

I'M A JOKE *AND SO ARE YOU*

‘Clever, funny, kind and interesting – just like Robin.’

Sara Pascoe – comedian and author of *Animal*

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Alan Moore – author of *V for Vendetta*

About the Author

Robin Ince is co-presenter of the award-winning BBC Radio 4 show, *The Infinite Monkey Cage*. He has won the *Time Out* Award for Outstanding Achievement in Comedy, was nominated for a British Comedy Award for Best Live show, and has won three Chortle Awards. He has toured his stand up across the world from Oslo to LA to Sydney, both solo and with his radio double act partner, Professor Brian Cox. He is the radio critic for the *Big Issue* and appears weekly on Steve Lamacq's show on BBC Radio 6 Music.

I'M A JOKE AND SO ARE YOU

**A Comedian's Take on What
Makes Us Human**

Robin Ince



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London

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*To Nicki and Archie,
who, in the words of Guy N Smith, have to 'put up with it all'
and to Barry Crimmins, an inspiration who used his voice
to make sure so many others were heard.*

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The moment a man questions the meaning and value of his life, he is sick . . . By asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression.

Sigmund Freud

The problem with Freud is that he never had to play the Glasgow Empire.

Ken Dodd

FOREWORD

All Mimophants Now!

In the otherwise thoroughly well-observed television drama series about 1950s American stand-up, *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel*, the titular character's first three spots, which wow-jaded late night audiences at the Gaslight Café, are all the result of her turning up drunk and angry and impulsively storming the stage to riff in perfectly constructed sentences about the domestic injustices currently tormenting her.

The series contrives to give the impression that great stand-up routines are conceived on the hoof, in a booze or drugs haze, rather than as a result of endless hours of soul-searching, honing phrases and reaching for just the right word. I am sure lots of stand-ups have found themselves the worse for wear at least once at some late-night club gig where they improvised in the moment a bit that went on to redefine the direction their work was taking. (Mine was at The Classic in Auckland, New Zealand at about 4 a.m. in April 2005.) But a real-life Mrs Maisel would not have flounced into the world fully formed. We all know this, and so does Robin Ince.

I have, I suddenly realize, known Robin Ince for three fifths of my life, and most of the time I have spent talking to him was

backstage, in bars near venues, or on shared rides ferrying us between underpaid 1990s gigs in far-flung locations. Nearly thirty years ago now, as we crossed the storm-tossed Severn Bridge in the small hours in a spluttering Austin Maxi, the delightful older comic driving us explained to me that the weather conditions did not bother her as she was being looked after by her Native American spirit guide, who was sitting between us on the front seat.

I looked into the rear-view mirror and saw Robin raise a quiz-zical eyebrow as we tightened out seatbelts and settled in for the ride of a lifetime. I knew that both of us were thinking the same thing: what qualifications has a nineteenth-century nomad, perhaps only familiar with horse travel, that enable him to supervise late twentieth-century motor transport? And wouldn't you, if you were the ghost survivor of a genocidally exterminated indigenous culture, use the car as a weapon to take out as many of your oppressors' people as possible? It's moments like this that seal bonds that last a lifetime.

Ince's subtly significant influence on the trajectory of the better parts of British stand-up over the last few decades has been taken for granted. The resolutely anti-mainstream stand-up salons he began to run at the turn of the century gave a generation of left-field acts, me included, a safe space to experiment, and the connections he made in large-scale shows between comedy and the worlds of politics, philosophy and science went on to be commercially exploited by less scrupulous talents who declined to credit him for his innovations. Remove the jenga brick of Robin Ince from the foundations of the tower of the last few decades of British live comedy and it suddenly would start to look a bit

wobbly. *I'm A Joke And So Are You* bequeaths us all the benefit of his experience.

This deceptively deep book is an invaluable and inspiring effort, worthy to sit on a shelf alongside other classics of stand-up comedy analysis, such as Stewart Lee's *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, or *If Your Prefer A Milder Comedian Please Ask For One*, by Stewart Lee, or Syd Little's *Little By Little*. But it is also much more than that.

Taking the way stand-up comedy routines are crafted and the mindsets of the people who make them as his starting point, Ince swiftly swoops out into wider consciousness, attempting to analyse and anatomize the very essence of how imagination works, where creative ideas come from, and what conscious and subconscious processes the human mind engages in when it chooses to try to surprise itself with notions it never knew it was capable of.

Truth seekers from all walks of life will find it inspiring and illuminating, even if they are not stand-up aficionados already aware of the works of Sofie Hagen, Paul Chowdhry, Josie Long, Nina Conti, Noel Fielding, Jason Cook, Lenny Henry and Felicity Ward, who are all interviewed within, alongside a host of scientists, psychologists, cultural commentators and an astral-projecting occultist who worships a snake god.

A few years ago, I seem to remember, Robin Ince interviewed me at length for this book. And yet none of my comments appear in it. There is, however, a lengthy section of quotes from an interview with Ricky Gervais, a man whose stand-up is essentially a copy of mine, stripped of nuance, and performed by a comic who doesn't really understand it, and yet is paid literally tens of

millions of dollars more than me for his ersatz version of my act, by a network which describes me as 'too parochial'.

I discovered Robin Ince had declined to use any of our interview in his book when he asked me to read it in advance of publication, with a view to furnishing him with an introduction. I have now completed this introduction despite being in dreadful agony due to a repetitive strain injury caused by the angle at which I have been gripping the mic stand with my tension-racked left hand for two and a half hours a night over two hundred and fifty dates of my recently completed eighteen-month tour.

Even as I type this sentence I am aware that merely raising my left hand to the keyboard causes terrible endless spasms of pain to shoot down my left side, numbing my shoulder and neck. Robin Ince has suffered for his art, and so have his audiences, and today I am suffering for Robin Ince's art too. Now, gentle reader, it's your turn.

Stewart Lee, writer/clown, Stoke Newington/Camden, June 2018

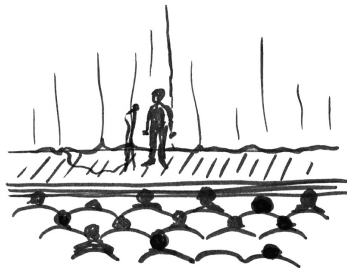
PS: Ince's book also includes, amongst a list of abandoned notes on scraps of paper he never developed into routines, the phrase 'All Mimophants Now!', surely a title Mark E. Smith of The Fall would have got around to using, had he lived long enough to see the publication of this book.

INTRODUCTION

Shouting at Strangers for Money

I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But
now the dream is over . . . and the insect is awake.

The Fly by Seth Brundle



Before I began this book I thought I should ‘check my privilege’. Then I thought, ‘Why am I checking my *own* privilege? Why hasn’t the publisher employed someone to do it for me?’

The weight of my privilege requires excess baggage allowance.

I am a straight, white, middle-class male who has never had to fight in a war, is not trusted to repair anything that is electrical or might splinter, and has never had to manhandle a plough or turn the handle on a mangle. I am in a very small minority of world citizens.

