The CURIOUS COLUMNS of ADRIAN CHILES

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A NICE WORD

I dedicate this book to anyone who's ever stopped me in the street to say anything obliging about my column in the *Guardian*. While it's obviously nice to be complimented for a TV or radio show I've presented, a nice word about some words with which I managed to fill a blank page somehow means so much more. In fact, they don't have to be nice words. I don't mind if someone tells me some column I've written was crap – that they troubled to read it is compliment enough for me.

I also dedicate this collection, with special thanks, to all the staff on the *Guardian*'s features desk who've been lumbered with me and my words over the years, especially Kira Cochrane, who commissioned me in the first place, Phil Daoust, who I'm sorry to have driven to distraction with my constant indecision and lateness, and Jenny Stevens, who has been relentlessly supportive from day one, more than two hundred columns ago.

The

CURIOUS COLUMNS

THE MOST SHOCKING MOMENT OF THE MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ SHOW

This performance art is intense, moving and baffling. Nonetheless, I wasn't prepared for the wares on sale

My mate Big Dai was in town and it was raining. We needed something to do other than what we normally do, which is either walk our dogs or sit in a pub. So we went to the Marina Abramović retrospective at London's Royal Academy. Abramović styles herself the grandmother of performance art. Her stuff is, in my inexpert opinion, mad, brilliant, silly, absurd, wonderful, moving, ridiculous, baffling and so on.

Among the more unsettling exhibits was *Rhythm 0*, depicted on a series of slides. Abramović stands next to a table on which are arrayed items associated with pleasure and pain, from a metal spear and razor blades to some grapes and olive oil. To quote her instructions: 'There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired … I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility.' The audience started off tamely, feeding her the odd grape, anointing her with a dab of oil. But before long, they set about harming her with some relish. Abramović's conclusion was devastatingly concise: 'The experience I drew from this work was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.' Noted.

By now, Big Dai and I were clinging on to each other for support. But things were about to get yet more stressful. To move from one of the rooms to the next, visitors were invited to pass through a doorway in which two naked models stood facing each other. The gap between them was extremely narrow. After some nervous shuffling around, Dai declared:

'I'm going in,' in the tone and accent of a Swansea copper about to enter a pub to break up a brawl. I held his coat to afford him – and the poor models – a little more breathing space. And through he went.

My turn. I was gripped with shame, fear, embarrassment and lots more besides and all but chickened out. In the end I braved it, worried sick about brushing the models' bits as I squeezed my bulk between them. But at the moment I was the filling in the sandwich, so to speak, it dawned on me that my biggest concern should have been how to avoid crushing some or all of their 20 toes beneath my size 12s. I didn't. Relief.

Was this the meaning of it? Worrying about the wrong thing? Worrying about anything? As with each exhibit, I was a dog looking at a card trick – aware there was something clever going on without being sure what it was. But my most profound emotional response was still to come. In the giftshop, Abramović pint glasses were available, upon them instructions: With your hand, hold a glass of pure water … drink in small sips, etc. By now, I had given up trying to work out whether anything was daft, absurd, moving or whatever. I took two to the checkout, one for me and one for Big Dai. The sales assistant tapped her till, looked up at me, and asked: 'Are you OK with the price?' They were 35 quid. *Each*. All I could manage was a choking gasp and a blushing nod of assent.

It has since occurred to me that my face at that moment might well have been filmed in close-up for inclusion in a future Abramović work called, if I may suggest a title, *Empty Glass Half Full*. If this is so, I hereby give my consent.

✍ Dai's wife put his glass in the dishwasher, which duly washed off all of Abramović's markings. Disappointing. Or could this have been part of the art? My glass remains in its box.

A STRANGER ON A TRAIN – AND A SMALL, STUNNING ACT OF KINDNESS

Humans can be a wonderful species

As simple unexpected acts of kindness go, this one will take some beating. I was on a train from London to Plymouth, on my way to a reunion of some university friends, among them people I'd not clapped eyes on for 30 years. Oddly, I found myself getting nervous about it, feeling like a fresher, making friends again with old friends. And when I get nervous, I get tired. I have this much in common with the footballing great, Gordon Strachan, who, when he was nervous before games, would yawn uncontrollably. This greatly annoyed his managers, not least Sir Alex Ferguson.

I tried to lean my head on the window but the gap between the seat and the window was too big, making it most uncomfortable. After a bit of wriggling, I felt something soft being pushed into the gap. It was a rolled-up pink woolly jumper from the woman behind, for me to use as a pillow. Being prone to a bit of a slobber while snoozing, I tried to refuse but she insisted. I slept very soundly, thinking what a wonderful species humankind can be.

When I woke up, I was quite unable to find words to adequately convey my gratitude. The sentences I composed in my head all felt a bit cloying. In the end, I just said thank you several times and left it at that, which still doesn't feel enough. So, to the woman in the red dress and slobbered-on pink jumper who alighted at Totnes on Friday, I thank you again, most sincerely. What made the act so pure was that she obviously didn't want anything in return, even conversation – no offence taken. Quite the opposite.

I MET A MAN FROM AN ADHD CHARITY AND IT WAS LIKE MEETING MYSELF

A conversation containing all the right notes, if not necessarily in the right order

I had an appointment with a man from the charity ADHD UK. We arranged to meet at a pub next to a station at half past two and I resolved, for the thousandth time in my life, to be there bang on time. I boarded a train that would arrive at 14.24. I was going to be on time, which was an unfamiliar feeling. Then, in a classic ADHD passage of play, it all went wrong. I got so absorbed in Philip Short's biography of Putin that I missed my stop. (By the way, if Vladimir doesn't have ADHD, I'm an oligarch.) The train back from the next station was delayed, obviously, so it was nearly 3pm when I met my man, one Henry Shelford.

