



and they feel they should discourage me." He'll miss them, he says, but his door will always be open should they wish to come and visit.

On arrival in Greenland, Kpomassie hopes to spend a year travelling the country, giving talks to schoolchildren about his adventures in their country and across Africa. Then he'll head north, where he'll stay for good. "I'll have a dog sled and huskies," he grins. "I'll find myself a small fishing boat. And here I'll happily spend my remaining days, and finally find time to write my second book, about my childhood in Africa."

That is, of course, if the authorities allow it. At present, aside from locals, only Danish people are allowed to buy property in Greenland. "I think they might make an exception for me," he says, winking. "Well, at least I hope so." He wants to be buried at the foot of an iceberg. "In African animism, we believe in spirits in trees, the sea and mountains," he continues. "Greenlanders also believe icebergs have a soul. Sitting and staring at the icebergs I can converse with these spirits. I find my ancestors in Africa, but I find them in Greenland more."

Coping without life's luxuries will be no trouble, Kpomassie assures me, as a waiter delivers him a plate of duck breast and refills our glasses with Côte du Rhône. "All this? It's superficial," he says. "The day I put on my seal-skin anorak hanging in my hallway, I'll forget it all and

'My children admire me, but they are afraid': (from top) note books and the book that first inspired him; Kpomassie photographing life in 1965; and kayaking

'I'll have a dog sled and huskies and find myself a small fishing boat'



say goodbye. It's just to survive, I've had to adapt. When you pursue a dream," he continues, eyes twinkling, "one which has grown with you for an entire lifetime, you live and breathe it. It's inside me. Fulfilling it is not a choice. Anyone would have said my first journey there would be impossible, but I proved them wrong. Why should it be any different this time just because I'm older? It's my destiny. There is no other way." ■

Michel the Giant: An African in Greenland, Penguin Modern Classics, £9.99, or £9.29 from guardianbookshop.com

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Thanks to Wordle, we're in the midst of a puzzle boom. Word game compilers across the board are suddenly in demand. So what is the secret of a really addictive brain teaser and why are we all so hooked?

Words **RICHARD GODWIN**
Illustration **LISA SHEEHAN**

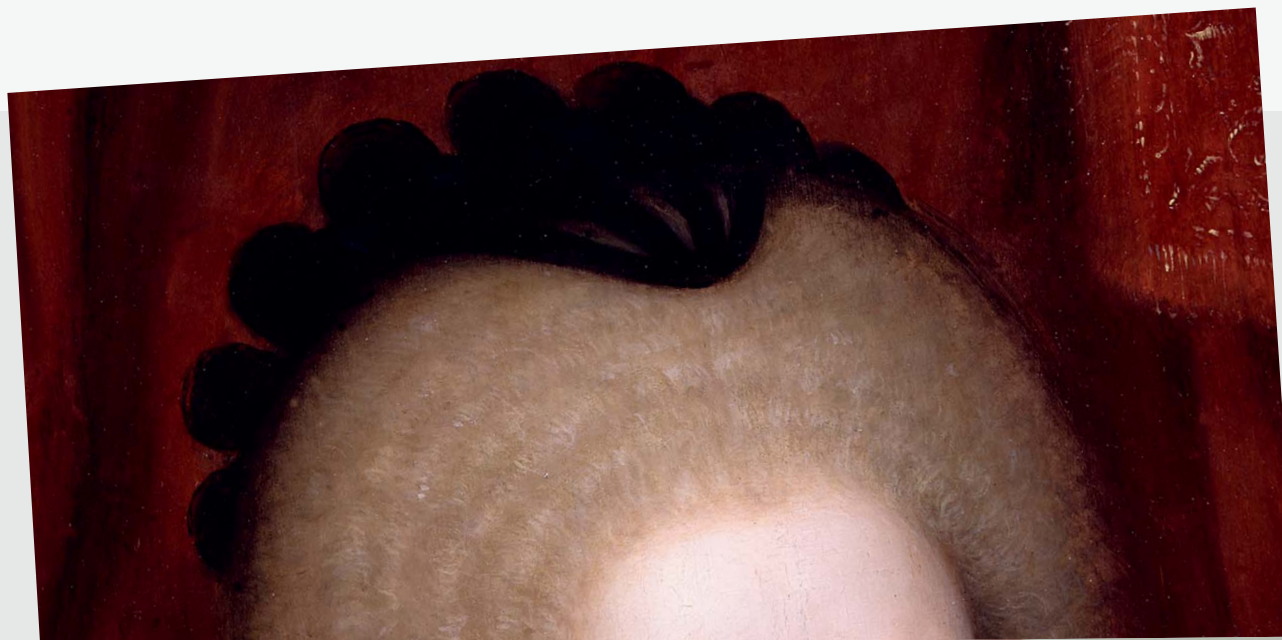
I scored a two in Wordle the other day. God. The rush, as the five squares in the second line blinked green, one by one, touched on the sublime. I felt like Mary Magdalen in the Caravaggio painting, lost in ecstasy. Oh mama.

Up until this point, I had considered that those who found the solution in two guesses were simply lucky. Consistent threes and fours – this was a surer marker of Wordle prowess. Once I had scored a two myself, however, I began to doubt this hypothesis. Surely, only the most elite players could manage such a feat. Surely, I was now part of this pantheon.

How did I do it, I hear ye mortals enquire? How did I reach ROBOT in two? Why, a combination of stellar start word (RATES), impeccable logic and a poetic appreciation of the Wordle lexicon, which appears to offer an oblique commentary on 21st life (TROLL... PROXY... PRICK...). No doubt this has helped the internet word puzzle to become, as one Twitter wag put it, “The sourdough starter of Omicron”, spreading at the same speed as its companion variant. According to the (non-affiliated) account @WordleStats, the number of people sharing their Wordle scores was roughly doubling each week in January: from 137,586 on 12 January to 280,622 on 19 January. This is just the people

who are sharing their scores; there are perhaps millions more, Wordling in private. Not since the Sudoku-mania of the mid-00s, or perhaps even the first crossword craze of the 1910s, has a novel puzzle so captured the zeitgeist.

The Wordle origin story is already part of the nano-mythology of the internet – it was designed by the British programmer, Josh Wardle, as a present for his girlfriend, Palak Shah, who was a fan of the *New York Times*’s Spelling Bee game. The beauty lies in its simplicity. You have to guess a five-letter word. You have six guesses. It would be addictive were the entire English-speaking world not rationed to a single hit per day. “One puzzle a day with >



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› exactly one solution. There is something almost religious about it, no?” wrote the American author Brandon Taylor in an essay on his Substack newsletter. “There is something peculiarly Calvinist about Wordle, or perhaps Wordle illuminates something particularly Calvinist about digital scarcity.” I logged on to Twitter to proselytise my miracle score – only to be confronted by a guy who had got it in one. A total fluke, obviously.

What is it about these silly games that compels us so? Why do I experience a little rush of joy, each day, when I remember there’s still the Wordle to do? Alan Connor, author of *Two Girls, One on Each Knee*, a history of the crossword, notes that the pandemic has provided the perfect conditions for an upsurge of interest in word games of all kinds. “It’s no surprise that those who have had more time alone should see the appeal in losing themselves in a puzzle for a spell, but it also works for those who’ve been run off their feet: a puzzle is, at least, something you can feel you’ve finished.”

Connor sees Wordle as a “charming gateway” to the world of “moving letters around for the sheer pleasure of it”, but it is far from the only distraction we have turned to. The crossword setters and puzzle compilers he knows report that they’ve never had so much interest. Publications from the *Sun* to the *Telegraph* to the *New Yorker* have upped their puzzle content in recent months – and this was from a position of strength. On the 100th anniversary of the crossword in 2013, Connor commissioned a YouGov survey on the popularity of the crossword and found that three in 10 British adults attempted a crossword each week and more than one in five made their decision to buy a newspaper based on the particular crossword culture of the publication. The solution to the clue that forms the title of his book is PATELLA, by the way.

Like so many word puzzles, Wordle is really a numbers game masquerading as a letters game, according to mathematician Alex Bellos, *Guardian* puzzle compiler and author of the *Language Lover’s Puzzle Book*. “You’ll find that the people who are really brilliant at word games are mathematical. It’s quite often maths graduates who win the international Scrabble competitions and set cryptic crosswords.”

The crucial strategy is that of “exhaustion”, he says – which is maybe why I’m so good at it. No, not that sort of exhaustion: “You have a finite number of solutions and you have to exhaustively look at every permutation and combination. It’s a natural instinct for mathematicians. You also have to be drawn to the non-human, a bit like a robot, working through letters in every different position.”

Yet really successful puzzle games seem to share certain irresistible human elements, too – competition, status-seeking and superstition. Everyone Bellos knows has now arrived at a favourite first word, he says. “They are probably quite protective of them, too. They’re almost like lucky charms.”

The author Laura Shepherd-Robinson tells me she used to have RATIO as her starter word. “Then I made the mistake of telling my husband,” she says. “He would work backwards from that knowledge when he saw my little yellow and green score on Twitter. So I’ve had to mix it up now. He is insufferable if he gets it in two or three.”

