

10 JULY 2022

# *The Observer Magazine*

*John McEnroe on learning to lose, and what*

*it's really like to be the rock star of tennis*

**'It's been  
a hell  
of a ride'**

**'I've got 35 siblings  
and counting'**  
**Green scene: the  
best veggie retreats**  
**Why men need to  
make more friends**



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# The Observer Magazine



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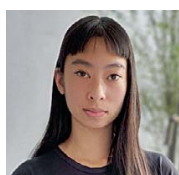


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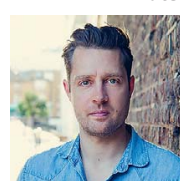


## Contributors

**Andrew Woffinden** is a fashion and portrait photographer who has shot some of the most recognisable faces in entertainment. He seeks out the humanity and unique character in each subject. This week, he shot our colourful summer fashion story (p32).



Los Angeles born and raised, **Janice Chang** is an illustrator based in Brooklyn, who works on editorial and commercial projects. Her art features in our piece on the cult of confidence (p16). Much of her work uses humour, and bendy-limbed characters, to create an honest way to engage in conversations around social and interpersonal issues.



**Max Dickens** is an author, playwright and recovering standup comedian. His latest play, *Love Them to Death*, debuts at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this August. *Billy No Mates*, his funny memoir about male friendship, was published this week. In this issue, he shares what he's learned about why so many men lose their friends in middle age (p44).



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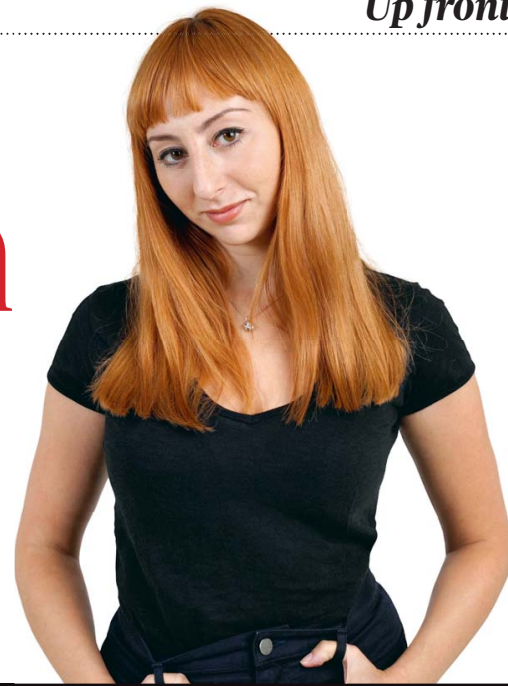
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# Eva Wiseman

## A good funeral can be one of life's most uplifting occasions



🐦 @evawiseman



### From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

Raquel Welch, now 81, was in 'cracking form for a lady who has survived 44 years, 27 films, three marriages and two children' in a photoshoot for the *Observer Magazine* in 1984. She was plugging the publication of her workout book, *Raquel: The Raquel Welch Total Beauty and Fitness Program*, 'like those other mature American glamour pussies Jane Fonda, Victoria Principal and Linda Evans'.

The book revealed Welch's 'most cherished beauty secrets, physical and mental' and drew from the Hatha yoga that she discovered seven years previously. 'The fact is,' Welch confided, 'that the mind and the body are interrelated.'

Thousands of women, apparently, had asked about her diet. 'When they hear that I have given up salt, sugar, oil and processed food,' she said, 'they are aghast.' She described her step-by-step programme as 'when East meets Welch', and

a third of the book is either Welch exercising (in skimpy clothing) or not exercising (in skimpy clothing).

To promote the book, 'jocks' from the US Olympic male swimming team 'offered their whole-hearted support', surrounding her wearing – and not wearing – budgie-smugglers while Welch sported a spaghetti-strap zebra-print bodysuit.

Given that the swimmers appear to be swimming not in water but oil and also that they seem to be attempting a sort of proto-twerk in her face, Welch's salt and oil intake may have temporarily increased to dangerously unhealthy levels during the photoshoot.

Welch said it was while completing a stint as the replacement for Lauren Bacall in the Broadway play *Woman of the Year* that the book idea occurred, rather than a suggestion by a publisher after *Jane Fonda's Workout* shifted millions of books and videos.

'I love Jane, but that book was sort of, well, tacky,' said Welch, unlovingly. **Chris Hall**

Last week, I went to the most fabulous party, and it happened to be a funeral. My best friend's mum, Janet, died – a clever, funny, brilliant woman who was remembered for the way she danced around kitchens, and smelled of perfume and fags, and trucked across the world with priceless artworks, and brought up two of the most extraordinary girls in London. But while the loss was incredibly sad, her funeral was an absolute blast.

My friends and I dissected it on the way home in the car. Why did it make us feel so... good? The journey was long, the roads were blocked, so we had plenty of time to discuss it, to think about the way their family had performed this quiet trick, taken a sad song and made it better. They'd started by employing progressive funeral directors who gave them a copy of the book they'd written, *We All Know How This Ends*, a guide to death and the lessons it teaches us about life. They said talking about death and dying can be life-enhancing; they never used the words "passed away", always "died". And they insisted the funeral could be anything the family wanted it to be.

There was nothing wild about the afternoon, nothing fired from a cannon or dropped from the sky, instead just this sense of gentle shared joy, passed from hand to hand. Beside the coffin, Janet's daughter did, not a speech, really, it didn't feel like a speech, it felt like a series of happy memories told beautifully and everyone laughed. A colleague talked about Janet's work, her husband talked about the places they'd lived and the family they'd built, their shared love of drunkenness. There was a poem which read like a love letter, and there was mingling outside in the sun. At a café down the road a jazz trio played while we ate some sandwiches and drank some wine, and the place was packed with Janet's many friends, some old, some young, some she'd known from work, some from the pub, everyone chatting and chuckling, and holding each other's arms with that perfect griefy care.

I'm sorry to go on about the pandemic again when I know everybody's doing so well at trying to forget all about it, but God, every now and then the facts of it prick freshly at me: the way so many had to mourn alone, or die on FaceTime, or attend funerals from home and the distance of a shaky camera, or sit very far apart in ventilated rooms while coffins slid away. It is unbearable, really, to remember.

I had thought before about how sad and how hard it was to organise a funeral without hugs, without people to support you or hold your hand, but it wasn't until this week that it hit me how difficult it must have been to mourn somebody properly without also having an opportunity like this, to celebrate their life. The gatherings of warm bodies and unplanned conversations, and strangers meeting across a memory that they didn't know they shared. And food, and drink, and good things like that, passed over babies' heads on paper plates, and all these

witnesses, to see what a life, and to see how loved.

It's something that still feels quite profound to me, these coming-togethers of people after so many months of distance, whether at the funeral, where there were lots of us, but only one thing talked about, or miles away at Glastonbury, where there were thousands of people all singing one song. I have moments of feeling pleasingly moved by crowds today, people needing people, and acknowledging our mutual humanness in glances or touch. Even if, of course, that understanding is fleeting and forgotten as soon as you leave, when somebody cuts ahead of you in a traffic jam or gobs wetly in the street. That's human, too.

One of the things this funeral did for us (we realised as we crawled through a humid rush hour detour near Ealing) was remove some of our fears around death. The seemingly casual ease of the afternoon led to us talking about what we wanted to happen when (if) we die, and to talk to our parents about it, too – we'd seen how joyful a funeral could be, how life-affirming.

I'd always thought of funerals as a place to cry. Instead, it turns out, there's a way to plan a funeral so that, as well as tears, there's cake and laughter and the sense of life trundling merrily on, better somehow for having contained the life of the person gone. With its fondness and music, this funeral felt like a really good leaving party, which, I suppose, it was. Everywhere there were people smiling. Everywhere Janet's friends were admiring the flowers or telling stories, and reaching for each other with meaningful hands and everywhere people were saying, "She would have loved this." ■

### One more thing...

I came to **Sheena Patel's** *I'm A Fan* for the cover (clothbound, red on lilac) but stayed for the prose – burning, unforgiving, written in the first-person, the narrator uses the story of their horrible relationship to explore sex and power.

Are you going to see the new **Elvis** film? I'm not sure. I'm worried that it's one of those biopics that just... tells the story? I grow weary of these montages as movies. If I'm watching

a film about a star whose life I already know, I want it to secretly be about something completely different – shame, or fame, or ageing – a nice surprise for halfway through, when the popcorn's run out.

In a piece for Refinery 29, Janey Starling writes vividly about '**women's spaces**', reporting that one in six refuges have closed since 2010. 'While the Violence Against Women and Girls sector is under strain, the transphobic lobby is currently attempting to sue a rape crisis centre in Sussex for including a trans woman in their women's support group: £61,000 has been raised towards the centre's legal fees for this case.' Some feminists need to think about their priorities.





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# This much I know

*Alison Steadman, actor, 75*



Interview **ROZ LEWIS**  
Photograph **CHRIS FLOYD**

**My earliest memory?** When my grandfather was ill in bed and I was taken upstairs to see him. I was really young, maybe two or three years old. I remember him holding my hand; I think he died the next day. For months, when I went back to my grandma's house I'd ask to go and see him. I thought he was still in bed.

**I do enjoy a gin** and tonic in the evening. I see it as a relaxing thing, particularly if I've been busy working. I look forward to that, and olives. My boys send me up rotten about the olives. They know I can't have a drink without a bowl.

**I was pretty starstruck** when I worked with Tom Jones. I did a little half-hour telly with him a few years ago. We played husband and wife. I think it

was the second or third day, we were doing some rehearsal, when he said: "I feel, I'm a bit out of my comfort zone doing this." I said: "Tom, if someone gave me a microphone and told me to stand on the stage at the Palladium and sing to 2,000 people, I'd be a bit out of my comfort zone." We both just laughed.

**I used to be very scared** of flying. Every time I flew, I would shake like a leaf. Then I said to myself: "If this carries on, it's going to ruin your life." I got myself through it – now I'm perfectly fine.

**I've loved being** a mum. I was particularly happy looking after my boys when they were little. I did work, of course – I didn't want my career to disappear. But I would balance it. Life goes in stages. Toby is 44 and Leo is 40. It's nice that they've sort of come back to wanting to be with mum a bit more.

**I'm lucky that** I've had a healthy life. If you haven't got your health, you haven't got anything. I've got to count my blessings and every day have fun, live your life, do things. Friends of mine say I do too much. But I want to be like that.

**I think I'm an optimist.** Although I have to say, now I'm older, I do get days when I feel a bit down. I have to pull myself together and move forward.

**I love watching birds. You think: how can a young bird fly to Africa? I have no sense of direction**

**I love bird watching** and watching animals. You think: how can a young bird fly to Africa? I have no sense of direction.

**The worst thing** anyone has ever said to me was when I was told that my mother had a few months to live. She had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I said to the consultant: "You are not to tell my mother that." She'd have faded on the spot. My mother lived for two years.

**I'd like to be** remembered for my acting, and that I managed to earn a living for my whole life from it, which isn't easy. One of the teachers at Liverpool Youth Theatre said to me, "You should go to drama school and become an actor. I'd hate the thought of you in 20 years time, stirring your pan of stew, saying to yourself, 'Oh, why didn't I do it?'" ■  
*Alison is an ambassador for the charity, Marie Curie ([mariecurie.org.uk](http://mariecurie.org.uk))*





*Interview* **TIM LEWIS**  
*Photograph* **SEBASTIEN VINCENT**



# 'You learn more from losing'

*As a film about his life is released, former bad boy John McEnroe reflects on how he went from villain to tennis hero*





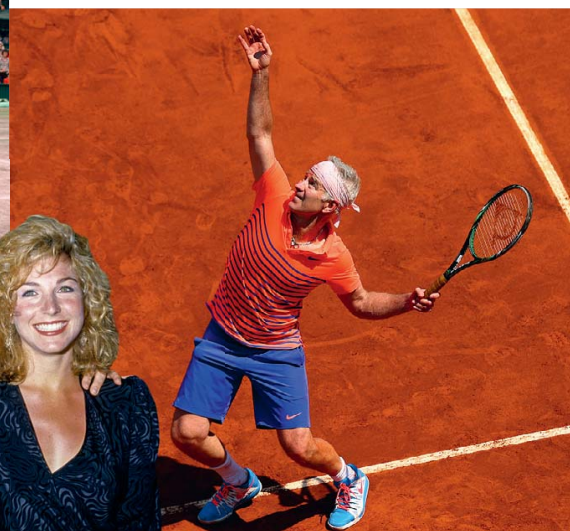
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Advantage McEnroe: (from left) Wimbledon champion in 1983; with Björn Borg, 1980; with Tatum O'Neal, 1985; in the Men's Legend Perrier Over 45s, 2015. Below: with wife Patty Smyth

In March 2020, just before the pandemic locked the world down, John McEnroe faced Michael Chang in an exhibition tennis match at Indian Wells in California. As a contest, it was next to meaningless. It was a chance for a nostalgic crowd to squint and remember these players in their heyday, almost 40 years in the rear view. At some point, McEnroe, not contractually obliged but almost, would surely kick off at the umpire or a hapless line judge. Maybe he'd even bust out, "You cannot be serious!" Everyone would go home happy. No one would remember Chang won the match.

No one, that is, except McEnroe. "Michael Chang is a great champion in his own way," he says more than two years on, of the former French Open winner, 13 years his junior. "But he's lost something with his body: he used to be a great runner, he wasn't running. And long story short, I lose to him. I'm like, 'Argh, that's it! I can't even beat him!'"

The anguish is palpable. "I remember, I called my agent: 'Don't you ever put me in another match the rest of my life!'" McEnroe goes on, his Queens – New York, not west London – twang more pinched, the volume escalating. "Getting old sucks is the bottom line. I said to my wife, 'Listen, this is the first time in my life where I could say I'm as good or better guitar player now than a tennis player. If people ask me what I do for a living, I'm going to say I'm a guitar player.'"

