

Poo: the last taboo

We all do it – even those of us who pretend we don't. So why are we still so hung up about it? By Christa D'Souza

Poo. The last taboo. The last taboo – and yet, what we all do. Yes, even you, Kate Moss. On average, a human being will spend three years out of his or her lifetime sitting on the lavatory and voiding an approximate 12.5 metric tonnes of waste. (Up to three times more if you are from the developing world and your diet consists mainly of grains.) Defecating, evacuating, pooing (or, if you are American, pooping) – it is one of those inescapable, unequivocal, non-negotiable, non-discriminatory facts of life that no amount of Japanese technology will ever make redundant.

And no shit, Sherlock, a lot of us gain an enormous amount of pleasure from it, too. As that old, famous quote goes, "There is nothing so overrated as sex, and nothing so underrated as a good bowel movement." So why, then, if it is such an integral, pleasurable part of our lives, are so many of us hung up about it? Why are there so many perfectly alpha, perfectly non-prissy women out there – women like me, who have perfectly

scatological senses of humour – who would nonetheless rather die than brandish a newspaper about the office the way their male counterparts so airily do before planning to use the lavatory? Why are there so many women who would do *anything* rather than have someone they fancy know that's what they do? Oh, come now. Am I really the only woman in the world whose heart has sunk when she's seen how close the loo is to the bed? Who's had to pretend she's got to get a newspaper from the hotel lobby in order to go? Who's held it in until it's almost coming up the other end rather than reveal herself to a lover as someone who – ugh, the shame of it – does something as unladylike and noxious as *that*?

Of course, there are men out there whose insides turn to concrete at the idea of a weekend away or an office cubicle. But, in my not so meagre experience, this constant deferral – it's a woman's thing, not a man's. As Martin Amis quipped in *Money*, those ambulances you see whizzing around London? They're mostly rushing women who desperately need to crap to hospital. Honestly. The inequality of it. When I think of the way the majority of the male heterosexual species doesn't know what a lavatory brush is there for, or the way even the most upmarket of builders save it up so they can go at your place, rather than their own. It doesn't seem fair.

Women and pooing. Can the two things ever be reconciled? Should the two things ever be reconciled? Is the queasiness the Western world has at the thought what, in fact, holds modern civilisation together? Or as the American poet Muriel Rukeyser once rhetorically asked, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?" Would, as she wrote, the world split open?

Well, that's partly why I'm here in a doctor's office in Harley Street, to see if, just perhaps, it might not. Picture the scene. It is a nice, neutral office with blue carpeting, sympathetic down-lighting and shelves studded with framed family snaps. The doctor herself, Patricia Evans, is a reassuring lady in a stripy cardie and comfortable flats. Not heard of "Trish" Evans? Well, perhaps you know her as the Balloon Lady, then, for as one of the country's leading stool specialists and an expert on something called biofeedback therapy, that is what she is – a lady who sticks balloons up people's bottoms.

Most of Evans's clients are female, and most of them come for either constipation or, aargh, faecal incontinence, but they also come to see her to learn how to poo properly. The lavatory, she says, has taught us such >

bad habits – the way it raises us so far up from the ground and forces us all, without even knowing it, to strain. So, yes, that’s what I’m here for: to improve my pooing technique. And there it is, on the desk between us, still in its wrapper: an innocuous, Non-Stop-Party-Shop-like thing, attached via a tube to a rather large syringe. The idea is for Evans to put the balloon up there and blow it up to “to the size of an average stool” and then for the patient (ie, me) to “poo” the balloon out. Learning the art of producing the perfect stool (one that doesn’t need wiping and is about the length of between your wrist bone and the crook of your elbow) “is tricky”, says Evans, “like learning a new dance step”, but with practice, it comes.