This meeting turned out to be like meeting myself. Ideas, thoughts and half-thoughts tumbled out in both directions. A point would be made that would spark a response that would in itself remind one of us of another point we wanted to make, which we'd better make straight away lest we forget it but when the time came to get back to the original point we'd have forgotten what it was so we would start making another different point before the other one interrupted to go off on various tangents. In this way, the baton in this zigzagging ADHD relay race would pass from one interlocutor to the other. All in all, paraphrasing the great Eric Morecambe, it was a conversation containing all the right notes, if not necessarily in the right order.

Shelford put me right on a few things. I had long been holding a couple of opinions that, thanks to him, I don't hold

any more. Firstly, I had developed a sense that, from being wildly under-diagnosed, ADHD had now gone the other way and was being diagnosed and treated left, right and centre. I was wrong – wrong because I had been seeing it through the prism of my own experience: essentially, that I had been able to pay to see a specialist. For everyone else, Shelford made clear, it's a very long wait. And the stakes can be very high. The biggest single donor to his charity is the family of a teenager who took their own life as, in the absence of treatment for ADHD, their world overwhelmed them.

Unwelcome confirmation of all this came from an old schoolfriend of mine, a GP, at his surgery in the Midlands. He told me that the wait for a referral for adult ADHD on his patch stands at five years. Through the NHS Right to Choose system – which facilitates referrals to different health authorities – the wait can be significantly shorter, measured in months rather than years. In this way, my doctor friend had managed to sort something for a patient – only to find that by the time he had done so, his patient was (back) in prison. People with ADHD are greatly overrepresented in the prison population.

Shelford, like me, is squeamish about the idea of ADHD as some kind of superpower. Yes, if you can harness the chaotic torrents of thought, there is the potential for great things to be achieved. But for every Heston Blumenthal, who has been speaking of his diagnosis, there are probably hundreds of budding chefs with ADHD who, unlike Heston, never managed to find a way of making it work in their favour. Also, let's not forget this potential for high achievement cuts both ways. For every Albert Einstein, there will be a Vladimir Putin – and I'm serious about the latter; I know a good cognitive behavioural therapist who could help him out,

if he's interested. I digress; it's in my nature to do so. The key point is that, as ever, it generally depends on which side of the tracks you are born. ADHD can be hell whichever side you hail from, but if it's the wrong side, where your condition is likely to be untreated, your symptoms are more likely to lead you into the darkest places.

The other key point Shelford put me right on concerns my oft-ranted rant about the stigma around mental health problems being much less of an issue than it is made out to be – certainly less of an issue than access to care.

Why, I've banged on publicly about having ADHD, and my dependence on alcohol, and it has never done me any harm. But now I realise this is because of my line of work. As a freelance writer and broadcaster, my mental health doesn't much matter (in a good way) to whomsoever engages my services. If they like what I write or broadcast, then I'm in. I suppose it's the same with many trades: a plumber, electrician, footballer or rock star might be tormented by their condition but if they deliver, they deliver. Shelford points out how hard it can be getting work in the corporate world, in places where you are often employed rather than contracted, in organisations with, ironically, human resources departments. Here, ADHD on your CV is rarely going to be to your advantage. How naive I was to think otherwise. And on this occasion, I'm not going to blame my own neurodiversity for such blinkered, selfish thinking.

MY AGAVE PLANT IS IN FULL BLOOM

But it's a bittersweet bonanza ...

There is a great big plant outside my place. It looks bewildered to find itself in west London. Its leaves are like the tongues of giant lizards, with prickly edges and nasty spikes. This summer, out of their ferocious midst, a thick stalk emerged suddenly and grew, almost overnight, to an astonishing height. There was a certain exhibitionist arrogance about this new weapon in its armoury.

Enquiries revealed the plant to be *Agave americana*. This species is commonly known as the century plant, although typically it lives for 10 to 30 years. I read with great sadness that it sends up the magnificent, branched stalk only the once, as it comes to the end of its life. This changed everything between me and that stalk. Where once I cowered beneath it, I now look up with an admiration grounded in sorrow. But what better way to rage against the dying of the light than throwing up a wondrous flowering phallus towards the sky?

I can't bear to think about how the end will come. If it were just to droop, that would be a sorry, humiliating way of bowing out. Better that, I suppose, and less dangerous, than for it to snap suddenly, possibly taking me or one of my fellow residents with it. Before that time comes, I feel as if my neighbours and I should gather – cautiously – beneath it, perhaps even joining hands as we mourn its imminent passing. If I could, I would get it transported back to Mexico to die in peace, in the home of its ancestors.

✍ It died. And the whole thing was taken away, phallus and all. The gardener gave me an offshoot, which I have planted ...

EVERY AUTUMN I AM SHUNNED BY MY FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS

Year after year, I struggle to give away an enormous crop of scarred, worm-eaten apples

Every autumn the world divides into those with fruit trees and those without. The latter need to be on high alert for the people bearing fruit. A friend, a colleague, even a passing stranger can stage an ambush. Before you know it, they will have whipped out a bag of their produce and thrust it under your nose so that intense, musty smell specific to sacks of fruit assaults your senses. 'Help yourself,' they say. 'Ooh, lovely!' you are forced to exclaim. It's the simple gift there is no polite way to refuse.

