

The Collected  
Wisdom of

# Frank Skinner

'One of Britain's funniest men'  
*Evening Standard*

Dispatches  
From the Sofa



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## About the Book

Over the course of the last ten years, Frank Skinner has toured sell-out stand-up shows, hosted countless TV shows and an award-winning radio programme, written two well-received volumes of memoir, as well as recording a couple of pop songs and learning to play the ukulele. He has been a busy man.

Yet, for the last two years, he has also managed to squeeze in a weekly column for *The Times*. Without fail, he sat down every week and wracked his brain to think of something to write 900 words about. *Dispatches From the Sofa* is the brilliant result.

Alighting on such random topics as the potential demise of Margaret Thatcher, the love-hate relationship with your football club, Mike Read's musical of Oscar Wilde, fat pop stars, Serbian breakfast banter, the pleasures of air-guitar, the banking crisis and the evil phenomenon of Jedward, this is a thought-provoking, wide-reaching, hilarious and self-deprecating collection - which also includes the first two chapters from his unpublished novel - from one of our funniest, quickest and most beloved comedians.

## About the Author

Born in January 1957, Frank Skinner grew up in Oldbury and Smethwick, West Midlands. After various jobs, he performed his first stand-up gig in December 1987 and went on to win the Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Festival. He is currently a radio presenter on the Saturday morning slot on Absolute Radio and host of the BBC2 talk show *Opinionated*.

ALSO BY FRANK SKINNER

Frank Skinner on the Road  
Frank Skinner

Dispatches From the Sofa:  
The Collected Wisdom of  
Frank Skinner

Frank Skinner

  
CENTURY · LONDON

For Cath.  
Hot and cold beneath the coyote.

# Introduction

I TEND NOT to read introductions to books. They're like ramps, designed to gently raise the reader to a level where they're ready to begin the book proper. I'd say most people are happy to take on, unaided, the sudden steep incline of a chapter one. However, with a book like this one - a collection of various writings - it feels polite to meet you at the door with a site map so you can get your bearings.

Of course, introductions aren't always written by the author of the book. Sometimes they're by another writer - a fan of the book - who's keen to whet your appetite and get you to share their enthusiasm for the work. That kind of introduction is much easier to write. You can rave about the book and the author's many qualities until the reader is straining like a police dog on a leash, desperate to get at the main body of the text. It's a bit trickier to whip up that kind of frenzy when you're talking about your own writing. 'Read this and see how brilliant I am' is an approach that could alienate some people. Better I draw you in with a slightly more circumspect rallying call.

The bulk of the book comprises the weekly columns I wrote for *The Times* newspaper from January 2009 till January 2011. Don't panic. I know no one wants yesterday's papers but the columns, though they are often inspired by a specific news story, soon break free from the shackles of topicality and produce what I would unhesitatingly describe, if I was someone else writing an introduction to this book, as timeless wit and wisdom. The initial facts become a springboard to other things. Thus, a column that

begins with a description of Cliff Richard's 2011 calendar soon becomes an essay on the dangers of moderation and another, concerning the joys of air-guitar, morphs into a critique of secular society - with jokes, obviously.

I also include an unpublished obituary I wrote for *The Times* in June 2009. It was unpublished because Margaret Thatcher didn't die after all. Any aspiring writers should note that, when it comes to obituaries, the non-death of the subject can severely hamper publication. It's taken me two-and-a-half years to find a way around it.

Considering these columns were written over a period of two years there's only a tiny bit of repetition. A couple of images and the odd brief anecdote reappear but are employed for quite different purposes. See them like the leitmotifs in a Wagnerian epic. Does that sound a little grand? The truth is you can get a bit carried away with a newspaper column. You feel you have the ear of the people. I honestly thought my ideas for a Prime Ministerial speech to get the electorate back onside would be taken up by Gordon Brown and ultimately win Labour the 2011 election. I also thought my scheme for performance-based student tuition fees would radically change the UK's Higher Education system. Perhaps the column on the thrills of daydreaming explains how I managed to get so carried away.