Before we do that, however, let’s see what my posture is like. If I would just sit on that chair over there and demonstrate, please, how I normally sit on the loo. “Ah!” says Evans triumphantly. “Very ladylike, I see, which, of course, is terribly restricting for the colon. Knees apart please, like a man, and lean forward from your hips as if you’re reading the newspaper. That’s right. Now, what I want you to do is put your hand on your tummy, bulge it out... and open your bottom. Go on – open, open, a bit more. There we go. Now, can you say the word ‘ouge’ for me? Yes, ‘ouge’, with an emphasis on the ‘g’ because that pushes the diaphragm out. There we go. And open and ouggggggge...”

Evans says that if one talks about it enough, rather than jokes about it, poo should automatically become less of a taboo. Part of me agrees with her. After all, I’ve no secrets – I’ve had babies, I live with a nice man. What’s the problem? On the other hand, old habits die hard. That inner Victorian prude of mine, that creature who would like to remain forever mysterious to the opposite sex, she’s not going to be easy to let go of. How am I going to go in front of my other half when the tacit understanding between us is that I haven’t been for the past 15 years?

The next step is to confront the issue head on – look at “it”, as it were, directly in the face. Off I go, then, to Hydrohealing in Notting Hill to have a colonic. I’ll not be coy here. I’ve had a few of these in my time. Weirdly, it’s quite easy to retain one’s privacy while having one, what with the dainty positioning of blankets, the 150 per cent odourless environment and the thick piece of tubing between you and “it”. I can quite see, in other words, why Princess Diana didn’t mind the world knowing that she had them, too. And this isn’t any old colonic – this is one administered by Hasmira Yadev,

the self-described “Queen of Poo”. Like Evans, she clearly loves her work. Engaged to a trainee surgeon currently working in the colorectal unit of St Marks, Hasmira, 26, likes nothing more of an evening *à deux* to talk poo. She encourages her patients to do likewise. “We’ve become so disconnected from our bodies, the way we pop pills for the smallest ailment,” she says. “We need to get in touch with what is going on inside; we need to acknowledge how everything sort of collapses when we don’t get that function right. I have some female clients, for example, who have two different wardrobes for when they ‘have’ and they ‘haven’t’, and who can’t let anyone go near them when they’ve not been for a certain amount of time. The whole day pivots on a perfect poo, don’t you think? OK now, beginning to cramp up a little? That’s right, here it comes...”

Amazing. *Amazing* – how something is merely undigested food while it is inside your body, and yet the moment it leaves it, it becomes so graphically, so shockingly, so absurdly “other”. No wonder Swift and Rabelais loved writing about it. No wonder children and political prisoners like to smear it on walls. (For Steve McQueen’s film on the

subject, *Hunger*, by the way, they used a mixture of brown paint, PVA and food dye.) No wonder, too, the world of contemporary art, when it wants to be particularly subversive, finds it such a useful tool. (Think Piero Manzoni’s famous 1961 opus *Artist’s Shit*; Gilbert and George’s *The Naked Shit Pictures* (1994); and *The Home-Coming of Navel Strings*, that extremely popular installation at Frieze in 2004 by Noritoshi Hirakawa, which involved a girl sitting on a chair reading a book, with a pile of her own poo sitting there beside her.) As for Anish Kapoor’s latest monumental exhibition at the Royal Academy... What were those marvellous cement sculptures if they weren’t meant to be crap?

According to the social anthropologist Mary Douglas, one of the reasons excrement has this everlasting power to shock, titillate and disgust is because, like any other taboo, it does not fit neatly into any social categorisation. It is both “of” us and not – or, as Lord Chesterfield once described dirt of all kinds, “matter out of place”. Jean-Paul Sartre, typically, had a more existential take on it. In his philosophical work *Being and Nothingness*, he posits how it is the sliminess, the lack of boundary

between it and ourselves when we touch it, that provokes fear and disgust. It is for the same reason, he says, that some people (including him) have an aversion to honey.

