**The teacher who inspired me**

Sharon Horgan, Paddy Ashdown, Bonnie Greer and others on the teachers who meant most to them. Share your own memories of the teacher who inspired you below - and if one of these stars was your pupil or you know someone who taught them, tell us what they were like



[**Nicole Jackson**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/nicolejackson)

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 Bonnie Greer, Paddy Ashdown and Sharon Horgan remember their most inspiring teachers. Photograph: Photomontage/Rex Features/Getty Images

**Andrew Motion Former poet laureate**

My background was very unbookish, and there was absolutely no expectation from my family of my ever reading very much or even writing anything. I wanted to birdwatch and be left alone. Then I was taught English by **Peter Way** (Mr Way to me), and it was as though he walked into my head and turned all the lights on.

He manifested in everything he said and did that poems were not a strange addition to life, but a part of it. And that is one of the great lessons of my life. He didn't know he was doing this, but he gave me my life. He lent me poems he liked and I showed him poems I had written, which weren't really poems but more an explosion of words. But he took me completely seriously. He introduced me to Woods, ­Larkin, Keats, Edward Thomas – all people who have meant more to me than anyone else. His way of teaching was very searching but also very passionate and scrupulous. When I left, he gave me the latest published edition of Moly by Thom Gunn, which had druggy poems in it. It was wonderful ­evidence of his broadmindedness – as if I needed any proof. He was an exemplary figure to me and now a dear friend. I don't doubt that if he hadn't taught me English, I would now be working for the RSPB.

**Sarah Waters, Novelist**

My most inspiring teacher was **Ed Tanguay**; he taught me art A-level at Milford Haven grammar school, south-west Wales, in the early 1980s. He was a really brilliant guy – inspiring in the best possible way, not just because he had all sorts of technical expertise and was good at passing it on, but because he encouraged us to think. Until he came along, art classes had been about putting a few objects on the desk and drawing them; he got us to do all sorts of crazy exercises – things about perception and response. He was a bit of an iconoclast, I suppose. One day he arrived at school having forgotten to wear a tie; he got us to make him one out of painted cardboard. He was ­everything a good teacher should be: stern at times, but good-­natured; clever, creative, and fun.

**Michael Morpurgo, Author**

I'm the proud owner of a third- class degree and have been teaching for 40 years, so I'm interested to learn that the Tories don't think I'd be up to the job now. The teacher who most inspired me was **Edred Wright**, director of music at the King's School, Canterbury. His great gift was being able to inspire children (like me) who weren't necessarily musically gifted – that's what we should require of teachers in all subjects. With Mr Wright it was never about improving the reputation of the school, just his intense love of music. What that man taught me aged 14 has ­enriched my entire life.

**Robert Peston, BBC business editor**

I went to a north London comprehensive in the 1970s. It was called Highgate Wood, and it had been created out of a secondary modern. The ethos of the school, created by the head, Eurof Walters, was that every kid deserved an equal chance to succeed. They were great at not writing off anyone – and lots of kids were given opportunities they wouldn't have had under a selective system.

Two teachers had a particularly big impact on me: **Ruby Galili** who taught history, and **Peter Hudgell**, head of English. I have no idea what qualifications they had, but they loved their respective subjects, knew tonnes about them, and were brilliant at communicating their learning and their enthusiasm. I still keep in touch with Ruby. She has ­always been supportive, then and now. She's like all great teachers – consistent.

**Deborah Moggach, Author**

My most inspiring teacher was my English teacher at Camden school for girls. She was called **Margot Heinemann** and wasn't like a teacher at all, she was a hugely intelligent woman with large dark eyes and a Past. This included ­being the lover of John Cornford, a beautiful young poet who died in the Spanish civil war, and what could be more potent than that? I adored her, we all did, because she treated us as grownups. Camden girls were famously grownup anyway, alarmingly so, but she seemed to take that for granted even more than the other staff. She introduced us to The Waste Land, to books outside the curriculum, and somehow to life itself, with all its tragedy as well as its possibilities.

**Paddy Ashdown, Politician**

**John Eyre** really changed my life. He persuaded me to join the poetry society (which all rugby playing "hearties" resolutely despised) and gave me a lifetime love of poetry, even getting me to write some for the school magazine. Eyre lit in me a fire for literature, especially Shakespeare, which has never gone out. He persuaded me to act in the school play (I was a wordless monk in Auden and Isherwood's The ­Ascent of F6). He even, with the assistance of another master in my house, got me to join a group to sing in (and win!) a madrigal competition – which, to anyone who knows my totally tuneless voice and incapacity to hold a melody, was nothing short of a miracle.

