

It Is Just You, Everything's Not Shit



Steve Stack

IT IS JUST YOU

EVERYTHING'S NOT SHIT

Steve Stack

 HarperCollins e-books

for

you know who

with love

x

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Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of popular books moaning about life and how crap it is. Whether it be grumpy old men, miserable old women, or people asking, 'Is it just me or is everything shit?'. I am OK with that, I accept that the world can be a crappy place sometimes, but do we have to be so bloody pessimistic?

I am a fully paid-up subscriber to the notion that life is actually pretty damn great. There are loads of wonderful people, places and experiences surrounding us every moment of our lives and if we ignore that fact, then it is no wonder that we end up grumpy and miserable.

This book is designed to celebrate what is good in life and to act as a reminder that there are truly great things to experience all around us. I have tried to select an array of subjects that should inspire, delight, fill us with wonder or just make us smile. From the humble, but highly amusing aardvark to the altruistic global vision of Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhamad Yunus; from breakfast in bed to Patrick Moore playing the xylophone; I hope the following entries present the case for the nice things in life.

But whatever you do, don't take it too seriously.

Steve Stack
(from my hammock in the garden)
2007

A

Aardvark

Whether you are an ardent Creationist or zealous advocate of Darwinism you have to admit that the aardvark is one amazing creature. Weighing in at up to 150lb and with a nose like a Clanger, the aardvark is almost entirely hairless and can seal its nostrils at will.

The unusual name comes from the Afrikaans for ‘earth pig’ and makes it ideally placed for coming at the beginning of encyclopedias, much to the envy of yaks and zebras. Native to Africa, the aardvark is no relation to the anteater, in fact it doesn’t eat ants at all—it eats termites, often by sucking them straight out of the ground. An accomplished digger, it can burrow through even quite hard earth, but generally it can’t be bothered, moving on to softer stuff elsewhere. Not that it is a lazy animal, far from it; when an aardvark first wakes up it leaps around for 30 feet or so before going about its business. And when attacked, it will use its strong tail to somersault out of harm’s way.

Put Richard Dawkins and Pope Gregory XVI in a room, show them a picture of an aardvark and for a brief moment they will be united in appreciation at the sheer wonder of such an animal. And then they’d spend the rest of the night arguing about just who made it.

FASCINATING FACT

The collective noun for aardvarks is *aarmory*, although some experts disagree on this. Not that they have ever offered an alternative so they should probably keep quiet.

Advent calendars

Why restrict the joy of Christmas to one solitary day when you could extend it to cover the twenty-four preceding ones as well? All you need to do is hang up a sheet of cardboard with little windows cut into it. Easy.

For some reason, pulling open the little hinged flaps to reveal the picture and—if you are middle-class and not related to a dentist—chocolate hidden behind is a minor miracle every December morning. Just watch parents volunteering to assist children who are having trouble getting theirs open.

The first advent calendar was made in either Austria or Germany in the early part of

the twentieth century. The Austrians and Germans can't seem to decide who got there first, while the rest of the world thinks of them as pretty much the same country, anyway, so isn't that fussed. Before printed calendars, families would light an advent candle (some still do) or mark the twenty-four days off with chalk marks on the fireplace (slightly less popular now).

Allotments

You might find it odd to see an entry for allotments in a book about all things nice and wonderful but there is a very good reason for their inclusion. Put simply, if it weren't for allotments you probably wouldn't be here today. During the Second World War, when the UK was blockaded by U-boats, the women, children and old men of the nation picked up their spades as part of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. The 1.4 million allotment plots across the land yielded 1.3 million tonnes of produce a year—that's nearly 1 tonne per plot! The fruit and veg grown on small pieces of council land fed your parents, grandparents or great-grandparents and led to you sitting (or standing) there right now holding this book.

The idea of allotments—small areas of council or parish land given over to local residents for them to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers—dates back over two hundred years but they really came into their own during Victorian times. As more and more families moved to the cities, less and less agricultural land was being tended and the new urban dwellers were encouraged to 'grow their own'. It was also seen as a way to keep the lower classes occupied and off the demon drink.