My own feeling is that word games – like chord sequences, like chess, like translating a Russian sonnet into English while retaining the same metrical form – lie in the sweetspot between maths and art, logic and creativity, left brain and right. It’s the same metaphysical zone in which you would find Jorge Luis Borges’s *Library of Babel*, containing books with every possible permutation of 25 characters arranged over 410 pages of 40 lines each. Somewhere, amid the apparent randomness of the seemingly indefinite but not quite infinite library, there



must exist a book containing the key to the universe. And also, its refutation.

Word games are “about breaking meaning down to its atomic units,” says Adrienne Raphel, author of *Thinking Inside the Box*, a history of word puzzles. “When they are put together the letters make sense – but pull them apart and they have a different kind of elemental power. It taps into the primal instinct that we have where we see letters and we have to play with them.” Letter blocks are, of course, one of the first toys we give to toddlers.

When Raphel first encountered Wordle, she was struck by the grid’s similarity to the Roman “magic square”, one of the earliest and most enduring of word games. A magic square is a grid of letters where the words read the same across as they do down. In English, magic squares of up to nine letters across have been constructed. A 10x10 is seen as the Holy Grail. But the most famous example is the SATOR 5x5 square, a palindrome, which reads: SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS (roughly: “farmer Arepo works with a wheel”). It is one of the most common forms of Roman graffiti, turning up everywhere from Pompeii to Syria to Cirencester but its meaning is unknown. It may have been a charm for warding off evil spirits, or a way for early Christians to signal their presence to one another. “In Roman times, people delighted in the idea of remixing the same letters and getting new words,” Raphel says.

“It must have seemed magical.”

She detects similar properties in the game Boggle, in which the player must find the words snaking through a 4x4 grid of random letters. “It’s the magic feeling of creating a chaos of symbol, from which patterns emerge. People think of it as this junior cousin to Scrabble – I actually think Scrabble is inferior.” Maya Angelou would have been with her – the great poet was a Boggle nut and held regular tournaments in her Harlem home.

But as a recovering Scrabble addict (I developed a seriously bad online habit in the mid-00s) I would maintain that Scrabble has its own life lessons to impart. A rookie player will often fixate on the word they can nearly make with their tiles, or moan about the constraints of the board. “Can’t make a thing with these darned letters!” they will cry. But the darned letters are the point. You must operate on the board in front of you with the constraints that you have. As in life.

There is, of course, great art to creating a puzzle – just as

there is a science to creating a perfect rhyme. “A good clue can give you all the pleasures of being duped that a mystery story can,” said Stephen Sondheim, who compiled cryptic crosswords. “It has surface innocence, surprise, the revelation of a concealed meaning, and the catharsis of solution.” Vladimir Nabokov composed chess problems and saw them in much the same way. “Chess problems demand from the composer the same virtues that characterise all worthwhile art: originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity and splendid insincerity.” He additionally published the first known crosswords in Russian, admiring “their geometric, closed structure... reminiscent of chess”.

One could begin to think that word games were the stuff of life itself. Or, perhaps, the inverse, an enormous waste of life. There’s something rather disturbing about the relish with which the husband in *Brief Encounter* attacks

Looking for clarity: ‘It’s very often maths graduates who win international Scrabble competitions and set cryptic crosswords,’ says Alex Bellos

his *Times* crossword while poor Celia Johnson pines away. Connor points out that there was once a moral panic about the crossword – “coming here from America and wasting workers’ time” – before it became seen as

a respectable, intellectual pastime.

But in the 21st century – and this would be a very 21st century way of seeing things – we are more apt to see these things as means of “optimising” ourselves to ever-greater efficiency. Shepherd-Robinson canvasses her online group of writers (all Wordle nuts) and finds them split on the matter. Some see Wordle as just another form of procrastination. She, and many others, however, see it as a “warm-up exercise” for the day’s intellectual labours. “Wordle uses the same part of my brain that I’m using when I’m really wrestling with a plot,” she says. Essentially, it’s a logic problem, isn’t it? You are narrowing the path to the right answer. That’s exactly how I approach a book.”

Even if it is a form of timewasting, though, it’s a relatively safe one, given that you have to wait 24 hours for each new puzzle. This is entirely deliberate. Wardle had worked in Silicon Valley, where software designers typically try to capture as much of your attention as they possibly can: by making the game endless, by sending you constant push notifications, by encouraging you to collect “gems” or build your “streak” (see: Duolingo, Simply Piano, the ghastly official Scrabble app, etc). “Philosophically, I enjoy doing the opposite of all those things... which I think has bizarrely had this effect where the game feels really human and just enjoyable,” he told *Slate*.

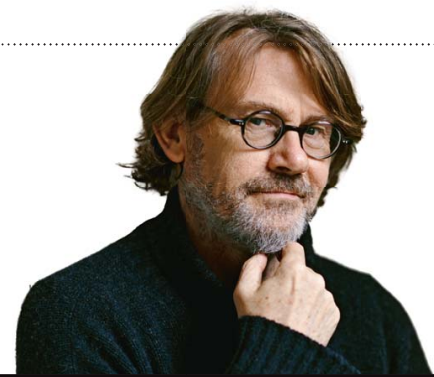
This is what the author Brandon Taylor was driving at in his essay on Wordle. The internet once promised to be a space of boundless freedom, where we could each be fully ourselves. Social media has, however, brought about something like the opposite. As soon as anyone shares something interesting or funny or clever or cool, others imitate it and soon everyone is tweeting the same memes, idioms and ideas. Everyone is always “optimising” whether they realise it or not. As such, Taylor resists any temptation to share his first word, his score or his strategy. “I don’t want to be a replicant. I don’t want to be a cyborg. I don’t want to be just like everyone else, playing the same words and solving the puzzle in the same way.” He wants to do it in his own dumb way. Which seems pretty smart to me.

And in short bursts, a word game can offer a respite from the endless imperatives of ambition, competition, optimisation. “When language is so often weaponised and over-scrutinised, it can be hugely curative to turn words into nothing more than pieces in a game,” says Connor. Bellos sees such games as the mental equivalent of isolating a muscle in the gym. “It’s pure concentration,” he says. “And when you do enter this cocoon of concentration, you forget about everything else in the world. You’re focused on this one small, elegant, aesthetically pleasing thing. For a few minutes, it’s a beautiful world.” He stops himself. “God, I sound pretentious.” ■

Food & drink

Nigel Slater

🐦 @NigelSlater



Warm your soul with a nourishing bowl of broth

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

There is something grounding about a bowl of broth. A glistening stock to bring us back to earth. It is where so many recipes start, but I like it as it stands, to eat as a sustaining soup, the brown liquor ladled into deep bowls; the steam aromatic and bosky from dried mushrooms and woody herbs.

No bones are needed. The backbone comes from dried shiitake or ceps, onions browned in the oven and tough stalks of thyme. The broth is the soul and benefits from the usual onion, carrot and celery, bay leaves and a splash from the bottom of a bottle – sherry, marsala or sake. You could add juniper berries if you wish or coriander seeds. It is ready in half an hour.

To the broth I will add sweet, roasted vegetables – tiny potatoes, artichokes (the noisy variety) and large shallots or small onions whose layers have been cooked until they are soft and melting. Any winter vegetables will also be welcome here – carrots, parsnips – and maybe some cooked pasta, such as rice-shaped orzo or stelline, miniature stars to twinkle in the smoky depths.

Potatoes have once again become daily visitors to this kitchen. This week I brought them to the table in a cast-iron pan, Maris Pipers thinly sliced and layered with sweet onions, thyme leaves and garlic. The most humble of offerings until I brought out a lump of taleggio to slice and melt over the top.

Roast artichokes and onions, vegetable broth

The artichoke season is short and I make the most of them, but small potatoes, perhaps a waxy variety like Charlotte, would be an admirable substitute, or parsnips, cut into short pieces. They are most delicious added just after roasting so they are still crisp from the oven.

Serves 4

For the broth:

onion 1, or large banana shallot
groundnut or vegetable oil 1 tbsp
carrots 2, medium
celery 1 stick
bay leaves 3
water 1.5 litres
shiitake mushrooms handful (15g)
dry sherry or sake 150ml

For the roast vegetables:

banana shallots 4, or small onions
Jerusalem artichokes 400g
groundnut or vegetable oil 4 tbsp

For the crumbs:

groundnut or olive oil 1 tbsp
fresh white breadcrumbs 60g
parsley 10g
dill fronds 5g

To make the broth, peel and halve the onion, warm the oil in a pan and lightly brown the onion. Scrub the carrots and roughly chop them, together with the celery, then add them to the pan, letting them colour a little, then add the bay leaves and water. Drop in the shiitake mushrooms and pour in the sherry or sake, bring to the boil, then lower the heat and simmer for 30 minutes. Remove from the heat, pour through a sieve and discard the vegetables and aromatics.

Make the roasted vegetables. Preheat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Peel the shallots or onions, cut them in half and place them cut side down in a large roasting tin. Scrub the artichokes, cut them in half lengthways, then snuggle them among the onions. Trickle over the oil, season with salt, then bake for 45-50 minutes until tender and the shallots are nicely golden-brown.