There's also a longer article about the largely uncelebrated joys of staying in at night and a short story that originally appeared in the *Sunday Times* magazine. The latter is something of an oddity. The editor asked me if I'd write a short story based on Shakespeare's Ophelia. I decided to turn the whimpering victim into a tough, calculating survivor but I felt she should still sound like a Shakespearean character. All I had to do was write like Shakespeare. I don't mean with a big feather, I mean I somehow had to recreate his style. I didn't go as far as a 'thee' or 'thou'. I just put in some words that tickled the

lips on the way out and deliberately made my sentences a bit bouncier than usual. It's the first short story I ever wrote. I'm currently trying to peddle it as a half-hour monologue for radio. All it needs is a bit of incidental lute music and we're off. The radio version, like this book, would be an inspirational monument to recycling.

In 2005 I started writing what I now like to refer to as my great unfinished novel. Called *Thunderman and Geoff Phillips*, it was a sort of superhero story but while I wanted it to have the same visceral punch as a modern American comic book, I also wanted it to be very British, and funny – a sort of *Carry On The Dark Knight*. I hadn't read a novel for years and I got it into my head that this was a positive advantage. I would be untarnished by influence. It would be a novel by someone who didn't know what novels were supposed to be. I figured that would make it very original and almost certainly prizewinning. Again, the column on daydreaming may be enlightening here. About 50,000 words in, I decided that any gift I had in the prose department was probably more to do with expression than invention and so I gave up on the project. I've included the first two chapters of *Thunderman and Geoff Phillips* to give you a little taster. If I was someone else writing an introduction to this book, I'd say this great unfinished novel has a sort of Baroque richness to it, heavy with strange digressions and internal dialogues – with jokes, obviously. I've thought about trying to redo it but I can't remember the password for the document containing the other chapters. That isn't a joke. It may, however, be an act of God. I must say, I enjoyed revisiting it after so long. It's written with a lottery-winner-like excess but that makes it a nice contrast to the all-lean-meat discipline of the 900-word columns.

If there was an FAQ section, I'm sure 'Is this a toilet book?' would be on the list. Well, by way of celebrating its four-hundredth anniversary, I've been reading the King

James Version of the Bible on the toilet of late. It helps me to understand the concept of God truly becoming man. Consequently, I've come to see *every* book as a potential toilet book. However, if you're actually asking me 'Can this book be easily broken down into shite-sized chunks?' the answer is yes. Now shut up about it. Can't you see I'm trying to pass myself off as an intellectual? I'm not saying I don't talk about toilets any more but, when I do, I try and make it sound spiritual.

Anyway, I'll take your hat and coat and leave you to wander around at your own pace. If I was the sort of person who said 'enjoy' I'd say 'enjoy'. However, generally speaking, I find such people to be imbeciles. Then again, I don't find them as idiotic as people who say 'squillions'. Oh, anyway, I don't have time to list all the key words to look out for when assessing people's varying levels of stupidity. As a general rule-of-thumb, if they're reading this book and either laughing out loud or saying 'That's a really good point. I never thought of that' they are bright as a button and ideal for breeding purposes. Now get stuck in and don't come back till you've found at least one quote you'll use for the rest of your life.

Frank Skinner,  
June 2011

PART ONE  
*THE TIMES* COLUMNS

# Redneck Revelation: or how I learned to see through the ink and discover the sweet soul within

16 JANUARY 2009

HAVING SCRATCHED AROUND for a couple of weeks I seem to have, at last, arrived at my New Year's resolution for 2009. It's a decision I take seriously. I'm extremely keen on the idea of self-improvement and always on the lookout for another piece in the 'perfect me' jigsaw. I make my New Year's resolutions in pairs, mainly because I resolved, in 1986, to learn French and, having failed to do so, have made that my rollover resolution for each succeeding year. My only advances in that area have come through the Michel Thomas language tapes. Thomas, who died a few years back, was something of a legend on the language circuit. One of his claims to fame, according to the official website, is that he taught Doris Day Spanish so she could sing her most famous song, 'Que Sera, Sera'. As I recall, there are only two Spanish words in 'Que Sera, Sera'. They are 'que' and 'sera'. Ms Day's diligence is an inspiration to us all.