Since the end of the Second World War, the number of allotments in the UK has decreased to around 250,000 and many feared that the decline was terminal. However, allotment land is protected by an Act of Parliament and councils are obliged to keep the space available at low rents to residents. Thankfully, the last few years have seen a resurgence in allotment use from young gardeners and their families moving towards a more environmentally conscious philosophy as the appetite for organic produce increases. So they are likely to be around for a long time to come.

Allotment shows

And if it were not for allotments then we would never have had allotment shows: old men showing off award-winning onions and dusting down their leeks alongside young whippersnappers with enormous pumpkins. Even the most cynical of observers cannot fail to be enthralled by the politics and etiquette of prize vegetables.

Amuse bouche

In some of the more posh restaurants your meal will begin with an unannounced course, known as an *amuse bouche* (literally, ‘mouth amuser’ or ‘to amuse the mouth’). This is usually a small appetiser designed to titillate your taste buds.

So, let’s get this straight. We are talking about a surprise extra course, at no additional charge, specifically designed to make you smile before embarking upon the main meal. What’s not to like?

Archers theme tune

Tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum

Tum ti-tum ti ta tum...

Even if you don’t listen to *The Archers*, or even Radio 4, you can probably hum the opening bars of the theme tune. One of the most instantly recognisable pieces of music in contemporary culture, it has heralded the start of this agricultural soap opera since it began in 1950. A particularly joyful ditty, Billy Connolly once suggested it should be adopted as the UK’s national anthem.

The original composition is called *Barwick Green*, written by Arthur Wood. It is taken from his suite *My Native Heath* where it features as a maypole dance. And perhaps that explains the enduring appeal: to have a jaunty country tune explode onto the airwaves immediately after a depressing news report can put the supposed ills of this world into perspective.

Arts cinemas

They might show far more subtitled movies than are good for them but any cinema that serves a cup of tea and slice of cake that you can take into the auditorium with you is worthy of celebration. Watching angst-ridden French actors argue with each other in between bouts of athletic and graphic sex is made all the more palatable with a forkful of cream slice. Try it some time.

Sir David Attenborough

Sir David Attenborough is worthy of two entries in this book—one for his remarkable body of work and another for the wonderfully soothing effect of his voice—but I shall combine both here.

He has been broadcasting on television since 1954 and his career since then has spanned twenty separate series, with a twenty-first currently in production, and countless individual documentaries. His perceptive, empathetic and enthralling commentary to each of these programmes has been one of the major factors in their enduring quality and generations of children and adults have grown up listening to his voice. He has informed, educated and delighted an entire nation.

FASCINATING FACT

Attenborough's groundbreaking 1979 series, *Life on Earth* was watched by over 500 million people worldwide when originally broadcast.

B

Bacon sandwiches

Proof of the irresistible nature of the bacon sandwich is that it stands as the number one reason for former vegetarians falling off the wagon. Even hardened veggies (you know, the ones who don't even eat fish) can be seen to swoon at the smell of frying bacon and the sight of a bread knife cutting through a crusty loaf in preparation. I once lived with a woman who had been vegetarian all her life (I blame the parents) but still insisted on making my bacon sandwiches for me so that she could be close to their sheer culinary perfection.

Bacon sandwiches come in all shapes and sizes, with many accompanying ingredients, but—and here is the ultimate accolade—they are all great. A long, crunchy baguette filled with exotic salad and slaverings of mayonnaise can be delightful, but then no connoisseur of the bacon butty would turn down two slices of white with a bit of butter and brown sauce either. It doesn't matter how you serve it up, a bacon sandwich is bloody marvellous.

