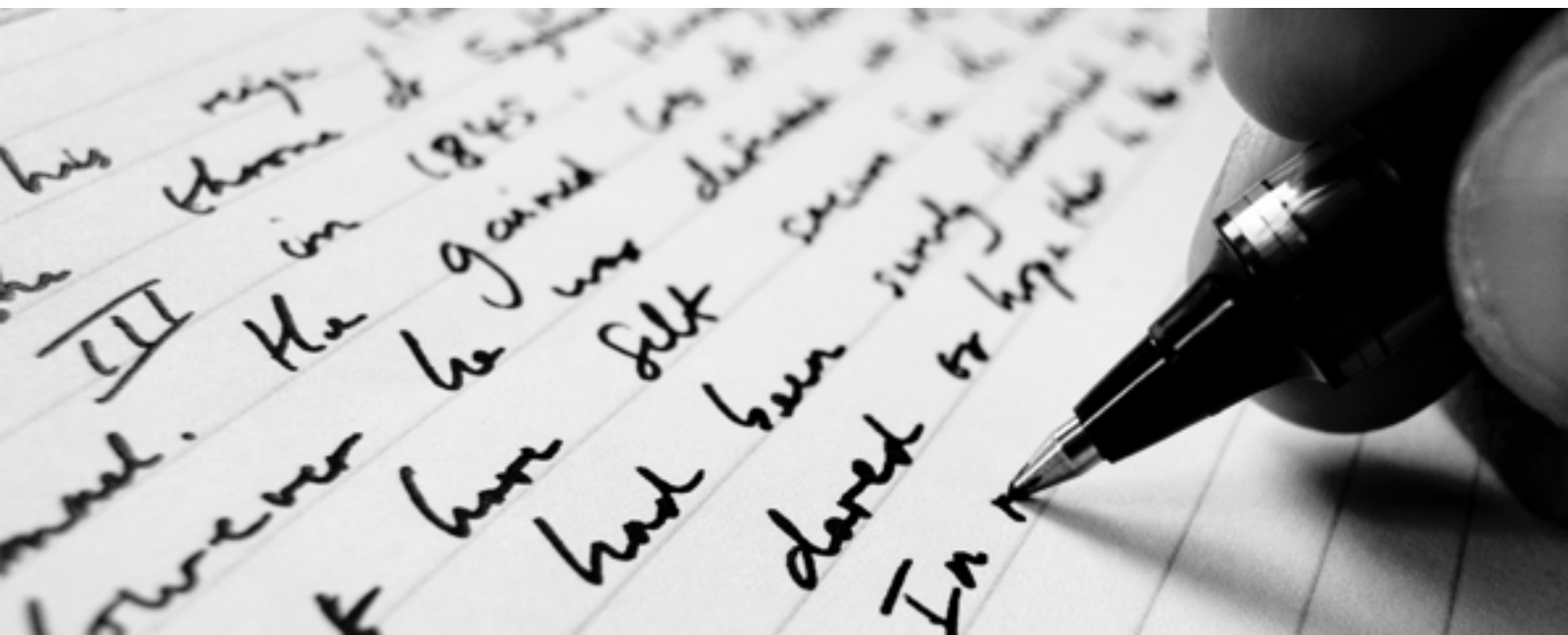# Nat 5 and Higher Persuasive Folio Inspiration

Ryan Gosling in La La Land is every bad date you ever had

Chances are, after yesterday's events in DC, you're feeling a little bruised. Traumatised, even. So, you are likely seeking some escapism and, given that literal escape by moving to Mars is, for now, not a possibility, it is also likely that everyone and your mum will suggest you go and see La La Land, written and directed by 31-year-old Damien Chazelle. And sure, it is a gorgeous movie, as far from Trump as The Wizard Of Oz is from getting a root canal. But, actually, I didn't love it, which is strange, because two of my favourite genres are movies about movies, and films in which the female lead is blatantly better at singing and dancing than the man, and La La Land cheerfully ticks both those boxes.

There are many reasons this movie failed to make me feel as if I was dancing on the ceiling of the Griffith Observatory, but the main one was this: Ryan Gosling's character is every bad date I have ever had. Gosling plays Sebastian, a jazz snob, the kind whose response to a woman saying she "hates jazz" is to tell her she's wrong and take her to a jazz club on every date thereafter. He is also, as a sidenote, often an actual jerk, one who thinks it is acceptable to barge aggressively into a woman because he feels unappreciated by Da Man, and then not apologise to her until months later, and only because she orders him to do so.

But the movie paints all this as part of Sebastian's old-fashioned passion, and if he's rude sometimes, well, that's because he is – as he proudly says – "a romantic", too busy defending freestyle jazz against music that doesn't sound like noises you'd hear in an animal rescue home to worry about manners. I realised this movie and I were not about to embark on a romance when Sebastian's snobbish behaviour gets him fired from his piano-playing job, meaning he then has to play keyboard in an 80s tribute band, knocking out songs like Take On Me – and the movie depicts this as his "humiliation".

Take On Me! One of the greatest songs ever written! I'd love to hear more about your artistic soul, Sebastian, but I'm too busy dancing to music that people with ears actually like.

Academic studies have been written about how romantic heroes in movies are often terrible people: stalkers, obsessives, narcissists, immature assholes. Sebastian is pretty much identical to Andrew, the jazz student in 2014's Whiplash, who sneers at anyone – girlfriend included – who doesn't share his musical taste. In this film, he's coated in the romanticised

twilight of a musical. As it happens, Whiplash was also written and directed by Damien Chazelle, and I found it hard to focus on La La Land because I was distracted by an increasingly pressing question: did I once date Damien Chazelle?

Every woman has dated the jazz snob. Even Sex And The City did an episode about Carrie dating a jazz snob, who managed to be more annoying than the twentysomething man Carrie slept with in another episode. And all thirtysomething women know there are few things worse than dating a twentysomething man (#yesalltwentysomethingmen).

The jazz snob doesn't have to be into jazz; he just has to believe that his preferred music is the only acceptable music, and that any woman lucky enough to be in his sphere must show their worthiness by appreciating it, too. I have dated men who insisted I love reggae, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Arab Strap, Mogwai and the Red Hot Chili Peppers (that one didn't last long).

Jazz snobs don't even need to be into music: those guys who insist on ordering your drink because only they understand what makes a good cocktail? How you absolutely must swap your Starbucks for the fresh roasted beans they will hand-grind every morning? How you must respect their childish obsession with (insert name of sport team) while they make fun of your interest in fashion/romantic comedies/80s music? Jazz snobs, one and all.

I use the male gender advisedly, because I have yet to meet a woman who insists on imposing her taste on everyone around her. Meanwhile, I have largely dated men like that, who think the world needs to shape itself around them, and who confuse their interests with their sense of self, who are incapable of accepting that different people have different tastes. This is what happens when male entitlement meets boyish insecurity, otherwise known as A Really Bad Date.

Sadly, La La Land was more like a terrible memory rush. I should have gone to Manchester By The Sea, the other big Oscar-bait movie, about a dead brother and a tragic relationship. Comparatively, that sounds a hoot.

Written by Hadley Freeman for *The Guardian*

Princess Leia gives a generation of women a new hope

Princess Leia, portrayed by the iconic Carrie Fisher, subverted the archetypal image of women characters that were floating in mainstream cinema in the 1970s. Leia exuded an aura of self-assurance, self-governance and a sense of stability. Very rarely did she exhibit her vulnerable, feminine side. Leia's fierce determination to 'lead' (a traditionally male characteristic) the Rebellion and destroy the Evil Empire was groundbreaking in the history of how women characters were portrayed before Star Wars. Simply put, Princess Leia was a badass rebel.

As a child with a pliable mind, I was brought up on a diet of Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella fairy tales, where the eponymous characters were always shown to be dependent on men. By way of circumstances, these women cartoon characters would invariably find themselves entangled in sticky difficulties, and it was always the sword-wielding, charismatic, supremely intelligent Prince Charming who'd save the day by rescuing these women. Prince Charming was the quintessential "hero", not Snow White, not Cinderella, not Sleeping Beauty. The fairy tales were instrumental in sending out the overarching message of patriarchy, that women were meant to be beautiful, coy and patient — to be rescued, you see. When I watched Star Wars for the first time, Princess Leia stood as a jarring contrast to that message. She altered what I was conditioned to believe.

My perception of how women should behave in society changed when in Episode IV – A New Hope, Han Solo and Luke Skywalker sneaked into The Death Star to rescue Princess Leia. While the two men were engaged in a serious battle with the Stormtroopers, the Princess refused to sit back demurely, waiting for the men to finish them off. In fact, Leia was quick to pick up the gun (again, a weapon that is traditionally used by men) and fire back. She even openly mocked Han when he accidentally blocked their only route of escape. "This is some rescue!" Leia told him before shooting open an escape passage. "Somebody has to save our skin," she continued, implying that she was the one who finally would. Right then, Leia's character introduced a paradigm shift: in conventional terms, she was being "rescued", but the film dramatically steered off conventionality when the Princess decided to take matters in her own hands. Here, it was she who was the hero. Leia spoke her mind and told the men around her to zip it when they were trying to wield their male entitlement to command women. For instance, Leia tells off Han in Episode IV – A New Hope, "I don't know who you are or where you've come from, but from now on you'll do as I say, okay?" She was practical, goal-oriented and smart.

While Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia was sculpting a new sense of confidence in women, the 19-year-old Fisher at that time was as self-conscious as any adolescent girl would be. Unfortunately, Fisher was also self-deprecating. In her recent interview with NPR's Terry Gross, Fisher confessed that while many teenage boys saw her as a sex symbol, she saw herself as a "giant fat face, like a sand dab, with features…and the horrible hair…and to put more hair on either side [hair buns] on a round face was going to make it look even wider." What this anecdote revealed was that Fisher was an ordinary girl who was conscious of her physical appearance – something that societal pressure continues to successful ingrain in our minds.

Princess Leia's propensity to become a sex symbol was evident. It led George Lucas to dress Fisher in a quasi-metal bikini – an outfit that went on to achieve cult status. Bikinis were a characteristic trope in sci-fi/fantasy productions. Whether it was Jane Fonda wearing the 'spacekini' in Barbarella (1968) or Raquel Welch in the fur bikini in One Million Years (1966), the bikini pandered to the ultimate male fantasy. So, in Episode VI – Return of the Jedi, Princess Leia's character was unclothed. And she had to look sexually appealing, flawless. The director therefore, was extremely careful of Fisher's appearance. In the scene with Jabba the Hutt, Fisher was dictated to sit erect. "I couldn't have lines on my sides, like little creases," Fisher informed Gross. "No creases were allowed, so I had to sit very, very rigid straight."

However, while Princess Leia's outfit (interestingly bridled by chains) conformed to the overarching desires of the male fantasy, her character refused to conform to the role of playing the damsel, or to the idea that only the men kill the bad guys. In the scene, it's not Han Solo nor Luke Skywalker who chokes Jabba to death with the chain, but Leia herself. In that moment, Princess Leia overturns the image of a woman who is a slave, to that of a fearless warrior. She rejects the idea of pandering to male desires by killing its representation – i.e. Jabba, the slug who forces her to wear the bikini in the first place.

While on-screen Fisher embodied the feminine identity which was revolutionary and rebellious, off-screen she continued to instil hope and confidence in young women. Suffering from a mental illness which couldn't be tamed by alcohol, Fisher unflinchingly spoke about her bipolar disorder. Every now and then she doled out inspirational nuggets to women. "Stay afraid, but do it anyway. What's important is the action. You don't have to wait to be confident", she had said once, which motivated women to plunge into action. But it was her crackling wit, deep-seated in feminism that conquered the hearts of many.

Carrie Fisher and the character of Princess Leia, who Fisher confessed eventually melded into her, encapsulated the ideology of a modern woman who could think for herself and not bow to patriarchal agendas or stereotypes. The two broke the mould of feminine expectations, where Fisher, a strong champion of feminism taught young women that nothing should stop them from being themselves. Princess Leia delivered immortality to Carrie Fisher. Her passing is a monumental loss not only to cinema, but to generations of women who were taught the importance of carving their own identities, distinct from men. In short, Carrie Fisher gave our gender something we can never repay: a new hope.

Written by Radhika Iyengar for *The Indian Express*

Hollywood Sets Up Its Lady Superheroes to Fail

Female superheroes in lead roles just don't work. Isn't that what we've been told? Leaked emails from the CEOs of Marvel and Sony have called female-led superhero films disasters.

Why is that? According to a exit polls, 40 percent of the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* audience was female, and similar stats have been published for other super-powered films. This proves (to those who didn't already know) that there are women superhero fans. So why do we not get leads of our own gender?

It's understandable that studios and networks want to back money-making franchises, but let's face it: female superheroes have not been given much of a chance. I analyzed superhero films going back to 2000 and found that of the Marvel and DC films that were released theatrically since then, only 4 percent had female leads (i.e. the titular character or the top-billed actor in ensemble casts).

This was a depressing sample size of two: Catwoman and Elektra. Of these, Catwoman was the only true box office bomb; Elektra brought in more at the box office than it cost to produce. There are certainly financial failures in the 96 percent of male-led superhero films (Jonah Hex, anyone?), and yet these box-office flops have not prevented additional male-led films from being green-lit.

