

DISGRACEFUL



TODAY, THE MUNDANE SHANNON PURDY

Elevating the art of everyday dressing, just in time for a summer of freedom and style. Get ready to get inspired with these looks of a lifetime.

JUST BE YOU BETHANY PRESTON

We sat down for a fully nude interview with the St. Ives Mermaid – environmentalist, business woman and artist, Laura Evans. Dive deep with us.

CAREER OR LOVE MARINA MESTRES SEGARRA

It's the time old question, and the choice we all feel forced to make. Will you pick your career, or your love life? Explore all the reasons you'll never have to.



© Laura Tobin from the project 'Capsule Magazine: A Guide on Saying "No" to Fast Fashion.'
The project is available to view via Laura's portfolio website lauratobin.co.uk

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Welcome to issue three of Disgraceful.

I am very excited to share this issue with you. The last few months have seen our readership, community and team grow as we've continued to create fierce content and celebrate every single person involved in making Disgraceful happen; we've also been interviewed by the BBC and other media outlets, launched our awareness driven project, Unspoken, and broadened our work with women's charities across the UK.

Issue three has so much in store for you – from pieces unpicking life as a professional mermaid to exploring the businesses that aim to make women the default in extreme sport. We're once again diving deeper into the issues we discussed the last time around and tackling new taboos and timely topics all at once.

Thank you so much for being here, being a part of our Disgraceful family, and for believing in this publication just as much as we do. We can't wait to hear what you think and start many Disgraceful discussions; join the movement over on our Instagram page and share your thoughts using the hashtag #WeAreDisgraceful.

Disgraceful sets out to claim space in this world where women are expected to do the opposite; in a world where women are pushed to be thinner, talk less and smile more. Disgraceful is for every woman who sets out to build her own empire; the only expectations in sight, are the ones she sets for herself.

For our readers, our writers and the team who have worked extensively to bring this publication to life, Disgraceful is a place to be brave, expressive, inspired; a place to figure out exactly who you are without fear of societal pressures or constraints telling you to be otherwise.

We are powerful; we are loud; we are strong; we are entrepreneurs, business owners, leaders, mothers.

We are confident; we are disgraceful.

And you can't repress a disgraceful woman.

**Melissa Hawkins,
Founder and Editor-in-Chief**

DISGRACEFUL ISSUE THREE



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FROM
PRE-TEEN
PASSION
TO PODCAST
COMMUNITY:
CHALLENGING THE
MISCONCEPTIONS
OF FANGIRL
CULTURE

Issy Aldridge

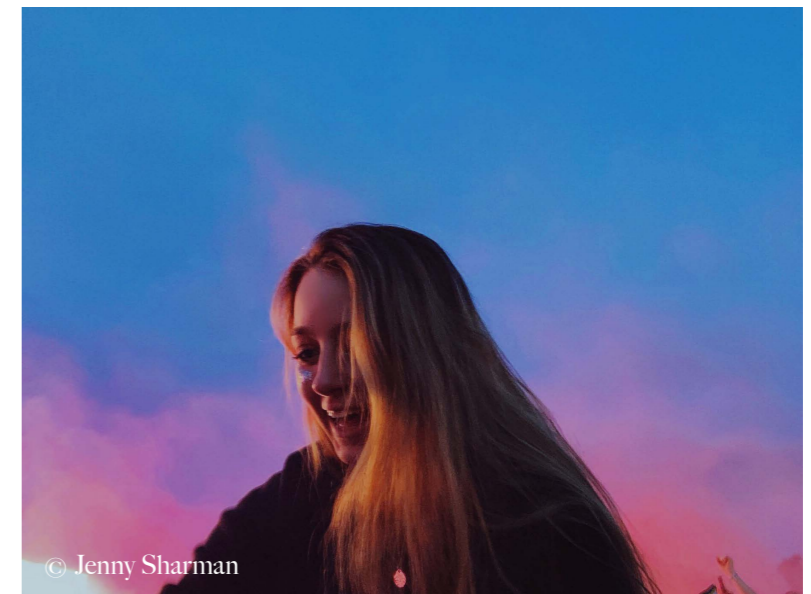
Issy Aldridge talks boybands, fangirls, fandom culture and teenage heartthrobs, and tackles those important questions – why is the legitimacy of teenage fandom constantly in question? And why are female music fans so often stereotyped? Her brand-new podcast, *That Fangirl Life*, smashes the stigma and celebrates female music fandom in all its glory.

I was born on the tail of the nineties boyband revolution. Too young to appreciate the likes of NSYNC, Backstreet Boys, Boyzone and Take That, I grew up in the early noughties awaiting my chance to experience that world for myself. Unlike most children, bedtime stories in my house would not be fictional. Instead, they'd be in-depth recounts of my parents' experiences with earlier bands like the Bay City Rollers, fuelling my interest in the world of music from an incredibly young age.

As I grew older and noughties pop produced the new age of mainstream boybands, I embraced this world with open



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© Jenny Sharman

and welcoming arms. Saturday nights would be headlined by myself in the lounge, with home videos showing a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl jumping up and down on the sofa, wielding her imaginary electric guitar just like she'd seen on TV, or heard in previous bedtime stories. This fascination with music and boybands continued right through to my teenage years, with One Direction and Five Seconds of Summer capturing both my heart and mind seemingly

overnight. Hours of my week would be spent on social media, and all the money I earned from my Saturday job would be saved and spent on concert tickets. But when adulthood loomed and I left secondary education, I was led to believe that I'd now outgrown the world of music fandom. I thought that *that* chapter of my life, one which had played host to some of my fondest memories, would become a thing of the past. I look back now and simply say oh, how wrong was I?

Since the earlier days of Frank Sinatra and The Beatles, female music fans have existed in a highly contested cultural space. Shamed for their interests and ridiculed



© Jenny Sharman

for their actions, the term 'fangirl' was, and still is, shrouded by connotations of hysteria, delusion, and hyperactivity. The early 1940s saw the beginnings of fandom culture, with Frank Sinatra and his 'Bobby Soxers' the first prominent example of popular music fandom. Grainy, monochromatic pictures from the time depict a story we are now all-too-familiar with. Fans laid up outside venues awaiting their chance to catch a glimpse of their idol and would turn out in their droves to greet him in each new city. They'd surge and scream and throw their arms out to touch him, even if it was just for a fleeting second, some with tears trickling down their cheeks. Does this description sound somewhat familiar? The tropes of fandom culture have barely changed across its seventy-year life span. Scenes such as these have become part and parcel of the wider fan experience and deliver some of the culture's most defining images.

But it is also these images

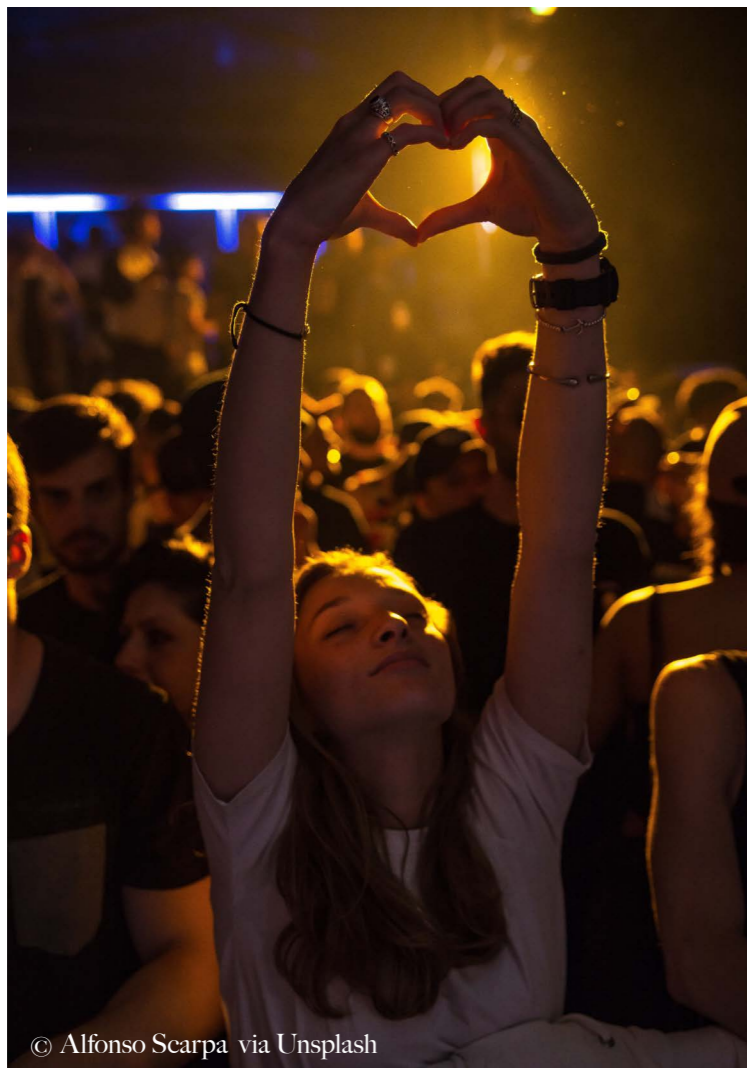


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that have created much of the discussions which surround fandom and its perceived societal legitimacy. Thinking back to the mid-twentieth century, society was working on a completely different page. Societal and gender norms dictated that women were subordinate, raised to become housewives and mothers, and knew their position both within a relationship and within society. The emergence of these fangirls, who with their loud and outspoken actions challenged everything the rulebook originally quoted, sparked great discussion about the legitimacy of teenage fandom. In the controversial article written by New York Statesman journalist, Paul Johnston, he commented on the wake of Beatlemania, referring to female fans as some of the 'least fortunate of their generation, the dull, the idle, the failures.' Written in 1964, these comments were a

sign of the times. This rigorous form of vetting undertaken by outsiders was deeply rooted in society's battle with rife misogyny and sexism. Take football as an example of this. You've never seen Manchester United fans branded with comments like "hysterical" or "childish behaviour", yet with female music fans, these are common terms. Both communities behave in similar ways, but because popular music fans tend to be young and female, it's easy to tarnish them with a biased and slanderous brush.

For the millions of girls who subscribe to fandom ideology, their experience will at some point, sadly be tarnished by negative and ill-informed comments. It could be a judging eye, it could be a direct tweet, it could be teasing by a peer at school, or it could just be a poorly worded headline in the paper. Ask any female fan, and they will most likely have experienced one or more of those scenarios. It is for this reason amongst others,



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that communication amongst fans is now typically performed online.

Following the loss of publications such as *Shout* and *Sugarscape* in the early 2010s, female fandom was cruising into choppy waters. There was no longer the one-stop shop for all your pop-culture needs; no more weekly gossip columns or freebie pull-out posters, the blue-tacked remains of which would leave your walls stained for years to come. As teen publications fell by the wayside, the space for

fans amongst the mainstream media gradually became smaller and smaller. Migrating into the digital space, fangirls re-staked their territories and did so with force on sites like Wattpad and Tumblr, re-writing the narratives which had been lost due to their eviction from the mainstream. But for those who wanted that one-stop-shop, nothing had come along to take up the reins.

Amongst the craziness of 2020, we began to lay the foundations for a new pop-culture platform. Now a weekly podcast and web publication, *That Fangirl Life* champions female fans of musicians, celebrities, and everything in between. Over the last seven months, the team have worked tirelessly to build a community that wants to redefine what it means to be a fan in the twenty-first century. Saying goodbye to outdated connotations of hysteria and obsessive practices, we welcome fangirls with open and supportive arms, offering a place where they can express their love for pop culture freely without fear of judgement. The website, due to launch in June of 2021, features voices solely of those from within the fan community, championing those who have been marginalised by the mainstream and giving them a platform to share their personal stories. Whilst we can't

offer free pull-out posters, we can offer a platform that unites under one same goal, and a safe space to meet new fans. What more could the twenty-first-century fan want, hey?

Fandoms continue to illustrate their influence on young people around the world, their popularity only increasing as time marches on. The pandemic allowed all of us to slow down and take a step back, re-kindling relationships with some of our former pre-teen passions. Within the space of the last twelve months, being a fangirl has become something to be proud of. People are happy to claim their title, wearing it like a badge of honour in their day-to-day lives both digitally and physically. For so many people all around the world, music is a powerful vehicle, so why should you be ashamed of that? I know that I'm not. Music fandom is no longer something exclusive to teenage girls. *Anyone at any age can be a female music fan.* So, really, it begs the question: what's stopping you?

Follow Issy on Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/issyaldridge>

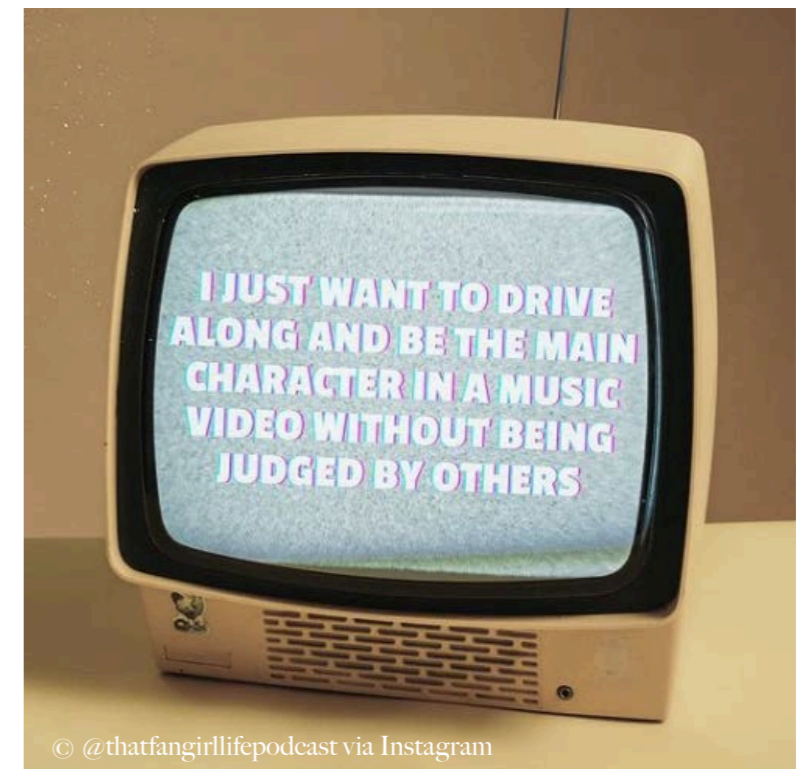
Listen to *That Fangirl Life* - <https://linktr.ee/thatfangirlife>



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THE BOLD TYPE CARRIES THE WEIGHT OF BEING A WOMAN

EMMA GILL

Disgraceful's Emma Gill reviews hit Netflix show *The Bold Type* – contains spoilers.
TW: sexual assault, miscarriage, abuse

It is more than likely that by now you have heard of or have watched *The Bold Type*; it has become a staple for escapism for many people across the world thanks to its arrival on Netflix at the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Inspired by the life and career of former editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Joanna Coles, *The Bold Type* follows three mid-twenties best friends (journalist Jane Sloan, social media director Kat Edison, and assistant Sutton Brady) as they navigate their New York City lives, their friendships and their careers at women's magazine *Scarlet*. You may yawn at such an overused setting and plot summary, but *The Bold Type* offers a refreshing stance; for once, it's not women vs women.

The Bold Type depicts a world where women support, encourage and uplift each other in their personal lives and in the workplace. Throughout all four seasons, Jane, Kat, and Sutton huddle in the fashion closet for celebratory moments with a bottle of bubbles, a confession of a secret, or a 'I regret all of



my life decisions, what do I do now' pep talk. It proves that women can be confident, independent, and supportive, without jeopardising their career or their friendships. The show explores independent women carving out their identities with bold choices and raising their voices within a workplace dominated by an archaic but all-too-realistic and all-too-male governing board. Whilst the show weaves together feminist principles and twenty-something lifestyles, albeit sometimes unrealistically, it also tackles taboo and outside-the-box issues, both positive and negative.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

Throughout all four seasons, *The Bold Type* religiously demonstrates that women are allowed to enjoy sex just as much as their male counterparts. Even in 2021, there is still so much shame and stigma attached to young women partaking, experiencing, and owning their sexual pleasure. The show paves the way for strong, confident, and bold women who are not afraid to explore and enjoy sexual inclinations. It informs women that they should not be ashamed of enjoying or wanting sex, and that they should never be degraded because of it – or told otherwise. *The Bold Type* discusses and showcases various sex positions, the thrills of shower sex, and women watching and enjoying pornography. It also celebrates women pleasuring themselves; cue the multiple scenes where all three protagonists celebrate their vibrators and openly talk about female pleasure and masturbation. The show's candid approach removes the stigma of female desire and sexuality, and encourages women to take control of their pleasure.

Another poignant moment is when Jane admits that she has never had an orgasm, despite being sexually active for a long time. The revelation is portrayed with sensitivity and eliminates the shame around never having an orgasm before. It proves to women who have not experienced an orgasm before that they are not alone and that there is nothing wrong with their experiences.

In the season one finale, *The Bold Type* explores the theme of sexual assault when Jane is asked to write about a sexual assault survivor and Editor-in-Chief of Scarlet Jacqueline Carlyle reveals that

she is a survivor of assault. The episode also dives more notably into sexual assault and harassment within the workplace. Coming a month before the #MeToo movement back in 2018, *The Bold Type's* portrayal of such a horrific and triggering subject for many was a bold move. The show's producers didn't shy away from speaking out and exploring how different victims react to their experiences. They decided to honour victims with integrity, dignity, and solidarity, no matter their circumstances. But this goes beyond just the victims; the show perfectly demonstrates how to support those who have been abused and victimised. Sometimes all you need is for someone to show up and listen.

SLUT-SHAMING, WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE DEGRADING OF WOMEN

Sutton has been in an affair with board member Richard since she first started at Scarlet magazine. In series two, Sutton calls off her relationship with Richard as she is scared about how it will shape her reputation, and does not want to be perceived as a woman who 'slept her way to the top'. Having worked hard to secure her position and achievements in the business, Sutton does not want to be overlooked by who she is dating. No woman's career should be associated with who she is dating. A woman's career should be based on her, her achievements, her dedication, and her hard work. Sutton has already experienced slut-shaming at the hands of fellow fashion assistants, who disregard the hard work, courage, and determination she puts into everything that she does. These murmurs play into her insecurities as she worries that she is not worthy of the position. This kind of experience is all-too-common and recognisable for women in and out of the workplace. But ultimately, Sutton is a woman who fights for what she wants and soon picks herself up, not letting the degrading opinions or comments get in her way. So, if you take anything away from this article, please let it be the challenge to *be more like Sutton*. Keep your head held high and never let a man dictate your ambitions.

WOMEN AND THE MEDICAL WORLD

Early in season one, Jane grapples with her mother's death from breast cancer, and the nerve wracking process of discovering if she has inherited the BRCA mutation gene from her mother. Throughout the remaining seasons, we follow Jane's journey of discovering that she has, in fact, inherited the gene; the regular check-ups that disrupt her life, the complications, the side-effects, and the creation of a fertility plan. All of these culminate in her decision to take the preventative measure of getting a double mastectomy.

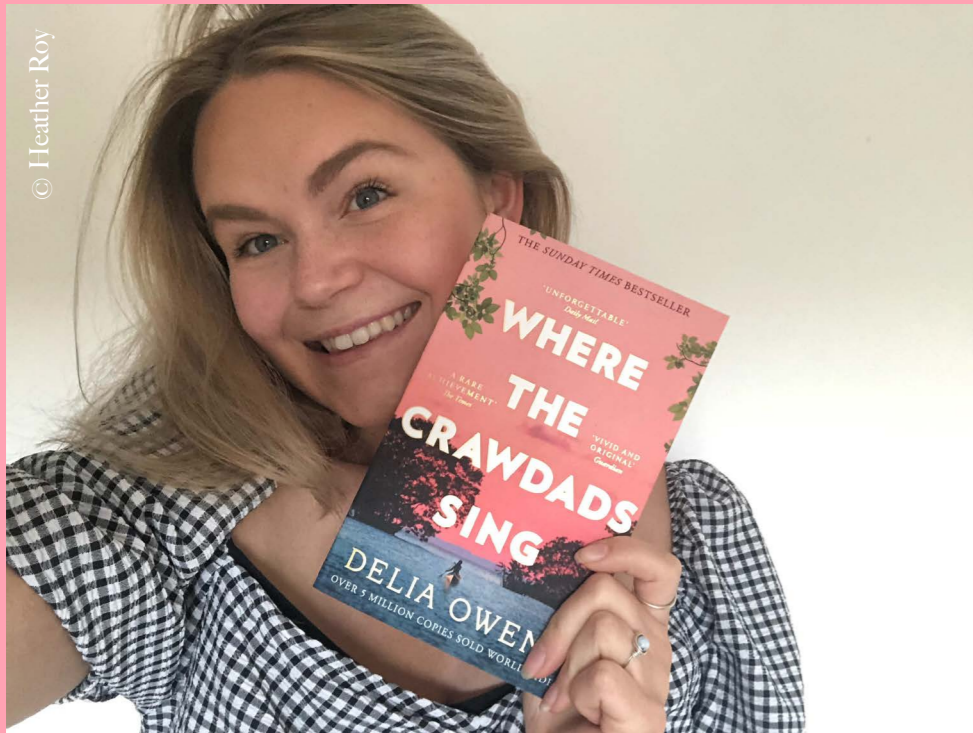
The double mastectomy storyline is handled with humility and humour; at the beginning of season four, Jane becomes reacquainted with her new breasts and learns to love them with the help of Kat and Sutton; all of them stand in a circle and touch each other's breasts. If that doesn't scream female empowerment, what does? We also join Jane on a journey to find herself again through the encouragement of her support group. Jane offers a message of reassurance and hope to those in her situation; that you can be okay, learn to love your body how it is, and learn to reconnect with your old but stronger self.

A further aspect explored is that of miscarriage. Sutton finds herself pregnant but loses the baby after discovering at a scan that there is no heartbeat. Throwing herself back into work, she struggles to cope with holding back her true feelings about losing the baby. Eventually, she admits to Jane and Kat that she feels relieved that she lost the baby, as she now knows she wasn't ready and that she doesn't want to have kids. This plotline showcases that it is okay for women to decide not to have children and that they are not confined to feeling those societally-expected emotions after such a loss. Throughout the 'expected' sadness that many women do feel, there are women who find themselves feeling relief mixed with the sadness. *The Bold Type* removes the stigma of these emotions and reassures women that they don't have to feel guilty for deciding not to have children or not feeling ready to have children.

Although *The Bold Type* is marketed as a show revolving around friendship and female empowerment, it carries the weight and brings forward issues faced by women across the globe. It highlights the power of female solidarity and the fact that women have a voice and should not be afraid or ashamed of owning it. But most importantly, *The Bold Type* unapologetically pushes boundaries and starts conversations.



DISGRACEFUL REVIEWS



Heather Roy Reviews **DELIA OWENS'** **WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING**

(Little Brown, 2019)

Where the Crawdads Sing is Delia Owens' debut novel. Initially released in 2018, the book has topped the New York Times Fiction Bestsellers lists of 2019 and 2020 – and it's easy to see why.

Star rating: ★★★★★

Set in the swamplands of North Carolina, its primary narrative follows socially-isolated protagonist Kya Clark, the "Marsh Girl", over a period of almost 20 years as she grows up alone after being abandoned by her family.

A different narrative following a suspicious death parallels Kya's story, with the two interweaving towards the end of the novel when Kya is tried in a court of law after being accused of murder. Without giving spoilers, the novel's conclusion encourages the reader to take a look at the justice system and perhaps question their own standpoint on matters of right and wrong.

Owens puts her background in wildlife science to good use in the novel, with nature itself becoming a feature as prominent as the protagonist. Kya

learns from the wildlife around her – it often acts as a comforting friend more so than the majority of the other characters she encounters. *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a book unique in its fluidity, offering an engagement with nature and emotion that is reminiscent of the Romantics, with a simultaneously suspenseful and twisty crime plot.

Despite being set between 1952 and 1970, the novel's attention to racial injustice, prejudice and social division resonates today, perhaps one of the reasons for its firmly established place on the bestseller list. Putting its suspenseful narrative and lyrical language aside, at its heart, *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a book that encourages kindness in the face of injustice; a notion which, if nothing else, makes it worth a read.

Lauren Taylor Reviews **NAOMI ALDERMAN'S THE POWER**

(Viking Press, 2016)

If you have ever wondered what the world would be like if it were ruled by women, Naomi Alderman's sci-fi novel *The Power* provides an interesting scenario.

In Alderman's new world, girls as young as fourteen and fifteen years old are beginning to discover that they have a power; they can use electricity to hurt or even kill at the touch of their fingertips. As more females begin to discover their powers, we see a reversal of the typical gender roles.

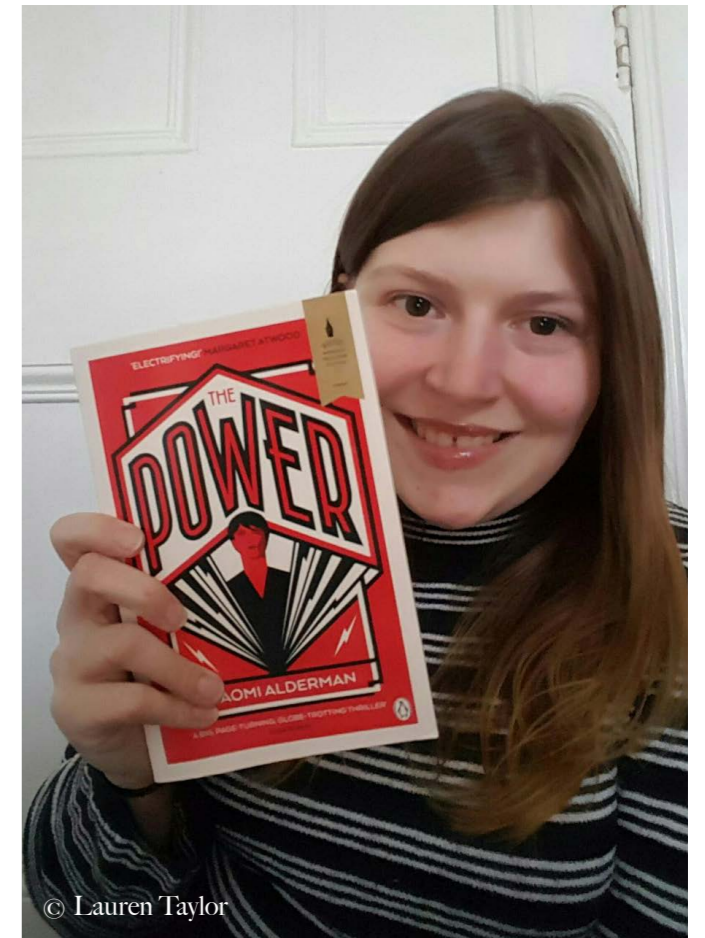
Women no longer fear walking down the street late at night, and oppressed females from around the world begin breaking free and reclaiming their lives.

This power that is awakening in women is giving them the ability to fight back against the sex that has thus far used their brute force to instill the patriarchy. Soon, there are revolutions taking place around the world as women use violence to take control.

Alderman cleverly highlights the injustices faced by women by portraying those same injustices happening to men.

One example of how this novel highlights issues of injustice is when the TV anchorman, Tom, does not accept the ways of the new world, and storms off the set only to be replaced by a younger, better-looking man. Meanwhile, his co-star, Kristen, begins to wear less tight-fitting clothes and wears her glasses, making her look more professional, and she begins to dominate the conversation.

The news industry is traditionally considered to be male-dominated, and Alderman's role reversal in this instance is interesting. Particularly in American broadcast news, women are often replaced by someone younger and "sexier".



Star rating: ★★★★★

There is a continuous pressure for female newsreaders to always look good and they are not given the opportunity for serious dialogue, unlike their male co-stars.

More extreme examples of gender reversal occur throughout the novel, and we learn that women can use their power to rape and torture men. There are moments of violence enacted against men by women, which feels perverse and wrong to be reading, even though these things have been happening to women for a long time.

Alderman is perhaps suggesting that in a world where women are more powerful than men, they too will act unjustly and that the two genders are not so different after all. The novel allows the female characters to have the power to enact revenge on their oppressors, but the world may not entirely be a better place.

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

Sophie Fisher Reviews

CHANEL MILLER'S KNOW MY NAME

(Viking, 2019)

It is difficult to put into words just how powerful and raw this book is. *Know My Name* poignantly details the trauma caused by sexual assault and how it floods over into every aspect of daily life. *Know My Name* explains the exhausting and invasive process of fighting for justice.

In 2016, Chanel Miller's victim impact statement was published online under the pseudonym 'Emily Doe' and within four days, it had been read by 11 million people. *Know My Name* is a memoir that gives

Star rating: ★★★★★



©Sophie Fisher

a first-hand account of the Stanford Sexual Assault Case and shows the resilience of Chanel Miller as she learns how to live a full life again in the wake of suffering.

Know My Name exposes the patriarchal systems that are engraved within the justice system that too often fails the people who need help the most and protects sexual assailants.

“My pain was never more valuable than his potential.”

It is incredibly frustrating to read the trial unfold, but the aftermath of the trial that sparked outrage within millions of people creates a sense of hopefulness that there are people who are willing to fight for change.

This is the easiest 5/5 stars I've ever given, not only because the subject matter is extremely important but because Chanel Miller's writing is exquisitely beautiful, honest and poetic.

While the subject matter is heavy and heartbreaking, Chanel Miller does a fantastic job of writing in a way that inspires hope. It emanates courage, which in turn gives strength to others.

What was interesting about this memoir is that it doesn't only describe how sexual assault can impact the victim, but also how it impacts the loved ones of the victim. It is incredibly moving how Chanel fiercely attempts to shield her younger sister, Tiffany, from all the turmoil happening around them and how Tiffany does everything she can to help Chanel get justice. Multiple women supported Chanel during this difficult time; it is a beautiful display of the power sisterhood has in the face of adversity.

Know My Name is the perfect example of a woman reclaiming herself and turning her pain into something powerful and inspiring. I will recommend this book to every person I meet.

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

“Hold up your head when the tears come, when you are mocked, insulted, questioned, threatened, when they tell you, you are nothing, when your body is reduced to openings.

The journey will be longer than you imagined, trauma will find you again and again. Do not become the ones who hurt you. Stay tender with your power.

Never fight to injure, fight to uplift. Fight because you know that in this life, you deserve safety, joy, and freedom. Fight because it is your life. Not anyone else's.”

Emily Oram Reviews
**SOPHIE
 MACKINTOSH'S
 THE WATER CURE**

(Penguin Books, 2018)

Longlisted for the 2018 Booker Prize, Sophie Mackintosh's gripping debut *The Water Cure* tells the story of three sisters isolated from the world. Theirs is a story of injustice; their freedoms are encroached upon by those who are meant to care for them.

The world of *The Water Cure* is a dystopia, but unlike other dystopian novels, this one is set in one location: the grand home where the family lives. Cut off by the sea on one side and surrounded by barbed wire and forest. Isolated from the outside world, the sisters are raised on stories of toxins that plague women on the mainland.

All that the reader knows about the world comes from what the sisters' parents have told them and it was quite challenging at times to truly understand the nature of the world. At the end of the novel, I still wasn't quite sure whether it was a dangerous dystopian world, or whether the sisters had been subjected to some sort of experiment by their parents in an attempt to raise them away from the dangers of the world we know.

The sisters' worlds are changed when three men arrive on their shore. After growing up learning about the dangers of men and the sickness that plagues the outside world, the sisters begin to question just how much of what their parents taught them was true.

Mackintosh's use of perspective formed an interesting element of the novel. We start by hearing from the three sisters together or from one of the eldest two. The middle section is told by the middle sister Lia, sharing her experiences as the world as she



Star rating: ★★★★★

knew it changes and she struggles to understand her new feelings and the nature of men and women.

Mackintosh reverts to the eldest sister's perspective at the end as she begins to take control of the lives of her and her sisters, along with returning to the shared perspective as the sisters come together after challenges have pushed them apart.

It's impossible not to feel for what the three sisters go through in this novel; from their parents' so-called 'cures' that are violent and unpleasant, to coping as the very foundations of their lives are ripped out from under them. *The Water Cure* ends on a slightly more hopeful and powerful note.

After a lifetime of living according to someone else's view of the world, they reclaim their futures, take ownership of their lives and resolve to move forwards.

Maddie Bazin Reviews
**SAYAKA MURATA'S
 EARTHLINGS**

(Granta Books, 2020)

Murata's latest novel ties beautifully into this issue's theme of 'injustice'.

Following *Natsuki*, a young girl who struggles to make sense of the world and the rules around her, *Earthlings* packs in discussions of the heavy topics generally steered clear of in modern fiction. *Natsuki*, a 10-year-old girl who is revealed to be being sexually abused by her teacher at school, pulls herself out of the traumatic reality she lives by making up fantastical stories. Piyut, her toy hedgehog, grounds her in these bizarre fantasies as she imagines him as a creature from a far-away planet, guiding her to save Earth and protect those who call it home. However, her disconnection from her reality pulls her into greater trauma when she is caught with her cousin in a sexual situation and punished for being with the one person whom she loves.

The novel jumps from traumatic childhood to the familiarity of Murata's favourite mundane adulthood. But in *Natsuki*'s case, her trauma seems to have impacted her irreparably. She finds herself in a loveless and sexless marriage of convenience with a man who cannot ground her, both of them viewing society as a 'factory' to breed humans. Her mind and her husband pull her further into her warped fantasies, which quickly become reality with the novel descending into horrifying scenes of cannibalism and necrophilia. Far from the weighted comfort of Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, *Earthlings* had me looking away and my eyes flicking over lines, avoiding what I could. And yet, between me, *Natsuki*, and the other characters of the novel, I was the only one with such a luxury.

Murata is making an exaggerated point in respect to *Natsuki* and her trauma. A girl with her head already in the clouds is pushed further into her mind and fantasies by the fact that her lived reality is so traumatic and abusive. A lack of understanding and comfort, something that pushed her to her cousin in the first place, crystallises *Natsuki*'s ability to truly relate to and trust those around her. She is on her own and constantly reminded of this, and so she creates a world where she is not.

The novel is uncomfortable and scary, and not something to read if you are seeking the comfort of Murata's usual misfits.

This is a book that showcases the psychological damage and desperation resulting from trauma, slapping the reader with horror and grotesque scenes of deprivation. It is bizarre and throws the reader about with their own emotions, destabilising them in an attempt to recreate the uneven terrain of abuse and recovery.

