

Life

A woman of confidence



Susie Boyt

After the double christening of two delightful tots I was sitting in a field in the rain, shivering, talking to their grandmother, who was bundled up in a dark blanket and a child's spare black hood. "Bit too grim reaper, am I?" she asked with a laugh. She was an impressive woman, very funny and very happy-seeming, without a bad word to say about anyone.

"When can I come and see your new band, the one you say I'll hate?" she teased her older grandson cheerily. He coloured and scuttled away. We drank gin to keep warm, and she chatted for nearly an hour to my dog-mad toddler about canine care.

"And has he got a lead and a belt and a silver clip and a bowl for food and a bowl for his drink and a basket?" the little one asked her, more than seven times.

"Oh yes, he most certainly has," the woman explained again and again and again.

This happy scene was broken by one of the new godparents, who came and sat next to me, swaggering slightly in his very elegant suit. "Do you have a godchild?" he asked.

"I don't mean to blow my own trumpet, but I have 11," I said.

"You'll be up the creek if all the parents cop it," he replied.

"Yes, that is probably true," I agreed.

"We would buy a Routemaster and kit it out with bunks, I expect."

"What do you do?" he continued. I didn't mind that he posed this question but it isn't one I ever ask. Why not? Because it's nosy. I don't hold with such a direct line of enquiry. You may as well go all-out, Oxbridge interview-style, and demand: "Say something brilliant about Wordsworth!" Besides, so many people don't feel that their job or lack of job truly represents them. Quite a few are between things these days, uncertain and anxious, and do not wish to be defined by their current lack of definition. Even if you have a very clear answer, such as "I am a Catholic priest, as it goes" or "I am the home secretary," your certainty can seem tactless or boastful in the face of others' more hazy employ.

"I am a writer," I said. He laughed, and looked me up and down, doubtfully, in the fashion of a teenage bus queue. He shook his head derisively. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

I took a deep breath. "If you must."

"Would you say you came from a middle-class background?"

"I do."

"I knew it!" He smiled, knowingly.

"Right," I nodded.

"I knew it when you said that you were a writer," he continued. "I expect your secure and comfortable middle-class

upbringing gives you the confidence to make that claim about yourself. People like you have no idea." Facing this strange fellow, legions of possible retorts clouded my mind. I built a little pyramid where honest courtesy sat at the bottom and vicious outrage teetered wildly at the summit. Possible responses included:

"I only say I am a writer because it's true"; "I know I once claimed that all other people are to a certain extent our own creations but your version of me is so unfamiliar that you had better answer any further questions you have for me yourself"; "Can you give me more details about my wondrous carefree childhood, s'il vous plait?"; "Please know that I take full responsibility for everything that has ever gone wrong in your life."

I said none of these things, of course. It was all rather odd. I tried to imagine how little means such a contretemps to God.

"You see" – the fellow was still speaking – "I am a prize-winning photographer, my pictures have been exhibited around the world and are owned by all sorts of celebrities, but because I also work in a restaurant I tell people that I am a waiter. And that is because I had a difficult working-class upbringing, whereas you with your easy and privileged start in life are able to

announce to the world that you write."

I made a lurid list of everything that's ever gone wrong for me, changed the font into bold caps, parcelled it up into a bulging file and dragged it over into the trash part of my mental filing system. "Oh right, I see," I said. "Well, I'd be very interested to hear more about your photography work. Are there any current projects you could tell me about?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Not at all."

"Wow, I've really pressed your buttons, haven't I? You're on the back foot. I can see this conversation is uncomfortable for you. Do we have some little issues by any chance?" His grin was wide.

"Not at all," I answered. "Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry but I see my toddler has disappeared into yonder forest please forgive me if I pursue her, won't you? ..."

Ten minutes later there was a little tug at the half belt of my polka dot mac. "I'd like to continue our conversation from earlier," the fellow said. "I was enjoying it. I think you misunderstood me. What I was trying to say was that when you have had to fight for stuff all your life, it's hard." He patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm not blaming you."

"Thanks for that," I replied.

