

The ACLU

The blogs of
ABI GOODENOUGH



THE A CLUB

My life –

School. By my count, that's 195 days a year eight
thirty to four. Plus travelling time. Homework.
Basketball team practice. Music. Jazz dance class.
Church. Friends. Now don't get me wrong – I ♥ my
friends. But why do they so become The Invisibles
when I need them?

I could go on. Teachers giving their subjects the
GCSE hard sell. Parents paranoid about 'tidy
bedrooms'. Best mate ~~not~~ getting on. Like,
again. And now the A Club to get sorted. Not to
mention Char's problems. Or Eddie Finn fancying
me. Ugh!

Is it just me? Or is everyone's life like this,
whizzing round faster and faster? Who's really in
charge? And how do I get some control back when
stuff happens?

Welcome to my blogs.

Abi says Absolutely Big Thanx to
Vince Cross
for helping her write
The A Club.

And hugs and kisses to Marilyn Watts,
Juliet Mozley and Kirsten Etheridge for making
a book out of a heap of words.

The **ACLUB**

The blogs of
ABI GOODENOUGH




LION
Children's Books

Text copyright © 2006 Vince Cross
This edition copyright © 2006 Lion Hudson

The moral rights of the author
have been asserted

A Lion Children's Book
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Mayfield House, 256 Banbury Road,
Oxford OX2 7DH, England
www.lionhudson.com
ISBN-13: 978-0-7459-6019-7
ISBN-10: 0-7459-6019-7

First edition 2006
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset in 10/14 Garamond ITC
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Cox and Wyman Ltd, Reading

What do you think?

Is the future more like an endless road or a huge painting?

If the future's like a road, then it stretches out in front of us, and we're just looking through the windows of the car as we whizz along. Stuff happens, and there's nothing we can do about it.

If your vote's for the massive painting, then it's us making the stuff happen. We're all up there together like Michelangelo and his merry men, slapping on our tags, talking to each other, swapping ideas, never finishing. The future's down to you and me.

I really want to know which is true.

Fact.

I, Abi Goodenough, am a very busy person.

Let's start with work. School. By my count, that's 195 days a year eight thirty to four with half an hour lunch break every day except Monday ('to minimise vandalism of the school fabric'). And while we're talking lunch, I make my own. Salads. I would *never* trust the school canteen.

195 days, that is, minus any sick note time. Though illness is virtually unknown in the Goodenough household. We just pretend we're not sick, and wait to be sent home when we've finally puked over the school library carpet. Well, I *was* only eight. But these

things stay with you. Total time off last year: two days. *Really* bad period: one day. Strange spots which *might* have been something infectious: one day.

Then there's travelling time. (Approx. one hour a day however you do it, car, bus, on foot. Slightly less if Mum's driving.) That's an *extra eight days a year*! What a thought! What a waste!

Homework. Unpredictable factor and therefore a potential source of major stress. Might be two hours a night. Might be ten minutes. My point is, how do you know when enough's good enough? (*'Good enough is never enough for a Goodenough.'* Yes, thank you, Dad. Now shut up!)

Monday night. Tap class six till seven. Stupid time, but what can you do? I like tap.

Tuesday. Basketball team practice after school in the sports hall. Five o'clock finish. Possibly. But I don't mind. As sports go, basketball's cool. And maybe later in the term I'll get to be team captain. Which would be nice. Never been captain of anything before.

Wednesday. County Youth Choir. Yawn, yawn... Fauré's *Requiem*... yawn, yawn. Supposed to stop at 8 p.m.. Usually on its last croak at about half past. After-hours singing courtesy of Jemima aka Droopy Drawers aka our esteemed conductor, Miss Everard. Can't find her music, can't remember what we did last week, can't cope with anything less than total perfection, has us practising standing up and sitting down for hours on end. Completely hopeless!

Thursday. 'Tomorrow's People', i.e. the church youth group. Six to seven. Don't laugh. Not quite as bad as it sounds. Sounds complete pants though. Must tell Jana and co. to bin the name. And they're surprised kids aren't beating the door down?