Star rating: ★★★★★



Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN: THE REVENGE TALE WE'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR

Disgraceful's Alicia Leech reviews *Promising Young Woman (2020)*, the must-see dark comedy thriller from director Emerald Fennell - contains spoilers.
TW: rape, abuse, sexual assault



Written and directed by creative powerhouse Emerald Fennell, the familiar face of Camilla from *The Crown* and co-writer of the hit show *Killing Eve*, *Promising Young Woman* is a jaw-dropping, spine-tingling, must-see cinema phenomenon. Having previously appreciated Fennell's creative brain from her impressive accolades, I was prepared for something pretty momentous. However, it was not until I had actually watched *Promising Young Woman* that I truly understood the sheer talent she has as a writer, creator and director. *Promising Young Woman* is a film that focuses on not just the 'what's' but the 'why's', not simply on the 'how's' but the 'who's'. Most significantly, it is a scathingly honest interpretation of a societal issue that is so prominent in our contemporary world, and one that has been so underrepresented within

Hollywood. With the relentlessly talented Carey Mulligan as the protagonist in this unique revenge fantasy, I would go as far as to say it is one of the best films that I have seen all year. I have never witnessed a more accurate depiction of the earth-shattering damage and aftermath that one faces after being abused, and how it can affect not only the abused, but their loved ones too. Fennell's creation is one that made me laugh, cry, and scream out with disgust as I rolled my eyes at the all-too-familiar and hideously enraging behaviour of the male characters. Set in the US with dark undertones which foreshadow what is to come, Fennell strategically contrasts the premise of the film with elements of a bubble-gum, pop-princess fantasy which makes you feel as though you are watching a cartoonish female superhero fight back against her enemies. Although it is satirical and light

in places, Fennell has created a world that every woman is able to relate to.

Everything from the strategic casting of familiar, household-name male actors that we have grown to love and trust over the years, such as *New Girl's* Max Greenfield and teen-heartthrob Adam Brody from *The O.C.*, proves to the audience that there is no such thing as 'the nice guy', and that they too can be equally as dangerous as the repugnant high-school jock that we are so accustomed to seeing in the media. It is also the unwaveringly fierce performance from our protagonist, Carey Mulligan, that makes this one of the best and most impactful films of our generation.

But what sets this performance and script aside from other pieces of art that address what is such a dark and uncomfortable topic?

The first is the film's undoing of the historical stereotyping of both

men and women and the way in which it eradicates ideas around who is capable of doing what. The beauty of *Promising Young Woman* is that it shows how certain types of men, and women, are no longer protected by their social surroundings and their stereotypical personality traits. For example, the beloved Adam Brody is originally portrayed as the thoughtful guy who berates his colleagues for laughing at Cassie (Mulligan) for what we later find out is her falsely intoxicated and unconscious state. He is the only man in the group who goes to her rescue... or so we think. It is only when he coerces her into going back to his apartment and begins to take advantage of her while she appears to be unconscious that Cassie shouts: "HEY! I said what are you doing?". This hits the audience like a ton of bricks: we have all become accustomed to trusting a certain type of man, and so many of us have been in the same undeniably frightening position. Not only does the film expose, attack and unveil abusers and male coercion tactics, but it also exposes the irreversible damage of silence. Something I have learnt as I've grown older, and particularly over the past year, is that *silence = complicity*. The genius casting of the endearing and charmingly goofy Bo Burnham as Cassie's love interest, Ryan, is also a loaded feature of the film, proving that even a man with the best of intentions could cause irreversible damage by refusing to speak up.

Fennell places a heavy focus on those who could have stopped it, but didn't. Throughout the

film, we grow fond of Burnham's Ryan, who is painted as the person who will restore Cassie's faith in men. Following a deliciously heart-warming and stylised scene in which Cassie and Ryan dance around a pharmacy singing to Paris Hilton, I began to feel slightly disappointed that this might be yet another film in which the female lead finds a male love interest and instantaneously feels 'cured' of all her insecurities. I was subsequently proven wrong; it is revealed that Ryan was present on the night of the assault, and he simply watched as the college culprits proceeded to film the rape of Cassie's best friend, Nina. Cassie threatens to release the footage in which Ryan is clearly present; his typical response of "but my career", followed by his refusal to inform Cassie of the whereabouts of the abuser's upcoming bachelor party, is the cherry on top of this cleverly-crafted cake. This strand of the plotline is so important, as Fennell possesses the power to prove that there really is no more Mr-Nice-Guy, and to also explicitly show the importance of speaking up. Sure, Ryan is not the straightforward villain in this assault, but his own irreversible silence alongside everyone else who was present that night, is something they will all have to live with for the rest of their lives.

Finally, there is an essential lesson in this film: the importance of sisterhood. *One Guardian* writer chronicled the film as a "thrilling and cathartic expression of post #MeToo female rage towards a problem that never goes away", and this is ultimately how I

felt as soon as I watched it. The female ensemble cast includes other blockbuster stars, such as Alison Brie with her brilliant portrayal of female weakness, and Connie Britton as the less-than-sympathetic Dean Walker. These two specific characters represent a severe lack of both empathy and courage, traits that are so detrimental to other women when fellow females refuse to speak up on behalf of a victim. It is not until Cassie craftily leads these women to believe that they are in the same danger as Nina was, that they start to truly understand what it is like to have their world turned upside-down. These female characters force the audience themselves to go through the motions of how it feels to be abused – the sense of shame, the unmitigated fear, and the perpetual understanding that life as it was before will cease to exist. This is just one of the many reasons why this film is so important; not only does it stress the need to speak up and speak out, it displays the damage from every side. It is not just up to us women, but we must stick together and fight with our fellow females to create a space to call out the offenders and unmask the beasts. Fennell writes this so perfectly; Al, the abuser in question, says to Cassie, "I was affected by it too, okay? I mean, it's every guy's worst nightmare, getting accused like that." Cassie responds with the words that every woman wants to scream from the rooftops: "Can you guess what every woman's worst nightmare is?"

POETRY SHOWCASE EMMA MASON

SOPHIE FISHER

Emma Mason is a 23-year-old university graduate who writes powerful poetry about current affairs, life, and injustice. Emma set up her poetry Instagram account @alittlebitofpoetry two years ago to share poems that she had been writing in her spare time. She aims to break up people's news feeds with short poems that are both thought-provoking and enjoyable to read.

Emma first started writing poetry in her second year of university, when her friends asked her to write a piece for a cultural and lifestyle account that they ran. Writing and being creative was always something that Emma loved, so she decided to keep writing. That's when she decided to create @alittlebitofpoetry.

I asked Emma what inspires the themes of her poetry; she tells me that she takes inspiration from the people around her and events that are happening around the world:

"My friends inspire me a lot with how they live their lives and all the stories that come with it. The news and current affairs also play a large part in how I come up with my ideas, and I think that is clear from what I write. So much of the news is negative, especially over the past year, [so] I enjoy putting a lighter spin on things in the hope that it will put a smile on people's faces, or make them think of things in a different way."

Emma's poetry revolves around cultural topics such as women's safety and the recent lockdown restrictions.

"By writing my poems, I hope that it will spark discussions around important issues, and I hope to engage with anyone who reads what I write."

"Nowadays, people can express their opinions with a click of a button. I think this is great in many ways, but I love that by writing poetry about cultural issues, people hopefully will take the time to read it and really think about what is going on around them."

"When I shared my piece in the wake of Sarah Everard's death, I got so many positive responses from young women who could really relate to my poem. I found [it] so amazing that I got to create a little community at that moment in time for such an important issue."

‘Cover Letter No.1432.’

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to apply for this entry-level role, as advertised on your website - ‘Graduate with no hope & no goal’. I know this beginner’s job requires the experience of six years, but I hope my enthusiasm makes up for my lack of careers.

Being the assistant to the assistant’s assistant has always been a dream of mine, so when I saw this role everything began to align. My degree has taught me to read and write to a very high level, and discussing, in any way, its relevance to the job is something in which I’d revel. I know 2,700 applicants is a lot to sift through, but look no further as I am exactly what is right for you.

I have all the extremely unique qualities you are specifically looking for. I am organised, hard-working, and have a personality that’s hard to ignore. I have already completed your five-hour test online; verbal reasoning and personality tests are a speciality of mine. I understand that there will be eight interview rounds I will have to get through, and I will definitely accept to work for below minimum wage too.

Given all this, I believe I have all the relevant skills you are looking for, and I have attached my CV if you would like to know more. I look forward to possibly hearing back from you or receiving a rejection 4 months later out of the blue.

Kind Regards,

Emma Mason

“Trying to find a job in a pandemic definitely inspired me to write this as I think I wrote about 50 cover letters, all of which I dreaded writing. I thought why not create one I would like to write!”

‘Equality’

I have an apple.
That I want to share.
The slices are uneven.
No one seems to care.

I give away two slices
Out of a total number of four.
But how is this equal?
When the apple’s rotten at its core.

“In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, I came up with this short, but hopefully punchy, poem. I was going to write a longer piece, but I thought the shorter the better for this one. I think it makes a stronger impact.”

'20 questions for 20 something-year-olds'

Oh you have just graduated, what did you get?
 I've heard so and so's got a job, do you not have one yet?
 Can I see your ID? Oh you don't look like you're 22!
 You're so young, surely you don't know what you want to do?
 You've never dyed your hair? Let's dye it pink!
 You'll never find a job with hair like that, don't you think?
 I've done nine internships, how many have you done?
 Only two? That's fine! Your 20's are there to have fun.
 Your 20's are for being single, but are you seeing anyone right now?
 Guess who's just had their 4-year anniversary? I don't even know how.
 You don't want to get drunk? But our 20's is our prime!
 Aren't you getting a bit old to be going out all the time?
 Where do you think you see yourself 5 years down the line?
 You don't know? Well, I'm sure it'll all work out fine...
 Do you think you'll want children in the next few years?
 Isn't it so hard for women to have kids and also their careers?
 People say your 20's are confusing, would you agree?
 I'm sure we'll figure it out by the time we're thirty? That must be the
 key.
 So, are you excited to be going into your third decade?
 Not really? Well I've heard your thirties don't get easier I'm afraid.

"Being in my 20s and constantly questioning what I am doing with my life, as I know so many people do, was definitely the inspiration behind this one!"

Walking Home

'OK - put my maps on, I need to plan my route, and turn the volume up so my phone's not on mute. This is a pretty well-lit street, a good few people around, some of them seem like they'd help if I made an alarming sound. Keep on walking, but I should turn my headphones down too low, and I'll just hold my phone, but make sure it's not on show. The group of lairy men I'm sure are just that, but I think I'll pick up my pace and try and avoid eye contact. But I don't want to seem like I'm running as that would seem presumptuously rude, and if I make no eye contact will that spark one of them to be shrewd? Fine, I've passed them, I can hug my coat around me a little less. I think is it bad of me to presume? But this is a thought I'll quickly repress. Keep on walking but I'll just text my friends an update, and turn Find my Friends on so I'm easy to locate. Footsteps behind me, I'll just glance in the shop window's reflection, and maybe cross the road in a subtle change of direction. Nearly home, if I need to run, I know which way I would go, and there are still plenty of streetlamps giving off a reassuring glow. At the front door now, I unclench the key from my hand, and text my friends as promised and as planned. Shut the door, coat off, bag down.'

"This poem was one of the easiest to write, but also for that reason the most upsetting. I had so many women messaging me after sharing this to say how relatable it was, which shows that something needs to change, and I hope things will begin to change for the better soon."

NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS: WHERE DOES THE UK THEATRE INDUSTRY GO AFTER COVID?

With stages across the world having been dark for over a year, Heather Roy speaks to two performers whose careers and everyday lives have been most impacted by the closing of theatres.

There's such an illustriousness to the theatre; it's in strangers sitting shoulder-to-shoulder and in the combination of sounds, lights, and that palpable atmospheric buzz unlike any other. I am, admittedly, a self-confessed theatre geek, and I speak for millions of others around the world for whom the joy of theatre is incomparable to any other.

Amanda Kelleher is an Irish theatre-maker who describes her role as making and performing "silly shows about serious stuff". We spoke to her to find out what she misses most about theatre, and her concerns and hopes for the industry's future.

Sharing Amanda's thoughts about the joy of theatre which has been so noticeably absent this past year is 20-year-old Musical Theatre student Beth Williamson, who is due to graduate this year from the MGA Academy of Performing Arts.

HEATHER ROY

Q: Sadly, the theatre industry has pretty much been at a standstill for over a year now - what is it that you miss most about it?

Amanda: "I miss so many things about theatre - the smell, the focus, the people. The people more than anything. Theatre doesn't exist without an audience. To be in the same room and share an experience can be an intimate thing. Not having that joy for so long makes life feel a little flatter and sadder."

Beth: "The atmosphere of being in the theatre full of people seeing a show where every night the actors give live performances, full of raw emotion, is a type of entertainment that I believe is unmatched. I have been a theatre-goer my whole life and I can't wait to sit in a theatre once again."

In true 'the show must go on' spirit, the industry has rallied together over the past year, with performers hosting online concerts and industry leaders like Andrew Lloyd-Webber taking action to fundraise for those whose jobs have been left at a standstill. In May 2020, Lloyd-Webber raised half a million for the Actors Fund by streaming several popular shows online. There is, it seems, a lot of love and support circulating in the theatre industry.

Q: What are you looking forward to about a return to normality in the theatre industry - do you think there will be a return to normality?

Beth: "I am looking forward to attending the theatre again, full stop. I know that the first time I hear the 'Les Misérables' overture again live I will begin to cry out of sheer joy. It's a feeling like no other and one I cannot wait to experience again. I do think the industry will return triumphant as ever, but it won't be the normality we are used to. Even with the vaccine I don't believe there will be a full capacity or unmasked audience in there for a long time."

Amanda: "I don't think we'll return to normality for a long time... I can't imagine being on stage and seeing my audience spread out and wearing masks, it would lose so much intimacy for me. Maybe a 'new normal' is no bad thing, a theatre that is delivered in community spaces and outdoors, a theatre that doesn't have to just exist inside a theatre building. The idea of that is both scary and exciting to me. Having been isolated for so long, especially as a new mum, I'm excited to just see people and co-create with them. I'm going to be delivering some workshops with other lockdown mums this summer, which is part workshop, part celebration, as

we have all missed out on baby groups and so much more. I'm looking forward to just being around people again."

Tentative optimism seems to characterise the feelings of those embedded in the industry and for good reason. This is not the first time theatres have been forced to close their doors - the Bubonic Plague, two World Wars and The Spanish Flu all ground performances to a halt, but theatre's innate magic has seen full houses and standing ovations return time and time again.

Q: Despite us living in such a digital world, the theatre seems to be a medium that has outlived so many other forms of entertainment - why do you think this is?

Beth: "The theatre is not like a movie. If you see an actor cry in a movie or TV show, they've done five takes. In live theatre with eight shows a week, actors are constantly drawing on their emotions. I believe that theatre allows for people to follow a journey with no distractions or interruptions - they are invested and connected. Theatre will transcend time due to the massive following it has and the family favourites that it has always been able to create."



Amanda: "For me, theatre is about stories, and people have told stories to learn and cope with life as far back as the Stone Age. We need stories to imagine and heal and hope again. Digitisation will be part of that storytelling, but to look into the eyes of your audience, to hear collective gasps or rolling laughter, well, nothing compares!"

The desire for theatre has outlasted so much, and to believe that it will outlast COVID seems increasingly likely with every ease of restrictions. Perhaps it will not only survive but emerge even stronger than before. New talent and new ideas are so often born out of catastrophe - it's widely speculated that Shakespeare wrote King Lear and Macbeth during a plague outbreak in 1606. As American novelist Rick

Riordan succinctly puts it: "Out of every tragedy comes new strength."

Q: What are your hopes for the future of the industry?

Amanda: "I'd love to see work that engages communities in a really meaningful way. People have been starved of the arts for so long that it would be really great to see some really exciting community projects outside of London. These things are so often dependent on funding, so I really hope investment in the Arts continues."

Beth: "My hopes for the theatre industry are that it is given more care and recognition. Throughout COVID-19, it has been so difficult watching friends of mine struggle to find work due to the lack of jobs. I think that there are so

many people who put their lives and souls into this industry, and it's time that they were given as much recognition and thought as other industries that are deemed 'more important'. I hope that it can reopen as glorious as ever, and that people can see how it brings us together in so many different ways. Theatre is just as important as any other form of entertainment and it deserves to be treated as such."

Working in theatre brings out the optimism in people - after all, the ones on and behind the stage are the ones with undeterred smiles even through broken set pieces, missed cues and sheer exhaustion. If any industry can make it through a pandemic and emerge even stronger, theatre, with its unique capacity for hope, resilience, and magic, most definitely can.

STUDENT CREATIVES LEFT BEHIND

MEGAN BINNING



If we've learned anything from 2020, it's that creative freedom is an intrinsic aspect of our society. In the year when theatres came to a stop, we've realised we need them more than ever.

It was a freezing winter morning in my crumbling, cheap student accommodation where I sat behind my computer screen and interviewed Poppy Exton via Zoom, in a way that has become so familiar to many of us. Poppy's working-from-home setup was similarly styled; she crouched between her bed and wardrobe, whilst her laptop was balanced on an array of stacked pillows.

Poppy Exton is a talented, up-and-coming theatre prosthetics expert. She is enrolled in the Hair and Prosthetics for Performance course at the University of the Arts London. Poppy's course focuses on making hair and prosthetics for any kind of performance, but sadly COVID-19 has had a massive impact on her career prospects, meaning she may need to search for a new career.

Poppy was extremely excited about our call and was keen to answer all my questions about how she felt theatre has been treated over the past year:

"I actually can't believe theatres have been treated this way. They haven't received any help, only some financial help from arts charities. Theatre has always been a huge part of my life and it's strange being without it."

Creativity is a key part of every person's daily life, whether you paint, listen to music, or put on EastEnders whilst you cook

your dinner. Don't we all love a good musical too? *Mamma Mia*, *Grease*, *Wicked*, what more could you want? People have been entertained by the theatre for centuries and there have been very few moments in history that theatres weren't performing. As we all know, last year was one of those rare periods.

When I asked Poppy about what theatre meant to her, her face lit up with pure joy:

"I have always loved the stage, growing up dancing with my older sister, putting on at-home performances, and constantly visiting the West End to see the latest show. It wasn't until I turned seventeen, I realised what I truly loved was the creation of the amazing hair and make-up you see on stage".

Prosthetics make-up is an elaborate and beautiful craft which enhances and brings to life the directors vision; it's an additional tool used to convey the character being performed. Poppy says:

"A prosthetics artist must be able to design, cast, sculpt and mould. There are several stages for applying and removing stage make-up, which involves a vast range of tools and a lot of patience!"

Luckily for Poppy, she found a degree course where she could take her artistic visions and transform them into something hundreds of audience members can see each night.

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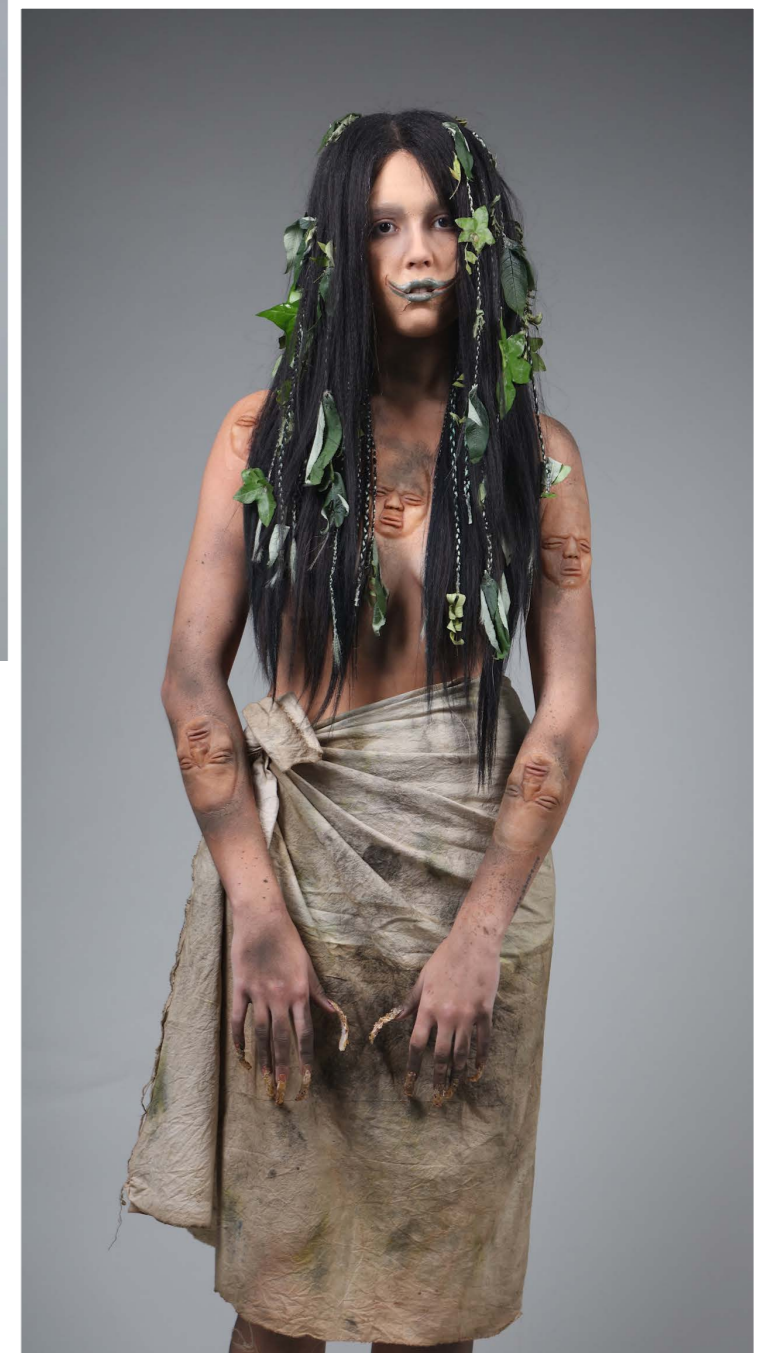


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Throughout her course, Poppy has been able to open up her creative horizons and work closely with others:

"It's fun because you get to create ideas you wouldn't have ever thought of, and you get to work in

an environment that's as similar as possible to professional theatres. I was sad to hear that because of the lockdown restrictions, we were unable to do that to the full extent this year."

COVID-19 has not only obstructed existing theatre workers, but also aspiring creatives. Even though universities have tried their best to accommodate students due to the pandemic, there have been further struggles for students once they leave university. In particular, students who have graduated with degrees in creative subjects have been left with worries about how to find suitable employment. If theatres are closed, how will they gain work experience? Will there be any jobs left for new starters?

Your third year at university is usually the pinnacle of your degree course. It's the last year of assignments, the year you hand in your final project, and for a lot of people, it's the last time you will see the friends you have made along the way. For Poppy, her third year was the most important year in terms of progression. But like for so many others, her final year has consisted of constant Zoom calls, meaning her workspace, creative space and social spaces have all become the same.

"Our third year is extremely important, there's no doubt about it. We were meant to have a showcase to demonstrate our work so that we could network and get our name out there.

Directors, Producers, Stage Managers, everyone would come down to see the fresh talent. UAL is the leading university for arts, so there would have been such a great chance for me to get noticed."

Poppy also had the opportunity to complete a placement within the industry taken from her due to the pandemic:

"Last year, I was actually meant to work on the theatre production of *Shrek The Musical*. I was going to shadow a professional and help them with the prosthetics, and may have even gained a job from it, but because of everything closing I wasn't able to do so."

These two aspects of the course would have really helped to build her career, but now finding work has become so much harder.

My last question for Poppy concerned the struggles that creatives are facing and the future of theatre in light of the pandemic:

"It's impacted theatre workers the most, mainly because they can't do anything at home - there isn't any feasible way to work from home. It has also changed students' career prospects because we aren't prepared - we haven't had the same training as previous students. To be quite honest, I don't know what the future holds for theatre. We can't really know what to expect. I just really hope this isn't the end [of the industry]. I want theatres to stay afloat, and I know so many others hope for this too."



© Poppy Exton

SOUTH ASIANS: LET'S TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

AABIDAH SHAH
FEATURING AIYESHA KHALIL & FURVAH SHAH

TW: this piece features in-depth discussions of mental health issues, eating disorders, bereavement, and distressing personal situations which others may find upsetting.

For many people who deal with mental health issues, the stigma and lack of understanding from others can often make it much harder to open up and seek help. For those from South Asian backgrounds, this problem can be particularly hard. Less awareness, understanding and more judgment towards mental health in such communities often leaves people struggling and suffering in silence. This is why photographer and mental health advocate, Aabidah Shah, is using her voice and art to raise awareness for mental health issues within the South Asian community. By having open, honest conversations with people who deal with such issues, she hopes to explore what can be done to challenge the stigma.



As someone who has dealt with mental health issues for most of her life, this is a project that is particularly close to Aabidah's heart. "I experienced the stigma around mental health from the South Asian community first-hand when it came to dealing with my own mental health. I suffer with a number of issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression." Through her photography, Aabidah aims to show people that they're not alone. "I hope this project will raise awareness and provide a powerful message to viewers. I want to encourage change in how our culture deals with mental health."

Aabidah hopes to see her work exhibited at the University of Wolverhampton in June 2021, which will be available to purchase in a limited print edition featuring several more participant portraits and stories.

ASK FOR HELP

<https://southasiantherapists.org>

<https://myh.org.uk>

<https://www.baatn.org.uk>

FAHEMA

Fahema is a young South Asian woman who battles with bipolar disorder, an eating disorder and PTSD. Fahema first began the journey of seeking help at the age of 16 when she was diagnosed with depression and prescribed medication. When her mental health began to decline, she was admitted to a mental health unit where she was told that she had anorexia. Fahema began anorexia therapy for almost a year before she was told that she had been misdiagnosed with depression. Her antidepressants were stopped and she was given a new diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. She went on to receive therapy for her BPD diagnosis, which was again discontinued due to another misdiagnosis.

At the age of 21, Fahema finally received the correct diagnosis of bipolar disorder after 5 years.

When asked about her support system, Fahema stated that upon hearing about her mental health struggles, her manager put in place provisions to support her, including counselling to help manage her PTSD, as well as the creation of a medical passport that documents her needs and requirements. The majority of Fahema's support comes from her husband of 3 years. She states that he's very aware of her mood changes and triggers

and that she can completely confide in him about anything. Fahema expressed that her South Asian background has negatively impacted her mental health, and that the South Asian community portrays mental health as a villainous thing, often silencing people's feelings. Fahema's family were unaccepting of her mental health struggles and even went to the lengths of making her have an exorcism. They told her that she was struggling because she wasn't praying enough. Fahema expressed how, prior to her own struggles, her South Asian background made her believe that mental health issues were not real, and that people who suffered from them were just weak. She now believes that the South Asian community can improve their response to mental health by recognising that it is real and that there is nothing to be ashamed of.

“I was told that i'm not praying enough”



AIYESHA

Aiyesha is a young South Asian woman who experienced mental health issues after witnessing the passing of her mother in 2018, whom she was forced to perform CPR on. Aiyesha tried to express her grief to her father, who refused to talk about it, instead telling her to pray. Having tried this, Aiyesha discovered that praying did not fix her problems. She began to question her religious beliefs because she felt her prayers weren't being answered. She felt like Allah was punishing her by letting her mother die in her arms.

Aiyesha stated that it was difficult for her to seek professional help, fearing her father's reaction due to comments he had made regarding other family members who had sought psychological help. The lack of sensitivity she experienced from her father when she tried to confide in him made her afraid to seek help. She had tried to express how she couldn't shake the feeling of her mother's ribs cracking as she performed CPR. Her father told her that she would be okay, but that she needed to go and clean the bathroom because there were visitors coming over. Aiyesha says a negative aspect of the South Asian community is the constant need for perfection – everything must look good because keeping up appearances is more important than your feelings.

Fortunately, Aiyesha was able to seek counselling



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from a bereavement charity. She believes that South Asian communities could improve their response to mental health by holding transparent conversations. She also expressed the need for wider representation of South Asian mental health professionals. After receiving counselling sessions from both a South Asian counsellor and a White counsellor, Aiyesha stated that there were clear differences in the way each of them approached the cultural/religious aspects that were spoken about. The South Asian counsellor was able to completely understand Aiyesha's thoughts and feelings better, and she felt more comfortable confiding in someone who shared her cultural experiences.



“My mum just died but i had to clean the bathroom”

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IBRAHIM

Ibrahim is a young South Asian male with anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Ibrahim previously sought professional support in the form of therapy. This was kept private from his family, who were not supportive of his mental health struggles. He stated that he cannot turn to any members of his immediate or extended family, and instead seeks the support of two of his close friends. Ibrahim feels that his South Asian background has negatively impacted his mental health because of the gender stereotypes that his family inflict upon him. They often tell him that he needs to 'man up' and 'stop being so emotional'. His parents view mental health issues as feminine, but Ibrahim states that mental health isn't tied to a certain gender. He feels that he has to keep up a pretence when around his family, which has taken a toll on his mental health because he can't be the 'perfect' man his family want him to be. His parents refuse to acknowledge the scientific facts surrounding many mental health issues and he is often told to 'pray it away', which has made him question his religion.

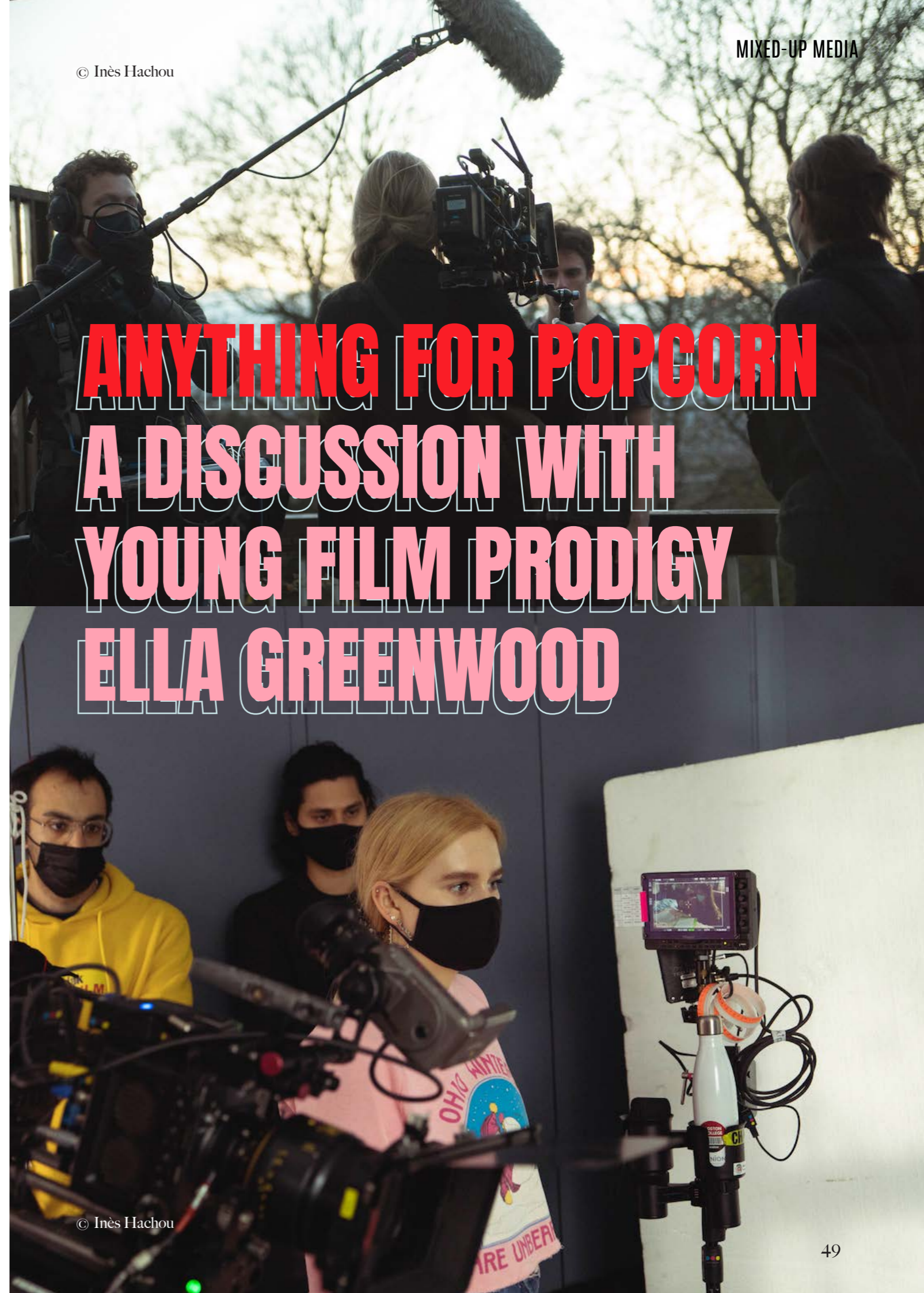


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Ibrahim has a large proportion of South Asian followers on TikTok, where he sometimes speaks about the stigmatism within the South Asian community regarding mental health. Ibrahim says that whenever someone is vocal about the issues within the community, they get attacked

by their own people due to the long standing ideal ingrained within the South Asian culture that everyone must be better and even more 'perfect' than others. When asked how the South Asian community could improve their response to mental health, he stated that parents need to establish a close relationship with their children to better understand them. He feels that bad family relationships contribute to mental health issues, but having supportive family members would make dealing with these problems much more manageable.

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MADDIE BAZIN

Discussing all things from mental health to the depiction of teen life in Hollywood's film circles, Art & Culture Editorial Assistant Maddie Bazin interviews Ella Greenwood, award-winning director, producer, and actor, named in this year's *Forbes* 30 Under 30.

TW: depression, self-harm

Ella Greenwood, a London-born director and producer, has built up her own production company, Broken Flames, from scratch. Her films approach subjects such as mental health, depression and illness, all through the eyes and experiences of teenagers and younger adults, who perhaps struggle the most to talk openly about these subjects. She focuses

on her characters as whole, beautifully-rounded people, as opposed to caricatures of the disorders they suffer from. As a result, she brings mental health back to a place of recognition and familiarity for many. "There's so much to say, and so many stories to tell," she says, "It will keep me busy for a while!". Her recent endeavours have landed her on the 2021 *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list in the Entertainment category, alongside BAFTA award-winning actor Bukky Bakray who starred in Ella's recent short film, *Smudged Smile*.

