



# Fingers in the Sparkle Jar: A Memoir

*Chris Packham*

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*Every minute was magical, every single thing it did was fascinating and everything it didn't do was equally wondrous, and to be sat there, with a Kestrel, a real live Kestrel, my own real live Kestrel on my wrist! I felt like I'd climbed through a hole in heaven's fence.*

An introverted, unusual young boy, isolated by his obsessions and a loner at school, Chris Packham was only at home in the fields and woods around his suburban home. But when he stole a young kestrel from its nest, he was about to embark on a friendship that would teach him what it meant to love, and that would change him forever. In his rich, lyrical and emotionally exposing memoir, Chris brings to life his childhood in the 70s, from his bedroom bursting with fox skulls, birds' eggs and sweaty jam jars, to his feral adventures. But pervading his story is the search for freedom, meaning and acceptance in a world that didn't understand him.

Beautifully wrought, this coming-of-age memoir will be unlike any you've ever read.

## Fingers in the Sparkle Jar: A Memoir Details

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Author : Chris Packham

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## From Reader Review Fingers in the Sparkle Jar: A Memoir for online ebook

### Alex Sarll says

The deeply relatable memoir of a boy growing up on the edge of a nowhere town, not really grasping how people work and much happier wandering the half-wild edgelands or engrossed in his own worlds. I'd expected something like the chatty style of Packham's presenting, informative and straightforward, but no - this is non-chronological, impressionistic, almost fractured in places. Beautiful, too. When he talks about how "beneath the roots of long-gone oaks pike lay log-like in their frozen palaces", you can tell he's part of a noble, poetic tradition of nature writing. But more than anything the immersion in the protagonist's sensorium, while at the same time they're often seeing themselves from outside, reminded me of an odd, anonymous modernist porn novel called Beatrice. "A dusty rain that smelled of cardboard chattered in the high canopy, pixelated by millions of emerald gems made from sunlight".

Weirdly, for all I recognised the story, I only teared up at the acknowledgements, not least for the way they admitted that the family who'd seemed so antagonistic to his younger self were in fact both loving and extraordinarily patient.

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### Anna says

I was repeatedly surprised by Chris Packham's memoir. First by his writing, which is amazingly lyrical and poetic when describing nature. It's beautiful, in fact, and really gives the reader an insight into his love of wild creatures. Second, by his raw emotional honesty. Parts of the book, especially those that deal with a suicide attempt, are upsetting and difficult to read. Packham appears to be working through the traumas of his childhood, periodically occupying the point of view of others observing his younger self. It's disconcerting but works. At the centre of the book is his relationship with the kestrel he kept; this reminded me of the excellent H is for Hawk. I found the whole thing powerful and evocative, a very personal account of nature's wonders and the perils of being different as a child. As usual, I have much less to say about a book that provoked a predominantly emotional rather than intellectual response.

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### Harriet says

'Fingers in the Sparkle Jar' is unique, startling, bewildering, frustrating and like nothing else I've ever read. Completely engrossing, this is a book you wander around thinking about and then return to in a quest to understand and make sense of it. So searingly raw and revealing to be sharp and painful in places; so powerful and shining when Chris Packham describes the creatures that made his youthful world sparkle. I wanted more narrative, more connections and explanations, but realise that memories don't always work that way.

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### Penny says

Well, this was nothing remotely like what I was expecting.....

I'd seen some good reviews in the paper, and I enjoy watching Chris Packham on various nature programmes on TV. I was expecting a gentle memoir of a boy growing up with a love of animals which he then turned into a successful career.

Instead the book is a series of beautifully written but often deeply disturbing snapshots of Packham as he grew up. Many are written in the first person and describe his life when he was around 7 or 8 and again when he was in his mid teens.

In other parts of the book he sees himself as he would have appeared through other people's eyes (the ice cream man, or an elderly neighbour). These passages were some of the most heartbreaking and poignant.