You will look into the bag to see dozens of imperfect apples, scarred and blotched. Some will be holed, the work of worms that have burrowed in, perhaps never to emerge. But you mustn't be squeamish and turn up your nose. Have you not railed against the suspicious gloss and symmetry of supermarket fruit? Now here is the real thing and you must dig in, and dig deep, and be the opposite of picky. You must actively enthuse. Mmm, authentic!

There is a lot going on here. The pressure is acute, on both sides. We bearers of fruit are weighed down by our bounty, oppressed by the need to pass it on before we have to bin it. Yes, we can juice it and puree it, but there are only so many hours in the day. And there is only so much of it we can eat; only so much Imodium we can safely take.

This autumn has not been quite so bad. I have fewer and better apples. I followed some advice that when the fruit first starts to develop in little clusters on the branches, you should

leave just one apple from each cluster to grow to a decent size, instead of half a dozen tiddlers.

Something had to change. Last September, my single tree yielded possibly 200 undersized apples. My neighbours started shunning me, pretending to be out when I knocked on the door. Others crossed the road if they saw me coming. Nobody came visiting. I resorted to taking my produce to work. This was in the weeks after the death of the Queen. I was broadcasting live from Canada Gate, across the way from Buckingham Palace. I did good business on the first day, shifting a couple of dozen to producers, technicians, royal correspondents and other contributors. But on day two I detected a loss of enthusiasm. Perhaps someone had found a worm and sent out a warning.

My rucksack remained heavy with apples as I wandered around the temporary memorial flowerbeds of Green Park, speaking to mourners. Then I had a brainwave. At the conclusion of an interview with a Canadian woman, I asked her if she would like an apple. She looked nonplussed – Canadian journalists obviously don't give items of fruit to interviewees – but nevertheless accepted and munched away happily enough. The next couple of interviewees took some too. A man down from Fife took a handful. Soon I dispensed with the interviews and just started handing out apples. People were heartbreakingly grateful. Absurdly, my gesture even took on a faintly spiritual dimension, which made me feel a bit of a fraud.

I walked back to the broadcast point with an empty rucksack. My colleagues relaxed, visibly. The pressure was off. It was over for another year.

HOW TO TELL IF SOMEONE'S REALLY AN ATHEIST? WATCH A PENALTY SHOOTOUT

There are times when everyone resorts to prayer

Each to their own, and all that, but I do occasionally enjoy challenging those who profess to have not one iota of religious belief. Nothing too heavy, you understand, as serious theology is quite beyond me. I restrict myself to a single aphorism, which goes like this: there are no atheists in a penalty shootout. I contend that most fans of the teams involved engage in something approximating prayer. The only exception will be fans behind the goal who support the team whose goalkeeper is attempting to save the penalty. These members of the congregation will tend to pause their prayers to make hostile noises and obscene hand gestures in an attempt to put off the penalty taker. By the time a player on their team is preparing to take the next penalty, they will have returned to prayer.

This aphorism began life in the context not of sport, but war – although nobody seems sure which one. I thought the contention that there were 'no atheists in foxholes' was first expressed in Vietnam, but it turns out there are examples of its use in the Second World War and, albeit referencing trenches rather than foxholes, in the First World War. The same idea was alive and kicking in the previous century, too, when sinking ships were cited as a good place for faith-testing. Before that, I suppose the idea that there wasn't some deity in charge was thought too absurd to merit challenge.

This all came to mind during the making of a series called *My Life at Christmas* for BBC One, in which I spend an hour talking to a well-known person – or people, in the case of Martin and Shirlie Kemp – about what Christmas means

to them. I was worried it might come across as a bit, well, cheesy, but once I had reluctantly caved in to the producer's demands that I wear a Christmas jumper, I decided to just embrace the idea. I'm good like that.

And I'm so glad I did, because it turns out that getting people to reflect on the Christmases of their life is a remarkably efficient way of getting to the heart of them. Childhood and adulthood; home and professional life; hopes and dreams; joy and despair; success and failure. It's all there. Religious belief – or lack thereof – is part of their stories, too. The champion dancer Oti Mabuse talks of church being a sanctuary for her when she was a kid growing up in Pretoria. Martin Kemp professes no faith, but nods when I invite him to try my aphorism on for size. He concedes that he resorted to prayer when brain tumours put his life in danger. Shirlie, who was eventually confirmed as a Christian when she was 60, found herself in a hospital chapel praying angrily – as she put it – for Martin's recovery.

John Simpson, foreign correspondent for nearly 60 of his 79 years, found solace, if not conviction, in Christianity. But this was long after he survived torture and a mock execution at the hands of Christian militia in Lebanon in 1982. I asked him if, as the trigger was about to be pulled, he prayed. He said he didn't. Neither did he thank God for salvation when the gun barrel proved to be empty. So, for John, this was no penalty shootout/foxhole/trench/sinking-ship moment.

I asked him if, 40 years on, anything had changed; whether if, perish the thought, he was facing execution again, he would turn to prayer. He said he probably would. I suggested he probably shouldn't. 'Never change a winning formula' would be my advice.

FORGET WINNING STREAKS, IT'S THE BAD TIMES THAT REALLY FUSE US TOGETHER

Research into fans of rival football teams indicates that adversity has a surprisingly bonding effect

I once wrote a book exploring exactly what goes on between the ears of football fans. It was called *We Don't Know What We're Doing* and will now cost you anything up to 50p to buy. I spoke to fellow West Brom fans who had not missed a game for 30 years and then just gave up and never went again; there were others who never thought about going until they were in their 40s and then went every week, home and away. One young woman had been watching our team for her whole life without ever seeing us concede a goal. This she achieved by closing her eyes whenever the opposition looked likely to score.