While they are cooking, make the herb crumbs. Warm the oil in a shallow pan, then tip in the breadcrumbs. They will fizzle in the oil. Toss them around a little so they colour evenly. They need to be lightly crisp and a deep golden colour. Finely ➤



Crunch time:
potatoes with olive
oil, garlic and rosemary.
Facing page: roast
artichokes and onions
in a vegetable broth

loaf



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Food & drink

Nigel Slater

Some cooked pasta, such as orzo or stelline, is good here – miniature stars to twinkle in the smoky depths

► chop the parsley leaves and dill fronds and mix with the crumbs.

Bring the broth to the boil. Transfer the artichokes and onions into soup dishes, ladle over the hot broth, then scatter with herbs and crumbs.

Potatoes with olive oil, garlic and rosemary

Thinly sliced potatoes are best here, crisping nicely on the surface and baking to a melting consistency underneath. I'm sure a mandolin slicer is best for giving thin, crisp-like slices, but I don't trust myself with one, so I slice them as thin as I can with a large kitchen knife instead. The potatoes will soak up most of the oil, but there will be a little left in the dish to spoon over as you serve. *Serves 4*

potatoes 1kg, Maris Piper or similar
olive oil 100 ml, plus a little extra
rosemary leaves 10g
onions 2, medium
garlic 2 cloves

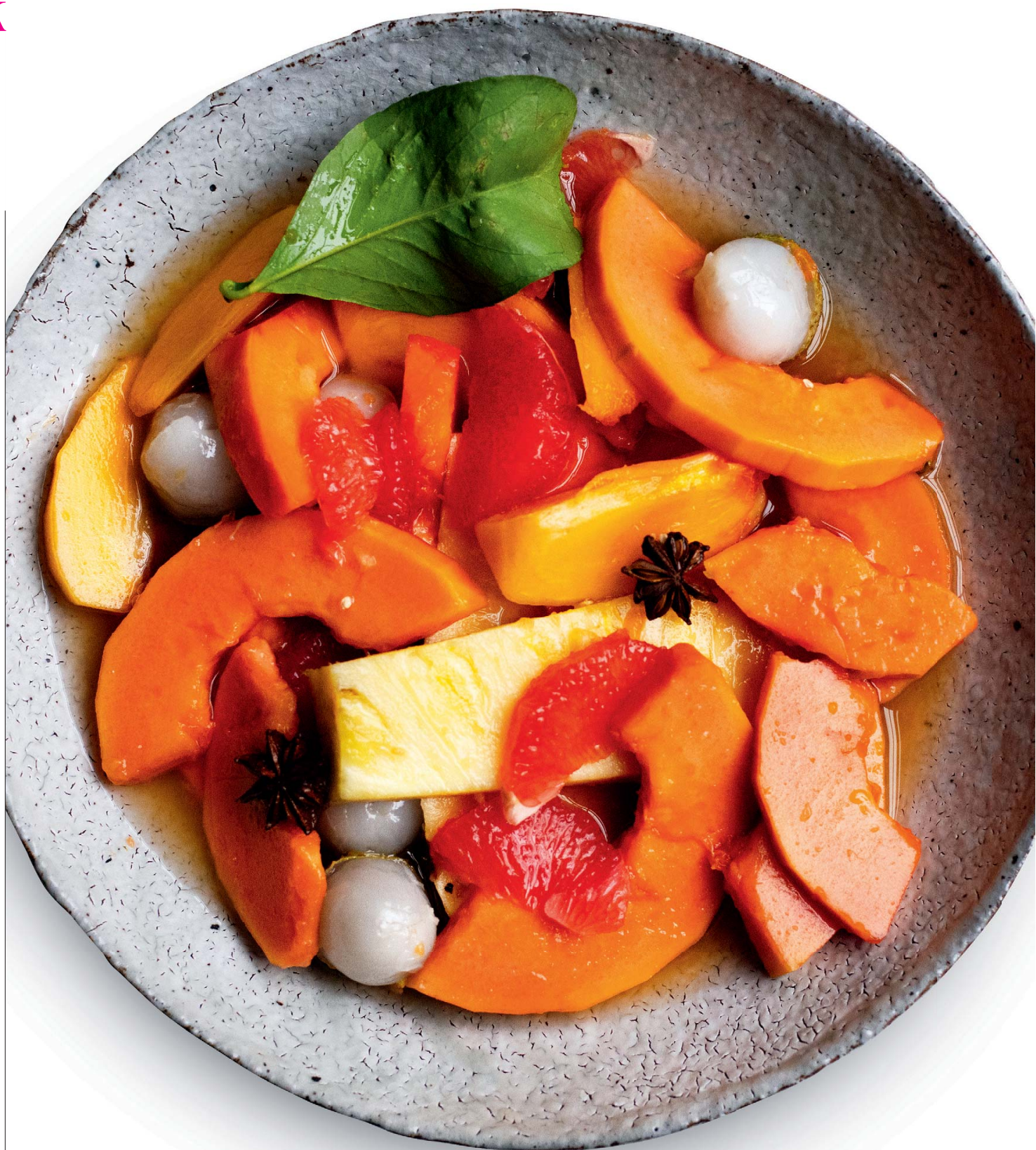
You will need a 25cm ovenproof frying pan that doesn't stick.

Set the oven at 180C/gas mark 4. Scrub the potatoes and slice very thinly. Pour half the oil into a large mixing bowl. Finely chop half the rosemary, leaving the rest on their stems, and add to the onions. Grind in a little black pepper and salt, then add the potatoes and gently turn them over in the seasoned oil.

Peel the onions and slice very thinly. Peel and finely slice the garlic. Pour the other half of the olive oil into a shallow pan and place over a moderate heat. Add the onions and garlic and cook for 7-10 minutes, stirring regularly until they are soft and pale gold. Remove from the heat.

Transfer the onions to the mixing bowl and toss them with the potatoes. Cover the base of the pan with a single layer of slices, each overlapping the other and adding a little salt as you go. Place a second layer on top, then another and so on. Pour any remaining oil and herbs from the bowl over the top.

Bake the potatoes in the preheated oven for 1 hour or until the top layer is golden and lightly crisp at the edges. Test that they are completely cooked by inserting a skewer into the thickest part. It should slide in effortlessly. ■



Nigel's midweek treat

Tropical fruits and lemongrass syrup

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

Make a syrup for the salad by putting 100g of **sugar** in a medium-sized saucepan and pouring in 400ml of water. Crush 2 stalks of **lemongrass** firmly with a heavy weight so they splinter (I use the pestle from my mortar, but the end of a rolling pin will work, too.) Add the water and bring it to the boil. Add the lemongrass to the water. Remove from the heat as soon as the sugar has dissolved, pour in 100ml **orange juice** and set aside to cool and infuse.

Peel 1 large **papaya** and remove the black seeds. Slice the flesh into pencil-thick pieces and place in a mixing bowl. Peel 1 **pink grapefruit** with a sharp knife, removing every little bit of the white pith, then slice into segments, peeling away the skin of each segment as you go.

Reserve as much of the juice as you can. Add the grapefruit to the papaya. Peel 12 **lychees** and add to the grapefruit and papaya, then pour over the chilled syrup removing the lemongrass as you go.

Peel 1 small **pineapple** and discard the skin. Slice the fruit in half and then into thick segments. Add to the marinating fruits and leave for a good hour in the fridge before bringing to the table. *Serves 4*

◆ The salad should have a good balance of sweet (papaya, pineapple) and tart (grapefruit, lemongrass). I like the sourness to ring loudly, so I include all the juice from the grapefruit as well as its flesh. Taste as you go.

◆ Let the fruit marinate for a good hour, but not overnight. The papaya may lose its texture if left too long in the syrup. ■

Food & drink

Jay Rayner



Twitter @jayrayner1

The address has long been a family favourite, but the new owners provide a good reason to visit

Food House

46 Gerrard Street,
London W1D 5QH
(020 7287 2818)
Starters **£5.80–£9.80**
Large dishes
£9.80–£24.80
Hot pot **£18–£38.80**
Whole fish **£36**
Wines from **£19.80**

All parents will retain a deep affection for any restaurant where their once small children were happy, and the family therefore harmonious and nobody died and can we all go home now please? It's why Pizza Express retains the love of a slab of the British middle classes, despite endless whining over

the current quality of the pizzas, and the silliness of the one with the hole in the middle, and the blood-sucking endeavours of venture capital firms. They have managed to retain a culture that is welcoming to small kids, without infantilising their weary parents. It's a neat trick. And if you still want to rant about why Pizza Express is terrible, please take it up over on Reddit. Someone there will be gagging for your hot take.

I have similar warm, fuzzy feelings about the premises at number 46 Gerrard Street in London's Chinatown, with its arched marble frontage. For many years it was an extremely reliable Cantonese place called Harbour City. My boys loved the dim sum there when they were small, and so did I. The fluffy, cloud-like char siu buns had an uncommon citrus kick. The har gow were spot on. A Sunday lunchtime at Harbour City was always a good one.