Ella's origins lie in dance and theatre, where she discovered a love for performing and acting. "I started in local theatre, but I knew I always preferred screen," Ella reminisces, as we discuss some of her first roles. This drive developed into a love and interest



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© Inès Hachou



© Inès Hachou

in film when she began going to the cinema, where she could fully immerse herself in whatever world was being shown; as Ella told me, "I would literally go to see any film if I got to eat popcorn!"

She dreamt of being one of the actors on-screen, playing inspirational roles and creating first-hand the experiences she loved to view so much. "I sent

my headshot to every agent in London," Ella reveals, "It was just one that my mum had taken of me in the garden". On the topic of the industry, Ella admits: "It's a lot about who you know. Sometimes you'll just meet someone and they'll do so much for your career, even though you've met them by chance!" Recently, COVID-19 has hugely impacted the film

industry, especially film festivals, where many directors and actors do most of their networking – and Ella is no exception. “Maybe people did make connections through Zooms and chatrooms, but I personally struggled with that.”

After being managed by an agent throughout her childhood, with her headshots sealing her roles in short films such as *Before Nightfall* (2020) and *In Front of You* (2019), Ella decided to take back control over what she starred in. After finishing her A-Levels, she decided to refocus her work: “I didn’t want to just wait around for auditions and then not hear back, so I began filmmaking.” On the back of this, Ella produced her first short film, *Faulty Roots*, at just 18 years old. “I wanted to bring an awareness to that depression that appears out of the blue. There’s far too much stigma of ‘oh, something bad must have happened for someone to be depressed’, but for a lot of people

that’s not the case”.

On top of writing, directing, and producing the film, Ella also starred as Lola, one of the main characters. A teenage girl suffering from depression, Lola finds herself unwillingly spending her summer with a childhood friend, Zack, after her mother Susan decides she needs to ‘cheer up’. Whilst Zack is the vibrant energy of the film, it is revealed that he suffers from an incurable genetic disorder. “Despite all this, he is happy,” Ella hums, “Compared to Lola, who has more reasons to be happy but just can’t be”. Zack guides Lola through the summer with gentle but cheerful playdates, but there is no sense of competition in their differing disorders. They are just two people pulling one another through dark and difficult times. Possibly the best part of the film is its lack of a ‘Disney’ ending – the last scenes of the short film simply reiterate that life should be



© Broken Flames Productions



© Inès Hachou



© Broken Flames Productions

lived regardless. The characters are the focus of the film, not their conditions, and this perhaps is what is missing from many other films that aim to highlight or destigmatise mental health. “It’s nothing daring,” Ella explains, “It’s just... teenagers”.

Faulty Roots was shown at various film festivals, including Tallgrass Film Festival, where it won an award. “I sent it out to be reviewed a lot, and so many

said such wonderful things about it!” It did indeed receive incredible reviews, with UK Film Reviews calling it “a story of inspiration, friendship and much-needed understanding and joy”. After a feature in *Deadline* and an invitation to work with the Shakespeare Sisters (a London-based production company), the film gained traction and is now being developed into a feature-length film featuring a sparkling



© Broken Flames Productions – Candid Broads Productions

cast and crew, including Melanie Waters (*Gavin and Stacey's* Gwen) and Kayleigh-Paige Rees (*Sandinton's* Julia), which is currently in pre-production. "They're all people I absolutely love working with," Ella admits, "They all care about social impact and the impact of the script".

With the film industry frequently coming under fire for the innate prevalence of white male directors and producers (think Natalie Portman's embroidered cape at the Oscars), Ella found she was struggling to find female directors to work with. "I would go to film festivals and watch a short I liked, but it was never a female director. I did notice that I was having to actively seek them out – they aren't necessarily easy to find". After being asked about the changing nature of the industry and its gradual diversification, Ella admits: "It's hard, because you can't just change it. It takes a lot of people to put in a lot of effort and time". Another aspect of her career that Ella struggled with

was rejection and bad reviews. After sending *Faulty Roots* to reviewers the first time, Ella received mixed responses. Where some found it inspirational and endearing, others found it bland. "I struggled, because these were my experiences," she explains. When asked how she dealt with the reviews and rejections, she had simple and honest advice: "There will always be someone else who wants to work with you. Change is sometimes good, and sometimes you have to adapt to the problems".

On the back of *Faulty Roots*, Ella found a kinship with mental health charity Stem4. She received help from them in a time of need: "I had no idea what I was going through, and I just needed help". After noticing an increasing number of teenagers reaching out to her with their own issues having watched *Faulty Roots*, Ella began to work with the charity on early intervention and creating an open discussion around mental health. "I reached out to



© Inès Hachou

them, because I was desperate to promote them and help in any way I could". Stem4 offer various apps and advice to those who find themselves struggling with their mental health, such as their app CalmHarm, which offers tips to manage and resist self-harm urges. The apps can be used immediately and anonymously, which often appeals to those who may not want to admit what they are going through. "Progress has definitely been made in terms of young people understanding their mental health more, but there is still a long way to go".

Broken Flames' most recent project, a short animation called *Dreary Days*, will soon be playing at Monstra Film Festival. "I'm literally praying I can attend in person!" laughs Ella, who has seen much of her work come

to a standstill in the wake of COVID-19. Ella planned and animated the short film alone over lockdown, using the time to plan her new project. With several shorts and feature films in post and pre-production, including *Why Wouldn't I Be?*, shot in partnership with HUMEN, the men's mental health movement, we can't wait to see the future successes of the wonderful Ella Greenwood.

To explore more of Ella's works and upcoming projects, visit her website <https://ellagreenwood.com/> or the Broken Flames website <https://brokenflamesproductions.com/>. If you or somebody you know is struggling with mental health issues, visit <https://stem4.org.uk/> for further resources.

VIBRANT, KINETIC AND EXPRESSIVE:

INTERVIEW WITH MAYA PREVER



MISTY ROBSON

Misty Robson interviews Maya Prever, the London College of Fashion graduate who has launched her own original art and homeware brand.

Maya Prever is a London College of Fashion graduate whose love for visual graphics and original creativity led to the creation of her new art and homeware brand, Glasshouse Abstracts. Maya graduated with a degree in special FX makeup, but fell in love with the movement and excitement of kinetic abstract painting when she stumbled across similar examples on Instagram. Now, one year on, we catch up with her to find out about her brand's success and the incredible reception she has received so far.

Q • I love your work! How do you go about creating each piece?

A • I use acrylic paint with a special medium that allows the colours to be layered up without fully mixing together. It also thins out the paint so I have full ability to make the paint move exactly how I want! More recently, I've adopted the same process but using paint brushes instead of moving the canvas around. Weirdly, I find using paint brushes more freeing than not using them! I have realised that the longer you stare at my work, the more interesting it becomes. Your eye starts to tweak and discover details that you may not have initially noticed.

© Maya Prever & Sophia Vrahimi



**“My work is vibrant,
kinetic and expressive”**



Q ■ You started commissioning your work during lockdown. What inspired you to start selling your art?

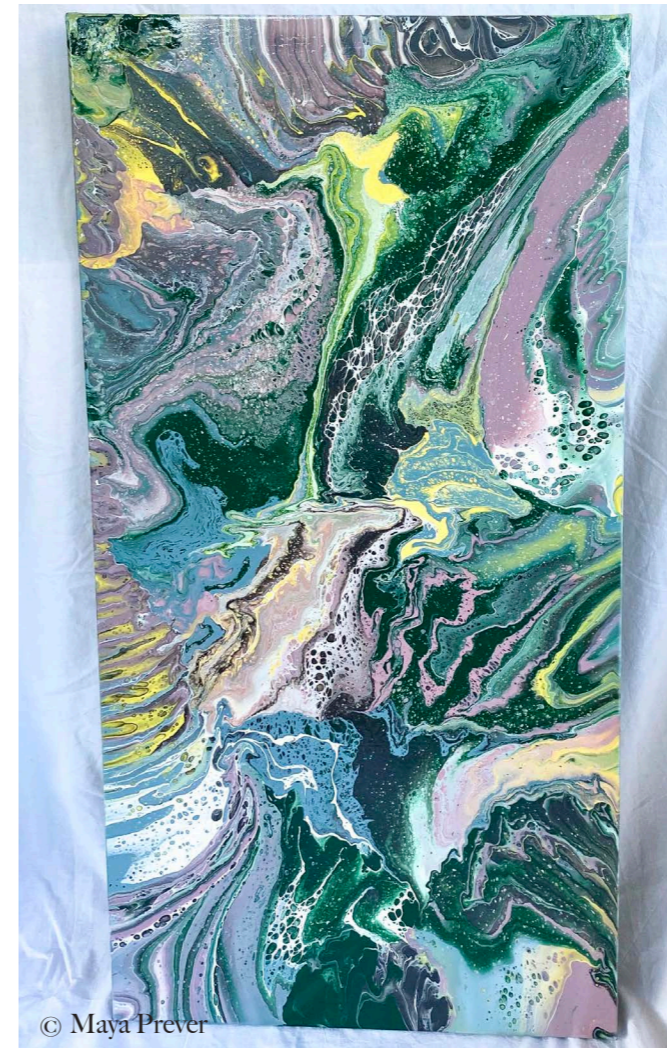
A ■ Honestly, it was the support and push from my loved ones! They gave me the confidence to start an Instagram account. I was receiving quite a bit of interest and felt it was the right moment to form the business. I was recently approached by a talented photographer to be included in a visual book all about celebrating different creatives and their line of work. I have also had my work commissioned for an album cover for an indie band! A notable milestone for me is that a renowned makeup artist commissioned a large painting for his beauty room back in November. As a fan of his work, this was a really proud moment.



“It is vital these days to provide a social platform that shows both the sunshine and the rain.”

A ■ While I love showing a finished piece of art, I enjoy revealing behind the scenes and showing both my achievements and struggles. As an artist I’m so new, and I’m still exploring different concepts in all aspects of Glasshouse, however I think this is also the most exciting phase as there is no pressure to conform to anything or anyone. This transparency is something I feel a lot of brands are beginning to demonstrate, and this ‘realness’ is something I really love about *Disgraceful Magazine*.

Q ■ Have you faced any struggles during the first year of your business?



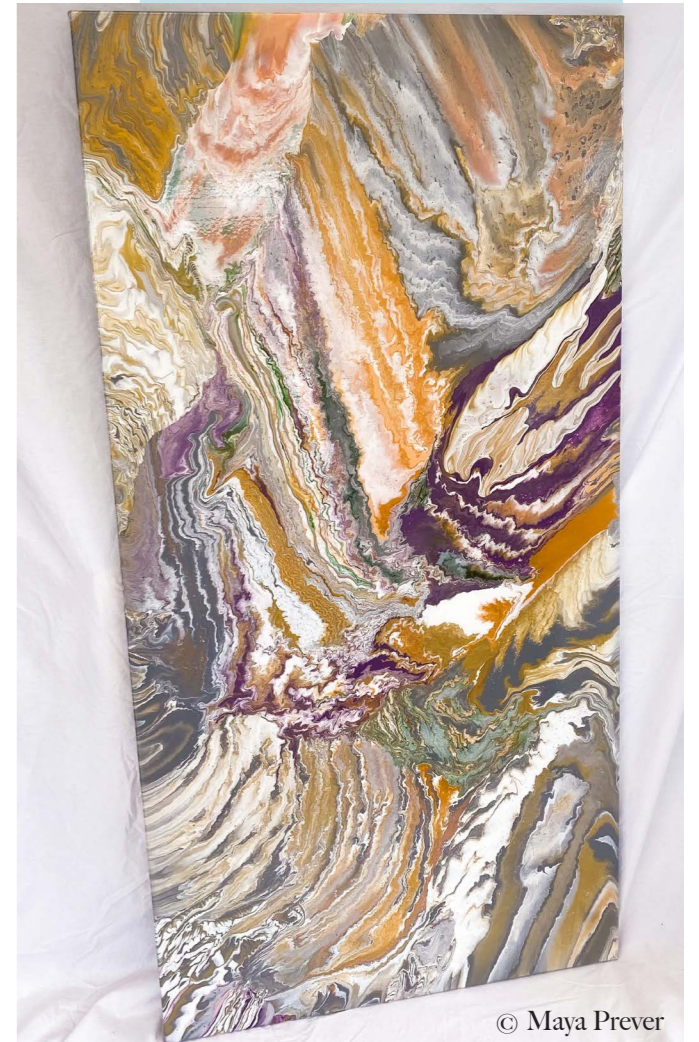
Q ■ Do you have any advice for other artists breaking into the industry?

A ■ I feel the art world can be a very intimidating industry. I wish to portray that art truly is subjective – there doesn’t always need to be a profound concept behind why you do something, as long as it sparks an emotion for either you or the viewer then that can be just as powerful! I suppose that is a message in itself, really.

Maya’s portfolio, as well as information about Glasshouse Abstracts, can be found here:

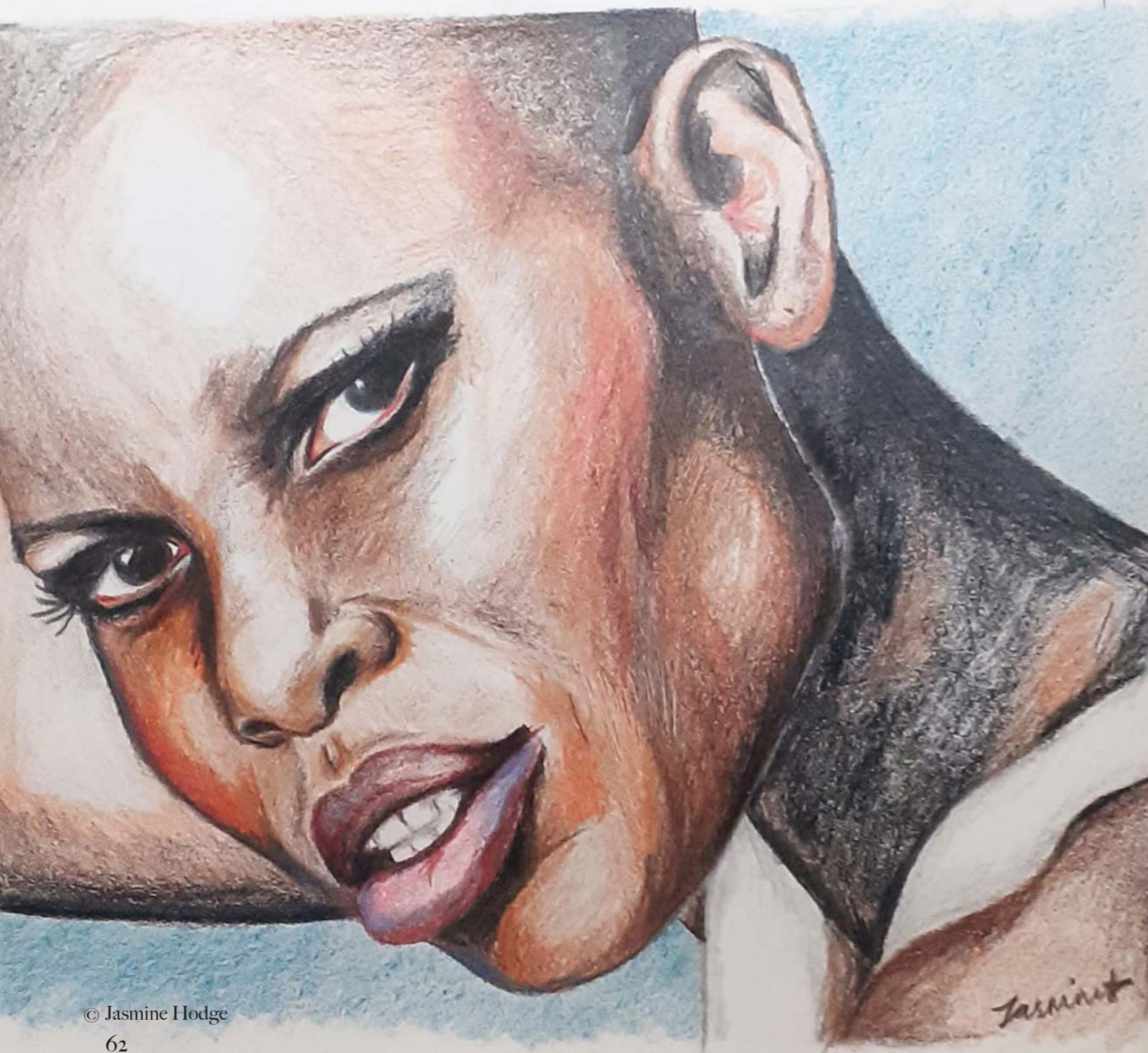
Instagram: @glasshouseabstracts
 Website: <http://glasshouseabstracts.com>
 Email: maya@glasshouseabstracts.com

“I hope to inspire other artists - particularly abstract artists - to break that ‘rule book’ and simply CREATE.”



FEMALE PORTRAIT POWER

JASMINE HODGE



Portrait artist Jasmine Hodge uncovers the inequality within the worldwide music industry which has sparked her conscious efforts to promote more women in music through her artwork. I have been a portrait artist for a few years now, selling my paintings and creating commissions. Thanks to those who supported my art, this ultimately helped to keep me afloat throughout lockdown. However, at the beginning of this year, I looked back at some of the portraits I had created, and was shocked to see that they were predominantly of white, male musicians. Seeing my portraits of Bowie, Lennon, and Doherty got me thinking – although these portraits reflect what I listen to, they only reflect half of my music taste. I then questioned whether I was doing this because the male portraits sold better, or whether I was conforming to the music industry's disregard for female talent. Either way, it needed to change.

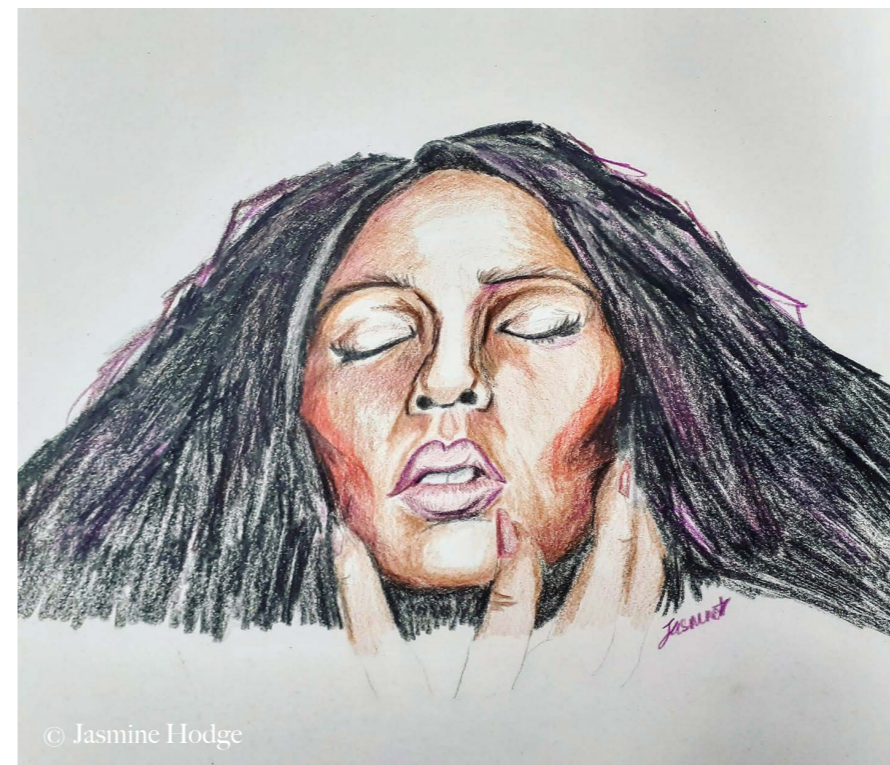
This year, I have made a conscious effort to draw, paint, listen to and promote more women in music. Here are three of my most recent portraits with some words on why these women are such incredible feminist icons.

BILLIE EILISH

“Somehow, I feel more like a woman. It’s all about what makes you feel good. If you want to get surgery, go get surgery [...] If you want to wear a dress that somebody thinks that you look too big wearing, f**k it – if you feel like you look good, you look good.”

This is just one of the iconic quotes taken from Billie Eilish’s recent cover shoot and interview with *Vogue*. The feminist icon has been on our screens, feeds and Spotify playlists since 2015, and this

recent shoot has reminded us all of why she is such an inspiration to women. Her choice to wear what she wants, act how she wants and to not let any media judgement phase her, shows that she is successfully disregarding what is expected of women in the public eye. By maintaining complete control over her body, and by choosing to ‘cover up’ as she pleases, she is completely going against the grain of what is expected of a female in the music industry. Eilish has continued to champion marginalised people directly and indirectly throughout her music, as well as commenting on the constant observation and judgement that women face.



SKIN

Deborah Ann Dyer, otherwise known by her pseudonym Skin, is recognised primarily as the front of rock band Skunk Anasie. Playing a large part in the movement of Britrock, Dyer's career has seen her receive the Inspirational Artist Award and the Music Week Awards as well as being featured as one of the cover stars for *Classic Rock's* 'She Rocks' issues. Alongside these achievements, she was also the first black British-led act to headline Glastonbury.

Dyer has publicly spoken out about how herself and her band have faced racism and discrimination and that this is why she is sometimes overlooked in music history. Speaking to *The Guardian*, she said: "We didn't get anywhere near the recognition we deserved, because our faces weren't what the establishment wanted to define Britain."

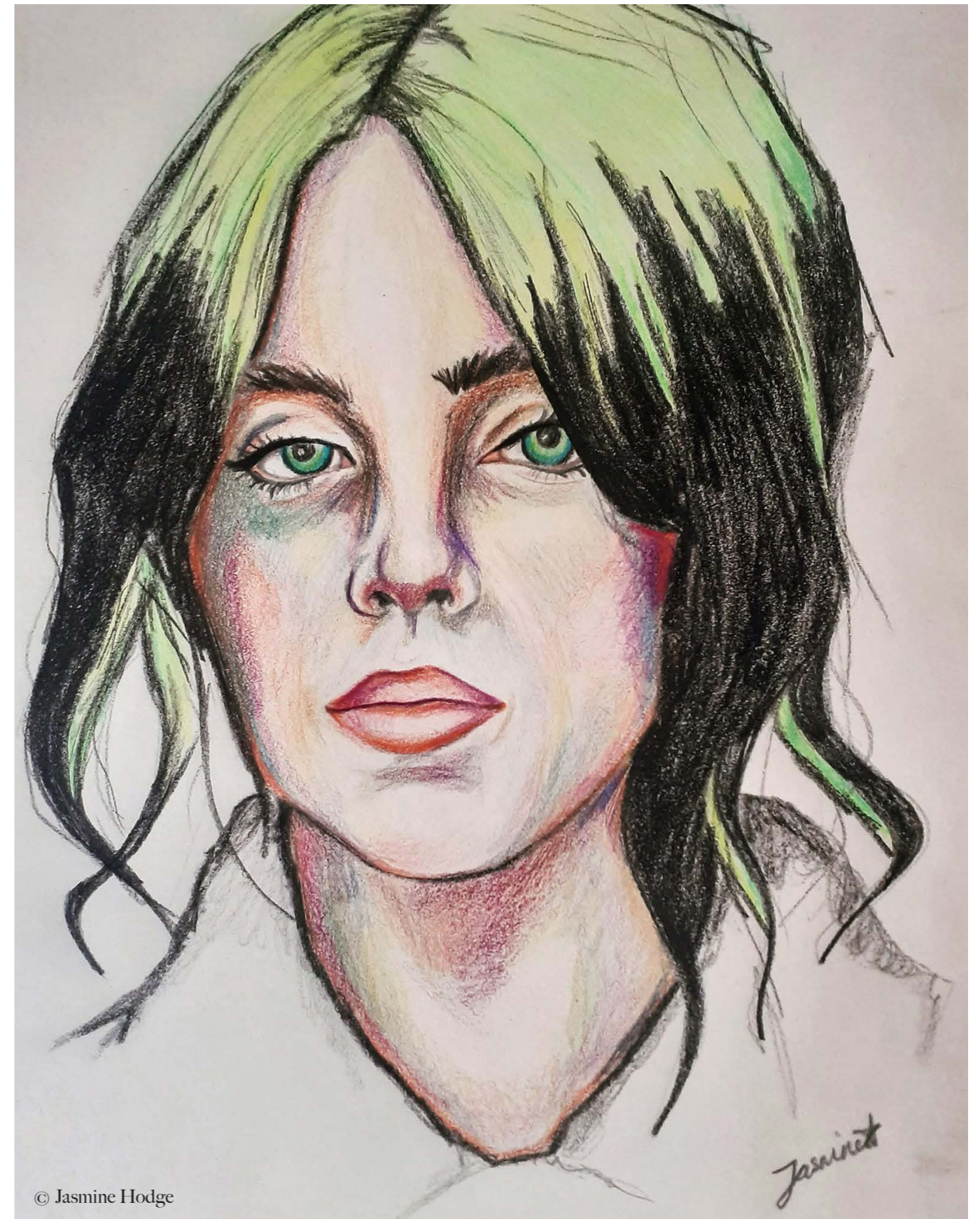
Dyer has built a career on breaking boundaries and not letting anything stop her. Shaving her head in her early 20's was an act of rebellion against the 'fuss' that came around haircare for women. Her blatant rebellious streak against any form of discrimination towards any marginalised groups makes her a feminist icon that deserves to be at the front of our musical history books.

LIZZO

Lizzo is one of my favourite tequila-drinking, ass-shaking women (and I know a few of these women!). She is a constant champion for women of all ethnicities and shapes. By not fitting into the stereotypical pop-princess labels that the music industry has created, Lizzo has taken her gorgeousness in her stride and uses her confidence to empower fans and followers. Her contagious self-love is something that everyone admires, and the presence of her music coming out of speakers gives a sense of reassurance that makes listeners feel special and worthwhile.

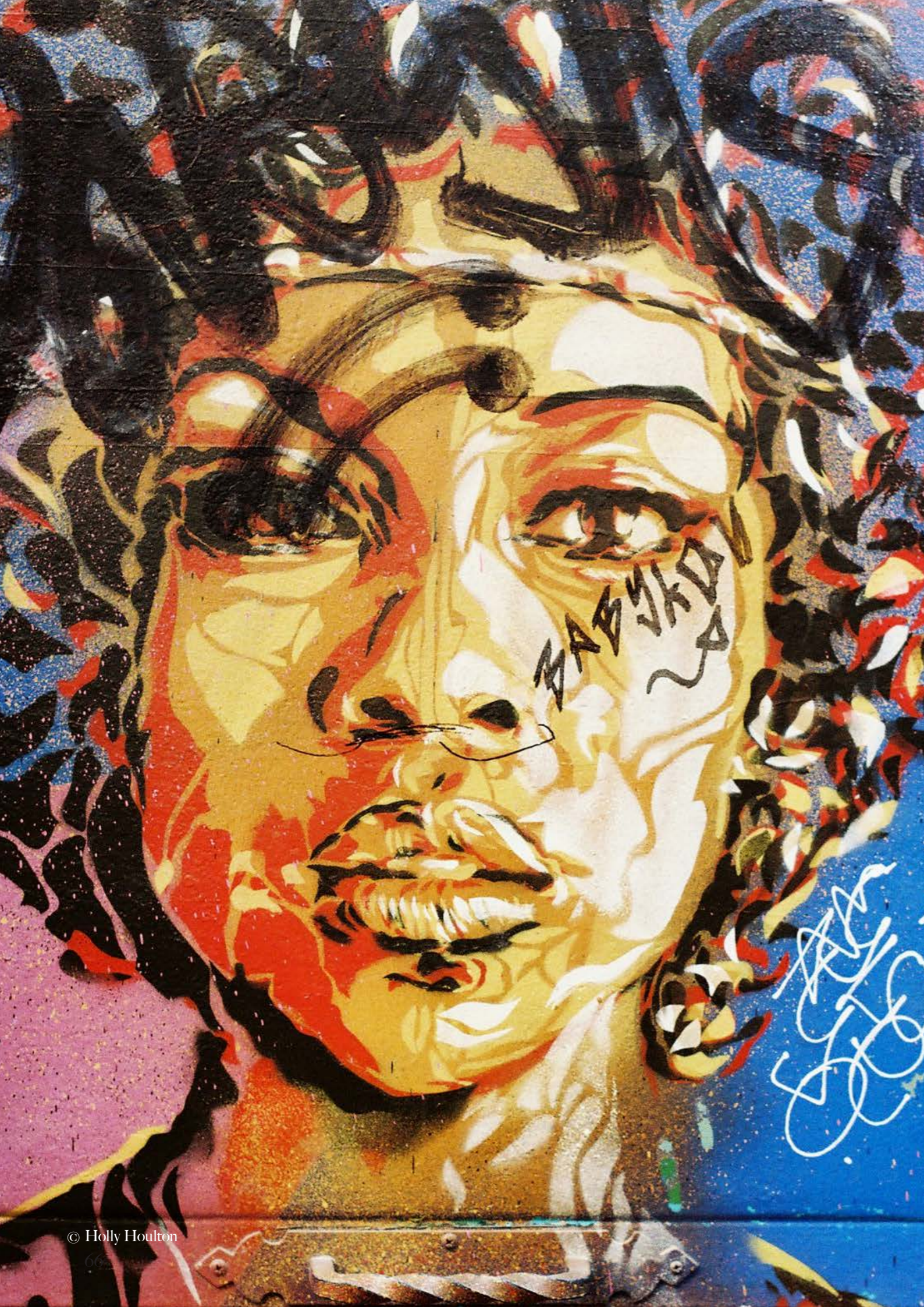
In the past, she has used her platform to speak on body positivity and other important topics such as dealing with anxiety, not wasting your time with f**kboys and putting more efforts into your self-care. In her music, she sings about doing things 'like a girl' and not relying on men; this irresistible and empowering energy is starting to rub off on young fans. Treating her music as activism, she is one of the most empowering artists I have ever discovered, and I can't be the only one who feels like a completely different person after listening to her music.

Twitter: @Obviouslyitsjaz
IG @artbyhodge @oi.jasmine



© Jasmine Hodge

PHOTOGRAPHY SHOWCASE:



© Holly Houlton



© Holly Houlton

HOLLY HOULTON, 12 STREETS OF MADRID

JENNY SHARMAN

Disgraceful Magazine's Art & Culture Editor, Jenny Sharman, interviews Holly Houlton, a 24-year-old photographer and freelance writer based in the UK. Her collection *12 Streets of Madrid*, showcased here by *Disgraceful*, focuses on bringing to the attention of its audience the colourful and vibrant street art of Madrid. Holly's most recent venture is a writing platform called *Now Tell Me*, which is dedicated to giving freelance and emerging writers on photography the freedom to write self-styled and self-directed content.



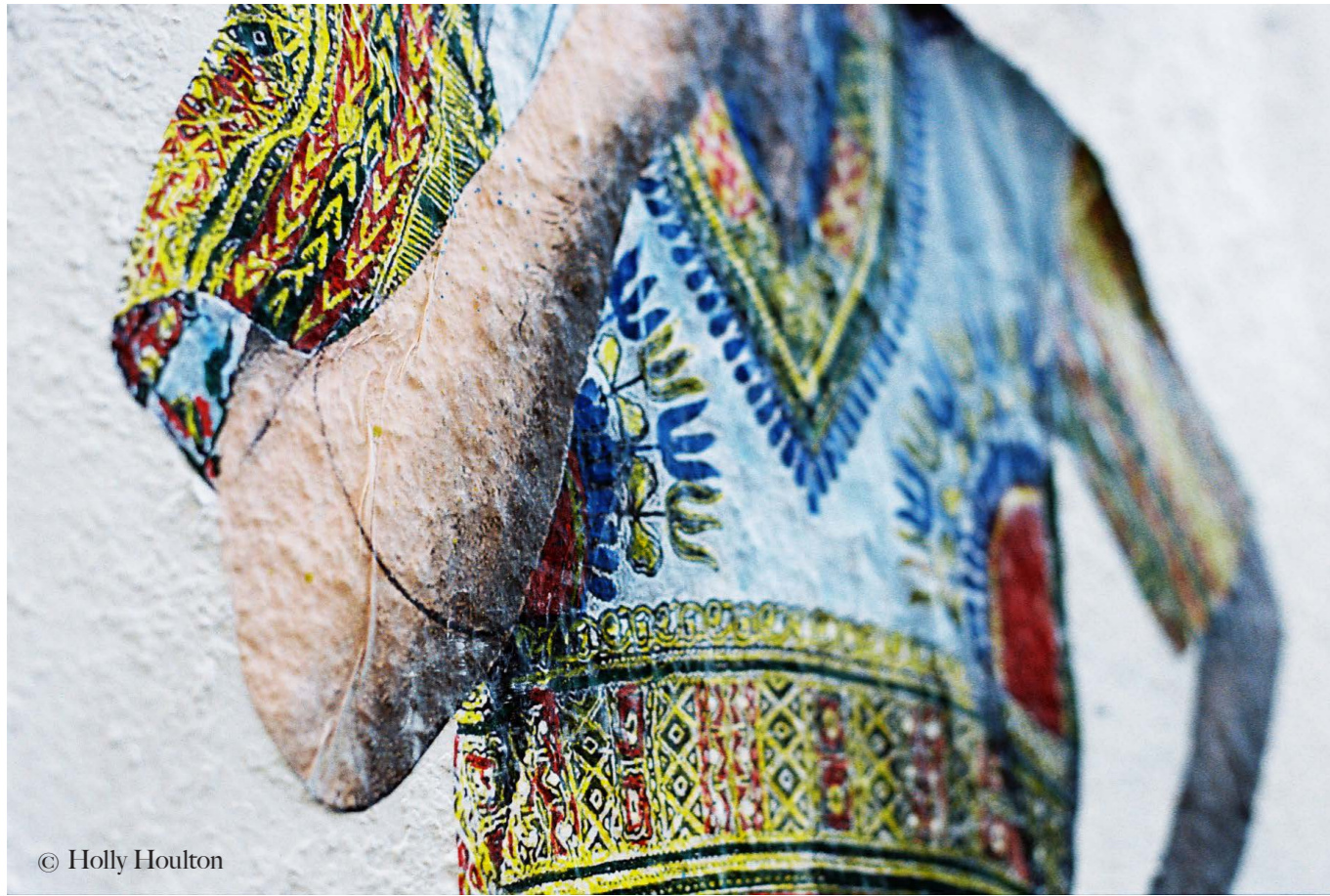
How long have you been interested in photography? What made you take the step to become a freelance photographer?

"My interest in photography really sparked when I was about 15/16 years old and started using my parents' 35mm SLR camera on family holidays. I was fascinated with the aesthetic of film photography and learning how one mechanism in the camera affected the other (e.g shutter speed to aperture). I decided to take up A Level Photography and knew I didn't ever want to study anything else, so it went from there really!"