Everyone who makes a bacon sandwich will claim to be the finest proponent of the art in the whole of Christendom. I am no exception and here is my classic recipe:

- 3 rashers of smoked back bacon (it is worth stumping up for some really good quality stuff from a proper butcher but, let's face it, anything will do)
- 2 slices of hand-cut crusty white bread
- some rocket leaves
- a handful of cherry tomatoes, cut in half
- Parmesan cheese
- mayonnaise
- Dijon mustard
- some butter (obviously)

Fry the bacon in a little olive oil. When the bacon is almost cooked, but not quite at the crispy stage, chuck in some cherry tomatoes. While these are cooking you can prepare the bread. Cut two thick slices and slap on the butter. Coat one slice with a generous amount of mayonnaise, and the other with an equally friendly spreading of mustard. Using the mayo slice as your base, pile on the rocket leaves (as much as you want, really). Once the bacon is crispy enough for you, then arrange the slices on the bread; I prefer two diagonal and once across the middle. Plonk the cooked

tomatoes on top and then, using a potato peeler, shave some Parmesan over the lot where it will start to melt. Stick the mustard slice on top and press down firmly. Cut lengthways (never diagonally—too flimsy) and enjoy with a cup of tea, a broad grin and juices dribbling down your chin.

Bank Holidays

Any day when you don't have to go into work is good. But here's the remarkable thing about Bank Holidays—there is no legal right to time off, but we get to stay home anyway.

Originally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bank Holidays were just that: days when the banks were closed. There were thirty to forty of them spread across the year coinciding with religious festivals and feast days but only bank employees really benefited from them.

It wasn't until 1871, when Sir John Lubbock introduced the Bank Holidays Act, that the rest of us got a lie-in as well. Lubbock was a wonderful old duffer who felt that bank employees should be allowed to watch lots of cricket, so his list of holidays included the dates when village matches tended to be played.

There has been plenty of fiddling with the numbers, frequency and timing of Bank Holidays since the original Act of Parliament and many people are lobbying for a few more days to be chucked into the mix as well. Most popular are the arguments for St George's, St Andrew's and St David's days for England, Scotland and Wales respectively, in line with the national day of drinking and falling over in Ireland for St Patrick's Day.

FASCINATING FACT

Christmas Day and Good Friday are not technically Bank Holidays, although they are observed as common law holidays.

Albert Coombs Barnes

Every now and again, history throws up an individual so eccentric and remarkable that they deserve to become part of modern folklore. Albert Coombs Barnes is one such person, but sadly his renown is nowhere near as great as it should be.

Barnes was born in 1872 in Philadelphia in America, the son of a butcher. He paid his own way through university where he excelled in chemistry. As a young man he developed a treatment for gonorrhoea (rumour had it to cure his own) that proved so successful that he was able to retire, a millionaire, at the age of 35.

He subsequently founded the Barnes Foundation, which acted as an art collection and cultural centre. He also funded projects for the underprivileged of his home city. And he certainly knew his art from his elbow, since the Foundation included works

by Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse and a number of Renoirs, many of which he had bought for bargain prices.

Access to this formidable art collection could only be achieved by writing to Barnes to request permission. Applicants who had, for whatever reason, incurred the ire of the great man would often receive rejection letters from Barnes' dog, Fidele. Here is one such letter:

Madame,

I have received your letter of the—th, asking for leave to visit my master's Foundation.

Unhappily, being young and poor, my master was treated in a hospital founded by your family. As a result of intimate relations with one of the nurses he contracted a venereal disease. He has never forgotten this, and is therefore obliged to refuse your request.

He was also a strong supporter of the black rights movement in America and would frequently receive visitors of all colours at his home in Philadelphia. When this brought protests from his neighbours (this was 1930s America), he pointed out that he owned the land they lived on and threatened to build a hospital for the black community right in the middle of the richest district in town. This soon shut them up.

My favourite Barnes story was when a rich socialite couple came to visit the Foundation. They were met by a janitor who was busy washing the floors. They then proceeded to loudly criticise the Renoirs and Cezannes on display, at which point the janitor manhandled them off the premises. He, of course, turned out to be Barnes himself.

Baths

With any combination of the following:

- a) a glass of wine
- b) bubbles
- c) a good book
- d) someone else

Bedtime stories

When I was a child, I would look forward to bedtime and hearing the magical stories my parents would read from books or make up off the top of their heads. It was one of the highlights of my day.

Now, as a parent, I find myself looking forward to my children's bedtime so that I can read them stories or make some up myself. It is *absolutely* the highlight of my day.

Bekonscot Model Village

At the very end of the walk round Bekonscot Model Village there is a sign. It isn't particularly big but its size is in inverse proportion to the joy it brings to those who read it. It says, quite simply:

Please feel free to walk round again.