McEnroe's wife of the past 25 years is Patty Smyth. She's not only a musician of some renown, but has more experience than anyone at defusing his outbursts. McEnroe, who seems to be running out of steam now, huffs, "And she said, 'No, I'm not letting you do that.' So I got to keep pushing the tennis a little more, I guess."

It's not a newflash that John McEnroe hates losing. But there is much about our conversation today that does surprise me. And this is, well, unexpected. Few sporting lives – maybe only Muhammad Ali's – have been as chronicled as McEnroe's. There have been multiple documentaries and dramatisations of his life; two autobiographies (*Serious*, then *But Seriously*) and many other books; he's inspired pop and punk songs, as well as Ian McKellen's portrayal of a megalomaniacal Coriolanus for the RSC and Tom Hulse's petulant Mozart in the 1984 film, *Amadeus*. You would have to go deep, deep off-the-grid to find someone who doesn't have a familiarity with that fourth-set tie-break against Björn Borg at Wimbledon in 1980. Famously, even Nelson Mandela convinced his prison guards on Robben Island to let him listen to that match on the BBC World Service.

So McEnroe has had an examined life, right from when he broke through as an unseeded teenager and made the semi-finals at Wimbledon in 1977, to today, where he continues to set the standard for incisive, no-fluffing sports commentary. But now 63, there's a sense McEnroe wants to move on from being stuck forever as that furious kid with the wooden racquet and the wild hair, scarcely tamed by the red, towelling headband. McEnroe estimates, semi-seriously, that he has seen "37 psychiatrists and psychologists" over the years

– some court-mandated, after the acrimonious break-up of his first marriage, some voluntarily – to figure out if he can control his anger better and stop sabotaging himself. And he thinks he's finally landing on some answers.

That process is there in a new feature-length documentary, *McEnroe*, which calls itself "definitive" and has the blessing of its subject. Of course, there's a lot of tennis in the film, which is directed by British filmmaker Barney Douglas. But it ends up being more a rumination on the pursuit of perfection, and what that drive ultimately wreaks on you, your two wives and six children. An introspective McEnroe does most of the talking, but there are candid interjections from, among others, Smyth, two of McEnroe's older kids, Borg, Keith Richards and the Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde, who recalls hanging out with McEnroe in the 1980s, when he was simultaneously the best tennis player of all time and also "a pot head".

Mainly, the documentary reminds you why there are countless films about McEnroe, and not so many about, say, Tim Henman or Pete Sampras. It's not every athlete's story that takes in Studio 54, Andy Warhol and the Rolling Stones. But it's also more personal and perhaps intimate than previous accounts. "It's not that people care about what I'm doing now," says McEnroe, on a video call from New York. "That I've got kids or I'm happily married, my second marriage. But I last played at Wimbledon 30 years ago, so who the hell still cares about what I did 40 years ago? So I was like, 'Jesus Christ, can we move on?'"

Watching *McEnroe*, the film, it can be hard to work out if McEnroe, the man, loves tennis. He's not sure himself. "I'd say, on a certain level, I love tennis," he replies. "I mean, it's a very difficult thing to be out there on your own when you're laying an egg, like that's a bad feeling. You're exposed, and you know, everything you put into it."

"My true understanding of whether I love tennis would be: if I love tennis, I would go out there and play tennis, whether I got paid for it or not. At this point in my life, I have not gotten to that point where I haven't been paid for it. So I don't know the answer. I'd like to tell you yes, but I hope that there's never a time where I have to answer that question!"

As he pops up on the Zoom, you're reminded how well McEnroe looks. His hair is fully silver these days, and he wears a skinny black denim jacket, white T-shirt, with a loopy necklace. It's not an aesthetic that every sexagenarian could pull off, but he is pretty much the build and weight he was when he was playing. He's a fidgeter, McEnroe, and his answers tend to jump around, too. I think I'll warm him up with an opener about New York and 10 minutes later, he's covered the first 18 years of his life, why the punks on the King's Road supported him and how it was

his mission to save tennis from the "bunch of old farts" who ran it in the 1970s and 80s.

"Not that much has changed," he concludes, sadly. "Honestly, I think I failed pretty miserably in that."

In the film, his wife, Smyth, says he "might be on the spectrum". Does McEnroe agree? "I'm not exactly sure," he says, giving the matter serious thought. "She was saying that in a little bit of jest, but she knows me better than anyone. Um, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, as long as you control it in the right way."

"What I've always thought about myself is that I'm more like the normal guy than Björn is," he goes on. "Björn's the freak that could go out there and not change his expression for four hours. I'm the normal guy that gets frustrated on the court and expresses himself. So I feel like, I don't want to say 'everyman', but I live in the city, I'm going to go to the Rangers [ice hockey] game tonight. So I don't know exactly what her definition was of 'spectrum', but I want to take it as a positive, not a negative."

McEnroe has identified that the great, recurring stumbling block of his life, or at least his career, is that the pain of defeat has always stung more than the joy of victory. This is seen most obviously in the 1984 season, where he won 82 matches and lost just three. But what does McEnroe linger on from that year? That he was two sets up against Ivan Lendl in the French Open final and threw it away after losing his rag at the crackling headset of a court-side cameraman. "That's the part that was so hard about being an athlete, at least for me," he says, "is you always remember your losses."

Even then, McEnroe wondered why success didn't make him happier. "You're never satisfied," he says. "I remember thinking when I came to Wimbledon, 'If I ever win this, I am never coming back to this goddamn tournament.' But then I won it [in 1981] and all of a sudden I felt like I was gonna fly over the stadium. It was unreal. Then I felt this incredible sense of relief, because I'd blown the one the year before. You go through a lot of different emotions, often-times, during a match: you are loving something, then hating it. Maybe that's the way it is with life: you just have to minimise those moments where you think it's horrible and maximise the moments where you think it's incredible? That's what I've been on a quest for the last 40 years."

While he always looked on the verge of boiling over, the closest McEnroe came to an actual meltdown was 1992, when he was 33. He hadn't won a grand slam singles title for seven years, since the US Open in 1984, and it was becoming increasingly clear he never would again. There was a rift with his father, John McEnroe Sr, who had guided his career since he was a junior player, but who felt "stabbed in the back" when McEnroe told him he might benefit from a proper coach to arrest his decline. He wasn't helped by what he calls the "performance-detracting drugs": mostly marijuana but also cocaine. ➤

# 'Björn's the freak. I'm the normal guy that gets frustrated on court'





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► As much as he was dismayed by the end of his career, though, it was the implosion of his marriage that nearly derailed McEnroe. He met the actor Tatum O'Neal in 1984 at a party in the Hollywood Hills; O'Neal was already an Oscar winner, for *Paper Moon* in 1973 at the age of 10. McEnroe believed he had finally found someone who could understand and help him navigate the pressures of relentless scrutiny. Instead, their union exposed both of them to new, unprecedented levels of interest. At their wedding, in 1986, paparazzi circled above in helicopters. That same year, when McEnroe was 27 and O'Neal 22, the first of their three children was born. "No other athlete in any sport has ever had to go through what I have to," McEnroe bemoaned at the time, with some justification.

"I remember thinking, 'I'm going to fly under the radar' with my ex-wife," recalls McEnroe now. "Like, who the hell are you kidding? The level of attention exploded! There was way more than I'd ever gotten with any person or any thing. Oh my God! So then you dig in your heels."

Meanwhile, McEnroe's ego was taking a battering as he became an also-ran at the major tournaments. He took a six-month "sabbatical" from tennis in 1986, but when he returned he lagged even further behind his younger rivals. "They always say you learn more from losing than you do with winning," notes McEnroe, with a wry laugh. "Well, the last six or so years of my career would be living testament to that. It was like torture. I tried a lot of different things to get stronger, fitter: this, that, trainers, travelling with the coach at the end. Things that I didn't believe in, in a way. But I was willing to try anything and everything to figure out how to become a better person, father, husband."

In 1992, O'Neal decided she wanted to split. "I was falling apart in a way," says McEnroe. "I don't think I ever got to that falling-apart stage, but I was having a hard time functioning. For that first six months, it was like, just get the kids in school, or make sure that I'm there for them. But at one point, someone told me, 'They're seeing you

with tears and crying and that's not good for your kids.' So I had to get my shit together." The divorce was confirmed in 1994, and in 1998 McEnroe was granted sole custody of the children because of O'Neal's heroin addiction. "The ultimate nightmare to me would be what we just watched with Johnny Depp and Amber Heard," says McEnroe. "This public trial? Thank God that didn't happen. That would be beyond belief. To each his own, I'm not here to pass judgment, but I'm like, 'Wow, I'm glad I missed that.'"

**McEnroe still has** a temper and, apparently, it's scary when he loses it. But that happens less and less these days. He credits the mellowing to Smyth, whom he met on Christmas Day 1993. McEnroe was bruised and not looking for a relationship or at least certainly not one, he admits honestly, with a woman who was older than him and already had a child. But, for once, the instinct to self-destruct didn't kick in.

"It became apparent pretty quickly to me, 'Are you going to show some balls here and realise that someone's giving you a second chance for some reason?'" he says. "And I'm proud to say I made the right call at that time. I about-faced and was like, 'OK I'm going to be with this one person and goddammit, I'm going to make this one work.' I'm going to try harder than I did even the first time. Someone's put this woman in front of me, don't blow this. And obviously I didn't blow it."

McEnroe also made some pretty shrewd calls with his post-athletic career. He actually doesn't commentate on tennis very much, only about eight weeks a year at the major tournaments. The rest of the time, he plays guitar: his early mentors included Eric Clapton and Eddie

Van Halen, and he toured for years with his rock band, the Johnny Smyth Band. He also pursues his interest in art and checks in on his tennis academies. McEnroe has always felt it was not healthy to be too consumed by tennis, which is part of the reason he wasn't crazy about his own children pursuing it to a high level. "I just felt there would be extra attention on my kids, because of the way I acted," he says.

When McEnroe reflects on his life now, there are a lot of contradictions to wrestle with. And wrestle with them he does. The big one is how, as a player, he was everything that was wrong with tennis – even society – and now he's part of the establishment, revered on the same grounds he used to terrorise. Or there's the conundrum that a man who spent his whole career furious at the ineptitude and presumption of journalists has become the most influential member of their cohort. Or how about the fact he can broadly be content with life, but also apoplectic that he's lost a fun knock-up with Michael Chang at the age of 60?

McEnroe doesn't claim to have all the answers. "It's been a hell of a ride, I'll say that," he says. "And I feel like I've come out in a pretty good place. It's been amazing to go from this villain... I remember seeing in papers 'the most hated people in history' and you've got Adolf Hitler one, Attila the Hun two, John McEnroe three, Jack the Ripper four. Now, all of a sudden, I'm the ambassador of tennis, somehow. So it's sort of funny, honestly, but it beats the alternative, I guess." ■

*McEnroe is in cinemas from 15 July*

## 'If people ask what I do for a living, I'm going to say I'm a guitar player'



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**B**elieve in yourself. Be empowered. Show up. Love your body. Stand tall. How many times have you seen statements like these on social media? Or used to advertise products? All point towards confidence: a particular c-word that the modern woman cannot get away from.

Being self-confident is the command of our time. At some point in the past decade, women's media seemed to shift from celebrity mockery and dieting advice to talking about "empowerment". Parenting books told mums it was OK to be wobbly and have stretch marks, as long as they were bringing up self-assured children. Beauty and fashion brands started telling us to love our bodies just the way they are. Along with social media came a tide of feminism that prioritised self-care and welcomed imperfection. On the surface, we are living in a golden age of female confidence. But how much are we really feeling it?

Women are called on to believe in themselves while gender, class and racial inequalities deepen. By suggesting that psychological blocks are holding women back, is our

attention being drawn away from the society we live in? If capitalist enterprises tell us to celebrate our bodies as they are, yet only go up to a size 12, how deeply can we take in the message? Did women have an innate lack of confidence in the first place, or have we been led to believe we have?

Sociology professors Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (of City, University of London, and the London School of Economics and Political Science, respectively) think the latter. In 2015, the two friends began making what they called a "confidence basket". They tore pages from magazines and newspapers, piled up self-help books and had a digital folder of music, social media content, apps and advertising images. All contained a repeated message being broadcast to women: the answer to all your problems is to be more confident. They describe this trend as "confidence culture" – the title of a book they published earlier this year.

"Confidence culture opens up a way of thinking about gender inequality as something women do to themselves," says Gill. "Lack of confidence is positioned as a personal defect. When we hear business leaders, politicians, coaches

or brands talking about inequality, women's confidence is always discussed. But we're letting institutions and wider structures off the hook from making changes as long as we're saying that women are responsible."

Body image is synonymous with confidence culture. Brands such as Dove say that "all bodies are beautiful" and feature a diverse range of bodies in their campaigns. Gill believes that "optics and visibility are really important", but are not enough: "These campaigns often feel cynically manufactured for a particular moment. Brands are rarely rethinking their whole raison d'être. They still exploit women's insecurities and sell products that target them." Flattening women's differences (in terms of race, disability, etc), she feels, "empties the meaning and significance of those differences".

*Confidence Culture* references a 2014 Dove advert called "Patches". Women came to a fake laboratory and were given a "beauty patch" to wear by a psychologist, described as "a revolutionary product developed to enhance the way women perceive their own beauty". After two weeks, they >

## The cult of confidence

**The past decade has seen a boom in 'confidence culture', with the life-coaching industry teaching women that the only thing holding them back is themselves. But behind all the self-belief and positive thinking, are more cynical forces at work?**

Words **ELEANOR MORGAN**  
Illustration **JANICE CHANG**









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› returned more confident. One woman started wearing clothes that showed off her arms. The psychologist revealed that the patch was a placebo: any changes were down to a shift in mindset. The message? Low self-esteem can be cured with positive thinking. The responsibility for the damaging nature of beauty culture is on women themselves.