At the time, around 2003, I couldn't find a great deal of academic research into the psychological aspects of football fandom. Something I did come across was the work of Dr Sandy Wolfson at Northumbria University. She had done lots of interesting stuff on football's contribution to social cohesion, pointing out that a match was a rare place where a binman and a high court judge could be in each other's company on the same level. She had also looked at how fans viewed their counterparts at other clubs as inferior in every aspect bar one: they considered themselves more passionate, funny, loyal and knowledgeable than fans of rival teams but, hilariously, not better-looking.

I didn't realise it at the time, but my book was essentially about what psychologists call fusion. If you are exceptionally passionate and loyal to something, you are said to be

psychologically fused with it. I have been educated in this concept recently by a cognitive anthropologist, Dr Martha Newson. She has studied football fans in some depth, even going so far as to harvest their saliva to see what their teams' performances were doing to their cortisol levels, cortisol being related to stress. Just so you know, the more fused you are to your team, the more your cortisol levels tend to rise.

I was intrigued by her latest research into the differences between supporters of more and less successful teams. Which, she set out to discover, are more fused with their clubs?

As a fan of one of the underachieving clubs studied, the results surprise me not a jot: followers of the most successful clubs are less devoted to their clubs than long-suffering fans of the likes of West Brom, Crystal Palace, Norwich and Sunderland. When asked if they would be prepared to sacrifice nothing less than their lives for their fellow supporters, more than a third of Palace fans said they would. In contrast, fewer than 10 per cent of Arsenal fans were prepared to do so.

And the fascinating conclusion Newson's research leads us to is that sharing bad times is more bonding than sharing good times: euphoria is all every well but it's dysphoria, essentially its opposite, that brings us together. This, you would hope, might be a positive outcome of the pandemic, given that all seven billion of us on the planet are going through the same thing. My cognitive anthropologist friend takes this point but quotes me a line from a brilliant poem by Damian Barr that seems to me to embrace nothing less than the biggest truth about humanity itself: 'We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.'

I DON'T WANT A BARBECUE. NOT EVEN IN LOCKDOWN

The food, the cooking process, our climate – there's nothing good about them. And I always overeat

Oh joy, we can have barbecues again, while in lockdown. What a disappointment. Barbecues have so much not to commend them. We don't have the right climate, for a start. As with those other summer pastimes – cricket and lawn tennis, which we happened to invent – the UK doesn't have the weather for barbecuing. So much uncertainty prevails.

In the old days, before gas barbecues, the preparation of the charcoal was a decidedly uncertain business, too. Still ringing in my ears are the bollockings my mum gave my dad for not getting the thing burning quickly enough, or indeed at all. Then gas came along, which is more reliable but surely renders the whole thing pointless. Cooking food over charcoal has something going for it; cooking food over a line of gas flames resembling F-16 afterburners doesn't.

Then there's the food itself, which presents a problem for me, whatever its quality. If it's bad, it's bad. There's a very thin line between what is artfully charred and what is simply burnt. If it's good, then, however good it is, there is always too much of it, and I can't see food go to waste. If it's bad, I still have to eat it as I can't bear to see food thrown away.

All barbecues end the same way for me: I sit there in a light drizzle under darkening skies sipping warm beer. Having overeaten to a gruesome extent, there's grease all around my mouth and a creaking sound emanating from the region of my distended belly as it strains against my belt. Please, no more.

ISN'T IT IRENIC? IT'S TIME TO BRING BACK BEAUTIFUL WORDS WE HAVE LOST

The word for 'tending to create peace' is one of dozens of forgotten positive terms – while negative terms flourish. Let's redress the balance

I have been trying to make a small impression on my pile of unread editions of the *London Review of Books*. While I have neither the time nor the brain for much of the content, there's always something brilliant in there for me. This is usually a fascinating biography of someone I've never heard of, generally presented in the course of a review of a biography – one written by someone who plainly feels they know the subject better than the biographer.

On this occasion, the discovery of just one word, in a piece by Rosemary Hill, was worth the cover price. She uses the word 'irenic' to describe the son of John Lewis, the original draper. Irenic? I'd emphatically never come across this word before. This is a shame because it describes something beautiful. As I'm sure *Guardian* readers will know, it means, according to *Chambers*, 'tending to create peace'; my *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* has it as 'aiming or aimed at peace'. Either way, sweet.

The lexicographer and etymologist Susie Dent tells me that it comes from *Eirene*, the Greek goddess of peace, who also gives us the name Irene. What a pity, then, that you don't hear of many Irenes these days. I'm sure my nan knew an Irene, but that's about it in my life. I searched a list of 50 famous Irenes and hadn't heard of any of them. However, I'm so glad I looked, because I came across the quite fabulously named actor and director Irene Miracle.

It says something bad about us that this beautiful word, irenic, has fallen out of use, as has its only real synonym, pacific. As Dent points out in her book *Word Perfect*, negative words are more likely to flourish than positive ones. She reminds me that there is no synonym for love and yet we have endless choices for hate, and that while once we could be ruly, couth, wieldy, pecunious, mayed, ept, gruntled and so on, now we can only be their opposites.

Bring back irenic, I say. Get the word out to Alanis Morissette; she can redeem herself with this idea in song. And as for Irene Miracle, it turns out she won a Golden Globe for her role in *Midnight Express*, so that's what I'll be watching this evening.

THERE'S NOTHING COOL ABOUT REGIONAL PRIDE. THAT'S WHY I LOVE BIRMINGHAM

Brummies don't bang on about their home town – and thank God for that

When I turn left out of the hotel where I often stay in Manchester, I pass a patch of derelict land next to a pub. Written large on the wall of this establishment is some street art. The legend reads: 'ON THE SIXTH DAY GOD CREATED MANCHESTER'.