Female-led films are set up to fail. Let's use the Razzie-winning *Catwoman* as a case study. *Catwoman* had a production budget that was two-thirds that of *Batman Begins*, which came out the next year. Unlike the well-known directors who spearheaded male-led films, *Catwoman* had a director unknown and untested in the American market.

Catwoman's costume, clearly made for sex appeal, was criticized by fans and media alike. The male-written script may be the largest culprit. The main plot begins with Halle Berry's character being killed over…face cream. Is it any wonder *Catwoman* wasn't a success?

Some may point out that despite the lack of lone superheroine leads, there are women in ensemble casts: Storm. Emma Frost. Black Widow. Such characters have been a saving grace to female fans.

Yet it hardly seems fair that only a quarter of both the *Avengers* and the *X-Men* are women. When they do appear, these characters function largely as love interests for the male leads. Black Widow's highly-criticized role in the recent *Avengers* film is a prominent example.

The disadvantages suffered by female superheroes go even further than the films themselves. Off-screen, superheroines don't get the same merchandising support as their male counterparts do. Mark Ruffalo (yes, the Hulk himself) tweeted about the lack of Black Widow merchandise. Of the 60 items initially released for the latest *Avengers* film, Black Widow featured on just three. This under-representation not only gives superheroines a disadvantage in terms of branding, but it supports the idea that they are less important to the industry.

Television has been more willing to give female superheroes a chance. Of the DC and Marvel live-action series that aired in the past 15 years, 27 percent had female leads. ABC does deserve kudos for picking up *Agent Carter* for a second season. This spin-off of *Captain America* proves that there is an audience for female-led shows in which the main plot is not a romance. In adult 18-49 same-day Nielsen ratings, Agent Carter is on par with the male-led The Flash, Arrow and Gotham.

If only future shows would learn something from Agent Carter. Yes, *Supergirl*, I'm talking about you. The trailer for *Supergirl* markets the show as a rom-com about a ditzy blonde who goes from dorky to bombshell, falls in love, battles indecision on clothing choices, and somehow still manages to save the day in her brand-new miniskirt. So it's basically *The Devil Wears Prada*…with superpowers.

It's patronizing to market to female viewers as if we are only interested in fashion and romance. Do we not face the same major struggles that men face? The *Supergirl* trailer is shockingly similar to Scarlett Johansson's spoof of the Black Widow movie that-sadly-will-never-be on SNL. Perhaps the *Supergirl* trailer is misrepresentative of the actual show. With female writers on staff and a sizeable budget from CBS, hopefully this is true. However, if the show really is as harebrained as the trailer makes it out to be, *Supergirl* will inevitably be cancelled. When that happens, Hollywood will have one more example of how female superhero leads just don't work.

That's our double standard.

Poorly penned scripts. Rom-com female superheroes. A lack of female writers. A lack of understanding female audiences. Unknown directors. Significantly lower budgets. Little, if any, merchandising. So, to all of you naysayers out there who say that female superhero leads just don't work…well, of course they don't. How can they be expected to succeed when they are doomed to fail from the beginning?

Audiences certainly have a desire for action films and series with strong female leads: *The Hunger Games*, *Alias, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the most recent *Mad Max*. Why can't the superhero genre get on board?

Of the announced 10 DC and nine Marvel films that will be released over the next several years, each publisher had just one female-led film each. Should we be happy that they each had one? Is that 11 percent of upcoming female films so much better than the 4 percent we had before? Still, with *Captain Marvel* and Wonder Women in the works, perhaps there is hope for female superheroes. More likely than not, these films will suffer in the same way that their predecessors did.

With studios and networks putting no faith in their super-heroine content, there is little hope that female superheroes will be given the chance they deserve.

Networks and studios should invest in female-led films and series. They should hire female writers, and take the time to understand female audiences, and focus on the strength and intelligence of their female leads (as opposed to their ability to win men). If they do all this, then we stand a real chance.

You'll see: Female superheroes will just work.

Written by Kelsey Snyder for *Wired Magazine*

Rise of the apes: how Rogue One's strange birth lays bare Hollywood's imagination drought

The revelation that the Star Wars spin-off was mapped out using clips from existing movies is a reminder of the multiplex's resistance to breaking new ground. We must cherish the films that do.

It's become a familiar experience to the 21st-century cinemagoer: that nagging feeling of deja vu in the multiplex, the sense that one is seeing the same movie over and over again, ad infinitum. This is hardly surprising given seven of last year's 10 highest-grossing films were either remakes, sequels or set in a pre-existing "cinematic universe". Hollywood has become – perhaps always has been – a cultural Möbius strip, doomed to eternally travel the same path, only ever shifting its trajectory slightly; an old scratched, warped record that never plays quite the same way twice.

But while cinephiles have long become used to shelling out their hard-earned wonga to watch the same movie several times over, a new interview with the editors of Rogue One: A Star Wars Story hints that Hollywood's habit of regurgitation goes further than we imagined. It reveals the film's initial "cut", designed to map out the movie before any shooting took place, was cobbled together by editor Colin Goudie using footage from hundreds of other existing films.

For protagonist Jyn Erso's early encounter with Mon Mothma and her comrades on the Rebel council, Goudie substituted in the interrogation scene from the beginning of Aliens; for the bit where Erso and her pals break into the Imperial data vault, the editor inserted a similar scene from 1983's WarGames. Old Star Wars movies were also pilfered from. Using this celluloid patchwork quilt, director Gareth Edwards was able to devise a working template for Rogue One (albeit one that would later be ripped apart and stitched back together following extensive reshoots). How long does an Imperial shuttle take to land, a Death Star to blow up, a Mon Calamari commander to question whether the Rebel fleet might be heading into a trap? Hollywood, it seems, already had all the answers hidden in the studio vaults.

Given, then, that Edwards' film began life as a hotchpotch of old movies, the eventual parachuting in of Peter Cushing's Grand Moff Tarkin makes even more sense. For what exactly were those sublime yet utterly bizarre sequences of digital resurrection if not a CGI-assisted alternative to chopping in the best bits from Hollywood history? Who needs WarGames when Tarkin can be lifted from the original Star Wars and reanimated, pixel by pixel, using the green-screen ghost of some bloke off Holby City?

But Edwards is not alone in turning to the archives in search of inspiration. Matt Reeves, the director of forthcoming sci-fi sequel War For the Planet of the Apes, revealed recently that he and screenwriter Mark Bomback sat down and watched dozens of movies before even beginning to put pen to paper.

"We watched every Planet of the Apes movie, war movies, westerns, The Empire Strikes Back," Reeves told About Movies. "We just thought, 'We have to pretend we have all the time in the world,' even though we had limited time. We got really inspired."

Therein lies the rub, of course. Modern Hollywood requires such a blitzkrieg-paced turnover of product that studios inevitably look for shortcuts in an effort to keep the creative juices flowing. Even when they are not explicitly remaking a classic product, or putting together a sequel, a director's first instinct is therefore to duplicate, to copy, to half-inch from the past.

Such insights into the strange gestation period of the 21st-century blockbuster paint a picture, both fascinating and terrifying, of film-makers as modern-day Victor Frankensteins, constantly splicing together old parts to create new forms. Is it any wonder that, rather than bothering to come up with original ideas, JJ Abrams and his team simply recycled countless elements of the original 1977 Star Wars when putting together The Force Awakens? Does this also explain why the new Ghost in the Shell movie looks nothing like the original anime, but does seem suspiciously reminiscent of Robocop with a bit of Jason Bourne thrown in for good measure (at least if an early trailer is to be trusted)? Even the highest-grossing film of all time, Avatar, can be broken down rather cruelly (at least on a thematic level) to Ferngully crossed with Dances with Wolves in space.

The fact that many of the above movies are derivative does not make them bad films. Plagiarism, in many ways, is the oil that greases the cogs of the studio machine. Each film-maker takes something from the last, and hopefully passes something on to their successor. It has been ever so since the early days of silent film, and indeed even the era of Shakespeare.

The only problem here is that if you spend all your time watching other movies before making your own, it's inevitable that a process of assimilation will take place – a sort of cultural osmosis. Rogue One is a fine movie, a splendid rewind to the classic 1970s space operas injected with just enough Trump-era bleakness to make it a more than worthwhile trip to the multiplex. But its greatest achievement will always be to remind viewers of the brilliance of George Lucas' game-changing original, rather than to break new ground.
This sense that Hollywood is slowly but surely eating itself should make us more grateful for the truly original genre movies – Ex Machina, for instance, or Arrival – when they push their heads above the celluloid parapet. Because if these rare sparks of inspiration were to fizzle out altogether, those of us who love the movies could be facing a cultural desert of Tatooine-like dreariness. Apart from anything else, there would then be no material for Hollywood's next generation of directors to pilfer from.

Written by Ben Child for *The Guardian*

Posting photos online is not living. You are producing your own obituary

As you point your phone at everything from Notre Dame to a slice of chocolate cake, remember these images will take on significance only after you have gone

Summer begins again. Millions of people are packing their bags to get away from it all. Their eyes are ready for fresh sights: sun-drenched beaches, famous museums, parasolled cafes.

More eyes than ever before will, however, see nothing fresher than the screens of their own smartphones. They will not need to look at sunsets and palm trees, for they will have flawless copies on their devices (click!). The great scale of the Notre Dame cathedral, in Paris, or the Colosseum, in Rome, will bring no risk of eyestrain: they will be able to see the grandeur of these sites in harmless digital miniature (click!). Screens will give them their own versions of the Mona Lisa or Van Gogh's Sunflowers, versions that have this significant advantage over the originals: they can be owned, stored and used as material for a personal online story.

As we see more and more parents who seem to watch their children grow up entirely on a screen, it becomes obvious that storing our sensory stimuli in digital form has become the main event. No one really believes that they will sit down in the future and play back everything they have recorded. That is clearly not the objective. No, the point is that ordinary memory has come to seem inadequate as a register of "life" – whatever that is. Human experience needs to be converted into the inhuman in order for it to be real. If it has not been made digital, it did not happen.

How did we get here? Ours is a materialistic era, so we are inclined to believe in materialistic explanations. Digital technology, we tell ourselves, has caused this devaluation of experience. But the opposite explanation, though more mysterious, is equally true: it is the devaluation of experience that has caused digital technology. It is not that digital prostheses exist, and so, with remarkable coincidence, our inner life suddenly "needs" them. No, for more than a century we have been caught up in machinic processes that have caused us to stop believing in our own experience, and – like a colonised people asserting themselves in the oppressor's language – we feel a surge of dignity with each new word we learn of the machine's own tongue.

Of course, when machines can laugh, they will, like other oppressors before them, ROFL at these efforts of us to "speak machine". They will see our obsessive self-documentation for what it is: a futile attempt to assert what we do not ourselves believe – that we actually live. *I am visiting New York. I am eating chocolate cake. I have a flower in my hair.*

When people were really alive, they did not need to protest so much. They did not imagine that strangers might be interested in the fact that they had chocolate cake at lunch. Not, at least, during their lifetime. They were aware that such trivia become significant only at the moment of death – at

which point, yes, it is suddenly overwhelmingly poignant to remember that someone had those clothes and food and rhythms.

In an era when people still believed in their own lives, they wrote autobiographies. We, by contrast, have become auto-obituarists. Despite all the work that social media users do to document themselves from one day to the next, what is recorded is not life. Rather it is death-in-life: it is "existence" from which life has already fled, leaving behind a digital husk. Our social media footprint is an obituary we write ourselves – a set of remembrances we leave for future generations to give strength to this simple, spurious claim: that we lived. Only at the moment of our death does our Facebook or Instagram account acquire its true and always intended significance, and finally the chocolate cake that we had for lunch once is meaningful.

That consummation lies in the future. A day *will* come when this summer's screen obsession finally makes sense. It's just that we will never live to see it.

Written by By Rana Dasgupta for *The Guardian*

How a TV Sitcom Triggered the Downfall of Western Civilisation

Picture this. It's the story of a family man, a man of science, a genius who fell in with the wrong crowd. He slowly descends into madness and desperation, lead by his own egotism. With one mishap after another, he becomes a monster. I'm talking, of course, about *Friends* and its tragic hero, Ross Geller.

You may see it as a comedy, but I cannot laugh with you. To me, *Friends* signals a harsh embrace of anti-intellectualism in America, where a gifted and intelligent man is persecuted by his idiot compatriots. And even if you see it from my point of view, it doesn't matter. The constant barrage of laughter from the live studio audience will remind us that our own reactions are unnecessary, redundant.

The theme song itself is filled with foreboding, telling us that life is inherently deceptive, career pursuits are laughable, poverty is right around the corner, and oh yeah, your love life's D.O.A. But you will *always* have the company of idiots. They will be there for you.
Don't I feel better?

Maybe I should unpack this, for the uninitiated. If you remember the 1990s and early 2000s, and you lived near a television set, then you remember *Friends*. *Friends* was the Thursday night primetime, "must-see-TV" event that featured the most likeable ensemble ever assembled by a casting agent: all young, all middle class, all white, all straight, all attractive (but approachable), all morally and politically bland, and all equipped with easily digestible personas. Joey is the goofball. Chandler is the sarcastic one. Monica is obsessive-compulsive. Phoebe is the hippy. Rachel, hell, I don't know, Rachel likes to shop. Then there was Ross. Ross was the intellectual and the romantic.