Roland Callingham was a successful London accountant in the 1920s and with the money he made from his business he bought several acres of meadows adjoining his home in Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire. Together with his head gardener, Tom Berry, he built a number of model houses as a feature for his alpine garden. The scale he used for these houses (1 inch to 1 foot) is now the accepted 1:12 scale for all dolls houses worldwide.

In the early days, the model village was only intended to entertain his friends and clients but, as it grew in size, he was encouraged to open it to the public. He did so in 1929 and Bekonscot Model Village was born—the first such attraction in the world. During his lifetime Callingham added an extensive railway system, a lake and a number of surrounding villages, including Greenhaily with its own zoo and the fishing village of Southpool.

Nearly eighty years later, Bekonscot is still going strong with all proceeds given to charity. A decision was taken in 1993 to maintain the village in its 1930s likeness, thus preserving a portrait of a way of life that has long since vanished in the real world.

FASCINATING FACT

Bekonscot Model Village includes a scale model of the home of children's author Enid Blyton who lived nearby. Eagle-eyed visitors will spot a bright red and yellow car in the driveway with a certain nodding wooden toy at the steering wheel.

Being a kid for five minutes

Sometimes the opportunity presents itself to shrug off your adult years and muck in with the kids. Setting up a Scalextric set, finger painting, rearranging the furniture in a dolls' house, rolling out plasticine, making mud pies. The list will differ depending on your age and what you got up to when you were a child, but the unadulterated joy of these stolen moments is the same for everyone.

Berry picking

Few foods taste nicer than a blackberry picked from the bramble and popped

straight into the mouth, or a strawberry plucked by hand. Modern retailing means that you can buy most types of berry, frozen or fresh(ish) all year round, but not even the owners of Tesco would claim that a raspberry flown over from South Africa tastes as good as one you have picked yourself.

Pick-Your-Own farms are commonplace and scattered across the UK. At the height of summer they are full of seasoned pickers and children toddling around with juice-stained faces. Obviously the aforementioned raspberries and strawberries are popular, as are gooseberries for cooking, but there are many more berries out there to try:

Bilberry. A pain in the backside to harvest but they are very tasty and well worth the bother if you have the patience. They are the key ingredient of Mucky Mouth Pies, a popular Yorkshire dish.

Cloudberry. Largely native (in the form of jam) to IKEA stores nowadays, you can still find this small shrub alongside moors in the north of England and across Scotland, although they are quite scarce. If you are lucky enough to come across some of these deep orange berries, they taste great warmed over ice cream or used in puddings or jam.

Cowberry. A close relative of the cranberry, these really need to be cooked before eating.

Crowberry. You are unlikely to find many of these around (they are far more common in Scandinavia), but they make a nice jelly.

Dewberry. A little like a small blackberry, but with less of a cluster of fruit; these are very difficult to pick without bursting, so it is best to snip the stems and then eat the fruit dipped in sugar.

Juneberry. Quite rare and usually confined to the south of England, these are sweet purple berries and can be eaten straight from the bush.

Rowanberry. Found on the rowan tree, or mountain ash, these resemble elderberries but are larger and bright orange. They are usually cooked and preserved as jam or served as a sauce with meat and game.

Whitebeam. You can often find these on suburban roadsides and they are also a popular garden shrub. The small bunches of red berries are not overly nice, but at least you can say you tried them.

Birthday cards with cash in them

When you are a child, cards are the most boring part of birthdays. What you want are presents, and lots of them. So when you open up that pastel-coloured envelope to reveal a card with a puppy on it, you have to pretend to be grateful. But then a nice crisp tenner falls out and suddenly the moment is saved. We've all been there, don't pretend you haven't.

Black and white movies

Sunday afternoon, no one in the house, black and white movie* on the telly, bar of chocolate on the arm of the sofa. Perfection.

Bookshop browsing

Some of the greatest pleasures in life are the most simple. Standing in a bookshop, surrounded by thousands of volumes, is one such joy.