That “confidence” is such an omnipresent word doesn’t help. It is so charged with positivity that questioning it seems ridiculous. As Gill and Orgad write: “The self-evident value of confidence – and particularly female self-confidence – has been placed beyond debate, treated as an unexamined cultural good that is rarely, if ever, interrogated. In this way, a belief in confidence has come to suffuse contemporary culture, like an article of faith.”

In reality, confidence cannot be bought or plucked from thin air. It is a slippery thing, dependent on a person’s environment and the social norms they have been exposed to. When I posted a tweet asking women what made them feel confident, hundreds of replies flooded in. Certain clothes and makeup (red lipstick was common, as were boilersuits) made women feel confident, but so did significant events like childbirth, or surviving a hard divorce. Confidence also seemed strongly linked to validation from bosses, partners, friends and family.

“Confidence is inter-subjective,” says Gill, meaning that it comes alive when other people reflect how we feel. It is also context-specific. I have confidence in my ability to communicate and cook, for example, but less in my ability to drive. For someone else, it may be the opposite. Mantras like “lack of confidence is holding you back” are seductive, but ignore the variability of human experience. Yet they have become a rallying cry within a self-care-obsessed, capitalism-friendly feminism that encourages exhaustive work on the self. If we dig and dig, surely we’ll find the gold. We can pay others to help with the excavation, too.

*Confidence Culture* examines the coaching industry, which has sprung from self-help ideas that push an individualistic approach to improving confidence. Coaching is also rooted in positive psychology, which is often criticised for ignoring systemic issues. As the journalist and activist Barbara Ehrenreich argues in her book *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*: “If your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success.”

Many people credit life coaching with bringing about new perspectives, but there are reasons to maintain critical thinking. The industry is unregulated, yet the millions of Instagram posts tagged #lifecoach show how many people are selling this kind of service. The current trend hinges on terms such as “manifesting” and “magnetism”, which broadly relate to positive thinking: imagine being successful or having more money and you will reap the rewards. Coaches often market themselves on social media, where cherry-picked testimonials and assertive language serve as a demonstration of capability. To an outsider, it can seem cult-like.

Increased access to new forms of help is a positive development, but what are the risks? In a 2020 journal, Stanford University psychiatrist Dr Elias Aboujaoude, whose work explores the intersection of psychology and technology, wrote: “Life coaching operates in a regulatory vacuum, with no education, training, licensing, or supervision requirements for coaches and no specific legal protections for any harmed clients. The risk that mentally ill patients may undergo life coaching rather than receive proven psychotherapy treatments raises concerns about patient safety.”

Life coaching has been around for a long time, but the limitations of a stretched mental health system and the powerful connective tool of social media have created an even bigger market for clear-sounding solutions. Those entering the space will have good intentions, but we cannot

## Confidence can’t just be plucked from the air. It’s a slippery thing...

ignore that this is a market based on vulnerability. Money is exchanged, often small fortunes, and the power dynamic of any client-and-practitioner relationship must be open to criticism. But coaching hinges so strongly on that article of faith – confidence – and creates a strong belief system. Even if the ethics are murky, arguing against improving confidence becomes difficult. Especially when clinical-sounding labels are used.

**“Imposter syndrome” is a** coaching industry buzzword, particularly relating to women in the workplace. The term has also become part of everyday conversations. Do you often doubt yourself? Think you’ll eventually be caught out? That’s imposter syndrome! But can this term really explain why some women might not trust their abilities?

Psychologists Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance developed the idea in 1978, then called “imposter phenomenon”, with a study on self-doubt in high-achieving women. “Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise,” they wrote.

We often mistakenly equate the confidence demonstrated by white, male leaders with competence. Some years ago, I started an editor role. Upon learning that I was paid less than a male colleague with the same title, I spoke to my (male) line manager. “You should have negotiated better with HR,” was his response. Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey’s argument that “employees who can’t (or won’t) conform to male-biased social styles are told they have imposter syndrome” certainly rings true.

Feeling unsure is common, but high-achieving women are told they’re suffering from an ailment. For Dr Jessica Taylor, a chartered psychologist, author and feminist campaigner, the term imposter syndrome is too close to “hysteria”: the historical diagnosis given to women who made too much noise or took up too much space. “So-called imposter syndrome is ‘more common’ in successful women than in successful men because society is more likely to tear down women who become too opinionated, intelligent, educated or assertive,” she says. “Believing that we have a syndrome is the desired outcome.”

Taylor routinely deflects sneers from male peers. “Some male academics talk to me like a piece of shit or like I’m thick,

**‘The self-evident value of female confidence has been placed beyond debate and is treated as a cultural good’: Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill**

because of my background and experiences.” Taylor is working class and has spoken publicly about her experience of rape, as well as the abuse she received when completing her PhD, which

hinged on “someone like me bringing the institution’s reputation down”. She has to push away self-questioning, but says that doubt is “not something inherent” in her. It is because she “is not supposed to succeed.”

The way we hold our bodies speaks volumes about our confidence. Or so we’re told. In a popular TED Talk from 2012 about power poses, Harvard Business School professor Amy Cuddy said that altering one’s posture – like standing with hands on hips – before a setting like a job interview, can “significantly change how your life unfolds”. For Gill, the command to “stand tall” is “one of the common-sense ideas we’ve taken for granted about what confidence looks like.” Studies have also shown that power poses alone do not translate into powerful behaviours.

**Is there a clear,** physical way of seeming confident? Imogen Knight, a choreographer and somatic experience therapist, spends her days noticing how people move. “In my experience, it’s too fluid and dependent on the context to really pin down. But a lack of confidence can manifest in a person subtly adjusting themselves all the time; their position, hair or bits of clothing. They might also cover vulnerable parts of their body like their stomach,” she says. “Eye-contact can be difficult, too, but these things aren’t fixed: some days it is easier for people than others.”

With “anti self-help” media on failure, along with Brené Brown’s work on the power of vulnerability, we have some resistance to the idea of what success and empowerment really look like. As Brown writes in her book *Dare to Lead*: “Grounded confidence is the messy process of learning and unlearning, practising and failing, and surviving misses.” But we cannot do these things alone. I experienced a crisis of confidence throughout the pandemic, mostly relating to work and the end of a relationship. Nothing ruptured that distress like leaning into my friendships and receiving the message that I am good enough.

The pandemic presented an opportunity to disrupt confidence culture in the ways it exposed inequality and highlighted our interdependence. Well-meaning motifs of self-care and feel-good media came thick and fast, because people felt rudderless and afraid. However, many already did under a government that has, through austerity and the stripping away of community hubs, taken a hammer to our soft relationships. Perhaps it’s time we matched the endless calls for women to turn inwards to be self-believing with something clearer: we need each other. ■







'It's still the wild west here; it's a "self-regulated" industry': Chrysta Bilton at home in Los Angeles



# ‘I discovered I have dozens, probably hundreds, of siblings’

**The man Chrysta Bilton knew as Dad had a secret that would change her life for ever. She tells Eva Wiseman how she found out that her father was a prolific sperm donor – and why she decided to meet her extended family**

Photograph **PATRICK STRATTNER**

One afternoon in Los Angeles, Chrysta Bilton had a party; a family reunion, of sorts. Her mother, Debra, arriving in tears, told her the party was a terrible idea. Her sister, Kaitlyn, was worried a guest might steal something. It was 2019, Bilton was 34, a decade into her new understanding of what a family might look like. “Kait,” said Bilton, “if the worst thing that comes from this weekend is that one of our siblings, who we have never met, steals something from my house, I will consider it a rousing success.” And so, in they came, one by one, dozens of new brothers and sisters, all of whom shared (they learned that day in the backyard) the same big toes, the same dimple, the same inability to keep their phones charged – and all the same father. But it was more complicated than that.

Bilton arrives early to our Zoom, her large dog roaming by her feet, her small sons asleep in the room next door. She’s excited, a little nervous, to discuss the story she’s been trying to write since she was 17. It’s a memoir called *A Normal Family*, and it’s a book about anything but. “On the one hand I’ve written a story about” – she takes a deep breath – “discovering in my 20s that I had dozens, and most likely hundreds, of biological siblings growing up all over the US. And that the man I knew only as my dad, who has struggled with homelessness and drug

addiction, was secretly one of the most prolific sperm donors of the California Cryobank.”

In 2005, the *New York Times* ran an article about two teenagers who had met on the newly launched Donor Sibling Registry, which allowed parents and offspring to search for others by sperm bank and donor number – both were the product of Donor 150. In Venice, Los Angeles, Bilton’s father, Jeffrey, saw a copy of the paper on a café table. He was living out of his car then, working on the boardwalk, cracking tourists’ necks for \$10 a go; soon after reading the story, he realised he needed to make two calls. One was to the paper, which ran an interview: Jeffrey, “Donor 150”, was the first anonymous sperm donor in history to publicly give up his anonymity. The second was to Bilton’s mother, Debra, to admit she was not the only recipient of his sperm donations; that as their daughters grew up, throughout the 1980s, he’d made at least two deposits a week.

“So the book, in one sense, is about all the truly wild ramifications of that discovery,” Bilton continues. “But then, in discovering that, I realised a lot of what I had been told about my parents and my upbringing were what my mum would call ‘white lies.’” She had not realised, for example, that Jeffrey (whose name is on her birth certificate) was paid not only to father her but to come and play guitar for her, or bring his dog round for the girls to ride around on its back on the afternoons they asked for Daddy. “And so the book was me trying to understand what had really happened.

A portrait of what it was like to grow up with my larger-than-life, gay mother, in LA in the 80s, and 90s.” Debra had a grand and hedonistic life, meditating with the Beatles, dating Eva Gabor, breaking hearts across LA. If she wanted something, she found a way to get it. So, in the early 80s when she realised she wanted children, she approached Jeffrey in a hair salon in Beverly Hills. She paid him \$2,000 to father her child, with the proviso that he never donated sperm again.

He was a strip-o-gram at the time; the month Bilton was born he was the centrefold of *Playgirl* magazine. Over the years, he drifted in and out of their lives, as did Debra’s partners – the family moved from mansions full of exotic pets to an empty room in an office block. “My mother was incredibly loving and magical, but also incredibly complex. She struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction, and cycled through several [spiritual] cults in her own life. Through my upbringing she often paid the bills through wild get-rich-quick schemes. So the book is also about what it’s like for a child to grow up in that kind of instability.”

Bilton’s earliest memory is standing among thousands of naked women in Yosemite National Park “amid the birthing of the feminist revolution”. As a teenager, when her mother was in rehab, she was responsible for bringing up her sister while her abusive boyfriend crawled in and out of their lives. “The things my mother took issue with in the book, though, were not the things you might expect, says Bilton. “She had no problem with me writing >





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› about all her drug use, for example, but she had a real problem with me saying her dog was ‘pudgy’. And when I say a real problem, I mean, you know, several sessions of therapy.” At times the life she describes, with a semi-closeted lesbian mother winning and losing millions against the backdrop of a city that was shifting, spiritually, politically, seems exciting; at other times a kind of violent chaos.

“I realised that the question I was asking, was: ‘What is family?’ My mum had a lot of different relationships – sometimes that meant other kids who would become my half-siblings for a while. Then when I found out about the biological siblings, it led me to think about what it means to be in someone’s family. What responsibilities do you have to those people? I hadn’t been told that there was a financial arrangement between my parents for him to play the role of Dad and that he was effectively a sperm donor to me in many ways as well. So flipping between seeing him as my father versus a donor, what did that label mean?” She apologises, it’s too much; I’m meant to be asking the questions – what would I like to know?

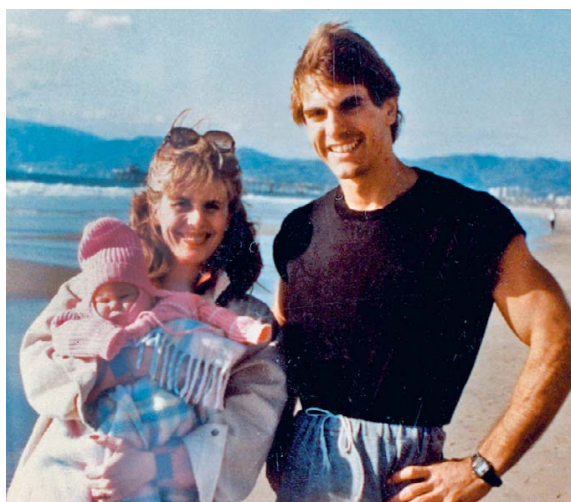
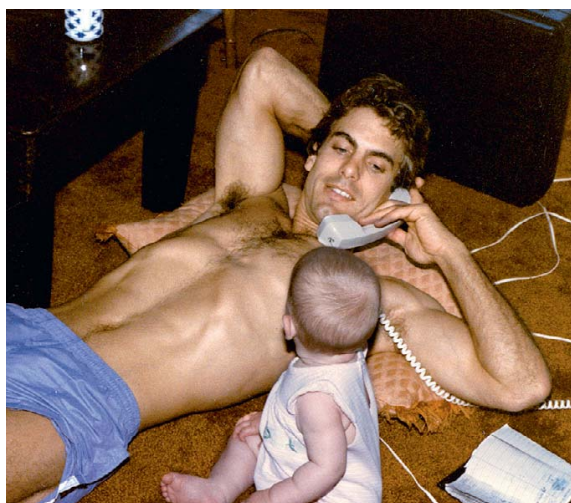
**In Britain today**, donor children born since 2005 have the right to find out the identity of their biological parents when they reach 18. This “removal of anonymity” law came about after studies found that adopted and sperm donor-conceived children benefited emotionally from knowing who their biological parents were, regardless of whether or not they had any contact with them. In the UK, a donor’s sperm can be used to create a maximum of 10 families. In the United States, it’s different. “It’s still the wild west here; it’s a ‘self-regulated’ industry,” says Bilton. There are no legal limits to how many children a donor can produce, or anything to stop donors visiting multiple banks. Donations organised online have resulted in a number of cases like Bilton’s, where men have fathered dozens of children who are beginning to discover, through social media and direct-to-consumer genetic testing, that they have half-siblings scattered across the country, or even their own city.

