

# THE SCIENCE OF BOREDOM

painful, drool-inducing ennui: it's our brain's way of making loud gagging noises.

WORDS JO WALKER

For those who aren't so keen on chunky 19th century novels, it might seem pretty apt that it was Charles Dickens who first coined the word 'boredom' back in 1852. A lot of early researchers in the phenomenon would also nod their heads approvingly at the timing. Boredom, it was thought, was a product of the industrial age. On the one hand, you had all those poor mopes shut up inside factories performing mindlessly repetitive tasks. Of course they were going to start basically drooling from tedium. And then there were the newly leisured middle classes, who suddenly had a lot of time on their hands and probably weren't that great at coming up with new fun things to do. Especially if you were a lady and only allowed to paint water colours, wear uncomfortable clothes and swoon a lot.

These days science still hasn't reached a grand unified theory of the emotion best described as 'meh'. But one thing most experts now agree on is that it's nothing new. As long as there have been people around and blank spaces to stare at, there's been boredom. And attempts to overcome it.

According to Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion – a standard academic classification for emotional states – boredom is a milder form of disgust, which basically means it's our brain's way of making loud gagging noises. As well as producing the psychological version of the colour wheel, a lot of Plutchik's reasoning was based on survival instincts. So just as disgust might save us from straying too close to disease and dead things and other rancid stuff that makes us ill, boredom is a protective mechanism of sorts, saving us from droning lectures and mind-numbing chores. It forces us to try new

things and seek out stimulation, lest we go a wee bit crazy. This can be good if we're a caveman toying with the invention of fire as a way to ward off the yawns. Or a great artist or writer driven to finally pull their finger out and get some work done.

When we're bored, our brain activity drops by only about 5%, so the grey matter is still in there ticking over, even though it sometimes feels otherwise. MRI scans on the severely unenthused show greater electrical activity in regions responsible for autobiographical memory, empathy and conjuring hypothetical events – which maybe means we're daydreaming about ourselves, but we're really worried about what other people might feel about it. The bad news is: nothing speeds brain atrophy more than monotony. We need variety and stimulation and fun to grow new brain cells and extend the lifespans of those we already have.

But when it comes to boredom, not all of us were created equal. Studies show that people who experience chronic boredom are more likely to lead risky lifestyles, dabbling in alcohol abuse, drug addiction, compulsive gambling and eating disorders – or more socially acceptable perils like jumping out of planes, climbing snowy peaks and doing the kind of extreme stunts you usually see in soft drink commercials and *Jackass* re-runs. Boffins think this might be because boredom-prone people have naturally lower levels of dopamine – a happy chemical that regulates reward and pleasure reactions in our brains. To get the same kicks as the rest of us, easily bored types have to constantly push for new, crazy and dangerous things to do.



Photo: Berta Pfirsich.

