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# Butterfly Brain

Barry Cryer

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Extract

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BARRY CRYER

# BUTTERFLY BRAIN



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# The Preamble [1]

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...

The opening line of a book is all-important, so what better mentor than Charles Dickens?[2] I wish to engage your attention, dear reader, but panic not. I am not about to embark on *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations* but rather a collection of anecdotes, attributions, allusions, appraisals and other words beginning with 'a'.[3] More to the point, memories of times past and people met.

My late writing partner, Ray Cameron, once said, 'I wish I could just once say something that didn't remind you of something else.' 'Funny you should say that,' I said, 'that reminds me ...'

Unfortunately, this habit of making endless connections is incurable, hence our title, so forgive me if I flit about

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1 The prelude to a ramble.

2 The actor Emlyn Williams, whose one-man performances of *Bleak House* became legendary, told me he was once asked to do a 'turn' (see 2a below) at a charity evening in London. He was at a loss, and then hit on the idea of a Dickens reading lasting around ten minutes. It went well and afterwards a producer approached him. The producer thought there was a whole show in the idea. Emlyn told me that it soon took over his life. He even had a shared joke with the audience where he would turn the page over every few moments to give the illusion that he was reading. Everyone knew he had memorised every word of every line. He toured the world for more than thirty years as Dickens. He said, 'Some people have forgotten I'm an actor.' Nobody who saw the show would ever have thought that. 2a For younger readers – yes you, Wayne – a 'turn' was an act, what is now known to young stand-ups as a 'set'.

3 See *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. Revised edition (1990).

during the course of this book. Just hang on to your hats and keep your eye on the footnotes, because the butterfly is about to take off.

I am seventy-four as I write this and I may be older by the time I finish it.[4]

> Anythin' for a quiet life, as the man said when he took the situation at the lighthouse.

Charles Dickens again, this time Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers*. Although I've never wanted anything approaching a quiet life.

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

That's more like it. Bill Shakespeare,[5] of course, whose plays are stuffed with quotations.[6] He's not the only one:

> Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark.
>
> BERTRAND RUSSELL[7]

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4 If you're reading this in paperback, I'm seventy-five.

5 *Macbeth,* Act 5, Scene 5. In which Soames visits his wife Irene.

6 'Now we sit through Shakespeare in order to recognize the quotations.' – Orson Welles.

7 A taxi driver once told me he had Bertrand Russell in the back of his cab. He was 'a bit of a clever dick', quoth the cabbie, a pithy but not wholly inaccurate definition, I think you'll agree.

But enough of flippancy. Bert (I use the familiar, even though I never met him) also said:

> Man is not a solitary animal, and so long as social life survives self-realisation cannot be the supreme principle of ethics.[8]

To wit, 'no man is an island', as John Donne averred. Although I'm prone to mention that they named Barry Island after me. But seriously,[9] a life lived in isolation with only four walls for company, or even a pavement, is too tragic to contemplate. I thank God that I have rarely experienced it. Loneliness is an endemic plague that affects so many people. I try to remember, each and every morning, that I have a wonderful wife, four children, seven grandchildren (at the last count) and many friends. I think, how fortunate I am.[10] Alright, alright, 'you're lucky, Cryer, tell us about some *hard* luck.' Well, I've had quite a few operations, but who hasn't? Many rejections, both in a personal and professional capacity, and … err … enough! The Bard, again:

> As good luck would have it.[11]

So, as the butterfly flaps its wings once again, I leave you

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8 Please note that for the remainder of this book, I'll be quoting from *Butterfly Brain* by Barry Cryer, Orion Books (2009).
9 As if what had gone before had you holding your side, groaning 'enough, enough'.
10 Sounds of muffled yawns.
11 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act 3, Scene 5. In which Soames confronts Young Jolyon and Irene at Robin Hill. It's hotting up!

in the capable hands of the songbird laureate, Gracie Fields:

> Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye.[12]



12 Words by Phil Park.

# The Ramble

> I have always been delighted at the prospect of a new day, a fresh try, one more start, with perhaps a bit of magic waiting somewhere behind the morning.
>
> J.B. PRIESTLEY

**Key facts**

*Proudest moment:* Heckling His Holiness the Pope in St Peter's Square. 'Where's your missus?' I shouted. What japes!
*Unhappiest moment:* Being arrested by the Vatican guard.
*Ambition:* To win the Job Centre lifetime achievement award.

