

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Making History

Stephen Fry

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About the author

Stephen Fry was born in the twentieth century and will die in the twenty-first. In the course of writing seven books he has drunk four hundred and twelve thousand cups of coffee, smoked one and a half million cigarettes and worn out nineteen pairs of trousers. He has no birth sign.

Also by Stephen Fry

FICTION

The Liar
The Hippopotamus
The Stars' Tennis Balls

NON-FICTION

Paperweight
Moab Is My Washpot
Rescuing the Spectacled Bear

with Hugh Laurie

A Bit of Fry and Laurie
A Bit More Fry and Laurie
Three Bits of Fry and Laurie

MAKING HISTORY

Stephen Fry



arrow books

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Epub ISBN: 9781409007623

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Reissued in 2004 by Arrow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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First published in the United Kingdom in 1996 by Hutchinson
First published in paperback in the United Kingdom in 1997 by Arrow Books

Arrow Books
The Random House Group Ltd
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney, New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road
Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berks

ISBN 0 09 945706 7

*To Ben, William, George, Charlie, Bill and Rebecca and to the
present*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BOOK ONE

MAKING COFFEE

It starts with a dream . . .

It starts with a dream. This story, which can start everywhere and nowhere like a circle, starts, for me – and it is after all, my story and no one else's, never could be anyone else's but mine – it starts with a dream I dreamed one night in May.

The wildest kind of dream. Jane was in it, stiff and starched as a hotel napkin. He was there too. I didn't recognise him of course. I hardly knew him then. Just an old man to nod to in the street or smile through a politely held library door. The dream rejuvenated him, transformed him from boneless, liver-spotted old bearded into Mack Sennet barman with drooping black moustache, tacked to a face hang-dog long and white with undernourishment.

His face, for all that. Not that I knew it then.

In this dream he was in the lab with Jane: Jane's lab, of course – the dream was not prophetic enough to foretell the dimensions of his lab, which I only got to know later – that is if the dream was prophetic at all, which it may well not have been. If you get me.

This is going to be hard.

Anyway, she was peering into a microscope and he was feeling her up from behind. He stroked between her thighs inside the long white coat. She was taking no notice, but I was outraged, outraged when the soft veef of hands rubbing nylon stopped and I knew that his fingers had reached the uppermost part of her long legs, the place where stocking ended and soft hot private flesh – hot private flesh belonging to me – began.

‘Leave her alone!’ I called from some unseen director’s corner, behind, as it were, the dream’s camera.

He gazed up at me with sad eyes that held me, as they always do, in the bright beam of their blue. Or always subsequently *did*, because I had, in my real waking life at that point, never so much as exchanged a single word with him.

‘*Wachet auf*,’ he says.

And I obey.

Strong light of a May morning whitening the dirty cream of cruddy curtains that we meant to change months ago.

‘Morning, babe,’ I murmur. ‘Double Gloucester . . . my mother always said cheese dreams.’

But she’s not there. Jane that is, not my mother. My mother isn’t there either as a matter of fact. Certainly not. It absolutely isn’t that kind of story.

Jane’s half of the bed is cold. I strain my ears for the hissing of the shower or the crack of teacups banged clumsily on the draining-board. Everything Jane does, outside of work, she does clumsily. She has this habit of turning her head away from her hands, like a squeamish student nurse picking up a raw appendix. The hand holding a cigarette end, for instance, might stretch leftwards to an ashtray, while she will look off to the right, grinding the butt into a saucer, a book, a tablecloth, a plate of food. I have always found uncoordinated women, near-sighted women, long, gawky, awkward women, powerfully attractive.

I have started to wake up now. The last granules of the dream fizz away and I am ready for the morning puzzle of self-reinvention. I stare at the ceiling and remember what there is to remember.

*

We will leave me lying there for the moment, reassembling myself. I am not entirely sure that I am telling this story the

right way round. I have said that it is like a circle, approachable from any point. It is also, like a circle, *unapproachable* from any point.

History is my business.

