

Last Night's TV



Thomas Sutcliffe

t.sutcliffe@independent.co.uk

With a little self-help from his friends

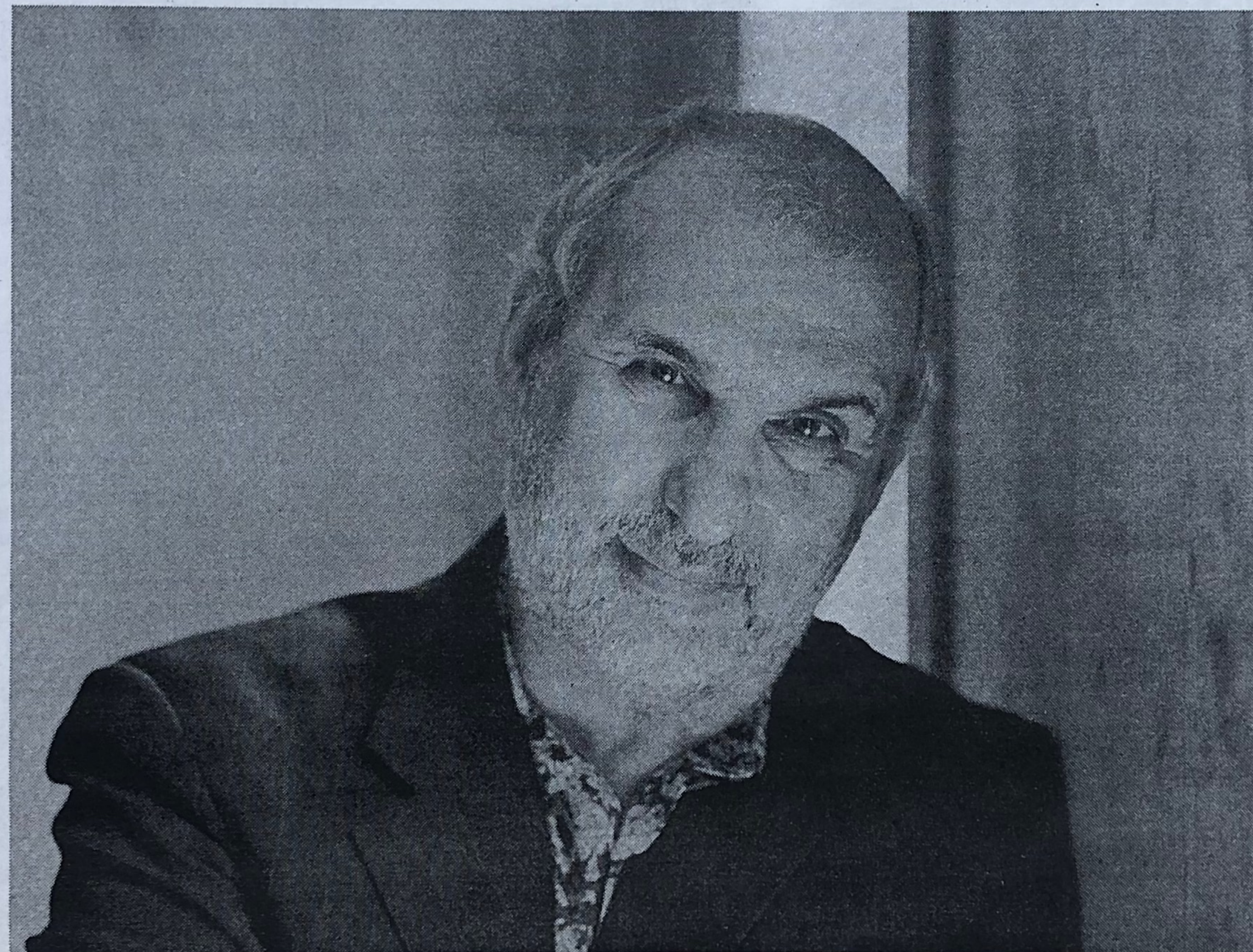
IMAGINE... BBC1

HORIZON BBC2

"I'm a great believer in saying 'yes' to everything rather than 'no' to everything," said Richard Branson in *Imagine...*'s film about self-help books. I found this a rather inspirational thought. It suggested that if I wrote to Richard Branson asking him to give me £1m, I'd get the cheque by return of post. "Screw it... let's do it!" I thought, adopting the title of Branson's own motivational bestseller. Sadly, I didn't move fast enough. Only a few minutes later, Alan Yentob was quoting from the founding text of motivational literature, Samuel Smiles's Victorian bestseller *Self-Help*. "Help from without is enfeebling, but help from within invigorates." And hearing that I began to doubt.