"I did the odd bit of freelance work whilst studying at school and then university, and really enjoyed being able to be paid to be creative and capture events or people through photography. Since graduating in 2020, I've just carried on doing freelance where possible, including my cyanotype printmaking, selling prints on my Etsy shop, and focusing on making my own personal projects. I always find it's important to express myself through photography on my own terms, as you can't execute in the same way doing client work."

LA GALERIA





© Holly Houlton

What does photography mean to you? Is your work geared toward artistic expression, or do you find that photography is more of a therapeutic exercise, for instance?

“Yes, I believe my personal projects are a form of expressing my emotions and dealing with certain situations and, most importantly, being able to archive and hold onto certain memories, experiences and feelings. I also often use other mediums in my works, whether it’s text or sound or moving image, to help encapsulate a certain atmosphere or environment - which I find comforting, to know I’ve at least attempted to capture it authentically.”

“My photography work mainly explores the subjects of people and place with a particular interest in the effects they have on one another in relation to experience and time.”

Your collection *12 Streets of Madrid* seems to focus on showcasing the work of other creatives, specifically graffiti and street artists in Madrid. I love the notion that your photography gives these ephemeral, semi-permanent murals a sense of permanence. Do you think that it’s important to showcase and uplift other creatives and form artistic communities?

“Yes, I think it’s very important. The idea for *12 Streets of Madrid* really stemmed from spending time walking around the city and being reminded of this incredible creative talent around every other street corner; I wanted to pay some kind of homage to their work and boldness.”

“I think most creatives have a universal understanding that we have chosen a competitive and often difficult path to take and try to make our mark in the arts, so I think it’s crucial that we support and unite where we can, to make each other stronger and learn from one another. This belief of mine is also one of the driving forces behind my formation of the writing platform *Now Tell Me*.”



© Holly Houlton



© Holly Houlton

You've previously suggested that we live 'in a world where it is difficult for creatives to be acknowledged or seen.' As a female creative, what difficulties and barriers to success have you encountered, and how have you overcome these?

"I've experienced rejection, negative feedback, and unacceptance just like I'm sure many other creatives have when showcasing or submitting their work. But one way I've definitely overcome this is to remind myself that with the arts comes a lot of subjectivity, so it's important to take some things with a pinch of salt, dust myself down, and carry on. I also ensure to always gain more contacts and connections where possible, to receive any feedback opportunities or work opportunities too. This is in order to surround myself with other creatives where we can support one another and be in groups or conversations with others who perhaps share similar career goals or objectives. I think this is really important to stay motivated and engaged!"

In November last year, you founded *Now Tell Me*, a writing platform for freelance photography writers to produce their own self-directed content. What prompted you to launch this platform? How has it developed since its inception?

"I've written about photography a lot for a range of different publications, magazines, platforms, and organisations, including The Photographers' Gallery, Photobookstore and Loupe Magazine. Although these were all great experiences that I really enjoyed, I couldn't help but feel like there was a slight gap in the market for some kind of platform or zine that could allow writers on photography to have the freedom to write self-directed content with barely any limitations on word count, style, and content."

"After a very successful open call back in November-December 2020, I've now got a total of 23 wonderfully talented writers on board to produce written content on photography about their chosen subject! This will take form in a total of three zines which I'm looking to publish digitally throughout 2021 - the deadline for the first zine is at the end of April which is really exciting, and I can't wait to start producing it and sharing the work online when the time comes!"

"I also run a 'Writer's Feature' series on the *Now*

Tell Me Instagram page, where I conduct short interviews with experienced and professional writers/editors on photography to offer some kind of advice and motivation to those following the platform. So, if you're reading this now and feel like you fit the bill for *Now Tell Me*, please do feel free to DM me on Instagram @now_tell_me_writing or drop me an email at hollyhoultonphotography@gmail.com."



© Holly Houlton



© Holly Houlton

If you're interested in seeing more of Holly's work, she can be found on Instagram at @Holly_Houlton_Photos and at @Now_Tell_Me_Writing, on Twitter at @HoultonPhotos, on Facebook, and on her website, www.hollyhoulton.com.

ONE TO ADD TO 'THE SHELF': AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR HELLY ACTON

Acclaimed author Helly Acton tells all to *Disgraceful* about her creation of strong female leads in her must-read debut novel, *The Shelf*. She also shares her take on feminist progress in the creative industries and highlights the sources of inspiration that have helped her along the way.

In the not-so-distant past, growing up female meant watching films, reading books, and being told stories where the damsel in distress floated around helplessly, looking pretty and waiting for her prince to come. A lot of us were convinced from a young age that being a woman meant being inferior to men, relying on their strength and knowledge to guide us through life. That was until we woke up.

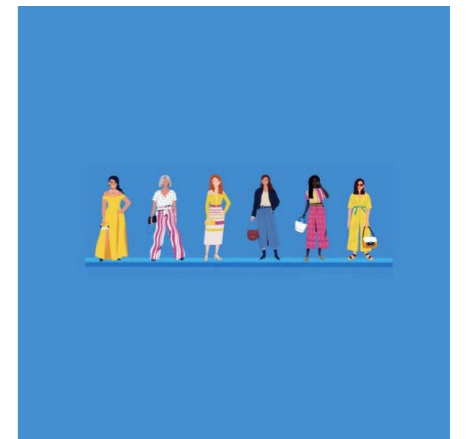
It was during my early teens that I wanted to see women portrayed and celebrated for what we truly are: tough, fierce, and full of attitude. Throughout my childhood, I was surrounded by strong women; I loved witnessing the power they possessed which they used to put men and boys back into their place, to teach them respect and to smash to

pieces the idea that either sex has superiority over the other.

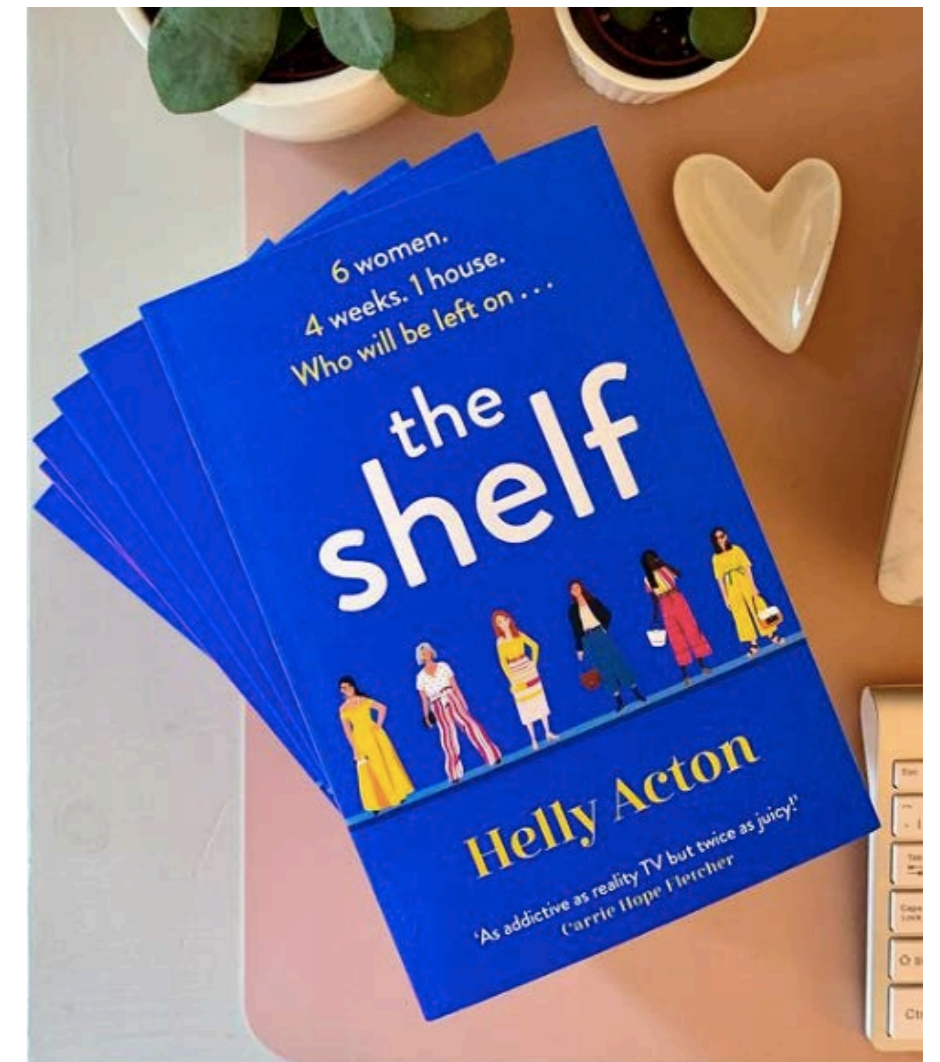
Over the last few centuries, feminism has been a subject that has arisen time and time again, spilling into the media and influencing society. Discourses of female empowerment have created a space for women to freely express opinions on what they care about without being subjected to silence.

One creative who has done this in a very clever and entertaining way, all the while fighting for equality, is author Helly Acton.

© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram



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© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram

BY DREW O'KEEFFE

© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram

HOORAY FOR HELLY

Zimbabwean-born author Helly Acton brings us *The Shelf*, a brilliant novel embracing female empowerment which gives us an insight into the growth women go through to reach their powerful potential. Acton herself is an example of a strong female lead, which is reflected in the characters she has created.

Spending most of her teenage years in East Sussex and travelling to Arabia where she spent the holidays, Acton went on to attend King's College London to study law. She spent her twenties travelling across continents, eventually finding herself back in the UK where she published her first novel, *The Shelf*.

The Shelf has a light-hearted, hilarious, and addictive storyline, with hidden gems of real-life scenarios and relatable female experiences that many of us can identify with. The narrative is set within a *Big Brother*-style gameshow where newly single women are encouraged to compete with one another



to become 'the dream girl' or 'the keeper'. The story follows each of the contestants on their individual journeys, all the while calling out the sexist expectations and patronisation which the characters encounter time and time again.

Acton's novel covers topics such as sexism, gaslighting, and the fight against society's stereotypical expectations. The book was published by Zaffre in 2020 and was picked for *The Radio 2 Book Club* after its release. It has been praised by popular publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Stylist* and *The Sunday Mirror*. Acton herself describes the book as "fun, feminist and fierce".



© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram

THE INSPIRATION

With the myriad of powerful female figures in today's media such as Michelle Obama, Reese Witherspoon, and Emma Watson, more and more female leads are taking the spotlight.

We asked Acton what inspired her to create such strong female leads, including the main character, Amy, who goes on a journey of self-empowerment.

"Amy went through a journey to become a strong female lead; she wasn't at the start. It was her experiences, and the lessons she learned from strong females around her like Jackie and Gemma, that gave her strength. My inspiration for Amy was probably 75% my own story and 25% the stories of the women around me. Six years ago, I went through my own journey (a divorce) and while it was tough, I am grateful for the experience as it has made me a much stronger person. It taught me to stand up for myself and gave me the confidence to be myself".



© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram

FEMALE FACING

In a world which has recently seen the #MeToo movement and frequent protests in relation to feminist issues, there has been a boost in creating female leads within the media who share relatable stories. Because of this, these important types of characters are gaining more positive attention.

When we asked Acton whether female leads are prominent enough in the publishing and entertainment industries, she said, "the industry has made huge

strides in the last five years in how women are depicted in the media with the rise of characters like Villanelle from *Killing Eve*, Fleabag and Cassie in *Promising Young Thing*, which I'm yet to watch, but excited about!"

Despite these great breakthrough works, are they enough to break the stereotype of the 'damsel in distress'?

"It's been a while since I've seen a fragile female in what I watch, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. I choose to watch and read about strong females. I think until we achieve gender equality, which we haven't, then work will always be needed."

MASTER MANIPULATOR

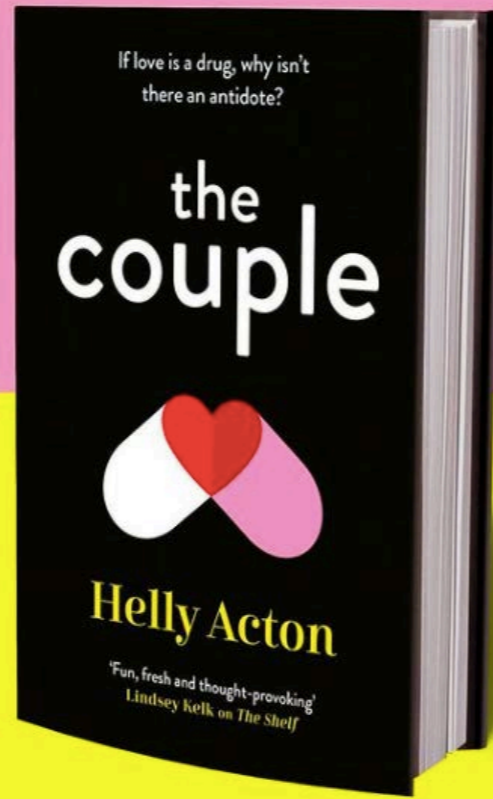
With discouragement and belittlement towards women being far from fictional, Acton explains her inspiration behind the misogynistic characters in *The Shelf*. One character in particular, Jamie, creates a lot of drama and displays downright selfish behaviour throughout the novel.

Jamie, who puts protagonist Amy 'on the shelf' at the beginning of the book, is the definition of arrogant, unapologetic, and someone who is clearly not boyfriend material. But when we asked Acton which of the characters was her favourite to write, the answer took us by surprise:

"Jamie. It is always fun writing a villain and writing him felt cathartic. To get all of that negative energy from previous relationships onto the page. [...] Jamie was a horrifying mash-up of my exes and my friends' exes."

Instagram @hellyactonauthor
Website www.Hellyacton.com

COMING
27TH MAY



#THECOUPLE2021

© @hellyactonauthor via Instagram

WONDER WOMEN

We also asked Acton which creatives inspired her to create the characters' personalities, with real-life experiences of her own also having an important influence:

"I'm a huge fan of Phoebe Waller-Bridge for her humour, her rawness and her realness. I adore Margaret Atwood for her powerful and dark imagination. And I love Marian Keyes for her astute observations and insights on human behaviour and relationships."

In recent years, female creators have had more and more opportunities to be seen, giving them the recognition that they deserve and claiming a spot in the limelight. With renewed

attention on equality within the workplace, both within the TV and film industries and in the publishing world, it's not surprising that creative pieces are increasingly focused on the treatment of women and making a stand against negativity and stereotyping.

Acton's work is a great example of how to express the need for both acceptance towards women and to expose the stereotypes and patronising expectations placed upon them.

The Shelf can be purchased via online book retailers and in all good bookshops. Acton's second novel, *The Couple*, was published in May 2021.





© Laura Evans

**BE LOUD OR BE QUIET, BUT JUST BE YOU:
IN CONVERSATION WITH LAURA EVANS**

BY BETHANY PRESTON

Disgraceful's Art & Culture Editorial Assistant, Bethany Preston, interviews environmentalist, sustainability advocate and businesswoman Laura Evans - the St Ives Mermaid.

Professional mermaid, advocate, and businesswoman Laura Evans is a force to be reckoned with. The underwater artist from St Ives can often be found exploring Cornwall's tidal pools or collecting discarded windbreaks found on our beaches. Prior to COVID, she made frequent appearances across the St Ives coast, dubbing a fully-functioning mermaid tail – yes, you read that right. Last year, she opened her shop 'Oh Give Me a Break', and her colourful bags have been making appearances across the region. We caught up with her to talk about all things mermaiding, body acceptance, and sustainability.

Q: For those who don't know, could you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your role as the St Ives Mermaid?

A: I'm Laura, an all-year-round outdoor swimmer with a passion for underwater photography, empowering people to embrace their individuality, sustainability, mental health, and sobriety. But it's fair to say that people sometimes simply know me better as the St Ives Mermaid. For the past six years (apart from last year due to COVID) I have washed up on the beaches of St Ives to crowds of 200-300 people whilst wearing a custom-made mermaid tail. This offers children a truly unique opportunity to meet a 'real life' mermaid and has given me an equally unique way of raising funds for local and national charities. I'm very proud to say that St Ives was the first town in the UK to have its very own mermaid.

Q: Your photos are stunning! How do you find the right location and are there any challenges to shooting underwater?

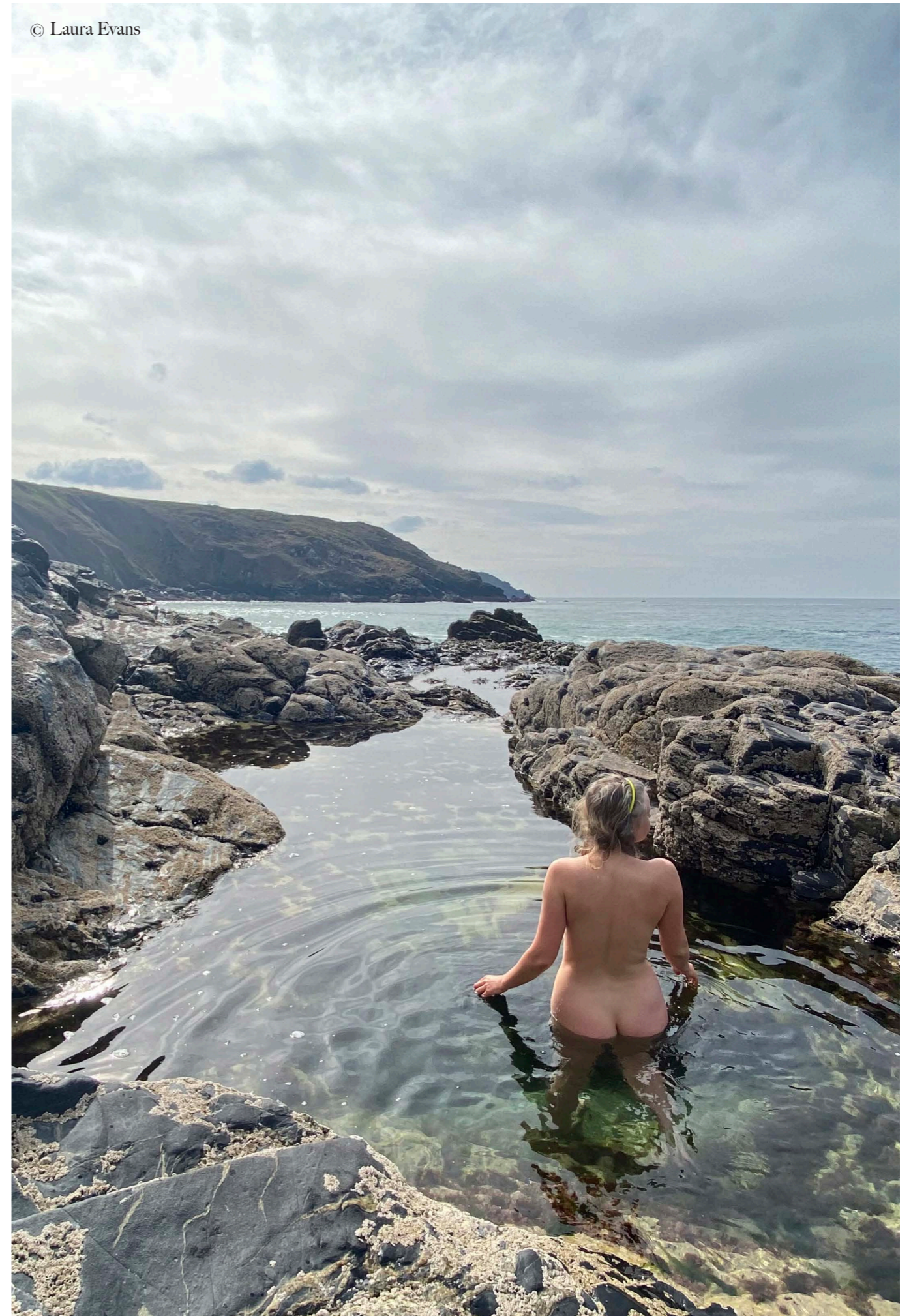
A: Thank you! Shooting underwater takes a tremendous amount of trial and error – especially as many of my photographs are self-portraits. I really am spoilt for choice when it comes to shooting locations in Cornwall, but I generally shoot in tidal pools as they are a much more controlled environment than the open sea. One of the main obstacles is visibility, because seawater varies so much throughout the year and sometimes even day to day. I also have to find somewhere to put my camera, which is one of the most amusing but frustrating things when it comes to shooting. My approach is to use the tools nature has given me, so my camera can

be found balanced on rock ledges in tidal pools, weighted on the bottom of a pool or the seabed itself and, if shooting on dry land, my shoes work well as a tripod. Once I have good visibility and a place to rest my camera I frame the shot as best I can, pop the camera on time-lapse and then do my best to achieve the pose I have in mind. It doesn't always work out the way I planned, but that is all part of the process. I take 300-400 photos per shoot and, if I'm lucky, I'll get 2 or 3 good shots.

Q: You radiate confidence in your photos! You're also vocal on social media about embracing your imperfections. Have you always felt comfortable in your body?

A: Not at all. When you're raised in a household with female family members permanently on a diet, you learn from a very young age that trying to lose weight or 'get trim' is the norm. I grew up with the idea that being slim was the only way I'd be happy, and that being 'overweight' (over a size 10/12) made me inferior and a failure. So as soon as I did gain weight in my late teens and early twenties, my self-esteem plummeted and I began a 10-year pursuit of the 'perfect body'. Perhaps I saw the body positivity movement growing on social media at the same time I was growing tired and disillusioned by my own obsession with my weight – still searching for but never finding that promised happiness, even when the number on the scales got less. Things really changed for me when I got sober. I talk openly about alcoholism on social media and, given that it's quite a long story, I'll keep it short and just summarise that when I came back from my lowest and darkest point and I found the strength to get sober, I was simply too grateful to my body for surviving all the abuse I had given it to continue

© Laura Evans



it any longer. And so began my journey to body acceptance and body gratitude. I am grateful for everything it is rather than everything it is not. It's not easy unpicking years of deep-rooted toxic diet culture but, aside from getting sober, turning my back on the idea of unrealistic body/beauty standards is one of the best things I have ever done and it's something I want other women (and men) to embrace. The more we see people celebrating the beautiful variety in our bodies, the more we can step away from this damaging culture we're so manipulated by from a terrifyingly young age.

Q: Do you ever have days where you don't feel brave enough to pose naked? How do you overcome this?

A: On the days I don't feel brave, I've learnt it's even more important to do the thing that scares you. So yes, I do have days when I perhaps don't feel as comfortable or confident in my body, but it's only through experience that I've discovered there is always a reward when I step out of my comfort zone. It may be uncomfortable at the time, but the reward always outweighs the discomfort. On the days when I want to hide my body and shy away, I do quite the opposite and will often go for a nude swim as an act of love for my body and my mind.

Q: You've mentioned previously that mermaiding is your way of giving back to the town that helped to heal you. Can you elaborate on this?

A: I came home to St Ives in 2015 with the symptoms of PTSD. Barely eating and barely sleeping, I survived on cigarettes and alcohol. That was until I started getting in the sea again and rediscovered the incredible connection I have with the water – a connection I hadn't experienced since childhood. Swimming in the seas surrounding St Ives brought me back to myself and changed my life in a way that I will be forever grateful for. With the mermaiding I saw a way of doing something unique and exciting for St Ives that would also give me the opportunity to support local charities – a way of giving back.

Q: In 2020 you started your own business 'Oh Give Me A Break', creating bags out of discarded windbreaks. Could you tell us a bit about what inspired you?

A: Starting a sustainable business genuinely wasn't on my radar until the day I found three discarded windbreaks by some bins in St Ives. Rather than seeing trash, I instantly saw treasure! I scooped up the windbreaks and carried them home over my shoulder with the idea for 'Oh Give Me A Break' forming in my mind. I knew instantly that I wanted to create colourful bags using simple designs that would utilise all of the windbreak fabric – aiming for a sustainable product made using a zero-waste process.

“ON THE DAYS I DON’T FEEL BRAVE, I’VE LEARNT IT’S EVEN MORE IMPORTANT TO DO THE THING THAT SCARES YOU.”

Q: You design your bags with as little waste as possible and you opt to use recycled materials, even donating 10% of your profits to the Sea Life Trust - is sustainability something you’ve always been passionate about?

A: I would say I was a late bloomer when it came to my education around sustainability. It happened quite organically alongside my burgeoning love for all-year-round swimming. It’s very difficult to be part of the outdoor swimming community and not become aware of or sensitive to the issues of sustainability, single-use plastics and pollution. The more aware and committed I become to living sustainability, the more important it becomes to me to share the experience and encourage others to make changes, even small ones, in their lives.

View Laura’s work on Instagram [@stivesmermaid](#) or take a look at her shop by visiting [www.ohgivemeabreak.co.uk](#).

Q: We believe that to be Disgraceful is to be bold, unafraid and unapologetic - in what ways would you consider yourself to be Disgraceful?

A: Even though I consider myself an anxious person I am truly and boldly 100% myself without fear or hesitation - life is too short to hold yourself back. Be loud or be quiet but just be YOU. My motto? Life is a festival so be a decoration!

Q: Lastly - what advice would you give to our female readers looking to break out of their comfort zone?

A: Do it. It’s in those uncomfortable places when you step out of your comfort zone that you will learn the most about yourself and it is ALWAYS worth it. There’s nothing like the sense of pride when you do something that scares or challenges you.



© Nicola Montfort



© Nicola Montfort

TOO YOUNG TO FEEL OLD: PREMATURE MENOPAUSE AND ME

BY CINTA MILLER

Premature and early menopause affects 1 in a hundred women in the UK, and 1 in a thousand women before they turn 30. Cinta Miller shares her journey to finding a correct diagnosis and living with the shockwaves of premature menopause.

As my alarm clock gradually started to get louder on a gorgeous Sunday morning, I remember thinking ‘FFS!!!’. I didn’t feel rested, my body was aching and I was baffled as to why I’d set my alarm so early for a Sunday. I reached over to grab my phone to finally swipe it into silence.

It was 12.45pm. The alarm clock must have been going off since 9:30am, I just hadn’t heard it.

To be fair, the same thing had happened the day before, and the day before that too. It was the third month in a row where I just didn’t feel my usual self and, right then, I had pretty much reached what I thought was my lowest ebb.

I’d mentioned to a couple of friends that I wasn’t feeling myself and was unusually exhausted. I was used to running around at 100 miles an hour, working as an industry leading make-up artist and hair stylist. I flew to LA three times a year, worked at Fashion Weeks across the globe and had a long list of high profile clients I tended to. I never, ever wanted to be the person that was known to be unwell all the time or come across as a hypochondriac.

So, when I started feeling a demise in my well-being, I struggled in silence.

One day, a friend suggested that maybe I was suffering with adrenal fatigue. I read up on it and it looked plausible. 75% of the symptoms were what I was experiencing, so I then started packing down all the vitamins that promised to make me feel better. They didn’t work.

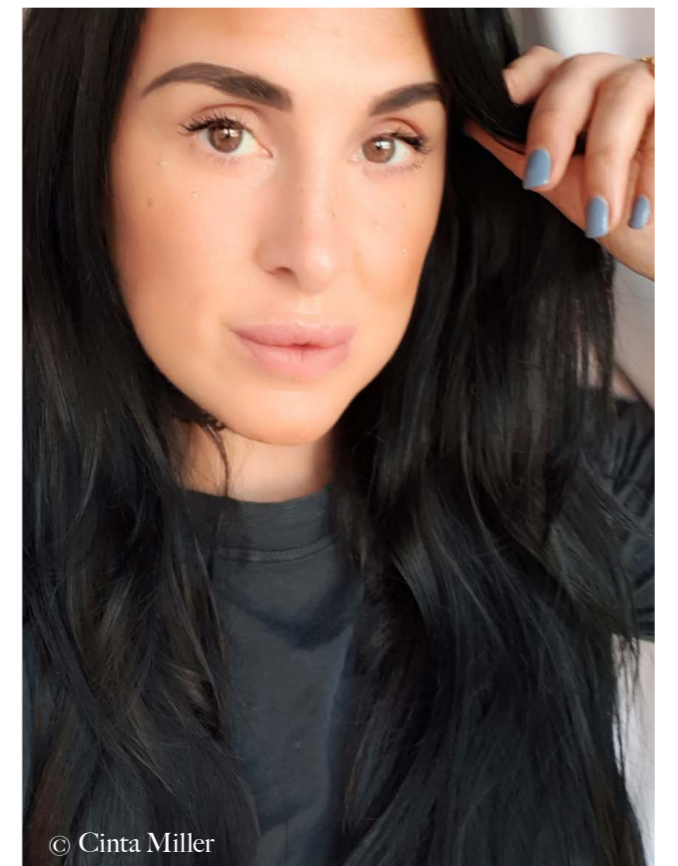
I measured my well-being by recording how knackered I felt. Some days were better than others but because I was convinced I had adrenal fatigue, I didn’t really pay much attention to my mood swings. There were days I couldn’t stand the sight of someone I adored, couldn’t bear music being played loud and I’d throw my phone at the wall when friends would text me because I felt like I was being suffocated.

This particular Sunday, I knew it was going to be one of those days. I didn’t even think I was going to make it into the bathroom to brush my teeth. My heart rate was already going like the clappers and I started burning up. I instantly burst into tears. Another thing that had made a regular occurrence in my life was crying – I felt like I could cry for England, but I’d only ever cry when I was alone.

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror. The luscious long hair everyone always commented on looked straw-like and my naturally golden complexion was grey and sullen. I cried until I fell back to sleep.

I was woken by a tap on the shoulder. Startled, I looked up at my friend who’d been calling for days. She had the ‘emergency’ spare key to my flat and had taken it upon herself to check in on me. I remember her saying to me, “Cinta, I think you’re suffering with depression darling. You need help!”

It was a year since I had lost my mum suddenly to pulmonary embolism (a blood clot). We were extremely close and as the youngest of five children, even in my 30s, my mum always treated me like her little girl. I had taken it okay at the time, and instantly stepped up to help with funeral and family arrangements. In hindsight, I think I kept my mind busy because I didn’t want to crash and let my mum down. I remember thinking I was most upset that my mum was never going to see me have children, and that thought hurt so deep that the only way I knew how to cope with it was to bury it deep down inside and block it out. I’d also broken up with my boyfriend as I had caught him cheating and maybe, it was all catching up on me.



© Cinta Miller



© Cinta Miller

After a series of talks with my GP and several bereavement counselling sessions, I felt as though I was supposed to feel fixed. The truth was I didn't. I had taken an antidepressant drug prescribed to me called Citalopram and, after taking it for a total of two days, I thought I was going to die. My mental health was worse than ever.

I stopped hearing from certain friends and despite it always being so important to me, my work was now beginning to suffer. The only place I felt unpressured and safe was in my bed.

One of my best friends thought it would be a good idea to get away. We went to Miami and every day was a struggle to smile. All I wanted to do was sleep, but my friend was wonderful and slept next to me for the majority of the trip. Being away was nice and spending time with a friend who didn't piss me off easily was a relief.

Halfway through the trip, she walked out of the bathroom looking miffed, complaining that she wanted to wear this hot, little white bikini to the pool but had just come on her period.

Her period? Shit, a period!
I hadn't paid much attention to my period during

the battles of my adrenal fatigue and depression. Giving it some thought, in fact I couldn't remember when I last actually had one.

I checked in with my doctor on my return and raised my concerns. He said with the huge emotional distress I had been a part of, alongside a fair amount of rapid weight loss and dealing with grief, the likelihood was my body was in shock and the loss of my periods was probably a side effect. I left and ate my body weight in chocolate, and could have continued to do so for days.

I then started to put myself in situations that were once normal to me, but were now out of my comfort zone. I went to parties, I hung out with friends after work and I even went on dates. Losing my mum had caused my family to fall apart and, as mentioned, I was beyond gutted that mum was never going to see me become a parent in my own right. But the thought of meeting someone, and maybe building a family, was something that fuelled some hope in my belly.

I met Liam a few months later. Straight away, I put my cards on the table and he was in agreement - being in our mid-thirties, we were wanting the same thing for our future. Everything started going from strength to strength, then out of nowhere it

“Giving it some thought, in fact I couldn't remember when I last actually had a period.”

felt like I had an emotional blackout. I didn't want to be touched, I didn't want to talk and I couldn't be bothered to make an effort. I read the signals and went back to see the doctor again. This time, I broke down like never before.

It had been a year already since I'd felt my lowest ebb and now that dark cloud was back with a vengeance. My friends thought that because I was in a loving relationship and I was back at the top of my game at work, that things were fine and they didn't need to bother checking in anymore. Of course, I can see why. Things always appear better from the outside, don't they?

This time I insisted I wanted to see a hormone specialist. My moods were at their worst, I had gained weight, my periods were still not back and now my skin was really itchy all the time. I was referred to Mr Reginald at The Princess Margaret Hospital and after, conducting the same tests three times, he shared his results.

At 36, he finally diagnosed me with

PREMATURE MENOPAUSE!

Well, that was it - I went deaf! The menopause was something I remember my mum going through in her mid-fifties and my two older sisters certainly were NOT going through it yet. So why, at 36, was I? The one and only question I asked was, "Can I still have children?" You can guess the answer.

The symptoms of early menopause are the same as those for the 'normal' menopause and can include:

- menstrual cycle changes (changes to the usual bleeding pattern, or irregular bleeding) hot flushes
- sweats
- sleep disturbance
- urinary problems (increased frequency of urination or incontinence)
- vaginal dryness
- increase in mood changes
- increase or decrease in weight
- aches and pains

Looking back at the symptoms now, I had them all! I had them from the age of 34. But how on earth was I supposed to know this is what my body was going through? Menopause was for women that were older, that had their children and liked watching Coronation Street of a weeknight!

Despite the shock and despair, I started to feel a wave of relief that finally, I had some answers. I was still the same loving, caring, funny, happy Cinta but I had been lost in a hormone deficiency and it had turned my world upside down. Here was me - festival lover, beauty expert, life and soul of the party. I felt like I'd been written off and it had all come to an end in the prescription note I was handed for HRT (hormone replacement therapy).

There are various reasons as to why girls go through menopause earlier in life. Autoimmune conditions, Crohn's disease, rheumatoid arthritis and galactosaemia are just some, as 60% of the causes remain unknown. It's one of those anomalies you can't control.

I started researching and found a few other girls who were going through it, or had been through it and were now on the other side. This gave me hope. I got scared about HRT and was reassured by the girls I spoke to. I already felt old before my time, and the devastation of knowing my egg reserve was gone and I wouldn't be able to have my own children was hard enough - loneliness didn't need adding to it.