Eventually, the *Friends* audience — roughly 52.5 million people — turned on Ross. But the characters of the show were pitted against him from the beginning (consider episode 1, when Joey says of Ross: "This guy says hello, I wanna kill myself.") In fact, any time Ross would say anything about his interests, his studies, his ideas, whenever he was mid-sentence, one of his "friends" was sure to groan and say how boring Ross was, how stupid it is to be smart, and that nobody cares. Cue the laughter of the live studio audience. This gag went on, pretty much every episode, for 10 seasons. Can you blame Ross for going crazy?

And like a Greek tragedy, our hero is caught in a prophecy that cannot be avoided. The show's producers, akin to the immutable voice of the gods, declared that Ross must end up with Rachel, the one who shops. Honestly, I think he could've done better.

Why such sympathy for Ross?

The show ended in 2004. The same year that Facebook began, the year that George W. Bush was re-elected to a second term, the year that reality television became a dominant force in pop culture, with *American Idol* starting an eight-year reign of terror as the No. 1 show in the U.S., the same year that Paris Hilton started her own "lifestyle brand" and released an autobiography. And Joey Tribbiani got a spin-off TV show. The year 2004 was when we completely gave up and embraced stupidity as a value. Just ask Green Day; their album *American Idiot* was released in 2004, and it won the Grammy for Best Rock Album. You can't get more timely. The rejection of Ross marked the moment when much of America groaned, mid-sentence, at the voice of reason.

Yes, my theory is that *Friends* may have triggered the downfall of western civilization. You might think I'm crazy. But to quote Ross: "Oh, am I? Am I? Am I out of my mind? Am I losing my senses?" Did you know the song that originally accompanied the *Friends* pilot episode was R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know (And I Feel Fine)." A blissful song with an apocalyptic message that goes largely ignored.

I was a teacher in 2004. I coached our school's chess club. I saw how my students were picked on, bullied. I tried my best to defend them, but I couldn't be everywhere. My students were smart, huge nerds, and they were in hostile, unfriendly territory. Other students would be waiting outside my room to ambush the chess club members who met in my room every day at lunch. During my tenure as a teacher, I gained the reputation of being a slayer of bullies and defender of nerds. I promise you: bullies can be mean, but they knew Mr. Hopkins was much worse.

Maybe intellectuals have always been persecuted and shoved in lockers, but something in my gut tells me we're at a low point — where social media interaction has replaced genuine debate and political discourse, where politicians are judged by whether we'd want to have a beer with them, where scientific consensus is rejected, where scientific research is underfunded, where journalism is drowning in celebrity gossip.

I see Kim Kardashian's ass at the top of CNN.com, and I am scared.

Maybe it's all harmless fun. Like the good-spirited laughter of a live studio audience? Maybe. But I am sincerely worried we have not done enough to cultivate intellectual curiosity within our culture.

Fortunately, there's a resistance forming. People with grit, who aren't afraid to begin a sentence with "Did you know…" These are the Rosses of the world. I saw them in my chess club. And I see them in my city, hiding at the art museum, crouching at used book stores, exchanging sideways glances at the public libraries and coffee houses, and sneaking around at our schools, community colleges, and universities.

There was no hope for Ross. He went insane, and yeah, he did get annoying.
So, how do we retain our sanity in a dumb, dumb world? I wouldn't be a good teacher if I didn't come prepared with a few ideas.

No. 1: read a book. Something special happens when you set aside the inane distractions of modern culture and immerse yourself in a novel. You open yourself up to new ideas, new experiences, new perspectives. It's an experiment in patience and mindfulness. The New School for Social Research in New York proved that reading literature improves empathy. It's true. Reading makes you less of a jerk. So, read often. Read difficult books. Read controversial books. Read a book that makes you cry. Read something fun. But read.

No. 2: learn something. Your brain is capable of so much. Feed it. Learn something new. The greatest threat to progress is the belief that something is too complex to fix. Poverty is permanent. Racism will always exist. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is too difficult to understand. The public education system is broken. Educate yourself, so you can be part of the conversation. Learn something scientific, something mathematic. Explore philosophy. Study paleontology. Try to learn a new language. You don't even have to make fluency your goal, just get a few more words in your head. Listen to an educational podcast. Professors from colleges — such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford — are offering their lectures online for *free*. Think of what you could learn. One of my greatest challenges as a teacher was convincing students they were smart after someone had told them they were dumb.

No. 3: stop buying so much crap. This may seem like a non sequitur, but I'm convinced consumer culture and idiot culture are closely linked. Simplify your life. Idiocy dominates our cultural landscape because it sells more Nike tennis shoes and Big Macs. When we thoughtfully consider what we bring into our home, we are less likely to be manipulated by empty impulses.

And finally: protect the nerds. A computer programmer from Seattle is doing more to alleviate world poverty, hunger, and disease through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation than any other person in America right now. Nerds create vaccines. Nerds engineer bridges and roadways. Nerds become teachers and librarians. We need those obnoxiously smart people, because they make the world a better place. We can't have them cowering before a society that rolls their eyes at every word they say. Ross needs better friends.

Written by By David Hopkins for *Medium Magazine*

Star Wars fans: for God's sake get a grip, it's only a movie

Mass hysteria over the new Star Wars trailer, especially among grown men, leaves Martin Daubney feeling baffled

In case you missed it – perhaps you were in a galaxy, far, far away – the trailer for the new Star Wars movie was released yesterday. Even though *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* isn't due to be released until December 18, its trailer was unleashed eight months ahead of that date, at a huge "official fan convention" in California.

The Telegraph's film critic Robbie Collin flew half way around the world to see its 111 seconds and compared the event, attended by 7,500 variously fancy-dressed miscreants, to "a mass flamingo flocking, or perhaps the migration of wildebeest across the Serengeti".

The trailer was also shown as a simulcast online and, globally, grown men starting behaving the way tween girls do when Justin Bieber takes his top off. Like Beliebers, Star Wars fans (how can it be that they don't even have a name, like Trekkies?) took leave of their senses, gushed adoringly in quasi-orgasmic tones and posted wildly inappropriate tweets. Some even started dressing as Storm Troopers and body-popping on YouTube. One adult male tweeted: "I've watched the trailer 13 times now, I'm literally crying." Another: "I don't think I've seen my wife this happy since our wedding day. In fact she might be happier". Seriously? Perhaps he needs to up his game between the sheets.

Am I the only man who finds this behaviour all a bit odd? Shouldn't grown men get over Star Wars already? Don't get me wrong: I quite like the look of the new trailer. To me, it looks mostly like every other Star Wars movie, only with better CGI. It certainly looks slicker than Tom Cruise's sci-fi flick, *Edge Of Tomorrow*. But "quite liking" Star Wars doesn't seem to be an option these days. You're either a fully paid-up convert, or a heathen. If you can't appreciate it as the foremost work of art of our age, you're a plebeian who just doesn't get it.

I don't dislike Star Wars. Far, far from it. I watched the entire box set last summer, which proved to be a life-saver on a monsoonal July week in Cornwall. My son loved it. But then, he's six. I remember going to see the first Star Wars film in 1977 and being pant-wettingly excited about it. But then, I was seven.

I'll probably see *The Force Awakens* at some point, after my son nags me into submission due to the inevitable and unavoidable tsunami of marketing the film will receive. The opening line of the new trailer – "the Force is strong in my family" – is telling. Because, like ginger hair, a Star Wars obsession is a condition that is passed on genetically.

I have close friends, colleagues and neighbours who baptised their sons into the Star Wars brethren while they were still in nappies (the kids, I mean). One has bought every Star Wars Lego toy in existence – these have the biggest franchise mark-up of them all – for his boy, who is not yet ten. He gleefully posts pictures of completed Millennium Falcons, AT-AT Walkers and Imperial Star Destroyers on Facebook, which I find simultaneously sweet and tragic.

I'll admit, I'm partly guilty here, too. Like conjunctivitis, you can't avoid picking up Star Wars toys when you've got a kid these days. After our Star Wars box-set marathon, I bought my son a replica light sabre, which – true to 1970s form – broke the first time he hit me with it, which prompted an emotional meltdown, a habit some Star Wars fans don't seem to have grown out of.

You can forgive a small child getting overexcited about what is essentially a kids' movie franchise, but not adults. Of course, it's a free world, I suppose, and Star Wars fans do not inflict any harm, especially if wielding a wobbly, defective light sabre. But like collecting action figures or skateboarding, shouldn't we leave Star Wars at puberty's door?

Worst of all, Star Wars obsessives are complicit in the grandest financial extraction process in the history of popular culture. The Star Wars films and their re-releases have generated $4.54bn in worldwide ticket sales, according to Bloomberg data. This week, the release of the trailer for *The Force Awakens* added almost $2 billion to the value of Disney.

Stripped back to bare mammon – which is what all of this is really about – that makes Star Wars just another product, like *Frozen*, but with more lasers and less annoying songs.
And that's why, sorry guys, I'm just not feeling the Force with Star Wars any more.

Written by Martin Daubney for *The Telegraph*

Dear Katie Hopkins. Stop making life harder for disabled people

My father is Stephen Hawking, and I have an autistic son. So it makes me sad when your 'jokes' about Ed Miliband mock people with disabilities.

Dear Katie Hopkins,

I am writing to you – not respectfully, but politely – to ask you to stop. I read your comments about Ed Miliband and his supposed resemblance to someone "on the spectrum" just as I got home from a trip to Australia. I was there as one of the presenters of a show which featured my father, Stephen Hawking (I'm going to assume you know who he is) as a live hologram beamed into Sydney Opera House.

In my introduction to him, I said that I hoped attitudes to disability had changed since I was a child in the 1970s when having a disabled father was a rarity. We were openly and intrusively commented on when we went out together. We had many difficult moments, such as the time a restaurant manager asked us to leave while wewere in the middle of lunch because we were putting the other diners off their food. In fact, it was like growing up with a whole world of people like you, everywhere, all the time.

The point of my story at the talk in Sydney was that I hoped that now, no disabled person would encounter this kind of behaviour – and that they would be treated with respect and dignity. It's on YouTube; you can watch it and see how the audience responds.

And then I read with great sadness your "jokes" (are they jokes? I don't even know?) about Ed Milliband.

I have an autistic son. He's very sweet, polite, hard-working, kind and generally lovely. But yes, he does stare at people from time to time. When we are on the tube, occasionally I have to say to a member of the public that my son is autistic and that I'm sorry he is staring. The reaction is always kind and compassionate.

But if he were staring at you, I presume it wouldn't be okay, that you would make a laughing stock out of him. You would use his disability against him – and you wouldn't care how embarrassed, hurt or distressed he was. Because it wouldn't matter to you. Don't you think kids with autism have enough to deal with already? Don't you think that they already face enough rejection and social isolation with you making it worse? Do you really think they need you to tell them they don't fit into society?

And when someone with your public profile tells others that it's okay to mock people with disabilities, you cause enormous damage. The little work I've done with child carers of disabled

parents shows what a vulnerable group they are, already regularly bullied and taunted by their peers. It just takes a figure like you to validate the bullies' point of view – and who knows how

terrible the outcomes could be. There are lots of kids out there with disabled parents or siblings whose lives just got harder because of you.

I don't know what you are paid to express such unreserved and trenchant views, but it surely cannot be enough. Soon, the media spotlight will move on and your planned obsolescence (planned by media companies, not by you) will kick in. At which point, you will be left with no viable career and a backwash of hatred of a staggering acidity and volume.

To be honest, I don't really care what happens to you. But I do care what happens to people with disabilities and their families, and I care that you are making difficult lives even more challenging. Please stop.

Written by Lucy Hawking for _The Guardian_ 30th April, 2015

Can you be a pacifist and still enjoy military gaming?

Those who decry violent video games don't understand that simulating an activity can act as a replacement, not just an encouragement.

Studying the horror of the world wars turned me into an avowed pacifist by age fifteen. Two years later, I walked into an army PR van for a chat with the recruitment sergeant. I felt confused when I went in but when I left, a bundle of helpful propaganda under my arm, I was also scared. How could I have become a pacifist thinking about signing up to the armed forces?

It took years before I understood myself, but smarter people had already worked it out. Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien and other biographers of America's failure in Vietnam had the answer. To say that war is hell is an obvious truth, but the harder, darker and more subversive idea is that it can be persuasively glamorous too. A clarion call to the base instincts beneath our precious veneer of civilisation. It satisfied desires that lurk hungrily in us all, however much we might wish otherwise.

Some soldiers and civilians recall wartime as the best years of their lives, the carnage and loss forging bonds of solidarity as strong as those of family. It is a thing of extremes that brings out the best and the worst in people. Rick Rescorla, an Englishman who served in the US army before becoming a security consultant on Wall Street, was in the Twin Towers on September 11. After leading his charges to safety he went back in, again to save more people and was killed when the South Tower collapsed. Shortly before he'd called his tearful wife and told her: "stop crying ... I've never been happier."

