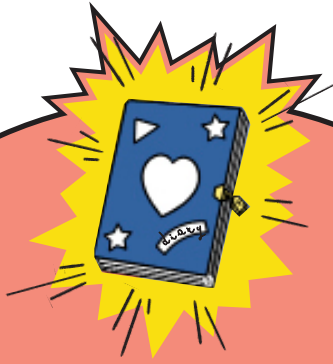


Imagine reading aloud your most embarrassing teenage thoughts. Add a crowd. No, it's not an anxiety dream, it's a mouthy night out that's taken London by storm. HELEN WHITAKER listens in

Illustration: Janne Iivonen





Boys will have just written:
"I saw Sarah.
She looked fit"

In the wood-panelled basement of a traditional London pub, it's standing room only as a woman approaches the microphone on the spotlight stage, and starts regaling the crowd with an anecdote about a holiday to Corfu that involves a character known only as 'Microwave Maureen'. As the swell of laughter rises, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a stand-up gig by a circuit veteran. But not only is the material 30 years old, the act isn't even delivered by a professional performer.

This is Cringe London, where members of the public sign up to read out embarrassing extracts from their teenage diaries in front of a crowd of strangers. Adolescent photos of each of tonight's seven readers flash up on a giant screen as they do it. They're all hoping for the exact response to their private thoughts they most dreaded as a teenager – uproarious laughter.

"It's such a great concept, because the laughs come really easily – much more than any comedy open mic night I've seen," says Lucy Thackray, who has kept diaries intermittently from the ages of nine to 30. She reads extracts from her diary as a 13-year-old on holiday with her parents in France. "Whether we're clever, boring, over-dramatic or introspective, everyone's teenage 'voices' are just delightfully self-important and naïve," she says.

Pop culture would agree. 'Confessional comedy' is at an all-time high. The traditional (and often self-aggrandising) celebrity autobiography has been usurped in the bestseller lists by collections of personal essays that emphasise the awkward and embarrassing nature of the authors (see: Amy Schumer, Mindy Kaling, Anna Kendrick). King of the average-Joe comedy, Judd Apatow, has put it down to audiences' hunger for honesty. "People uploading their personal experience, in whatever format, has become modern entertainment," he has said.

Nothing provides more of a personal experience goldmine than the inner life of your teenage years, which more often

than not comes with a total lack of self-awareness. "It's amazing how many people invoke Anne Frank in their teenage diaries," says organiser of London Cringe, Ana McLaughlin, with a chuckle, "A good 50 per cent." (One of tonight's readers opens her diary with that very reference.) It's worth noting that the readings are punctuated by the readers giving an embarrassed chuckle or burying their heads in their hands when they get to a particularly excruciating sentence, but the atmosphere in the room is one of camaraderie, the audience is laughing along with, rather than at, the reader.

Cringe originated in New York in 2005 when a house move led Brooklynite Sarah Brown to uncover her teenage journals. She sent the choice excerpts to her friends by email, who then one-upped her with their own mortifying extracts. The volume of funny, OTT emotional outpourings made her realise that she had the seed of an open-mic night.

A book, compiling diary entries, bad poetry, song lyrics and unsent love letters followed in 2009, before Brown flew over to London to research a British edition of the book and ended up setting up a UK branch of the night with McLaughlin, who worked in the publicity department for the book. Cringe still only operates in two locations (New York and London), but plenty of other places worldwide have diary-reading events.

The most famous of these is Mortified, which has chapters all over the world (including LA, Portland, New York, Amsterdam, Paris, London and Malmö). Mortified has generated a Netflix documentary as well as a regular podcast featuring guest appearances from celebrities such as Alison Brie, Elijah Wood and teen angst icon Alanis Morissette. On this side of the pond, BBC Radio 4 has run *My Teenage Diary* since 2009, with everyone from Terry Wogan to Caitlin Moran reading out extracts and discussing their formative years with host Rufus Hound.

The majority of Cringe readers are female, McLaughlin tells me (although tonight the ratio is 4:3 female to male) and "the diaries tend to be quite different," she says. "The girls are very heavy on detail and, while a girl will spend five pages examining an interaction with a boy, including analysis of what everyone was wearing and maybe even diagrams of the angle they were sitting at, the boys are often more pared back and factual. Boys will have just written: 'I saw Sarah. She looked fit'." ©



But for both sexes, travel and holidays crop up time and again. “It’s because teenagers can pretend to be someone else while on holiday,” McLaughlin explains. “It’s a window of reinvention. With boys, they might only ever have written a diary on a school French trip or something, because they had to do it for an assignment.”