When the oestrogen depletes from our bodies, we're often left feeling a bit like a dehydrated prune. Our bodies change, our skin changes and it's a constant battle to try our best to prevent ourselves falling into a rabbit hole of low self-esteem.

It's easy for us to think that certain symptoms lead to the most common problems. One of my biggest regrets is not speaking up sooner; I knew my body and I knew something wasn't right. It was more the mental trauma I was living through. The good thing though is my hardcore friends knew my soul too well, and if it wasn't for the few that stuck around I probably would have suffered in silence for longer. Every doctor's trip was a step closer to discovering I was in the depths of menopause, but I couldn't have made it there without support.

I decided to embrace a plant-based diet and started to take extra supplements like Cell Nutrition on top of my HRT. I read books and continued to reach out to others I found who went through a similar experience to normalise my condition. I was amazed with the discoveries and even more amazed by how well I responded to my new way of life. The weight had been lifted off of my shoulders for sure!

I've been slowly finding ways to feel more like myself again. Hydrating my skin is the most common and easiest thing to keep on top of, as skin can have a tendency to dry out during menopause, get spotty or become super itchy. I use products that contain hyaluronic acid to hydrate. Facial spritzes are the easiest way to do this, and I stocked up on tonnes! Nourishing my skin and eating lots of fruits and veggies, avoiding anything with added hormones, has worked wonders for the way I feel.

To some extent, I feel like the old me. But in a strange way,

STRONGER.

The good news? I've learnt that despite having no egg reserve, I can indeed try to carry with an egg donor and have spoken to various experts in the field who have shown me empathy and filled me with hope. If it doesn't happen, then I plan to adopt. I feel like the love I carry is meant for someone special, and I am sure every day is a step closer to the family that is meant for me.

The best advice I can give anyone has to be this; If something doesn't feel right, never be afraid to ask for help. Ask for all the tests you think are relevant to you, and remember that things always get better.



© Cinta Miller

Premature and Early Menopause affects 1 in 100 women in the UK and 1 in 1000 women before they turn 30. Early Menopause can happen naturally if a woman's ovaries stop making normal levels of certain hormones, particularly the oestrogen. The symptoms are also called Premature Ovarian Failure, or Primary Ovarian Insufficiency.

LESS-COMMON WARNING SIGNS YOU SHOULD NEVER IGNORE:

- Facial hair becoming thicker and darker
- Mood swing extremities that are out of the norm for your personality
- Dry, itchy skin
- Adult acne
- Anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmingly hot most of the time or abnormal sweating in the night
- Any hard, marble-like lumps in your breasts. They're not always sinister, and are often down to blocked ducts or fibroids (which can contain a lot of oestrogen, and can be a sign they might be forming in your uterus too)
- Lack of Libido

(All of the above are common signs that there is some sort of hormonal imbalance in your body. You have every single right to ask for tests that check this, as opposed to being given medication to mask the symptoms. Always ask for thorough hormone tests to find the cause of the symptom.)

And here's some books I'd recommend if you're going through this too:

Before Your Time: The Early Menopause Survival Guide
by Angie Best-Boss and Evelina Weidman Sterling

The New Hot by Meg Matthews

Hot Flush by Michelle Heaton

OHNE-ING YOUR PERIOD:

Founded by best friends Leah and Nikki, who met at university in 2010, Ohne is the period brand of dreams - theirs and ours! The idea is simple: everyone who menstruates should be able to manage their period however they want. Ohne fits around busy lives through a home delivery subscription service, and works hard to have their products work even harder for you.

BY JOANNA HAWKINS

Have you met the baddest, most personal period care brand on the block? Ohne's here to change the personal hygiene game with their subscription services.

All contents of the subscription boxes are picked by you - tell Ohne what you need, customise your kit and you can change your mind by editing or cancelling an order at any time. According to their website, this revolutionary brand's led by the mantra:

'Working to unfuck the planet.'

Ohne's products are also said to be 'animal lover friendly' and 'as good for the planet as they are for the body'.

Certified by both Soil Association and GOTS, Ohne provides

vegan and cruelty free tampons, recyclable cardboard applicators and no plastic packaging!

These products are made with vaginas in mind - no toxins in their totally normal, unscented, unbleached tampons and pads.

Disgraceful spoke to co-founder, Leah Remry-Peploe, and we covered Ohne's humble beginnings, what drives them to do good and all things period care!

What were the driving forces for you and Nikki to start Ohne?

"We were both organic tampon users already, but we also both fit into the 69% of women that are always unprepared for their period when it comes!

Unfortunately, this meant a lot of dashing to the shops, not being able to find organic tampons and

having to use conventional ones instead.

We realised that there must be a better way - we have a technological answer for almost anything we could ask for these days, so there's really no reason shopping for your period products has to be harder than finding a date!

"We decided to launch our bespoke subscription service to address this issue, and to do it in a way that caters to as many different people who have periods as possible. Not every person who menstruates has a 5-day cycle that lasts exactly 28 days. Our service reflects this, as well as being cognizant of the fact that many people need a variety of absorbency types over the course of their period!

"There are so many reasons contributing to why we started Ohne, beginning with an ever-

'CYCLE CARE FOR BABES WHO BLEED'

©Ohne, @im_ohne on Instagram



growing love for all things organic and our frustration at the way periods are still treated as such a shameful thing when they're just a bloody fact of life (cheesy pun intended)... But the real lightbulb moment for us came when Nikki and I were hanging out at my house and talking about periods, as usual.

"We were complaining about how much we hated the designs of traditional period products; all flowery, pink, infantilizing designs that we just couldn't relate to. Nikki pulled out a pad to illustrate her point and we were suddenly struck by just how much plastic was all over it.

Not just in the wrapper, but the actual pad itself is quite obviously

made of much more than just cotton. It bothered us so much that we started doing more in-depth research and discovered stats like the fact that your average sanitary pad contains the equivalent of four shopping bags worth of plastic. After we realised the period product company of our dreams - organic, environmentally conscious, no excessively girlish branding - simply didn't exist, we just knew we had to build it ourselves."

There's still so much stigma

around bleeding. What can each of us do to help fight this, do you think?

"Just something as simple as holding your tampon or pad with pride as you walk to the loo can feel super empowering!

We think opening up conversations with friends, family members around your cycle can be so important, as you realise most bleeders are going through something similar to you, but you're all suffering in silence.

Talking about your period, symptoms, how you feel is so key for representation, and it fights the stigma by normalising a conversation that previously would be shunned as taboo."

What advice would you give to your younger self, in terms of period care and self-love?

“I would tell myself that every single experience you’re having with your period is valid and important, and to respect the process more.”

Don’t be embarrassed to talk about your period pain or staining your knickers. Just embrace your cycle and get to know your body more with cycle tracking, as this will give you a much deeper understanding of why you’re feeling a certain way.”

Here at Disgraceful, we too are determined to fight the shame surrounding periods. How does the future of period care look in your eyes?

“The future looks bright! There are so many amazing conversations being had, and our community of amazing subscribers and followers shows us every day that people are hungry for change, and there’s a fierce passion for changing how periods have been viewed. We’ll keep fighting!”

To continue this conversation, Ohne’s ‘fem space’ community can be found on their website; set up as an online blog discussing all things periods, pro-period CBD care, sex and wellness.

Become a part of the community too, on Instagram @im_ohne or online at ohne.com.



©Sarah Obende, @itsheysarah via Ohne, @im_ohne



©Leah Davis, @leahhdavis on Instagram via Ohne, @im_ohne on Instagram

BY MONICA GIULIANI

HOW WELL DOES CELEBRATING INSECURITY ONLINE WORK ANYWAY?

If you weren't insecure about a feature on your body before it was negatively highlighted on social media, don't let a post tell you that you have to be insecure about it! Someone's insecurity doesn't have to be yours too.

It was just like any evening: I was relaxing in my room, mindlessly scrolling through the Instagram 'Explore' section when I saw it. A Reel popped up from a very well-known fitness guru, with the title 'Want to get rid of hip dips? Do these exercises.' Obviously, the video continued, showing me five or so different exercises, but I couldn't concentrate on them. The only thought racing through my mind was "What the hell are hip dips?"

A few videos skipped by, yet the picture of this fitness star pointing to this sign in true Reels fashion was still stuck in my head. I hadn't heard of hip dips up until that moment, so I googled them, and the same sort of content came up: 'Hip dips workout', 'How to fix hip dips', 'Do you have a hip dip?'... the list went on.

I immediately went to the mirror and looked at myself. I had hip dips. Then, the thoughts came rushing in about whether this was something to be ashamed of, whether I had to do these exercises and whether other people had noticed this on me before.

I concluded quite quickly that the fact I had hip dips didn't bother me and that I was okay with them, but this doesn't mean that this would be the same for everyone. Amongst these articles and videos on Google were a couple of women's magazines that had written about embracing hip dips – but at this point, the damage had been done.

I realised highlighting these 'issues' online that people may not have even known about could trigger them to think about their own bodies as something negative, even if it is a celebratory post.

Is it the smartest idea to talk about your insecurities so freely online? I thought it was, but this Reel made me do a double take.

I wanted to put this concept to the test: Is celebrating insecurities online doing more harm than good? I put up a small questionnaire on my Instagram stories to see if people had experienced anything similar, and what they thought about the whole idea.

In asking if anyone had ever seen an insecurity

others have spoken about online and not realised it was 'something to be insecure about', 80% of people said they had.

The most common point of insecurity? Coincidentally, hip dips! Responses towards hip dips showed confusion towards where this insecurity even came from, and thoughts on the insecurity: "Hip dips! Where did that come from?" and "In the past couple years, people have been talking about hip dips! I don't even notice them" were just a few examples. Another response cited stretch marks, calling them "a confusing concept".

These answers convey how displaying insecurities, especially minuscule and even 'new' insecurities, can be damaging, which was my worry when seeing the Reel.

These influencers and journalists, who are supposed to be respected and looked up to figures, can make someone feel badly about parts of their body they weren't even aware were something to be insecure about.

However, my next question was when the light at the end of the tunnel, as well as my final thoughts, started to appear. 'How does it make you feel seeing people celebrate their insecurities online?'

Whilst this got a mixed batch of answers, with responses such as "great that they're owning it but labelling it as an insecurity can affect others", the overwhelming response was one of happiness. Answers included those of people sharing they feel



© Jade Orth on Unsplash

they're no longer alone in having an insecurity when they see these posts appear, people feeling inspired, liberated, accepted and normal. Something I personally agree with is when widely-followed celebrities celebrate their insecurities and, most importantly, if the post appears genuine, **it really shows a more human side to them and that life is not always as perfect as it may seem.**

I realised my thoughts before seeing this Reel still stood – a world without people openly celebrating their insecurities could be a very dim one. Having these posts published online are so important, and perhaps overrule the harm that may be caused by a couple of viral videos.

I received an email from @forever.saving.for.a.rainy.day on Instagram with her story following this questionnaire, which really solidified my opinion on this article. She spoke about how she developed acne aged 20 and how there was never anyone in the media with acne, as well as anyone around her with acne like hers (which is something that I hugely relate to, as a teenage-to-present-day acne sufferer myself). Her acne made her feel incredibly low and it wasn't until she saw a photo being shared on social media from @theblemishqueen, showing her spots and scarring proudly for the world to see, that her mind-set changed. Where she thought she was going to see hate comments on that post, she saw comments full of encouragement.

The journey of her finding these acne-positive accounts online has led her to feel represented, and that she no longer has to agonise about her skin. Her story was incredibly powerful to me and made me realise celebrating insecurities online is something many of us are so grateful for – the body positive and fat liberation movements may not even exist in online spaces without it. This also seemed to be the final opinion of my followers too, with 83% of people agreeing there are more positives to the celebration of insecurities than there are negatives.

These posts stop people from feeling like they're not normal, and create a worthy, positive self-image. We need to start seeing this kind of content as a good thing, and as an important tool for personal relief when those struggling with insecurities will allow it to be.



©Megan Bagshaw on Unsplash

If you feel that you're still wrestling with negative thoughts when you see people celebrating their so called 'flaws', think about this: if you weren't insecure about this feature before, don't let this post say you have to be insecure about it now!

Remember the time you walked into a room feeling your best self? You probably still had this 'insecurity' at the time and you didn't notice it then, so don't notice it now! Someone else's insecurity doesn't have to be yours too.

Think about people celebrating their insecurities online as a way to celebrate your shared features and realise that you're not alone in feeling how you do about it – everyone has them! Surround your social media space with people that love their body, no matter their shape or size.

ALL BODIES ARE BEAUTIFUL AND UNIQUE, SO DON'T LET ANYONE TELL YOU DIFFERENTLY.

HOW ALOHA APPAREL CO. IS CHANGING THE FACE OF FASHIONABLE CUSTOMISATION



© Aloha Apparel Co.

With fashion trends ever changing, the customisation of clothing is a staple that's withstood the test of time. Aloha Apparel Co. and their customisable clothes are here to prove exactly why this is, and share how empowering personalising your fashion can be.

BY EMMA GILL

It survived the arrival of skinny jeans, the revitalisation of the miniskirt and the short-lived comeback of the leg warmers – it's safe to say customising our clothes is here to stay. It's undoubtedly one of the best ways to boost your self-confidence too. We asked Aloha Apparel Co. and one of their customers, Beth Dawson, for their thoughts on customising clothing, the benefits it has and how it can empower each and every one of you.

Hi Aloha Apparel Co.! Tell us all about your business?

"Aloha Apparel Co. designs magical apparel for everyday life – clothing that sparks joy and happiness from the minute you put it on! Using high quality clothing and material, we bring designs to life that can be worn at home, at the park, on the move, wherever life takes you! We are excited to be offering clothing for both adults and children, giving people the opportunity to style their whole family."

What inspired you to start a fashion company based around embroidery?

"There are many different ways to put your designs on clothing, such as screen-printing and heat press transfer. In my opinion, embroidery gives the customer the best possible quality. As an online business, people want to be able to see the quality of your product up close and when they cannot see or feel the product in person, customers need to be sure that you are providing them [with] the best for the money they are spending. Embroidery washes extremely well and the finish of the stitching is flawless."



© Aloha Apparel Co.

Running Aloha Apparel Co. isn't your day job, is it? How did you get into the fashion world?

"No, I am a Primary School Teacher by day! I work on Aloha Apparel Co. in the evenings and at the weekend. Aloha Apparel Co. started as a 'what do you think' conversation with my partner."

I had been looking into the embroidery world and had done a lot of research. The fashion world is a big place and I felt as though I had something to offer which would be of value to other people."

And how do you decide on the designs you sell?

"Design inspiration can come from anywhere! I'm not an artist in any way, but I find myself sketching

out little designs on sticky notes. I take these and develop them further.

"When it's one of my own designs, it can be quite a long process. I like to draw out my initial design on the embroidery software and then I make several copies of it, each tweaked in different ways. From this, I can pick out the elements I like, merge things together and produce a final design. I like to run my ideas by friends and family to get their thoughts too."

"When I think I have a final design, I do a test run where I stitch the design out on some fabric. This will give me an idea of what the finished design looks like, and how it stitches out. From there, I can make any changes necessary."

Why is it that you choose to embroider everything to order? It must be a time-consuming process; how do you deal with not burning out because of your business?

“It’s true, embroidery can be quite a time-consuming process. There are a lot of steps that happen both before and after the design has been stitched. The length of time a product takes from start to finish depends on both the size and how intricate the design is. We have some designs that take over an hour to stitch! We currently run our business from one machine so while it’s stitching out a product, I get to work on prepping the next item, packaging items that are done or catching up on admin. I really enjoy doing everything involved with Aloha Apparel Co! Yes, it’s time consuming and there are difficulties as there are with any job, but it is so rewarding posting out our products and hearing such positive reviews from happy customers.”



©Aloha Apparel

How do you think customisation empowers women?

“Customisation gives women a sense of ownership. Seeing their designs come to life is a really exciting process and knowing they have created this product is something that people are proud of! When you are wearing something that you have had a hand in, you feel a sense of confidence and pride.”

Yes, absolutely! There seems to be a connection between customisation and confidence. We spoke to one of your customers, Beth Dawson, who recognised this link from your products. She shared this review with us...

“I chose to buy customised clothing from Aloha Apparel Co. because I love that I can be at the forefront of my own design, in the sense that I can go to Aloha and work alongside them to create my own clothing. Additionally, I love that they have designs you can build upon but also, they’re stylish but subtle! Often, I find that designs can be too bold and too big. It feels over the top to wear out for day-to-day and [non] special occasions where those designs may not always fit, so I never feel too over the top [in Aloha] which is really important for me.

“It makes me feel confident too, which I love! I believe Aloha

Apparel Co.’s customisation empowers women because it allows you to have the creativity to be unique and individual. I also feel empowered because – it might sound silly, but I love that they offer ladies fitting t-shirts. I always feel it’s hard to get the right fit. It either feels too tight or too baggy or doesn’t hang in the right place. But this fit allows the customisation to feel even more like it was handpicked just for me. So, not only do I love the design, I become empowered and confident in what I’m wearing and am eager to show it off!”

Beth also shared these benefits to buying clothes that are customised...



©Aloha Apparel

“You own a unique product! It’s so special for a customer to be given the opportunity to create their own piece of clothing. It means that people can bring their own design to life, something that they may not have had the opportunity to do before.”

And she told us her favourite perks of customising her clothes professionally too!

“For me, I love the fact Aloha Apparel Co clothing is customised because for ages I would only be able to buy certain themed clothing from big chains like Primark and I found everyone would be wearing the same thing. But something customised is so eye-catching and

leaves everyone wanting to know where you got it from! I also love that I can create a design that’s more to my taste and is specific to my favourite [characters and icons] rather than it being a one option only that you may not really like but buy because it’s the nearest thing. I also love that I can customise something which then helps me to build upon memories and create it so that the clothing and design have personal meanings to me!”

Back to you, Aloha Apparel Co! Fashion trends are ever changing, will you adapt to them as they do?

“We are constantly looking at what is going on in the fashion world.

T-shirts, crew neck jumpers and hoodies are a staple in most people’s wardrobes. We will adapt to changing trends and continue to create designs that people love!”

What advice would you give to others who want to start a fashion business but have no experience within the fashion world or a fashion background?

“Give it a go! It’s scary taking that step, whether [in] the fashion world or not, but without giving it a go, you’ll never know what it is like.

Research is so important – find out anything and everything you can about your field and use this to power forward.

Reach out to others in the same field as you; join social media groups to gather knowledge and contacts. Not having experience in the fashion world is not a problem!

Be yourself, be your biggest cheerleader and go for it!

You can find Aloha Apparel Co on:

Instagram: @alohaapparelco,

Facebook: Aloha Apparel Co.

Website: www.alohaapparelco.com

HOW TO AUTHENTICALLY STYLE PUNK FASHION

Punk dressing emerged in the 1970s, and the rock-inspired fashion has been steadily becoming more stylised, and celebrated within society ever since. We talked to Miffy Englefield about her own brand of punk style, and how her styling choices allow her to feel the most authentic to herself.



BY EMMA GILL

Hey Miffy! Tell us a little about yourself?

“Hi! I’m Miffy, I’m 22 and I live in West Sussex. I’ve been in the punk scene for over 10 years, and I don’t see my love of the scene dying off any day soon!”

Why do you choose to dress in the punk style?

“Although there is no one way to look ‘punk’, I do realise I take a lot of elements from what might be seen as more traditional punk style and use it in my outfits. I do this simply because I like the way it looks and how it makes me feel. I also like to use my clothes

to portray a message, whether that be my political standpoint, lyrics I like or bands I want to openly show my support for.”

So how long have you been styling yourself through a punk fashion lens?

“I’m not really sure how to answer that as I’m not sure what really classes as ‘punk fashion’ – I do know the first jacket I ever made was when I was 11 (it had a UK SUBS backpatch and the some pretty terrible studding), so I guess that’s when I started showing my love for the music through my clothes!”

What do you think make up the basic clothing elements of punk fashion, and how instrumental are accessories and hair styles to the look?

“The punk scene is filled with so many people that there’s not really a fashion to it! I know people with face tattoos and giant mohawks, but I also know people who live in their comfy jeans and worn-out hoodies who, a lot of the time, are even more prevalent in the scene. It is not important at all to look more alternative to the norm.

For many people, dressing more ‘out there’ isn’t for them, we’re all just in it for the music and the people who make up such an inclusive and accepting scene. Punk is for everyone – studs, or no studs!”

A big part of punk culture is being anti-brand and pro DIY-ing clothes. Where do you buy your clothes from and what do you look out for?

“I’d say 97% of my clothes are second-hand. I get most of my clothes through charity shop hunting or eBay – I hate textile waste and think there’s absolutely no need to buy things new when clothes are the tenth biggest pollutant in the world. I’ve found some incredible items online and in charity shops that are already a bit different but a lot of the time I’ll look for things that I can customise by cutting, studding, patching up or painting on.

“Punk is for everyone - studs, or no studs!”

“My latest investment is a cricut machine (which is like a cutting printer) that I got second-hand from Facebook. This means I can cut out designs onto vinyl and press them onto clothes I want to add a little spice to. I spent so many years suffering with fabric paint that I thought it was time to treat myself to an easier method!”

We love that! Do you have any tips on customising your own clothes to create an outfit that’s authentic to ourselves?

“We live in a world with some fantastic online resources, you’re almost guaranteed to find a tutorial



© Miffy Englefield, @miffyenglefield on Instagram

online these days for whatever you want to do. Do some googling, get some ideas together, watch some tutorials and practise on something you don’t mind ruining first! I’ve definitely screwed up cutting a band t-shirt before because I got cocky and didn’t plan it out properly before!”

Do you think clothing customisation can empower women?

“For me, customising my clothes is a way to keep myself authentic to who I am. With so many retailers these days all portraying very similar images of what looking like the social ideal of a woman is these days, so many clothes out there look so similar to each other.

“I don’t like the thought of being told what to wear or what I should look like through the extremely quick movement of trends and these big influencers we’re constantly saturated with, so customising my clothes makes me feel comfortable with myself. It works too. I’ve had some of the pieces in my wardrobe for 10 years now and I still wear them just as much as when I first got them.”

And how does dressing punk empower everyone?

“Not only is it empowering to look a way that makes you feel good, but it’s great to use your clothes to show your support (or dislike) for certain things. You’ll not only see people in the punk scene sporting t-shirts of their favourite bands but a lot of the time they’ll also wear things that show their views on things that are happening in the world like the [actions of the] government, homophobia, racism, etc.

“A lot of people in the scene have very strong views of the injustices going on in the world and by wearing items of clothing that bring attention to those things you’re showing the whole world how you feel about them.”

It’s often said that dressing alternatively to the norm can affect your employability and status in this world. Do you think your stylistic choices have ever impacted you professionally?

“For me, it hasn’t at all. My tattoos are easily covered, I have very few piercings compared to other people I know and when I go into an interview for a job, I always do my best to look professional. I have had a few jobs in the past that have subtly voiced their views on the way I dress outside of work but because I’d always turn up to my job looking professional [so] there’s not much they can do about it. I’ve also had a couple of jobs where they were super supportive of the way I dressed, and didn’t mind at all when I was on shift – the joys of being a barmaid!”

“by wearing items of clothing that bring attention to those views you’re showing the whole world how you feel about them.”

“I’ve been in the punk scene for over 10 years, and I don’t see my love of the scene dying off any day soon!”

What advice would you give to others who dress in punk style and want to remain authentic to themselves, but also conform to interview dress codes?

“Turn up to your interview looking professional – it shows you want to make a good impression, and that applies for people who don’t dress in a more alternative fashion. You wouldn’t expect someone to rock up to a job interview in a tracksuit, so maybe don’t turn up in 6-inch platforms and your most political t-shirt. And ask about uniform policies when you’re in the interview so you can make sure it’s the right job for you if you have plans to dye your hair very bright colours or get visible tattoos.

“In my experience, these days people don’t care about hair colour, but each company is different and you wanna make sure the job is right for you in all aspects.”

And lastly, what advice would you give to others who want to dress/style themselves in such a bold look but are too apprehensive due to backlash?

“The world has never been more accepting of people who dress in a more eccentric way than it is today. In reality, there’s probably very few people in the world who care what outfit you’re wearing or what your hairstyle is when they have their own lives to think about.

You can follow Miffy’s fashion on Instagram: [@miffyenglefield](https://www.instagram.com/miffyenglefield)

© Miffy Englefield, @miffyenglefield on Instagram

“DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY, YOU’RE THE ONLY PERSON WHO MATTERS AT THE END OF THE DAY!”

A NEW HOPE FOR FASHION CREATIVES

WITH NEW TALENT FASHION



© New Talent Fashion, @newtalentfashion on Instagram

The fashion industry is notoriously hard to break into, and don't we know it. It's an industry that gained its esteem by being incredibly exclusionary, but New Talent Fashion are working hard to change this. Could this up-and-coming platform reimagine the way fashion works, once and for all?

BY SCARLETT HATCHWELL

It's the dream of so many young creatives – to learn everything there is to know in the arena of style, to hone their natural talents and to truly make a name for themselves in the competitive world of fashion. Right now, more than ever, we need a workforce made up of inclusive voices – one that goes beyond superficial 'diversity quotas' – to ensure fashion's future is headed in the right direction.

New Talent Fashion is here, and they're all about making the industry and its elusive opportunities a lot more accessible.

With their slogan, 'We See You', they work hard to find opportunities for underrepresented creatives, breaking down one barrier to entry at a time. We sat down with Siobhan O'Donnell, the founder and CEO of the platform, and Helena Smith, marketing manager and PA to Siobhan, to take a peek behind the scenes.

We'd love to hear about your backgrounds and how you broke into the field. Could you tell us more?

Helena: "At university, I studied BA (Hons) Communication and Media and graduated in 2018. Although I enjoyed my course, I still felt unsure about what I wanted to do with my career. I always had an interest in the fashion industry and a handful

of assignments around fashion-based subjects and case studies. Later that year, I decided to take on a masters degree, studying an MA in Fashion and Business at Manchester Fashion Institute. I passed with a Distinction in September 2019 and during this time felt I had learnt so many rewarding skills to start my career in the industry.

"At MFI, I worked as the social media assistant for the faculty's magazine and the summer before I graduated, I started as a digital marketing assistant for a fashion wholesaler. Unfortunately, I was made redundant in 2020 due to Covid-19, but I soon found my spot at New Talent Fashion in June 2020."

Siobhan: "I'm the founder and CEO of New Talent Fashion and have eighteen years of experience working within the fashion industry. I attended Brighton University to study biomedical sciences, where I founded and successfully ran the university's first ever fashion society for three years. It was here that I launched my first fashion business and put on a series of fashion catwalk events to sell-out audiences. I'm also a qualified tailor and seamstress and have designed, launched and sold two small fashion labels during my career. I've worked as a freelance writer for several fashion platforms in the UK [too]."

Where did the idea for New Talent Fashion come from, and what was it born of? Once you'd created the blueprint for the business, how did you mould it into the powerhouse platform it is today?

Siobhan: "New Talent Fashion started from a passion for wanting to see change within the fashion industry and a love for new talent. I've always believed everyone should be given the same opportunities and no one should be held back by gender, beliefs, ethnicity, race, postcode, status, financial aspects or their past. For the people who have lost self-belief, we believe in them."

"Here at NTF, we see you. We celebrate new talent, we support new talent and we help new talent grow. We're successful because we have a team that believes in our vision, a team that puts value for our users at the heart of everything we do. The business is run with a clear vision in mind, and we can adapt and make changes to survive any unexpected circumstances. New Talent Fashion supports communication within the industry - engaging in the conversations people don't often talk about."

"With hard work, dedication, stubbornness (to not give in or give up), adaptability, authenticity, passion, honesty and most of all belief, anything you do will be a success."

What services do you currently offer within NTF?

Helena: "[We're] designed to empower, showcase talent and connect creatives, graduates and students with the fashion industry. By highlighting the most creative minds, we recognise new talent and help them grow. We support each individual by offering a space to feel accepted and an opportunity for self-expression, with diverse content to inspire each unique journey."

"Our support is extended from our site through two subscription services: the Student Hub, an exclusive subscription tailored for students and accessed by our partners and education, and NTF Exclusive, a targeted solution to keep users informed on the ever-changing industry."

We recognise new talent and help them grow

The exclusive areas of your site make a great toolkit for up-and-coming creatives, and we live for it! What are the biggest benefits of signing up to your Student Hub or NTF Exclusive subscriptions from here?

Helena: "Each subscription has been tailored for its intended demographic, so the Student Hub produces content to help

you kickstart your journey into the fashion industry. By collaborating with education, we're being implemented into the curriculum to support employability and personal development."

"NTF Exclusive, on the other hand, offers that all-important content surrounding industry updates, the latest innovations and all the tools to help develop your existing skill set. We hope this pushes the user that one step further in helping them secure their dream job, or gain the right experience to be on the right path to do so."

You have a growing community of dedicated fans online. How did you go about cultivating this?

Helena: "I truly believe we're offering something unique here at NTF, something which has been missing for a while for creatives in the industry. I've said since the start, I would lap this platform up during my time at university, but nothing of the sort existed then. Our followers have helped us get to where we are today. Whether via Instagram or our subscribers, each individual has contributed to our development and position within the industry. We vouch to always remain open, honest and reliable, and provide content based on what our users need whilst creating an exciting network of creatives who can trust in us to help them."

How important is it to NTF

to make your stance on the fashion industry - such as a push for more accessibility, more inclusion, more representation and more sustainable practices - known?

Siobhan: "It's extremely important. We will continue to innovate our business model to make sure we're supporting accessibility and inclusion within the industry, and each day strive for more representation."

"In March, we presented our event, Sustainability meets Fast Fashion, and hosted a panel of industry experts discussing their experiences coming from both backgrounds within fashion. It's these conversations that help make the change, and we will continue to ask the questions that others may be afraid to ask in order to make a difference."

Helena: "We're currently working on our very first Northern Fashion Week. Our fashion week aims to be very different from the rest by championing new talent from the North of the United Kingdom. Our agenda includes catwalks highlighting body positivity, inclusion, LGBTQIA+ talent and much more."

"It's important for us to give a platform to those who are under or misrepresented in the industry. It doesn't matter to us how big or established your brand is, if you have only made one collection -

we want to see it and offer you the stage."

"By supporting Northern businesses, our fashion week will spotlight the great opportunity that lies in the North to retain talent and create an ecosystem to build Northern industry. We are hosting Northern Fashion Week in July 2022, so stay tuned for more details!"

And how is it that you market what you do as a brand? What're your best tips to young creatives on marketing

We're supporting accessibility and inclusion within the industry, and each day strive for more representation. We will continue to ask the questions that others may be afraid to ask

themselves to the industry?

Helena: "We always remain true to ourselves, and organic marketing has done us wonders so far! Most of what you see on our Instagram has been designed by a member

of our team and we take time to create content that is unique and engaging for our audience - images and graphics that they haven't seen anywhere else. I believe this is what really captures the audience's eye."

"In regards to marketing yourself to the industry, I think it's important to believe in your work and your skills. Employers notice when you aren't sure of something, so speak and share with assertiveness. Start by creating an Instagram account dedicated to your practice; this will get you used to talking about yourself more, ready for those all-important interviews."

"When it comes to CVs and portfolios, there is a lot of competition online. I see some amazing creative CVs on LinkedIn, but don't be put off by this if you feel you'd prefer to share a more conventional one."

"It all boils down to your experience and how you express yourselves. Where's the fun in us all doing the same thing? Don't be afraid to share work that you aren't the proudest of either, because you never know, it may be exactly what someone is looking for."

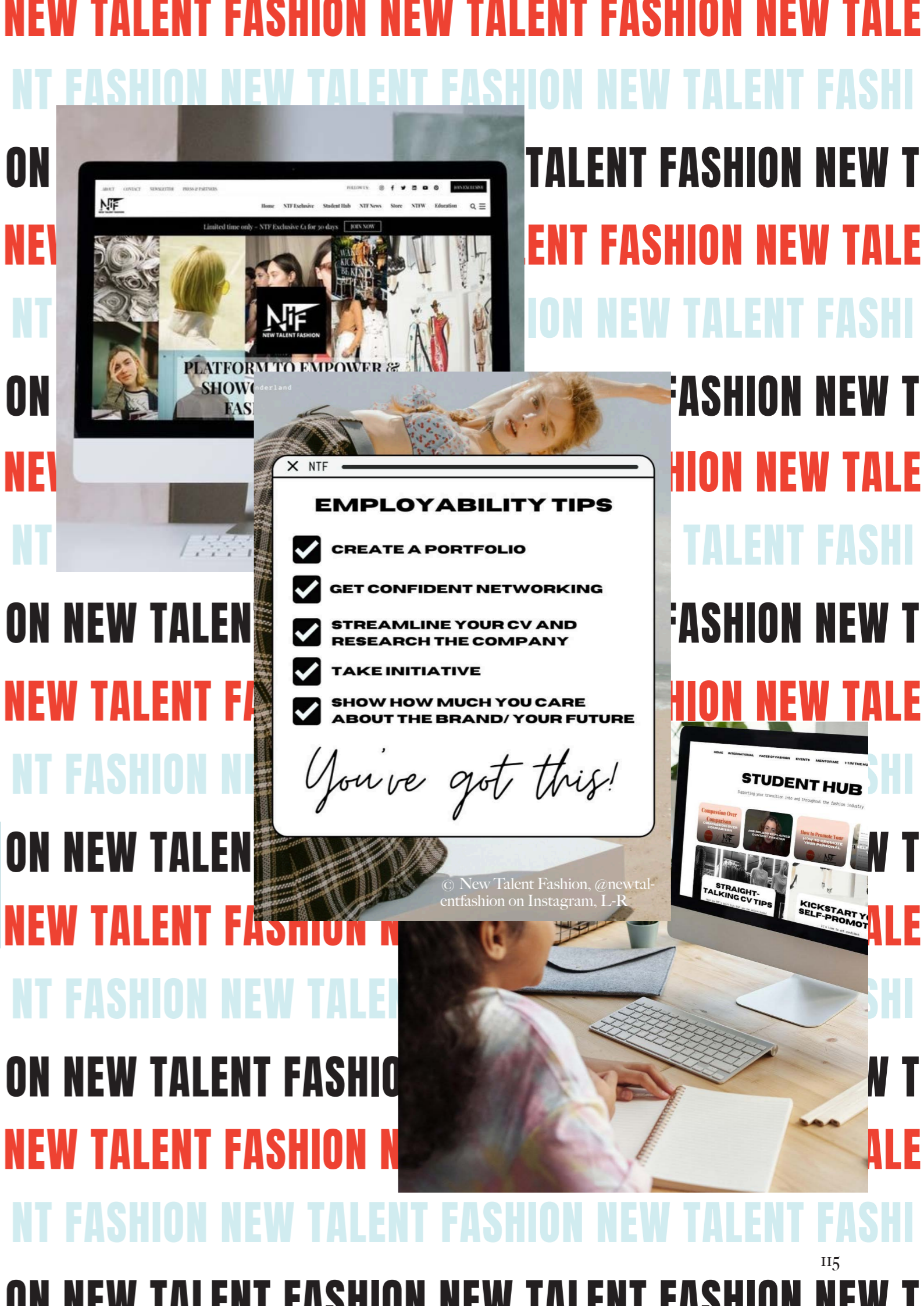
The creatives born during Covid times are so valuable, as they have had to adapt to new forms of learning and developing. Your time will come!

