

Dr Thomas Stuttaford

Let's all go pear-shaped



In an age of obesity and anorexia it's vital to understand the best shape and composition for our bodies

Before the First World War Karen Blixen, the renowned writer on Africa, was an art student at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. She was determined to lose weight as she equated a lean figure with being interesting and bohemian, like her aristocratic cousins. Conversely, obesity represented the bourgeois solidarity that she was trying to escape. So keen was Blixen to become thin that one morning she threw her lunch-time sandwiches that her mother made out of the train window.

Karen Blixen, who was a bit chubby-faced in early adolescence, now became slim — and a depressive like her father, who later committed suicide. Blixen's house outside Nairobi is now owned by the Kenyan state and is open to the public as a museum to commemorate her life. Photographs there show that, although the slimness she strived for produced some elegance in youth, in later years the weight loss was excessive and she was prematurely aged and withered. A museum curator said that although Blixen had other health problems her death was attributed by some to anorexia.

Dr Susan Jebb, of the Medical Research Council's human nutrition research unit in Cambridge, warned a conference on obesity held in London this week that parents, schools and doctors did not attach enough importance to encouraging children to achieve a weight that is in the healthy middle range for pre-adolescents and adolescents. Achieving this would lessen their chance of suffering from cardiovascular disease or metabolic syndrome with its associated diabetes type 2, high blood pressure and several other factors when adult. An aggressive or jocular belittling approach to sensitive adolescents about being too fat or too thin could trigger a reaction that might lead to eating disorders.

Nor should family and teachers feel reassured by the thought that plump children and adolescents are only suffering from puppy fat. Dr Jebb said that neither girls nor boys should expect pre-puberty fat to disappear when adolescent. The weight graph showed only a slight



Karen Blixen in 1935 — her death has been attributed to anorexia

difference depending on their gender. Overweight girls continued to gain weight, whereas boys, although they lost a bit, remained heavier

than their contemporaries.

However the body mass index (BMI), is calculated or expressed, and whether it is applied to adults or children, it gives the same message: that average weight is increasing alarmingly. International figures show that children need special attention because they are not just small adults. Moreover, people of all ages are putting on weight because the energy taken in as calories isn't being balanced by the energy expended by exercise.

Determining the significance of the BMI is always complex. The BMI of the raw-boned, heavily muscled rugby player is less medically important than that of the short, overweight apple-shaped woman,

where the excess weight is carried in fat. The BMI equation is even more difficult to interpret in children, in whom the percentage of fat is different and varies when their hormones proliferate in puberty. The generalisation is that those who have an early puberty will end up fatter and shorter than those in whom it is late.

Professor Andrew Prentice, the head of the MRC International Nutrition Group at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said that children who were at a lesser risk of the effects of obesity tended to be those of average size when born and later grew at the same rate as their contemporaries. Trouble was more likely when children were born small but later grew faster to catch up and in the process became too fat. Professor Prentice also discussed the influence of racial differences in the determination of the BMI and its likely influence on health. A raised BMI didn't represent, for example, the same risk for South Asians, Caucasians and African Americans. Different races stored excess fat differently and the

A rugby player's BMI is medically less important than an overweight woman's

location of the fat stores was important. It is now generally known that it is better at all times of life to be pear-shaped than apple-shaped, far better to have fat on the thighs, shoulders or buttocks than around the belly. Equally, if not more important, is the amount of fat carried in the abdomen, where visceral fat hangs from the mesenteric tissue attached to the stomach and guts. The adipose (fat) cells of visceral fat produce much of the biochemically active molecules known as adipokines. When the adipose cells become over filled with stored fat the cells secrete adipokines that can have dramatic effects on insulin resistance and production, the cardiovascular and metabolic systems.

The proportion of someone's weight attributable to fat, although all important, is rarely calculated, although it can now easily read off the relatively inexpensive Tanita Body Composition Monitor. This look like a set of bathroom scales, but it doesn't just weigh; it also works out what percentage of the weight is from fat, bone or muscle. The person then knows whether their weight, fat mass and body composition is similar to that of comedians Dawn French and Matt Lucas and related to fat, or Lawrence Dallaglio and his rugby colleagues whose raised BMI is a reflection of strength.

