Scottish Schools’ Young Writer of the Year 2017
As a 14-year-old girl my immediate reaction to, 'Is there any chance you could be pregnant?' was to deny all knowledge of sexual education and play the innocent little angel face, but my GP saw right through that act and proceeded to do a test anyway. When he revealed the positive result I thought about pleading the immaculate conception or maybe even explaining how he, a medical professional, had definitely done the test wrong.

In the end, I just sat there and stared at a man telling me that I was going to have to inform my parents that their 14-year-old baby was at least 18 weeks pregnant (possibly more). I announced to my (now ex) boyfriend, family, friends and pupil support teacher that I was in fact a grand total of five months pregnant with a little girl and was definitely going to be keeping her.

It took about two weeks for my parents to be able to talk about my 'situation' without crying; about three weeks for my fellow school students to find out my news and for me to have such lovely comments shouted at me in the corridors; about one month and one week for the charming father of my child to decide that he didn't really feel like sticking around that much; about one month and three weeks for bus drivers and grannies in shops (grown men and women) to shout abuse at me; about two months for my friends to stop inviting me out; and about three months (one month early) for her to arrive.
And from the minute I laid eyes on her, I loved her. Everything was wonderful. She was a dream baby. My friends were back with the new title of 'aunties', her father appeared to be as smitten as I was, my parents were proud as punch of their new granddaughter and I couldn't care less what anyone thought of us. Of course, these wonderful things soon began to fall away. The novelty of a newborn wore off. The number of visitors drastically decreased and therefore the constant help and support did too.

Our government pride themselves on the fact that they aim to support all children and keep them safe and happy. In fact, the children's commissioner, Bruce Adamson, claims that he will make sure all children and young people in Scotland get a 'fair deal.' In Scotland, England and Wales you cannot legally be considered an adult until the age of 18. So how can it be that in a situation that involved a 15-year-old and a baby (two people under the age of 18) we were refused help?

Because of my age, I was refused any financial support and any other means of help for the first year of my daughter's life. I, a 15-year-old girl, was abandoned by the government and left to support a child on my own. We claim we care about all children. But is care really care when we fail to provide for those in need and leave not only one, but two children behind?

A few months after giving birth, I returned to school and got a small part-time job. School became not only an essential place for me to go but a place I wanted to go. I was so lucky to have been given such incredible support from my teachers, after being let down by so many others. However, this is not the case for all of us 'teen mums.'

I met a girl at a young mums' group (recently shut down due to lack of government funding) who was in a very similar situation to mine. She was the same age as me and also has a beautiful little girl. She too, had received
judgement from complete strangers and friends and was receiving no help from the government. When she informed her school of her pregnancy, she was politely asked to leave and told to 'apply for college in the future.' As I was listening to her, I realised just how lucky I am to be a pupil at my school.

The fact of the matter is that it is very easy to judge and forget about teenage parents but, believe it or not, we are capable of the same things as middle-aged parents: errors, successes, kindness and love. My life didn't just stop after I created another one. In fact, becoming a parent at such a young age, I believe, made me a much better person. She is my reason to work hard, my reason to finish my studies and to build a better future. Before my daughter, I hated school and couldn't wait to leave. I had no goals or aspirations. I was a nightmare (ask my parents).

When I think back to that afternoon at the doctor's and how my life changed after his pronouncement, I can't believe where I am today: last year of high school, part-time job, applying for university, saving for a new home for me and my daughter.

Yes, I started my own family very early but sometimes plans, no matter what age you are, can take unexpected turns. It was very easy for many people to turn their backs on me and it might have been easier for me just to give up. But I didn't. I didn't because of the support of a few: my family and my school. And yet today there are people in similar situations, struggling to find any support and only finding isolation, vulgar comments and cruel judgements.

This is not a 'fair deal,' it is not 'child care.' This is not the compassion that a properly caring society should extend to its young people when we find ourselves in vulnerable situations.
Joint runner-up
Wallace Dempster
Mallaig High School

The greatest show on earth

Usually I quite like Hugh Jackman. The loveable Aussie has starred in a plethora of memorable films, perhaps not all Oscar worthy, but memorable. But his latest, hope-to-be blockbuster has me annoyed. 'The Greatest Showman' is the story of American politician turned circus owner and general entertainer, P T Barnum. Except it's not.

The real P T Barnum was someone that traded and abused disabled people for entertainment, bought and sold slaves and women to use as props, and made profits from appalling acts of animal cruelty. The film biography, set to be released into the baying crowds on 20 December, is an orgy of self-acceptance, coined with a catchy, I am what I am-esque anthem. Oh, how very 2017.

Gone is the buying and selling of people with disabilities and deformities in favour of a more family appropriate, 'Let's embrace our differences together' ideology; essentially doing what 'Hairspray' did for racism in the 1950s but, instead of 'Let's sing, dance and integrate,' we're gifted with a loving message of self-acceptance.

Most of us know little of the story of P T Barnum. So now follows a history lesson. It's really a pity that the film producers aren't in class today. But, anyway.
Barnum was born in 1810, and from a young age was a natural salesman: selling lottery tickets and liquor to soldiers when only 12 years old. In 1834, the Connecticut local left his political work and moved to New York where he started his career as a showman. His first act was to purchase Joice Heth, an elderly slave who claimed to be 161 and to have nursed George Washington. Barnum bought her for $1,000.

Yes, you can see where this is going. With the profits from Heth he bought Scudder's American Museum in Manhattan where he displayed over 500,000 exhibits including General Tom Thumb, who stood 25 inches tall, and was taught to sing and dance and perform for crowds.

However, the film was inspired by Barnum's 'Greatest Show on Earth,' which was created when he joined forces with circus owners James Bailey and James Hutchinson in 1881. The following year they introduced Jumbo the elephant, forced to do tricks for the audience. I can vaguely hear the soft clump of organic, natural fibre sandals as PETA rally their troops.

But of course, these details will not be in the film. Why? Because they are just that little bit too distasteful for a film, especially at Christmas. But I think that it suggests a much deeper issue, one that has been especially rife over the last year, where people try to distort the brutal facts of history to make it more comfortable to digest. The truth is history is brutal: for hundreds of thousands of years, from the earliest civilisations, to religions, to slavery. Brutal.

Humans have wasted their time killing, raping and enslaving each other, despite being the same species. Trying to live out our miserable existence on the same rock floating through time and space. History acts as a reminder, an insurance policy if you will. It is evolution: from the earliest memories of human existence, we know that eating that berry will make us ill, so we avoid eating it. We learn from it, and change our ways. Or at least that's what should
happen in a lovely hypothetical world where human greed and emotion doesn't get in the way.

Our grease-soaked, school-shooting, Bible-bashing neighbours across the Atlantic have had to answer a similar question this year. Not circus owners but Confederate statues. Our story begins in Charlottesville, Virginia: a surprising start as it's hardly a bastion of political correctness or modern thinking. Earlier in the year, the government decided that the statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee needed to be taken down, much to the displeasure of the conservative right and the strange, orange Oompa Loompa that is the elected leader of the free world. And on this rare occasion I agree with him: the Oompa Loompa, that is.

The cause people like Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson fought for was, no doubt, wrong: slavery and white supremacy were and still are cancers on society that need to be hacked out. But the statues themselves represent not what those people fought for good or bad: they are a reminder, in durable metal; a memory of good or bad times, of good or bad people both as important as one another.

The good people inspire us; the bad make us ache with the memory of things we have changed and need to change. These statues are scars, reminding us of the painful experiences humanity has created, undergone and learned from; and like scars we should embrace them, not cover them up. Embrace the fact that mistakes were made and will constantly be made. We are, after all, human.

Now, of course, anything related to America has to be taken with a pinch of salt, or in their case a massive, diabetes-inducing mountain of sugar, but unfortunately the very same problems are beginning to trickle into our own society. The timid cries especially amongst minorities were suddenly amplified in August when journalist Afua Hirsch wrote an article for the Guardian
explaining why she felt that Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square should be demolished because of his links to slavery.

I disagree. Throughout most of London, memorials are of heroes, people like William Wilberforce who helped to end the Slave Trade, and Nelson's Column acts not as a memorial to the Lord Admiral, but rather a choice. It demonstrates the worst of humanity, a gauge for atrocities today, reminding and warning us of the things we find unpleasant. Whereas memorials of heroes like Wilberforce remind us of how great we can be when we work together to achieve something that seems impossible.

