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# Gyles Brandreth

## – a way with words

The author, raconteur, and former MP is at home to Zoë Fairbairns

**T**hey break you in gently at *newbooks*. The first three people they invited me to interview were women writers with whom I could be sure (either from their work or from personal knowledge) that I had things in common. But this time the gloves are off. This time it's: 'Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to interview Gyles Brandreth.'

GYLES BRANDRETH?!! What, the Conservative ex-MP, John Major's government whip? Erstwhile editor of the *Sunday Telegraph Review*, author of books with titles like *Charles and Camilla: Portrait of a Love Affair*, *Yaroo! The World of Frank Richards*, and *The Scrabble Omnibus*? The strict-but-fair senior prefect who supervises the other public school boys on BBC television's satirical quiz show *Have I Got News for You*, and who shares Dictionary Corner on Channel Four's word game *Countdown* with the erudite, elegant lexicographer Susie Dent, never quite pouncing on her but always looking as if he is about to? Gyles Brandreth, who appears on his own website wearing a pink frock and long dark plaits with ribbons on the end? You want me, a *Guardian*-reading leftie, to interview *him*?

Of course I will.

### Sweater

He lives in a large Victorian house on a busy road in Barnes, west London. As with many people whom you have only ever seen on television, he

seems shorter in real life, but the open face with its boyish grin (he'll be 60 next birthday) is as expected, as is the deep fruity voice with its practised resonance. No sign of a frock or pigtailed: just a sober grey sweater with slacks. He ushers me through to a huge, gleaming kitchen/diner, and offers me tea and biscuits.

He's very charming. At least I think he is. That's the trouble with someone for whom charm is part of the job description (you don't need charm to be a writer, but I doubt you would get very far without it as a government whip, let alone an after-dinner speaker or awards host, which also feature on the Brandreth CV) – the person on the receiving end can't know whether she is being charmed for a purpose (to get her to march through the right lobby, or give a good write-up) or whether it's the real thing.

He reminds me a bit of his own description of the Duke of Edinburgh in his royal biography *Philip and Elizabeth: Portrait of a Marriage*: 'he listens, he laughs, he looks into your eyes, he takes you seriously, he makes you feel he wants your company.' Brandreth asks about *newbooks*, my role on it, and what kind of article I will be writing. A seasoned interviewee and interviewer, he is determinedly helpful, speaking clearly, spelling out names and foreign words without having to be asked, and keeping his eye on the little red light on my cassette recorder which shows that the record function is working. He

“My wife often says I am a lesbian's idea of a real man”



even promises to eat his biscuit quietly, to avoid annoying me with crunching sounds when I play back the tape.

### Progress

He was born in 1948 in Germany, where his father was a lawyer working with the Allied Control Commission. His mother was a teacher. He was educated at the Lycée Français in London, Betteshanger School in Kent, Bedales School in Hampshire and New College Oxford, since when, 'there has essentially been no progress. I'm doing essentially now what I was doing then. At school I was the editor of the school magazine. At university I was the editor of *Isis*, the university magazine; in grown-up life I was the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph Review*. At school I acted in school plays, and 40 years later I found myself acting in the west end. At school I was a candidate in the school elections. We had mock elections for parliamentary elections, and in 1992 I became a member of parliament, as before I had been president of the Oxford Union.

'If you asked me what I wanted to do in life, it was probably to be a politician. If you ask me what I am best known for, it's probably wearing colourful jumpers on television in the 1980s. If you ask me what I've spent most of my life doing, it's actually been sitting at the typewriter or the word processor, writing.'

### Wilde

His new book, his third adult novel, which is published in paperback by John Murray in January

2008, is *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders*. The first of a series, it is a tale of late nineteenth-century London, in which the eponymous playwright meets and becomes friends with Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. Intrigued by Holmes's methods, and shocked by the murder of a young friend, Wilde takes time out from writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to do some detective work of his own.

The tale is told in the first person by Robert Sherard, real-life friend and biographer of Wilde – except of course that it isn't (Sherard died in 1943), it is told by Gyles Brandreth in the persona of Sherard. The boundary between fact and fiction remains blurred throughout the book, but not so blurred as it would have been if Brandreth had got his way and named Sherard as the author on the book's jacket. The publishers' response to this suggestion was to put their foot down, saying, 'You can't play games like that.' But why would Brandreth want to? And why bother to create fiction in the first place about such a vivid and well-documented historical figure as Oscar Wilde?