Tanita UK www.tanita.com

Q&A

Campaign to stop lice

A reader from Oxfordshire has written to complain that no sooner has a new school year started than her eight-year-old has again caught lice. So has his younger brother. Is there any way that she can prevent both becoming infested?

At any time one in seven young children's scalps support lice. Now a campaign has been launched to beat the insects. Its clarion call is, "Once a week, take a peek". It is based on research carried out by the School and Public Health Nurses Association at the Medical Entomology Centre near Cambridge which involved interviewing 4,000 parents.

The research showed that lice develop resistance to long-established insecticides, some of which have unacceptable side-effects. It also revealed that parents no longer think it their business to search for and eliminate lice but think of this as a job for schools. Hence the "peek" slogan.

Sixty per cent of mothers assumed that the school took responsibility for checking hair for lice and one in four thought that schools still had regular louse-checking sessions with a school nurse. A third said that as they didn't know what to look for, it wouldn't be much good if they did check, and nearly 50 per cent admitted they didn't understand that there was a need for anyone to check regularly. When asked how often they thought their children's hair was carefully scrutinised, 50 per cent of parents thought that it was once a month. In fact, children's hair should be carefully tended weekly.

The conclusion of the research, summed up by Christine Brown, the nursing adviser to the Medical Entomology Centre, was that lice were now so common that nobody needed to be shy about them. Children's heads should be checked regularly by parents and a lotion used to treat them to which lice don't develop a resistance. Hedrin, first introduced in 2005, can be bought over the counter. It contains Dimeticone and Cyclomethicone 5; these don't act as a chemical poison, have no serious side-effects and only occasionally cause skin irritation. They don't poison the louse but asphyxiate it by coating its breathing tube.

Ask Dr Stuttaford

Send your questions about current health problems to drstuttford@thetimes.co.uk or to times2, The Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E98 1TT

Screen

timesonline.co.uk/film

'Darcy simply won't die'

Colin Firth tells **TIM TEEMAN** about teenage rebellion, taking drugs and his plan to finally rid himself of his doppelgänger

Off Colin Firth goes, darting around topics as unexpected as taking drugs, screwing up at school and flawed parenting. It's odd for such a famous actor to be so candid, and even odder to find a star better looking off screen than he is on — old-school rugged, softly spoken and mahogany-brown after filming the big-screen version of *Mamma Mia!* in Greece. The 47-year-old actor didn't like Abba: "Like most boys it wasn't my thing. I was 14 in 1974 and fancied girls to death."

Firth's confessional mood echoes his role as Blake Morrison in the film version of Morrison's autobiographical memoir *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, which evoked the relationship between Morrison and his domineering father, Arthur. In this moving, quietly powerful film Firth and Jim Broadbent, as Arthur, have just the right kind of double-edged intimacy.

Arthur couldn't be more different from Firth's "quiet, unassuming" father. "But I was a surly, pretentious adolescent, like Blake's portrait of himself. My father and I were not close in a cosy sense but I am as connected with my father as Blake was with his. The difference is my animosity with my dad was left behind in my teens. But, even now, three seconds in my parents' company and a tone of voice or trigger will bring me back to being 15."

Firth was born in Hampshire, then moved to Nigeria where his father taught. His parents have always been "eternal students" and it is a close family, he says. Firth lost his first grandparent (his grandfather, whom he was close to) at 35. "It was a shock," he says, "some part

of me finding out we weren't immortal in my family."

The family returned to the UK when he was small and Firth struggled to fit in schools in Bath and Essex. "Accents were an issue," he recalls, grimacing. "It was a shock to hear aitches being dropped. I felt like a freak speaking with the accent I had. So I changed it and only started to speak like this when I was in the sixth form."

He lived in America for a year when he was 12. "I feel quite strongly about anti-Americanism. I share people's grievances about the current Administration but I remember my father and I watching the Watergate hearings. Here was a country arraigning its own leaders. America has a fantastic history of dissent."