I had a phone call a while back about a celebration for Roy Hudd's fifty years in show business. The man asked me how long I'd been in the business. 'If you're talking about my first paid job, then it's fifty-three years.'[1]

Fifty-three years since that day in 1956, when I was offered a week at the Leeds City Varieties Theatre.[2] I've said it before, and I'll say it again:[3] I've been dogged by good luck. I never planned my career. A year after I appeared at the City Varieties I took a train to London on a seventeen-day ticket and

1 When Mozart was my age he had written 42 symphonies, 27 concertos and 16 operas. And had been dead for over 40 years.
2 Five days of walking on and offstage to the sound of my own feet.
3 And again on pp.256, 457 and 801.

on the sixteenth day I got a job as a bottom-of-the-bill comic at the Windmill Theatre.[4] From there, I began writing revues for Danny La Rue and even released a record that went to number one in Finland.[5] Then, in the early 1960s I met David Frost, who invited me to join the writing roster on not only 'The Frost Report' but also many of his other shows. In the 1970s and 1980s, I was fortunate enough to team up with a series of wonderful writers and work with Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, Kenny Everett, Les Dawson and many others. The 1970s also brought 'I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue' into my life and for that, I'll be eternally grateful. Then, in the 1990s, I went back to performing and touring; first with Willie Rushton, and now with Colin Sell and Ronnie Golden. I still do the odd bit on radio and TV and retirement is a four-letter word.[6] You don't retire in this business: the phone just stops ringing.

I can honestly say that this is the best time of my life. I haven't had a career, more a series of incidents. The only vague plan I had was to make a living at the thing I loved, to marry and have children. And that was it. It may surprise you to learn that I don't consider myself to be a comedian. I just sing songs and tell jokes. I'm an entertainer and an archivist – I've got a good memory.[7] I never wanted to be a star because I never felt I had the 'X Factor' needed to become one. I think the really good ones – Spike Milligan, Tony

4 When I was working at the Windmill, I got to know a man called Bruce Forsyth. I wonder what happened to him.

5 This may have had something to do with the fact that they gave away a car with each record.

6 In a kind of ten-letter way.

7 It's a good job too, because we have a long meander ahead.

Hancock, Peter Cook, and the rest – had an air of self-destructive madness about them which I've never personally felt. I don't have the introspective nature needed to reach that level. I've had my lows, I've made my bad decisions and sometimes I've frightened myself, but I've had a go and, by and large, it's worked out.

In short, I've been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time on so many occasions. I've wandered through doors that have led to the most wonderful experiences as a writer, and not for a minute have I had what you might call a 'career plan'. I've gone with the flow and somehow it's all turned out very well. Earlier, I mentioned Emlyn Williams as an example of how this kind of chance happening or meeting can sometimes transform your life. There have been rejections and disappointments, naturally, but more often than not things seem to have worked out for me. I can honestly say that all of it has involved very little planning. In life in general, I try not to analyse things too much, because I like to think that every day is a new one. I get up in the morning with the attitude that when it's over, I'll go back to bed looking forward to the next day. It's a simple philosophy, but it's stood me in good stead and brought me many happy memories.

Willie Rushton once told me that I'd drop dead in the middle of a gag. I can see his point, but I hope it doesn't happen, or at least not yet, because there's still plenty I'd like to do.[8]

8 About 200 pages, for a start.

# By the Way, This is not an Autobiography[1]

> Autobiography is an unrivalled vehicle for telling the truth about other people.
>
> PHILIP GUEDALLA[2]

You won't believe this, but my first book[3] was meant to be an autobiography. When it was finished, my agent phoned me up and said, 'Barry, where are *you* in all this?' My aforementioned penchant for anecdotes had meant that I'd forgotten to include anything about me. A novice's mistake in writing an autobiography, but I came by it honestly.

The truth is that I hardly ever look inwards and I'm not really one for self-reflection or too much analysis. I much prefer the company of other people to my own. I think this need for sociability probably comes from the fact that my father died when I was very young.[4] John Carl Cryer was a Masonic golfing accountant, which is about as far away from a description of me as you can get. I have very vague memories of him, but if I was listening to a recording of his voice right now, I probably wouldn't recognise it. My mother never remarried

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1 I hope you kept the receipt.
2 As you will recall, Guedalla was the editor of *Slings and Arrows: Sayings Chosen from the Speeches of the Rt. Hon. David Lloyd George* (1929). I believe it's on everybody's bookshelves.
3 *You won't believe this, but* by Barry Cryer, Virgin Books (1998).
4 Not that I'm analysing, you understand.

and she hardly ever spoke about him after his death.

