



Maggie & Me

Damian Barr

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Long-listed for the Green Carnation Prize and *The Sunday Times*' selection for Memoir of the Year.

*"This amazing book tells the story of an appalling childhood with truth and clarity unsmudged by self-pity. It grips from beginning to end." — Diana Athill, Costa Book Award-winning author of *Somewhere Towards the End**

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* crossed with *Billy Elliot*, *Maggie & Me* is a unique, tender, and witty memoir of surviving the tough streets of small town Scotland during the Thatcher years.

October 12, 1984. An IRA bomb blows apart the Grand Hotel in Brighton. Miraculously, Maggie Thatcher survives. In small-town Scotland, eight-year-old Damian Barr watches in horror as his mum rips her wedding ring off and packs their bags. He knows he, too, must survive.

Damian, his sister, and his Catholic mum move in with her sinister new boyfriend while his Protestant dad shacks up with the glamorous Mary the Canary. Divided by sectarian suspicion, the community is held together by the sprawling Ravenscraig Steelworks. But darkness threatens as Maggie takes hold: she snatches school milk, smashes the unions, and makes greed good. Following Maggie's advice, Damian works hard and plans his escape. He discovers that stories can save your life and — in spite of violence, strikes, AIDS, and Clause 28 — manages to fall in love dancing to Madonna in Glasgow's only gay club.

Maggie & Me is a touching and darkly witty memoir about surviving Thatcher's Britain; a story of growing up gay in a straight world and coming out the other side in spite of, and maybe because of, the Iron Lady.

Maggie & Me Details

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Author : Damian Barr

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From Reader Review Maggie & Me for online ebook

Warren Dickson says

Compelling, challenging and moving. Visit's the early 80's and Thatcherite times with it's many challenges, though this young gay man has many more challenges than most. All written with a sense of worth and at times humour.

Jane says

Without a shred of self pity, Damian Barr tells the story of his appalling childhood in a Housing estate near Glasgow and how it (and Maggie Thatcher) shaped his life. A wonderful read. I couldn't put it down.

Steven Benson says

A mixed book. VERY poignant in parts and reminding us of the horrors (and, later, a few joys) of growing up as gay child and teenager (and abused by his mum's boyfriend). That (even) more lgbt people aren't heavily traumatised by childhood repression of their sexual orientation beggars belief: to be honest, I think (writing as gay man, a child/teenager in the 70s) we all ARE traumatised and damaged, to various degrees: its just what levels of strength we have, somehow, garnered from WITHIN ourselves (with little help from heterosexist, sometimes homophobic, mainstream society) to re-invent our sense of self. Barr - this is an account (largely) of his ACTUAL life - conveys the trauma through showing not telling. But it is, by dint of recounting a gay male adolescent's vicissitudes, a deeply political book.

The thesis which forms the book's touching peroration - that "Maggie" (Thatcher) actually, in a bizarre often negative but, somehow, galvanising way, helped form who Barr is now - is somewhat tenuous; but then aren't we often torn, if we are totally honest, between abhorring and admiring some dubious figures of history. I think the point he is making is that young Damian needed someone/thing to PUSH/fight against to give him the STRENGTH to become himself. Some didn't make it: at the end I cried - and was shocked - at the fate of his beloved schoolfriend, Mark, who takes his own life because he cannot find out how to be gay, comfortably enough, in a hostile world.

Everyone - and, ESPECIALLY, every parent - should read this. Your child may be gay, trans or bi: don't make them suffer as Damian did; give them positive education and role models.

The deadpan humour is quite interesting; though I would aver that is a way of dealing with (repressed) trauma, often

Melissa Jane says

Sitting on my sofa, tears streaming down my face. I'm crying for the boy in the book, for the man he had to struggle to become. I'm thinking of the boys and girls I've worked with over the 17 years I was a youth worker. The ones I'm no longer there for. The ones in the future. The harshest of places to be different, those inner-city London schools where "batty man" remains the worst thing you can be called. The invisible walls put up blocking the young non-binary, the gay, the lesbian, and those feeling like they're constantly outsiders. They live their childhood years hidden, silenced, fearful of rejection, with acceptance during adolescence as delicate as rice paper and a heavy hand.

