

An evening with Damian Barr



Edinburgh Central Library hosted Damian Barr, author of the memoir 'Maggie and Me', in conversation with Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh earlier this week.

Richard Holloway opened the evening, describing Damian's book as 'beautiful, moving and funny.' It is the story of Damian's childhood, and of how Mrs Thatcher and her policies coloured his early life – but it is also the story of a young boy growing up in the shadow of Ravenscraig, child of a 'mixed marriage' (his mother is Catholic, his father Protestant) in a part of Scotland where these things matter, a marriage that ultimately fell apart, leaving Damian and his siblings at the mercy of a violent, abusive stepfather. Meanwhile, his father took up with 'Mary the Canary' an auxiliary nurse and country and western singer, a woman whom his mother described as a 'whore's handbag.'

Damian vividly remembers the day his mother left home, taking him and his sister with her. In a grim and empty flat, they huddled together watching the news on a portable TV (back at home, his father had retained the colour set.) The news on every channel was the same: it was the night that the IRA bombed the Brighton hotel at which the Conservative party conference was taking place. Feeling almost sorry for the indomitable Mrs T, Damian soon realised that in his home the only acceptable emotion was hate – 'Shit doesn't burn, Maggie won't,' said his mother, and young Damian was amazed to learn that when he – more out of conformity than true feeling – called the Iron Lady a bitch, he didn't get in trouble:

'I'm allowed to swear about Maggie, that's how bad she is.'

Terrified of his appalling stepfather, Damian spent more and more time away from home – at his then girlfriend's house, in

the local library, or even with various evangelical Christian groups. The current campaigns to save our libraries may talk about 'life enhancement' and other middle-class ideals, but the teenage Barr saw them more as safe, warm places where no-one was trying to kill him.

Sectarianism was a part of Barr's childhood, although neither of his parents were interested in its prime focus, football. Constantly taunted about his parents' religions, and asked which side he was on, he was told by his mother to reply 'I support my legs and my legs support me'. It didn't work. As a child, he thought the Orange marches exciting; as an adult he sees them as a national disgrace.

Eventually, with the help and support of two of his teachers (who even bought him towels and crockery to take to university), Damian got away from Lanarkshire and, via Edinburgh, Lancaster and Texas, became a successful London journalist – he now also runs a celebrated literary salon in St Pancras, hosting the likes of Armistead Maupin, Patrick Gale and Kirsty Wark.

✘ Damian came out some years ago, and now says that he always knew he was 'different.' He lives in Brighton, but explains that even this famously liberal town is sometimes a focus of homophobia – the English Defence League will march through it next weekend. On the subject of gay rights, he says that although things seem to be ever-improving in the UK, there is no room for complacency – it is all too easy for prejudice and bigotry to reassert themselves, and it is essential to remember what is happening to gay people in places like Uganda. Richard Holloway calls them 'former colonies to which the UK exported its homophobia together with a Biblical justification', but Barr says he is heartened by the Scottish Government's agreement to accept gay people from these countries as refugees. He has recently married his long-term partner. Of his own wedding, Barr says that he felt a physical surge of love coming towards him as he entered the room in

which the ceremony was held.

Barr's book has been read (by him – though he had to audition for the part) on Radio 4 and is now to be serialised for television. Next week he will be touring the US and Canada. He was delighted when an audience member told him that Armistead Maupin had recommended 'Maggie and Me' as a book to give to a young gay man living in small town Scotland. The wheel had turned full circle.

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)