What worries me more is what our generation's history will look like. If we distort and soften the brutal cattle prod of reality then that will become our own history, our legacy to future generations. And how can that be learned from? When we mollycoddle ourselves by hiding our decisions, we can never learn from them. If we try to hide or cover up the ugly truth about what we were, we can never change what we could potentially become. Unlike P T Barnum, history really is the greatest showman on earth.
There is a state where political journalists are threatened for reporting the words and actions of the powerful figures of the day and holding them to account. There is a state where political journalists are advised to attend public meetings accompanied by bodyguards. There is a state where political journalists receive vile abuse from online trolls who disagree with their opinions and call for violent retaliation. There is a state which has experienced all of the above in 2017. That state is Britain.

The recent intimidation of Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC’s political editor, reveals much about the changing nature of political life in Britain today. The explosion of media platforms and networks of instant communication is transforming not only the behaviour of politicians; it is also transforming the treatment of journalists.

In this post-truth age, where public figures are held in low regard and trust in the integrity of politicians has been undermined, a new phenomenon has emerged, the unwavering support given to certain charismatic figures from online communities. Like devotees who remain blind to a guru's failings, they refuse to accept any criticism of their leader and threaten anyone who dares to question their policies or decision-making. In the Twittersphere, trolls can take advantage of their anonymity and say what they want, confident that they will
not be identified or tracked down. They may hide in the virtual Cloud but their comments have real consequences.

The conflict between Ms Kuenssberg and the Corbynistas began following an interview she conducted with Jeremy Corbyn following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. Some of his most fervent supporters felt that Ms Kuenssberg had overstepped the mark in her line of questioning and indeed one formal complaint relating to the BBC’s accuracy and impartiality rules was upheld. The criticism resurfaced during her coverage of the 2016 Labour party leadership contest and a petition calling for her to be sacked reached 35,000 before it was taken down.

Ms Kuenssberg received many threats during the General Election campaign in June 2017 over alleged bias in her reporting of Corbyn’s activities and speeches. A pattern has therefore developed. Just as every major political occasion affords greater exposure to the BBC’s political editor, so it provides another opportunity for Ms Kuenssberg to be abused online in the vilest possible terms.

The relationship between politics and social media is changing all the time. Many politicians have embraced this technology with enthusiasm, enabling them to respond instantly to the concerns of constituents. The number of followers can also give a boost to self-esteem. Many politicians are desperate to be liked and to show themselves to be in touch with the present. Yet it is possible that they have confused their parliamentary majorities with numbers of followers.

Although there may be some overlap between constituents and online followers, the latter are self-selecting, tribal, and unrepresentative of any single real community which will always contain different voices and will always be self-regulating. In the past there has usually been a significant gap between what people think and what they say, social shaming operating as a powerful
disincentive to threatening or abusive language. Social media has removed that filter. From the privacy of a home, anyone can now fire off a derogatory tweet, safe in the knowledge it will be supported by the in-group, unconcerned about the impact it will have on the figure targeted.

The Kuenssberg story also has much to teach us about contemporary attitudes to women in positions of authority. It implies that, for a vocal minority at least, successful women are still legitimate targets for abuse, that women who have broken through the glass ceiling can expect to be treated differently.

It was reported that the shadow chancellor commented: 'She should tell them that John McDonnell will sort them out.' This reaction is dispiriting on several levels. It suggests that it was down to Laura Kuenssberg to respond directly to the cyber-bullies; that she needed a man to sort out the problem; that violence was an acceptable solution. If correctly reported, this reveals more about the old-fashioned attitudes of the shadow chancellor than representing any genuine attempt to offer help.

At a deeper level, Ms Kuenssberg's experience reveals a retreat from reasoned discourse and a return to a more brutal form of political life, where personal abuse and threats of violence are once again viewed as legitimate responses. Modern opinions are formed through social media and online publications. The 'retweet' is rarely a considered action, more often an instant gratification for the need to be recognised and popular.

Admittedly more traditional criticisms have also been raised, implying for example that Ms Kuenssberg and her organisation are not impartial in their reporting of political events. Such tactics undermine her credibility and reputation as a journalist. None of these accusations need be true for them to be effective. But these have always come with the territory of being a high-profile journalist. The vitriolic nature of the present abuse, however, the death-threats and descriptions of violent reprisal, these features are new.
How then should those trolling Laura Kuenssberg be challenged? To threaten them with prosecution is to arouse anxieties around free speech. To request the companies who own the online platforms to reveal the identities of those involved is to contravene current data protection laws. Perhaps the most realistic solution is to implore all commentators to be unanimous in their criticism of the abusers.

There should be no space in modern Britain for this kind of behaviour. It cannot and should not be condoned. It is only when the cyberbullies are challenged by women and men of every political persuasion that the threat may recede. Let us hope that this is the high-water mark in the objectionable and illegal pursuit of female journalists for doing their jobs. Enough.
Joint runner-up
Anoushay Okhai
High School of Dundee

The taste of success

Last year, when tasked with branding and creating a gin, one of the teams on the show 'The Apprentice' chose 'Colony Gin' as the name of their spiced spirit. When one South-Asian candidate criticised the name, the English team leader reiterated the strap line: that the world was going through a period of discovery at the time of the British Empire, when they learned about new spices and flavours in the colonies.

To a team of adult professionals, this was a perfectly legitimate concept. The British did learn about different condiments during their 89-year Raj over India. But to them, this was all that colonisation was: an international tasting, a foreign enrichment as Britain discovered cloves for the very first time. Nothing more.

This complete misinterpretation of colonialism stretches beyond the show. According to a 2014 YouGov poll, 59% of British people are more proud than ashamed of the British Empire, and 49% believe that the colonies are more stable due to British rule. Countless hotels, restaurants, and yes, alcoholic beverages, have been condemned for using colonialism as a marketing point.

Students studying at Oriel College, Oxford, walk under the stony gaze of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, an openly racist colonist of Southern Africa – a statue
that Oxford University resolutely decided against removing. The evidence overwhelmingly points to not merely a hole, but a gaping chasm in the country's knowledge of the Empire, and it is a chasm that badly needs to be filled.

It was not merely spices that the British purloined: it was cotton, diamonds, and ammunition. It was cheap labour, soldiers, and slaves. It was an industrial revolution and a London Underground system funded by the choking of Indian industry, and hundreds of millions of lives; numbers beyond comprehension. So why does a full understanding of colonialism so rarely come to light?

The obvious answer is education. In the 2017 Higher history exam, there was no topic on the British Empire. The BBC information page on Britain's rule of India has no mention of the famine, nor of the violence that took place. In order to learn about the truth of our country's ravaging of nations, one must dig deeper than the public is willing. Whatever education we have on colonialism is simply not enough.

Schools teach us history. My fourth year history classes helped me to learn about the Atlantic slave trade, civil rights, and the black power movement. This inspired me to investigate how these all link to the treatment of African Americans today. Studying Hitler's rise to power and regime ignited my interest in the totalitarian state of Nazi Germany. My point is: without the Scottish education system guiding us through these topics, we would be left with a paltry, fragmented understanding of the KKK and the world wars – and a similar level of misunderstanding of colonialism lies throughout the nation.

There have been several movements forcing education systems to question the Western viewpoint of the Empire we are taught. The little that is brought to light is spun in a positive context of industrialisation and societal progression in impoverished nations. How patronising. Maybe we think colonialism is too
complex a topic to be taught? Perhaps shame and 'white guilt' is too heavy; the teachers would struggle under its weight. It may even dampen the national pride felt by our citizens, pushing against a long-established sense of international superiority.

For one thing, students need a fully-formed depiction of our country's history. Leaving such a prominent aspect of British actions out of the curriculum does us a disservice. Take Winston Churchill's treatment of Indians during the second world war. We are blind to his seething hatred of South Asians ('I hate Indians, they are a beastly people with a beastly religion'). His loathing extended to depriving the Bengali region of food to supply European soldiers with back-up provisions, causing a mass famine that killed three million people and drove civilians into sickeningly brutal acts of desperation. Yet Churchill was still voted by the public in 2002 to be the greatest Briton in history. This minor detail is entirely missing from our curriculum. Without serious and genuine efforts to accept the truth of our past, we risk arrogance and superiority.

Furthermore, as the UK diversifies and attitudes in the West grow more treacherous towards ethnic minorities, knowing Britain's colonial past becomes increasingly important in curbing negative attitudes towards other nations. This could push people to be more active in charity work, particularly in African nations such as Kenya, with a knowledge of out-stealing of African resources and communities. We, as a nation, lack the awareness that Britain is largely Great because it stood on the backs of Pakistan, Zimbabwe, and India. Remember Britain burned innocent people alive in concentration camps during the Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya; displaced 14 million people in pushing partition between India and Pakistan; and wiped out the Australian Aborigines. We do not want to repeat history.