Recently the website Eater London, an offshoot of the US Eater empire, published a list of 38 "essential" London restaurants. If you don't know Eater London, think of them as the cool boys on the back seat of the school bus of the food journalism world; the ones who listen to those bands you've never heard of and yes, they've got a girlfriend, she just goes to another school. But the thing with the cool boys is, secretly you always wanted to listen to those bands to find out what was so great about them. Because maybe that would make you cool, too.

Included in that essentials list alongside reliable bangers like Mangal 2, Trullo and, er, the River Café was a Sichuan restaurant called Food House, which they said was "the trendiest restaurant in central London". In keeping with the whole back-seat-of-the-bus thing, it was so trendy, so cool, I'd never heard of it. I squinted at the address. Blow me: it occupies the location of what was once Harbour City. Naturally, I booked.

Going by the carpets I'd say little has been done to the joint in years. But this is a very different type of restaurant from the one I knew. It is all the grand, jumpy, thrilling, chilli and numbing peppercorn hullabaloo that those of us addicted to the Sichuan repertoire just adore. I believe you're meant to say that



The seabass is first roasted whole so the skin and the flesh along the tail is crispy. It is then plunged into a bath of chilli oil

Heat of the moment: (from left) roasted seabass; the dining room; pan-fried pork dumplings; Yu Xiang aubergine; red chilli oil noodles with lamb; and hot and sour kidney

Sichuan food is not just about chilli heat, it's about flavour. And, of course, it's not just about chilli heat. But actually, it also is. There's even a samovar-style decanter of bright red oil, full of chillies, on the bar so they can dispense it at the turn of a tap, like absinthe. If I had brought my boys here when they were small, they would, faced by all this, have tugged at the sleeves of strangers and asked to be taken to a place of safety. Or perhaps a plate of safety. Food House is full on, in a very good way.

One of the dishes regularly talked up online is the fearsome sounding red chilli oil noodles. It's actually one of the more soothing platefuls: broad, ragged-edged ribbons of noodle the colour of a baby's teeth, come slicked with just enough of the crimson oil to remind you where you are. We have it topped by friable pieces of long braised lamb. It's comfort food for when you're caught in a winter storm, or like to imagine you might be.

Before we get to that there are other thrills. There is the barbecue menu of things on skewers, roughed up

with cumin, salt, chilli and the occasional dab of sugar. Often, these can be mimsy affairs, delivering seized up pebbles of hard matter. Here, the red willow twig lamb skewers are solid, chunky pieces of still smoking baby sheep. There are also skewers of lamb kidney which, arriving with a cloak of crispy fat, must be eaten while still hot. I understand that offal and its fat may not be everybody's thing. They are my thing. We have king prawns which, under the heavy hand from the spice mix, seem to become even sweeter. Alongside this there are silky-skinned, pan-fried pork and cabbage dumplings that leak their juices down my chin. It is an attractive look.

We have Yu Xiang aubergine (eggplant, on this menu) in a deep glossy gravy and, from the broad selection of offal dishes, a heaving plateful of more kidney in a hot and sour sauce. When I called to book, I was asked if I wanted the hot pot. It's a big thing here. I've tried them elsewhere and never quite enjoyed them as much as I think I should. This is partly because, however varied a list of ingredients you get to drop in the boiling stock or oil, it all ends up tasting rather similar to me. It's also down to incompetence. I usually end up sticking a chilli-dipped finger in one eye or the other.

Instead, we have another of their big statement dishes: a whole seabass to share, first roasted so the skin and the flesh along the tail where it narrows, is crispy. It has then been plunged into a bath of chilli oil, bobbing with dried chillies and slices of lotus root, sprigs of coriander, halved cloves of garlic and so much more. It is magnificent to behold, as if it has its own stage lighting system, and justifies its price of £36 on those dashing looks alone.

It is not, however, simple to eat. We get in there together, working our way around the bones to get at the prized flesh. But it is very much worth it: there is a sweetness to the soft fish, stained red by its vigorous liquor. It can get messy. Either wear a bib, or don't wear a white shirt. Perhaps don't bother with clothes at all. It's a pretty laid-back place. Drink bottles of Yanjing beer to soften the burn. I shall have to take the word of the cool boys on the bus that this is a very trendy restaurant. I long ago mislaid the ability to recognise what is fashionable and what is not. But I can say it's an awful lot of fun. I have a great reason at last to return to 46 Gerrard Street. ■

Notes on chocolate

Travel the world, one chocolate treat at a time. By Annalisa Barbieri

This week I've been to Istanbul, New York, Guangzhou, Turin, Bangkok and the Arctic, among other places. And that was just by Thursday.

I want to say 'sadly this was via a box of chocolates', but I'm actually not sad at all, because they were absolutely terrific. **Fifth Dimension** chocolates marry super luxe handmade chocolates with tastes from around the world.

Every day I sat down and read my menu which told me about the ingredients and their global inspiration. Biepu, for example, is from when the makers (Albert and Russell) travelled to Taiwan and made Hakka tea using sesame seeds and peanuts – thus both ingredients appear in the chocolate. (Biepu was a favourite. I sighed after eating

it.) Siem Reap (Cambodian curry) is white chocolate with lemongrass, galangal, coconut and chilli. Hong Kong is milk chocolate with a soy sauce caramel. You get the idea.

It may sound sad, but every day I looked forward to my little chocolate (I had a box of 12 – some days I did travel to more than one place, truth be told). January was a particularly anhedonic month for me, as it nearly always is. I usually try to go away in January, but travel isn't easy at the moment is it? I found myself often looking up the city/town the chocolate was named after and finding out a bit more about its ingredients.

Prices start at £22.60 for a box of 12. Much cheaper, and less stressful, than air travel. 5dchocolates.com

Wines of the week

California's wines are often overblown. But these show its range. By David Williams

Classics California Zinfandel USA 2020
£8, Marks & Spencer

A fun fact about Californian wine for your next quiz night: if the region was a country, it would be the world's fourth-largest wine producer after Italy, France and Spain. It is, therefore, easily the biggest non-European wine 'country', and is responsible for 81% of the US's total wine production. And yet, for all its scale, I've never quite had the feeling its wines are treated with the same respect and affection afforded to the wines of Australia, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand and South Africa – let alone that shown to the big Europeans – on this side of the Pond. Much of the problem is down to the quality and style of the state's cheaper, sickly sweet big-name brands. Indeed, sub-£10 pleasure is thin on the ground, with M&S's juicy bramble-jam zinfandel an exception.

🐦 @Daveydaibach

Le P'tit Paysan P'tit Pape, Central Coast, California USA 2018
£30.82, Nekter Wines

If the starting point, pricewise, for good Californian wine is higher than any other wine country, it is at least somewhat lower than it used to be. Tasting a range of 70 Californian wines available in the UK, I was struck by the quality – and diversity – of its wines in the £20–30 bracket. That's nobody's idea of cheap, but then the luminous complexity of Alma de Cattlea Chardonnay, 2019 (£27.95, jeroboams.co.uk); the fragrant ripe red fruits of Varner Foxglove Pinot Noir, 2017 (£19.25, bowlandforestvintners.co.uk); the spicy-berry succulence of Qupé Syrah, 2018 (£22, thewinesociety.com); and the peppery savouriness of Le P'tit Paysan P'tit Pape are all at least as good if not better than comparably priced wines made in Burgundy or the Rhône Valley.

Chateau Montelena Calistoga Zinfandel Napa Valley USA 2016
£42, Grapesmith

California's other problem in the UK is that we tend to treat it as a viticultural monolith, when, as you would expect from a state of this scale, there's at least as much geological and climatic variation as there is in France or Spain. Officially, there are now 142 American Viticultural Areas in California, from the deep southern San Pasqual Valley near San Diego to Willow Creek in far northern Humboldt County. Over the past decade, some of my favourites have come from Pacific coastal and/or high elevation sites between these poles. But my recent tastings showed there is still plenty of interest in the best-known region, the Napa Valley, where, in among some of the world's more ludicrous overblown lifestyle products, are distinctive, complex wines, such as Chateau Montelena's Italian-esque zinfandel.



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Style Notebook

Fashion editors **JO JONES & HELEN SEAMONS**



Setting sail

Alex Monroe's galleon necklace is handmade in England and was inspired by his childhood on the Suffolk coast. £174, alexmonroe.com



Easy does it

Comfort is at the core of Joanna Dai's collection, with tailored workwear that is stretch- and wrinkle-resistant. Blazer, £395, daiwear.com



Art and soul

Illustrator Coco Bayley has joined forces with Jigsaw on a capsule collection featuring heart motifs within her artwork. Scarf, £70, jigsaw-online.com



1. Black £43.99, gap.com 2. Cream £225, arket.com 3. Green £180, cosstores.com 4. Taupe £495, riley.studio 5. Mustard £495, holzweileroslo.com

Power puffers *Warm up to the new quilted jackets for men*



Hoop dreams: Justin Bieber at a basketball match

Kanye West's puffer makeover for Yeezy x Gap has helped keep the ubiquitous quilted jacket at the centre of stylish outerwear for another season

Kanye's (sold-out) cropped jacket has put some serious style weight behind the look. Now the high street has upped its game on recycled credentials – see Gap's well-priced 100% recycled jacket (3, above). And if you're looking for something more fashion than Uniqlo's roll-up-and-stuff-it-in-your-bag budget option (from £49.90), you can still pick up a navy and khaki, satin-look, oversized parka from their Jil

Sander J+ collection (on sale at £99.90) via the Uniqlo website.

