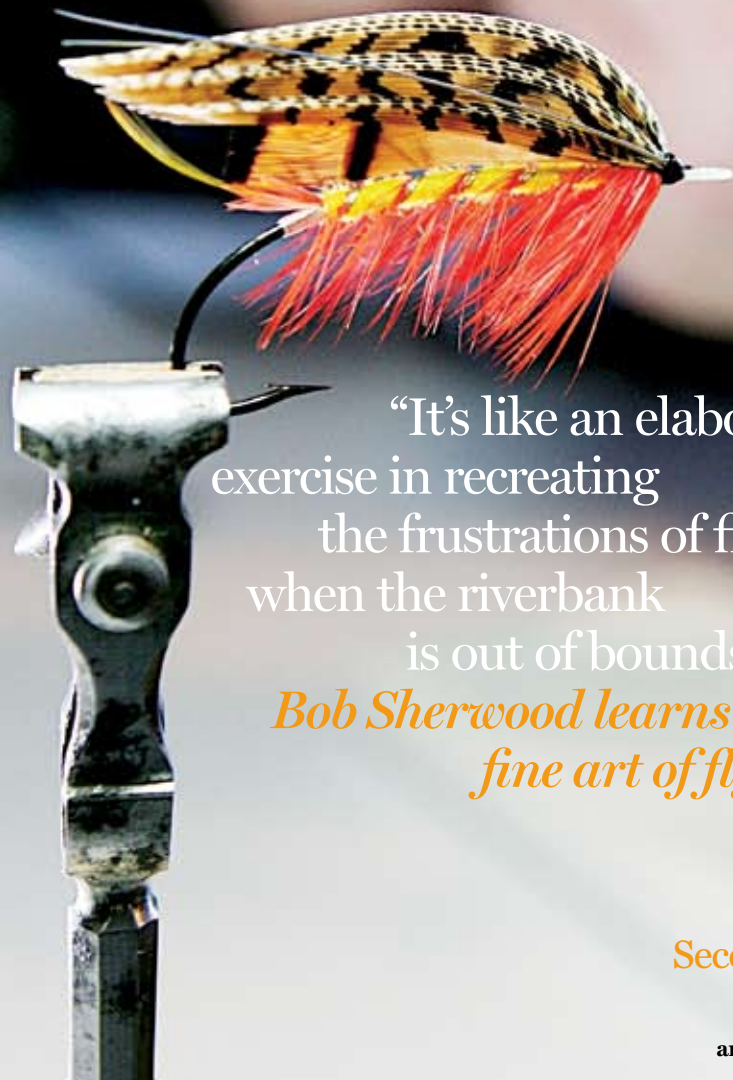


# Pursuits

The things we long to do



“It’s like an elaborate exercise in recreating the frustrations of fishing when the riverbank is out of bounds” ➤➤➤

*Bob Sherwood learns the fine art of fly tying*

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➤ Fly tying is supposed to be the game angler's favourite winter pastime.

While temperatures drop in the rivers and the fish prepare to spawn, the angler fills his or her fly boxes with neat ranks of intricate creations ready for next season's piscatorial quest. That's the idea, but it never seems to work out that way.

Feathers twist and fall off, tinsel spirals out of control and wraps of thread clog the hook eye so that you cannot even tie the unruly mess on to the line. It's like an elaborate exercise in recreating the frustrations of fishing when the riverbank is out of bounds.

Above my own fly-tying bench is a frame displaying two rare classic salmon flies from the workshop of Paul Little, the man considered by many to be Britain's best tyer. The flies are meant to be an inspiration, but their power has yet to transform my tying. So I went to see the master himself.

Little's fly-tying den is piled high with boxes, drawers and shelves; each brimming with feathers, furs, synthetics, tinsel and thread. Most of it appears in myriad different colours, often dyed by Little himself. If I can't tie the perfect fly here, I'm going to give up.

Little is well known for tying the classic salmon flies popularised by the Victorians, who made them using all kinds of exotic materials, typically marrying tiny strips of different feathers together to create multicoloured wings. Nowadays, such flies are destined for frames rather than the riverbank. Indeed, I have seen anglers vying to spend several hundred pounds on a Paul Little fly at charity auctions.

"The process of mounting a married wing on a classic salmon fly so that there are no creases is the Holy Grail of fly tying," says Little, as he picks out dyed turkey, peacock and bustard feathers from the piles around us for my masterclass.

He has set me the task of tying the Namsen, named after the great Norwegian river, which has a wing made up of fibres from six different feathers. I wonder if he's ever seen a grown man cry. At first, I manage to get the golden pheasant feather tail on the fly and wind on a yellow,



**THE DETAILS**

Paul Little is the master fly dresser of the Association of Advanced Professional Game Angling Instructors. To find an AAPGAI-qualified fly dressing instructor near you, go to [www.aapgai.co.uk](http://www.aapgai.co.uk).

orange, red and blue body. I wind some silver tinsel forward in a five-turn spiral that, if I say so myself, looks immaculate. "You've got a few uneven turns there," says Little.

"It's all about thread control," he explains. "I have tried to master different techniques and understand how different materials behave when you tie them to a hook. Then you can tie any pattern you want."

In the face of cheap imports of flies, tied by people who have never

set eyes on a trout or salmon, Little is clear about the advantages for anglers of tying flies themselves. "You can tie them the way you want them – any colour, shade, size or weight specifically to suit the waters where you fish – rather than the way other people dictate them."

