

WARMINING

live culture

Ode to a perfect Fry-up

Stephen Fry is a national treasure. Possessed of a brilliant mind, a natural wit and a passion for words, he has the world eating out of his hand. How could a man like this possibly be sad?



Kate Stein
Culture Editor

CELEBRATED for his wit and charm, Stephen Fry is everyone's perfect dinner party guest. Comedian, successful novelist, star of the stage, small screen and film, Fry has tried his hand at just about everything. He's a real life Renaissance man whose knowledge of the classics through to contemporary culture is pretty staggering.

As prolific as Picasso, Fry is a huge creative force in this country, forever churning out brilliant books, plays, films, poems and fabulous quotes. ("I get an urge, like a pregnant elephant, to go away and give birth to a book").

Many of you will remember him as the hilarious Lord Melchett in the 80s cult comedy show *Blackadder* or as the serene Jeeves on TV's *Jeeves and Wooster*. Maybe you've read his best selling novel, *The Hippopotamus*, or watch his renowned intellect in action

when he hosts his popular quiz show, *QI*. Stephen Fry is certainly a ubiquitous figure in our lives. He's recently finished recording the audiotape for the seventh and final book in the *Harry Potter* series. Rumour has it he's one of just five people in the world to know the ending of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

On paper he seems to have it all, but despite his dazzling CV Stephen Fry has struggled with a mild form of bipolar disorder (manic depression) for most of his life. Twelve years ago he suffered a nervous breakdown and walked out on a West End play in which he had the starring role. He subsequently went missing for several days, coming very close to committing suicide. Thankfully he abandoned the idea and fled from England by ferry, eventually resurfacing in Belgium. Last Christmas, Fry spoke publicly about his experience of living with mental illness and presented a BBC2 documentary, *Stephen Fry: The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive*.

Stephen Fry was once described as "a man with a brain the size of Kent" in an interview with Michael Parkinson. I think Parky got it wrong. I would have compared his brain to Sussex, not Kent. For a start, Sussex is much more sprawling and diverse than Kent and I assure you the size of Mr Fry's brain should not be underestimated. Both regions may be crammed full of beautiful, picturesque English countryside but Sussex has more layers. For a start, it has Brighton, probably the most buzzing, liberated and gay friendly town in Britain. It also has Beachy Head, the beautiful but notorious suicide cliffs where many sad and lonely people - including my mum's brother - have taken their own lives. Like many great brains, Fry has an edge (excuse the pun) and I believe that Kent, the 'garden of England', is too neat, too prissy, too... *English* to describe such a complex character. I had the very good fortune of meeting Stephen Fry recently and I discovered to my delight that his amazing brain, which has become almost a national treasure in itself, is not for the quaint-hearted.

People see you as being the 'Best of British'. How do you feel about being considered quintessentially English?

I'm possibly quint but I'm not sure I'm essential! I find it rather amusing that people view me like that, especially since I'm only half English. My mother's side of the family are all Hungarian Jews. There's no logic behind it; a welder in Rotherham could be twice as English as me. It's probably got something to do with the fact that people assume that my vocal cords are made out of tweed.

You are seen by many as an ideal dinner party guest, but which people, dead or alive, would you like to invite to a dinner party and why?

It's hard to avoid the clichés - how could one turn down Oscar Wilde, Winston Churchill or



Stephen Fry entertains starstruck Culture Editor Kate in his *QI* dressing room

Dorothy Parker? Shakespeare would also be extraordinarily good fun. I guess people want wit at a dinner table but also something else. In a way you want neutral people. There are people that I admire enormously but because I would be

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slightly too in awe, they wouldn't be top of my dinner party list. Nelson Mandela, for example - I'd want to talk to him about Robin Island and the day he walked out. But the poor man wouldn't want to be quizzed about that over dinner!

In your autobiography and previous interviews, you have often mentioned your grandfather, whom you adored as a child. Would you want him at the dinner table?

