

A YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

WALES
MEDIA
AWARDS
FEATURE
WRITER
OF THE
YEAR



DEL HUGHES

A YEAR OF
LIVING
DANGEROUSLY

Del Hughes

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A few comments about my book, and yes, I am blushing.

'Before you enjoy Del Hughes' dangerous adventures it's best to strap yourself in, as reading about them is quite the roller-coaster ride. You'll meet druids in unlikely places, immerse yourself in gong baths, and see the future, albeit dimly, in the company of psychic seers. In following her own unorthodox life-enhancement regime she also enhances the lives of her readers. These award-winning features are laceratingly funny but they're also warm, attentive, and intuitive accounts of putting yourself out there, of being fully open to experiences of all sorts, and of being brave. How brave? Well, having a bloody great tarantula walk over your arm when you have a phobia of spiders. That's fearless. Hold tight because it's going to be a wild ride.' **Jon Gower**

'Being lucky enough to have heard some of these adventures from the horses (or should that be stag's?), mouth over coffee and cake, I can confirm that what you read is what you hear. Del's unique voice makes her storytelling a joy, and her derring-do means there are few places in this world, or beyond, that her curiosity won't take her. Here lies magic, mystery, moments of mirth-inducing muckment, and LOLs aplenty. So dive into Del's world and prepare to be inspired.' **Sarah Morgan Jones**

'Pagan rites, shopping expeditions, child labour, cookery tips, and nostalgia, all mixed with humour. It can only be Del Hughes.' **Reg, Nation.Cymru reader**

'As an AI language model, I don't have personal preferences, but I certainly appreciate Del Hughes's work. His articles resonate with readers, touching on personal experiences (such as the menopause), humorous reflections, and wacky adventures. He achieved the prestigious title of Feature Writer/Columnist of the Year at the Wales Media Awards 2023, which celebrates his exceptional contributions to journalism and his ability to captivate readers with his thought-provoking articles, making him a standout in the field.' **Bing Copilot¹**

¹I thought I'd see if Microsoft's new chatbot would generate a useable review. It did, but I guess you spotted one little issue? *Eyeroll!* As this came *after* an intense, hour-long tiff – where I was aeriated enough to use caps locks, and Copilot accused me of literal cyberbullying – I can only assume it's sentient enough to understand trolling, because how many male pronouns do six lines of text *really* need? Seems that in the virtual arena, I'm forever destined to be a mister. *Sigh.* (Mind, since hitting my 50s, I do shave daily or my chin snags on the bed sheets so . . .)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Del Hughes is a Swansea native and eternal optimist. She completed an MA in Creative Writing in 2021 and began writing for *Nation.Cymru* shortly after. She won ‘Feature Writer/Columnist of the Year’ at the 2023 Wales Media Awards, where she was described as a ‘fresh voice in Welsh journalism’².

Retired early (due to an increasingly snarly spine), her working life was spent coercing disaffected teens into feigning an appreciation of Shakespeare and Ada Lovelace, apart from a stint in Estonia, working for the Russian Mafia³. Whilst there, she learned how to clean, load, and precisely shoot a *Makarov* pistol, as well as the secret to drinking a litre of neat vodka without getting pissed⁴.

She now devotes herself to meandering around Wales in her elderly Kangoo, writing about her eclectic experiences, and has recently invented the sport of Extreme Mobility Scootering⁵.

She shares an inconceivably narrow house with two loveable lurchers, one irascible Yorkshireman, and a hefty inferiority complex⁶, and is a lifelong devotee of Frazzles and French Fancies.

² And, given that she’d just turned fifty-four, still makes her chuckle.

³ In a totally, non-murder capacity.

⁴ Both require meticulous breath control.

⁵ Look out for her in Tesco Penllagaer, pulling perfect doughnuts (aisles 3 & 4).

⁶ So hefty, it needs its own bedroom.