I've somehow got the six feather slips together without destroying them, a process which involves scrabbling around on the floor to retrieve wayward fragments. Then I have to do it all over again with sections from the opposite side of the feathers to create a mirror image for the other side of the fly. Now, with the two married wings sandwiched together, I can wreck it all as I try to get the whole ensemble on to the hook.

Little shows me the crucial technique with a spare wing. I copy him and, staggeringly, it works as the wing sits straight with no creases or bumps. This is a watershed moment in my fly tying. "That's great," he says. "But it's too short." I take it off for another try.

"The process of mounting a married wing on a classic salmon fly so that there are no creases is the Holy Grail of fly tying"



(Main picture) the Kate – which comes from George Kelson's 1895 book "The Salmon Fly" – as tied by Paul Little; (above, from top) Bob Sherwood and Paul Little

It works again, and this time the wing extends back to the tip of the tail in textbook fashion. Little is congratulatory, even if he can't help but mention that the top wing section is a millimetre or two short where I married the feather quills together. It's not perfect. But it is the best fly I have ever tied.

Little is passionate about sharing his knowledge and has established an international reputation. He has recently given demonstrations in the US, Denmark, Italy and Holland, and is the fly-tying guru for the UK's leading game angling instructors' association. But it remains a hobby: he donates flies to charity auctions, and gives some away, but never sells them for personal profit.

It is a scientific attention to detail that sets this 51-year-old nuclear physicist apart. Little makes sure every feather fibre he uses is pristine and goes to great lengths to find rare but ethically sourced materials. As he ties, he seems to unwind every other wrap of thread, insistent that each turn is laid on the hook shank perfectly.

I'll never fish with a classic-style fly, since modern patterns made with mobile materials are more effective. But I can already see that the techniques and tricks I have learnt will help make my trout and salmon flies neater, stronger and better proportioned. And they'll certainly feel easier to tie.

Little describes himself as a fly tyer who fishes. But I know he's an ardent angler for salmon on his local river Derwent and for pike on Bassenthwaite lake, where he keeps his boat. He caught more than 140 pike last season, all on his own flies.

Before I leave, I cajole him into showing me his fly boxes. There are none of the old classics here, but the simpler hair-wing salmon patterns and supercharged pike flies are no less beautifully tied. So it's not just about recreating the historic patterns for framing, then?

"So many people are prepared to fish with badly-tied rubbish on the end of the line when that's all the fish see," he says. "The biggest thrill for me is to tie on a nice fly that I have created and then to catch a fish on it. That's the ultimate achievement in fishing."

As a raider of fly boxes myself, I wonder whether Little fishes with flies that other people have tied. He fixes me with a steely glare. "No." ■

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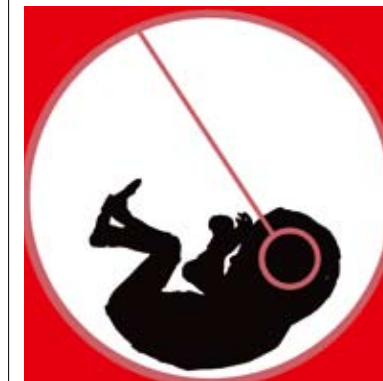
Second opinion  
A test of tolerance

By Margaret McCartney

"Autism is not the only developmental disability that a child can be born with. It does, however, garner a lot of attention. Part of the reason is that we still don't understand the condition as well as we would like. And we still have no way of testing for it through prenatal screening.

Recent research has raised the potential for such a test in the future. Published in the British Journal of Psychology, it showed an association between higher levels of testosterone in amniotic fluid samples and autistic traits in the older child. Simon Baron Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, noting this, has called for a debate on the idea of prenatal screening – and in an online article in Community Care magazine, makes it clear he is against such screening.

If there is one absolute about screening tests – where testing is done in the absence of symptoms – it is that one has



to be extraordinarily careful. The prenatal screening tests currently available – for Down's syndrome and spina bifida – are meant to be performed only after appropriate discussion of the potential problems. Yet these tests are still limited in the information they can give us. They do not tell us how disabled the child will be, or what its life would be like.

Has prenatal testing for Down's syndrome led to improved quality of life for people with Down's? Mencap, the charity for people with learning disabilities, notes that 92 per cent of

women whose babies are diagnosed with Down's syndrome end up terminating the pregnancy. It says there is "growing evidence" that doctors put pressure on women to abort babies thought likely to have a disability. It recommends that women in this position be encouraged to speak to parents of disabled children to get better information about the implications of the test. There are also significant problems with false positive testing, and the intrusive tests this may lead to, such as amniocentesis (taking an amniotic fluid sample with a needle).

Prenatal tests increase the stigma of a disorder that may have little impact on the person's ability to live a happy life. Genetic "normality" does not guarantee a "healthy" or productive life.

And what of autism? If prenatal testing allowed an intervention which could improve the outlook, then it might be worth considering. But that kind of intervention seems even further away. The degree of disability may not be known at the prenatal stage: some people with autistic traits excel at particular types of work, while others with autism are more severely affected and need a great deal of support. But what we are actually aiming for? Perfect people don't exist. We all have "flaws". Intolerance is one of them.

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For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at [blogs.ft.com/mccartney](http://blogs.ft.com/mccartney)