Lastly in other sections we meet him in his early 40's, apparently having counselling following a suicide bid. These passages are written in italics, not sure why.

Maybe we all knew someone like Packham when we were at school. The boy (nearly always a boy) who was the clever geek, no friends, rarely spoke, terrible at PE, hair, clothes and shoes always wrong, often badly bullied or ignored. Often with an obsessive interest and knowledge about something.

So, one of the strangest, most moving memoirs I have ever read. So many books disappear from my mind almost as soon as I finish them, but I know this one will stay with me.

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## **Bettie? says**

BOTW

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b079mwt6>

*Description: Chris Packham is a naturalist, nature photographer and author, best known for his television work. But in his lyrical and painfully honest new memoir, he reveals the life-events which would eventually shape him and change him forever.*

*Chris brings to life his childhood in the 1970s, from his bedroom bursting with birds' eggs and jam jars, to his feral adventures. But throughout his story is the search for freedom, meaning and acceptance in a world that didn't understand him.*

*This unconventional and uncompromising memoir moves back and forth through time, capturing a child's view of the 60s and 70s - the music, the clothes, the cars - alongside recent, more exposing recollections from adulthood.*

Episode 1: Chris begins his recollections as an introverted, unusual young boy, isolated by his obsessions and a loner at school.

2/5: Chris continues to remember his difficult childhood, discovers the taste of tadpoles and encounters some bullies.

3/5: Chris decides that animals are easier to trust than people. He makes a nocturnal escape through his bedroom window, finds treasure up a tree and falls in love.

4/5: Chris takes a kestrel from its nest, forming an all-consuming friendship which will eventually teach him

hard lessons about love and loss.

5/5: Chris concludes his painfully honest memoir. He is a confirmed outsider - almost overwhelmed - but determined to do things his way, on his terms.

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### **georinagem says**

I absolutely admire what he's doing here, can't fault the book on integrity and original approach but the sentences are absolutely stuffed with adjectives, I just couldn't absorb it all. Only odd sections here and there really got through to me

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### **Lizzie (Littlehux) Huxley-Jones says**

I am in awe. Chris Packham's memoir Fingers in the Sparkle Jar is a brutal, beautiful book that subverts the memoir genre through third person accounts of events involving him. The timeline flicks around, with the Summer of 1975, the Summer of his kestrel, playing a centralised role. Alongside that are his end-of-chapter discussions with his therapist in September 2003, shortly after almost committing suicide.

While reading I saw so much of my childhood in his own, then realised he too is autistic. So much of what happened to him mirrors my own life, making this a book very close to my heart. I realised that growing up watching him on The Really Wild Show meant I was watching someone who thought like me, experienced life the way I do... and that means so very much to me.

It's utterly stunning.

Thanks to @eburybooks for sending me a review copy.

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### **Penelope says**

This is a difficult book to review or even to describe but it is absolutely worth reading. Whilst described as a memoir it is more a collection of perfectly framed moments, some of which are hauntingly beautiful, others are heart wrenchingly sad and some are just downright icky. Raw, visceral, glorious, and magnificent this not at all what I expected it to be but somehow it was even better.

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### **Paul says**

Chris Packham is a well known presence on our TV screens, presenting The Really Wild Show from 1986 to 1995 and most recently Springwatch. He is passionate about all things wildlife and conservation, an interest that stemmed from early in his childhood where he developed a fascination with all creatures great, small, dead and alive. His introverted personality meant that he was a boy who didn't fit in with anyone else at school; he was bullied, beaten up and suffered in some way every day. He was an indifferent pupil, but with the subjects he loved, he excelled at them.

Where Packham felt most alive though was when he was interacting with the natural world. He felt a connection to every creature that was living and had a fascination with those long departed like dinosaurs. His bedroom was a cross between a zoo and a museum with jam jars full of frog spawn, snakes in fish tanks and drawers full of skulls, eggs and deceased insects. He would spend hours outside looking for specimens, poring over his collections and boiling carcasses to get to the bones. But the creature he most coveted was a kestrel, a real live kestrel, and one day he was to realise that dream. Every magical moment that he spent with the bird learning how to train it and observing it in the tiniest detail was to be the time he finally felt at peace with the world around him.

