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CLASS ACTION
WHAT'S SCHOOL FOR?

EDUCATION SPECIAL

LESSONS FROM THE FAMOUS & FICTIONAL

OPEN YOUR IMAGINATION WITH NEIL GAIMAN

DOES FINLAND HAVE THE ANSWER?
AQUILA CHILDREN'S MAGAZINE is witty, well written and beautifully illustrated: ideal for lively 8–12 year-olds, its inspiring monthly topics bring a thought-provoking mix of Science, Arts and General Knowledge that's fun for the whole family.

MEET THE VIKINGS: fierce and loyal, high-tech masters of the ancient seas! Children can discover their culture, myths and legends; experiment with Viking-style bread-making and devour a feast of puzzles and competitions.

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Hello, my name is Tom.

This week The Big Issue focuses on education and what the school system needs in order to make it fit for the future. I’m from the travelling community, so I didn’t have formal schooling. My mum taught me to read and write, and my father taught me my trade. I had nine brothers, three sisters and lots of cousins, so I didn’t feel like I was missing out on time with other kids. I didn’t know any different. We look at the current reality of home educating on page 26. I’m a good salesman by now but for those who want to improve their skills we examine lifelong learning on page 29. And you can read my story on page 54.

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What schools tell us about where we are as a society

THE BIG ISSUE MANIFESTO

WE BELIEVE in trade, not a handout...
Which is why our sellers buy every copy of the magazine for £1.25 and sell it for £2.50.

WE BELIEVE poverty is indiscriminate...
Which is why we provide anyone whose life is blighted by poverty with the opportunity to earn a legitimate income.

WE BELIEVE in the right to citizenship...
Which is why The Big Issue Foundation, our charitable arm, helps sellers tackle social and financial exclusion.

WE BELIEVE in prevention...
Which is why Big Issue Invest offers backing and investments to social enterprises, charities and businesses which deliver social value to communities.

WE BELIEVE in education...
Grammar drama
I would have thought that an editor would have had a high level of education.

I have just read your editorial in The Big Issue [August 27-September 2] and am disappointed grammatical [sic] errors in your article. Not only is it incorrect; it does not even make sense. Which school did you attend and who on earth was you [sic] English teacher. Obviously Fowlers [sic] Usage and Abuse of the English Language was not adhered to. I quote your words: “What is Brexit, asked colleagues from Korea. And Taiwan. And Japan.” It should be: “What is Brexit asked colleagues from Korea, Taiwan and Japan?”

One NEVER starts a sentence with And. Neither does one use a comma prior to BUT. If asking a question where is the question mark?

Come on Paul, do at least give us an editorial which is grammatically correct.

I doubt you will print this as it would be an admission of your grammatical weakness, though I do think you should take more care when writing your editorial.

Peter Millett, Dawlish, Devon

Plugged in
I’m not in the least surprised that young people can’t wire a plug. I can (I’m older!) but I haven’t for many years, why would anyone? Every appliance comes ready-plugged. It’s only in recent years I’ve managed to stop my husband taking them off old appliances just in case we need one!

Ruth Povey, Leicester

Building Unsafe
The question is when the builders, joiners and plumbers of Europe are lost, why on earth would millennials want to fill the void? My husband works as an electrician on new-build accommodation so we know all too well the dodgy sub-contracting which forces workers to be self-employed with no pension, no sick pay, no holidays, no security, despite fulfilling all the duties of an employee. Work and stress-related illness and injury leave him earning less than the equivalent of minimum wage each year. And we were only able to get a mortgage due to my employment, so these jobs are not going to help millennials on to the housing ladder either.

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DAVID’S MAKING WAVES WITH NEW RADIO 4 DOC

Rising star artist David Tovey has already graced the cover of The Big Issue this year when he designed a Royal Wedding cover. Now, he is aiming to be king of the airwaves when he makes his debut on BBC Radio 4 this Sunday.

Tovey took an unusual route into the art world, having cooked for the Queen at Windsor Castle while in the military before going on to run a restaurant until health problems left him homeless and suicidal.

David’s uncompromising The Art of Now: Outsiders documentary will ask, ‘Can anyone declare themselves an artist?’ as he grills leading art figures, including activist and writer Liv Wynter and Sir Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England among others.

The Art of Now: Outsiders will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Sunday September 9 at 1.30pm.

Cash runs out for Wonga

It was with more than a hint of irony that payday loan pioneers Wonga slipped into administration without any sign of a last-minute influx of cash.

Board members had already poured in £10m in a bid to keep the ailing company afloat just six years after it touted a US stock exchange flotation worth £1bn.

But it was to no avail as the rags-to-riches story was punctured by a sea of compensation claims after the government cracked down on payday lenders.

The Big Issue has always rallied against the inequity of firms who look to make a quick profit out of the most vulnerable with sky-high interest rates, and our founder John Bird is continuing his battle for fair credit with his Creditworthiness Assessment Bill.

The Big Issue recently investigated why Brits seem unwilling to fill the gaps left by the loss of seasonal EU fruit pickers – but robots could pick up the slack in time for Brexit.

The University of Essex has struck up an unlikely partnership with jam makers Wilkin & Sons of Tiptree to produce an arm capable of picking, inspecting and packaging soft fruits.

Researchers hope a prototype will be up and running before Brexit to compensate for the predicted drastic labour gap, with 63 per cent fewer job applications this year, as well as slashing production costs.

Project lead Dr Vishuu Mohan said the biggest challenge is designing a robot to work in a natural, unstructured setting. He added, “The environment keeps changing constantly – sunny, windy, rainy – in contrast to a typical industrial environment.”

ON BIGISSUE.COM THIS WEEK

• Ralf Little reveals why he had a right Royle row with Jeremy Hunt over the health of the NHS

• A Donald Trump safety preparation kit is what Josh Groban wishes his younger self had made. Sad!

• Bake Off is back, so we investigate how the smash-hit show has inspired a rise in our taste for artisan bread
The complex nature of giving cash to homeless people

Giving cash to rough sleepers is by no means a silver bullet – the complexities of homelessness are harder to solve than by giving a few pounds to make it go away.

Last week there were two contrasting tales that clearly illustrated this.

The first starred Cameroonian legend Samuel Eto'o, the most decorated African footballer of all time. Eto'o rushed to the aid of former national team captain Norbert Owona, visiting the 67-year-old in hospital after he was discovered sleeping rough in Douala following the death of his wife and children.

Ex-Barcelona striker Eto'o gave Owona £750 as well as pledging to buy him a house. The Cameroon nation is waiting to see if Eto'o will deliver on his promise.

Another, more cautionary, tale comes from Philadelphia. Last year, homeless veteran John Bobbitt selflessly walked to the nearest petrol station to spend his last $20 helping stranded Kate McClure. It moved McClure so much that she set up a GoFundMe campaign to bankroll a house and car for Bobbitt. Inevitably this went viral and raised over $400,000 (£300,000). Trouble is, Bobbitt is claiming that he never received all the money. McClure had promised to set up a trust to pay Bobbitt a salary and a retirement fund but those good intentions have collapsed into a war of words and litigation. Bobbitt has questioned McClure and boyfriend Mark D’Amico’s spending on cars and holidays, with allegations of theft and drug abuse the other way as the couple reportedly withheld the remaining $200,000.
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Street Art is created by people who are marginalised by issues like homelessness, disability and mental health conditions. Contact streetlights@bigissue.com to see your art here.

I THINK IT’S OKAY

BY JOHN SHEEHY

Regular Street Art contributor John was born in south-west Ireland in 1949. He emigrated to London in the 1950s and has worked as a builder and roofer, but has endured lengthy spells of unemployment. He has also experienced periods of homelessness and suffered mental health problems. In 1999 he first discovered his natural ability and enjoyment of painting, encouraged by The Big Issue. He has since exhibited at Somerset House, The British Museum, The Royal Academy and in Europe.
BACK TO SCHOOL

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JOHN BIRD

To save the world, we’ll need to transform trade

I was all ready to do a podcast on ‘How to Change the World’, but it has been delayed until the autumn. There are already so many books, manifestos, radio and TV programmes that have been made on this topic – so many sincere beliefs by sincere people (although there are those that are less than sincere).

So, why would I enter the “Here’s the wisdom you’ve all been looking for but couldn’t find” game?

Aside from delusions of grandeur and my Napoleonic complex, I’ve spent hours writing about and hours telling the story of it, arriving like a misty feeling on a wet slum day in Notting Hill aged seven, I do believe that everyone else has not quite got it right. Loaded down with self-delusion and slummetry still in my thinking, yet I still proceed to tell the world what the world should do with the world.

So, I was willing, nay ‘champing at the bit’ to get into the studio with a famous bod who would ask me questions that would be preposterous about changing and saving the world. And each question I would treat as if they were asking me what colour shoes I prefer, and what’s my favourite film (brown, and the Steve Martin version of The Pink Panther).

I am not the only one who believes they were sent here to change the world and save the world. Every self-help writer, every diet creator, every pumped-up sporting guru all offer themselves as examples to show you out there that you can “save yourself and the world by copying them”.

Yes! The world is not the world really; the world is you!

So, when the Reith Lectures appear on the BBC with all their portentousness, and the whole business that I have just delayed until the autumn. There are already so many books, manifestos, radio and TV programmes that have been made on this topic – so many sincere beliefs by sincere people (although there are those that are less than sincere).

So, my vision for the world is to change the way we trade. To stop enriching the gated community and trade with the community. Creating social capitalism and not simply the lumpy, unevenly delivered capital we have at the moment. We need the consumer – who determines the wealth of the wealthy – to buy products from social sellers and not just the market behemoths.

As I have said on countless occasions, I’m looking forward to the creation of a social Amazon which will give the public the consumer hit they want, but with the profits spent on upping the wages of the workers working to deliver that consumer hit.

So, if asked ‘what would you do to save the world?’ My answer would be to transform trade.

There are only one or two cures to get someone out of poverty. One is to take a poor person and enrich them with the public or charitable purse to such an extent that you get them out of poverty. That means improving not just their shelter and food, but also enabling them to live as full a life as possible, even if they have injuries or inherited health issues; you can’t say you have helped people out of poverty if you only get them to a state where they are just able to exist.

The other way to get someone out of poverty is to up their value in the market place. That requires moving them as astutely as possible away from zero-hour contracts, away from minimum wages, and towards the wages that specialists and professionals get. And for their children to be given all the advantages that come with the fact that mum and dad have got money to spare on education and self-improvement.