And this country "allows" (feel grateful?) gay marriage, adoption, parenthood. Look at what's happening now in Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Chechnya, Russia to name a few. The recent gains in Malta, India, Cuba dwarfed by the continuing prejudices - and unimaginable violence - people hold against the LGBTQI+ community. Powered by men who need to read the study that those who identify as strictly heterosexual and against gays show the largest reaction with their penises when shown erotic gay images. Those who identify as straight but non-judgemental and gay-friendly seldom had a twitch when their cocks were wired up and the homoeroticism started to play. So why are men (mostly men) so afraid of being gay? of gayness? of the other? While patriarchy and the macho clearly don't favour these guys, I can't speak for them. Aside from: chill the fuck out and accept sexuality as an ever shifting pendulum that harms nobody.

Well, I can thank my mother, Mary Knight, massively for shaping our family view on sexuality and gender norms. For retelling me her lectures on Foucault at fourteen. For being so immersed in her academic studies after leaving school at 15. Doing her MA research on the gay scene in the 90s. Watching a woman in her forties go from disgraced Catholic dropout to all black and grey wearing feminist fag hag with three degrees. For the guys calling me Saffy from Ab Fab, when my frizzy head of hair would come home to various men, lying around listening to KD Lang on repeat; men who make you feel safe and loved and like life is one big party once you get through the shit growing up bit.

And thanks, Mum, for taking us to Pride as a family and me finding out which teachers from my church school were gay, seeing one in his favourite dark stonewashed jeans and Doc Martins but up top a leather harness over his pasty white chest. His small gold hoop earring in school was always a giveaway. At Pride, I had an intimate moment with a young guy in his early twenties who was beaming that a whole family were at the festival. Then his face dropped just as fast as he shyly wiped away the tears he hadn't expected, his chin quivering as he whispered, "I wished I had a mum like yours". At fourteen, my heart pinching at his pain while looking at my little brother sat on the grass opposite with his prepubescent chubby cheeks. We told my bro constantly it's okay to be gay, so much so, he had to find a moment to come out as straight: "Mum, I know everyone wants me to be gay but I like girls". The kind of insideout family we still are today.

And now I'm a mum. I've made a partnership with someone who is equally and genuinely as open to our "sons" being gay, non-binary, trans, whoever they want and feel they are. We got their backs.

So that's my bit. I pass on the baton my mum handed to me. I open my heart and mind. I say, it's not only okay to be gay, it's fucking amazing!

And thank you, Damian Barr for writing this important book. I've scattered copies around my besties and now I've read it, I've added a fair few more folk to the list in the next round of making your memoir a journey to cherish. Despite the harshness of your hometown and the misery and inner confusion, the hope and the beauty shines through. I love the book. I want to hug that little Damian and take his struggles away but then we would never have Maggie and Me and we would never have you how you are, with how you see the world and what you give should never be compromised.

Layla says

Not til I turned the final page in this book with a smile of satisfaction I realize that I've seen this author in real life. When I realized that the very cool and cheery Damian Barr who runs the impossibly hip Shoreditch Literary Salon in London was my beloved little 'Gaymian' from *Maggie and Me*, I got a sentimental and embarrassing tear in my eye. Because this is a memoir about surviving a grim childhood. I'd spend days of reading willing him to escape the poverty, bullying, alcoholism, violence, unreliable parenting, and general difficulties of being a gay boy growing up in a poor part of Scotland. That this book exists is of course some testament that he did, but the vision of him as MC at that cool Literary Salon confirms it.

But against all expectations, this book is not actually grim. *Maggie and Me* has every element that could make it ripe for a harrowing misery memoir. And yet it is almost the opposite. Damian's experiences skip from the sad to the joyful, the funny, the silly, the universality of being a kid. He addresses his many childhood challenges in a sensitive, generous way, affording sympathy and understanding to the many people who let him down. And throughout, his character is believable, sweet, funny, stoic, and hopeful.