Yes, that's good thinking. He was a marvellous Eastern European Jew. He taught me how to be emotional about food

and to laugh in delight at things. My mother always said I reminded her of him. That side of my family were very un-English. They were warm and affectionate, open and loud, they talked about food in a way that the English would never

do. We've got a lot of catching up to do when it comes to food and by extension the pleasures of life. I learnt from them that pleasure is not just a right but a duty.

I guess you threw a spanner in the works by airing your laundry in your documentary on mental illness. That's not very English!

Perhaps to the embarrassment of those close to me, there has always been an oddly confessional side of my personality. Although saying that, interviewers always say that I hold something back. Being confes-

sional in public reminds me of Wilde's paradox of the mask. He famously said, "Only shallow people don't judge by appearances," meaning that the mask becomes the truth of a person. It's a bit like scar tissue, that might once have been there to cover up a wound, but actually becomes the essence of who we are.

You are an extremely high-achieving individual. Some might argue that a true manic depressive could not achieve so much. How does your condition manifest itself?

I was diagnosed with cyclothymia (also called 'bipolar light' by the Americans!), which I think is pretty accurate. I'm not rapid-cycling by any means. Perhaps every seven years, I fall into a deep depression. But this period is so black that it really is the worst kind of suffering. Suicidal thoughts crowd in all the time and it takes all my self control to carry on living. The only thing that stops me is the image of my mother's face being told that I'd killed myself. At the time, this image doesn't comfort me though, I think 'Bloody bitch! I'm hanging on just so I don't upset her!'

Fry's Quintessential Quotes

On being gay: "I suppose it all began when I came out of the womb. I looked back up at my mother and thought to myself, 'That's the last time I'm going up one of those'."

"Having a great intellect is no path to being happy."

"I don't need you to remind me of my age. I have a bladder to do that for me."

"I don't watch television, I think it destroys the art of talking about oneself."

"Many people would no more think of entering journalism than the sewage business - which at least does us all some good."

"Old Professors never die, they just lose their faculties."



How long do these depressions last and when do you get the highs?

The blackest times last for about two weeks to a month. They don't go away suddenly but one day you can do something you couldn't do the day before, such as answer a letter or go to the shops. You start to pick up the pieces and gradually remove that awful suffocating blackness. As for the highs, by most people's standards I'm probably quite manic all the time. I've certainly been in a phase for the last four months where I've got by with hardly any sleep. Saying that, I haven't had too many of those ridiculous shopping sprees recently.

How did you feel about the impressive public response to your documentary on manic depression?

I was delighted. The BBC had not anticipated such a response. They considered it part of their worthy role in the learning section and thought no one would actually watch it. I spoke to a GP recently; he said, "I'm sure I've prescribed people antidepressants because they've presented depressed without even bothering to ask them whether they're sometimes the opposite. So I've treated them as bipolar, rather than bipolar." If that's one thing that happens as result of the program- that doctors start to ask those questions ("Do you feel manic sometimes?") - I'm pleased.

Why have you never taken medication for your condition?

I guess I'm scared of losing that part of the mind that is hardest to access, the creative part, that you can't be sure is there every morning. Recently I did an after-dinner speech in front of an audience that included Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The thing that makes you nervous is not trusting that you can do it. I plan in my head and I may have jotted a couple of things down but when I stand up I never use notes. Almost until I've stood up I don't know whether I can. It comes from that part of us that is unteachable. It's something you discover you can do and as a result you feel it may just go away. That is my true deep-seated fear and why I don't take medication.

Do you worry about the next black period?

It does worry me. There is a dark knot of cloud on the horizon that is the possibility that I won't take it and I'll do away with myself. And that would just be so stupid. When I look at it now it seems inconceivable, but I do know that plenty of

times I really have been in a state where it has been so close. I've planned it out in my head and I just manage to hold back. That, in the end, is the fundamental that one wants to escape from.