Ideally, you would be in no rush. It is good to linger when browsing books. You can then identify a suitable section and decide upon your strategy. There are many to choose from:

The Librarian. Strict alphabetical order; you start at A and allow your eye to run across each spine, perhaps aided by a pointing finger. A small “*Tut!*” may venture from your lips when you find something not in the correct order. Selected books will be removed from the shelf, examined and then placed back carefully from whence they came. After twenty minutes you have only reached as far as C, so make a mental note of where you got to for your next visit.

The ADHD. Even though you have all the time in the world, you don't want to miss anything, so your eyes scan huge sections in one go, lingering briefly on interesting looking jackets or strange titles. You will pick things up but get bored after the first few lines of blurb.

The Favouritist. You make a beeline for your favourite authors and quickly check that they haven't published a new book without you knowing. They never have. You then proceed to rearrange their titles on the shelf so that other shoppers are more likely to come across them.

The Janitor. A nice leisurely browse, tidying as you go. Booksellers of the world love people like you.

The Gambler. Pure pot luck. You pick up anything that comes to hand using whatever method works for you that day. You end up taking home a bunch of stuff you've never heard of just to see what it is like.

The Pigeonholer. You know what you like and like what you know. You head straight for your department of choice, never deviating or being swayed by multibuys or special offers. You are rarely surprised.

The Abramovitch. It is pay-day and you buy everything that looks remotely attractive or interesting and end up with a pile of books that you will struggle to fit on your shelves.

Breakfast in bed

This is the one thing no one minds being woken up early for and is the rare occasion when a continental breakfast isn't a disappointment.

Breaking the ice on a puddle

Once you reach about the age of ten you stop being magnetically attracted to rain puddles. No longer do you jump straight into them, wellies or not. No more do you risk the anger of your mum for getting your socks all wet. You are growing up and jumping in puddles is something you choose, albeit reluctantly, to leave behind.

A frozen puddle, however, is a different thing entirely. It is almost impossible for an adult to walk past one without testing it with their foot in the illicit hope of that beautiful and satisfying crack and the spider web of fractures as you break the surface. It is the sort of moment that fuels an otherwise grey day.

Bubble wrap

Happy birthday, bubble wrap! Bubble wrap was invented by Marc Chavannes and Alfred Fielding in 1957, making it fifty years old this year (unless you are reading this later than 2007, in which case I am a little surprised by this book's longevity). Technically, the term 'bubble wrap' is trademarked by the Sealed Air Corporation and to avoid any legal wrangling I should refer to it as 'air cellular cushioning material', but then you wouldn't have a clue what I was talking about.

Originally, the inventors were trying to come up with a new type of wallpaper but ended up with a versatile packing material. Little did they know at the time that they had actually created one of the most pleasurable and hypnotic stress-relieving devices known to man, which is, of course, the real reason for its inclusion in this volume. The Sealed Air Corporation seem to have a sense of humour about this aspect of their product and even have a personality test on their website, which determines the sort of person you are by examining the way in which you pop the bubbles. For example, an extroverted and self-motivated person tends to throw bubble wrap on the floor and stamp all over it. I prefer to pop them one at a time, which makes me pragmatic and self-assured, apparently.

FASCINATING FACT

Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day is celebrated on 29 January every year, with events to mark the occasion including popping relay races and bubble wrap sculpture.

*It makes absolutely no difference what the film is, as long as it is in black and white.

C

Cancelled meetings

You are snowed under at work, your inbox is full of unread emails and messages with red exclamation marks next to them, you haven't had time for lunch and you have a meeting you don't want to go to starting in half-an-hour.

Then a miracle happens. The boss's PA calls to tell you that, for reasons you are too giddy with excitement to hear, the meeting has been cancelled. Suddenly, your whole afternoon opens up before you like a beautiful summer field full of daisies. You feel like running barefoot through the car park and jumping for joy. Well, sort of.

Brian Cant

Brian Cant has managed to be a key performer in no fewer than five television shows that are now part of modern folklore: *Play School*, *Camberwick Green*, *Trumpton*, *Chigley* and *Play Away*. He was a fundamental, and fondly remembered, part of the early years of millions of children in the UK and around the world. He was, for most of the 1970s, the nation's storyteller.

