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OpinionKate Garraway

Kate Garraway deserves our thanks for her heart-breaking home movie

Barbara Ellen

Vilifying the presenter for documenting her husband's plight is beneath contempt

Kate Garraway in her London home in the documentary Finding Derek, about her husband's battle with Covid-19.
Photograph: Tony Ward/REX/Shutterstock

Kate Garraway in her London home in the documentary Finding Derek, about her husband's battle with Covid-19.
Photograph: Tony Ward/REX/Shutterstock

Sat 27 Mar 2021 14.00 EDT

It must take a special kind of person to sit in lofty judgment on *Good Morning Britain* presenter Kate Garraway for making the documentary *Finding Derek*, about her husband Derek Draper's year-long battle with the effects and after-effects of Covid-19. It would require an extraordinary mindset to witness all that suffering and effectively opine: "It's morally repugnant how she's invading her husband's privacy. I'm better than her because I wouldn't do that. I say to you now, as I sit in my pants and stained dressing gown, ranting online, that in the same circumstances I would be noble, wise and true, setting an ethical example for all to follow."

Draper, a former Labour party adviser and lobbyist turned psychotherapist, was admitted to hospital last March and, for a time, placed in an induced coma. Since becoming Covid-free, he's struggled with long-term effects,

including heart and kidney failure, pancreatic and liver damage, holes in his lungs and potential cognitive damage.

Draper is also thought to be the longest surviving Covid-19 hospital inpatient. This last point alone would appear to validate the making of at least one documentary. If you wanted to be cold and clinical about it, then we should be begging Garraway to tell us what's happening, not berating her for using her valuable public platform to do so.

Yet berate her is what a strident minority continue to do. They see a mother with two brave children, somehow managing to maintain a happy, stable home, and their reaction (their actual reaction!) is to carp about some messy Lego and suggest she tidy it up. They say that Garraway is being a journalist rather than a wife, as if it's somehow impossible to be both simultaneously. They see footage of Draper dazed, despairing, mouthing the word "pain" and label it "exploitative", as if nobody else, Garraway included, had considered this possibility.

Of course there are ethical questions: would Draper, before he was sick, have wanted to be portrayed in this way? Would any of us? Isn't that the point: that Covid in such an extreme and lasting form is unavoidably distressing and confrontational. If this documentary hadn't shown Draper as he is – his suffering, his reality – what could it hope to achieve?

The blackly amusing thing about all this is the sanctimonious posturing of the trolls. Some people seem to think they're sticking up for Draper against his self-promoting television presenter wife. That, if Draper could, he would rise up from his hospital bed, solemnly shake their hands and say:"Thank you for publicly attacking my wife, the mother of my children, in her darkest hour."

It's far more likely that Draper would be proud of Garraway. As the country starts to grapple with the multifaceted aftermath of the pandemic, we need people to shine light into the darkest, most personal and painful areas. By making this documentary, Garraway has probably done more to get people to keep taking Covid seriously than any number of government campaigns.

Amazon workers need time off in loo

People hold signs during a rally at the Amazon Spheres and headquarters in solidarity with Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama. Photograph: Jason Redmond/AFP/Getty Images

Be in no doubt, Amazon's lavatory habits matter. Once again, it's in the news that Amazon warehouse workers and drivers have to urinate into bottles and defecate into bags in order to maintain productivity levels. The issue was reactivated in a tweet from the Amazon News account that read: "You don't really believe the peeing in bottles thing do you? If that were true, nobody would work for us" and so on. In case there were still a few people who didn't believe it, a memo was then leaked, in which employees were warned to stop urinating and defecating in this manner.

Ironically, the Amazon News tweet was probably sent in an attempt to undermine the efforts of workers at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, to unionise, which are drawing widespread support, including from Bernie Sanders. If the unionisation is successful, it could trigger other efforts, which Jeff Bezos probably doesn't want. That's Jeff Bezos, who is reported to have 25 bathrooms for his personal use in his Washington DC mansion alone. No peeing into an empty bottle for Jeff.

While this topic may seem slightly squalid, it's important because it's about the dehumanisation of the modern worker. It's astonishing that any employee in the 21st century isn't afforded the time and dignity for basic bodily functions. Yet from the days of the "McJob" through to zero-hours to the gig economy, some employers seem to want the impossible from workers who may have few other employment options. Whatever Amazon's official attitude, it says something about the extent of denial about the humanity of its workers that even the simple act of going to the bog is turned into a corporate psychodrama.

Pete Doherty rocks a new look. And it suits him

The way he was: Pete Doherty with Kate Moss. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

Photos have emerged of Libertines/Babyshambles/Puta Madres frontman and erstwhile Kate Moss paramour, Pete Doherty, in France, looking – how to put this? – as though he's really enjoying his dinners. As have many of us in lockdown. Doherty's larger appearance is only notable because we're used to him epitomising the skinny, wasted rock'n'roll casualty cliche.

First, you hope that Doherty's health is OK; then it occurs that he's probably healthier than before, if he's ditched the drugs for eating. Doherty,

42, also looks extremely happy as he strolls along with his partner. Far happier than he ever looked at the height of his fame, staring, stupefied, at the camera with those big, lost eyes, like a punk junkie Tweety Pie. Allegedly.

This could be Doherty's greatest act of defiance yet. Usually, reformed rock stars are a hyper-controlled melange of fitness, yoga, juicing, "my wild days are behind me" interviews and sharp, red carpet-worthy suits. Fair enough. Hard-living rock stars have to clean up their act or they will surely die. Still, it's refreshing to see Doherty clearly not giving a damn and making up his own elder statesman rock star survivor rules.

Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

OpinionTrade unions

Why the Shrewsbury 24 case is so relevant right now

Kenan Malik

Its major themes – the gig economy, official disinformation, the right to protest – all remain contemporary struggles

Members of the Shrewsbury 24 campaign outside the the Royal Courts of Justice, London, last week, after the court of appeal quashed the 1973 convictions. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

Members of the Shrewsbury 24 campaign outside the the Royal Courts of Justice, London, last week, after the court of appeal quashed the 1973 convictions. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

Sun 28 Mar 2021 02.30 EDT

Last week, the court of appeal quashed the convictions of the Shrewsbury 24. A group of trade unionists, some of whom were imprisoned, they have battled almost 50 years to clear their names. Their case, which included official disinformation, police malpractice, the right to organise, remains relevant today.

The 24 were, in 1972, part of the first nationwide strike by building workers for better wages and the abolition of the casual labour system used to keep wages down and conditions poor. They had peacefully picketed building sites in Shrewsbury to persuade others to join the strike. Five months later, they were suddenly arrested and charged with unlawful assembly, intimidation, affray, criminal damage and assault.

It was a political move, driven by a government desire to break union power. The Information Research Department (IRD), a secret Foreign Office cold war propaganda unit, was used to spread disinformation. An ITV documentary, *The Red Under the Bed*, using fake IRD information, was broadcast in the middle of the trial to smear the strikers.

All this should remind us that there's nothing new in "fake news", except that, in the past, the primary sources of disinformation were state institutions. That's reason to be wary of demands today for the state to police disinformation.

The legal assault on the Shrewsbury 24 was the beginning of a long process of undermining trade union power. The return of a casual employment system, in the form of the gig economy, shows the continuing need for organisation. Having curtailed union rights, the government is now undermining the very right to protest. That, too, needs resisting. The real victory of the Shrewsbury 24 will lie in how well we learn the lessons of their case for contemporary struggles.

Kenan Malik is an Observer columnist

OpinionCoronavirus

The Observer view on emerging from Covid lockdown

Observer editorial

The arrival of spring brings the urge to shake off the restrictions of a grim winter, but we must remember the lessons learned

People enjoy the spring weather at St. James's Park in London on 27 March 2021. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

People enjoy the spring weather at St. James's Park in London on 27 March 2021. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Sun 28 Mar 2021 01.15 EDT

It will be hard for many people to suppress feelings of relief tomorrow as they enjoy the first lockdown freedoms of a spring that will hopefully lead to summer months devoid of all Covid restrictions. The country has

endured a grim winter and the urge to step out and share time with friends and relatives has become increasingly intense.

Such urges should be tempered with the recollection that we have been here before. Lockdowns were lifted last summer yet the virus quickly returned. The fear that it could re-emerge in a third, deadly wave cannot therefore be ignored, although two key factors should give us confidence that we are now better placed to control Covid-19 than in 2020.

The first reassurance is straightforward. We can thank the remarkable success of a vaccination campaign that has seen more than 32 million people in the UK receive jabs, a programme that puts the nation on target to offer vaccines to all adults by July. And with vaccines not only warding off death and hospitalisations but also inducing reductions in virus transmissions, we can expect daily case rates to remain relatively modest. At least, that is the forecast, one that scientists will be monitoring with considerable care over coming months.

The second factor is less striking but still provides comfort – for it is clear that a sense of caution now pervades the government, which seems better prepared to accept scientific advice and which appears less likely to indulge in bluster and on an insistence on the early reopening of the country at all costs. This has not always been the case, as Wellcome Trust director Jeremy Farrar made clear yesterday.

As Farrar said, terrible damage was inflicted on the country when ministers recklessly refused to impose a September circuit-breaker lockdown urged on them by advisers who had become alarmed by new cases of Covid-19 soaring across the country. The end result was a jump in admissions to hospital that eventually led to a seven-week period in January and February when Covid deaths reached their highest levels of the last 12 months.

People need reminding of this very dark statistic. Boris Johnson's government may have learned its lesson but it has done so only after tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths have occurred in the UK. The current lockdown that we are only now preparing to leave could have been lifted long ago had the government demonstrated caution, listened to its advisers and acted more swiftly. Let's hope it now sees sense. Certainly, Johnson's

rhetoric is showing some restraint at present. How long it stays that way is another matter.

The country needs to remain diligent over the next few months. As we make clear elsewhere, there are genuine fears for the health of employees returning to workplaces that have not been assessed for Covid risks – at a time when our vaccination programme is still incomplete and when dangerous variants are still circulating. An example is provided by staff at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea, who are preparing to strike over safety concerns after more than 600 workers tested positive for Covid-19 in recent months. Those who continue to work at home face other problems, with one group of call centre employees having been told that webcams could be installed to monitor their activity and work levels at home.