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More columns at www.ft.com/boyt

The Diary

Malcolm McLaren



Two words sum up today's culture:

"authenticity" is one, and the other is, well... "karaoke". Most artists spend their lives trying to authenticate (or make true) today's karaoke culture, but you have to be a magician to do that. Karaoke is mouthing other people's songs; it is life by proxy, liberated by hindsight and unencumbered by the messy process of creativity.

Everything and everyone in a karaoke world is for sale, and so successful are its TV shows – *Pop Idol*, *The X-Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* – that I am racing down an ancient road to Portsmouth on a nothing Saturday morning to judge a talent contest. I am on a mission: I have this undeniable thirst for something authentic. But Portsmouth is agog with signposts and fast becomes impossible to navigate. And, then, no. It can't be. Yes, it is... the Live and Unsigned Talent Contest.

I have never been a good judge of anything, not women, not friends. I am feeling submissive sitting here at the back of Portsmouth Guildhall. I've got "willing prey" printed across my forehead; I am an icon of 21st-century unhappiness.

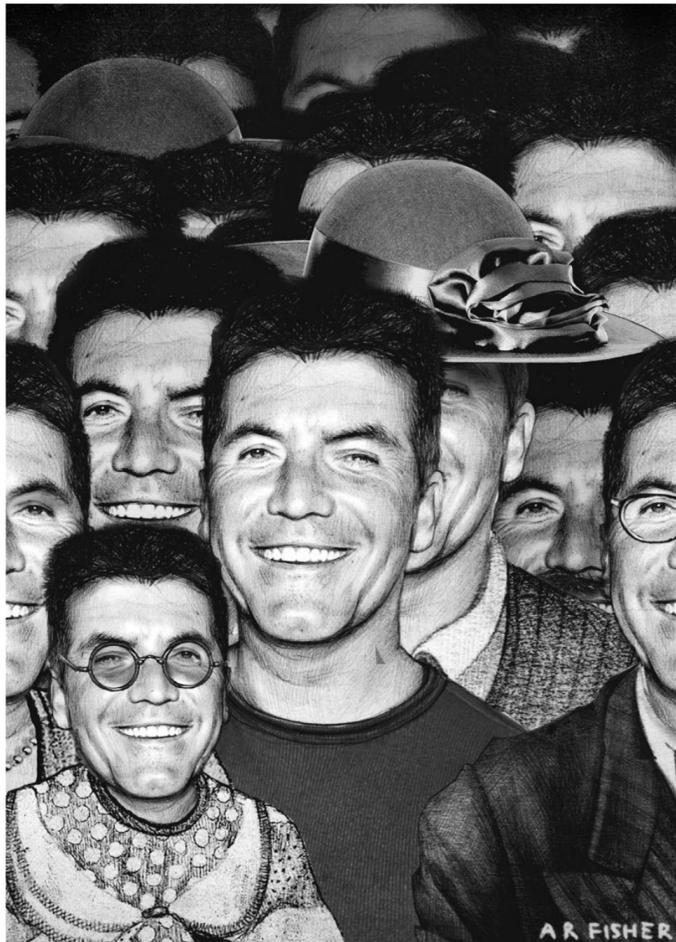
Surrounded by talent scouts and DJs, I am told that 10,000 acts across the UK have entered this competition: the names on the paper in front of me are the final 60. The panel has to award marks out of 20, according to look, originality and performance. Suddenly, I see Simon Cowell everywhere. Even the women look like him! I can't be imagining this. Looking for the authentic here might be like looking for a ruby in a field of tin.

The bands thunder forth like horses at the Grand National. They occasionally trip up, singing variation after variation of Beatles' hits. Are these acts imitating the imitators? Is this what happens when you watch too much *Pop Idol*? When you aspire to join Simon's chosen few? How old are they? They look old, the music is old... and yet...

A girl wanders up to the mike. She is 14. Her face swells into a torrent of tearful stagefright and I think I hear her sing a line from "Can't Buy Me Love". Her supporters, her particular tribe, wear their star's T-shirts. They are coached by mothers, or aunts or friends, who cheer and wave banners.