Friday. Clash of the Titans. Youth theatre at the local college, seven till nine. *And* church choir/music group at much the same time. Can't win. One or the other's always in a strop when I stand them up.

Saturday morning. Jazz class at dance school nine till ten. Then change in fifteen seconds max. Grab fiddle. Run up road to County Music School trailing tights, deodorant, music. Try to look amazed everyone's so early for rehearsal. Lasts till noon.

Saturday p.m.. So when did you *think* I get to do the weekend homework?

Sunday. Church most of the morning. Then Sunday Lunch. No avoiding *that* particular date with danger. Because we're so Christian and wonderful, might be anyone there from Gran to the local dossers, and likely to go on a bit too. And on. And on. Lucky if we're done by three thirty. Still, it's a good chance to mock older siblings for strange and deviant choice of clothes, hair, etc.

And in between...

Well, Mum's always on at me to go running with her in the morning, so I try to a couple of times a week. I know she misses having Hannah and Debs around. Pete? Well, he's never going to shift his bum out of bed before the absolute last minute, is he?

Violin practice. Ugh!

Domestic stuff. I do my bit. I'd do it, even if the rest of the tribe weren't so big time on my case. In my humble opinion, I do it better than they do. No bits left on the carpet after *my* session with the Dyson. Nor do I avoid grappling with the Toilet Duck, like some.

Friends. Yes, I do still have friends. All of them with umpteenth-generation mobile phones, which make tea, monitor the universe

for extraterrestrial life etc etc, unlike my dinosaur model. Though, usually when they phone, they want something. Strange, that! When I phone or text, it's to see how someone is, or invite them down the cinema or Café Doppio. And in reverse? More like an advice and counselling service. Anything from help with the maths homework to definitions of date-rape.

That's it. Another week, another wad. In my case, that'll be five pounds pocket money plus expenses. All to be tightly, minutely accounted to the Family Financial Planning Manager otherwise known as My Pa.

Is it something about me? Or is everyone's life like this, whizzing round faster and faster? Stop the world, I want to get off!

And now I'm going to have a little rant.

Frankly, what really gets up my nostrils is that while everyone's so on my back to do what floats their boat, 24/7, I never see anyone else quite so flat out and frantic. Flat out maybe. Frantic, not! For instance:

I know for a fact Mum manages a little snooze most afternoons, which, at her age (44), is just gross. Fair enough, she does stuff (half a week paid in the church office, voluntary work, Board of Visitors at the local prison, that kind of thing), but Mrs McDonagh comes in twice a week to give the house a professional polish, and we eat a lot of Marks and Sparks fire-and-forget food, so she's not exactly rushed off her feet domestically, is she? What's to recover from?

And Dad? Well, let's make allowances for his advanced age (55) and the fact that I don't know what he was like when he worked for the bank. (He retired early with a nice fat pension five years ago.) For all I know he might have been Mr Go-Getter 1978. But this 'consultancy' stuff he does now doesn't seem like it interferes with his golf too much. Or the tennis club. Or the stamp collecting. Or his Sunday afternoon zizz. I could go on.

Pete would probably trot out his hormones as the reason why at

17 he's such a complete and utter lazy slob. But hey, I'm 14 next birthday (14 February – aah!), and I've got hormones of my own, right!

Airhead Hannah's living in sin with Dirty Dan her boyfriend and pretending to do Sociology at Leicester Uni. Whatever Hannah does, she always does v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. No nervous exhaustion there.

Now she's got her own flat, we don't see so much of Debs these days. Which is rancid, 'cos she is definitely My Big Sister. Debs is very calm. You always get the feeling there's loads going on in her life, but it never gets to her. I have to squeeze her to tell me anything. She just seems to take everything as it comes. I'd *like* to be like Debs, but I'm worried I'm so not. I don't think she'd waste her breath letting off steam like this, for a start. So I make an exception for Debs when I say that everyone in my family thinks they can click their fingers from the comfort of the sofa and I'll jump, any time of the day or night.

