

Tales of the unexpected

There's no such thing as a typical academic, but some have more unusual backgrounds than others. **Matthew Reisz** discovers some startling stories

It is probably impossible to find a contemporary academic who was brought up by wolves. But there is at least one who has brought up a wolf.

This is not the easiest of lifestyles. As soon as Mark Rowlands, professor of philosophy at the University of Miami, brought Brenin home, the six-week-old cub proceeded "to rip down every single one of the soft, lagged pipes that directed the cold air from the air-conditioning unit up through various vents in the floor".

Yet – as Rowlands wrote in *The Philosopher and the Wolf: Lessons from the Wild on Love, Death and Happiness* (2008) – they remained "inseparable for 11 years. Homes would change, jobs would change, countries and even continents would change, and my other relationships would come and go – mostly go. But Brenin was always there – at home, at work and at play."

Living with a wolf, Rowlands reveals, largely made him "tune out human beings". Yet he also assures us that "much of what I know about life and its meaning I learnt from [Brenin]. What it is to be human: I learnt this from a wolf."

Rowlands' spur-of-the-moment decision to buy a wolf may appear bizarre, but it seems to have worked for him, in so far as it made him happy, fed into his philosophical interests and led to a very successful book. And he is far from the only academic who has built on an unusual background, life experience or

hobby in their career.

When Katherine Smart was studying biological sciences at the University of Nottingham, she sometimes dropped in to see her grandparents in nearby Beeston. She had an occasional drink at The Greyhound in the town and got a job there as a barmaid while waiting for her finals results, little realising that her grandmother had grown up on the premises. So she was "already well down the brewing path", she says, before she "discovered the family connection and realised there was something in the blood. I was descended from a long line of publicans, going back to at least the 1830s."

After graduating, Smart embarked on an industrially funded PhD at the research and development department at Bass Brewers in Burton upon Trent, where engineers shared a lab with biochemists, microbiologists and analytical chemists. Her own research focused on how to keep yeast attached to the glass at the bottom of the bottle. Since this involved pouring out White Shield beer in just the right way to facilitate analysis, her skills as a barmaid

proved unexpectedly transferable.

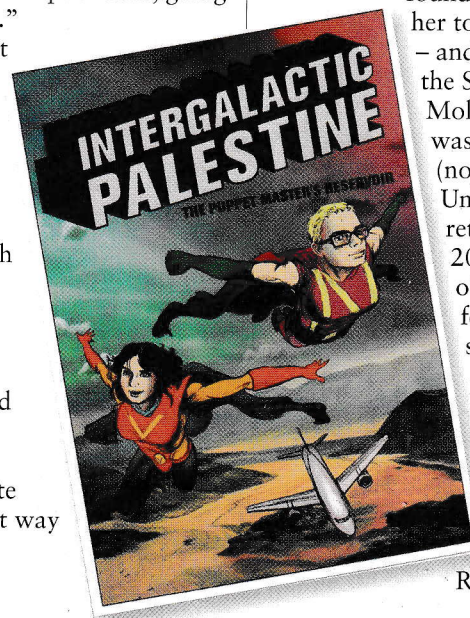
Her first postdoctoral position took Smart to the department of plant sciences in the University of Cambridge, where she worked on packaging designed to destroy the microbe in fruit juices on contact. Yet the work made her uncomfortable.

"Brewers revere their yeast," she explains, "and I had also come to love it. Now, after years of encouraging my yeast to be happy, I had to find ways of killing it off, since it was the main contaminant."

After 18 months, therefore, Smart found a post that allowed her to return to brewing

– and keeping yeast alive – in the School of Biological and Molecular Sciences in what was then Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University). She eventually returned to Nottingham in 2005 as SABMiller professor of brewing science – the only female professor of brewing science in the country.

She now runs one of six multimillion-pound programmes, spread across several universities which make up the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council Sustain-



able Bioenergy Centre. Her programme investigates ways of converting waste material from agriculture and industry – including husks of malted barley from the brewing process – into bioethanol. It will shortly be brought together with research teams working on innovation in brewing and food-processing in a newly built £25 million Bioenergy Centre at Nottingham, where she will serve as director. Facilities include a 1,000-litre micro-brewery.

These are world-class research programmes that have been widely acclaimed. But Smart has also received a more unusual personal tribute. When a brewing company was closing, the owners wanted to donate a particular strain of yeast to her for research purposes. So she asked them what they wanted her to call it.

Yeast is traditionally female, so the brewer suggested “Katherine Smart” in her honour. The human Katherine Smart could hardly



Rowlands a man's best friend is his wolf

have been more delighted.

“She’s one of my favourites, very unusual and photogenic. We go back a long way and she’s never let me down. I met her before I met my husband!”