Now, I don't think He did, but that is not my issue. While I acknowledge that the artist's tongue may have been in his or her cheek, it is the self-love that does my head in. I really like the city and the people. And, in so far as I am qualified to say what is cool and what isn't, they both seem cool to me. But cool people surely know that the most uncool thing in the world is bigging oneself up.

Most cities and regions do this to some extent, but Manchester is right up there with Yorkshire on this one. Again, a genuinely wonderful part of the world, urban and rural – but do stop telling us, please. How many times have you heard someone from Yorkshire say, as though they are paying themselves the biggest compliment ever, that they are 'Yorkshire through and through'? Meaning what exactly? If a bloke walks into a room and says: 'Hey, everyone, I'm really brilliant,' everyone in the room rolls their eyes. So why would banging on about a place be any different?

For this reason, I won't bang on about my city, Birmingham, other than to say that what is so great about us is that we never bang on about how great we are.

For many years, there was a luminously brilliant website that promoted the second city. Do look it up. It is called birminghamitsnotshit.co.uk.

That is as much as we are prepared to say in our own favour – and that is what makes us the greatest city on God's green earth.

FOUR LITRES OF WATER A DAY? REALLY?

I used to laugh at my friends' frequent toilet breaks

I have long been proud of my bladder control. Not for me the frequent, often urgent, toilet visits of my fellow middle-aged friends. Motorway pit stops not for petrol, just for a pee? Not me. Nor was I ever heard to say, before setting off, 'Ooh, I'd better just pop to the loo.' No need, you see. And in pubs, the hours I'd spend drumming my fingers, lonely as a cloud, waiting for my friends to return from the gents. Poor souls, ageing quicker than me, I reflected, smugly.

Hubris, sheer hubris. Last week, I read that a chap of my age and weight – 55, and 97kg (15st 4lb) – should be drinking 3.7 litres (6.6 pints) of water a day. Since I have complied with this guidance, my pride in my bladder has been flushed away. No wonder I could control it – there was hardly anything going in there.

While I've long started the day with a pint of water, apart from the odd tea or coffee that would be about it until teatime. Not any more. Before I know it, a smartwatch app is badgering me to drink some more. But the input side of things is less of a challenge than the output. I'm forever running – and I mean running – to the toilet.

How on earth do the properly hydrated get anything done? How do they ever travel anywhere? It's a mystery. I'd like to know the hydration levels of the super-busy. I bet they're as low as reservoirs in August. I'm sure the lavatories at the G20 are underused. There's no way those world leaders are doing their 3.7 litres. If they were, we'd forever be seeing them hurrying in and out of plenary sessions. Hydration has changed everything for me. I want my life back.

IS THERE ANYTHING MORE SHAMING THAN SHELVES FULL OF BOOKS YOU'LL NEVER READ?

I am infuriated by people whose libraries are only for show. But it's time to tackle my own backlog

It is nice to have a wall full of books. Being sigs of great intellectual virtue, bookshelves are enjoying their moment in the sun, choicely lit in the background of a thousand Zoom interviews on TV. My own shelves reproach me, as I behold the spines of so many books I have never actually, you know, read. It's cheating, that's what it is. You should only be allowed to display books you have finished, or at least started. When I see someone opining about something with all their books on display behind them, it makes me mad. 'You can't have read them all!' I yell, throwing one of my own unread Grantas at the screen. 'You haven't been alive long enough to have read them all.'

Over the weekend, I met a nice guy who's done a deal with himself to get through all his unread books before he buys any more. John Budden, sometime footballer at Crystal Palace among others, went on to be a headteacher and then chief executive of a group of academy schools. He is presently on a bit of a career break, which is just as well because he has got 125 books to read.

'It started with a house move when I was sorting them out and realised how many I'd never read,' he told me. 'Also, one of my best pals died at 50. He was the first of my friends to die of natural causes rather than an accident or anything, and it really made me think. I looked at those 125 books and thought: "I'd be lucky to read them all before I die."' And so he committed himself to doing just that.

John is fascinated by the fact that these books were either bought by him or given to him by someone who knows him well, and yet he has never read them. 'It raises a really interesting philosophical question about why we choose the art we choose at that time. And I still don't really know what the answer is.'

He reckons he is now around halfway through his reading list and says the joys have been many, including finally reading a copy of *Oliver Twist* he bought on a school trip to Rochester 35 years ago. The glue had gone from the spine and the pages were falling out. He has at last got to the end of it and realised that the book is not very much like the musical at all; it was, he says, 'like a big reveal'. He's also loved two Philip Roths: *I Married a Communist* and *Patrimony*.

But this mammoth task has not been without hardship. He is one of those people who can't not finish a book once he has started it. Patrick White, the Australian Nobel Prize winner, was recommended to him by his English teacher when he was 17. Thirty-two years on, he finally got around to grinding his way through *Riders in the Chariot*. I salute his diligence.

Nigh on flinching with shame, I squint at some of the pristine paperbacks on my shelves. I have picked three to be getting on with: *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth, *The Ginger Man* by JP Donleavy, and *West Bromwich Albion: The Complete Record* by Tony Matthews. But before I can start, John texts me, confessing that he couldn't finish *The Conservationist* by Nadine Gordimer. So, I am going to read that one, just to earn myself a small patch of literary high ground next to him.

✍ More than two years on, I'm ashamed to say I haven't read, or even started, any of those three books.

