

How to be
CHAMPION

My autobiography

**SARAH
MILlicAN**

J
O
A
P
E
Z
E

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Trapeze,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Sarah Millican 2017

The moral right of Sarah Millican to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback): 978 1 4091 7430 1
ISBN (Trade Paperback): 978 1 4091 7431 8
ISBN (eBook): 978 1 4091 7433 2

Typeset by Born Group

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



www.orionbooks.co.uk

To the loves of my life, Gary and Tuvok

CONTENTS

Foreword	1
1. A Bit About Me	4
2. What I Was Like at School	8
3. Excellent Things About the Miners' Strike	16
4. Wearing Glasses	22
5. Things I've Been Bullied For	27
6. Good Things that Happened at School	41
7. Being a Wallflower	59
8. I've Had Proper Jobs	62
9. The Big Breakfast	84
10. Dates I Have Had	90
11. A Love Letter to My Knockers	94
12. Divorce	97
13. Thirteen Excellent Break-up Tips	110
14. Moving Back in with My Parents	113
15. So Many Proper Jobs	116
16. Pre-stand-up Stand-up	122
17. My First Proper Ten-minute Set	131
18. Counselling	136
19. Things My Dad Taught Me	142

20. Not Drinking	146
21. Things I'm Good at Doing on My Own	150
22. Friendships	154
23. The Six Men I Have Loved	160
24. Holidays	165
25. Getting Married a Second Time	170
26. Tips on Making a Relationship Work	175
27. My Favourite Room in the House	178
28. Millican's Law	192
29. Life on the Road	196
30. I Don't Want Kids	205
31. My Love of Stationery	214
32. Who Do You Think You Are?	217
33. Sometimes I Hate Myself	223
34. Ten Good Things About Being a Bit Overweight	240
35. The Poo Holiday of 2011	241
36. The BAFTA Article	245
37. Standard Issue	250
38. How to Be a Comedian	257
39. Why I'm Not a Criminal	272
40. Not Good at Being Famous	275
41. #Joinin	281
42. Tips for Turning Forty	285
43. Recipe for My Very Favourite Cake	287
Being Champion	295
Acknowledgements	297

FOREWORD

Champion *adjective* BRITISH *informal dialect*

1. Excellent. “‘Thankye, lad,” the farmer said. “That’s champion.””

WHICH IS A typical dictionary boffin’s idea of what a northerner sounds like. As soon as I’ve milked these cows and egged these chickens, I’ll get cracking on my book. I’ve called it *How to Be Champion* because that’s what I always strive for. Being champion. And I wanted it, as well as being my autobiography, to be a bit self-helpy. When I described the book to my best friend, she said, ‘Do you mean the sort of book you wish someone had given you at sixteen?’ Exactly that. If I’d known then that work is better than school, bullies get their comeuppance by having a boring life, YOU WILL GROW BOOBS AND THEY WILL BE HUGE, I’d have been much less anxious and would have started saving for GIANT BRAS.*

* Speaking of massive tips, most chapters have How To Be Champion tips at the end.

FOREWORD

I'm all about the adjective. Champion means canny means pretty good means not bad means fair to middling means cracking on with life means nowt's a bother. That's what I want. To always be champion. I think it's important not to give yourself the pressure of having to be amazing all the time. It's also sometimes used as a verb. Because of *Standard Issue*, my no-bullshit women's podcast, I'm often referred to as 'championing' women. Championing. I'm pretty sure that's also French for mushroom.

The title of this book was picked from a list of potentials. I knew I wanted something that was very me. Maybe using a word people associate with me, like nunny or claggy. The obvious title there is perhaps a little graphic though generally true. What about something super-Geordie like 'Gaan Canny', 'I Love Pasties' or 'Hadaway and Shite'? With the latter there was a worry people would think it was an aggressive autobiography from the popular nineties' pop star who asked 'What Is Love?' repeatedly while I danced around De Niro's in South Shields with patent-leather chunky heels and a Mirage and lemonade. I tried to think of what a tabloid newspaper might call my book and came up with 'Cakey Cakey Fat Cunt'.

