The letters that became a publishing phenomenon – and divided my family

INTERVIEW Hugo Rifkind
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I think I've been terribly unfair to Jane Torday. I had an e-mail from her about a year ago, you see, and I thought she must be a bit of a nightmare. And she isn't. She's a sweet lady in late middle age, who lives in a lovely farmhouse in Northumberland. She gave me gin, and baked me a pie. Damn good pie, too. I mean, seriously. Not nightmarish at all.

Some background here. Torday is the first wife of the late Paul Torday, who wrote the smash *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. Although that's not terribly relevant. More pertinent is the way that she's the daughter of the (also late) Roger Mortimer. A near legendary racing correspondent in life, Mortimer has become more legendary in death, thanks to a bestselling book called *Dear Lupin*, which catalogued his letters to his wayward son, Charlie.

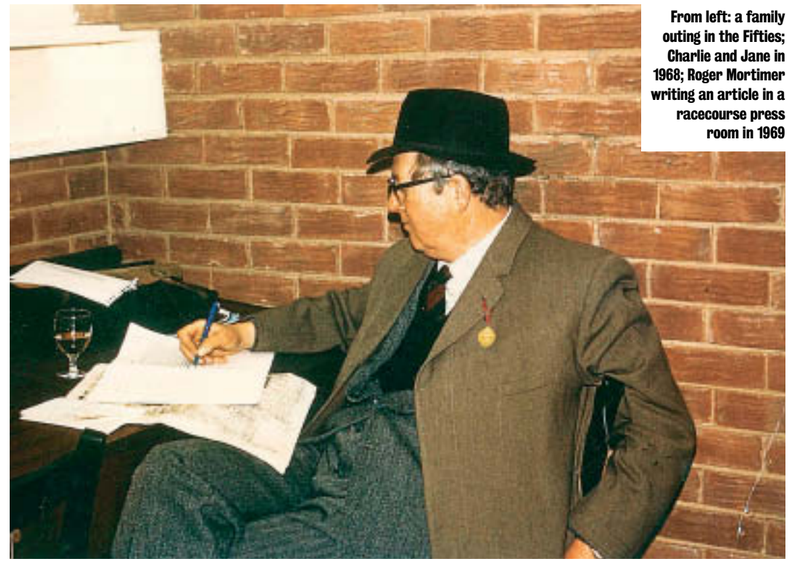
Last year, for another interview, I met Charlie. And, while he didn't give me gin or a pie, he did give me a cup of tea and an ashtray, and I liked him a lot. We sat in his home in Parsons Green, southwest London, with his other sister, Louise (who had just published *Dear Lumpy*, about the letters sent to her), and we all had a good old natter about their witty, beleaguered father and his boozy mum, who would get in fights and put her wig on backwards. Dimly, I'd been aware that there was another sister, and that she had long been planning a book of her own. But really, I didn't give it much thought.

It was a few days after the piece ran that Jane sent me an e-mail. Her mother, she wrote, was "much maligned". Her siblings, she added, were "highly dubious". Moreover, she concluded, as claims "flow as naturally from those children as other effluents through a sewer" (damn good phrase), they probably hadn't told me that her own book, *Dearest Jane*, was well on the way. "Won't hold my breath," I thought, and promptly forgot about it for a year. But it was, and here I am.

"I think that really we should all have been in on this together, and we were all in it separately," Jane says now. "It's a very sad thing. Because the books seem to represent the celebration of a family, but in fact they've divided it. And if I look back on it carefully, I see that the dynamic of a family can change completely when both the parents have died."

As to precisely who stopped speaking to whom, and when and why, well, God knows. The different characters here, though, are plain to see, as much in the people as in the books.