LIFE LESSONS FROM BOXERS? CONTROL YOUR AGGRESSION AND FORGIVE FOES

Boxers consistently make for fabulously peaceful, thoughtful and rewarding company

In covering the Olympics for BBC radio, it's been my privilege to speak to all sorts of sportsmen and women. Once again, I've been reminded that boxers never give bad interviews. The latest one to impress me has been Karriss Artingstall, who won bronze in the featherweight division, after losing on points by a whisker in her semi-final. Artingstall, from Macclesfield, left school at 15, took up boxing, joined the army, where she's a gunner in the Royal Horse Artillery, and eventually became an Olympian. Ben Whittaker, the light-heavyweight from the Black Country, wanted not only a gold medal but to become mayor of Wolverhampton. Sadly, he lost in the final to Cuba's Arlen López, something on which he wasn't putting a brave face. 'You don't win silver; you lose gold,' he said.

These are gifted amateurs but, as with the pros, there's always a handy turn of phrase, some straight talking and a fascinating backstory. Of all the athletes I've been lucky enough to speak to, boxers are the most rewarding. Outside the build-up to, and immediate aftermath of, big fights there's a noticeable sense of thoughtfulness and peace about them.

The first boxer I ever interviewed was Richie Woodhall, the former world super-middleweight champion you'll now hear commentating. It was 25 years ago that I spoke to him for a business programme called *Working Lunch*. It was a feature about how people in different walks of life managed their finances. He spoke with startling eloquence about

the challenges of being a kid suddenly paid big money and having to be careful not to squander it before getting a tax bill a year or two later. The responses to that interview from our audience were all the same: what a remarkably intelligent young man that boxer was.

The truth is that they, like me, had low expectations of boxers. And why wouldn't we? After all, we generally only ever see them either behaving childishly at weigh-ins or engaged in the brutality of the fight itself. Outside of this circus, it turned out, they are different creatures altogether. Why is this? I suspect one answer is rather simple: all the aggression in their bodies is expended in the gyms and rings in which they train and fight. But there is something more profound going on too. Richie once told me that the one thing you could never do in the ring was get angry. 'Once you get angry,' he said, 'you've had it.'

I just spoke to Woodhall again, and he's clear where boxers get their sense of peace from. 'It's all about self-control. It takes an enormous amount of self-control to manage your emotions when punches are raining down to you. Very few people have that level of self-control; it goes against all your natural instincts. It's something boxers have to learn, or they'll never be boxers.' The boxing expert Steve Bunce takes a similar view. 'Boxers simply have very little to prove away from the ring: no inferiority or short-man problems; no need to test their bullshit manhood. They do all of that four and five nights each week. They are the last to throw punches, the first to stop fights.'

Covering Muhammad Ali's funeral in Louisville, Kentucky, I got to know Mike Costello, a peerless commentator on boxing and athletics. He's endlessly fascinated by the transformation in the personalities of the boxers he knows so well. 'There's tension during the early part of fight week, but on the day of

the weigh-in it's as if they pull down a mask that changes their character. Close to the fight, a day away, and that nice bloke you've known disappears and the beast emerges. I haven't known such a stark contrast in any sporting build-up that I've worked on. 'They are special people, complex characters who, as [the legendary boxer] Roberto Durán once said, go to really dark places and yet come out the other side as some of the most decent people you could meet. And I'm lucky – I've met a lot of them.'

If you never get to meet a boxer – and perhaps wouldn't want to anyway as you can't bear the sport – then there is a moment after every fight that might possibly convince you that the likes of Costello, Bunce and I aren't merely punch-drunk with love for the whole business: it's the embrace that follows the bell marking the end of the bout. One moment the contenders are apparently intent on inflicting real harm, the next they're locked into a loving clinch no less fierce. It's a sign of sporting respect on a different level to what you might see between players at the end of a tennis or football match.

'Yes, that is a special moment,' says Woodhall. 'It's about respecting someone no matter what's happened in the fight or the build-up. And it's truthful; there's no bullshit. And that's magical, that is.'

Love or hate boxing, there are surely lessons in life here for all of us: by whatever means you choose, expend every ounce of aggression you have in you and do so in a controlled and mindful way. Keep calm and collected, no matter what blows life lands on you. And when your particular fights have been fought, embrace your foes to forgive and forget, and move on.

AFTER TRAVELLING IN EUROPE, I'M CALLING IT: BRITISH FOOD IS THE BEST

That is, until you stop off at a motorway service station

Last month in Croatia an old Serbian guy told me a joke about the British, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the Swiss. I'm shaky on the details but it concerned a vision of paradise in which the engineers were German, the chefs were French, the lovers were Italian, the Swiss were in charge of organising everything and the police – or the 'bobbies' as my Serbian friend Slobo called them – were British. I felt a light swelling of pride at this Dixon of Dock Green characterisation of law enforcement in my home country. As for the punchline, I'm not sure how we got to it but there was some kind of muddle in which the Italians were put in charge of organising everything, which led to the policing being done by the Germans, the engineering by the French, the British did the cooking and all the lovers were Swiss.

Now, there's a lot of crass national stereotyping to unpick here. German coppers seem OK to me, and our Renault drives very nicely. As for the Swiss, while I've never had a Swiss lover, I can't imagine what they might lack for in the bedroom. My friend told me he once offended a Swiss bloke with this joke, and now he had offended me. It wasn't the first time I'd heard my home country's food casually disparaged. And I'm not having it. Having spent three weeks travelling around Europe this summer, I know for sure that, depending on the criteria, we're the best.