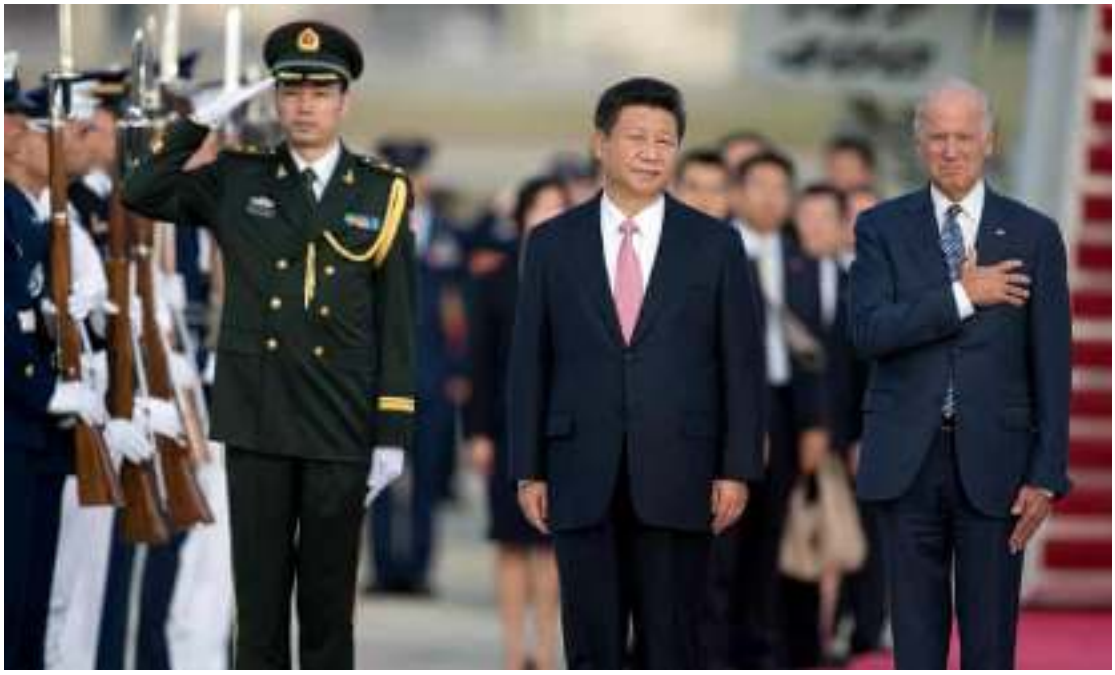
It is clear that after all our lockdowns, the route back to normality is going to be a hard one, a journey littered with problems as we try to readjust to the lifestyles we abandoned a year ago. We are going to need time, effort and support to adapt to post-Covid life in Britain – and a government that recognises the long-term nature of the problem.

OpinionChina

The Observer view on the threat posed by China

Observer editorial

The west must not allow to allow its understandable anger with Beijing to escalate into another cold war



‘Aggressively assertive international policies’: Xi Jinping and Joe Biden in September 2015. Photograph: Carolyn Kaster/AP

‘Aggressively assertive international policies’: Xi Jinping and Joe Biden in September 2015. Photograph: Carolyn Kaster/AP

Sun 28 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

It is difficult to be exact about dates, but at some point in the recent past, China’s global outlook underwent a fundamental shift. The “peaceful rise”, or “peaceful development”, doctrine associated with Hu Jintao, president for 10 years until 2013, was quietly dropped. In its place came the more aggressively assertive international policies of his successor, Xi Jinping.

In less than a decade, Xi has amassed greater personal power than any leader since Mao. His initial focus was on domestic economic reform, social control, internet censorship and an anti-corruption drive that, incidentally, ended the careers of party rivals. In 2018, he became, in effect, president for life. China's newly combative global posture reflects Xi's formidable, dictatorial personality.

At the same time, the world around China was changing. In 2017, Donald Trump became US president and relations quickly deteriorated. Trump blamed China for America's economic problems and the coronavirus pandemic. Xi's 70-country Belt and Road investment initiative was viewed as a threat to US global leadership. Trump declared China a "strategic competitor".

Faced by increasingly hostile western criticism, tariffs and sanctions, and persuaded by the thesis, popular in Communist party circles, that America is in terminal decline, Xi decided – it's not clear precisely when – to take the offensive. His order went out to officials and a new generation of uncouth "wolf warrior" diplomats around the world: China has stood up. Show "fighting spirit".

This is the broader context in which last week's furious row over the sanctions imposed on four Chinese officials by the UK, the EU, the US and Canada must be viewed. Beijing's disproportionate response in penalising democratically elected politicians, academics and non-governmental organisations is about far more than the alleged genocide of Uighurs in Xinjiang.

It's about enforcing a wider message. It's of a piece with China's ongoing, treaty-busting suppression of democratic rights in Hong Kong. It is consistent with Beijing's hazardous disregard for international law in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, its oppression of Tibet and its relentless intimidation of Taiwan. Xi's defiance over Xinjiang is also matched by China's predatory trade practices, economic blockade of Australia and covert cyber warfare.

In short, China – in this relatively novel, expansive incarnation shaped and controlled by Xi – has grown into a huge international challenge. It believes

it can do as it likes. Its government's behaviour, at its worst, threatens the rules-based order created after 1945 and the security, sovereignty and democratic values of the western countries it now daily confronts.

What is to be done? For Britain, this is an especially awkward question. Last week's furore may spell the end for Boris Johnson's efforts to build a deeper, post-Brexit business relationship with China while at the same time championing human rights. His characteristic bid to have it both ways was never going to work. Now it has collapsed in ignominy.

Hong Kong was already a major casualty of Johnson's shaming prevarications. It is extraordinary that the UK has not taken tougher action to punish China's putsch. Why has it been left to the US to sanction officials such as Carrie Lam, Beijing's puppet chief executive? The answer lies in Johnson's failing hopes of a favourable, Brexit-salvaging trade deal.

China, of course, is well aware of this conflict and contemptuously exploits it, fatuously condemning interference in its "internal affairs" while pumping out puerile propaganda about the delights of life in Xinjiang. The US and other allies say genocide is taking place there. Why does the government refuse to speak this ugly truth? And why, if it has nothing to hide, is China blocking a UN inquiry?

EU countries, notably Germany with its large China export trade, suffer a similarly hypocritical ambivalence. And so, too, if it is honest, does the US, whose farmers fared particularly badly in Trump's still unconcluded tariff war. Like Britain, Europe and the US need a peaceful, working relationship China. But individual states cannot curb Xi's excesses by themselves.

As the US president, Joe Biden, acknowledged last week by inviting China to a virtual climate summit next month, there is also an urgent, shared global agenda that includes the pandemic, hunger and nuclear proliferation. Such issues may only be effectively addressed through international collaboration. That necessarily includes China.

