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HOW THE NEW RICH BAG A SUPERNANNY

The perks may be extraordinary but the work is gruelling, warns the woman who finds nannies for the super-rich. Fiona Neill reports

PORTRAIT Mark Harrison



Sarajane Ambrose
of Imperial Nannies
at home in London

Shortly before I was due back at work after the birth of my first child 13 years ago, I leafed through a couple of CVs sent to me by a nanny agency. One in particular caught my attention. It was not so much the qualifications of the applicant – at that stage all had way more experience than me in dealing with eight-month-old babies – it was more that she had given Jerry Hall as one of her referees. Surely it couldn't be Mick Jagger's wife? I weighed up the evidence – the Richmond address; the ages of the children; the reputation of the nanny agency that had recommended her – and concluded that the reference must be bona fide.

As I looked round my kitchen, it equally rapidly dawned on me that no one who had worked in a fully staffed celebrity household in Richmond would seriously consider exchanging that environment for the chaos of my home. It was a ludicrous prospect, almost as absurd as the idea that I would cold-call Jerry Hall to ask her opinion of this woman.

On this ground alone I decided not to interview her, although it was a tantalising

nanny jobs were for the most part abroad, working for British tax exiles in Geneva and Monaco, for Middle Eastern royalty, or for wealthy American dynasties.

According to Sarajane Ambrose, who set up her own elite nanny agency, Imperial Nannies, at more or less the same time that I was trying to piece together childcare for my eldest son, in those days her wealthiest clients tended to be celebrities; mainly rock stars. She is too discreet to let slip exactly who. The rest were pretty average middle-class families.

From 2000 onward, however, as London was transformed into a global financial centre, all this changed. The golden postcodes of Knightsbridge, Belgravia, Mayfair and Chelsea became among the most sought-after in the world. Looking for a safe berth in which to educate their children and set up home, the international super-rich, especially from emerging nations such as Russia and China, set their sights upon London.

They were attracted by the quality of private schools; property; British culture; a timezone that sits between the emerging East and the Americas; favourable tax breaks; and a liberal banking system. Their arrival dovetailed with an unprecedented boom

threats to relocate to more favourable tax zones, few bankers were upped sticks. Last year's bonus payments were as big as ever.

There was widespread incredulity recently when Gwyneth Paltrow placed an ad offering £60,000 for a multilingual, classically educated nanny/tutor (her husband, Chris Martin, took a first in Ancient World Studies at UCL). There was similar disbelief when Linda Evangelista asked the father of her child for \$80,000 (£50,000) a year to pay for childcare. Yet, according to Ambrose, such sums are not unusual. She has one client with three children, each with their own nanny, all earning £1,500 net per week, and a spare on the payroll to cover illness and days off.

Over the past few years, the Russians have overtaken Middle Eastern royalty as the highest-paying employers in London. Ambrose cites the recent example of a Russian client who interviewed one of her Norland-trained nannies, then left the country without offering her the job. When the client came back to discover the nanny had accepted another post, she immediately raised the salary from £1,000 to £1,500 per week (salaries are always quoted net, so this is about £120,000 gross per year). The nanny swiftly reconsidered her decision.

Many of the live-in positions advertised by Imperial Nannies offer starting salaries of £500 per week (about £45,000 gross per annum). This basic salary is in addition to board and lodging – a flat that is self-contained or on a separate floor, or at least a room with en suite bathroom – in a desirable Central London borough, and almost always includes a car. Ambrose has nannies on her books who specify what vehicle they want (one questioned the registration of the BMW model on offer) and who refuse to fly anything but business class. Another ruled out easyJet flights in her contract. Maternity nurses, who are brought in to help out new mothers for anything from six weeks to six months, can command even larger sums. Sometimes there are astonishing perks: one nanny was bought an entire new wardrobe of clothes by her Italian employer; another was given a house when she finished her career with a member of the Saudi Royal Family. Patricia, an old-style British nanny with 27 years' experience, told me that a Middle Eastern employer regularly popped a £1,000 tip into her top pocket when she returned to London at the end of a trip to his home country on his jet.

All but one of the nannies that I spoke to while researching my new novel, *What the Nanny Saw*, were very well treated by their bosses. (The exception was a neurotic, stressed-out mother who shouted at her nanny for perceived misdemeanours such as using iron-on instead of sew-on name tapes for uniforms or failing to make the children work hard enough on school holiday projects.)

Such competitive salaries have made these positions attractive to professionals who might otherwise never have considered looking after children for a living. Two of the nannies I interviewed, for example, are fully trained teachers. There has been increased demand for governesses in the Jane Eyre mould who can assist with homework, offer extra tutoring and help their charges secure places in highly competitive London day schools. Imperial Nannies recently placed a former teacher as a nanny/governess for four hours each afternoon for £50 an hour.