There is also, of course, that smell. That smell which can be so intolerable that you sometimes can’t help but want to hit its sheepish perpetrator, no? Vegetarians will try to tell you theirs doesn’t, but guess what? Everyone’s does. However many lentils one eats. (Or marzipan. The Marquis de Sade used to feed it to his prostitutes, believing it made their stools taste sweeter.) But then, as potentially toxic waste (a gram of faeces can contain 10 million viruses, 1 million bacteria, 1,000 parasite cysts and 100 worm eggs), it is meant to smell. That it doesn’t necessarily smell so bad to ourselves is because our own is not poisonous to us. (Did you know, for example, that Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, used to eat a teaspoon of his own every day?)

“The fact is,” says Rose George, 40, author of *The Big Necessity: Adventures in The World of Human Waste*, “faeces are unpleasant. No one wants to smell it or touch it or feel it – most of all me. But this culture of denial around it, the way society has made it such a foul, shameful

thing, particular for women, seems slightly ludicrous. To me, poo is almost the foundation of civilisation. It is through the management of poo, through toilet training, that we integrate our children into society. To negate its existence doesn’t make sense. Tellingly, though, *I still* can’t go in front of anyone – not within hearing distance, anyway.”

Aha! So there *are* lines that cannot be crossed. As a famously earthy W11 girlfriend of mine primly declared when I asked her about whether she’d ever gone in front of her equally earthy husband, “Boundaries, Christa, boundaries...” (Or as the author Natasha Walter politely wrote back when I emailed to ask whether she’d consider commenting on the topic from a feminist point of view, “Thank you for this, but I’m not sure I have anything to contribute on the subject. I’ll enjoy reading it though...”)

“Look, we’re all too used to it being a very private thing,” says George, who, as a journalist, also worked on Oliviero Toscani’s lavish coffee table tome *Cacas: The Encyclopedia of Poo* and was compelled to write her own book after finding out that 2.5 billion people in the world do not even have a lavatory. “If I lived in China, where >

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communal loos are the norm, I might get used to it. Certainly, when I was on Operation Raleigh in Siberia for three months, toileting was no big deal whatsoever. Have you heard of this thing the Japanese have called a Sound Princess, by the way? It's an electronic gadget you put next to the loo, which makes the sound of constant flushing. Brilliant, don't you think?"

The Japanese, they sure have the smell and sound thing nailed. But as a nation, we might be catching up. On a recent stop-off at the BP Connect loos on the A303, I notice, they've got a continual loop in the ladies of canned tropical birdsong.

"The interesting thing about the act is that it is not innately private – it only became so about 200 years ago with the invention of the private bathroom." So speaks Professor Virginia Smith of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who is the author of *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity*. "Up until then, communal latrines were the norm and our courtly ancestors were not embarrassed about defecating in front of others at all." She cites as an example Henry VIII's famous Great House of Easement at Hampton Court, a row of seats with holes in them, which enabled 28 heads of state to talk about current affairs and defecate at the same time. She also mentions the high-ranking position of the Groom of the Stole, whose sole job was to preside over the monarch's excretions. What, too, of the court at Versailles, where the gilded corridors would often be lined with piles of human ordure, to be cleared every morning by liveried footmen?

The upper classes historically had no problem with it at all. It was really the rise of the middle classes in the Victorian era, with their frilly jackets for piano legs and so forth, that turned it into such a shameful, private, bestial thing. But then, *plus ça change*. For isn't your reaction to a scatological joke shorthand for showing the world you are not – how to put it? – "common"? Isn't squeamishness around the subject the social equivalent of having a doorbell that goes "ding dong" or putting a plastic cover on one's sofa? As Milan Kundera, who was all for open-door lavatories, once put it, "Kitsch is the inability to admit that shit exists."

Smith herself (a comforting presence in her late fifties), meanwhile, has no qualms about going in front of her partner. Indeed, she believes it to be "a good sign of the relationship. Perhaps that is because I think of defecation as part of the grooming process – cleansing

one's outsides and insides. Would it not help if you gave it this slight perceptual shift?"