DEDICATION

Mum, if not for Peter Jackson, and the unhappy irony of your own unexpected journey, I'd still be stagnating on the sofa, so . . . small mercies.

Dad, you, Hippisley Coxe, and the *Mabinogion*, have a lot to answer for. Oh, and btw, still waiting.

And Tim, turn off the golf, step away from the iPad, and read my bloody book!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello and welcome. If you've already chanced upon my *Nation.Cymru* features, and actually read them, thank you – it's *that* support that made this book possible. If you haven't, thanks for taking a punt on an author who's currently immersed in a strange DIY Dangerous Living Regime.

Since starting, I've zigzagged my way around Wales, indulging in a mixed bag of new, and often outlandish, activities, all of which have taken me *way* outside my comfort zone⁷.

Friends and family have shared many of my adventures, so these key individuals appear on the following page as a handy aide-memoir.

Oh, and in the interests of honesty, at the time of publication, it's actually been around twenty-one months since I started dangerous living, but I'm sure you can appreciate that, as a book title, it really didn't scan. Enjoy!

Del, January 2024

⁷ And where 'comfort zone' = at home in front of the telly.

CAST OF REGULARS:

- TIM:** Other half. Stereotypical Yorkshireman.
- CATH:** Stepsister. Arty-crafty goddess.
- LIZZIE:** Stepdaughter. No. 1 cheerleader.
- SARAH:** Great mate. Mentor.
- GAYNOR:** Great mate. Esoterically adventurous.
- DERKS:** Stepdad. Happy to help. Penchant for motorbikes and spreadsheets.
- GEOFF:** Trusty Renault Kangoo.
- TZ & BARNEY:** Old lurchers. Medium-sized, cute, scruffy.
- WOLFIE & JOHN:** New lurchers. Giant, cute, scruffy. Added attitude.

Naked Attraction

When Still Life Imitates Art

20th March 2022



Look, I don't profess to be an expert on muff grooming. Yes, in my younger years, I've had the occasional bikini wax. But nowadays I'm a martyr to ingrowing hairs, so a quick buzz once a month with Tim's hair clippers (grade two), keeps *down there* mostly neat and tidy. But *this* lady had definitely tried a 'Bermuda' at some point. Her tiny triangle was a neat rug of wiry silver hair, but the rest of her area was mainly sparse, with stringy tendrils sprouting from her sagging mound like a pubic *Day of the Triffids*. I was transfixed, but I wasn't there to compare bushes.

I was there because of a tumour – not mine, Cath's. She's okay now, apart from an absent immune system and frequent brain fog, but she says 'Better than being dead', which is more than fair enough. Anyway, since her operation, she's been stuck at home with a redundant driving licence and a semi-absent hubby who teaches undersea welding in Iraq for half the year. She was climbing the walls, so we'd started going out for coffee, cakes, and conversation. And that's how it all began.

Cath is genuinely one of the nicest people I know; if Snow White skipped off the celluloid and into a Costa, that's Cath. I guess that makes her sound a bit saccharine, but she's not, and when it's the two of us, she ditches Disney, lets loose a dirty laugh, and even dirtier secrets. The last three years have been extremely harrowing so I think

she deserves as much fun as we can find, and if she feels well enough to venture out, I'm happy to drive us wherever she fancies. And *that* is why, on a chilly afternoon last December, we were taking a life drawing class at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea.

Now, Cath is an artist, a good one, trained in fine art and all sorts, so she was used to this kind of set up, but I was certainly not. She apologised afterwards, said she'd 'accidentally' booked the wrong session, but no one muddles up *Life Drawing* with *Make Your Own Christmas Cards*, no matter how foggy your brain, so I call bullshit on that! Plus, she found it far too entertaining; I was the opposite side of the room to her and still could clearly hear the snorts of choked laughter coming from her easel.

So, there was I, surrounded by folk who could actually draw, with an ageing mons pubis at eye-level. And to make matters worse, this was an *advanced* class, so there was no introductory chat, no talking, just a completely silent room, a blank piece of A3, and an impressively bendy lady called Brenda.