So, when the Reith Lectures appear on the BBC with all their portentousness, and the whole business that I have just delayed until the autumn. There are already so many books, manifestos, radio and TV programmes that have been made on this topic – so many sincere beliefs by sincere people (although there are those that are less than sincere).

So, my vision for the world is to change the way we trade. To stop enriching the gated community and trade with the community. Creating social capitalism and not simply the lumpy, unevenly delivered capital we have at the moment. We need the consumer – who determines the wealth of the wealthy – to buy products from social sellers and not just the market behemoths.

As I have said on countless occasions, I’m looking forward to the creation of a social Amazon which will give the public the consumer hit they want, but with the profits spent on upping the wages of the workers working to deliver that consumer hit.

My delusions of grandeur are based on firm ground. Unlike the rest of those selling you a pig in a poke.

John Bird is the founder and Editor in Chief of The Big Issue. @johnbirdswords john.bird@bigissue.com

THE BIG ISSUE / p11 / September 3-9  2018
LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Back to school

Every week we ask famous faces to share advice with their 16-year-old selves. Memories of school often come up so we’ve collected a class of celebrities who reflected on the best – or worst – days of their lives and how it shaped the person they’d become.

Salman Rushdie
I came from India to Rugby in England [for boarding school] when I was 13. By 16 I was a pretty conventional public school conservative. With one exception – I had no idea when I came to school that I would be judged as someone who was different to the others because I wasn’t English-white. It really was a harsh awakening. It gave me a difficult time in these early years. I had been happy until I came to school in England. I’ve often thought if I’d been good at games my background wouldn’t have mattered. There were a few other Indian/Pakistani boys who were outstanding cricketers and they didn’t seem to have the same experience. But I was lousy at games.

Ozzy Osbourne
I’m extremely dyslexic but they didn’t understand then what dyslexia was. I went to school, a secondary modern in Birmingham, where there were 49 kids in a class, all boys. The kids used to mess around, smoking behind the toilets. It wasn’t the best if you wanted to be taught anything. I was the crazy guy. I made the big tough guys like me by making them laugh.

Joanna Lumley
I was born in India, raised in Hong Kong and Malaysia and went to my first boarding school at eight, which now seems paralysingly young. It seemed par for the course as my parents were brought up abroad and sent home to school. I especially loved my second boarding school, an Anglo-Catholic convent in the hills behind Hastings. The nuns wore blue stockings and were brainy and lovely. There were 70 boarders and I was happy as a clam.

Margaret Atwood
One thing I would advise my younger self would be to take secretarial studies to learn touch typing. I still can’t type. Careers advisor had a short list of possible careers for girls. Primary school teacher, nurse, airline stewardess and home economist, which meant something along the lines of a nutritionist or dressmaker. I didn’t want to do any of those things but looked at all the salaries, being a mercenary child, and home economists made the most. So I took those classes and learned how to fasten a zipper but I never learned to type.

Michael Morpurgo
Like most middle-class English boys I went away to boarding school. The regime was rigorous; there were a lot of cross-country runs and far too much sport and it was all very competitive. It you weren’t top of the class there was lots of fear. But that was true of most schools then, children were caned. We all thought it was horrible but no one complained because we all accepted it as normal. I was very homesick and found the change of life from home to school very hard. But you learn to survive and the key to that is to be good at something. I was good at sport so people thought I was a good chap and left me alone.
I was never very good at school and used to dread going. It never came easy for me. I always felt there must be something else.

Then at 16 I had my first school play – I was Jean Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* - and I immediately thought: this is what I want to do; I don’t want to do anything else. And that was lucky because I’m not qualified to do anything else and I’m no good at anything else.

When I was 16 I was spending most of my year away at public school. I’d been there a couple of years, so I’d got past the bit when you’re treated as the lowest of the low. I was doing a bit of sport, rowing quite a bit, getting terrible bum blisters on the Severn. I was settling down. People liked me, I was able to make them laugh. Some of the teachers perhaps saw a glint in my eye, a cheekiness, that they liked. I had an accommodating nature and tended, and still tend, to see the good in people. I was deliberately approachable because I was so curious about people.

At 16 I was miserable at school. There was a lot of racism in the air then and Asian kids made up about a third of the school. I remember one of the Asian kids said to me, right, we’ve decided you can’t talk to white people any more. I said that might prove to be a little difficult. And none of these kids have done anything bad to me so why should I stop talking to them? And he said, well, you’re either with us or against us. So I continued to get the usual racial insults from the white kids but now I got them from the Asian kids too. It was horrible but now I’m grateful – it clarified for me that your tribe don’t necessarily look like you. You look for the people you connect with.
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I have always been very grateful for the opportunities I have, because I wasn’t born into them, my mum and dad worked really hard to afford them. Mum made commercial choices – and dad as well – to keep me in school uniforms and keep the fees paid. I was like a walking mortgage! I was a very expensive child because of the way they tried to educate me. That was completely off their own bat. Dad had a pretty nasty experience at public school and was ready to pull me out at any moment if I didn’t enjoy myself. I didn’t have a great time – I had a mixed time. I really enjoyed some aspects, but I was far happier at the first school I went to.

There was a time at school when I was very conscious of my prosthetic leg. It only went to the knee, so in summer I used to wear long socks to cover up the join. Then I realised the only kids who wore long socks were the nerds who got beaten up. So I was being mocked not for having a prosthetic foot but for pulling my socks up. And when I pulled my socks down, no one really noticed my leg. No one picked on me for that. The bullies at my school weren’t disablist. I think the younger me would be surprised how much I’ve embraced my foot as it were.

I hated PE. Of the 60 or 70 people who the school put through the exam, I was the only male who failed physical education. Maybe the only one ever who went from failing PE to becoming a sporting world champion. I was so exhausted doing my sport I had no energy for PE. I spent my weekends doing about 250 miles up mountains in the Highlands on my bike, so I was slumping over my desk come Monday morning.

There was a time at school when I was very conscious of my prosthetic leg. It only went to the knee, so in summer I used to wear long socks to cover up the join. Then I realised the only kids who wore long socks were the nerds who got beaten up. So I was being mocked not for having a prosthetic foot but for pulling my socks up. And when I pulled my socks down, no one really noticed my leg. No one picked on me for that. The bullies at my school weren’t disablist. I think the younger me would be surprised how much I’ve embraced my foot as it were. During the week I was actually quite quiet and well behaved at school. I wasn’t really a big fan of school. I remember people saying it was the best years of your life and I thought, God, I hope not, this is shit. I’d never been that happy at school – I’d been bullied ‘cause we’d moved around a couple of times. I was quite awkward, I got teased a lot. I got teased for having things like long skinny legs and big lips. Now I think, here I still am with long legs and big lips; that didn’t turn out so badly.

I was very dreamy at school. I spent a lot of time staring out of the window, watching the birds. I felt oppressed by crowds. It wasn’t that I didn’t know how to have fun – in fact I was apparently regarded as a ringleader at my junior school. I had good ideas. I would form clubs and people would turn up. I’d say, right, we’re the fruit and nut club. And people would say, so what do we do? But I hadn’t thought about that. I’ve been like that all my life. I suppose I should give my younger self a pat on the back for having any kind of career, albeit an occasional career, at all.

When I was a kid in my primary school and then my grammar, there were about 32 kids to one teacher. It’s a bit too high for the everyone to get individual attention, but that’s just a result of a society which has decided to spend money on things other than education. I have no idea if I’d have been more academically inclined if I’d been taught differently. I could probably have been encouraged in pursuing the natural sciences, that’s what I was interested in. We have to give children the power that comes from self-belief. We have to encourage them to think for themselves, not tell them how to think. Our brains can be trained, they’re just machines.
Imagination can change the world

Bestselling author Neil Gaiman on the power of reading and daydreaming. Illustrations by Chris Riddell

IT IS OBVIOUSLY IN MY INTEREST FOR PEOPLE TO READ, FOR THEM TO READ FICTION, FOR LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS TO EXIST AND HELP FOSTER A LOVE OF READING AND PLACES IN WHICH READING CAN OCCUR.

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We have an obligation to read for pleasure. If others see us reading, we show that reading is a good thing. We have an obligation to support libraries. To protest the closure of libraries. If you do not value libraries you are silencing the voices of the past and you are damaging the future.

Fiction is the lie that tells the truth. We all have an obligation to daydream. We have an obligation to imagine. It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything, that society is huge and the individual is less than nothing. But the truth is individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different.

These words and images are extracted from Art Matters by Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell, their manifesto celebrating the power of reading, imagination and creativity. Published September 6 (Headline, £9.99)
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t feels a very long way from Tony Blair’s Education, Education, Education speech. Then, as the New Labour machine swept all before it, the bright new hope for Britain explained his three priorities.

In the intervening 21 years, the percentage of people going to university has almost doubled. But much else has also changed. The introduction of university fees has placed a debt burden on graduates. And while this can be viewed as a success tax, to be repaid by those who will gain better-paid employment, the changing job landscape – a gig economy and the shadow of increasing automation – has meant that the value of that success is increasingly unclear.

There are governmental statistics about the upticks in secondary education, many tied to academies, but teachers and teaching unions frequently claim they are being suffocated by paperwork, to the detriment of pupil wellbeing and deeper learning.

There are requests for more vocational training and focus on learning that leads directly to jobs. But what of the joy of learning for learning’s sake? Is there a better balance to be struck? Should we look to other international systems for tips? Should we encourage more home-schooling – and what is the measure of success anyway?

Everybody has a view on education because everybody has been in it. Many are going round again seeing children, and then grandchildren, passing through. And we all remember an inspirational teacher, one person who saw something in us that had languished. There are unquestionably thousands of men and women like this across Britain. How do we find the best way to allow these inspiring educators to shape future lives?

Also, it’s the 40th anniversary of Grange Hill. It was the TV show that hooked a generation and reflected something of our lives back at us. Or at least allowed us to think we were like the faces on the screen. Who doesn’t like an image of a flying sausage on a fork?
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WE NEED A RADICAL RETHINK OF OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

Britain’s sticky social mobility is hurting us all but inequalities are so extreme that schools can’t level the field. Lee Elliot Major, chief executive of The Sutton Trust, explains

The romantic notion of education as the great social leveller is indelibly implanted in our national consciousness. The country’s first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, was the daughter of a shopkeeper who went to Oxford University. Adele, the singer-songwriter from Tottenham who has sold 100 million records, attributes her success to gaining a place at the BRIT School for Performing Arts. The son of immigrants, Harry Kroto, who went on to win a Nobel Prize in chemistry, said his life changed when he secured a scholarship at a local grammar school.