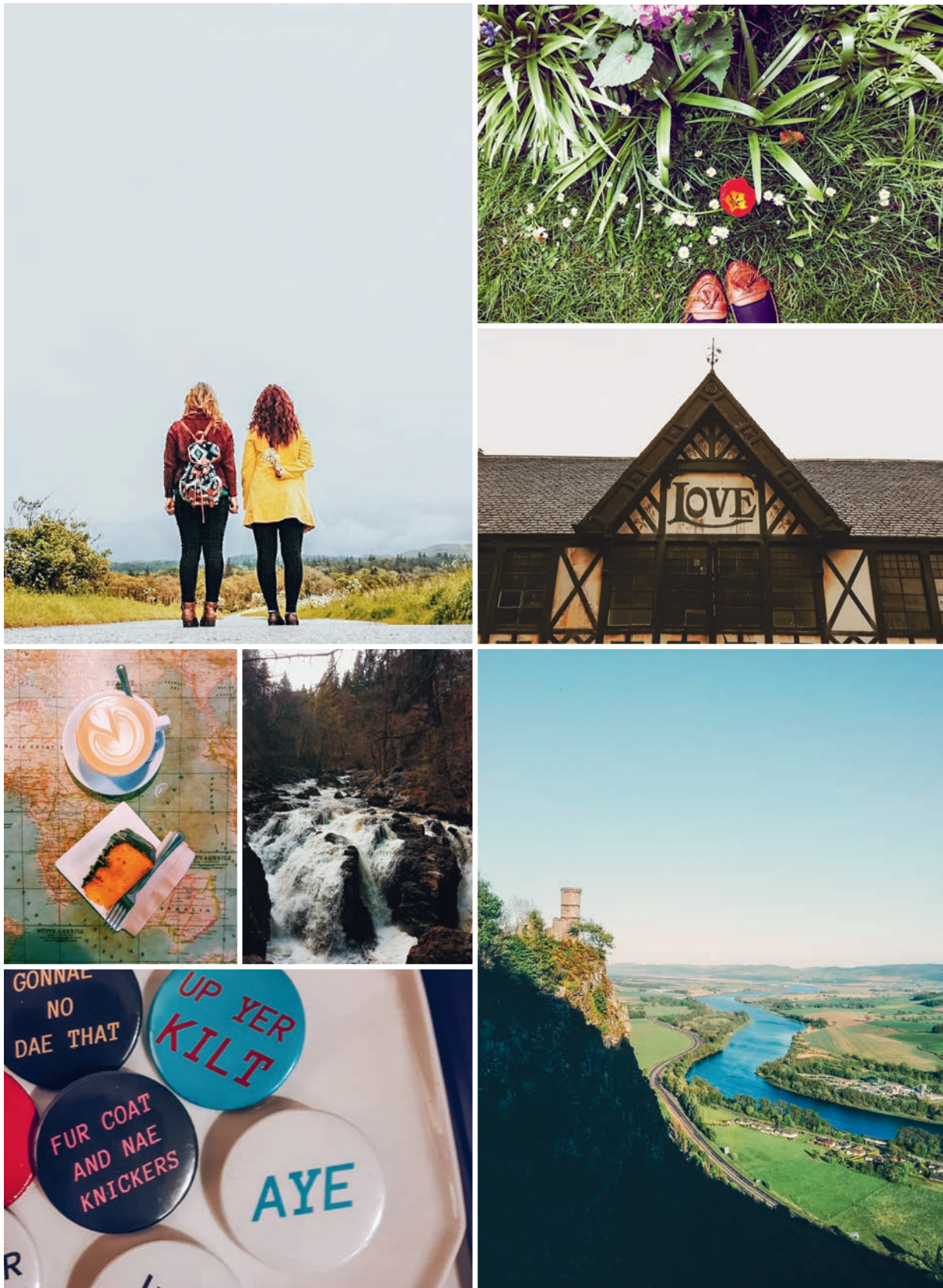
It might not rate up there with the World's Most Entertaining Quiz Activities, but there is such a thing as the Boredom Proneness Scale, which asks participants to rate their reactions to statements like, "I often find myself at loose ends, not knowing what to do," and "I am often trapped in situations where I have to do meaningless things." Statistically speaking, men rate higher in the test (meaning they're more bored than ladies), as do people with brain injuries – especially those with damage around the frontal cortex. This also happens to be the area of the brain responsible for our perception of time, which could be why minutes and hours drag by with excruciating slowness when we're bored out of our heads. Thanks for that, frontal cortex.

Still, our brain might not just be out to torture us with boredom. It seems to have developed some coping mechanisms, too. Hallucinations are a well-documented side effect of extended periods of boredom, wherein the brain effectively says, 'Bloody hell, if you're not going to stimulate me then I'll just go and entertain myself.' This is known as the Ganzfeld Effect, and has also become a way for slightly geeky people to get high without drugs. The idea is to deprive the brain of any variety in input. So, for instance, people tape half ping pong balls to their eyelids so they're seeing only uniform whiteness, and tune the radio to static so there's no change in noise levels, either. Do this for long enough and the brain cuts off the boring, unchanging signal and replaces it with something else: hallucinations reported to be anything from flashing lights and colours to exotic waking dreams.

Another enemy of boredom – as we all learnt in our childhood – is mums. We've all experienced the litany of suggestions a mother will make to a kid complaining of being bored. "Why don't you go and play outside?" "Why don't you ride your new bike?" "Why don't you go next door and say hello to Mrs Smith and get the hell out of my face?" The mixture of ennui and apathy and increasing rage and frustration that nothing seems worth doing – no matter how many options Mum might have up her sleeve – is another hallmark of boredom, researchers say. Some now suggest that boredom is a fundamental breakdown in our understanding of what it is we want to do. Bored people tend to score badly when tested for self-awareness. They find it hard to monitor their own moods and feelings. So not knowing what you want to do, even when presented with all the fun stuff in the world, is par for the boring course.