My childhood lacked severe beatings, and the smacked bottoms I did receive were lacklustre, my parents having tired themselves

out on my far naughtier older sisters. I was also the youngest of three and the only boy, so I was considered best, which is of course true. In this book I will occasionally write about my misguided miserabilism and slumping into the doldrums, but be aware that I am neither seeking your pity nor worthy of it. If you find yourself thinking: I believe this writer is trying to engender a sense of 'pity me', then I am probably attempting to say, *I was an idiot* or *I am an idiot* or *I will be an idiot again*.

I am aware of my absurdity. I am a fool, on- and offstage. I think it is a pity that the entire human race has not been able to accept how silly it is and has not then got on with living ridiculously, but also more kindly and helpfully. It is dangerous to take yourself seriously. Only a few changes in your gene sequence and you are sitting in a tyre, hurling poo at a tourist. And perhaps for some it may not even require that change in gene sequence . . .

Our desperation to feel a sense of superiority over others means that we often don't notice the big strip of toilet paper stuck to the sole of our shoe as we walk across the room. It is when we take ourselves too seriously that the cracks begin to widen. For this reason, there is nothing I enjoy more than seeing a dictator slipping in dog shit. Sadly, dictators usually have the means to erase all evidence that they did so, by shooting the dog, destroying the shoe and murdering all the spectators. The colonel who innocently commented on there being 'a bit of a funny smell in the war room' is later found shot seventeen times in the head after having overzealously committed suicide.

To be self-conscious is to be aware of the perpetual possibility of being ridiculous. If you are not ridiculous right at this moment,

then don't worry – you'll be ridiculous when you turn that corner and collide with a lamp post. So it's human nature to do all that is possible to avoid public derision and lamp posts. Who wants to have hiccups in the 'quiet carriage' of the train, or accidentally slip and fall into the open grave at their aunt's funeral? Though those who have called their teacher 'Mummy' are many, it does not lighten the sting of the blush. Many of the psychological problems of our existence come from our fear of being seen to be ridiculous. The effort of keeping ourselves together is often what pulls us apart.

There is one group of people who go out of their way to highlight their own absurdities, weaknesses and ridiculousness, and then shout about it for profit and in the name of art. Those people are comedians.

This is why comedians can be seen as so peculiar; it's as if they are deliberately going out of their way to potentially embarrass themselves. And yet revealing your stupidity for all the world to see could be said to be an intrinsic part of what it means to be a complete and psychologically healthy human being. This is why I love Laurel and Hardy, and I am more likely to trust people who love them, too. You can read academic psychology books on what it is to be human, or you can watch Stan and Ollie in *The Music Box*. I think all of us should spend more time trying to deliver pianos up steep hills and stairs. The trouble with Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* is that there's just not enough slapstick. The question of whether to live or die is written all over Ollie's face as that piano lands on his toe again.

I am fortunate in that I have had just enough peculiar thoughts to be able to fashion them into a career as a comedian, but not so

many that I have had to be incarcerated. I have always thought of myself as a weirdo. In most rooms, train carriages and municipal parks I always imagine that anyone who notices me is thinking: Sheesh, that guy is a bit of a freak.

Perhaps because of this, even my wife has remarked on my ability to look out of place in all public situations. And perhaps that is why I became a comedian. With that level of paranoia, standing up in front of strangers and emptying out the contents of my head, for them to pick over and laugh at, was the obvious choice of career.

Comedy had been a childhood obsession. Robin Williams, The Goodies, Rik Mayall, Laurel and Hardy – these were the people who made life worth living for me. Aged nine, I would crouch next to the television, holding a tape recorder beside the speaker, capturing the sounds of my favourite comedy shows, but mainly gathering the noise of my own high-pitched, zealous giggling.

Aged fourteen, I started keeping secret notebooks with ideas for jokes. Aged eighteen, I did my first gig. Aged twenty-three, stand-up comedy became my full-time job. I have been professionally absurd for a quarter of a century. I have taken being an idiot very seriously.

I have been fascinated too by both the onstage and offstage personas of comedians. I have loved reading about their real-life tribulations, depressions and doldrums almost as much as I have liked watching their work.

Being a comedian meant that, with scant permission from a room full (or not so full) of people, I could scream and gurn and roll around on the floor, twist myself into unseemly shapes and mime legal and illegal acts. Then I would be given money

– sometimes coins on the night and sometimes a cheque twelve months later, once the booking agent had accrued enough interest to keep himself flush in silver cigar-cutters and nasal fancies. Sometimes I would be rewarded handsomely, sometimes scarcely – and sometimes I would be asked to do all these things for free. What could be better than having permission to be ridiculous, yet appreciated? What could be worse than being ridiculous, only to be ignored or scorned? That was the now-nightly gamble I took. Triumphant, shameful or mediocre – what would it be this time?

What *did* seem clear to me, though, was that I had become part of a mythical group that I had been obsessing about relentlessly. Comedians were not like the others. Comedians do not think or live like ‘you’. The comedian is better than you, because he is in a long line of alcoholic, tearful misanthropes, who shine brightly in the spotlight and then lurk silently in the darkness, cursing the very audience they have come to please. Finally I could be privately miserable for professional reasons.

I was pretty certain on what I thought I knew about comedians – I’d read the biographies and seen the documentaries. Typically, the comedian’s childhood is confused, laced with a lack of love or an oversupply of death. They can give love to a crowd, but they fail to share it with an individual for any meaningful period of time. When they get drunk, it’s not like your stupid, pointless boozing on a Friday night because the weekend is here. Comedians drink because of the terrible poetry in their minds that must be silenced. They are sometimes drunk on a Tuesday, and when people see them in their dusty coats – hunched, snoring and dribbling onto their shoes as the train carriage runs over the points – they think: What a very noble figure of a human. That

drool shines with a depth of meaning and melancholy. Tragically, they will almost certainly die before you, and before their time; Peter Sellers, John Candy, Peter Cook, John Belushi, Rik Mayall, Chris Farley, Mitch Hedberg, to name just a few.

But when all is said and done, don't you know people who are often drunk, have a predilection for feeling down in the dumps shortly after being boisterous and joyous, might have seen divorce or death close up as a child and yet live their life as a postman or computer programmer? Spike Milligan, who suffered from mental breakdowns throughout his comedy career, did not think comedians were more likely to be depressives – he just thought that depressive episodes show up more in a comedian, like a black ink stain on a white shirt or an archbishop on a tricycle. If all the people who could tick two of the categories of 'what makes a comedian special' became comedians, there would be no one left to form the audience. The world would reverberate to the phrase 'Have you heard the one about . . .', but no one would be listening. But as Penn Jillette of the revelatory conjuring duo Penn & Teller says:

The same pain, the same suffering . . . the same tortures, the same doubts, the same misery are all there. In *show* business you show what you're feeling. So yes, they show the angst, but they're showing the angst of humanity. The angst that we all share. If you had a comic that truly had experiences that were outside the realm of the general humanity, no one would go see them.¹

So perhaps in the end the only difference between comedians and other, quieter human beings is that comedians like to shout

about their fury, unhappiness, delight and frustration, while the rest keep a lid on such feelings and experiences, sharing them only with their nearest and dearest – or, as it all crumbles around them, with their therapist. And could this reserve be a useful trait? For perhaps it is only by noticing and drawing on the absurdist and surreal that we can see the conflicts, incidents and coincidences that make all human beings such a curious and special species?