Because, says Brandreth, too much has been made of Wilde as a tragic figure, the victim of Victorian sexual hypocrisy and homophobia. (Wilde was convicted of gross indecency in 1895, and sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour. He died three years after his release.) 'At the Père Lachaise cemetery in France where he is buried,' Brandreth explains, 'there is this monolithic piece of sculpture, a sphinx by Epstein.' (You can view this by Googling Oscar Wilde's Tomb and clicking on Images.) 'It's huge and heavy, and it sort of crystallised for me the fact that the huge and heavy millstone around Oscar Wilde's neck in the hundred years since his death, has been the trial of 1895 and its aftermath. We see him through the prism of the trial, and the disaster that befell him. And that seems to me to be wrong. One-sided.' Brandreth talks passionately about Wilde, as if he is in love with this man who died nearly half a century before he was born. 'I think if you are going to spend many months writing about somebody, you've got to be a little in love with them. You've certainly got to want to spend time in their company. Oscar Wilde was a remarkable man – brilliant, flawed, endlessly fascinating.'

### Billy Bunter

Brandreth and Wilde go back a long way. H Montgomery Hyde's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* was part of his early childhood reading. (The author was a family friend, which is why this controversial volume turned up among young



Gyles's Billy Bunter books and Rupert annuals.) At the age of 13, Brandreth was given Wilde's *Complete Works*, and read them – all 1,118 pages. At Bedales (which was also the alma mater of one of Oscar Wilde's sons) Brandreth played Scrabble with John Badley, the school's 97-year-old founder, who had been a friend of Oscar Wilde. In between triple letter scores, Brandreth recorded Badley's memoirs of his friend. In 1974 Brandreth produced the first stage version of *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* at the Oxford Theatre Festival.

In November 2000, Brandreth travelled to Paris with friends to take part in a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Wilde's death in the very place where it occurred. 'We gathered at 1.45 in the afternoon in this small bedroom on the first floor of the Hotel d'Alsace in the rue des Beaux-Arts. It was 100 years to the day, to the hour, to the minute after Oscar's death. A clergyman said a prayer and we raised our glasses to the memory of Oscar Wilde, and held a celebratory party. And that triggered in me the desire to write a series of books about Oscar Wilde which would be engaging and amusing Victorian murder mysteries, but would also be an accurate serial portrait of Oscar Wilde the man, showing him in the round, showing him not as we now see him as this tragic figure we look back on, but actually as he was, this generous, witty, warm man, this happily married man, this father, this rounded, complex, interesting character.'

### Sacrifice

*Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* owes its title to the discovery of the first victim, laid out as if for a ritual sacrifice, naked, surrounded by burning candles and with his throat cut. It's a lively, lightweight, fast-moving read, which makes creative use of the traditional staples of old-fashioned detective fiction: the amateur who happens upon the crime by chance and is drawn into its world of sleaze and danger, police who can't or won't intervene, body parts dispatched through the post as a warning to stop meddling, and a denouement which is both surprising and – in terms of the story – convincing. Oscar Wilde is a congenial companion on the voyage of enquiry, but readers disconcerted by questions of fact and fiction, should not expect clarification from Brandreth. 'There are lots of real people in the book,' he concedes, not terribly helpfully: most readers won't need to be told that Wilde is real, as are Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Sherard and Wilde's long-suffering wife Constance. But what about Billy Wood the unfortunate first victim and his desperate battered mother Susannah, what about creepy detective Aidan Fraser, and his

feminist fiancée Veronica Sutherland, who channels her frustration at not being allowed to enter the medical profession into an affair with one of the main characters? 'Almost everybody in the book is real,' says Brandreth. 'I don't want to tell the reader who is real and who isn't real, because I want the reader to believe in everybody.' To add to the confusion, the biographical notes at the back of the book, instead of concentrating on the author, as is customary, give priority to the characters, Wilde, Conan Doyle and Sherard, before finally moving on to Gyles Brandreth, as if he were a very junior partner in the enterprise.

