

Samira Ahmed **The Diary**

My first swim in six months, a last summer of childhood, and remembering Anne Brontë



I didn't expect to feel so emotional after one of my first swims in nearly six months. At 4pm on an August Tuesday I step into the arena of the Hathersage open-air pool in Derbyshire, see the still blue lanes stretch 30 metres and feel the tears well up. After a wild and windy morning on Stanage Edge and a walk to Little John's grave in the village churchyard, the sun comes out just as I walk into the art deco splendour of the pool entrance. On my backstroke laps I look up at the edge of the elegant spectator stand and feel part of a grander age.

It's one of many highlights of a week in the Peak District, booked back in April with the hope that lockdown might be lifted by then. We're staying in the Unesco-listed site around Richard Arkwright's mill complex in Cromford, near Matlock Bath, and take genuine pleasure in wandering through the Victorian gardens alongside the Derwent. There are families in the row boats and leather-clad bikers eating fish and chips; all of us equally thrilled to be in the self-styled "little Switzerland" of the Peaks. My home for the week is one of Arkwright's then-revolutionary terraced cottages for millworkers, restored by the Landmark Trust. As the lockdown has revealed the compounded calamities in overcrowded housing for those without wealth, I was struck by its generous windows filling it with light at all times of day, giving both dignity and essential conditions for homeworking weavers.

Calling all students

The whole week was planned as a "last summer" break with my two children before the younger heads off to join her elder brother at university. I've nothing but admiration for how she and her generation have coped with the fiasco of this year's A-levels. They are like Neo in *The Matrix*: forcibly red-pilled to see through the fiction that exams define your value. I've just watched the Michelle Obama documentary *Becoming*, in which a group of Native American high-schoolers in Arizona ask her advice on how to survive the daily intimidation they've

been facing since Trump was elected. "Have perspective as you're going through it," she says. "And [do] not let this time shape what will be. So you're in school. Be in school. Get your freaking education." I can't think of better advice for university students.

Finding delight in the past

A last summer means facing childhood's end, but perhaps also its rediscovery as my own children leave. I've been reading *Doctor Who Magazine* cover to cover, as I'm on its editorial review board. Now I realise how important its retro joy has become to me.

I notice what looks like a cast-iron steam-punk Dalek outside one of Cromford's original village shops. It belongs to Ian Jackson, a fellow Gen X-er, who quit a job as an art conservationist at Chatsworth to follow his heart and open Collectors Corner selling vintage toys, comics and collectables (the Dalek was made by his dad). My spirits lift as I walk inside. It's part inspired by the feel of Emily's shop in *Bagguss*, he tells me. I buy some *Space 1999* and *Blake's 7* annuals and imagine a photo of myself in sepia hugging them.

High praise indeed

Returning from holiday, there are still kind emails coming in from viewers who loved *Art of Persia*, my BBC Four series about the cultural history of Iran. Two stand out. From Michael Palin and Valerie Singleton. My heart swells with pride.

Thinking like a Brontë

Towards the end of the week I am the latest guest in the Brontë Lounge, a regular online chat event run by the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, west Yorkshire, where I'm creative partner for the 200th anniversary year of the youngest Brontë sister – Anne. We'll schedule physical events when we know we can, but in the meantime I talk about my fascination with Anne's Christian socialism and her remarkably feminist novels. In *Agnes Grey* she's whistleblowing about the exploitative treatment of

governesses based on her own experiences. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* speaks across centuries about a woman escaping an abusive marriage, and counters the enduring myth that a good woman can reform a "bad" man. I suggest that the Covid-19 months of enforced confinement – appreciating nature on our doorstep, reading, volunteering and helping our elderly neighbours – could be an opportunity to "think like a Brontë".

Voicing viewer unease

After months of asking, I'm thrilled to get confirmation that *Newswatch* is returning in September, after being taken off-air in March because of the BBC's Covid-19 studio staffing restrictions. The weekly TV programme, in which I put viewer concerns about BBC News output to editors, has a full inbox. Not least viewer unease at reporters on boats sailing alongside overloaded dinghies of refugees in the Channel.

Big conversations in lockdown

Just before lockdown I won the Broadcasting Press Guild award for Audio Presenter of the Year, partly for my Intelligence Squared podcast, *How I Found My Voice*. We've been recording series three via live video with an online audience throughout the summer. Singer-songwriter Gloria Estefan joins me from her Miami study, with a magnificent bookcase full of family photos, the Cuban and American flags, and the military Stars and Stripes that was draped on her Vietnam Veteran father's coffin. I'm moved by the combination of public statement and intimacy that this format affords.

Among the confirmed guests still to record is the former shadow chancellor John McDonnell. From the moment Chancellor Rishi Sunak opened up the Treasury coffers, offering billions of pounds, including through the furlough scheme, to tackle Covid-19, I've been dying to know what McDonnell thinks of the state we're in. ●
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