

HICKEY

AMIALE polymath Stephen Fry, who narrated the Harry Potter audiobooks, light-heartedly recalls author JK Rowling, pictured, proving unsympathetic after being informed he was struggling to pronounce the tongue-twister "Harry Potter pocketed it", when reading her work.



Appearing on ITV, Fry remembers: "I called her up and said, 'Would it be all right if I [instead] said, 'Harry put it in his pocket', which I can say? She said: 'No.'"

He adds: "And not only that, but in the following books, right up to the last one, she made sure the phrase was in. A little bomb left for me. I'd be cursing her!"

CURMUDGEONLY movie star Hugh Grant fumed at British Airways on Twitter this week: "Just to point out that no one on your planes believes any of the reasons you give for delays and cancellations. We're not idiots. And by the way, we're passengers not customers."

A BA spokesman later publicly apologised to Hugh for any "disruption", courteously adding: "Your comments are very much appreciated."

Mr Grant appeared to have second thoughts about the rant – he later deleted his tweet.

ALMOST 50 years since his band Slade topped the charts with Merry Xmas Everybody in 1973, drummer Don Powell is shown old footage of festive rivals Wizzard during an appearance on Sky News.

After watching Wizzard frontman Roy Wood belting out I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday on Top Of The Pops – it reached number four behind Slade – Powell confesses: "Actually, that's my favourite Christmas record."

HIGH-profile Labour MP Chris Bryant, these days chair of the Commons Committee on Standards, acknowledges he isn't averse to enjoying the odd tittle in Westminster.

Recalling being asked by his doctor about his alcohol intake, the Welshman mischievously reveals: "I said, 'A parliamentary amount!'"

CELEBRATING the 30th anniversary of much-loved festive movie The Muppet Christmas Carol, starring Sir Michael Caine as Ebenezer Scrooge, pictured, American puppeteer Dave Goelz (who operates Muppets character Gonzo), enthuses: "I was so taken with the way Michael was performing and the fact that he never blinks in a shot. That's one part of his technique. You'll never see Michael Caine blink."



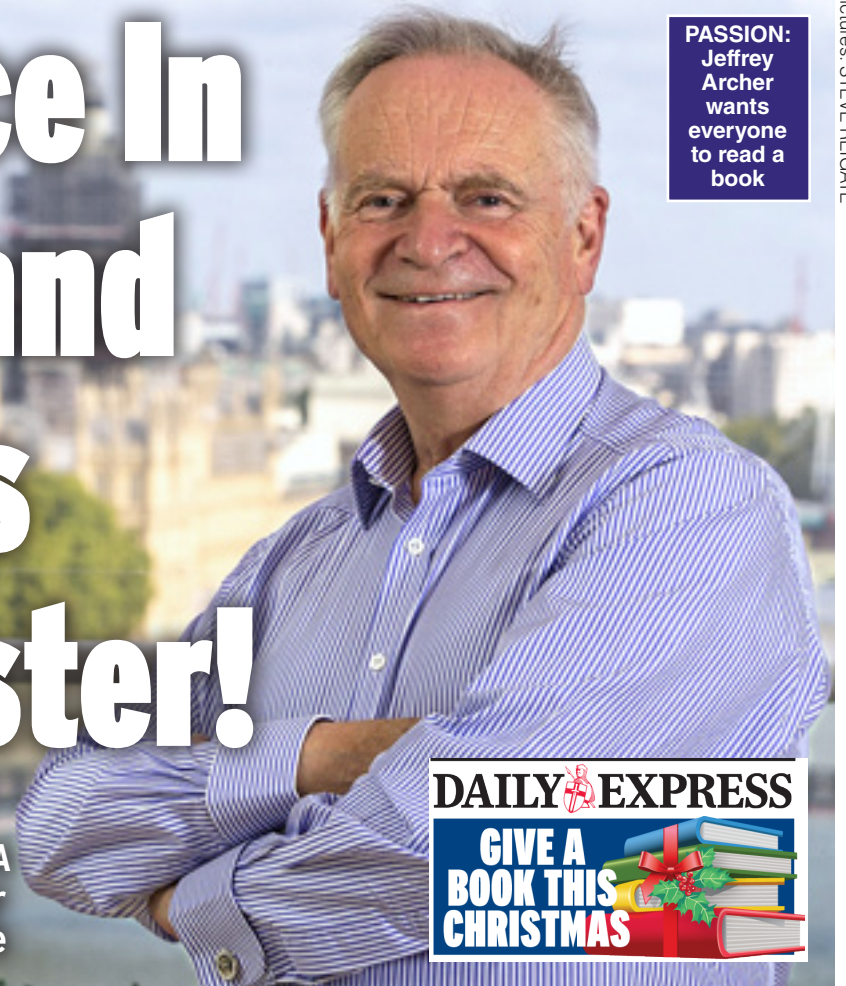
OUTSPOKEN actress Miriam Margolyes remarks: "I do love shocking people. I do get a bit of a buzz... but if you say really awful things, that can upset people, and I don't want to do that."