Mortimer, who died in 1991, was a sublime writer. In *Dear Lupin*, he tries and fails to comprehend the life of his only son, who seems to be veering badly off the rails, in manners we shall come to. In *Dear Lumpy*, the action revolves around the eccentricities of Louise (the youngest sister), her husband (inexplicably known as Hot Hand Henry) and



From left: a family outing in the Fifties; Charlie and Jane in 1968; Roger Mortimer writing an article in a racecourse press room in 1969

COURTESY JANE TORDAY

'THE PUBLISHERS SAID, "JANE, YOU MUSTN'T WORRY, BECAUSE YOUR FAMILY ARE SEEN AS FIGURES OF FICTION"'

Mortimer's own wife, Cynthia (equally inexplicably known as Nidnod). Last year, when I met Charlie and Louise, they told me a fun little tale about Nidnod getting HHH into a headlock at a family festive dinner and smashing him through a plate-glass window. Charlie called it "*Straw Dogs* Christmas".

Jane wasn't terribly happy about any of this.

"At the beginning of my relationship with the publisher," she says, in her steady, quite worried voice, "it was pointed out to me, 'But Jane, you mustn't worry about anything because, you know, your family are seen as figures of fiction.' And I thought, 'Well, yes, that's OK if you're not a member of that family.' But strangely enough, I'm still alive."

When I met Charlie and Louise, I tell her, they'd just had an approach from a TV company. Charlie had turned them down, furious because they wanted to make what he called "a posh bloody *Shameless*".

"Well, how strange," she says. "How strange that they were prepared to do just that in print."

Jane's point, which is both fair and utterly human, is that Roger Mortimer deserves better than to be recalled merely as some baffled old bloke with a flair for writing letters. He was an army veteran, for one thing. Early chapters in her book thus go through his time with the Coldstream Guards in the prewar Middle East, through letters sent to his own parents and sister, Joan.

He has a nice turn of phrase, especially when stretching out horror into wry mundanity. "One unfortunate gentleman was squatting on the basket when the bomb blew up," he writes, of an attack on an Arab marketplace by Jewish terrorists in Thirties Jerusalem. "He was completely disintegrated except for his legs, which were paraded up and down the street all that day by his female relatives, accompanied by piercing and incessant lamentations."

Mortimer's wartime hinterland, merely nodded towards in his domestic letters ("The brief heatwave is over and the weather is dark and clammy like a woman I used to know in Alexandria before the war"), makes a lot more sense in the context of all this sort of stuff. "An awful dinner party last week," he reports from Egypt. "Thirty-four people and I sat next to a fabulously wealthy and exceedingly vulgar old bitch who was in the back row of the chorus of a Greek cabaret before marrying the richest man in Egypt." He goes on to claim that he told her a bunch of lies, and invited her for a cruise on a fictional yacht in the Aegean. "She has accepted and I think is looking forward to it," he writes.

There follows a chapter about his life during four years in a wartime Belgian prisoner-of-war camp. Jane, it turns out, has already written a book about this period, called *The Coldstreamer and the Canary*, published almost 20 years ago. This was not a man, in other words, who had spent his whole life watching Nidnod falling over at the races.

"I've had a great many conversations with people since he published it," she says, of Charlie and *Dear Lupin*. "I call it being 'lupinated'. Sometimes, I very much enjoy what people say to me; sometimes I enjoy it less. It depends which angle they come from. But what I have appreciated enormously is how much my father is seen as a kind of hero of tolerance."

One accidental upshot of the format of *Dear Lupin* – the way that Charlie's own involvement is a mere skeleton, with sparse passages introducing letters – is that Charlie himself comes across rather badly. All we see is his father, urging him to sort his life out. According to one reviewer at the time, he seems "utterly feckless" and "spectacularly unfit for all the normal occupations of the upper-middle classes". The impression one gets is of a sort of Richard Branson gone wrong; Toad of Toad Hall at the bottom of a gin bottle.

In fact, as you'd never expect from the books, Charlie ended up as a fairly successful antiques broker. More pertinently, he is gay, a fact unmentioned in his book, and which I only realised myself when his door was answered by an elfin, white-haired chap called Tim, who introduced himself as "Mrs Lupin". Odd hints litter *Dear Lupin* that Charlie's health might not be great – at one point, there's a mention of a "hideous rash" – and one puts it down to booze and the aforementioned fecklessness. Whereas, actually, as he told me quite cheerfully over a cup of tea, he was diagnosed with Aids in 1985 and it's fairly astonishing he's still here. Was Roger really aware of none of this?