So apart from a few photos and, several years ago, a chat with someone who knew him, I have nothing tangible to connect me to my dad. I wonder whether my relentless seeking out of other people – to swap ideas, to work and to socialise with, was an attempt to replace my dad.[5]

In many ways, these factors also mean that I had what you might call a classic 'gay upbringing'. After all, my father had died, my brother was away for long periods with the Merchant Navy and I was this young bloke with vague theatrical ambitions, alone at home with my mother. However, had I been gay, I don't think I would've been aware that there were any gay people living in Leeds at all. Maybe I was naïve or maybe this ignorance was understandable, given that the shameful intolerance of the time meant people had to hide their sexuality. It was different when I moved to London, of course, and met gay performers at the Windmill. Then I merely wondered what the big deal had been. That I then went on to work with people like Frankie Howerd, Kenny Everett[6] and Graham Chapman probably stemmed from this rather matter-of-fact empathy. This was generated in spite of, not because of, my rather conservative Leeds upbringing.

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5 The comedian and actor Robin Williams said that he once shouted at his son when he was five years old, 'Behave, behave! You were out of order. You never do that again.' And then he said, 'Behind me was the ghost of my father saying "revenge".'

6 As Kenny Everett once said to me, 'Ooh Baa. Married for over 30 years. Four children. What a smokescreen!'

# Yorkshire

> Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it.
>
> GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

## My Yorkshire Credentials

| | |
|---|---|
| *23 March 1935* | Barry Charles Cryer is born at 3 a.m. in an all-nite drive-thru maternity ward in Leeds. |
| *7 September 1947* | Enters Leeds Grammar School. |
| *11 June 1952* | Voted School Bully. |
| *2 September 1955* | Enters Leeds University. BA Eng. Lit. (Failed). He failed due to the outbreak of the Second World War, which was sixteen years before, but upset him very deeply. |
| *18 April 1956* | Offered a week at Leeds City Varieties Theatre. Five days of walking on- and offstage to the sound of my own feet.[1] |

A Radio Leeds presenter rang me recently to do an interview, as I was about to do a show in the city. She asked me how long I'd been down south, and I told her it was now quite a

1 See page 5 for the first time that line was used.

bit longer than I'd lived up north. I left Leeds when I was twenty-one and now I'm seventy-four,[2] so in fact it's more than fifty years since I've lived there.

'I can tell,' she said. 'It's your accent.'

'Oh,' I said, a little taken aback. 'So what would you say my accent is now?'

'Radio 4 posh,' came the reply.

I was a tad hurt. My friends in the south know that I'm a Yorkshireman, because of what Alan Bennett calls 'the incurable disease of the vowels' that affects all northerners' nasal tones. I'd hoped my friends in the north would feel the same.

So if my voice *has* changed, am I still a Yorkshireman?

I love Yorkshire, and I'm very proud of the place but I'm also mindful of the George Bernard Shaw quoted from above. I can't see the logic of having pride in a place just because you were born there and I've always been wary of playing the professional Yorkshireman. It's an easy role to do and once you start it's hard to get out of. So I've never gone round saying, 'I'm a Yorkshireman, me.' If it comes up in conversation that's great; especially if the other person is from Leeds and remembers it how I do. Other than that, I don't think about it very much. However, there are times when it's thrust upon you. For instance, when I first went down to London and came back to Leeds a few months later, someone said to me, 'How are you liking it down there?' The implication was that I would be back pretty soon. This attitude also once found its way

2 Again, seventy-five if you're reading a paperback.

into a chat show I was doing, when the presenter said to me:

'Your Yorkshire accent has become more pronounced now the camera is rolling.'

'Yes, it's called Parkinson's Disease,' I said and immediately regretted it.

There was an intake of breath from the audience and they never actually used that bit. I was relieved because I didn't mean it badly, it was just that the host was trying to root out the closet southerner in me and my pride had been hurt. Unfortunately for me, this wasn't the only time that I'd be put on the spot in front of a Yorkshire audience. Many years ago I was on another chat show in Leeds with Barry Took.[3] The presenter was Austin Mitchell, now MP for Grimsby, and he said to me:

'You were born here, you must be proud of that.'