It is thus that the scientific literature includes occasional references to a brewer’s yeast known as KS1. What could be nicer for the descendant of generations of publicans?

Go into his classroom on the right day and you might find Richard Barbrook, senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages at the University of Westminster, playing Monopoly with his students.

The interest in games goes back a long way. As a teenager, Barbrook recalls, he was a history nerd, fascinated by toy soldiers and military games. I took part in re-enactments of the English Civil War organised by the Sealed Knot”, the historical association.

However, he adds, “I gave all that up when I discovered sex and drugs and rock’n’roll.”

Twenty years old in 1976, Barbrook defines himself as “part of the punk generation” and is proud of a picture of himself with punk rock band the Sex Pistols. After confronting “the British oligarchy en masse” at the University of Cambridge, he became politically active and helped to set up a multilingual community radio station in London while working on his PhD.

Radio and then the internet became central to Barbrook’s research interests and he acquired a full-time academic post at the University of Westminster in 1995. His toy soldiers seemed to have been left far behind. Yet, as chance would have it, they were to prove crucial to his latest set of academic concerns.

Although he is too young to have been involved in the student demonstrations of 1968, Barbrook was interested in the Situationist International movement which had inspired them, and notably Guy Debord’s book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Later he discovered that Debord had responded to the failure of the protests by sulkily retiring to the country and devoting much of his energy to developing a board game called *The Game of War* – specifically designed to provide training for political activists.

This immediately aroused Barbrook’s curiosity. When his father died, he retrieved his toy soldiers from the attic where they had been stored and gave most of them away to the teenage son of a friend. But he kept enough to form a set for the long-forgotten *The Game of War* and soon realised that, unlike most games with a strong political message, it was actually fun to play.

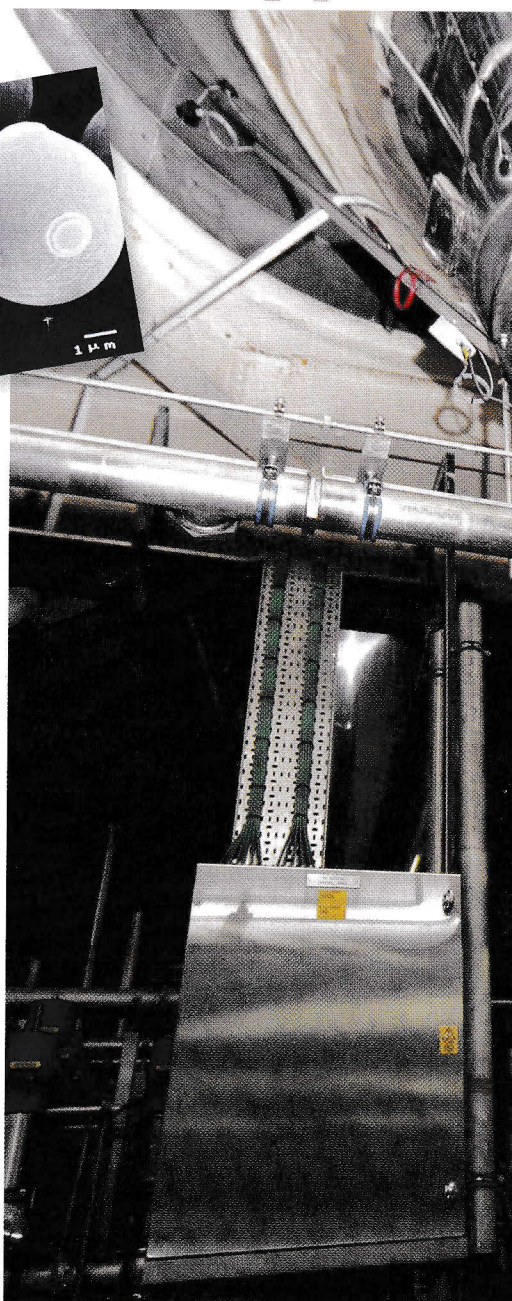
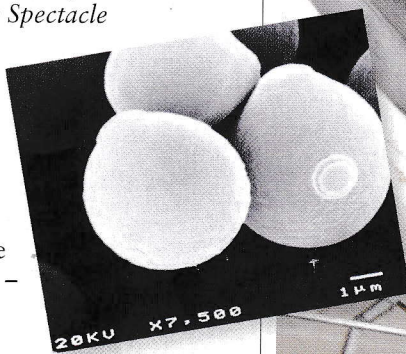
This led Barbrook to found a group called Class Wargames, devoted to “putting on participatory performances” of Debord’s game and “creating a social space where radicals can meet and play with each other”. (Other, not wholly serious, goals included “re-enacting the proletarian struggles of the past in ludic form” and “training the militants of the cybernetic communist revolution to come”.) He is now working on a book using the game to examine English Situationism, political art and the relevance of military theory to left-wing politics.