The best defence, according to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is to find your 'flow'. Difficult or uninspiring chores that take a great deal of effort to hold our attention – tax returns, IKEA instructions – are tedious. As are dull and repetitive tasks, like factory work. Somewhere in between is a Goldilocks zone, where the activity is neither too hard nor too moronic – it's just right. For Csikszentmihalyi, this is where you find your flow: an intersection between your skill level and the difficulty of the task at hand, where you're challenged enough to stay interested, but not so much you want to hurl things across the room and swear a lot. Stick to your flow, and you'll never get bored. ❀





*perth, scotland*  
danielle douglas

**What do you do?** I have a photography business called Arcadiancity. **What's your neighbourhood like?** I live in a small village called Forteviot, just outside the Perth city centre. It's really quiet and quaint – the only things here are an organ repair shop, a wood kitchen workshop, the town hall and a few cottages and houses. **What is Perth known for?** Glass paperweights, Dewar's whisky and Ewan McGregor. It's a small place, but some interesting things have come out of it. **What do you love best about your city?** Its historic landmarks! You can look at photos of Perth from over 100 years ago and find loads of original buildings, parks and historic features that are still here. It's remarkable. **What is the local creative community like?** There's a lot of knitting and felt-making in Perth. Those communities are doing well, which is nice because they are both traditional Scottish crafts. **What frustrates you most about Perth?** There isn't much to do. I normally head out to other cities like Edinburgh for some fun. If you grew up in Perth, you've experienced everything already! **Where is the best place to get a drink or nibble?** My favourite for a good coronation chicken sandwich is a café called Delicious. There's also a local bakery that does a great macaroni

and cheese pie. **What is everyone talking about in Perth right now?** There's talk of installing night-time projections and fairy lights to brighten up the city vennels (alleys) and landmarks. The design looks super-cool and still keeps the traditional look of the city, but with a new lease of life. It'll cost a lot, but hey, everyone loves some fairy lights! **What is something you'd only find in your city?** We have Scone Palace, where the Stone of Destiny sits. For over 1000 years Scottish kings would travel there for their coronation, including Shakespeare's Macbeth. No king was allowed to rule as King of Scots until he was crowned at the Stone of Destiny. It was last used for the crowning of the current queen, Elizabeth II, in 1953. **Have you been to Perth, Australia?** No, sadly! My mum is Australian and was born in Adelaide, though. I would love to visit my roots someday. **From your understanding, how do the two cities differ?** Fir trees instead of palm trees; cottages instead of skyscrapers; parks and fields instead of beaches; wind and rain instead of sun. The whole scene is the opposite. Also, Perth in Australia is a bazillion times bigger. **What makes Perth, Scotland feel like home?** There's something about the Scottish humour that you can't find anywhere else.



# HOME IS HOME

actress rarrowuy hick divides her time  
between sydney and arnhem land.

AS TOLD TO SAMANTHA PRENDERGAST

**Me and my brother grew up in the '90s living between my dad in Sydney and my mum in north-east Arnhem Land. The two places are worlds apart. Mum and Dad split up when we were young and most of the year was spent with Dad, going to school in the city and living in this beautiful area in a lovely house. Then over Christmas or the Easter break, we'd go to live with Mum and our family.**

I'm from a very small community in Arnhem Land called Dhalinybuy. It's about a two-hour drive from the closest town, Nhulunbuy, and there are maybe 10 little houses – tin sheds, pretty much. We have fires instead of ovens and mostly we live off the land. At night there's a generator that runs, so we have fridges, but you have to be pretty smart with how you store food. In some ways it's a lot harder to live out there. Mum and I are always out with an axe and a wheelbarrow chopping down wood and building a fire just to make a cup of tea! But it's also beautiful. It's where I feel at peace and at home.

As a kid and a teenager I found going between Sydney and Arnhem Land really hard. Even now it's weird. When I've been home for a while and I come back to the city, everything's so daunting. The noise of planes and cars; the language. English is my fifth speaking language and I've thought in my first language, my mother's tongue, Yolngu Matha. The longer I'm away, though, the more I find myself forgetting it. Then when I go to Arnhem Land, I have to adjust back into my language and the lifestyle. It's almost second nature to me now, but in high school I was always really homesick and I'd rebel a little bit so that I could get a ticket back to Mum. I'd do something to annoy Dad and he'd go, "All right, I'm sending you home!" I'd just be like, "Yes, good."