So I decided that I wanted to see whether the world could learn anything from comedians – their lives, their performances – by looking at why they do what they do, but also by asking whether all the clichés about comedians are really just that, clichés, and whether science and psychology can prove that comedians are, in the end, just like anybody else.

This book is my attempt to answer those questions, with each chapter looking broadly at a different aspect of how being a stand-up intersects with the psychology of life, and hopefully drawing out what we all can learn from comedy and comedians. I've talked to a lot of other comedians about what makes them tick, and to a lot of psychologists and scientists about how their study of humour, laughter, madness and sanity – their understanding of what it is to be human – can help us all as we navigate our way through life. Despite appearances, this has not merely been driven by the urge to get free sessions with psychotherapists, under the guise of writing a book.

What I also hope may come from this book is the realization that far more of us are madder than we thought. In fact so many of us are secretly mad that it may turn out that we're sane, and

it's just that sanity is wonkier than we thought it was meant to be. Once we can be aware of that, then perhaps we can live with our hidden eccentricities, safe in the knowledge that many other minds contain absurd trains of thought. Imagine a world where we were so fearless that when someone said, 'Hey, what you thinking?', you had the confidence to say exactly what that was. 'I was just imagining what would happen if I licked all the statues in the National Gallery.'

Alternatively, I might discover that rather than Broadway, my career goal should have been Broadmoor after all.

CHAPTER 1

Tell Me About Your Childhood

When we were growing up, we were so poor that we couldn't afford any clothes, so we had to stay in the house. But my dad saved up and saved up, and finally, on my fifth birthday, he bought me a hat, so at least I could look out of the window.

Les Dawson



I was worried about becoming a parent. As someone who ruminates too much, the potential to get it wrong seemed daunting, and the number of ways of getting it wrong seemed myriad. I would lie in bed at night, wondering if it was best that I died in my sleep and my child never knew me. If my heart gave out from an undiagnosed inherited fault, it might save everyone a lot of bother and hopelessness. The child would be brought up with a memory and rumour of me that would be more satisfactory than the clumsy living reality.

These thoughts vanished from the moment my son mewled into the world. Within the first month of his life, the weight of responsibility for trying to turn him into a good human transformed into a jagged stormcloud of abject horror. A question reared up in my head, 'What would be my one mistake in bringing him up that would turn him into a mass-murdering serial killer?'

I imagined that day in the police cells, after he'd been arrested for killing, cooking and eating thirty different strangers from Bruges.

'Oh, Son, why did you kill, cook and eat all of those people?' I'd ask.

He would look at me and say, 'Don't you remember, Father?' And I'd shake my head.

'It was that day on the beach. Chesil Beach, I think. There was a sudden gust of wind and I dropped my Strawberry Mivvi and it landed in the shingle. And you shouted at me, even though it was not my fault . . . And from that point onwards, I KNEW I'D KILL!'

In the last hundred years there has been a great deal of research in neuroscience, psychology and genetics into why we are the people and personalities that we are. Such research, which shines a light on both the intrinsic make-up of our brains and bodies and on our childhood experiences, can be incredibly valuable in understanding why we end up doing the things we do – whether it's working as a hairdresser, killing Belgians or becoming a stand-up comedian.

*

Fortunately, I was unhappy as a child. This has made it a lot easier to make the transition to stand-up comedy. I am sure I wasn't unhappy all the time, but the romantic memories of sitting alone, the outsider, in a graveyard, thinking about poetry have usurped the delightful nostalgic memories of larking about in woods and playing Horror Top Trumps.

If I think hard, there definitely are some good moments I can recall, such as the time I poured fruit punch into the hair of Tom Simpson, a boy who had made my life unpleasant at the school bus stop. The sugary punch attracted insects to his scalp, and it ended up becoming an unbearably itchy entomological menagerie. Happy days!

The biographical details of childhood can rarely be ignored these days, and it's the rise of psychotherapy and neuroscience that has made our childhood inescapable. We've all been given an alibi for our lousy behaviour.

'Don't blame me – my parents fed me my pet rabbit when I was four. They left the ears sticking out of the pie, that's why I've smashed all your collectible Beatrix Potter figurines with my hammer.'

We've read the childcare books and the memoirs, and we know that somewhere there is a childhood event that has doomed us.

It would be easiest to identify what such an event was, if it was one nice and neat, tumultuous emotional catastrophe that led in a direct line to a desperate need for public acclaim or just acceptance. Has your whole life turned out this way because of the day you wet yourself in art class and had to wear a pair of replacement pink frilly pants? And sometimes there really is just one such event. Alexei Sayle told me about the old saying, 'Show

me a comedian and I'll show you someone who lost their father when they were eleven.'

Amongst contemporary comedians the most well-known example of bereavement being linked to creativity is Eddie Izzard. Eddie's mother died from cancer when he was just six years old. He believes that everything in his life has been about getting over that; it is where his comedy comes from. His analysis of his situation is that his audience acts as a surrogate affection-machine to replace his mother. Izzard has repeatedly spoken about the effect of the sudden loss of all the affection his mother provided, and his belief that it is linked to his desire to perform and achieve. 'I know why I'm doing this. Everything I do in life is trying to get her back. I think if I do enough things . . . then maybe she will come back.'¹ His drive to do twenty-seven marathons in twenty-seven days, to learn to do his stand-up shows in fluent French, German and Russian, his political ambitions – for Eddie, all this has been a direct result of losing love so young. I think it is a convincing theory.

Comedian Paul Chowdhry, who – like Eddie – has built himself up to arena comedian without using the regular mass-media route, lost his mother when he was five years old. 'You don't quite understand it when you're five, the only things you see are superheroes who have lost a parent and become a superhero. But that doesn't help a child. When you're five, you don't get it, you think they'll come back.'²

Comedy guru Barry Cryer lost his father in the war. Over a pint, he once told me that he never knew his father nor anything about him. With post-war stoicism and the muffling of grief, his mother never spoke of him. The only conversation he ever had

with anyone about his father was at a Freemasons' event that he'd been hired to talk at many years later. A Mason asked if Barry was one of the brotherhood and Barry was then regaled with stories of his father's time in the Masons. I wanted to ask him how much he felt the loss of his father may have contributed to his desire to perform, but then I thought, 'He's got to eighty years old and without spending too long on the psychiatrist's couch. Why ruin it all now?' We had another beer instead. Eric Idle's father survived the war. But on his way home, with all the trains full, he hitch-hiked instead. He was killed in a car accident on Christmas Eve. Eric's brilliantly vicious festive song 'Fuck Christmas' is a far more haunting melody since I read this story.