This moving memoir is written with an intensity that is so very different to anything that I have read before. Packham is eloquent with an attention to detail that is quite astonishing, you could say that obsession is his middle name, but it is not surprising when you learn he suffers from Asperger's. His parents were gracious and tolerant with the way that he saw the world and the way that it saw him, but the way people failed to understand him did intensify the internal conflicts he suffered from. Woven in are accounts of his meetings with a psychologist, where he takes the tentative, painful steps of opening up to a stranger and it is where we learn of his greatest fears and those moments where he has stood at the abyss. If there was one flaw for me, it was the way it was written in the third person. It felt like he was detached from the events going on, and to a certain extent he probably was, but overall it is a really good read.

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## Chrissie says

First just stop and consider the cover....which looks very simple. At the center are a kestrel and a heart. From them flow waves and reverberations back? I neither considered the cover nor its significance until after finishing the book. It is a perfect cover.

Exquisite writing is the feature that stands out most prominently.

Humor, deep sadness, grief and cause for anger are to be found within these pages. Also an awakening, understanding of what has not been understood before, both for the reader and the writer.

This is a very unusual memoir. It does not focus on a check list of information such as date of birth, schools or occupations. The author speaks of his world through the eyes of his younger self. It flips between periods in his childhood, his teens when he had a pet kestrel and his meeting with a psychologist when he is in his forties. Each chapter begins with a date. Knowing that he was born in 1961, makes understanding each section simple. The author has (view spoiler). I was told this by a friend, but I appreciated discovering this on my own as I read, so I am putting it in a spoiler here. His intelligence and his ability to minutely **observe** and **appreciate** what he saw around him are magnified, not diminished. As one discovers more and more about the young boy one needs to reevaluate that which we are told. I loved the ending, how the author sees the world around him and relates to others.

The author is not only an author, naturalist and nature photographer, but also a television presenter. Narrating his own book was thus a given. He is a talented speaker and nobody but him could possibly have read the lines with such perfection. He is best known for the children's nature series *The Real Wild Show* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rea...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rea...)) of the late 80s and has presented the BBC nature series *Springwatch* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springw...>) from 2009. I recommend listening to the audiobook rather than reading the paper book. You get an added dimension. You hear through his intonations what the author saw through his eyes and felt in his heart. This is a great book for both children and adults.

I am giving this five stars, even though I did feel that at the two thirds point it dragged a bit. It has beautiful

lines, draws the reader in, reveals so much about the author's inner self (view spoiler) and finally has fascinating information about many, many animals. From snakes and tadpoles and dinosaurs to otters and mice and tons about birds! I highly recommend this book. It is a work of art.

The book will make readers open their eyes to the beauty of nature.

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### **Mandy says**

Unusual, honest memoir about a boy obsessed with the natural world. I can appreciate his interest in the natural world as I too had a (somewhat smaller) collection of skulls, birds eggs and the like in my bedroom and saved my money for binoculars for bird watching, but not to the extent of his obsessions.

It is a sad, lonely story but so well written and captivating even at its most brutal.

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### **Dan says**

This is a book unlike any I've ever read.

Chris Packham is a fantastic British naturalist and TV presenter. I first saw him as a child when he presented children's wildlife programme The Really Wild Show and have enjoyed much of his work since then, including his current role at the helm of the wonderful Springwatch. I even met him when I was about 11 and won a short story competition. But there's more to the man than meets the eye as this book describes.

