

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE
BASED ON THE LIFE OF THE SCOTTISH CAMPAIGNER



'AN ASTONISHING TALE ABOUT
AN AMAZING MAN'

JOJO MOYES

'SKILFULLY TOLD'

THE TIMES

'BRAVE, SHOCKING, FUNNY AND MOVING'

RACHEL JOYCE

'SUPERB ... ENGAGING AND FASCINATING'

DAILY MAIL

I SWEAR

My life with Tourette's

A photograph of John Davidson, the author, wearing a blue tracksuit with white stripes on the sleeves. He is shown in a sequence of five overlapping images, each with a different expression, from serious to smiling. The background is a solid blue color.

John
Davidson

Praise for *I Swear*

'An astonishing tale about an amazing man. If this book were given out to schools it would triple the empathy levels for Tourette's.'

JOJO MOYES, author of *Me Before You* and *Someone Else's Shoes*

'Funny and heartfelt . . . this skilfully told tale deserves praise for how it lets us non-sweary people see inside the ordinary, albeit anxious, mind of someone with Tourette's Syndrome.'

THE TIMES

'This superb book is an engaging and fascinating account of what it's like to live with Tourette's.'

DAILY MAIL

'Brave, shocking, funny and moving, *I SWEAR* opens our eyes to the reality of living with a complex condition.'

This is a really important book.'

RACHEL JOYCE, author of *The Homemade God*

Praise for the motion picture

'The most inspirational British movie of the year.'

ROLLING STONE UK

'An astounding feel-good film.'

THE TIMES

John Davidson MBE was born in 1971 in Galashiels. After leaving school without qualifications, he began work as a caretaker at Langlee Community Centre in Galashiels, where since 2002 he has also been a part-time youth worker.

Aged sixteen, John was the subject of a BBC documentary, *John's Not Mad*, about living with Tourette's syndrome, and he has since been an ambassador for the condition, giving talks and workshops in schools and to the police, and running residential camps for young people with Tourette's. Since 1989 he has featured in several follow-up documentaries; Kirk Jones's 2025 film *I Swear* is based on John's life.

In 2019 John joined the board of Tourette Scotland and was awarded an MBE in recognition of 'his efforts to increase understanding of the condition and helping families deal with it across the country'. He has also gained international recognition for his online support for families all over the world.

I Swear

My Life With Tourette's

JOHN DAVIDSON

as told to Abbie Ross



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In memory of Tommy Trotter
1 January 1955 – 3 June 2019

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John with his dog, Suki, and with Abbie Ross.
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'Hope is optimism with a broken heart.'

—Nick Cave, *Faith, Hope and Carnage* by Nick Cave and
Sean O'Hagan (Canongate Books, 2023)

*'In examining disease, we gain wisdom about anatomy and
physiology and biology. In examining the person with disease, we
gain wisdom about life.'*

—Dr Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His
Wife for a Hat* (Picador, 1985)

*'I remember one man with Tourette's, who wrote and said that he
had a "tourettised soul", it affects one and one affects it—there's
a liaison of a sort. A condition is sometimes a collusion, and
sometimes a compromise.'*

—Dr Oliver Sacks speaking at the *Music and Brain* presentation
at the 2008 Science Festival, New York City

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A Note About Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's syndrome affects around one in a hundred school-aged children.

It's more common than most people realize – and often goes undiagnosed.

(NHS England, 2023)

Coprolalia – involuntary swearing – affects only around one in ten people with Tourette's.

Though often portrayed in the media, it's not typical of the condition.

(Tourettes Action, UK)

Tics can be motor or vocal, simple or complex.

They range from blinking or throat-clearing to repeating phrases or performing patterned movements.

(NICE Guidelines on Tic Disorders, 2022)

Tourette's rarely appears on its own.

Up to 85 per cent of people with Tourette's also have conditions such as ADHD, OCD, anxiety or autism.

(European Clinical Guidelines for Tourette Syndrome, 2011)

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Tics can change over time.

They may increase or decrease in frequency, and often shift in form – especially under stress, excitement or fatigue.

(Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH))

People with Tourette's can suppress their tics – but it's exhausting.

Suppressing tics often causes discomfort and can lead to a rebound of more intense tics later.

(Tourettes Action, UK)

Tourette's isn't just a childhood condition.

Although it typically starts between the ages of five and ten, many continue to experience symptoms well into adulthood.