Something went awry in Firth's teenage years. "I loathed authority but was frightened of it. My rebellions were sneaky, passive. I didn't smash windows or get into fights — if I did I was strictly on the receiving end. Like Blake, I took refuge in books with the hope of getting laid by name-checking Dostoevsky. It wasn't Hardy or Austen for me, but Camus. I grew my hair long, pierced my ears and then got slightly stranded by the punk thing."

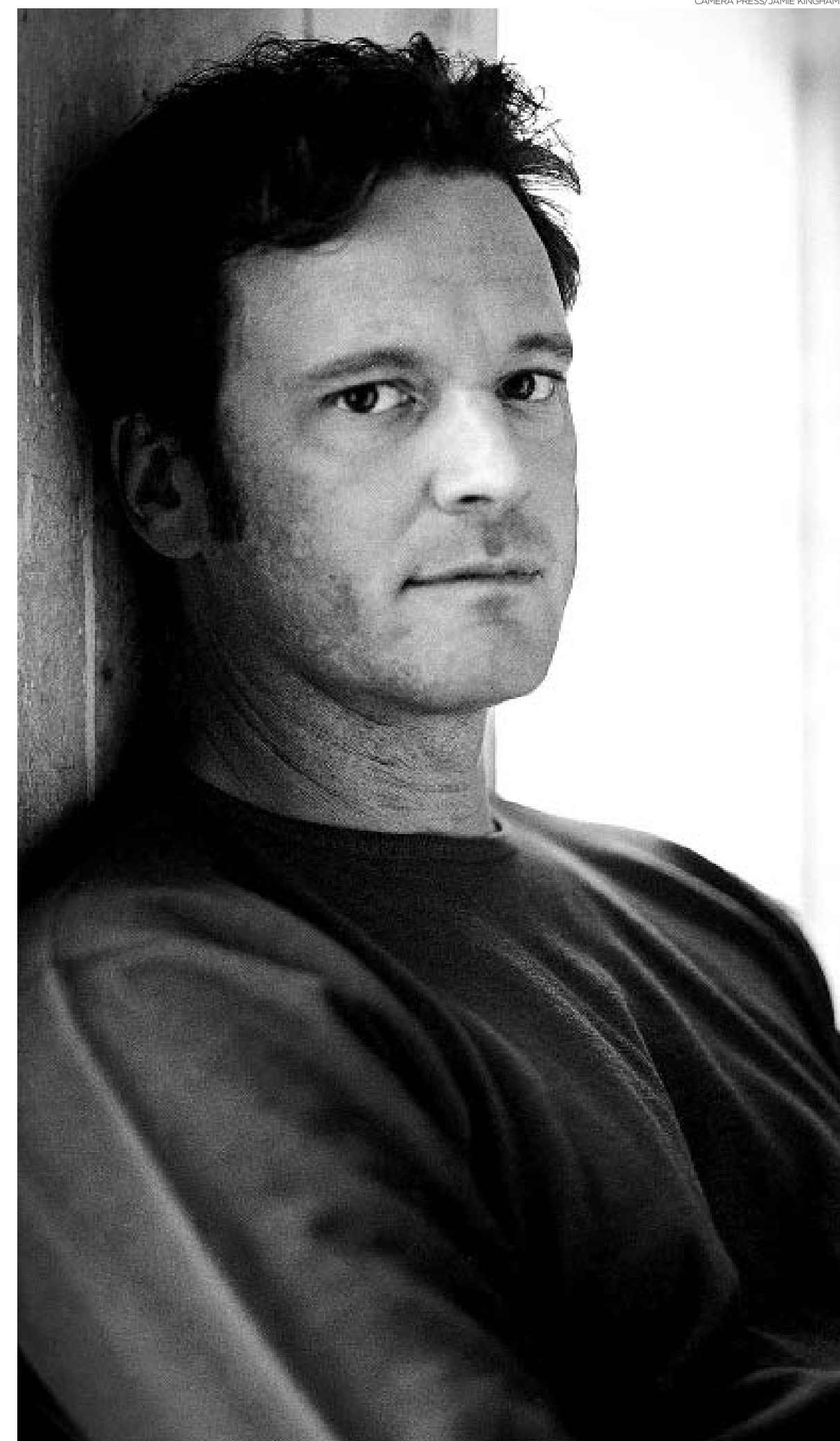
He loved music and joined "a not terribly good band" doing Doors covers. (A Gram Parsons fan, he nevertheless vociferously denies being a "dad rock nostalgic" and name-checks Wilco and Lambchop.) He also started to write, although "there comes a point," he says gently, "when unless you practise something you have to classify it as a fantasy, but I do think there are worse writers than

