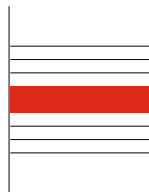




W₅ O₂ R₂ K₄ / L₃ I₂ F₃ E₂



Molly Oldfield, 34, is a QI 'elf'. She lives in west London with her boyfriend, Oliver, a lawyer



One of my all-time favourite facts is about Amazonian tribe the Maypure. After they died in the 18th century, the explorer Alexander Von Humboldt acquired a parrot that used to belong to them. The bird could speak the Maypure dialect, which meant it was the only speaker of the language in the world, which is incredible. I'm a font of useless information; my boyfriend's always saying, 'You never forget anything.' It's handy for working on the BBC2 panel game *QI* [*Quite Interesting*]. Presenter Stephen Fry nicknamed us 'elves'. It's our job to research obscure facts and turn them into questions.

I arrive at the office for 10am. We sit at desks surrounded by encyclopedias and someone will randomly say something like, "Did you know that carrots were originally purple?", which will spark conversation and generate ideas.

Every Monday we'll have a meeting about what we've researched, involving anything from Velcro to extinct animals, then start picking out themes for the show. Sometimes we'll use the internet for fact-finding. Websites such as *mentalfloss.com* and *boingboing.net* are useful. Or I might type 'armadillo and David Attenborough' into YouTube, then extract some facts. For example, when crossing rivers, an armadillo gulps enough air to inflate its lungs to help it float, or it holds its breath for up to six minutes and walks along the bottom.

We also interview experts. My favourite is Irving Finkel at the British Museum. He's the curator of the cuneiform tablets – the oldest written script in the world.



MOLLY OLDFIELD RESEARCHER AND WRITER, *QI*

Afternoons can be spent visiting museums to do research. I love the Natural History Museum and The Roald Dahl Museum.

Nearly all our *QI* work is in the UK, although I have been on a trip to Paris, where I went on a tour of the sewers. In the resulting show we asked, 'What's the quickest way to get to the Eiffel Tower from the Louvre without seeing a Frenchman?' The answer: through the city's sewage network.

I've also driven a motorbike from Kazakhstan to London and visited the Tibetan Plateau – an area once under the ocean that now sits 5,000m above sea level.

Some elves are specialists but I'm a generalist. I've always loved books. As a girl I was obsessed with Enid Blyton. I studied history at Oxford, where I met John Lloyd, the creator of *QI*, through a friend. He asked me to join the show once I graduated.

One of the most interesting things I've learnt recently was about whale flu. The woman who studies it told me she needs to catch what comes out of a whale's blowhole when it sneezes. She uses a model helicopter that she flies with a remote control through the 9m-high sneeze, catching it in Petri dishes. Then she'll study the sample under a microscope for viruses.

"I'M A FONT OF USELESS INFORMATION. IT'S HANDY FOR WORKING ON THE SHOW"

My favourite script I've written was when Daniel Radcliffe was on the show. We asked, 'What's the oldest trick in the book? He knew the answer – when the Egyptian magician Dedi pulled the head off a goose and then resurrected the bird. We got someone from The Magic Circle to perform it.

As well as working on BBC Radio 4 show *The Museum Of Curiosity*, I've written a book called *The Secret Museum*, about what museums *don't* have on show – most only display about 4% of what they own. I saw Archie the giant squid and a pig with two heads at the Natural History Museum and went behind the scenes at the Smithsonian in New York, which has a space section. Astronaut Harrison Schmitt's suit is stored there and still has grey space dust all over it.

I'll finish work at 7.30pm, then Oliver and I like eating out at Shed in Notting Hill. I'll head home and read *The Miniaturist* by Jessie Burton before going to sleep at about 11.30pm."

***The Secret Museum* by Molly Oldfield (Collins, £16.75) is out now**

HOW TO PLAY

Use the codes on the right to find the six clue words that form a clue to Molly's fantasy career.

GUESS HER PLAN B

To find Molly's Plan B career, find the clue words using the codes below. For example, 20/2, means you'll find it on line 20, word 2 (starting from the line that reads "Molly Oldfield, 34, is a QI 'elf'"). CODE: 19/5, 35/5, 71/3, 75/1, 90/5, 109/3 Give up? See the answer on page 61.

20

40

WORDS: HELEN BOWNASS PHOTOGRAPHY: GEMMA DAY

80

100