When warfare is so dramatic, so pivotal in much of history, it seems less inconsistent that some might find it both irresistible and appalling. My pacifism is a luxury, bought with the blood of warriors. As Richard Grenier, paraphrasing Orwell, had it: "people sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf." War is sometimes necessary, and without it there would be no pacifism. That's a far greater contradiction than being a militarist who favours peace. At age 17, I understood little of this. All I knew was that a drive toward pacifism and a fascination with the military were tearing me apart. I called on a friend who was playing the latest video game he'd acquired: Overrun, a tactical simulation of modern warfare. Over a surreal afternoon, we discussed the consequences of real violence while playing at it on the computer.

As is so often the case, play proved a fantastic medium to explore the activity it was mimicking. Theories of learning through play suggest that children use it to explore adult activities prescribed to them due to their youth. Why shouldn't adults use it as a way to get inside activities they find fascinating in theory but repugnant in practice?

That was the start of a long love affair with military games both on screen and on the tabletop, from frantic shooters like Medal of Honour to sedate simulations such as Unity of Command. In playing these re-creations of horrors past and yet to come, my desire for militarism is satiated. It's a safety

valve, a way I can harmlessly examine the dichotomy between the lure of war and the fruits of peace. Those who decry the depiction of violence in these games don't see that simulating an activity can act as a replacement as well as an encouragement.

To accept this does not equate with across-the-board comfort at all titles. There's a world of difference between the flawed, sinister protagonist of Spec Ops: The Line and the gung-ho, invulnerable super-soldiers of Call of Duty. Time and perspective also matter. The hard realism of the excellent Band of Brothers: Earned in Blood works because the second world war is history now – something we've discussed, deliberated and put in its proper context. By contrast, the release of Battlefield: Hardline directly after the tragedies in Ferguson just feels crass and exploitative.

Yet even the people who choose those sorts of games over more contemplative fare may be doing so for good reason. In the humdrum safety of our cosseted, comfortable western lives we yearn for stimulation and excitement. Some find it in extreme sports, others in travel and adventure. I, and many others, find it in military games.

Study after study has found no suggestion that playing violent games makes people violent. But no one has stopped to wonder whether playing them might help divest gamers of their more warlike urges. Perhaps it's time to update the wisdom of the ancients and say that if we want peace, we must prepare for war games.

Written byMatt Thower for *The Guardian* 29th April 2015

Since when were music festivals al fresco fashion shows?

At a music festival, self-consciousness should be left behind – along with personal hygiene. And you can't really do that if you're fretting about whether your Native American headdress really works with your Isabel Marant boho top

I've been seeing a lot in magazines of late about "festival fashion". But what exactly is "festival fashion"?

In an ideal world, by which I mean my world, festival fashion consists of a plastic rubbish bag fashioned into a poncho; wellies covered in *E coli*; absolutely no clothes because you lost your tent on the Friday night and your clothes shortly after that; and maybe a hat that you found in a skip by the toilets. This, clearly, is how a festival attendee knows they have had a good weekend, and I live in constant hope that when I see the words "Festival fashion special!" on the front of a weekly glossy magazine it will include photos of men who look like Iggy Pop with a hangover wearing parkas splattered with fecal matter and dragging a wet dog round on a string.

But of course, such hopes are dashed time and time again, because what festival fashion actually means is endless boring photos of people such as Kate Bosworth and Poppy Delevingne, who, as far as I can tell, are famous purely for being photographed at music festivals, looking improbably glamorous. We can talk until the cows come home about how Kate Moss and her Hunter wellingtons and Sienna Miller and her boho leather belts are to blame for this, but increasingly my finger is pointed more towards the rise and rise of Coachella in the US, AKA the whitest event in American history this side of the 1960s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a music festival in California, where the weather is always good and the celebrities are in close proximity, has proved itself especially conducive to furthering the myth that music festivals are not about music, mayhem or mischief-making, but white girls looking as sexy as possible with pointless hair accessories.

Unsurprisingly, this idea that music festivals are actually al fresco fashion shows has risen up alongside the – for want of a better term – middle-classification of music festivals. Seriously, have you seen some of the nonsense that happens at them these days? Friends have told me about one particular music festival where you have to make reservations – reservations! – ahead of time in order to eat food cooked by Michelin-starred chefs in a field. Honestly, can you even imagine? This is at a MUSIC FESTIVAL, an event where I personally think a young person is winning if they remember to bring underwear, never mind pre-booked dinner reservations.

I'm a pretty high-maintenance kinda lady. I like my creature comforts as much as the next spoilt fashion columnist. But this is also why I love music festivals, because they allow even the most obnoxious of us to offer it all up to the weather gods, get disgusting and lose that self-consciousness that plagues us the rest of the time. Look, I don't want to sound like Ol' Granny Time here, rocking on my porch and telling sepia-tinted tales about that year at Glastonbury when Travis headlined and

how, oh truly, those were the days. But one of my favourite photos does, indeed, come from that seminal year and it features myself, several friends and more strangers all sitting in a field at 6am. I appear to be wearing – and I'm looking at the photo as I write this – wellies printed with stars, corduroy trousers at least two sizes too big, a sweatshirt with a map of Asia on the front (because sure, why not, maybe useful?) and a man's ski jacket. And I was not 12, not 16, but 23 at the time and already working in the fashion department of this paper. That's right, readers, you were taking style guidance from a woman who wore wellies with stars on them. No, you cannot now have a refund.

The point is, I looked like a complete weirdo but I also had a great time, and I firmly believe those two things are connected. No one has fun when they are fussing over how they look, or if they're too scared of getting messy to relax. I love fashion and I love festivals but I do not understand people who go to festivals with specific looks planned. Do these people have fun? Because they don't look like they're having fun. They look like they're thinking about how to look as hot as possible on Instagram, and that, to me, is completely anathema to the festival experience. I never understood Kate Moss and Alexa Chung's predilection for denim hotpants at Glastonbury – seriously, do they not feel the cold? Or the mud? Never mind the various Pucci outfits worn by the aforementioned Poppy Delevingne.

Like I said, the music festival is where you should leave your self-consciousness behind along with your personal hygiene, and you can't do that if you're fretting about whether your Native American headdress works with your Isabel Marant boho top. I just worry, Poppy Delevingne, that you're missing out on the sweet, sweet pleasures of trying to find your tent at 7am while wearing star-studded wellies. Then there's that sense of delicious pride when you arrive back in your hometown and everyone looks at you like you're insane because you're dressed like a basket case and you know that the worse you look, the bigger your triumph in surviving the weekend. So you walk home from the station, in your sweatshirt printed with a map of Asia, head held high, until you get home, collapse on your sofa and vow never to underestimate indoor plumbing again. Simple pleasures, Poppy Delevingne. And you're missing out on the lot of them.

Written by Hadley Freeman for *The Guardian* 27th April, 2015

Suicide Squad showcases all of Hollywood's dangerous ideas about mental illness

A trailer for the new DC Comics supervillain movie *Suicide Squad* offers a quick summary of each character's powers. Deadshot: "He shoots people." Killer Croc: "He's a crocodile, he eats people." Enchantress: "Possessed by a witch." Finally, we land on Harley Quinn, played by Margot Robbie: "She's just crazy."

What kind of "crazy" is Harley Quinn? There are, after all, currently 157 mental illnesses listed in the DSM-V, from schizophrenia to obsessive-compulsive disorder, each with a wildly different and highly specific list of symptoms. You would think filmmakers might give it a read before making a lead character mentally ill. But this is Hollywood, and Harley Quinn is a woman, so we already know what her diagnosis is going to be. Harley Quinn is a "Crazy Bitch."

This tragic, untreatable illness is suffered exclusively by fictional women in pop culture. A character with Crazy Bitch Syndrome will conform to one of three stereotypes: the cute and quirky child-woman; the kinky sex doll; or the violent monster. Sometimes, as with Harley Quinn, the character may be all of the above. This is a problem not just for women with mental illness, who are subject to the same ludicrous stereotypes driven by male fantasy, but for neurotypical women who are also tagged with the same diagnoses every day.

Which brings us back to Harley Quinn. She wears pigtails and a shirt that says "Daddy" on it and is prone to adorably silly non-sequiturs. But she *also* does mid-air yoga, licks things provocatively at random, strips in full view of her co-workers, and wraps her legs around men's faces as a means of combat. Not to mention she's a violent killer who delights in carnage and death, which is why she's on a team of supervillains in the first place. So, you know, all the totally non-contradictory qualities you'd expect to find in one woman with an imbalance in her brain chemistry.

The problem is hardly limited to her character. Women whose mental illness is expressed primarily through kinky sex and wacky dialogue abound throughout genre fiction. Joss Whedon, the king of nerd culture, has created two notable iterations. On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* there is the moon-eyed, masochistic vampire Drusilla, who plays with dolls and pouts that her lovers "won't hurt me even a little bit." The series *Firefly* features the even more heavily infantilized River Tam, a woman in her late teens who is treated as a small child by everyone around her. If triggered, she becomes a one-man murder engine. In Neil Gaiman's book *Sandman,* we have Delirium, the literal personification of madness, who (of course) takes the form of a teenage girl with colorfully dyed hair and a propensity to express herself in adorable-child malapropisms.

Granted, comic books and fantasy fiction are not known for their realism. But the stereotypes about women and mental illness are so embedded in our culture that they also show up in "realistic" works—even those with overtly feminist intentions.

The Netflix series *Orange is the New Black,* for example, has *three* major mentally ill characters. Only one of them, the schizophrenic Lolly, even has a diagnosis. The remaining two, Lorna Morello

and Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren, each have plotlines featuring their overabundant, scary sexuality: Morello is a stalker who threatened a man's life on multiple occasions after one date, and Suzanne fixates intensely on her fellow inmate Piper Chapman.

All three are childlike and quirky. (Suzanne, in particular, acts so young that she collects stuffed animals in her 30s and can't understand why it's wrong to invite a small child to her house for a sleepover.) All three have outbursts of sometimes-lethal violence. And, although all three are depicted as sympathetic, the show isn't particularly interested in depicting them as people with real medical illnesses rather than amusing freaks.

Such stereotypes have deep historical roots. The idea of a nebulous, indefinable female madness characterized by an overflow of sexuality is more or less the definition of "hysteria," the 19th-century pandemic that resulted in forced institutionalizations, medicalized rape (doctors believed that stimulating patients to "paroxysm," or orgasm, was the best treatment) and clitoridectomies. Erotic images of "hysterics" flourished during this period. Paintings like Tony-Robert Fleury's *Pinel Liberates the Madwomen of Salpetriere* depicted "mad" women as, primarily, women who liked to show their breasts to strangers. And "hysteria" expert Jean-Martin Charcot specialized in taking provocative photographs of his patients in their underwear. His most famous subject, Louise Augustine Gleizes, had been raped by her employer, who locked her in an institution after the attack. She was 14 years old.

This phenomenon rested upon the Victorian belief that women were basically large children: innocent, fragile, incompetent, and therefore best served by being put forcibly under male authority. Women who acted out against these constraints were necessarily mad. To this day, our "crazy" women overflow with deviant desires yet look and act like little girls. So "craziness," in women, is not just *sometimes evidenced* by hypersexuality (and some disorders genuinely do cause ebbs and flows in sex drive) but historically defined by it. Which makes female sexuality—or simply being female—a pathology.

We are supposedly at the beginning of a new era of mental-health depictions. Shows *Mr. Robot* or *BoJack Horseman* tackle mentally ill characters with dignity, respect, and even some measure of interest in showing how mental illness can add more human complexity to its protagonists. Yet these are overwhelmingly shows centered on troubled men—and men have never been the people who suffered most from mental-health stigma.

It's women, who are uniformly stereotyped as "irrational" and are called "crazy" every time they leave a bad relationship or voice an unwelcome opinion, who suffer from misconceptions about mental illness whether they are neurotypical or ill. The single most troubling fact about "hysteria" is that some doctors honestly claimed that 75% of women had it. Hysteria wasn't an illness. It was a medical way to penalize people for being female.

And our wrong-headed ideas about mental illness still work that way. Which is to say: Harley Quinn may have Crazy Bitch Syndrome. But the problem isn't Harley Quinn, and it never was. The problem is that in real life, if you're a woman, and you behave in a way that some people don't like, a man may very well decide you're a Crazy Bitch, too. It's the diagnosis our culture uses to excuse ignoring a person's humanity. And it's just another means of locking women away.

Written by Sady Doyle for *Quartz*

Indonesia is burning. So why is the world looking away?

I've often wondered how the media would respond when eco-apocalypse struck. I pictured the news programmes producing brief, sensational reports, while failing to explain why it was happening or how it might be stopped. Then they would ask their financial correspondents how the disaster affected share prices, before turning to the sport. As you can probably tell, I don't have an ocean of faith in the industry for which I work. What I did not expect was that they would ignore it.

A great tract of Earth is on fire. It looks as you might imagine hell to be. The air has turned ochre: visibility in some cities has been reduced to 30 metres. Children are being prepared for evacuation in warships; already some have choked to death. Species are going up in smoke at an untold rate. It is almost certainly the greatest environmental disaster of the 21st century – so far.

