

LIFE

International Left-Handers Day: celebrating lefties' battle



Left Handers Day will be celebrated on August 13.

THERESA MILLER
The Australian July 31, 2017

As a young reporter I was sent to the Supreme Court to follow a murder case. I sat next to four other court reporters and we suddenly realised we were all writing with our left hands. "That's because we're more creative," a radio reporter whispered.

"That's because we're more intelligent," an old hack from The Advertiser said. We beamed. The judge hammered his gavel — with his right hand. "Silence in the court!" We jumped. Righties still ruled after all.

We left-handers make up about 10 per cent of the population, while the ambidextrous, those who use both hands and legs, account for 30 per cent. Scientists claim animals such as chimps and apes that use tools also have a hand preference and the split is 50-50.

Strangely, there's a long-running myth that all polar bears are left-handed.

There are theories that lefties are more creative, that we don't live as long and that we're likelier to have criminal tendencies — none of which has been scientifically proven. No one really knows why we exist at all.

What we do know is that the spread of left-handedness is consistent across all countries and races and it tends to run in families

There are also slightly more male left-handers, although mostly women answered my questionnaire on social media.

Left-handers make up about 10 per cent of the population.

Growing up left-handed can be alienating, according to one respondent, Bernadette Schwerdt. "No one wanted to sit next to me in class because I always bumped the right-handers when we were writing," she says. "The teacher scolded my smudgy letters and three-ringed folders were a nightmare because I couldn't get my hand over the bulky metal rings. I hated standing out."

Left-handed Annie Buchner has recurring nightmares about sitting a three-hour exam and just as the bell rings she realises she has smudged her paper and it's illegible. Buchner can't bear to have her left hand held and must always sleep on the left side of the bed.

Al, aged 81, says, "My teacher tied my left hand behind my back. If I used my left hand to write, she would hit it with a ruler until it was swollen and numb." Al's teachers believed Satan was left-handed and only the virtuous sat at the right hand of God.

It's true we lefties have problems using scissors; the blade is not angled in our favour and the holes in the grip are designed for the right hand. We get frustrated and appear clumsy with soup ladles; can openers; signing cheques or paperwork at the bank with a pen tethered to the right; chairs in lecture theatres with fold-down desks; winding a watch; or using the mouse on the computer's right.

Most of us are forced to learn some skills with our other hand. Most of us use a knife and fork the same way as everyone else.

Lucinda Duckett from Britain says: "I'm annoyed at manufacturers for not making left-handed versions of things, especially cameras. I want the shutter button on the other side." Duckett emails me a list of products that taunt her. "Wallets: I open them the wrong way. Matches: I have to turn the box upside down to use the striker strip. Irons: the cord pokes out the wrong way. Zippers: when I get to the bottom I have to change hands to release the opening bit. The controls on my printer are on the right; ditto for my cooktop. Bread knives because the serrated edge is on the wrong side; I'm always cutting bread wonky. And buttons!"

Duckett's brother says men's undies are designed for right-handed access. "You'll never see a left-handed man in Y-fronts — they're impossible — only boxers," he says.

The word for left in Latin is sinistra — which is the root of sinister. Whereas the word for right is dexter — think dexterous and dexterity. The Anglo-Saxon origin for left is lyft, which means weak. The French also applaud “adroitness” — from the word droit, meaning right — and they turn up their Gallic noses at anyone gauche. In German a lawyer is Rechtsanwalt, which is, literally, “right counselling”.

We lefties can usually spot a fellow southpaw a mile away. There’s an immediate connection. It’s like meeting someone with the same birthday. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Barack Obama, Robert De Niro, Nicole Kidman, Prince William and the Queen are all in my camp.

When I realised Paul McCartney was left-handed, I felt as if I shared in his triumph. As a kid, I attempted to learn the violin. My left hand longed to sweep the bow across the strings but was restricted to fingering. Similarly with the guitar, the choice was to buy a left-handed one or learn to play like a rightie. Left-handed Jimi Hendrix played his guitar upside down. He usually destroyed it after his performance ... perhaps in frustration.

Schwerdt says she’s relieved her red-headed son has not inherited her left-handedness. “He’s already in a minority, he doesn’t need another one,” she says. However, he does kick with his left foot, which gives him an unexpected advantage in soccer matches. “He kicks literally out of left field,” she says. “He takes the righties by surprise.”

Consequently, there is a disproportionate number of professional left-handed athletes in sports such as tennis, cricket, boxing, hockey and baseball. Some of the world’s greatest tennis players are left-handed: Martina Navratilova, Rod Laver, John McEnroe and Rafael Nadal.

My grandmother tried to teach me to knit when I was seven. I struggled to mirror her actions but my wool turned into a knotty, mess. “You’re as bad as your cacky-handed aunt,” Granny said. I escaped outside to teach the dog to shake hands ... with his left paw.

Cacky-handed comes from cack or excrement, stemming from the ancient practice of eating with your right hand and wiping your backside with your left. It is still rude in parts of Asia and Africa to give or receive something with your left hand. The old Aussie slang term mollydooker sounds rather sweet at first. But dooks or dukes mean forks and molly comes from mollycoddling someone who is weak.

Today there’s a successful winery in South Australia called Mollydooker, after its two lefthanded owners.

According to left-handed British couple Keith and Lauren Milsom, left is the new black. They run the online store Anything Left-handed, selling left-handed

scissors, potato-peelers, can openers, rulers, power tools and cameras. They also offer cheeky posters: "I might be left handed but I'm always right".

The Milsoms have a left-handed son and a right-handed daughter — a little like the 1960s sitcom *The Munsters* — about a family of monsters and one human.

All those I interviewed liked being left-handed despite the inconveniences. My aunt thinks it makes her special and is chuffed three of her nine grandchildren are left-handed. I must admit I am disappointed that neither of my daughters takes after me.

Duckett is convinced lefties have better spatial awareness because we're forced to see the world from both sides. "I'm brilliant at reverse parking and moving furniture," she says. "I can just look at a piece of furniture and know if it will fit through that door if we just twist it a bit that way."

I can't claim any special powers although I once won an arm-wrestling competition against the school bully. I challenged him to use his left hand. He had no idea it was my strongest. He left me alone after that. As we celebrate Left-Handers Day on August 13, I challenge all righties to do everything with their left hands for 24 hours — unless you're a brain surgeon or pilot, of course.