Much as it may anger Tory armchair warriors such as Iain Duncan Smith, there really is no choice. A new cold war, promising ever greater strife and division, is no answer. Nor are unchecked, escalating economic, hi-tech and

info wars a constructive way forward. Last week's events suggest China's regimented political system has more than enough strength in depth to outlast its western critics.

In any case, the time has passed when the western powers tell other countries how to behave. Cooperation, competition and, solely when unavoidable, calculated confrontation: this is the only policy, if consistently pursued by a united front of democracies, which can reroute Xi's accelerating authoritarian juggernaut down a mutually beneficial path. Spasms of justified anger must not cloud calm, hard-headed analysis of the long-term China challenge. It's too dangerous to get wrong.

Observer comment cartoon
Coronavirus

'Greed is good' on Covid contracts – cartoon

NotebookParks and green spaces

All hail our overlooked bandstands – beautiful, essential meeting places in a pandemic age

Susannah Clapp

Let’s reclaim these spaces, gifts from the past, and bring our parks alive again with public performances

The bandstand at Arnold Circus, east London. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Observer

The bandstand at Arnold Circus, east London. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Observer

Sun 28 Mar 2021 03.15 EDT

In Covid walks through central London, I have found myself collecting pavilions and bandstands. And longing for them to be put to good use. They are structures unlike any others: halfway between the outside world we crave and the domestic interior to which we have been urged to retreat. They are often beautiful – flashing their finials – and often neglected, with mossy roofs and scuzzy floors.

Occasionally, they are commandeered. The bandstand on Clapham Common was the natural place for people to gather after Sarah Everard's death. Pavilions in Sheffield and Bath are apparently in demand for weddings. I have seen boxers springing around on the bandstand in Regent's Park, which, in 1982, was bombed by the IRA while the Royal Green Jackets played extracts from *Oliver!*. The marvellous stand in Arnold Circus in east London is an essential meeting place.

While theatres and concert halls are closed, surely these structures, which provide some shelter for performers and plenty of ventilation for an audience, should be co-opted for small-scale productions? As large sections of our cities are privatised, and spookily patrolled by security guards, we need to claim and illuminate the public spaces we still have.

Public whitewash

Students at the Royal High School, Bath, which charges fees. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

“Public” is becoming an increasingly difficult word to pin down. It is never more slippery than when applied to schools, which becomes evident as soon as you try to explain to a non-Brit that a “public” school is actually private. The pandemic has, for a moment, laid bare the terrible abysm in our education system: I would be surprised if any cabinet minister’s child has been catch-up tutored by a 17-year-old in Sri Lanka. So I return to something that has nagged me for years. Let’s start putting our mouths where our money is. And referring to non-state education simply as “fee-paying”. Anything else is just sanitising.

Radio wonderlands

Viola Davis in the 2020 film version of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, one of August Wilson's Pittburgh Cycle. Photograph: David Lee/AP

On Friday, BBC Radio held its (virtual) Audio Drama awards ceremony. As a judge in the "best adaptation" category, I was bowled over by the winner, Tom Stoppard's *The Voyage of the St Louis*, which showed how effortlessly radio can roll between continents and eras. It made me want to revive a proposal dreamed up with a friendly producer a few years ago: that Radio 3 should put on August Wilson's tremendous "Pittsburgh Cycle" of plays, which dramatically charts the experience of black Americans through the 20th century.

Denzel Washington is setting about filming these individually but, as far as I can discover, the entire set has never been performed in one season over here. It is a mighty undertaking, not least because Wilson constantly shifts between documentary and dream. Still, radio can switch easily from realism to apocalyptic imaginings. There could not be a better time to consider which playwrights are central to 20th-century drama – and to look hard at US history.

Fight club

Kate Waters, fight director. Photograph: David Levene/The Observer

I have seen a lot of feeble fights on stage, with wagging hands making soft landings on hysterically appalled faces. The work of Kate Waters, one of only two women on the Equity register of fight directors, has been a revelation. She has galvanised the duel in *Hamlet*, made a bar-room brawl erupt feet away from audiences in Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* and is regularly called in to organise a ruckus at the Rovers in *Coronation Street*. She can send energy zipping through a scene, though what she does is invisible and seldom credited; you don't see a cleverly crafted series of moves, but emotion gathered into action, a plot running its inevitable course.

During the pandemic, Waters has been campaigning on behalf of her fellow freelance theatre workers, many left without income. She has also been running Zoom fight classes. In my Covid 3am fantasies, I sometimes think of asking to join. Until theatre returns.

Susannah Clapp is the theatre critic of the Observer

OpinionJohn Lewis

A trip to Sheffield’s John Lewis was the most intense childhood treat. I’ll mourn its passing

Rachel Cooke

Imperilled by Covid and online shopping, the store’s demise marks the end of an epoch

Christmas at John Lewis & Co on Oxford Street, London, in late 1936. Photograph: Fox Photos/Getty Images

Christmas at John Lewis & Co on Oxford Street, London, in late 1936. Photograph: Fox Photos/Getty Images

Sun 28 Mar 2021 03.00 EDT

In Penelope Fitzgerald's 1990 novel *The Gate of Angels*, a mother and her daughter go "up west" to visit Selfridges soon after its opening in 1909. Both are determined to play it cool on this grand day out. Mrs Saunders, for one, is unwilling to let on that she might be impressed by its 100 departments ("freely compared in the store's advertisements to the bazaars of the farthest orient"). But such nonchalance involves no little effort. What to make of an establishment where a bugle is blown at the hour of its closing "as though every day spent in shopping was an epoch of history"? Back at home, the women talk with quiet amazement of their dreamlike excursion. "How long do you think it'll last?" Mrs Saunders asks. "Floor after floor of stuff… And all laid out for everyone to stare at, it didn't seem quite decent."

