

### 3. A Jolly Way to Kill Time

*In this passage, Katie Grant, writing in the Scotsman newspaper in March 2005, gives her views on the advantages and disadvantages of a "Gap Year".*

As the mother of a gap year student, I read with interest extracts of the study "Seeing the World: An Examination of Backpacking as a Global Youth Culture" by Lucy Huxley, a sociologist at Manchester Metropolitan University. Lucy Huxley may be a clever girl, for all I know, but why it took her three years, and doubtless thousands of taxpayers' pounds, to discover that gap year students may go abroad but, once there, hang about mostly with each other, phone home constantly and learn almost nothing about the country to which they have travelled, I do not know. Twenty-four hours in the home of a gap-year student's parents would have shown her, more graphically than any study, what modern gap-yearing is all about.

In the main, it is about pretence: the pretence of independence. The advent of the e-mail has made that pretence increasingly difficult to uphold, but we do it anyway. Since our gap-year daughter is in Italy and unlikely to read this, I will reveal, with a twinge of disloyalty, that scanning back through her emails, I know almost nothing about her life, but an awful lot about her bank account.

Recently, as I travelled on the train between Glasgow and Edinburgh, I found myself sitting behind a group of first-year university students indulging in an exquisite (for the listener) game of one-upmanship over their gap-year travels. In those weary, God-I'm-soooooo-cool-I-can-hardly-speak voices, two young men and a young woman talked about bars they had visited in a country whose name seemed to have escaped them - not that it mattered - and how difficult it was to manage a hangover when the temperature was 35C. They laughed, again in their soooo-cool way, about vomiting in the street of a town (un-named) among people (un-named) who were "really soooo sweet".

Then they tried to outdo each other's tales of discomfort. I am sure they thought all their fellow passengers were suitably impressed by their gappie sophistication. Sadly, we were too polite to disabuse them.

These young people illustrated only too clearly that, for most young adults, gap years have become nothing more than a jolly way to kill time. Nowadays, although gappies still return home with that oddly endearing kind of youthful arrogance that declares them to have been there, done that, as if that settled the matter, in fact, their year out no longer generates any real knowledge about anything, as the path most of them have trodden is well-beaten and they mostly hang out with each other.

It is claimed that students have a more productive time if they go to countries on organised placements. But whereas this has some advantages, if only to stop gap-year students wandering pointlessly from bar to beach and back, it still does not quite produce the independence of spirit, or the ability to cope with the unexpected or the severance from the familiar that the gap year should ideally be about. If a gap-year student's greatest achievement is to have followed the advice of some group leader on a pre-packaged expedition to a specially-made jungle camp, or to have successfully spent some months essentially playing at being a teacher in a third-world village, all arranged through organisations such as Gap Activity Projects, they will have had a wonderful time, and may even have learned a skill or two, but it is hardly the stuff from which heroes are made.

It would be unfair to tar all gappies with the same brush - some do use their time productively - but it seems to me that gap years have forfeited any claim to be an essential part of the maturing process. For middle-class British students, the best that can be said is that a gap year begins, very gently, to wean them away from the culture of the risk assessment exercise and the health and safety checklist that has cosseted them all their lives so far. Though insured to the last strand of designer-straightened hair, gap-year students must, I hope, take at least a smidgen more responsibility for themselves than they did in their school sixth form.

I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, however. If, for middle-class English gappies, far from teaching them how to combat loneliness and homesickness or opening their ears and eyes to other cultures, the gap year has become little more than an early introduction to corporate bonding, where the only lesson learned is how much they drink under a baking sun, there are others who would benefit hugely.

When I was at Glasgow University (graduated 1997), far too many of my fellow students had scarcely been beyond the end of the road. The Scottish system, which sees students finishing school one term and beginning "yooni" the next, in effect simply swapping the classroom for the lecture hall while still living at home and being looked after by their mothers, is as grim a recipe for parochialism of outlook as you could devise.

There are, I know, good financial reasons for this arrangement, particularly with the four year Scottish honours degree system. But it sets such a limit on the student's outlook on the world that it should be discouraged. University should be a faintly alarming experience. It should see students feeling, occasionally, that they have leaped out of a plane without a parachute. If Scottish students cannot afford to live away from home during their university careers, a pre-university gap year, however pre-packaged, might provide some useful shock therapy. Moreover, if more Scottish

students took a gap year, university dropout rates - currently rising - would drop, since those shovelled into the university system as statistical cannon fodder would probably realise, as their horizons broadened, that "yooni" was not from them and find something else to do.

So while Lucy Huxley's study does prove something - that modern gap years lack a good shot of adrenalin, with spoon-feeding preferred to self-reliance - the gap year theory is still a good one, even if the practice has gone soft.