This isn't an autobiography, it's a memoir. It doesn't share his life story, just some of the more memorable moments from Packham's childhood and teenage years. It reads almost like a novel and Packham even refers to himself from the third person and looks at himself through the eyes of other people. It has an interesting structure which darts around the place. At the end of each 'chapter' there is a few pages describing therapy sessions that Packham went to as an adult shortly after trying to commit suicide. These tie together the text and give it a deeper meaning.

The style of writing is remarkable. Rarely does prose feel so poetical. Packham manages to describe all sorts of things in this style. There's obviously lots of wildlife descriptions and these are beautiful. There was a really clear picture in my head of all these scenes. But even other scenes are well described, from the family dynamic to a film poster to Packham's school peers.

I did find a few problems with the book though. Whilst I sort-of liked that the structure was nonlinear each section was so short it did become a little overwhelming constantly switching- I would have preferred longer sections within the structure. And again whilst I liked the switching viewpoint thing I found that a little confusing at times as you end up trying to work out where Packham actually is in the text.

Overall though this was a unique, remarkable read that I really related to. Rarely does a book make you feel like you know the author personally by the end but this one really does.

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## Laura says

*From BBC radio 4 - Book of the Week:*

*Chris Packham is a naturalist, nature photographer and author, best known for his television work. But in his lyrical and painfully honest new memoir, he reveals the life-events which would eventually shape him and change him forever.*

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*2/5: Chris continues to remember his difficult childhood, discovers the taste of tadpoles and encounters some bullies.*

*3/5: Chris decides that animals are easier to trust than people. He makes a nocturnal escape through his bedroom window, finds treasure up a tree and falls in love.*

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*This unconventional and uncompromising memoir moves back and forth through time, capturing a child's view of the 60s and 70s - the music, the clothes, the cars - alongside recent, more exposing recollections from adulthood.*

*Read by Chris Packham and Rachel Atkins*

*Abridged by Jo Coombs*

*Produced by Pippa Vaughan*

*A Loftus Media production for BBC Radio 4.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b079mwt6>

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## Paulfozz says

Unlike any memoir I've read; written as if it were at the same time a novel and a journal, it clearly was a deep source of catharsis. A profoundly exposing and emotional journey into Chris's childhood, detailing his obsession with wildlife and the growing distance he felt to other people, but concentrating on one summer that he shared with a beautiful Kestrel, a summer that would have a deep impact on his life. It is telling of his character that this book is so meticulously and beautifully honed, the language carefully considered and precisely arranged, as though it were a rare eggshell cosseted in cotton wool in a display cabinet.

I finished reading this book last night, but even having slept I find it difficult to describe how it makes me feel. It is one of those rare books where having read it the world feels quite different somehow, you sense that something in shadow at the corner of your eye was momentarily lit, leaving you with the impression of

having glimpsed something important, but only the vaguest impression of the outlines remain. I think I shall be mulling over this book for a long time to come.

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## **Mark Avery says**

If you are expecting a book of rather sweet wildlife tales from your favourite TV personality then this book may not be for you. This is a brave and powerful book.

It's brave because it is a self-portrait of a rather weird kid – not good with people and not a bundle of laughs, it seems. A kid who was fascinated by wildlife. This slightly weird kid grew up to be a slightly weird, and troubled, adult, and the honesty of the book is what makes it very powerful.

This book dips into Chris Packham's childhood from the age of about five to about sixteen but at the end of each chapter there is a shorter account from his forties (the early 2000s) and these later accounts of conversations with... , well you read the book, are unnerving and dark.

There's lots of Chris's unhappy school times, unhappy home times, and happier times out with nature. There's the discovery of punk. There's the relationship with a Kestrel.

And, heavens, it is very well written. Blend 'A Kestrel for a Knave' with 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning' and then dim the lights to make it darker and that's where this book takes you. If you are old enough (I am) it will take you right back to the 1960s and 1970s.

I don't want to tell you too much about the book, as you should read it yourself. I'll just say again – brave and powerful. And very well written.

This review first appeared on my blog on 17 April 2016 <http://markavery.info/2016/04/17/sund...>

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