Tonight, in addition to Thackray’s camping trip to the Loire Valley, we hear Phil Horton’s musings as a 15-year-old about his family holiday to Florida, including a painstaking level of detail about the airport transfers and queueing time for rollercoasters. “It makes me sound like a young Alan Partridge,” he says afterwards.

Sometimes it’s just dreams of future travel that the readers obsess over. Katherine Blamire, 34, reads an extract from her diary in 1998, at aged 15, in which she is a budding musician, obsessed with Sheryl Crow and convinced that her life would be complete if only she had a tour bus like her idol (even though she’s not very sure she’s “good at music”).

“On one level it is mortifying,” Blamire says afterwards. “But on the other, it’s quite liberating. I was on an absolute high. It is like getting the most embarrassing version of yourself out there in the open and finding acceptance. Everyone at that age is fairly ridiculous and self-obsessed but also quite vulnerable. Hopefully I’ve changed to become more mature, but reading the diary made me actually wish I still had the same blind confidence I had then.”

“It’s just such an intense time,” says McLaughlin. “You’re working out who you are, and it’s hard. It comes through in most of the diaries. Things feel like the end of the world, but when looking back they’re obviously not.”

And whether the readers came of age 30 or only five years ago, or the cultural references change, the preoccupations remain the same. Romance, infatuations, friendship – especially with the girls, says McLaughlin – hatred of siblings and unfair parental restrictions. “There’s a lot of, ‘How unreasonable is it that I’m not allowed to be on the phone after 9pm? I have so much I need to talk about to these people I was at school all day with!’”

The melodrama of unrequited crushes and naïve attempts to conflate world events with their everyday lives all raise laughs, but the biggest cheers of recognition and solidarity are reserved for nostalgic cultural touchstones, which also give a unique view of (often small-town) UK life during a particular era. References to Nokia 3110s, *Top of the Pops* and the pitfalls of shared halls of residence payphones all resonate with different parts of the mixed-generation crowd. The youngest readers are in their early twenties, while Cringe’s oldest reader read his diaries from the 1950s, says McLaughlin. “The names were different – he refers to people like Gladys – but in his diaries, Gladys is a 15-year-old hottie.”

“People love cultural references that are specific,” adds McLaughlin. “There was once a girl who read this amazing piece about trying to stalk Paul Nicholls, the *EastEnders* actor who was very big in the 1990s. It was pre-Google, so she went to the library and looked up phone numbers of schools in Bolton – where he was from – then she

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went to a phone box and rang them all in order to try and contact him. The whole thing culminated in no one answering because it was the Easter holidays.”

“It’s therapeutic,” says Horton, about why he does it. “When you’re that age, everything is so massive and emotional. Even if at the time you might have been going through some bad stuff, you look back and think, ‘I got through it and now I can share it with people and make them laugh.’ I was cracking up myself as I read them back.”

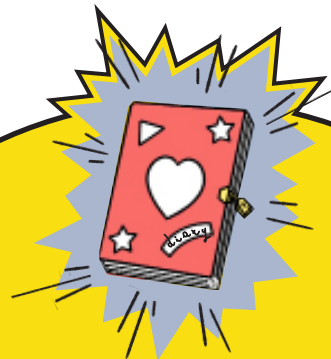
Another of tonight’s readers, Hannah Stone, is a psychologist and she agrees with the therapeutic aspect of sharing such private shame. “I think it’s a very healthy way of processing the experiences during our teenage years that feel so significant,” she says. “There is nothing more validating than the empathic response of a crowd to something that felt so important when you were 14.”

“My overwhelming feeling was that I wanted to go and give this 13-year-old over-thinker a hug,” says Thackray about her trip down memory lane, which involved a holiday romance that concluded when she abruptly left without saying goodbye. “It’s brilliantly nostalgic and sometimes quite sweet and poignant.”

For Blamire, her reminiscences also have a neat ending. Now 34, she did become a musician, has released four albums with her band Smoke Fairies, regularly travels on tour buses and, in 2015, she sang backing vocals for Jack White at the MusiCares event in Los Angeles, where she also met... Sheryl Crow! The audience breaks out into a huge cheer as a photo of Blamire with Crow flashes up on the screen at the end of her reading. “The 15-year-old version of me was desperate for an exciting life and it’s quite validating to know that I did achieve the wishes that were expressed in those pages,” says Blamire. “My 15-year-old self would have been happy with that.” ■

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The next Cringe London night is at The Phoenix, London on 4 July. phoenixcavendishsquare.co.uk



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