Anonymity is a flimsy thing in 2022. “I’ve heard of a lesbian couple who are having a baby,” Bilton says, “and one of them is a well-known personality. They were absolutely gung ho on this one donor; they just thought he was Mr Perfect. They made a pact that they would not research who the man was because they wanted it to be anonymous, but one woman just couldn’t help herself. And through a bit of sleuthing, she found him on Twitter. Which is when she realised that he absolutely hated her wife.” A hundred sitcoms are writing themselves, daily.

There were many reasons Donor 150 was such a popular choice. In his file, Jeffrey said his parents had gone to prestigious colleges. One lesbian couple in the Midwest added their name to his six-month waiting list when they read about his spirituality. Some liked that he “tanned easily”. Nurses told prospective parents he was “Very good looking.” “My thoughts on regulation are complex,” says Bilton, “because if there had been regulation, then a lot of these sweet kids that I know and love wouldn’t exist. But, you know, having potentially dated my brother...” OK.

In the book, she writes sensitively, tentatively, about discovering Jeffrey was the father of her then-boyfriend’s twin sisters. She and her boyfriend had been mistaken for brother and sister in the past, but she didn’t feel it was her place to tell him he might not be his father’s biological son. She broke up with him over the phone. “It’s something to keep in mind when choosing sperm, all these factors – but then, you don’t always know people in real life either.”

After her turbulent adolescence, Bilton got sober and married “a guy who has no addiction issues – I didn’t want my kids to experience a parent with alcoholism. We have a very traditional family. But my mother’s an active grandma and the kids call the biological siblings their aunts and uncles.” At first, the biological siblings started to assemble on Facebook, in a group called Donor 150. As numbers increased they moved to WhatsApp, but soon the hundreds of messages became overwhelming. Now they have a group on Discord, organised by topic. There’s an animals thread (most have multiple pets), a thread about their kids, there’s a DNA and Jeffrey thread, there’s



## ‘None of these kids would exist if it wasn’t for my mother doing this crazy thing’



politics (one sibling left when another, with far right-wing views, joined), “life updates”, memes, reunion planning, there’s financial advice, and a thread where they organise the Secret Santa.

When Bilton first found out about Jeffrey’s past, she was overwhelmed: she stopped calling him her father, instead reverting to “Donor”. It took meeting a half-sister 10 years later, who was excited about the promise of an extended family, for her to see it as, rather than “heavy and dark”, simply an “adventure”. There are currently 35 in the group, and a handful of siblings who don’t want anything to do with them. “Some have not responded to us; some have said, ‘I’m just not ready to deal with this.’ But most of the siblings that we find out about now, usually one every couple of months (more around the holidays, when Ancestry.com is pushing specials) are excited.”

While the original siblings tended to be, like Bilton and her sister, children with a gay parent, the majority grew up in heterosexual homes, where the father was infertile. “And these

**Family affair: (from top) Chrysta as a baby in 1985 with her donor father, Jeffrey; with her mother Debra and Jeffrey; some of her extended family**

children were often not told that they had a donor. So for them, it’s a shock when they take a DNA test. They look in the mirror and see a different person.” The “journey” is usually shock, then validation, as they come to

understand parts of themselves that they didn’t before. “Then there’s a period of idealisation of Jeffrey before a... coming down to earth. Many come to meet him, hoping for a deep child-parent bond, but usually they settle for bonding with the siblings as a way to connect with that side of themselves.”

Bilton sees Jeffrey a couple of times a year: “A coffee while I listen to him warn me about Armageddon or, you know, the aliens that are going to come harvest my eggs.” She shrugs. “What was interesting interviewing him for the book was that he’s incredibly lucid about the past. He calls himself the ‘soul caller’.” Every time he donated sperm, he meditated, calling on the spirits to ‘bring into the world a beautiful soul’. “He sees it as his spiritual mission in life, to have given birth to these kids. It’s interesting that his spirituality was one of the things that a lot of parents resonated with, when in reality it’s...” – she gestures in a way that takes in his conspiracy theories, his favouring animals over humans, his choice to live in a van – “tricky.”

Before Bilton discovered the siblings, she was a firm believer in “nurture”. Now, she says: “Discovering one after the next with so many similarities had a profound effect on me, understanding that it’s not all about the way you were raised, but that there might be a biological component. It means you can be easier on yourself.”

Readers might start off thinking this is a book about Bilton’s father, but quickly come to understand it’s a love letter to her mother. “None of these kids would exist if it weren’t for my mother doing this crazy thing. She willed so many things into existence. It didn’t always work out the way she hoped. But her ability to continue dreaming and willing things in the face of failure was really amazing.” She had “second mothers” (Debra’s partners) who came and went, and a father who was never really a dad, but upon meeting her 35 new siblings she realised “something shared between all of us is that we all had a mother who desperately wanted us to exist.”

Sitting back in her chair as an LA morning opens behind her, she considers her childhood. “All that dysfunction helped me in a lot of ways: it made me scrappy and resilient. It’s something I think about with my kids sometimes, because they have such a different kind of life, blessed and stable.” She wonders, sometimes, about injecting a little chaos into the nurture, dropping a modest bomb into their bathwater. Since writing her story down, with its cliffhangers and peril, and pet pigs and new brothers, and family secrets that take generations to emerge, “I’ve come to think a little bit of difficulty is good for the spirit. You know,” she grins, “I wouldn’t change a thing.” ■

*A Normal Family* by Chrysta Bilton is published on 14 July by Octopus. Order it for £14.78 at [guardianbookshop.com](https://guardianbookshop.com)



# Food & drink

## Nigel Slater

🐦 @NigelSlater



## The salad days of summer call for cool, crunch and contrast

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

There is a moment, in deepest summer, when I wonder if I couldn't just live on melon. Wedges of cantaloupe tucked under folds of San Daniele ham; a slice of the now unfashionable green-fleshed honeydew for breakfast; plate after plate of ice-cold watermelon with feta. Melon makes a cooling summer gazpacho with tomatoes and basil, and I sometimes serve it as dessert in a chilled syrup made with elderflower cordial and lemon verbena.

The salad I have served twice this week is the classic version with watermelon and feta, but with pumpkin seeds and whole leaves of high-summer basil. The warm

pepperiness of the basil is good with the chilled melon, the pumpkin seeds a pleasing crunch with the salty feta.

It's all well and good as a side dish with squid from the grill, but if I am making salad for lunch, then there must be a substantial offering, too. This time a chicken version with white-tipped radishes, sprouting seeds, watercress, couscous and harissa. You could make it with leftover roast chicken, but I poached the bird from scratch in with herbs and vegetables and then used the resulting stock to plump up the grains of couscous. A tiny detail, but one that makes the couscous much more interesting.

### Chicken couscous salad

My rule with any couscous salad is that there must be twice the volume of herbs, fruit and vegetables as couscous. And I do use the instant variety of couscous, because life is too short not to.

Serves 4

For the chicken:

**chicken breasts** 2 on the bone  
**chicken leg** 1, large, whole  
**chicken wings** 6  
**carrots** 2, medium  
**leeks** 2, small  
**onions** 1, large  
**thyme** 6 sprigs  
**parsley** 8 stalks  
**celery** 1 stick  
**tomatoes** 2  
**water** 2 litres

For the couscous:

**boiling stock** 200ml from cooking the chicken  
**fine couscous** 100g  
**cherry tomatoes** 15  
**harissa paste** 1 tsp  
**runny honey** 1 tsp  
**sprouting chickpeas** 75g  
**sprouting mung beans** 75g  
**watercress** 50g  
**parsley** 30g (weight with stalks)  
**radishes** 12  
**lettuce leaves** a few large ones, to finish

For the dressing:

**olive oil** 4 tbsp  
**sherry vinegar** 1 tbsp  
**runny honey** 1 tsp

Put all the chicken pieces in a large, deep saucepan. Scrub then roughly chop the carrot, wash the leeks thoroughly, making sure no grit is trapped between its layers, then add to the pan with the carrots. Peel the onions, cut in half and add to the chicken with the thyme, parsley stalks and celery. Add the tomatoes, whole, then pour the water over and bring to the boil.

When the water is boiling, lower the heat, then leave it to simmer for an hour. Remove the pan from the heat, let the chicken cool in its stock, then remove the meat from the bones. (The wings have done their work.) Cut or tear the meat into pieces and set aside in a cool place.

Bring 200ml of the chicken stock to the boil. Put the couscous in a bowl and pour over the hot stock. Cover with a plate while you make the salad. ➤





Stay cool: watermelon, peach, feta and toasted seeds. Facing page: chicken couscous salad





# IN YOUR ELEMENT

POLZEATH BEACH  
NORTH CORNWALL  
50.5763° N, 4.9201° W  
16:02





# Food & drink

## Nigel Slater

### The pepperiness of the basil is good with the chilled melon, the seeds a pleasing crunch with the salty feta

➤ Cut the tomatoes in half, put them in a bowl and toss them with the harissa and the honey. Put the chickpeas and mung beans in a colander and rinse in water, then shake them dry and put them in a mixing bowl. Wash the watercress and shake dry and remove tough stems. Roughly chop the leaves from the parsley. Toss the watercress and parsley with the chickpeas and mung beans, then the chicken and the tomatoes and their dressing. Thinly slice the radishes.

Run a fork through the couscous to separate the grains and add, with the radishes, to the other ingredients. Mix all the ingredients for the dressing with a little salt. Pour the dressing over the salad and gently toss everything together. Pile on to a serving plate – if you wish, lined with salad leaves.

#### Watermelon, peach, feta and seeds

Chill the watermelon thoroughly. I used white peaches, but it is good with any, as long as whatever you use is ripe and sweet – a contrast to the crispness of the chilled watermelon and the salty feta.

*Serves 4*

**watermelon** 1.2kg, chilled

**sesame seeds** 2 tsp

**pumpkin seeds** 30g

**feta cheese** 200g

**basil leaves** 15

**olive oil** 2 tbsp

**red wine vinegar** 1 tbsp

**white peaches** 4, small

Remove the rind from the watermelon. Cut the flesh into thick slices (about 5mm). Pick out as many of the seeds as you can, taking care not to crush the melon. Return the melon to the fridge.

In a dry, shallow pan over a moderate heat, toast the sesame seeds until golden. (They burn in a heartbeat, so keep an eye on them.) Tip them into a bowl and add the pumpkin seeds. You can chop these if you like, but I like them whole. Crumble the feta amongst the seeds, then add the basil. Pour in the olive oil and the vinegar and a grinding of black pepper (no salt).

Cut the peaches in half, remove their stones, then slice each half into 3 or 4 pieces. Add to the dressing. Arrange the chilled watermelon on a dish, then spoon over the feta, peaches and herbs. ■

## Nigel's midweek dinner

### Raspberry tiramisu

Photograph  
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

#### The recipe

Place 175g of **sponge fingers** in a serving dish (I use a 5cm-deep dish measuring 24cm x 16cm), breaking them up and squeezing them into the gaps where necessary so the base of the dish is covered. Stir 200ml of **orange juice** and 60ml of **fino sherry** together, then spoon it evenly over the sponge fingers. Cover the dish and set aside for 30 minutes.

Using a fork, mash 250g of **raspberries** to a thick purée, then spoon over the sponge fingers.

Separate 3 **eggs**, and put the yolks in the bowl of an electric mixer and the whites in a large mixing bowl. Add 4 tbsp of **sugar** to the yolks and beat until thick and creamy with the whisk attachment, then blend in 500g of **mascarpone** and a few drops of **vanilla extract**. Stop the mixer.

Beat the egg whites until thick and foamy, almost stiff. Now fold them,

using a large metal spoon, into the mascarpone mixture until incorporated.

Spread the mascarpone mixture on top of the crushed raspberries and sponge fingers, cover the dish again and leave in the fridge for at least a couple of hours, preferably overnight. When you're ready to serve, whip 250ml of **double cream** and decorate with a further 150-200g of raspberries. *Serves 6-8*

◆ Take care when folding the beaten egg whites into the mascarpone mixture. You want to make certain there is no egg white visible, but also be careful not to overmix.

◆ You can eat this tiramisu within an hour or two of making it, but it is far better if you can give it an overnight stay in the fridge before adding its final top layer of cream and extra fruit. The longer the sponge has to soften with the fruit and boozy juice, and the layers have to combine, the better. ■



# Food & drink

## Jay Rayner



Twitter @jayrayner1

Taunton is blessed with many things, but near the top of the list is its classy little bourgeois bistro

### Augustus

3 The Courtyard,  
St James Street,  
Taunton TA1 1JR  
(01823 324354;  
augustustaunton.co.uk).  
Starters **£9-£14**  
Mains **£15-£32**  
Desserts **£6-£12**  
Wines from **£24**

There are various things every town needs: a good bookshop run by people with serious reading habits; an independent mini-department store selling a seemingly random but vital collection of things for when you have to acquire both an emergency colander and a pair of leopard-print wellington boots at the same

time; a well-positioned bus stop for bored teenagers to smoke in surreptitiously. And a restaurant exactly like Augustus in Taunton; a place which can serve for both special occasions, but also for an impromptu lunch with a mate; where the food is indulgent and diverting without being look-at-me showy; where the prices, while not exactly cheap, won't make you gasp. In short, it's a classy bistro that will look after you and make the world feel just that little bit better. You now want an Augustus in your town, don't you? Quite right, too.

