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INTERVIEW

Katherine Ryan

'Many single mums I know are happy'



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 - » Backlash comes as Barnier and EU team arrive in London for talks aimed at ending deadlock on trade deal



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The EU ambassador to the UK, Joao Vale de Almeida, arrives at Europe House, London, as Brexit negotiations resumed yesterday NIKLAS HALLEN/AFPI/GETTY

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Crackdown on social gatherings: from 30 down to 6 people

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Arts

Podcasts Stars Cars Guitars



Tony Hadley, Jim Cregan and Alex Dyke sharing their "rock and roll adventures"? I'll give anything a go, once...

Given its title, Stars Cars Guitars hardly needed to turbo-charge the testosterone with the kind of loud American intro I'd expect to hear at a Monster Trucks rally - it's an offputting opening to a series that is, in fact, easy to listen to, companionable, and thoughtful, as the trio use their shared love of cars as a vehicle (ahem) through which to reflect.

The men share their experiences of the oddness of fame - how they adapted to it as they have grown older, how they restarted their careers when things went quiet - nerves, putting their "soul" into live performance, and seeking their parents' approval.

Sarah Carson

We still suffer from a narrative about single mothers," says Katherine Ryan. "They're downtrodden, they drink too much white wine, they're sad and they're a mess." This Friday, the stand-up comic wants to change all that with *The Duchess*, the Netflix comedy she wrote, executive produced, and stars in. It's about "being empowered as a single mother and celebrating your relationship with your child, and illustrating a shape of family I don't often see. It was really important for me to show the reality of many single mums that I know: they're very happy."

The Duchess is, Ryan explains, "a long-form extension of my stage persona - a terrible person but a good parent". She plays Katherine, the single mother of nine-year-old Olive. Katherine is desperate for a second child, and wants her estranged ex-boyfriend, Shep (Rory Keenan), to be her sperm donor. Her foul-mouthed female lead "is, in many ways, a narcissist. It's far more fun to play a villain than a hero. I feel really comfortable laughing at my own shortcomings."

"Katherine always thinks she's right," says Ryan. "But in trying to avoid problems, she creates bigger ones." Ryan, 37, drew on her own experience of parenting her 11-year-old daughter, Violet, for the show. Is this alter-ego cathartic to write - and play? "I don't shout at the mums at the school gates, but there is this fantasy, when your child's being bullied, that you want to be their protector: you wish that you could be unfiltered and go at the other parent like a tiger."

Olive's father and Katherine's ex is a former boy band member. When Ryan arrived in the UK, "there was this saturation of boy bands - that culture was very formative for me. I wanted to see how this eccentric character would play out after his boy band era. That's something from my life 15 years ago I was fascinated by."

This eccentric, Shep, isn't exactly a model dad, yet Katherine works hard to keep him in Olive's life. "I really believe in peaceful co-parenting," states Ryan. "I think, with very few exceptions - like when someone is pointedly dangerous - you need your parents in your life. I'm vehemently against parental alienation."

"My own parents had a really tumultuous divorce, and they didn't get on," continues Ryan, who is from Ontario, Canada. "I was a lot older than Olive - I was 15. But they didn't have a good word to say about each other, and I do wish that they'd put their differences aside. I think it's so important to prioritise the wellbeing of your child. I feel passionate about that."

During lockdown, Ryan, who has filmed two Netflix specials, began a candid podcast, *Telling Everybody Everything*, recorded from her home in north London, on which she discusses topics such as getting burgled, pregnancy loss, cancel culture, how she ended up reuniting with - and then marrying - her high school boyfriend, and Kanye West. She offers intimate, sisterly advice to listeners who write in, and invites Violet on to offer surprisingly sage wisdom of her own.

"Parents are reluctant to let their teenage daughters listen to my work, but I would never point them in a dangerous direction; it's meant to empower women and young people. I've always treated Violet as an equal. My admissions of my own mistakes, being honest with her and forthcoming about most information has

I feel comfortable laughing at my own shortcomings. My alter ego always thinks she's right

●● Landing a man is not the greatest thing in the world ●●

Canadian comedian Katherine Ryan's new series is about a terrible person who is also a good parent. She tells **Marianka Swain** why we are wrong about single mothers





Ryan stands out among female comedians for embracing glamour: in *The Duchess* (left and below) in which she plays a single mother
CATHERINE HARBOUR; OLIVER UPTON; SIMON RIDGWAY/NETFLIX

helped turn her into an empathetic, kind, very old soul.

"I am, on the surface, a really nasty performer, filthy – I get called all sorts of fun adjectives – but my redemption is that I've managed to raise this lovely, thoughtful daughter. And I think that juxtaposition is funny, so I've enhanced it in my stage persona and in *The Duchess*."

Another fascinating Ryan juxtaposition is her heightened femininity (she has discussed at length her love of cosmetic treatments) and confrontational comedy. "When I started stand-up, it was considered very rebellious to dress glamorously. Women had to choose: you can be a comedian, or you can be a lady. I rejected that from the start. I love fashion, it's an extension of art, and I like playing with stereotypes and expectations. I love beautiful jewellery and dresses, but I'm still provocative and disruptive."

The label "damaged" is often foisted upon unconventional women, and single mothers in particular, she says. "It's so important to me on *The Duchess* that the mum is together and leaves the house every day with that level of self-care and intention." The character also has a doting boyfriend who plays "the stereotypically female romcom character of, 'I love you, oh OK I'll tolerate these crumbs from our relationship, oh please let's get married', but Katherine keeps him at arm's length." In writing her that way, Ryan challenges "the general assumption that we're not single by choice, that we've been discarded and we're failures. That's just not true. We have plenty of choices, and landing a man is not the greatest thing that can happen in your life."