I went to see him for lunch in 2001, five years before he died. He had lost none of his old spark, or his impish and acerbic nature. He opened our last meeting with, "Ah yes, Ashdown – you were ­always an interesting boy. But you were one of the few to surprise me – I never thought you would get as far as you have. Still, there's no ­accounting for fate is there?"

**Kamila Shamsie, Novelist**

Through much of my childhood in Karachi I was painfully insecure. In classrooms, when the teacher asked a question, I'd never raise my hand because I'd worry I was wrong. All this changed in class five when **Mrs Rehman** was my class teacher. I still don't know how she did it – but in the kindness of her manner, in a certain way she had of asking a question and then looking directly at me as though to say, "Go on, speak up: if you're wrong, that's OK," she made me feel confident. It's not that I started to believe I always had the right answers; instead I came to see that not knowing the right answers wasn't such a problem. From Mrs Rehman I learnt to feel more comfortable in my own skin.

**Michael ­Winner, Director and critic**

When I was 17, I went to a private tutorial establishment that was based in Buckingham Gate and Guildford, and met the greatest educationalist I have ever met. Her name was **KM Hobbs**. She wrote to my parents and told them I was illiterate. She said, "If you think your son is ­going to get into Cambridge, you'll have a long wait." Within a year I had passed the ­necessary exams and I was a student at Cambridge, still at the age of 17. She turned a moron into something close to a genius. That was a great achievement.

**Sharon Horgan, Comedian**

I didn't have great luck with my teachers. I remember a series of chinless wonders and impotent bullies. And that was just the nuns. The only one I ever think about was a lady from my primary school days called **Eileen Daly**. She was tough as a brick, scary, ­opinionated, a bit of a dark horse, she'd tell you to sit down and shut up if she felt like it, but she had the ability to make kids feel like they were individually important. And she had a sense of humour. I remember once ­cycling with my friend to the village where she lived and knocking on her door, hoping to sell her some tickets for a sponsored charity thing. She invited us into her home. We sat around, drinking coffee and shooting the breeze with her, like equals. It was so exciting. She bought a load of tickets and we left buzzing from all the caffeine. The thought of making her proud makes me happy.

**Bonnie Greer, Playwright and critic**

One of my best teachers was my history professor, **Dr Turner**, at university at the beginning of the 1970s. He laid the facts down and was able to show how history moved in cycles. He predicted the disaster of Richard Nixon and Watergate, based on Nixon's activities in the 1950s. He let me see that history is written by the victors not the vanquished, and that it is always necessary to ­investigate – never to take ­anyone's word for anything.

**Alexei Sayle, Author and actor**

When I was at foundation art college in Southport there was a teacher there called **Max Eden** who had known ­Picasso in the 1950s. He was wonderfully ­dismissive about things like art A-level. "Just draw the fingernails and you'll pass," he told me. He also showed me how the way you lived your life could be a work of art. Recently I opened a new wing of Southport college and they gave me one of his paintings, which I treasure.

**Kate Mosse, Author**

I went to a comprehensive school in Sussex in the 1970s, where one teacher stood out, my A-level English teacher, **Henry Thomas**. He was by way of being an eccentric – tall, patrician, often done up in a white suit and Panama – kind of a Jean Brodie, though young and English. He was passionate about writing, reading, talking too, always engaged and enthusiastic, and made each lesson unique, fun, exciting. He didn't suffer fools, but in return treated us as thinking people with opinions worth listening to. As a result, we all raised our game and, in his lessons, were students rather than schoolgirls. Most important – and even harder these days of league tables and inflexibility – he encouraged us to think not about passing exams and grades, but rather the books themselves and the writers behind them. An exceptional teacher.

**Rory Bremner, Comedian**

**Derek Swift** taught me French at Wellington College. He was ­unconventional, original and ­inspiring, constantly inventing his own teaching materials and covering the whiteboard with words and phrases in anything from German to Serbo-Croat. In his class of 24, 21 got A grades and 3 got Bs. He taught us Russian in his spare time – four got As and two got Bs. We were like Alan Bennett's History Boys. He always challenged us, setting sixth-formers Oxbridge Finals prose exams and using Asterix and other comic strips as ­learning aids. He also introduced me to Voltaire's novel Candide – and therefore to satire.

**Shazia Mirza, Comedian**

My drama teacher **Mrs Fisher-Jones**was a great teacher. She always told me I was really funny and that I should develop that. I didn't know what that meant – I hadn't even heard of stand-ups then. She would let us write our own plays and do improv. There were loads of us who didn't go into the arts but still remember what a brilliant teacher she was. I still get Christmas cards from her now. She says she always knew what I would do.