Shocking drone footage captured by Greenpeace field researchers shows extensive peat and forest fires burning in Indonesia in early October. And the media? It's talking about the dress the Duchess of Cambridge wore to the James Bond premiere, Donald Trump's idiocy du jour and who got eliminated from the Halloween episode of Dancing with the Stars. The great debate of the week, dominating the news across much of the world? Sausages: are they really so bad for your health?

What I'm discussing is a barbecue on a different scale. Fire is raging across the 5,000km length of Indonesia. It is surely, on any objective assessment, more important than anything else taking place today. And it shouldn't require a columnist, writing in the middle of a newspaper, to say so. It should be on everyone's front page. It is hard to convey the scale of this inferno, but here's a comparison that might help: it is currently producing more carbon dioxide than the US economy. And in three weeks the fires have released more CO2 than the annual emissions of Germany.

But that doesn't really capture it. This catastrophe cannot be measured only in parts per million. The fires are destroying treasures as precious and irreplaceable as the archaeological remains being levelled by Isis. Orangutans, clouded leopards, sun bears, gibbons, the Sumatran rhinoceros and Sumatran tiger, these are among the threatened species being driven from much of their range by the flames. But there are thousands, perhaps millions, more.

One of the burning provinces is West Papua, a nation that has been illegally occupied by Indonesia since 1963. I spent six months there when I was 24, investigating some of the factors that have led to this disaster. At the time it was a wonderland, rich with endemic species in every swamp and valley. Who knows how many of those have vanished in the past few weeks? This week I have pored and wept over photos of places I loved that have now been reduced to ash.

Nor do the greenhouse gas emissions capture the impact on the people of these lands. After the last great conflagration, in 1997, there was a missing cohort in Indonesia of 15,000 children under the age of three, attributed to air pollution. This, it seems, is worse. The surgical masks being distributed across the nation will do almost nothing to protect those living in a sunless smog. Members of parliament in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) have had to wear face masks during debates. The chamber is so foggy that they must have difficulty recognising one another.

It's not just the trees that are burning. It is the land itself. Much of the forest sits on great domes of peat. When the fires penetrate the earth, they smoulder for weeks, sometimes months, releasing clouds of methane, carbon monoxide, ozone and exotic gases such as ammonium cyanide. The plumes extend for hundreds of miles, causing diplomatic conflicts with neighbouring countries.

Why is this happening? Indonesia's forests have been fragmented for decades by timber and farming companies. Canals have been cut through the peat to drain and dry it. Plantation companies move in to destroy what remains of the forest to plant monocultures of pulpwood, timber and palm oil. The easiest way to clear the land is to torch it. Every year, this causes disasters. But in an extreme El Niño year like this one, we have a perfect formula for environmental catastrophe.

The president, Joko Widodo, is – or wants to be – a democrat. But he presides over a nation in which fascism and corruption flourish. As Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary The Act of Killing shows, leaders of the death squads that helped murder a million people during Suharto's terror in the 1960s, with the approval of the west, have since prospered through other forms of organised crime, including illegal deforestation.

They are supported by a paramilitary organisation with three million members, called Pancasila Youth. With its orange camo-print uniforms, scarlet berets, sentimental gatherings and schmaltzy music, it looks like a fascist militia as imagined by JG Ballard. There has been no truth, no reconciliation; the mass killers are still treated as heroes and feted on television. In some places, especially West Papua, the political murders continue.

Those who commit crimes against humanity don't hesitate to commit crimes against nature. Though Joko Widodo seems to want to stop the burning, his reach is limited. His government's policies are contradictory: among them are new subsidies for palm oil production that make further burning almost inevitable. Some plantation companies, prompted by their customers, have promised to stop destroying the rainforest. Government officials have responded angrily, arguing that such restraint impedes the country's development. That smoke blotting out the nation, which has already cost it some $30bn? That, apparently, is development.

Our leverage is weak, but there are some things we can do. Some companies using palm oil have made visible efforts to reform their supply chains; but others seem to move more slowly and opaquely. Starbucks, PepsiCo, Kraft Heinz and Unilever are examples. Don't buy their products until you see results.

On Monday, Widodo was in Washington, meeting Barack Obama. Obama, the official communiqué recorded, "welcomed President Widodo's recent policy actions to combat and prevent forest fires". The eco-apocalypse taking place as they conferred, which makes a mockery of these commitments, wasn't mentioned.

Governments ignore issues when the media ignores them. And the media ignores them because … well, there's a question with a thousand answers, many of which involve power. But one reason is the complete failure of perspective in a de-skilled industry dominated by corporate press releases, photo ops and fashion shoots, where everyone seems to be waiting for everyone else to take a lead. The media makes a collective non-decision to treat this catastrophe as a non-issue, and we all carry on as if it's not happening.

At the climate summit in Paris in December the media, trapped within the intergovernmental bubble of abstract diplomacy and manufactured drama, will cover the negotiations almost without reference to what is happening elsewhere. The talks will be removed to a realm with which we have no moral contact. And, when the circus moves on, the silence will resume. Is there any other industry that serves its customers so badly?

Written by George Monbiot for *The Guardian*

A picture of loneliness: you are looking at the last male northern white rhino

What is it like to look at the very last of something? To contemplate the passing of a unique wonder that will soon vanish from the face of the earth? You are seeing it. Sudan is the last male northern white rhino on the planet. If he does not mate successfully soon with one of two female northern white rhinos at Ol Pejeta conservancy, there will be no more of their kind, male or female, born anywhere. And it seems a slim chance, as Sudan is getting old at 42 and breeding efforts have so far failed. Apart from these three animals there are only two other northern white rhinos in the world, both in zoos, both female.

It seems an image of human tenderness that Sudan is lovingly guarded by armed men who stand vigilantly and caringly with him. But of course it is an image of brutality. Even at this last desperate stage in the fate of the northern white rhino, Sudan is under threat from poachers who kill rhinos and hack off their horns to sell them on the Asian medicine market – despite the fact that he has had his horn cut off to deter them.

Sudan doesn't know how precious he is. His eye is a sad black dot in his massive wrinkled face as he wanders the reserve with his guards. His head is a marvellous thing. It is a majestic rectangle of strong bone and leathery flesh, a head that expresses pure strength. How terrible that such a mighty head can in reality be so vulnerable. It is lowered melancholically beneath the sinister sky, as if weighed down by fate. This is the noble head of an old warrior, his armour battered, his appetite for struggle fading.

Under his immense looming shoulder, his legs protrude like squat columns from the tough tank of his body. The way his foreleg emerges from his thick coat of skin reminds us how long human beings have been wondering at the natural spectacle that is the rhino. For Sudan does not look so different from the rhinoceros that Albrecht Dürer portrayed in 1515. They have the same little legs stuck out of a majestic body and they even lower their heads in the same contemplative way. Dürer was a Renaissance artist picturing an exotic beast from the exotic lands that Europe was starting to see more and more of. In 1515 a live Indian rhinoceros was sent by the ruler of Gujarat to the king of Portugal: he in turn sent it to the Pope, but on the way it died in a shipwreck.

Human beings – we always kill the things we love. We have been doing so since the ice age. There are beautiful pictures of European woolly rhinos in caves in France, that were painted up to 30,000 years ago. These ancient relatives of Sudan share his heroic bulk, mighty power and paradoxical air of gentleness. A woolly rhino in Chauvet cave seems agile and young, a creature full of life. But the same people who painted such sensitive portraits of ice age rhinos helped to kill them off. As climate turned against the woolly megafauna with the end of the last ice age, human spears probably delivered the coup de grace.

Today, immense love is invested in rhinos, yet they are being slaughtered in ever greater numbers. The northern white rhino is the rarest species of African rhino. There are far greater numbers of southern white rhinos and black rhinos. But the demand in Asian countries such as Vietnam for rhino horn as a traditional medicine believed to cure everything from flu to cancer is fuelling a boom in poaching. From 2007, when just 13 rhinos were killed by poachers in South Africa, the killings have grown horrifically. Last year 1,215 rhinos were slaughtered for their horns in South Africa. This year already looks certain to beat that dreadful record.

This is a photograph from the front line of a crisis. The vulnerable northern white rhino has been hunted virtually to extinction – in spite of every precaution, in spite of these guards and their guns – and other varieties of African rhino are under a sustained attack from poachers that is totally out of control. The Javan rhinoceros is also on the verge of extinction. India has successfully protected the Indian rhinoceros after it was almost wiped out by British hunters in colonial times, but here too poaching is a menace. What a majestic creature this picture records, and what futile human destructiveness. Have we learned nothing since the ice age? Can the better angels of our nature not defeat the impulse to kill?

Written by Jonathan Jones for *The Guardian*

Aspirational parents condemn their children to a desperate, joyless life

Perhaps because the alternative is too hideous to contemplate, we persuade ourselves that those who wield power know what they are doing. The belief in a guiding intelligence is hard to shake. We know that our conditions of life are deteriorating. Most young people have little prospect of owning a home, or even of renting a decent one. Interesting jobs are sliced up, through digital Taylorism, into portions of meaningless drudgery. The natural world, whose wonders enhance our lives, and upon which our survival depends, is being rubbed out with horrible speed. Those to whom we look for guardianship, in government and among the economic elite, do not arrest this decline, they accelerate it.
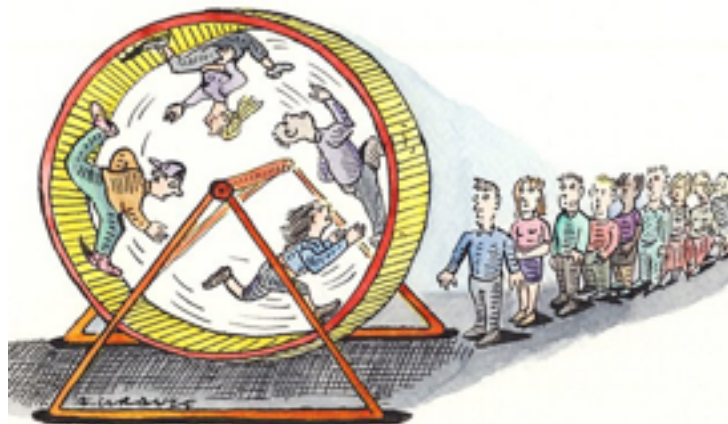
The political system that delivers these outcomes is sustained by aspiration: the faith that if we try hard enough we could join the elite, even as living standards decline and social immobility becomes set almost in stone. But to what are we aspiring? A life that is better than our own, or worse? Last week a note from an analyst at Barclays' Global Power and Utilities group in New York was leaked. It addressed students about to begin a summer internship, and offered a glimpse of the toxic culture into which they are inducted.

"I wanted to introduce you to the 10 Power Commandments … For nine weeks you will live and die by these … We expect you to be the last ones to leave every night, no matter what … I recommend bringing a pillow to the office. It makes sleeping under your desk a lot more comfortable … the internship really is a nine-week commitment at the desk … an intern asked our staffer for a weekend off for a family reunion – he was told he could go. He was also asked to hand in his BlackBerry and pack up his desk … Play time is over and it's time to buckle up."

Play time is over, but did it ever begin? If these students have the kind of parents featured in the Financial Times last month, perhaps not. The article marked a new form of employment: the nursery consultant. These people, who charge from £290 an hour, must find a nursery that will put their clients' toddlers on the right track to an elite university.

They spoke of parents who had already decided that their six-month-old son would go to Cambridge then Deutsche Bank, or whose two-year-old daughter "had a tutor for two afternoons a week (to keep on top of maths and literacy) as well as weekly phonics and reading classes, drama, piano, beginner French and swimming. They were considering adding Mandarin and Spanish. 'The little girl was so exhausted and on edge she was terrified of opening her mouth.'"

In New York, playdate coaches charging $450 an hour train small children in the social skills that might help secure their admission to the most prestigious private schools. They are taught to hide traits that could suggest they're on the autistic spectrum, which might reduce their chances of selection.

From infancy to employment, this is a life-denying, love-denying mindset, informed not by joy or contentment, but by an ambition that is both desperate and pointless, for it cannot compensate for what it displaces: childhood, family life, the joys of summer, meaningful and productive work, a sense of arrival, living in the moment. For the sake of this toxic culture, the economy is repurposed, the social contract is rewritten, the elite is released from tax, regulation and the other restraints imposed by democracy.

Where the elite goes, we are induced to follow. As if the assessment regimes were too lax in UK primary schools, last year the education secretary announced a new test for four-year-olds. A primary school in Cambridge has just taken the obvious next step: it is now streaming four-year-olds into classes according to perceived ability. The education and adoption bill, announced in the Queen's speech, will turn the screw even tighter. Will this help children, or hurt them?

Who knows? Governments used to survey the prevalence of children's mental health issues every five years, but this ended in 2004. Imagine publishing no figures since 2004 on, say, childhood cancer, and you begin to understand the extent to which successive governments have chosen to avoid this issue. If aspirational pressure is not enhancing our wellbeing but damaging it, those in power don't want to know.

But there are hints. Mental health beds for children in England increased by 50% between 1999 and 2014, but still failed to meet demand. Children suffering mental health crises are being dumped in adult wards or even left in police cells because of the lack of provision (put yourself in their position and imagine the impact).