The book has a fantastic sense of time and place, and the sort of Scotland you don't often read about (a particular treat for me as I grew up there at the same time as him). This is all drawn together through the almost personal relationship the British public, and Damian in particular, experienced with controversial Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the eponymous "Maggie" of the book. The struggles of the adults in the book to succeed against the often harsh influences of a woman who is supposed to be working to help them reflects Damian's struggles with his own parent figures, and conversely with insufficient parental authority in his life, he actually flourishes by embracing the authority this hated figure represents, and turning it into inspiration for how to succeed – and succeed he does.

His voice is likable, charming and funny. His stories are tragic and hilarious and ordinary and relatable. And I challenge anyone not to root for his success.

Alex says

This memoir is very real – it's frank, and matter-of-fact. A childhood that, in this case, was very difficult. As the title suggests it touches on the way Margaret Thatcher, and the life she imposed on Britain, touched a life. But it doesn't focus on that. Don't imagine it is a book about her. Rather, it is about a life of someone who has made that life worthwhile, and successful, in the present day, but who had to travel a rough road to get there.

Because of its nature I found it difficult to admit to liking it as much as I did. It feels wrong, somehow, admitting to pleasure from knowing about another's hardships. But Damian Barr writes in the perfect way: presenting his story without bitterness or sentimentality, and speaking with a forgiving voice. Because of this, the reader can have no trouble indulging in this lovely piece of writing, supporting its hero all the way, taking the extreme brutality of those early days with a grave nod, and subsequently grinning wildly at the knowledge that Barr is writing it from the life he always wanted. So, somehow, he rose above what tried to bring him down.

A wonderful, flowing prose with a sparkling intelligence; this is a talented writer. His world is brought to life as his message is conveyed. Where they're unnecessary, the details aren't dwelt upon. The story of a life moves with an interesting pace, every moment is of great importance, stimulating sympathy and reflection, and often shining with a warm sense of humour.

It is particularly interesting, too, when speaking of Maggie. Whether you support her or not, it manages to make you think a little. If life was difficult, you came through, and if you know you shouldn't agree with her, but feel just something in the way of sympathy, that's okay. Something about her reassured you, and you don't mind admitting it.

It's a beautiful memoir, and a book that is so worth a read.

Adam Mills says

I knew from the very start this book was going to be very special. I flicked through it when I got hold of my copy, but then wanted to read it properly, and have just finished turning the final page... And what a book it is.

I'm a big fan of Damian - his Lit Salon is an absolute joy, and his love of books and reading is beyond anyone I've ever known. This is a true masterpiece. The ability to describe some of the most tender, poignant moments in his life in such a way continually astounded me. I was sobbing my way through some elements, whilst getting funny looks on the train home for laughing too loud in other parts.

One message throughout the whole book sticks with me more than any other: with one boy being the token Tory in an otherwise wholly-Labour class, he was the only one that was different, and willing to stand up for himself and his views. Damian did the same and became who he is because of it. I admire them both - the book isn't about accepting who you are, but knowing full well who you are, and getting others to accept you.

I urge you to read this. It's an incredibly powerful book.

Carole says

This book is a true gem! Funny and sad and clever and well written and I enjoyed every minute of it. The author grew up in Glasgow in the 1980s and certainly had plenty of obstacles to overcome. But with a few good friends and some supportive adults he was able to do well at school and build a successful life, and be confident to just be himself. In spite of all the hardships, this is a positive and uplifting book.

Lou Pollard says

I loved this book as much as coal miners hated Maggie Thatcher. I wanted to snatch mini Damian away from his troubled life and tuck him into bed in an immaculate house under a perfect Laura Ashley duvet cover. Funny, wise and uplifting, Damian Barr's beautifully written memoir captures the harsh reality of Scottish life under the rule of Empress Thatcher. Using long-forgotten quotes from the Iron Lady herself to start each chapter, he vividly brings to life the characters that inhabited his childhood. This is a must read memoir from a wonderful writer

Kim says

Intriguing and interesting memoir/biography. Enjoyed it - 8.5/10.