Where we win hands down is on variety. I was told the joke in a bustling village by a harbour on an island in the Adriatic. I love the place and I've spent an awful lot of time there, although

I won't name it lest I cause offence with what I'm about to say, resulting in me being killed, cooked and eaten next time I'm there. But within five minutes' walk of the cafe where we were sitting were about 20 restaurants. I've been to them all at some time or other. While some are better than others, the standard of food is generally excellent – seafood, some meat, plenty of salads, a lot of chard and a pizza or two. However, the menus are about the same wherever you go. The offering hardly varies. This is true on that beloved island of mine and indeed elsewhere in continental Europe. In France you eat French, in Italy Italian, in Greece Greek, in Spain Spanish, and so on. Wherever you go, it's marvellous for the first five days and then it becomes a bit more boring with every day that passes.

In the UK, we have a bit of everything, happily offering up French, Italian, Greek or whatever you fancy. Even the smallest of our towns will probably have – in addition to a traditional cafe, chippy, restaurant or pub with food – an Indian/Bangladeshi place, something Chinese, a kebab shop and perhaps a Thai restaurant. A nonsense argument about this diversity being itself an outcome of our incompetence in the kitchen might be advanced, but even if this is the case, what of it? How lucky we are not to be living in the culinary monoculture that is the norm for many of our European cousins.

The area in which we are comparatively and embarrassingly ill served is what we might term food on the move. Our motorway services are overcrowded and overpriced, featuring all the usual suspect mega-brands. Off the motorways you'll find next to nothing, and if you do, well, good luck. Best of British.

On the continent, however, it is a different story. Going back to where I started this rant, in Croatia, there seem to be excellent little family restaurants at every other bend in the road. And the motorway services, as elsewhere in Europe,

are spotless and replete with interesting stuff you want to eat and drink. Somewhere in Belgium, along with fuel, we got a small loaf of bread as black as night, with some nice cheese. In Italy, east of Venice, the chap mending the espresso machine filled my mug for free. But my personal favourite was one of Landzeit's Autobahn-Restaurants in Austria, just south of Wels. Ye gods, it was like a cross between Fortnum & Mason, your best local buffet restaurant and your favourite farmers' market. Mountains of salad and vegetables; hams and strings of things hanging all about; a fish counter; patisserie; and sausages – meat and vegan – so thick and long you could have rolled cricket pitches with them. Agog, I looked again out of the window. Yes, there was a motorway out there and this was therefore a motorway service station.

The chefs looked like chefs, and not in a fancy dress way. It wasn't just the outfits; they knew their onions. Each counter was like a different cookery class. Other staff were kitted out in what I took to be traditional Austrian dress. Bit kitsch, I suppose, but why not? Could we bring the dog in? But of course! And here's some water and snacks for him. I was filled with regret that we'd only popped in to charge the car and had to be somewhere else by nightfall. Otherwise, I would have stayed for the night, or even a week. I may make a special journey back there next year. Before we left, heavy of heart, I startled one member of staff by barking at her in poor German that it was the best Autobahn-Restaurant I'd ever come across in all my days.

I'm now working on a joke of my own featuring a vision of paradise in which we find a Croatian roadside restaurant, an Austrian motorway service station, a faulty Italian espresso machine and a British curry house. Feel free to come up with your own punchline.

IN THE WASTELANDS, BUDDLEIA IS A SYMBOL OF OUR NATIONAL NEGLECT

The purple shrub thrives in dereliction and decay. How much better things would be if it had nowhere to grow

A couple of years ago, I was with a TV director, standing on Soho Road in Handsworth, Birmingham. There was a break in filming while someone faffed around with something. This gave the two of us a chance to pause and admire a derelict pub called the Red Lion. It was built at the start of the last century and remains, for all its dilapidation, magnificent.

My colleague pointed at a bush, thriving improbably out of a crack high up in the terracotta facade. 'That,' he said, 'is a buddleia. It's incredibly hardy, it can take root anywhere.'

Ever since, I have been seeing buddleia everywhere. Admittedly, this could be because it is one of about six plant species I can identify correctly. But it is the association with dereliction and decay that niggles away. It's not a bad-looking thing with its slender purple flowers: a splash of colour swaying in the monochrome of unloved, uncared for, unproductive land and property. But how much better it would be if we lived in a country where it had nowhere to grow.

There are 140 kinds of buddleia, also known as summer lilac, butterfly-bush, or orange eye. Many are pretty little things you may hear about on *Gardeners' Question Time*. The variety that has taken root in my mind is *Buddleja davidii*, named after the French missionary and naturalist Father Armand David, who first spotted the shrubs on his travels in China in the 19th century. It seems like Pere Armand was a nice chap; I doubt he would have been much pleased to see the flora bearing his name becoming a sure signifier of neglect.

I divide most of my time between London, Birmingham and Manchester. It is in the latter two where the buddleia leers in greatest abundance. These great post-industrial cities are trying their damnedest to better themselves, but even in the city centres there are wastelands galore where Father Armand's seeds germinate and take root. I have read that those who lived through the postwar years called the buddleia the 'bomb-site plant'. But that was then; what are we doing with so much land and so many buildings resembling bomb-sites now?

In an old piece I found on the BBC website, I came across the suggestion that 'it stakes an increasingly plausible claim for the title of Britain's national flower'. So a plant that thrives where our life no longer thrives could be a symbol of modern Britain? That's just about the saddest thing I have read in a while.

In London, incidentally, I can go from one week to the next without seeing either branch or flower of a buddleia. There is scarce habitat for them you see. Such are property prices that a spare plot the size of a squash court will have eight flats built on it before a buddleia seed can sow itself.