Life's tough right now, but so is everyone looking to work in the fashion business. What's your best piece of advice for persevering through the end of these difficult, different times?

Helena: "Patience is key within the fashion industry, and setbacks are important for personal growth. The creatives born during Covid times are so valuable, as they have had to adapt to new forms of learning and developing. Your time will come!"

And lastly, why should our readers come check you out and join in on all the incredible things you're doing?

Helena: "We're a friendly team who're always here for our users to reach out to. We like to put our faces out there so you can see who we are. We're a relatable bunch of creatives who can truly help you with your transition into the fashion industry. Make sure you're following us on Instagram, @newtalentfashion, to stay up to date and get to know us more. "We hope to see you over on NTF soon!"



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TODAY, THE MUNDANE



© Shan Purdy

SHANNON PURDY

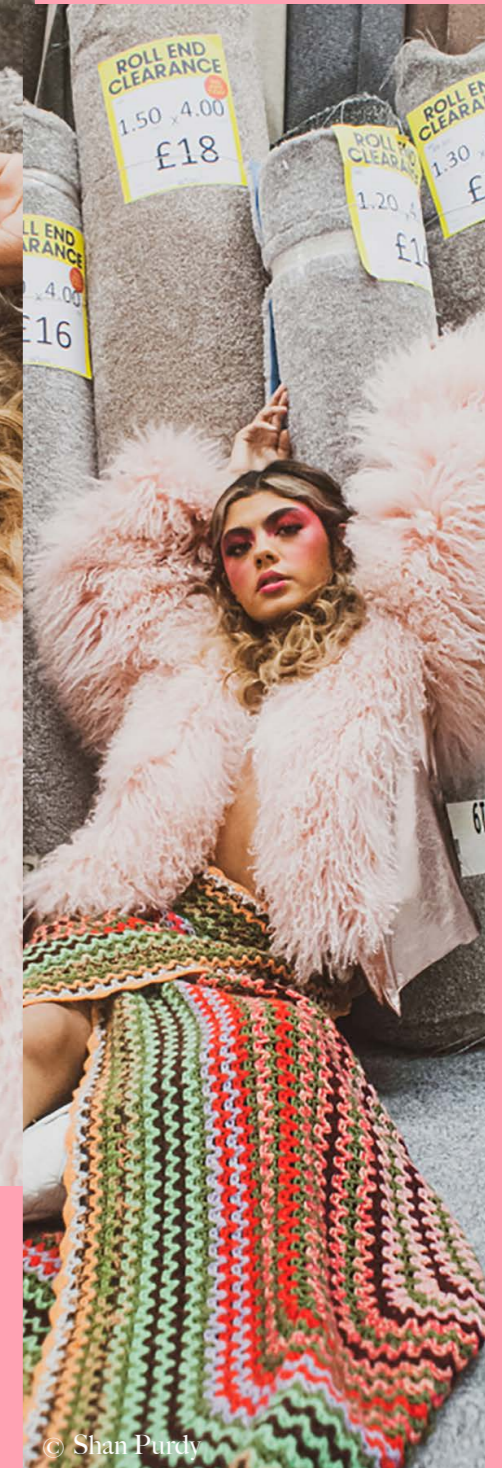
Photographer – Shan Purdy (@shannpurdyphotos) Stylist & Art Direction – Lucy Dunkley (@lucy.dunkley)
Model – Reanna T of Jadore Models MUA – Charley Pick (@charleypickma) Hair – Michelle Gibbons



© Shan Purdy



© Shan Purdy



© Shan Purdy

Pink Mongolian Fur jacket – Rachael Blasbery
Crochet blanket worn as a skirt – Oxfam
White and gold leaf cowboy boots – Darcy Grant



© Shan Purdy



© Shan Purdy

Green floral unitard - Sarah Thompson
 Green Corset: Ellie Misner
 Earrings - Model's Own
 Tight-shoes - Stylist's Own



© Shan Purdy

Earrings - Model's Own
 Tight-shoes - Stylist's Own
 Trench Coat and leather corset belt - Emily Harper



© Shan Purdy



Corset Dress and purple flared trousers - Ellie Misner Belt worn as a necklace - Sacred Hawk



© Photo by Fox from Pexels

IS THERE A SERIOUS FUTURE FOR THE FEMALE JOURNALISTS OR ARE WE STILL A JOKE?

Staring hard into the university lecture theatre, the guest speaker and long-time working journalist stops and scans the students before him. After a squint and a blink to check he isn't imagining it, alongside a chuckle he shouts to the class, "Wow, how many girls are in here? Raise your hand if you are a man?" After four or five males raise their hands, the guest speaker puts his hands on his hips, takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "I can't believe how many girls are in this class, I thought this was journalism."

In recent years, the media industry has plastered the promise of improvement when it comes to diversity inclusion, especially with women. As a recent journalism graduate, who just also happens to be a woman, it's clear to me that post-university life and endless applications make doing what we love a near impossibility.

Women still seem to be left in the dark and surreptitiously brushed aside when it comes to applications and important roles. That is, unless, there's a need for the latest makeup and fashion trends. *Well, duh. Us women will, like, totally know all about that for sure!*

Surprisingly, there's more to the complexities of female media professionals than carrying the latest copy of Vogue, which smashes stigmas in this industry by the way. It also isn't feeling the need to update the boardroom on what celebrity scandal has occurred or getting overly emotional when reporting sensitive topics, something that apparently, we as women are at risk of. So, even when these stereotypical personality traits are noted down to be forgotten, why does it feel like they're still buried deep into the 'to be deleted' pile when it comes to being taken more seriously?

When looking deeper into whether women feel valued in the media industry, especially new starters, it turns out that many

BY DREW O'KEEFFE

women turn to personal projects just to feel that sense of control and inclusivity that's missing.

When speaking to active journalist Gina Tonic, she explains how she too created her own publication to 'make space' for certain females.

"I started my own publication last year, *The Fat Zine*, to make a space for fat people to share their stories in a platform specifically designed and upheld by fellow fat people. The same is true for women and I got my start in journalism through female focused publications like *Bustle*, *Refinery29* and independent zines like *Polyester* and *Sister*. I'm a huge advocate for making our own spaces if the outside world is not open to us and I hope that female focused independent publications lead the way in journalism more and more in the coming years. A great example of a publication that does this is *Gal Dem*, who definitely represents an inclusive and engaging future for journalism in my eyes."

The idea of women taking matters into their own hands is both upsetting and yet empowering. This doesn't just occur in the media industry, but through all walks of life, as every woman would know. Gina goes on to tell us what she thinks is the best advice for someone who needs to break a little more mould to fit into the man's world of journalism:

"Probably self-confidence! I feel women often approach work, especially in the media, not seeing the value in our work in the way that men inherently understand theirs. This has been hard to get over, is something that still trips

me up, and feels like a commonality for most women in this industry."

Being a journalist can mean a number of things in modern day, ranging from working in news, on magazines, within radio and TV as well as running a blog. The definition of a journalist is being an individual who collects, researches and shares information and stories. So why is it that when we think of journalists, we automatically think of a mysterious male figure smoking a pipe, sitting alone in a dimly lit room dressed in a hat and coat?

The answer is, when educated about journalists you will come across the men who made it what it is but will be told the female side of it resembles an amphibian enclosure at the zoo. Full of dragons with scales and cold blood. Only women with no emotion or empathy can do this job right, right? Just look at the depictions of Anna Wintour, one of the magazine industries most successful individuals.

Gina Tonic shares her opinion on what she, a female in the field, sees when the term 'journalist' is mentioned.

"I feel it's a bit dated! I definitely prefer the term writer. It's more encompassing of the different styles of journalism, especially in the personal essay era, and gives more space for creative freedom. The term journalist makes me think of Boris Johnson and Piers Morgan having weekly columns in rags that allow them to perpetuate their right-wing point of view."

The likes of Stacey Dooley, Emma Barnett and Ann Curry

are female journalists who battle the stereotype and welcome women into the trade. One of the biggest scandals of the 2010's was broken by dynamic *New York Times* duo Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey in 2017. A big slap in the face to anyone who doubted their ability as women, in more ways than one. Staying quiet in the small space we are given is no longer an option. We are growing day by day, so the industry better get a bigger box.

So, could the future of journalism be female? Or are we going to have to make our own space inch by inch to get where we really deserve to be?

Recent journalism graduate from the University of Westminster, Niamh Hutchings, shares her opinion on life in the industry after graduation.

"At uni I thought it was (the future being female), our class was majority female and so were the classes above and below us which was super interesting. However, the last couple of industry jobs I had (especially the last one) almost made a point of hiring more male journalists than women. So, whilst more women are training in journalism, employers are still more likely to hire men over women. It's something that I think will only be changed by new publications, such as *Disgraceful*."

Celeb Stylist and Digital Editor, Marian Kwei, shares what she thinks from an editor's point of view.

"This industry could definitely be 'more female'. I think there is an old stereotype that women can't be 'hard news based' but this is

**WE ARE
FEMALE,
WE ARE
PROFESSIONALS
AND WE ARE
THE FUTURE.**


an old boy's chauvinistic belief. Women don't have to take on roles that are considered 'softer' and can do anything they want to do."

A last word from Gina Tonic shares the industry, "definitely needs work! Luckily, the circles I work within are diverse, but even they are not as diverse as they could be, let alone the press out-

side of the bubble I, and many of my peers work within. I feel "equal enough" which is an oxymoron, how can equality be achieved just because your staff is only 50% men compared to 80%? It takes more work than simply the hiring process in my opinion, but the content put out, the people who are at the top of these companies, and so many more intricate nuances."

Could it be that the industry is slowly changing and making room to see us women as equals? With the push from publications such as *Disgraceful*, a female run future within the media is in clear view.

We are female, we are professionals and we are the future.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black top, is climbing a metal staircase. She is looking up and pointing towards the camera. The staircase is made of metal railings and is set against a stone wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

ROTATING THE LADDER: WHY MY NON-LINEAR CAREER PATH IS MY STRENGTH

BY AMY KIRKHAM

I used to get uncomfortable when the topic of my career journey came up in conversation. When people asked, I didn't like not having a smooth, strategic story to neatly lay out on the table. Instead, my journey seemed random, branching off in different directions based on my curiosities and a questionable calculation that it would all work out.

But over time, my perspective shifted. I now enjoy the diversity of experiences I can bring to a conversation, using it to reflect my strength and versatility. And while there are still times when I question what life would be like if I stayed or chose differently, ultimately, I don't regret any of my decisions.

I've worked in production, content, operations and project management. I've exposed myself to multiple industries, from publishing and consulting to start-ups and media. I've managed a team and executed international programmes for organisations. I have worked creatively, strategically and analytically across global teams and cultures.

My path so far is not linear, and for many others, it's a similar pattern...

The nature of the career progression story has been transforming with every year. What was once a conversation, often between men, about how you were likely to get your boss's job after 10 years if you stayed and worked hard, has now translated into a more fluid and unpredictable tale for everyone.

We now have planned and unplanned gaps in our career paths, such as going travelling, starting a family or taking some time away to recharge. We have the ability to job-hop to reach our professional goals or make it fit with our changing life situations.

For many of us, we're lucky not to have to seek the stability and tenure that ruled our parents and grandparents professional and personal decisions. Instead, we're more nomadic as a generation, ruled by different expectations about what life can offer.

To a large degree, we have technology to thank for that. In an age of phones and laptops, we've seen the job market rapidly evolve and provide the option to work and connect from anywhere in the world. As a result, the scope of what's important in life has expanded, with personal fulfilment taking centre stage more than ever.

So, it's no surprise that the traditional, vertical model of career development no longer fits the mould, right?

Yet, despite such a positive shift in the direction of more freedom, there still seems to linger a set of silent rules that run parallel with our decisions. We still feel like we're doing something wrong if we choose not to climb the vertical ranks of one organisation or if we can't answer *that* five-year plan interview question.

But why? What is stopping us from simply rotating the ladder and climbing laterally to our goals?

This is something Lisa Alteri, Chief People Officer for Kraft Heinz U.S. advocates for. After her career spanning finance and sales, Lisa moved into the people function as CPO in 2018. In an article with Glassdoor, she encourages us to lean into our curiosity and embrace the power of a lateral move or step down.

'It's something I try to encourage within people when it comes to their performance: Don't think of moves as just about moving up - think also of moving laterally.'

So, this horizontal growth that we're exploring is actually something that's hugely important for both our professional development and stability. With the modernisation of many businesses, leaders now look for employees with soft, transferable skills as well as specialist, technical skills. These days, employees need to be fluent in a variety of disciplines that bridge gaps between different functions, so it's vital that we continue to explore growth on whatever level we stand on.

Lateral moves also cover a broad spectrum, with some exploring a new role, team or department while others move to entirely different industries and fields of interest. William Craig, in an article for Forbes, touches on this idea well when he describes a career trajectory as a lattice rather than a ladder. He says:

'Vertical growth is like taking the elevator straight to your destination. Horizontal growth is like opening a bunch of new doors on the floor you're already on.'

When I apply this to my own experiences, I have leveraged and improved my skills due to exploring opportunities both up and across. I've had to learn to work with a lot of new teams, systems, processes and industries, I am a better person and employee for it.

For those considering a move but afraid of looking jumpy or disloyal, remember that the reason behind your consideration is likely because you are seeking something that is missing currently. Here are just some of the signs that it might be time to explore a move:

1. You no longer feel challenged in your role and the progression upwards isn't there or doesn't appeal (be honest with yourself on that last one - it's ok to not want the promotion).
2. Other industries ignite your curiosity, and you find your interests are greater elsewhere.
3. Your life has changed and requires something that your current role or organisation can't give you.

Take your time to consider your next move and ensure it's for the right reasons related to you. Find a common thread between your roles, even if they're unrelated and across different industries; transferable skills and talents can transcend one industry or function, so don't allow it to act as a barrier to what you want to do.

Linear paths are not the only way to success. Instead, success is something that fits uniquely with each person. If opportunities arise in your life and for whatever you reason you want to jump at them, then jump.

Life continues, as do you.

“SUCCESS IS SOMETHING THAT FITS UNIQUELY WITH EACH PERSON”



WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW BEFORE THEY GRADUATE

BY ANIKA AKTHER
AND ABI PURVIS

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False promises were made about life after graduation. Why did no one warn us? Future graduates, here's what you need to know.

[Abi] When University was sold to me by my secondary school, I was under the impression that I'd get my degree and be able to waltz into a graduate scheme or entry level job in my desired career. False.

I thought when I graduated, I'd know exactly where I wanted to be career-wise and exactly how I'd arrive at that goal. False.

I thought the day I left uni would be exciting, emotional and one of the most memorable days of my life. False... well, perhaps there's some truth to this, just not in the way I expected.

Now, as a graduate of 2020, there are unsurprisingly few reasons as to why my leaving day from Plymouth University was not quite the big send off I had envisioned... all thanks to our good friend, Sir Covid-19. But regardless of the send-off, the reality of life after being officially termed a 'graduate' is incredibly different to the expectations we were once falsely presented with.

That's not to say that if I could go back in time and not go to university I would, because that's not true; I would still go to university. I love learning, I adored my course, and I made some wonderful friends and memories there which I would never pass up.

It's just that life after uni is not the instant job securing, money making, goal achieving future we once thought it would be.

Myself and Anika, and practically almost all graduates, were not expecting the world which we were faced with. That's why we've decided to write this piece. We want to make future grads aware of what to expect when graduating and provide some advice we wish we hadn't had to learn the hard way.

As 2020 graduates, our time was cut short and the job market became virtually impossible to navigate. Regardless, we've had to live with it and adapt, and

so will those after us. Graduates of 2021 and maybe even 2022 might still have to face the consequences of Covid on the job market – who knows when or if it'll ever be 'normal' again.

Internships

[Anika] Internships and work experience are some of the best ways to get a foot into the industry you want to work in.

One of the reasons I chose to do an internship is so that I can distinguish myself from other applicants. Outside of lessons, it's extracurricular activities, volunteering and work experience that will set you apart from other candidates.

Digital internships have grown in popularity due to Covid-19. As someone who has taken part in one, they are a good way to test those soft skills companies are looking for. Adapting through Zoom meetings and communicating through a screen while still getting the message across is a great way to show potential employers your flexibility in a work environment.

Make sure the employers are paying for your work and putting you on an official legally binding contract. It's a known fact that students and graduates can be exploited by these schemes in the guise of gaining experience. Your time is just as important as the paid employees of the company. You are a valid member of the team so also make sure to ask for help and mention any concerns.

How to Job Hunt

[Anika] Job hunting during a pandemic is like navigating a minefield... whilst blindfolded. Unprecedented times call for an unprecedented job market. It's already a tricky process. The endless adjustments of what you thought was a great CV and creating

new cover letters to fit the job role can be exhausting. Pair that with companies downsizing and suddenly the minefield becomes a large landmass with obscured potholes.

Job boards such as Indeed provide a plethora of job advertisements, giving you a great insight into how these companies work. Sites tailored towards graduates, like Milkround, deliver great information about applying for jobs, particularly looking at graduate schemes. From these, I've created a list of keywords that I noticed in many of these roles. These can then be used in your own application so there's a higher chance of being selected for the next stages.

University alumni sites are also available to build CVs, provide interview tips and deliver live events with industry experts. Although you may have graduated, or are about to, it doesn't mean you have to stop using the many resources your university provides.

The stark difference of me spending HOURS to send off just one decent application compared to the average recruiter taking less than 10 seconds to read through an application is painful. However, it's worth spending that time if it means it will catch a recruiter's eye. For every keyword you place in your application, you'll be defusing one of those live mines, making that journey across the field just that bit easier.



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Although many negatives have come out of this pandemic, one of the major positives is how companies have started to operate. The physical office has been shuffled into the digital space, meaning you can work from home and are no longer restricted to jobs in your area. As someone looking for a creative job, I can look into creative hubs around the country to find the right place for me. The opportunities have opened up to a global scale, connecting you and I to potential employers all across the world.

Job Rejection

[Anika] Rejection is often a disheartening part of the job application journey. It's sadly inevitable, especially in this climate where many businesses are downsizing to accommodate for the lack of demand. You may receive the automated reply with a vague rejection suggesting you were not a "good fit" but they "wish you the best in all endeavours". If that's the case, it's worth emailing back asking for feedback on what qualities they liked about you and what you need to work on. Chances are they may not reply, but if they do, then you're armed with some tailored feedback just for you.

Don't let a rejection hold you back. Every single one of them will help shape future applications and push you to find the right job for you.

Missing Uni:

[Abi] Missing university is something I'm sure that every graduate has felt. You go from living with your friends and having financial and physical independence to... living back at your parents' and, until you get a job, relying on them again for support. You suddenly start getting weird looks for cooking up some honey on toast at 11pm or finding yourself feeling guilty for spending the little money you have left on a coffee when you meet up with friends.

The independence you had at uni begins to become a little different. The house is your parents' and so you have to slot back into their way of life. Yet, you suddenly have to grow up. You're an adult out of education. There's this crushing pressure telling you that you need to get a job so you can move out. This abrupt change, the sudden pressure to achieve, the feeling of the unknown, and the missing of university life can cause depression in graduates. Know you're not alone, and it's okay to miss uni. You're just finding your feet in this new world and that takes time.

Graduate Routine:

[Abi] From the moment we start school we're in a routine. We know we have to finish primary school by attending five days a week, Monday to Friday, from 9am to 3pm. We know we have to finish secondary school by attending five days a week, Monday to Friday, from 9am to 3pm. If we then opt for university, we know that we have another three years in the educational system giving us a timetable, a structure of learning and developing, and realistic deadlines. Then all of a sudden, it stops. The structure, the security, is gone.

I thought I'd be in a full-time job in journalism or content writing by the end of the summer, but here I am still job hunting. My biggest advice is to find a routine.

I've been dabbling a bit in freelance writing, some paid and unpaid, and I'm working as a temp in a local supermarket so I schedule in specific days for each of these as well as designating a day that I'll look or apply for jobs. I also schedule in two days off so that I don't burn myself out. It can be exhausting applying for jobs and I found it took a toll on my mental health, but by giving myself a break, and following a routine, I seem to be doing okay. It works for me.

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[Anika] For me, I have found that a strict routine has never worked. I still have a small pile of discarded revision timetables from the GCSE and A Level era. In fact, I spent longer making them beautifully colour-coded rather than actually committing to one.

I found that to-do lists worked for me. They weren't as claustrophobic as committing to a timetable. And of course, the satisfaction of crossing out a task was well worth completing it. The Eisenhower Matrix has also helped me create a loose routine. To implement this, you create four quadrants labelled 'Urgent Important', 'Urgent Less Important', 'Less Urgent Important' and 'Less Urgent Less Important'. By grouping my tasks with urgency and importance, I found that I can do them at my pace and less likely to panic at 1PM because I haven't completed the tasks that I was set out to finish at 12:30. This principle prioritises tasks for you which helps get the important things completed first.

Some Final advice

Don't put too much pressure on yourself and give yourself a break. It's tough when graduating and you need to take the time to find your feet and work on yourself. You're in a new routine and structure of life, and that's okay.



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HOW TO POST-LOCKDOWN PROOF YOUR BUSINESS

ADVICE FROM LOVE THROUGH THE LETTERBOX

BY EMMA GILL

Whilst the various Covid-19 Lockdowns kept us indoors and apart from our closest friends and family, it also allowed many people the time and freedom to cross things off their to-do-lists, use their imagination and make their wildest dreams come true. For some people, they recognised a gap in the market and started a business, but now that lockdowns are coming to an end, how are they going to survive? We talked to *Love Through the Letterbox* about starting her business in lockdown and how she plans to adapt to the easing of the restrictions and continue to thrive.

Tell us about your business?

Love Through the Letterbox is a small, home-run business that I started in February 2021 during lockdown, selling letterbox sized parcels that people are able to send to their friends, family and loved ones. At the moment, I sell a Pick Me Up box and a Pink Pamper box. These include items such as socks, tissues, bracelets, scrunchies, chocolates, popcorn and much more. I am releasing more boxes soon which will cater to a wider variety of people and different demographics. I sell through the platform Etsy, but I also make sales through social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (one of my TikToks has over 40k views!). It's been a very successful start for me- having

over 300 orders in just 2 months and I am really excited to see how it develops, evolves and what the future has to offer!

Why did you decide to start your business?

As well as doing an MA degree at the University of Westminster, I thought it would be a really good idea to start up a business during a pandemic to try and spread some joy around the country from my small home in Hampshire. My aunty is unwell, and I spent a long time searching the internet to find a lovely gift that I could send her that had been well thought out, and could cater to her needs! When I couldn't find a gift that best suited the situation, I decided to make my own! Then I thought to myself, why not start this as a business? I haven't looked back since. Besides, everybody likes to receive something in the post, especially if it's unexpected with a personalised message!

How did you set up your business in the face of adversity (aka COVID-19)?

Setting up a business during a pandemic may seem daunting, you have to make sure that you are always fully resourced with stock, as there could be a delay due to shipping restrictions. You have to be clear on your idea and branding, in order to ensure that your

product is recognised, remembered and stands out. One vital aspect of setting up any business during COVID-19 is ensuring your social media is well represented, as this is the only way that people will notice your brand. Having a good social media presence that is novel and innovative is what can make or break a company that starts out solely online. I've also sourced outside help from friends who have a degree in Business & Broadcasting. They've been so helpful during this period, and have helped to make a lot of my graphics for social media, including my logo and business cards.

How did you find the gap in the market to start your business?

As I said previously, I was attempting to look for a gift for a family member that was struggling. There are a lot of 'gift boxes' out there, especially on *Etsy*. So there is not so much a gap in the market for gift boxes, a lot of the time it comes down to what's in the boxes themselves. I believe that I've found a good combination of items in my boxes that really stand out, including a personalised message that is typed up and printed so the box feels very personal to the receiver.

What advice would you give on how to spot the gaps in the market?

I have spoken to a lot of small business owners about this subject, and I would definitely say it often comes down to the individual.

- Using personal experiences for spotting gaps in the market is definitely one way of figuring it out.
- Hearing stories from your family and friends of what they would like to receive/purchase can often help you too.
- But also, your own experiences, what do you like to do? Is there a hobby/craft that you enjoy, and you are actually pretty good at?

Have a go at starting your own business, there is always a gap in the market for something that you're interested in. I knew I wanted to make people happy and cheer one way or another, and the reviews that I've received since I started have really shown that I chose to fill the right gap.

What are your plans to sustain your business going forward now that lockdown restrictions are easing?

Going forward now that the lockdown restrictions are easing, I am hoping to release new boxes into the collection that can be bought for people doing other activities. Such as for the summer holidays, for festivals or even a vegan/sustainable box! There are so many opportunities that can come with a business such as this one. I am hoping to perhaps try and sell them on market stalls now that more markets are happening in my local town. Everybody knows someone that needs a pick-me-up, whether they are in lockdown or not, people still need cheering up because of other issues.

What advice/tips would you give to other businesses on how to sustain their businesses now that lockdown restrictions are easing?

Definitely do not let you stop it from what you want to do! The main thing you need to remember is that there are people that will buy what you're selling, you just need to find who they are! Go to markets, promote it on social media (I joined lots of small business groups and they often all support each other), go to car boot sales. Just try and get it out there.

Once you get to a certain point, it may begin to slow down. This will happen with any business; you just have to keep pushing it. Social media is key for sustaining your new business out of lockdown.



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LOVE THROUGH THE LETTERBOX

If you do find yourself starting up a business, follow me on Instagram (@LoveThroughLetterbox) – I would love to see all of your work and amazing little creations.

LIVING THROUGH SOCIETY

THE POWER OF PODCASTS



Nottingham University graduate Kate Ainsworth launched her podcast *Living Through Society*, with the aim to unbottle restrained conversations, accept imperfections and turn the tide on staying quiet and encourage people to speak out about mental health. We catch up with Kate to get the inside scoop on her ever-growing podcast...

BY KATE AINSWORTH



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How did the podcast come about?

In the beginning it was my therapy. I struggled through three years of university and in my second year I dealt with an incredibly abusive partner which carried on into my final year. I realised how much I had neglected myself and my writing was my solace. I had an outreach of people telling me how brave I was, how inspiring and how many of my friends had been blissfully unaware. I spoke to the head of mental health at my university and initial radical action was swiftly implemented, but no one actually supported me - no academic staff were informed and the same academic performance was still expected of me. I didn't get counselling because I thought other students needed it more than me and I didn't feel strong enough to ask for help. It was then that I realised how many others must be suffering in silence and the true power I carried in sharing my story.

I very much live by the mantra 'everything happens for a reason', and every experience and every person you meet is to shape you into a better person and the person you ultimately become. Yes, I wish I hadn't

gone to uni and suffered that abuse (of course) but, it made me who I am today. If I hadn't experienced that, I wouldn't have my podcast which I LOVE and every door that it's opened for me. I feel blessed to be able to stand alongside others who share my pain, standing strong together and rising up from the dark. Yes, my abuse broke me but I thrive on how I managed to get up and build myself into the woman I am today.

We changed the narrative, we use our pain for power - it made me less of a victim, less of a survivor and more of a hero.

What's your aim for the podcast?

As well as sharing important stories, we aim to debunk everything society projects and pressurises us to do. We hide a lot of our insecurities; why don't we wear them? Because we're scared to be vulnerable, want to be liked and frightened of what others might think? That shouldn't stop us from opening up because people are also kind, considerate and understanding. We have to find the right tribe.

What has been featured so far on *Living Through Society*?

All people who inspire me. An anorexia sufferer who became a personal trainer, two sexual assault survivors and another mental health podcaster @practicemakesprogresspod, amongst others. I have eight episodes out and there's a few more in the works!

What's your best piece of advice?

Love yourself the way you love others.

What's next?

I want to engage my audience more through creating weekly features such as a 'What not to say' feature. For example, 'What not to say to someone who has depression'. So often we say the wrong things because we don't understand and that can really affect people and how they deal with life and their trauma. It's been proven that after sexual assault, external people's responses, such as victim blaming, can retraumatise an individual. That's why it's so important that everyone is educated so we can love, nurture and share experiences with each other without fearing judgment.

Why do you refer to *Living Through Society* as we?

I have a small team of four behind me - students and recent graduates who volunteer to help me out from time-to-time. Initially, we spent a lot of time working together throughout lockdown, but we have all taken on more life responsibilities and some full-time jobs, so they just help me out whenever they can. They have been amazing. Cindy, Megan, Katie and Sorcha, I love you all for the hard work you do - you inspire me daily.

What's the dream?

Ultimately, I want to help people. I want to make a difference in other people's lives and somehow make money from doing that. I want my podcast to become successful and do something great alongside that, like become a coach, a full-time editor/writer or find a creative job within the food industry.

“ULTIMATELY, I WANT TO HELP PEOPLE. I WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES”

Where can I listen?

Anywhere! We are on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google podcasts, Anchor, Breaker, Castbox, Overcast, PocketCasts, RadioPublic and TuneIn!

Either type '*Living Through Society*' into your podcast streaming platform search bar or find me on Instagram, click the link in my bio and there is a link to my podcast on all streaming platforms there!

What's the most important thing you want your listeners and anyone else out there to know?

That they're not alone. If you're going through something and you think 'no one else could possibly understand the hell or this situation that I am going through', there will be someone, if not thousands of other people who have experienced or are experiencing something very similar. I am still yet to find my tribe of abuse victims who have been psychologically abused by a female - I know you guys are out there somewhere!

Keep up to date with Kate Ainsworth and the *Living Through Society* podcast by following her on Instagram @livingthroughsociety.



SIMPLY SONA

© Simply Sona

BY BETH SHELPER

Founded in 2020, *Simply Sona* is a vegan-friendly, cruelty-free candle company set up during the COVID-19 pandemic by two childhood best friends, Sonita Prinjha and Oonagh Bottalico. Armed with a passion for sustainability, lifestyle blogging and beauty, both girls began working on their business venture while on the graduate job-hunt. From branding and product sourcing to ingredients testing and packaging – you name it, they did it. All from the comfort of their own homes too. We caught up with Sonita and Oonagh to chat about all things *Simply Sona*...

KICKASS CAREER GOALS

It's so important to us that we're being as friendly to the environment as we can, and there are so many options when looking for product suppliers that it seems silly to not opt for the products to not damage our precious earth any further.

Tell us a bit about the process behind choosing your signature scents. Do you have a firm idea of the scents you want to try, or does this develop through the process?

We usually have a starting point when discussing fragrances. We brainstorm about memories we've shared together and how we can tie this into any of our products. For example, we travelled to Italy together (pre-covid) and we wanted to create a scent that would remind us of this trip and the Italian coast, so we then began researching typical scents from the area. We settled on pomegranate and raspberry which turned into our Portofino scent. We will also decide on the type of scents we want to launch in the future: fruity, floral, woody, musky and we do lots of testing to find ones we love and how we can tie these into our range.

Your brand has built exponentially in such a short amount of time. Would you attribute this to anything in particular?

Social media has been an incredible marketing tool for us to convey our brand story, message and we try to beautifully capture our products. We tried to create a buzz around our business before launching and this was amazing for us to build momentum when starting out.

Firstly, congratulations on the launch of *Simply Sona*! Can you tell us a little bit about how you started the business?

Thank you so much! We started *Simply Sona* while on holiday in Norfolk as we loved the idea of starting a business together. We've both always had a joint love of candles and home decor so thought we could bring a new minimalist brand to the market.

We were both expecting to graduate from University and fall into full-time jobs, however due to Covid, that hasn't been the case for so many. We therefore had some free time and we wanted to use that to create something we could both be really proud of.

We started making hand-poured, eco-soy wax fragranced candles in 2020 and have slowly been adding to our product lines since. We now have a line of diffusers, wax melts and more recently, shell and pillar candles.

Can you tell us about how you managed to take those first

steps into starting your own business? Was there anyone or anything in particular that really supported/helped you through this?

We took part in *The Prince's Trust* business course for young people and we would highly recommend it! You get to meet lots of other young business owners and share ideas. You learn about lots of the complicated business things – taxes, registering your business and everything in between. You can also apply for a grant, which we were successful in receiving and that really helped us buy stock before we launched.

We've noticed that all of your products are environmentally friendly. Is this something you are both passionate about? Was this always the vision for *Simply Sona*?

Yes definitely, we decided very early on that if we were to set up a business we would make sure our products were made as environmentally friendly as possible.



© Simply Sona



© Simply Sona

Do you have any advice for anyone who may be thinking of starting up their own small business?

Definitely create a business plan before starting up. If you're setting up a business with a friend it's really good to have a business plan to refer back to and make sure you're always on the same page and have the same visions for the business. We would suggest starting a business only in something you're really passionate about as you have to fuel your own motivation. Enjoy everything as it's so rewarding and something to be really proud of.

If you could give a piece of advice to any graduates out there that are apprehensive about life after uni, what would that be?

Everything will work out in the end. It all seems so daunting when you graduate and with the job market being so difficult at the moment it's easy to feel like you're never going to be hired. But, as long as you're able to sell yourself, you'll find somewhere. Use your time to do things you enjoy, once you start a full time job it's much more difficult to do some of the things you can do when you have extra time: start a new hobby, set up a business, get fit, start a book club, go travelling (when we're allowed) and really just make the most of your time before endeavouring into the world of work.

What do you think is the hardest aspect of starting a business from scratch?

It's quite difficult trying to position yourself in such a saturated market, but as long as you have a real understanding of who you're targeting your products at, and what you want to achieve with your brand, you'll find your own position in the market. Money can be really difficult at the beginning too, especially when you are creating products, as you need to put money into the business before you see anything coming back into your account. That can be really difficult and can put people in a difficult position.

What's the goal for *Simply Sona*, say, in five years?