Twelve hours later, a strange-looking boy in ill-fitting adult clothes strums away on a guitar. His strings break but he continues regardless. The sound is terrible. Sympathy from the emcee allows him a reprieve. His few friends wait in anticipation and horror. Then Harry Housego reprises his song, a fragile tune distinguished by a lyric that describes his recent love affair with a hospital bed, a place he never wants to leave. Harry Housego is 16 and I award him full marks. He is a dysfunctional, impossible-to-define, wonderful creature. How does he manage that?

More Beatles, Stevie Wonder and Queen covers follow. Next up is Boomin', best



described as a post-karaoke act that cuts up all of those groups' Best Of's: a verse here and a chorus there that have no reason to be stuck together and sung, except for the fact that they are and in a similar key. Fascinating. Like out of a William Burroughs novel.

The 55th act, Theory of the Sixth Degree, bellows out: "Mom's in the Moshpit". She probably is at Glastonbury. By the time they segue into "Johnny B Goode", I fall in love with what their mum just might look like (in the moshpit of course). They are 13 and full of it. Then there is Henry, Rupert and the Revolvers: girls dressed in purple shifts fire a revolver from the edge of the stage. It propels them and the group into action: a cover of Del Shannon's "Runaway".

Smiley faces in tiny, beautifully cut purple suits bob up and down – a magnificent puppet show!

Monday morning, I am at the Baltic Institute of Contemporary Art in Gateshead: a converted flour mill that sits on the banks of the Tyne overlooking Newcastle. I meet its new and enthusiastic director, Godfrey Worsdale, and curator David Thorp for lunch on the top-floor restaurant. Godfrey describes the power breakfast he holds here every Monday morning for the titans and business clans of Geordieland. We both emerge from lunch intent on working together.

On the train back south, David decides to pop into the British Library to see Alan Moore give a talk: a psychogeographic

journey into the bowels of London's past. Years ago, I co-wrote a screenplay in Hollywood with Alan. I explain to David that Alan has become an alchemist. Sadly, I can't join them.

I have dinner with another David, the theatre producer David Johnson, known for putting Malcolm Gladwell on the road. Crazy people who work with me thought it an excellent idea to tell my stories to the public, and, at dinner at the Wolseley restaurant in Piccadilly, David madly agrees. Eyeing the crowd surrounding us – Lucian Freud and his daughter Bella, Alan Rickman and fans, Justin Timberlake and American record producers from my not-so-distant past – I realise fate is playing me a card and decide that is what I will do. "It's agreed," David says, "but what shall we call it? *Confessions of a Rock 'n' Roll Swindler*?" "No," I say, "*History is for Pissing On*".

I work in a very shitty neighbourhood in Paris: dogs are considered better folk in these parts and, such as Parisians are, they allow those creatures to shit anywhere they choose. I am forever slipping and sliding in it. But, perched on top of the Folies Bergère, in what was once the atelier of the painter Kees Van Dongen, I sit on the floor of a large empty space. The bell rings. It is a curator from the Netherlands Institute of Art History in the Hague.

She is here, she says, to do research: a Van Dongen retrospective will open there next year and Van Dongen did his best work right here, in my studio. Did he? She shows me photos of Van Dongen sitting monk-like in the atelier and I wonder how he lived here. Regardless of the fact that this studio is a marvel of light, it is all but impossible to get a stick of furniture into the space, so narrow are the doors and so tight the stairwell. I had to cut my bed in half and put it back together again so I could sleep sandwiched along the mezzanine.

Best is the view: grand, sweeping, romantic, across the rooftops of Paris to the Sacre Coeur. I tell the curator I think Van Dongen's paintings are banal. She comments kindly that anyone who has lost the connection with the fundamental in art also lacks sense for the banal. I look at her, amused and curious as to what will come out of her mouth next. She doesn't mean the ability to see that something is banal, she says, but the ability to understand the artistic value of banality. She thanks my girlfriend for iced coffee and explains further: "A great work of art is the complete banality, and the fault with most banalities is that they are not banal enough". I am sold.