## 4. Friends Reunited

*The website "Friends Reunited" became very popular in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It allows people to make contact with former classmates from school and to exchange information with them.*

*The passage below, which appeared in the Herald newspaper in January 2003, is by Melanie Reid, at that time a regular writer of "opinion" pieces for that paper. Read the passage straight through in order to get a general grasp of Reid's attitude to the website and the people who use it.*

The moment you log on to the Friends Reunited website, as an estimated 15000-20000 people do every day, you embark on a strange kind of anthropology: a journey into your own past. There you will find people whose names you vaguely recognise, and encounter long-forgotten memories: whiffs of floor polish or mouldy hockey boots; the slam of desk lids. There, among the ghosts of your school days, you will find a simplicity and a certainty about who you once were.

If ever anyone wanted proof that nostalgia sells, Friends Reunited is it. The website, which now has eight million subscribers, has been the phenomenon of internet-age Britain. With more members than there are trade unionists, and fast catching up with the Automobile Association's 12 million members, Friends Reunited has become one of the biggest organisations in the country in just over two years.

Like all hugely successful ideas, it couldn't have been simpler: offer a national message board for old school friends who may not have seen each other for 20 years or more. Now 45,000 schools are listed, and anyone can log on, read about other people, post an update on their own lives, and for a small fee, make contact.

Most people are happy just to chat about themselves. The website's "success board" and "school memories" lists are filled with enthusiastic stories, happy events, self-conscious jokes (and a plethora of exclamation marks). "I had a wonderful time at both reunions, and would like to invite anyone from the class of 1964 to get in touch." "A very old and close friend of mine found me through your website. We lost touch 20 years ago." "Miss Greaves - we nailed a rotten kipper under her desk and she took hours to find it!!!" "We played American skipping which was with elastic bands joined together: does anyone remember that?"

Friends Reunited has a compulsive quality: it defies human nature to log on and then not to peek at the list of your own contemporaries. So it was that, in researching this

piece, I was unable to resist opening a door to my past to find an entry from a small boy I once carried aloft in piggyback fights at primary school, whose entry is fairly typical of a million others: "Married for 20 years (to the same person!). Two daughters 12 and 9 (late starter!). Still living in town (really boring!). Still playing rugby (bloody mad!!). I am a maths teacher (really bloody mad!!!!)."

You can see what I mean about the exclamation marks. Read between the lines and you perceive a decent, self-deprecating man who, for all his self-consciousness about doing it, can't help reaching out into the ether to see what the past can offer him. He's needy. He's fishing for who knows what: camaraderie, recognition, excitement, adventure. There are millions like him. Friends Reunited is as sad, trite, silly, nosey, mundane, and boastful as it is sweet, warm, life-enhancing, diverse and poignant. It is a mirror held up to our lives.

It succeeds because it taps into the world of school, the ultimate shared experience. But I suspect the unconscious brilliance of the website is what it says about contemporary society. It is, above all, a thing of its time. Children who grew up in gentler, securer times are now adults grappling with a difficult world. Communities which used to be tight are now scattered. This is an age of mobility: marital, social, and geographical. People are widely dispersed and frequently estranged from their roots.

Take it to the extreme, and Friends Reunited symbolises the amount of chronic loneliness that exists as a result. This is a competitive, high-speed, relentless age. We don't have time or opportunity to find people, or talk to them, or develop friendships: no wonder we love a website, bathed in the warm light of nostalgia, which does it for us. It is, in its spectacularly simple way, pub, club, network, professional association, singles night, missing person's bureau, and dating agency all rolled into one.

As dating agency it has led to many romances - but it has already gained infamy as a breaker of marriages. In case after case, reunions provoked by the website have led to steamy affairs between adults desperate to rekindle the spark of youth. Unconsummated teenage romances have exploded into life again, with dire consequences. After my own ghastly 25<sup>th</sup> school reunion, which took place shortly before Friends Reunited started, there was a subsequent outbreak of sexual liaisons between all kinds of highly respectable married lawyers and accountants and executives; and to my knowledge at least one divorce resulted from it.

But all this just adds to the emptiness that underpins Friends Reunited once you get beyond the essential fascination. You make contact with people you were once at school with. You exchange names, e-mails, and career stories. Then what? You will come to realise that the expectation of meeting these people again was far more pleasurable

than the reality. Slowly it dawns on you that the reason you didn't keep in touch with them in the first place was because you had nothing in common with them; and there is no earthly reason why you should feel any closer to them now 20 years have passed. Once you have exchanged life stories, and gained recognition for your career achievements, shared a few old jokes about teachers, and showed them pictures of your children, then very often there is little else to say. The only half-decent thing left to do is that refuge of the dead relationship: the Christmas card which says "Must see you this year" and means the opposite.