How long do you think it will last? What a mournful thought that an answer to this question may now be in sight. Yes, the department store was in

trouble long before the pandemic hit – and we all knew it, too. We'd seen the headlines ("Family-run business to close after 200 years"). We had begun buying even our fripperies via our laptops. Somehow, though, we resisted the reality. Debenhams was a mess; its demise could not be taken as a sign of anything. The great liners of retail – the smart ones, the creative ones – would sail on, whether the water was choppy or calm.

People talked of John Lewis in particular as a safe space: the immutable haven into which they'd dash in the event of an emergency, seeking comfort among the white goods. But then there really was an emergency, at which point we realised that this would not, after all, be an option. The doors of John Lewis having closed, its chair, Sharon White, calmly strolled into its haberdashery department, took up the sharpest pair of scissors she could find and set about her alterations. It's not a case, now, of only nipping in the waist. A lot of fabric is going to have to be taken out. Eight shops will go, on top of the eight whose closure was announced last year. Almost 1,500 jobs are at risk.

> In its halls, you measured out the stages of your life: first school uniform, first suitcase, first kettle, first washing machine

One of these stores is in Sheffield, where I grew up and where half my family still lives. It began its life in 1847 as a silk mercer whose proprietors were some brothers called Cole – the site of the original shop is still known as Coles Corner, a spot immortalised in the song by Richard Hawley – and thanks to this long history, people in the city are heartbroken at its imminent disappearance. (They are furious, too: it's only six months since the council spent £3.4m buying its current building, the better that it might make its lease more affordable to John Lewis, which Coles became in 2002.)

"Bad news," wrote my brother on WhatsApp after the closure was announced, a cue for us to remember its toy department, where as children we hankered after Lego, and its cafe, where we lived in hope of a vanilla slice (the cake stand rotated decorously, your hovering hand italicising your greed). On Twitter, the old photographs came thick and fast. My favourite, posted by the editor of the *Sheffield Star*, Nancy Fielder, was of the crowds at the opening of the store's new building in Barker's Pool in 1963, the men

in ties and flat caps, the women in cat's eye spectacles and mushroom-shaped hats. Would people in future drive to Leeds to visit John Lewis? someone wondered. No, they bloody well would not, someone else replied.

Tom Hunt, a sensible, city-loving person who is the deputy director of an economic research institute at Sheffield University, said that, however devastating the news, this must be a moment for change. He spoke of a new arts centre. But this isn't just another case of a business going down, about which we must try not to be too sentimental as we swiftly move on. I hear the sound of a bugle and with it – yes – the end of an epoch.

Department stores are far more than just shops. Their loss leaves a hole in the heart | Polly Toynbee
Read more

Culture takes many forms. Binns, Lewis's, Dickins & Jones: wherever you're from, there will be one name that's stitched to your brain like a Cash's name tape. Such places were, for most of us, at least as important as any gallery. As a child, I visited Coles far more often, and much more enthusiastically, than Weston Park Museum. If the latter had a stuffed bear and two life-size plaster-of-paris wrestlers, well, Cole Brothers had someone demonstrating a knitting machine and the latest video recorders. It was a place of wonder, innovation and (potentially) treats and it was in its halls, too, that you measured out the stages of your life: first school uniform, first suitcase, first kettle, first washing machine.

How to mark the passing of these places? How to celebrate them? We need some kind of depository for our memories. When I interviewed Claire Wilcox, the senior curator of fashion at the V&A, last year she told me she was reading Zola's novel *The Ladies' Paradise*, about a 19th-century Parisian department store, and that she dreamed of recreating such a shop in the form of an exhibition. Wilcox's fabulous hallucinations – visitors, she told me, could be greeted with a blast of perfume as they arrived – may now be on their way to becoming a reality. I do hope so.

Meanwhile, I humbly offer an idea along similar lines to the good men and women of Sheffield city council. Let the tills ring again. Let there be tissue paper and ribbon and vanilla slices for everyone.

Rachel Cooke is an Observer columnist

The weekly stats uncoveredMedical research

The UK's randomised coronavirus trials are a global success story

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

For more than a year the Recovery programme has used the NHS to test many Covid treatments, saving lives worldwide

A member of staff at a pharmacy in London holds a packet of anti-inflammatory drug dexamethasone. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

A member of staff at a pharmacy in London holds a packet of anti-inflammatory drug dexamethasone. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

Sun 28 Mar 2021 01.45 EDT

As it is a novel disease, inevitably there have been numerous suggestions for treatments for Covid-19, ranging from herbal tonics to the anti-malarial

hydroxychloroquine, as advocated by the former US president. The question is: what treatments work best?

It is not enough just to compare what happened to people who did or did not have the treatment, which may, for example, have been given to healthier patients. The only reliable method is to allocate volunteers at random to either receive the novel treatment or a control, and, if possible, neither they nor the medical team know which. Randomised trials reduce statistical biases and, if they are large enough, researchers can robustly say whether the intervention helps.

The Randomised Evaluation of Covid-19 Therapy (Recovery) trials began in the UK more than a year ago and have been extraordinarily successful. The world's largest Covid-19 trial organisation, with about 40,000 hospital patients so far taking part, Recovery takes advantage of the NHS to simultaneously run overlapping trials, so that each patient may be in many studies.

Recovery trials have been hugely influential. Low-dose dexamethasone is a cheap and widely used steroid that reduced deaths in Covid patients receiving invasive mechanical ventilation by 36% (uncertainty interval 19%-49%) and those receiving oxygen by 18% (6%-28%). This finding alone is estimated to have saved 22,000 lives in the UK and more than a million worldwide. Another study showed that for every 25 patients treated with tocilizumab, one additional life would be saved.