I was very close to my grandmother on my mum's side, and when we'd go home I'd spend hours listening to her and my great-grandmother talking. We used to sit there and make dilly bags together and she taught me how to weave and paint. I was always trying to get as many stories out of her as possible, even as a kid. I knew I was missing out on a lot of the cultural stuff that my cousins were getting while I was at school in Sydney, so I'd try to get as much as I could before I had to leave.

My mum, Janet Munyarryun, is a dancer and was a founding member of Bangarra Dance Theatre in Sydney. She was always my inspiration to be a performer, and initially I wanted to be a dancer like her. In high school I set up a dance troupe that's still going today. I went to a Catholic girls' high school and when I started there were only a few of us Aboriginal girls, but by the end there were maybe 40. The school was supportive, and the dance troupe was great because it gave people confidence, which I think everyone really needs as a teenager. A lot of the Aboriginal girls there are boarders, and dancing can sort of connect you to your identity and your culture.

After high school I did one year of study at NAISDA Dance College in Sydney, and then I got this call from a relative who wanted me to audition for a musical called *Wrong Skins*, an Indigenous interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Even though I'd wanted to be a performer for a long time, acting wasn't something I'd ever considered. I didn't like drama in school and I'd always been really shy. But I figured I might as well audition for the part. I've always believed that if an opportunity comes your way you just have to go for it, but then when I got this role I was like: Oh god, now I actually have to do what I believe in. I have to give this thing a shot.



*Wrong Skins* was my first acting role and it turned out to be an amazing experience. Part of what made it so fun to be involved with was that the whole cast were family. We were literally all related and we were on tour, which was new for all of us. There were no egos and everyone was supportive. The Chooky Dancers were particularly hilarious. I'd do a show with them anytime just because they're so funny. We were laughing all the time and I was just like, someone needs a camera backstage because all of the action's happening back here in the dressing rooms.

After *Wrong Skins* I just kept auditioning for things and was fortunate to get a lot of the roles. I worked with Sydney Theatre Company straight away and then went on to do the TV series *Redfern Now*. That series was great both because it's a really well-told story and also because the producers, directors and writers were all Indigenous people – it's us telling our story, which I think is very important.

The roles I've played have all been really good, but there are always challenging moments as an actor. Like I often find myself playing 16-year-old girls, which is strange to me because I'm 25 and I don't really have a lot in common with teenagers. In *The Gods of Wheat Street* I played this really feisty tomboy. She shanks people and bashes old men, and I was a bit of a door slammer as a teen, but this wasn't me at all! It meant I had to do my research and think about some people who can get a bit angry. They were mostly boys. I was like, well, my brother's a bit grumpy sometimes, and so-and-so has his moments, so I took bits of those guys and made the character my own.

Probably one of the most challenging moments was when I played the character Black Mary in a telemovie called *The Outlaw Michael Howe*. The movie was based on a true story about a Tasmanian

convict who fell in love with an Aboriginal woman, Black Mary, and the two of them tried to take over Van Diemen's Land. It was really great to be a part of, but a few scenes were very hard. At one point a horse and cart dragged me along down a street. There were all these non-Indigenous people standing on the road watching me and it was a funny thing, the way that made me feel. For one I was chained up, and I've never had that experience before. And it was based in 1817, so it's a completely foreign era and these people are just looking down at you. That feeling is horrible; I felt no good after that.

I've had some amazing opportunities so far, but if I could change something, it would be the labelling. I'd like to think I am just an actor, but we're always 'Aboriginal actors' or 'Indigenous actors'. I'm good at what I do, I love what I do, and this is my craft – so it'd be great to get roles that are just roles. And it'd be especially great to get roles that are sexy and sassy! A few times I've gone into the change room with other girls and they've said to us, "All right, how do we make you look ugly?" That's fine, that's acting, but one day I'm hoping to see more Aboriginal women on screen looking sexy.

Really I'm pretty much a typical girl. I like to dress up and wear heels, put on make-up. But the girl I am in the city is completely different to the girl I am in the bush. The way I walk, the way I talk, the way I dress and wear my hair – none of it is the same. And maybe that's helped with my acting career, having those two alter egos. It's funny, I guess, because my family doesn't really know what I do. It's not because they're uninterested, it's just that they don't question it. That is really nice, actually: I always have somewhere to escape to. A while ago I did send them some DVDs of *Redfern Now*, so I guess they might be starting to catch on, but it doesn't change things. When I go back, home is home. No one treats you any different. ❀