

An aesthete's adventures

Oscar Wilde is set to return in an unlikely new guise as a detective. The man responsible, Gyles Brandreth, tells **Benedicte Page** about the ambitious nine-book murder mystery series he has devised

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



Photo: Iliaz Spiets

Brandreth in room 118 in the Cadogan Hotel, where Oscar Wilde was arrested

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 Sher-

lock 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."

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 down-

CV

Born 1948

Educated at Bedales School, Hampshire, and New College, Oxford, where he was president of the Oxford Union, editor of student magazine *Isis* and director of the Oxford University Dramatic Society

1970s Worked in theatre. Was artistic director of the Oxford Theatre Festival from 1974–76, and co-produced three West End plays

1980s Had a high profile as a TV personality, including appearances on "Countdown" and "TV-am". Continues to appear regularly on BBC Radio in comedy and current affairs programmes

1992–1997 Conservative MP for Chester and served as a government whip

Is a widely published journalist and the author of numerous books, most recently royal biographies *Philip and Elizabeth* (2004) and *Charles and Camilla* (2005), both published by Century

Married with three grown-up children

Climbing high

Jacquetta Megarry started her series of 'rucksack-friendly' guidebooks by tackling the routes herself. By **Anna Richardson**



Megarry: "I wanted to redesign the format from the bottom up"

© Allan Milligan

Ten years ago, Jacquetta Megarry was a well-paid IT consultant living in Dunblane, embarking on the occasional trip to North America, Europe and Africa. Today, she is a publisher developing a list of guidebooks who has climbed Aconcagua and Kilimanjaro twice, has walked the Inca Trail and the Great Wall of China, and is about to join a medical research expedition to the Himalayas—something of a transformation for the 59-year-old grandmother.

It all started in 1998, when Megarry completed her first long-distance walk, the West Highland Way, with a friend. Heading to Kilimanjaro a year later, she was hooked: "There's something passionately and deeply relaxing about going to altitude and having all your kit with you, appreciating that food and shelter are enough to get through the day," she says.

Megarry found conventional guidebook formats lacking, so decided to invent "rucksack-friendly" versions. She launched Rucksack Readers in 2000, subsidising her first books, *The Great Glen Way* and *The West Highland Way*, with her IT earnings.

She wanted to produce them herself from her Dunblane home rather than take her idea elsewhere: "I knew I had to be the publisher, because I wanted to redesign the for-

mat from the bottom up. Everything about the books is different."

The waterproof guides are arranged in vertical spreads, with a map that folds into the back cover and drops down when needed. "They are very rich visually," says Megarry. "We put the same resources, cost and effort into the text, photographs and cartography." Her seven summits Pocket Summit series, of which there are two titles to date, is also designed with high altitude in mind, with page counts kept to 96 and the weight under four ounces.

Fulfilling her dream was not easy, Megarry says: "I had no financial training; there never was a business plan. Getting the books right was a challenge, but much harder was getting them into the book trade, and understanding the mechanism of distributors, wholesalers and retail." To begin with, she did everything herself—climbing the mountains, writing the books, and dealing with distribution and marketing—but now most jobs are outsourced, from writing and design to distribution through Booksources.

Rucksack Readers now has 15 titles, many in their second or third editions, and the business is starting to take off, with Megarry's imminent departure to the Himalayas attracting Scottish and national media attention. (She will spend 23 days with the Xtreme Everest expedition as one of 200 volunteers being tested to determine the causes of altitude sickness and effects of oxygen deprivation.) "A head of steam seems to have built up," she says. "This is our seventh year, and suddenly we've been discovered—it helps enormously."

Traffic to the company's website, www.rucsacs.com, is also increasing, mainly because its forum facility went live last month. "The website is central to everything we do," Megarry stresses. "We like being in dialogue with our customers and, whereas the book trade sales are necessary and desirable, we regard the web sale as the profitable sale."

But Megarry is determined not to get ahead of herself. "We'll only expand at the rate that we can manage and sustain the quality [of our books]. We don't say: 'Stack 'em high and sell 'em cheap.' We've got lots of ideas for expansion, but we're not suddenly going to release another 10 or 15 titles this year." She wants to complete the Pocket Summit series by 2011.

Unfortunately, she won't promote her wares at London Book Fair this year, because she leaves for Everest on 7th April. "Earls Court or Kathmandu?" she asks. "No contest."

CV

1948 Born in Woking, Surrey

1965 Studied mathematics, psychology with history and philosophy at New Hall, Cambridge

1969 Worked as secondary school teacher in mathematics and physics

1973 Became lecturer in education at Jordanhill College of Education

1981 Turned freelance education consultant with emphasis on IT

1998 Embarked on the West Highland Way, her first long-distance walk

1999 Climbed Kilimanjaro for the first time

2000 Launched Rucksack Readers
Lives with husband Keir Bloomer in Dunblane

fall. "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."