A printer by training, Cant was playing around at amateur dramatics when he was offered a professional acting job and quit work the next day. After some time as a jobbing actor, he auditioned for a new BBC children's show called *Play School* and there began his stint in living rooms across the land.

Following an early period of heavily scripted shows, Cant got more involved in the production of *Play School* and ended up writing whole weeks of episodes. These were never live, as many people assume, but recorded a week ahead.

His appearances on *Play School* landed him some voiceover work for Gordon Murray and Freddie Phillips who were putting together an animated series for the BBC called *Camberwick Green*. This was such a success that he was asked back to do the same for *Trumpton* and *Chigley*. Recording his material in a converted broom cupboard, Cant didn't get to see the animations at the time and, to this day, has not seen every episode from the series.

Play Away evolved from *Play School* and was aimed at older children and recorded in front of a live studio audience. During his time on that show, he worked alongside actors such as Jeremy Irons and Tony Robinson, both of whom went on to enjoy success with an adult audience, but Cant will always be remembered for his work in children's television. Still acting today, he appears regularly on stage up and down the UK.

Personally I think it is about time that his significant achievements, and his place in the memories of millions, were recognised with an honour. Perhaps a knighthood is out of his reach, but an OBE or something like that wouldn't be too much to ask, would it?

Frank Capra movies

The word 'Capra-esque' is often used to describe a movie, or anything, really, which has a heart-warming, life-affirming and slightly magical quality. It came about because of director Frank Capra's tendency to produce films that ticked all those boxes, and many of his productions are considered all-time classics. His films include *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* or *It Happened One Night*, which starred Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert and became the first film in history to win an Oscar for every major category.

Coming from a working-class background, Frank Capra was drawn to stories about the little man fighting against the odds, something epitomised by James Stewart's performances in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Capra himself was, by many accounts, not a particularly nice chap, but he was an excellent film director. He also knew how to pair up with talented people; many of his more successful films were penned by screenwriter Robert Riskin, a man whose vision is probably more aligned to the true meaning of Capra-esque.

Three Frank Capra movies appear on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 Greatest American Movies of all Time. These are *It's a Wonderful Life* (#11), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (#29) and *It Happened One Night* (#35).

Cartoons

An artist draws an image on a sheet of paper. He then draws a slightly different image on another sheet. By quickly flicking between the two, he creates the illusion of movement. He has made a cartoon.

Take thousands of artists drawing millions of images over the past hundred years or so and you have a universe of animation that has brought joy, awe, wonder and amazement to everyone who has had the pleasure to witness them.

Cartoons unite us; they make us all smile; they are an experience we share with everyone else who has ever watched one. When my son laughs at Bugs and Daffy arguing over rabbit season/duck season, he is reliving the laughter I expressed when I was his age watching that very scene, which is precisely the same as my father before me.

Every now and then some morally outraged individual will complain about all the violence in animated cartoons. They will point to Jerry smashing Tom's face in with an iron, or Wile E. Coyote getting crushed by an anvil, and suggest that it is corrupting the minds of minors.

I say that they clearly didn't watch enough cartoons as a kid. If they did, they'd have a bloody sense of humour.

Children's paintings

On one hand, the critical and artistic one, children's paintings are basically crap. Of course they are. They are created by people with no artistic talent and with the most basic of materials. They tend to look nothing like their intended subject.

On the other hand, the emotional and creative one, they are little rectangles of pure imagination.

A blue strip of sky clings desperately to the top of the page. A monster with 13 legs and eyes hovering somewhere above its head explodes in a riot of colour. An incomprehensible mass of paint swirls together into impossible shapes. Go and see an infant school art display some time; they will be the greatest pictures you will ever see.

If you still aren't convinced that children's paintings are the most rewarding form of art we have, then ask yourself this. Why is it that all the great modern artists spend their adult lives trying to see the world as children again? If you want to paint as well as Picasso, you either have to be a genius...or five years old.

Chinese chips

Obviously it is a bit silly to order chips from a Chinese takeaway, but if you have ever done so, you will know that the Chinese have a secret magic recipe. Somehow their chips taste nicer than any others. I have no idea how they prepare them, and I have never thought to ask. Perhaps they cook them in a wok. Whatever it is they do, it elevates the chipped potato to a whole new level.