Finally, if not to unify and to educate, we at least owe it to those who suffered and died at the hands of the colonists. They were exploited and had their livelihoods dismantled as Britain took over the management of their nations for
her own benefit. The least we can do as a country is to educate the next
generation. Japan teaches people about its treatment of war prisoners in the
1940s and Germany educates her youth about Hitler. (Remember 2.5 million
Indian soldiers fought for Britain in the second world war, but they are rarely
commemorated.) Those colonised deserve the memorials that other victims of
genocide and enslavement were given by their oppressors, and their
descendants should be granted the most basic reconciliation that Britain can
offer – a display of acceptance, regret, and acceptance through the spread of
the truth.

When we are unable to treat colonialism with the seriousness and respect that
such brutality deserves, it reveals a deep and shameful rift in our country's
self-awareness. If we are only taught to associate British colonialism with rose-
tinted nostalgia, we have no way of knowing what truly took place to lift Britain
out of penury. Without the courage to teach the next generation of the stains
on our history, we risk the isolation of our country, disunity, and – most
hauntingly – forgetting. One who does not learn is doomed to repeat...

The taste of colonialism is not merely of cloves and success. It is also of
supremacy, exploitation, torture, and death, as countries were usurped merely
to uphold ours; but without a rounded education on colonialism, we will never
know the truth.
Just two weeks after the inauguration that shocked the world, Saturday Night Live (SNL) aired what was to be one of the defining clips of 2017 – a punchy political sketch depicting Melissa McCarthy as the then press secretary, Sean Spicer.

Proudly decked out in an overly large suit, sporting a stunningly slicked down comb-over, McCarthy was hilarious. As she slouched in front of an ironically blue background and took ‘journalists’ questions at ‘the White House,’ the audience was in stitches; her newly prominent forehead just about as large as the persona she took on. She yelled into the camera lens with such vigour that she was more Sean Spicer than Sean Spicer.

Gathering over 30m views, this video was a fresh and biting piece of satire, lampooning the Trump regime for all it was worth. The only real flaw was something relatively minor, something of little importance: it achieved absolutely nothing.

This problem is not unique to this one sketch; McCarthy is not at fault. She did everything a classic satirist should do, lambasting Spicer with the sheer lunacy of a fake ‘turd’ and a super-soaker of soapy water. She finds the humour in criticising the actions of another, something satirists have been trying to achieve for centuries. And just as McCarthy found out, in having to suffer another six months of Spicer’s idiocy, never once has it achieved a single thing.
As far back as the Jacobites, the central institutions of the world were receiving this style of battering at the hands of politically minded comedians. Often cited as a true master of satire, Jonathan Swift was one of the first, and most prolific, people to give this a go. Enraged at the poverty seen in Ireland in the 18th century, he shocked the British public with his dark suggestions of eating children to end hunger. Asserting that they are ‘a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled,’ the strength of his ridicule almost punches you in the face.

He so blatantly mocks the state of the British stance on Irish inequality that you would think that nobody could miss it. But of course, people did. Somehow, some people thought that Swift was being serious. About eating babies. I mean, come on. This is one of the greatest issues with any form of humour – it is subjective, some people just won’t ‘get it.’

Even those clever individuals who did read ‘A Modest Proposal’ as it was intended did not follow the path Swift desired. Far from ending the strife of the Irish, his writing riled politicians and policy-makers but changed nothing. You’ve only got to look at the potato famine to understand that. So yes, now we can look back and intellectually wonder at just how comedic his extreme style of writing was, at the originality of this form of satire. But we should have learned. If Jonathan Swift couldn’t do anything with satire, back when it was new and daring and radical, then we have no chance.

Granted, the majority of satire now does not focus on cannibalism. It is much more concerned with corrupt politicians, decision-making bodies which are causing our societies to crumble, just that little bit at a time. Perhaps that is why satirists are all over American politics like McCarthy’s Spicer is all over gum. Really, who can blame them? There seems to be no easier target than Trump. With his tangerine face and terrible excuse for hair, he may as well have a piece of paper stuck to his back saying ‘SATIRISE ME’. Being the most Googled person of 2016, his being the muse of many a satirist is not surprising. Again though, this satire packs no punch. You try making fun of a man whose whole state of being is the biggest joke on the planet and you’ll
see what I mean. Copious amounts of fake tan and countless wigs have been purchased in the pursuit of mocking Trump but it is hard to poke fun at the truth.

Yes, we will sit at home and laugh at Alec Baldwin’s pout, but behind the laughter there is nothing. We are simply distracting ourselves from the words coming out of the real Donald’s mouth, trying to bury our heads in the metaphorical sands of satire. The damage he enacts is laughed at, not critically examined, not rebutted. All of these late night hosts, New Yorker writers and outspoken comedians should be campaigning for Americans to sign petitions and protest, picket the White House and actually take action. With the current policy of simply satire, they may as well be chuckling to the punchline of a knock-knock joke for all the political effect it will have. After all, he’s still president isn’t he?

Clearly, the very concept of satire is defunct. It believes that everyone who witnesses it will understand it. Wrong. It believes that people actually possess any respect for modern day politicians. Wrong. It believes that the average person can be pushed into action by a little chuckle as they flick through their Facebook timeline. Wrong. Satire is mainstream, but so is the moronic politician and the idiotic voter. One look on Twitter and you’ll see some MP wannabe giving Theresa May a hard time and someone else sharing a Nigel Farage meme. And yet nothing ever changes.

Even if a satirist is lucky enough for people to understand their message, which rarely happens of course (I’m looking at you, Stephen Colbert), it doesn’t mean that gaining a giggle achieves anything. The intellectual impact of a quality political joke is null and void. We all see, read, hear satire – we are all satirists. But for all the effort we make, we may as well dress up as clowns and do the YMCA to get the laughs – it would have exactly the same consequences. A click, a smile and then? Absolutely nothing.
Highly Commended
Niamh Corkey
Balwearie High School
Kirkcaldy

Happiness

*If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.* – J R R Tolkien

Clearly defining happiness is a task that has long eluded philosophers, psychologists and economists. Psychology Today defines happiness as ‘a state of well-being that encompasses living a good life,’ while UC Berkeley believes it denotes ‘subjective well-being’ in terms of contentment and purpose. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the helpful suggestion that happiness might signify ‘the state of being happy.’

The common denominator here is that happiness is a long-term state of satisfaction and positive emotion, and in fact largely unrelated to its excitable younger brother: pleasure. A momentary, but instant, sensation created by something external, pursuing pleasure is increasingly defining every aspect of modern life. Happiness, simultaneously, is being driven out by this reward-seeking, fast-paced lifestyle, and is at risk of extinction. I believe that this shift – engineered by modern corporations – is dangerous, and worryingly detrimental to our mental health.

The battle between happiness and pleasure is chemically represented by the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine. Both naturally occur in our brains, and stimulate receptors in specific parts of our nervous system with the
purpose of making us feel good. Serotonin, also affectionately known as 5-hydroxytryptamine, is responsible for regulating our happiness and maintaining mood balance. It is widely believed that an imbalance in serotonin levels is a major cause of depression, along with obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, and suicidal behaviour, and medical researchers found that serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which cause serotonin to stimulate our receptors for longer, are actually the most effective form of antidepressants.

Dopamine, however, has a more sinister side. It works to reinforce specific behaviours by providing us with pleasurable feelings if we complete tasks that our body deems useful, so when we eat that extra slice of pizza or receive that extra ‘like’ on Instagram we receive a little burst of dopamine as our brain’s way of thanking us for nourishing our body with all those calories or feeding our ego with a social interaction. Dopamine can very easily lead to addiction, whether it be junk food, social media, or even hard drugs – cocaine and heroin, in particular, cause huge boosts in dopamine which last for a short while then plunge an addict straight into withdrawal. As our desire for happiness is replaced with a craving for pleasure, our brain produces more and more dopamine to keep us excited, while our serotonin production takes a backseat, leaving us ultimately unstable.

At the risk of sounding like an old-fashioned teacher, it is imperative to mention the monumental role that technology and social media play in terms of our mental health. Much of our pleasure comes from online gratification, in the form of social media popularity or temporarily enjoyable internet activity like streaming our favourite TV shows online. And one television celebrity – psychological illusionist Derren Brown – has become so interested in our pursuit of instant gratification from these sources that he published a book exploring the topic: ‘Happy: Why More or Less Everything is Absolutely Fine.’ He claims: ‘Feeling we have to be constantly updated about the lives of our friends and that everything we say has to be out there leads to frustration, anger and jealousy much more than it leads to anything else.’
It could be asserted that online interactions have largely replaced meaningful real life communication, which is a lot more rewarding in the long-run. A study by Matthew Brashears, professor of sociology at Cornell University, demonstrates that in the past 25 years the average number of intimate friends we have has been reduced from three to two, but the average number of Facebook ‘friends’ now sits at 338, compared to 2009’s figure of 171.