Death and childhood bereavement aren't the only life experiences that a psychoanalyst would have a field day with, when examining what it is that may make a comedian tick. Neither of Richard Pryor's parents died at war, but he had an unusual upbringing nonetheless. His father was a pimp who was prone to violence, and Richard lived in the brothel where his mother worked and which his grandmother, his primary carer, ran. His mother was nearly beaten to death by his father and she left Pryor when he was five years old.

Lenny Bruce's parents divorced when he was five and he was shunted around different relatives during his childhood. Alexei Sayle mentions itinerancy as a possible springboard to showing off. He says that a sizeable proportion of the comedians he worked with at The Comic Strip were 'army brats'. Jennifer Saunders, Adrian Edmondson, Rik Mayall, Keith Allen, Dawn French and Rowland Rivron all had parents with some service-based itinerancy. Peter Cook saw little of his father, as he was

away in Africa for the Colonial Service. Cook recalled that his father used to receive the news six months after it was published. 'It went to Africa by boat, then up the river. He'd then open up *The Times* and exclaim, "Good God! Worcester are seventy-eight for six!!"'³

Certainly, if you are moving school and location with frequency, then 'Ta-dah' – you have to keep making an impression on your new classmates in a desperate attempt to make new friends, so jokes and larks it has to be.

I only changed school once between the ages of five and thirteen, but that was bad enough. I was having a lovely time at the local village school, but when I was eight I was upgraded to a fee-paying preparatory school, to be moulded and prepared for a lifetime's sense of superiority. That's when it went downhill rapidly. I didn't even know I was odd until then. I automatically turned from being a normal boy with a normal group of friends into someone who seemed to be carrying a contagious disease, as, it appeared, were all of the other late entries. The playground was a contamination pit. You could get 'Calvert disease', 'Hagyard disease' or 'Ince disease'. Newcomers were outsiders, treated in much the same way that white blood cells would treat new bacteria. A few other rejected boys had been there longer and were no longer highly infectious, merely kept at a distance, as one was overweight and the other ran in a 'funny manner'. But was this enough of a traumatic experience to set me off on a completely different course from the one I would otherwise have pursued? I don't think so.

*

‘Attachment theory’ developed out of the horrors of the Second World War, when psychologists in the US and Western Europe began to study those people who had suffered loss or trauma in their very early childhood. Psychoanalyst John Bowlby, who had himself suffered an absent father during the First World War, was one of the leading proponents of the theory – one of the main tenets of which was that, in early infancy and childhood, in order to build a strong and stable personality, a child must have had at least one committed, stable and loving primary caregiver. Recent studies by psychologist Sue Gerhardt seem to suggest that even what takes place during the first few hours and days of a child’s life can have an adverse affect on their attachment profile.

Adoption can occur in very different circumstances, but can lead to attachment issues and is often said to impact heavily on a child’s understanding of the world and the people around him or her; indeed, therapists have to undergo special training even to speak to an adopted person, so complex are the potential issues involved. At least eight comedians that I have worked with were adopted, including Stewart Lee, Mark Steel, Robert Newman and Rhona Cameron.

Some of them found out they were adopted when they were quite young, while others didn’t discover this until well into their teenage years. Some of them have gone on to use their experiences as an adopted child as material for their shows, whilst others have brushed over it, giving it little meaning at all.

Jo Brand believes, though, that there is a statistical over-representation of comedians who were adopted and of those who lost a parent when very young. She believes that ‘those sort of

huge, catastrophic incidents in your early life do not bode well for your future mental health'.⁴

Mark Steel was brought up in a working-class family in one of Kent's less impressive towns. In middle age he found out that his biological father was a card-playing companion of the notorious Lord Lucan and of gambling wildlife park entrepreneur John Aspinall. Steel has discussed adoption with other adopted comedians and has concluded that 'We've all come to live with it. I don't think any of us are in a state about it. I never felt like an outsider.'⁵ His conclusion is that the experience of adoption and grief is not rare, and yet most people who experience these things early in life will not decide to become comedians. Equally, I'd say that there are many who do not experience such things and do become wildly successful comics.

Perhaps I needed to look elsewhere for the childhood comedic impetus? Kurt Vonnegut suggested that the youngest child in any family was always a joke-maker, 'because a joke is the only way he can enter into an adult conversation'.⁶ Straw-polling a group of fourteen comedian compatriots, I found that eight were the youngest in the family, two were only children (which technically makes them the youngest), three were the oldest child and only one was the middle child. The middle child was Matt Parker, a stand-up mathematician, so I am sure he would tell me that such a small sampling risks being statistically irrelevant. One of the youngest was a twin and was only the youngest by an hour, but I reckon that still counts for my bias. In my unscientific trial, it seems there was an element of truth in Vonnegut's words. But looking at the work of the comedians polled, I am unable to draw any conclusions on how their family positioning affected their level of funniness or

success. I have certainly laughed as much at one of the eldest-child comedians, Mark Thomas, as I have at most of the youngest. Thank heavens he doesn't have the extra privilege of being last from the womb or I would have found it even harder to follow him at the benefit night in the Red Rose Comedy Club.

And as I ponder these various childhood experiences that have stimulated or influenced comedic greatness, I wonder how – if at all – I fit into any of these groups? I am not adopted. I did not lose a parent in childhood. My parents weren't in the army and, as far as I know, my grandmother wasn't a pimp for my mum or for anyone else. But I am the youngest of three. Though I have grown up to be the biggest show-off of the three, I was the least outwardly confident in the family. I was highly strung, volatile, shy and likely to become visibly upset if I didn't win Pass the Parcel at my own birthday party. I was the babyish baby brother.

I do have a 'traumatic event' filed in my memory-card box, though, but even now I wonder if it was traumatic enough to count as trauma, and I feel a certain embarrassment at bringing it up at all.

It was late winter and dark. My sister had been riding a pony with her friend, and she and I were both in the back seat of the car, with my mum driving the short distance to our home. I was searching for my machine gun, my favourite toy, under the passenger seat. It had a handle on the side and it made a rat-a-tat-tat sound when you turned it.

I don't remember the moment of collision, but I presume there was a thud and a jolt. Everything stopped and was quiet, and then the sobbing started. I was two years old – though I was a grown-up three-year-old in my mind, as my birthday was only a

week away. I know this because there was going to be a party, and Mum had planned the cake. It was my sister who was sobbing. Her head had struck the right-side passenger window and was bleeding. Another car had been on the wrong side of the road, hurrying to get home. His impatience changed everything.

Mum was motionless in the driving seat, head up, eyes shut.

I can still see it all clearly. Though I am aware my memory may have changed the details with each revisit, the stillness of her face is consistent.

I remember saying, 'Why's Mummy's eyes closed?'

My sister didn't say anything. She was seven. Time moves differently when you're two. It's much bigger then, and there is more room to play in it. Such long afternoons up trees. My mother's stillness dominated everything. Although I could still see her face clearly, I couldn't see the damage done.

The rest is collage and jumpcuts.