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CAMERA PRESS/JAMIE KINGHAM

screen



'If I'm not on a horse it's considered a stretch'

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me who have published novels." (Acting and writing are linked "because I quite like to do what I do to hide — by obscuring yourself you can reveal something".)

Firth Sr could cope with the long chair but not Firth's "bad choice" of friends. There was a charismatic hard nut at school who led Firth astray. Or "the misdemeanours that go along with wanting to be rock-and-roll and hippy, the music festivals, staying out late." Drinking? "I was a bit naughty in that respect," he says. Drugs? Firth looks stricken.

"I'm not at liberty to go into detail about such misdemeanours. Yeah, it was all the usual stuff. If Labour Cabinet ministers can confess to

some of those things, I probably can as well." How did your father find out about the drugs? Did you smoke cannabis at home? "Nahhhhhhh," Firth mutters. "It was a whole series of things and was as much as to do with what he suspected. It wasn't one incident." The worst rows with his father "were about washing dishes and homework. There wasn't a massive meltdown," he insists.

But his teenage rebellion was concerted. "I would have gone to university had I not allowed myself to be derailed into moody adolescent laziness. I liked to characterise it then as a defiant decision to resist the system. But I was just resistant to schoolwork. If someone wanted

me to read Shakespeare, I wanted to read Thomas Mann. If someone tried to make me listen to Brahms, I had to listen to Hendrix." On the morning of A-level retakes, "I thought, 'F*** it' and went back to bed, it felt like a treadmill I didn't want to be on." Firth pitched up, "like Dick Whittington", in London wanting to act and he got a job at a theatre switchboard. He read Kafka in his cubbyhole, and "stared into the abyss", until he met a casting director who smoothed his way into drama school and then to a part in Julian Mitchell's *Another Country*.

Sudden fame "blew me away". He didn't get on with his co-star Rupert Everett though denies all reports of

20-plus years of simmering rivalry and resentment. "Rupert got on with very few people. He found us all ghastly, naive and bourgeois. I envied his confidence. I was intermittently flamboyant but felt outside [and he puts on an LA twang] my comfort zone." They have worked "very happily" since on *The Importance of Being Earnest* and — coming in December — *St Trinian's*.

His looks and upper-class, ruffled demeanour meant he graduated from playing posh schoolboys to posh older men. There were appearances in *A Month in the Country* and a controversial Falklands drama, *Tumbledown*. But Firth's life really changed when he emerged, sodden-shirted, from the lake as Mr Darcy in the BBC's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The screenwriter Andrew Davies recently revealed the plan had been for Darcy to be naked. Firth had "a bit of the usual tension about getting your kit off" but thinks it remained sexy because he "rerobed, not disrobed, Austen".

He groans at the very mention of Darcy, whom he regards as "a part-time burden. It got my name recognised but it also put me in a box. Things were going well; I was building a diverse working life."

Darcy made him feel "a bit of a star" (he smiles pleasantly at that thought), his wife Livia Giuggioli would greet the sight of him dishevelled every morning with an ironic, "Oh look, it's Mr Darcy". But, Firth says, "12 years on it feels like a



school nickname you can't shake. It occurred to me the other day to change my name to Mr Darcy and be done with it." I laugh but he is serious, despite parlaying the Darcy image to his advantage in the *Bridget Joneses* movies, playing Mark Darcy, much obsessed over by Helen Fielding's lead character.

"The frustration is anything I do not on a horse looks a stretch," says Firth, smiling yet serious. "When I did *Fever Pitch*, to get into my own jeans to play a guy living in North London where I lived, to play a character from my own background — people considered that a stretch."