### Backlist

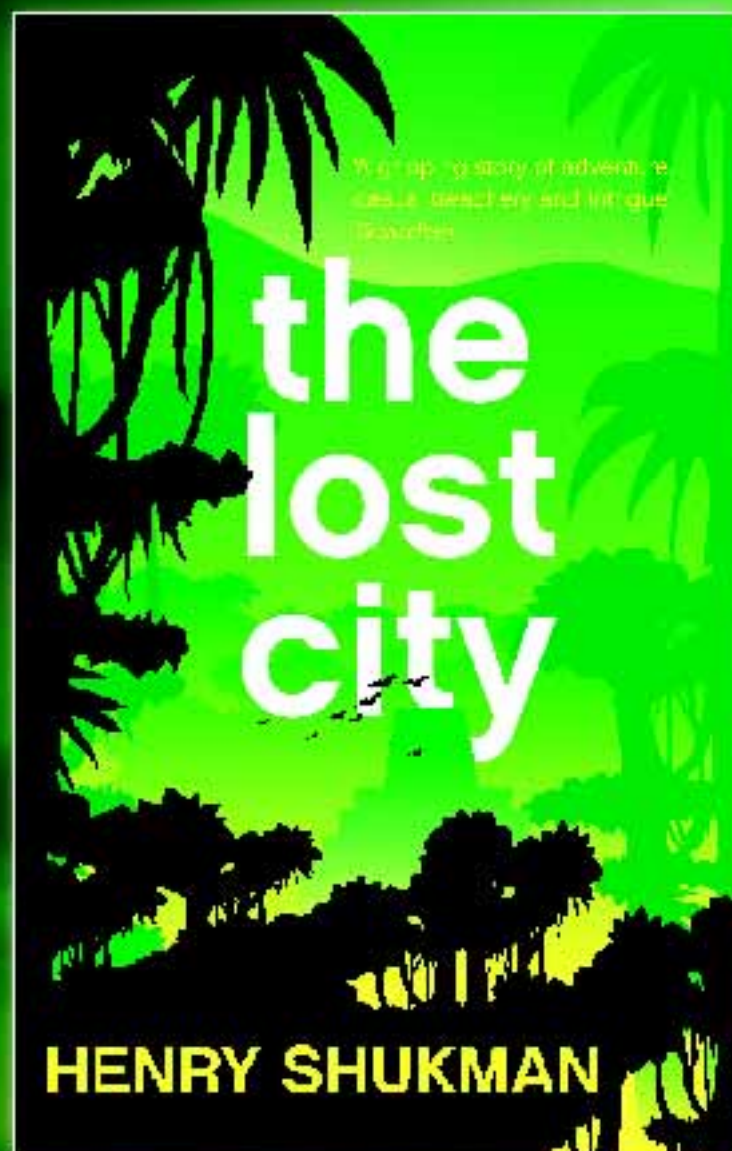
Brandreth says he doesn't know how many books he has published, but he thinks it may be hundreds: 'When I was in my twenties and thirties, I did a lot of books as other people might do journalism. I did books on games and puzzles and humorous books. I churned them out as a journalist might churn out articles.' His more substantial and longer-lasting works include children's books (mostly written when his own children, now in their twenties, were young), theatrical biographies (Dan Leno, John Gielgud), and *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries May 1990-May 1997*, which covers his years as a member of parliament in the last Conservative government.

'Somebody said to me, "Weren't you unlucky to have John Major as the prime minister to write about? Alan Clark had Margaret Thatcher." But the point is, John Major was prime minister too. Somebody else said to me, I forget who originated this phrase, "be not too proud to be there." I think it is quite interesting to find people as you find them and portray them.' *Breaking the Code* reveals the author's fascination with the political process and mastery of it, but is vague about his beliefs – what, for example, led him to be a Conservative rather than Labour or Lib Dem? 'I am reluctant to talk about politics,' he says, which seems odd, coming from a political diarist. 'I could only be a Conservative. I mean, I am instinctively a Conservative. The very fact that you query me on my views on policy, shows that possibly you are not a Conservative. It's a mark of me being Conservative that I do not have enormous views on a great number of things. That to me is what makes a Conservative attractive. My kind of Conservative believes in as little government as possible. Society is changed by small individual things happening on the ground.

'I did of course find the political process

“If you ask me what I am best known for, it's probably wearing colourful jumpers on television in the 1980s.”

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completely fascinating. I would still be a politician I think, had I not lost my seat, and my lot then being put into opposition. Opposition is not interesting. Being a backbench MP nowadays is not interesting. That may be wrong, but that's the way it is. So I'm not sorry not to have spent the last ten years ferreting around on the back benches.'