The corollary to these benefits, however, is that nannies are expected to work long hours, be on call 24/6, forsake their own social life and be permanently available to travel. "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald back in the Twenties. His comment holds true today. Nannies describe a world where a child gets excited by the novelty of travelling on a "public plane" as opposed to a private jet, where there is someone on hand to pander to every whim and where any sense of the value of money is warped. The super-rich play by different rules.

Lucy, a former teacher who became a nanny to pay off her debts, told me that one boss left out between £100 and £200 every day to spend on organic fruit or treats for her two boys and was annoyed if she came home with change. The mother never got out of bed

'RUSSIAN FAMILIES REQUIRE YOU TO BE ON CALL 24 HOURS A DAY. THE CHILDREN ARE ALWAYS ACCOMPANIED BY BODYGUARDS'

before 4pm and sent Lucy out every week to collect a supply of sleeping pills. At her next job, the mother banned her from wearing a bikini. Another nanny went on holiday with a family to Sardinia. When she arrived, they apologetically explained that there wouldn't be enough room in the house because they had guests staying and asked if she would mind sleeping on a boat. It turned out to be a 140ft yacht, which she had to herself.

Some parents see very little of their children. One Russian family has two adjacent houses. The parents live in one while the nanny lives next door with the children. Only a tolerant individual can accommodate the peculiarities of such a lifestyle.

"Not everyone is cut out to do these jobs," says Ambrose. "You're walking into a completely different culture and environment of extraordinary wealth and different family values. Russian families require you to be on call 24 hours a day, 6 days a week. The children are always accompanied by bodyguards. There are cameras everywhere. They have a jet-setting lifestyle, which means you spend a lot of time packing and unpacking. They're very ambitious for their children and because they dress them in designer clothes, they're not allowed to get dirty. Russian children don't wear Gap."

Nick, a 24-year-old university graduate, had been doing a teacher-training placement in a state school in the East End of London when, enticed by the salary and prospect of travel, he accepted an offer to become nanny to an 11-year-old British boy. The position involved picking the child up after school and helping him with his homework, as well as accompanying the family on holidays abroad. The job lasted two years.

Nick was privately educated and grew up in an affluent middle-class home in southern England. But the scale of wealth surpassed anything he had ever seen. He recalls his first trip away with the family. They were spending a week in the Alps before heading for their holiday home in Italy. Rather than take unnecessary clothes to the second destination, they got their driver to travel to the Alps from London, and exchange five huge suitcases of mountain attire for another five containing clothes suitable for a beach holiday, then drive home again. "To say that this family lived in

a bubble is being generous," he says. "They were protected from everything and were aware of nothing outside. In London they had two housekeepers, a driver and a gardener. If I wasn't around, there was another nanny."

Patricia, now in her fifties, recalls one job working for an English family who divided their lives between London and their country home. The mother would never get up in time for breakfast with the children before they went to school and would nap every afternoon. In the four years she worked for her, Patricia was never allowed to call her employer by her first name. When their fourth child was born, if the baby cried at night, the parents would head to a luxury hotel in their London street. Even when the mother was at home, Patricia still had to take the baby on the school run with the older children.

"The problem with some of these very wealthy families is that they have lots of children but don't want to take responsibility for them," says Patricia. "Some are almost neglectful. But it's not my role to judge people and at least they have chosen someone like me who cares. If I put too much emotion into thinking about it all, I'd be a crap nanny."

It struck Nick that the young boy in his charge was incredibly close to the housekeeper, driver and gardener in London, treating them more like uncles and aunts than members of staff. It quickly became apparent that the child spent more time with these people than he did with his parents. Nick thinks he was given the job in part because the boy's father worked such long hours that the child didn't have a male role model. Even on holiday, he spent very little time with his mother and father.

Nick still seems baffled by the conundrum of parents who were so remote from their own children but kind and generous towards him. On holiday he ate with the family and was introduced to all their friends, in contrast to the other, "invisible" members of staff.

"The boundaries were so blurred it was sometimes difficult to know whether I was staff or a guest. Basically, I think they wanted someone who would keep their son out of their hair," he says. "There is as much neglect at the top end of the market as there is at the bottom. The children are materially well off but emotionally neglected. These mums

FOREIGN PARENTS WANT CHILDREN TO LEARN ENGLISH, AND BRITISH NANNIES HOLD THE BIGGEST SOCIAL CACHET

prospect. Perhaps she would tell me what used to go on behind the closed doors of the Jagger household? Was Mick really tight with money? How much did Jerry know about his affairs? What kind of parenting technique did they favour? It struck me that this nanny was uniquely placed to answer these questions. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that few people would have greater insight into the Jagger lifestyle. But I managed to resist the urge to meet her for voyeuristic pleasure and hired my mother-in-law instead.