Hypothetically, if these patterns were to continue, in less than a century we would have no real-life confidantes whom we trust, but we would all be incredibly popular on social media, which would certainly spike our dopamine for a little while. While I’m sure this would be temporarily delightful as we all watch the ‘likes’ rolling in, the inevitable onset of intense loneliness in the real world is a horrifying prospect.

Social media is often deemed a breeding ground for self-esteem issues. Scientist Clarissa Silva conducted interviews in which 60% of people using social media reported that it has impacted detrimentally on their self-worth, and this figure increases dramatically for impressionable groups, in particular young girls, as nine in 10 female social media users say that they are unhappy with their appearance. An especially worrying statistic suggests that 75% of girls with self-esteem issues engage in activities such as self-harm, bullying, drugs, drinking, or anorexia as a way of dealing with their insecurities.

Moreover, our entire economy thrives on maintaining a constant desire to be fulfilled by something purchasable. Not only are we being sold products and services, we are also being sold the idea that these purchases will make us happier, when extensive research suggests that ‘retail therapy’ is not a powerful remedy at all. In a recent paper published by Knox College psychology professor Tim Kasser, a series of experiments demonstrated that when people gain more wealth and/or possessions, their emotional well-being
plummets. This is due to the subconscious realisation that the hole in their life has not been filled by their purchases.

These days we crave instant rewards, resulting in sky-rocketing levels of pressure from peers, parents, schools and ourselves. Results are more important than how you reach them, e.g. the school system’s focus on exams, which according to ChildLine makes 96% of children feel anxious. Clearly our modern reward-orientated outlook puts unmanageable pressure on young people in particular.

Is this transformation of modern Western lifestyles impacting upon our mental health? Yes. In the 1960s the average onset age for depression was 45. Today it is 14. Hospitalisations for eating disorders and self-harm have doubled over the past three years. The suicide rate has increased by 125% in the last few decades. Modern life not only makes us unhappier, it has the potential to kill us.

Derren Brown rightly claims: ‘The problem with the modern conception of happiness is that it is seen as some kind of commodity. There is this fantasy that simply by believing in yourself and setting goals you can have anything. But that simply isn’t how life works.’ We forget to consider what matters: meaningful relationships; a sense of purpose; authentic happiness. Unless we remove ourselves from the race for instant gratification, these values will be lost forever.
'Is life not a thousand times too short for us to bore ourselves?' This is the question that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche asked and now, nearly 200 years later, it seems the world has finally answered. Yes.

Life today is a whirlwind of activity. We head straight into the day with the constant pressure to have, do and become something weighing down on our conscience. We look to the successful in life – the celebrities, businessmen and women, and world leaders – the ones who ‘have it all,’ and often try to emulate them. Which means being busy. So we jam-pack our days, writing out hectic schedules that we whip out whenever we’re asked how we’re doing. Leading a busy lifestyle has become a worshipped feat, with society’s ‘unsuccessful’ scorned and shunned. Because of this, most people go through life like mechanical zombies, always moving to the beat of their ringing mobile notifications.

On top of this, today’s society demands us to remain socially connected and publicly aware at all times. And technological advances have equipped us with more powerful compact tools to do so. The push of a button can lead to a virtual torrent of information and unlimited access to social media sites (for young and old alike). Moreover, we can now carry these tools with us – whether in our bag, hand or securely strapped to our wrists. They are the perfect portable distractions. This is not sustainable. And it isn’t living.
Studies show that being actively busy can lead to better brain power and quicker reflexes. However, these studies also point towards feeling overwhelmed, lacking isolation or reflection time. This can cause long-term damaging effects to your health and body, including stress, anxiety and exhaustion. Even without the scientific proof, it’s clear that no-one is immune to these effects. Secondary school students, for example, march through weeks filled with school, homework and extra-curricular activities. When their two-day respite finally arrives, the majority are so tired that they spend their time catching up on sleep and clearing their muddled minds...with social media. If this is what busy can do to children, how much worse is it for adults?

A common solution parroted time and time again: ‘You need to find the right balance between work and play.’ And although this is true, the real answer to solving our fast-paced clockwork lives isn’t to the world’s liking. It has many names – ennui, accidie, malaise – but we all know the feeling. We all need it. Yet hardly anyone wants it.

Charles Dickens introduced boredom to the world in 1852, with the publication of his novel ‘Bleak House’ (boredom featuring a total of six times). Obviously this emotional concept goes back further, and records have found (sparse) use of the word in Greek and Roman manuscripts. Roman philosopher, Seneca the Younger, explored boredom in his Epistle 24.26, comparing it to seasickness.

Today we’d describe boredom as a mental vacuum with the power to drive you insane. It is unpleasant, constricting and can be slightly nauseating – in a society that is always doing, never stopping, this isn’t a surprise. Boredom has such a strong stigma that we can automatically counter-attack it without asking ourselves the important question: ‘Why do I feel this way?’

Boredom must have a purpose. All emotions do. They’re said to help us ‘react to, register and regulate our response to stimulus from our environment.’
Emotions are essentially psychological warning signals that are key to our survival and, in recent years, boredom’s value has been unlocked.

In 2014, psychologists Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman of the University of Central Lancashire put boredom to the test. They challenged 80 participants to think of as many uses for two polystyrene cups but, beforehand, one group copied out phone-book numbers for 15 minutes. Results showed that the phone-book group were the most creative, thinking of many more out-of-the-box uses than the control group. In another study, carried out by researchers Karen Gaspé and Brianna Middlewood of Pennsylvania University, participants watched a clip that encouraged feelings of relaxation, elation, distress or boredom. Then participants took the Remote Associates Test – a test of creativity – where they were asked to provide another word based on the unknown connection between three seemingly unrelated words (For example, ‘cottage/swiss/cake’ has the solution ‘cheese’). Those who were bored scored higher.

It’s proven: boredom is a crucial part of any person’s life, particularly in those of children and teenagers. Doing nothing can reawaken creative thinking, thought patterns and problem-solving skills that have been lying dormant for years. This is essential for their future and could set them up for more success than a constant busy lifestyle ever could. All we need is for parents to stop employing the world’s number one electronic babysitter to fill the mental vacuum ‘tormenting’ their kids. Simple really.

As well as creativity and innovation, boredom can lead us into a place of peace and calm. At least once today, you will have stopped what you were doing – and felt bored. This boredom will have allowed you to be still and simply take stock of your surroundings, your thoughts and your emotions. This is mindfulness, something becoming increasingly popular and beneficial to a wide range of people. Mindfulness can help our mental wellbeing by alerting us to negative emotions and thoughts earlier on. This can make treating mental
health illnesses, such as stress and anxiety, easier and effective. Mindfulness can also help us respond to situations, rather than react in ways that could make them worse.

Across Scotland, ‘The Mindfulness in Schools Project’ has introduced the `.b,’ standing for ‘stop and be’. The `.b’ involves interactive lessons and talks, designed to engage students and teach them more about their minds and how they work. This work has helped students deal with strong emotions, particularly stress and anxiety during the exam period, and 77% say they would recommend `.b’ to a friend or family member.

These are several benefits to being bored out of your mind and, since the science of boredom has just begun, I’m certain there will be many others. Boredom when utilised correctly can be a tool greater than technology itself, enabling us to do more and feel more. Now, I’m not saying you should become a recluse, isolating yourself in order to achieve success. Too much boredom, like too much activity, can be harmful. We’re humans. We will always need other things – friends and families, foods, phones and even work – to be happy. But we should never forget boredom in our day-to-day lives. We must embrace it.
It was three years ago today (give or take) that I first heard the Beatles’ ‘Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.’ It was life-changing. For 40 magical minutes I was transported into the world of four Liverpudlians with the world at their fingertips. I could barely understand it. Why was there a crowd cheering over blazing guitars and layers of horns? Who let the drummer sing? A sitar?

This thing may have been about 50 years old, but it sounded like the future. However, this isn’t about my experience. This is about how a piece of wax changed the world. It may be clichéd nowadays, but I really think there’s no denying that ‘Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’ is the most important album ever made.