Yet these are the notable exceptions to the overwhelming pattern observed for schools and universities. We have unrealistic expectations of our education system as an engine of social mobility. Teachers do an amazing job. But the idea that they can, single-handedly, cancel out the extreme inequalities outside the school gates is a fanciful one. It is little wonder we are witnessing a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention.

What we have instead observed has been an ever-escalating education arms race, in which the poorest children have ended up hopelessly ill-equipped to fight. The signs are all around us: the booming billion-pound industry of private tutors paid to boost pupils’ grades; the sharp-elbowed tiger parents stopping at nothing to get their children into the best schools, and the stressed-out students trying to navigate a complex and often baffling university admissions system.

In this race, the rewards have increasingly gone to the offspring of our social elites. Take for example the expansion of universities. The proportion of the poorest young people earning degrees grew from six per cent in 1981 to 18 per cent in 2013; yet the proportion of the richest young people earning degrees went up from 20 per cent to 55 per cent. In one generation the graduation gap nearly trebled; and because graduates make more money than non-graduates, the middle classes have got even richer.

In this race the biggest losers are the school-leavers with no qualifications at all. Around a quarter of 16 to 18-year-olds lack basic numeracy and literacy skills. Every year hundreds of thousands of children leave the school system without the basics to get on in life. Most end up in dead-end jobs stuck on the lowest rungs of life’s social ladder.

To understand how a 16 or 17-year-old can leave education without basic skills, you need look no further than a school register detailing the tough lives of their most troubled pupils. These are deeply harrowing tales involving years of instability, abuse and violence at home as young children.

The only way to improve Britain’s low social mobility is to address inequalities both outside and inside the school gates. The divides in income and wealth have reached unhealthy levels. We need to pay decent wages for teachers and other key workers and close the tax loopholes enjoyed by our wealthy elites.

At the same time we need a radical rethink of our education system. Our schools have become an academic sorting machine celebrating a narrow range of academic and memorisation skills, but neglecting other talents, be they creative, practical or vocational. Many pupils, labeled as failures, could benefit from a more vocational curriculum teaching functional maths and English. A vocational pathway need not equate to a drop in standards. We need to assess schools on how well they prepare all pupils with the basic skills for life.

We also need to even up the academic playing field. School tests are as much a signal of the support children receive as their natural ability, and universities have become hyper selective as they try to pick out the very best students. Universities could instead identify a threshold of academic excellence – the minimal grades that are good enough to get in. Unquestionably, the most equitable way to allocate places to equally deserving candidates would be to pick them randomly. ‘Losers’ perhaps could be guaranteed a place at another university. Deploying random allocation alongside simple academic criteria would create more diverse intakes of students. It would have the added benefit of cutting down on the escalating costs of admissions.

Improving social mobility requires tough choices both inside and outside the education system. Failing to face up to them however means that our schools and universities will continue to benefit the few and not the many. And we all pay the price for a society missing out on all its talents.

Social Mobility And Its Enemies by Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin is out on September 27 (£8.99). Lee Elliot Major is chief executive of the Sutton Trust. @Lem_SuttonTrust
Finnish education is simple. No league tables, no uniforms and some of the shortest school days in Europe. Yet the country has a claim to A's across the board, consistently topping world rankings.

In the UK, standardised tests are today’s hot topic – an increasingly controversial pillar of all our school years. In Finland, such a thing is almost non-existent, with the only state-regulated assessment coming in the form of one exam which can determine a pupil’s entry to university. Otherwise, testing is down to a teacher’s prerogative. When data is collected by the regulating body, it’s with improving the service in mind.

Akseli Huhtanen is a philosophy teacher by trade and is now CEO of Helsinki learning festival Dare to Learn. “We’re motivated for longer, it delivers better results and spreads from learner to learner,” she said about removing standardised testing, calling it “the single most valuable factor” in the sustainable learning Finnish schools strive for.

There’s little variation in results between schools across the country – suggesting that to an extent, good education can level the playing field for pupils. Children are grouped together in classes by age rather than ability, driven by the notion of equality at the system’s core. The result is a shrinking achievement gap and, most likely, fewer kids discouraged by school from the off.

Some of their success has been attributed to the calibre of teaching staff, who need to pass exams with flying colours well before they can lead a class to do the same. Required to have at least a Master’s degree, teachers are some of the most respected workers in the country and, crucially, better paid than their British counterparts. Finnish teachers with 15 years’ experience earn on average around 38,000 euro (£34,000) a year, while their UK counterparts earn roughly £28,000 annually.

They have an unprecedented level of freedom in their classrooms, with no one-size-fits-all teaching style prescribed, in what is commonly referred to as a ‘culture of trust’. And, even more alien to the UK, it’s a competitive business. Less than a quarter of Finnish applicants were admitted to study teaching in 2016.

Huhtanen insisted that the importance of teaching to the Finnish public shouldn’t be understated. “Education has lifted Finland from conflict-torn poverty into a modern welfare state in 100 years, and this makes most Finns respect it very highly. There are no dead ends, meaning that despite your school choices earlier, there’s always a route to higher education.”

She also denied the idea that the freedom afforded to teachers has led to an overly traditional, textbook-dominated learning experience. “The problem is rather that the new methods don’t spread from one classroom to another,” she said. “Every teacher has to discover the same ideas themselves!”

But while Finland boasts a generation of kids who would make University Challenge hopefuls quake, the country’s educators are adamant that the journey there begins with one thing: play. Finnish children don’t start school until the age of seven, making them some of the oldest kids in the world to make their formal education debut. There’s a firm belief in the importance of letting kids be kids, and data shows the
later starting age is in no way to the detriment of their learning. Even once in school, kids are sent for 15 minutes of play for every 75 minutes of learning; led outside for breaks and encouraged to be physically active, with exceptions made only when the outside temperature drops well below freezing. The value of when-1-stand-inside-this-tyre-it-will-be-a-rocketship kind of play is something we're only now beginning to embrace in the UK, despite plenty of evidence backing it up. Ofsted research showed that play and learning outside the classroom significantly improved pupils' personal, social and emotional development.

So revered is Finnish education that experts have mobilised to see just how far their methods can go when packaged as a desirable product. Education Finland, a branch of the Finnish National Agency for Education, is a programme delivering their native teaching style as an export, offering Finnish educational know-how to anyone in pursuit of the same results.

Within school walls, their education seems holistic and very, very human; outside, an opportunity to cash in has been recognised, and the bare bones of their education system is a commodity offered to the world.

Dennis Hayes, University of Derby professor and director of group Academics for Academic Freedom, has a bad feeling about this. “Finland should export a debate about what education means,” he says. “Whatever else it packages up to sell will just be snake oil – but it may sell well.” Many countries are looking for shortcuts, he added, rather than taking up Finland's supposed commitment to knowledge and the belief that all children can be taught.

Hayes is concerned by the deeply child-centred approach to education, too, and worries that some of Finland's methods are the teaching equivalent of wrapping pupils in cotton wool.

“Today they have been taught – by teachers, policy-makers and armies of counsellors – that education is all about them,” he explains. “They are told they should want to know about themselves. This therapeutic culture undermines education and the authority of teachers.”

Some may find Hayes’ concerns puzzling, as other analyses of Finland’s schooling prowess point to the country’s social make-up as a major factor. With the smallest wage inequality gap in the EU (the UK holds the largest), there are fewer children to fall through the cracks and fewer cultural chasms to span.

According to some, the reality is that the effects of poverty and cuts on British education could make the Finnish model impossible to replicate.

In a report for the Finnish Institute in London, Vilja Kamppila noted that obstacles for UK teachers won’t be found in teaching methodology but in the system itself, as it “inherently recreates undemocratic and polarising structures in society”. She concluded that “alleviating the situation of deprived neighbourhoods and schools under strain should be a priority”. Whether Finland is top of the class or not, that seems like a decent place to start.

@hannahjtw
Financial education is now part of the curriculum, but it’s not always paying off. Liam Geraghty tries to make it all add up

The debt crisis continues to grow in the UK – but is our understanding of how to pay our bills growing with it? Bombarded with small print and contradictory figures at every turn, it can be hard to grasp complex financial concepts.

And credit company warnings are calling into question whether we are getting the financial information needed to make the decisions that keep a roof over our head.

Debt charity StepChange revealed last year that the number of younger clients seeking debt advice has grown by 10 per cent in the last five years.

The loss of private tenancy remains the single biggest driver of homelessness, according to government figures, with rental arrears a key reason as people struggle to find the cash to cover it.

But in theory kids should leave school fully prepared for the wider world – financial education has been on the national curriculum in England and Wales since 2014.

That allowed primary school kids to get their teeth into money studies in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and citizenship as well as using pound signs in their maths sums.

Wider social context is added in high school with a focus on personal finance, taxes and credit in citizenship classes.

In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence, introduced in 2010, has provision for covering financial understanding, competence, responsibility and enterprise across learning.

But is the information delivered in classrooms enough to keep heads above water?

Russell Winnard of leading financial education charity Young Enterprise says: “No, it’s not.

“But how it is done is the issue. There’s a widespread understanding that schools and teachers are underfunded and overworked and expected to find time to teach this subject when they themselves might not have had that education in the first place.

“It’s also about what national curriculum we give to schools and winning the hearts and minds of teachers, because education is about preparing our young people for the next stage of life and the world of work.”

When it comes to exam time, financial education is unlikely to be one of the subjects kids are graded on. Citizenship is the only subject where financial education is actually tested, with public finance questions in exams for 11 to 16-year-olds.

But the trouble is that it is not a compulsory subject, with exam regulator Ofqual finding that just 1.7 per cent of pupils chose to study it at GCSE.

Sharan Jaswal is the director of education at MyBnk, a charity that provided workshops on financial education for 26,000 young people last year from the age of seven to vulnerable adults aged up to 25.

And for Jaswal, financial education’s place on the national curriculum is not the be-all and end-all.

In fact, it is just as important that teachers are taught too.

An all-party parliamentary group on financial education in 2016 found that almost a fifth of teachers involved in teaching it are still not confident about the subject.

“It was great when financial education was included on the curriculum and it was something that we campaigned for over a long period – it felt like a bit of a victory at the time,” says Jaswal.

