

Client: Ebury Press
Source: The Daily Telegraph. (Magazine)
Date: 18 July 2009
Page: 7,9
Circulation: 827377
Size: 681cm2
AVE: 21887.34

THE FRONT

The world of Annabel Karmel, children's cookery writer

Annabel Karmel, 50, has written 14 recipe books for babies and young children, including her *Complete Baby and Toddler Meal Planner* (Ebury, £14.99), which has sold more than two million copies worldwide. It was written as a tribute to her first daughter, Natasha, who died of a rare virus at 13 weeks old. She lives in west London with her three children, Nicholas, 20, Lara, 19, and Scarlett, 17, and two dogs.

Morning routine I don't get up until about 7.30am. I usually go to the local bread shop; I love fresh bread in the morning, with some fruit. Then I'll sit down and go through my emails. If I'm working with people in Australia or America I get a lot of emails through the night.



Childhood ambition I was really influenced by my mother, whose sister played the harp. We went to Harrods one day and there was a harp (pictured) as part of the display. My mum asked what they were going to do with it afterwards and they

sold it to us. So I started to learn to play – I didn't like it, actually, it hurt my hands, so Mum bribed me with sweets. I started winning competitions, and then got to love music. I ended up playing the harp professionally for years.

Losing a child Natasha was everything I'd ever wanted. It had taken me two years to get pregnant. One day I walked into her room and she didn't look right. I called a doctor and he gave me a lecture about how mothers fussed and that children were more robust than we thought. But the next morning I took her to another doctor, who sent her straight to hospital. She was there for five days, which is when they told us that the thinking part of her brain had gone. We had to switch the machine off. I went home that night and it was so bleak. Her clothes were there, her cot was there, but I was no longer a mother.

Turning point Natasha's dying changed my life. I wanted to have something good come out of her death. When Nicholas was born I was so grateful to have a child, but he was such a bad eater. I wanted him to have the reserves to fight if something happened to him. So I made up recipes for him, kept on trying new things, like soups and purées. I was running a playgroup and the mums there loved the recipes and said I should write a book. That was the beginning of the *Complete Baby and Toddler*

Children like

sushi and curries. They are more sophisticated than we think

Meal Planner. It was my legacy to Natasha, therapy to help me get over her death.

Fussy eaters Children are wary of things that are different. I meet so many mums who are frustrated because their children won't try anything, so I have to think of ways to get them to take the first mouthful. One way is not to give them anything else. Eventually, when they're hungry they will be more likely to try something new, to break the pattern. There are other ways, like reward charts and star charts, but to be honest, hunger is the best.

Surprising choices We I got to love music and played the harp professionally for years

were on holiday in France and there was a bowl of olives on the table; my daughter, at 18 months, ate the whole bowl. Children like sushi and curries. They are more sophisticated than we think.

Latest purchase I was in north Wales, at a Haven holiday park, where I teach cookery classes. I saw these wooden sheep everywhere (pictured) and loved them. I rang up the craftsman who made them and asked him to



make some for me. He drove all the way to London and delivered them. You can sit on them, too.

Another garden creature My painted cow, Cowmercial (pictured), came from a ▶



charity auction. It gets repainted occasionally.

Lucky dress Whenever I go to an awards ceremony, I wear this pink satin Ralph Lauren dress (pictured). I'm very into pink. I'm quite small and it's sometimes hard to find clothes that fit, but as soon as I put this on it was perfect.

Minnie Mouse This painting

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(pictured) is by James Holdsworth. It's a fun picture but there's something menacing in the background. It makes me smile.

Sculpture I arrived in Singapore on a book tour and had forgotten my wash stuff, so had to go to a shopping centre. There was a gallery there with amazing things in the window. I went to buy a 50p packet of cotton wool and came out with these huge sculptures (pictured). I love their humour – they're bowing as if they're subservient but they're not, as they have smirks on their faces.

Memorable moment

Nicholas was born on the stairs. I rang my doctor when I was having contractions, and he said stay at home, it's going to be a long time. Then I went upstairs and my waters broke

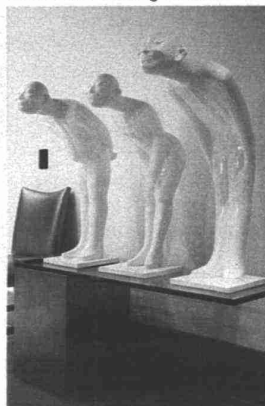


and the head came out. Simon [her then-husband] delivered the baby right there.

Pets I'm obsessed with my dogs. My children were always nagging me about having a dog, but you know what children are like – they get a pet and then they don't look after it. And I was right – they never take them for a walk.

First I got Oscar, a golden retriever, he's 17 months. Then I fell in love with samoyeds. Everyone said they weren't affectionate, but my one is. His name is Hamilton and he's five months old. I cuddle the dogs when I get home.

Beside reading I love cookery books and biographies. I also have a book about the making of *Gone*



with the Wind – I called my daughter Scarlett after Scarlett O'Hara.

Interview by Sarah Stephens. Photographs by Wang Wei

Next week: Gus Christie



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