Church bells

I don't care what religion you are, the ringing of church bells on a sunny spring morning is a joy to the ears.

Close encounters with wildlife

Most wild animals steer well clear of us human beings. A very wise move, too—we have a tendency to kill them for food, sport, or out of sheer boredom. So when an otherwise shy creature happens across your path and doesn't instantly flee, it is a rare privilege.

Those brief seconds, silent and still, can seem timeless. As you make eye contact and, for a moment, you acknowledge each other's presence, it is as if you are

communing with nature on an almost spiritual level. It is enough to humble even the most cynical of humans.

Clouds

Floating above our heads every day are the stuff of dreams and poetry. The most amazing sights in nature are just an upwards glance away.

Don't just take my word for it, here's someone who knows far more about it than me.

AN INTERVIEW WITH GAVIN PRETOR-PINNEY, FOUNDER OF THE CLOUD APPRECIATION SOCIETY.

What inspired you to start the Cloud Appreciation Society?

A few years back, a friend asked me to give a talk about clouds for her literary festival. She knew how enthusiastic I was about them and, of course, I said yes. But in the weeks before the event, I worried that no one would come along, since most people complain about clouds. It occurred to me that they might be more likely to come if I gave the talk an interesting name. So I called it 'The Inaugural Lecture of the Cloud Appreciation Society', even though no such society existed. When the talk was packed out, and everyone came up afterwards to ask how they could join, I figured that it was about time I started a society for real.

How many members do you have?

There are currently 7,700 members in 42 different countries, with more joining every day.

What are the benefits of membership as opposed to, I don't know, just looking up at the sky?

There are no particular benefits. We have yet to negotiate with airlines for members to have priority booking of window seats. But when you spend £3 to become a member, you get a badge and a certificate with your name and membership number on it. This states that you will 'pledge to persuade all who'll listen of the wonder and beauty of clouds'. Of course, you don't need to be a member to look up and enjoy clouds. They are there for anyone to enjoy. They belong to everyone and no one. It is about time someone stood up for clouds. It's just about that, really.

Any famous cloudspotters among your number, or is that a secret?

I have the utmost respect for the privacy of our members. Still, I can divulge that membership includes a celebrity chef, a musician/conceptual artist who had a number one hit single, and a husband-and-wife TV presenter duo.

What is it about clouds that you like so much?

I like the way they bring variety and drama to our skies. Life would be dull if we had to look up at monotonous blue skies day after day. Clouds are precious precisely because they are so transient: every cloudscape is unique, and clouds generally are useful metaphors for life down on earth (just one of the reasons for their great credentials as subjects for poetry and art). Put simply: clouds are for dreamers and their contemplation benefits the soul. A few minutes looking up each day to let your mind float along with the clouds is the best form of meditation I know. It helps elevate you above earthly concerns—and saves on psychoanalysis bills.

What is your all-time favourite cloud?

It is either the pileus cloud or the lenticular cloud. A pileus is like a cloud haircut. It looks like a blow-dried bouffant, and sometimes forms on top of the puffy, cauliflower-like summit of a large cumulus cloud. It only lasts a few minutes, before the cumulus grows up through it. It therefore embodies the transitory, ephemeral nature of clouds. A lenticular cloud tends to form in hilly or mountainous regions. It looks like a flying saucer. Unlike most

clouds that blow along in the wind, the lenticular formation hovers, more or less stationary, in a brisk breeze.

One of the joys of cloudspotting is finding shapes, so this UFO-shaped cloud is a winner.

Cloudspotters: anoraks or poets?

Both. And that's the beauty of it.

Do you think people who appreciate clouds have a more optimistic outlook on life?

Yes. What could be more optimistic than finding profound beauty in the everyday? Let others find clouds mundane; let them spend fifty weeks of the year wishing they were on holiday somewhere else where the sky is always blue. If a dramatic display of altocumulus undulatus, cast in the warm light of the setting sun, appeared only once in a generation, it would become a legend. I don't think the fact that it happens on a weekly basis makes it any less remarkable.