We would both absolutely love to continue to grow *Simply Sona*. It would be amazing for both of us if we could transition to making *Simply Sona* our full-time jobs and work for ourselves. We're always trying to come up with new ideas for products, scents and ways to grow our business so hopefully in five years time *Simply Sona* will be flourishing and we will still be loving the journey together!



© Simply Sona



© Simply Sona

THE BUSINESS THAT AIMS TO MAKE WOMEN THE DEFAULT IN EXTREME SPORT



Hear the words extreme sports and where does your mind take you? Activities that are unreachable? Men climbing mountains, riding waves and pushing the limits? Well, *She Flies* is here to change that.

BY KATY LAYTON



The brain-child of Josie West, *She Flies* was born two years ago while travelling the world on sabbatical from her full-time corporate job. Josie started instructing kitesurfing to help pay the bills, and soon noticed a difference in the way women learn in comparison to men. Two years later and *She Flies* is here to make women the default in extreme sport until we no longer have to.

Tell me about yourself. What's your background?

I grew up in Surrey and I went to uni in Cardiff to study maths.

I've always been a water baby and every weekend my friends and I would go to the beach to go surfing. When I graduated, I went into event management and through that, a friend and I set up our own wedding planning company. From there, I went into management consultancy and that is where I've been for about eight years. It's completely different to *She Flies*. I'm high up in the leadership team and I'm doing multi-million pound deals – it's all very corporate. I like it because I get a sense of intellectual stimulation. However, *She Flies* is where the love comes.

How did *She Flies* begin?

I turned 30, left my boyfriend and I just needed to travel the world and be me. The aim was to kite surf everyday and to help pay for it, I started instructing the sport. I loved teaching everyone, but women were more of a challenge. I soon realised you have to get through to their minds first and get them to trust you before you can teach them to kite surf.

I started researching how men and women learn and there's a very different approach. Men learn by trying and failing; women learn through visualisation. Extreme sports doesn't teach visually and slowly, it's about going and trying it and that can be really overwhelming. *She Flies* came from there. In the early days I didn't know what it was, but I knew it wasn't just about getting women together, it was about recognising and being proud of female strength. Now we create environments that make women the default, not the exception.

From where *She Flies* started to where it is now, how would you describe that journey?

It's been all over the place. I'm a business woman, so I know how to set a strategy, but because I'm so passionate about *She Flies*, I was always chasing everything. It was a bit of a mess at the beginning and it didn't really have focused attention. Then, we got our focus but COVID hit. Our focus was always on camps and events, but that soon all went online and focused more on the community aspect. I feel like we finally



© Mark Gray (@rotterboy)

have a solid foundation as to why we're here and what our purpose is. We're still going to focus on events, but we're also going to focus on bringing big communities together.

Our mission has changed since the beginning. It was "to grow and strengthen the global wave of women in extreme sports", and whilst I really want to do that, the strengthening bit is the important part to me. Growing and getting women into extreme sports is really cool but strengthening the ones that are already there is more important. Our mission now is "to make women the default until we no longer have to." It's not about forgetting men. It's not about having female only communities. It's about gifting women confidence. If you make women the

default, you're gifting them that confidence. Bring your husbands, bring your mates that are male, but let them know, it's about women today.

Why do you think there is still a stigma for women in extreme sports?

Because of the word extreme. I have been talking about it a lot recently and whether we should be dropping the word extreme to get more women involved. The reason why we have it is because of the mental challenge as well as the physical. But it's not just about the challenge, it's about the mental medicine. We don't recognise how valuable sport is for us and if we don't have friends that already do it, it's a really hard

thing to step into, because it's not as 'normal' for women. It's usually a solo thing we do and it's therapy to go and do sports with your friends.

One of my friends, Jalou Langerie, is an ex-world champion wave rider in kite surfing and she gets told she rides like a guy. It's a massive compliment because riding like a guy is the best thing to do. She gets so stoked to hear it, but then you take a step back and wonder; why is riding like a girl so bad?

A lot of the female pros don't get paid as much as the guys and so they have to work half the day and then train the other half. Whereas the guys can train all day. So there's an element of a chicken and egg situation. The skill levels

are different and men are better than women at a lot of sports, but when it comes to surfing they are on par. Surfing has become more mainstream so they're paying the women more and therefore means they can train more. Whereas kitesurfing and wakeboarding is way less advanced, so they can't get as good as the guys as they're not paid enough.

I want *She Flies* to be much more professional than some female only organizations. We're still trying to work it out but the aim is for *She Flies* to have a professional business approach because no-one else is making women the default. It needs to be a space where women are badass and can ride like women. It's not girls. It's not ladies. It's women. We're fucking awesome and women are so sexy when they ride with an

elegant strength. Women are so beautiful, we don't need to be in a bikini on a beach to be beautiful. We can be shredding and be sexy.

How do you find the balance between *She Flies* and your full-time job?

I don't sleep and I don't have a boyfriend. I used to work four days and then do *She Flies* on the fifth day, but as *She Flies* is costing me a lot to run, taking a day off work as well is a tough thing to do, so I'm back up to full time. It's hard to balance it all and I am often the one that suffers, but I get so much energy from *She Flies* that when I work on it, it feels worth it. Assessing the priority and being strict with my time is the way I just about manage it for now, but as we grow, we're looking to bring the community

in to support and I'm hoping that will get a lot of traction and it will slowly start to run itself.

How has COVID impacted *She Flies*?

I hate to say this but it's actually been really good for *She Flies*. The growth of the company has been because of COVID and I've been able to plough all my energy into it. We have quite a global community and we were one of the first female-only virtual events in sport that started happening. Now the people that joined as strangers, just seeing each other every week at a virtual event, eventually became friends. It's made us stronger.

I've also lost a lot of money and had to cancel loads of camps, but in hindsight, it's been a good

© Chris Reed

“WOMEN ARE SO BEAUTIFUL, WE DON'T NEED TO BE IN A BIKINI ON A BEACH”



© Stuart Haythorn Photography





© Mark Gray (@ronerboy)



© Mark Gray (@ronerboy)

thing. I've been able to work a lot, and I've been able to really just take a step back and see what the strategy is. We've grown through this virtual world and the challenge for us now is striking the right balance between virtual learning events that people find really interesting, and physical events in the right location.

What advice would you give to someone that wants to set up their side hustle?

You will always have a list of things to do that's longer than you can even read. You have to be disciplined with the time you spend trying to get through the list. A lot of the time, the most important things to do are the things you don't really want to do, such as seeking sponsorship. You tend to do the jobs you're good at first and sometimes that's a waste of time. You can spend hours perfecting your website or your Instagram feed but it's not important if you haven't got the service, the product and the customers behind it.

I think for women, just that you are able to do it. Stop thinking you're not because you are. You are your own worst enemy and the longer you wait, the longer it's not happening. Just do it. Life's more fluid than you think. Don't worry about taking big steps because they're not. It feels like a big step until you've stepped.

Who inspires you?

I mentioned her earlier but Jalou Langeree is a three times world champion kite wave rider. She really inspires me because she is an all female badass. It doesn't come



© Patrick Kloister

easy to her, she's been riding since she was about 12, and her older brother's a pro. She's previously been in the shadow of her brother but now she's very much her own person. She works really hard; if it's windy, she's out riding. She shows determination and she doesn't allow brands to exploit her. She's just fucking badass.

Women in business who are compassionate leaders inspire me as well. There's a lot of women in business who are very hard and bullish, but you can also see through a lot of them and they've had to be like that to get where they are. I commend these women

but the people that really inspire me are the ones that are right at the top of their game, but they're them. They're soft. They're compassionate. They're determined.

What's next for *She Flies*?

We've got *She Wakes*, *She Kites* and *She Surfs* this year in the UK that are mini festivals to make women the default in each sport. It's really exciting, especially now COVID is dropping off a little bit. Women are hungry.

Keep up to date with all things *She Flies* over on Instagram @sheflies_

PRETTY AIN'T PROFESSIONAL ON LINKEDIN. OR IS IT?



© Photo by Sora Shimazaki from Pexels

BY KATE
AINSWORTH

LinkedIn. A place to find a new job, sell yourself to potential recruiters and a way to connect in the business world. Your LinkedIn profile is an extension of yourself, a way to get yourself noticed, tell everyone what you are doing and how brilliant you are.

So your LinkedIn profile picture has got to be professional looking right? Then why do I feel like I can't look pretty? That somehow employers are going to judge me for looking nice, for smiling, for having nice hair or nice eyes or maybe even sexualise me as a woman?

Do I need to look like I would fit into a mundane office and just smile and nod and get on with work? Why do I feel like I can't look pretty? Grey jumper, glasses, the "ability to get the job done." Just because I am attractive doesn't mean I can't do a good job. I've heard of countless women being sexualised in the workforce; 'We liked her, she gave us something to look at'. Why can't I boss-up my profile, have an amazing smile, a great figure? Why do I feel like I cannot look attractive? Your LinkedIn profile is meant to show off your best self, right?

Being attractive isn't professional.

I am again reminded that this actually feels like slut-shaming, I am aware I cannot show... you know loads of skin, be in a bikini or sipping alcohol but, how do we define "professionalism" anyway?

Why can't I show off my tattoos? Why can't I show off my amazing smile? Why can't I have obviously dyed hair?

Society needs to realise and understand that our aesthetic doesn't define who we are, it's a projection of ourselves and our creativity; just because someone has pink hair doesn't make them any less professional or less qualified for a position.

OUR AESTHETIC DOESN'T DEFINE WHO WE ARE, IT'S A PROJECTION OF OURSELVES AND OUR CREATIVITY

This even stems from when I was in Sixth Form and we weren't allowed to "show our shoulders". What's that about? I can understand ripped jeans but on a hot

sunny day you are telling me that I have to wear an 'appropriate' top, meaning one that specifically covers my shoulders? Being someone who sweats a lot and needs to breathe - it was an issue! I would always have to hide my burger bun sweat stains that showed through and all because of a uniform rule.

Their reasoning why we couldn't show our shoulders though - "Because it's distracting to other pupils and teachers." Are you flipping kidding me? This is rape culture, actual rape culture within a school with a sixth form. The irony is the school has been in the press a lot for having paedophile teachers. Don't tell the pupils how to dress, tell the teachers how to act and keep it in their pants!

So own your face, own your talents and own your capabilities because they go way beyond how you look. Skills run deeper than skin deep, your talent is inside of you, and if they judge you from your photo - that's their loss.

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BY LUCY ROUGET

HOW TO COMBAT THE ASSUMPTION



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THAT BUSINESSES SET UP BY WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO FAIL THAN THOSE BY MEN

“As a study by Deloitte discovered, businesses founded by women are more likely to fail than those set up by men”. Reading this statement in an article published by *The Telegraph* in 2020 was a shocking acknowledgement, however, it didn't bring much surprise, only annoyance. It seems ridiculous that we're living in 2021 and this is such a true and regular occurrence in business industries. However, it appears to be a natural assumption made by many people. We took a look into why this statement is still so apparent in this day in age, and have created a few tips and proposals for how we can combat it...

1. Be confident and embrace your skills and abilities - you are talented

A further article published by *The Telegraph* in 2020 quoted that 'Women tend to be less confident than men in their abilities'. This seems like such a small statement to be able to reverse, however, research by *MyConfidenceMatters* in 2019 found that 79% of women regularly struggle with their confidence at work. It's also been suggested that people lacking confidence in themselves are less likely to achieve the success that they desire. To conquer this, here are some tips to pursue a confident image:

- Accept thanks and/or congratulations when you complete a task or project, hit a goal or milestone, or even helped out a colleague. Accepting your achievements can emphasise the evidence of your abilities, and each small success can contribute to your self-confidence.
- Keep your head up, stand tall and portray yourself as confident – even if you're feeling the complete opposite in that moment. We've all heard the phrase 'fake it 'til you make it', and with so many people using it in work environments to increase their confidence, you might as well try it out too!
- Set smaller targets and deadlines prior to your big deadlines – by breaking down your looming deadlines into smaller and more manageable tasks, it allows you to celebrate small successes, and reinforces your skills and abilities, you can do it!

2. Network with like-minded people - you are valued

Networking can be really intimidating, both online on websites such as LinkedIn, or in-person at events and conferences; however, networking can be a *huge* advantage, particularly for female-led businesses. There are a multitude of tips and tricks you can find online regarding networking for women in business. Below are some suggestions on how you can get involved in a network of fellow women in business, or even start your own:

- Embrace every situation you can. Networking on LinkedIn is effective, but there are also so many people around you, in the same office and the same building that might really appreciate some fellow female support. Making conversation in the bathroom when washing your hands, or in the queue to get your coffee can initiate work relationships.
- Meet people at professional events who work in similar industries – having connections with people with similar careers, aspirations and experiences can benefit both you and them, in that the topic of conversation can be relatable. Additionally, in the need of advice, your network can offer new perspectives of the situation and the discussion can be tailored to your specific area. This will be important for the development of your business – especially being a female business owner.

MOVE ONTO BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS

3. Overcome the fear of failure - you are resilient

When approaching any area of life, the thought of 'What if I fail?' is often far at the back of many people's minds. This can hinder progress and development of both a business or an individual's career and can be overcome with a few changes:

- Develop a growth mindset - When faced with a challenge, don't give up, try another strategy and keep making changes until you have accomplished the task. When things go wrong, use them as a learning experience and you'll know not to make the same mistake in future. When someone has a skill or ability that you don't, use them to your advantage so you can also learn a new attribute. When plan A fails, move onto plan B - if there's no plan B, then make one.
- Shit happens - it's impossible for everything in life to go ahead as planned. Sometimes things out of our control happen, and that's okay. Once you've accepted it's happened, you can move onto bigger and better things. Shit happens, and there's not always a way of preventing it, so embrace the lessons you've learned and implement them into future tasks and projects.

It would be impossible for us to resolve the issue of female-run businesses failing more often than men, and it's *SO* much more complicated than acting confident, or creating new networking relationships. But there's hope that one day, with us empowering and inspiring each other and working together, we can falsify this statement.

HOW TO NEGOTIATE PAY



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AS A WOMAN IN THE WORKPLACE

BY ANGELA MACK

You've just landed your dream job. Or you've just been told that you got that promotion you thought you'd never get. They offer you a salary and benefits package, and quite frankly, you think you deserve more. You don't want to rock the boat or appear ungrateful, so you remain silent. You do not fight for your worth.

According to the latest research, most women do not negotiate their salary when offered a position. Since gender pay gap reporting began in 2018, employers are being forced to systematically approach access to equal pay and although the latest report has shown an improvement year-on-year, it is only incremental. In fact, *Forbes* released an article in 2020 stating that it would take 86 years to close the wage gap based on current projections—86 years! This means at least four generations of women will have to fight for equal salaries before it becomes a reality.

Dr Julie Davies of the Manchester Metropolitan University Business School when interviewed by *The Independent* in 2020 explained how the underlying cause of the gender pay gap starts when a woman is offered her very first role within a company: 'There is a cumulative effect as they move from one job to another. Often women don't ask for more money and are just grateful to be offered a job.' A recent study published in 2019 by legal firm Slater and Gordon, which surveyed over 1,000 working women, found that 82 per cent of women never negotiate their salaries. Many of these women admitted that whilst they felt they were being underpaid, they had not raised the issue with their boss. Why is this? Why is it that women do not feel comfortable negotiating their salary, unlike men, who seem to be perfectly at ease with the subject?

The primary reasons given in the study by Slater and Gordon in 2019 centered around anxiety. Women are worried they would be thought of as rude or ungrateful, or perhaps the very discussion of a higher salary would back-fire, endangering other benefits such as flexible working. Yet the research shows that these fears are unfounded—of those women who do negotiate their salary, 70 per cent are successful.

Okay, so you've decided you're going to bite the bul-

let and negotiate salary. How should you go about it? Here are three top tips to help you prepare:

1. Do Your Research

What is the average salary for your position across the industry? Companies like Glassdoor make it easy for you to research salaries for roles similar to your own across a range of businesses. Consider also approaching your peers at work. Gender pay gap reporting means that salary discussions are happening more and more frequently, and whilst it can be a sensitive subject, people are growing more comfortable talking to their colleagues about the issue (if not their bosses). Whether they are male or female, see if your colleagues will open up about their pay so you can assess your own salary expectations. This is incredibly powerful in organizations where pay scales are not transparent and you feel like you're fumbling around in the dark, trying to figure out what an acceptable amount would be. Even if you're happy with an opening offer, still do the research. Perhaps your expectations were too low in the first place. If the gender pay gap has taught us anything, it's that many companies do not make their best, most fair offer to female candidates upfront.

2. Stick with The Data

Negotiation discussions can feel deeply personal, especially if you feel insulted by an offer or learn that a male colleague is earning more than you for a similar role. However, getting emotional during discussions is never as effective. As hard as it may be to keep your emotions in check, try to stay objective. Focus on the *value* that you bring to the company as an employee and be prepared to cite specific examples from your experience, reaffirming your skill sets and attributes. And don't forget to use your industry research! It's perfectly acceptable, advantageous even, to present the salary data you've gathered.

3. Prepare Language That You Are Comfortable With

Again, these discussions can be profoundly uncomfortable, especially if you've never engaged in salary negotiations previously. Asking for more money or stating a figure that you absolutely will not accept anything less than, is not something that comes natural to a lot of us. Research alternative language

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“ONCE I ASKED, THEY SAID YES. THEY DID NOT FIGHT IT. AND MAYBE THAT’S THE MESSAGE: THAT WE JUST NEED TO PUT OUR FOOT DOWN.”

that feels more instinctive to you. For example, you could ask, “Is there any flexibility with the salary offered?” You have not explicitly asked for more, yet you have implied that's what you're after. It's not as direct, but you'll be amazed by how many companies automatically offer an improvement, even if it's only small, without you even having to really work for it! In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* back in 2015, and later stated in an article by *The Cut* in 2020, Charlize Theron discussed her experience on negotiating the same pay as her male co-star for *The Huntsman: Winter's War*: 'I have to give them credit because once I asked, they said yes. They did not fight it. And maybe that's the message: That we just need to put our foot down.'

These tips can be applied to when you are first offered a position, but also if you're currently in a role and are unhappy with your pay. Although it's often easier to start off with a salary you're happy with from the very beginning, it's never too late to ask for a salary discussion. When speaking with *TIME* in 2016, Nicki Minaj expressed her opinion on the topic of equal pay: 'If you know you're great at what you do, don't ever be ashamed to ask for the top dollar in your field.'

On the other hand, Anna Ritchie Allan, executive director of Close the Gap, argues in a 2020 interview by *The Independent* that the onus should not be on women to negotiate higher salaries in order to receive a fair wage—it's the responsibility of the employer to value their employees equally. And I agree. It absolutely should be down to the employer to make a fair offer in the first place. However, I am not prepared to wait 86 years for companies to catch-up to this and so whilst I personally also find salary negotiations completely awkward and borderline painful, I am determined to do better at advocating for myself.

The key takeaway here? Always ask for more. Always.

RETURNSHIPS



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A WAY OF COMFORTABLY GETTING BACK TO WORK AFTER AN EXTENDED PERIOD

Mainly aimed at women returning back to work after an extended maternity break, returnships are a fixed, three to six month contract aiming to assist in the return to work following a career break of two+ years. During this time, participants are reacquainted with the nature and fast-paced status of the workplace, whilst reinforcing any skills required that have been out of practice. Through undertaking a returnship consisting of targeted training and coaching by a mentor, participants are reintroduced to the job and the type of employment, rather than feeling like they were starting at step one again. According to an article published on The Telegraph website in 2019, as many as 91% of women returners were offered no support to come back to work and 92% said that a dedicated returner programme would have been beneficial to them.

Women often struggle returning to work after having children; they can find that there is no longer a position for them, as their roles can be replaced whilst they've

been on leave. As stated on Women Returners website, the result of a 2014 survey by London Business School revealed that 70% of women feel anxious about taking a break in their careers due to the apprehension of whether a role will be available on their return. While returnships cannot guarantee your job will be vacant on your return, their focus on reintroducing returners back into the work environment with a specialisation of skills, can at least reduce some of the stress and anxiety caused by returning to work.

Returnships are however, becoming increasingly common in businesses both big and small and, despite being primarily aimed at women, they are open to men too. Displaying evidence of success, returnships are proving highly successful and have aided in the comfortable return of 80% of employees, as stated in an online article published by The Telegraph in 2019.

Specialists in returning to work, Women Returners, have found a

constant increase in the amount of programmes available across the UK helping those returning to work; having tripled in numbers every year between 2014 and 2016, and it only appears to be growing. These internships are particularly popular with women re-entering the workplace, and open up fresh opportunities within the same seniority.

Despite having such positive feedback, several media sources, including an article published online by Forbes in 2019, state that the mere concept of a returnship exploits the lack of confidence women have upon returning to work. Similarly, would returnships even be necessary in the workplace if employers implemented the required parental support favourable of women on leave in the first place? Do you think a returnship is a good programme concept? Let us know your thoughts at disgracefulmagazine.co.uk, or on our social media platforms.

LUCY ROUGET

FEMALE FOUNDERS FIGHTING THE STIGMA: SMALLS FOR ALL

In our last issue, we looked at some wonderful women fighting back against certain stigmas that surround females simply being female. This issue's incredible social enterprise, Smalls For All, aims to raise women and young girls out of hygiene-based poverty through the help of other women.



Now I can go to school every day,
just like the boys

Joyce - Kirusha Secondary
School, Tanzania

SMALLS
FOR ALL

© Smalls For All, @smallsforall on Instagram

BY JOANNA HAWKINS

Founded by Maria Macnamara, MBE, Smalls for All distributes new pants and new or gently worn bras to adults and children who need them most in Africa and the UK.

In doing so, the charity's work fights stigmas around poverty, opens up the conversation on hygiene needs globally and gives the opportunity for women to help other women through donating a necessity we may take for granted – clean underwear.

On the January 2021 Pantometer, collectively Smalls For All and those who have donated to them had collected 1,543,391 items of underwear and distributed 1,508,991!

Prior to launching in 2010, Maria had worked in finance. However, after spending three weeks working with children in an orphanage

in Brazil in 2004, and subsequently volunteering in Thailand in 2006 and Ethiopia in 2009, things changed.

“... gives the opportunity for women to help other women through donating a necessity we may take for granted - clean underwear.”

Maria was concerned, and as the charity's website shares, she realised: 'When I got home, I was always very aware that following my trips, I'd left behind many children who had got used to me and come to rely on me. I was very worried that perhaps I was doing more harm than good by spending two to three weeks with them, then leaving for home. So, I

realised I needed to do something more sustainable that would have longer-term benefits'.

As a result of this, Maria remembered the health and hygiene challenges surrounding a lack of underwear in Africa, and 'so that's how Smalls came to life as a registered charity: to help women and children in Africa by providing them with underwear they otherwise wouldn't have access to'.

Underwear helps by allowing women to remain in the workforce, and girls to remain in school each month giving them a better chance of fighting their way out of poverty. Pants are also very important for women and girls recovering from fistula surgery, as well as other medical conditions.

Since 2019, Smalls has also helped charities that focus on alleviating poverty in the UK by providing

them with underwear.

The laundered bras collected are given to women in need, as well as sold to family run recycling company LMB Textiles to help raise vital funds needed to support the work. LMB sends the bras they get from Smalls to people in developing economies, like Africa, to help them earn an income by selling on the bras.

Men's pants are less requested; however, they are still desperately needed.

In Africa, underwear helps to preserve dignity in situations where the wearer is already poorly and vulnerable, such as those going into hospital to be fitted with prosthetics and orthotics.

Meanwhile, UK requests come from charities supporting the homeless and from school uniform banks. Despite Covid-19,

donations can still be made to the charity and are needed even more as more people are using temporary accommodation.

“Underwear helps by allowing women to remain in the workforce, and girls to remain in school each month giving them a better chance of fighting their way out of poverty.”

There are many ways to get involved: by donating underwear, donating money, organising a community collection at a school or workplace or, if you're taking part in a challenge, you can pledge your sponsorship money to Smalls For All.

You can even donate when shopping online at no extra cost to you, via the easyfundraising website! Smalls For All receives a cash donation every time you shop or book online with many retailers through the site.

There has been some misinformation circling about where to send your donation of smalls after a change of office, but please do send them to this address:

Smalls for All®
Five Sisters Business Park
Westwood
West Calder
EH55 8PN
United Kingdom

Please note that Smalls can only acknowledge receipt if you enclose an email address with your kind donation. For more information on this wonderful work, do check out smallsforall.org where you can also sign up to their mailing list.

HELENA WILTSHIRE

Q&A WITH THE FOUNDER OF WILTSHIRE & WILLOW



© Helena Wiltshire

We sat down with Helena Wiltshire, entrepreneur and fashion marketing graduate from London, to chat all things Wiltshire & Willow.

Q: Can you introduce yourself to our readers?

Hi, my name is Helena. I'm a 24 year old Fashion Marketing graduate from London. I recently set up a home and lifestyle subscription box exclusively supporting small UK businesses in April 2021 called Wiltshire & Willow.

Q: Can you tell me the Wiltshire & Willow story so far?

Last summer amid the pandemic I started a hand-made facemask business (Wiltshire Masks) and I was selling them through Instagram. Through this, I fell into an amazing and supportive small business community and discovered so many new brands and people. When face mask sales started declining, I wanted to do something so people like me who love small businesses could find them. There's been a boom in interest in shopping small and so I started to develop a home and lifestyle box that featured small businesses and helps give them a new platform to showcase their pieces.

After lots of planning through the winter I launched in April 2021 and it was really successful, I also featured in Stylist Loves which was a massive highlight and proud business owner moment! The May box proved to be just as popular and I'm super excited to send out Junes soon. Every month I send out a box with 4-5 premium home décor and lifestyle products, they retail for £40 with a value of much more.

Q: Where do you wish to go next?

I want to continue to grow the box online, and build up my social media presence. I recently opened a shop on my website where you can purchase items individually that have been featured in boxes which has been really popular. I would also love to launch a homeware line myself and collaborate with other small businesses to make it.

Who would you consider your professional support network?

My friends and family have been a huge help, in just supporting me to chase my dreams and goals. They all give me advice and even help me choose products and colours and test things out. I have also made some great small business friends who are much more established, they have really helped me in avoiding mistakes and just cheering me on in general. When I launched Zoe from GladioliUK helped me a lot with my branding and social media and I'm so grateful to her!

Q: Do you have any tips on building and sustaining a community on Instagram?

My advice is to not be afraid and to engage with everyone. When I first started my business I felt quite overwhelmed and honestly, nervous to reach out to all the brands but I've found everyone to be so welcoming. Now I sometimes have people come to me for advice and I want to share everything with them as everyone has done with me! Also connect with your followers and customers, share a bit of your personality and life with them because at the end of the day you are the business too!



© Helena Wiltshire

I DON'T NEED YOUR VALIDATION BECAUSE

Q: How important is community to you?

Community is really important to me, it's what Wiltshire & Willow was built on. I think it's key for small businesses to stick together and I always go by the saying "community over competition". I have made so many friends on Instagram and people have helped me in ways I could not imagine and I have so many of them also own subscription boxes too and we just all support each other as much as we can. I love to share the brands I buy, try and feature in my box as much as I can and get a conversation going. I love it when people are chatting in the comments to each other and to the other small businesses I shared, it's an amazing thing.

Q: What can we do to support you?

I would really appreciate it if you could give me a follow on Instagram (@wiltshireandwillow) and share my box with your friends if you think it might be something they'd like. I work with an amazing bunch of small businesses too and have a brand directory on my website (www.wiltshireandwillow.com) where I share all my favourite home and lifestyle small businesses so I'd love to give them a shout out too.



© Helena Wiltshire

Q: Tell me what you think of Disgraceful!

I love Disgraceful, I think it's amazing when a group of talented hard working women come together. I love the stories, the honesty and creativity its packed full of. It's so well put together and I think everyone should read it. I can't wait to get my next printed copy, the first and second were beautiful!

My feelings are mine; not yours.
They aren't yours to judge or discuss.
You don't get to make me feel inferior,
For what I feel or how I express it.
You can't downgrade my level of hurt
Just because others have it worse.
I can't tell you why I feel this way
Or how long it will last.
But that doesn't give you the right
To comment and spectate.
I don't need your invalidation.
My feelings are mine;
not yours.

MY FEELINGS... ARE MINE!

BY EMMA GILL

THE CHOICE:

HOW SOCIETY TRICKS WOMEN INTO BELIEVING THEY MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN A SUCCESSFUL CAREER AND LOVE, AND CRITICISES THEM EITHER WAY

BY MARINA MESTRES SEGARRA

For a long time I thought I was alone in my struggle. I felt guilty, longing for an ambitious and successful career yet wanting to find the love of my life. Was I feeding into patriarchal stereotypes? Should a strong, independent woman not crave companionship? I decided to turn to my career-driven friends to find the truth, who I've found feel the exact same way as I do.

As I write this article, I find myself sitting in a cafe. I open yet another job rejection email, get one offer for an interview and gaze out the window – wondering where on earth I will find myself next year? I can only pray it's not in my mum's home, back in Barcelona. Then, the lovely guy that works in the coffee shop comes over to check how everything is.

“Wonderful, as always”, I mumble. I've been wanting to ask him for his number for a while now. I allow my mind to consider it one more time, but yet again, my grandmother's words resonate in my head: ‘With the career you've chosen, no guy will ever want to follow you. You've chosen a life of loneliness.’

For a long time, I thought I was alone in this. Feeling guilty, working hard towards a successful career while longing to find the love of my life too. I was giving in to societal stereotypes, the ones that tell us a strong woman shouldn't crave companionship – career ambitions should be enough to satisfy us. I decided to turn to my career-driven friends, whom I've found feel the exact same way as I do.

We are lucky that women in the past have fought, so we can hold the powerful positions we do today. We live in a world where we can awe at the talent of female politicians, poets and entrepreneurs on TV. Yet, we also live in a world where the media scrutinises our every move, most notably when it has to do with a woman's personal appearance and life.

If Hannah Montana was right about something, it's that women must lead a double life if they want the best of both worlds. They must be stereotypically masculine in the workplace and feminine for their dating life, a balance that's almost impossible to maintain.

If the scale tips, say goodbye to either dream.

Emilia (23) draws from her personal experience. She is now in a loving relationship with a partner that understands her drive, yet has had previous breakups due to her career potentially requiring a move

abroad. She says: “Men do not have to change their image from the workplace to be successful in their personal life. Whereas women have to juggle... they need to present themselves as professional, serious, well put-together at [work], but to attract a partner they need to be ‘fun’, ‘easy going’ and ‘feminine’.”

But changing our personality for the sake of balancing love and work is a job in itself.

We've been told a feminine woman is the perfect accessory for a successful man. That a masculine man will hardly ever want to be the accessory of a powerful woman in heterosexual relationships. We've battled many decades to move away from the traditional gender norms that undermined women's positions in society, yet this masculine-feminine dichotomy haunts our ability to lead full, satisfying lives to this very day.

It's a problem that reaches beyond women having to behave and dress in a certain way to be successful, or taken seriously by the media. It's the fact that women who choose to potentially ‘outperform’ a partner career-wise are seen as intimidating and unappealing when in relationships with the opposite gender; we problematically associate success with ‘masculinity’. On the other hand, we link ‘femininity’ not only to emotion, softness and empathy, but also to weakness, defeat and an expected submissive attitude. Women who choose to be assertive are told we can't ever expect to find love, but women who decide to be emotional are unsuited for power.

There is no grey area - it has always been either, or.

Then there's a second issue, one I find to be more prominent among older women – who, in return, encourage their daughters not to follow in their footsteps. My own mother had to give up her degree and potential career to find a “stable life” and a “good husband”, she tells me. These were not her wishes, but those of her parents who believed a woman's ultimate goal was a happy marriage and a family.

My mum still tells me no man will ever abandon their career to follow me or understand I want to be successful, even if he is too. She has always pressed me to aim higher, study harder. She believes men and the traditional expectations of heterosexual relationships to be the thing holding women back, and sees marriage as becoming chained. I found that many women of her generation feel the same way, and push their daughters towards ambitious roles, supporting them every step along the way as they themselves wish they had been.

Essentially, what we have done is flip the coin. Women used to be forced into a cage, made to abandon their ‘unrealistic’ dreams. Now the world has changed, but we are sometimes taught that finding love means choosing to go back into that cage – that career and love are antonyms that can't find harmony.

“If Hannah Montana was right about something, it's that women must lead a double life if they want the best of both worlds.”

During more interviews for this article, a few women in their 20s confessed to previously looking down on women who chose ‘love over their career’. They viewed it as a woman's defeat, their surrender to an oppressive system. One of my respondents commented on how she felt worried for her friend, who's currently re-shaping their goals to fit around their partner's. She highlighted a very important point: “women often get defensive and feel like we need to give explanations when we decide to choose ‘love over career’ or else ‘career over love’.”

I, myself, faced a lot of hatred when I decided to break up with my partner for my career ambitions and felt the need to justify my decision whenever the conversation came up. In the same way we cannot expect women to stop their careers for a partner, we cannot assume that a woman who moves away for love is automatically unsuccessful or being pressured into that decision.

There are always those that say, ‘You are not enough. You are not doing enough. Women have been incarcerated and have died for you to enjoy the privileges that you have today’. As someone specialising in women's rights, whenever I consider not following my parents' expectations of me, this horrible idea pops into my mind. Does wanting to pursue love mean I am treating women's struggle as a joke?

What I found through opening this conversation up with other women was that we all feel differently on this one. Personally, my parents' pressure to succeed in my career ambitions has often made me feel like a failure. As though I was inadequate unless I was working twelve hours a day, and juggling 5 jobs and a degree. For Esther (23), who's planned to be both a renowned psychologist and a mum ever since she was little, a main concern is how she's expected to give up her career to be a good mother, or else not be a mother at all.

Friends back in Barcelona (all 22) have voiced how their boyfriends don't understand when they need to study for exams instead of meeting up, which has affected their ability to concentrate when revising. Ari (21) is told by her mum (50) that one must choose, that opening a career door may close the one that opens to love forever. That we must value what is our priority in life. Maria (23) has often received criticism for participating in pageants and has been told it's too selfish a hobby to want a career in social work; she is lucky to have a partner that supports her in every step, but is no stranger to the scrutiny aiming to deflate her self-esteem. Women are often made to feel selfish if they choose ambition, and weak if they choose family or love. Those whose decisions are supported are not exempt from the need to pick either.

What's the take away then? Every single woman in their 20s, 40s and 50s that I spoke to confessed to having received or engaged in (regrettably so) criticism of other women's life choices.

Yet every single woman said that they didn't see love and career as polar opposites.