But first of all, how do you measure something’s importance? Do you count the number of awards it has won, or how many copies it sold? No, to judge something’s importance you must look at what it did for its respective medium in both the short- and long-term. And what ‘Pepper’ did for the album cannot be understated. ‘Pepper’ changed the very concept of the LP from being mere entertainment to a legitimate piece of art.

The Beatles achieved this by changing the playing field completely. By taking on the guise of the fictionalised, titular band, they allowed themselves to break free from not only their own identities, but the constraints of contemporary music.
pop music. The rules no longer mattered (or existed). With the burden of being the biggest band on the planet off their shoulders, John, Paul, George and Ringo explored musical realms that their peers could only dream of. This resulted in the first ‘concept’ album.

The contemporary critic may argue that this is false, as The Beach Boys’ ‘Pet Sounds,’ released the previous year, contained songs with overarching themes, and to be fair, Frank Sinatra had been making concept albums since the late 50s. However this was the first time that the concept deeply influenced the music. ‘Pepper’ plays less like a few hit singles and a handful of filler, and more like one cohesive piece of music, much like a symphony, albeit a very trippy one. ‘Pepper’ revealed pop music’s full potential, allowing it to become the creative and cultural force it was always meant to be.

Cultural significance aside, what really makes ‘Pepper’ (and all great albums) so great is the quality of the songs. Taking on influences ranging from contemporary psychedelia to eastern philosophy, the Beatles expertly crafted the most vibrant and eclectic songs of their careers. Completing the departure from their early ‘pop rock’ sound and into the depths of modern sonic experimentation, a journey which they began on 1965’s ‘Rubber Soul’, the album’s 13 tracks encompass a wide range of genres, from the psychedelic outing of Lennon’s ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ to indulgent music hall escapades courtesy of McCartney’s ‘When I’m Sixty Four.’

But the Beatles weren’t just looking to the past and future. They were taking direct inspiration from those around them, citing the aforementioned ‘Pet Sounds’ as perhaps the main influence on ‘Pepper’. That album’s impact can be clearly heard on ‘She’s Leaving Home,’ a classically-influenced piece containing both the intertwining harmonies and orchestral instrumentation that made ‘Pet Sounds’ such a masterpiece. The result is one of the album’s peaks, with lush instrumentation, a melancholy vocal delivery, and lyrical content with a message that starkly contrasted the optimism of the era.
The ‘Flower Power’ movement was only just beginning, but the cracks were already beginning to show. The Beatles saw through this façade and delivered a track which showcased the reality of the times. This subtle criticism would echo through the music industry during the next few years, as more and more artists began to realise that the utopian idealism of the hippies was not all it was cracked up to be. But the Beatles were among the first to do so, giving more credit to ‘Pepper’s’ timeless status.

Quite contrarily, however, arguably ‘Pepper’s’ most important song is one that embraces this doctrine. George Harrison’s ‘Within You Without You’ is a far cry from the typical pop song of the era. In fact it was hardly a pop song at all. A spiritual journey which completely contradicts anything ‘She’s leaving Home’ had to say about the times. The track had a profound influence on the hippie movement, by bringing into focus eastern philosophies of peace and understanding, which helped fuel the movement and perhaps give it some weight.

But it wasn’t just the ideology that makes ‘Within You Without You’ so important. It was the style. The song is essentially a piece of Indian classical music with a pop melody on top. Sure, Harrison had tackled Indian music before, on ‘Revolver’s’ ‘Love You To,’ released the previous year – but he was only flirting. Here, Harrison embarks on a spiritual odyssey, complete with a classical Indian backing band. The fact that a band of this magnitude released a song like this had a tremendous effect on what was considered suitable for inclusion on a pop album. Not only did it bring Indian music to the masses, it also encouraged others to indulge in other forms of world music, giving a breath of fresh air from the Western-dominated musical landscape of the time.

Hype is a horrible thing. Hype can cause confusion. Hype can cause disappointment. When something is as acclaimed as ‘Pepper’, there is really no way to hear it objectively. Listened to with modern ears, ‘Pepper’ can feel formulaic, pedestrian, or just plain boring. However, this didn’t occur to me until I recently played the album for some friends after explaining its brilliance to them – they could hardly sit through it. But I made the mistake of trying to
tell them why they should have loved it, as opposed to letting the album do
the talking.

I suppose that revelation is rather ironic, considering the essay I’ve just
written. But it doesn’t matter. Because sometimes the hype is right.
Sometimes it is right to describe something as being ‘mind-blowing’ or ‘life-
changing’. ‘Pepper’ changed music but it also changed lives. It certainly
changed mine.
This article was almost called something else. ‘The Dubious Canonicity of the Gap Between Lion Kings One and Two.’ Not the most snappy of titles, but it got me thinking. The canonicity of the period of time between ‘The Lion King’ and ‘The Lion King Two’ is dubious, for sure, but it started me thinking about something with more scope – namely, why do I care?

Most people aren’t even aware there exists a second ‘Lion King,’ so why do I worry about something so...obscure? Why, for that matter, does anyone? Everyone has something they’re experts on, some arcana which we share with but a few people. Maybe it’s an indie band, maybe it’s your family history, maybe you can, with perfect clarity, recall every ‘Doctor Who’ story ever put to film. After a moment’s thought, I reached a rather unsavoury idea: perhaps we care because we want to feel better than other people.

We want to feel we know something they don’t, that we’re set apart, different. We almost need it. Yeah, that Jim over there, sitting behind you in his fancy padded chair, he might make more than you, be more successful, good-looking, richer that you, he may make twice your salary and do half the work, but you know something he doesn’t. You’re better at something than he is. At the end of the day, you can go home safe in the knowledge that, at least in one area, you’re superior.
An exaggerated pettiness, to be sure, but at some level it’s in us all. There’s a pride in it. That’s part of the truth, in my opinion – that we just like to know more than others.

It’s almost like a secret. Some definitively uncommon knowledge, to feel smug about. To those with no interest whatsoever, the information is utterly useless. But to someone who has a passing knowledge of the subject, it can be impressive as hell. I have a friend who takes great satisfaction in his ‘Doctor Who’ obsession. He can recite every single story ever put to film, in order. All 200-plus of them. To me, as a casual watcher of the show, it’s genuinely awe-inspiring; for others, it seems a pointless time-sink. Whichever view you take, it’s a knowledge he’s proud of, and has every right to be proud of. Yet it is not, as I relievedly countered, quite as simple as that.

It is not only that we want to feel special, but that the very knowledge which makes us so also creates groups. That knowledge, it’s almost like a code. The vast majority of people may not care about the existence of ‘Six New Adventures’ and its effect on the ‘Lion King’ canon, but for those who do, it’s a fascinating discussion. It’s something to talk about, break bread over. No-one else may give a flying warthog about the continuity problems, but to fellow fans, it can be a badge of acceptance. You care? Well, so do we. It can create communities, things like that. It’s almost entirely what online communities are built upon. The internet is largely what has made obscurity enjoyable. We can easily research, find pointless information, and find others, spread thin across the globe, to discuss it with.

Yes, part of the pleasure of obscure information is the (mostly unconscious) feeling of superiority, but part of it is finding others to discuss it with, too. Small communities form around the most obscure of topics, for no other reason than that people with similar minds want to talk about it. The same
satisfaction exits within these communities, pride in their specialisation. But from this pride can stem a pompously self-important mindset.

It makes us feel special – why shouldn’t it? After all, when you know something which the overwhelming majority of people you meet do not, that is special. We all like knowing secrets, being able to choose, at our discretion, who to give information to. Perhaps this is why so many fans get upset when an indie band they like make it big, or a niche series finds success. The knowledge isn’t theirs any more, they’ve lost that. That group of maybe 5,000 people you were part of? Suddenly it’s 50,000,000. And when 50m people are aware of something, it’s not exactly obscure. Secrets are no fun when everyone knows them.

Yet an important point for these people to remember: it, whatever it was, was never yours. At no point did it belong to you. Feel glad you can talk about it to thousands more than you could before, shed a quiet tear for the loss of that small community, and find some other crumb of obscurity to dive into.

There is a limit, though. There is a danger in, like Alice, going too far down the rabbit hole. Many people become so obsessed that they simply lose themselves, associate their personality so closely with their interests that any criticism of these interests is seen as a personal attack upon themselves. Like anything, it can be taken too far.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniable satisfaction in knowing something others don’t. There’s nothing wrong with that. Everyone has some odd, unusual, useless information they know, and it’s something to be proud of. So take it, hold onto it, but don’t be upset when it becomes common knowledge. It can bring people together, it can bring great satisfaction – there’s a joy to be had in obscurity.
Imagine spending £40m a year on an anti-radicalisation plan that is racist, stifles freedom of expression and runs on completely false principles. This is precisely what the UK government has been doing since 2007 when the PREVENT strategy was established, following the horrific 7/7 bombings in London. PREVENT is one of four parts of the government’s overall counter-terrorism strategy (‘CONTEST’) and essentially aims to stop individuals adopting terrorist beliefs, or being ‘radicalised’. However, the government is yet to realise that PREVENT simply does not ‘prevent’ radicalisation.

