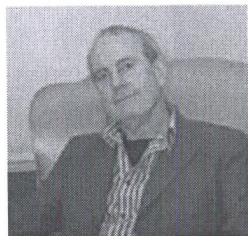


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## Gyles Brandreth: An aesthete's adventures

23.03.07 Benedicte Page

Gyles Brandreth has the next decade of his writing life all planned out: he intends to spend it sitting in front of a computer screen in the company of Oscar Wilde, producing a nine-book series of "traditional murder mysteries" in which the celebrated playwright, wit and gay icon appears as a Victorian detective. Moreover, Wilde has assistance in his investigations from none other than his good friend Arthur Conan Doyle.

This unlikely but amusing concept is to be given its first outing in *Oscar Wilde and the Candlelight Murders* (John Murray, May), with a book following every year thereafter for nine years. Publishers have reacted eagerly, and deals have been signed with Simon & Schuster in the US, as well as with publishers in Italy, France and Russia, all committing to the series.

The multi-talented Brandreth is variously a writer; a broadcasting veteran of programmes such as "Just a Minute", "Countdown" and "TV-am", where he became famous for his brightly coloured jumpers; a former theatre producer; and, under John Major, a Tory MP and government whip. He is also a lifelong enthusiast for the work of Oscar Wilde, and a fountain of knowledge on the subject.

As a child, he lived near Wilde's stomping grounds and was taken by his father to visit room 118 in Sloane Street's Cadogan Hotel, where the homosexual Wilde was arrested in 1895 before incarceration in Reading jail for committing "indecent acts". As a schoolboy, he listened eagerly to first-hand anecdotes about Wilde relayed by an elderly ex-headmaster of his boarding school, Bedales, who had known Oscar and his wife Constance in earlier days.

Taking tea in the Cadogan's famous room 118, Brandreth explains how he came up with the cheeky idea of making the aesthete and conversationalist the hero of a detective novel, after reading *Memories and Adventures* by Arthur Conan Doyle.

"I loved it. I am a huge fan of this interesting, rather dour-looking man [Conan Doyle]. But I was amazed to find, reading the book, that Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde were friends. So unlikely! Conan Doyle was in every sense straight as a die, in the tradition of Kipling and Baden Powell, and the master of the adventure yarn. But he fell for Wilde in the best sense, and admired him, and they became firm friends."

In August 1889, the two met for dinner at the Langham Hotel at the invitation of American publisher J M Stoddart, who wanted them both to write for him. "He wanted murder mysteries," explains Brandreth. "He commissioned from Arthur Conan Doyle what became the second Sherlock Holmes story, *The Sign of Four*, and he commissioned from Oscar what became *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. So I had these men sitting over dinner at the Langham Hotel discussing murder, and that was the beginning of the adventure."

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Brandreth then does a very funny impression of his agent Ed Victor receiving the idea: "Gyles, this is a very exciting concept. Wow! Wow!"

Brandreth says that his nine-part series will be set across the arc of Wilde's celebrated career and downfall. "There are dramatic changes in his life: the young man at Oxford, the brilliant prince of the aesthetic; this tragic figure in Reading jail; this glorious figure on trial, putting up this amazing performance; this touching figure after he's released from prison, living in France under an assumed name."

Because Wilde knew all the famous people of his day, there's plenty of opportunity for appearances by them—for example, Bram Stoker will pop up in the second book in the series, where Wilde's lover Bosie makes his first appearance. And, because the elderly ex-headmaster at Bedales informed Brandreth that Oscar used to practise his witticisms on friends and family before making use of them elsewhere, Brandreth feels it quite legitimate to borrow some of Wilde's famous turns of phrase.

The first book in the series features Oscar on the case of a slain rent boy, but Brandreth seems to be intending to tackle the subject of Wilde's homosexual life with some care. "Oscar is a great man, a huge personality and belongs to everybody," he insists. "Of course he is a great gay icon, and quite right too, but he does not belong in a gay ghetto. There's no doubt that Wilde, when he got married, was committed to his marriage, and he was a devoted father, and loved women and had lady friends of all sorts.

"I wanted to dive into the deep end with this book—hence the murder of the boy—but at the same time create a book that is going to appeal to somebody who enjoys a murder mystery in the tradition of Conan Doyle or Dorothy L Sayers rather than anything too louche."


#### **Brilliant Oscar**

And how could Wilde, in between penning scintillating plays, uttering sparkling witticisms and leading a sexual double life, possibly find the time to solve murder?

"Because he was brilliant!" proclaims Brandreth confidently. "He was a thinker, he was an observer, he had the ability to look and remember—his plays are social comedies where he is observing the scene. He's also a poet, and it's the poet that can make strange leaps [of the imagination].

"And he could listen: when he was a boy in Dublin, his father Sir William Wilde was a great raconteur and knew all the great social and political figures of the day, and he used to invite his small sons Willie and Oscar down to the dinner table to sit and listen. So this is what Oscar was born to do."

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