Anyway, as learning French has become my default resolution, I like to combine it, for the sake of variety, with a second, slightly higher-minded one. For example, last year I pledged I would 'listen more'. (In an effort to kill two birds with one stone, I actually wrote 'écouter plus' on my

calendar.) I wanted to curtail my unfortunate habit of interrupting people. It went well, though I'm sure some friends, once they became aware of my efforts, started to deliberately tempt me with unnecessary pauses.

This New Year, however, I struggled to come up with the second resolution. Then, last weekend, I was on a plane flying from Houston to Miami. In front of me sat a grey-haired lady and a teenager I rightly assumed to be her grandson. I don't want to be unkind but the youth didn't look like someone who'd be your first choice for phone-a-friend. He was one of those teenage lads who seem to regard breathing through the nose as an unnecessary risk. Soon, however, his blank expression switched to one of concern. He beckoned the rest of the family, seated nearby, and they scurried towards him. The first was a long-haired man with tattoos that covered his hands and arms and crept up his neck to the tops of his ears. I guessed his whole body was tattooed. The general theme seemed to be demons and skulls. 'You OK, Mom?' he said to the old lady, in an accent you'd normally expect to hear accompanied by banjo music. The old lady stared at him but did not reply. He was soon joined by two women with similarly wide-ranging tattoos. I imagined the three of them naked, arm in arm, forming some sort of sweaty triptych. Still the old lady just stared. Tears began to moisten the eyes of the long-haired man. I'd become the accidental witness to this family's crisis but, though I hate to admit it, the tragedy was somewhat diffused for me by *The Jerry Springer Show* nature of the dramatis personae.

Soon an announcement asked if there was a doctor on board. A tired-looking woman, probably mid-thirties, in a crumpled T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, appeared. She had dark hair pulled roughly back and a noticeably bad complexion. She took the old lady's hand and knelt in the aisle beside her. I'd never seen such caring in anyone's eyes. As soon as she fitted her stethoscope, this drab little

woman seemed to be transformed by her vocation. She continued to hold the old woman's hand, speaking kindly to her, trying to get through. At the same time, she calmly quizzed the family about the patient's recent health and any medication she may have been on and instructed a stewardess to fit the old lady with an oxygen mask. When she then told the sick woman to breathe through her nose, the grandson took on the expression of someone witnessing an elaborate magic trick. As all this unfolded, the long-haired man stood gently stroking his mother's hair and repeating in a near-whisper, 'Can you hear me, Mom?' Happily, it became apparent that she could.

I felt bad. I had dismissed these people as white trash but they weren't trash, they were a close, loving family. Come to think of it they weren't even that white. They were mainly blue with some red bits. The doctor also was a challenge to my assumptions. As soon as she saw the sick woman, she came to life, became dynamic, heroic even. So here was my New Year's resolution - don't judge a book by its cover. Assume everyone, even the heavily tattooed, have an inner beauty, not necessarily apparent.

The plane made an unscheduled stop at Tampa and four burly medics, all scrubbed and professional, boarded the plane and took the old lady away in a wheelchair, the family following on behind. These medics barely acknowledged the doctor. Once her patient had gone, she shrunk back to ordinariness and shuffled back to her seat. Nevertheless, my resolution was now in place. And it was soon reaping benefits. The next day I got in a cab driven by a grubby woman with badly dyed blonde hair who, on further investigation, turned out to be a former professional ballet dancer and now an enthusiastic cheap-seat regular at the Miami City Ballet. Of course, there will be disappointments, but then you know what Doris Day said.

