

TAKING ON THE ENGLISH: THE ANGLO FILES

A review by Nicole Pellaton

Sarah Lyall's hilarious book of essays on British culture, *The Anglo Files*, is an eye-opener for anyone who hasn't lived in Britain, and a laugh-out-loud read for those non-Brits who have. Lyall '81, a *New York Times* journalist who moved to England more than 10 years ago, casts an incisive observer's eye on the real-life characters she meets on a daily basis, in her roles as journalist, neighbor, wife and mom.

Lyall spares little in this book billed as "A Field Guide to the British"—from the coming-of-age sexual antics at British private schools ("Naughty Boys and Rumpy-Bumpy"), to the ethics of the British press ("A Fact Too Good to Check"), the Brits' sentimental attachment to animals ("Invasion of the Hedgehog People"), the change from a society of stoics to Princess Diana-style emoters ("By God, Sir, I've Lost My Leg!"), and the odd doings of the House of Lords when the hereditaries were still in fine fettle ("Law-makers from Another Planet").

Although she touches on commonly known British oddities, Lyall's treatment is universally insightful and studded with stunning quotations: "Sometimes, despite my desire to keep an open mind and look past the stereotypes, I ran smack up against a wall of clichés that, annoyingly, turned out to be true."

In an essay on the British penchant for self-deprecation ("False Modesty"), Lyall takes us to interviews with actor Hugh Grant ("Brimming with articulate intelligence, he merely has to train his lazy charm on you for a few minutes to have you in his thrall."), "the unnaturally clever actor Stephen Fry," the adventurer Ranulph Fiennes, and many more. Each subject applies a slightly different twist to the very British use of self-effacement, often ironic. In conversation with Boris Johnson—current mayor of London—whose long list of accomplishments includes Conservative member of Parliament, editor of *The Spectator*, assistant editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, writer for *The Times*, author of several books and celebrated guest host on the popular TV show, "Have I Got News for You," Lyall writes:

But Johnson (full name: Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson) exuded the shambling disorganization of an oversize adolescent. He had a shock of messy blond hair that looked like a bad wig threatening to slide altogether off his head, and an air about him of chaos and confusion. . . . He liked to give the impression that work flowed invisibly from him, with no actual effort. 'Because I have no time to do it,' he told me once, referring



With comedic flair, Sarah Lyall '81 delivers insightful and witty observations about British life from her vantage as an American journalist living in London.



to his column, 'I do it in no time. You just whack it out.'

'Don't you worry about sounding, uh, not very serious?' I asked.

'Beneath the carefully constructed veneer of a blithering buffoon, there lurks a blithering buffoon,' he said.

Underscoring it all is a love of words. In "Honorable Members,"

Lyall takes on the House of Commons where "one person's boorishness is another's 'traditional vigor and forthrightness,' as the Commons' Web site describes the permitted conduct in the chamber, or to put it another way: 'The House of Commons has never thrived on excessive politeness and restraint.'" Lyall goes on to cite examples:

It is in this spirit that the Labour MP [Member of Parliament] Tony Banks once got away with telling Margaret Thatcher she was behaving 'with the sensitivity of a sex-starved boa constrictor,' and with saying that Terry Dicks, another MP, was 'living proof that a pig's bladder on the end of a stick can be elected to Parliament.' Michael Foot, another Labourite, was allowed to call the Tory MP Norman Tebbit 'a semi-house-trained polecat.' In 1978 Denis Healey, the Labour chancellor of the exchequer, compared being criticized by his Conservative counterpart, Geoffrey Howe, to being 'savaged by a dead sheep.'

Summarizing the essence of Britishness is, Lyall explains, virtually impossible. Even for the British. When the government announced that it wanted to develop a statement of "British values," *The Times* of London jumped in, requesting motto ideas from readers. Popular entries included: "At least we're not French," "We apologize for the inconvenience" and "Once mighty empire, slightly used." Lyall recounts that the winning entry, with the support of 20.9 percent of voting readers, was: "No motto please, we're British."

Lyall, who lived in New York prior to marrying an Englishman, acknowledges that she's become somewhat British over the years. When she first arrived, "Sometimes it seemed as if nobody believed I was even speaking English, so hard was it to make them comprehend what I was trying to say." But she now apologizes all the time, kisses people on both cheeks and uses Britishisms such as "tea towels" and "maths" in lieu of their American analogues "dish towels" and "math." Describing a cocktail party in London, at which Lyall was distracted by her extreme hunger, she writes:

I tried to focus on the conversation: it was so much better than it

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ALUMNI/AE

1946—W. Harrison McLeod. *Effervescence*. (self-published, 2009)

1947—J. Michael Mahoney. *Topsy Turvy: A Compilation of Quotations*. (AuthorHouse, 2008)

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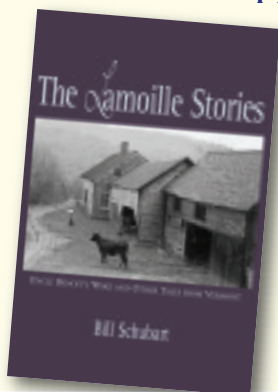
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1958—Winslow Myers. *Living Beyond War: A Citizen's Guide*. (Orbis Press, 2009)

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1963—William Howard Schubart. *The Lamoille Stories: Uncle Benoit's Wake and Other Tales from Vermont*. (White River Press, 2009)

1965—Charlie Smith. *Word Comix: Poems*. (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009)



1966—Peter Thompson, English translator. *Hearing Your Story: Songs of History and Life for Sand Roses*, by Nabile Farès. [a trilingual text for the Sahrawi people]. (UNO Press, 2008)

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FACULTY

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John P.C. Daves. [review of] *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?*, by John Charles Boger and Gary Or-

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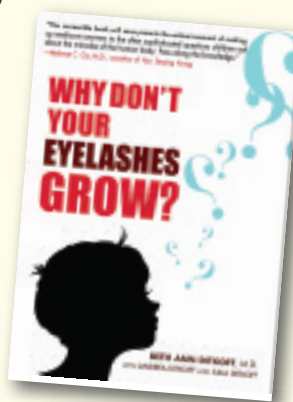
L. Todd Hearon. "Dante scan fragment." [poem]. IN *Literary Imagination*. (fall, 2008)

L. Todd Hearon. "De Profundis," "Harry Farr," "Sundial" and "Translation." [four poems]. IN *Memorious: A Journal of New Verse and Fiction*. (winter, 2008)

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Matt W. Miller. "Decidious" and "Ballistics." [two poems]. IN *Memorious: A Journal of New Verse and Fiction*.

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BRIEFLY NOTED

2001—Thomas G. Beatty and B. Scott Gaudi. "Predicting the yields of photometric surveys for transiting extrasolar planets." IN *The Astrophysical Journal*. (October 20, 2008)

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would have been in New York. There was no chatter on the topics of *My Therapeutic Epiphany*, for instance, or *My Hamptons Traffic Nightmare*. No one was bragging about his accomplishments or being earnest about her problems. I don't even remember what clever arguments they marshaled, what personal disasters they spun into sharp anecdotes, but they were dropping the sort of witty offhand remarks that make listening to Britons in full humorous mode one of life's great pleasures.

For Anglophiles and phobes alike, this book can be one of life's great reading pleasures. ●

Nicole Pellaton is Exeter's website managing editor. She lived and worked in

London for four years and shares with Lyall a fascination with British customs.