



about a boy

Paul Kirkley takes a leap into the unknown as a first-time father

Foul playtime

THE big news of recent weeks is that George has left home and moved into the garden. Well, not entirely – he still reluctantly comes in for meals and to sleep but, other than that, he pretty much wants to be outside from dawn 'til dusk.

Which is fine on a sunny Saturday afternoon, less so at 6.30am on a chilly Tuesday morning. On which point, I'd like to apologise to the neighbours who have to keep waking up to the sight of a sleepy, grumpy, slightly bewildered middle-aged man being led around the garden in a fetching dressing gown, jogging bottoms and work shoes combo (you can laugh, but you'll all be wearing them in six months' time).

And then there are the cats. It's fair to say I am not what you'd call a pet person. In fact, it is just me or is the whole idea of pets just a little bit, you know, weird? I mean, think about it: they're animals. Living in your house, like it's the most natural thing in the world. What's that all about?

But do the neighbourhood cats respect my views? They do not. In fact, they insist on using our lawn as some sort of communal toilet block. And because cat faeces and small children are a toxic mix, I often find myself starting the day scooping up steaming piles of cat poo when, all things considered, I'd really rather be having a coffee and a croissant. And don't even get me started on dogs. Did you know that a single gram of dog waste can contain 23 million fecal coliform bacteria? 23 million. Or that toxocariasis causes partial blindness in more than 100 British children every year?

Despite this, people still merrily go around letting their mutts foul in public parks. But that's okay because, oh look, they're scooping it up. With a plastic bag. You can send the forensics team home – there's absolutely no chance of leaving any trace of bacteria with a clean-up operation as thorough as that. I know what you're thinking: chill out, Howard Hughes; it's not exactly like people are leaving IEDs lying around in children's play areas. But I spend enough of my time dealing with George's business end, thanks very much; I could do without having to clean up after other people's mangy animals as well.

Oh, and while I'm on a roll, one of our neighbours has just bought a new dog. Well, I say dog – it's more like an oversized rat with an attitude problem. And it yaps yaps away all the live-long day, usually reserving its most vociferous protests for the moment when George is finally just about to drop off to sleep. I hate that dog.

The ironic thing is that Captain Yappy is desperate to be let into the house, while George is desperate to go back outside. Maybe if I put the dog in his cot and left him in the neighbour's garden overnight, everyone would be happy and we'd all get some peace and quiet.

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Boni Sones, 56, is a writer and broadcaster with more than 30 years experience in newspapers, radio and television journalism. Currently executive producer of Women's Parliamentary Radio, she received an OBE in January 2009 for services to broadcasting and PR. She has just published two new books: *The Mermaid's Tale* is a collection of stories inspired by her childhood in Sizewell, Suffolk, while *Two Mermaids Together* is a portrait, in prose and poem, of her family, friends and passions. She lives in Newnham, Cambridge, and has three grown-up children.

▶ **I've always felt that turning up as a journalist is a great privilege, because you learn about others.** If you work in a job where you enjoy Monday mornings, it gets you through so much.

▶ **I had a 1950s childhood in an *Upstairs Downstairs* environment.** We were the downstairs – my parents worked for the lord of the manor; my father was a painter and decorator and my mother was a cook. We put on the balls, we made all the food, we did all the creativity.

▶ **My writing process comes from the subconscious.** I never know what I'm going to write – I put my hands on the keyboard and it just happens. And then it's done.

▶ **In "Silly Suffolk", we don't take ourselves seriously.** We laugh at ourselves. That can also be quite constraining: we might think the incomers are too clever by half.

▶ **The oral tradition is alive and well in Suffolk.** It's the joy of the fire, the hearth, the food and the companionship of others. Everything takes place across the kitchen table, and it's therapy for your troubles.

▶ **Sometimes you don't want to tell other people your personal stories.** It was a friend's funeral that prompted me to publish them. I sat and wept and thought, we keep these stories up our sleeves, but the time has come to put it down.

▶ **Death is constantly there.** Growing up on the east coast, with the constant risk of flood, I keep coming back to a refrain: Never talk to the mermaid; blow her a kiss, but don't stop and talk because the mermaid is the sign you will never defeat the power of the sea.

▶ **We got on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* in the early 1960s because, the day they switched the Sizewell Power Station on, the villagers of Sizewell didn't have electricity.**

We all wished the power station wasn't there; we all wished our landscape back.

▶ **I transferred my love of the ocean to the Fens.** That great landscape of the Fens is tremendous in terms of the light and the colours. Strange things happen out there. I don't like the hills of Wales – give me the Fens any day.

▶ **The walk from Cambridge to Ely is one of the wonders of the world.** It's the three kingdoms: the sky, the water and the landscape.

▶ **A few years ago, I wrote a book called *Women in Parliament: The New Suffragettes*.** [Home Secretary] Theresa May has ordered eight copies a month for the past three years – she's a great fan. So I thought that was the end of the project, but the women MPs called me back in and said, will you do something else?

▶ **I had just spotted that you could broadcast through the web without going through a dreary commissioning process that took two years.** So I went back in and booked a committee room to give a presentation. In walked Harriet Harman and half the women in the Cabinet, stayed five minutes and said 'Go away and do it then'. Now we have an audience of 77,000.

▶ **The OBE was a great surprise and a great honour.** I'm just someone who sits in the background who grafts.

▶ **The Queen knew lots about me!** It was an incredible moment, because she had the curiosity of mind to say "I don't quite understand your project, tell me about it". Isn't that impressive?

▶ **Having children is the most constant thing in life.** It is the most worthwhile thing. It's the most reciprocal and loving thing.

Interview: Paul Kirkley

■ *The Mermaid's Tale* and *Two Mermaids Together* are both available from www.wpradio.co.uk.

