

A funny man of one word

Here's one of those "where were you when you heard...?" questions, usually associated with the death of Princess Di or John Kennedy, or now maybe the wake-up call Meghan has given The Firm (put that one on your list for the future).

My one is when did you first become aware of Billy Connolly? And – this depends on how long ago it was – did you understand a word he was saying?

He was very broad when I came across him back in the 70s. I was with my Scots father-in-law and his mates and they were peeing themselves listening to this Scotsman telling jokes in a language I'd never heard.

I should have understood some of it. I'd been married to a Scotswoman for a year or two and I knew your armpits are "oxters" and when you're feeling crook you're "peely wally", sort of thing.

They're Scots words, in case you're wondering like this computer I'm using, which helpfully corrected to "otters" and "peels Wally". Who the hell is Wally?

Anyway, the really odd thing was I don't recall hearing the f-word in this obscure monologue that was causing my rellies so much mirth. Either he was more restrained in those days or his broadness hid what I would have thought was the most distinctive word in the English language. But then, it wasn't English he was speaking.

A few years later I knew more about who he was and we went to his first show in Auckland and by then he'd modified things enough for most of us to understand, and get, the jokes. And the fs were fairly flying (there's a joke about alliteration there somewhere).

Thing is, I've just finished reading Billy's memoirs, Tall Tales and Wee Stories, and I thought I should recommend them to you, since you'll remember his stay in Taranaki back in the summer of 2002 to shoot The Last Samurai, when he was happy to stroll our streets while his co-star, Tom Cruise, mostly hid.

You'll recall Billy stumbled accidentally into a do at Little Theatre and entertained everyone. Lin and I had a coffee with him at the movies after she dared me to go over and say hello. Not a single f was exchanged, I might add.

His book is radioactive with cursing, but oddly it's not the swearing that distracts you. Billy has obviously dictated it into a voice recorder and some poor bugger has had the job of writing down his numerous exclamations and singing shorthand, each as polysyllabic as a German place-name.

There's also a frequent need to laugh uproariously. I drove Lin to despair every night for a week while she was trying to read something else.

If a passage was brief enough to read out loud, I obliged and Lin joined in the laugh fest, but a lot of his tales are long and complicated. I'll tell you a few of the short ones, but basically you'll have to read them for yourself.

Billy on cuddling (abbreviated): I'm not against cuddling, but it doesn't belong in bed.

Your knees are tucked in, and her bum is in there at your crotch. And one of your arms is fine, but the other one is a real problem. You can't get your head in the right position because her hair goes up your mouth and up your nose.

And then she says, 'See? It's nice, isn't it!' You're thinking, 'I wonder what's on TV?' It always ends in tears, with the woman suddenly jumping away, saying, 'Oh for goodness sake!'

On mobile phones: Aren't these the bane of the world? People with no arse in their trousers and a phone. If you walk behind them you can hear them: 'Guess where I am now!' He goes for a walk and phones home to tell everybody where he is!

The cost of computers: Bill Gates lives in a fortress. He's a squillion-billion-dillionaire! So why doesn't he make the f...ing things cheaper? 'Oh, he does good work.' I should f...ing hope so – he's got everybody's money!

Stupid questions: Your mother starts it all with the first stupid question of your life: 'Where did you lose it?' 'Er, I don't know. It's lost – that means I don't know where it is!' 'But where?' 'I don't f...in' know!'

Swearing: People say it's a limited vocabulary that makes you swear. Well, I don't think so. Because I know at least 127 words. And I still prefer 'F...!'