Barbrook also started collecting election games, coalition games, even a card game based on the Stalinist purges. All form vital props for his new module on political simulations and gaming, which explores the different perspectives on games offered by military history, cultural studies and game theory. He firmly believes that playing games, and thinking about how political conflicts can

be turned into games, offers an excellent hands-on way of getting to grips with politics.

“The polls indicated that a hung parliament was the most likely result of the recent election,” he notes. “One of the things that emerged from [the television programme] *Five Days that Changed Britain*, presented by the BBC’s political editor Nick Robinson last July was that none of the political parties had ‘gamed’ it and thought through the different possible scenarios. But Sir Gus O’Donnell, head of the Civil Service, made it clear that his

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Smart research into brewing and food-processing

staff had done so. One might see the coalition as a *coup d'état* organised by the Civil Service.

"If politics is played as a game, it's interesting to look at it as a game. Politics students can't actually do things like running election campaigns or organising a revolution, so games are an attempt to do something similar. They help you think about the practical issues and engage with the theory."

It is not particularly unusual to find academics who are also performers. Some just happen to be keen amateur magicians, others embrace stand-up comedy or get on stage to find new ways of communicating their research to a wider audience. Will Kaufman, professor of English and American studies at the University of Central Lancashire, has taken his one-man "live documentary", *Woody Guthrie: Hard Times and Hard Travellin'*, around the country.

Some academics have also led adventurous

or even heroic lives before moving into higher education. Jo Salter was Britain's first female fast-jet pilot, and studied for an MBA with The Open University while policing the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. She is now an associate lecturer in management for the OU, and has drawn on her experiences in her books, consultancy work and "inspirational speaking".

At least one person, however, combines the two roles of hero and performer, since she used a research grant to create an alter ego as a superheroine.

While Oreet Ashery was growing up in Israel, she lost connection with one of her closest teenage friends when he became distraught from his experiences in the Israeli army, turned to religion and told her he could not see her any more. By 1999, she was working as an artist in London and decided to adopt the persona of ultra-Orthodox Jew Marcus Fisher "to see what it felt like".



the scientist back to her publican roots



Barbrook board games offer training in strategy

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Ashery, dressed as Fisher, went to places where you seldom see Orthodox Jews: London's Soho, a Turkish café in Berlin, a beach in Tel Aviv. Reactions were sometimes pretty strong.

"In Soho," she notes, "people didn't serve me, they didn't know what to do with me – it took me a couple of hours to get a coffee. In Soho Gardens, I lay down and a man came to pick up the rubbish around me."

Another performance project, *Say Cheese*, gave participants a chance to spend five minutes alone in a bedroom with Fisher and do anything they wanted, within limits. Ashery describes some of the bizarre requests: "A lot of people wanted to act out a separation, and me to tell them I didn't love them any more, that it was over. Somebody wanted me to blindfold him, lie on top of him and sing a Nirvana song..."

In 2007, Ashery moved into the academy for three years on an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded creative fellowship attached to Queen Mary, University of London, where she is still an honorary Fellow with teaching duties. One of her projects involved adopting the persona of the Jewish "false Messiah", Sabbatai Zevi (1626-76), who eventually converted to Islam. She sees him as a kind of early performance artist.

"He did a whole series of 'strange acts'," she explains. "He planned a meal and bought one thing at a time. He dressed a fish in baby clothes, put it in a pram and walked around Thessaloniki [in Greece] saying Israel would be saved under the sign of Pisces."

"I re-enacted that in a number of places that I thought needed saving: a deserted community centre in Whitstable [Kent], outside the Church of Scientology, a place in [London's] Vauxhall where a lot of homeless people were hanging out. I just kissed the fish for a long time as a sort of intervention. Teenagers shouted out that I was dirty or 'sick in the head'."

A strong critic of Israeli policy, Ashery has always been interested in working with Palestinian artists and in whether artists can have any impact on the real, political world. As another part of her AHRC fellowship, she teamed up with Palestinian Larissa Sansour, who shared her desire to "engage with the politics of the Middle East" in artworks drawing on humour, popular culture and personal experience.

The result was a graphic novel they scripted, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009), where they appear as (rather inept) superheroines who attempt to "save Palestine" after contracting a strange virus. In the first half, they explore complex issues of politics, creativity and identity. In the second half, they handed over control to an illustrator called James Pyman, who embroiled Ashery and Sansour's characters in a much more traditional intergalactic plot.

Let no one say that professors are all elbow patches and beards... ●