

Television

It has been said that a half-hour spent in the company of someone who is good at his job is never wasted, although the person I can find saying it in writing is me. I know I didn't make it up, but I can't remember who did.

The Culture Show: Lynn Barber's Celebrity Masterclass (BBC2) could only be an instructive 30 minutes, especially for someone unable to source a simple quotation. Barber is, according to Alan Yentob's narration, "one of the most admired and feared journalists in the country". Her hatchet jobs have earned her the title "Demon Barber of Fleet Street".

She and I have, I think, just one professional assignment in common: we both interviewed Meat Loaf once, back in 2003. A genuine fan, she was shocked to find him dull and grumpy, and was unable to elicit anything of interest from him. I was simply shocked to find the second side of the cassette on which I recorded my interview perfectly blank. It will come as no surprise that her salvage job was a damn sight better than mine.

The Meat Loaf case raises an intriguing point. Alan Yentob asked Barber a lot of questions about her interviewing technique (she writes down questions, but doesn't really stick to them; she's "incredibly nosy", and unperturbed by bad behaviour), but technique isn't much use when an interview goes wrong. A subject might walk out halfway through, or might stay and be boring. The real trick of being a celebrity interviewer happens later, when you take whatever scraps you've gathered up and cobble them into something insightful, funny and different, every time.

I found myself wondering how Lynn Barber might find Lynn Barber as an interviewee. Tricky, I think: her skin seems too thick to get under, and she's too engaging for you to even want to try. She gave the impression of being hard to control - every time Yentob



Last night's TV

How might Lynn Barber find Lynn Barber as an interviewee? Tricky, I think

By Tim Dowling



turned his back she nipped out for fag, and he had to conduct a lot of the interview in her front garden - but she was remarkably cooperative when questioned and, as she cheerfully admitted, unembarrassable. Bullet-proof, in other words.

She learned her trade working for Penthouse magazine (her first interview was with Salvador Dali). Her reputation for savagery is undeserved, she said, because it's only the hatchet jobs that people remember. And anyway, at the time she earned her Demon Barber soubriquet, the most outrageous thing she'd done was ask Jimmy Savile if he liked little girls. "At least I asked," she said.

As interviewer-of-interviewer, Yentob ran into difficulty when he met an even more intriguing character halfway through: 91-year-old Edda

Always nipping out for a fag ... the Demon Barber of Fleet Street at home

Tasiemka, who curates an exhaustive celebrity press cuttings library from her house in north London, providing Barber with the bulk of her research material. How do you stop a minor character taking over the story? Or do you just let her? Now that's a question you'd want to ask Lynn Barber.

Former BBC economics editor Stephanie Flanders was just six when her father, Michael Flanders of Flanders and Swann, died of complications resulting from the polio he contracted in the navy. His death informs her approach to presenting **The Battle to Beat Polio** (BBC2). She didn't just lose her dad to the disease; she lost him through failings that delayed the development of a vaccine by decades.

It's a story of vital decisions affecting public health taken in almost complete scientific ignorance. Treatments for infantile paralysis - such as they were - were sometimes wildly counterproductive: paralysed limbs were splinted and plastered, so the muscles withered even faster.

In the early part of the 20th century, researcher Simon Flexner determined that polio was contracted solely through inhalation, and that the virus never entered the bloodstream, making a vaccine useless. He was completely wrong, but terribly influential. He singlehandedly set back vaccine research by 20 years.

Outbreaks were blamed on immigrants. The race to create a vaccine was just that - a race - with the two front-runners, Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin, criticising each other's methods and competing for funds. In the end it was Salk who won, only for Sabin to prevail later: Salk's vaccine was cleared for mass inoculation in 1955, but within a few years Sabin's was the preferred treatment. Looking back, it seems a miracle they came up with a vaccine at all.



AND ANOTHER THING

"Every time I think there can't possibly be another thing to do, I think of another thing to do." Artist Michael Craig Martin on What Do Artists Do All Day? (BBC4)