“If classroom contributions are not fitting the bill, there are financial education programmes elsewhere that can instil crucial positive financial habits.

MyBnk’s Money House programme takes cues from Big Brother with a five-day crash course on living with others, paying bills and making positive lifestyle choices – albeit without the pressure of round-the-clock filming.
Taking place at two flats in Greenwich and Newham, the programme has been such a hit that it is now mandatory for care leavers in some London boroughs.

And that’s because attendees are three times less likely to fall into rent arrears than their peers, while none of those who complete the course have been evicted, according to a 600-strong survey.

It also highlights the importance of context, as well as time, in giving kids the tools to have a positive relationship with their finances.

That is often a tricky thing to provide in the classroom, which is why apps like RoosterMoney are aiming to tap into kids’ tech savvy to track their income.

The app allows parents and children to have a visual account of pocket money. This enables kids as young as four to see a real-time balance of how much they have earned, making them responsible for deciding whether to make that impulse purchase in the supermarket aisle.

Will Carmichael, RoosterMoney CEO, insists that it is a key part of building a positive conversation about money and reinforcing good habits from a young age.

“I think the important thing about teaching children about their finances is that it is contextual,” he says. “When you’re teaching children how to cross the road, you don’t take them to the blackboard, you take them to the road where the cars are whizzing past. I think that’s the same with money.”

The challenge of equipping the youngsters of today with the financial tools to stop them becoming the homeless people of tomorrow, or worse, is clear.

“When you come out of school and you all of a sudden have access to a range of products on offer, it can be really confusing and hard to find out what is best to do,” says Winnard. “The news you see of people who can’t cope in that situation can be truly devastating. It’s an important area for young people because the mistakes that they can fall into can have serious consequences.”
We decided to home educate for the primary years. And just kept going

Numbers of children being educated at home in the UK rose by 40 per cent between 2014 and 2017 – around 48,000 according to latest figures. Children are withdrawn from school for many reasons including mental health issues, unmet special needs provision or avoiding exclusion. But alongside this is a growing movement of parents choosing to reject the mainstream school system and instead home educate – not parroting a school curriculum but taking a radically different approach to learning, growth, skills and knowledge, centred around the interests of their child. It involves considerable discipline, time management, creativity and commitment on the part of parents who choose to follow that path. Jax Blunt, who has home educated four children, explains its challenges, advantages and joys

In a way my decision to home educate my children was because I knew they wouldn’t get my experience of education. I went through mainstream schooling. I went to a little village primary school which had 100 kids, the teachers knew everybody, if it was a nice day we had lessons outside. There was no testing at primary level. I went to a private secondary school on an assisted-place scheme and did nine O-levels.

Now they have all these hoops to jump through, which seems to be getting worse every year. When my daughter was born in 2000 I looked at what was going on in education, and by the time she was three or four they were bringing in SATs, and I thought, no. We’ll do home education for the primary years, then maybe she’ll go to secondary school. But we just kept going. And that worked perfectly well.

‘Home schooling’ is an American term and tends to be what politicians and local authorities here use, which is not helpful. It makes people think you are following a school curriculum. You do get people who school at home and follow the national curriculum and do so successfully. But that is not what home education means.

It doesn’t need to be as regular and rigid and regimented as people think. You can cover something in a huge amount of depth in a short time. We will binge our way through something then not touch it for a couple of months. When there’s something on at a local attraction or local event we might go and be interested in whatever that was and do that for the next week, so we’ve done it for hours rather than a 40-minute lesson. They might decide that their interest is in scientific things (my younger daughter likes exploding things), and there’s lots of box kits – we used one that included a film canister rocket – that you can order.

What experienced home educators will say is you don’t have to do it all in one day and you don’t have to do everything that’s on the curriculum – that’s where people often fall down, they expect their children to tick the boxes that they see of school expectations at certain ages. Children don’t grow at the same rate, why would you expect them to learn at the same rate? They just don’t.

I have now home educated all four of my children at one time or another. The younger two, who are six and eight, have never been to school at all. My oldest, who is now 18, chose to go to school at the local academy when she was 15 – it was her choice and I supported her. She decided she might possibly want to go to university, found out what qualifications she would need and worked back from there. The school bent over backwards to set her up, gave her a compressed timetable to do five GCSEs and moved her up a set when they recognised what she was achieving and had a chance to push her grades up. She would do extra self-directed study every day. It was the easiest way for her to get the grades she needed.
My son, who is now 15, did things differently. He came out of Montessori [schools with an education methodology based on a philosophy of child-centred education] when he was six and was home educated after that. A local college was offering outreach for home-educated kids to do maths and English from age 14, and that was perfect for him.

It’s an absolute headache finding out what you can do to sit exams in your area as an external candidate, and how to do it. Some GCSEs you can do as an external candidate – that’s increasing because they have reduced the coursework for GCSEs, so it should be possible to access them from outside the system. But you have to find an exam centre that will take you on. If the subject has coursework you have to do an IGCSE, then you can face the problem of a college or university asking that is a real qualification (it is). Sitting exams as a private candidate is expensive.

In the 15 years I have been doing it, home education has changed hugely. Digital technology has made it much easier to network: at the beginning a paper newsletter with names and addresses listed was posted out. Now Facebook is the main way people keep in touch, and email, there are still Yahoo! groups too. We share resources, ideas. And it’s a way to just have friends to talk to – parents who home educate can be isolated and Facebook is the ‘school gate’ for us.

My youngest two have access to apps for English, maths and science, including Skoolbo and DoodleMaths, and I buy in other resources. I share bargains through my blog, and there are also groups that come together through Facebook to get group discounts on various educational activities. We get very resourceful at finding second-hand resources and sharing things around, and the public library is your friend. There are online courses of varying prices and varying quality.

It does require a level of dedication from the parent, particularly when the children are younger. Co-ordinating everything can be quite a challenge when you have got four children and they’re doing different things – swimming, Scouts, soft-play sessions all at different times. I have a wipe board for writing down who’s where when, who’s driving or can we walk. The older children help, it really is a team effort. It makes your family come together.

At Westminster a massive consultation has just ended which is looking at guidelines for local authorities in England and home educators – we are waiting for the government response. And Lord Soley has introduced a Private Member’s Bill (now progressed from the Lords and awaiting a second reading in the Commons) which wants compulsory registration and annual inspections. I can’t see how this will all be carried out with no extra cost to the local authorities. There are hugely positive things that they could do which would be more cost efficient.

One of the reasons people are reluctant to engage with authorities is the bureaucratic headache when you don’t get anything out of it. If local authorities were saying, ‘When your child hits 14 we will guarantee access to GCSE maths and English’ there would be a lot more people who wouldn’t mind being in touch with them.

But at the moment, although there are good examples around the country, many local authorities can’t even tell you which schools in the area will take private candidates for exams – every family has to ring every school individually to ask. There is no one exam centre that children can sit the exams at. That is one of the biggest challenges.

The biggest benefits are being able to personalise education to your child, being able to follow your child’s interests, being able to specialise at a younger age, being able to become an expert in whatever they want to do. That’s why we do it, because we can fit it to our children.

Jax was speaking to Vicky Carroll @vcarroll100
liveotherwise.co.uk/makingitup @liveotherwise
The adult education sector is facing many challenges right now; declining student numbers coupled with funding pressures, the advance of automation and robotics, as well as the challenges of Brexit and an ageing population. Change is happening more quickly than many realise, and people are unsure what to do about it.

Many experts say that much of Britain’s education system is not working properly. Instead of the emerging generation rushing to gain skills the economy will demand, the number of students enrolling has been declining and the UK is lagging behind in adult literacy and numeracy.

The latest Universities UK report, Solving Future Skills Challenges, highlights the need for continual upgrading of skills, lifelong learning and study of higher education qualifications at all levels. It reveals that by 2020 more than one-third of desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today. Educators are in a difficult position where they are having to prepare learners for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that have not yet been invented.

This is why adult education has never been more important. It provides the opportunity for adults to successfully access learning opportunities that work for them and fit with their busy working lives, to then equip them with the relevant life, education and employment skills to support these critical transitions throughout their lives.

We recognise that for many people, returning to education as an adult can be daunting and difficult and so we work to remove barriers wherever possible.

When so many people leave school without qualifications, it means they then lack the entry-level skills or essential qualifications to progress into education later in life. And there are even greater challenges for people for whom English is not their first language.

This is where adult education flourishes – second chance education. We have lots of students who come to us after not getting any qualifications or after a negative experience of school.

However, it’s not just those who didn’t do well in school, retraining is a must for everybody. The most recent data shows that young people will need to be prepared for more than a dozen job changes in their working lifetime.

At the moment school leavers, even with all the options available, are not prepared for the future world of work. So where does this leave those who have been out of education for decades? A culture of adaptability and lifelong learning will enable us to share the benefits of automation, particularly with an ageing population where people will be working for longer.

Retraining is not an easy option for many people. However, the government’s National Retraining Scheme, once finalised, could ensure there are opportunities available for everyone to get the skills they need throughout their lives. It is too narrow in focus at the moment, looking at tech and construction only, but if this was widened to include all sectors it could see a push towards retraining for all.

We are calling for a “hop on, hop off” education system which is affordable and accessible for people at all ages and in which education becomes a positive setting throughout life rather than a brief period in younger life. This will ensure people are not left behind and ensure they are adaptable and employable throughout their working lives.

Without a proper strategy for adult learning we will not realise our full potential as a nation, socially or economically, especially in the uncertain landscape of post-Brexit Britain.

@RuthSpellmanWEA
LEARNING THROUGH THE BIG ISSUE

Poverty is inextricably linked to education. One teacher brought the topic to life by using The Big Issue in the classroom.

This week The Big Issue has turned its attention to running the rule over the state of schools – but one teacher has flipped the script to use the magazine as a teaching tool.

Sharon Godfrey purchased scores of magazines to introduce her classes at Newton Abbot College in Devon to The Big Issue and homelessness.

Kids from years seven to 12 swapped textbooks for the mag and used it to inspire spoken word and dramatic performances that delved into issues associated with life on the streets, including monologues exploring PTSD and mental health issues, as well as addiction.

“We worked quite hard right across my own group and across the campus as a whole,” says Sharon. “We did a body of work on homelessness because that is something that I am very passionate about. The pupils all produced pieces on homelessness so we can break the myth and perception.”

The project did not limit itself to dismantling poverty within the school walls. The children also raised £70 and donated cans of food to their local foodbank as well as making further offerings to homelessness charity St Petroc’s and a local youth centre.