(NHS Inform Scotland)

Repetition is a common feature.

Some people repeat others' words (echolalia), their own words (palilalia), or imitate others' movements (echopraxia).

(DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association)

Tourette's is a spectrum condition.

Some people barely notice their tics, while others experience severe and painful symptoms. Most fall somewhere in between.

(NHS England, 2023)

There is no cure – but there is adaptation, self-awareness and resilience.

Many people with Tourette's report strong creativity, humour and emotional intelligence.

(Dr Tara Murphy GOSH)

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Further Information

NHS England, Tourette's Syndrome Overview, 2023
Tourettes Action (UK), www.tourettes-action.org.uk
NICE Guidelines on Tic Disorders, 2022
Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH), Specialist
Resources on Tourette Syndrome
DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association
European Clinical Guidelines for Tourette Syndrome,
2011
NHS Inform Scotland
National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
(NINDS), 2023

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I

The Letter

The letter, when it came, was in a thick, white envelope. It stood out from my usual post – the bills and the junk mail, and the boring stuff like that.

It looked important.

I'm in trouble, I thought. They've caught up with me now.

There'd be something I'd done, guaranteed.

There was always something.

The letter was addressed to me, Mr John Craig Davidson, and it said 'Esquire' after my name.

Esquire? Who gets a letter with 'Esquire' after their name? I thought. What does that mean?

On the top right of the envelope were the words 'Private and Confidential', and my heart started racing when I saw the Home Office stamp, and 'On Her Majesty's Service' typed in black ink.

This is serious now.

What is it? What the fuck have I done?

I was shaking. My hands were all over the place – that sticks with me, and how tricky it was to open the envelope, like I'd lost control of my fingers.

Suki, my black Labrador, was looking at me, thinking something was up, her tail wagging and thumping on

the wooden floor as I ripped it open and made a right mess of it.

At the top of the letter it said 'In strict confidence', and I couldn't help smiling at that, because if you know me, you know there's no way I can keep anything a secret: if I'm not meant to say it, you can bet I'll be straight out with it. Surprise birthday parties are a nightmare for that.

'The Prime Minister has asked me to inform you,' the letter began.

'What's this, Suki?' I asked. 'What does the Prime Minister want with me?'

I always ask her advice, and she's not helped me out yet, but I live in hope.

'... Her Majesty the Queen may be graciously pleased to approve that you be appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the New Year 2019 Honours List,' I read out loud.

I remember looking around my front room, checking: *Yes, there's my couch with the orange cushions, my mug on the coffee table, the photo of Suki on a canvas on the wall.* Outside: *Yes, the front garden's still there, still real.* A wee robin flitted down on to the bird feeder to prove it.

WHAT THE FUCK?

I just stared at those three capital letters. *MBE.*

Being awarded to me.

Suki was whining now, as I stood there with my mouth open, trying to make sense of it.

Things like this – they don't happen to people like me.

I can slip straight into full-on panic mode if I'm not careful, and so I breathed in deep a few times to calm myself.

Should I be accepting this? I was thinking, as a reel played

on a loop in my head: the edited highlights of all those shame-making things from my past that I try hard to keep hidden away.

Is this something I really deserve?

I've worked hard over the years, trying to spread awareness of Tourette's, I've worked really hard, I told myself.

Fuck yeah! I thought. *This is something I'm going to very proudly accept.*

'Guess what, Suki?' She cocked her head at me. 'Daddy's going to go to Edinburgh to accept a medal!' And she jumped up at me, all crazy excited, and started licking my face.

Even on a normal day, it's hard enough for me to keep my emotions in check, but now they were flying all over the place: excitement, then panic, and then that familiar feeling of dread that always overtakes me whenever I have to put myself out there.

It was like I was preparing myself for battle, or embarking on an epic quest. I knew I'd have to dodge so many obstacles first, fighting my way through God knows what chaos of my own making, and then, only then, could I bag the prize.

Dottie, I thought. I need to phone Dottie.

Dottie's like my adopted mum, or the godmother I never had. However you want to describe her, she's like family: someone who always has my back.

'Dottie, are you sitting down?' I asked, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

'Aye?' she said. 'Why?' I could tell from her voice she was thinking, *Here we go. What the hell has he done now?*

She just went quiet when I told her.

'Are you still there?' I said, because Dottie doesn't do quiet, not really.

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‘I’m here, aye.’

‘Well, what do you think of that?’