'History Is for Pissing On' by Malcolm McLaren, *Live at the Pleasance Grand, Pleasance, Edinburgh, Sunday August 23, 2.30pm. For bookings, tel 011 536 6550 or visit www.pleasance.co.uk*

The List

Sean Smith

Things I have learnt from the stars

For the past year I've been writing about Girls Aloud singer and *X Factor* judge Cheryl Cole. Hers will be my eighth celebrity biography in the past eight years, a sequence I began with JK Rowling in 2001. Since then, I've favoured stars who we know by a single name – Britney, Robbie, Justin, Kylie, Jennifer, Victoria and now Cheryl.

I don't work like a journalist who breezes into town knowing exactly where they are going and who they are interviewing. I travel with a blank notebook and an open mind, not looking for scandal, just the private person behind the public face. I start each biography by disregarding what I have read about the subject previously.

1 Britney is not poorly educated trailer trash

All I had when I arrived in Britney's birthplace of McComb, Mississippi, was the name of a downtown store which mentioned Britney's school on its website. The owner, I discovered, was a former pupil who knew Britney, as well as her first boyfriend, judge's son Donald Reginald Jones Junior. She told me that their school, Parklane Academy, was strongly Christian and cost \$3,000 a year. She also directed me to the Jones family home, a mansion so splendid there was an elevator between floors.

2 JK Rowling's birthplace

According to early media biographies, the Harry Potter author was born in the quaint market town of Chipping Sodbury in Gloucestershire, but her birth certificate names its not-so-lovely neighbour, Yate, a sprawling new town 10 miles outside Bristol. I knocked at the modest bungalow in Sundridge Park, the address listed. "I'm sorry to bother you," I said to the woman who answered. "Is JK Rowling from here?" "Oh yes," she said, smiling. "I bought the place from her dad".

3 Justin Timberlake is not so cool

I thought Justin was a cool dude from Memphis, but I had to drive an hour from the blues capital to the rural surroundings of Shelby Forest, where Justin's family had a lovely detached home and where the yellow school bus stopped at every gate. "He was an Apex student," said his teacher at the local school, meaning that he was gifted, and particularly good at maths and science, before producing a list containing his name. "The Algebra Club," she said, proudly.

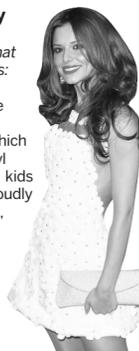
4 Victoria Beckham's ride to school

It is widely believed that as a schoolgirl the soon-to-be Posh Spice was bullied because she used to be dropped off by her father, Tony, in his gold Rolls-Royce. I chatted to a schoolfriend who surprisingly told me that "it happened so rarely it was no big deal". She added, "Her mum used to bring Victoria in her Renault."

5. Cheryl Cole was no ordinary Geordie girl

In the Girls Aloud biography *Dreams That Glimmer*, Cheryl says that before *Popstars: The Rivals*, she had never sung live in front of anyone, but I learned otherwise from Andrew Bailey, the boss of an entertainment complex in Gateshead which closed last year. He told me that Cheryl performed in front of a thousand or so kids at weekends aged just 14, and then proudly produced her first-ever demo recording, *Something Special*, from those days.

Sean Smith's forthcoming works including *'Cheryl'* (Simon & Schuster, September 3) and *'Victoria'* (Pocket, August 6)



Raider of the lost archive

Continued from page 1

of tiny coloured drawings, usually of cherubs, which he later discovered were drawn by Hitler and handed out as souvenirs to intimates. (The Sayer Archive contains 60 letters and photographs signed by the Führer, from 1920 to just before his death in the Berlin bunker in April 1945.)