One of the reasons why PREVENT is ineffective is because it runs on the false belief that religious ideology is the driving factor behind radicalisation. In her book ‘The Causes of Terrorism,’ internationally-renowned professor of political science, Martha Crenshaw, outlines various social, economic and political factors that are likely to play a more dominant role in a person adopting terrorist beliefs. Being subject to discrimination and lacking in opportunity for political participation are examples given.

Crenshaw’s statements can be backed up with real-life examples. For instance, in the Channel 4 documentary ‘My Son the Jihadist,’ Sally Evans talks of her son Thomas’s involvement with terrorist organisation al-Shabaab, and the possible reasons behind his radicalisation. Although Thomas converted to Islam
in order to join the group, de-radicalisation expert, Mike Jervis, believes that religious ideology did not feature in his decision-making. Instead, he thinks that Thomas became disillusioned with life following his parents’ divorce and was almost in search of a ‘family’ environment. During his short spell as a terrorist, Evans tortur ed and brutally killed many innocent people, all of whom could have been saved if PREVENT focused less on religious ideology and considered other factors.

Another major issue with the PREVENT strategy is that it stifles freedom of expression, predominantly in a school environment. Can you imagine being viewed as a potential threat to humanity, by trying to aid a humanitarian cause? This is exactly what happened to 17-year-old Rahmaan Mohammadi, who was referred to PREVENT after organising a fundraiser for those affected by the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Disgracefully, he found himself in the demoralising, dehumanising and destructive investigation process for simply wanting to help people. It is undeniable that the PREVENT strategy is misguided, and Mohammadi’s rights were no doubt stifled.

Some may argue that, although Mohammadi’s case questions the PREVENT strategy, it can’t demonstrate that it is ineffective based on this case alone. However, there have been many other cases much like Mohammadi’s which should be recognised. For instance, Mohammad Farooq, a student studying terrorism at the time, was targeted by PREVENT after borrowing a book on terrorism from his university. It is imperative that we are allowed to research ideas like terrorism because it allows us to build a more tolerant society where people of all backgrounds are accepted. Furthermore, it allows us to better understand why people become radicalised, informing strategies like PREVENT to make them more effective.

In a recent interview, Farooq stated his belief that he was only a suspect because ‘My name is Mohammed, I look the way I do and I’m Muslim.’ This
statement has some truth to it; there is a danger that certain religious groups will be marginalised or even excluded from society.

The final and arguably most concerning issue with PREVENT is the way it criminalises, alienates and stigmatises the Muslim community. Between 2012 and 2013, over half of all students referred to PREVENT (57.4%) were of Muslim origin. This is made even worse given that, according to the most recent census, Muslims make up just 5% of the overall UK population. These figures wrongly stigmatise Britain’s Muslims as a ‘community of terrorists’ which is nothing short of racist to suggest. If our government continues in this vein, there is a risk that Muslims will be perceived as dangerous, and this could lead to a rise in the number of racially-motivated hate crimes.

Furthermore, when a portion of PREVENT’s 2010 budget was used to fund 72 new surveillance cameras in Muslim areas of Birmingham, the Muslim community became alienated. How must it feel to have your privacy constantly compromised simply because your chosen religion is Islam? Once more, the words demoralising, dehumanising and destructive spring to mind. Although some racial stigma will always be present when addressing radicalisation, PREVENT is permitting UK citizens to believe that spying on someone because of their race is completely justified. This has to stop! The strategy’s treatment of Muslims is downright disgusting and a sad reflection on a government which promised to target ‘all forms of terrorism’ instead of isolating specific groups. It begs the question: can we truly trust a racist government to finally put an end to terrorism? Ironically, rather than preventing terrorism, we may even be maintaining it.

From the various issues cited, there is no doubt that the PREVENT strategy is futile and needs to be re-considered. It seems that racial stigma is at the heart of PREVENT’s problems and is potentially what our government needs to concentrate on when re-assessing their approach. This situation could have been easily avoided, however, as racism is never an effective strategy, least of
all when racial tension is already a dominant theme within the subject. However the government choose to tackle this issue, it is clear PREVENT cannot continue in its current ill-considered form as it is damaging the innocent and creating an intolerant society. Significant changes are required if we want to successfully end the war on terrorism.
Highly Commended

Hamish Martin
Portobello High School
Edinburgh

The Colonel’s monster

One rainy day in early October, I sat idly before my televised entertainment set when, without warning, the screen burst into flames before my eyes. I leapt to action, and was mere seconds from dousing the television in water when the flames receded, only to be replaced by something far more shocking. Much like Victor Frankenstein upon completing his creation, I was at once filled with a combination of amazement and sheer terror. Filling the sizeable screen was a rotating image of perhaps man’s most frightening invention, something so powerful that I very nearly passed out just from viewing it in digital form. Scared out of my wits, I was incapable of doing anything but continuing to watch this horror unfold.

The embodiment of Beelzebub that held my attention so, was none other than the Double Down, a new ‘bacon burger’ from KFC. But this is no ordinary fast-food sandwich. The slice of bacon, with Monterey Jack cheese and BBQ sauce, was contained not within the standard bread roll, but something much more calorifically petrifying: two Original Recipe chicken fillets. This behemoth of a burger had arrived in the UK, and all I could think was that if there is a God, he must live in perpetual fear of what he has created.

Enraptured by what I had seen, I grabbed the nearest piece of technology and, with great haste, searched up this monster. What I found made me more
terror-stricken than I had previously thought possible; eating one Double Down supplies you with 1210kcal, which is over half of an adult’s daily reference intake, and almost 400kcal more than a 20 piece McNuggets share box from McDonalds. I thought of all my fellow teens who would be fatally enticed by this malevolent being, and I wept tears of fear and sadness for these potential victims.

That night, as I tossed and turned in my sleep, a vision came to me. A vision of the near future, a horrible future, where deep-fried Mars bars were considered a light snack, and almost all of the population travelled exclusively by mobility scooter as their legs, for all their considerable girth, were unable to support their bloated bodies. At the centre of this dystopian, diabetic future stood none other than Colonel Harland David Sanders, a vast grin filling his wrinkled face, and a hoarse chuckle emanating from his aged throat as he handed free Double Downs to the legions of children surrounding his bargain-bucket podium, as if he was taking pleasure in destroying these children’s metabolisms, and thus ensuring that we would forever grow larger until our feeble arteries became so clogged that we would go extinct eternally.

I snapped awake from these troubled dreams to find my bedsheets drenched with sweat, and that, not dissimilar to Gregor Samsa, I had been altered considerably. I now knew that there were two things I had to do; firstly, I must taste this Double Down, and discover if it is truly as beastly as I have envisioned it to be, and secondly, I have to redirect humanity towards a safer, healthier life, or I would watch my vision become a reality.

My hands shook with immense vigour. I could feel a growing dampness on my forehead. The queue moved forward at what seemed an unbefittingly slow pace for what was such a monumental occasion. I looked around me at my fellow queue-mates, then up at the counter, from which Bargain Buckets and ‘Krushems’ milkshakes appeared to fly.
Two people were working at the counter, both sporting the typical garb of a KFC official, topped with the traditional red baseball cap with the Colonel’s grinning visage framed in the centre. I looked deep into the Colonel’s eyes, and wondered how he could live with the guilt of creating this monster. There was a picture above the workers of the beast itself, and upon growing sick of the sight of Colonel Sanders’ sinister smile my eyes moved up to this well-lit image.

The Double Down was advertised to come as a meal, for £5.79 you could get the sandwich along with fries and a drink. This seemed like an excessive eat to me, but as I realised I had unwittingly reached the counter, I had no time to think and found myself requesting the full meal. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, as I collected this seasoned lump of calories the grinning attendant told me that they were out of medium cups, so I was getting a large for free. A small whimper escaped my mouth.

I walked down to the tables and took a seat. No one around me seemed at all awestruck by the boldness of my meal choice, but perhaps they understood that my being there was purely for research purposes. I picked up the surprisingly small foil bag and felt its weight in my hands, and then removed the sandwich.

