

After Miranda Harris's death, her daughter Jo Swinney discovered her unfinished book on food and hospitality. Interview by **Sarah Meyrick**

IT IS impossible to talk about Jo Swinney's new book, *A Place at The Table*, without starting with the family tragedy that lies behind it.

The book, subtitled *Faith, hope and hospitality*, is a joint project with her late mother, Miranda Harris, who died in a terrible car accident in October 2019, aged 66.

Mrs Harris and her husband, Peter, who founded the Christian conservation charity A Rocha International, were in South Africa with the executive director of A Rocha, Chris Naylor, and his wife, Susanna, when their car plummeted 75 feet off a bridge into the river below.

The Naylor and Mrs Harris were killed almost instantly; Mr Harris and the driver were seriously injured. Mrs Swinney and her three siblings flew out to South Africa to find their father "critical but stable" with two punctured lungs, fractured ribs, a broken sternum and right shoulder, and a bruised heart. That he survived at all — and has made a good recovery — was something of a miracle.

Mrs Harris, who originally trained as a teacher, had always written. "She wrote a huge amount, mostly letters. She was one of the world's great letter-writers — she was always looking for a postbox," Mrs Swinney says. "And in the latter years, they did a lot of travelling, setting up different A Rocha organisations around the world, and things like that. People said to her a lot, because of these letters, that she had a gift for writing, and she really did."

Mrs Harris was known, too, for her generous hospitality. "When my parents founded A Rocha — which, in 1983, was a very strange idea — the thing that Mum really gave to the endeavour was her gift with people, and specifically hospitality."

"She just had a way of making people feel immediately at home with her — she had a warmth about her and a vivaciousness. That was really attractive, and so A Rocha ended up being an organisation with a real heart for community, and one that takes food seriously and takes people seriously. All of our work in nature conservation is very much done in that context."

The idea of writing a book about hospitality had long been there. "She did talk a lot about it, and she'd say, 'Oh, I'm having a morning on the book,' things like this, or 'I've made progress with the book.' But those comments happened over so many years that I stopped holding my

# A recipe left to me by my mother



Jo Swinney

breath," Mrs Swinney says. "I didn't think she would do it."

Mrs Swinney, who is director of communications for A Rocha International, already had six books to her name. "When Dad was in intensive care after the accident, he said to me, 'You've got to get her words published.'"

MONTHS of trauma and confusion followed, and then the pandemic. It wasn't until February 2021 that Mrs Swinney had any idea how to begin. She and her father began clearing out her mother's study in preparation for a house move, and to her amazement she came across a blue ring-binder labelled "Book". It was full of material. "It was quite overwhelming. I felt awful that I doubted her."

It was all handwritten, made up of notes and ideas; then there were the photocopies of letters that her mother had written to supporters, the family Christmas newsletters, and personal journals.

Earlier conversations about the project helped Mrs Swinney to whittle down the material to her mother's writing about food, relationships, and community life. "There are some darker, more anguished reflections. Like everyone, she just had her ups and downs. Some of those are in the book, and some of them felt like they would be wrong. If she was here, she would never have signed off on them."

Her father went through the journals, to protect her mother's privacy, and the family had the right of veto on the text. Mrs Swinney is not sure whether or not it was a

cathartic process. "I found out some things. It was like getting to know a different part of her. There were arguments I needed to have with her because of reading it. I felt like our relationship evolved a bit through that."

The process allowed Mrs Swinney to spend more time in her mother's company. "But I can't really explain how painful it was. I had to do it in quite short bursts, because my body would just become very painful."

The book that evolved has six sections. "It starts with hunger, because all good meals require you to be very hungry; then preparation; and then welcome. Then the table, the meal itself; and the clean-up, which was my brother's idea, actually. And then the last bit is called 'the forever feast'. And that's looking at why so much of the metaphor and imagery around heaven is related to meals."

THE book touches on another book that Mrs Swinney wrote in 2017: *Home*, which, like this, is partly inspired by her nomadic upbringing and the attendant homesickness. Has the loss of her mother changed her perspective on home?

"I think grief at times has felt like homesickness," she says. "There's something quite exposed about not having a mum. . . . There's a tenderness to a mother that no one else really can have for you. And I know that as a mother myself, that their concerns are so close to mine."

"She created my first home, and she set the pattern for the kinds of homes I have tried to recreate. So I don't feel homeless because she's not here. But I do have this homesick feeling that hits me here and there. I remember it from boarding school, actually: it's a similar kind of yearning."