It took me a second to realize that the weird noise she was making, the high-pitched wail, was the sound of her crying.

‘Are you OK, Dottie? What’s up? Are you all right?’

‘Davidson, you daft lad.’ She was laughing now. ‘Of course I am. I’m beside myself!’

I could invite three people to come with me to the ceremony. For most people, that’s probably an easy enough decision – maybe they’d choose their mum, their dad, their partner – but for me, it’s never been that straightforward.

I haven’t ever had a long-term partner, but that’s not through lack of wanting, or trying, but who wants to stay with someone who calls out another woman’s name when they’re having sex? Or punches them in the breast? Who wants to live with someone who calls out to an obese person in the street with the cruellest taunt they can think of?

Some people think Tourette’s is funny, or an excuse to behave badly, but believe me, it’s the opposite of how I want to behave. I don’t doubt it’s impossible to be with someone so eaten up by it, too – all the ups and mainly downs that it creates. So no, sadly, there’s no partner.

My parents are still alive, but I don’t see too much of them these days. All the years of living with my Tourette’s made it hard for them to cope. I get it. I don’t know how I would have dealt with me as a son, if I’m honest, so of course it took its toll on our relationship.

When Tourette’s arrived, life took on a different shape for us all.

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I think back to the meals at the dinner table, me spitting food in my family's faces; the calls from the police; the problems at school; the endless doctors' appointments; the rage from other kids' parents. All that upset and stress and the strain of it. Can you imagine what that does to a family? In the end, my parents' marriage just couldn't survive it.

I still see them both, and I love them, but though things are much better now than they were, we're not close.

Sometimes when I can't get to sleep at night, I can make myself go mad with the guilt of it. I think of what Tourette's did to us all, how it ripped through and destroyed what might have been a happy, functional family. It's hard for me not to take the blame for it. I carry that weight with me always.

Dottie made me read the letter out loud to her twice, and only once I was done did it begin to really sink in.

'Will you and Chris come along with me, Dot?'

I heard the crackling of the cellophane wrapper on her cigarette packet.

'Go on – *will you?*' I said. I have ADHD as well as Tourette's, so maybe it's down to that, or maybe it's just me, but I was born an impatient bastard.

Now I heard the grinding flick of her lighter, and her sharp inhale of a cigarette.

'Dottie!' I said. '*Please!* Will you just answer me!'

'Davidson, keep your hair on, will you, lad? Of course we'll come.' She gave a shriek of laughter. 'We wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'Oh, thank God,' I said, patting Suki's head to calm myself. 'WHORE! Dottie! You're a fucking whore!'

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No need to apologize. Not with Dottie. It's such a relief for me to be able to tic shame-free.

Worrying about the third person to take with me was all I could think of for a while. Choosing Dottie and her husband, Chris, had been easy.

They'd taken me in, without question, when I was sixteen and everything had got too much for me. They've played such a massive part in my life, and still do to this day, standing by me and supporting me and giving me so much encouragement and love.

But who else?

There was so much guilt attached to it – all I could think was who I would upset by leaving them out.

Eventually I decided on Caroline, my younger sister, and asked if she could represent my whole family. She's the one I'm closest to out of my three siblings, and the most accepting of my condition.

She was blown away when I asked her, and she started crying too.

I'm going to have to get used to this, I thought, this happy crying thing. It's all a bit new to me.

Caroline was in charge of my outfit. Galashiels, where we live in the Scottish Borders, is a big enough town, but it's not big on fancy clothes shops, so we took a trip to Edinburgh, to a specialist place that did all the traditional Scottish clothing.

I was all set on a kilt but, as Caroline pointed out, a true Scot can't wear underwear with a kilt, and knowing I was naked under there would be just too much of a temptation

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for me. Even the thought of me exposing myself and shouting out 'My crown jewels are bigger than yours!' made me sweat with shame, so I was relieved to settle on a Bonnie Prince Charlie jacket, with a waistcoat and a bow tie, and some lovely tartan trews. They came halfway up my stomach, and I felt a wee bit like Simon Cowell in them, but I didn't care – they seemed like the safest option.

When the day came, Dottie and Chris came with Caroline to pick me up in their blue Volvo estate.

Seeing them all dressed up in their fancy clothes – Caroline and Dottie in their lovely summer frocks, and Chris in his tartan – made my eyes fill up, and I swiped my tears away with the back of my sleeve, embarrassed. I don't cry very much these days. I used to, non-stop, in the early days, but now I think I'm so busy trying to stop things coming out, it's not that easy for me to let go.