I take my hat off to Smith. I take my hat off, too, to the friend of mine who will happily evacuate while her husband is having a bath. And to the friend who doesn't even have a door to the en-suite loo she and her other half designed in their new house. Or to the one who says, "Yes, of course I'd go in front of my boyfriend! We eat, we shit – for me it's no big deal. In fact, if he were one of those men who think that girls don't poo or fart, he would worry me. But maybe I'm just too comfortable with my body?" Interestingly, though, they were all terrified of being outed by name. Doing it, I guess, is one thing. Admitting it in print is another.

Not so for Charlotte Roche, whose semi-autobiographical novel *Wetlands* begins with the famous first line, "As far back as I can remember, I've had haemorrhoids," and then describes in forensic, exhaustive, exhausting detail her difficulties with evacuating after an operation for them.

Nor for Lucy Tang, amateur runner and wife of the entrepreneur Sir David Tang. In fact, so "normalised" is Lucy around the subject, she actually exchanges pictures of it with her husband via iPhone. "Oh God, I send pictures of mine to all sorts of people," she gaily admits. "And then people send me pics of theirs, and I forget to erase them. I'll be in a shop buying something, and look down at my phone, and go, 'What on earth is that?'"

A former sufferer of severe constipation (which she has since eliminated with a combination of regular exercise, two litres of water and a tablespoon of flax seed every day), she puts her somewhat maverick attitude down to pride. "You've no idea how constipation dominated my life," she says, "what an all-encompassing thing it was not to be able to go. Now I can, I suppose I need to tell the world how clever I am. Although, you could also say there was an element of one-upmanship to it, too. It's as though I'm saying, 'Got a problem with talking about it? Well, then you can't be in my gang,' kind of thing..."

Not being part of the gang. How true. As an American friend of mine once put it when he was living here, what is it about us guys that 10 minutes into any conversation, the topic *has* to be brought up? What is this social obligation, almost, to bring one's experience of a barium enema or haemorrhoid operation or colonoscopy up at table? And might this

puerile approach to the subject (I'm as guilty as any on this front) – this competition, if you like, to be the most gross – actually be perpetuating the problem? Might the Teutons, with their inspection platforms and their fastidiously unfunny approach to the subject, teach us a trick or two? As Sigmund Freud wrote in the foreword to Captain John Bourke's *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, an anthropological treatise on the subject written at the turn of the last century, instead of distancing ourselves from it, either by joking about it or pretending it does not exist, the better, more sensible path "would undoubtedly have been to admit [to the act of defecation] and dignify it as much as its nature will allow".

Back to Hasimira's couch. And she's delighted. "Total Brownie points for you!" she says, pointing at the tube. "See here? That's exactly the shape and colour it should be. You should be very pleased with yourself!" Well, yes, I think I am. Though it's not quite the same as having someone analysing your blood or even your wee, is it?

Poo. It's just too interesting not to talk about it. All these facts out there to know and learn. Like the fact that French women used to store it in

powder form (*poudrette*) and sniff it like snuff. Like the fact that people used to use corn on the cob in medieval times for lavatory paper. Or that the faecal transplant of a relative is often used to treat severe cases of MRSA. Like the fact that we ought to be going three times a day, and that the perfect stool should not need even one sheet of loo paper. "Well?" asks Sophie Heywood, a Beam (Bosiger Energy Alignment Method) therapist from Wiltshire, and one of the many poo experts who volunteered to help with this story. "Animals don't need paper, do they?"

But have I become normalised about it? I don't know. They say caveman wasn't at all embarrassed about doing it in front of his fellow cavemen, that the concept of "me time" is pure modern-day construct. But when I tried, for the purpose of this piece, to make history and go with the door ajar while he was just in the other room, that sensation of vulnerability, of needing privacy, that refusal of my colon to relax and let go... Well, it felt awful primal to me. And another thing. Men may say it doesn't matter at all, but, actually, it sort of does. The day before my weekend at Glasto this year, therefore, I'll definitely be seeing Hasimira. ■

What is this social obligation to discuss one's enema at table?