

INTERVIEW BY ROB MCGIBBON

At 81, the broadcaster is haunted by death... from loved ones she's lost, to a teacher who committed suicide ('I don't think I actually killed her, but I am really ashamed') and even the *Vicar Of Dibley* (who bumped off a sitcom she wrote with Jeremy Vine!)

What is your earliest memory?

Being carried out to the Anderson shelter in our garden by my father when I was five. I remember the spiders and cobwebs in the shelter and that it wasn't very well lined, so it was clammy and damp in there. It was just a piece of corrugated iron dug into the earth. The shelter was pretty grim and I sensed my parents' anxiety, but we had no option but to wait out the raid. I remember the relief upon hearing the 'all clear' and to this day that sound is wonderful to hear.

What sort of child were you?

I had a very lively imagination. For about 18 months from when I was six I had an imaginary friend called Mary, which became a bit of a problem. I insisted she had a place at the table and that she was given food and a drink. I would talk to her and say things like, 'Mary would like some more cake now.' It became quite irritating for my mother. I don't go around making people up now, but I still have a vivid imagination. Reality needs a bit of spicing up.

Describe the best night of your life.

I was 18 in Paris with a boyfriend. We had very little money, but we decided to go to Venice. We got a night train and slept in the corridor. We travelled through the frontiers and the mountains and had a croissant on the platform in Switzerland. Arriving in Venice at dawn was sensational. Ever since, Venice has been one of my favourite places. I must have been the only person looking at photos of George Clooney's wedding who was staring at the buildings.

What do you dream about?

The dead. By the time you get to my age you have lost so many friends and family that they come to you in your sleep, which is really quite nice. My father might turn up and we'll go for a walk, or just have a chat. He was always an inspirational figure, who encouraged me so much. I'm glad to say that my mother doesn't crop up. We had some unresolved issues, so she wouldn't be welcome.

Who would like to say sorry to and why?

Miss Ashworth, who was my French teacher at grammar school when I was 14. A gang of us in the class teased her mercilessly and wound her up. Ten years later she committed suicide by putting her head in a gas oven. I don't think I actually killed her, but she was desperately unhappy and I am really ashamed of our mob behaviour.

What is the worst thing anyone has ever said to you?

Someone on Twitter called me a 'bed blocker' because I tweeted support of carers who had gone on strike. It's the term some idiots use for old people who are not physically ill but who occupy a hospital bed because they don't have anyone to look after them. I am old but I am not in hospital, so I thought it was a bit of cheek.

What is your most treasured possession?

My house in north London, where I have lived for 50 years. It is

the most important, continuing object in my life. I bought it in 1963 for £12,000 and it is probably worth £4 million now. I've been very lucky, but I love it for the neighbourly community around me.

Who would your dream dinner date be?

I'm a little old for a romantic date, but I'd be fascinated to sit down with Pope Francis. I'd like to know whether we will have woman cardinals and if he will sanction abortion. Also, he is Argentinian; they are enormously warm-hearted and wonderful company.

What are you scared of?

I have suffered from vertigo for much of my life. I only go up to the first level of the Eiffel Tower to escort my grandchildren, but I never look over the edge. I went in the London Eye with them last year and I could not let go of the rail.

What is your best character trait?

I am very organised. My desk might be covered in papers, but I know exactly what those heaps signify. One of my grandchildren was amazed that all my novels – I have hundreds – are arranged in alphabetical order of the authors.

... and your worst?

Instinctive timidity. Whenever I am asked to do something, I always say I will think about it because I have a fear I will disappoint. I was brought up to be afraid of making a mistake: deadly for a child.

What has been your biggest achievement?

Keeping going with my work. I am 81, but I still have many adjacent interests – television, radio, the House of Lords – and it can be hard fitting it all in. People say that I never stop, but I don't know how to.

And your biggest disappointment?

Not interviewing Picasso. I interviewed all the famous artists for a TV arts programme during the late Sixties and early Seventies, but I never chased Picasso. I should have made an effort, but you can't do everything.

Tell us a secret about yourself.

I wrote a sitcom with Jeremy Vine about the Church of England and submitted it to the BBC, but the commissioning editor said: 'What a pity, we have just had one submitted by Richard Curtis!' It was *The Vicar Of Dibley* and you can't beat him.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

'Well, actually...' 'Actually' is a terrible word. Nice-sounding and bogus. It is basically saying, I am being emphatic to make you agree with me. But 'actually' doesn't mean anything. It's only there to cover your tracks while you gather your thoughts.

Joan Bakewell presents 'Sky Arts Portrait Artist of The Year 2014' starting on November 4 on Sky Arts 1 HD

THE LAST WORD

LAST FILM YOU SAW

Pride. It is not a great movie, but it is funny and very moving. I shed a tear.

LAST BOOK YOU READ

There But For The by Ali Smith. Witty, engaging and it's extraordinary how she plays with language. Quite hilarious.

LAST GIG YOU ENJOYED

Verdi's *Otello* at the English National Opera. It is one of my favourite operas. I love opera and this was thrilling.

LAST TV SHOW YOU LOVED

Episodes is charming. Tamsin Greig and

Stephen Mangan are delightful and Matt Le Blanc is terribly good playing himself.

LAST THING YOU WANT TO SAY

Life is worth living, so start now and don't look back. It is important not to live in the past and say, 'It was better in my day.' You must look forward.

SHRINK RAP

Inside the head of... Joan Bakewell

'MY DEAD FATHER VISITS ME IN MY DREAMS, WHICH IS NICE... BUT MY MOTHER? SHE ISN'T WELCOME'



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