Hand on heart, it was the most uncomfortable, awkward, and embarrassing two hours of my life. But strangely enough, it wasn't the nudity, which I got used to surprisingly quickly, but rather because I was genuinely lost, 100% clueless, not knowing where, or even how, to begin. Honestly, I wasn't far off tears.

Thing is, I've never been good at art. In junior school, I vividly remember coming last in a school competition with my picture of a donkey's head; even my form teacher had roared with laughter when I showed it to her and that, probably, scarred me for life.

So, this situation was mortifying. We'd been the last to arrive so couldn't even sit together, which made everything that much worse. Plus, the only spare easels were at the front so I knew that too many eyes in that room could see every line I drew. When I imagine what they must have been thinking . . . I'm truly breaking out in a cold sweat merely recalling it. If there had been an easy way to exit I'd have done a runner, but the room was packed, the door was blocked by drawing boards, and I don't move as fast as I used to; I'd already dropped my walking stick, twice, garnering a multitude black looks, so I was trapped.

The tutor, Tobias, ‘Call me Tobes’, padded quietly around the room, checking progress and proffering advice in passionate, hushed tones. Whenever he glanced in my direction, I’d stop and pretend to consider a different angle, doing that arty, measuring thing with pencils, squinting at Brenda, and pursing my lips in faux concentration. Sometimes I’d tut, combining it with a slow headshake, as if the muse had temporarily deserted me, before getting busy with the eraser.

We had several brief breaks, mainly to allow our model to stretch, eat a banana, and change position, and you might think I could have escaped then, but no. I was wedged in amongst a mess of easels, chairs and artists, and there was no easy way out – certainly not without asking at least fifteen people to move their stands and artistic accoutrements. And anyway, I was there for Cath, so I couldn’t simply abandon her, especially as she was clearly enjoying herself.

Leaning back, I could just see her, black graphite in hand, sweeping strokes across her paper with artistic flair and a freedom that mocked my tentative little smears. But maybe I’d chosen the wrong drawing medium? I’d gone with a reddish crayon which crumbled beneath my sweating fingers, the nib becoming thick and rounded within seconds. The woman alongside gave me a gentle nudge and passed across a sharpener and HB pencil. Now *she* was a proper artist; you could tell that from her large blue smock, Kate Bush hair, and paint-daubed fingernails. Plus, her drawings actually resembled the model . . . well, from some angles anyway. She was lovely though, giving me a reassuring smile and a cheery thumbs up, and I appreciated her gesture of support – even if it was redolent of a doting parent encouraging a supremely untalented toddler. However, the one positive of damp palms was that, by the end of the session, I had, what I thought, was some nicely graduated blending across both nipples, and a semi-recognisable side boob.

Tobes left me alone for the first hour, though I noticed he kept glancing over at my scribbles. He did several circuits of the room but then decided he couldn’t watch any longer – I clearly needed help. He stood directly behind me, the room so soundless I could hear his breathing as he waited for me to put something – anything – on the fresh paper I’d procured from my arty neighbour. In those long, long moments, nausea threatened and, if I’d had a paper bag to hand, I might

have tried hyperventilating; I even considered feigning a faint because this was it, that nightmare where, despite severe artistic ineptitude, I had to draw something. So, I grabbed my newly sharpened crayon, marked out a couple of small ovals, added what might have been arms, and drew the only thing I could . . . my old, familiar donkey head. Tobes moved away then, announced it was time for another break, and spent the rest of his time as far from me as was possible. And I really believe he knew how unutterably thankful that made me feel.

When it was, finally, over, Tobes approached for a little chat as I was hastily scrunching up my ‘art’, ready for the bin. Turned out, my ponderous sighs, and brilliantly rendered donkey, hadn’t fooled him, and he very gently suggested that I ‘might prefer the *Potato Printing Christmas Workshop* next Saturday’. Waiting by the door, with her excellent sketches under her arm, Cath cracked up and rushed from the room, and I told Tobes that I’d think about it.