The trials have also found what doesn't work: hydroxychloroquine showed no clear clinical benefit, and neither did convalescent plasma, another of Trump's enthusiasms; they have not tested injecting bleach.

Recovery is one of the UK's greatest contributions to world health, all based on the deceptively simple principle of deciding treatment by the flip of a (digital) coin. It has demonstrated what can be achieved through efficient organisation, a national health service, dedicated medical teams and vast numbers of volunteers.

David Spiegelhalter is chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication at Cambridge. Anthony Masters is statistical ambassador

for the Royal Statistical Society

OpinionChildren

The kids aren’t all right – and the government has stopped caring

Sonia Sodha

In the past decade, we have lost our way in our concern for young people’s wellbeing

Children having fun in a playground in London: ‘Why on earth aren’t we throwing bucketloads of cash at structured activities for children this summer?’ Photograph: Andy Hall/The Observer

Children having fun in a playground in London: ‘Why on earth aren’t we throwing bucketloads of cash at structured activities for children this summer?’ Photograph: Andy Hall/The Observer

Sat 27 Mar 2021 15.00 EDT

When throwing out a load of stuff a couple of years ago, I came across an old Biro adorned with the rainbow logo of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, disbanded by the Conservatives in 2010. It went in the bin with a pang of sadness, even as I thought how silly it was to feel an emotional connection to a decade-old, government-branded pen.

But after 10 years of policy that has lacked any notion of what constitutes a good childhood, maybe it’s not as ridiculous as it first sounds. My sorrowful nostalgia for a time when concern for child wellbeing drove the national agenda long predates Covid. It shouldn’t have taken a pandemic that has claimed the lives of thousands of parents and grandparents, and shut schools for the best part of a year, to shine a light on how our society has collectively lost its way on childhood.

That's not to be over-dramatic: children can be incredibly resilient and the majority are healthy and happy and developing well even after the year they've just had. But there are a significant minority who are not, for whom Covid has made things immeasurably worse. Once upon a time, we used to think every child mattered, to the extent this was the defining trait of the last Labour government. Today, our political discourse has shrunk children from the little people they are – the parents, colleagues and citizens of the future – to "remote concepts or data points" in the excoriating words of the outgoing children's commissioner.

> No cabinet minister has responsibility for children; there is no cabinet committee devoted to children and families

The statistics are tripped off so frequently that it's easy to forget how awful they are: the number of children with mental health conditions had risen by 50% four months into the pandemic, compared with a 2017 baseline. Is it any wonder so many are struggling when 2.3 million children are growing up with domestic abuse, severe parental mental health issues or drug and alcohol abuse at home?

Yet we are doing so eyewateringly little for the children who have suffered most, who have gone backwards not just in terms of educational outcomes but the social and emotional capacities they have lost as a result of not socialising with friends, losing so much of their real-world mediation of social media or living round the clock with a dad who abuses their mum. The government hasn't done anywhere near enough to close the widening attainment gap, but at least we still have the inclination to talk about it.

In the policy circles that matter, there has been so little focus on the lack of social and emotional development that is at least as profound and will do children lifelong damage including to their learning. Why on earth aren't we throwing bucketloads of cash and energy at structured activities for children this summer, at revolutionising child mental health services and putting counsellors in every school? Why aren't we investing vast sums in reversing the decline in parental mental health and in domestic abuse prevention programmes, given the impact they would have on children's lives?

So much has been learned in recent decades about what makes for healthy and happy childhoods. We understand the importance of parenting to children's abilities to form healthy relationships for the rest of their lives, of good social and emotional development for educational outcomes, of the early years as a foundation for life. The 00s were all about putting those insights into action: the decade of Every Child Matters – a holistic framework for every part of the state that supported children – of Sure Start children's centres, of early years parenting support, of resources for schools to focus on social and emotional learning alongside the 3Rs, of a target to eradicate child poverty by 2020. It was a decade where visionaries such as Tessa Jowell and Gordon Brown elevated childhood to its rightful place within government and invested big in trying to realise their ambition of making Britain the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up.

So much of this was ripped away by the Conservatives in the 10s. Spending cuts have seriously reduced children's services and financial support for low-paid parents. The refashioning of the Department for Children, Schools and Families into the Department for Education was driven by ideological disdain for a holistic understanding of childhood and a belief that what cannot be measured by an exam is a distraction. No cabinet minister has responsibility for children; there is no cabinet committee devoted to children and families.

The result is not just an insanely minimalist response to the pandemic that has barely gone beyond a bit of catch-up tuition. Not that this government was getting childhood right pre-Covid; far from it. The architecture that was painstakingly built to collectively nurture the children that need it has been dismantled and schools are being left to pick up the pieces as best they can. There are no answers for the children groomed into gangs, for the girls being sexually assaulted by their peers or for young people whose understanding of intimate relationships is being shaped by easy access to violent porn.

The idea that this can all be mopped up by relationships and sex education delivered by untrained teachers, some of whom embody the problematic attitudes found in wider society, is absurd. The narrow focus on schools to

the exclusion of all else is not even delivering on its own terms; devastatingly, the primary school attainment gap was widening pre-pandemic, and the numbers of young people leaving education without basic qualifications have been rising. You cannot drop the ball on family wellbeing and expect children to excel at school.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children,” Nelson Mandela said in 1995. I look at the Conservatives running our country and all I see is indifference to other people’s children; a government more bothered about flags than the next generation. Is it really too much to ask for a prime minister for whom there is nothing more important than ensuring every child gets the start in life they deserve?

