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OBITUARY

# Oliver Black

Philosopher, corporate lawyer and author known as ‘London’s leading hypochondriac’, who hosted lively salons at his Georgian home



*Oliver Black with Maud, who changed radio channels with her backside*

For the past 13 years an eclectic group of writers, academics, philosophers, diplomats, lawyers and others have gathered on a Sunday afternoon every other month at a gorgeous Georgian house in Spitalfields, east London, the home of Oliver Black and his wife, Jenny. After tea and cake there is a 20-minute talk followed by a discussion. Such is the popularity of this salon, with guests sitting on chairs, window ledges, floors and stairs, that on one recent occasion the drawing-room floor began to sag and numbers have had to be limited.

Black was a paradoxical man: serious yet humorous, misanthropic yet sociable. He collected friends with the same enthusiasm a young boy might collect stamps. He loved conversation and dinner parties. Acquaintances would be gathered to read through a play or to listen to a recording of an opera, with Black providing copies of the score.

Despite effortlessly blending his academic studies in philosophy with his “day job” as a lawyer, Black was sometimes introduced to people as “London’s leading hypochondriac”, although he insisted that “valetudinarian” was more accurate. “A valetudinarian can always find something on which to hook his anxiety: a tender gland in the neck (sign of mumps), a mild rash (shingles), a dry throat (Ebola), a lack of energy (almost anything),” observed the man who was on first-name terms with his GP, Vera.

This and other subjects were discussed with dry, deadpan humour in his book *Shrunk and Other Stories* (2016), its title coming from the way in which his bank account was diminished by visits to shrinks. In these autobiographical meanderings, with chapter headings such as DIE-DIY, Road Hogs of the World, and Spotty and Horny, Black describes the pitfalls of arranging DIY funerals for relatives, the delights of driving a black cab as a private car, and how he refused to live in East Anglia for fear that the fallout from a dirty bomb in London would be carried on the prevailing wind.

One of Black's university friends was Anthony Gottlieb, who became executive editor at *The Economist*, and it was through him that Black met Jenny Geddes, who was editorial manager of the paper's website. They married in 2004 and settled in east London, where Jenny, who survives him, is now an interior decorator. One friend described how the couple had a "grinning delight" in each other, revelling in the absurd and enjoying each other's sense of playfulness. Children adored him, although the affection was rarely reciprocated.

His nickname for Jenny was Fluffy, while she would call him "Baby Jesus", a name that came about during the "passionate stage" of their courtship, as he explained: "It was that moment when, seed and passion spent, you used to light a cigarette, but, as neither Fluffy nor I smoked, she wrapped the duvet around my head and shoulders like a shawl. 'Baby Jesus!' she cried."

On one occasion they contemplated acquiring a bird as a pet, which brought back memories for Black of travelling with a former girlfriend to a farmhouse near Bologna to visit a gay couple who kept hens and "a strutting, polychromatic cock". He was making clucking noises at it when one of their hosts walked up in a pair of tight white jeans. " 'I'm admiring your cock,' I heard myself say, and he gave me a sly smile," Black wrote, adding: "You can understand why Americans prefer to say 'rooster'."

Oliver Misha Black was born in London in 1957, the son of Misha Black, an eminent Azerbaijani-Jewish designer who helped to create the distinctive road signs on the streets of Westminster, and his second wife, Joan (née Fairbrother), a former Wren who worked for Unesco. From his father's first marriage he had a half-brother, Jake, who became an anthropologist and died in a skiing accident some years ago, and a half-sister, Julia, a textile designer, who survives him. An uncle was Max Black, a leading postwar figure in analytic philosophy.

Young Oliver was about 15 when he accompanied his parents to Buckingham Palace, where his father was being knighted by the Queen. He was wearing a maroon denim suit with flared trousers, with disastrous consequences. "As I got into the limo, the crotch split from end to end, and I spent the morning with my thighs pressed together."

He recalled his mother acquiring a car, although once she got out to ask directions and forgot to apply the handbrake. As the car rolled backwards she shouted, "The brake, the brake," to Black's father, "whose head wobbled in panic as he gawped at the dash board". Leaning forward from the back seat, Oliver pulled on the brake, later musing: "It is worrying to think that my father designed planes and locomotives."

He was educated at Bryanston School, Dorset, where he was third trombonist in the school band, and read philosophy at Queens' College, Cambridge, taking the parts of both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a production of *Hamlet* because the student playing Guildenstern was "useless". He continued to act, taking part in "playlets" by Gottlieb.

It was at Cambridge that he had his first encounter with psychotherapy, although he was mortified when a letter referring him to a new analyst was opened by his mother, who had mistaken the brown envelope for a bill. It read: "Dear Oliver, you are right to continue treatment, especially for your sex problem."

His first brush with the law came when driving a friend home after an evening's hard drinking. "As we hit 65 on Ladbroke Grove, a blue flashing light appeared in the mirror," he recalled. "Getting out of the car, I lost my balance and rolled on to the road. 'You don't care if you lose your licence or not, do you,

chummy?’ the policeman said to me with standard irony, his face hardening when I prattishly replied, ‘Not really, I’m at Cambridge most of the time and have little use for a car.’ ” He got a £200 fine and a ban.

For two years he worked at Bernard Quaritch, the antiquarian book store in Mayfair, developing a new department specialising in philosophy and the human mind, before spending 1981 as a fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. Back in Britain he taught philosophy at Cambridge.

By 1987 Black had a doctorate in philosophy from University College London, but jobs for philosophers were few and far apart. It was a problem he encapsulated in *Diary of a Misplaced Philosopher* (1989), a humorous, first-person account written using the pseudonym Joseph North that describes his fellow lodgers in a shabby boarding house and his family, friends and lovers, and his triumphs and humiliations.

Instead, Black sat his law exams and in 1989 joined Linklaters, the multinational law firm, where he eventually rose to be head of the UK procurement law practice and counsel in the competition and regulation group. The issues on which he advised included Network Rail’s acquisition of Railtrack, the restructuring of Anglian Water, and NatWest’s defence against takeover bids.

Black had no interest in religion, but he adored trains, especially steam-hauled services. He recalled that the best birthday present he received from Fluffy was “a ride in a driver’s cab” on the Underground, although he perhaps spoilt the effect by comparing it with the images as he watched a colonoscopy camera explore his bowels, describing the latter view as “like that from the cab of the Northern Line train, only the sides of the tunnel were pink and squashy, and there were no stations”.

In recent years Black’s feline companion was Maud, an eight-year-old tabby rescue cat. She regularly accompanied him to his beloved 18th-century cottage in Dorset, where he would write. Maud had a habit of sitting on the radio, using her backside to change channels. “We therefore covered the buttons with a large cookery book, and Maud now sits on the face of Delia,” he observed with possibly too much pleasure.

**Oliver Black, corporate lawyer, philosopher and author, was born on January 8, 1957. He took his own life on March 27, 2019, aged 62**