

Samantha Norman

Interesting parents



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As the daughter of Barry Norman, the late film critic – and therefore, brushed by celebrity from birth – I have often been asked what it was like to be brought up by a man who regularly rubbed shoulders with the international glitterati. And then, as my brainiac mother, the historical novelist Ariana Franklin, became better known, interest peaked in her too; people wanting to know what it was like to be raised by a woman of her erudition and wisdom.

The truth is that for us, my younger sister Emma and me – the progeny of that interesting union – it felt... well, pretty normal really. Our house, although arguably more book-lined than average, wasn't especially hung about with film stars or showbiz types or famous intellectuals or anybody, in fact, who would be considered notable except to us. Most of the time there was just us and Gran, of course – my maternal grand-mother imported from Devon by my mother to help bring us up – and Mrs B, our cleaner who came on Mondays and Fridays. We did normal family things like watch the telly and walk the dog and between times argued and made up and chatted inconsequentially over family Sunday lunches, just like everybody else. The only thing that marked us out, as far as Emma and I were concerned, was that, on the days we didn't have Mrs B, we were required to do more Hoovering than most kids because, every morning, almost immediately after breakfast, both parents would retreat to their respective studies at opposite ends of the house to write: Interesting people, we learnt early on, live largely inside their own heads and resent distractions such as the whirring banality of vacuum cleaners and will ruthlessly exploit their children in order to avoid them.



Apart from the excessive Hoovering, we were normal, self-absorbed kids and, just as long as we were fed and cossetted – which, for the record, we were – we tended to ignore our parents’ extracurricular activities unless they impinged on us.

In fact, for years, Emma thought Dad worked on the railways because every morning before being dropped off at school – first the village primary and later the local comprehensive – Mum would chivvy us to the car to “*give Daddy a lift to work.*” And because that journey ended at the local railway station, Emma assumed that this was where he must work. Nobody thought to tell us that from there he took the train to London, often en route to some exotic location where, in all likelihood, he would hang out with the likes of John Wayne, or Clint Eastwood or Robert DeNiro or... whoever. In fact it was years before we actually knew what he did for a living and what the daily pilgrimage to Knebworth railway station was really about.

But although Emma’s misapprehension may seem strange now, for my parents’ generation, for whom modesty prevailed and pride came before a fall, celebrity, as we know it, hadn’t been invented yet. Besides, in those days it was *infra dig* to shine too brightly or to talk about oneself too much – especially in the gloriously down-to-earth Hertfordshire village they chose to bring us up in – all of which meant that I was actually quite old by the time I realised that my parents were “interesting” to anyone but me.

And they, bless them, never seemed to realise the fact at all.



My father, in particular remained oblivious to the effects of his burgeoning fame, even on family outings when people started to recognise him, and Emma and I looked on in varying stages of mortification as strangers gathered around us, fingers pointing inches from his head, discussing him at volume as if he wasn't really there.

“What people?” He would ask, astonished when we, self-conscious teenagers that we were then, complained about it.

They're both dead now, alas, and therein lies the rub. As a family friend said, shortly after my mother died while we wept together,

“The trouble with having parents like yours is that you'll miss them more than most.”



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