Well, it's not that bad, I say. He's about to play a Roman commander

Part of me thinks I should change my name by deed poll to Mr Darcy'

in *The Last Legion* and there's a scene in *And When Did You...?* in which Blake masturbates in the bath. Firth shakes his head, smiles wearily. "Every single film since there's been a scene where someone goes, 'Well I think you've just killed Mr Darcy'. But he is a figure that won't die. He is wandering somewhere. I can't control him. I tried to play with it in *Bridget Joneses*. I've never resented it — if it wasn't for him I might be languishing, but part of me thinks I



should do this postmodern thing, change my name by deed poll to Mr Darcy. Then people can come up to me and say, 'But you are not Mr Darcy' which would be different. I dare say it will be my saving grace when the only employment available to me is opening supermarkets dressed in breeches and a wig."

Away from this half-joke fretting, Firth is socially conscious. He has campaigned to stop the deportation of a group of asylum-seekers. He is the executive producer of a documentary at this year's *Times* BFI London Film Festival, *In Prison My Whole Life*, about Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther who has spent more than 20 years on death row for the murder of a policeman. (Giuggioli is producer.)

Firth is clearly an intense thinker and considers everything — family, career, politics — quite deeply. Morrison's book made him pause before teasing his two younger children (he has three; a son, Will, by the actress Meg Tilly and two younger boys with Giuggioli). He jokingly agrees with "whoever said that when he upset his children he put a dollar in a jar for their future therapy".

Firth's own father is 73 and the

This film made me think we let our parents die with things unsaid'

Blake Morrison film "made me think we let our parents die with things unsaid", but he cannot imagine a relationship with his father where "everything has been resolved", even though they are close. Firth himself isn't sure if he is a good father — "I'm not going to be writing the review on that one" — but says he tries to make himself "available" to his children. He reveals that he squeezed himself "into a bourgeois life to reach a sense of being settled".

Why? "Serenity. When I was a teenager I romanticised the idea of artistically deranging oneself, whether it was a rock star f***ing himself up with drugs or Rimbaud's conscious disordering of the senses. Being sane was a tedious, suburban thing to be. Unfortunately it's not the brilliance, but rather the screwing up, that's easy to achieve."

He broods momentarily, agonises, looks down. "Acting messes with you. Whatever it is to seek that kind of attention is combined with the ability to play different characters — so there's something fractured there. You take a person like that, subject them to all the vicissitudes of praise and attack and critique and you are going to wreak havoc with people who aren't stable."

Is he talking about himself? "Yeah... I didn't go off the deep



Clockwise from top right, Firth with Jim Broadbent in *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*; in his first film success, *Another Country*, with Rupert Everett; that wet shirt in his *Mr Darcy* turn; in real life, with his wife Livia Giuggioli

end. But it gets lonely. There came a time where I wanted to settle down. Excessive praise is like a drug but it doesn't stay around for long. People can't come with you while you're up your own a***. If you want to have any companionship you have to have a little bit of generosity." So he's created "new disciplines" to maintain close relationships.

This is said in a halting mumble. It reminds me of the gruff intimacy between Morrison and his father in the film — that particularly masculine trait of revealing something heartfelt by sounding as determinedly unheartfelt as you possibly can.

And When Did You Last See Your Father? is released on Oct 5

▶▶▶ To watch a Q&A with director Anand Tucker and author Blake Morrison, go to timesonline.co.uk/film

Darcy does . . . Darcy

Another Country (1984) Darcy in training: Firth's first experiment with a furrowed brow (committed Marxist-style) and pairs with it the gentlemanly, earnest, dignified gaze he would practice in . . .

Pride and Prejudice (1995) The lake scene has been replayed a thousand times on a thousand clip shows. Firth hones his stilted but honourable shtick.

Bridget Jones's Diary/Edge of Reason (2000, 2003) Firth sensibly just gives in — the big D is given a modern update.

Girl with a Pearl Earring (2002) His Vermeer is the most charming painter ever on screen: terribly polite, slightly bumbling. Hmmm. Reminds us of someone.

Love Actually (2003) Ahhh. Darcy's language-barrier love.

And When Did You Last See Your Father?; The Last Legion (both 2007) No more Mr Wet Shirt Guy. Firth does serious and modern and Roman and butch.

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