

The Guardian

Landlords are social parasites. They're the last people we should be honouring

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The 'landlord of the year' is being announced but most buy-to-let opportunists make their tenants' lives hell - giving them a prize is like giving Stalin a humanitarian award

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The landlord of the year award is announced on Monday, bestowed by the home insurance provider Home Protect. “Landlords often get a bad rap,” the CEO explains on its website, and I’ll stop him there. They don’t get a bad enough rap.

When they do make the news, you already know the story. Tory landlords dragging their absentee, ancient arses into parliament solely to vote down a bill that says rented properties should be “fit for human habitation”. “Lockdown” landlords bleeding councils dry, installing vulnerable people in micro-units, with inadequate fire provisions, so they can soak up treble the housing benefit. Who can forget the competition in the Daily Mail that offered up a buy-to-let

property as top prize? This, from a paper that crucifies scroungers. Scroungers being people who live off others, and shirk their responsibilities. But back to landlords, eh?

Landlord of the year. Lol! Rofbhawuild! (Rolling on the floor, banging my head against the wall until I lose my deposit.) Who is it going to be? One who lets you have a pet? Some of my friends are landlords, and I'm sorry to say it, but they are going straight to hell too. Imagine how satisfyingly overcrowded the underworld must be with landlords; partitioning the seventh circle into seven more circles, charging each other extra for underfloor heating. The best thing you can say about them is that they are better than letting agents. But that's like giving Stalin a humanitarian award for massacring fewer people than Genghis Khan. The fact is, they're all rogue. Whether your landlord is a genial profiteer or an actual psychopath is the luck of the draw. Anyone can be one, if they have made enough money or inherited property, and those are two of the worst qualifications imaginable. Like anyone who thrives off the housing crisis, they are social parasites.

I wonder what is meant by a "good" private landlord, worthy of recognition. Someone who charges below insane market rates, purely by choice? Who pays for top-quality repairs, when they could get a mate to do a botched job on the cheap? Who offers long-term secure tenancies, despite the fact there is no legal minimum? Who refrains from revenge evictions? Who isn't Fergus Wilson? Someone who displays basic human decency, in an unregulated sector that encourages its opposite? Who acts, in other words, not like a landlord at all?

If you are an oldster with a lodger, I'm sure you're fine. But it's the buy-to-let vampires, monopolising new builds, setting social inequality in stone, who define the term today. Try to understand these characters, so money-driven that they view people's need to sleep indoors as the chance to turn a tidy profit. (Having said that, the main cause of homelessness in the UK is, by a long way, the termination of short-term tenancies, so maybe they're not that committed to it.) No pets, no posters, no parties. That's their mantra. No repairs. Don't wear down the crap carpet. Just sit on a damp mattress and cough up the cash. All so they can keep expanding, squatting over lives like feudal incubi. If you're one of these people, you can shove your property portfolio up your arse. And make sure you leave room for your award.

The notion of houses as investment opportunities of any sort has been a cancer. Here's a radical idea: buy a home if you can, then live in it, and do something else with your time. Something that isn't about exploiting the less privileged. Apologies for taking a Daily Mail-sounding stance on this, but landlords: get a proper job.

It's official: it takes 90 hours to make friends. Who's got that long?

A University of Kansas professor studying friendship has concluded that it takes more than 50 hours of shared time to become anything more than an acquaintance, 90 hours to develop a friendship, and more than 200 hours of time together to become close friends. As an introvert who lives in a city, I see the people I really like about twice a year maximum, so we should make the grade by the time we're 100 years old.

Time and activities in a developing friendship "can be thought of as strategic investments toward satiating long-term belongingness needs," says the study's author, Jeffrey Hall, which makes me sure that, if we were friends, I'd call him "Prof" and we'd get into mismatched scrapes together, adorably. The types of experience matter, too - hours spent working together don't count for as much, he has decided. I'm not so sure; some of the best relationships of my life have revolved

around bitching about bosses, creative slacking and covering for each other. But then, I never actually did any work at work.

It strikes me that the character of real life relationships - often boring, sometimes resentful, even harrowing - has no online analogue. I never felt closer to any people than those with whom I was once stuck in a remote French cottage. The septic tank became clogged, and the toilet wouldn't flush. A few days, during which you cannot poo, feels like an eternity. It was astonishing how colonic our conversations grew, and how quickly. A practical girl called Kate eventually climbed into the tank to plunge it. Supervising from a safe distance, as flecks of all of our previous faeces kicked up on to her arms, I knew in my gut that we would be friends for life. You weren't there, man.



Strawberries ... filthy Photograph: mikroman6/Getty Images

And the prize for filthiest fruit goes to ...

It has been revealed that strawberries and spinach are the dirtiest fruit and veg. This is surprising; I always thought there was something inestimably perverse about parsnips. Of course, there is something deliciously filthy about a fig, and don't get me started on kumquats. They're all passion fruits, if you ask me, lads. It turns out that the US Environmental Working Group, which made the announcement, is talking about pesticide residue on produce, which is a bit of a mood killer. Best to go organic, it says. Or "au natural", as I've been asked to stop calling it.

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