

The Prodigies

These three women have IQs that put them in the top two per cent of the population. They're members of Mensa, but is their brilliance a gift or a burden? They talk to André Wiesner about being smarter than the rest

Nicola Peisl

33, business manager
in market research

Party tricks? I'm good on the piano and I can write sentences backwards as fast as I can do them forwards. It's entertaining at boring conferences; it's not to say I walk around reciting trigonometry theorems. And it's really not the case that I'm looking at trees and calculating the angles between the leaves and branches as derivatives of pi. I'm not a space cadet living in a high cerebral atmosphere. At school in King William's Town I was a terribly solid achiever, and on the nerdy side. Glasses, braces and skinny legs didn't help, either.

I like to think what's going on in my head is pretty normal and my bent is practical. I work for a leading market research company and the combination of left- and right-brain stuff keeps me on my toes. You sift through samples of 4 000 people times 45 minutes of interviews, or data from six or eight focus groups, each resulting in about 60 pages of transcripts. I enjoy pulling a coherent story out of that, finding the best way to present the information.

What I notice is that I'm faster.

I usually finish first in tests, fill in forms the quickest. I feel that I catch onto things faster and I sense it in the moment when I want to laugh at a joke split seconds before everyone else does, or when I'm the first to see the pattern in a flash of seemingly unrelated things.

I have no sense of direction. I glaze over when it comes to machinery. It defies me to translate a recipe into something edible. Then again, I have an IQ score that puts me in the mystical top two per cent of the population: randomly put 100 people in a room and I'd probably be one of the two smartest people there. Is IQ really a measure of intellectual giftedness? My dad's an active member of Mensa and likes to say getting a good score on an IQ test could just mean you're good at IQ tests.

I'm aware that I'm more intelligent than most and I've had that awareness since junior school. What I didn't know, until recently, is that my parents have known my IQ since early childhood, seeing as my mom was a teacher at my school and privy to IQ results. It's been a help that my parents always understood my intelligence.

To relax, I read, have tea with a friend, walk my dog. I love reading. I'm in

a Monday-night quiz team and enjoy card games and puzzles, but reading has a special place for me, and I belong to two book clubs as well as the library.

I try to maintain an intellectual humility and I hope I don't judge people who aren't as smart as me, in the same way I hope gifted runners don't judge me as I plod along. Friends of mine tease me about Mensa. They don't treat me as if I'm some exalted being; they don't treat me as an aberration either. When it comes to relationships, I've generally sought out intelligent men – my intelligence has never really been an issue for them.

Mensan intelligence is a double-edged sword. On days when I feel down and dumb I can reassure myself that I'm actually quite bright. The top two per cent is a high place to be, but do I feel I'm in the top two per cent of achievers in South Africa? No. I'm not a loser, but no, I don't.

My attentiveness means I notice things about other people to their advantage. The other side of that is self-awareness, and not always in a good way. I feel this pressure and expectation to be doing something more significant with my brain and my life. Probably all self-imposed. I can be very self-critical.'

Anna Germanis

33, fixed income trader
in asset management

I've been a member of Mensa, the high-IQ society, since 2002. I wrote the test on a hangover, the kind where you need a crowbar to loosen your tongue from the roof of your mouth. The question is, would I have passed if I hadn't been hungover?

Mensa membership implies an IQ of 140-plus. IQ's an intrinsic thing, though you do have to work at staying on the ball. I recently took time out in my home country, Zimbabwe, and was averaging just over a novel a day. So I read really fast, about 500 pages a day. I don't notice page numbers, but if you asked me to