# Why comedians are cleverer than journalists

23 JANUARY 2009

SO I'VE GOT a column in *The Times*, I'm discussing new films and novels on BBC Two's *Newsnight Review* tonight and, on Monday, I'm presenting *Panorama*. I seem to have become a one-man dumbing-down operation. Understandably, this has wound some people up. Janet Street-Porter, who I must say I've always liked, suggested in her newspaper column that employing me as a presenter proved that *Panorama* was no longer a 'heavyweight programme'. It seems the government's call for more liberal attitudes towards social mobility is falling on deaf ears. If the show was about Gaza or the social services, I'd see Janet's point but, as it is instead about swearing and bad taste on television, getting me in has the same logic as getting Sue Barker in to do the tennis. I've been swearing and making off-colour remarks on television since 1988. I'm calling that credentials.

I remember the same dumbing-down accusations when Jo Brand first did *Question Time*. I think this is just comedianism. Serious TV presenters are saying stuff like 'These comedians, coming over here, taking our jobs.' And then there's the prevalence of comedianist language. What does it say about a society when words like 'comedian', 'joker' and 'clown' are used as insults?

There is definitely a strong feeling that comics should stick to comedy. I honestly sympathise with that. A

comedian who wants to be taken seriously is like a politician who wants to show us their human side, best viewed with mistrust. But I don't want to be taken seriously; it's just that occasionally doing serious stuff makes a nice change. And, the truth is, it's much easier than doing comedy. I know I set myself up for a fall by saying that but it's a fact.

Over the last few weeks, I've interviewed several people for *Panorama*. Obviously, you have to read up on them and have a sense of where you want the interview to go but it's a walk in the park compared to the comedy interviews I did when I had a chat show. A serious interview is just asking questions. It's like helping someone to fill in a form. Then you get what's known as the hard-hitting interview. It's still just asking questions except you ask some of them three or four times. A comedy interview, such as you'll see on tonight's *Jonathan Ross* show, is genuine multi-tasking - like doing an interview and a stand-up act at the same time. Questions are only part of the equation. You have to lead the interviewee towards the clip of them falling over in a charity football match or that paparazzi shot of them snogging someone from *Girls Aloud* and then look genuinely concerned as they talk about their alcoholism while you're trying to decide exactly the right time to whip out the drunkard's liver prop. It's complicated. Maybe that's why the serious lot get angry when comedians have a crack at their job - they don't want them to find out how much easier it is than comedy. It must have struck you that comics keep cropping up on *Newsnight* or *Question Time* but serious presenters never seem to do stand-up tours.

Of course, if I do fall flat on my face on *Panorama*, it will at least prove that the programme is still heavyweight and thus an unsuitable vehicle for a gimmick-presenter. So that'll be nice. Tonight's *Newsnight Review*, which, of course, I'm only doing because David Baddiel wasn't available, is on at the same time as Jonathan Ross's

returning chat show so if I'm rubbish on that, at least there won't be too many witnesses. It seems the storm over Manuel-gate, or Sachs-a-phone as I like to call it, has subsided, the sun is shining and it's safe for everyone to come out into the open again. I saw Russell Brand's new stand-up show in Reading on Monday. There's been much talk of how he deals extensively and enthusiastically with the recent furore but I was more taken aback by his outfit. The last time I saw him live, he looked like a gunslinger, all belt-buckle and cowboy boots. On Sunday he wore leggings and a little black dress. Combined with his lustrous black hair and wispy beard, when he first walked out I thought it was Cher. I suppose if you have sex as often as Russell Brand does, buckles and buttons become a time-consuming annoyance. With leggings and a mini-dress, there's only a little bit of elasticsation between you and instant pleasure.

I know everyone's anticipating Jonathan Ross's return to be less confrontational than Brand's but wouldn't it be strangely wonderful if Ross came back, instead, with all guns blazing. Imagine the spine-tingling exhilaration if he said the same thing to Tom Cruise he said to Gwyneth Paltrow, especially if Tom, caught momentarily off-guard, responded in the affirmative. It would be the perfect chat show moment - a big laugh followed by a major exclusive.