The temptation for the travelling critic is to make Augustus sound like some breathless discovery. As it's been doing its thing very happily since 2011, thank you, that would be pushing it. If the restaurant is less than well known nationally, it may be because Taunton is dominated by the venerable Castle Hotel, where the late Gary Rhodes first made his name, later to be followed by Phil Vickery. On a recent trip to Taunton to thrill the town with one of my fabulous, feather-bow-tied and burlesque live shows – get that image out of your head – the venue offered me a room at the Castle. I declined out of good manners. Twenty or so years ago I wrote about the place in what some would call a disobliging manner. The service and the eccentric approach to customer relations of the man then in charge made it an ordeal rather than a delight. It's still owned by the same family, so I thought it better that I slope off to one of those good beds at the Premier Inn; I like a Premier Inn.

After my extremely pleasurable lunch at Augustus, I looked back at that Castle review from 2000. I clocked the positive things I said about the food. Oh, the celebration of beef. I also clocked that the chef who cooked it all was Richard Guest. He subsequently left the Castle with his front-of-house colleague Cedric Chirrosel to open Augustus. It's named not after Escoffier apparently, but Augustus Gloop, the chunky boy from Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, because he liked his grub. Why do the ones with a healthy appetite always meet a sticky end in fiction?

The restaurant is located in a quiet courtyard off one of Taunton's pretty lanes, in a sleek space of painted brick and bare polished floorboard softened by strategic



**Turbot was cooked with care and respect, with a gruyère and herb crust and an honour guard of broad beans and new potatoes**

**Ode to joy: (clockwise from left) turbot with gruyère; the dining room; Somerset faggots; eel and scrambled eggs; chocolate and hazelnut éclair; meringue and raspberries**

outbreaks of foliage and drapery. There's a glass-walled extension out front and on a warm summer lunchtime the doors are thrown open. There's a short à la carte with starters at around a tenner and mains about double that, supplemented by a fixed-price menu with two courses at £29 and three at £35, though you can mix and match.

One starter sums up the approach: a dome of creamy scrambled egg comes draped in soft fillets of room-temperature smoked eel, the boisterous oils encouraged out by the warmth beneath. On top is a teaspoon full of shiny smoked herring roe. It's surrounded by pale green fronds of frisée, like a choir boy's ruff, and dressed with dribbles of spiced oil. It is the intensely comforting and domestic, that scrambled egg, raised up to something so much more glamorous and downright sexy. The other starter is a generous portion of freshly made butter-yellow tagliatelle, the ribbons tumbling over themselves, spun through with heaps of brown crabmeat and a hint of chilli, and topped by a pretty dice of chives. The bread rolls are warm. The butter is salty and not fridge cold.





The wine list is short and to the point. The customers are relaxed and cared for.

On the set menu, scribbled up on a blackboard, is the promise of “Somerset faggots”. I order them, even though I know it’s a promise which can easily be broken. The real thing is a product of domestic pig-keeping and the imperative to use the whole animal once slaughtered, which means they have to be big on the inner wibbly bits of the animal that the unenlightened run screaming from, and especially liver. The very best I’ve ever had came from Neath Market, south Wales. Historically, along with parts of the West Midlands, it was the focus for domestic pig keeping going back to the 19th century and beyond, so faggots became a speciality. The ones here were not some prissy, toned-down version. They were properly offaly and strident, and came with a glossy onion gravy and, to remind us of the chef’s classical chops, a beautifully glazed dauphinoise. Have some greens on the side to balance everything out.

The other main was a piece of turbot, cooked with due care and respect, with a gruyère and herb crust, and an honour guard of broad beans and new potatoes. It was all brought together by a thick, rust-coloured bouillabaisse sauce that was a proper whack of trawler and dock. In a good way. And so to dessert, where none of those well-juggled balls were dropped. A coffee, chocolate and hazelnut éclair was an elegant piece of patisserie, the work of a man who has made an awful lot of crisp, light choux buns in his time. There were the just-contained whorls of both coffee cream and vanilla, and the vital chocolate topping. Or have a scoop of their vanilla ice-cream, with meringue, chantilly and freshly glazed raspberries, for it is summer in one of the greenest counties of England, where the fruit and the dairy is in abundance and these things make total sense.

Which sums up the sweet joys of Augustus. It all makes sense. It is a quietly professional operation that does its job with grace and skill. I suppose if you wanted to rant at the terrible inequities of the world, you could go all 1968 and dismiss it as terribly bourgeois. To which I’d say: we’re in a courtyard in Taunton, opposite a hairdresser’s called Inside Out and a menswear shop called Astaire’s. Of course it’s bloody bourgeois, and so am I, your honour. Alternatively, you could just give yourself to it. Just come here to stop thinking about those inequities, even if only for a couple of hours. ■

## Notes on chocolate

Another week, another ‘best ever’, but this time it’s a dark bar. By Annalisa Barbieri

There have been a lot of ‘best ever’ reviewed in this column in the past few weeks. And there’s going to be another one this week. An embarrassment of riches. I don’t plan it that way, it just seems to happen like that sometimes.

**Bare Bones**, a Glasgow-based bean-to-bar company that I have featured before on these pages, has this limited-edition 70% Philippines bar (£6.50, 70g) which is the best dark chocolate I’ve ever sampled. It’s so... tasty.

The tasting notes say pecan tart and crème brûlée and I don’t really get that, although you might. I’m not great at describing food in a fancy manner. But if the most perfect day, the sort of day you don’t plan but where everyone you see says good morning to you and is nice, and

everything you went out for you find, and the sun shines, but not so much it makes you sweat like a teenage boy on a first date, and the flowers are out and you catch sight of your reflection in a window and you look better than you thought and you smile all day and life feels full of promise and dazzle. If that sort of day were a chocolate bar, then it would be this.

Like so many of BB’s chocolate – such as the amazing Dominican 68% salted bar – it’s transporting. I know, crazy isn’t it? But try it yourself and you will soon see what I mean.

Can I also squeeze in a mention of another toasted white bar? **Cocoa Retreat**’s version (£6.25, 45g). Utterly beautiful. I ate the whole thing in one go. Shocking.

## Wines of the week

The Loire is loved for its whites, but it also makes excellent reds.  
By David Williams

🐦 @Daveydaibach

**Domaine Serge Laloue Rouge, Sancerre, Loire France 2020**  
£22.82, Strictly Wine

The cluster of appellations that hug the bend in the River Loire between Nevers and Orléans are known for being the spiritual home of sauvignon blanc. Pouilly-Fumé and

Sancerre are the two most famous names, although each village provides its own quicksilver version of the variety. On a hot day, a glass of Loire sauvignon can be like lying down in a patch of grassy shade: that’s the effect of a classic Sancerre variation on themes of green and cool riverbeds, such as Domaine André Vatan Les Perrières Sancerre 2021 (£19.95, yapp.co.uk). But this part of the Loire isn’t just about whites. The reds, made from pinot noir, can be just as distinctive and refreshing, with a red-fruited clarity that is so beautifully expressed in Domaine Serge Laloue’s Sancerre Rouge.

**Domaine Chavet La Côte Rouge, Menetou-Salon, Loire France 2020**  
£16.99, Virgin Wines

You might occasionally hear people make noises about climate change improving things for vignerons in a region that was once thought to be on the northerly limit for red-wine production.

But if it’s true that it might now be easier to ripen red grapes in more vintages in the Loire than it was even a decade ago, I’ve yet to meet anyone who believes that simple fact outweighs the winemaking downsides, such as devastating late-spring frosts. Strictly from a pinot-lover’s point of view, however, I’ve been finding the Loire an increasingly fruitful alternative to the expensive pinots of Burgundy. The fine-knit tannins of Domaine Chavet’s version from the Menetou-Salon appellation is a brilliantly expressive, distinctive summery red wine in its own right.

**Denis Jamain Les Fossiles Pinot Noir, Reuilly, Loire France 2020**  
£18.50, Vintage Roots

The Reuilly appellation is nearer to the Cher tributary than the Loire, but its wines are a good-value match for those of the more famous addresses further east. One of

the best producers here is Denis Jamain, who works his family’s 18-hectare estate biodynamically – a method of cosmic farming that, despite the fact many of its precepts are as scientifically robust as astrology, seems to be responsible for more than its share of the world’s finest wines. Jamain has a knack with both sauvignon and pinot, with the wines of both varieties showing the brightness and verve I associate with limestone soils. His pinot is especially charming, whether it’s being used to make a dark raspberry-juicy red or a very pale, very graceful, stone-fruited rosé (Les Chatillons 2020, £15.99, bbr.com).





# Getting a kick out of fashion

Designer Sophie Hird brings flamboyance and football together in her eclectic collections, which are made from upcycled team kits. By Rosie Mullender

**A**s a child growing up in Darlington, County Durham, Sophie Hird saw football as a largely masculine pursuit. “I grew up around football – it was a massive thing where I’m from, and I’d go to matches with my dad on a Saturday,” she says. “But it felt very male-dominated. You never saw women’s football on TV, and although I played a bit myself, I never saw it as a possible career.”

Things are very different today – 27-year-old Hird plays for a local women’s team, and has made a name for herself with her flamboyant fashion collections made from upcycled football jerseys.

She came up with the concept when she was undertaking a year-long internship at a global sportswear brand, as part of her degree at the London College of Fashion. During the internship, she started collecting unwanted football kit samples. However, her pieces radically break with traditional football stereotypes and were inspired by looks from bygone eras, including the 17th century and the wild west.

“Even though I studied fashion design, I’ve always been really interested in costume design, and in styles from the baroque period, especially menswear,” she says. “When I was working on my final degree collection, I found a set of postcards depicting baroque characters, including one who was wearing a red and white striped leotard. I thought: ‘That looks like a [football] shirt ...’ and all of a sudden I saw the connection between football jerseys and that era in fashion.”

“I wanted to create a contrast between those flamboyant, delicate 17th-century styles, and modern football – the baroque characters wearing silk-striped fabrics, and the football players in striped polyester. I loved the idea of playing with putting football jerseys in a brand new context.”

The result was a collection of colourful, gender-fluid garments: panelled crop tops, tassel tracksuit bottoms, and dramatic bell-sleeved doublets, all made from upcycled football shirts. Now, three years on from her graduate show, Hird works part-time in a local cafe and sells her designs on commission ([sophiehird.com](http://sophiehird.com)), creating each piece in the living room of her flatshare in Deptford, south-east London.

“It takes a lot of hustling and perseverance to make it work, so it’s great that Visa is supporting small businesses like mine – there are so many of us out there that need this support,” she says. Visa’s tools and resources have helped countless people like Hird to begin selling their work to the world.

After Hird had worked through the sample kits she picked up at her internship, she began visiting car-boot sales to find new items to upcycle. “I became a bit obsessed with it,” she says. “I couldn’t even contemplate going fabric shopping in the same way I would have done in

## ‘I loved the idea of playing with putting football jerseys in a brand new context’

the past – this was much more exciting. Luckily, I live close to a big car-boot fair in Deptford, and every Saturday there’s a stall selling piles of jerseys. It’s like a goldmine, especially as I try to get all my materials secondhand.”

Although Hird didn’t set out to be a sustainable designer, her work is inherently eco-friendly – partly thanks to a longstanding interest in the eclectic looks afforded by secondhand fashion.

“When I was a teenager, before sustainable fashion was even a topic of conversation, I would go charity shopping with my mum,” she says. “When I was at college I just loved it, because you knew no one else would be wearing the same thing. You could buy clothes that were really unique, and I’ve always preferred that kind of shopping.”

“At the same time, I appreciate that not everyone can afford to avoid fast fashion. I’m not trying to change the industry – it’s the big brands that have the power to do that – but there’s a community of designers, especially in London, doing similar things, and it’s nice to see our work getting recognition.”

As well as dressing high-profile fans from the music industry, including Declan Mearns of punk rock band Amyl and the Sniffers, and Sports Team’s Alex Rice, Hird has worked on some exciting collaborations, some of which

are likely to coincide with UEFA Women’s Euro 2022, which England is co-hosting.

“Collaborations help keep my work fresh – it’s nice to have input from someone else, and be given a different direction,” says Hird. “One of my favourite projects to date was with UEFA, for the Women’s Champions League. The brief was to celebrate different moments through the tournament, which allowed me to create items I really wanted to make. To have that freedom with such a high-profile client was surreal, but also a bit terrifying.”

This year, she is working on a personal project with the art director Craig Stronach, celebrating the unofficial England women’s squad who competed at the 1971 women’s World Cup. “We’re making something special for the team and their coach, Harry Batt, who together paved the way for women’s football.”

It is just one of many ways in which Hird has kept finding new ways to build upon her initial idea. As a football fan herself, Hird applauds Visa’s sponsorship of the 2022 Women’s Euros and she will be cheering on the England team at the competition. “I’m going to a few of the matches with my best friend, and some of the girls from my football team have bought tickets too,” she says. “I think it’ll be great for the younger generation to see women’s football getting more exposure. There are exciting times ahead.”