What a way to start . . . history isn't my *business* at all. I managed, at least, to stop myself from describing history as my 'trade', for which I reckon I can award myself some points. History is my passion, my calling. Or, to be more painfully truthful, it is my field of least incompetence. It is what, for the time being, I do. Had I the patience and the discipline I should have chosen literature. But, while I can read *Middlemarch* and *The Dunciad* or, I don't know, Julian Barnes or Jay McInerney say, as happily as anyone, I have this little region missing in my brain, that extra lobe that literature students possess as a matter of course, the lobe that allows them the detachment and the nerve to talk about books (*texts* they will say) as others might talk about the composition of a treaty or the structure of a cell. I can remember at school how we would read together in class an Ode by Keats, a Shakespeare sonnet or a chapter of *Animal Farm*. I would tingle inside and want to sob, just at the words, at nothing more than the simple progression of sounds. But when it came to writing that thing called an Essay, I flubbed and floundered. I could never discover where to *start*. How do you find the distance and the cool to write in an academically approved style about something that makes you spin, wobble and weep?

I remember that child in the Dickens novel, *Hard Times* I think it is, the girl who had grown up with carnival people, spending her days with horses, tending them, feeding them, training them and loving them. There's a scene where Gradgrind (it is *Hard Times*, I've just looked it up) is showing off his school to a visitor and asks this girl to define 'horse' and of course the poor scrap dries up completely, just stutters and fumbles and stares hopelessly in front of her like a mong.

‘Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!’ Gradgrind says and turns with a great sneer to the smart little weasel, Bitzer, a cocksure street kid who’s probably never dared so much as pat a horse in his life, gets a kick out of throwing stones at them I expect. This little runt stands up with a smirk and comes out pat with ‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth . . .’ and so on, to wild applause and admiration.

‘Now girl number twenty you know what a horse is,’ says Gradgrind.

Well, each time I was asked to write an essay at school, with a title like ‘Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is the Egotism without the Sublime: Discuss’ I felt, when I got back my paper marked E or F or whatever, as if *I* were the stuttering horse-lover and the rest of the class, with their As and Bs were the smart-arsed parroting runts who had lost their souls. You could only write successfully about books and poems and plays if you didn’t care, really care, about them. Hysterical schoolboy wank, for sure, an attitude compounded of nothing but egotism, vanity and cowardice. But how deeply felt. I went through all my schooldays convinced of this, that ‘literary studies’ were no more than a series of autopsies performed by heartless technicians. Worse than autopsies: *biopsies*. Vivisection. Even movies, which I love more than anything, more than life itself, they even do it with movies these days. You can’t talk about movies now without a *methodology*. Once they start offering courses, you know the field is dead. History, I found, was safer ground for me: I didn’t *love* Rasputin or Talleyrand or Charles the Fifth or Kaiser Bill. Who could? A historian has the pleasant luxury of being able to point out, from the safety of his desk, where Napoleon ballsed up, how this revolution might have been avoided, that dictator toppled or those battles won. I found I could be most marvellous dispassionate with history, where everyone, by definition, is truly dead. Up to a point. Which brings us round to the telling of this tale.

As a historian I should be able to offer a good plain account of the events that took place on the . . . well, when *did* they take place? It is all highly debatable. When you become more familiar with the story you will understand the huge problems that confront me. A historian, someone said – Burke, I think, if not Burke then Carlyle – is a prophet looking backwards. I cannot approach my story in that fashion. The puzzle that besets me is best expressed by the following statements.

A: None of what follows ever happened

B: All of what follows is entirely true

Get your head round that one. It means that it is my job to tell you the true story of what never happened. Perhaps that's a definition of fiction.

I admit that this preamble must look rather tricky: I get as snortingly impatient as the next man when authors draw attention to their writerly techniques, and this sentence itself disappears even more deeply than most into the filthy elastic of its own narrative rectum, but there's nothing I can do about that.

I saw a play the other week (plays are nothing to films, nothing. Theatre is dead but sometimes I like to go and watch the corpse decompose) in which one of the characters said something like this, she said that the truth about things was like a bowl of fish-hooks: you try to examine one little truth and the whole lot comes out in a black and vicious bunch. I can't allow that to happen here. I have to do some unfastening and untangling, so that if the hooks do all come out in one go, they might at least emerge neatly linked, like a chain of paperclips.

I feel then that I can confidently enough begin with this little series of connections: if it weren't for a rotted clasp, an alphabetical adjacency and the predictably vile, thirst-making hangovers to which Alois was subject, then I would

have nothing to tell you. So we may as well start at the point I have already claimed (and disclaimed) to be the beginning.