"People have often asked me this," says Jane. "And he was a very worldly man, my father. But it was definitely my mother [Charlie] came out to, never my father. But, I'm sure that my father... We never discussed it. We discussed his ill health, we discussed the fact that he didn't seem to have a long-term relationship, meaning generally girls. But I do rather wonder if fundamentally my father had grasped something. I don't know."

It says reams about the characters of the two siblings that, whereas Charlie himself was fairly blithe about this misunderstanding, Jane, despite not being on speaking terms with him, seems to have been terribly bothered he might have been judged too harshly. It concerns her that people don't know what Charlie was wrestling with, and for how long, or that, in the end and after all, he actually made quite a success of his adult life.

This, really, marks out the difference between her book and the other two. Hers may lack some of its predecessors' snappy flair, but in its place has lots of context and explanation, to be sure that nobody gets the wrong end of the stick. Or, as Charlie himself put it in a newspaper diary story, in that appreciative manner of younger siblings the world over, "*Dear Lupin* was about 10 per cent me and 90 per cent my father. I expect hers will be about 10 per cent Dad and 90 per cent Jane."

For their mother, says Jane, Charlie was always the favourite. She first realised this very young, when they both went off to boarding school. "I suddenly realised," she says, "that the desolation my mother felt at my brother's absence so young at this school was very much greater than her pleasure at me returning home that first weekend."

By her own admission, she was an awkward teenager, and in a manner that both of her parents struggled to understand.

"Well, I wasn't horsey," she says. "Not in the way my mother was, nor in the way my father was. My mother was a great Pony Club mother. You know what I mean."

Jane rode, too, until she fell off and opted not to continue. "It was actually a very funny occasion," she says. "I was in a field with my mother and I had been cantering around on ➡

my fat little pony, and then suddenly the pony bolted, because it saw my mother waving a white flag in the distance. Which in fact turned out to be her knickers. Because she had sat on an anthill. So the whole... I mean, my sister, who was a toddler, was there crying, and my mother was waving her knickers, the pony was bolting, and I fell off. So, that really was the end of my riding career."

Instead, she says, she'd skulk in the car, smoking and reading women's magazines. In a way, I suppose, she was a pioneer teenager, living exactly how teenagers weren't supposed to in the late Sixties. By 17, she was at a sixth-form college in Oxford and had "fallen in with a very unsatisfactory Adonis".

In what way, I ask, was he unsatisfactory?

"In every way," she says. "He was so totally unsatisfactory. He was a very, very beautiful young man who really gathered women like trophies, and I was one of them. But I needed to believe that this was a great romance; it wasn't really, but it had an effect on me."

There's a calculated reserve there, all the more notable when contrasted with the instinctive oversharing of her brother. "Have you succeeded in bursting open that terrifying monopoly in the creation of bizarre shoulder bags that was threatening Western culture?" her father writes to her, at about this time. "Are you still in the throes of a meaningful relationship with the trendy, avant-garde critic of wet and dry groceries whose name continues to elude me?"

Not so many of the letters in Jane's book are about Jane, though, perhaps because, for all her protestations, she was a bit too normal and stable to fire his incredulity. Or at least, not to the extent that his wife and son did. "Your mother is in bed sending out lunch and dinner invitations to persons who do not want to come here and whom we do not wish to entertain," he writes. Or, beautifully, "We had the Reading Crown Court Judge staying here. He completely out-talked Nidnod at dinner and repeated the performance at breakfast. I pity his juries." Or, my favourite, "Your mother is entertaining four men in the kitchen including a postman press-ganged into moving a swarm of bees. Your mother has monopolised the conversation and not even a bee has managed to get in a buzz."