“I think that a lot of the kids’ perceptions of homelessness changed and they were very engaged by the issue,” says Sharon. “I wanted to get the message out that The Big Issue is a great read and not just something you buy to help people.”

“I then allowed the children to take home The Big Issues that I bought so that they could see for themselves. The kids were amazing and they were really invested in the issue.

“I have so many ideas about how you can pack some punch in education. I feel so passionate in that this is such a pivotal way forward to make change happen, to ignite compassion and make a difference.”

Education can also be a stimulus that is crucial to help vendors lift themselves out of poverty.

Long-time seller Daniel Collins (pictured right) is the latest to enter higher education – he is due to stop selling the magazine next month to study for a degree that will allow him to achieve his dream of becoming a counsellor. Daniel had previously completed an Access to Humanities course at Glasgow Clyde College.

Another Scottish vendor, Brian Wilson, has been hard at work getting his qualifications to set up his own boiler maintenance firm and completed a Level 3 diploma in Domestic Core Gas Safety this year.

He follows former vendors like Geoff Edwards, who hit the headlines last year as he headed to illustrious Cambridge University to study English Literature. He had previously slept rough in the city before taking up his place at Hughes Hall, the oldest Cambridge College for mature undergraduates.

It’s not easy juggling studies with any job, let alone selling The Big Issue. Janet Bowers had the added complicity of supporting four children and an ill husband while she completed her Level 2 Customer Service NVQ at Bournemouth and Poole College in 2015. She told The Big Issue: “I didn’t get any qualifications at school, so the NVQ felt like a real achievement.”

I’m hoping it helps towards my husband and I starting a market garden business one day, selling fruit and vegetables and plants – that’s our long-term dream.”

And some vendors have completed vocational studies that have resulted in them taking up jobs. Gary Jackson, June Fullerton and Julie Cherry all completed an employability programme at Saints Foundation as part of our first-of-a-kind team-up with Premier League club Southampton FC last year. They have taken up roles at the stewarding department at St Mary’s Stadium alongside fellow vendor Aa Ron New, whose Level 1 accreditation in customer service earned him a job in conferences and events at the club.

Words: Liam Geraghty
@Lazergun_Nun

Number of people over 21 studying at further education level (including but not limited to HNC, HND, DipHE, CertHE, NVQ, SVQ - 2016-17)

England
97,565
82% of all FE students

Scotland
16,620
72% of all FE students

Wales
16,285
71% of all FE students

Source: HESA [hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he]
From Flashman to Grange Hill at 40, the curious cultural rendering of education and what it says about us. By John Sutherland

We could never make our minds up about David Cameron. Was he Lord Snooty (he actually did wear a topper at Eton) who surrounded himself with ‘pals’ who had attended the same top people’s school?

Or was Cameron ‘Flashman’ – the Rugby bully who roasts Tom Brown over a dormitory fire to make the brave little fellow part with his winning lottery ticket? Every Wednesday at PMQs ‘Dave’ would hold Corbyn’s rump to the flames. And Jezza? Leader of the Gasworks Gang.

And what of the Maybot who took over running Britain when Dave dropped the baton? Is she, as Private Eye mocks, the Headmistress of ‘St Theresa’s Independent State Grammar School for Girls (and Boys)? And what of her odds-on successor, ‘Beano Boris’ – leader of the Bash Street Kids? A playground bullyboy?

Americans who come to Britain are amazed by the fact that in this country, ‘Where did you go to school?’ should be an important question.

Something else that amazes foreigners is the way in which top people until recently sent their little ones
away to boarding schools as young as six. To be educated? Or indoctrinated?

Another amazing thing, for those of a reflective turn of mind, is how influential our unusual school system was in making our tiny island ‘Great Britain’ and, before the great wind of change blew it away, ruler of the largest Empire the world has ever known.

The great architect of the school system which created imperial Britain was the mid-Victorian Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby. Schools are incorrigibly violent places. Arnold (‘the Doctor’) realised the value to the state of that violence if it was not suppressed but educationally harnessed. Under his educational regime there would emerge the most ‘physical’ team game in our sports system. Along with its unique ‘rugby’ football, the most violent individual sport we have – boxing – was cultivated. Regimental pluck and heroism were inculcated into pupils before they entered the world. And took it over, knocking any country that stood in the way for six.

Thomas Arnold realised that the other thing that the upper classes need to stay upper, and make the country upper, was the aspirant middle class. Tom Brown, in Thomas Hughes’s fictional tribute to Arnold, is of ‘yeoman’ class, not blue-blooded. But it is the ‘Browns’, Hughes argues, who have covered a third of the globe imperial red. Hip Hip!

The Empire’s gone. The UK doesn’t punch above its weight any more. Why, then, don’t we abolish public schools – why allow them to fiddle their books as ‘charities’ when what they do is cement an out-of-date class system? Nostalgia? Inertia? Fear of what would happen if we shook things up too much? Feebly we resolve to make the ‘best’ schools more ‘open’ and do the same with Oxbridge while we’re at it. In Lampedusa’s famous phrase, things must change so that they stay as they are.

The best literature and film about British schooling has been frankly oppositional, celebrating the rebel, the deviant, and the drop-out. George MacDonald Fraser’s Flashman series hilariously contradicts Tom Brownism. The great things that Britain has done (Fraser believed in them) had been achieved by those who resolutely did not toe the line like Tom Brown. Richmal Crompton, in a milder way, voiced her opposition to Tom Brown with her (Just) William Brown, who is a gangster, leader of the ‘Outlaws’. A little Al Capone. He will go on to great things.

The best film about British schools is _ff..._ by director Lindsay Anderson and writer David Sherwin. It’s set in the kind of ‘minor’ public school both men went to. In the film’s climax the sixth-form hero, Mick, and his gang shoot up the school, Columbine style. It’s not a massacre, it’s payback. Michael Moore would struggle to understand it.

The best novel/play/film about about top girls’ schools is Muriel Spark’s semi-autobiographical _The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie_. The hero, Sandy Stranger (unisex first name, second an allusion to Camus’ _Outsider_) is a sexual rebel, who deposes the ‘maverick’ teacher of the title. Both of them sleep with the art teacher, Teddy, Sandy, an anarchist, goes on to destroy her neo-fascist teacher. The best TV series about school? Phil Redmond’s aggressively non-conformist, real-world _Grange Hill_. No question.

All of which brings us to the most successful novel/film series school story of all time: _The Potteriad_. J.K Rowling’s epic starts with Harry Potter, a lower middle-class abused child who is magically transported to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Witches, wizards and warlocks were, we should recall, not that long ago burned at the stake.

Rowling’s novels are many things but, at root, they are an assertion of what children are and how society’s educational institutions should best handle them. Her novel controverts that other supremely influential novel about schoolchildren, _Lord of the Flies_. In Golding’s novel, after being marooned on a desert island in a nuclear war, a company of children (mixed public school, grammar school, technical school) revert to savagery. It’s their nature. It’s human nature. Education cannot bring out the good in children – or at least most of them. It can only control their innate savagery ruthlessly.

Rowling’s view is optimistic. Children are primitive and so is their culture and their magical view of the world. There is bullying at Hogwarts and evil at the gates and, with puberty, the teenage confusion of sex. But the essence of the Rowling worldview is hope. Not just for Hogwarts but for humankind.

Given the choice, I’d rather believe in Rowling than Golding. Who wouldn’t?

John Sutherland’s new book _Frankenstein’s Brain: Puzzles and Conundrums in Mary Shelley’s Monstrous Masterpiece_ is out on October 4 (Icon Books Ltd, £9.99)
Children’s Books

Trains
Adventures
Engineering & STEM

“This unique series of 19 children’s books combine amazing train stories with loads of engineering, science and fun historical facts.”

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E ducation can, to the untrained eye, seem more fraught and fractured than ever before. Employers and celebratory commentators routinely call for our outdated, ‘Victorian’ system to be reformed and for schools to focus on so-called ‘21st-century skills’. With the relentless increase of automation and the gig economy, traditional jobs will no longer be available and so the education system must somehow prepare children for jobs that haven’t yet been invented.

Twenty-one years ago, Tony Blair told the nation that his three priorities were education, education, education. In the intervening years almost twice as many people go to university, but with the increasing burden of tuition fees many feel higher education is beyond them. At the same time, teachers and teaching unions report being choked by meaningless paperwork, perverse accountability demands and dubious data. Added together, does this create a perfect storm in which the old must be scoured away to make room for a shiny new techno vision? Frankly, no.

Our system is far from perfect and there’s much that schools could do to improve the life chances of disadvantaged young people, but bold and bloody revolution is not the answer. Instead we need to unpick some of the web of popular misconceptions in which education seems so inextricably bound.

First, why do we think our school system is ‘outdated’? Various reformers would like to do away with classrooms, desks, books and even teachers talking to students. Understandably, these efforts have met with some resistance. Why, reformers wonder, are some teachers so resistant to change? In fact, teachers, like everyone else, tend to embrace change as long as it’s positive. What we tend to hate is loss. Consider a scenario in which a school informs its staff that they are all required to work one less day a week for the same pay. Will anyone resist the change? The truth is that most of these ill-conceived ideas add considerably to teachers’ workloads.

We also need to ask whether the internet really has changed everything. We still have essentially the same brains as our Palaeolithic ancestors and the need to be creative, solve problems and collaborate is so vital to the survival of the species that these things have become evolutionary adaptations. It was just as important for Socrates to think critically, Julius Caesar to solve problems, Shakespeare to communicate, Leonardo da Vinci to be creative and the builders of the Great Wall of China to collaborate as it is for young people today. But more importantly, these ‘skills’ should more properly be thought of as manifestations of knowledge. Anyone can collaborate on organising a night out to the pub or solve the problem of how to get dressed in the morning, the only thing that appears to make these things valuable today is the extent to which they depend on what people know. To think critically about, say, climate change or the energy crisis you need to know a hell of a lot.

While it’s true that our access to information is unparalleled, there is no substitute for storing information in our brains. Knowledge is a function of organic tissue – information only becomes knowledge when it lives and breathes inside our minds. Any attempt to substitute a more traditional approach to the school curriculum for a focus on trendy-sounding generic skills will only impoverish children and those that are most disadvantaged will suffer most. In addition to all this, the claim that most people are now doing jobs that weren’t invented 10 years ago is bunk. The top ‘in-demand’ jobs in 2014 included mathematician (at number one), university professor, statistician, actuary, audiologist and, curiously, dental hygienist.