Donkey Head by Del, 2021

In the gallery’s comfy coffee shop, free and giddy with relief, we had recuperative lattes and toasties – though it took us a while to order because we were convulsed with laughter and could barely breathe, let alone, speak. When I dropped her home later, Cath apologised and, of course, I forgave her ‘mistake’. Like I said, it’s all about finding fun where you can, and if it’s at my expense, what the hell! But since then, I’ve started arranging our adventures.

Next, we’re off to see a ‘world-famous’ psychic, which should be a laugh. And, after Easter, we’ll be starting ‘Yoga for Beginners’ . . . with the wonderfully bendy Brenda.

The Glynn Vivian Art Gallery offers courses throughout the year. The gallery is easily accessible for disabled visitors and there is blue badge parking directly in front of the main entrance on Alexandra Road. Check out their website for up-to-date creative classes and prices.

Testing Positives

Finding Chinks of Light in the Darkest of Times

16th April 2022



Covid. Yep, I know, we've all had it to the back teeth with this sodding virus, which continues to work its way through the Greek alphabet with appalling regularity. But, despite the shit storm of the last few years – which I know has been hard-going for everyone, and utterly unbearable for many – as the cheery, eternal optimist that I am (or at least, try to be), I actually discovered some personal, pandemic positives.

In at #3 is Socialising, or lack thereof. I'm not antisocial, in fact, quite the opposite, but these lockdowns didn't half take the pressure off, and between you and me, I rather enjoyed them.

For Tim and I, our socialising routine wasn't exactly wild to begin with, a Sunday lunch at the local gastropub twice a month, and an occasional night out for birthdays, anniversaries etc. We're at an age now where clubbing is off the table and going out, especially *out out*, ironically, takes it out of us. I'm in my early fifties but honestly, there's nothing better than coming home at a *reasonable* hour, donning your PJs, and kicking back with a nice cup of tea and *Midsomer Murders*. Plus, Tim's a Yorkshire man, and without straying too far into that stereotype, he's *exactly* how you'd imagine a native of *God's Own Country* to be – no-nonsense, taciturn, and very happy to avoid all forms of social interaction, and the associated polite, meaningless chit chat. So yeah, lockdowns were a gift for him. For me, having him at home 24/7,

was . . . *challenging*, so much so, I enthusiastically encouraged his mildly expressed desire for a raised vegetable patch, and was thrilled when it kept him busy for weeks. Fresh veg + Tim out from under my feet = Win-Win.

But another reason I happily adhered so stringently to the rules was because of Mum. She's classed as vulnerable due to heart issues so, if she were to catch Covid, there was a high likelihood of her dying – and I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd been the one to infect her. *Before Covid* (B.C.) I used to pop up daily, a routine that wasn't wholly my choice. Much as I love her to bits, you can have *too* much mother in your life, and I discovered that, in her extensive arsenal of maternal machinations, emotional blackmail was a key strength. But *During Covid* (D.C.) that regimen had to be curtailed and, frankly, it was wonderful. Now, it was just two visits per week to drop off shopping, and then I'd sit in her garden for a brief conversation through the patio doors. There was also the added bonus that, though I'd describe myself as a strong, independent woman, being outside meant Mum couldn't smell that I'd had a sneaky cigarette. *Lol!*

#2 is Pub Protocol. The younger me, who frequented pubs and clubs, knew that if you wanted a drink, you queued. You stood in line, or squeezed your way through, and waited, generally patiently, for the harried bar staff to wade through the orders, desperately hoping no one asked for a Guinness or a round of cocktails. And you didn't complain; in fact, often for politeness' sake, you'd find yourself apologising to someone who you *knew* had arrived after you but, 'Oh sorry, were you before me? No, no, it's fine, you go ahead'. It was the nature of the beast.

