

‘Feeling like a MISFIT can turn out to be an advantage’

Clare Balding, 42, talks to Victoria Young about the animals in her life, the advantage of feeling like a misfit as a child – and the joy of being “Auntie Clare”

Broadcaster Clare Balding lives in London with her civil partner, Alice Arnold, their dog, Archie, and their cat, Itty. Clare’s memoir, *My Animals And Other Family* (Penguin) is out now in paperback.

Nothing has connected me to other people as much as writing my book. It’s a memoir rather than an autobiography and I wanted to make people think about their own childhood; their relationship with animals and their brother or father, and the things they were insecure about at school. I was inspired by a reviewer who referred to David Sedaris’s account of his life as “warped but not bitter”.

I absolutely wept when I was writing – at the animals dying mainly. I enjoyed writing about my grandma. She was a strong woman who said extraordinary things, like, when I was born, “Oh, it’s a girl. Never mind, just keep trying.”

Of course, some of the things she said to me hurt at the time. But they make for quite good comedy. And I didn’t go through my childhood saying “ouch” – I

really didn’t. I was just mucking about with horses and dogs most of the time.

Being made to feel like an irrelevant child was probably an asset. Benign negligence is not a bad parental attitude or at least a cross between a benevolent dictator and benign negligence – you should just let kids crack on with it. That suited us and we lived in a very safe environment where you could have this wild, muddy, outdoor lifestyle; I thought it was absolute bliss.

My mum is only 22 years older than me and our relationship is good. She’s pretty busy running a stud, but she comes to London and we go to the theatre – she’d rather go with Alice and me than with Dad because he’s not great at concentrating.

My father is a very comic character in the book. Every time he appears you know something disastrous will happen, whether it’s putting milk in the kettle or attaching our toboggans behind his truck and not noticing for half a mile that my brother Andrew had fallen off. He took my nephews tobogganing recently in the same way and they loved it!

Dad is really proud of my book. He kept saying, “Did this really happen?” I was like, “Yes Dad, this was our life, while you were busy doing what you were doing.” But I’m not sure he really learned anything about me or my childhood.

I offered Mum three vetoes – but she didn’t use any. It’s really a book about my mother. It’s about her and the influence she had on my life: she is the beginning, the middle and the end of it. Dad’s attention was like a spotlight coming on you, it was so bright it was startling; my mother’s was constant daily sunlight. >>

“My book is really all about my mother and the huge influence she had on my life”



THE OLYMPICS

The Olympics and Paralympics were the absolute highlight of my working life. They will never be topped and I'm fine with that. They brought out the best in the athletes, the organisers and the viewing public. People talk to me about the Games all the time, and it's lovely to be able to share that enthusiasm. It's as if the flame is still burning inside everyone. It certainly is inside me.

I probably underappreciated that constant, steady presence. Every child is like that. You go through stages of being filthy to your mother. I'm pretty certain I tried to write things that I couldn't say to her.

The book is also a real slice of an English country lifestyle. Although I suppose it was quite unusual too. I grant not many people have the Queen to breakfast!

I see the royal family at Royal Ascot and the Derby, but I don't socialise with them. There are charities I'm involved with, such as Riding for the Disabled, which Princess Anne is the president of, so I see her at sporting functions, but we're not hanging out at Nando's!

So many people read my book and say, "Your poor brother." Obviously, I clearly abused Andrew, growing up. But that's the role of the older sister, isn't it? We get on very well these days.

His kids come and stay... with Lisa, their mother. We might take one at a time unsupervised; Flora, who's two, likes hanging out with Auntie Clare. We were sent a jumper for our dog Archie and I thought I'd try it on Flora to see if it fitted – it didn't. But she went home and said she'd had fun (so I think that's okay).

I love being Auntie Clare. But I'm quite happy to just have a dog. I can get a bit panicked with too many children around.

Not everyone has to have children. If everyone had two or three, we'd run out of room. I think it's a very responsible decision if one's not going to have them by accident – which Alice and I are not.

I have seven godchildren: six girls and a boy. I see it as a serious job, consisting mainly of giving them a Christmas treat when we go to Olympia to see the showjumping. Flora and my nephews come too, as well as adults – because I don't want to get into the thing of disciplining other people's children.

I'm quite interested in the brain. I went through a period of feeling tense about work. But I understand my brain better now so I wouldn't let that happen again. Once you understand that your thoughts control your feelings, you can change the original thought that made you feel bad.

I've had so many things, good and bad, said about me. I'm way beyond worrying about what people say. If people don't like you as a presenter, you can't protect yourself by saying it's the role they don't like. If they don't like me, it's me they don't like – not the part I'm playing. You have to push it aside; you wouldn't make it to work tomorrow if it bothered you. "Jog on," I say to myself – and laugh about it.

I felt like a misfit at school and I think that's quite common. But that feeling is an advantage when I interview people because when you're on the sidelines, you're a spectator. I can talk to different characters with different life experiences and I can listen very carefully. I'm much more interested in them than in me in that interview, just as I should be.

