

**John Crace's  
Digested week**



# *Rubbish piling up in a cold, damp house - ah, 1978 was a happy time*

## **Monday**

This was the fourth Queen's speech I have attended, but the first at which there have been plenty of empty seats on the Lords' benches. The press were in the gallery long before kick-off and I assumed the gaps on the Tory benches would fill up. But there was one pocket of about 12 places that remained stubbornly empty, apart from a top hat left in situ as if to reserve a space. The hat never did get claimed and it could still be there for all I know.

This was also the first time I had seen the Queen look quite so frail and furious. Having already been embarrassed once by Boris Johnson over the unlawful first prorogation, she now found herself being used as a frontwoman to launch the Tory party's manifesto campaign. Rumour had it that trust between Buckingham Palace and Downing Street is now so low that the Queen demanded a copy of the speech five days in advance to make sure Boris Johnson did not sneak in anything untoward at the last minute. Throughout the speech Her Majesty made sure her voice maintained a tone of passive-aggressive disgust, never betraying a hint of enthusiasm for anything she was saying. I half expected her to end by ad-libbing that "My government will abolish the monarchy forthwith." Just to save herself from going though the

whole thing again within months.

## **Tuesday**

The Booker prize was shared between Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, and many literary critics were outraged that the judges had been unable to decide on a single winner. Inevitably, some muttered that Atwood was being rewarded with a long-service medal and Evaristo

should have been given the nod, but both winners took the decision far more graciously than those who were angry on their behalf.

It struck me as a very reasonable decision by the judges, even if it broke the rules of the competition. Literary prizes have always been a matter of judgment. There is no video assistant referee or goal difference on which to weigh the merits of two novels. If the judges were genuinely unable to separate Atwood and Evaristo after several rounds of intense deliberation, then a draw was the right outcome. Far better than one judge saying: "Sod it, let's just give it to Evaristo so we can all get down the pub"; or - as has been rumoured in the past - settling on a compromise book that no one really liked as much as the two on which they were deadlocked.

I also can't help feeling it was within the finest traditions of the Booker itself. From 1973 to 2006, Martyn Goff was responsible for

administering the Booker and nothing upset him more than judges being in total agreement on a winner that received the unanimous applause of the critics. He loved the Booker to generate controversy and

relished the publicity because he reckoned it boosted book sales and the profile of the prize. This year's judges have done him proud.

## **Wednesday**

A team of Warwick University psychologists have trawled through Google - really - and concluded that people in Britain were at their most unhappy during 1978. More unhappy even than during the two world wars. Not for the first time, I find myself completely out of step with the national mood. For me, 1978 was one of the happiest years of my life.

After a childhood during which I had frequently felt alienated, lost and insecure - out of step with myself and my surroundings - I finally felt as if my life had started when I arrived at Exeter University. After a false start on the French course - I was genuinely amazed to find I was expected to read books in French rather than translation, not least because I could barely read French - I had taken a year out and swapped departments to enrol on the politics course in 1976.

Two years later I was living what I felt was my best life in a cottage with no heating and slime trails up



the bathroom and kitchen walls for a rent of £5 a week and doing just enough work to get by. The three-day week suited me just fine - though two and a half days might have been more convenient, the rubbish piling up in the streets was nothing compared with the state of my bedroom, my tuition fees were paid by the government and I even got a grant for living expenses. Best of all, I had made friends who shared my values. We could be

both simultaneously lost and found together. Of course, my life fell apart soon afterwards as my mental health deteriorated and my drug use progressed into full-on addiction, but just in those moments I had a glimpse of what might be possible. Those two years of 1977-78 were both the beginning and the end of my Age of Innocence.

### Thursday

In the past it was weddings, but now large family gatherings take place at funerals. Today we all met up for the thanksgiving service of my cousin Simon, who died of a heart attack aged 64. Far too young. My lasting memory of Simon was of a holiday in Ireland with my parents. I was 14 and he sneaked me off to a pub to teach me how to drink insensibly.

As a rule, the younger you die the better the turnout for a funeral - the dream is to die at the age of 98 with no one at the crematorium except for a couple of stragglers who have turned up for the wrong person - but even so I was amazed at just how many people had come to see Simon off. There were literally hundreds. I wasn't the only one to observe that I'd have to pay to get that many for my funeral. It was a tribute to just how well loved and respected he was. The service itself was both joyous and heartbreaking, with some lovely tributes from his children and family. One theme resonated throughout: that Simon was a man of immense fun and dependability, who never had a bad word to say about anyone. At which my sister nudged me and said: "We

won't be able to say that about you."

### Friday

The one upside to parliament sitting on a Saturday for the first time since the Falklands war is that I now get to miss Spurs v Watford. Even if we should surprise ourselves with a win against the bottom club in the Premier League, I suspect I am still

protecting myself from a world of pain. There will be pain of a different sort in the Commons though, where Johnson will be hoping to win the vote on his new Brexit deal. He will have to do so without the help of the Democratic Unionist party (DUP), having in effect created a border in the Irish Sea less than a year after telling their party conference that was the one thing no Conservative prime minister could agree to do.

The Northern Ireland temporary backstop has now been replaced by a permanent full stop. Even so, my hunch is that Johnson will narrowly get his deal over the line. The Tory European Research Group's previously unwavering support for the DUP will evaporate as they eye up deregulated free-trade deals for England rather than all of the UK. Amazingly, it doesn't seem to have occurred to them that Johnson will sell them out eventually just as he sold out the DUP. But it will be Labour MPs in leave-voting constituencies who will see Johnson home. They are unlikely to be thanked for it as they will still probably lose their seats in a general election, at which the Conservatives will probably romp home.

Apart from the disastrous consequences for the country - a 6% loss in earnings - what really sticks in the throat is that a prime minister clearly unsuited to office and who has made a career of serial dishonesty will be allowed to rewrite his own history as a statesman and leader of Churchillian brilliance. Or rather it will be rewritten for him by Charles Moore, who will push himself forward for the three-volume triumphalist work. It should be called Decline and Fail. Though

that is also the title of my new collection of sketches coming out at the end of this month.

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**Digested week, digested**  
**You are the Mount Everest every man wants to climb**

*'My government ... can go stuff itself!'*

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS; JACK HILL/AFP/GETTY



*'And the best thing is the DUP initially believed us!'*

