

my culture fix

The novelist lets us into her cultural life

Charlotte Mendelson



My favourite author or book

I am a one-woman evangelical movement for the supremacy of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* over almost all other novels by anyone, ever. It is staggeringly bold, modern, astute and, frankly, weird: probably the most famous line of Lucy Snowe, its grumpy, intelligent and plain protagonist, is: "I, Lucy Snowe, said nothing." George Eliot wrote about it, "It is a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*", and you don't argue with George.

The book I'm reading

Our Wives under the Sea by Julia Armfield, a collection of Korean short stories and a book about fermenting.

The book I wish I had written

I'm furious not to have written *War and Peace* because it's the greatest novel, but inventing the wit and oddness of Molly Kean's *Good Behaviour* would have made me very proud.

The book I'm ashamed I haven't read

I'm horribly under-read in fiction from Japan, Korea, the former Soviet republics, Africa and Australia. I haven't read *Oliver Twist* or, shh, lots of Shakespeare. I gave up *A La Recherche...* because I wanted to smack Marcel. Generally, I think it's fine to give up on novels/films/plays/people, but I probably ought to give Proust another bash.

My favourite film

When Harry Met Sally... makes me intensely happy. I live through its quotations: "You made a woman miaow?"; "Tell me I'll never have to be out there again"; "At that moment I knew. I knew like the way you know a good melon".

My favourite play

Macbeth is the greatest play for me; its psychological insight, its sense of inevitability and its gore.

My favourite TV series

ER and *Smack the Pony*.

My favourite piece of music

My grandfather used to play Chopin, so I deeply love his music, but also JS Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, which is both stimulating and soothing.



The last show that made me cry (and laugh)

Liz Kingsman's *One Woman Show* made me cry with laughter. *Happy Valley* made me both cry and laugh, but I'd like to emphasise that I'm a Sally Wainwright super-fan; I've seen *Happy Valley* series one and two, *Last Tango in Halifax* and *Scott and Bailey* twice. She's Euripides with laughs, and a cast of Britain's greatest actors. I couldn't admire her more.

The lyric I wish I'd written

I'd be proud to have written any line by Stephen Sondheim.

The poem that saved me

I honestly believe that poetry did save me; so often I've found in it a reflection of my own sadness, longing or wonder. As Louis MacNeice wrote: "World is crazier and more of it than we think,/ Incurably plural." I carry around with me lines from Emily Dickinson, Carol Ann Duffy's love poems, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mary Oliver and Frank O'Hara. But also lines from lyricists such as Cole Porter, Lucinda Williams and Gillian Welch; they make life richer and more bearable.

The instrument I wish I'd learnt

I am the opposite of gifted. I had years of piano lessons, yet never reached grade one and I can't read music. Next, as ever determined to choose the most complicated path, I decided to learn the French horn, the most difficult instrument. No progress there, either. But I wish I could play the piano, or sing, or something. Anything.

The music that cheers me up

Music is a fail-safe source of joy. I add to my favourites every day — this week's favourites are Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*, Ini Kamoze's *Here Comes the Hotstepper* and Nick Cave's *Into My Arms*, but my stalwarts are Lizzo, *Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster*, the Cole Porter songbook sung by Ella Fitzgerald and the greatest song ever written — please don't argue — Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart*.

If I could own one painting it would be...

This is a difficult question for an enthusiast and latent kleptomaniac. When my children were little I invented a game, "Art or Fart?", to persuade them through galleries by deciding whether works should be deemed, yes, Art or Fart. Now the game I play is which painting I'd bring home. There are hundreds on my list but, oh God, if I had to, it would be one of Rory McEwen's *True Facts from Nature* rotting leaves paintings. Though I wouldn't say no to *The Wilton Diptych*. Or a modest Vermeer.

The place I feel happiest

I'm never happier than on my



allotment, getting entirely coated in mud, painfully nettlesung and violently scratched. We've only been together a year, so growing anything sufficiently edible to bring home is a distant dream, but she gives me such peace.

My guiltiest cultural pleasure

I don't believe in guilt about pleasure, but my greatest cultural pleasure is definitely crime, read in the bath, preferably either a) set somewhere unsumptuous in Northern Ireland, Glasgow, Scandinavia, a dismal American backwater happened upon by Jack Reacher or Slough House, or b) full of the secret madness of normal-seeming people's worlds, which is why Ruth Rendell is my hero.

I'm having a fantasy dinner party, I'll invite these artists and authors...

There are so many extraordinary dead people I'd kill to have met, and

they'd make a raucous dinner party: Angela Carter, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia O'Keeffe, Nora Ephron, Amy Winehouse, Iris Murdoch, Grace Paley. And James Baldwin as the token male. And Dolly Parton and Sally Wainwright, before whom I'd be so busy genuflecting I'd burn everything. And no one would care, because we'd be singing along to...

And I'll put on this music...

First Ladies of Country, which I have on vinyl, CD and Spotify.

The concert I'm looking forward to
I'm excited about seeing Bonnie Raitt in



QUEEN OF COMEDY Liz Kingsman. Left: George Clooney in *ER* in 1998. Below: *The Virgin and Child with Angels*: Leaf of the Wilton Diptych, c1395. Below left: Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal in *When Harry Met Sally...*

June and Mary Coughlan, whom I've loved since my teens for her wistful, sexy, lyrical voice; more imminently, *Oklahoma!* and Alice Neel at the Barbican in London. What else should I see? I love a recommendation. **Charlotte Mendelson's latest novel, *The Exhibitionist*, published by Picador, has been shortlisted for the Comedy Women in Print prize. The winner will be announced on April 17, comedywomeninprint.co.uk**