Buddies? Well, best friend Em (full name Emily Louisa Bradley)... she's really conscientious. But she doesn't do the stuff I do outside school, she doesn't lift a finger at home, and she's an atheist, she says, so no church.

Drew Chapple gets by. He'll probably surprise us all and get straight A*s for his GCSEs, if there still *are* GCSEs by then, but as far as I can see, he just coasts. Minimum action. Maximum anxiety. And congenitally incapable of making a decision about anything. Maybe that's why, like Em, Drew claims to be permanently stressed out. And in both cases I refer you to my comments above about phone manners.

Then there are the other people in my life: the teachers at what I shall have to get used to calling Willowmede *Academy*; Jana and the other dog-collars at St Michael's; Ciarán at the Dance School. It always seems to matter so much to all and sundry that 'you don't let us down, Abi'. As they sometimes so charmingly put it! But do I exist just for their benefit? I don't think so! Does their future depend on my success? For their sakes, I jolly well hope not.

Though, a lot of the time, they act like it does. Go get your own lives, guys! Who's the one really working round here?

OK, that's the rant over. There was a programme on the telly last night. One of those where there's a bunch of people high up in the Himalayas, kayaking down some bluey-green ice-melt river. For a while the river's powerful but smooth, and the canoes make their way serenely downstream. Everything's teeth and smiles. Then suddenly, whoosh, they're in the maelstrom of the rapids, the world goes mad, and suddenly one or two of the canoes are upside down with bodies hanging off them and the paddles all smashed. The music hits a grimy groove, and you don't know whether everyone's been battered to pieces on the rocks, or whether next thing they'll be found laughing and hanging on to a bush at the side of the torrent.

Well, that's me, today and tomorrow. Today = last day of the summer holidays. Tomorrow = first day of the new term. Today, total serenity. Tomorrow, madness and chaos.

So welcome to the Year Nine white water, and hang on to your hard hats. Don't rely on me to keep any kind of a diary going: I've tried it before and can't get into that every-night-before-bed thing. But Drew says blogging's the new rock'n'roll, so I'll give it a go and check in with some words at the end of every week. Then we'll see what's left of this expedition at Christmas.

Because there's always a story to any term, isn't there? I wonder what the story of this one will be?

Blog the First 11 September

Nothing's ever what you think, is it? The first thing I hadn't reckoned on was a total world record-breaking heatwave for the first week back at school. 9JE were three down before Monday's assembly was halfway through. Jane Pitcher keeled over first, though she'll fall in a dead faint if you whisper 'spider!' in her ear, then Melanie Appleyard, and after her Prithi Shah. The boys were killing themselves laughing, though Adam Parsons for one looked a bit green. Well, it was about 110 degrees in the school hall. The heating was full on, and the big windows were apparently stuck shut.

'I think it's me next,' Em muttered, wobbling slightly on her long legs.

'Don't you dare,' I said, doing a quick *plié* or two to keep the blood circulating. I could feel the sweat trickling down my back, and it was only nine thirty. 'We're in this together, girl.'

The next thing was the problem with the Humanities and Creative Arts Blocks. According to Big Ben (Mr Browning, our headteacher), they had something called concrete cancer.

'What did he say?' Em whispered, shuffling from foot to foot, and taking deep breaths.

'The buildings are falling down.'

'Oh!' she said, gulping for air, and looking feeble. I got ready to catch her.

The gist of the concrete thing is that for a term or two, to avoid valuable pupils being crushed by careless masonry, Years Eight and Nine will be having their Humanities and Creative Arts lessons down the road in the newly vacated premises of Brooklands Primary School. The primary school doesn't need them because they've just moved into their brand spanking new buildings close by.

'Fine,' hissed Em, indignation getting the better of lack of oxygen. 'Let the little kiddies have all the fun then. We'll just clean up their mess, shall we?'

Which was broadly the idea. Because since there'd been no thought that anyone was ever going to use the old Brooklands school again before it was pulled down, the place was apparently a total tip. It seemed we were going to have the privilege of making it habitable again.