I asked my husband Gary, who is also a comic and is a genius with words, to help me. I said I liked the word 'champion' and maybe he could come up with some wordplay around that. Now, one thing you need to know about my husband is that he ranks wordplay way above his marriage or indeed anyone's feelings. His suggestion: 'Heavyweight Champion'. He also suggested using the phrase 'older and wider' in the blurb. I have helped him with the title for his next tour: 'Short jokes. Fat man.' And, hilariously, he's actually considering using it.

Chapter 1

A Bit About Me

I'M GUESSING YOU'VE bought my book because you know the basics about me (glasses, cake, potty mouth) and would like to know more. Well, before we get into the nitty gritty, here are six stories that sum me up. So if you're cramming for your NVQ in Sarah Millican, inhale these first.

I'm a performer who as a kid was afraid to perform. I was quiet as a mouse at school, but at home I used to make up poems and would read them aloud from behind a curtain. I was about eight and the curtain in the breakfast room only went down to my knees. My mam suggested the curtain thing and, oddly, it gave me confidence. If I did a good job, my mam would give me a banana. When it came to learning about the birds and the bees, my mam said, 'How do you want me to tell you?' and I said 'Can I go behind the curtain?' It was clearly a safe place. Which was fine until I came out and she gave me a banana, like I was supposed to get cracking straight away. She'd also asked which word I

A BIT ABOUT ME

wanted her to use for the man's bits and I said 'dick'. I still have sex behind a curtain today.*

I was destined to tell jokes for a living. For Halloween my sister Victoria, being six years older than me, decided she was too old to take this ten-year-old out, so my mam suggested I trick or treated on my own. Great idea, but I was only allowed to trick or treat our house. So I used to go out of the back door and walk around the block, which took less than two minutes, wearing a shawl that was covered in fake blood from Strand, the local card shop. I'd knock on the front door and my mam would leave it a few minutes, to make it exciting. What if she didn't answer? Then she'd open the door and I'd say, 'Trick or treat?' She'd always say 'trick' and I'd tell her a couple of jokes that I'd memorised from Janet and Alan Ahlberg's *The Ha Ha Bonk Book*, which was the first book in my imaginary library (ordered alphabetically, obv's). Then she'd give me a mini Milky Way and I'd go in the house. And that's my job now. But I get cash instead of mini Milky Ways and it's all my own work.

I have a big working-class chip on my shoulder. The first time I bought a first-class train ticket it was by accident, and when the conductor came along to where I was sitting in standard class he said, 'You should be along there,' pointing to the first-class carriage. I said, 'Oh no, I don't think so.' I thought everyone would look like *Downton Abbey* and I was putting my make-up on out of a sandwich bag. He pointed

* A curtain of confidence and/or darkness.

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

to the ticket and said, 'It says first class, look.' I said, 'Oh no, I don't think I'd feel comfortable in first class,' to which he replied, 'Oh no, there's plenty of your sort down there.' Cheeky fucker.

I'm quite dull. I had a hash cake in Amsterdam and fell asleep complaining the cake was rubbish.

I'm rubbish at sticking to things. I tried the clarinet and marriage, didn't put the work in and had them both taken off me. Trying things helps you find out who you are. I am a non-musical married divorcee who takes pictures of puddings and is still partial to Phillip Schofield. Hey, not everyone is an adventurer, right?