Back then, in the late Nineties, ultra-high net-worth individuals (a financial term used to define anyone with investable assets of more than £30 million) were pretty thin on the ground in the UK. There were still a few aristocratic families with estates that generated enough income to support a household of butlers, cooks, housekeepers and nannies in far-flung parts of the British countryside and Central London. And there was a handful of celebrity families who ran fully staffed households. But the best-paid

in the financial sector as investment banks paid out vast bonuses to their rainmakers.

"Fifteen years ago you would have recognised the names of many of our clients," says Ambrose. "There were fewer of them. Now there are more families with far more wealth, but they tend to be low-profile and discreet. Usually we've never heard of them."

Old-style, fully staffed households with housekeepers, gardeners, cleaners and drivers suddenly mushroomed all over Central London. At the top of this domestic hierarchy sat the traditional British nanny. Foreign parents wanted children to learn English with a native speaker, and British nannies have historically held the biggest social cachet. Demand outstripped supply and salaries for nannies swelled accordingly.

Ambrose says that she has been waiting for a downturn in her business since the 2008 credit crunch, but it hasn't happened. Unlike the rest of us, the super-rich are insulated by their vast wealth from the ebb and flow of world markets, and despite



STYLIST: CHARLIE LAMBROS; HAIR AND MAKEUP: SAM NORMAN; DRESS: £1200, ROLAND MOURET AT HARVEY NICHOLS

SUPERNANNIES

and dads are never there and they assuage their guilt by paying other people to look after them as much as possible. The child I looked after spent one hour a day with his mother. I don't know what she did. She was probably busy socialising and shopping."

Most of these families lead peripatetic lifestyles, especially in the holidays, often travelling by private jet from one fully staffed home to another – perhaps their ski chalet in the winter and a house in the Mediterranean over the summer. Some fly abroad every weekend or take a helicopter to their country estate. It sounds glamorous, but being on the road is demanding. One of Ambrose's nannies left a job after a month because she couldn't tolerate the open-ended nature of flying by private jet from one country to another without knowing for how long the family would be away or what clothes to pack.

It is also difficult to create a stable life for children if they are never in the same place long enough to nurture lasting friendships. This means they rely much more on their nanny for company. "The children have to fit in with the parents' lifestyle," says Lucy.

Lucy recalls how she spent the summer with the two boys in her care and their mother in the South of France, while the father flew out every weekend. The children, who had already been uprooted from several schools, had few friends. When it came to organising a birthday party for one of them back in London, their mother offered Lucy an expensive pair of shoes if she could persuade enough children to come. She couldn't.

After a while, Nick says, he began to feel that his main role was to try to show the boy in his charge that other people's lives were very different from his own. "I wanted to turn him into a decent bloke who realises how lucky he is," he smiles, recalling how he would read him *If* by Rudyard Kipling. "I wanted to instil real values to make him understand that people can be hard on you if you're given everything." When he left, he says he doesn't know who suffered most, him or the child. They had spent so much time together that it was a painful separation.

In an effort "to show what life is really like", Patricia makes a point of taking the children she looks after on buses instead of always using taxis. She also makes them tidy up their own bedrooms. She successfully persuaded one employer that buying an Apple MacBook Pro for their child's tenth birthday wasn't appropriate and another that their 11-year-old daughter shouldn't be allowed to go to a birthday party in the South of France for the weekend.

"Someone has to set the rules," Patricia explains. "I can make sure that I knock the arrogance out of these children by establishing proper parameters. Having money isn't



Ambrose admits that extreme wealth can rob a child of ambition

enough to see you through life. You need to develop inner strength to draw on."

Patricia has zero tolerance of arrogant behaviour and left one job because she didn't like the way the children treated the Filipino housekeeper. She does this because she believes that parents fail to set proper parameters for their children and that "inner strength and integrity" are more important than a very large trust fund to get through life.

"Children need to have a sense of purpose and ambition for themselves," agrees Ambrose, choosing her words carefully. "Sometimes extreme wealth stops that from happening." She tells me she recently saw a girl that one of her nannies looked after in a glossy magazine. "She was a great beauty. I hope she has a happy life. I know there were great pressures."

It is telling that none of the nannies I have interviewed over the past three years envied the children in their charge. Lucy says that she found it so difficult to reconcile

her own belief system with the families she worked for that she never wants to work as a nanny again. Nick periodically takes on temporary posts as a short-term solution to earn a little extra cash while he completes his teacher training. Patricia made a decision only to accept positions with working mothers because they are less spoilt and she can be genuinely helpful to them.

"Discreet nanny wanted." "Rather formal home." "Fully staffed house." "Travel to all sorts of places." "Some proxy parenting." "Second home in Switzerland" – the ads are cryptic. If you want to know what really goes on behind the closed doors of London's ultra-high net-worth individuals, ask the nanny. ■

Fiona Neill is author of the Magazine's Slummy Mummy column. To order her new book, What the Nanny Saw, for £7.49, free p&p (RRP £7.99), call the Times Bookshop on 0845 2712134 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop

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