Another innocuous-looking note proved to be a document so important that it actually changed the course of the 20th century. On August 2 1934 Hitler assumed his new position as supreme commander of the German Armed Forces, or Wehrmacht. Some weeks earlier he had destroyed the potential challenge from one of his own paramilitary organisations – the SA, or Brown-shirts – by executing their senior commanders during The Night of the Long Knives. The executions were carried out by the Führer's smaller unit, the SS, but he needed to ensure that the German army did not interfere with his plans, as it was the only body capable of ousting him or, alter-

natively, sustaining him in power. To this end, he had made a secret agreement with the head of the army, General Werner von Blomberg, in April 1934, by which the army would support Hitler in his taking the presidency of Germany once the incumbent Paul von Hindenburg died (which he duly did, on August 2).

A week later, on August 9, Blomberg sent a note just one sentence long, saying, somewhat menacingly: "My leader, I would like to remind you of your statement to the Wehrmacht. Blomberg." The general had, by standing by as Hitler crushed the Brown-shirts and then took the presidency, effectively allowed him to become dictator of Germany. Now he wanted his reward. It was not long in coming. On August 20 Hitler issued a public proclamation which accorded the German army the sole power to bear arms on behalf of Germany. Blomberg's note, such a key document, is not to be found among the Bundesarchiv material in Berlin but in the Sayer Archive.

As the collection grew, so did

Sayer's expertise. When the Hitler Diaries fiasco – in which the Sunday Times published extracts from Hitler's supposed personal journals, which turned out to be forged – blew up in 1983 he demonstrated, by showing how Hitler's handwriting had changed over the years, that the diaries were forged.

In 1988, Sayer tracked down the SS war criminal General Wilhelm Mohnke, who had been responsible for killing a group of British soldiers in retreat to Dunkirk in 1940 and for two other massacres in 1944. The Mohnke case developed into an international "cause célèbre". The West



Surrender Gen Jodl (centre) signs Getty

German authorities grudgingly initiated an investigation which lasted several years before concluding in 1994 there was insufficient evidence to bring Mohnke to trial. He died in a nursing home in Germany in 2001.

One of the star documents in the Sayer Archive is the last letter Hitler wrote apart from his last will and political testament. On April 23 1945, Field Marshal Ferdinand Schoerner sent a radio message to Hitler exhorting him to leave Berlin as the Russians approached, and carry on the war from southern Germany. Hitler wrote out his response, which was radioed to Schoerner. Asking him to push his group northwards, he wrote "every effort must be made to win the struggle for Berlin".

With the forces available to him, Schoerner was unable to break through the tightening Russian encirclement but was nonetheless promoted to commander-in-chief of the Wehrmacht on April 29, the day before Hitler committed suicide. In this last letter Hitler stated: "I shall remain in Berlin, so as to take part,

in honourable fashion, in the decisive battle for Germany, and to set a good example to all the rest." Instead he shot himself.

Sayer passed his collection over to his children in the mid-1990s and now acts as the archive's honorary curator. He continues to look for nuggets of history within it. He is also a consultant to auction house International Autograph Auctions.

To those historians who despair at the thought of ever trying to find anything "new" about the second world war, I offer the thought that there might – perhaps – be other Ian Sayers out there, men whose quiet expertise and dedication can, even seven decades on, shed new light on the story of the greatest cataclysm ever to engulf mankind.

Andrew Roberts' *'The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War'* is published by Allen Lane on August 6. Available through the FT Bookshop at £20 plus p&p (RRP £25). Tel: +44 0870 429 5884; www.ft.com/bookshop

Weekend's most read on FT.com

- 1 Elon Musk's groundbreaking electric car (from July 25)
- 2 A library of the world's compounds (from June 20)
- 3 Why the Saab inspires intense feelings (from July 25)
- 4 Lunch with the FT: Lars von Trier (from July 25)
- 5 Tyler Brülé: an air of confidence (from July 25)
- 6 Robin Lane Fox on the American genius behind a great English garden (from July 25)
- 7 Nigel Andrews on the return of 3D cinema (from July 25)
- 8 Andrew Clark asks is classical music trying to be fashionable? (from May 30)
- 9 Nicholas Lander on al fresco dining (from July 25)
- 10 Vanessa Friedman: from 'Harry Potter' to prêt-à-porter (from July 18)