The number of children admitted to hospital because of self-harm has risen by 68% in 10 years, while the number of young patients with eating disorders has almost doubled in three years. Without good data, we don't have a clear picture of what the causes might be, but it's worth noting that in the past year, according to the charity YoungMinds, the number of children receiving counselling for exam stress has tripled.

An international survey of children's wellbeing found that the UK, where such pressures are peculiarly intense, ranked 13th out of 15 countries for children's life satisfaction, 13th for agreement with the statement "I like going to school", 14th for children's satisfaction with their bodies and 15th for self-confidence. So all that pressure and cramming and exhortation – that worked, didn't it?

In the cause of self-advancement, we are urged to sacrifice our leisure, our pleasures and our time with partners and children, to climb over the bodies of our rivals and to set ourselves against the common interests of humankind. And then? We discover that we have achieved no greater satisfaction than that with which we began.

In 1653, Izaak Walton described in the Compleat Angler the fate of "poor-rich men", who "spend all their time first in getting, and next in anxious care to keep it; men that are condemned to be rich, and then always busy or discontented". Today this fate is confused with salvation.

Finish your homework, pass your exams, spend your 20s avoiding daylight, and you too could live like the elite. But who in their right mind would want to?

Written by George Monbiot for *The Guardian*

A Lie by Any Other Name

This is not a presentation of "alternative facts," whatever that may mean, as Kellyanne Conway, President Trump's mistress of misdirection, posited over the weekend. These are lies; good old-fashioned lies, baldfaced and flat-out lies. Some have suggested that we in the media should focus a bit less on these lies — some of them issued in tweets and some in interviews or news conferences — and focus more on policies, particularly the ineptitude of the gathering cabinet and the raft of executive orders that Trump himself is signing. But I take the position that this is all worthy of coverage, that there are simply different kinds of news being unearthed about this administration that exist on different strata.

To take it even further, it may be these seemingly smaller infractions that produce the greater injury because the implications are more profound. Trump does not simply have "a running war with the media," as he so indecorously and disrespectfully spouted off while standing on the hallowed ground before the C.I.A. Memorial Wall. He is in fact having a running war with the truth itself.

Donald Trump is a proven liar. He lies often and effortlessly. He lies about the profound and the trivial. He lies to avoid guilt and invite glory. He lies when his pride is injured and when his pomposity is challenged.

Indeed, one of the greatest threats Trump poses is that he corrupts and corrodes the absoluteness of truth, facts and science.

It is no coincidence that the rise of Trump is concurrent with the rise of "fake news." It is no coincidence that his rise comes during an age of severely damaged faith in institutions.
And now that he has been elected, Trump wants absolute control over the flow of information, to dictate his own version of facts rather than live with the reality of accepted facts. Trump is in a battle to bend the truth to his benefit.

He hates members of the press because, when properly performing, they are truth seekers rather than ego-strokers. The press may sometimes get things wrong, but it most often gets them right. A truly independent press is not stocked with political acolytes but political adversaries. This doesn't sit well with an administration that wants to be perpetually patted on the back and never rapped on the knuckles.

After Trump and his press secretary, Sean Spicer, got called out by the press for lying about Trump's inauguration crowd size and viewership, Spicer limped back to the mic and whined of Trump's press coverage: "The default narrative is always negative, and it's demoralizing."
No, sir, the default is to call a lie a lie; lies are negative because they are the opposite of the truth; and Trump continuously lies. Also, he who is devoid of morality is immune to demoralization. You can't wring water from a rock.

The bone you have to pick is not with the press but with the "president."

Trump's team seems to need to control narratives and to stanch what they view as negative, even if it's true. This compulsion may in fact be spilling over into the Trump administration's approach to government agencies, particularly those with a more scientific leaning.

As The Hill reported Tuesday, "The Trump administration is clamping down on public communications by agencies as it seeks to assert control over the federal bureaucracy."
The site continued: "New restrictions on social media use and interaction with press and lawmakers at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the departments of Commerce, Health and Human Services, Agriculture and the Interior have sparked concerns of a President Trump-backed effort to silence dissenting views.

Although The Hill granted, "it's not unusual for incoming administrations to seek control over agency communications," it cited "experts on the federal work force" who said "they have never seen a White House take the type of steps Trump's administration has to curb public communications."

And Trump for his part continues to rage about three to five million illegal votes causing him to lose the popular vote in November. This, too, is a lie. A lie. Not the euphemisms you hear on television, like "unsubstantiated," or "unproven," or "baseless." It is a lie, pure and simple.

But Trump won't let it go. His pride is hurt, his vanity tarnished. The man who prides himself on winning lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes, the biggest popular vote loss by a winning candidate in American history. That stings.

So, even after his lie is reported and rejected, he continues to perpetuate it. This is what makes Trump qualitatively different from our leaders who came before him: He believes that truth is what he says it is, and the only reason it has yet to be accepted is that it has yet to be sufficiently repeated. Unbowed, Trump published two tweets on Wednesday morning that read together: "I will be asking for a major investigation into VOTER FRAUD, including those registered to vote in two states, those who are illegal and even, those registered to vote who are dead (and many for a long time). Depending on results, we will strengthen up voting procedures!" This is just like Trump, whose inclination is never to admit a mistake, and instead to redouble his self-righteousness even in the midst of his wrong. This statement weakens our democracy and strengthens voter suppression efforts.

We all have to adjust to this unprecedented assault on the truth and stand ready to vigilantly defend against it, because without truth, what's left? Our president is a pathological liar. Say it. Write it. Never become inured to it. And dispense with the terms of art to describe it. A lie by any other name portends the same.

Written by Charles MB for *The Guardian*

Befriending Becky: On The Imperative Of Intersectional Solidarity

I don't like white women.

Whenever I say that, white women look at me like I just decapitated Taylor Swift. If I'm being honest, their reaction is part of the reason I say it. But rest assured, it's not the only reason. I don't like white women because I'm not particularly fond of the construct of whiteness or what it represents. I also don't appreciate those who are complicit in my oppression and benefit from it. When I say I don't like white women, it's not in reference to any specific white woman (aside from maybe Taylor Swift). It's a declaration that white women pose a very real threat to my existence, and I don't have to embrace that threat with open arms. You have to earn my fondness. This goes for several other groups, obviously, but for some reason white women seem the most baffled by it. Whenever I meet a white woman who's not baffled by it, we instantly become friends. Those are the white women I like.

As an unapologetically black, queer, and cash poor femme, I accept that I can only speak definitively on my own experiences. In fact, I'm of the belief that our experiences are the only things any of us can definitively speak on. But that doesn't mean ours are the only experiences worth acknowledging. There exists a space between the oft chanted chorus "silence is violence!" and the realisation that when we advocate for other people we usually have no idea what we're talking about. Navigating that space can be difficult, but it's vital to achieving universal liberation. The fact so many white women continue to evade this space is why Black women like me are under the impression they aren't all too concerned with our liberation. And just once, I'd love for them to prove me wrong.

I'm not a scholar, so occasionally I get left behind by academic terminology used to define my identity. I'll never understand why I have to classify myself the way others see fit. Once, someone asked why I refer to myself as "cash poor" instead of "working class." I think working class is a misnomer, since work is no indication of any shared socio-economic status. An undocumented sex worker, for example, and a white housewife trying to get her Etsy Store off the ground don't have much in common. Saying both are working class does a lot to alleviate the conscience of those in positions of privilege. Yet still, when I turn on the news, that's the group I hear politicians declaring their allegiance to. That's the group I see folks clamouring to fight for. Terms like working class often erase intersections of oppression and replace them with a fictional shared experience. The same can be said of words like "feminism," and even "women." Ultimately, it's not our shared experiences (real or imagined) that will unite us. It's acknowledging our differences.

Today, intersectionality has become a buzzword meant to lend credibility to social agendas that are anything but inclusive. We leftists and liberals often like to think of ourselves as an intersectional body of unity. When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the phrase "intersectionality" in the late 80s, the concept was meant to bring attention to co-existing layers of social identity. Today, intersectionality has become a buzzword meant to lend credibility to social agendas that are anything but inclusive. I witnessed this, first hand, last month at the Women's March.

The Women's March was bittersweet for women of colour and trans women. Although the official platform of the march referenced intersectionality twice, the experience was anything but that. For all its symbolism and potential, the Women's March was largely a tightly packed shrine to alabaster skin and pink vulvas. My compatriots and I jokingly nicknamed the crowd a "sea of astroTERF" (a reference to the way trans women were all but excluded from the concerns of the participants). I made a mental note whenever I saw a white woman holding a sign that acknowledged women of colour or immigrants—or Black lives mattering. My mental notepad remained largely unused.
I immediately began to think of the violence and harm that self-proclaimed feminists inflict on the most marginalised among us. I thought of all the times I, as a queer individual, believed I was doing enough for queer Black folk by just providing my queer Black body to spaces where not enough of us were present.

I considered the ways in which I was complicit in the erasure of trans women, non-able bodied femmes, and undocumented immigrants; the times I was in my feels because a trans woman made a Facebook status dragging the fuck out of my perception of solidarity. I thought of instances when I actually said "Why would I want to fight alongside your struggle if you aren't welcoming people like me who are actually trying to advocate on your behalf?"

Each of those times I had the wrong way of thinking. I came to that realisation by listening and learning and surrounding myself with people who were gracious enough to share insights that I lacked. I believe this has led me to not only be a better feminist, but a better human being. I haven't quite yet reached the pinnacle of intersectional Shangri-La, but I know some stuff. And in the interest of sharing my own insights, I'll leave you with three things I try to consider when partaking in liberation work.

I try to always keep in mind that there are things I don't know. More importantly, there are things I think I know now, that I'm just flat wrong about. Hopefully in the future I'll figure out what those things are, and continue on my path of self-determination. But we can never grow mentally, emotionally, or spiritually if we approach things with a closed mind. I always try to listen to the accounts and experiences of others with the notion that I'll pick up something new. That's how we learn about privilege and our role in oppressing others. That's how we learn about intersectionality. I can't overstate the importance of listening to people who are willing to share their experiences with us. We just have to be cognizant of who we're willing to listen to most intently—which brings me to my next point.

Society has a hierarchy of experiential priorities. Those priorities align with the social pecking order, starting with straight white able-bodied cisgender men, and proceeding down the line accordingly. When I do anything, I try to start by flipping that hierarchy upside down before I proceed. If I'm picking a restaurant to eat dinner, I'm going to go out of my way to support a minority-owned business. If I'm participating in a direct action, I want to make sure it's led by, or in alignment with, the leadership of the most marginalised. Many Black women who attended the Women's March did so begrudgingly because Black women were largely excluded from the planning until the 11th hour. That doesn't go unnoticed. In order for our liberation to become a reality, we have to incorporate diversity from the top. And it can't be symbolic diversity or tokenism. Are you centering the voices of the unheard? Are you following their direction and listening to their needs? I promise you that your own liberation depends on everyone else's. When you fight for the lives of the most marginalised you simultaneously liberate yourself. A rising tide lifts all boats, y'all. Don't end up with a yacht in the desert.

Lastly, even when I say I don't like white women, I don't do it from a place of hatred. I do it from a place of self-love and preservation. I don't have to like you to have love and respect for you. If you prescribe to the idea that impact trumps intent, you still can't deny the fact that people who act with love in their hearts usually have the most positive impact. And the best way to convey love is with our actions, not just our words. So when doing this work, it's OK to stop and ask yourself if your motivation is coming from a place of love or a place of fear. It's easy to hate. I hate the police. But that's not why I do this work. I do this work because I LOVE my beautiful people, in all their magnificent shapes, sizes, shades, and orientations. I see you. I hear you. And I promise to do my best to honour you.

Written by Didi Delgado for *The Huffington Post*

The Rise of the Female Nerd

From Lisa Simpson to Issa Dee, there's never been a better time on TV for women who are geeks.

"Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses." —Dorothy Parker, 1925

In the new superhero sitcom *Powerless* (NBC), Vanessa Hudgens stars as a variation on a woman we've met before: a cheerful, irrepressible go-getter who may be a little green but is clearly used to success. On her first day as Director of R&D at Bruce Wayne's security company (though her branch is run by Batman's sleazy cousin Van), Hudgens's Emily brims with memorised quotes from her personal bible: Bruce Wayne's guide to business, titled "Wayne or Lose." No one on Emily's team is impressed by her B-school nerdery, but they should be. This Muggle represents one of the most crucial yet under-appreciated cultural shifts of the last two decades.

With the premiere of the otherwise unexceptional *Powerless*, Emily joins a sisterhood of nerdy females who dot the TV landscape — a sorority of women who'd never pledge a sorority. Their numbers have increased so gradually that their rise hasn't garnered much attention, even though the recent narrative about the (mostly male) geeks inheriting the Earth has become a guiding principle in film development and TV programming. But the mainstreaming of female nerds in television — a process that began in the '90s — is a phenomenon worth exploring, as it marks a change in how we regard women's intelligence, independence, and ambition.