It follows that Scandi brands know their way around a puffer jacket. Norwegian company Holzweiler's Dovre jacket (5, above) is water resistant, made using responsibly sourced down and has a temperature rating effective to -15C. Swedish brands Arket (4, above) and Cos (1, above) both offer recycled and upcycled options in several colourways. To maximise use, choose a neutral shade that will fit seamlessly into your wardrobe.

Arket's grey version works just as well worn over office wear as it does with jeans. Reiss's stone-

coloured hooded version is on sale at £180, from £298. Not forgetting go-with-everything black, as seen on a casually dressed Justin Bieber courtside for a trip to the basketball, or when worn with smarter black separates (above). M&S's take is water-repellent and comes in regular and long length, in sizes from small to 4XL (£69).

Riley Studio spent months developing a food-waste natural dye for their recycled nylon jacket, dyed using onion skins and rice husks to create the taupe hue (2, above). It's a high-ticket spend but on the coldest mornings there is no better coat. It's like wearing your duvet to work. ■



She's the Boss

Hugo Boss launches a brand refresh for its core Boss line with a campaign featuring Hailey Bieber. Bomber jacket, £525, hugoboss.com/uk



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Classical Jordan: *From price applies to departures on 18/01/23. **Egypt: The Majestic Nile:** *From price applies to departures on 07/06/22 and 21/06/22. A visa must be obtained before travel. Please note availability is limited for our lead-in 'from' price. All offers are subject to availability & can be withdrawn without notice. Prices shown include return flights, accommodation, all internal travel, entry fees and English-speaking tour guides throughout. Prices based on flights out of London; other regional airports are available and may be at a supplement. Terms & conditions apply, for further details and detailed itineraries please visit mercuryholidays.co.uk.

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Beauty Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto

10 of the best Facial masks

From buying the same groceries every week to using beauty products forever, we are all guilty of sticking to what we know. I see the sense in this, but it can mean missing out on great new products from niche brands. Take masks, relevant now as winter is one of skin's biggest enemies: while nothing beats an incredible facial, masks are financially less painful and if you are consistent with their use your skin will thank you. Hydrating masks from the likes of Verso are a no-brainer right now. Youth To the People's clever combo of science and botanicals is the ultimate exfoliating, yet moisturising boost. Votary's is similar, its key ingredients – lactic and mandelic acid – are great for shedding dead skin cells, but the formula is impressively gentle and hydrating. As is Farmacy's. To refine skin texture without stripping the skin, Ameliorate's is game changing. For decongesting, Olivanna, Zitsticka, Strivectin and Wildsmith are brilliant at drawing out impurities. And if you are in the market for a brightening, anti-puff, under-eye treatment that is a little more sophisticated than cucumber slices or old tea bags, Equilibrium has you covered. ■



1. Ameliorate Resurfacing Facial Mask £22, spacenk.com
2. Farmacy Honey Potion Plus Mask £36, boots.co.uk
3. Votary Radiance Reveal Mask £55, votary.co.uk
4. Zitsticka Pore Vac £30, zitsticka.com
5. Strivectin Multi-Action Blue Rescue Clay Renewal Mask £47, strivectin.com

6. Youth To the People, Superberry Hydrate and Glow Mask £42, cultbeauty.co.uk
7. Hourglass Equilibrium Instant Plumping Eye Mask £61, johnlewis.com
8. Verso Nourishing Mask £80, versoskincare.com
9. Wildsmith Skin Double Clay Mask £65, wildsmithskin.com
10. Olivanna Detox Oceanic Marine Mask £56, olivanna.com

Dutch courage

An 18th-century farmhouse in South Africa's Cape Winelands has been restored to its rustic yet grand origins

Words **SALLY RUTHERFORD** Photographs **BUREAUX**



Hearth beat: the kitchen with thick stone walls, a huge refectory table and a chandelier made from a wine-bottle drier. Facing page: the garden, where 300 varieties of edible and medicinal plants are grown



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Alexander Miles, inventor of the Gx Pillow pictured with his invention

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The air hums with the work of the bees in Babylonstoren's garden of Eden. Here, owners Karen Roos and Koos Bekker grow more than 300 varieties of edible or medicinal plants in the extraordinary gardens inspired by the farms that supplied ships passing the Cape of Good Hope in the 17th century.

Today, the *werf* (farmyard) and its structures remain among the finest unspoilt examples of traditional Cape Dutch architectural styles. In this positively utopian setting in South Africa's Cape Winelands, the Owners' House – the Babylonstoren estate's principal home – is irresistible. Roos's deft touch and nuanced appreciation of tradition are unmistakable in the simplicity of her homestead, which has been not so much restored as fully reinvigorated.

The farmhouse itself dates back to 1777. When Roos, the former editor of South Africa's *Elle Decoration*, and Bekker, a telecoms billionaire, first bought Babylonstoren, one of its many attractions was the fact that the house had never been restored. The most recent work, in fact, dated back to 1931 when a Victorian renovation to remove the gables was undone and the gables replaced.

The couple – who also own the Newt in Somerset, a magnificent, newly restored 300-acre hotel and estate – have long had a commitment to authenticity. In the sitting room at Babylonstoren, for example, Roos supervised the painstaking removal of 23 layers of paint to reveal the original ochre-hued brown wall paint finely edged with stripes of teal, cream and dark brown. The colours were exactly matched and the room carefully repainted. "It has



the benefit of downplaying the heaviness of the dark wood built-in cupboards that the Dutch loved so much," says Roos. "They have the potential to be overwhelming if the walls are whitewashed, but here they just melt in with the original wall colour."

The sitting room – with its contemporary linen, leather and steel furnishings that meld seamlessly with the 240-year-old structure – is cool and calm, and forms the crossbar of the home's traditional H-structure. As such, it has doors linking to the two perpendicular rear wings of the house. To the left is the door leading to the main bedroom suite and to the right is the kitchen.

Throughout the home original fittings have been reconditioned to their original



Southern comfort: flagstone flooring in the sitting room, which has been painted in its original colours; Karen Roos at the gate; and the double marble basin in the bathroom

Roos supervised the painstaking removal of 23 layers of paint to reveal the original ochre-hued wall paint

splendour – worn flagstones polished to a high gloss, and wide yellow-wood floorboards, ceiling beams, wooden windows and sills set deep into the thick clay-brick walls all restored.

Despite the grand heritage of Babylonstoren, this is unmistakably a farmhouse. Much of the action takes place in the kitchen, with its huge open hearth and enormous refectory table. There's an Aga gas hob and wood-burning stove and the kitchen chandelier – made from an antique wine-bottle drier – is rustic yet contemporary.

While the sitting room and bedrooms are the essence of comfortable, traditional minimalism, the library-cum-study (*voorkamer*) is a room of wonder. Cabinets are filled with collections and objets, from shards of pottery dug up on the farm and original VOC Delftware to massive ammonites and an encyclopaedic collection of butterflies. When it's time for a rest, a scarlet-covered couch is the perfect place for an afternoon nap in front of the fireplace.

The floor-to-near-ceiling-high windows in the *voorkamer* are typical of Cape Dutch homes. The windows are deep-set, revealing the thickness of the stone and clay-brick walls built to withstand the intense heat in summer. The curvaceous Norman Cherner vintage chair is perfectly at home in this eclectic yet cohesive space.

The magnificent wetroom evokes spa-like Edwardian bathrooms. The marble double basin and taps are from a salvage building yard, the mirror was custom made, and the rainshower is from Axor. The glass-and-wood display cabinet from a junk shop is filled with a vignette of bathroom luxuries reminiscent of an old-school apothecary.

It is fitting that this home, which has been continuously occupied for 240 years, is no stiff museum piece. Its interiors pay tribute to its traditional heritage, but it is Karen's appreciation for contemporary aesthetics that brings the Owners' House to life. The ensuite bathrooms are a wonderful example of this. Individual in style, they evoke a grand era of Edwardian spas and the lavish luxury of indoor plumbing. You can just imagine splashing about in the massive circular bath or languishing under the rain shower in the wetroom.