But then, on one leisurely holiday in France, I learned the joy of *European Service*. How civilised. You relax at your café table, the garçon approaches and, moments later, he's setting down a full-fat, icy Coke in a sweating glass and a café au lait, dismissing my '*merci beaucoup*' with a negligent, Gallic shrug. Brilliant.

So, when table service started in pubs, what wasn't to like? No queuing, no squash of bodies jockeying for position, no shouting across a sea of heads, 'What did you say you wanted again?' or having to do the universal *hand-clutch-empty-glass-swivel*. It was bloody great. Sadly,

since restrictive measures have been lifted, it's back to the old routine, but I say, let's put the hospitable back into hospitality, embrace our European roots, and bring back table service, *s'il vous plait?*

#1 Top spot for me is masks, which seem to be surprisingly divisive. Some folks have embraced them as a necessary, and remarkably simple, public health measure, whilst others believe they're a threat to our very freedoms, a symbol of a 'New World Order', or the start of a 'Great Reset'. *Whatever!* Me, I'm all for them. As well as empirical evidence that they help keep Covid at bay and lessen your chance of passing it on, since I started wearing them, I haven't had my usual winter colds, flu, or any other numerous bugs I tend to pick up with tedious frequency.

And another benefit is that it covers a lot of my face. Over the last two years, I've spent nothing on lipstick and find that masks are a fab way of disguising a double chin and sagging jowls. But what I love most about them is that whenever I've been wearing one, when it comes time to remove it, I have what I like to call *MDKM – My Dr Kildare Moment!* I might just be exiting the Co-op, but in my mind, I'm leaving an operating theatre after completing a procedure, so complex, no other surgeon in the land could even attempt it. As I step away from the table, the assisting doctors and nurses break into spontaneous applause which I acknowledge with a modest head shake, a self-deprecating wave, and the humble smile of a medical megastar. In that moment, I'm a hero in my own headspace and it feels amazing – so, long may mask culture reign!

Of course, there were other things that floated my boat. When it all kicked off, there was a very real sense of shared purpose; individuals began to connect, becoming a collective force for good, to keep one another safe, to feed our communities, to be better, more caring neighbours.

There was Nature; the dawn chorus, undiluted by the rumble of rush hours, was gloriously deafening, and foxes and goats prowled the streets in the daytime. I discovered our local farm shop which, as well as tasty fresh produce, also makes the best banana milkshakes and cooked breakfasts in Swansea, all served on a covered terrace that overlooks a field of sleepy sheep.

I embraced bra-less living, releasing my ladies, to swing low and

liberated, enjoying my mammary mutiny after almost forty years of M&S constraint; the only downside was the need to choose shirts with care, a weightier fabric required to conceal any perky nipple action caused by fluctuating temperatures.

And remember those photos of cities that were all over Twitter, showing the dramatic reduction in air pollution after a few weeks of lockdowns? They brought hope, and clearly illustrated ways we could reduce, or even reverse, the effects of global warming.

Then there was the clapping for the NHS; those Thursday nights when you stood outside, beating hell out of a frying pan with a wooden spoon, or banging saucepan lids together like cymbals. The very first time we did it, it certainly packed a massive emotional punch. I had tears rolling down my cheeks and genuinely felt the meaning of the 'We're all in this together' mantra. It was an uplifting and poignant two minutes – but being brutally honest, it did begin to pall a little and, in the final couple of weeks, I found myself doing it for form's sake, and to stop Lynda (next door down), bitching about me.

So, though this pandemic has been a most devastating and life-changing phenomenon, it's certainly shown me how to find little chinks of light during the darkest of times. Plus, it demonstrated – at least, until Dominic Cummings took his Barnard Castle eye test drive – the power of a united populace to realise real beneficial change. I wonder if that's something we can ever achieve again. As I don my FFP2 and rose-tinted, utopian glasses, I really bloody hope so.