Maybe Richard Branson, as a go-getting, yes-to-the-universe type of guy, would be just too caring to risk enfeebling me. Then again, it could be that I was Feeling the Fear and Saying "Oh, Sod It, It'll Never Work... I'll Do a Sudoku Instead", very much not the approach counselled by Susan Jeffers, the author of the zillion-selling *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. I began to feel a little low, which as it happened primed me perfectly for the arrival of Adam Phillips, a man of refreshing realism. "We're never going to be cured of the fact that we have conflicting desires," he told Yentob. "We're never going to be cured of the fact that satisfaction is limited, we're never going to be cured of the fact that happiness is transitory, if it's available at all... Plus, we're all going to die."

I can't tell you how that cheered me up, so much less naggy and disapproving than the Gillette-commercial boosterism of Anthony Robbins, an eerie man with a smile like a calving glacier, who has made a fortune



Out of the blues: in last night's 'Imagine...', Alan Yentob looked at the bestselling books on finding happiness

out of peddling self-improvement fantasies to people who believe they can think themselves rich. And, oddly enough, the stoical acceptance that life is less than perfect does have an echo in some self-help bestsellers. The writer Amy Jenkins, who likes to start the day with a chapter or two of some self-help tome to get the motor running, recalled her relief at encountering the opening line of M Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*, "Life is difficult", the kind of truism that would be dismissed as self-fulfillingly defeatist by Mr Robbins.

Yentob had come to mock, but stayed to lean pensively on a London

balcony and concede that there might be something in some of it, particularly those titles that modestly aimed at ameliorating the universal griefs of the human condition rather than turning the reader into some grinning automaton of self-empowerment. If you're anxious to get started and looking for the bullet points, *Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy*, a bestseller about cognitive behavioural therapy, got a big thumbs up (and a lot of clinical backing) and Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* - drawing on the author's experiences in Auschwitz - got an eloquent endorsement from the Chief

Rabbi. But the really liberating remark came from Phillips. "What works?" Yentob asked him. "Nothing works," he replied, and then, as if seeing how crestfallen his interviewer looked, he softened his answer just a little. "Some things work some times for some people." With expectations that low, I think most of us could achieve a modicum

of contentment, and at least not beat ourselves up if we failed.

Whatever you do, getting stressed about your lack of success and happiness is going to be counterproductive, if *Horizon*'s documentary about ageing is to be believed. Apparently, stress hormones can play havoc with your prospects of a longer life, though if you're that stressed, it's possible that you won't want to live to 98 anyway. *How to Live to 101* reported on research being conducted in three of the world's longevity hot spots: the Japanese island of Okinawa, a Sardinian town called Ovodda and Loma Linda in California. The unsurprising news is that there aren't any short cuts. It helps to be born with the right genes and in the right place, but even then, you're going to have to eat well and you'll need to work out too. Marge Jetton, a sprightly centenarian, starts the day with six miles on an exercise bike and a weights session. "If you don't have something that hurts you, why it's not worthwhile," she explained, a "secret" that is not likely to recommend itself to the great mass of the people.

I don't think there's going to be a huge take-up for "caloric restriction" either, which is part of the culture in Okinawa, where it's regarded as sensible to rise from the table when you're still not quite full. Apparently, having some meaningful activity to do helps as well, though you don't have to go quite as far as Dr Ellsworth Wareham, a 92-year-old who still practises open-heart surgery three or four times a week. He doesn't tell his patients how old he is. The information is contra-indicated for people with weak hearts.

THE TEN BEST
CRIME NOVELS

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