There I lie, wondering like Keats, Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music, do I wake or sleep? Wondering too, why the Christ Jane isn't coiled warmly beside me.

The clock tells me why.

It's a quarter to nine.

She's never done this to me before. Never.

I rush to the bathroom and rush out again, toothpaste dribbling down the corners of my mouth.

'Jane!' I bubble. 'Jane, what the pants is going on? It's half-past nine!'

In the kitchen I snap on the kettle and frenzy around for coffee, sucking my peppermint fluoride lips in panic. An empty bag of Kenco and boxes and boxes and boxes of teas.

Raspberry Rendezvous for God's sake. *Rendezvous?* Orange Dazzler. Banana and Liquorice Dream. Night-time Delight.

Jesus, what *is* it with her? Every tea but tea tea. And not a bean or bag of coffee to be had.

At the back of the cupboard . . . triumph, glory. Mwah! A big Aquafresh kiss for *you*, my darling.

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground for Filters.'

All *right!*

Back to the bedroom, hopping into cut-off denim. No time for boxers, no time for socks. Bare feet jammed into boat shoes, laces later.

Into the kitchen again just as the kettle thumps itself off, bit of a hiss from so little water, but enough for a cup, easily enough for a cup.

No!

Oh damn it, no!

No, no, no, no, *no!*

Bitch. Sow. Cow. Angel. Double-bitch. Sweetness. Slag.

'Jane!'

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground For Filters:
Naturally Decaffeinated.'

'Pants!'

Calm, Michael. Calm. *Bleib ruhig, mein Sohn.*

I can keep it together. I'm a graduate. A *soon-to-be-doctored* graduate. I won't be beaten by this. Not a little nonsense like this.

Ha! Gotcha! Lightbulb-over-the-head, finger-snapping eureka, who's a clever boy? Yes . . .

Those pills, those pep pills. Pro-Doze? No-Doze? Something like that.

Skidding into the bathroom, my brain half-registers something. An important fact. Something amiss. Put it to one side. Time enough later.

Where they go? Where they *go*?

Here you are, you little buggers . . . yes, come to Mama . . .

'No-Doze. Stay alert. Ideal for exam revision, late nights, driving etc. Each pill contains 50mg caffeine.'

At the kitchen sideboard, like a London cokehead giggling in a night-club toilet, I crush and grind and chop.

The chunks of white pop and wink in the coffee mud as I pour the boiling water on.

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground For Filters:
Unnaturally Recaffeinated.'

Now *that's* coffee. A tadlet bitter perhaps, but real coffee, not Strawberry Soother or Nettle 'n' Camomile tisane. And you say I have no gumption, Jane hun? Ha! Wait till I tell you about *this* tonight. I outdid Paul Newman in *Harper*. All he did was recycle an old filter paper, yeah?

A quarter to ten. Teaching at eleven. No panic. I stalk comfortably now, mug in hand into the spare room, quite in charge. Bloody showed *her*.

The Apple is cold. A nannying humming nag no more. Who knows when I may condescend to turn you on again, Maccie

Thatcher?

And there, on the desk, neatly squared, magnificently, obscenely thick, *Das Meisterwerk* itself.

I keep my distance, just craning forward; we cannot allow even the *tiniest* drop of recaff to stain the glorious title page.

From Brunau to Vienna:
The Roots of Power

Michael Young, MA MPhil

Way-hey! Four years. Four years and two hundred thousand words. There's that bastard keyboard, so plastically dumb, so comically vacuous.

QWERTYUIOPASDFGHJKLZXCVBNM1234567890

Nothing else to choose from. Just those ten numbers and twenty-six letters permuted into two hundred thousand words, a comma here and a semi colon there. Yet for a sixth part of my life, a whole *sixth* of my life, by big beautiful Buddha, that keyboard clawed at me like cancer.

Fiff-ha-hoo! Bit of a stretch and there's the morning workout.

I sigh with pleasure and drift back to the kitchen. The 150mg of caffeine has hit the ground running and breasted the blood-brain barrier with arms upraised. I am now awake. Pumpingly A-wake.

Yes, I am now awake. Awake to everything.

Awake to What Was Wrong in the bathroom.

Awake to a piece of paper leaning up between the heel of last night's cheese and the empty wine-bottle in the centre of the kitchen table.

