

Here is my quarantine schedule — do feel free to copy it if you'd like

Deborah Ross



So here we are, which, for many of us, means a life in quarantine, and which I would feel better about if we could all agree to come out the other side with bad hair, whiskers and having put on a "corona stone" or two. Is it possible we can agree to that? Or some of us might never come out again. Great. Thanks.

But until we do come out the other side, ugly and enormous and whisky — but at least we'll all be ugly and enormous and whisky, even Cheryl Tweedy*, if I can get her on board — it is important, in these fearful and chaotic times, to have a fixed daily schedule and to stick with it come what may. Or, as I keep reading, "it's a wise idea to add some structure to your day" since that is what will get you through.

It's certainly what will get me through, I'm hoping. And here's what my quarantine schedule looks like. It's not copyrighted or anything so please feel free to adopt the same timetable if you think it will be of some help.

4.35am Wake with racing heart from dream about rats, zombies, Nazis. Realise it's just a dream, but no it isn't, not really. Stare into abyss. Feel as if falling. Hear an owl, which is crazy for London. Bore self back to sleep by wallowing in self-pity. (Will I ever feel the sensation of a proper waistband again? Take a walk without regarding every approaching jogger with abject terror? Feel enraged by the person who doesn't have their Oyster card at the ready? Those were the days.)

6.45am Wake. With racing heart from further dream about rats, zombies, Nazis and a rat-zombie that is also a Nazi. Realise it's just a dream, but no it isn't, not really. Stare into the abyss. Wallow in self-loathing. Berate self for not ordering an online supermarket delivery at an off-peak time, like a month ago, and not having written novel yet. Scroll through news, Twitter, Whatsapp groups and emails from PRs wanting to "reach out" about "bamboo picnic ware". Decide they are just the job for all the picnics no one is allowed to go on.

7.30am Get up, wash hands. Vow once this is over to never wash hands again. Administer "self-care" by exfoliating face with hands that are now sandpaper, or as good as. Put on way too much

hand cream, pick up laptop, watch it shoot from hands and land at bottom of the stairs, smashed. Ask hands: happy now?

8.30am Breakfast. Eat everything about to expire, including the pack of smoked mackerel fillets no one wanted for dinner last night because they are "too fishy". (That's because it's fish. "But some fish isn't as fishy.") And also a Kit Kat for "the sugar lift". As well as a Twix. Can't now let everyone down by not emerging enormous.

9am Scroll news again. And again. And again.

10am Feel superior to other members of household who are just getting up and have yet to do anything productive like smash laptop, cry over news, feel as if falling or weigh up merits of "bamboo picnic ware" for picnics that are now outlawed.

10.30am Wash hands, Dettol door knobs, Dettol the post, Dettol the cat, prowl house with fish slice, swatting at anyone about to touch face with hands.

Noon Make list of all the things I thought I'd do if I had the time, such as write a novel, or a play, or poetry, or knit, or paint, or learn another language. Tear up and stare at wall. Then radiator. Those rusty bits. Could be sanded off just with hands?

1pm Light lunch to include block of cheese.

2pm Summon household for daily Fiit exercise session. Be met by zero enthusiasm. Too fishy? No, what is the point when we skip the burpees and squats and lunges because they are "too hard"? Session cancelled.

3pm Wash hands. Re-vow that when this is all over will never wash hands again, not even after a poo. (This will show "washing



hands" who has the upper hand.) Put on too much hand cream and wipe excess on jumper and on hair since this is where we are at.

3.20pm Consider spending next hour in socially distant queue outside Sainsbury's, but pavement not wide enough for pedestrians to pass while leaving enough space, so laugh at that, because if this were a war, it would count as a "suicide mission".

4pm Scroll news till dinner.

7pm Make dinner. If you don't have the right ingredients for something, swap them out for what you do have, as Jamie Oliver advises. That said, a chicken pie when you don't have chicken and don't have pie but do have some old barley and an old carrot may not fool everybody. ("But this is not chicken pie," some smartarse will inevitably say.)

8pm Watch crap telly and even BBC's latest thriller, *The Nest*. Wonder if it's reasonable to point out that a surrogate would have to have had extensive medical tests before egg implantation so you'd know if she were already pregnant. Decide it is not reasonable to ruin enjoyment of others, who are idiots and morons through no fault of their own.

10pm Bed. Try to read, but for first time in life find I can't. (Genuine question: is this because we are living the only story that matters so all other stories seem stupid and meh?)

11pm Go to sleep and dream of rats, zombies, Nazis...

4.35am Start over... (*Have contacted Tweedy's agent, who says, while she's yet to confirm, if it's for the sake of the nation, she may well agree to emerge ugly and enormous and whisky. Am on to Margot Robbie's people now.)