But when I have to stand up and perform, I switch in to performance mode. Music is very useful for getting into a certain frame of mind. When we rehearse, they run the opening titles and the theme music triggers something. Then when the red light is on the camera, my mind switches on. I have to think fast and remember a lot of facts. I get given a running order, but there's no script and no autocue. With a live event there are key points that have to be very tight and someone is counting in my ear all the time. It's quite draining. Last year's boat race took me a week to get over it.



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Weekends don't really happen. I did see one in June that I thought I might have clear but I'm getting an honorary degree, so I'm going up to get that on the Saturday. I present *Good Morning Sunday* on Radio 2 for 40 weeks of the year. People often say, "I hope you are relaxing," but I can't think of anything I would rather be doing.

Very little of what I do feels like work. I was thinking about Cheltenham week. Where would I have been if I wasn't working at Cheltenham? I would be at Cheltenham, talking to more people, eating more, drinking more – and with a worse view!

I do take breaks. We had a really lovely week in Dubai in March. And Alice makes sure there are spaces blocked out in the diary for holidays – and she makes them happen.

Having thyroid cancer in 2009 really didn't change my life at all. I wish I could say that I had this epiphany. But I knew I was lucky before that, so it's not like I suddenly realised how lucky I am. Do I have a greater capacity to enjoy happiness while it's actually happening? Possibly. But that's more from recently reading *The Power Of Now* by Eckhart Tolle than from having cancer.

I was very practical about having cancer. I delegated all the worry to Mum and Alice because all I needed to do was to make sure I was back in time for the Derby. I used work dates to help me through.

The dynamic of our relationship hasn't changed since Alice stopped working. But it's much better. It was never bad – we just see each other more now. Before, I would come back from the Grand National and Alice would almost always be on a late shift and I wouldn't see her until the next day; that has changed. And I think she looks a lot healthier.

The most important quality in a partner is a sense of humour. Not taking life too seriously and the ability to enjoy. Also someone who is practical, thoughtful and considered. Alice is probably more analytical than I am. I'm relatively simple, and most days I'm like a Labrador puppy where everything is great. We're quite a good balance because Alice will say, "Hang on a minute, we have to do this, you can't just bounce through life."

I still see all my friends from Downe House boarding school, apart from the ones who were in the shoplifting gang. They are very much a part of my life.

Our other main group of friends all have dogs, and live near us in London. There's

a group of ten of us, who met because our dogs made friends. But dogs can be picky – if your dogs hate each other, you can't be friends. It's awful.

Archie is a Tibetan terrier and Itty is a black cat. Archie is very beautiful, but Itty absolutely hates him. She'll hiss when he comes near her, and he eats her food, which is very annoying.

I'm very close to my parents' animals too. They had a gorgeous boxer called Ruby. She would climb on you, convinced she was a Chihuahua and could fit in your lap. She died two years ago during Wimbledon and my mother, bless her, waited until the Sunday after the final

to tell me. When she told me, I started weeping uncontrollably. She said, "That's why I didn't tell you while you were still working."

I am very into my home. We're quite minimalist in the sense that Alice won't have clutter. My mother has piles and piles of paper, so our minimalism is partly me trying not to be like that, and partly Alice not letting me keep anything anywhere than where it's meant to be filed.

My favourite room is the L-shaped kitchen/sitting room. That's the room we spend the most time in. I have life pretty easy. I don't have children, I don't cook – we take people out instead of dinner parties – and I don't drive much as I tend to go by train. I've taken out the things that are most exhausting in life. To me, that's time bought and stress removed.

I'm a saver, not a spender. Occasionally I'll make myself, or Alice will make me, spend money on something. I enjoy shopping if I'm in a shop that has things that suit me. There's a very nice designer called Saint Bustier. And I have help from a designer called Claire Thorogood. But I can't pretend to like the whole experience. Claire has shown me how to dress for my shape. I went to the Book Awards wearing an LK Bennett dress. It was well fitted and I was wearing good underwear, which helped, and nice shoes. Everyone thought I'd lost a stone!

I don't weigh myself any more – as a jockey I'd weigh myself four times a day. If I could do with losing a little bit of weight, I'll set myself half a target, such as if I'd like to wear a nice dress to the BAFTAs.

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CLARE BALDING IN BRIEF

Earliest memory?

My dog Candy's face.

What are you best at?

Getting on with things, and moving on. I can just sitting there thinking, literally decide to say, "That was yesterday, now let's move on."

When were you last

happy? I'm happy all the time. I sat in a café today drinking an orange and carrot juice, and I was sitting there thinking, "I'm just really happy."

What's the one thing you'd change in your life? I would have more

sunshine, that's all. I could say I'd change the shoplifting at school, but it makes such a great chapter in my book! What are you reading? *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson, which is very funny. w&h