In fact, the story would be so big, it would surely only be a matter of weeks before Michael Sheen was on the set of the new film, *Ross/ Cruise*, doing his best Jonathan Ross impression and recreating the interview with Verne Troyer in a Tom Cruise wig. Perhaps when that film outdid *Frost/Nixon* in box-office takings, comedy-interviewing, and indeed comedy in general, would at last be recognised as the superior genre.

# The one good thing about seeing your husband shot in the head

30 JANUARY 2009

I ALWAYS TRY to be positive, to see the dark cloud's silver lining, even when I have a day like I had on Tuesday. It didn't start well. When I got in at three minutes past midnight, my girlfriend was still up so I asked her what she thought of the *Panorama* I'd hosted on BBC One that evening, my big move into serious television. 'I really liked the music,' she said. I waited to see if there were more compliments to come. There weren't.

On Tuesday night my team, West Bromwich Albion, were at home to Manchester United. Living in London, home games for me represent a 250-mile round journey. I generally get back around midnight. Things were made worse on Tuesday because, after sitting in horrible traffic on the M25, I dumped my car with little heed to parking restrictions and ran all the way to the ground; only to find the kick-off had been delayed by 30 minutes. Thus I spent the match dreading that announcement 'Will the owner of a silver-grey BMW, registration number ...' to call me from my seat. I say 'dreading' but by the time we were 4-0 down, I was praying for it.

There's something about Manchester United that makes me become abusive and irrational. When the fifth goal went in I told a slightly confused man next to me that Manchester United not only represented what had gone

wrong with football but also what had gone wrong with society.

Back at my car it became obvious that I had a flat tyre. It was 10.45 p.m., I was in a dark, desolate street in West Bromwich and I was handicapped by that most debilitating of diseases - celebrity. You see, when you become a bit famous you get yourself a personal assistant, someone to basically run your life, pay your bills, answer your mail and so on. I phoned my PA, Jenny, but there was no answer. I panicked. I suddenly became painfully aware of how mollycoddled I am. I certainly don't know how to change a tyre.

When I finally managed to contact a breakdown service, I realised that there were lots of other things I don't know. The lady on the other end of the phone asked me what model BMW I was driving. I had no idea. I had to get out of the car to find out what the registration number was and, despite her patient instructions, I couldn't find the spare tyre in the boot. By the way, I've been driving this car for five years.

I didn't fancy waiting for the rescue truck for ages and I started to wonder if I should say: 'By the way, I'm Frank Skinner. You may have seen me on *Panorama*' in order to get some special treatment. I couldn't bring myself to do it, partly because it seemed pathetic and partly because I couldn't take any more tactful comments about the soundtrack.

However, I was due to turn 52 at midnight so I told her about that in the hope of getting special birthday treatment. I don't know if that made a difference but a man in a truck soon arrived. Upon recognising me, he asked if I had any photos in the car I could sign for him. I explained that I hadn't. 'You bastard,' he said. I was a little affronted but his facial expression suggested that he intended it as a term of affection.

I felt a bit better about myself when he couldn't find the spare tyre either. 'Maybe it's in a cage underneath,' I said, scratching around for any manly knowledge I might have. He had a quick look but then said there was no spare - there had never been one. 'This model of BMW just comes with tyre-mould so you can patch up your flat tyre and get to a safe location,' he explained.

When he said 'tyre-mould' I felt like a stranger in a strange land. 'You're going to need a recovery vehicle,' he said. For some reason the word 'vehicle' made me feel more secure. It had an official ring to it. Like when people in clothes shops say 'garment'. Soon another man arrived in an even bigger truck and my car was loaded on to the back. As it was finally secured, the first man said 'Oh, tell a lie, it has got a spare after all.' It was in a cage underneath.

