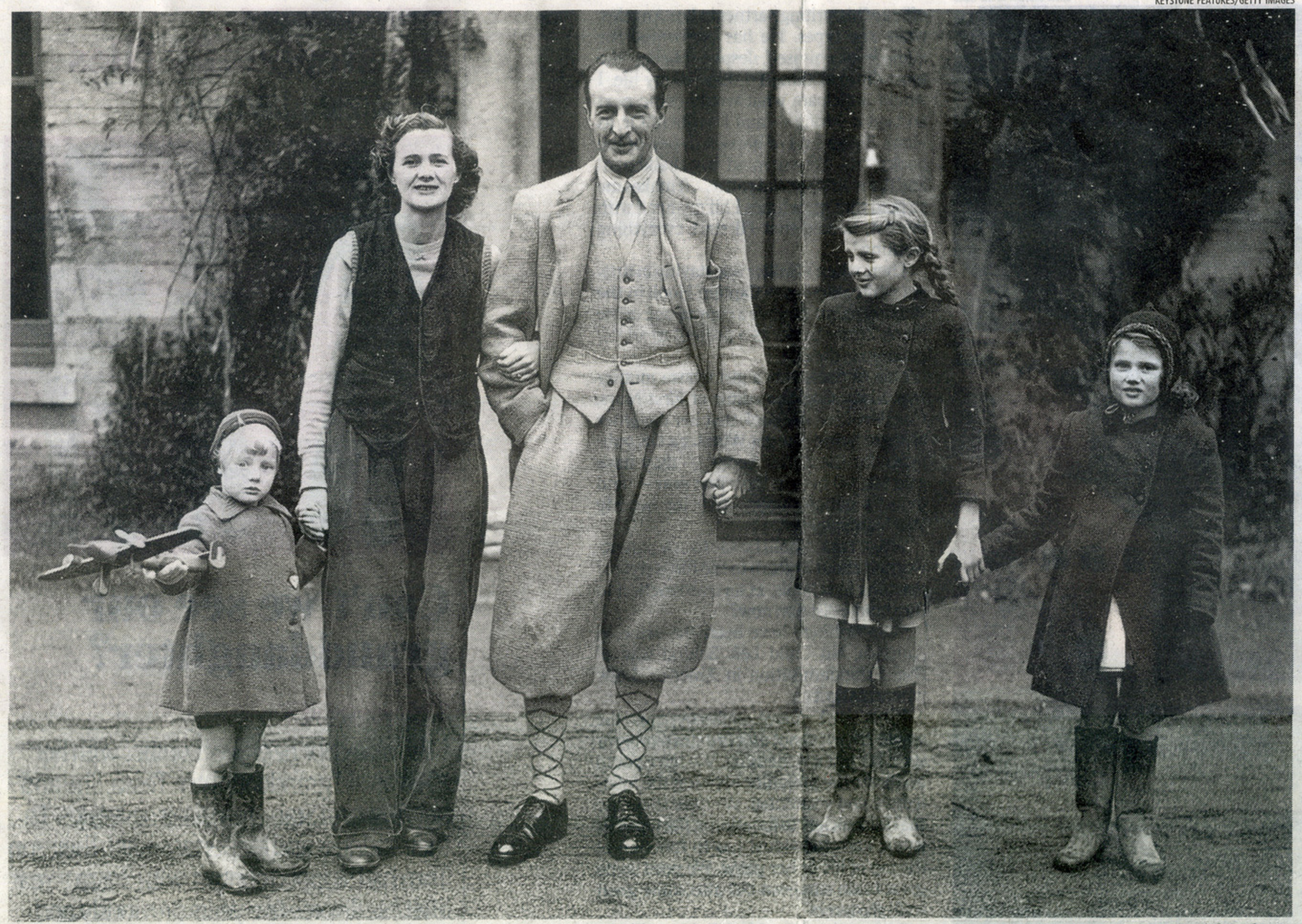
KEYSTONE FEATURES/GETTY IMAGES



Daphne du Maurier and husband with daughter Tessa (second from right) and her siblings. Below, Jennifer Saunders, Adrian Edmondson and family

Mum, will you ever finish that novel?

Is growing up as the child of a creative parent a boon or a burden, asks *Fiona Neill*

Ever since I discovered that the artist Barbara Hepworth sent her eldest son to boarding school when he was 5, I have been fascinated by the dynamics of growing up in the shadow of a creative parent. I had assumed that it would be mostly advantageous, that Hepworth engaged in a seamless interchange between work and family life, popping from her studio at the end of the garden to hang out with her children, and streams of interesting and unconventional guests holding court in a cosy but chaotic kitchen.

The truth was less romantic: Hepworth got a nurse to look after her son, Paul Skeaping, almost as soon as he was born. The artist's single-minded approach reaped professional rewards but her son paid a heavy price.

I began to wonder whether his experience was typical. As a writer and mother of three, I could understand in some small way the conflict between the desire to work and domestic imperatives: how did it play out in other households? So I embarked on a six-month journey to interview different generations from creative families about their domestic lives.

I wanted to find out whether their parents' successes were a boon or a burden for children and how it impacted on their own choice of careers. All the interviews for the subsequent radio series took place around kitchen tables, sometimes with three generations of the same family.

It was with some trepidation that I knocked on the door of Lady Tessa Montgomery's flat in South Kensington in July last year to talk to her about what it was like growing up as the daughter of the writer Daphne du Maurier. I knew that du Maurier was a notoriously distant mother. In fact, Montgomery, a wonderfully dignified and softly spoken 76-year-old, described her mother without any hint of resentment.