Dearest Jane, even more so than its predecessors, is best understood as a record of a time now passed, populated by people of a sort who don't really exist any more. Theirs was a racing set, based around Newbury, both privileged and accustomed to it. Mortimer had been to Eton, so Charlie went there, too. Life revolved around croquet and ponies and house parties and gin. And, overshadowing it all, throughout the Seventies, was the pervading sense that it was coming to an end.

"I hope Piers relished his second birthday," Mortimer writes, of Jane's firstborn. "What a ghastly world the poor child is growing up in! By the time he is 15 this country will probably be occupied by the Chinese." Most of the time, he refers to the baby as "Sir Denis", having decided that he resembled Denis Healey. "If he's fractious," he writes, "he's probably worrying about the wealth tax."

Jane with her father at Christmas, 1988

'I WANTED TO GIVE MY MOTHER A VOICE, TO SHOW HER OUTSIDE THE MARTINI BUCKET'

Later, he muses about his grandfather, who "though never a rich man... seldom had fewer than six servants indoors", and contrasts this with his own circumstances. Jane's children, he decides, "are destined to live in an egalitarian society". And he doesn't seem to be suggesting this is a good thing, either.

Everybody also seems to have been drunk, pretty much all the time. Especially Nidnod. "I desperately wanted to give my mother her own voice," says Jane, "because I wanted to show the dimensions of her that were outside the martini bucket." To be honest, I'm not sure she pulls it off. Yes, the book has pictures of her as a beautiful young woman. She clearly could be a lot of fun, and the hyperbolic myth-making her husband trotted out for family consumption perhaps looks more damning than it ought when taken directly as fact. But even with all that as a given, the letters themselves are pretty unequivocal. In the space of a single missive, Roger at one point has her "stepping out of a first-floor window onto one of my better shrubs" and then "endeavouring to bring off a flying tackle on a moving car 48 hours later".

"There was a lot more pre-lunch or pre-dinner drinking," allows Jane. "My father used to do this to my own friends, actually. If he discovered a gaggle of my friends would be coming to lunch or something, he'd get this vast china jug, one of the old washbasin jugs, and fill it with some lethal mixture of every liquor and spirit, and masses of fruit juice – what he always called 'the undependable portion of yesterday's fruit salad'. And get everyone totally p***ed."

Charlie, she says, first got drunk as a very small boy. He drank a bottle of cherry brandy on the sideboard, because he thought the label said it was for children. "And what it actually said, of course," she sighs, "was, 'Try it chilled.'"

Taken as a set, these books are also a timely study in the art of the confessional memoir; in what it means to take the inner humour of a family – with all its exaggerations, shared presumptions and intimacies – and invite the world in on the joke. Jane says freely that she has edited these letters, "Which is exactly the opposite of my brother's approach." Despite this being precisely what most of us would do with intimate family letters – I mean, I certainly bloody would – I'm struck by the way that, through the vulture eyes of a reader, I slightly resent her reserve. Readers will love Jane's book, although I'm not sure it will make them love her father to the extent that *Dear Lupin* did. And yet, it's surely far closer to the tribute he'd truly have wanted.

"I think in the case of both my parents, this series of books would have delighted them at one level, and horrified them at another," she says. "Because there were things that my father would not have wanted to share with the world at large, even if he wrote them to us."

Jane has a different family now, anyway. She and Paul Torday separated when she was 40, long before his *Salmon Fishing...* success, but they remained close until his death last year. They have two sons: Nick, who is married and lives in Somerset, and Piers, who lives with his civil partner in London. She married her second husband, the Northumberland landowner Tommy Bates, 25 years ago, and has another six stepchildren as a result. It all seems very normal, stable and calm.

But then, maybe that's just because it has kept itself to itself. Roger Mortimer was far too beautiful a writer for his best work to have stayed in a box. Leaving Jane for the station, full of pie, full of gin and leafing through his world once more, I find myself thinking of that famous phrase of the Polish man of letters Czesław Miłosz: "When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished." Sometimes, it just takes a while. ■

Dearest Jane... My Father's Life and Letters*, by Jane Torday and Roger Mortimer, is published this Thursday by Constable, hardback £14.99*