Ryan is alert to gendered double standards. For example, she thinks there is a "layer of misogyny" in the discussion of Ellen DeGeneres, whose daytime talk show has recently come under scrutiny. "Chat show hosts are notoriously complicated characters, and a lot is demanded of them. I don't think it's right to have a toxic work environment, but when you become beloved and famous on that very un-

healthy level, and you produce 10 shows a week, we can't expect them to behave like a normal person."

There are other, male, hosts "who've slept with interns, treated production staff really badly, and they don't get held to the same standards," she says. "Because first and foremost, women are meant to be warm and nice." She also thinks – though she does "Trojan horse" serious messages into her own comedy – that women's art is "deconstructed a lot more". She brings up the much-debated "WAP" music video. "Maybe Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion just wanted to dance around in some cute outfits. It doesn't always have to be this big metaphor or political commentary."

Ryan has spoken out about why she stopped appearing on panel shows. Some were only casting one woman, and she realised that if she was hired, "I was not taking the job of just any comedian, I was standing in the way of a female comedian." She still loves the specific British voice of panel shows, but felt "as guilty as anyone" of not questioning why most shows had six white men. "That's down to my own unconscious bias. Now, when I see one woman, maybe two, but still they're all white, that actually jumps out at me. It's not representative of reality. So I'm happy that those shifts are being made."

She's dubious about the reported comments of the new director general Tim Davie that BBC comedy is too left-wing. "We do see a mixture of political voices – any time I'm working there, they're very careful about not being biased, and taking the mick out of both sides."

As for her own entry into the industry, she originally "did impressions of other people". It took several years to find her own voice, and she was grateful for the relative anonymity of the Canadian stand-up circuit. Then, in 2012, "I was in a dressing room, preparing to go on for *8 Out of 10 Cats*, and Sean Lock was there, Hannibal Buress, Jimmy Carr, John Richardson, and I thought, 'I'll never be as funny as they are – I can't hold my own.'"

It was, recalls Ryan, a moment of surrender. "I went, 'Well, all I can do is bring my own angle' – and I tried it, and luckily people responded. So I fell into authenticity by accident. It was either crawl out the window or be myself."

What advice would Ryan give to budding comedians? "Be relentless, because you will hear 'No' 100 times a day. Just put the blinders on and seek your own truth. And you have to be comfortable with the fact that, no matter what you do, there will be lots of people who truly hate it. I don't think about barriers – I just think about goals."

'The Duchess' is on Netflix from Friday



Last night's television

ED POWER



By no means pooch perfect, but the canines are adorable

» *Dog Tales: The Making of Man's Best Friend* BBC4, 9pm ★★★★★
» *All Creatures Great and Small* Channel 5, 9pm ★★★★★

Dogs have been our steadfast companions since, well, forever. It must be love, too, as they have remained loyal even when we insist on trussing them up in doggy jackets and carrying the smaller ones around in purses.

The science behind this millennia-spanning friendship is complicated but it was laid out in agreeably cuddly fashion in *Dog Tales: The Making of Man's Best Friend* (cats get their own companion documentary next week).

We all probably have a vague understanding that dogs started off as wolves, which befriended Stone Age tribes. Yet how many of us were aware that they evolved musculature around the eyes in order to throw us that woebegone look when caught chewing slippers?

The documentary certainly didn't shy away from the technical stuff. At one point, a dog was wedged into a Computed Axial Tomography (CAT) scan. The film didn't make enough of this pun when it obviously should have done. We did, though, see the dog's brain light up with joy as it was praised.

Mark Benton's narration was matey throughout and the producers were careful to offset the complex development biology with footage of dogs doing what they do best: being cute. It was ingenious. You could lean into *Dog*



'Dog Tales' investigates the bond between dogs and their owners BBC

angsty livestock just as much as the two storylines and stunning shots of the Yorkshire Dales.

Ben Vanstone's remake has thus far played out like a faithful cover version. This continued in a brisk and agreeable second episode that ticked all the mid-century veterinary drama boxes. A stricken cow and a pampered Pekingese with bowel issues – the latter belonging to Diana Rigg's aristocratic Mrs Pumphrey – were among the challenges confronting our young vet (Nicholas Ralph). These furry set-pieces were curiously satisfying, linking the rest of the action like the fights in a comic book movie.

Supplying the human conflict was Callum Woodhouse as caddish Tristan Farnon. The tearaway younger brother of Herriot's boss Siegfried (Samuel West) is back to bring some red blooded derring-do to the sleepy world of Yorkshire animal care.

Tristan's chutzpah was initially resented by the upright Herriot. But the softly spoken vet soon had bigger problems, as he discovered fanciful farmer Helen Alderson (Rachel Shenton) was spoken for.

His veterinary expertise meanwhile was called into question. Herriot misdiagnosed a woebegone cow as fit only for the butcher's block, earning the disapproval of the eccentric Siegfried.

Sometimes you want to see superheroes save the world. And sometimes you just want to watch a vet coax a cow to its feet. Like a quiet walk in the woods or a quick biscuit break, *All Creatures Great and Small* is the simple pleasure that keeps on giving.

You could turn down the sound and 'ooh' and 'aaah' at the parade of fur balls

Tales if interested in the nuts and bolts of pet evolution. Or you could turn down the sound and "ooh" and "aaah" at the parade of fur balls. An impressive cross-breed.

Okay, so there are more pressing issues in the world than unravelling the inner lives of dogs. And some of the conclusions – that dogs cherish human company, for instance – rather stated the obvious. *Dog Tales* was by no means pooch perfect, then, but even when it missed the bark, the canines were far too adorable to resist.

The original BBC adaptation of James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* blended whimsical plotting, gorgeous scenery and luxuriant footage of cows in mild distress. All three components were essential – the