### WHEN MORE OF US PLAY, ALL OF US WIN

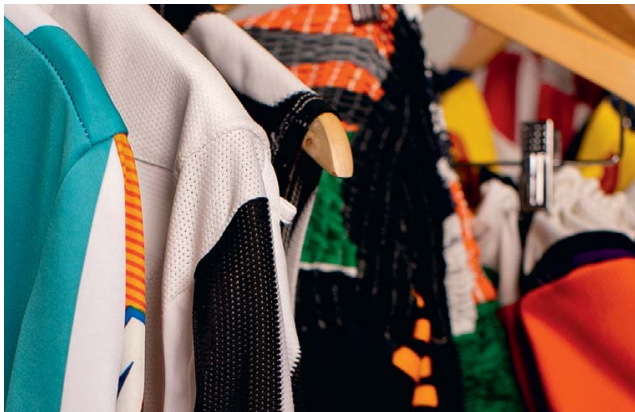
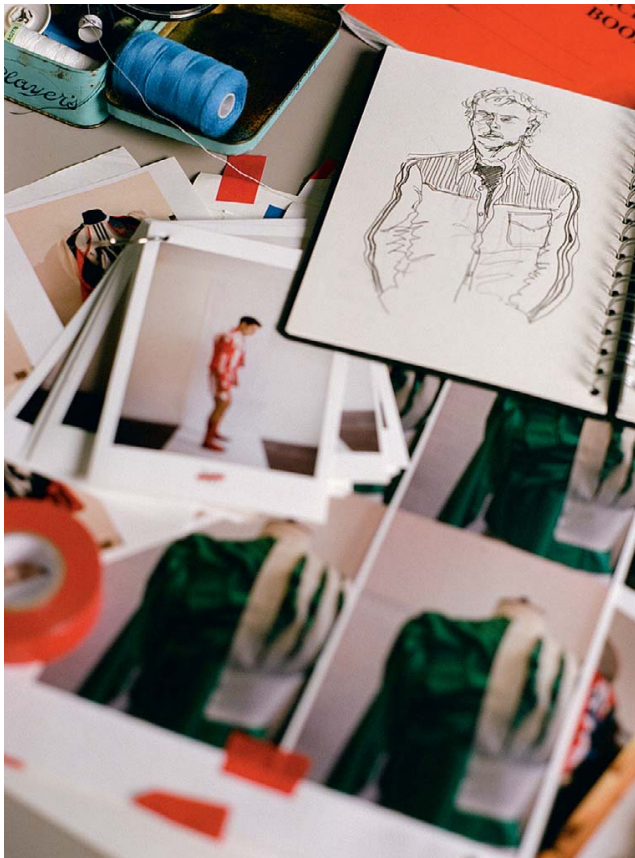
Competition is at its best when everyone truly has the chance to take part. That’s why Visa is a proud sponsor of UEFA Women’s EURO 2022. And Visa’s support goes beyond the pitch. Visa has committed to digitally enabling 8 million small businesses in Europe by the end of 2023, providing technology and tools to help turn small ideas into big businesses, wherever they are. To find out more about how Visa is championing access and inclusion visit: [theguardian.com/all-win](https://theguardian.com/all-win)

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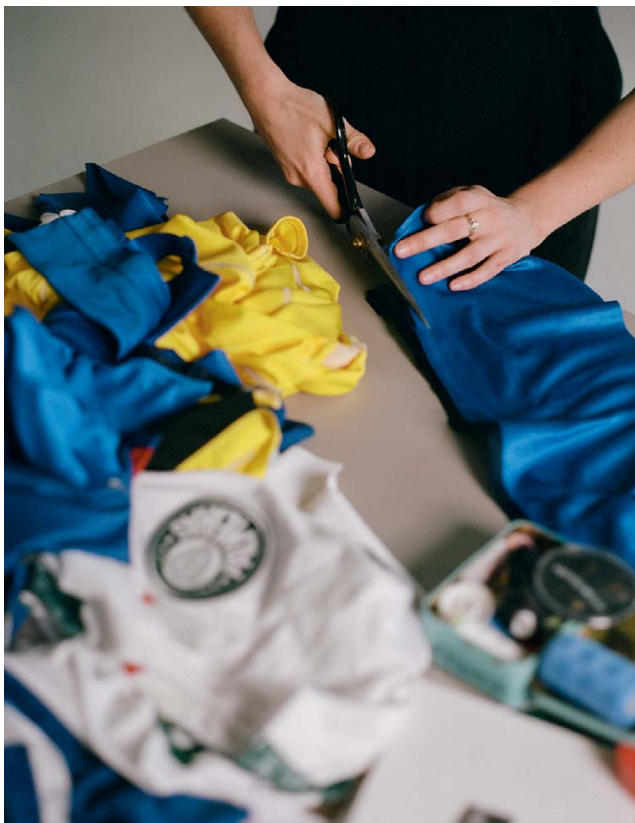
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Sophie Hird surrounded by her creations, which she sells on commission: 'Luckily I live close to a car boot sale. I try to get all my materials secondhand'





Mix bold  
colours,  
fabrics  
and prints  
to keep it  
bright  
and breezy

# Summer of fun

Fashion editor **JO JONES**  
Photographer **ANDREW WOFFINDEN**







Cashmere jumper  
aethel.com Tie-dye  
shorts stellamccartney.  
com Gold bracelets  
dinnyhall.com.  
Facing page Sleeveless  
denim jacket 7forall

mankind.co.uk  
Embroidered dress  
Devotion Twins (fenwick.  
co.uk) Sunglasses  
stellamccartney.com  
Hoop earrings  
monicavinader.com



# Football Weekly

## Live tour



## On the road from June to July 2022

**13 June - Leeds** City Varieties

**15 June - Birmingham** Birmingham Town Hall

**19 June - Manchester** Royal Northern College of Music

**4 July - Dublin** Liberty Hall **New date**

~~**5 July - Dublin**~~ Liberty Hall **Sold out**

**8 July - London** Hackney Empire

**9 July - London** Hackney Empire

**13 July - Glasgow** SWG3

Join Max and Barry, your favourite football podcast hosts, as they take their show on the road.

Enjoy their unique take on the world of football, plus - special guests, the chance to win prizes and an unmissable half-time extravaganza.



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**Crop top** [allsaints.com](https://allsaints.com)  
**Trainers** [nike.com](https://nike.com)

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**Sweatshirt** [madesome.world](https://madesome.world) **Floral hat** [Erdem](https://erdem.com)  
([matchesfashion.com](https://matchesfashion.com))



Above **Hoops** [monica-vinader.com](https://monica-vinader.com) **T-shirt** [urbanoutfitters.com](https://urbanoutfitters.com)  
Right **Jumpsuit** [Missoni](https://missoni.com)  
([matchesfashion.com](https://matchesfashion.com))  
**Bikini** [hunzag.com](https://hunzag.com) **Quilted sliders** [birkenstock.com](https://birkenstock.com)

**Model** Odile Jordan at Select  
**Hair and makeup** Stefan Jemeel at Stella Creative  
Artists using Chanel Les Beiges and Chanel Sublimage La Protection UV and Bouclème







# The edit Polo shirts

Striking stripes, bold prints and zesty hues... Nothing says summer like a classic polo shirt

Edited by ROZ DONOGHUE



Striped £32.99, zara.com



Contrast sleeve £95, reiss.com



Tartan £175, A Bathing Ape (selfridges.com)



High street hero

Towelling £55, arket.com



Bright £140, stoneisland.com



Editor's choice

Floral £85, fredperry.com



Classic £109, ralphlauren.co.uk



Chevron £66.50, gant.co.uk



Blue stripes £19.99, mango.com



Green £130, Beams Plus (mrporter.com)



Blow the budget

Geo print £250, paulsmith.com



Yellow £95, oliverspencer.co.uk



# Beauty Funmi Fetto

@FunmiFetto



## The power of a bright-coloured lipstick or gloss

Lately, I have been enjoying the ease of gloss. They are no longer annoyingly sticky, they keep your lips hydrated for longer and you don't need a mirror to apply. That said, nothing packs a punch like a bright lipstick. I was reminded of this recently when I was sleep deprived, grumpy and had seconds to join a Zoom in which I had to embody joy. I swiped on a bright-coloured lipstick. And *voilà*... It masked the fact I was desperate for a nap, it lit up my face and actually cheered me up. But remember, unlike lipgloss, you definitely need a mirror to apply.

**1. Dior Addict Lipstick in Coral Bayadère** £33, dior.com **2. Huda Beauty Liquid Matte Lipstick in Slaytina** £18, feelunique.com **3. Sensai Contouring Lipstick** £11 (holder) and £27 (lipstick, refillable and interchangeable), sensai-cosmetics.com **4. Kind Words Matte Lipstick in Bold** £14, spacenk.com **5. Luxuriously Lucent Lipstick in Atomic Cherry** £26, lisaeldridge.com



## On my radar

Bergamot scents to take you off the beaten track

**Best of both**  
Dries Van Noten has added some new scents to his fragrance launch. This unusual bergamot and vanilla concoction is both zesty and sensual. *Dries Van Noten Sur Ma Peau Eaux De Toilette*, £150, selfridges.com



**French dressing**  
In Paris? Visit Perfumer H. It's a great way to enter the unusual world of perfumer Lyn Harris. Otherwise just try her lavender, tonka and clove-infused bergamot scent. *Bergamot Eau de Parfum*, £400, perfumerh.com



**Prada perfection**  
Miuccia Prada is famous for toying with contrasts in her fashion line. The ethos is no different in fragrance: bergamot, sandalwood and cardamom. *Prada Infusion d'Ylang Eau de Parfum*, £115, prada.com



## I can't do without...

A stunning new mascara from the trendsetting Isamaya Ffrench

**Rubberlash Latex Lift Mascara**  
£35 isamaya.co.uk

I'm stunned by the number of run-of-the-mill brands that never create something groundbreaking or even slightly exciting. But then why would they? Bog standard has a crazy ability to sell. Wunderkind makeup artist Isamaya Ffrench, on the other hand, isn't interested in joining the status quo. Her work goes against the grain and challenges the ideas of who and what beauty should look like. And, unlike most, she has been successful with it. Even her personal look – she famously sports bleached eyebrows, brightly hued hair and thick spider-like lashes – is unorthodox, hence the likes of Tom Ford, Byredo and Burberry have all sought her stardust for the kudos it brings to their brands. Now, she is sprinkling that magic into Industrial, her own beauty line. Which, as one would expect, is brilliant. There is a 14-shade, multi-coloured eyeshadow palette with such deep, rich pigments it'll probably last an eternity. For those wanting a lip plump sans injectables, her lip serum does exactly that. Seeking a brow product to keep brows in place all day? Check out the Brow Laminator. Her triple hyaluronic serum launches imminently, but for now, my fave product is the mascara. The conditioning formulation is super nourishing, the colour is unapologetically inky black and it will give you the thick spider lashes of your dreams.







# Top of the Lakes

Words and photographs **CLAIRE BINGHAM**

Rural retreat: the whitewashed cottage and landscaped gardens. Facing page: Simon Rayner sits at the table in the cosy kitchen on a fleece from the Living Rug Company





Two dynamic  
creatives have  
worked to give  
their Lake District  
farmhouse the  
perfect homely feel



If there was ever a definition of a comfortable seat, this house would be it. A patterned seat, a colourful seat... the interior is an alchemy of antique and modern pieces that are as much to do with comfort and practicality as they are to do with aesthetic appeal.

When Simon Rayner and his husband Jeremy Langmead moved into their 17th-century farmhouse in late 2019, they both had ideas about what they wanted. Simon was after a house with a long driveway that couldn't be viewed from the road (it can, but barely). When the garden gates open, there is a feeling of stepping into a private world. Jeremy's craving was to create a cosy rural retreat. Previously they lived in a big-roomed Georgian house in Suffolk and the couple wanted to embrace a more kicked-back, country-cottage lifestyle – and this Grade II-listed whitewashed property hit all the right notes for them.

“Do we remodel? Do we move the kitchen down to the far room?” says Simon of the thought process when they first moved in. “Because of lockdown, we knew we were never going to be able to do the building work, so we settled on using furnishings and furniture to make the house feel like home instead.”

Simon, a PR-turned-hospitality entrepreneur, never thought he would move back to his home county in the Lake District (where his family founded the kitchenware business Lakeland), but a pub changed his mind. Alongside business partner Andrew Black, a former publisher at *Wallpaper\** magazine, Simon renovated the Hare & Hounds Inn near Windermere, a 17th-century pub with rooms. Here, the style of decorating features the same confident use of pattern and paint that counterbalance the antique wooden furniture. The result is an inviting, homely atmosphere that is modern yet unstuffy.

Similarly at home, furniture may be vintage, but it's far from twee. There's not a hint of French shabby chic. In its place, there is a Swedish twist – cue the painted Gustavian cabinets that the couple have collected over years. Throw in a touch of Tangier with the Moorish ottoman in the living room (found on eBay) through to the striped ticking fabrics that are used as door curtains or sofa throws all over the house, and you have a decorating masterclass on learning to layer.

For instance, take the sitting room in the oldest part of the house. In this room, hand-dyed yellow linen blinds are paired with silk ikat lampshades, and a chair is upholstered in red linen from Pierre Frey with blue piping. These are all by textile designer and decorator Susan Deliss, who had a hand in many of the textile goings-on. The ottoman is from Robert Kime and the jute log basket is from Maison Bengal.

Other than the tiny dining room, which is painted in Farrow & Ball's India Yellow, neutral walls are the foundation. “If you took away the patterns, the rugs and the paintings, the decoration is plain underneath,” Simon explains. “I think we're moving away from bold-coloured



Layer up: (clockwise from left) the beamed ceiling in the sitting room; yellow walls in the library; a Moorish table in the drawing room; colourful linen in one of the bedrooms; and an old dresser in the kitchen



**‘Because of lockdown, we settled on using furnishings and furniture to make the house feel like home’**

rooms where the furniture is almost a secondary thought.”

Objects are cleverly grouped. An expression of their stylish selves, a statement piece, such as the green dresser from Framlingham antique dealer Dix-Sept in the kitchen was the starting point, with accessories in a multitude of prints and supporting colours, bringing the whole room together in a lively mix.

“We didn't want the units to be all the same colour,” Simon says of the introduction of red and blue to the palette, which took more than 40 tester pots to get right. “The red in the kitchen

makes it feel warm in winter, whereas the blue adds freshness during the summer.” The cream-coloured walls hold everything in place.

Walk into the expansive, light-filled drawing room at the opposite end of the house and there is a shift in mood – less snug farmhouse, more elegant country house. Patterns work in harmony, with jewel-toned pinks and blues a recurring colour pairing and the walls painted a sandy brown – Chocolate by Edward Bulmer Natural Paint. The sofas have been upholstered in curtains repurposed from a previous home.