If you are so minded, by the way, in Brexit terms you can get a bit 'leavey' about the buddleia. How dare this foreign species, with its easily dispersible seeds, grow all over the place, highlighting our shortcomings? Reassuringly, the GB Non-Native Species Secretariat has noted its proliferation. This unsettlingly Orwellian-sounding organisation is a government body, but sounds as if it might be the horticultural wing of the European Research Group. Either way, send the buddleia back to China, I say: we have too much use for it here.

WE NEED TO GET RID OF BUSINESS JARGON. DO I HAVE YOUR BUY-IN?

I hate it when language is used to exclude and obscure. But it takes guts to resist

My first job in journalism was in business news. This wasn't my first choice; in truth it would probably have been my last, but it was the only place that would have me. I was as bewildered as the next work experience bod but, since I had three weeks there, I thought I might as well try to get to the bottom of the stuff they were talking about. At school, no teacher ever had to encourage me to put my hand up if I didn't understand something. Invariably, my hand was raised already. My powers of concentration, severely limited at the best of times, diminish to zero if I hear words and phrases with which I am unfamiliar, so the need for clarification has always been urgent. I'm sure my teachers got tired of this, but not half as tired as the staff in the BBC's Business Programmes department.

'What's RPI?'

'Inflation,' someone would explain.

'But what's it stand for?'

'Retail Price Index.'

'Oh. And what's RPI-X then?'

And so on.

All this came back to me when I was in conversation with the speechwriter Philip Collins about his book *To Be Clear: A Style Guide for Business Writing*. In it, he explores why so much business writing has become dreary, boring and incomprehensible, with all its jargon, cliches and downright absurdities. Collins pores unlovingly over an address

Microsoft's chief executive gave to his employees in 2015. Satya Nadella told his flock that their 'mission is to empower every person and every organisation on the planet to achieve more'. Every person on the planet? Really? I can't put it better than Collins when he wonders if 'every person, no matter what their passion – Benedictine monks, repertory actors doing Shakespeare, the company that has the cleaning contract for Birmingham city council, a retired crofter on Jura – there is not one of them that will not find their capacity to live the good life enhanced by Microsoft'.

The truly terrifying thought is this: there must have been people in the audience that day who actually bought this drivel and admired the boss for sharing it with them.

It's almost a cliche in itself to marvel at new and terrible buzzwords. When exactly was it that people started telling us they would revert rather than get back to us? When did things start being done at pace, rather than quickly? Buy-in? Core competency? What was policy based on before it was evidence-based?

To search companies' mission statements is to take a tour of Planet Cringe. My favourite so far is McKinsey's. The promise here is to help organisations create the 'Change that Matters'. The capital letters are McKinsey's. In order to effect this Change that Matters, the consultancy explains, it partners with clients 'from the C-suite to the front line'. C-suite? That was a new one on me. Who or what is this C-suite? What does the C stand for? Well, that might depend on whether you ask somebody plying their trade on the 'front line' or someone with a seat in the C-suite itself. Because it turns out that the C, I was appalled to read – from between my fingers – stands for chief, as in chief executive officer, chief financial officer etc. Oh please.

The conversation with Collins was on my radio programme. It was all entertaining stuff that, judging by the texts, our listeners greatly enjoyed. Alison, a former senior employee of a bank, said that, in her experience, 'jargon was the gift of the person desperate to get on without having any more talent than their peers'.

Another message unsettled me. A man in Wiltshire who had worked in several big corporations said: 'The introduction of a new language, buzzwords, is a form of control. If you can get people to talk like you, you can get them to think like you.'

This is so true, and I for one have been guilty of it. Back in the day, as soon as I had learned a new bit of jargon, I would be using it at every opportunity. It was a way of showing I was a grown-up and one step above whichever befuddled work-experience kid came along behind me. It's a brave and brilliant person indeed who dares to use only the simplest language possible to make themselves clear.

I HAD SUCH BAD CAR SICKNESS AS A KID THAT THE SMELL OF DAD'S VOLVO WOULD SET ME OFF

As I stopped in a lay-by recently, the memories flooded back. No trip to Wales was complete without me throwing up

To free the dog from a tangle he had got himself into on the back seat, I stopped in a lay-by on the A491, just off the M5. A strong memory stirred. Ah yes, I vomited here once. I was a kid, in the back of my dad's car, on the regular drive from the West Midlands to our caravan in south Wales. I was always, but always, car sick.

On a good day, I'd make it over the border into Wales, even surviving the then tortuous Heads of the Valleys road but, one way or another, before journey's end, there would be an incident. A wail from me, a curse from Dad, a screech of brakes, a leap from Mum out of the front seat to open the back door for me to stagger out and heave. The whole operation was as slick as a Formula One pit stop. The A491 lay-by puke stuck in my mind because it was my quickest ever on that journey; we were barely five minutes into it. 'Not already, surely,' moaned my dad. Oh yes. Curse, screech, door, heave, and we were on the road again. It was good to get it out the way early doors, I suppose we thought.

Whatever happened to car sickness? Is it still a thing? A doctor tells me that the meds are a lot more effective now. Kids these days don't know they're born. The tablets I was given – Sea-Legs, I think they were called – weren't much help. All in all, the whole business blighted my kidhood. It got to the stage where just a whiff of my dad's Volvo was enough to turn my stomach. My poor parents. One time we couldn't

safely stop, and all my mum had to hand was a paper bag. She got it to me just in time. We had two seconds to breathe sighs of relief before the sodden bottom of the bag gave way, depositing its cargo all over my lap. Where were you when Elvis died? I know where I was. I was bent double on a grass verge in the car park at Strensham services with my mum holding my forehead. Oh, the memories.