**Trevor Baylis, Inventor**

I failed my 11+ and went to Dormers Wells secondary modern in Southall after the second world war. We were considered to be inferior to those at grammar school and we were made to feel that as well. To start with, I didn't want to know. [Teaching](https://www.theguardian.com/education/teaching) me must have been like trying to communicate with a slab of tripe. One teacher in particular encouraged me to get hands on. He taught woodwork and metalwork and showed me, literally, how to use a spanner. He would show you how to drill a bit of wood, how to sharpen your tools etc. He was a very bright type, a very intelligent chap but he was a very fatherly type too. This was before the days when health and safety came into the equation and we didn't have safety helmets but that helped me grow up as well. My teacher had to know about first aid because every lesson someone would cut their finger, so he was also a nurse as well.

**David Nicholls, Writer**

There was something of a double-act at my school (Toynbee Comprehensive, Eastleigh, 1977-1983); music teacher **Mary Granger,** and drama teacher **David Dalton**. Both showed incredible tolerance and enthusiasm, given that I had no discernible talent in either subject.

Miss Granger, in particular, was obliged to hear me alternate Imagine and In The Air Tonight on the rehearsal room piano, often for hours at a time. Both teachers gave a great deal of their own time to pursuing out-of-hours projects. "Strict but fair" is an awful cliche, but both managed to combine passion for their subjects with discipline and rigour. They also managed to conquer the suspicion and indifference of the (male) students. I sometimes wish that I'd had the same inspiration in more "sensible" vocational subjects. Instead I spent far too much of my adult life pursuing a career as an actor, without ever really having the ability to act.

**Glyn Maxwell, Poet**

In the old days there was a "seventh-term" set aside for Oxbridge candidates. There were only two or three of us going for it at my school, so we'd wander round, in and out of the building as we pleased, beholden to no one, a vaguely celestial "upper-upper-sixth".

One of my Oxbridge tutors was a man called **Peter Gardiner**. What was odd about Mr Gardiner was that he'd come from a glittering career in various top private schools – headmaster at one of the best – and, for his own reasons, had decided to finish his career as deputy head at our Welwyn Garden comprehensive. It seemed to me like this chap had walked right out of Greyfriars into Grange Hill. We made fun of his accent and his two posh middle names.

I went to him for one-to-one coaching in English. I'd shamble into his office reeking of smoke from the toilets, I'd not have read anything he recommended, I had all the miserable self-pity of the fortunate and promising. And this fiftysomething old gentleman – I didn't know any gentlemen – looked at me with the face of a passionate boy whose love of books and stories had filled his life to the brim.

We were different generations: I was the old at their worst: mind made up, black-or-white, full of myself, bad habits. He was the young at their best: open, innocent, self-effacing, eager to share. I think a great teacher isn't talking to you: he's talking to someone he can see inside you, so that in time you shed who you think you are, like an old skin, and walk out into the sun again as young as you can be.

**Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty**

I don't think it's enough that teachers just need to be an elite graduate – you have to like children and be skilled at communicating with them, so I would challenge the idea that you have to be an academic genius to be a good teacher. It is more about opening up children to the possibilities that come from learning. Many of my best teachers taught music. I was never going to be a professional musician, but that didn't matter – to have a teacher who took an interest in me, and shared their passion was hugely valuable.

I couldn't pick out a single teacher, I had many who inspired me. The difference between the teachers I loved and those I didn't was whether they treated me as a person, engaged in a debate. You may find this hard to believe, but I was probably quite a challenging, argumentative kid. The teachers who were best were the ones who realised how important intelligent dissent is, rather than churning out people who become cogs in the wheel. Not all were like this, but enough of my teachers respected me, encouraged my curiosity and dissenting nature.

**Lynne Truss, Author and journalist**

I went to Tiffin Girls in Kingston from 1966 to 1973, and my recollection is that it never occurred to any of us to criticise the teachers, or appreciate them very much either. In the run-up to my history O-level, I did realise I wasn't learning enough, but I blamed the period, not the teacher. To save the situation, I asked her whether I could look at some exam papers, to see what else I could answer questions on. Then I just mugged up this other stuff by myself. The best teacher I had taught religious knowledge, so I took it to A-level, despite being a non-believer. His name was **Levi Dawson**, and I'm pretty sure, now I come to think of it, that I looked up to him mainly because he was the first person I'd ever met who had written a book.

**Dinos Chapman, Artist**

I hated every single one of my teachers and if any one of them are still alive, I hope they read this. They were horrible old fascists, convinced you could beat education into kids, and they threatened to cut my hair because I had lovely locks back then. It obviously traumatised me because now I'm completely bald.