So, as I sat in the recovery truck, going down the M1 at 60 mph, I had time to consider the positives of this situation. I didn't have to drive home, I was saving on petrol money and best of all, it suddenly struck me that the whole story could go in this week's column. I'm hoping that any bad things in my life will now be sweetened by the knowledge that they are potential column fodder. I wonder if Jackie Kennedy, as the third bullet ripped into the car, thought 'Oh, this'll be good for the column.' I'm guessing she had one in some New York socialite magazine.

I finally got home at 3 a.m., and, in an attempt to find one last positive, I walked past the man on reception with a look that said 'Yes, I'm 52 but I'm still swanning in at three in the morning.' He looked at my West Brom scarf and nodded sympathetically.

# How one wave of the hand changed my life forever

6 FEBRUARY 2009

IT SEEMED ODD to hear the leader of the Conservative Party condemning a Labour Prime Minister for using the phrase 'British jobs for British workers'. Had the charge been plagiarism, rather than protectionism, I would have understood David Cameron's outrage. As it is, it shows how much the Tories have changed, or seem to have changed, under his leadership. In fact, were it not for Carol Thatcher referring to someone as 'a golliwog' this week, I would have said there was no continuity left in the Conservative Party.

As it was, Cameron's 'British jobs' attack on Gordon Brown was seen as perfectly natural whilst Ms Thatcher's faux pas has been a cause of some shock. Yes, Margaret Thatcher's daughter may possibly have revealed herself to be a little right-wing. Hard to believe, isn't it? Not only that but there's a rumour going round that the Reverend Ian Paisley's son is a Protestant.

Mr Cameron seemed particularly pleased that the wildcat strikers at Lindsey refinery had taken up the 'British jobs' quote as their un official slogan. I enjoyed reading about wildcat strikes in all the papers. It took me back to my youth. I think I even spotted a brazier on one of the news reports. Sadly, that 'British jobs' slogan takes me back to my youth too. For many years, my first workplace, the Hughes-Johnson Stampings, had 'Jobs for Britons first'

in white paint, on its exterior brick wall. This was pre-aerosol. The brush strokes were neat and unrushed, as if the artist, confident of widespread concurrence, was not afraid of discovery. Seeing Mr Brown's phrase on placards this week was a scary reminder of what dark shadows can fall across a country when recession bites.

As it was, the foreign workers everyone was angry about were Italian and Portuguese so it didn't seem quite so bad. It's hard to see the Italians as victims when they're so much better dressed and better looking than we are and the mere existence of Cristiano Ronaldo seems to suggest the Portuguese deserve everything they get. The odd thing about the dispute was the management's insistence that the foreign workers were not being paid less than the British ones. This was supposed to placate the strikers in some way. Had I been gathered at the brazier I would have taken great umbrage. The clear inference seemed to be 'They're not cheaper - we just like them better than we like you.'

Maybe the idea is that foreign workers are less trouble. You certainly couldn't imagine a bunch of Italians and Portuguese standing defiantly outside the work-gates in six inches of snow. Surely, even if they did call a strike, they'd soon be ensconced in a nearby wine bar, flirting with the local townswomen and composing a mournful fado about protectionism.

I must admit though, I get all romantic when I hear of British workers on the march - all hand-rolled cigarettes and embroidered banners. The first march I ever went on, back in the seventies, was a protest about student cuts. We all got on a specially chartered train and sang 'We Shall Overcome' from Birmingham to London. It was that day I became a lifelong Labour Party supporter. Not because I was moved by a tear-inducing political speech, or won over by the camaraderie amongst my fellow placard-bearers - the truth is I got very drunk and never made the march - it

was because Jim Callaghan waved at me. Neatly, I had ended up outside 10 Downing Street after downing about ten pints. In those days you could stand right opposite the famous front door. Suddenly, it opened and the Labour Prime Minister, Callaghan, stepped out. There were only me and a couple of drunken friends standing there and he smiled and then waved. I waved back gleefully. At that stage, I was 20 and had never voted. 'That's it,' I thought, 'it's the Labour Party for me.' I would advise Gordon Brown to get waving, soon and with gusto.