Beware a man who wants you as a muse

Polly Samson was 26 when she had a son, Charlie Gilmour, with a poet who abandoned them. Her new novel draws on that time, she tells Andrew Billen

Her coffee table carries the weight of a lost golden age, although scarcely an innocent one: a book of obscurantist poetry by the adolescent Leonard Cohen; a biography, in Norwegian, of Axel Jensen, the acid-addled novelist who was the husband of Cohen's lover Marianne Ihlen (as in *So Long, Marianne*); and a novel by the Australian writer, journalist and drunk George Johnston. The most striking title lying before me, however, is *Peel Me a Lotus*, a 1959 memoir by Johnston's wife, Charmian Clift. Its cover is a photograph of her aged 35. She unmistakably sports a black eye.

"That's a ravaged photograph, but she's still ravishing," says the writer Polly Samson, sipping tea in her sitting room by a large window framing the turbulent waterfront of Hove in East Sussex. We are meeting just before lockdown to discuss her latest novel, *A Theatre for Dreamers*. It is about these same writers and artists and recreates the year 1960 on Hydra, a Greek island at the height of its pulling power for western bohemians. By the end the reader may be unable to decide whether Hydra enchanted or cursed those attracted by its primitive beauty, cheap rents and easy access to sex, drugs and performance poetry.

Samson first visited the island in 2014 and was so entranced that she bought a place there. A fellow Hydra obsessive is the film-maker Nick Broomfield, who made the recent, semi-autobiographical documentary *Marianne & Leonard: Words of Love* about the same era. Samson's book, however, features Cohen much less than Ihlen. There is much more about George and Charmian than either of them. Were money a problem in her life, Samson admits, she would write more commercial books and this one would probably be titled *Leonard & Marianne*. Money, however, is not a problem: her husband is David Gilmour of Pink Floyd.

At heart her semi-factual novel is about the treatment of women by artistic men who take their superior genius as read and were permitted to do so in the wilderness years between Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in 1970. When these men were not chaining their women to their kitchen sinks, they were placing them on pedestals as their muses. Johnston and Jensen are the greatest culprits, although the commitment-allergic Cohen cannot entirely evade the charge either.

At 57, Samson speaks with conviction on these matters, and well she might. In her twenties she had a child with the wild-man poet and playwright Heathcote Williams, whom she met when she was a publicist

promoting his 1988 bestseller, *Whale Nation*. He deserted his new family soon after their son was born. Charlie, whose relationship with Williams was mostly distant and sometimes turbulent, suffered gravely, Samson believes, and mother and son largely blame him for the mental health problems that landed Charlie in jail a decade ago. Nor has Samson forgiven Williams for walking out. Samson was left homeless and rebuilt her life through the kindness of friends before she was wooed by Gilmour.

"I struggle with the word 'muse' anyway," she says. "I think a man who needs a muse is a man who basically needs... well why not replace the word 'muse' with 'mummy' or 'parent'? What is a parent's job? It is to give nourishing food to your child, make sure that your child has all the right crayons, a lovely place to do their homework and then to admire their work and encourage them to do more of it.

"You know how Leonard Cohen talked about Marianne. What did she do? 'She put a fresh gardenia and sandwich on my desk every day.' Well, isn't that what Mummy does for baby?" Was she was anyone's muse? "I would say that there are parallels to mine and Heathcote's relationship. I was able to draw quite a lot on my own life."

Williams, she explains, was "a really charismatic, interesting nightmare".

What Charlie did was outrageous but he was having a breakdown

And she just fell for him? "Well, that's an interesting question. Did I fall for him? Or did he fall for me? Why someone of 26 threw it all in for him, I don't know. I found a photograph of myself at that period the other day and I kind of thought, 'What were you thinking of?' Except that he was really, really charismatic and brilliant and those things seemed to count for a lot. I don't think there was anyone I knew who really thought it was a good idea."

Did he make her his muse? "Yes, yes." What did that involve? Sandwiches? "Endless. No, I mean, just being thoroughly involved in his work in the way that I make David be involved in mine, but it wasn't reciprocal. He was also obsessive. After *Whale Nation* he did a book about elephants and a book about a motor car. He got me to join him in his obsession and make sure I was talking only about that and really pulling my weight in terms of research."

Then, in the throes of a mental breakdown — "Oh he had so many,



DAVID TITLOW FOR THE TIMES

many breakdowns!" — he left her with their new baby. Charlie had no contact with Williams until he was 13. When Charlie was at college in Cambridge in 2010, they met once more, only for Williams abruptly to cut off all contact. High on Valium, whisky and LSD, Charlie travelled to London to join the protests against tuition fees and was photographed swinging a flag from the Cenotaph and leaping across a Jaguar that was escorting Prince Charles and Camilla to the *Royal Variety Performance*. A judge sentenced him to 16 months for violent disorder, calling the behaviour "outrageous and deeply offensive".

"He did do something outrageous, but he was also having a nervous breakdown at the time," says Samson, who visited him in Wandsworth prison and spoke to him through semen-smear glass. They still campaign against poor prison conditions.

Like Williams, the Hydra novelist Jensen was pals with RD Laing when the unorthodox psychiatrist dosed patients with LSD. Like Williams, Jensen lopped a young son out of his life. "Little Axel" has spent much of his adult life in mental institutions.