Mrs Swinney hopes that the book will have a wider audience than just family friends. "I think hospitality is having a moment. Even before the pandemic and the isolation of that, this direction we've gone in — of extreme individualism and fragmentation and hyper-mobility — it's not working for us. I don't think we were meant to live like little units. I think we need to be sharing life in a far deeper, more involved way."

SHE hopes, too, that the book will provoke readers to think about the way by which food is produced. "I

[wrote it] thinking: this is going to be a better way into themes of conservation and the environment than coming straight at it, because we all eat, and most of us socialise."

The climate crisis and the cost-of-living crisis require radical change, she says. "I think there is a way to eat really well and quite frugally and quite kindly to the planet. But it's a learning curve. It's a learning curve for me, and I grew up in an environmental organisation. But I think we're going to be forced to do it. So, in some ways, it's a massive opportunity, and quite exciting."

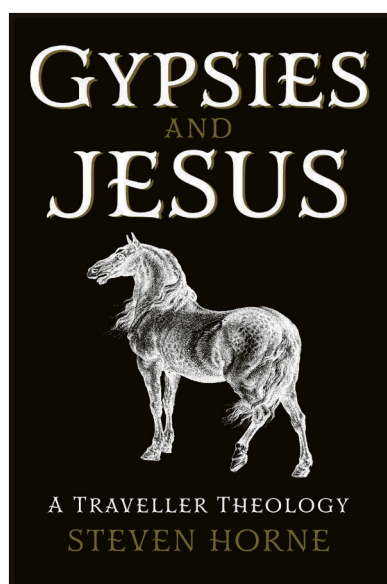
Hospitality doesn't need to be extravagant or complicated, she says. As she writes in the prologue: "To be hospitable, you do not need to know how to make square of fabric into elaborate shapes. You do not need to have mastered French, Italian, Indian or indeed any country's cuisine. You do not need to have unchipped glasses and matching plates, silver cutlery and special knives for fish, butter and cheese. You do not need to have a stock of witty anecdotes or a dust-free home. You can, in fact, be hospitable without a home."

Mrs Swinney's husband, Shawn, is a vicar, and they have two daughters. Their vicarage is large, and there are often people staying. "As a family, we have quite a high value on hospitality. My girls are 15 and 12, and they're already really into cooking. They're very used to people showing up, but we try and decide as a family, and give them a say."

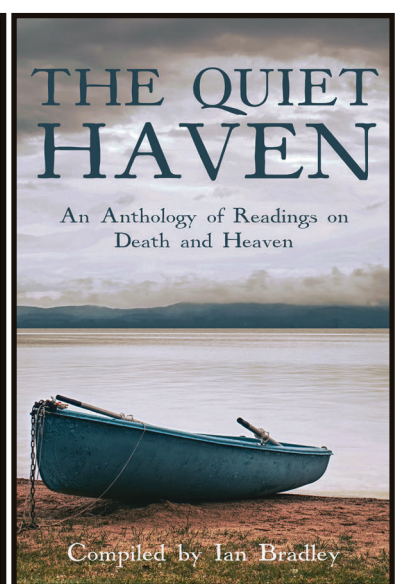
She is awaiting the response to this book with some trepidation. The rights to the book have been assigned to A Rocha International, and she and her father have a tour in the diary to promote it in the United States. "It's scarier than any of the ones I've done before, because I think if anyone said anything bad about my Mum's writing, I don't know if I could deal with that."

Her books tend to be quite personal, and she enjoys the conversations she has as a result. "It can lead to the most deep and profound encounters with people; and hearing about other people's stories in return is such a gift. I absolutely love that part of it."

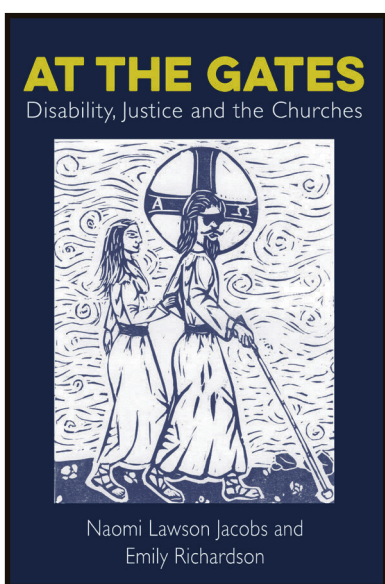
*A Place at The Table* by Miranda Harris and Jo Swinney is published by Hodder & Soughton at £16.99 (Church Times Bookshop £15.29); 978-1-529-39205-0. [placeatthetable.info](http://placeatthetable.info)



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