She recalled a woman whose primary motivation was writing and fear that the muse might desert her. Her desire to write undisturbed was the principal factor behind moving the family to Menabilly, the isolated house in Cornwall that inspired *Rebecca*. "Shortly after we moved she had a hut built at the end of the lawn and she used to take herself off there to write . . . we learnt not to disturb her. It was a sort of unwritten law," she explained. "When we were small we never ate with her. She ate alone, we ate in the nursery. I suppose she was mulling over her book and didn't want to be disturbed by childrens' chatter. I think I was at least 11 or 12 before I was allowed into the dining room."

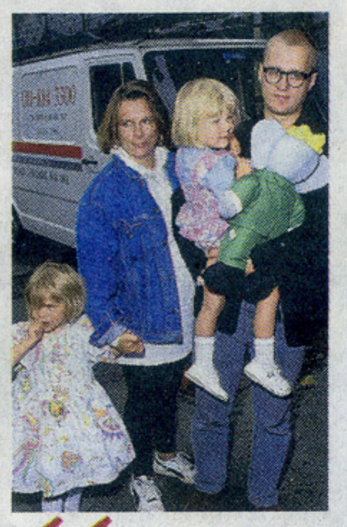
Montgomery recalls a childhood with aunts and nannies, and a father who was absent for up to two years at a time during the Second World War. After a five-month trip away with her husband in Egypt, du Maurier came home and shocked even her own mother by asking if she would keep the children for an extra ten days over Christmas so that she could keep working on *Rebecca*. "I was very, very lonely. We didn't really have many friends around. I don't think I ever had a friend to stay," Montgomery explains. "My mother didn't really bother with my sister or me. My brother was her great favourite, which we didn't mind. We accepted it." Du Maurier's approach was probably not radically different from many women of her social class in the 1940s when governesses were still commonplace. Her failure to involve her children in her career, however, meant that the isolation was compounded.

By contrast, the comedians Jennifer Saunders and Adrian Edmondson have always involved their children in their work, whether by press-ganging them to play extras in their television series, or by simply discussing what they are doing. They have managed to combine writing and performing with bringing up their three daughters, Ella, 24, Beattie, 22 and Freya, 18.

In the heyday of *Absolutely Fabulous* in the early Nineties, Saunders' children were all under 10. No mean feat for any working parent but she and Edmondson managed to get through the early years without nannies and housekeepers.

When writing the raucous TV series *Bottom*, Edmondson and his writing partner Rik Mayall organised their days around the school run. "We were very dutiful fathers. We took our kids to school. We started work at 10am, had lunch and worked another hour, in time to pick up the kids from school." Edmondson says that his disciplined approach to work and a desire to be organised have provided a good counterbalance to the more erratic approach adopted by his wife.

Saunders says: "I create on the hoof. I don't think I like to have anything written beforehand. I used to think it was an accident but I think I like it that way." I wondered whether the Edmondson children were exposed to this stress and Ella Edmondson describes an *Ab Fab* script crisis: "The night before a read-through we were driving to London and Beattie had pens and paper and [Mum] was dictating the script to us while we were driving to the studio." Such experiences have given the Edmondson children a wealth of insider knowledge that others might take a lifetime to accumulate. Ella is a singer-songwriter who has recently released her first album and Beattie is on the comedy circuit in a female group called Lady Garden.



> "We had pens and paper, and Mum dictated the *Ab Fab* script to us in the car to the studio"

Their parents' fame has undoubtedly helped to open doors, but the most valuable lesson the girls have learnt is that nothing is achieved without hard graft. They understand obsession can breed success.

It is an example that the songwriter Guy Chambers also absorbed from his family. He has worked with some of the world's best-known performers and his collaboration with Robbie Williams spawned hits including *Angels* and *Let me Entertain You*. He has a strict working routine that he believes is inherited from his parents, particularly his father, Colin, who spent 20 years playing principal flute with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. "Dad was often out, so I presumed that to be a musician you were working all the time and I took that for granted. And when I eventually became successful, I did work all of the time for a while."

At the peak of his career, Chambers says, he and his wife Emma and their two children would go on holiday with Williams so that they could continue working. Chambers doesn't exclude his children: he composes and practises at home if the urge takes him; he asks his children for opinions about songs; and he brings them into the studio. His daughter Isis, 9, describes how the lead singer of the Scissor Sisters, Jason Sellards, aka, Jake Shears, sang a slow version of *I Don't Feel Like Dancing* to her in case she couldn't decipher the words.

Now the father of four children under the age of 10, Chambers admits that it would be impossible to sustain his career without his wife. "I've never got up in the night. So I think that's what's kept us together. I think that if she'd been the type of woman who expected me to take turns, it wasn't going to work because I can't write songs and be sleep-deprived."

Chambers is fortunate that he has met someone happy to pick up the slack. Creative parents are by definition obsessive workers. Their hours can be unorthodox and their habits not conducive to the ebb and flow of family life. That they often work from home also means that their families are unusually close to the highs and lows of their professional lives.

The threat of financial insecurity lingers in the background (incredibly, Saunders still worries about where the next job is coming from) and their moods can be mercurial, depending how work is going. However, as long as there is someone to fill the emotional void when a parent is working at full throttle, it doesn't have to be a detrimental environment for children.

My eldest son recently remarked that it might be better if I died because he thought the books of dead authors sell more than those of the living. I've always worried about my children living too close to the stresses of my working life but, based on the experiences of these families, it would seem that his exposure to the highs and lows of the publishing process is a better alternative to being shut out completely. It might even prove beneficial.

Famous Footsteps *begins today at 9.30am on Radio 4.*
Friends, Lovers and Other Indiscretions *by Fiona Neill is published in paperback on February 4, £6.99 by Arrow books*