Donna Lees says

I felt this book was brilliant. The author was brought up in the next village to me. I actually went to the opposite high school from him Taylor High mentioned. I feel this book was very well written and depicted a very clear account of what it was like growing up in Lanarkshire in the Thatcher era and council estate and of the poverty and lifestyle choices of a lot of people in the area.

This book had me hooked and felt it was sad to finish it although bit of a feel good book to see how well the author has done for himself considering such a difficult upbringing.

Very clever use of humor too and accurate use of the banter of small Scottish villages. This book had my emotions all over the place in a good way due to being so well written and having me hooked. At times I burst out laughing then a paragraph later have a lump in my throat. I

BrIDGET says

I loved this memoir on lots of levels. It was a great story of growing up in awful circumstances, being loved but also being left to fend for himself, Damian really had some challenges. The poverty, the humour despite the grim reality of life under Maggie Thatcher with factories and industries closing right and left, not enough of anything and the grim determination of Damian to get the hell out of town were really powerful. I really felt for him as I read the anecdotes, the secret of his attraction to men that he carried around with him and the tormenting of him by schoolmates who were only too keen to persecute him at any moment. This book makes you realise that we have come a long way as a society in the way we treat gay people in some ways, but it is a reminder that it wasn't long ago that persecution was the norm. I'm sure in towns like the one where this one is set, gay teenagers are still tormented and teased for their differences. A really enjoyable, at times uncomfortable read.

Keith Johnstone says

I can't rate this book highly enough for anyone associated with Scotland, difficult childhoods or coming out - in fact anyone associated with life in general! I was genuinely moved by Damian's clever and witty writing and his incredible lack of self-pity over surviving a harrowing childhood. One of the best books I've read in years, I couldn't put it down

Kristin says

I am a huge fan of Damian Barr's The Literary Salon podcast (link below) and have been looking forward to

this book for ages. Excerpts from Maggie & Me featured on a recent episode and I laughed out loud and shed a tear from sadness whilst on a Melbourne train, all in the span of a few minutes. Barr nails the voice; of course he does, it's a memoir, but not for a moment did I feel I was being told a story. I was living it, alongside a young Damian.

I am not a fan of the misery memoir, mostly because I get slightly annoyed with the 'triumph of the human spirit' cliche, but this book changed my mind. Because it's not all misery, and it's not all overcoming obstacles. See, Damian was a fighter from the beginning. He was ambitious, he knew he could be more than the usual product of such harrowing surroundings.

Barr does not paint a young Damian as an angel, but as a kid struggling through the chaos of childhood and teenagerdom. Everyone can relate to bullying, fear of not fitting in, lies that we spin to seem cool. Maggie & Me took me back to my childhood, which was light years from Barr's geographically and emotionally. That's where Barr nails this misery memoir: he makes it relevant, no matter what the reader's background. He makes it uncomfortable, hurtful, awkward, shocked, delighted, hilarious, maddening. He somehow connected my middle-class childhood in Wichita to a council house upbringing in western Scotland. That's genius.

Barr cleverly frames the book with quotations by Margaret Thatcher, who constantly hums in the background of this book, interjecting a sense of time and place throughout. Maggie's influence on Barr and those who share his background is a story I've heard before, after many years in Scotland, but one that hasn't been fully explored by someone of my generation who lived it. This is a brave book for tackling the story of thousands of people in Scotland during Thatcher, because this is their story too.

The Literary Salon by Damian Barr: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/t...>

Angie says

My book of the year. I devoured this at every opportunity. A brave and honest memoir which gave me food for thought regarding Maggie Thatcher. I grew up in Lanarkshire around the same time and, for me, the writer highlights so many issues of the era in a voice which will resonate with me forever. I will be reading this again and recommending far and wide. I only wish he'd gone to my school - it's shite being studious in Motherwell. 'Mon the brainboxes!