The audience murmured its approval.

'No, not really,' I replied. 'It's just a matter of fate that my mother happened to be here at the time.'

Blame George Bernard Shaw. However, I am happy to say that when I play Leeds these days, I do notice that I get a good reception. Perhaps they're thinking, 'He's one of us. He might live down south, but nobody's perfect.'

> The more we elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.
>
> JOSEPH PRIESTLEY[4]

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3 How could they tell the difference?

4 I don't think he's related to J. B. but you can tell he's a Yorkshireman nonetheless.

I might be a fan of the American style of one-liners, but I'm also a sucker for that dour, lugubrious humour from the north of England, especially the sort that comes with a hidden twinkle. It's so characteristic of Yorkshire; humour that is misunderstood at the start but then comes good at the punch line. I'm reminded of a story that Joe Brown[5] once told me. He had played a gig in Leeds and he went for a pint in the local before the show. He was recognised by two older men and they soon started talking about the Second World War and their experiences of it. One of them said:

'Joe, during the war do you know that I marched across Yugoslavia from one end to the other, and when I got to the end, my boots . . .'

'Boots?' said his companion.

It's like one of my favourite cartoons, which shows an old man in a pub and a young couple sitting opposite him. He's saying, 'Local character, fund of anecdotes, buy me a pint and I'll piss off.' The desire not to get too big for your boots, whether you've walked across Yugoslavia in them or not, is redolent of Yorkshire. This is a little island and Yorkshire is quite a large slab of it. It's a bit like the Texas of England and, like the US state, it comes with the same strange mixture of being full of itself but not wanting anyone to know it. I tend to like people who are arrogant

5 Joe Brown is a great example of someone who, although notorious for his sharp tongue, knew how to be economical with his wit. He was once a guest on the famous Simon Dee show in the Sixties and was coming under fire from Simon's usual barrage of barbs. They culminated in Simon asking Joe if he'd like to play his 'dreadful new single'. Joe once told me that ten responses flashed through his mind before he settled on 'Alright then'. Suddenly, he was the victim and the audience was completely on his side. As a response, it probably worked better than any of those comebacks he could've offered.

in their humility and perhaps this is where it comes from. That spiritual northerner, David Nobbs, tells a story about two girls he overheard on a bus outside Harrogate. One of them was relating her experiences of a film premiere she'd seen in London, where she'd been behind the red rope with all the autograph hunters and well-wishers.

'Brad Pitt come along the red carpet, as close to me as you are now.'

'Brad Pitt!' said the other girl, her face lighting up. 'What was he like?'

'He wouldn't be much at a bus stop,' her friend replied.

With this in mind, it surprises me that compared to Lancashire, the number of comedians Yorkshire has produced seems to be minimal. Ernie Wise, Frankie Howerd and Charlie Williams are the ones I can name off the top of my head, but it's a small list when you look across the Pennines and see how many that have come from Lancashire, especially Liverpool. Maybe that's because humour in the north-west is geared towards an 'end-of-the-pier' sensibility and consequently has travelled better. After all, there's no shortage of Yorkshire writers – Alan Bennett, Ted Hughes, Keith Waterhouse, J.B. Priestley, Andrew Marvell and the Brontë sisters, to name but several, but why Yorkshire humour travels better in print is a mystery to me.

I think television has seen off the north–south divide in terms of humour. Peter Kay is one of the biggest stars we have in comedy, and he can sell out weeks in London with no problems. On the face of it, Peter might seem a very northern comedian, after all, *Phoenix Nights* is about as parochial as you get, but the cleverness of his humour comes

from simply being traditional. His world is families, weddings, funerals and old aunties. That stuff travels far. It could be old-fashioned, but when you're as good as Peter is, it feels very fresh. He's also very physical, constantly moving around the stage and using gesture to get his point across. That visual element makes his stuff accessible.

There used to be a fear among English comedians of crossing the border into Scotland. Max Miller's agent once got him a booking in Glasgow. Max refused to go, saying he was 'a comedian, not a missionary'. Conversely, Scots comedians didn't really travel south until Billy Connolly and Chic Murray[6] broke the mould.



6 Although a hugely popular comedian in his day, I think Chic is sadly overlooked now.