

A LIFE IN THE DAY

Barbara Amiel

The writer and former society hostess, 81

Also known as Lady Black, Amiel was born in Watford before moving to Canada at the age of 11 with her mother and stepfather. She was the first female editor of the *Toronto Sun* and went on to be a leading Fleet Street columnist. She is married to her fourth husband, Conrad Black, the former media magnate who was convicted of fraud by a US court and served three and a half years in prison in Florida. In 2019 Donald Trump granted him a presidential pardon. She lives with Black in Toronto.

My day usually starts around 7.30am. I've been sleeping on an air mattress on the dining room floor for 13 months, ever since my elderly dog — a Hungarian kuvasz called Arpad, right — discovered he could no longer go upstairs to our bedroom. He is trapped in a body slowly undergoing paralysis.

Every morning I hear a small half-bark to tell me he's awake and ready for his morning walk. He has a special harness called Help 'Em Up, which has handles front and rear, so I can assume his weight when his legs or spine collapse. This is easier said than done because he weighs 115 pounds, I weigh a little less. Lifting him is my version of bench pressing.

Conrad is very understanding about my desertion of the marital bed, and while I dream of sleeping in with him again, that would mean my dog has died. For 12 years this dog has kept my morale up and I can't desert him now.

Occasionally I have a breakfast of porridge but usually I skip it



in favour of Carnation milk, Ribena and shortbread biscuits. No lunch, just a steady stream of ginger tea and more biscuits. Dinner is haphazard and may be at 7pm or midnight.

I've never got used to "woke Canada" and Conrad promises we'll be back in London to live within 18 months. In fact we were in London a couple of weeks ago to see British friends, who, unlike most of our American acquaintances, stood by us through every horrible moment of our legal cesspool. And very soon my wish will become reality and I'll be "home" again.

Meanwhile I sit for a good portion of the day and helplessly ruminate. This is a

by-product of immobilising depression, which I have fought all my life but which periodically creeps up like a nasty recurring rash. Bogus words I dislike often circle in my head. "Mindfulness" is one and "sustainability", which has jumped ship from its Latin root *sustinere* — meaning to hold up or support — and become politicised. Eventually I slither over to my desk to work on my new book, but on bad days I take a lot of over-the-counter painkillers to chase away depression and replace it with a codeine-induced optimism.

Bedtime depends on when Conrad emerges from writing his modest undertaking, *An Interpretative History of the World*, and can sit with me while I take innumerable sleeping meds. I do get to see him at 6pm when he comes up from his library to watch Fox News, which I jokily refer to as "the Din", but it's a chance for togetherness, so I put in my earbuds and listen to something like [the opera] *Mefistofele* by Boito while the Fox pundits talk away. Afterwards I lure Conrad to stay and talk over current events or watch a film.

I have televisions in almost every room. This ghastly habit was picked up when Conrad was incarcerated in the United States and friends were in short supply. I would turn them all on with sound muted so I had faces around me. These days I've been seduced by the HBO drama *The Gilded Age*, which I watch munching McVitie's chocolate digestives.

I have a soft spot for Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, and I identify like mad with Lily Bart, who ends up killing herself in dire poverty. It will only be my husband's genius that ensures I don't end up the same way, because I've never saved a penny in my life. Thank heavens summer is here and the extra hours of light ought to jump-start my sanity ■

Interview by York Membery.
Friends and Enemies:
A Memoir by Barbara Amiel is published by Constable with a new chapter on Thursday at £12.99

WORDS OF WISDOM

Best advice I was given

Write books! Instead, I became a journalist. Huge mistake

Advice I'd give

Take a finance or history degree rather than anything ending in "studies", such as women's studies or gender and inclusion studies. Such courses are largely opinions

What I wish I'd understood

The cliché "How time flies"