When I got in the back seat, the first thing I did was to get the seatbelt on as fast as I could, wrapping my arm in it, trapping it there, just in case I got that compulsion to punch my sister in the face. I gave up sitting in the front seat years ago after grabbing the steering wheel and guiding the car off the motorway at seventy miles an hour.

I remember looking at Caroline's feather headpiece blowing in the wind as we drove off with the windows down, and thinking, *I'm going to bash it*, so I kept the seatbelt tightly round my twitching arm till it went numb and stopped being a bother.

I was fretting in the car for the whole journey to Holyrood Palace, and my ticcing was near constant for a while.

'Wanker!'

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‘Dottie, show us your titties!’

‘Let’s have sex!’

‘God, John, you aren’t half hyper, aren’t you?’ my sister said. ‘It’ll be a breeze,’ she continued. ‘If you panic, just tell yourself, “I’ve been through so much worse.”’

She was right. Compared to some of the things I’ve had to face, collecting an MBE was like the ultimate quality problem.

The drive to Edinburgh from Galashiels takes you through some grand countryside. We passed mountains and lochs and forests of Scots pines, following the Gala Water for a while, past my favourite fishing spots, where I’ve lost myself for hours fishing for rainbow trout.

It was blue skies all the way, but the views and the sun warming me through the glass didn’t soothe me like they usually would.

Worrying and Tourette’s is a dangerous combination. The more you worry about something setting off your tics, the more likely it is that you *should* be worried. It’s never a case of ‘will I embarrass myself?’ It’s a case of when, and how badly. When I’m out and about, I’m never more than a split second away from saying something that will get me arrested or punched in the face.

What if the police don’t know who I am? I kept thinking. *What if I get chucked out?* Picturing all the disasters I could make happen, the fear of it pushed away any excitement or pride I should have been feeling.

There was a bottle of fizz in the back with the picnic Dottie had packed for the journey home.

‘How about we open up that champagne?’ I said.

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Dottie turned round to smile at me. 'You don't need it. You'll be fine – don't you worry.'

'But I cannae do it.'

'Bullshit, Davidson!' That got me sitting up straight in my seat. 'You'll be amazing,' she said. '*You really deserve this.*'

I remember just staring at the floor of the car.

Edinburgh was so busy that day. I don't do too well with cities as it is: the noise and the crowds and the busyness, all of it sets me on edge.

The traffic was bad. I remember the car slowing to a crawl as we got closer to Arthur's Seat, where the palace is, just below it. I started to get really ticcy as we joined the queue of cars heading to the entrance. There were barriers everywhere, and just the sight of them made my chest tighten; I felt like I was going to burst right out of my waistcoat.

This is it, I thought as we drove through the massive, fancy gates into the grounds. *It's actually going to happen.*

Through the gates, the sandstone walls of the turreted palace threw long, dark shadows across the immaculate lawns. I couldn't believe just how many people there were, all done up in their best clothes, straightening up as they got out of their cars, smoothing themselves down with nervous smiles. Everywhere I looked there were uniformed officials, so smart and serious and professional it was impossible not to feel intimidated.

I hadn't really thought through the sheer scale of the operation.

Armed police were waiting to greet us, and I felt my stomach sinking inside my high-waisted trews at the sight of them.

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My tics have got me into so much trouble over the years, so policemen just remind me of what I'm capable of. I've spat at them, punched and sworn at and insulted them, and who was to say I wouldn't do the same today? God forbid I catch sight of a Black police officer . . .

I chewed my lip as I sat there in the back of the car. *Come on now*, I told myself, *keep it together, you can do this* – sitting on my hands, digging my fingers deep into the car seat to stop me from punching the window.

A policeman bent down to Dottie's open window to ask us for our ID, as a couple of other police officers started checking the underside of the car with metal detectors and mirrors, and I felt the panic rising then, and a tic starting to bubble up inside me.

I knew what they were looking for. We all knew what they were looking for. You don't say it, though, do you? You don't alarm people by reminding them of the facts of the matter.

I could see Dottie knew what I was battling with from the way she was staring at me in the mirror, with that steady, 'easy now' look that she gives me.

I tried so hard to keep the tic back – biting my lip, holding my breath – but sometimes there's no stopping it, and it just blew up and I shouted out:

'Bomb! I've got a fucking bomb!'