Awake to the reason that at eight on the tit I was not, as I should have been, awake.

Let's face it, Pup. It's not working. I'll call back for the rest of my things later today. We'll sort out how much I owe you for the car. Congratulations on your thesis. Think about it for a while and you'll know I'm right. J.

Even as I feel myself go through the necessary shock, rage and howls, a part of me registers relief, does instantly register relief, or if not relief an awareness certainly that this elegant little note accesses a smaller and less significant proportion of my emotions than have done the earlier absence of coffee or the possibility that I might have been allowed to oversleep or most especially now, the casual, the arrogant assumption that *my* car shall go to her.

The explosion of fury then, is mostly for form's sake, a kind of compliment to Jane in fact. The hurling of the wine-bottle – *the* wine-bottle, the celebratory wine-bottle, the wine-bottle I had so carefully chosen at Oddbins the night before, the Chateauneuf du Pape that I had worked towards for a sixth part of my whole life – is a gesture therefore, a necessary theatrical acknowledgement that the ending of our three years together has earned at least some noise and some spectacle.

When she returns for her 'things' she will spy the elegant curved streak of rusty sediment along the kitchen wall and her big feet will crunch on the glass and she will derive some satisfaction from believing that I 'cared' and that will be that. Jane&Michael have ceased to be and now there is Jane and there is Michael and Michael is, at last, Somebody. Somebody, as Lennon would have it, in his own Write.

So.

In the study, picking up the *Meisterwerk*, weighing it in my hands, ready to push it delicately into my briefcase, I suddenly goggle, with Roger Rabbit starting eyes to the accompaniment of a loud klaxon, at a small speck on the title page: it has erupted from nowhere like an old surfer's melanoma, just in the short time I was in the kitchen hurling wine-bottles. It's not a spot of coffee, I am sure of that,

perhaps just a flaw in the paper that only the strong May sunlight can expose. No time to boot up the computer and reprint, so I snatch a bottle of Liquid Paper, touch the tip of the brush to this naughty little freckle and blow gently.

Holding the paper by the edges I go outside and hold it against the sun. It is enough. 'Twill serve.

There by the telegraph pole is the space where the Renault should be.

'You *bitch!*'

Oh dear. Bad move.

'Sorry!'

Little delivery girl veers and races away, thrust over the handlebars remembering every terrible story she ever glimpsed on the front of the newspapers she daily dumps onto the doormats. Telling mummy on you.

Oh dear. Better give her time or she'll think I'm following and that won't do. I don't know why we have to have a newspaper delivery in the first place. Jane is a newspaper junkie, that's the fact of the matter. We even get the *Cambridge Evening News* delivered. Every afternoon. I mean, please.

I turn and wheel out the bicycle from the passageway. The ticking of the wheels pleases me. Hell, I am young. I am free. My teeth are clean. In my noble old school briefcase there nestles a future. Nestles *the* future. The sun shines. To hell with everything else.

MAKING BREAKFAST

The smell of the rats

Alois swung into the saddle, shifted the knapsack over his shoulders and began to pump rhythmically up the hill, the green stripes on his uniform trousers and the golden eagle on his helmet flashing in the sun. Klara, watching him go, wondered why he never stood in the pedals to give himself impetus, as children do. Always with him the same absolutely mechanical, frighteningly regular, purposefully subdued action.

She had risen at five to light the stove and scrub the kitchen table before the maid was awake. She always felt the need to purge the table of wine stains and the sticky pools of schnapps and shards of broken glass. As if hoping perhaps that the sight of a clean table might make Alois forget how much he had drunk the night before. Nor did she ever want the children to see the ruins of their father's 'little evenings in'.

When the maid Anna rose at six she had sniffed, as always, at the sight of the clean table and her wrinkled nose had seemed to say to Klara, behind Alois's back, as he buffed his boots before the stove, 'I know *you*. We're the same. *You* were a maid too once. Not even a housemaid. Just a kitchen maid. And inside that's what you still are and always will be.'

Klara, as ever, had watched her husband polish away, envying the love and detail and pride he invested in his uniform. Lulled by the swinging rhythm of brush on leather she had, as ever, wished herself back at Spital with its fields and milk-pails and silage smell, back with her brothers and sisters and their children, away from the respectability, the

stiffness, the brutality of Uncle Alois and uniforms and people whose conversations and conventions she could not understand.

