

OPINION

A riveting book plus G&T spells a perfect Christmas



GRAY MATTER

CHRIS GRAY is enthralled by the work of a former OED chief editor

Christmas perfection for me is to be seated by the fireside, a large gin and tonic in hand, with a good book to read and a crossword puzzle to solve. This is such an alluring prospect that through most of December – pantomimes and parties permitting – I have been practising for the big day.

Beefeater has been my gin of choice, *The Times* the only possible crossword and the reading matter, in recent days, John Simpson's *The Word Detective* (Little, Brown, £18.99) which recently featured as Radio 4's *Book of the Week*. It is subtitled *A Life in Words: From Serendipity to Selfie*.

This is a pleasing production, combining autobiography with astute observations on the use of words, about which the author is well qualified to write as a former chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. A large part of the task of moving this eminent publication online fell upon him – an astonishing feat of scholarship and daring. The book is compulsively readable, especially about the work of the dictionary compiler and the qualifications, or rather the skills, required to become one.

I could quote reams of Simpson's well-wrought prose. Here is one example: "Lexicography is pretty sharp-edged. There is no place for wobbly or brittle thinking. You see a problem and leap in to solve it; you don't wallow in it, indulging yourself in the beauties of the language... You need a scientist's sense of distrust and a writer's sense of elegance."

It was a scientist of the word, as it happens ("the tall, thin embodiment of scientific – as



John Simpson, former chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary

opposed to historical – lexicography") who failed to recognise Simpson's potential as a dictionary-maker when he came for interview at the OUP dictionary department in 1976.

This was John Sykes, editor of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and famous as consistent winner of the annual *Times* crossword competition. He could solve even the hardest puzzles as fast as he could fill in the squares.

As a reporter for *The Oxford Times*, I used to ring him about his success every year – later, every other year, as he took a periodic break to give others a chance.

Sykes denied Simpson the job being offered, one under his aegis on the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*.

Happily, the interviewee had impressed the chief editor, Dr Robert Burchfield, who soon found him an alternative berth.

Readers of *The Word Detective* can hardly fail to conclude that the author has not forgiven the initial rejection. He tells us: "My former colleague John Sykes had apparently been tickled that many dictionaries said 'atom' on the spine. It turned out that this was 'A to M'. It doesn't take much to make some lexicographers chuckle." Ouch!

Crossword solvers come under the hammer, too, especially those rash enough to admit an enthusiasm when applying for a job at the *OED*. "I'm not sympathetic to crossword solvers," writes

Picture: bloomingphotography.co.uk

Simpson. "We were not playing games on the *OED*, we were researching language history. Some of my best friends are crossword compilers: I tend to steer the conversation in other directions if they want to talk about their clues."

It was an answer rather than a clue that set me thinking when I put aside Simpson's book one night for a shot at *The Times* crossword.

The first answer I saw was 'guesstimate'. This is a word defined in dictionaries as "an estimation based on a guess". But is this *really* any different from an estimation without the guess? *Can you estimate without a guess?*

Is 'guesstimate' a word we really need? The same can be asked of 'glam-ma', newly admitted to the *OED* last week along with 'Brexit'. It is said to be a word for baby-boomers, but I have yet to hear anybody use it.

There are passages of great sensitivity and beauty in Simpson's book concerning his and wife Hilary's second child, Ellie, who has a serious developmental problem that means she has never acquired the power of speech.

"Her wordlessness stood in such dramatic distinction to the rest of my life," he writes. "We have never discovered a cause for Ellie's condition. She is a beautiful child. Other people – including myself – are better people because of how she is, but that's no help to her."

Comment is superfluous.

I'm constantly under attack by winged beasts

THINGS with wings have been more than usually troublesome to me – a pesky nuisance in fact – during the year just ending.

The various insects and birds have only been doing, I acknowledge, what they were designed to do, but I wish they would do it away from me.

My cycle rides beside the Thames were rarely accomplished at certain periods without eyefuls of tiny black flies, which were not always easily dislodged. I'd have worn goggles, but feared looking like Mr Toad.

In autumn came a twin peril chez Gray of wasps and moths.

Examples of the former slunk

through the rafters from a nest beneath the roof to sting me as I slept. (I had forgotten how long it takes a wasp sting to cease itching.)

Meanwhile grubs of the other pestiferous insect were chomping their way through a drawer full of winter woollies. Cashmere unfortunately proved their favourite.

I have previously mentioned seagulls circling and dive-bombing, splashing windows with excrement.

Likewise pigeons, flocks of which descend to scoff everything placed out for smaller birds.

Can this be why the sparrows have taken to eating the house?

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw half a dozen glued like limpets to the brickwork and pecking away. Their quarry, I could see, was the cement between the bricks and, in one patch, a section of the ornamental stonework.

A quick examination of the walls showed they had been chewing through other areas, with some urgent repointing required.

This is clearly a significant problem. Has anyone else come across it? Can anything be done to discourage sparrow attack?

Please let me know. Meanwhile, a happy Christmas to all.

Doddy fan not tickled by lack of knighthood for comic Ken

WHEN the New Year's Honours List is published next week, one name that is likely to be conspicuous by its absence will be that of comedian Ken Dodd.

Awarded an OBE as long ago as 1982 ("for services to show business and charity"), the 89-year-old 'Squire of Knotty Ash' has received zilch from the government in the years since, despite an unparalleled contribution to the world of entertainment.

The last survivor of a great generation of comedians, whose names are too familiar to need rehearsing, Doddy is surely deserving of a knighthood.

There are those campaigning to secure him one, among them one of my readers, Stuart Jarvis, of Milton, near Abingdon.

He says: "It is very disappointing that he has not been awarded a knighthood because he has brought so much happiness and laughter to so many people in the UK during his 60 years of performing.

"He still tours every year, appearing in about six theatres every month. They are always sold out. He does five hours on stage and always signs autographs afterwards, so stays until at least 3am."

As one who has been present at a number of these marathon shows over the years, I have tended to view them rather more critically.

With hundreds of jokes delivered in quick-fire fashion, they seem to me to confirm that one can sometimes have rather too much of a good thing.

And what of theatre staff, who are obliged to miss their buses or trains home?

Yet the case for a knighthood is surely a powerful one, not least because of the different areas of show business in which Dodd has operated.

Besides his work as a stand-up, he has made a major contribution to children's entertainment with his *Diddy Men* and to popular music with a succession of big-selling singles, including *Tears*, from 1969, of which a million and a half copies were bought by an eager public.



Ken Dodd with his tickling sticks
Picture: David A Ellis