Sonia Sodha is an Observer columnist

Names in the newsDemi Lovato

Demi Lovato is dancing with the devil on behalf of women everywhere

Rebecca Nicholson

The singer’s brutally frank documentary about the perils of addiction is an exhortation to those under stress to seek help

Demi Lovato: under unimaginable pressure. Photograph: Rich Fury/Getty Images for OBB Media

Demi Lovato: under unimaginable pressure. Photograph: Rich Fury/Getty Images for OBB Media

Sat 27 Mar 2021 13.30 EDT

When the pop star Demi Lovato explains that she wants “to set the record straight about what it was that happened”, in her new documentary *Dancing with the Devil*, she is not messing around. The first two parts of the film, which were released on YouTube last week, tell the story of Lovato’s relapse into drug use and her near-fatal overdose in 2018. This is the era of selfies, of course, with everything documented and preserved, but a selfie captioned “Demi on crack for the first time” shocked me. This is a brutally frank account of her troubles, with seemingly nothing left out. If anyone remains in doubt that fame is a grim pact for most, and particularly for young women, then this puts the case to the jury, again and again.

Dancing with the Devil was the third documentary I had seen in the last month about a famous woman under unimaginable pressure, in unimaginable pain. I watched *Framing Britney Spears* and saw a charismatic pop star churned up by the spotlight, hounded wherever she

went, cracking under the weight of it all. With heavy heart, I watched the difficult, moving Channel 4 film about Caroline Flack, made with the participation of her brave family. It was announced recently that Brittany Murphy, the *Clueless* star who died at the age of 32 in 2009, will be the subject of a new two-part documentary that promises to "cut through the tabloid noise" and "[craft] a grounded account of Brittany Murphy's life struggles".

Part of me steels myself for the others that will follow. There is a lingering worry that this will become a trend, a genre, and I can already imagine the scrabble for suffering that will be going on in meeting rooms. But each of these films has a purpose. They are attempting to find whatever form of justice they can grasp, to allow the people involved to correct the record, to put forward another side of a story you think you already know. Perhaps this is a tentative new form of power inside a tabloid culture that has always been tilted heavily in the tabloids' favour.

Lovato is clear about her reasons for putting it all out there as plainly as she does. The viewers will not all be public figures whose bodies, choices and movements are scrutinised and judged by many millions of strangers, but sadness is universal and addiction can affect anyone. Each episode of *Dancing with the Devil* ends with an exhortation to speak to someone, to seek help, an insistence that you, whoever you are, are not alone.

Emerald Fennell: Oscar nominee the wrong side of the Atlantic

Emerald Fennell: looks like a no-show at the Academy Awards. Photograph: Colomba Giacomini/Getty Images

After a series of dreary-to-disastrous award shows, this year's Academy Awards have issued a strict "no Zoom acceptance speeches" mandate. It's understandable, though it does mean the new spectator sports of "frozen face or frozen screen" and "which arty book have you casually displayed and why" will no longer have such a big playing field. It also throws a spanner in the works for nominees who don't live down the road. Emerald Fennell, the director nominated for *Promising Young Woman*, has said she is "desperate" to attend, "but I'm not going to break the law by swimming the Atlantic. Though I would if I had the time and the core strength."

I realise that this is at the lowest level of pandemic annoyances, up there – or, rather, down there – with that brief period of lettuce shortages and the time I had to queue for 15 minutes to get into Ryman's to buy printer paper. But *Promising Young Woman* came out in the US in December and was only last week given a UK release date, of 16 April.

I have been refreshing a "when out in UK" search on three films languishing in transatlantic purgatory this year: *Promising Young Woman*, *Ammonite*, finally out this weekend, and *Palm Springs*, due on 9 April. Release dates seem to have broadly aligned in recent years; this hungry gap

reminds me of being younger and desperately waiting for some sign of a big US blockbuster, probably starring Keanu Reeves, appearing at the local Ritz.

Still, anticipation has built to fever pitch and now I can't wait to see all three.

JRR Tolkien: wizard rescue plan to no avail

JRR Tolkien: his appeal fell on deaf ears. Photograph: PA

Even Gandalf and Bilbo Baggins could not rescue the campaign to buy JRR Tolkien's old house in Oxford. Despite the backing of Ian McKellen and Martin Freeman, Project Northmoor, which aimed to raise £4.5m to buy the six-bedroom property where Tolkien is said to have written *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, reached only 17% of its target. The Tolkien Society had not supported the move, saying that the house was "well protected under the law and not in need of rescue" and would not have been open to the public.

That is a shame. Writers' houses are my number-one favourite tourist attraction, more than cemeteries, arcades with a good range of 2p machines and offensively cold places – and if someone could combine all of those

aspects into one perfect holiday, I suspect I'd never come home again. I have wandered around Virginia Woolf's garden and stared agog at Anne Brontë's bloody handkerchief, on display behind glass in the house where she grew up.

I will happily gawp at a writer's study even if I don't particularly like the writer, in the hope of absorbing some of the magic or at least stealing a few interior design tips.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersFood

Letters: conservation, not consumerism, is key to our survival

We could all learn from the Knepp estate's natural approach to farming and food

Storks on the Knepp estate. Photograph: Brad Albrecht/PA

Storks on the Knepp estate. Photograph: Brad Albrecht/PA

Sun 28 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

A point worth making about the activities of Knepp in West Sussex is that the estate manages to combine conservation with visitors and some food production, thus helping fund its activities while assisting food security ("Pioneering rewilding project faces 'catastrophe' from plan for new houses", News). Purists might argue for a more fundamentalist approach but is this realistic?

Environmentalists a few decades ago reckoned three or four fully used planets would be needed for everyone to have western lifestyles and jobs to afford them; a more recent estimate was 11, based on well-off US living standards, while rehoming climate refugees will apply further pressure. Combining conservation with careful use seems more likely to salvage something from the wreckage; tribal people have known that for millennia. As long as conventional economic wisdom boils down to "make more money, buy more stuff", though, the natural world will be in desperate trouble.