One woman ran from her car with a toilet roll, to stem the flow of blood from my sister's head. She was quite a big lady, who looked kind. My dad had been following us in his car and this was the one piece of good fortune in all the bad luck, as it undoubtedly saved my mother's life. He persuaded the ambulance driver that the local hospital did not have the facilities to deal with Mum's injuries and that she must be taken somewhere better equipped. Later on, the medical people would say it was this act of furious persuasion that saved her life.

We are all unreliable narrators of our past. My injured sister, Sarah, remembers it slightly differently. She saw more than me because she was sitting up rather than searching for a plastic gun. She saw the lights of the car coming straight at us. She believes

she was too shocked to cry, as she noticed the stickiness of the blood in her hair. She remembers the police asking where our shoes were, because they had apparently come off our feet due to the force of the impact. She, too, remembers our mother's stillness. My eldest sister was home alone, waiting for *Top of the Pops* to begin, when the police arrived, so she never got to see Marc Bolan singing 'Telegram Sam'.

What I recall most viscerally is the knowledge that it was all my fault. This had happened because I was looking for my toy machine gun. Somehow, that had caused the crash. If I hadn't been squatting behind the passenger seat looking for that gun . . . ? I knew people would be very cross with me. I had caused a lot of trouble. I was taken in the second ambulance, then sat alone in a hospital corridor. Collected by the friends who owned the pony, I was put straight to bed until my other, undamaged sister explained that I had had no supper, and then I was brought downstairs again to eat soup or spaghetti shapes. Something red anyway.

When was I going to be told off? It never happened, but I didn't see my mother for some time. She was still in a coma on my birthday.

We had a party anyway, but the cake was bought from a shop.

During this period an older woman in tweed was employed to look after us. She was no Disney Mary Poppins, and she forced me to sit on a potty, even though I had a painful boil on my bottom. I cried and cried and cried. My sisters rebelled, as they would again and again, and fought against the beastliness that was being inflicted on their little brother, then ran away in protest with their anoraks and biscuits.

After the protest, a kinder woman in tweed replaced the anti-Poppins, and Mum eventually came home.

Her jaw was held together by screws, and she didn't know who that boy or his sisters were. She had woken up in a time before any of us existed. I have very few memories of those days when she first left hospital, and perhaps that's just as well. The cover-up of the situation was done very proficiently by the grown-ups. Eventually Mum's memory caught up with reality and then life went on, though not in the same way it would have done if someone hadn't been on the wrong side of the road at the wrong speed. Not a bad life, just a changed future.

That is my creation story. If I want to thank or blame one incident for why I am what I am, I choose that one. With time, its magnitude seems to have increased and its ability to explain many things has become greater. But I don't know how much importance it really has in the tale of an idiot's progress.

During that stage of a child's brain development, how much effect does blaming yourself for a traumatic car crash have? What does the confusion around a mother being in a coma do to the child? My 'make-do-and-mend' mentality, nurtured by watching Sunday-afternoon British war films on telly as a child, says, 'Forget it all, just keep moving on', but the boy in the library is filled with questions.

As I have grown distant from the event, it seems that I can see it more clearly for what it was and what it might be. I do not see what happened as an excuse for what I am, but I slice into it forensically, wondering what it did to me.

Like so many events in our lives, all the raking over will only lead to 'maybes' and vague ideas concerning the probability of

outcomes. When I asked Essi Viding, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at University College London, about the possible effects, she told me, 'Although we can say with confidence that any big trauma typically impacts the individual experiencing it, I think it would be difficult to say with certainty how precisely the event you describe would affect a child and shape his development.' She explained that the impact of such an event can vary enormously from one individual to the next, depending on their predisposition, as well as the life events that follow the trauma. Although Professor Viding thought that comedy may have been a critical outlet following trauma, she is also aware that cannot be said conclusively, for it perches in the category of 'reasonable hypothesis'.

Now middle-aged, I still try and pick apart the effect that event could have had on my young mind – the neural connections that were made that day, when I thought I had caused a terrible catastrophe, and then the confusing guilt-ridden years that followed.

As human beings as much as comedians, we all have a repertoire, a few core bits of material that become our regular anecdotal routines. As we retell them, how much further away do they get from the now-forgotten reality? The neuroscientist Dean Burnett explained that memories such as this could be described as a 'flashbulb memory'. The most important events in our life create more and more links in our brain, so that they become easier to retrieve. The flashbulb memory is attached to traumatic events. It is a survival strategy. The adrenaline released at the time of the event helps keep everything more vivid in the future, and hopefully it helps us avoid traumatic situations as well. You

won't find me looking for my toy machine gun in the back seat of the car any more, I promise you. I learnt my lesson there.

The importance of schooldays frequently looms large among those comedians who turn to jokes as a form of defence or acceptance, such as those 'army brat' children, and then make those punchlines into a career.

You don't have to feel like an outsider to become a comedian, but it can help. It's easier to focus on being creative if you are not preoccupied with socializing with popular people. Sitting on the edge is a better spot from which to observe than being hugged in the middle.

I was fortunate in this respect. Firstly, I wore glasses. My prescription arrived just as Elvis Costello made his debut on *Top of the Pops*, so in addition to 'speccy four-eyes', a chorus of 'Oliver's Army' would frequently greet my entrances and exits into the classroom.

Secondly, I joined the school much later than most of the other pupils, hence my earlier mention of being an outsider and feeling as unwanted as an infectious disease.

Thirdly, I had the sort of dimpled chest that meant I looked as if I had small breasts. (I know you are wondering just how many advantages one child can have, when it comes to placing petals on the pathway to being a comedian?)

I was around eight years old when I experienced the dawning self-realization of the freakery of my flesh. This was presumptive of me, as neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, an expert on the teenage brain, believes that the acutely self-conscious phase really kicks in at eleven. I can content myself with the knowledge that I have always been ahead of the curve in such matters.

My fleshy chest caused me acute embarrassment in PE, when I was in the team that would be marked out by not wearing tops (skins). I would try and conceal my 'breasts' by keeping my arms crossed at all times, though this severely hindered dodging in dodgeball, and pretty much ruled out any activity that required a modicum of balance. If only I could have uncrossed my arms, I could have been a gold-medal gymnast.

This noxious horror remained with me long enough for it to be recycled, eighteen years later, into a five-minute stand-up routine involving my breasts, a macabre sex-change revenge story, and the punchline 'my sister's cock'. This was my most popular punchline when I went to entertain the troops in Bosnia. What had made my stomach ache with anxiety, for most of my school life, was now turned into a revenge drama in which I was victorious over those boys who had maximized the hellishness of existence. You just don't get as much material if schooldays are the happiest of your life.

At times I had tried to fit in, but – to my relief, in hindsight – I never managed to run with the pack. If I had, I most certainly would only have ended up with a stitch. As I was unable to fight my corner physically, the speed at which I could use words was my right jab. It wasn't a swollen eye they gave; it was the ability to bruise an ego, which would lead to you having a bruised eye, but also the vestiges of some sort of bloody-nosed dignity. Quite often I would say nothing, but never fear – I was scripting ripostes in my head, for a 'what might have been' universe.

