



Home
News
Sport
Business
Politics
► **Features**
Going Out

LIVE UPDATES

News
Sport

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News to your PDA
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Picture archive
Help & FAQs
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Crosswords
The Diary
Local news
Local weather
Fantasy Football
Week in photos
Today's page 1

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The tool kit for teenagers

BETH PEARSON

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GOING to meet an anthropologist at King's College, Cambridge, makes one very aware of simultaneously being a working-class girl from the north east of Scotland, a journalist living in Glasgow and the only person of any background wearing heels in the vicinity. The lack of signposting seems to imply that those who are meant to know where certain rooms are, will. A groundsman points the way, then a cleaner tells me not to knock on the outer, felted door of his office because he won't hear, and to just walk in. When I do, Alan Macfarlane offers green tea and chats about the pre-sales of his new book, *Letters For Lily*. He appeared on Radio 4's *Midweek* the previous day and, during the programme, the book was propelled on to Amazon's bestsellers list. This is uncharted territory for Macfarlane, whose work is usually sold in academic bookshops and reviewed by his peers. But then *Letters To Lily*, too, is unlike anything he has done before. It's a series of letters written for his seven-year-old granddaughter, Lily, which tackle issues related to marriage, democracy, war, education, sex and work (Lily is intended to read the book when she reaches 17).

"The oddness of this book is that it asks those childlike questions of 'why?'" he says.

"When I was at the end of my schooling, I knew that I was going to stop asking questions, so I kept myself young. I read fairy stories and Tolkien and slowed down my maturity so I wouldn't have all those questions destroyed too quickly.

"The rest of my life has been trying to answer them. For 20 or 30 years I had no answers, but I began to have possible answers to some of them."

Macfarlane's academic work has ranged from population studies to a seminal work on English individualism. "Each segment of my work has been specialised, so there has been a book on population problems, tea, glass, family life, marriage and love, but, in a sense, these are 15 windows into central things," he explains. "The way to solve very large questions, as Descartes pointed out, is to break them into bits and do it one by one, then bring it together. That's how knowledge proceeds in our society because there is so much knowledge you have to dig very small holes.

"Many people go on digging small holes and end their life with lots of little holes that aren't connected. I had this idea that the holes were connected to each other and that, one day, maybe I'd be able to show how."

After the interview has ended, he picks out some of his works and arranges them on his desk. There's historical works on Britain that sit in a line, a row on Nepal and a couple of oddities: his histories of glass and tea. He places a copy of *Letters To Lily* in a corner of the desk. The academic books are like tributaries running down to *Letters To Lily*, he says.

Given its sources, the book's likely to surprise its readers. It is in part anthropological, philosophical and historical and, as such, places westerners in the minority. Teenagers feeling the full force of their individuality will learn that this isn't something they just have, but something created by this society. If they were born into a different society, their identity may be subsumed by the family. They will learn that morality is complex and that democracies do not just happen. Macfarlane believes young people are ready to learn these things, though he acknowledges the view of Evans-Pritchard – that anthropology is too destabilising a subject for people who are already dealing with puberty and finding out who they are and why.

"It leads you to question everything you take as natural," he says. "You realise everything about you is not given by nature or God, it's been invented by someone else fairly recently. Evans-Pritchard's view was that it's bad enough to become an adult without everything else being thrown into confusion.

"Children are more mature now. People tended to grow up in homogeneous, probably white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant/Catholic groupings and they would encounter a degree of otherness, but not much. That has changed entirely. We're in the middle of thousands of cultures and traditions. That being the case, anthropology says, 'they may wear funny clothes and eat funny food but let's find out why they do it' and you usually find it's for the same reason we wear funny clothes and eat funny food."

Indeed, Macfarlane believes teenagers may be at the ideal age for *Letters To Lily* because they have their own sense of otherness. "They're searching for answers and all they have to go on is their experience," he says. "I know at the age of 17/18, I realised the world was full of pain. I was searching for answers while growing unhappier about the answers that had been given. So, I was very open to a book like this, I would have

ALISON ROWAT



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ENTERTAINMENT

The Herald Going Out



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loved one. It's a sort of tool kit of ways of thinking about problems. It does not have answers, it suggests where to look, what other people have found and what questions you might ask."

As well as prompting questions, however, Macfarlane has been on the receiving end of questions and sympathises with parents and grandparents who find their replies never quench children's thirst. "Why children go on asking 'why?' is that the answers being given to them aren't the kind of answers they want," he says. "In desperation, the parent or grandparent can say, 'I don't know'. A better strategy is to say 'my answers are not satisfying you. Let's discuss what kind of answer would satisfy you. You ask me, for example, why there's a war in Iraq, if I tell you in terms of politics, that might not interest you. Would you like to know in terms of personalities or history or a religious explanation?'"

He hasn't had to use this method on Lily; he knows she likes practical explanations. He imagines she sees him as "on the surface an ancient individual, but, behind it, we're in this imagined landscape". Lily is proud of the book and has used it to try to bribe money for a new Bratz doll out of her grandfather. It will be another decade before she reads the book and decides what she thinks of it, but its author is content that his work is done. "In some ways, each letter could expand into other problems," he says. "On the other hand, I feel at rest. This is as far as I'm going to get."

- Letters To Lily, Profile, £14.99, is out this week. Find out more at www.alanmacfarlane.com or the www.letters2lily.com chat room.

What is love? and other big questions

In Letters to Lily, Alan Macfarlane attempts to tackle the questions children and teenagers ask. This is a selection of his advice.

What is love?

Romantic love gives meaning in an otherwise cold world. It promises that fusion with another human which is so lacking in lonely crowds of autonomous individuals.

Why does God allow bad things to happen?

One suggestion is that God, like a loving parent who gives his children the exercise of free will, has to allow them to make mistakes and hence to suffer. God made us a wonderful world in which we can make good and bad choices, and the latter can lead us into dangerous situations. Pain is part of being human and something that constantly asks us to wonder, with the philosopher Nietzsche, "Is man one of God's blunders or is God one of man's blunders?"

What is a good friend?

The essence of friendship is equality. It must also be based on liking, mutual interest and shared feelings and thoughts. I have heard people say that they love their parents (or their brothers and sisters) but do not really like them much. This is quite possible and in the end, both are important.

Is famine inevitable?

It is not enough just to improve agriculture or education or to provide political stability or to minimise malaria and Aids. The system has to be altered; open politics, security of property, these and many other assurances are needed. This is not easy when much of the wealth and attention of the world is devoted to attacking supposed terrorism or absorbed in making weapons for the lucrative arms trade.

Is there hope for the world?

We will dig away furiously to try to escape the traps we find ourselves in. It is impossible to predict whether these attempts will lead us to new frontiers or into rapid extinction.