“We loved the process of doing it up,” Simon recalls. Jeremy, who was head of content at Mr Porter for the best part of a decade and is due to launch his own skincare brand, is renowned for his taste and is an expert at object placement. Two creatives working together... this is a very stylish home-making team. ■ [hareandhoundslakes.com](http://hareandhoundslakes.com)



# Gardens James Wong

🐦 @Botanygeek



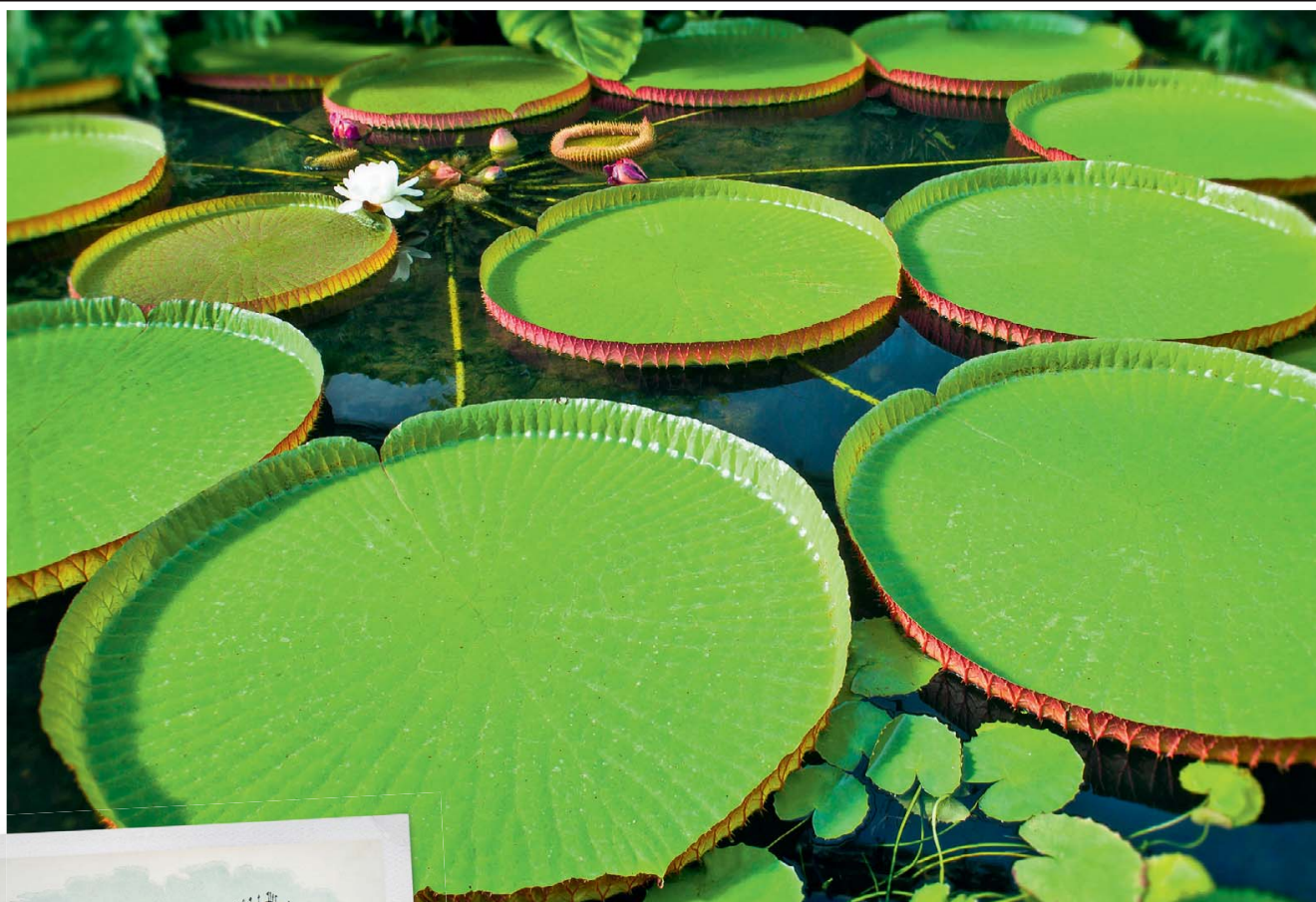
## The waterlily that changed architecture

One of the most wonderful things about working as a botanist is the sheer number of plants that are out there. It is estimated that there are 400,000 species on Earth – I say estimated, because more than 1,000 are recorded as new to science each year so no plant scientist can ever know all of them.

And it's this incredible diversity that occasionally throws up something that captures our imagination – so much that our passion to grow them sets off ripples that revolutionise not just horticulture, but the entire way we live our lives, even architecture. A classic example of this can be found in the most unlikely of places: the upper tributaries of the Amazon rainforest.

The enormous leaves of giant waterlilies, *Victoria sp.*, aren't just fascinating for their incredible size, being large enough to support the weight of a child, but for the way they changed the face of modern architecture. When seeds of this amazing plant first made their way to Victorian England from South America, they sparked off a race among the British aristocracy as to who could be the first to get one to flower.

The problem was that its huge leaves just kept growing and growing, which meant the elaborate heated pools and the specially constructed glasshouses used to house them had to get ever bigger. This posed a massive problem for architects and engineers at the time, because until that point there wasn't



**Support cells:** the internal structure of giant lily pads led to the creation of Crystal Palace

really the technology to create large, pillarless expanses wide enough.

By an amazing twist of fate the solution to this conundrum lay in the very leaves they were trying to grow. The plants themselves are only able to create such

vast lily pads due to an elaborate network of ribbed veins, creating reinforced mini-arches to support their weight, distributing the load over a series of "cells". This was noticed by ingenious horticulturist Joseph Paxton, who despite no formal architectural or engineering training, realised this same technique could be employed to form huge, glazed structures.

He used this to construct the enormous Crystal Palace to hold the Great Exhibition in London in the mid-1800s. It was a total revolution in

architecture, being the structure with the greatest area of glass ever seen at the time. It's these techniques that lead to the creation of pretty much every large public building in the world, from shopping malls to airports to office blocks.

It has even been argued that without structures able to physically hold such large gatherings, where people of different social strata can mix, the world would be a much more segregated place than it is today. All, apparently, thanks to a waterlily and the obsession it triggered in our minds to see it bloom. ■

## Plot 29

Under the Danish sun we listen to birds and let the flowers go wild.

By Allan Jenkins

Back at the beach house. We're here to sow the poppy seed and surround ourselves in Danish summer. The sun rises before 4.30am and sets at 10pm. It's never really dark. The long days of lazy bike rides by the sea.

The Icelandic horses have had a foal. Lazing now in the buttercup meadow, just its tail swishing at flies. The fields are scattered with wild orchids, shots of purple among the gold. Overhead, skylarks flutter and call. Peewits harass an egg-hunting rook.

Our meadow is alive with yellow: clumps of birdsfoot trefoil and buttercup. Henri, here a few days earlier than me, has given up on mowing the grass and been won round to its glories. She's cut a couple of paths through to better take in the wilding flowers.

The garden is thick with ox-eye daisies, more commonly known here as Marguerite after the Danish queen who's taken them as her motif. They punctuate the long grasses, like living in a kid's colouring book.



**'The fields are scattered with wild orchids, shots of purple among the gold'**

Tall poppies are coming. They dot and line the green wheat fields on the road, skimmed by the sand martins who have returned to colonise the cliffs. We scatter the Serifos poppy seed among the edges and molehills – Henri is almost resigned to the moles, too.

There is a 'bee-friendly' bed strong on blues: with phacelia and cornflowers. The nasturtium are coming. I have over-sown one of the herb boxes with calendula, so I plant seedlings through some of the meadow.

We take a trip to the plant nursery for a blackcurrant bush to supplement the two we have. Henri and her brother will add the harvest to fruit found in Ina's freezer. There'll be the best jam.

We potter about. We eat outside and listen to birds, sound-scan them on the Merlin app. We walk through the meadow in the morning, to the sea sunset at night.

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



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**PETER CHRISTIAN**  
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**1 Mayu Retreats, Norfolk**  
Luxury and vegetarian are two words you rarely get to savour in the same sentence. Which is why Mayu is something of a rarity: beautifully presented, delicious meat-free menus in an opulent setting. Mayu's philosophy is rooted in nutrition, boosting your intake of as many different plant-based ingredients as possible – expect at least 30 in a two-day stay. Husband-and-wife team Pamela and Kieron offer expert nutritional advice alongside delicious cooking. Their next retreat (3–6 September) is at Great Barn Farm, a luxury barn conversion with swimming pool, steam room and jacuzzi along with daily yoga and Pilates, and nature



## Green and pleasant

Live well at 10 of the UK's best breaks for vegetarians and vegans

Words ANNABELLE THORPE

trails deep in the Norfolk countryside. *From £550 for three nights, including accommodation, meals, drinks and activities; mayuretreats.co.uk*

**2 Our Lizzy, Worcestershire**  
Lizzy's offers courses ranging from Greek and Thai plant-based dishes to tofu, vegan baking, street food and dairy-free desserts. Private classes can also be arranged, including a children's cookery course and gluten-free cooking. There are two B&B rooms, with a slap-up vegan breakfast to start the day and evening meals on request. *Day courses from £90, doubles from £72 B&B; ourlizzy.com*

**3 Saorsa 1875, Perthshire**  
Scotland's first vegan hotel, Saorsa sets out to prove that boutique style doesn't need to involve animal products. The 11 rooms all feature Egyptian cotton on the beds and vegan toiletries in the luxury bathrooms. Set in a grand 19th-century baronial house, it has a pleasing dose of old-fashioned glamour alongside the sustainable ethos. Food is plant-based, with a focus on local ingredients. *Doubles from £160 B&B; saorsahotel.com*

**4 Avenue Cookery School, London**  
For those who really want to expand their vegan repertoire, the Avenue offers a one or two-

week vegan cooking course, covering the basics, plus lipsmacking bakes and dinner party dishes. The first week is targeted more at beginners, with week two tailored to those at intermediate level. Both weeks can be booked separately, and the course is an informal, fun affair. Accommodation can be booked directly with the Avenue (£305pp for four nights). *Five-day course costs £895; theavenuecookeryschool.com*

**5 Demuths Cookery School, Bath**  
The original plant-based cookery school, Demuths offers day, half-day and evening courses, including lessons on southern Indian



thali, Lebanese mezze and Asian street food, alongside classes focusing on quick easy meals, 30-minute suppers and Sunday brunch. For serious cooks, the Vegan Diploma is a five-day course, covering everything from knife skills to using ingredients such as aquafaba. Combine a course with a stay at the Queensberry Hotel, which offers vegan/vegetarian tasting menus and a vegan breakfast. *Doubles from £148.50 room-only; thequeensberry.co.uk. Day courses £185/Vegan Diploma £1,050; demuths.co.uk*

**6 The Detox Barn, Suffolk**  
Run by two sisters, the Detox Barn is an elegant conversion surrounded by Suffolk countryside, offering weekend breaks with yoga, guided walks, beauty treatments and plant-based meals. With a refreshing dose of good humour (the course includes a demonstration on how to make smoothies "that don't taste like pond water"), accommodation is in the cosy bedrooms in the barn, or off-site. *Two-night Gentle Detox break £495pp, with meals, drinks and classes; gavinsisters.co.uk*

**7 Over the Rainbow, Cardigan Bay**  
This restored Georgian mansion, set in several acres of woodland and gardens near the Welsh coast, is ideal for those looking for a sense of escape. Run on ethical and environmental principles, the house uses renewable

sources for heating and electricity, and many of the ingredients in the delicious vegan/veggie breakfasts are sourced from the surrounding gardens. The bedrooms celebrate female history, myths and legends, with B&B stays from Thursday to Sunday. *Doubles from £100 B&B (two-night minimum); overtherainbowwales.co.uk*

**8 Stonecroft Guesthouse, Derbyshire**  
Surrounded by the spectacular Peak District National Park, Stonecroft is the passion project of chef Julia Reid, who produces sumptuous vegan, gluten-free breakfasts and hearty packed lunches for those planning a day walking in the hills. The rooms have wonderful views across the Edale Valley or Kinder Scout, while on cooler days the communal lounge is a great place in which to relax beside the fire. *Doubles from £130 B&B; stonecroftguesthouse.co.uk*

**9 Live Wild, Yorkshire**  
Foraging courses focus on edible plants and seeds growing wild in the countryside, making them ideal for vegans and veggies. Live Wild offers four-hour foraging courses, or a longer option including lunch, covering all aspects of wild eating, including the history and folklore around plants. Stay at the Vegan Home, a cosy, pet-friendly B&B in the Calder Valley, a short walk along



the canal from the centre of town (from £175; theveganhome.co.uk). *Courses from £50pp; livewild.org.uk*

**10 Ambleside, Cumbria**  
A classic Lakes house near Windermere, Ambleside Manor has 15 comfortable bedrooms, most with glorious views over the grounds. Ideal for a break with the kids, there are family rooms and dog-friendly rooms, and hearty vegan or veggie breakfasts. The house is within a short walk of two veggie restaurants, Zefirellis and Fellinis, offering pizza, pasta and Mediterranean dishes. *Doubles from £130 B&B (two-night minimum); ambleside-manor.co.uk. ■*



# Self & wellbeing

Photograph RORY MULVEY

## When it comes to banter, men are in their element. But that is no foundation for lasting friendship

Words MAX DICKINS

Men have a friendship problem. You probably know this already – walk into any pub in the land and count the number of blokes sitting there drinking alone. Social scientists know this evidentially. Recent research by the mental health charity Movember, for example, suggests that one in three men have no close friends. And I know this personally – in the summer of 2020, when I was planning to propose to my girlfriend, Naomi, I realised I had no one to call on to be my best man.