But what of student debt? Isn’t the marketisation of higher education strangling working-class children’s access to university? What puts people off attending university is not debt, but the fear of debt. The fact that many students borrow up to £50,000 is meaningless, what matters is how much they repay, and what you repay depends entirely on how much you earn after getting your degree; those who land fabulous jobs will repay a lot, those who earn little will repay nothing. Essentially, tuition fees are an equitable way to get those graduates who benefit most from going to university to subsidise those who benefit least, all without increasing the tax burden on those who don’t attend at all.

Finally, whilst the burden of unnecessary workload no doubt blights the lives of very many teachers, it’s important to know that both the DfE and the government watchdog, Ofsted, have told schools in no uncertain terms that they ought to stop generating so much pointless paperwork and abandon the delusion that collecting ever more data will solve anything. The only reason teachers continue to drown in meaningless administrative tasks is down to the ignorance and short-sightedness of individual headteachers.

Does education need to improve? Yes. Schools must stop burning through teachers as if they were an ever-renewable resource. Business leaders and futurologists must stop spouting their absurd, unevenced demands about what schools should be teaching. The media must stop spreading myths about student debt. And we should all acknowledge that the education system is, in many ways, healthier than it’s ever been.

David Didau is an education blogger and author of Making Kids Cleverer. learningspy.co.uk @DavidDidau

‘Bold and bloody revolution is not the answer’ Think carefully before you rip it up and start again, says education blogger David Didau

Much ado about nothing Don’t throw out the old ways just yet

THE BIG ISSUE / p33 / September 3-9 2018
Talent is everywhere, opportunity isn’t

Vanity Fair star Olivia Cooke earned her acting stripes at a local drama group in Oldham. She tells Adrian Lobb that if you’re working class, getting the chance to train as an actor is something you still have to fight for.

The new president of UK actors’ union Equity, Maureen Beattie, said recently that “it is more and more difficult for people from working-class backgrounds to get into the business”. The prohibitive cost of attending drama schools and lack of provision of drama classes in state schools – with 1,700 fewer drama teachers in UK schools in 2017 than in 2010 – are just two of the barriers to working-class talent entering the business. And for those who do break through, the choice of stories being told acts as even more of a barrier to success.

Olivia Cooke is one working-class actor who defied the odds to make a big breakthrough. In March, the 24-year-old from Oldham, Lancashire, starred in Steven Spielberg’s ambitious, head-spinning virtual reality nostalgia trip Ready Player One. Now Cooke leads the cast of ITV’s dazzling, big-budget adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray’s satirical masterpiece Vanity Fair.

It is a cast worth savoring. Each weekly episode kicks off with an update from Michael Palin as circus ringmaster/William Thackeray himself (all seven filmed in one, intense whirligig of a night), before Suranne Jones, Martin Clunes plus rising stars Claudia Jessie, Johnny Flynn and Tom Bateman join Cooke in the drama.

Cooke brings a playful wit, emotional intelligence and modernity to her portrayal of Becky Sharp, the focal point of Makepeace’s ‘Novel Without a Hero’. In the series, she tips a wink to the audience while outwitting and seducing wealthy suitors, relishing in being the cleverest person, if, most often, the least privileged, in the room.

“She has had to weaponise her talents and use everything she has got in order to survive,” says Cooke, when we meet in the former BBC Television Centre in west London.

“At that time, as a woman, that was your charm and your sexuality. She is working within the constraints of the time – she can’t get a job as a lawyer, she can’t go to university. But she has the power of perception and observation, so she is using everything she can while outsmarting everyone in the room.”

Cooke has also used her smarts to reach the top of her profession. “I have not had such a dire childhood as Becky but I have nothing to fall back on. I have no qualifications. This is it for me now,” she says.

In Cooke’s major roles to date – affecting indie comedy Me and Earl and the Dying Girl and long-running contemporary Psycho prequel Bates Motel – she has played Americans, rather than using the strong Oldham accent that has survived her recent move to New York. She believes this has been vital.

“If I hadn’t gone to America where accent doesn’t matter, I don’t think I would have been given the same opportunities to helm a production this large over here,” says Cooke.

“Some people think when you have a regional accent, you are only destined for soaps. When I first started, people on messageboards would say, ‘This girl is only good for Corrie’ or ‘With a voice like that she should be in Emmerdale’. Well, no.

“People down south get to change their accents all the time. Look at Kit Harington in Game of Thrones talking like me. So why shouldn’t we get to do the same in reverse?”

Another British actor whose route to UK success involved a detour to the US, Idris Elba, told a room of MPs and television executives gathered in the Commons to talk (not for the first time) about expanding access to the cultural industries: “Talent is everywhere, opportunity isn’t.”

If opportunity didn’t exactly come knocking directly, unlike many working-class youngsters, Cooke had a local space in which her talent and passion for performing could thrive and grow. The Oldham Theatre Workshop, which Cooke attended from the age of eight to 17, is a rare local space in which her talent and passion for performing could thrive and grow. The Oldham Theatre Workshop, which Cooke attended from the age of eight to 17, is a rare instance of an affordable, dedicated local drama group for young people.

“It is a real safe haven. Lovely, inclusive, if you feel you are a bit of a weirdo or feel like an outcast you go there and suddenly you are not,” says Cooke.

“It was where I found my people, all my best mates, more so than in school. We were all like-minded and I forged and cemented my personality there.

“It was such a joyous time, full of giggles and laughs and my imagination was full to the brim of possibilities and stories. It was this wonderful, loving community.”

Oldham Theatre Workshop also has a great track record of producing actors of integrity and skill, with Cooke following in the footsteps of Vanity Fair co-star Suranne Jones, Happy Valley’s Sarah Lancashire and This Is England’s Joe Gilgun.

“When I was there it wasn’t a pathway to casting directors or agents,” says Cooke. “It is more community-
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“Some schools don’t have a funded drama department. Also, it is not cool to try at school, whereas when we auditioned for the summer or Christmas shows it was a massive deal. I remember the panic of ringing up to see if you got into the show. I always got in!”

Alongside a few of her Oldham Theatre Workshop pals, Cooke applied for Rada – despite worries over the costs. She did not make the grade and instead, Cooke learnt on the job – winning an early role as Christopher Eccleston’s daughter in BBC drama Blackout and cast in modern Hammer Horror film The Quiet Ones.

“My mum was a single mum with two kids who didn’t earn enough to support me going to Rada,” says Cooke. “So I was really worried. Even if I had got into this incredible school, I didn’t think I would be able to afford to go. I would have got a little help from the government but didn’t think I would be able to afford to live in London either.

“It is already so nerve-wracking leaving school at 18, uncertain about what you want to do. To then face the challenge of having this passion, where you want to see if it leads to anything, but not having the possibility to study it because you are from a low-income family and don’t have the same access to funds or tuition as someone with more money… you get an ongoing cycle of poverty, unless you are incredibly lucky and incredibly ambitious and can start from scratch. You need gumption and effort, but not everyone has those opportunities.”

So don’t tell Cooke she is lucky to be rubbing shoulders with the likes of public school boys Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston, headlining a primetime TV series alongside big-budget and indie films.

“It is not anything bad against the other lot, I do genuinely think they are talented,” says Cooke. “But in this industry there is a lot of nepotism. I hear people saying, ‘Oh, Olivia, you are so lucky’. I am not lucky. They are lucky because of their genes and their DNA that they have inherited. I have worked really, really fucking hard.”

Cooke does not plan to stop with acting. Instead, she hopes to shape the stories being told, forming a production company as part of a new generation, changing the culture and output of the film industry. If Vanity Fair seethes with a quiet, cynical fury about the reproduction of inequality and privilege, Cooke again sees modern parallels while hopeful that change is coming.

“It is not hammered over the head as much in this adaptation as it is in the book, but I do think there are parallels with status and wealth and class and how there is definitely a ruling class – even if a lot has happened since the 1800s,” she says.

“But I do feel really positive about this lovely generation that I am in. Maybe every generation feels like this, though. I wonder if by the time I am 50 we will be ruining it for the kids? Hopefully not, maybe this momentum of progress and change is the way forward now and we have become more accepting and more open and more inclusive.”

**ARTS ATTACK – WHAT’S THE FUTURE FOR BRITAIN’S CREATIVE TALENT?**

Creative subjects in schools are in serious peril. Over generations, they’ve repeatedly come up against sideways sneers that they’re lightweight, but now the main threat (for pupils in England at least) seems to be aimed directly from above. Government plans for the new English Baccalaureate (EBacc) discount creative, artistic and technical subjects from school league tables and will make at least seven academic GCSEs compulsory, squeezing out everything else for many pupils.

The effects are already being felt. Last month, the Joint Council for Qualifications revealed there had been a 10 per cent drop in the uptake of creative GCSEs in just one year. Performing and expressive arts numbers fell by a devastating 45 per cent, again in just 12 months. But the threat has only just begun. More than 200 organisations have signed up to the Bacc for the Future campaign, calling on the government to rethink its plan (which originally came about thanks to a (state) school that nurtured creative talent. Sheku got behind the Bacc for the Future campaign, saying: “Without the amazing opportunities I had in my secondary school I would not be where I am today.”

Things are hardly rosier in Scotland. A recent report by Professor Jim Scott of Dundee University, published by Tes Scotland, found the range of subjects available to secondary pupils is on the slide. Most pupils (54 per cent) now study just six subjects in fourth year, up from 45 per cent the previous year. The Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association echoed concerns from England – that a narrow curriculum elbows out subjects like art and music. Factor in council cuts, which have seen funds for out-of-school groups drying up, and you have to wonder where a creative education is going to come from for any child other than the most privileged.

It’s worth remembering that the creative industries are worth £92 billion a year to the UK – more than oil, gas, life sciences, automotive and aeronautics combined – and last year the sector was growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy. So not particularly lightweight after all.

**Words: Sarah Reid @frutepastel baccforthefuture.com**
In the last days of his life, Baldhead was tamer than ever before. Every morning, he flew to Len Howard, who lived in the cottage in his garden, just as he had always done. But instead of taking the peanut she offered him and moving on with his business – working on his nest, singing for his partner – he sat down on her lap and slept. He often did not even eat his peanut.