A few years later I actually did make a march but for all the wrong reasons. It was a protest against nuclear weapons and I was only on it because a local theatre had paid me 15 quid, cash-in-hand, to hand out leaflets for a forthcoming stage-production of Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows*. As we marched through Birmingham city centre, a man in a shirt and tie came to an office window and shouted 'Get back to Russia!'

'Get back to f\*\*\*ing work!' a nearby marcher with a beard and desert-boots shouted in response. He then turned to me. 'Doesn't that idiot know we're marching for his life and for the life of his children?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'Have a leaflet,' I said.

My last political outing was the countryside march, again for all the wrong reasons. I went on it as part of a sketch for a TV show and was made-over to look like Saddam Hussein. Tony Blair had just told us about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and I carried a banner that said something like 'Don't worry; the whole country will be a field when I'm finished with it.' One very nice lady gave me a tuna sandwich.

In summary, be careful who you march with and be especially careful if that person says 'British jobs for British workers.' It could be Carol Thatcher.

# Red stilettos and other significant reminiscences

13 FEBRUARY 2009

I WAS HAPPY to read that the Advertising Standards Authority has decided not to pursue the 24 complaints it received about the current Virgin Airlines TV ad – the one with a bunch of glamorous stewardesses lighting-up a grim 1980s airport as they march through in their red stilettos. Some viewers, apparently, felt the ad was ‘sexist and presented a stereotypical view of gender roles’. My Political Correctness antennae must be malfunctioning because I love the ad. What’s more, when it concludes, with two men gazing in awe at the passing stewardesses, the first man saying ‘I need to change my job,’ and the second ‘I need to change my ticket,’ I always feel they should be joined by a third man who adds ‘I need to change my pants.’ To the 24 complainers, I can only apologise for having had that thought. Of course, it’s possible that those complainers love the Virgin ad too, and their use of old-fashioned feminist phrases like ‘a stereotypical view of gender roles’ is just their way of joining in with the eighties theme.

I think the ad offers an interesting lesson in retrospective. It celebrates 25 years of Virgin Airlines so it’s set in 1984, but the girls don’t just walk through a 1984 airport, they walk through the eighties. New Romantic hairdos, Rubik’s cubes, yuppies with massive mobile phones – they’re all there. There is a reference to a more serious eighties theme – the Miners’ Strike – but that is on

a newsstand outside the airport and thus external to the main narrative. Basically, the ad works because it makes you smile as you recall the absurdities of the period. It's the sort of thing you see on programmes like *We Love the Eighties* or *Top of the Pops 2* all the time. It's why people go to School Disco and Guilty Pleasures nights. People like to laugh affectionately at the past. I wonder if it's a sort of therapy. Our past is something we all got through, despite any attendant traumas, and when we look back at it, it's the silly things that dominate the remembrance of it, the Asteroids machines rather than the Miners' Strike. Our priorities change in retrospect. Somehow, with a bit of distance, it's the minutiae that seem to matter, not the global crises. For example, though I'm confident I've spotted every reference in the Virgin ad, I had to turn to Google when I heard political commentators describing this current economic crisis as 'worse than the recession of 1987'. I couldn't remember that recession at all. *Beadle's About*, yes, Black Monday, no. And it's not just me. When my mum talked about the war, she never mentioned fascism or appeasement; it was all George Formby, powdered egg and drawing a line down the back of your legs so you looked like you had stockings on. Thus, when we look back at the current recession, for all its apparent horrors, we might remember it very differently. It might not seem so important. It might just be outside on the newsstand. I think it helps to consider that.

Incidentally, the Virgin ad's soundtrack is 'Relax' by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, a 1984 single which the then Radio One DJ, Mike Read, refused to play on his show because of its sexual content. Mr Read went on to make his own point about the quirkiness of retrospect when his musical about Oscar Wilde closed after just one performance in 2004. In an interview following this setback, conducted, I imagine, amidst piles of redundant souvenir programmes, he suggested that the show might