Loneliness doesn't look like me. But there I was – 33 years young, outgoing, always quick to buy my round – and yet I had no friends. And it made me feel ashamed. Suddenly I was that guy sitting alone in the school lunch hall. I was a Billy No-Mates. This bruising realisation sent me off on a quest to answer a question: what goes wrong for men like me? And what can we do about it? I discovered there are three main theories.

“You don't have friends to call your best man because of the culture in which you were raised. It doesn't have anything to do with how you are naturally,” says Niobe Way, a psychologist at New York University who has spent her career studying the friendships of boys and men, and one of the many academics I spoke to who pointed the finger at so-called “toxic masculinity”. In her view, men struggle with friendships because they have been socialised into a “man box” of unhelpful gender norms that get in the way of intimacy.

But hang on, I'm not toxic, am I? In my mind, toxic masculinity referred to monsters like Harvey Weinstein, sociopathic tech bros and backwater Tory MPs. Not me. “I wouldn't say you're toxic,” Naomi reassured. “But you become very different when you're around guys. Do you know that?”

**When I began to** examine how I was with the men in my life, I realised that, yeah, maybe I was a bit weird. I experience an irrational tightening of the body and heart at certain moments; a boa constrictor of inherited awkwardness. Whenever a man tries to hug me, I just stand there paralysed and inept like a dog being washed against its will. The only time I ever tell a male friend that I even so much as like him is after seven pints. And whenever I give a compliment to a guy it's always paired with a joke. It gives me distance from the emotion implied in it. It raises the question, what do I really feel?

Ah, yes, feelings. Fredric Rabinowitz, a psychologist at the University of Redlands in California who is renowned for his work with men's groups, says: “There isn't any real education or encouragement for guys to develop a vocabulary of intimacy.” He recommended I get a therapist to change that. I swiftly learned I had developed a number of handy tactics to avoid any sort of deep talk with “the boys”. Banter loomed large – that peculiarly male way of relating, that jazz of casual



brutality, that belligerent way of occupying space.

About four months into our time together, my therapist told me this hometruth: “You have an aura that you are not open or connected. There is a detachment. A block. You might be a laugh, but you have a vibe where other people aren't going to share their innermost personal stuff. They get a feeling that you're not able to give it back. So, perhaps, it's no wonder you don't have any close friends.” Sadly, she was right. Laughter had become the only emotional display I felt comfortable with. Banter was everything and everything was banter.

Something was nagging at me, however. Male

**‘Whenever I give a compliment to a guy, it's paired with a joke’**

loneliness is not the contemporary problem we are often led to believe. The data suggests that men have been struggling with friendships for a long time – as far back as the 70s, when researchers began to look at these things. If toxic masculinity is the cause of men's struggles, then surely you'd expect

men's friendships to have improved. After all, it's hard to argue that the sort of restrictive masculine norms the psychologists told me about haven't softened since then. Does this not suggest that something else is going on? Something in men's biology?

Dr Robin Dunbar, leading evolutionary anthropologist and the godfather of friendship research, believes there is. He argues that men don't become less likely to have intimate friendships; they are born that way. “What's become very clear in the last decade,” Dunbar told me, “is the completely different way the social world of men and women works.”

The contrasting male and female social style is often characterised as “face-to-face” versus “side-by-side”. Women tend to socialise face-to-face with a strong preference for one-to-one interactions, based around talk and intense emotional disclosure. Men, however, tend to socialise side-by-side, preferring to hang out in groups, where intimacy is demonstrated by doing stuff together – playing five-a-side, going fishing, climbing mountains and so on.

Indeed, in the legendary male friendships of yore – Achilles and Patroclus, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Maverick and Goose – it was stoic,



shoulder-to-shoulder derring-do that was idolised as peak brotherhood. Not any more, however. Some social scientists argue that intimacy has been redefined in the modern world, to become understood as essentially a synonym for emotional disclosure. Thus, peculiarly “male” forms of closeness have become invisible to us or are even viewed as pathological.

Take banter, for example. Yes, men can be absolutely brutal to one another. Yet aggression is often employed not as the opposite of intimacy, but as a strategy to achieve it. While laughter bares teeth, this underestimates the complexity of what’s going on in that moment. It ignores the context – the sacred space of friendship, where there’s a tacit agreement that we don’t actually think or feel what we profess to. While there is a perpetrator and a victim, everyone is in on the joke. When that’s understood, mordant banter is actually a

perverse form of love. It is, in a real sense, intimacy in action, communicating both “I know you” and “I know you trust that I’m not being cruel and that we are playing a game.”

Dunbar’s theory was interesting, because it implied that I had been looking at my best-man challenge from the wrong direction. Rather than

focusing on improving the one-to-one friendships I had with the men in my life – as the psychologists had suggested – maybe I should be focusing instead on rebuilding the contexts where male friendships happen. On what we could do together. These habitats had been razed and not replaced in my grownup life. It turned out my best-man quest was actually a rewilding project.

**But sharing activities** – let alone organising them – takes a lot of time, and this is the third theory on why men have a friendship problem. Time is something that gets scarcer as you exit your 20s – your job gets more serious, so does your relationship, maybe kids turn up – and friends are the first thing pushed off the to-do list. Women are also faced with this same lack of time in middle age, of course. Yet while research shows that the social networks of both men and women wane as they age, men’s shrink much more. Why might that be?

It’s pretty simple, really: women put more effort into their friendships, while men are apt to let their social circle wilt and co-opt their partner’s instead. As the American standup John Mulaney has quipped: “Men don’t have friends. They have wives whose friends have husbands.” Men treat the women in their lives like their HR department. If guys were honest, they’d introduce their better half at weddings with, “This is Claudia, my wife and director of people operations at Geoff Limited.”

The good news is that effort is an easy solve. “My mates call me the Sherpa because I organise everything,” a friend of a friend told me one evening when I told him about my mission. “But if I didn’t do that, I’d never see them.” Be the Sherpa – that would become my new motto. A simple approach that helped me reignite my social life. And yes, I found a best man, too.

“A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair”, Samuel Johnson once said. The owner’s manual isn’t as complicated as I first thought. ■

*Billy No-Mates: How I Realised Men Have a Friendship Problem by Max Dickins is published by Canongate at £16.99. Buy it for £14.78 at guardianbookshop.com*

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## Séamas O'Reilly

**A life lesson in patience and perseverance badly backfires in the face of an infuriating toy**

🐦 @shockproofbeats



It was my wife's fault, mostly. The entire chain of events can be traced back to one interaction she had a few months back with another mum, when the subject of jigsaws came up. Having always enjoyed them, our son is now so good at them he routinely completes them with the tiles facing down, ignoring the design in favour of merely matching the shapes on sight. Our natural inclination towards pride in our son notwithstanding, we allow that this is objectively impressive. It's just that I also find it slightly unnerving, like something I can imagine kids being made to do in a Cold War orphanage.

My wife has no such qualms and has happily internalised this as one of his, and thus her, best qualities. 'Benoit is great at jigsaws, too,' the other mum said. 'Really?' my wife replied, her voice dripping with kindly derision, 'Ours can do 60+'. By this she meant jigsaws with 60+ pieces, not jigsaws judged only suitable for

people aged 60 and over, but I didn't want to interject as she was in full flow. 'Does he do them upside down?' she asked. I don't know what she expected from this exchange, presumably for the other mum to admit her child was a dour dunce compared to ours, and maybe to give us some money for time wasted. She winced to recall it a few days later, but it speaks to a confidence in our son's problem-solving ability, which has now gotten us in other troubles.

I speak of his birthday gift, a Transformers toy that was marked 8+. I'll admit that I thought he'd make short work of it, until I saw him thrashing it on the floor in frustration some minutes after it had been presented. 'Hey!' I said, like a caring, resourceful dad from an American sitcom, 'Don't give up, let's try again.' Tragically, this became a lesson for both of us; not only was my son unready for Transformers marketed to eight-year-olds. The '8+', it turns out, might as well have been specifying the hours

required to make this thing or the sessions of therapy necessary to overcome the trauma of making an attempt. Beginning as a humanoid robot, there were merely 24,000 moves to turn it into a pleasingly 80s-era hatchback. The mechanisms by which this was to be achieved were oblique. There were slots that broke all rules of geometry. After a length of time I'd rather not divulge, and more than a few noises which suggested I'd succeeded in transforming this toy into a paperweight, it finally looked vaguely car-shaped. Unfortunately, I had no idea how I'd done this and my efforts weren't exactly met with satisfaction from the bored four-year-old floor manager. It was misshapen and lumpy. It looked like a car that was wearing all its clothes at once, in order to skirt airport baggage allowance.

'Look!' I said, 'it's finished.'

My son flashed me a look of pity. 'Don't give up,' he said, placing a conciliatory hand on my arm. 'Let's try again.'



# Ask Philippa

## I fear my parents will disapprove of my new partner



🐦 @Philippa\_Perry



### Sunday with...

It's gardening and a dip for pop legend Kim Wilde

#### Are you an early riser?

Invariably, Sunday's a travel day – I do gigs on Saturdays. If I'm home, I lie in until the dogs make that noise you can't ignore, then I stagger down and let them out. If it's sunny, I'll start gardening in my pyjamas. We live in a 16th-century barn. There's a cottage garden, a wildflower meadow, a garden with a tropical vibe... a lot of plants.

#### What's on the menu?

I fancy a cooked breakfast, I'll have egg and bacon. If I don't, it's some bran and muesli with yoghurt, seeds and berries. In summer, we don't do roasts. I grow salad, so I add a bit of fish, chicken, feta or halloumi.

**And for exercise?** Mostly gardening and walking the dogs. I do Sporadic Yoga. I do it sporadically... when my sister takes me outside. Or my niece, Scarlett, my backing singer. They're yoga instructors. I'm surrounded by downward dog-ers.



**Family time?** If my son, Harry, and daughter, Rose, are home, we'll hang out. I'll play backgammon with Rose. Every now and again, the dice roll in my favour. I've got an above-ground pool. I jump in every day, even if we have to break ice. I'll go in naked if no one else is around.

**And to relax?** I've taken on an allotment with a girlfriend. We're growing kale, courgettes, radishes, cucumbers. It's a wonderful place with peace and good souls. If I do anything else, it'll be washing. Tragically, I find that therapeutic.

**On Sunday night?** I light candles and listen to Mike Oldfield's *Ommadawn*, beautiful meditative music, while I have a bath. Then, I do a mental housekeeping exercise. I'm early to bed – 10 or 10.30pm. I'm a great sleeper. I sleep for England.

**Katherine Hassell**

*Kim Wilde: the Greatest Hits tour begins on 10 September (kimwilde.com)*

**The question** I am 34, have work I love and I own my own flat. I am having the first serious relationship since a break-up two years ago, and I am full of anxiety about it.

I have been with my partner for seven months. We get along well and I have felt connected and comfortable with him from the beginning. We have been inseparable until he got a new two-year contract to work abroad.

But I care too much about what my family thinks. They are religious and when, at 26, I moved to live with my now ex, my father said I should never set foot in my parents' house again and stopped talking to me. After a couple of years, things were mended. My parents are loving and were supportive during the break-up, but I am wary of introducing another partner. I know he won't come up to their standards. He dresses shabbily, this is not a problem for me, but I worry what they will think. My parents will dislike his politics, even though I share them. My partner has not done particularly well economically and my parents are always contemptuous about things like that. I love that he is fun. We both tend to prioritise personal over professional, pleasure over duties, but sometimes I worry that might be a recipe for disaster if we have a family.

The move he made for work has left us in a long-distance relationship after only six months' dating. I miss him. It's not ideal.

I got pregnant accidentally and had an abortion right after he moved. Despite not being able to afford the flight and having just started at his new job, he flew to be with me, which I really value. When I am with him I feel great, but when I am not, I'm anxious he isn't right for me and I should end it.

**Philippa's answer** I have a hunch that I like your boyfriend. I also feel he isn't so much the problem, rather, I think your family is the root of your anxiety. You love them, you are attached to them, they are a source of stability and strength and yet you sound so enmeshed with them it is as though it is difficult

to think and feel for yourself. Every child needs unconditional love from their parents, but your father withheld his love, threatened to throw you off when he didn't approve of your living arrangements with your ex-partner. That might have traumatised you. No wonder you feel anxious; you don't want to be rejected by your father again.

In the first line of your email I think you are telling me you are an adult, but I wonder if you find yourself reverting to being in a childlike state when you are around your parents.

### Your family want the best for you but may not make the best choices

When you are in the present with your boyfriend, everything is fine. When you are apart from him and imagining the future, or what other people will think of him you tell yourself things that make you anxious. The future remains a mystery. However, the information you do have

is: how you feel when you are with him; how he behaves when he is with you; and what he does if he thinks you need support. That is real. Your catastrophising about the future is based in negative fantasies – that's not real.

Don't let your father scare you away from what sounds like a well-matched relationship. Prioritising fun is a recipe for happiness rather than disaster. Your future children, if you have any, are going to need fun and it isn't as though your boyfriend is pursuing fun to the detriment of all else. He is after all, furthering his career, so he doesn't sound frivolous, merely well-balanced.

Your family want the best for you (or maybe want what looks the best for them), but that doesn't make them the wisest people to make choices for you. What sounds best right now is this kind man who crosses oceans to be with you when it really matters – that also sounds responsible.

If your parents disapprove, stay adult, tell them that you know they mean well, but when it comes to spending your life with someone you must make that decision for yourself. Separate from them a little – this doesn't mean you don't love them, it's just that you own yourself fully, rather than unconsciously believing that they own you. You might find it helpful to read about transactional analysis (TA) – a form of therapy that helps you develop your adult self, or even try some TA therapy, it can help you be less reliant on and anxious about, parental approval.

You don't have to make any immediate decisions about whether your boyfriend is "the one". Your relationship is relatively new – stay in the present and enjoy it. I hope you two can get together again soon. ■

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



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