People stopped what they were doing, and heads turned towards me.

Imagine the shame of saying the very worst thing you can think of.

It makes you want to melt away and disappear into nothing, and sometimes, like in that moment, I can be

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silenced and frozen by it. It feels like my plug has been pulled out, and I stop functioning.

My expectations when it comes to people's reactions are usually pretty accurate. If they're a stranger, I'm used to their shock and anger; sometimes I get that look of complete revulsion. I think I've had to develop a sixth sense over the years to survive, and I'm proud of that – the way I can read people and be 99 per cent spot on – but I got it wrong when it came to this. The policeman just gave a wry smile.

'Oh, hi there, Mr Davidson,' he said. 'How are you doing?'

There was a collective letting out of breath in the car, and Dottie grinned as she saw the look of relief on my face, and my shoulders drop back down to where they were meant to be.

Maybe he'd seen me on TV, or he'd been given the nod. Either way, who cares – *he wasn't going to arrest me.*

'Right then, Davidson,' Dottie said as we got out of the car. 'Get in there and make us all proud.'

'I'm fucking HERE!' I shouted out, slamming the door of the car. The proud bit might have to wait.

Sometimes it feels like my Tourette's has a character all of its own. Right now, it was like it was testing everyone, checking to see if they knew that I had it.

'I want to go home, Dottie, please let's get out of here,' I said from the side of my mouth.

'John!' she said. 'Stop fretting – look! Everyone knows.'

Another tic came. 'Fuck that!' I yelled out, and then I could see she was right.

People turned to look, but only for a second, and then turned away and carried on like nothing had happened.

That helped to calm me, and I stopped ticcing for a while

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as we walked towards the huge double doors, where two officials were standing waiting to welcome us.

‘Hello. We’re delighted you’re here, Mr Davidson,’ said one, shaking my hand.

‘Just take it easy,’ said the other. ‘Keep calm. You’re OK to tic. If you do, I promise you, nobody’s going to give you a hard time.’

I wanted to say, *Thank you*. I’d have liked to have said, *You have no idea what that means to me*. But there was an armed policeman, holding his gun, standing right behind them, and I didn’t want to risk it, so I just kept my mouth closed tight and gave them what I hoped was a grateful-looking nod as I put a handkerchief over my mouth to help me to control my breathing.

They led us through a massive hallway and guided us along tapestry-lined corridors, to a big, open, lawned courtyard surrounded by pillars. It was filled with the hum of conversation as guests chatted away to each other while they waited in the sunshine.

Maybe it was the pillars, or the archways, but for whatever reason, the acoustics in that space were terrible. I could hear everyone’s conversations way too clearly, and I realized then, with a sick-making feeling, that there was also an echo.

The combination of strangers with an echo thrown into the mix felt nightmarish to me.

The embarrassment potential was just too high for me to be able to get any control of my tics.

I remember feeling the pressure building in my stomach and sweat breaking out on my forehead, and having to lean against a pillar to steady myself.

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'You're all right, John, you're doing grand.' Dottie put her hand on my arm.

I'm not great with touch, but she knows that sometimes, like right then, I need it.

Trying to suppress a tic is exhausting, and, for the most part, impossible, but still, I gave it a go and started walking around to attempt to distract it.

I could feel the words travelling up my chest. *You can't control me*, I told myself, but my Tourette's ignored me, and now the words were in my throat. *You're not my master*, I thought, but now they were in my mouth, and, timed perfectly, just as there was a pause in conversation, they burst free and I shouted out:

'I'm a paedo!'

Usually, I apologize when I tic like that, but 'I'm a paedo!' echoed straight back at me, and my tic jumped in to respond:

'Aye!' I shouted. 'I'm a paedo, too!'

Echolalia is an unwelcome side effect of living with my condition.

'I'm not!' I yelled in reply, as it echoed back to me again.

'I fucking am!' my Tourette's shouted back, as the guests busied themselves in forced conversation to spare me, my cheeks itching as they turned bright red.

Thankfully, I was saved by a chap banging a stick on the ground to get our attention.

'Can all the people who have been nominated for an award follow me, please?' he called out.

Aye, aye, I thought, *get me out of here*, as Dottie and I followed him along another huge corridor with floor-to-ceiling windows with shutters, and tapestry-covered walls.