Uncle Alois! He had forbidden her ever to call him that again.

'I am not your Uncle, girl. A cousin by marriage at most. You will not call me uncle. Understood?' But when talking to herself she could not help it. Uncle Alois he had always been, and Uncle Alois he would always remain.

The night before he had been no more drunk than usual, no more violent, no more abusive, no more insulting. Always with him the same absolutely mechanical, frighteningly regular, purposefully subdued action.

When she was being hurt she never made enough noise to awaken Angela and Little Alois for she could not bear the idea that they knew what their father was doing to her. Klara was not an intelligent woman, but she was sensitive and she understood that her stepchildren would feel not sorrow but only contempt for her if they knew she submitted so spiritlessly to their father's beatings. She was after all, and what a ridiculous fact it was, closer in age to the children than to Alois. That is why, she supposed, he was so determined to have children by her. He wanted to age her, to turn her from a silly country girl into a Mother. Remove the smell of silage. Get some fat on her, some substance, some respectability. Oh, he loved respectability. But then, he was a bastard. It was the one thing she had over him. She may have been a silly country girl, but at least she knew who her father was. Uncle Alois the Bastard did not. Yet she wanted his children too. How desperately she wanted them.

Three years earlier their son Gustav had died after just a week of blue, coughing life. The next year a little girl was stillborn and just a year ago the baby Josef had struggled, plucky as a game-cock, for a month before he too was taken. That was when the beatings began. Uncle Bastard

had bought a hippopotamus whip and hung it on the wall with a terrible smile.

‘This is Pnina,’ he said. ‘*Pnina die Pietsche*. Pnina the Whip, our new child.’

Klara stood now by the door and watched the upright uniformed figure reach the top of the hill. Only Alois could make such a ridiculous machine as a bicycle seem dignified. And how he loved it. Every new development in patent tyres and pedals and chains excited him. Yesterday he had read out excitedly to little Alois from a newspaper. In Mannheim an engineer called Benz had built a three-wheeled machine that travelled at fifteen kilometres an hour without human effort, without horses, without steam.

‘Imagine that, my boy! Like a private little train that needs no tracks! One day we shall have such a self-propelled machine and travel together to Linz or Vienna like princes.’

Klara turned back into the house and watched Anna frying eggs for the children.

‘Let me do that,’ she wanted to say. She knew how to stop herself now, so she moved instead with quick guilt towards the empty pail by the back door, feeling rather than seeing Anna turn at the squeak of the bucket handle.

‘Let *me* . . .’ Anna began, but Klara was outside and the kitchen door shut before the whining sentence could be finished.

Klara realised with amusement that she had, as so often, timed her visit to the pump to coincide with the passing of the Innsbruck train. She imagined its earlier progress through meadows and farms and watched, in her mind’s eye, her nephews and nieces in Spital jumping up and down and waving to the driver. She pushed down the handle more quickly and forced the water to plunge into the bucket in just the rhythm of the mighty locomotive as it pushed its imperial white moustaches into the sky.

And then the smell. Oh my God the *smell*.

Klara clapped a hand to her mouth and nose. But to no avail. Vomit leaked from between her fingers as her body tried to force out the reek, the terrible, terrible stench. Death and corruption filled the air.

MAKING GOOD

Parks

It had been a big error to have neglected socks. By the time I passed the Mill my feet were sweaty and bruised. As, when it came down to it, was I.

First years, as I pounded wearily over the bridge along Silver Street, bubbled merrily, skipping to avoid the traffic and exhibiting that blend of world-weariness and bragging bounce that is their foolish birthright. I could never do all that when I was an undergraduate. Too self-conscious. That way the studentry have of calling out each other's names across the street.

'Lucius! D'you go to that party in the end?'

'Kate!'

'Dave!'

'Mark, catchalater, guy!'

'Bridget, woah, *babe!*'

If I weren't part of it all I'd puke.

I remembered a huge piece of graffiti along Downing Street, done round about the time of the collapse of Communism and still defiantly and screamingly legible on the brickwork of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

THE WALL IS NOT COMING DOWN HERE. KILLAGRAD

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You could hardly blame any kid who grew up in Cambridge for redesigning himself as a class warrior. Imagine being surrounded your whole life through by all those floppy-haired Fabians and baseball-capped Brians with money and