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The WHO says that one in four people will be severely depressed in the 21st century. Do you think that we have medicalised sadness?

When people talk about the medicalisation of sadness, they're really saying there's a pharmaceuticalisation of sadness. Sometimes it seems easier to throw drugs at a problem. After all, everyone knows how difficult it is to get people to change their lifestyles. This problem is especially relevant in the HIV/AIDS crisis. On the one hand, we know an astounding amount about the human immune system, having developed these incredibly complex anti-viral drugs that can target viruses at such a precise level. But can we change human behaviour? Can you stop people going to bed with one another and somehow not using a condom? Can you make someone adhere to treatment? We can do these complicated scientific things that are nothing short of miraculous and yet we can't do the commonsensical stuff - we can't sort out the basics.

How would you like psychiatry to progress in terms of its treatment of mood disorders?

All the evidence

seems to point to a holistic approach. Talking therapy and various physical approaches, including pharmaceutical and endocrine treatments, all work better together than any does

on its own. We need to be open to theories of the mind and these are as much a question of philosophy as they are of psychiatry. Recent advances in technology such as MRI have opened up our understanding of

good student...but had a fantastic time! My advice to young people trying to find their way in life is to be open to new experiences. Find out who you are and prove who you are to the world.

Stephen Fry was everything I wanted him to be and much, much more. It's wonderful to meet someone who you admire and for them to turn out so incredibly nice. They say 'never meet your heroes', but I met mine and he didn't let me down. He was full of interesting ideas and engaging, funny insights whilst all the time he made me feel totally at ease. I could spend hours rattling off a list of his salient qualities but I won't bore you. Instead I'll leave you with a quote I stumbled across in which Fry reflects on his hero, Oscar Wilde. As I read it, I couldn't help thinking how easily it could have been written about Fry himself. Perhaps it's a cop-out, nicking his words, but I can't resist because the following description sums up *exactly* how I felt after meeting Stephen Fry:

'He caused a kind of devotion where everyone, who sat around a dinner table with him, agreed that when you got up you felt ten feet tall. You thought he was brilliant, but he didn't make you feel less brilliant. It was the kind of brilliance that can change the colours of things, and make the world suddenly look like a more remarkable place.'

the electrical and chemical energies inside the brain. But there is just so much more we can learn about the brain. And technology can drive it.

You often talk about your love of technology. What's your favourite gadget at the moment?

I have the great good fortune to be friends with the chief designer of Apple. He let me play with the new Iphone last month. It made me so happy. Now he's an exceptionally creative person; he's recognised that the customer should have an emotional relationship with the thing they use, especially if it's something they use every-day. It is right that an Ipod feels good in the hand, its right that it looks lovely, it should delight you, it should give you pleasure.

What were you like as a student?

In the beginning I worked hard. I got a scholarship to Cambridge and I wanted very much to be an academic. At the end of my first year I thought I would stay on, do a PhD and eventually become a don. Then I met Hugh [Laurie] and Emma [Thompson] and caught the acting bug, particularly the comedy bug, and I became a less

Eight facts we bet you didn't know about Stephen Fry...

Since 2003, Fry has hosted the brainy quiz show *QI* where guests are rewarded for being "Quite Interesting" rather than correctly answering questions.

He drives a former London Taxi when out and about in London.

A 15-year-old Fry was expelled from Uppingham School for stealing money from matron.

At 17, he went on a stolen credit card spree and as a result spent three months in Pucklechurch Prison on grounds of fraud.

The University of Dundee named their Students' Association bar after his most famous novel ("The Liar Bar").

He loves the word 'germs' and hates the word 'energy' ("when it is used in a meaningless, new-age sort of way, as in 'positive energy' and all that arse-wallop").

PG Woodhouse novels, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore tapes, Fawley Towers and Alan Partridge all make him laugh...a lot.

Fry was Liza Tarbuck's 'phone a friend' on celebrity Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? He provided the correct answer before even being given the four options.