I love my animals. One of the best days of my whole life was when a veterinary nurse said I could put clothes on my dog. As per the adoption rules, he'd had his gentleman's surgery (genitalman? Future Marvel character, surely) and we'd been assured he'd bounce back in twenty-four hours or so. It took him a month to recover. A month. He didn't eat or drink for days; we were beside ourselves. Also, he wasn't great with the cones. We tried rigid ones; he refused to move. We tried the floppy ones; he'd just get out of them. We were struggling with how to stop him having access to his stitches when the veterinary nurse said we could put some pants on him. I didn't need asking twice. We stood in Asda kids' section puzzling over which size he'd be. We got age four – as he was age four. I cut a hole out of the bum for his tail and put them on him, taking up the slack with a hairband. He didn't seem to mind them on, but he growled when we tried to take them off or put them back on after a wee, so we went back to trying

A BIT ABOUT ME

the cones. But for two glorious hours I had a medical professional's permission to put pants on my dog. And yes, there's a photo in the photo section. Go, go. I'll wait.

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

Remember something you were good at as a kid and bring it back as a hobby now that you're an adult. I gave gardening a go and also crying whenever I drop something on the floor and can't find it. Crying always makes it appear again, oddly.

Chapter 2

What I Was Like at School

GROWING UP IN South Shields, I went to Mortimer Primary and Comprehensive schools. Once, on my way there, I befriended a frog and was genuinely surprised after the bell went at the end of the day that he hadn't waited for me for the seven hours I'd been gone. Or, you know, gone about his day and then come back at 3.50 p.m. to meet me. I was generally good at school: clever, keen and I loved learning. Here's a pretty good summation of what it was like. Feel free to pop on the Sam Cooke classic 'What a Wonderful World' for this bit.

Don't know much about history. We had a mean history teacher who used to initial the centre pages of our exercise books so we couldn't use them for more fun things like drawing and paper cuts. But he wasn't that bright. We used to undo the staples, take the initialled pages out, nab the page underneath for paper aeroplanes and kill lists, and then replace the initialled ones. HA. We won that one. I never did

WHAT I WAS LIKE AT SCHOOL

that though. When I say we, I mean 'we' – the kids. We, the kids in the class. We were such a crazy bunch, always up to mischief. All getting along and chatting to each other. When I say we, I really mean 'they'. I was very much looking on in disapproval a lot of the time, siding with the teachers and sometimes grassing people up.

Don't know much biology. We did science double award so I learnt a tiny amount about all three sciences. Also, rumour had it that two of the science teachers were humping so the biology lessons always had an extra frisson. That sort of biology I didn't have to put into practice for a good while yet. Same as sex education. I really should have taken notes to refer back to, though. I remember the period lesson very well. The boys were sent away to watch cartoons while we learnt about 'becoming a woman'. I assume that when I talk about clotting or heavy flow or 'my tits are knacking', my husband's just chuckling to himself about *The Flintstones* and *Scooby-Doo*. Sure that's a great way to prepare men for adulthood. I agree with those who say boys should be in the class too, repeating aloud, 'Sorry your tits are knacking, love. Do you want me to get you some Dairy Milk?' My husband calls Dairy Milk 'lady medicine' because it fixes his lady. During our period lesson, one of the cool girls had something to say. We were all ears. While the nurse was showing us the model of half a woman so we could see where the tampon went, this girl said, 'My friend, right, shoved a tampon so far up that it came out of her bum.' The nurse was momentarily stunned and our shoulders were already starting to go with the beginnings of an eruption of laughter. We just wanted to check it definitely

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

wasn't possible first. To prove it definitely wasn't, the nurse put one finger up the fanny channel and one up the bum and showed us all (a) that they don't meet, and (b) a sexual trick that was not on the curriculum.

Science. See above.

French. I was very good at French but don't remember much now, as was proved on a recent trip to Paris where I panicked and asked for *les nugget de poulet* (oh yes, we eat in classy joints). But at school I was good and I loved it. I did it at A Level too, alongside German, maths and, later on, media studies. I didn't do brilliantly in my A Levels, which will be the first my mam's neighbour hears of it. She thinks I got two As and a B because my mam likes to brag. Presumably she's having a field day now. I was skinny at school and I remember the French teacher once describing me as fat to help everyone learn adjectives. *Merci, chienne.* (That's 'thanks, bitch' in French. Thanks also to Google who provided that, as I can only remember '*ou est la piscine?*' for obvious reasons.)