All in all, Babylonstoren's principal home is a living, fresh celebration of Cape Dutch style. ■ babylonstoren.com

Gardens James Wong

🐦 @Botanygeek

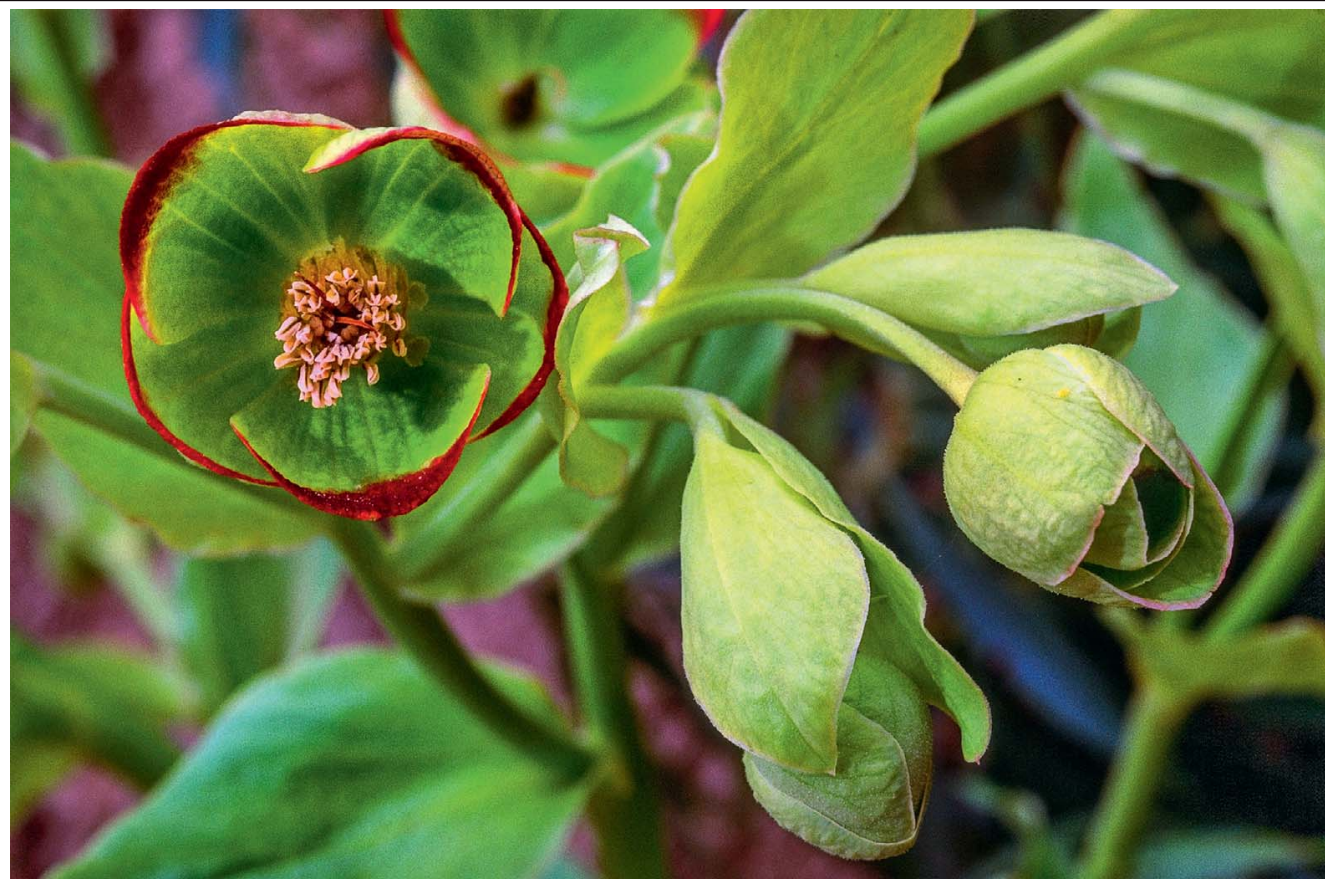


The winter wonder of hellebores

To me it's one of the perpetual mysteries of gardening: why some plants, despite appearing to really have it all, somehow still languish away from the horticultural spotlight. Very near to the top of that list must be hellebores, with their exotic blooms opening up as if by magic in the dead of winter. Their flowers often last for months at a time on evergreen, drought-tolerant, fuss-free plants. I often wonder if it's their incredible generosity combined with ease of cultivation that causes us to take them for granted.

Seeming to defy the seasons, *Helleborus foetidus* 'Wester Flisk Group' is bursting into bloom right now, its finely divided foliage and pistachio-flowers on salmon-pink stems making it appear like it belongs on some far-flung forest floor in the tropics. If you crave the look of a schefflera or one of the palmate begonias, but can't handle their upkeep (or price tag), this makes a perfect doppelganger. Like all hellebores, it even thrives in dry shade where little else will grow.

If truly fabulous winter greenery is your thing, *Helleborus x sternii* 'Blackthorn Strain' has prickly edged leaves covered in the most wonderfully reptilian green mottling, a botanical animal that gives you full-on *Jurassic Park* vibes. Finally, on the foliage front, the soft, bright green mounds of *Helleborus multifidus* erupt out of the ground like a bubbling emerald spring.



Evergreen joy: (above) the 'pistachio flowers on salmon-pink stems' of the *Helleborus foetidus*. Below: hellebores displayed as cut flowers

Now, let's talk flowers. "Unique" can be an overused word in horticulture, but the haunting mix of steel-blue, violet and grey hues in the velvety petals of *Helleborus* 'Blue Diamond' is really impossible to find anywhere else in the botanical world. Unlike in other plants where all the extra petals of double flowers can remove part of their wild charm, in hellebores they give them the wondrous ability to impersonate other species. To my eyes, *Helleborus* 'Onyx Odyssey' looks like a giant cherry blossom but, as its

name suggests, with the deepest black and a silvery-grey powder coating over its petals. 'Wedding Party Bridesmaid' is altogether more soft and delicate with a whiff of the forest cacti bloom about it. White petals are tipped with blackcurrant edging on one end, fading to palest jade green towards the centre. Just straight-up gorgeous.

There is even a whole series of doubles with an elegant water lily-esque look. 'Hebe' has burgundy breaks that bleed through the ice-white petals and, if you want even more colour, 'Artemis' features a very similar wine-coloured

mottling, but over acid yellow. Given that some of this detail needs to be appreciated close-up and their nodding heads can hide some of their true wonder in the garden, their splendour is sometimes best appreciated as a cut flower, with individual blooms placed floating in a bowl of water. A beautiful, unconventional form of floristry indoors, or alternatively the easiest eye-catching display floating in container ponds or water urns outdoors.

It really is hard to think of any single plant that can offer quite so much, at a time of year that often offers so little. ■

Plot 29

February can be a cruel month. Don't rush to sow outdoors just yet.
By Allan Jenkins

🐦 @allanjenkins21

First, the good gardening news: UK sunrise should be 50 minutes earlier by the end of the month. Sunset almost an hour later, days nudging two hours longer by 28 February.

Now, though, the weather. Temperatures can be fierce. They're often lower than January with severe frosts, sometimes snow. So don't rush to sow outside even on a bright sunny day. In contrast to TS Eliot, I find February to be the cruellest month. Less so April.

That said, there are a few

things ready to go into the ground, unless your soil is soaked or frozen. If it is, stick to sowing in indoor pots for planting out later. Rhubarb sets, shallot sets, garlic and broad beans can all go in. As can bare-root fruit bushes and trees. Remember, too, to finish winter pruning fruit bushes while they're dormant. They'll be starting to stir around now.

Seed potatoes can still be chitted in trays or egg boxes in a light cool room.

Keep feeding birds if you can and think about



In the pink: rhubarb sets can go in the ground, as long as it's not soaked or frozen

nesting boxes, so they can familiarise themselves before breeding begins. Please, too, keep an eye on ponds. Take measures to stop them freezing over. Gently break through any ice. Warm water works well.

There's a long list of plants if you have propagators or a cool inside space. Tomatoes and aubergines can be sown in propagators, but aubergine needs more warmth.

Radish, hardy salad, spinach, lettuce and leek seeds are good to go in indoor pots. Start early peas

in guttering for transplanting to trenches later. If in doubt how best to do it, there are many instructional films online.

We're still in limbo at the allotments. We don't know if the council will be gone by the end of the month as planned. So I'm practising patience – not with great success, though I'm trying hard to be more Howard.

Allan Jenkins's Plot 29 (4th Estate, £9.99) is out now. Order it for £8.49 from guardianbookshop.com

BLICKWINKEL/ALAMY; SIMICVOJSLAV/GETTY; ALLAN JENKINS

1 Hebridean Dark Skies Festival
A packed programme of astronomy talks, stargazing, films, music, visual art and theatre combines to create the Dark Skies Festival on the Isle of Lewis, which runs from 11-25 February. The Dark Skies exhibition will feature newly commissioned works by a group of Hebridean artists, stargazing events will be held indoors at the Cosmos Planetarium and outside with Highland Astronomy, and the festival will kick off with a night of comedy and astronomy. Stay at the Royal, a harbourside hotel, with a restaurant specialising in local meat and fish (doubles from £131, B&B, royalstornoway.co.uk). *More information at lanntair.com*



2

2 Exmoor
The festival in Exmoor happens in autumn, but if you can't wait that long there are regular Dark Skies events in the school holidays (a Night Sky Stargazing & Bushcraft Adventure evening is taking place on 21 February), while the Dark Sky Discovery Trail is a two-mile route across open moorland that takes in some of the best places to see the stars (exmoorwalks.org/darksky). Stay at the Exmoor White Horse Inn, a 16th-century inn (doubles from £119, B&B, exmoor-whitehorse.co.uk). *exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk*