## Monarchy

He has also written books on the English language (*The Joy of Lex* and *More Joy of Lex*), and royal biographies, including *Philip and Elizabeth: Portrait of a Marriage*. He approached this from the point of view of someone who knows and is fascinated by the eponymous pair, rather than any strong interest in the concept of monarchy as an institution. 'Monarchy is absurd, it's completely absurd, the whole notion, you know – "Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness". The very phrases are absurd. Walking backwards in front of somebody is absurd.' He recalls the comment attributed to Joyce Grenfell's mother, to the effect that when royalty leave the room it is a bit like getting a pip out of your tooth.

'You wouldn't necessarily invent royalty if it didn't exist,' Brandreth acknowledges, 'but since it's there, it turns out to be quite useful. A lot of people feel that they are given validation by the Queen when she comes to see what they are doing. And I think it's quite nice to have someone who is above politics, away from politics, who is this kind of figurehead.' A figurehead, but not a celebrity. 'One of the things that I know frustrates the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh is living in this celebrity age. They are not celebrities. One of the things that worried them about Diana, and Sarah Ferguson, was that they may have confused the celebrity they got from being royal with the kind of celebrity one gets from being a famous TV chef, which is a different thing altogether.'

## Brief encounters

Our time runs out and Brandreth goes off to find me a copy of *Brief Encounters, Meetings with Remarkable People*, a collection of his own journalistic interviews. He writes a nice message inside, signs it, hands it over and sees me to the door. 'Good luck with the piece!' he calls after me, his voice perfectly projected to be audible above the roar of the west London rush hour traffic. 'Make it work! Invent some quotes!'

I haven't felt the need to. Even if the interview had run out of steam, *Brief Encounters* would have kept me well supplied with bons mots – 'My wife often says I am a lesbian's idea of a real man' – and anecdotes – 'I sensed Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols was going to butt my head. I said,

"Lovely to meet you, Mr Rotten." He said, "F\*\*\* off, f\*\*\* face."

*Brief Encounters* is not just a series of interviews, fascinating though they are. Jeffrey Archer allows Brandreth to run one of psychologist Abraham Maslow's profiling tests on him; Sarah Duchess of York and Lord Montagu of Beaulieu burst into tears; Ann Widdecombe's response to Brandreth's tape recorder breaking down is to chortle with glee at her old friend's discomfiture, but then save the day with her capacious memory. The book engages with the very business of interviewing and being interviewed. What techniques are useful? What tricks can you get away with? What if the interviewee sets out to seduce (literally, metaphorically or both) the interviewer? Part of me wishes I had read *Brief Encounters* before I met its author, because some of its advice and observations are so acute and wise; another part is glad I didn't, because he would surely have recognised his own tips (or the ones he got from Alan Whicker or Walter Cronkite) being put into action.

The book explores the ethics of interviewing your friends, and the relationship between celebrity and what is being celebrated. At times it is less than gallant – perhaps Cheryl Baker from Bucks Fizz really did have a drip on her nose and a cold sore on her lip when she appeared with Brandreth on TV-am in 1984, but they can't have been all that distasteful to Brandreth, or their on-screen kiss wouldn't have lasted three minutes 45 seconds, as Brandreth boasts. And why on earth did he have to include (admittedly only in passing) Gerald Nabarro's 'would you like your daughter to marry a big buck nigger?' remark, if all he had to say about it was that it illustrated Nabarro's 'deft way with words'? But elsewhere *Brief Encounters* is fascinating, funny, informative, surprising, moving and self-aware.

Notwithstanding the page-turning fun of *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* and the gossipy fascination of the books about Westminster skulduggery and royal pairings, *Brief Encounters* is my favourite of the Brandreth books that I have read, and I would recommend it to anyone who reads interviews, conducts them or allows themselves to be interviewed – though they may not do so any more, after reading *Brief Encounters*.

I keep going back to it and re-reading my favourite bits. I was only with Brandreth for a couple of hours, during which he did most of the talking, but he nevertheless seems to have summed me up sufficiently to know that of all the hundred-plus titles he might have given me, *Brief Encounters* was the one that would really ring my bells. That's the Brandreth charm for you. ■

*Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* by Gyles Brandreth is one of this issue's featured books.

See page 62.

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