Lisa Simpson was arguably the definitive nerdy girl during the Clinton years, and is largely the model for smart female characters today: an overachieving, socially awkward outsider uneasy with traditional femininity and tenacious in her idiosyncrasies. Alternatively dreamy and sharp-eyed, she was often the most sympathetic member of her family on *The Simpsons*. But Lisa could also be a preening, self-righteous know-it-all, and was understood to be a perpetual loser: friendless, tribeless, romance-less. She's Milhouse, with dignity. These contradictions make Lisa a delightfully deep character — and also reflect the anxieties about female bookishness in a less progressive time, before girls outpacing boys in school became a given.

The combination of a girl's intelligence with her determination made for some of the most memorably repulsed (or at best, grudgingly admiring) portrayals of female nerd-dom in the '90s. *Election*'s maniacally dogged Tracy Flick is perhaps the purest expression of that shuddering revulsion some have toward a straight-A female student who wants more than what she's been handed by life. (I'd love to hear her "I Want" song.) Less am-bitch-ous, but still endlessly mocked, is *Saved by the Bell*'s Jessie Spano (Elizabeth Berkley), now remembered mostly as an extracurriculars-laden Type A whose self-destructive perfectionism pushed her into drug addiction. (Caffeine, but still.) Then there's Berkley's occasional *Bell* co-star, Tori Spelling, whose snorting, pigtailed Violet took the nerdy girl down several rungs further: a suitably four-eyed and otherwise personality-free mate for some boy geek.

But the '90s was also the decade that gave us some of the most beloved female nerds of any modern era: Daria, *Beauty and the Beast*'s Belle, *Freaks and Geeks*'s Lindsay Weir, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Willow Rosenberg, and *The X-Files*'s Dana Scully — all characterised by a Gen X–friendly alienation from society. Nerdy girls became the centre or the co-leads of their stories. But it was still mostly the under-18 set whom we admired for their love of knowledge. And viewers

looking for female nerds outside of the boxes of whiteness and straightness would mostly have to wait a while longer.

Living well is the best revenge, the poet George Herbert wrote — and by that metric, nerdy girls and women should star in their own Tarantino flick. Theirs has been a quiet but steady vengeance, as smart female protagonists and fan favourites have vanquished their previous invisibility or two-dimensionality to claim their place in pop culture, though mostly on TV. The gradual fusion between the nerdy and the normal has heralded a greater acceptance of women who tend to prize their own bright minds as people worth humanising and getting to know. (It's an event that *Stranger Things*, in its salivating adulation for the '80s, completely missed about Barb, whom it treated as mere fodder. Fans' outsize interest in the granny-glassed nerd showed how much time has changed and who we instinctively relate to now.) Thus we see today's female characters contending with the issues of being a well-rounded teen or adult, ones that 8-year-old Lisa Simpson has never had to deal with, like sex, tech, and work.

Being allowed to grow up is a primary reason why nerdy girls and women still feel so revolutionary. There aren't many close analogues to Tina Belcher of *Bob's Burgers*, Donna and Cam of *Halt and Catch Fire*, or Leslie Knope on *Parks and Recreation*. The strongest protests that a female nerd can also have a functional vagina still revolve around teenage girls like Tina, *My Mad Fat Diary*'s music-obsessed Rae, and *One Day at a Time*'s Cuban-American budding lesbian Elena. Sure, there are also the Hot Nerds cobbled together by capitalistic cynicism and the lusty male gaze — but you need more than a pair of glasses and a mouthful of jargon to make a convincing female nerd. Thankfully, though, the idea that novel-loving women aren't applying their primed imaginations to their libidos is an antiquated one.

So is the concept that nerds always have their noses buried in a book. *Halt and Catch Fire*'s engineer Donna and programmer Cam, who found a tech start-up in the early days of the personal computer and follow its entrepreneurial potential to Silicon Valley, are just two of the female nerds toiling (and mostly thriving) in the STEM fields. Other science- and tech-minded women who've connected with audiences include *The Big Bang Theory*'s Amy Farrah Fowler, *Arrow*'s Felicity Smoak, *Orphan Black*'s Cosima Niehaus, and *NCIS*'s Abby Sciuto. Flipping through channels — or, more likely in 2017, scrolling through Google image search results — girls can now imagine themselves in a rainbow of nerd types.

But it's arguably a nerdy female's career — specifically when she uses her education, resolve, and autonomy to create or to do good — that best exemplifies how much progress we've made in celebrating a woman's right to self-determination. To be a nerd is a feminist act, no matter the political leanings of the woman. Leslie Knope and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s Amy Santiago use their nerdiness in the service of peace and order, while *30 Rock*'s Liz Lemon and *Mad Men*'s Peggy Olson turn the parts of themselves that don't fit into the usual niches for women into career success. Even *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s Rebecca Bunch, who implicitly challenges our general fondness for nerdy women by testing the limits of female "likability," uses her years of neurotic book-learning to fight for her clients and help out her friend Paula. She'll correct your grammar, but she's so earnest about it that you almost won't mind.

It's crucial to note that we should be able to see more female nerds of colour and from sexual/gender minorities. Other than *Jane the Virgin* and *Ugly Betty*'s titular characters and their nerdy women mentioned above, TV's smart, awkward women, like *The Mindy Project*'s Mindy Lahiri, *Insecure*'s Issa Dee, and *Chewing Gum*'s Tracey Gordon, occupy the margins of nerd-dom. Perhaps the most prominent female blerd in pop culture right now is the Afro-British Hermione in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, whom only London theatre-goers have had the chance to experience. We've come this far in admiring female intelligence in its infinite permutations. We can go further.

Written by Inkoo Kang for MTV

Badgers at Bay (pupil example)

Picture this: a peaceful countryside landscape with luscious green fields and woodland. Then, the tranquillity is ruined by the sound of gunfire and the piercing scream of an animal in its dying breaths. This is the harsh reality of our countryside. Every day badgers' lives are threatened due to the cull the government so imprudently enacted. Britain's MPs and population were deceived into approving a policy that could send a third of the nation's badgers to their deaths: they were misled by the scientific case that backed the policy from day one. The same policy which Lord Robert May, a former government chief scientist, claimed simply "does not make sense"[1].

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is an infectious and contagious disease that resulted in the slaughter of 32,620 cattle in 2013[2]. Cattle are the main reservoir but a wide range of mammals including humans, badgers and deer can also suffer from the disease. It was for this reason that the badger cull began. Yet badgers, contrary to popular belief, are not the main contributors to the spread of bTB. Cattle to cattle spread is, according to the Independent Scientific Group (ISG), "the main cause of disease spread to new areas"[3]. So why, when this information is widely available, did the government still enact this preposterous policy? The ruthless slaughter of thousands of creatures should never have been permitted in the first place. The blame lies solely with our incompetent government. They refused to even listen to their own chief scientist who was unwilling to back this senseless slaughter. They are "placing politics above science and ethics" according to Claire Bass, from the Humane Society International/UK. She also claimed that "it fails farmers by promising a solution to TB that scientists agree cannot be delivered by killing badgers; and it fails the public by wasting valuable funds that could be far better deployed…".[4] So why- when scientists and experts have other ways to really reduce bTB cases- is this massacre continuing?

Presumably, it must be a cheaper option for the government. That is surely the reason why they enacted this butchery; that way the financial input could be diverted to other vital issues such as healthcare. But once again Britain has been let down. The government estimated a cost of £2,250/km^2 of participating land per year for the vaccination of badgers against bTB. Culling, however, only costs £1000. Well, until you add the £1,429 needed for policing costs.[5] So why, when a more humane, more cost effective and more tolerable approach is available, is the slaughter still proceeding? There is no logical answer. In Wales, 1,424 badgers have been vaccinated for a cost of £943,000 over 288km. In England, 1,861 badgers have been culled at a cost of around £8.1 million over 561km.[6] Vaccination is clearly both more cost effective and also better for the country's wildlife populations, so why does our government still have culling as its main approach? Such decisions are unfathomable. It is true that both vaccinating and culling are difficult to execute: badgers

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/oct/13/badger-cull-mindless

[2] http://www.viva.org.uk/resources/campaign-materials/fact-sheets/badgers-and-bovine-tb-btb

[3] http://badgertrust.org.uk/threats/bovine-tb.aspx

[4] http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/dec/18/government-admits-badger-cull-could-fail-reduce-bovine-tb

[5] http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Farchive.defra.gov.uk%2Ffoodfarm%2Ffarmanimal%2Fdiseases%2Fatoz%2Ftb%2Fdocuments%2Fbovine-tb-impact-assessment.pdf&ei=ECzuVO6uA8L_UMTvgOgH&usg=AFQjCNHQpet03f3CcsxgvRgvLq4E_ddAoA&bvm=bv.86956481,d.d24

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tb-statistics-and-badger-vaccination PDF ref: RF16187

are notoriously difficult to find as the gunmen trying to slaughter them have found. However why has inoculation of cows not been considered? This is far simpler to achieve and will satisfy both the farmers concerns about the welfare of their livestock and the animal rights opponents who, sensibly, do not approve of such a heartless killing spree.

And heartless it is. How long do you think it should take a badger to die? You would hope, being a nation of 'animal lovers' its death would be both quick and clean, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, this is not the case. Despite targets to keep only 5% of badgers awaiting upwards of five minutes to die, the government's independent panel of scientific experts exposed deeply concerning figures. Between 6.4% and 18% of slaughtered badgers took over five minutes to die.[7] This is over five minutes of incomprehensible, inescapable pain and unimaginable suffering; five minutes lying in a pool of its own blood as life oozes away. How can the government support a policy this barbaric, a policy so inhumane? Natural England, England's wildlife watchdog, released monitoring reports that show that a third of badgers were shot in the wrong place.[8] This meant that two out of nine had to be shot more than once, as they had not died instantaneously. These badgers will have been slowly, painfully dying, waiting for the gunmen to find them and end their lives.

So why do we continue with a cull: a cull which is foolish, ludicrous and senseless? To put it simply, we are too easily deceived by scientific facts that do not truly represent what we are led to believe. Not only is the government targeting the wrong species but it refuses to accept that an error was made - an error which is proving fatal for our country's badgers. Unwilling to come to terms with the fact that there is a cheaper, more sustainable way to solve the colossal issue that is bovine Tuberculosis, they turn a blind eye to the unimaginable pain that these animals suffer due to poor execution of the cull. All we must do is make a small change in our law that will save thousands of badgers from paying the ultimate price.

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[7] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-26369306

[8] http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/feb/28/badger-cull-humaneness-test-tb-cattle

Grade A Rubbish (pupil example)

We share 96% of our genomes with chimpanzees.[9] A mere 4% separates us from them on a genetic level so why are we so massively different from them? We are the only species on the planet that have the ability to not only use tools, but improve on those tools generation after generation. We can go from creating the axe to having more information than The Great Library of Alexandria in a 5 by 3 inch box in a matter of millennia. We have put a man on the moon (well…), created plastics, computers, synthetic fibres and the Internet while our evolutionary cousins have contented themselves with the all-be-it impressive feat of using stones to crack open nuts. So what separates us from the animal kingdom? What gives us the ability to strive further and further away from them? Collective learning.[10] The ability to gather and improve on information given to us by our ancestors is a gift given to us either by an evolutionary quirk or a divine being and should be treated as such. A gift. I believe that the education system here in Scotland is failing to treat this unique and awe-inspiring feat with the respect it deserves. Education not only splits us from the rest of the animals, our future as a race depends on it to grow and possibly even survive.

I believe that while the Curriculum sounds good (if you can make either heads or tails of it), it does not work in practise. One of the "capabilities" championed by the Curriculum for Excellence is to "think creatively and independently". Sounds great. If you offered my parents that ten years ago they would have bitten your hand off. I have however, been "shhh"ed when trying to discuss the basics of Quantitative Easing in MS, told to "be quiet" when trying to figure out the hook to Dan Croll's "Can You Hear Me?" in Music and told not to "answer back" when questioning a "teacher" in the audaciously named "Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies" all in the name of getting through the work. How can I be said to be "studying" philosophy when my questions are treated like the whining of a precocious child. Moreover, the logbooks in subjects that used to be a creative outlet for pupils are really draining both my "enthusiasm" and my "motivation" to learn. If ever the reader has the opportunity to design a curriculum, I implore you to ask yourself this: "would a genius in this field fail this course?" For example, Mozart would not fill out two reflection logs for every song he composed or fill out a logbook on his chosen instruments. Ergo, Mozart would fail National 5 music.

I probably sound like a nuisance judging by the opening paragraphs and I am certainly seen as such by many teachers trying, in general, admirably to get their classes through their exams and leave with as good a grade as possible. I would argue that if any system, never mind an education system, cannot cope with an inquisitive brain, it is a heavily flawed system.