Can making art be more important than bringing up a child? "I don't think it is one or the other. I think that's the nonsense. The whole pram-in-the-hall thing is a nonsense. I think some of the greatest art is made around people

having children. It's often used as an excuse by people like Heathcote and Axel. They say they can't do their work if they're caught in domesticity, but actually it's domesticity that they crave."

Does she feel guilty at not having given her son a better biological father? "Of course, but what was the alternative? That he shouldn't be born? I mean, I'm very glad he's in the world and he's got a very, very good adoptive father who really fought for him and actually fought for him to have a relationship with Heathcote."

In fact, Williams did not entirely disappear from their lives. Samson says he became jealous of Gilmour. Ostensibly seeking her advice as a lyricist on Gilmour's albums, he sent her a tape of a song he had written. It was called *The Wrinkly Bonk*.

Was it about Gilmour, who is 16 years her senior? "I don't know what it was about. Heathcote was older. I mean, if anyone was a wrinkly bonk it was Heathcote. But he was completely crazy. People over the years have gone, 'What a really bad man.' I don't think he was a bad man. I think he was a mad man. What I didn't know was he'd had electric shock treatment



Top: Polly Samson at home and, above, with her husband, David Gilmour, and son Charlie

***A Theatre for Dreamers* by Polly Samson (Bloomsbury; £14.99, ebook £12.58)**

and had spent half his life having breakdowns or in Tooting Bec mental hospitals. I know that sounds crazy, but at 26 you don't think to say to someone, 'Oh, have you ever been in mental hospital? Have you ever had electric shock therapy?'"

Was it a relief when Williams died three years ago? "It was sort of sad because I kept thinking that one day he was going to apologise to me. So that never happened."

For the muses of Hydra, the consequences of their relationships were sometimes appalling. Clift was not just a muse but cook, nurse and barmaid to Johnston. In 1969 she killed herself on the eve of the publication of his penultimate book, *Clean Straw for Nothing*, which told his version of their marriage.

As for Jensen, he left Ihlen, for the future film director Patricia Amlin. Ihlen's subsequent relationship with Cohen took longer to fizzle out, but she ended up in a conventional marriage to a businessman back in Oslo. She died of leukaemia in 2016 aged 81, just four months before Cohen. When she was on her deathbed he sent her a love letter.

Theirs was one of music's great public romances, and in the early stages of research for the novel Samson lived in fear of running into Cohen on Hydra and having to own up to planning her take on it. One afternoon she thought she spotted him in a café, but it turned out to be his son, Adam, who recognised her rock-star husband and introduced himself.

In contrast to Clift and perhaps Ihlen, Samson recovered from her brush with musedom and became a successful author and lyricist. Gilmour

proved to be a perfect husband with infinite patience towards his adopted son, Charlie, a journalist, has married, recently become a father and has a book out this summer charting his relationship with Williams. Their family home in London is shared with a tame magpie. His parents' main residence, meanwhile, is a farmhouse in Sussex, where Samson writes

in a "shed", but they are converting an old bathroom in Hove and own a mews property in London. And then, of course, there is their place on Hydra.

Would they have fitted in to Hydra in 1960, I wonder. She and Gilmour don't seem a very rock'n'roll couple. "Oh, that would be fair, I think. The thing is David's a musician, not a rock star. But God, that's a really interesting question. I suppose it would depend at what point we were in our lives. We both have incredibly strong work ethics. Maybe that would have saved us, but maybe we'd have become drunks like everyone else."

And so, all this speed and drink and acid — did it, I ask, make the geniuses of Hydra better or worse writers and artists? "Oh, God, much worse!" she says, and takes another sip of tea.

The lowdown

Go to 'unschool' with Alanis

Hey, you! Parent! Stop trying to educate that child!

Sorry, I really can't stop to chat. Polly and Oscar have been extremely slow with their fractions today and I'm under surveillance from their teacher over Zoom.

That's my point. Might I suggest something a little less... regimented?

I don't pay this much a term for the children to be unregimented.

Well, you won't want to hear about "unschooling".

Ooh, actually, yes I do. It sounds very LA. Is it like a forest school?

Only if you have an estate. It's more about letting the child lead the education at home.

To be frank, they already do.

It's called being spoilt in most households.

I don't mean that they just run rabid. Well, OK, they do — but between learning stations! Er... you mean the fridge and the TV?

No. According to a book on the subject, unschooling is a style of home education that allows the student's interests and curiosities to drive the path of learning.

The path of learning? God, sounds awful. I love it. Tell me more.

Rather than using a defined curriculum, unschoolers trust children to gain knowledge organically.

Trust? Organically? That would be fine — if they could get into Oxbridge to do a degree in *Angry Birds* and Disney. How do you keep them on the right track?

See Alanis Morissette. She practises it with her children. She says that she and her husband create areas of learning around the house, for spelling, maths, animals etc. She watches the kids closely, sees what sparks their interest, then goes in big on whatever is exciting them.

She must spend a lot of time talking about *Frozen*.

According to her, it's a lot of big existential questions, 24/7. It's meant to be jolly hard work. Harder than the 13-plus?

Maybe. Ironic.

Hannah Rogers