The last thing was that Mr Feltham the biology teacher had pegged it during the summer break. A heart attack. He can't have been older than Dad, which is a pretty horrible thought. We had him in Year Seven and he was dead useless then. Now he's just dead. What a terrible thing to say! True though. I wonder if he's got any family? He might have kids. Don't think about it!

The next couple of days we wandered backwards and forwards carrying things into Brooklands, and suffering the occasional lesson. They let us move a few chairs around too. The teachers all looked slightly spooked in case they were breaking any health and safety rules that meant they were about to get sued rotten. What with the mind-blowing heat and the lack of organization, it was all slightly weird.

'So welcome to the new Academy,' said Drew cynically. 'Isn't it just so much better than the old School?'

'Lovely!' I said, dumping a pile of dog-eared copies of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (the idiot's edited highlights version) onto a shelf.

During the summer, Willowmede has changed its name from being a plain boring old 'Comprehensive School' to being a supposedly much posher sounding 'Academy', which means that from now on it's going to specialize in PE. The deal is that Big Ben has got his bony hands on a shedload of new money to build sports halls and running tracks and so on. The first stage was completed during the holidays: a beautiful new state-of-the-art theatre, though what that's got to do with PE I don't know. The downside? Even before the concrete cancer scare, we'd known for ages we were

going to work in something resembling a building site for the next year or so.

When the Academy idea was announced early last year, it set off all kinds of rumours. Each year group and their parents were given an evening to third-degree Mr Browning and the governors about it.

After half an hour of waffle from Big Ben explaining the architect's designs, it had to be my dad who interrupted with:

'So what I want to know is, what difference will it *actually* make to my daughter's education?'

He can sound so rude sometimes.

'*Dad!*' I hissed, practically crawling under the chair with embarrassment. Big Ben sat down and gave way to our Head of Year, AD, who was clearly itching to stick his greasy oar in.

'Well, Mr Goodenough,' said AD smoothly, smiling his famous trademark oily smile, 'If I could put it in two words for you, I think it might be "*Added value*". Knowing Abi as I do – ' and here he turned a five-star smirk on me, ' – I can honestly say it will just add to the opportunities she has for using her many talents to the full...'

All around us, you could almost hear the hisses and boos rising up from the other kids and parents like poison gas. If AD's words weren't worth a beating on the way home from school one dark night sometime soon, I didn't know what was. Thank you so much!

'So it's not just going to be multigyms and squash courts for the sixth form then?'

'No, not at all,' continued AD, the grin becoming slightly more forced and fixed. 'Though obviously we'll be aiming to provide a fully enhanced sports curriculum for everyone, including Years Twelve and Thirteen. You could say we're returning to that old educational idea of *mens sana in corpore sano*...'

AD paused, and everyone looked blank. This seemed to include Big Ben.

'Perhaps you could just explain that a bit further, Dr Dickson,' he said, rather heavily. 'For those of us, like myself, who don't have any Latin...'

'I'm so sorry! *Mens sana in corpore sano* – a fit body in a fit

mind,' AD smarmed, clearly enjoying being one up on his boss in public. Em, who was sitting next to me, nudged me in the ribs and raised one eyebrow smirkingly.

'Would you say AD's got a fit body or a fit mind?' she whispered loudly in my ear.

I giggled, audibly enough that one or two people looked round, and Dad laid a restraining hand on my knee, his turn to be embarrassed. So that was quits then!

All that was back last year. Now this week, the sun has beaten down on our hot little heads as we've repeatedly skirted the high chain link fence surrounding what used to be the school playground. We've watched as the bulldozers have pulled up the tarmac and scraped holes for the new sports hall's foundations. The air's been thick with dust. When we've actually had lessons on what's now known as the 'Main Campus', they've been interrupted by the banging of metal and the occasional machine gun burst of pneumatic drills. I've come home with a headache most days. But next year it'll be marvellous, won't it? We'll all be able to work out in the school's new multigym before the start of each day. I don't think!

In between the heatstroke, the forced labour and the industrial pollution, I couldn't avoid various teachers cornering me at unguarded moments during the week, all wanting stuff. Some were friendly. Some loomed.

