

# Yentob survives encounter with the demon Barber

## Alex Hardy TV review



### The Culture Show

BBC Two

★★★★★

### The Battle to Beat Polio

BBC Two

★★★★★

As well as listening to a celebrity's words, listen to their toilet. That was a key lesson last night from the brilliant Lynn Barber, aka the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, as she showed Alan Yentob around her 40-year career as an interviewer (sometimes hatchet-jobber) to the stars. Try to interview someone at home, she said. "A trip to the loo is always instructive." "Really naughty journalists" might rummage in their bathroom medical cabinet too. How I'm hoping that her next celebrity

exposé will be titled *Nigel Farage: The Germoloids Years*.

There was a problem for Yentob in this **Culture Show** special: how to do a celebrity interview on a celebrity interviewer? Well, he played Barber by her own rules by getting her at home — and she gamely played along, even letting him into her toilet (there hung a letter from Lucian Freud, refusing her request to interview him. He didn't, he wrote, fancy "being s\*\*\* on by a stranger"). As is often the case with such interviews, Yentob also showed us a lady whose real-life persona was very different from what we might have expected. Far from demonic, she was gentle, smiling, almost playing peekaboo with the camera as she went for yet another fag break. The Barber we saw seemed powered not by swings of a hatchet but by curiosity, honesty and nicotine.

There were some lovely nuggets here — how could there not be when Barber's first celebrity interview was a four-day sojourn with Salvador Dalí? One of her more recent encounters was an uncomfortable face-to-face with Rafa Nadal, who sported little more than Armani pants. However, I would have liked to have seen Yentob probe further: on how celebrity culture has changed since Dalí; on how the media has evolved in Barber's time on the job.



Alan Yentob with the original celebrity interviewer Lynn Barber

Instead we got only fleeting insights into her life — she became "embarrassment proof" because her dad used to shout at her — and into key moments of her career (eg, the time she was castigated for asking Jimmy Savile if he liked little girls). This profile could have used much more than the 30 minutes it got. Which was probably more like 20 minutes if you took out the smoking. Who knew that celebrity would also play a significant role in

**The Battle to Beat Polio?** In Britain it took the death of footballer Jeff Hall, a fit young man suddenly struck by the virus, to increase uptake of the polio vaccine. "Celebrity scientists" in the US had been involved in the race to develop those vaccines, as explained by the host of the documentary Stephanie Flanders, the former BBC economics editor whose celebrity father (of the 1960s comedy duo Flanders and Swann fame) died when she was a young girl.

In the end, though, these connections to fame weren't the most compelling here. Most of all Flanders' film was instructive — as instructive as a celebrity's toilet we can say now — because it communicated the universality of the fear that descended with each unexplained epidemic. This was a terrifying account of a terrifying illness. alex.hardy@the-times.co.uk