Leaving my school for the final time on the bus, I had a horrific thought: 'What if schooldays really are the best days of your life?' Within weeks, would my memories have rewritten

those years as relentless jolly japes? Fortunately, my rose-tinted spectacles fell into the toilet the last time my head was shoved in it, and I have never hankered for my mythical past. Being bullied at school is a mainstay in the 'shortcut to reasons people became comedians' list. But does bullying turn you into who you are or does it simply speed up the working-out of who you are? If you are quirky, offbeat, unusual or just different, then you may only come to realize that you have such a difference when you are thrown mercilessly into a crowd, and the tribe hostilely shows its suspicion for any such lack of conformity.

'Did you tell jokes as a way to deflect the bullying?'

'No, I think it was the jokes that started the bullying in the first place.'

What came first: the punchline or the head in the puddle?

Joking about your own ineptitude is an attempt to create some kind of control as you sit in a puddle surrounded by aggressors screaming furiously, 'You've just lost us the game.' A study from Keele University, though, suggests that joking at your own failure may not be helpful. It studied more than 1,200 children between eleven and thirteen years old and their ways of joking, and found that the so-called class clown can heighten his or her status with what is known as 'affiliative humour'. This is where a child who already feels they are of a lower status uses self-defeating humour that relies on mocking themselves. In an attempt to have some sense of control over the mockery, they show that they are quite aware of their own feebleness and so they may even instigate self-mockery, thus pre-empting the bullies. In stand-up, this is seen when a comedian hastily makes

a mention of some idiosyncrasy concerning their appearance when they reach the microphone. If you have made a fat-joke about yourself, the heckler's shout of 'You fat bastard!' is made impotent. This won't stop a bullish or inattentive heckler, and should they continue shouting out about the comic's weight, they may find out that it is because every time the comic has sex with the heckler's mother, she gives him a biscuit. (I first heard the comedian Andre Vincent deal with a fattist heckler with this line, so I will credit him with its creation, but the patent of a heckle put-down is much-fought-over territory.)

Other types of humour that the Keele study described were 'aggressive', with the use of jokes to attack others; and 'self-enhancing', where jokes were seen as reducing anxiety by encouraging laughter at things that were in reality quite frightening. Dr Kate Fox stated that the study showed that humour plays an important role in how children interact with each other, but that using humour to make fun of yourself makes you prone to more bullying. In such situations children try to take control of the situation with self-mockery, which only increases their susceptibility to bullying. So as you up the self-mockery, the next thing you know, you are touring small-town art centres and appearing on radio panel shows. If I had kept to my earlier plan of punching people through the cheek with an ink pen, this would never have happened.

But despite being a highly strung child and being moved to a school where I discovered that I was both odd and infectious, by the time I was twelve I had still only stabbed two people – Adrian Chorley in the cheek with an ink pen, and Robert Boughton in the hand with a craft knife. I am quite sure both were accidents, and

I haven't stabbed anyone else since then. Were my short-tempered outbursts a result of having been in the car accident, being the youngest of three or some other forgotten minor trauma of my youth? Or was it just common-or-garden bloodlust? Was I simply on the path towards being a serial killer, as both my sisters used to taunt me – and way before it was fashionable?

When I asked the Jungian analyst Andrew Samuels what he thought of people using a single incident to justify or explain their ensuing life, he answered me brusquely. 'This is the kind of turgid rubbish that drives me nuts. Comedians are artists. You wouldn't talk about an artist like that . . . People's motivations just don't work like that . . . I would be more comfortable with a comedian who just said, "I haven't got a clue, it's just what I'm supposed to do, but I don't know why."'

One night in a bar I was with a group of comedians, digging through our miserable pasts in jocular fashion, when the youngest comic there suddenly became furious.

She was affronted. She had had a lovely childhood, no beatings, bereavement or bullying and she felt that, in a roundabout way, we were saying she couldn't be as funny as the rest of us. We explained that we were toying with ideas for drunken psychotherapy fun, and we were not suggesting that infantile melancholy was something to judge the quality of your jokes by. If it was, then every comedian would footnote each joke with 'And that punchline stems from the day I was pushed out of a treehouse by a Mother Superior', and then the audience would laugh even more, as they shrieked excitedly, 'It comes from her pain, it comes from her pain.' Equally, others might say, 'I went

to see a comedian the other day; he seemed quite funny, but I had a nagging suspicion that he was happy, so that spoilt it a bit.'

The comedian's sad childhood may be a pleasing story for the public, but not all comedians fit the bill. The comedian, author and *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here* survivor Jenny Eclair has said that it wasn't the misery of her childhood that made her a comedian, but the wonderfulness of it. She hoped that by making a career in nonsense and delight, she could rekindle the nonsense and delight of her youth. International surrealist Noel Fielding told me he had a childhood of joy and encouragement from hip young parents. His art was not an act of rebellion; he fell into art because his talent was encouraged. Meanwhile, when I asked international absurdist Ross Noble if he had anything to say on the matter, he explained that he had very little time for the inspection of doomed childhoods to find artistic inspiration. Ross just wanted to have fun, and he also comes from a happy family of encouragement.

But Eddie Pepitone fits the bill, if you want your analyst's couch to be dented by the expected level of neuroticism that a comedian should exhibit.

'I've screamed onstage for thirty years, it's hard for me to connect with anyone, but through comedy I've built a life,' says Eddie.⁷ Pepitone is an actor and comedian, born in Brooklyn, but now based in Los Angeles. He is a comedian that all the other comics love watching. Watching Eddie perform, you know that he has to be onstage. It is a volatile and hilarious scream at and about his life, his insecurities and the injustices of the world, both personal and political.

He has a tempestuous relationship with his father. They share a similar volatility. For much of Eddie's childhood, his

mother battled with mental health issues and was eventually diagnosed with manic depression, now called bipolar disorder. He remains furious over his relationship with his mother and her mental illness. Eddie felt his mother wasn't really there, and that is where much of his anger came from. He believes that the attention he missed from his mother is why he has spent so much of his life asking for attention onstage. When we talked, he told me, 'All of it just breaks my heart. And it's the reason I'm a comedian. Because, the only way to deal with that is either kill yourself or . . .'

He finds it amazing that he has been screaming onstage for so long. He says that he has only recently learnt that he doesn't need to scream. 'I've had all this pent-up rage in me, and comedy has been the way for me to express that rage through a socially acceptable manner – in my case, barely. In some parts of America, people aren't used to seeing such raw emotion.'

The surprise of greater age is the discovery that most of us don't become adults and ditch the fear of our parents' judgement. Eddie is amazed at how much fear and desire to please his father he still has left in him. Some days he wakes up and wonders why he hasn't called his father for a while, and then he realizes it is because he is scared that he will become antagonistic and will reawaken his father's disapproval. 'I'll say something, he's very sensitive to tone and he'll call me up on the tone of my voice and that will then trigger me.' Eddie realizes this is behaviour that was established when he was very small.

I understand his fear of judgement. It is easier to risk the judgement of strangers on a nightly basis than risk disappointing your parents just once. I didn't let my parents come and see any of

my shows for the first fifteen years of my stand-up career. My dad getting Google Alerts was what began to make my elusiveness no longer an option.