Geography. We did humanities mostly, which is a combination of geography and history and amounts to colouring in Romans for three years. When we did do geography I enjoyed it. We learnt mostly about New Towns and I remember that farmers leave fields to go to shit every now and again. Fallow, that's it. I got my GCSE results handed to me by my geography teacher, Mr Mizen. They weren't in an envelope, just open for him to see. He read them, winced and handed them to me. Luckily he was joking, as I got two As, three Bs and four Cs. At least I think he was joking – one of the Cs was for geography so who knows.

WHAT I WAS LIKE AT SCHOOL

Trigonometry. I loved maths, though I rarely put my hand up as our brilliant but mad teacher would make the girls do sit-ups if you got it wrong, press-ups if you were a boy. Thank God I didn't know about feminism then. I'd have been shouting my mouth off and then all of the girls would have killed me, and they would have been so much fitter and more able to do so. He thought this would make us all brilliant at maths. For me, it just meant I didn't speak. And it wasn't the sit-ups, it was doing them in front of the whole class. Many years before, when we were learning our times table, we had to stand up and say each one over the course of the term to get them ticked off on the teacher's wall chart. I was so nervous about standing up and talking with everyone looking (and I couldn't see any curtains or mams proffering bananas) that I left it all 'til the last day and got up and did the lot in one go. Odd that this is now my job. I was, and still am in many situations, very shy. I'd still rather stand on stage in front of thousands of people than go to a party where there is anyone I don't know. I only really like my parties.

You can turn the song off now. Or keep it on for the 'la ta ta ta ta ta' bit, as that's fun to join in with.

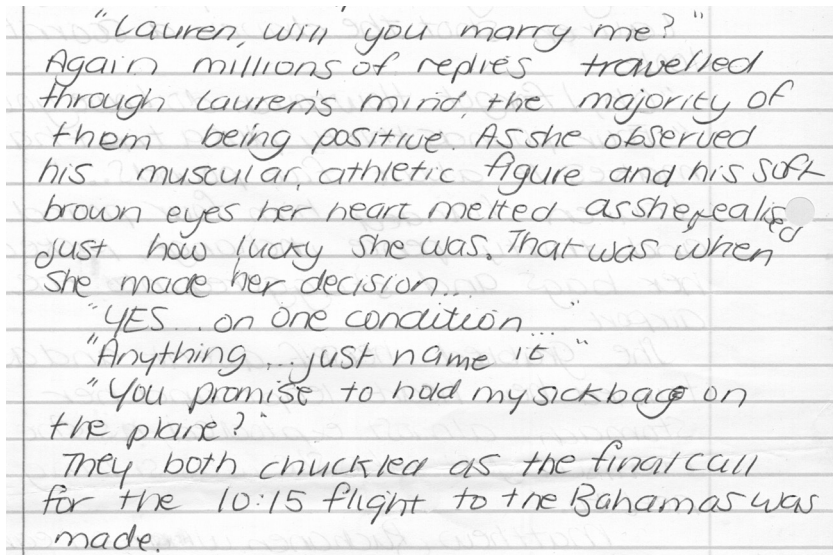
English was the lesson I loved the most. Pretty much as soon as our regular English teacher was off sick with two broken legs, I found our lessons much more engaging. I may have misremembered this and be thinking of Pam Short. As in 'Pam Short's broken both her legs and I wanna dance with you'. If you haven't seen *Strictly Ballroom*, I totally don't mind if you stop reading me to go and watch it.