The first thing to strike me was the size of the chicken; what had appeared in televised advertisements as two crispy ovular prisms of chicken were in fact two, rather greasy, spheres of chicken that could only just contain the filling. The fillings themselves appeared as promised initially, but as I started to bite into this slippery sandwich, I discovered that the chefs who had prepared my Double Down had not been so generous when dishing out bacon as the adverts had led me to believe they would be. The cheese tasted no different to any other cheese used by fast-food corporations, and the BBQ sauce was rather inadequately contained (although the fact that my hands were positively
dripping with sauce by the time I finished eating was possibly more down to the chicken’s ineffectiveness at being a roll than the sauce itself).

I did eventually complete the meal, but the sense of achievement I had anticipated never came to me; a whole lot of regrets came instead. I felt more full than I ever had before, after eating what was effectively a one-course meal. But the overall feeling I took away from the experience was a feeling of disappointment. If this is the piece of food to finally end the human race, why did I find it so underwhelming?
Highly Commended
Iona Weir
James Gillespie’s High School
Edinburgh

My life in stories

Ever since I can remember, I’ve loved books. The way you decoded each letter on the page to make up a word which made up a sentence which made up a story. How by the hand of fiction, all these words were floating in a state of uncertainty until finally pen was put to paper and out came an infinite cascade of shooting stars and meteor showers in the form of tales and encounters I couldn’t even dream of, soaring through time and space just to land directly into the paper universe held in my hands.

It spoke volumes about life in ways that I couldn’t express when I was young, and as I grew and became acquainted with the bittersweet reality of existence in a world not made purely for our enjoyment, the books grew with me. When I was content with the happenings of the day and wanted to sink into further happiness, they were there; when I was stranded in a state of monotony and wanted to enliven my thoughts, they were there; and when I struggled to remedy the pain in my heart, the writing on the pages was a sanctuary in which I found my refuge and could consign my grief into temporary oblivion.

Reading had always been a pastime my mum and I had done together. Her love of books inspired my love of books and we spent many days curled up reading story after story on the sofa underneath an itchy tartan blanket that she insisted we used, if not for warmth then for proclaiming our Scottish heritage, despite living in the vibrantly dynamic city of Bristol in the south-
west of England, a good seven-hour drive from the rest of our family up north. We were essentially all alone there, just the two of us as my dad had been an absent yet unwelcome figure in my life ever since my birth, but we were happy. Content in my bubble of seemingly endless moments of laughter and learning and constant chatter, they were my halcyon days.

My passion for books offered me endless opportunities to discover new adventures and to experience life through the eyes of people from all over the place – in the past, present and future. The idea of hundreds of different worlds all existing at once, just sitting on my shelf patiently waiting for me to open them up and share their tales mesmerised me. I loved the way sentences whirled around in my head, dipping and spinning with each coming line, and the way new vocabulary felt on my tongue, knowing that I had the power to change the world just with the simple complexity of language.

I devoured book after book, inspiring me to channel my day-to-day thoughts into stories, creating a mental narrative of our entwined lives together. We went to the park, we played games, we even taught ourselves our own secret language in the form of hand signals and gestures, all on top of her being a single mother with a full-time job and the busy schedule of her rather demanding daughter. We were interwoven throughout the pages of our existence and I couldn’t imagine my story without her.

Being a single parent with an only child creates an inexplicable bond between the pair; at least it did for me. My mum was my favourite person, and I was hers. Simple as that. The thought had never occurred to me that some day I would lose her and would have to continue being everything that embodied me, while missing the person who began my story.

I don’t think I ever outwardly questioned the fact that my mother was dying. In fact, I barely acknowledged it. Instead, I gave myself over to the hands of distraction in the form of what I knew could always be abandoned as soon as
they got too scary or sad. Books. I consumed them day and night, inhaling them as fast as I could, as much as I could, in all the time I had, running as quickly as possible away from my reality, as if other people’s stories were the fuel in my race to take things back to how they had been before. Throughout my deepest points of despair, all I had to do was pick up a book and I would, just for a split second, forget my agony.

On a cold November morning, my mum died. The cancer had spread to her brain and there was no more to be done except wait for the inevitable moment her heart would stop. I can recall the precise moment I found out she had gone – I was lying in bed and my grandma had cautiously peeked round my door to see if I was awake. She stepped closer to me and told me the news I knew was coming and then looked at me as if she expected the speech I loved so much to tumble out of my mouth in some sort of reaction. But I just looked at her and said nothing. I couldn’t find the words.

In the years that followed I grew increasingly more withdrawn and introverted, but most importantly alongside losing the person I loved most, I had lost my enthusiasm for fiction, which had been my salvation in my hardest times. I presumed my love for books had died with my mum, hand-in-hand in their graves like we should have been in life. I’d ripped our story into tiny little pieces and strewn them across the entire universe, with the intention of obliterating it from my memory. But I’d been wrong; I couldn’t pretend an event as significant as that didn’t happen and I couldn’t try and erase my mum from my mind. Life doesn’t work like that.

With time, I slowly started to rediscover the pull literature had on me and after many attempts at buying books and letting them accumulate dust in a cupboard for years, I eventually began to love reading again, while simultaneously sticking the pages of the story of me and my mum back together and reclaiming it as my own. I decided that instead of trying to forget my past, I was going to embrace it, enabling me to fully participate in the
chapters of my future and becoming the person my mum would have been proud of. Many of the pages in my story are ripped and crumpled, and the front cover has taken a battering, but the words have come back to me now.
Commended
Kiera Hayton
Stranraer Academy

Commended
Ella Jackson
Bathgate Academy

Commended
Sherzah Jamal
Renfrew High School

Commended
Lauren Kerr
Fortrose Academy
Commended

Emma Kirby
Eastwood High School
Newton Mearns

Hannah Lamond
James Gillespie’s High School
Edinburgh

Briony Taylor
Dunfermline High School

Charley-Marie Wilson
Wallace High School
Stirling
The brief
The competition was organised by the Institute of Contemporary Scotland (ICS) in association with the Young Programme charity. It was open to pupils in Scottish schools who were between the ages of 15 and 18 on 15 December 2017.

It was a condition of entry that the work should be that of the author alone, unedited by a teacher (or anyone else), and that it should be a work of non-fiction. Pupils were asked to imagine that they were writing a feature or column for an intelligent magazine or serious newspaper. Examples given in the briefing were: a commentary about something in the news; thoughts about a cultural event; or a personal experience of some kind. The articles were required to be in the approximate range 900 to 1,100 words.

There was a large entry representative of schools in most parts of Scotland. It was striking that 75% of the work submitted was by girls.

The adjudication
The original small panel failed to reach agreement. The four short-listed pieces were then sent to a considerably larger panel of 29 from the wider ICS community, with Kenneth Roy, editor of the Scottish Review, as non-voting chair. Members of the panel were asked to vote and append comments on their choice (many adding notes on the other articles). The winning article was comfortably ahead in the voting, but as only three votes separated the others it was decided that all three should be joint runners-up.
The awards
The winner received a cheque for £500 and each of the three runners-up a cheque for £250. Our congratulations to all 20 long-listed pupils for their outstanding work and to the many other promising young writers who entered the competition. Special congratulations to James Gillespie's High School in Edinburgh – the only school with more than one pupil on the roll of honour.

The panel of adjudicators
Bob Cant, writer and activist; Carol Craig, writer and founder, Centre for Confidence and Well-being; Katie Crerar, runner-up Scotland Young Thinker of the Year 2017; Ron Ferguson, journalist and biographer; Howie Firth, director, Orkney International Science Festival; Jock Gallagher, broadcaster and co-founder, Centre for Freedom of the Media; Rose Galt, former president, Educational Institute of Scotland; Andrew Hook, emeritus professor of English literature, University of Glasgow; Ian Jack, Guardian columnist and former editor, Independent on Sunday; Bill Jamieson, Scotsman columnist; Amy Jardine, Scotland Young Thinker of the Year 2014; Magnus Linklater, Times columnist and former editor, The Scotsman; John Lloyd, contributing editor, Financial Times; David McAlpine Cunningham, academic administrator and writer; Rebecca MacDonald, Scotland Young Thinker of the Year 2017; Alan McIntyre, patron, Institute of Contemporary Scotland; Alasdair McKillop, writer; Sally Magnusson, broadcaster and author; Catriona Mallows, Scotland Young Thinker of the Year 2016; Barbara Millar, journalist; Donald S Murray, poet and author; Bill Paterson, actor; Eileen Reid, writer; George Robertson (Lord Robertson of Port Ellen), politician and former secretary-general, NATO; Allan Shiach, film producer; Angus Skinner, former chief social work adviser for Scotland; Morelle Smith, poet and author; Gillean Somerville-Arjat, critic and writer; Eilidh Todd, award-winner, Young Scotland Programme 2016.
General comments
There was high – and clearly heartfelt – praise for the short-listed articles. One of Scotland's best-known journalists, Bill Jamieson, wrote: 'I have had to edit literally thousands of articles submitted for publication over a lifetime. Each one of these four articles would serve as an exemplar of clear and cogent writing. They are insightful, well-argued and thoughtful, and I would have authorised publication without hesitation. Could you kindly forward on my behalf my warmest praise to each of the four authors, together with the sternest advice that they continue to write and never give up. Never, never, never give up. My warmest appreciation, too, for the teachers who have helped to nurture and shape this talent. There is much about which to despair in education today. These top-quality essays are a blazing antidote. They are a credit to their teachers and to their schools.'