Baldhead was a Great Tit, and Len Howard was a violinist. They had met when he was young and strong, and developed what we could call a friendship. Howard had bought a small cottage in Ditchling, Sussex, in 1938, to study birds. She named it Bird Cottage, and opened it – literally, she kept the windows open – to the birds who lived in the area. Howard fed them and made nesting places for them in the garden and sleeping places inside her house. They soon learned not to be afraid of her, and began to use the house as they pleased. Some of the birds chose to sleep inside the cardboard boxes under the ceiling in her bedroom; others only came inside during the daytime. Younger birds often disappeared for weeks or months when they found a new partner, sometimes coming back to the garden when the nesting season started; others stayed around all year long. They were not domesticated, and did not do personal sacrifices: she had to retreat from human society and opened the windows of her home to the local bird population. Her extraordinary life was the inspiration for Eve Meijeris’s novel.

She sold sanctuary

Len Howard retreated from society and opened the windows of her home to the local bird population. Her extraordinary life was the inspiration for Eve Meijeris’s novel.

The two books that Howard wrote about the birds became bestsellers and were translated into many languages. Her work was however not taken seriously by the scientific community. The fact that she was a woman, and had not received a formal education, certainly played a role in this, but the way in which she approached the birds, as individuals with their own perspective on life and her, was also frowned upon. At that time, behaviourism was the accepted way of studying non-human animal behaviour, which meant conducting experiments in laboratories. Howard thought captivity influenced birds’ behaviour and wanted to study them in an environment of freedom and trust. Nowadays many ethologists share her views and study non-human animals in their own habitats, sometimes living with them for extended periods of time.

When I first read Howard’s books, I was immediately struck by her relationships with the birds and by her writing voice. She knew what she was doing and why, even though this went against what was seen as acceptable in the way somewhat. Living with birds generally involved a lot of cleaning.

The two books that Howard wrote about the birds became bestsellers and were translated into many languages. Her work was however not taken seriously by the scientific community. The fact that she was a woman, and had not received a formal education, certainly played a role in this, but the way in which she approached the birds, as individuals with their own perspective on life and her, was also frowned upon. At that time, behaviourism was the accepted way of studying non-human animal behaviour, which meant conducting experiments in laboratories. Howard thought captivity influenced birds’ behaviour and wanted to study them in an environment of freedom and trust. Nowadays many ethologists share her views and study non-human animals in their own habitats, sometimes living with them for extended periods of time.

When I first read Howard’s books, I was immediately struck by her relationships with the birds and by her writing voice. She knew what she was doing and why, even though this went against what was seen as acceptable for women in her time. I looked for information about her life online, but did not find much – a family tree, some poems by her father. She grew up in Wales, became a violinist in a London orchestra, and then made a radical choice to leave it all and study birds. Her work initially interested me as a philosopher – my other job – but this choice interested me as a novelist. One of the things you learn as a novelist is that you are never the one who chooses a story; the story chooses you. You can sometimes (try to) refuse, but in this case, I saw the value of the project.

Bird Cottage thus became a novel, about a woman who chooses to leave human society, with all its expectations and regulations, behind to live with birds. It is based on Len Howard’s life, and aims to do justice to her relationships with her flying friends, but it is a work of fiction. Writing a novel allows one to do justice to the emotional truth of a time, a person or something, by creating meaning through a story. In this case, it allowed me to do justice to what it means to share one’s life with non-human animals – to care about them, fight for them, and often also lose them. It also allowed me to follow in the footsteps of a woman who chose a different route in life. However, Bird Cottage is not just about humans. Readers will also meet Star, Howard’s favourite Great Tit, who learns to count and is generally very intelligent; Jane, who sings better than the males; Inkey; Smoke; Monocle; and of course Baldhead, who taught all his children to trust Howard, and came to see her every day, until his very last.

Photo: National Portrait Gallery Australia - David Moore

Bird Cottage
by
Eva Meijeris
out now
(Pushkin Press, £12.99)
The Infinite Blacktop / The Man Who Came Uptown

Crash course

Doug Johnstone is gripped by the tale of an LA detective who is left for dead after a road accident

This week we are looking at books by a couple of American authors who have recently been immersed in the world of television. The rise of streaming services has seen an explosion of dramatic content, and more and more novelists are being lured into writing for television, especially across the pond.

It will be interesting to see how this affects authors’ future work. On the one hand, the structures and tropes of television drama might seep into the books, then again perhaps their novels will show more experimentation, breaking free from the constraints of the small screen.

The Infinite Blacktop is Sara Gran’s sixth novel and the third to feature her wonderful anti-hero Claire DeWitt. It’s been five years since Gran’s last book, during which time she’s been one of the main writers on the underrated LA cop show Southland. The Infinite Blacktop is as uncompromising as Gran’s previous work and it literally starts with a bang. DeWitt coming to after being run off an Oakland road and left for dead by an unknown assailant.

What then follows is a masterclass in plotting, characterisation and style, as three storylines set in three different places and times are beautifully intertwined to create a mesmerising picture of a woman on the edge in every sense. So we get DeWitt’s burgeoning detective skills in 1980s Brooklyn, we get her solving a case in 1990s Los Angeles and we have her hunting down her attempted murderer in the present day.

DeWitt is obsessed with the art of detection, specifically the writings of an obscure French detective, and there are elements in The Infinite Blacktop that verge on the mystical and metaphysical. Throughout it all, DeWitt is as uncompromising and daring as her creator is, in a book that is deeply in love with the ethos of classic private detective fiction, while also dragging it screaming into the 21st century. It’s been five years since Gran’s last novel, and I hope it’s not another five until her next sublime offering.

George Pelecanos has considerably more television writing experience, having been both a writer and producer on The Wire, Treme and most recently The Deuce. He’s written 20 novels over the last quarter of a century, but it has also been five years since his last. The Man Who Came Uptown is absolutely worth the wait. It’s a short book at just over 200 pages but it packs an immense emotional punch, and while it ostensibly qualifies as a crime novel, it’s as much a character study and love letter to the power of books as a plot-twister. The story revolves around a triumvirate of fascinating and flawed characters. Anna is a jailhouse librarian, trying to improve the lives of her prisoners, Michael is a convict who has to deal with putting his life back together upon release, and Phil is a private investigator who doubles as a vigilante criminal.

Pelecanos gets under the skins of his characters with immense skill and really digs deep into the conflict in all of us, the small battles of good versus evil that occur in everyday lives. It is classic fatalistic noir, looking at how tiny decisions can have drastic consequences down the road, and the author never goes for easy answers, adding to the power and truthfulness of his fictional world. Terrific stuff.

Words: Doug Johnstone @doug_johnstone

The Infinite Blacktop
by Sara Gran, out on September 20 (Faber, £14.99)

The Man Who Came Uptown
by George Pelecanos, out on September 6 (Orion, £20)

Benjamin Markovits is a judge for the BBC National Short Story Award with Cambridge University. The shortlist is announced on September 14 and the winner will be named on October 2

TOP 5 SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

HATESHIP, FRIENDSHIP, COURTSHIP, LOVESHIP, MARRIAGE by Alice Munro
This has my favourite story in it – Post and Beam, about a woman whose cousin comes to visit from her small-town home, and is forced to realise that the front she puts up, to show how well she’s doing, isn’t quite true.

FRANNY AND ZOOEY by JD Salinger
Two stories about the precocious Glass family, brilliant at describing the kind of intense intricacy of ordinary life. There’s a great 20-page conversation between a mother and her son while he’s taking a bath.

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER by Alan Sillitoe
I spent my last year at university reading non-course books – mostly English novels of the Fifties and Sixties. Like John Braine’s A Room at the Top or Stan Barstow’s A Kind of Loving. This short story by Alan Sillitoe is one of the best.

MOTHERS AND SONS by Colm Toibin
Sometimes even good short stories exaggerate how secretly terrible life is. But this collection has a persuasive account of somebody becoming happier – in The Name of the Game, a widow uses her small inheritance to run a chip shop. Turns out she’s good at it. Sometimes things work out.

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF PETER TAYLOR
by Peter Taylor
I first came across one of the stories in a New Yorker anthology, Wonderful Town. 1939 is about a couple of creative writing students who drive to New York over Thanksgiving to meet their girlfriends. Part of what they learn is how young they still are.
The Sunday Times No.1 Bestseller

‘Don’t hold an opinion about this book if you have not read it’
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DAILY TELEGRAPH

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The course is offered in partnership with the Charles Dickens Museum, London.
Bad education

Gay conversion school isn’t heavy on laughs, but Desiree Akhavan makes sure teenage energy and joy aren’t dampened

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is set in the early 1990s. This comedy drama revolves around a high-school student sent to a Christian gay conversion camp in rural Montana after she’s caught in a relationship with another girl.

I’d like to think society has moved on in its attitudes towards sexual diversity since its timeframe, but I fear the film may still have some minds to convert with its celebration of tolerance. But The Miseducation of Cameron Post does more than deliver a message: this is a lovely, richly shaded portrait of adolescence in all its shifting moods, shot through with a melancholy sweetness and sly, intoxicating humour.

Chloë Grace Moretz plays Cameron, a girl in her mid-teens living with Ruth, her devout, well-meaning aunt who has been caring for Cameron since the death of her parents. In an extended opening sequence we see Cameron prepare for that staple of teen rituals, the high school prom, her date a handsome lad called Jamie. The scenes flit by with little dialogue, director Desiree Akhavan staging them as a kind of blurry reverie. But the look of awkward discomfort on Cameron’s face as she poses for the camera hints that Jamie isn’t quite the dream date he appears.

In fact, we know that Cameron is seeing her friend Coley (Quinn Shephard), and when the two girls are discovered making out in the back of car, Ruth sends Cameron off to God’s Promise, a residential school in a remote woodland where gay and lesbian kids are supposed to be purged of their urges.

It’s a pretty grim basis for any educational establishment, and Akhavan, adapting a novel by Emily M Danforth, never shies from the uncomfortable realities of life at God’s Promise.

A programme of reconditioning has been put in place, overseen and micromanaged by the headteacher Lydia. Played with haughty precision by Jennifer Ehle, Lydia is a stern disciplinarian who uses the intimacy of her therapy sessions with the kids to advance her anti-gay agenda: she is an icy dogmatist, the closest thing this otherwise generous film has to a villain, and for the students in her care, her influence is appalling.

Adolescents are already confused enough without attempts like hers to mess with their heads, and Akhavan leaves us in no doubt about its impact on the kids at God’s Promise, especially through the near-tragic case of a vulnerable pupil.