Jerry Seinfeld describes that strange moment when a grown-up person quakes at being observed doing stand-up in front of their parents. ‘I was so nervous that night because I was showing them this whole side of myself. It was like my little gay closet moment. I had to say, “Hey, Mom, Dad, I don’t know how to tell you this – I’m a funny person and I don’t want to be ashamed of it any more. I want to lead a funny lifestyle now.”’⁸

It was while supporting Ricky Gervais at the London Palladium that I thought, ‘If I can’t let them see me play the Palladium, then when can I?’

My worry trebled, the night I knew they were in the audience for the first time. I scoured my set list for jokes that I should remove, ideas that I was happy to voice with strangers, but horrified to share with my parents. My dad’s general judgement now on most of the things he has seen or heard on TV or radio involving me is that the show was terrible, but I was the least-bad thing on it. He prefers my later work.

Eddie Pepitone remains livid, though he is getting used to who he is. His stand-up is still an exorcism of all the rage absorbed from his father. There is a beautiful moment towards the end of his documentary, *The Bitter Buddha*: his dad hasn’t seen him work in ten years, but Eddie is returning to New York to do a headline set, and his dad will be there. Despite only living a few miles from Manhattan, his father hasn’t ventured into the city for seven years. Eddie is a ball of anxiety. The audience loves him, though, the show goes brilliantly and, after wrapping it up, with

the crowd going wild, Eddie walks straight up to his dad. The pride is clearly visible in his dad's eyes. His son has killed – and on home turf, too. 'You had them eating out of your hand. Any fucking thing you said, they were rolling in the aisles.' It's as if everything has been building up to this moment, and all Eddie's work was for this instant.

So does the bullying that I was on the receiving end of, or the crash, or fear of judgement, or any other significant early event in my life explain my seeking the nightly approbation of strangers? Like Andrew Samuels, I can't see how, and yet if that is the case, perhaps my desire for such acclaim is just something I was born with? And so to that age-old question: nature or nurture? Is your destiny defined as you emerge screaming from the womb, or will it take a series of unfortunate events before the age of seven to turn you into the mess you are now?

For a while, scientists declared that we were born as a blank slate. Since then, the amount of information on that slate has been aggressively debated, though it is unlikely we will ever return to the idea of us having a totally clean slate from birth. Some of our ghastly foibles may be foretold in our genome, but does that leave us predestined, whatever the chaos or kindness in our life? When I first saw my toddler son swear, as the coloured bricks he played with refused to behave as he wished, I wondered if there was a gene for pointlessly swearing at inanimate objects that had been passed down from me, or if he had just eavesdropped on me punching a misbehaving printer or cupboard door.

Remove one event from my early life, and does that find me managing a shoe shop rather than pacing onstage? Would a new

cut of brogue arriving in-store have brought me as much pleasure as a possible encore and the laughter of strangers?

Maybe none of my school experiences or toddler trauma played any part in my future career path, and perhaps instead it was destiny. It is in my genes. Some of our genetically inherited eccentricities are overtly on display. For instance, I have quite small thumbs – an object of great fascination to Ricky Gervais. Not really, really small thumbs. They are not the sort of thumbs P. T. Barnum would have made money from, but they are a bit stubby and blunt. Ricky would talk so loudly and publicly about them that I still get complete strangers approaching me in the street, asking to see them.*

Geneticist Adam Rutherford is the author of *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived*, presenter of Radio 4's *Inside Science* and sometime advisor on films about duplicitous, sexually attractive robots.⁹ Like most scientists, he is keen to have a law named after him before his life comes to an end. So far, Rutherford's Law is 'If a headline states that "Scientists have discovered a gene for X", where X is a complex human trait, they haven't, because in actual fact that gene doesn't exist.' Since the human genome was sequenced, the popular press has been keen to declare that there is a gene for this or that, from

* My relationship with Ricky Gervais has led to the creation of many apocryphal tales that still haunt me to this day. There are people who believe that I drank milk directly from a cow's udder and that I was once made to sit on ham bare-arsed, as a supposed cure for worms. Not a week goes by without me being asked if these stories are true. When I deny them, this is seen as an admission that they must be true. 'Aha, why would you deny them unless they were true?' Ricky is a very persuasive man when it comes to making up myths about his friends.

sexuality to murderousness, but Rutherford explains that this is not the case. Fortunately, from a genetic perspective, we are not given an alibi for who we are, and we are not given an alibi that gets us off our responsibility for who or what our children become. Adam says, 'It doesn't matter whether we are talking about criminality, or psychological characteristics, or psychiatric disorders, or perfectly normal human behaviour like political bent, or susceptibility to alcohol, or being gay or anywhere on the spectrum of sexual preferences, the biology that is revealed by genetics are not causes, or triggers, or foundations. They are potential factors: probabilities.'

Many geneticists no longer see the fight of who we are, and what we become, as nature versus nurture. Your genes may change the odds, but they do not tell you who will win and who will lose. The culture around you, the environment, your diet, love – or the lack of it – will all go to shape you. Your story does not end with cutting the umbilical cord. Neither nature nor nurture reigns supreme.

Adam thinks of it all as 'messy and complex and in the middle', which is often how we all feel. He told me about a paper from Cambridge that quantified the genetic effect that people have on each other. (It is important to know here that, more often than not, when scientists say 'people', they mean 'mice'.) The research attempted to look at the genetic effect that other people have on those they interact with. It is all about genotypes and phenotypes. Your genotype is your code. Your phenotypes are the observable characteristics, such as small thumbs, that come from it. This paper was looking at how the code of your partner affects your observable characteristics.

I read it for the first time and thought, ‘Sorry?’ ‘What?’ says an almost exasperated Dr Rutherford. Then he gave some fairly trivial examples and it all seemed to make sense. If your partner is bipolar – a condition that has a genetic component to it – spending half your life with this person is going to have a phenotypic effect on you. ‘What they tried to quantify in this paper is the genetic effect someone else has on you . . . the weight of the social genetic effect is greater than your own genetic effect for certain characteristics. That’s bonkers.’ And this means that what was already messy gets even messier. There is even greater complexity in the interaction between the environment and our genes. The reasons you are who you are are many and varied, and are sometimes impossible to calculate, unless you have been perpetually observed and chronicled. And if you were perpetually observed and chronicled, then this too would also have taken its toll.

There is one set of behaviours that, when grouped together, are often associated with comedians, and they are those that are suggested as the markers for someone being on the autistic spectrum. Those with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are characterized as having any number of a set of characteristics, such as obsessive behaviour, hyperactivity, tics, anxiety (particularly of the social kind), difficulties communicating in social situations and a general susceptibility to depression. The cause of ASD remains unclear, although a genetic component is suspected.