What is a grade anyway? It certainly is not a mark of our intelligence. Not useful intelligence anyway, for passing exams becomes entirely obsolete once one has escaped the aquarium of formal education. Take Quentin Tarantino for example. He is unsuccessful under our current system. He

[9]http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/08/0831_050831_chimp_genes.html

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPggkvB9_dc&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtMczXZUmjb3mZSU1Roxnrey&index=6

dropped out of high school at 15[11] and is therefor a failure in the CforE's eyes. Tarantino like so many others who do not fit in with education has done very well for himself. He was able to get over being called a failure and is now one of the best-known directors ever. He did not need the Pythagorean theorem to direct "Pulp Fiction" but there is nothing for his skill set in formal education. He actually puts it far better than I can: "When people ask me if I went to film school I tell them 'no, I went to films.'"[12]

My biggest problem with CforE is the lack of solid thought out reason for doing what we do in school. I spend 8-10 hours of my day being taught to conform, get through the exams and pipe down presumably to make me a cog that is easier to slip into the economy but I often wonder why my last two periods of Wednesday, RMPS and PSE (often referred to as "double free" by my classmates), are spent first copying from a textbook and then watching a PowerPoint presentation and/or a video, not-so-subtly trying to link drugs with the Nazis (no I'm not making this up). So underwhelming is my experience with CforE that I can count a generous 3 capabilities and 2 attributes that I have developed as a direct result of spending around half of my waking life since the age of 3 in it. Even those would hardly fit in with any quotes advertising Scottish education to foreign pupils. "My standard of what is interesting has been lowered so considerably during my time in school that I haven't had a meltdown yet". I call that resilience. "I'm so unstimulated by my experience of education that I've taken to watching educational clips on Youtube". That's self-reliance if ever I've heard it. While I am on the subject I would like to add that the 9-10 collective hours I have spent watching "CrashCourse" are considered wasted time by the education system. I do not have an exam on World History so there is no point in me learning about it.

That is why it is so important to not only reform but to revolutionise our education system. As the now legendary Sir Ken Robinson said "reform is not enough anymore because that is just improving a broken model."[13]. There is a point to genuine learning and improvement of the self in the greater world. If I want to be an intelligent member of society I have to take it upon myself to keep education meaningful and interesting. It used to be that students were told that by working hard in school and getting a degree, you would get a good job and be happy but that simply is not true anymore. Having a degree helps a little but not much[14] so why do we essentially spend 2 decades working towards one?

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[11] http://www.businessinsider.com/successful-people-who-dropped-out-of-high-school-2013-5?op=1&IR=T

[12] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3712013.stm

[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9LelXa3U_I

[14] http://diverseeducation.com/article/67011/

In the Shadows (pupil example)

For all our glory we are ignorant. When something unthinkable happens we strive to find answers. We dig in a desperate attempt to discover the source. We dig until we are blackened with dirt and when we find no real answers we are not discouraged; just a little deeper perhaps? What we fail to understand is that there are not always answers. Matters concerning the mind bear no logic. No rational explanation can be found however deep you delve because they simply do not exist. It highlights our vices; we do not comprehend mental illness, we do not speak of it. But when a person is driven to such shocking extremes as to take one's life, we need to know why? We need to vindicate violence. We need the reassurance; to be safe in the knowledge that if we can find out why then we can prevent it from happening again. Hypocrisy is our specialty; we condemn mental illness; hide it away in some disused room, boxed and taped – out of sight out of mind. Yet when it breaks out of that box and unleashes its full force upon us, only then do we notice it, comfort it and finally coax it back to where it can be seen no longer.

Like any disease there are different forms of mental illness as well as varying severities, all of which affect sufferers in different ways and on different levels. Mental illness is often mistaken for emotion – someone becomes overly anxious due to nerves, one drives themselves into depression because they listen to sad music too often; common misconceptions which yet again prove how blinkered society is. Mental illness is not self-inflicted, it is a disease and like its sibling cancer, it can develop due to a great many different reasons. It would be deemed wrong in this day and age to chastise someone because they were born brain damaged, resulting in the person not being able to communicate easily, suffering from heightened stress levels and fearing new surroundings. So why is it acceptable to deny those who develop mental health problems later on in life, employment? A recent survey carried out by the Guardian newspaper found out that 38% of employers would not employ someone with a mental illness.[15] Even more disturbing was the point that 40% of mental health suffers say that they were denied a job because of their history of psychiatric treatment and about 60% say they have been put off applying for a job as they expect to be dealt with unfairly.[16] Would a former cancer patient be denied a work placement if it was discovered that they had received chemotherapy? No. So why is it acceptable for those who have a mental illness to be deprived of work simply because they received treatment in an attempt to help their disease?

"People are always selling the idea that people with mental illness are suffering. I think madness can be an escape. If things are not so good, you maybe want to imagine something better."[17] As said by one of the greatest mathematical geniuses of our time, John Forbes Nash Junior, who, apart from being the winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences was a paranoid schizophrenic. No case is ever black and white. People think mental illness defines a person, that it somehow changes who they are, no matter how intelligent, comical, compassionate. Obliviousness leads to judgement. Mental health is stereotyped and mocked. Sufferers are made to feel inadequate, they wear their disease like iron bonds; heavy and shameful. Yet a transplant patient is commended, having suffered, fought and survived. Mental illness is not so easily fixed it is a constant battle that is more often than not fought in silence. In the case of John Forbes, he felt that he needed to escape – to hide in his mind, to pretend of better days. Perhaps a positive of the serious condition from which he suffered? I would have to disagree. Society made him feel that way, made him feel that he needed to turn away and run, to not let his disease seep into his everyday being. Would a gushing wound that required stiches be waved away in the hope that it would simply mend itself? Mental illness is our loudest secret: 30% of the adult population has a recognised psychological disorder.[18] Yet our ill-informed society creates a divide making it a shameful burden.

Fight; it is in our nature to care. Human beings have a remarkable gift that allows us to lend sympathy, empathy and words of comfort to those who are in need. In times of distress people come together and try in

[15] http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/nov/14/mentalhealth2

[16] http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/nov/14/mentalhealth2

[17] http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/johnforbes539726.html

[18] The Happiness Trap *Pocketbook* by Russ Harris and Bev Aisbett

some way to appease a bad situation. Flee; it is also in our nature to fear the unknown. Human beings possess the aptitude to turn disapproving, critical and pejorative. Lack of knowledge is our biggest sin. Being the superior species we look out for our own. If one member of the pack is in danger the rest protect it; fight. If one member of the pack is weakened the pack leaves; flee. Even today our animalistic instincts prevail leaving us intolerant of difference.

"The superior man is the providence of the inferior. He is eyes for the blind, strength for the weak, and a shield for the defenseless. He stands erect by bending above the fallen. He rises by lifting others."[19] A sweeping characterisation which holds outdated values. Men are humans. They have emotions, feel pain. The stigma for mental health is huge but it is far more negative towards male sufferers. A man who suffers from mental illness is, in the eyes of many, a weak man. Suicides rates show that British men are three times more likely to die by suicide than British women.[20] Men are less likely to seek help, not because they feel they are coping but because society paints a picture that to ask for help means to surrender; to declare oneself the loser. Even someone as talented, successful and loved as the great Robin Williams felt that he was alone, left to fight his demons unaided. In truth, the only person capable of telling you why they did what they did has fatally absented themselves from the discussion. And sometimes, even they would be unable to pinpoint a reason.[21]

Mental illness is often romanticised. Black and white photography of scars accompanied by meaningful quotes creates an ambiguous allure. Ignorance is bliss. The very idea that suffering from depression somehow makes you a more interesting person is delightfully idiotic. By pretending that mental illness is some grunge teenage phase that broadens your music taste and that lets you dress in edgy black cloths, it somehow softens the blow. Ignorance is not bliss. Depression is not some phase of dark love; it's not wanting to avoid the decaying society that we live in. Nor is it some ploy to read more poetry and head bang to Nirvana. It is, in truth, a nightmare; an ice cold black hole. You are alone, surrounded by many. So closed off you're an open book. You let no one in or yourself out. It is craving intimacy and longing for seclusion: a perfect contradiction; or imperfect.

Too long has society kept those who suffer from a mental illness in the shadows. Now is the time to free those from the dark and stand united in the light. Together we can break the stigma of mental health. Together we can forever be in the sun.

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Should the Driving Age be Increased in Britain? (pupil example)

Being seventeen can't be easy. With the stress of important school work, university applications and general teenage life on your shoulders, it surely wouldn't seem realistic to be expected to deal with the added pressure of learning to drive? Although on the surface it may seem appealing, do rocketing insurance premiums, fuel prices and maintenance costs sound as enticing? Not to mention those pesky mates of yours fooling around in the back offering you "a few for the road," only for you to end up upside down in a ditch. Some would say going on a day trip with your friends is a liberating, exciting experience to look forward to, but really is it not just a death sentence?

Just imagine. You are a seventeen year old stepping out into the big wide world. Your whole life of endless openings and opportunities ahead of you, with nothing to fear but the stinking hangover from the night before. Just imagine if all of that was to be taken away. To lose everything. In the blink of an eye. Family. Friends. Dreams. And for what? A moment of blind immaturity. That time where you just left the ringing phone. Where you just stopped at the red light. Where you just listened to what that wise, old instructor said. Accident statistics have shown that one fifth of deaths on British roads involve seventeen to twenty-four year olds and that during summer months, on average four hundred and twenty-two teens die every month.[22] Also, in 2011 in the USA alone, there were six thousand four hundred and twenty-eight fatalities involving young drivers and passengers between the age of fifteen and twenty. [23] One can only wonder as to how much society could be improved should these statistics be reduced. More teenagers alive and well makes for more teenagers getting up and making a positive contribution to our society. These statistics undoubtedly outline the growing problem that can only possibly be solved by an increase in the legal driving age to an age where the driver is less prone and responsible enough not to give in to the thrill of breaking the speed limit.

I'm sure it is of common belief amongst most teens that life is extremely tough without the everyday twists and turns of their social life. Facebook, Twitter, Skype, you name it; almost every teenager will have been affected by the realms of social networking at some point in their life. However, it is when these act as distractions to young drivers that problems arise. Common sense would suggest that a younger person's brain is less developed when it comes to decision making. This is partly down to the fact that young drivers certainly lack experience on the roads and are not fully aware of the dangers involved in using a mobile phone when driving. Answering that one call or responding to that one text can make all the difference to whether or not you and your car make it to that party in one piece. The problem doesn't seem to lie solely with mobile phones. Statistics have shown that a seventeen year old driver's risk of death per mile increases by 44% when driving with another passenger under the age of twenty-one.[24] The risk is doubled when carrying two, and quadrupled when carrying three or more. Think of the impact these statistics have on the families of the victims of these unnecessary deaths. One can't even begin to comprehend what it must be like to be a parent in that situation, having to be told you will never see your son or daughter again. Each of these statistics can be taken as just another number but when you actually think that these are real people with families involved, that is when it truly hits home that there is only one solution to this, and that is an increase in the legal driving age in Britain.

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[22] www.dailymail.co.uk

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[24] www.link.springer.com

Many would argue that a great deal of responsibility is carried when it comes to things like alcohol consumption and smoking cigarettes, both of which have older age restrictions. Should being allowed to drive a car not carry the same level of responsibility as merely smoking a cigarette? Some would make a case that smoking causes serious health deficiencies but it is clear that being involved in a serious car accident due to a bit of immaturity carries a little bit more danger, don't you? Unless of course, you happen to be the lucky escapee who has to live with the serious injury of one of your friends on your conscience. It is the responsibility and know-how of recognising when not to take that risk that doesn't develop until later life. Research has shown that the prefrontal cortex in the teenage brain does not register risk in the same way as it does for adults[25] so the facts clearly show teenagers' brains are not yet developed enough to assess the dangers involved in driving exceedingly fast. An increase in the driving age would allow more time for the teenage brain to develop and give the driver a better understanding of the dangers of driving.

A seventeen year old must be more than used to hearing their parents rumble on about the recession, "times are tough at the moment," is a personal favourite. Yet after all of this, teenagers seem to still expect to be able to afford the costs of running a car! At 17, most often find themselves unemployed and with no real source of income, yet they still think it's plausible to afford to run a car. It must be every parent's nightmare, booking those lessons, completely in the knowledge that the costs will likely be paid by them. With fuel prices rising almost monthly and insurance premiums going through the roof, it is becoming less and less plausible for a seventeen year old to be able to afford these, especially as available jobs seem to be running low. A case could be made that a few years down the line, financing a car would become significantly easier, but in all honesty, with the way the British economy is in this day and age, it would be incredibly silly to predict the future state of the British economy.

Finally, it is a common belief that the government has a responsibility to restrict driving to make it safer. In most countries there are strict rules in place to govern who is and who isn't allowed to drive. This means that the infrastructure is already in place to increase the driving age. It is not as if the government will have to introduce huge reforms to cater for an increase in the driving age, the restrictions are already there, such as the seizing of vehicles and alcohol abuse. Governments already restrict driving to make it safer through laws concerning insurance and alcohol use so increasing the age would only add to the campaign of making the roads a safer place. Surely the government has a responsibility to protect the safety of its people and this safety can only be ensured with an increase in the legal driving age.

In conclusion, it is clear to see that increasing the driving age in Britain is a must. Accident rates are becoming embarrassingly high, particularly with young drivers. The cost of running a car only adds to the stress of teenage life. The statistics suggest that young drivers are less effective at dealing with everyday distractions than older drivers, and take greater risks. This in turn, leads to greater accident rates and can only have a negative effect on the families of those drivers. It is for these reasons why I certainly believe that the driving age simply must be increased in Britain. I know you'd most definitely agree.

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