But the film is also about the resilience that teenagers forge in the face of crummy circumstances. “What feels like fun is actually the enemy,” a religious elder informs youngsters about the temptations of youth (he’s really talking about sex).

Well, when you’re oppressed by adults with views like that, the best way you can resist is by having fun: here an impromptu singalong in the school canteen to 4 Non Blondes’ 1993 hit What’s Up?, performed by Cameron with a broom for a microphone, constitutes a pretty forthright act of teenage rebellion, and Cameron is duly punished by Lydia.

Teaming up with fellow residents, the improbably named Jane Fonda (Sasha Lane) and Adam (Forrest Goodluck), Cameron’s questioning of the school’s authority grows more strident. But that sense of fun remains throughout, with the film attuned to the heady kicks and exuberance of teenage life as well as any John Hughes picture. It’s an impressively assured second feature from Akhavan (whose debut was the 2015 comedy Appropriate Behavior), with a winning central turn by Moretz.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is in cinemas on September 7. See next week’s magazine for an interview with Chloë Grace Moretz.

Edward Lawrenson @EdwardLawrenson
Human Writes

Around 3000 people are currently condemned to death in the USA. Most have been there for many years awaiting their final execution date. Living conditions on Death Row can be harsh and dehumanising with prisoners often being locked up in single cells for 23 hours a day. Many have been abandoned by family and friends and often letters from overseas penfriends are their only contact with the outside world in their final years of life.

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Some physicists tell us time is an illusion. I hope it is, especially after hearing a psychologist explain that one third of subjective experience of time is over and done with by the time we are eight years old.

Sarah Kendall’s new Australian Trilogy on Radio Four is about hamsters and bus stops, comets and Christmas trees, but it is also about time. Each episode flits through time, back and forth, as the final pattern of the story is eventually found. She has built her own block universe.

At times, you may be mistaken in thinking that this is a shaggy dog story, but each detail is ultimately very important. There is concision in the tangents which turn out not to be tangents at all, or maybe it is just that all life is a tangent and we just force story on to it in the hope of finding meaning. Kendall is adept at delivering mournful notes and the topping them with punchline twists that never belittle what has come before, but underline the absurdity of it all. When Australian Trilogy intends to be funny, it is very funny. When it intends to be meaningful, whether discussing dementia, cancer or autism, it is. The moments of sadness and quiet thoughtfulness never stray into sentimentality. It never becomes formulaic – at times we are relieved by a joke, but Kendall doesn’t get overwhelmed by the comedian’s urge to always leave you laughing.

The poignancy of the final episode’s conclusion leaves you wanting to go straight outside to look at the stars in the night sky. There is a tender, hopeful sadness.

Running through the series is a Chinese proverb that asks “Good luck, bad luck, who can tell?”

What seems like good luck can lead to death, what seems like bad luck can lead to a reprieve.

“Her mother warns that her grandchild must not drink from a park water fountain as it may have been used as a bidet by copulating couples”

The series begins in 1986, in a back garden in Australia, where Sarah’s family are waiting to see Halley’s Comet and ends in the mind of Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who won the opportunity to go into space on the Challenger shuttle which broke apart 73 seconds into its flight. Kendall’s pessimistic mother is the frequently the comic relief, whether offering dire warnings that her grandchild must not drink from a municipal park drinking fountain as it may well have been used as bidet by couples who have been copulating on the nearby swings or the delighted squeal of relief that her daughter hasn’t won big on a lottery scratchcard as she’d only buy a jetski that would lead to her horrible death – “For some people the glass is half full, for some half empty. For my mum not only is it half empty, someone’s rubbed their ball sack all over the rim.”

I am also desperately trying to find the set-up for the joke that ends, “You just move it to one side and keep on eating”, a lewd punchline that comes from the mouth of her grandmother at inopportune social moments.

Like Kendall’s previous series, this is a beguiling half hour, and we are left with many questions, perhaps none more profound than, “Is Clint Eastwood Stan Laurel’s son?”

Words: Robin Ince @robinince
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As the world increasingly feels like it is teetering on the brink of total political collapse, it’s worth looking back at how dark times in the past were met with popular protest. Ian Hislop’s Search For Dissent (Sept 6-Jan 20, Bloomsbury, London; britishmuseum.org) sees the Private Eye editor dig through the museum’s archives to present 100 objects that reveal how dissent, subversion and satire have fuelled protest over the centuries. He draws a line from ancient graffiti in Babylonia to today’s ‘pussy hats’ by way of banknotes with hidden profanities to show the many and unexpected forms that protest can take.

Here’s an excuse for gamers to leave the house and... look at some games. Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt (Sept 8-Feb 24, South Kensington, London; vam.ac.uk) shows the intricate planning and cutting-edge design behind modern games. There are also immersive installations and interactive elements to show why there is far more creativity and intelligence happening in the sector than the naysayers give it credit for.

For fans of gourmandising, there is plenty this week to pile on to your plate. Tower Of London Food Festival (Sept 7 to 9, Tower Hill, London; toffl.co.uk) lets you eat in the moat (don’t worry, it was drained years ago) and watch cooking demos from experts like Michel Roux Jr and Nadiya Hussain. Hopefully you can buy enormous turkey legs to chomp on and throw over your shoulder while laughing like a modern Henry VIII.

There is also the Edible Forest Festival (Sept 9 to 10, Leicestershire; goleicestershire.com) where you can chew your way around Charnwood Forest, with the option to go on a gourmet journey or book a forest dining pod. To help wash it down, head to the Gin & Rum Festival (September 7 to 8, Birmingham; ginandrumfestival.com) as it makes its way to the Midlands. You can work your way through some (not all) of the 60 different rums and gins on offer and sit in on talks and workshops from leading drinks producers.

Eamonn Forde @Eamonn_Forde

Scaling back

Has the fat lady sung for music lessons in schools?

As students up and down the country received their exam grades and planned their futures, another set of results was announced. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCoS) has published figures that show a further decline (10 per cent) in the uptake of creative subjects at GCSE, including music, over the past year. In addition, over the last 12 months, the uptake of creative subjects at GCSE has fallen by over 10 per cent. The fall is believed to be linked to the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, a government-designed performance measure that excludes subjects such as music, drama and art from counting in crucial school league tables in favour of perceived ‘academic’ pursuits, like maths and English.

At the same time, the Association of School and College Leaders released its survey results that reveal that 69 per cent of state-sector leaders believe they have been forced to cut back on lesson time, staff and facilities in A-level subjects. The survey of 420 respondents cited that music was the subject most affected by cuts, with 39 per cent of leaders concerned about diminishing resources. Twenty-eight respondents said their sixth form was considering closure, with many saying they have been unable to sustain student numbers with current funding levels. Perhaps it is no surprise to learn that since 2014, there has been a 25.4 per cent decline in music entries compared to a 2.6 per cent decline in A-level entries overall. In 2017, 42,507 pupils sat music GCSE, but this year the number fell to 39,358 – a decline of 7.4 per cent. Based on its current trajectory, the number of students selecting music for both GCSE and A-level looks set to decrease over the next few years. This is a real concern, given the important role the arts play in both our economy and society.

The start of a new academic year also ushers in the beginning of a handful of exciting operatic tours, when the summer’s productions uproot from the country houses and spill out into the provinces. Glyndebourne’s Tour 2018 calls in at Milton Keynes, Canterbury, Norwich and Woking this autumn (October 12 – December 1). This year’s perambulation includes Verdi’s classic La traviata and Cendrillon (Cinderella), Jules Massenet’s musical fairytale. The Glyndebourne tour celebrates its 50th anniversary year, and to mark the milestone, a gala concert of opera highlights will take place at London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall (December 4), featuring artists who have starred in tour performances throughout the past decades. All proceeds from the concert will be used to invest in the future of the Glyndebourne Tour.

Further north, Scottish Opera’s ambitious Opera Highlights tour takes high-quality operatic music to remote communities as far afield as the Outer Hebrides. This year’s series begins on September 20 in Giffnock before heading to Ayr, Drummandochit, Wick, Forres, Ullapool, Stornoway, Portree, Lanark, Helensburgh, Dundee, Inverurie, Laurencekirk, Perth, Dumfries, Musselburgh and St Andrews. The playlist includes hits by Mozart and Donizetti as well as new compositions by Scottish Opera composer-in-residence Samuel Bordoli.

Claire Jackson @claireiswriting
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Tom Cash, 52
BONN SQUARE, OXFORD

“I’d hit rock bottom but I’ve been given another chance in life”

Six months ago I overdosed on Brighton beach and I was found half-dead. I was really bad on heroin, crack and the drink and I used to go begging to make my money every day. After that I came back to Oxford and I’m better, I’m clean now. I’d hit rock bottom but I’ve been given another chance in life.

I don’t remember the overdose, it’s a total blank. I remember being in hospital – I was there for about a month. When I came back to Oxford I was staying with a friend but he was doing too many drugs and I knew I couldn’t stay there. That’s when Anna and Liz at The Big Issue helped me get a place. Without them I wouldn’t have coped. They took me down to the council and helped me sort myself out.

I started doing drugs about 30 years ago but I was clean when I was living in Ireland for 15 years. But then my mum died, and my cousin took his own life, so I went back on the drugs. It was just too much and I couldn’t cope. My escape was drugs and alcohol. I didn’t care about myself and I had no respect for other people. I’m a qualified block paver and slab worker and I used to be very good at it but that all went to pot when I went back on drugs.

Now I love selling The Big Issue. It gives me confidence and I’m part of society again. Being in Oxford I sell to people of all nationalities. Most of the people I meet on the street are polite. Sometimes they ignore you but I don’t let it get me down. Other times they say, “Get a fucking job”. I just say, “Have a nice afternoon” and it winds them up because they haven’t got to me.

I live in my own flat. I see old friends who are still using and I wouldn’t disregard them but I’ve told them that if I can do it they can do it. I’ve had people tell me they’re clean, but they’re not. They always give me a pat on the back though, so I’m a bit of a role model. Before, I wasn’t looking after myself properly. I wasn’t shaving or washing. I was just too interested in drugs and drink. There’s a big difference in me now. That’s down to The Big Issue.

I’m originally from Derry but I was raised in east London. I’m a traveller by blood. Over here you get called names, people think you’re a scumbag. But I’m part of that community and I’m proud to be what I am. I just take one day at a time and whatever crosses my path I try to deal with in a civil manner. I see myself as a recovering addict now so for me it feels nice to be nice.
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