3 Yorkshire Dales & North York Moors
Learn about the night sky while hiking across open moorland, soaking in a hot tub, paddling a canoe or listening to expert astronomers – all on offer across the Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors National Park. The festival runs from 18 February to 6 March and includes a rocket-making workshop and planet pizza-making evening. Stay at the 16th-century White Hart Inn (doubles from £120, B&B; whiteharthawes.co.uk). *yorkshiredales.org.uk*

4 Northumberland
One of the least-populated regions of the UK, this is an excellent stargazing spot with little light pollution. Its festival runs from



Festivals of light

The top 10 UK destinations where stargazers can celebrate the night sky

Words ANNABELLE THORPE

1

12-28 February, with events including aurora hunting at the Battlesteads Observatory, astronomy workshops, moon walks and stargazing experiences on Hadrian's Wall. Stay at the Battlesteads Hotel, just across the road from the observatory, with a buzzy dining room and stylish bedrooms (doubles from £115, B&B, battlesteads.com). *northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk*

5 South Downs National Park
The South Downs is holding its festival in February, with star- and moongazing events at Queen Elizabeth Country Park in Hampshire, Seven Sisters Country Park in

East Sussex, and Brighton seafront. Local astronomy groups along the coast will hold talks, with tours of the planets at the South Downs Planetarium in Chichester. Stay at the White Horse Inn in Sutton, a coaching inn with a well-loved restaurant (doubles from £133, B&B, whitehorseinn-sutton.co.uk). *southdowns.gov.uk*

6 Peak District National Park
Three spots across the park have been designated Dark Sky sites, offering the chance to see some spectacular starlit skies. The car parks at Parsley Hay, near Hartington, Surprise View near Hathersage and Minninglow at Pikehall have astronomy panels to help visitors explore the constellations, and private Stargazing Experiences in Hathersage can be arranged through Dark Sky Telescope Hire (darkskytelescopehire.co.uk). Stay at the George, a historic inn (doubles from £150, B&B, thegeorgehathersage.com). *peakdistrict.gov.uk*

7 Brecon Beacons National Park
Keen stargazers should put 23-25 September in their diaries for the second annual Beacons Dark Skies Festival, with events for astrophotographers, families and keen astronomers. Alongside practical workshops, there are talks on the history and folklore that surrounds the constellations and the nocturnal wildlife



3

that depends on them. New for this year is a mobile, inflatable planetarium that will be set up in locations across the Park. Stay at Gliffaes, a country house hotel just outside Crickhowell (doubles from £155, B&B, gliffaeshotel.com). *beacons-npa.gov.uk*

8 Cumbria
Art workshops, wood-whittling courses and guided night-time swims are on offer at the Cumbria Dark Skies Festival (12-26 February), along with woodside walks beneath starry skies, moon watching and listening to nocturnal wildlife. Stay at the Wordsworth Hotel & Spa in Grasmere – a short drive from the Dark Sky Discovery Centre at Allan Bank (doubles from £118, B&B, thewordsworthhotel.co.uk). *visitlakedistrict.com*

9 Forest of Bowland
The Forest's Dark Skies festival takes place over half-term (12-20 February), and although the live events are fully booked, you can join some online. The skies above the forest are spectacular at any time, however, and it's easy to stargaze independently, with public Dark Sky Discovery Sites around the Forest – at Beacon Fell Country Park, Gisburn Forest Hub, Slaidburn Village Car Park and Crook o' Lune picnic site. Stay at the Inn at



Whitewell, an elegant 17th-century hotel (doubles from £140, B&B, innatwhitewell.com). *forestofbowland.com*

10 Cairngorms National Park
The most northerly Dark Sky Park in the world, the Cairngorms is ablaze with stars – and there's a chance of seeing the Northern Lights. The skies are so dark it's possible to see nebula just using binoculars, with the "snow roads" between Braemar and the Spittal of Glenshee and Glen Muick being two of the best places to stargaze. Stay at Culdearn House, a classic Victorian country house hotel (doubles from £220, B&B, culdearn.com). *cairngorms.co.uk* ■

Self & wellbeing

Photograph MURDO MACLEOD

Spending time high above the ground gave one rock climber a new perspective on the world and herself

Words ANNA FLEMING

Climbing, I once thought, was a very manly activity. A pursuit for macho adventurers on a mission to conquer – conquer the mountain, conquer their fear, conquer themselves. That may be the story for some climbers, but as I found my way into this activity, I came to see that something quite different happens on the rock.

Like wild swimming, rock climbing immerses you within the landscape. On the rock, I am fully present. Eyes pay close attention, scanning the details of the rock, trying to read the passage up the cliff. Ears are alert, tuned in to the sounds of the stone, my partner and the environment. Hands roam across the surface, feeling for features while the whole body works to stay within balance, co-ordinating itself around the various forms of the cliff. Unlike walking, where I could happily trundle absent-mindedly through the landscape, in climbing, attentive observation is essential.

I started climbing when I was an undergraduate in Liverpool. I did not come from a climbing family. We were outdoorsy in a laidback country kind of way. We swam in rivers and quarry pools, mucked around in fields and went out religiously for Sunday walks in the rolling hills and woods of home. Moving to Liverpool was quite a contrast. Suddenly, I was in a buzzing city environment, surrounded by streetwise kids. It was fun, but I felt out of place. Something was missing.

Joining the university mountaineering club, I found a way to escape the city. Every weekend, dressed in a fantastic jumble of borrowed clothing and hand-me-downs, I staggered out of my hangover and on to a minibus to discover the mountains of the UK. With the club I explored Snowdonia, the Peak District, the Lake District and Scotland for the first time. I loved the walking and soon got the hang of scrambling, where hands and feet came into play to safely journey across exposed rocky steps and ridges, such as Crib Goch on Snowdon. Rock climbing was the next step.

I began climbing inside an old church in Liverpool and instantly fell for the movement. I loved placing my body on the wall and following the lines of coloured holds up towards the ceiling. Working these sequences required balance, co-ordination and power. When the climbs went well, everything flowed in a delightful dance. When things went less well, I had something to work on – a problem to solve next week. Indoor climbing was safe, warm, fun and sociable.

With those same mountaineering friends, I ventured out on to the gritstone edges of the Peak District at Froggatt, Stanage and the Roaches. But climbing on real rock did not bring the same instant rush of pleasure. Fumbling up routes, following more experienced male leaders, I struggled with moves and was frequently told off for using my knees on ledges (apparently that was



'I found a sense of connection between body and stone':
Anna Fleming at Hawkcraig crag, Fife

bad form). I fell off and dangled on the rope, shouting for help from my partner who would do his best to advise me by bellowing directions down from the top of the crag. This was not a dignified learning process.

Outdoor climbing, it turned out, was significantly more complicated than climbing indoors. I had to learn about equipment, various types of knots, how to move on the rock and to read the guidebooks, which had their own coded phrasing (I now know that “exciting” means terrifying and to avoid anything described as “thrutchy”).

My climbing apprenticeship was shaped by the many home and job moves of my itinerant 20s. From Liverpool, I moved to Yorkshire, where I became better acquainted with the rock of Brontë country – gritstone. This sedimentary stone is made up of sands and pebbles that once poured off mountains into the Pennine basin. Now, some 320m years later, it is the foundation rock for many British climbers.

I was an arts student – on the crags I discovered a new type of reading

This interest in geology was new for me. I was an arts student, studying English literature. Climbing outdoors, I discovered a new type of reading. Venturing out on to the crags, I saw how you can learn to read the rocks and, in order to do the climbs, you have to develop a vocabulary of physical movements. Good climbers knew how to map their bodies on to the stone. Watching them, I wanted to possess that dextrous language.

From the gritstone, I moved to the volcanic rocks of the Lake District. Working at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, I was immersed in a different landscape. The rocks were everywhere. The local slates and rhyolites appeared in the houses and barns, stonewalls, cairns and footpaths. They burst from the ground in outcrops and boulders and formed towering cliffs and crags. On these rocks, I found an ease of movement I had never had on the gritstone. A flow began to develop.

In Grasmere, I fell in with a crew of locals who deepened this sense of connection between body and stone. Unlike previous climbing partners, for whom the activity was a sport or leisure pursuit, climbing meant something else for these guys. They were stonemasons, path-builders and climbers who were out working with the rocks every day and in all weathers. For them, rock was a way of life.

On Greek limestone, Welsh slate and the gabbro pinnacles on the Cuillin of Skye, I built a wider climbing vocabulary and became conscious that different rock types demanded particular patterns of movement. Whereas gritstone is all about friction and maximum contact between skin and stone, slate is smooth and requires razor-sharp precision. Gabbro has impeccable grip, but where it is exposed on the crest of the youngest mountains in Britain, it can be loose and treacherous. Handling these diverse rocky places became an exercise in body/mind focus which, like yoga or meditation, dissolves away the self.

The next leap on my journey was north again, into granite country. Working for the Cairngorms National Park Authority, I became familiar with another distinctive landscape. In this huge tract of land, with its pine forests and subarctic mountain plateau, I roamed widely,

Climbing isn't about pitting yourself against anything

initially finding my feet through walking. Guiding my explorations into this strange new landscape was the local writer Nan Shepherd. In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd writes beautifully about the Cairngorms. Unlike the goal-oriented mindset of many mountaineers, she is not concerned with summits or personal bests.