'All these articles offer something a little different and they're all extremely well written,' said Sally Magnusson. 'They are all strong contenders, highly accomplished and articulate,' wrote Gillean Somerville-Arjat. 'I particularly liked the way they had all mastered a sense of writing an opening paragraph that hooks you in to their overall argument, before structuring their case and reaching a satisfying conclusion.' George Robertson commented: 'They are a vivid advert for today's generation of young people. It was a pleasure to read them.' 'Wow!', wrote Angus Skinner. 'What great articles. Superb, really.' Many of the judges admitted to difficulty in reaching a decision. As Howie Firth put it: 'What a challenge! I can see why the original panel was deadlocked. All four of them can write, and it's difficult to separate them on the basis of the writing alone.' Morelle Smith's statement that she could have made a case for all four as the winner was echoed by others.
Comments on the short list

**Shannon Henderson**
*St Maurice's High School, Cumbernauld*

George Robertson: 'I have no doubts about my choice. This piece is very powerful. It is also human and perceptive. It is really well-written and carefully constructed to make a restrained, passionate but effective political case.'

Carol Craig: 'I found this a very gripping article. Right from the start I felt drawn in to the story. It is written with great clarity and occasional wit. The author also challenges conventional wisdom – that teenage mothers are a huge problem. The writer displays a range of skills. She both tells the story well and makes a convincing intellectual argument at the end.'

Jock Gallagher: 'As a piece of writing I found it totally compelling. There was no self-pity and I feel the need to know what happens next. That, for me, is the essence of good writing.'

David McAlpine Cunningham: 'Dignified, nuanced and mature.'

Amy Jardine: 'I was very impressed by the way the writer mixed the personal and political. Great sense of immediacy... unambiguous, uncluttered and punchy.'

Magnus Linklater: 'Such an unusual and frank response to an age-old issue.'

John Lloyd: 'It's a rare testament. But this isn't to see it as deserving the prize only because it's touching. Writing, even about something as intimate as that, is always a matter of working out how to make it readable and powerful. That she does very well indeed: with a fine description of the badmouthing she got, but not
a self-pitying one. With the mixture of honesty and detachment she showed, she will most likely be a writer in some form in later life.'

**Rose Galt**: 'A deeply moving narrative. She demonstrates astonishing levels of maturity and determination as well as a shrewd ability to assess rather than judge those purportedly there to help her.'

**Howie Firth**: 'Powerfully put from first-hand experience.'

**Ian Jack**: 'The most compelling of all, because the writer was relating an intimate, distressing, joyous, socially awkward and life-changing experience...It was a rare and all too brief glimpse into a world that most of us know nothing about.'

**Bill Jamieson**: 'A moving and insightful account. Given her predicament and the formidable challenges she faced, it was a remarkably cool and dispassionate account – and all the more moving for being so.'

**Morelle Smith**: 'Balances well such a profound and life-changing experience with a lightness of touch in the writing. An ultimately optimistic essay.'

**Bill Paterson**: 'Frank and refreshing. We fill our lives these days with comments about what others are doing. It's good to receive this report from the front line.'

**Angus Skinner**: 'Lively, honest, brave and hopeful.'

**Wallace Dempster**  
*Mallaig High School*

**Bill Jamieson**: 'An outstanding accomplishment – elegantly and wittily written, with pace and grace, and a real pleasure to read.'
But beneath the smart and sassy style was a discussion of real maturity on how we treat history and its monuments – a resonantly topical subject.'

**Rebecca MacDonald:** 'Engaging and thought-provoking...a sassy piece.'

**Rose Galt:** 'Grips the reader in the first paragraph and barnstorms its way to a devastating critique of a man, a culture and a nation. Uses irony and humour to great effect.'

**Sally Magnusson:** 'This article impressed me with the energy, range and readability of its argument.'

**Morelle Smith:** 'The language is engaging and the metaphors punchy and sometimes unusual.'

**Ron Ferguson:** 'A vivid, engaging and inventive piece of writing. I learned new things about P T Barnum, and the story itself was told with humour, style and seriousness.'

**Eleanor Greenwood**  
*St Leonard’s School, St Andrews*

**Donald S Murray:** 'A remarkable piece of writing at any age. Stylish and lucid throughout. Builds well to its conclusion.'

**Eileen Reid:** 'Clearly written, didn't stray off point, well-argued and topical.'

**Andrew Hook:** 'Beautifully written. The analysis of the topic is carefully considered, well-measured and strikingly mature.'

**Alasdair McKillop:** 'Admirable clarity of thought and presentation. It made good use of a single case to illustrate trends with wider
implications, while raising important questions about the relationship between supposedly settled ideas, such as freedom of speech, and new forms of communication.'

**Gillean Somerville-Arjat**: 'Highly relevant, tightly focused and well-structured.'

**Barbara Millar**: 'A very polished piece of crisp, authoritative writing, with an extremely powerful introduction and a succinct punchy pay-off. An exceptionally mature piece of journalism.'

**Alan McIntyre**: 'Derives its power from good structuring and clear and concise arguments, and manages to avoid overwrought and overwritten prose. It recognises that there is no easy answer to the problem of anonymous trolling, but the piece does an excellent job of unpacking the issues and zeroing in on some of the more concerning aspects of the current environment for journalists of all stripes.'

**Anoushay Okhai**  
*High School of Dundee*

**Allan Shiach**: 'Whether you embraced the entire argument being made or dissented from the brook-no-opposition style, the writing was coherent and well-made. It deployed its arguments with considerable fluency and style.'

**Katie Crerar**: 'Uses excellent examples (including personal experience) to highlight the lack of knowledge and misconceptions about colonialism. Makes a convincing and well-structured argument.'

**Catriona Mallows**: 'An in-depth understanding of the important issues explored, and a convincing, contemporary argument.'
Eilidh Todd: 'A concise and well-argued piece with good use of rhetorical questions.'

Bob Cant: 'A well-structured piece, well-argued and tightly expressed. It raises important questions about the way in which history should be taught in schools. It made me, as a former history teacher, question the ways in which I tried to teach difficult issues such as colonialism and its legacy.'

Rose Galt: 'Brilliant piece of writing with lucid arguments supported by relevant and often devastating facts.'

Notes on Highly Commended

Olivia Brunton  
Peebles High School
Spirited debunking of the idea that satire changes anything

Niamh Corkey  
Balwearie High School, Kirkcaldy
Gentle reflections on what it means to be happy

Juanita Ekekwe  
St Margaret's School for Girls, Aberdeen
Stylish defence of boredom as an aid to living

Brad Gibson  
Carrick Academy, Maybole
Perceptive critique of a Beatles album's enduring appeal

Kåre Hansen  
Galashiels Academy
Quirky exploration of the joys of obscure knowledge
Strath Lumsden
Woodmill High School, Dunfermline
Forensic deconstruction of the UK's anti-terrorist strategy

Hamish Martin
Portobello High School, Edinburgh
Lovely comic observation of a fast-food horror

Iona Weir
James Gillespie's High School, Edinburgh
Tender evocation of how books shaped a young girl's life

Notes on Commended

Kiera Hayton
Stranraer Academy
Story of personal loss told in an unusual way

Ella Jackson
Bathgate Academy
Introspective essay of painful emotional honesty

Sherzah Jamal
Renfrew High School
Passionate plea for radical action to save the planet

Lauren Kerr
Fortrose Academy
Well-argued advocacy of music education in schools

Emma Kirby
Eastwood High School, Newton Mearns
Insight into autism, engaging as well as enlightening
Hannah Lamond
*James Gillespie's High School, Edinburgh*
Traumatic yet inspiring account of a sibling relationship

Briony Taylor
*Dunfermline High School*
Furious take on the Hell that is other cinema-goers

Charley-Marie Wilson
*Wallace High School, Stirling*
Sharp, witty indictment of the lies parents tell