

What the...?

Scepticism – and divine good sense – could be in our DNA, writes Anna Funder.

THERE ARE SOME STORIES YOU REMEMBER for a long time without thinking much about why. Years ago, I read Bill Bryson's account of going into a jeweller's shop in a town in northern Britain. The customer ahead of him is there to buy a crucifix. He asks the shop girl for a cross on a chain. She goes out the back to check. When she returns it's with a question: "Would sir like it plain, or the one with the little man on it?"

This has made me smile for many years, the staggering, liberating ignorance of it. But recently I was brought up short by my responsibility for inflicting the same staggering ignorance on my children.

We are in the Prado Museum in Madrid. I stand with our daughters, aged 11 and 8, in front of two magnificent, two-metre-high paintings of Adam and Eve. My husband has wisely skipped the Old Testament section and is off ahead, standing in front of cheery, Disney-coloured tableaux of the risen Christ with angels, explaining the resurrection to our four-year-old son – not a big ask, really, as our little guy views death as reversible, on a case-by-case basis. "Some people stay dead," he says, thinking of dinosaurs and his grandmother, who are "extinct". "And some don't," he adds, referring to Road Runner, vampires, etc.

So we stand in front of Titian's painting on the left, and next to it almost exactly the same picture by Rubens. The girls look suddenly very small. They swivel their heads from one picture of a naked man sitting passive and uncertain as a naked lady reaches up to pick an apple from a tree, to the other picture of a naked man sitting passive and uncertain as the nice naked lady gets him the apple.

"Spot the difference?" my 11-year-old quips.

"No," her younger sister says solemnly, as if discovering a monumental, 300-year-old crime, "that's copying." (In our house, as in much of the online and physical world, copying is both ubiquitous and a horrible, screaming-match violation of personhood.)

"Well," I offer, "it's called an *homage*." The girls look sceptical. They know when I resort



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to French I'm wriggling out of something – an infatuation becomes an *amour fou*, the baby cow on your plate an *escalope* or, as here, an outrageous counterfeit becomes an *homage*. For some reason French is my language of diplomatic *évasion* and *insincerité*, and they know it.

Nevertheless, I plough on, reading the signs next to the paintings. "Titian painted this one in 1550, and Rubens this one about 70 years later."

"That's why Adam looks older there," the eight-year-old says, and she's right – he's grown paunchy and grey in Rubens' vision.

Aside from Adam's weight gain, it all looks pretty harmless, perhaps even idyllic. Until I draw breath and start to explain this founding story of Judeo-Christian culture.

"Well," I say, "in the Bible there is a very famous story of how God created the world in seven days." The girls nod because we live in the US and they know that some people there believe this. "And on the seventh day," I continue, "he created man and put him in this beautiful world. This man was called Adam. Then, from Adam's rib, he created Eve."

My elder one wrinkles her nose; the little one squints. This is my home-grown audience; I don't want to lose credibility so soon (so young!)

with my own kids. But I plough on. "God told them," I say, "that they could do anything, but there were rules." Serious nods now; kids understand rules because they live in a thicket of them. "One of the rules," I say, "was not to eat the apples..."

"Why were they there then?"

"Good question," I say. I don't know. "Maybe as a test?"

More nods: the children's lives are also peppered with tests of one kind or another.

"Anyway," I tell them, "Eve couldn't see why not, either. So she reached up and got one. And for that she and the rest of humanity were punished by God. And bad things – called sin in the Bible – came into the world and it stopped being paradise. This painting is of a famous scene because it is when woman, according to the Bible, became responsible for all the wrongs in the world."

Is it possible to be thunderstruck by scepticism? That's the look I get from two little faces – a look of flat denial, a rictus of regal impossibility, a look that somehow arranges the very features of a small girl into the word NO. It's a look, standing silently on the shiny floors of the gallery, to rival the one when the facts of life were explained them. ("Well, I can see why you'd only do that three times," one had shuddered.)

We adults talk about the innocence of children, but this is perhaps its DNA: the core basic sense of what is insane, unfair, and ridiculous. And its flip side is the miraculous, innate sense of justice.

I don't want my children to just accept the story of Eve, or any number of others, from patriarchy to primogeniture. Or, indeed, the baffling ones that are real. I want them to retain, despite becoming better informed, their innate sense of incredulity and justice. Because reality regularly outstrips what we are prepared to find reasonable or just, from people begging for food in the New York subway, to a pro-democracy leaker exiled in autocratic Russia, to children in prison camps in Australian suburbs.

I want my children to see the world as the flawed paradise it is because true beauty is never unflawed, and because that way they can retain both their happiness and a sense of what needs fixing. I want them to be able to sympathise with Adam and his paunch and his fearful obedience. And I want them to admire Eve for being brave enough and sensible enough to get them something to eat at the risk, as it turns out, of her eternal defamation. **GW**

THE QUIZ

1. Which fictional hero rode a white horse called Silver?
2. In which NSW town would you find the main campus of the University of New England?
3. What is the antonym of philanthropy?
4. Which sport's standard ball is bigger – golf, squash or table tennis?
5. In which Italian city did parmesan cheese originate?
6. Who wrote the books *The World According to Garp* (1978),

The Hotel New Hampshire (1981) and *The Cider House Rules* (1985)?



7. Which cover of a song written by John Lennon (right) was a No.1 hit in Australia for Roxy Music in 1981?
8. With which sport is the Spanish star Pau Gasol associated?
9. What are the first three elements on the periodic table?
10. Which dessert's name is French for "burnt cream"?
11. Which two countries share the Jutland peninsula?
12. With which country would you associate the liqueur Drambuie?
13. In which year did the Wall Street crash that triggered the Great Depression occur?
14. Who wrote the composition commonly known as *Für Elise*?
15. What is Van short for in the name of singer Van Morrison?
16. What was the name of the Thracian gladiator who led a slave uprising against the Roman republic from 73BC to 71BC?
17. Which award-winning Australian film from 2001 is named after a noxious weed?
18. Which three winter Olympic sports use a sled or toboggan?
19. In electrical parlance, what do the initials DC represent in AC/DC?
20. In which Andrew Lloyd Webber musical do the actors perform almost entirely on roller skates?

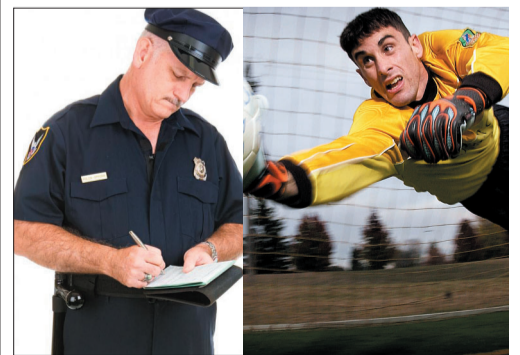
COMPILED BY STEPHEN SAMUELSON

GET IT?

BY GREG BAKES

Use the sequence of pictures to guess the answer

MOST BUSINESSES NEED ONE



FOR SUDOKU, QUIZ ANSWERS AND GET IT? SOLUTION, SEE PAGE 36