Shepherd sees the mountain as a total environment and she celebrates the Cairngorms as a place alive with plants, rocks, animals and elements.

The senses are key to Shepherd's process of understanding the mountains. She writes about going out in all weathers and using her body as an instrument to comprehend the place. She walks barefoot, tastes mountain berries and even directs the reader to move their heads to look at the world through their legs, exclaiming, "How new it has become!" Through her generous spirit and my own wanderings in the upland granites of the Cairngorm plateau, I saw that rock climbing need not be a process of pitting yourself against anything. Rather, the intensity of focus could release you into another way of being.

Climbing has taught me to play with risk, understanding my own vulnerability while also developing strengths I never had before. Alongside the enhanced physical and mental dexterity, I have gained an insight into the movements between people and stone. Learning to speak the rock's language is a movement between body and stone, muscle memory and tactile desire. Looking up at a cliff, an inexperienced eye will soon glance away, for all it can see is a barren expanse of dead rocks. But to a climber this is a living face, alive with opportunities, possibilities and intrigue.

Spending so much time in high and stony places has altered my view on the world and our place in it. I have come into physical contact with processes that go way beyond the everyday. Widening my perspective to take in the place and its environment, I came to see how particular rocks shape life and landscape. The climber's eye view is unique. Working with gravity, geology, rhythms of weather and deep time, we gain an embodied relationship with the earth. This connection lies at the heart of my passion for rock climbing. I return to the rocks, because this is where I feel in touch with our land. ■

Time on Rock: A Climber's Route into the Mountains, by Anna Fleming, is published by Canongate at £16.99. Order a copy for £14.78 from guardianbookshop.com



Séamas O'Reilly

The second baby should be easier. But my memory of the first is so bad that I need a few crib sheets

🐦 @shockproofbeats



For the first time in a long time, I've been reading my own columns from the start. The impetus came when a friend reached out to say he'd started doing so, on account of his imminent fatherhood. Going over the early articles might, he said, give him a sense of things to come. I was cheered by this, because I am extremely vain, but also slightly embarrassed since he'd worked out to do this before I had, now that I face the prospect of another baby and a startling lack of memory about how it should be cared for.

I simply can't remember much about the early days of fatherhood, because I wrote about the experiences of rearing an actual baby while I was rearing an actual baby.

It's a time in one's life where memory undergoes a dark age. Stress, sleep deprivation and the constant buffeting of immediate, short-term goals means there are entire months that might

only be retrieved from my brain via hypnosis.

This time four years ago, on the other hand, I'd been reading books, buying a small arsenal of clothes, accessories and equipment, cleaning and re-cleaning our house until it squeaked and gleamed like one of those crime labs you see in films. This time out, I haven't bought a single new piece of clothing, would sooner resit my maths GCSE than read another book about parenting, and the combination of two years spent with both of us working from home, and the grubby ambulations of our three-and-a-half year old son, have precluded our house from being any more hygienic than one of those crime scenes you see in films.

We do, of course, have some reason to be less worried. We've done it once before and, grubbiness and tantrums aside, he's mostly turned out all right. He was also the last baby to be born on either side of the family for a couple of years, and this inherited

an unprecedented jackpot in hand-me-downs so our ceiling now bulges with baby toys, gadgets and clothes.

But the day and daily of child-rearing feels distant and hard to conjure. So, here I sit, wading back through old columns to see if they can stand me in better stead, only to be found wanting. Not by the words themselves, of course – even I am rendered powerless by my trademark mix of gentle humour and wry observation. No, by the fact that I failed to create a step-by-step guide to baby care, and chronicled instead my boring old thoughts and feelings about the ordeal.

Overall, I'm stunned by the hubris. Of watching a guy, week by week, learning how little he knows, but always without realising that the frontiers of his ignorance will be stretched back further still by the following week. To some extent, perhaps, it's cheering; to watch this blundering moron fail, but fail upwards, step by step.

If he could do it, I reckon, so can I.

Ask Philippa

I slated my ex on social media. Why am I so full of hate?



🐦 @Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

Director Sadie Frost on yoga, films and football

What time are you up? I'm usually awake by 6am, with my sausage dog's nose pressed against me; we sleep arm-in-paw. I recently moved house and painted my bedroom pink with pictures of Marilyn Monroe on the walls, because I'm single so I can. I light the fire, incense and candles. Sensory satisfaction is all at this stage in life.

A morning routine? After 15 mind-calming minutes of Vipassanā yogic meditation, awakening my kundalini, I feel cleansed and calmer. Things are still, if only briefly. Then I chuck on my tracksuit and take the dog to the park while it's quiet out.

Sundays growing up... Were lively. My parents separated: Mum ended up having five girls, and Dad five boys. In London, it was sisterly love and squeezing into shared bedrooms, tagging along with Mum at the market – stalls she worked on. Up north with my dad, it was all footballs and total chaos with the lads.

A special Sunday? Any day spent with my four (now grown-up) children under my roof. They all pile into the bed with me: Rudy sucking his thumb, Iris chatting away, Raff doing back flips and Finlay reciting Shakespeare. I miss us being together.

Do you work? I might read a script or write; on Sunday mornings I try to focus on more creative parts of my job, then I'll do some prep for the week ahead. Once that's done, my next task is finding a good vegetarian pub roast. I rarely drink, but might treat myself to a glass of red.

And Sunday night? I've been going to the Hampstead Everyman since the 1970s, there's nothing better than settling down there for a cinema night. Or, we'll settle at home with whatever football is on, as is life when you're the mother of three boys. Honestly? I'll happily watch any game with them, if it means they're around.

Michael Segalov

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The question I am in my 50s with children who all left home recently. I have been in a relationship with a patient and kind man – but it hasn't always been easy, mostly because of my insecurities. We went away and I spoilt things by starting fights and, consequently, he decided to end it.

Up until this episode, I was a friendly, easy-going, non-confrontational person. The problem is that I don't recognise myself any more. When the relationship finished, I was out of control. I had created so much drama and upset, mostly drink-fuelled.

I made accusations against him at his work and he nearly lost his job. I didn't stop there. Overwhelmed by a compulsion and driven by anger, I messaged his friends and slated him on social media so much that he threatened legal action.

I am scared about my unpredictability and lack of control. How can I be so full of hatred, vengeance and spite? My mother, who is dead, was a difficult person and it is her unpredictability that I think I am playing out. I don't want to become her. I want it to stop. I could end up in court. I let such a good thing go and I will never find that again.

Philippa's answer I have hope because you have clarity about your situation. You are not blaming your ex and want to examine your own behaviour and impulses. This is commendable. You are on the right track.

We want our children to lead their own lives, but that doesn't mean we don't feel deserted when they leave home. This may be a contributing factor to your recent behaviour change.

You say: "I don't recognise myself any more." First, you need to rule out anything medical. Make an appointment with your GP and tell them exactly what has happened. It could be that a sudden drop in oestrogen, which happens during the menopause, has made you debilitatingly intolerant. Or perhaps you are on medication that is affecting you badly. It's unlikely, but you may even have suffered some sort of brain damage so that your impulse control is shot. Perhaps alcohol is also causing you to lose control. Or it could be something else, or a combination of the above... so make that appointment. They can also

refer you to a psychiatrist or mental health team.

You mention insecurities. I expect this means you have a deep fear you will be abandoned and might need more reassurance than most, which can be experienced by others as overly demanding and may lead to arguments. When you do not get this extra reassurance, the desperation you feel can drive you to lash out. Alcohol may be fuelling this, too. You may have felt that your ex was the sole cause of your suffering. Your behaviour seems to say: "I hate

Your behaviour seems to say: 'I hate you, don't leave me'

you, don't leave me." You cannot manipulate or bully your way into a healthy relationship and, when the red mist clears, you know that.

Maybe, when you were an infant or a child, it was only through extreme tantrums that you got the attention you craved, with negative attention feeling better than none – and

recent events may have triggered this regression in you. Or, triggered by insecurity, as you say, you may feel compelled to act like your mother. Parents' habits and reactions are often the blueprint for our own. You had nowhere to go to escape conflict with your mother but, of course, another adult can withdraw, and so your mother's blueprint for close relationships fails you.

When you start therapy, and I think you must, you may get angry that the therapist is only available to you at set times. You will probably want to punish them for not being there for you whenever you want, but with them you can work through this and find better ways of self-soothing and comforting yourself when you feel as though you are in danger of being rejected.

It is one thing to feel vengeful and fantasise about vengeful acts and it is quite another to carry them out, and I'm afraid you crossed that line. I am, of course, sorry for your victim – you must for his sake delete him and his friends from your contacts and leave him to live his life in peace. But I am sorry for you, too. I think this episode has possibly reignited a very old wound of yours, maybe emotional abandonment by your parents? I strongly recommend forming a good working alliance with a therapist, but first visit your doctor.

I would like you to know that I know of many psychotherapy clients who had a "I-hate-you-don't-leave-me" pattern in relationships who went on to break that pattern and form great relationships. We have more than one chance to get our lives on the right track. ■

For trauma therapy advice, contact emdrassociation.org.uk

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