First of the loomers was Miss Watkinson. Like all PE teachers, Miss Watkinson seems to think that thumbscrews or a gun in the small of the back is the only way to get a result. Do they train with the SAS or something?

'Abigail!' she shouted, from about fifty yards away. This was just as I was trying to get out of the school gates on Tuesday afternoon. Watkinson's got a voice like a sonic boom: it was no use pretending I hadn't heard. I sighed and trailed back to where she stood outside the school office.

'Swimming...' she said, without any preliminary nicety like,

'How are you? Have you had a good holiday? Isn't the weather hot?'

'... Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Six thirty. Town Baths. You'll be there, I hope? To keep us all company...' There was a mad, bad and dangerous-to-know glint in her eye.

Now this was completely out of order, because Watkinson's swimming isn't even really a school activity. It's more like a bit of private enterprise. She's a big cheese in the County Swimming Association, and true, once a year they run a gala for schools, but so what? And like, *six thirty*? In the *morning*? Let's get real here!

'Probably not, Miss Watkinson,' I said, facing her down while smiling sweetly. With PE teachers it seems to me the principles are the same as training a dog with bad habits and a nasty bite. I pretended to be giving the matter due consideration. Then I did some more acting and added uncertainly, 'It's difficult...'

'Disappointing,' she growled. 'Success isn't always about natural talent, you know. Hard yards, Abigail, hard yards. I thought you'd understand that!'

'I'm sorry,' I said, making like I really was, and backing away slowly. I could see that if I wasn't careful, she was going to go into her speech about being prepared to break through the pain barrier. (For the record I'm not. Not as far as swimming goes, anyway!)

'Mum's waiting for me... The mornings at home... They're complicated, you know. Sorry, Miss Watkinson. Maybe next year...?'

As I went, I thought, *Now she'll start thinking I have to look after baby brothers or sisters or something. Or that I've got a disabled parent. She'll probably check up. I bet I haven't heard the last of that one.*

On the other hand, Sandy Johnson, the drama teacher, was really nice when he sidled up to me at break on Wednesday morning.

'How's about I make you a star?' he said softly, and I jumped, not having heard him coming. Mr Johnson looks rather like a movie star himself. Perhaps slightly too much so. A bit careful with it? Think two parts Pierce Brosnan and one part Ewan McGregor. Handsome in a sort of old and creased kind of way.

'Pardon?'

'I know I'm a fool to myself,' he said, 'but I'm going to try another school production, now I've recovered from my last nervous breakdown. *The Crucible*. Ever heard of it?'

I hadn't.

'Well, it's a simply marvellous piece of drama, Abi. Everyone should do *The Crucible* once in their life. It's about persecution, and why people jump on bandwagons. Really important stuff. And funnily enough, one of the characters is called Abigail. So I thought of you. Interested?'

I said I might be.

'Fantastic! Auditions early next term. Showtime at Easter. It'd be great to have you on board. OK?'

And Mr Johnson smiled in that confidential, you-are-the-only-person-who-matters-in-the-whole-world manner he has. Which doesn't fool me for one moment. Might still do the play though.

By Wednesday afternoon, the classrooms at Brooklands were more or less finally sorted, and not their former squalid selves. So hey-ho, there was no avoiding top set French with Mr Farthing, known to everyone as 'Penny' for obvious reasons.

Penny is one of those teachers who always beams at people he's taken a shine to, of whom unfortunately I am one (despite all my best efforts to persuade him otherwise), and scowls at everyone else. It doesn't do a lot for peer-group relationships in the classroom, if you get me.

I do not like French or Mr Penny. I mean, Mr Farthing. There really is a severe danger I'll call him by the wrong name one day.

I was sneaking out after the lesson, and thought I'd made it safely, when I heard him call after me. I turned back. Penny's style is the iron threat in the velvet voice. He often wears a suede jacket, which tells you a lot, I think.

'Just a word,' he murmured. 'I wondered, have you thought about your GCSE options yet?'

I shook my head. 'Not really,' I said weakly.

'We'd be happy to have you in the German set, Abigail,' he said silkily. 'You could easily make a success of foreign languages at A