*(The Cloud Appreciation Society can be found online at www.cloudappreciationsociety.org. Gavin Pretor-Pinney is the author of *The Cloudspotters' Guide*, published by Sceptre.)*

Columbo

Peter Falk's portrayal of the seemingly hapless LAPD homicide detective Lieutenant Columbo has become one of the most popular character performances in television history. With its genre-breaking format—the audience knew the identity of the killer from the outset—the show became hugely popular during the 1970s although the pilot episode was shot as far back as 1968. In fact, the character of Columbo dates from much earlier, having appeared in a one-off TV drama in 1960, written by creators Richard Levinson and William Link. In that live broadcast, Columbo was played by Bert Freed.

Although it had a unique approach to the cop show format, the makers of *Columbo* were not averse to the world of cliché and the programme built up its own repertoire over the years, much to the delight of fans and aficionados.

Enthusiasts revel in hearing Lt Columbo utter his catchphrases, 'just one more thing', or 'about that alibi of yours', watching him trying to find somewhere to stub out his cigar or parking his battered old Peugeot really badly.

The original '70s series featured a cornucopia of special guest stars including William Shatner, Robert Culp, Johnny Cash and Leonard Nimoy, but was a breeding ground for significant talent behind the screens as well—John Cassavetes, Jonathan Demme and Stephen Spielberg all directed episodes.

Now a staple of weekday afternoon television, *Columbo* continues to find new audiences every year and its appeal looks likely to go on for many more years to come.

FASCINATING FACT

Despite the protests of Columbo's star and creators, NBC produced a show called *Mrs. Columbo* in 1979. It featured the crimestopping adventures of the lieutenant's supposed wife and starred Kate Mulgrew who later went

on to captain the USS Enterprise in *Star Trek: Voyager*. Unsurprisingly, it was cancelled after one season.

Constellations

If clouds are the poetry, then constellations are definitely the stories of the sky. They are thought to have been created by farmers in ancient times in order to more easily determine the seasons. They imagined shapes and characters within the star formations and some historians believe that these were the genesis of many ancient myths; by telling stories around these characters, they were better able to remember them and pass them down the generations.

Modern astronomy has changed the original formations somewhat, so that now every star in the sky is in exactly one constellation. There are 88 official constellations in the night sky.

Cracking a boiled egg

I suppose this falls into the same category as frozen puddles. Taking a spoon and giving a boiled egg a good beating is an intensely satisfying feeling. Not so severing the top with a knife; this is simply wrong and somewhat alarming. People who adopt that latter method are probably to be avoided.

A great practical joke when you are a child is to finish eating a boiled egg and then turn it upside down, trying to convince some unsuspecting victim (usually your dad) that it is indeed a nice, fresh new one. Actually, you don't have to be a kid at all to enjoy this. I am going to give it a go next time (and I am willing to bet that you do, too).

Cream teas

Every nation is rightly proud of its national dish but, for some reason, the English can never seem to decide what it is. Fish and chips was long held to be the meal in question, but then someone would pipe up and argue the toss for steak and kidney pie. In more recent years it has been claimed that curry is now the national dish, but this is clearly nonsense. I mean, curry is lovely and a very welcome addition to the national menu, but we really should make an effort to have one stand-out meal that isn't imported.

I would like to put forward the case for cream teas. A nice scone (fruit or plain) with a pot of jam and lashings of clotted cream. It is quintessentially English in the same way as haggis (or the deep-fried Mars bar) is Scottish and, I don't know, leeks I suppose are Welsh.

Historians in Tavistock, West Devon, believe that they have discovered the origins

of the cream tea. Apparently, after the Vikings had plundered the Benedictine abbey there in AD 997, the monks relied on local workers to help them rebuild it. To thank the men, the monks fed them with bread, clotted cream and strawberry jam. The meal proved so popular that they continued to serve it to passing travellers and the cream tea was born.

Crumpets

I am writing these entries in strict alphabetical order, which means that I am now rather hungry. I could just go a bit of crumpet.

The crumpet has the double honour of being delicious toasted and also the cause of much innuendo in *Carry On* films.

There are times when only a hot crumpet dripping with melted butter will do, and it is in honour of these times that crumpets find themselves in this celebration of all things wonderful.

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