Whilst ASD is brought into conversations about what makes a comedian, the evidence that there is any greater representation of this condition in comedy than in any other walk of life seems

scant. Most comedians whom people like to bracket as having ASD are simply the victims of conjecture, and in general it seems that the phrase 'I reckon he's a bit on the spectrum' comes from anyone who has decided it might be abnormal to put records in alphabetical order, or to like crosswords enough to do them twice a day, or to be able to work out who any member of the cast of *Downton Abbey* is from their silhouette. Being obsessed does not always need to lead to a diagnosis and, in my view, poor social skills are not always the signs of a clinical condition, either.

Comedians Dan Harmon and Dan Aykroyd have been diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, and Jerry Seinfeld has stated that he believes he is. But in terms of a statistically significant number of people on the autistic spectrum within one profession, mathematics and theoretical physics score far higher than comedy.

In the last few years there has been a rise in young comedians identifying with being on the autistic spectrum. In the UK, Robert White is an exuberant musical comedian who wrote a show about how what he intended as a vengeful practical joke against an ex-partner was misconstrued by the police and led to him going to prison for three months – a situation he puts down to his Asperger's. Before being a comedian, he had sixty-seven jobs in seven years, losing many predominantly due to his joking around. At one job there was no rule about not wearing a home-made Gareth Gates mask at work, so Robert wore one for three hours – and that was the end of that. Comedy has made his life easier. 'Onstage, I can make jokes in the context of making jokes. Saying the same things at work was perceived as a misunderstanding of the social situation and seen as inappropriate.'¹⁰

Ria Lina was diagnosed with Asperger's ten years into her career and went on to write a show about what is 'special' and what is 'normal'. She explained that being diagnosed had helped her understand why she saw the world in a certain way, perhaps giving her a unique comedic advantage, though she went on to say, 'Being labelled as autistic also made me feel like I'd lost some of the uniqueness that made me special.'¹¹

The 2016 documentary *Asperger's Are Us* tells the story of four friends with Asperger's who bonded through a shared sense of humour at an Asperger's summer camp for teenagers, and then created a comedy troupe. One of the quartet, Jack Hanke, gets out a graduation photo and talks of how he was voted 'most outgoing' by the class, which seems ridiculous to him. He sees jokes as his way to communicate, and explains that jokes are how he learnt 'to cross the bridge between me and the rest of the world'.

While I was in Toronto for the annual *Generator* show I met Michael McCreary. Michael is the self-proclaimed 'aspie comic'. He was ostracized in elementary school, so his parents thought it would be good if he took some comedy classes to boost his spirits, and it worked, as well as helping him bond with others on the 'Stand Up for Mental Health' course. Michael believes an important part of his stand-up routine is to eradicate the stigma that surrounds mental illness. He loved performing from an early age, but he found acting in plays worrying, as he always knew his lines but was anxious about others who didn't. He needed complete control, and that is what solo stand-up gave him. Wondering about any advantage for comedy that may come from being diagnosed with Asperger's, Michael tells me, 'One

of Asperger's' defining characteristics is that you tend to fixate on a handful of niche subjects. For me, one of those subjects is stand-up comedy, which enables me to attack it with all of my enthusiasm.'

This obsessiveness is something I have found to be common among the comedians with whom I work closely, whether diagnosed or not. Being on the autistic spectrum does not make a comedian, but as with all the other events and conditions discussed here, it appears that it can be usefully applied to stand-up, and stand-up can be a useful way of expressing what may otherwise be seen as socially problematic behaviours and attitudes.

Similarly, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) crops up as a bystander diagnosis of certain comedians. It has been suggested that I have ADHD, but I believe it is caused by stand-up rather than being a cause of it. I think I may appear to act as if I have ADHD when the adrenaline starts pumping under the lights, but not when I am sitting in the dark at home alone. I like talking about lots of things. I cram my mind with reading and experience, then I am given the chance to share it all for an hour, so the adrenaline and the desire to please and share create a very hectic performance. Should the bystander diagnosis be correct, I do not believe it would either improve or damage my existence, so I will happily remain in the hyperkinetic, occasionally spotlit dark.

This does not mean that having ADHD or being on the autistic spectrum cannot be something that can be turned into comedy. Rory Bremner, a comedian and impressionist who has been a television fixture since his early twenties, was not diagnosed with ADHD until he was in his fifties.

Rory sees a marked crossover between traits associated with ADHD and those that are part of a comedian's make-up: 'impulsivity, speed of thought, lack of inhibition, and so on'. He sees the similarity in the way comedians release from their mouth what many others may stop and filter. He told me that he thought being impulsive and irrepressible made him want to perform and show off; and then experience and peer reaction teach you how to show off properly, rather than just be an attention-seeking pain, which he believes he was at various stages of his childhood and adolescence. He sees his ADHD as his best friend and worst enemy – 'Enemy in that it's not fun being disorganized, not paying attention, forgetting things, messing up, but it makes me who I am in terms of the leaps of imagination, the random connections, the energy and the impulsivity.' Rory sees it as quite natural that people with ADHD will be drawn to the creative industries – a place in which to turn childhood disadvantages into career boons.

Would events such as the loss of your mother at six years old, as Eddie Izzard experienced, change the expectations about how active the genetic, or biological, component of personality might be? Is the diagnosis more important than the life events, or the other way round? Does one override the other? Adam Rutherford explains that there is no method for assessing such a scenario. He suggests taking 1,000 comedians, sequencing their genomes and then asking whether a geneticist would expect to find a pattern suggesting something unique to this group, and the answer would have to be 'no'.

I suggest attempting to set up an experiment. Say I discover an identical twin separated at birth, who has become a comedian. I

then find her twin sister, who has become an accountant. Is there anything I could discover in this situation?

Adam tells me that even this fiendishly clever experiment would need 100 more examples to become statistically interesting and relevant. And I see it becoming a resource-hungry experiment, as well as an ethics-board nightmare.

So if I succeed in finding 200 identical twins, and half of them became stand-up comedians while none of their sisters and brothers did, what then?

‘We could extract some meaningful data out of that, but I wouldn’t draw any firm conclusions from it,’ Adam says bleakly.

Is the scrutiny of our childhood any more use than a game, to justify why we are what we are? Does it make the slightest difference to my present life that I was in that traumatic car crash? Perhaps if my mother had died in the car accident, I’d have been a more successful comedian, in 20,000-seaters for ten nights rather than 200-seaters for one. But I prefer the destiny I had. Perhaps if that car hadn’t been so eager to be on the wrong side of the road, I wouldn’t have become a comedian at all. Perhaps.

Hopefully there is something satisfying, even beguiling, in knowing how murky and complicated our story is, rather than how straightforward, simple and linear. Perhaps we all have the possibility of being more than the sum of our worst experiences, or our best. Neither our nature nor our nurture has a singular control over what we become. When my son uses me in his defence, after being caught cooking and eating all those Belgians, and declares it was due to that bellowing over the broken ice-lolly, I will say, ‘Your Honour, I think you’ll find it’s a bit more complicated than that.’

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD

We are an amalgam. Your destiny is not written in stone, due to a single event or a strand of DNA. And I turn to Eddie Pepitone's inspiring and motivational words, which we can all draw on: 'The only things stopping me today are: genetics, lack of will, income, brain chemistry, and external events.'