Ian Climie
Whitchurch, Hants

Are we really going to put a few rare insects above the need for housing? The 3,500 new homes at the Knepp estate are sorely needed. We have a housing crisis. Let the campaigners put the insects and rodents in their own gardens. This is typical protest by comfortable "nimbys" who are probably most worried about the price of their own precious houses. Let them visit a family in a hostel and tell them they would prefer to give a home to mosquitoes.

Angela Donnelly
Cambridge

Cruel and stupid deportation

Congratulations to Mark Townsend on his story about Charles Oti ("Specialist Covid infection control scientist faces deportation threat", News). Oti is alleged to lack the correct documentation. What does it matter, weighed against all that he has done, and is eager to do, in contributing his knowledge and commitment to help fight Covid?

He is clearly highly intelligent and highly qualified. We need him here and should be delighted that he wants to continue to work for our wonderful NHS. The idea of deporting him is not only cruel, but gobsmackingly stupid. I have written to my MP asking him to use his influence against the Home Office in this case. I wish every reader would do the same.

Penelope Maclachlan
Hanwell, London

A tale of two parliaments

How much I agree with Rowan Moore's characterisation of the new press room at Downing Street as "Nuremberg Radisson" (Notebook, Comment). It is the perfect stylistic expression of the mentality of the government in living in an imagined past. In contrast, it has been a pleasure to see the elegant and progressive setting of Enric Miralles' poetic architecture of the Scottish parliament building at Holyrood, as the backdrop to the shenanigans that have been taking place there.

Dean Hawkes
Cambridge

I'm a believer

With reference to Harriet Sherwood's article, of course declaring oneself as Christian as against "going to church" are two separate issues for many of us ("Less than half of Britons expected to tick "Christian" in snapshot of the nation", News). As a gay man, who talks to his God most days, I have long felt excluded from the established church and have not attended for many years. However, when answering the question "What is your religion?", I still affirmed my Christian belief.

Jonathan Griffiths
Poole

Combine bike and rail

Your article "Mind the gaps: will we go back to public transport after Covid?" (Business) was concerned that the rise in cycling would lead to insufficient numbers of people using trains. One possible solution would be for the rail companies, which have in recent years taken an apparent delight in making a combined bike and rail journey hardly worth attempting, to cash in on the increased popularity of cycling and reintroduce the guard's van.

Nicky Coates
Bristol

Take a stand on pipeline

Further to the article by Simon Tisdall ("Biden must punish Putin's cyber-attacks", Foreign Affairs Commentary), in relation to the ineffectiveness of sanctions against Russia over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, the geopolitical debate in Germany has been muddied by the insertion of a moral dimension. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has declared that German support for the dual pipeline, which circumvents Poland and Ukraine and supplies gas directly under the Baltic Sea to Germany, is dictated by the need to atone for wartime German crimes against Russia.

Of course, Germany should display a sense of guilt towards Russia for these crimes, but not as a justification for isolating Poland and Ukraine to whom Germany has a similar, if not an even greater, moral debt. It is time that the UK took a similar stand to the US government on sanctions over this pipeline.

Wiktor Moszczynski, spokesman, Federation of Poles in Great Britain
Brentford, London

Bring back the school nurse

I was delighted to read the article "Nurse in all schools 'would help child mental health toll'" (News).

As an in-house education welfare officer in a secondary school, I worked very closely with the school nurse and she was invaluable in offering confidential guidance and support to students, from friendship problems, family issues and mental health concerns to encouraging good dietary habits. I recommended the school to buy in her services full time but sadly this was not affordable.

School nursing services have been eroded massively, to the point of them being there for vaccination programmes only. I am certain that having a full-time in-house nurse would pay dividends in improved student welfare and morale. Such a scheme would require the government to provide funding but would be money well spent.

Eleanor Reeves
Altrincham

Cauliflower curry to die for

I am a great fan of Madhur Jaffrey, followed her TV series religiously and have several of her curry-stained books on my shelves, but I couldn't let Jay Rayner's encomium go by without a nod to another star of Indian cookery, Mrs Balbir Singh ("Madhur Jaffrey's *Indian Cookery* was not only a brilliant cookbook but a guide to another world", Magazine). We came across her book *Mrs Balbir Singh's Indian Cookery* in Aigburth library in Liverpool in 1974 and are now on our third copy. I recommend the whole cauliflower curry and the pork vindaloo.

She trained in the UK in the 50s and eventually went back to India, where she became the Julia Child of Indian TV. Some of her grandchildren live in west London and have started a website. Interested TV producers might start there.

Chris Wallis
Marple, Stockport

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week’s corrections

Sun 28 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

A reference to the architectural practice O’Donnell + Tuomey said the firm worked on the Lyric theatre in Dublin; that building is in Belfast (“Meet the man on a mission to drag museums into the 21st century”, 21 March, the New Review, page 8).

The Marlowe theatre in Canterbury will run shows for a distanced audience from June onwards, rather than May, as an article stated (“Outdoor shows and decoy audiences herald return of live theatre this summer”, 21 March, page 10).

An article referred to the death of the designer Zeev Aram and mentioned “his store in Covent Garden, founded in 1964”. To clarify: the first showroom was on London’s King’s Road. In 1973 it moved to larger premises in Covent Garden (Notebook, 21 March, page 46).

Other recently amended articles include:

Rising from the rubble: London pub rebuilt brick by brick after illegal bulldozing

Angela Rayner backs Labour’s Hartlepool candidate after old sexist tweet

Letters: the law is failing abused women

‘People are exhausted’: Germans grow weary of endless lockdown

March design news

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