At the end was a room lined with velvet chairs and

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a white-painted carved wooden ceiling. Huge oil paintings dominated the walls and silver chandeliers hung overhead. I couldn't take my eyes off the patterned curtains – they were so big and heavy – and I wondered about the effort it must take to draw them every day. They could do your back in.

Wherever I looked, there were big, fragile-looking ornaments on plinths, and I went out of my way to avoid them, because you can guarantee my tics will become physical if I'm in punching distance of breakable, priceless antiques.

I was delighted to see that Doddie Weir was there, too – the ex-Scottish rugby union player, who had MND (and has sadly since passed away).

I'd always liked Doddie. He came from near Galashiels, and he'd always stop and say hello to me if he saw me in town. He was such a kind, gentle man, who'd never take the piss out of someone with a disability.

He caught sight of Dottie and me now, across the crowded room, and waved us over.

'Well, how are you doing, Mr Davidson?' he said, putting me at ease straight away, as I introduced him to Dottie, and we blethered on together for ages. He was excited about getting his OBE, he said, too made up about it even to feel nervous about getting up there in front of all those people.

'Nobody's bothering,' he said when I told him how stressed I was feeling, 'so you can call them whatever you want. Anyway, half of them speak with a teaspoon in their mouth so they'll probably no understand you.'

It felt good to be finally able to laugh.

'Come on, let's get ourselves a drink,' he said, nodding to the wine glasses on the table. 'A glass of wine or a wee dram of whisky would be nice, wouldn't it? To help settle the nerves.'

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We weren't laughing so hard when we realized that the glasses were only for water. We'd pass on that, we decided – Adam's ale wasn't really going to hit the spot.

The ceremony was due to start, and we were divided into groups of ten and led down another long corridor lined with photographs of past kings and queens. I wanted to slow down and have a good look at them, but there was no time. There was a sense of urgency now, and we had to keep up the pace.

We passed bedrooms with the doors open, and I tried to keep the feeling of overwhelm at bay by imagining the Queen in her curlers and dressing gown and fluffy slippers, chatting to her corgis as she got ready for bed.

When we reached the entrance to the grand hall, an official raised his voice over the orchestra to instruct us not to move until we heard our complete name and the reason for our award being called out by the announcer, and I kept concentrating on my breath, keeping it deep and regular to calm myself.

The music from the orchestra vibrated through my chest as I walked in with Dottie. Everyone else was going it alone, but I got to have her with me as my special companion, and I was so thankful for it.

'Go on, Davidson, you can do this,' she whispered as she was shown to her seat.

I tried my best not to look at the sea of faces as I stood there waiting with my fellow recipients, so I kept my eyes trained on Dottie – and there, just a few feet away from her, stood the Queen.

I knew that she'd be presenting the awards, but I think a part of me just hadn't believed it, because it was still such a shock to see her. **Copyrighted Material**

She looked so small – such a tiny figure in this giant, great big room – but she stood out, all the same, in her floral summery frock covered in white and yellow and lime-green flowers.

She looks kind, I told myself as I felt the pressure building. *She looks like my granny*, I thought, taking deep breaths. *Nothing scary about her at all*. But still the pressure kept on building, like a shaken-up bottle of Coke, fizzing away inside me.

I summoned all my powers to try to keep it in, I really did, but it was so, so hard, and then – *whoosh*!

Out it came.

It just exploded out of me, and I shouted out, at the top of my voice:

‘FUCK THE QUEEN!’

Premier League

I remember when I was a little lad, maybe seven years old, standing with my mum and brother and sisters, watching my dad play football for the local Sunday league team.

I was wearing shorts, wishing I was in trousers, shivering in the cold and the biting wind.

But so what? My knees could freeze to blocks of ice for all I cared, because my dad was playing football, *in front of the whole of Gala* – that’s what it felt like – and, right now, he’d been elevated from my usual, everyday dad into a world-famous celebrity.

That’s my dad! I kept thinking, looking around to see if everyone knew, my cheeks burning with pride.

He had the ball now and he was dribbling it across the pitch, and people were calling out his name.

‘Come on, Dad!’ I shouted, louder than anyone, just so they’d know that man with the sideburns and the silky skills was mine.

In real life, back at home, in our semi-detached council house, my dad was a quiet, reserved kind of man. A joiner by trade, I think he was happiest when he was working, more suited to a solitary life than spending too much time with his family. He was shy, really, compared to my mates’ dads at