News, no doubt, to the numerous showbiz figures Miriam lashed out at in her recent memoir.

ASKED how he keeps in tip-top shape at 82, Sir Cliff Richard playfully responds: "I take eight vitamins every day – one of them keeps me alive. I don't know which one!"

From Alice In Wonderland to Jeeves and Wooster!

As he lends his support to the Daily Express Christmas campaign with Give A Book, master storyteller Jeffrey Archer reveals how reading shaped his own tale



PASSION: Jeffrey Archer wants everyone to read a book

Pictures: STEVE REIGATE



EXCLUSIVE By Jane Warren

JEFFREY ARCHER has been an avid reader since, as a small boy, his mother introduced him to Swallows And Amazons. "It's a story with enduring appeal," says Lord Archer today. "I was very lucky with my mother; parents are very important. If they just say, 'Go and watch TV' it's very sad. Give a book and you get a person started."

That is why the author, who counts himself lucky to have grown up in a book-reading household, is backing the Daily Express Christmas campaign in partnership with charity Give A Book. The young Jeffrey progressed to Alice In Wonderland before his mother, Lola, a local newspaper columnist in their hometown of Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, decided to take Jeffrey's reading sessions in a new and unexpected direction.

"After Alice, slightly unusually, we went straight on to PG Wodehouse," recalls the author with a chuckle. And this, he insists, is not the only strange fact concerning himself and the creator of Jeeves and Wooster.

"The two most popular authors in India are myself and Wodehouse. Kane And Abel has been read by 100 million people in India, and they just love PG Wodehouse," he says.

He professes not to know what the connection might be between his bestselling title, which has sold more than 34 million copies worldwide, and the fictional creations of Sir Pelham Wodehouse. But when pressed, he suggests: "I think they equate me with being very British. In fact, I'm always surprised by how well my books sell abroad."

Sharing books with his mother and grandmother, who was equally "big on reading", led to a lifelong passion and eventually to his enduring and prolific career.

"I got lucky; my favourite master at school introduced me to Dickens," he recalls. "A Christmas Carol and Oliver Twist, which is also set at Christmas, were the best of the lot."

Even at 82, Lord Archer still holds himself to a relentless writing regime which takes place in two-hour increments throughout the day – he rattles off his routine at breakneck speed, with pride.

He's currently working on a new title in

his William Warwick series. Entitled Next In Line, it concerns an incident connected to Princess Diana that "did or didn't happen – readers can make up their minds", he says.

He continues: "To be honest, I'm frightened of stopping," he says of a career that has seen his 42 titles sell in excess of 275 million copies. "I do it because I love it. I'd pack it all in and go and watch the football if I didn't, and I'll stop the day I don't enjoy it. But if one gets an exciting idea you want to get on with it."

He doesn't understand people who want to stop working.

"We're all living to great ages; retirement will soon be at the age of 75. In my father's day, you got a gold watch at 65 and conveniently died at 70. I remember the mayor in Weston-super-Mare holding a tea party for a lady who had reached 100. Today, you'd be holding a tea party every day."

However, he doubts he'll make it to a century himself.

"So many friends have died that I just get up each day, look out of the window and say, 'Great, I'm still alive.'" This statement is deliv-



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ered in a joyful bellow. Lord Archer is a huge believer in getting books into the hands of those who need them the most, even when that involves lost royalties. "In India they steal my books," he guffaws.

"They buy them in London the day they come out, and have them on the streets three days later at a third of the price."

"I don't give a damn. It's wonderful that people are able to get hold of them. I'd give away a million copies of Kane And Abel if I could give them to people who'd never read a book. Some would want to read more."

He says that JK Rowling has done a "brilliant job" getting a whole generation reading. "Once you have readers, you try to pick up crumbs from the table as an author. If you can get to the young and capture them, they are yours."

AND, unlike some successful literary figures, he is always gracious to his fans. "Every writer should be painfully aware it's a great honour to have your book read. You can Twitter away in a few seconds, or watch a film in 100 minutes, but it takes six hours to read a book. I'm always very grateful when someone says they've read my latest because they have invested a significant amount of time in it." Fans, in his experience, come in "two extremes".

"This weekend was typical. I sat between a lady and a gentleman. The lady said, 'Jeffrey, I've read everything,'" he impersonates her swooning voice. "The chap said, 'They tell me you're a writer.'"

The power of books in the lives of those who need them the most, is something that clearly fascinates him. His favourite book is Beware Of Pity by Stefan Zweig.

"An Indian lady came up to me and said, 'You are my second favourite author'. I asked, of course, who her first author was, and since then I've read everything he wrote." Was her assessment correct? He guffaws again: "I could never be as good as him. He was an Austrian Jew with an academic background and was a very fine scholar, as well as a fine storyteller."

He adds: "I've long believed the secret of getting people to read is getting people to read, and what better way than giving a book? The greatest compliment an author can receive is, 'Yours is the book I first read.'"