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

I remember very little about the substitute teacher, just that she made English fun and creative and interesting. She passed the baton on to one of my favourite teachers, Mr O'Shea. I walked into his lesson once wearing my new glasses. They were purple with green speckles and massive. Deirdre Barlow is my closest reference point. I loved them. Because they were so huge, I could see so much of the world at once. On seeing my new specs for the first time, Mr O'Shea said, 'What big glasses you've got,' to which I replied, 'All the better to see you with.' My first zinger – and a literary one too. He must have been so impressed.

We had to write a short story for him once. It could be about anything. I wrote a romance called 'A Chance Encounter'.

Here is an excerpt. In fact, the ending. Well, you're not going to get round to reading the whole thing, are you?



"Lauren, will you marry me?"

Again millions of replies travelled through Lauren's mind, the majority of them being positive. As she observed his muscular, athletic figure and his soft brown eyes her heart melted as she realised just how lucky she was. That was when she made her decision...

"YES... on one condition..."

"Anything... just name it..."

"You promise to hold my sick bag on the plane?"

They both chuckled as the final call for the 10:15 flight to the Bahamas was made.

WHAT I WAS LIKE AT SCHOOL

I got a B. I was mostly a B-grade student in English. I was happy with that. A few lessons later, Mr O'Shea taught us about plagiarism and how important it was to be original and only do your own work. He told us a story of a pupil who copied one of Gerald Durrell's stories word for word and handed it in as his own. The teacher hadn't twigged initially and so marked it as normal. Gerald Durrell got a B. This was the first time I considered I could write. And either Gerald Durrell wasn't great or our teachers were HARSH. Either way, I WAS AS GOOD AS GERALD DURRELL. A badge I've worn with pride ever since.

Mr O'Shea was also the first person to stir up any kind of feminism in me. He made us write an essay with the title 'A Woman's Place Is in the Home. Discuss.' I don't remember being very eloquent but I do recall the fury, and even having to mention Margaret Thatcher in a good way. Not sure I'll ever wash that off. Mr O'Shea also taught us how to use a thesaurus. He told us to always look up the synonym you've found in the dictionary to make sure it definitely means what you think it means. The example he gave us that a student had used in previous years was: 'Then the man went into the forest and found haemorrhoids of wood.' Got it.

I loved craft at school. I'm not sure if I was good at it or if it just didn't matter if I was good at it. I keep getting the urge to join the Women's Institute, which in my head is just drinking tea with women in their fifties while fashioning a hanging basket out of an old bra. Sounds like bliss. In my time at school I made a tool rack, a wooden fish, a metal coat-hook and a money box that only held pound coins and therefore

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

always remained empty. Plus a lot of coil pots and ashtrays. My mam once decided to let an ashtray my sister had made her steep in the sink for a while. When she went back, the sink was empty. The ashtray had disintegrated.

I know what became of all the Christmas decorations I made for my parents over the years (including the Santa made from a toilet-roll tube and the sheep made with real sheep wool that we removed from a barbed-wire fence on a school trip). In 2008 my family bought a new Christmas tree, a rather classy affair that had in-built bulbs and needed no decorations. So I got all of the tat I'd made back. I think they were relieved. The best bit about art at school was painting your hands with PVA glue and peeling it off like you were a leper or had eczema. Obviously not that much fun for the kid who did have eczema.

So that was a potted history of my time at school set to the Sam Cooke classic. But it wasn't all colouring-in Romans and being better than, or as good as, Gerald Durrell. Turn to page 27 for the list of things I was bullied for.

HOW TO BE CHAMPION

My dad told me that your school days were the best days of your life. That used to fucking terrify me as my school days were pretty rubbish. If someone says that to you question how popular they were, and if everyone liked them, tell them to fuck off. Work days are better.

Be you in everything you do. Being me at school meant getting verbally bullied and not having many friends. But all of that changed from college onwards. While I was quietly me at school, I was banging the big drum of me at home. As soon as that big wooden front door closed, I was Sarah to the max. And I think young Sarah would have been very happy with what older Sarah does for a living.