"The right person will respect your lifestyle and your dreams, you will work together to make each other as successful as you can be", Maria said – and this reality doesn't have to be a far off dream. Choosing love is not equivalent to being unsuccessful, and neither should wanting to pursue an ambitious career imply spending your life in loneliness. Now that we are lucky enough to opt in to seeing incredible, empowered women nearly every time we consume media, it's about time we abandoned the toxic career/love dichotomy that continues to pit women against each other. The same one that

dictates who we should appear to be, just to achieve what we want in life.

We should never be anyone other than ourselves. So, next time I sit in the cafe and the sweet waiter approaches me, I'll ask for his number.

All because women are able to accomplish whatever they want, and deserve someone supportive to hold their hand when they need it most.

"...We are sometimes taught that finding love means choosing to go back into that cage - that career and love are antonyms that can't find harmony."



© Marina Mestres Segarra



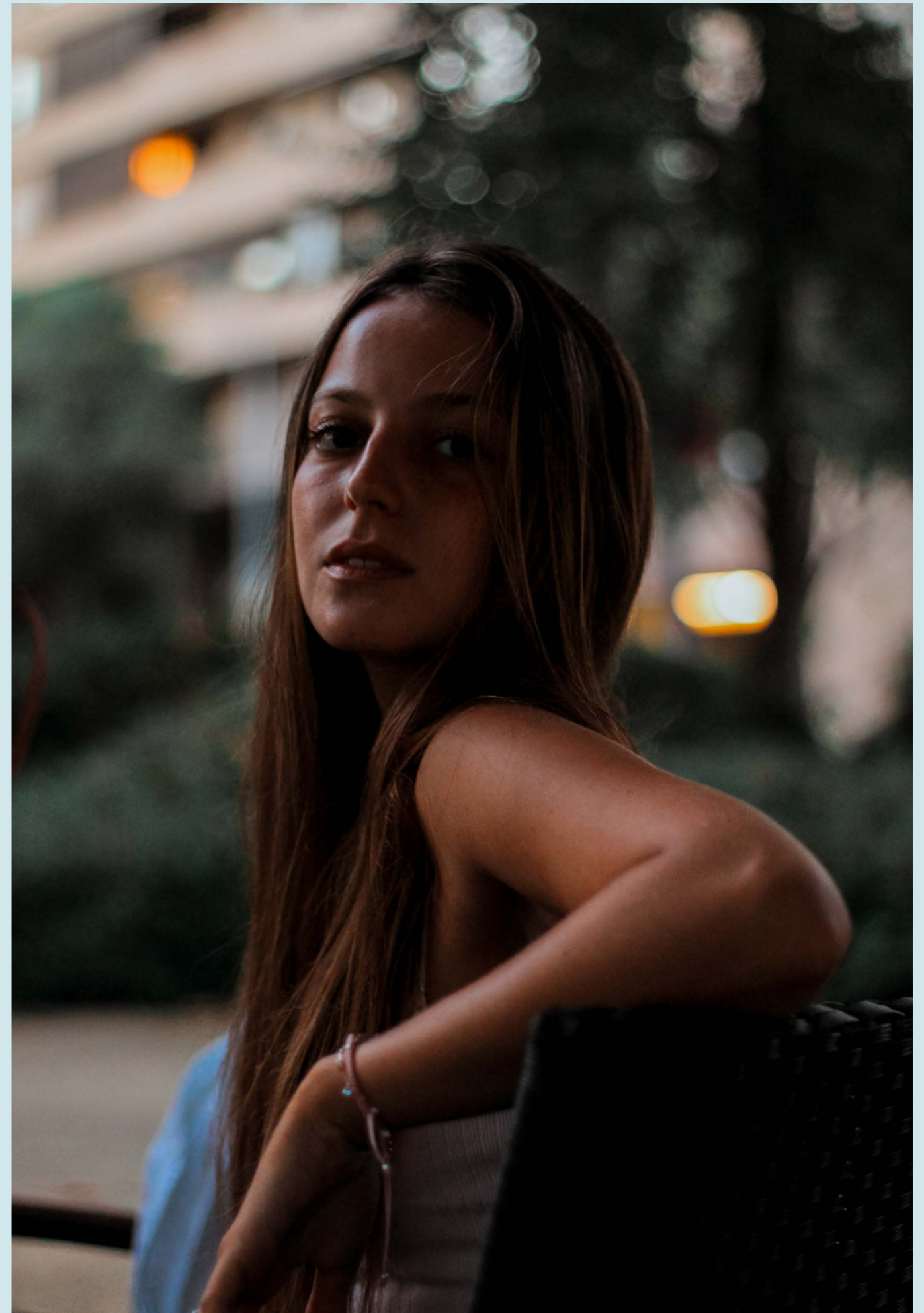
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The flip side of this thinking is to acknowledge over-apologising as a bad habit rather than being intrinsically linked to self-esteem – a belief expressed by the other 16.7% of survey respondents. If you've been listening to other women over-apologise time and time again, you may be doing it unconsciously. It might have become an automatic response you do without thinking, or without questioning why you do it.

Apologising too often is the same as any other habit. It's going to take effort and practice to retrain your brain and replace over apologising with new behaviours. So, don't be discouraged if you find it's a hard habit to break.

Over apologising seems like it can help us preserve peace in relationships by expressing sympathy or, more commonly, taking the blame – but saying sorry unnecessarily can actually make us feel worse. It takes away our right to be assertive, our sense of power and gives off the impression that we are unworthy, unsure and undeserving of our own power.

Saying sorry too much can have a significant impact on how you value yourself and the work you do.

So, how do we stop?

1. Be more assertive in your communication and rephrase your thoughts. There are plenty of alternatives to 'I'm sorry' you can use instead.

For example:

- Thank you – Swap "Sorry I'm late" with "Thank you for waiting for me." It recognizes the delay to the other person but doesn't imply you're at fault.
- Unfortunately – Switch "Sorry, this isn't what I ordered" with "Unfortunately, this isn't what I ordered. I asked for no sauce."
- Excuse me – Swap "I'm sorry, I need to get past" out for "Excuse me, I need to get around you."
- Take the sorry out altogether – Switch "I'm sorry, I have a question" with "I have a question." It makes you less passive and more assertive in your communication.

2. Pause before you apologise. Did you actually do something wrong? If the answer is no, then don't apologise. Turn a mindless apology into a mindful one. Being more mindful of when an apology is actually needed (when, and only when, you did something wrong) can lead to stronger communication, a sense of empowerment and, surprisingly, more support from those around you.

3. Ask yourself why you feel the need to apologise. Reserving your apologies for when they are really and truly justified will allow you to grow in self-confidence. You'll become more assertive in communication and you'll feel more certain of your ability to do the job at hand.

4. Make a 'Sorry' jar. Every time you apologise when you don't need to, put a pound in and set yourself a limit. For example, you can't touch the money in the jar until you can mentally call yourself out for saying sorry unnecessarily. Reward yourself for making progress. (Or, if you don't want to add a monetary value, write down a reward for yourself; a new top or a night out, or even a mani-pedi.)

5. Always remember this: You don't need to apologise for the things you didn't do, things you can't control, the actions of other people, asking a question or needing something. You don't need to apologise for your appearance, your feelings or how you express them, not having all the answers or not responding immediately either.

Next time you find yourself going to unnecessarily apologise, try using the steps above to turn the situation around. Always remember that it's possible to stop and win back your self-worth. Thankfully, the most recent trend in feminism is women becoming more unapologetically themselves.

**SO, JOIN ME - JOIN US -
IN OUR MISSION TO STOP
SAYING SORRY AND TAKE
BACK OUR POWER!**

LIFE TWISTS, TURNS AND CHANGES

BUT WE MAKE IT THROUGH



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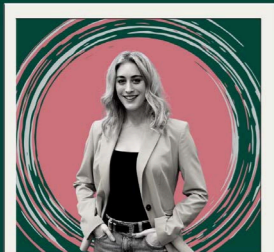
The one thing that's consistent in life is *nothing* ever stays the same. It's a harsh truth to come to terms with, that no part is entirely permanent, but one that's indescribably freeing to embrace.

In collaboration with Hey It Gets Better, a platform and podcast that's challenging the way we view change, we're exploring the stories of five women who've experienced the unpredictable nature of life firsthand. For all the inspiration you'll ever need to feel your setbacks and turn them into incredible comebacks, check out their advice on the pages that follow.

#DISGRACEFULXHEYITGETSBETTER

SCARLETT HATCHWELL

CLAIMING THE DRIVER'S SEAT WITH LAURA



Laura Lane

© Hey It Gets Better

Laura Lane's inspiring story is one of rebellion against the typical 9 to 5 career mould, just not in the ways social media has us used to seeing it. Instead of embracing toxic hustle culture and burning herself into the ground, this jill-of-all-trades has made multiple career paths for herself to embrace on the day-to-day.

Currently the CMO of creative agency, Studio Blup, the founder of e-commerce store, My Icon Story, and a personal trainer, Laura truly has it all going on. But did she always see her life moving forward in this way?

"Although I enjoyed [my job]", Laura says, "I always had a niggles in the back of my head that I wanted to do something for myself". Before she took on the challenge of budding entrepreneurship, she

wanted to test the limits of her self-confidence and her capacity to cope with rapid change. That's where the idea of travelling solo came in.

"At the time I was like, I'm so not a solo traveller", she shares. Her self-doubt had her second-guessing if she was ready to own such a level of responsibility for herself.

"The first hurdle for me was to be like, 'You know what, I can do this myself, and I'm totally cool with it'. As time went on, I just enjoyed my own company - I loved the freedom it gave me, and the mental freedom to think about what I wanted to do with my life."

You have to have a strong backbone and be able to pick yourself back up

It took her a while to adjust, as she knew it would anyone, but soon enough she came to love the newfound confidence she had in caring for herself. "It was the best thing I've ever done because you're not relying on anyone but yourself and you learn so much about who

you are, how you handle things [and] how you approach different situations", she shares.

"Going solo travelling, 100% it shapes you."

For Laura, it created the space for change within her life - and showed her she had the tenacity, talent and capacity to work for herself all along.

"As soon as you press the pause button and have time to be with yourself and reflect, you can then readjust yourself, reset and come back fresher - with new eyes, more clarity and more drive." Doing just this, she stepped into her own power and created the businesses she'd always dreamed of.

"To get through it you have to have a strong backbone and be able to pick yourself back up", she asserts.

Showing you don't have to tie yourself to a solo career path, her story reminds us we can do anything we set our minds to.

Her top two things to remember? "You're on your own journey", she says, but "don't be afraid to ask for help" - there's never any shame in needing it.

CHALLENGING TIMEOLD TABOOS WITH ELENA



Ellie Austin-Williams

© Hey It Gets Better

Elena Austin-Williams is a positive powerhouse, fighting hard to create change. In 2019, she saw the world lacked mainstream voices in a particular financial realm. So, she started her own platform - aimed at empowering women around their finances - to fill the glaring void. The platform, This Girl Talks Money, tackles the taboos that still stand when it comes to us women and the paychecks we work hard for.

Look at the cards you've been dealt and work with that

Since 2019, This Girl Talks Money has fought to improve the life of every woman it reaches -

and Elena's passion for financial equality translates fearlessly in her practical, empowering advice. Who would ever have known she was fully dedicated to a life as a qualified lawyer before all this?

For Elena, a switch simply went off one day. "The lifestyle I envisaged did not live up to reality", she tells us. With a poor work-life balance eating away her free time and a feeling of unfulfillment heavy in her gut, she knew it was time to pursue something more meaningful - even if it meant drastic life differences.

"When you change careers you do have a different perspective on things. Obviously, you can think 'I wish I started this earlier', but [like] with a lot of experiences - you have to have lived it."

After a move to marketing to test the waters, she found her love for personal finance and hasn't looked back since. She found that once you have this kind of experience under your belt, you can start taking steps towards a life that better suits your wants and needs.

What are these steps, you ask?

In order to create change, you first have to welcome it. In work-led settings, Elena suggests a great first step: to "expand your network to include people who can support

you and your business dreams". Nothing makes choosing new paths easier than a team of cheerleaders having your back.

"Some of the people I met have truly changed my life", she says. "I got out of my comfort zone and asked people to meet up" - and it's these awkward first coffees that ended up creating opportunity and lifelong industry friendships.

'What ifs' are never helpful and in retrospect things look very different

Elena's path is a prime example of how you may not end up doing the things you always thought you would. She tells us confidently to "look at the cards you've been dealt and work with that".

"What I have learnt is that 'what ifs' are never helpful and in retrospect things look very different. Put yourself out there! No one is going to question you more than yourself, [so] don't be afraid of getting things wrong."

After all, it's these wrong turns that often work out wonderfully.

TURNING SETBACKS INTO COMEBACKS WITH JESS & NAT



Jess MacIntyre
and Nat Moore

© Hey It Gets Better

Everyone knows redundancy's a thing, but to be made redundant at the same time as a great friend? It's almost hard to think about, as we all wish situations like these could be as make-believe as the Easter bunny, St. Valentine or Santa's elves themselves. For Jess and Natalie though, this instant change was all too real of a reality.

Speaking together in a joint statement, they shared their experiences and ultimate advice on coming back from career lows as guests on the Hey It Gets Better podcast.

"The assumption that you're going to head in one particular direction over a period of years can completely veer off", they share, and don't these creatives know it. From high-flying careers to being forced to spend too much time at home, their lives were

turned upside down in the space of a few days.

Looking back on this turbulent time, we wonder what they think of it now?

"The adversity you face means you can build up that resilience and that armour to protect you going forward, for whatever is going to be thrown at you next." Their advice for anyone going through the same is simple; we should all be "taking challenges and failures and rewriting them in ways in which you're learning to be better".

If you can get through something as difficult as this, the world's your oyster

Making the best of life changing times is always hard, but even harder when it comes to a working life you depend on – financially and mentally.

When it comes to picking yourself back up, "caring and having passion is the number one thing you start with and from there you can build", they assert.

"All of us have had these moments of self doubt", they assure us, but we all need to "stop apologising for things because [we're] feeling nervous or not comfortable putting it forward" too. Knocking this habit on the head, alongside building your resilience to change and a practical practice of self-compassion, will do wonders.

It was off the back of these major life changes that they founded Mac+Moore, their marketing agency working hard to support positive social change. Fighting for more representation, inclusion and kindness in the marketing sphere, Jess and Natalie take on every task with a passion for keeping morale high.

If you're looking to push the boundaries of who holds higher roles in the industry like they are, they urge you to remind yourself of this: "If you're the only woman in the room, it can be really difficult to maintain that belief you deserve to be there. You should be in that room and your opinions, worth and values are equal."

The words they leave us with are a perfect reminder of how the pits and peaks we journey through only serve to make us stronger. "If you can get through something as difficult as this, the world's your oyster."

REMEMBERING IT ALWAYS GETS BETTER WITH KATIE



Katie Watson

© Hey It Gets Better

Last, but by no means least, the story of Katie Watson's climb back to herself is one sure to stick with you. As the founder of Hey It Gets Better, this young creative wasn't always in line to pursue a career in self-help – but she's truly glad she did.

"I'm the type of person that loves to know what happens next. I skip to the end of books and read spoilers online", she jokes; a trait so many of us will share in. She had an unshakeable need to know how things would work out, often before they'd even begun.

"Growing up, I had a plan in my head. I would go to university, get a job and then do the whole 'adult' thing", she tells us. It's a version of her future that was quickly torn down when her mental health began to nosedive. "I thought I was wasting what everyone said

would be the 'best years of my life'. I spent the first year of university living with anxiety and depression, [then] I was diagnosed with OCD."

She had a whole life to live in front of her, but every moment of that real, messy, human existence had been planned in advance. Had she built her dreams up to her own depreciation?

Once you're comfortable with the fact you can take risks, you'll be open to new opportunities

The summer before her final year, she decided to create a resource for others whose lives had been uprooted like hers. From chats with friends around modern-day mental health, to reading inspiring stories from people who'd been there, done that, got the diagnosis – Katie knew she had to create something that could unapologetically merge the two.

"I've had so many amazing conversations with people from all different backgrounds, and there have been some common themes

throughout. One of them is you never know where you will end up. Once you're comfortable with the fact you can take risks, [you'll] be open to new opportunities and make decisions based on the life you want to live."

It's the advice her podcast shares that she continues to apply to her own life.

Graduating into the middle of the pandemic, she missed out on her first industry role because of the climate. "Thankfully", she says, "I had the lessons of Hey It Gets Better to fall back on".

"So, while sometimes I still check the last page of a book or glance at spoilers on Twitter, I've realised that not knowing where you're going gives you the freedom to write your own story."

What a brilliant story it has the potential to be.

You can listen to all these interviews and more over on the 'Hey It Gets Better' podcast, available on both Spotify and Apple Podcasts where new episodes land soon.

With thanks to the entire Hey It Gets Better team for their work on this collaboration, and Katie and Anna for making it happen.

NOTICING RED FLAGS AND TAKING BACK CONTROL OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

BY JEN BROGAN

Ever recognise red flags in your relationships, your own mental health or your behaviours and just ignore them? This personal account of Jen Brogan's experience with them offers advice on empowering ourselves to face them, and suggests practical ways to help yourself get better.

Self-Harm, Suicide & Self-Image:

The first time I felt suicidal, I was eighteen years old. It was my third year of college, and I was having a really tough time. I was in an incredibly toxic relationship with an ex-partner, I was not happy with my course, my relationship with my parents was incredibly rocky and, all in all, I was not in a good place mentally.

I think sometimes, it's hard to confess you need help because of this, that and the rest. Instead of being listened to, you can sometimes be accused of blaming others for your feelings. That's probably one of the worst things someone can say to you when you're suicidal; it's not helpful, and it is not supportive. It's not blaming to have feelings around how others treat you – it's about trying to confront your pain, and feeling hurt because of someone else's words or actions is completely acceptable.

Sometimes, when you try to confront that feeling and not bury it in order to help yourself and be open, you can get a defensive and negative reaction back. Strong negative reactions can make you feel even lower than before. Why? Because you tried to do the thing that maybe your counsellors and friends suggested you do, but it doesn't work and sometimes you wonder what will.

As I got older, I began to learn how to separate myself mentally from others. This may sound extreme, but it was actually the best thing I ever did for myself. I was in a previous relationship which massively affected my self-image. I was called names, commented negatively on my weight, what I looked like and, therefore, I began to see myself that way. I felt like I wasn't cared for by my parents at the time, feeling as if I was constantly seeking reassurance, putting all my effort into

The reason insecurities exist is because someone has told you about that part of yourself and made you feel negatively about it - that is called trauma.

trying to make them 'proud' of me and getting next to nothing in return. After leaving my partner, I began to try and fix this ugly picture of myself that low-esteem had created in my head.

You aren't crazy for being insecure after you have been treated this way by someone. The reason insecurities exist is because someone has told you about that part of yourself and made you feel negatively about it – that is called trauma. Even when I was in school, I recall these comments from boys in my year. I became bulimic and eventually stopped eating, I over-exercised and I looked hollow. I didn't do that because I wanted to chase an ideal of health, I did it because I wanted to be 'skinny' and 'beautiful'. All because a fifteen-year-old boy called me 'fat' and 'ugly' in a school hallway.

A few years later, the same thing happened with my ex-partner. Unfortunately, as a woman, self-image is something that is widely projected onto us at all ages; the pressure to look a certain way, and if you don't match up you're automatically considered 'ugly'. We need to re-learn what defines beauty in our brains and begin to recognize that there is no 'perfect' or 'ideal' version of it, because we just are it. We are beauty; our differences and features are what makes us it.

This is how I found ways to undo the negative effect this pressure had on my body:

You aren't crazy for being insecure after you have been treated this way by someone.

I dumped him. I didn't need someone calling me names, telling me how unattractive I was or how I needed to lose weight. It was a relief. A big weight off my shoulders, not my stomach and my days felt a lot easier. It gave me more time to look at myself and find things to like about me, which replaced the insults I would hear beforehand.

1

2

I found my OWN style. Clothing, make-up, hairstyles... you name it, I found it. I noticed in the past I was buying clothing I knew my ex would like and wouldn't comment on negatively because of it. I wore more make-up because then he wouldn't see anything 'negative' to comment on. I ended up finding new styles of clothing that I never imagined myself being able to wear and I looked amazing.

I wore less make-up and took care of my skin, experimented with new looks when I felt like it and regained control of who I was.

I logged my feelings. I bought a journal and I wrote down everything I was feeling. If I was having a bad day and the idea of talking to someone about it seemed too hard, I would write it down and feel relieved.

3

Reliance & Burying Pain:

Whether it be drugs, alcohol or another unhelpful habit, when you physically rely on it to disguise your pain then there's a problem. One that needs working through for your own benefit. When I started university, I began drinking heavily. It wasn't after fresher's week as a first-year student that I realised, it wasn't after a month and it wasn't after a year. It took two years for me to realise I had been unconsciously relying on alcohol to get me through my pain.

There were multiple signs, ones I can clearly see now, that were red flags:

1) **When ordering a double-shot alcoholic drink mixed with a soft drink in a nightclub or bar, I could no longer taste the alcohol.**

2) **I was drinking a bottle of wine every other night just to be able to sleep.**

3) **My friends used to joke (unaware that I had a serious issue, but an incredible tolerance) that my ideal drink was "A glass of vodka with a shot of coke."**

4) **I made sure I had money for alcohol for the week, instead of food for the week - my priority was the drink.**

5) **If I didn't drink in the evening, I would stay awake all night and become an insomniac.**

So, what needed to be done? I was too ashamed of myself to say anything about it to anyone. The way I dealt with it was by creating a whole new routine for myself. Fortunately, I was moving into a new house for university so it felt like a fresh start, which helped me a lot. I deleted dating apps, I stopped going out clubbing, I rarely went to bars and I put all my time and effort into my university course. I gave myself no distractions. Yeah, it was really hard at some points and I did crave a drink when things felt hard, but I didn't let myself have it.

Even to this day, after two or three drinks I know I shouldn't take it any further. Not because I can't be trusted, because due to hitting rock-bottom once before, I'm very aware of what I am drinking, how much I am drinking and most importantly why I am drinking. If I think about having another drink, I ask myself 'Do I really want one? Or am I just having another one because these people are? Am I drinking it because I will feel more confident and less shy? To loosen up?'

If my answer in my head to any of these questions is yes, then I decline. If I genuinely want one for positive and fair reasons, then I will say yes to another drink. I officially don't care if I get called 'boring' or a 'lightweight' because I know my boundaries and my limits and they're all that matters. Eventually I reached a point where I was eating more food because I wasn't prioritizing alcohol, I could taste a double-shot in my drink on an evening out again and I fell asleep because I was tired - not because I was intoxicated.

Another very important part of quitting excessive drinking was that I was more careful and rational about my own safety and awareness. As a woman, on nights out it can sometimes feel a bit like a meat market and you're the deal of the day. There were too many occasions I would wake up the next morning and not be able to remember the names or the experiences of the people I ended up with. I know my worth way more than I did then, right now. It's important to be conscious of your health and mentality alone, but it's so important to be conscious of your own safety as well and I was not protecting myself when I was drinking the amount I was drinking.

The main ways to get help and take control over your mindstate is to seek out the problem. Ask yourself, why you are doing this, saying this, taking this, behaving like this. Because it's when you confront the problem, instead of reacting in ways to avoid it, that the problem begins to get solved.

Get to know yourself, your reasons, your struggles before you try to resolve them, otherwise you will not be able to easily recover. Then, once you feel you've found the underlying influences of the unhealthy behaviours you've developed, you'll be able to start seeking the right support, treatment and help needed to find yourself and know your worth again; to truly love yourself again.

Things that helped me to recover the most:

1) Writing.

Writing down my feelings allowed me to reflect on them and figure out where they came from and why they were there. It also made me think about when they started so I could recognize a significant experience or time of my life when certain behaviours began happening.

2) Doing what I really wanted, instead of what others wanted.

If I didn't want to go out, I didn't. If I didn't want to drink more, I didn't. I knew that if I betrayed my genuine feelings about certain situations, based on pressure from others or to be liked, I'd be really disappointed in myself.

3) Talking.

It takes talking honestly about your feelings to one person successfully, to make it easier to talk to others. If you try to talk to someone about your feelings and they react badly, don't give up trying to seek help – just go to someone else. I realised that certain people in my life were very defensive and I needed someone more open-minded. This is why I steered more towards a counsellor or someone who didn't know my entire life-story like my loved ones did because they are less defensive; they have an outside perspective and, therefore, it becomes a lot easier to talk about.

4) Taking responsibility.

Giving myself responsibilities that I actually cared about made it a lot harder to slip into old ways. Because university work became such a big deal to me, I didn't want to go out and party. I just wanted to do my work, get good grades and succeed. That seemed more rewarding to me than getting drunk and I knew it would benefit me in the future.

5) Getting fresh air.

Whenever I felt angry or driven by my emotions; instead of sitting with them and potentially falling into unhealthy coping mechanisms, I went outside and I'd go on really long walks. Eventually, I'd calm down because I had channelled this explosive feeling within me into walking. It was better than marching to a shop and buying a drink, ripping up my work and going out instead or even saying something unfair and going off on someone when they didn't deserve it.

6) Accepting help

My university was really helpful and supportive of me when trying to get into a better mindset, to help with my studies. If you really want to get better, you need to acknowledge the help that gets offered to you. If you are offered a wellbeing service in order to help you recover, then I really advise you take that chance and utilise it. Because, realistically, the only reason I used to ignore or say no to these things is simply because I didn't want to admit there was something wrong. But then I used them; I accepted help and now I'm working on getting better. It gets easier one day at a time.

**FEEL THE FEAR
AND DO IT ANYWAY:**

FEMALE SOLO TRAVEL

Travel is finally within our grasp once again. This time, we're not waiting for a partner or friend to bring our adventures to life. It could take a lifetime for your dreams to fit into someone else's schedule **so, why not pack a bag and go it alone?**

BY CECILY RAINE

In early 2019, I was heading towards the finish line of my post-graduate internship with no sense of direction as to where I was heading next. Deep in the post-grad blues, I'd spent the best part of a year watching my friends celebrate their final year at university through Instagram, from my childhood bedroom.

Like many graduates, I was unsure about my career, my living situation (2 years later and I'm still with my parents, yay!) and the future of my relationship with my boyfriend at the time. There was a great big question mark labelled 'my future' standing in my way.

The idea for my first solo trip stemmed from a late-night viewing of Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again. It was in the depths of winter, I finished the film one whole box of tissues and a panic attack later, and it ultimately resulted in me booking a one way flight from Heathrow to Corfu. I wasn't the first person to be inspired to book a flight to Greece after watching the 'Why Did It Have To Be Me?' scene, and I doubt I'll be the last.

I'm someone who struggled massively with the idea of doing anything alone. The fear of looking like a 'loner' absorbed me. Something as simple as sitting by myself in a cafe or walking into town without my friends could never have happened.

For me, spending weeks on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean with a group of complete strangers - and even more inter-railing alone across Eastern Europe - actually felt less daunting than sitting by myself in my local park reading a book. I loved the idea of experiencing something

where you didn't have to worry about bumping into someone you knew, and you could exist carefree and happily.

Last summer, I read Florence Given's Women Don't Owe You Pretty which includes a quote I wish I'd heard in my teens and every day since then:

"The truth is that no one is ever looking at you and thinking 'what the hell are they doing on their own?'. Most of the time the things we are insecure about aren't about our dislike towards them, but what we think others will think when they see us."

Where was this advice 10 years ago? It's true - nobody is concerned about what you're doing as they're too busy worrying about themselves, simple as that.

Often when I talk to women about my experiences of travelling alone, the usual responses I get are, "I wish I had the confidence to do that" or "that's so brave, I could never travel solo." As women, we often don't believe in our own strength and capabilities. This is reinforced when eyebrows are raised at our plans and we're told that we shouldn't travel without a partner or friends because we're putting ourselves in danger.

The women I met while travelling were all told the same, it seems the norm not to believe women are just as capable of doing what men have done for centuries.

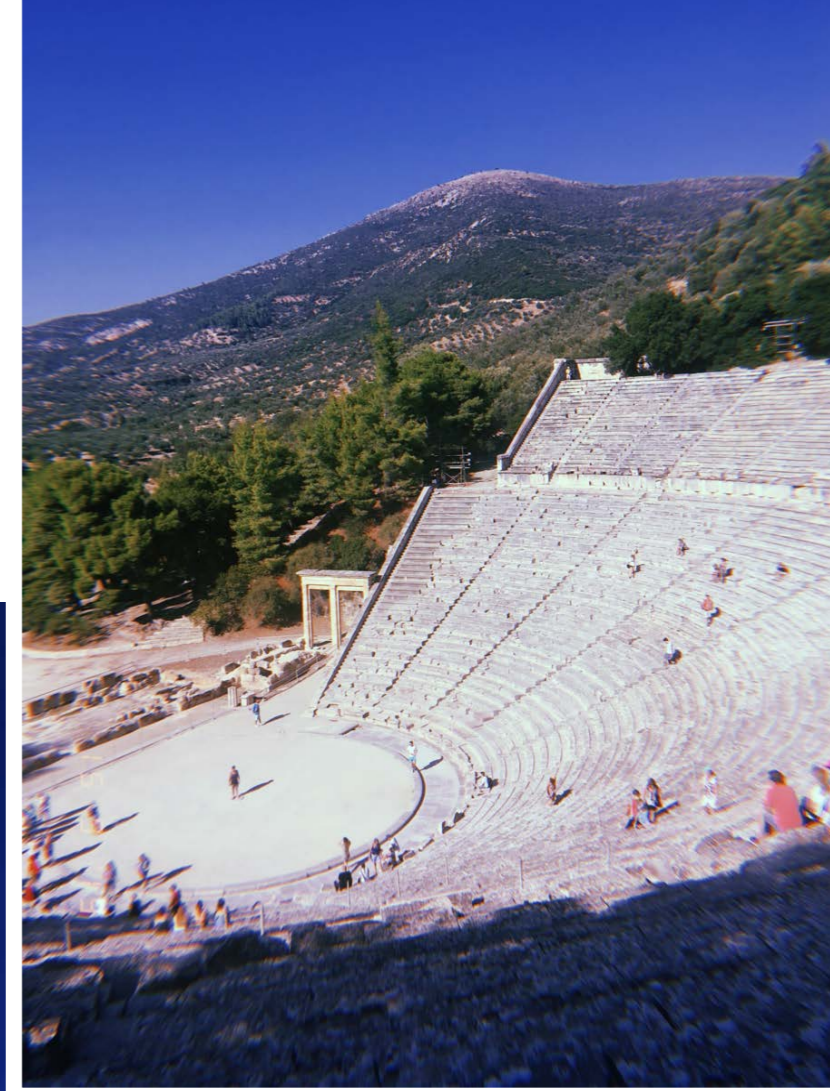
Solo travel allows you to make your own rules. You become the priority. Sleep in as late as you want, stay in a city as long as you want, go to the restaurants you want - it's all on your own terms. You don't have to compromise your wants and needs for the sake of another person, and you get to practice being selfish in the best way.

Throughout my trip, I met so many women from all walks of life. Some were older, some younger, some were from the opposite side of the world whilst another shared a mutual friend from primary school (weird, right?). These were women who were complete strangers to me and to each other, but we all shared one thing in common: we wanted an adventure, and we wanted to find it alone.

Those who travel independently embark on their trips for their own reasons, and none of them look at you like you're crazy for being on your own. There wasn't an ounce of judgement from any of the women I met, only acceptance. It was refreshing to talk to people who understood that desire to push yourself outside your comfort zone and have an experience that was solely yours.

Just because you're alone doesn't mean you're lonely. One of the biggest impacts solo travel has had on my life is on the relationship I have with myself.

© Cecily Raine



“Feel the fear and do it anyway”

I got to know ‘me’ beyond the influences of friends or family. I didn’t have the opportunity to hide behind anyone in situations I would have avoided, had someone else been there. It tests your strength in the best way and makes you realise you’re braver and more capable than you give yourself credit for.

That first solo trip helped me learn to enjoy my own company; I didn’t feel the need to reach for my phone and aimlessly scroll through social media to feel a connection with others. I was hanging out with myself, and the company was more than good enough.

People will come and go in our lives, but the only guaranteed relationship is the one we have with ourselves. It’s taught me what I value in friendships, relationships and in the people who have the potential to enter my life. When you’re only reliant on yourself, you no longer feel inclined to give up a part of yourself in order to let people in who don’t add to the fullness of your life. As Florence Given said: “Anyone who wants to be a part of your life must be an addition to your wholeness”.

Travelling alone, especially as a woman, can hold risks; whether it’s in your hometown or a brand new city, but there are definitely ways it can be both fun and safe. 84% of solo travellers are women, according to the Solo Travel Statistics (2020-2021) collected by Condor Ferries, so you know you’re in good company.

The thought of solo travel can,

understandably, be incredibly daunting to anyone worried about safety. Extra precautions you can set in place to ensure safety include:

- 1) Researching places and listening to other solo female travellers on their experiences visiting a city or country
- 2) Avoiding heading out alone at night
- 3) Having Find My Friends on so your location can be tracked.

These are a few rules I follow on every trip, but it’s well worth doing your own research into staying safe whilst solo travelling to help you feel empowered.

Luckily, there are plenty of Facebook groups for female solo travellers. It’s easy to find community and comfort among thousands of other like-minded women. Recently, I asked one of these communities what piece of advice they would give to someone embarking on their first solo trip. Some women suggested “starting small and heading out for a day trip to a place nearby and working your way up”, another said to “allow yourself to feel overwhelmed or lonely, it’s all about figuring out what works for you as you’re the priority”.

A response that stood out for me was,

If we stopped doing the things we wanted, out of fear, we often wouldn’t make it much further than our front door. The fear of the unknown holds me back in

every aspect of my life, and it did even more so with solo travel. If you’re looking for the queen of overthinking, I’m right here. Before my first trip, I overthought every tiny detail and worried myself out of going too many times to count. Although underneath all that worry, I knew in my gut that I’d regret it if I let that fear stop me.

I told myself, “if the thought of it makes you feel even a tad more excited than terrified, book the trip and go”, and I haven’t looked back since.

So, start with solo staycations and day trips if you’re nervous, as international travel is still up in the air at the moment. You won’t regret giving it a try, and you might even learn something about yourself along the way.

If you fancy a peek at some more of my amateur travel photography, you’ll find me at [@cecily.travels](#) on Instagram.





© Laura Tobin from the project 'Capsule Magazine: A Guide on Saying "No" to Fast Fashion.'
The project is available to view via Laura's portfolio website lauratobin.co.uk