Everything is nicer in the past. Safer. It is human nature to seek comfort and reassurance there. Friends Reunited can be seen as wish fulfilment for millions of 30 and 40 and 50 somethings who feel their lives have not turned out to be quite as they hoped. It speaks of times when things were simpler, easier, sexier, happier. It is, perhaps, a new version of Peter Pan for a new century.

## 5. TV Soaps

*The book TV soaps by Richard Kilborn, published in 1992, is an academic study of the construction and enduring appeal of Soap Operas on TV. In this extract from the opening chapter, the writer looks at various attitudes to their popularity and tries to find some reasons for it.*

*Read the passage straight through to establish Kilborn's views and the attitudes he takes to others' points of view.*

About the popularity of television soaps there can be no doubt. As a topic of everyday conversation in home, office, or classroom, talk about the latest twist in a story-line or a momentous event in the life of a well-known soap character provides a rich source for constant and enthusiastic conjecture.

Many reasons have been advanced to explain the continuing - and some would say rather alarming - fascination that soaps have for such a large number, but one of the most persuasive is that they allow particularly strong bonds to develop between characters and audience. These bonds sometimes become so strong that some viewers feel personally implicated in what happens in the lives of these characters; to the extent that an attempt by the production team to kill off certain characters is often met with vigorous audience protest. What seems to happen is that over a period of time viewers regard soap characters, or even the whole programme, as having moved into the public domain.

Various explanations have been offered for the tenacity with which viewers cling to or identify with characters in soaps. One of those frequently advanced is that audiences find it possible to relate to these fictional creations in ways often denied them in their real-life relationships. It is almost as if - in an age where an increasing number of people have lost that sustaining sense of belonging to a community, a neighbourhood or even a family group - the possibility of regular involvement in the lives and affairs of a fictional group or community can be a very attractive one. Psychologists might even claim that such ongoing attachment can be positive beneficial, as it fulfils a compensatory function.

In spite of the evident pleasure which soaps bring to so many viewers on such a regular basis, there have been no small number of people who have been only too ready to pour scorn on what they see as a highly dubious phenomenon. Such critics regard soaps as representing some of the worst excesses of popular television and take exception to what they perceive to be a particularly addictive and mindless form of entertainment. For those who take this view, soaps are simply a waste of time, mere "chewing gum for

the eyes", not particularly offensive in themselves, but guilty of diverting viewers from more challenging and intellectually stimulating types of cultural activity.

In addition to those who take this frankly elitist approach, there are others who believe that soaps can be a positively harmful, if not corrupting, influence. Consumers of certain soaps will - according to these self-appointed moral watchdogs - be tempted to model their own behaviour on the words and deeds of some of the fictional characters they regularly encounter. The argument is that since what is heard and seen in soaps often falls far short of being exemplary or inspiring, who can be surprised if we witness in real life an increasing amount of violent and anti-social, if not downright criminal, behaviour.

Small wonder - in view of the generally low esteem in which soaps are held - that over the years a number of quite potent myths have emerged about what watching soaps can do to you. People have been made to feel that a long-term commitment to their favourite soap opera was equivalent to a dangerous addiction. The result has been that for some viewers an innocent and pleasurable activity, in which there is a high degree of emotional involvement, has become tinged with distinctly guilty feelings. As a consequence of this, many people have not always felt able to admit the pleasures they gain from soaps, for fear that friends and neighbours would think less of them for wasting their time on such trivia.

Attempting to pinpoint the particular pleasures which soap-watching can provide is not an easy task, but based on the findings of viewer surveys, one can begin to establish certain broad categories. First, and possibly foremost, there is the pleasure of continuing involvement, the anticipation that at a set time and on a regular basis one will be invited into a world about which one has acquired - often over a long period of time - a considerable amount of pleasure. The contours of the soap opera world become in many ways as familiar as those which constitute one's everyday reality. The characters who play major roles in this fictional world are thus able to become the equivalent of friends or acquaintances. In fact some viewers will conduct imaginary conversations with these characters at times when they need comfort or advice, or even resort to writing to them when the character needs to be warned that something untoward is about to happen. All this is proof of the extent to which soaps can tap into people's imaginative and emotional lives and of the vicarious pleasure or pain which viewers can experience as a result of their long-term involvement with characters.

If one of the pleasures of soap watching derives from a strong sense of involvement, a further source of enjoyment is the endless speculation which a serial encourages among its followers. Most fictional narratives are organised in order to promote feelings of expectation or tension, but soaps are particularly adept at stimulating many forms of



conjecture. How will a character respond when he or she is given a piece of news to which we, as viewers, are already privy? How long will it be before the character X finds out about Y's infidelity? And what chance does Z have of ever fully recovering from that blow on the head which has led to such severe amnesia? Questions such as these form recurrent components of soap narratives and the promise that next week's episode will go some way to resolving these uncertainties is part of the unwritten contract between the producers and the audience. This is the very heart of soaps' continuing fascination.