

No, Mr Bond ... I expect you to Give A Book

Die Another Day and Alex Rider star Toby Stephens backs the Daily Express Christmas appeal in partnership with the inspirational reading charity



GRIPPING STUFF: Toby Stephens, and inset below, playing baddie Gustav Graves alongside Pierce Brosnan in the James Bond film Die Another Day

AWAY from home or filming overseas, actor Toby Stephens would try to record stories for his three young children because he didn't want them to miss their bedtime reading. It was especially important because, growing up the son of theatre royalty Dame Maggie Smith and Robert Stevens, his parents were often performing in the evenings.

"My mother never read me bedtime stories, that was never part of my childhood," he admits today. "To be honest, she was working. When I was young, she was doing a lot of theatre, long runs that kept her out, but I was always encouraged to read. Both my step-father [playwright Beverley Cross] and my mother were incredibly well read. Not in a pretentious way, they just read a lot, so it was a habit that was observed and, like a lot of these things, you pick it up from your parents."

"I really enjoyed reading to my own kids and thought it was important because it's such a lovely connection. When I was filming abroad, I'd record myself reading. That was part of our relationship and it was important to us to keep it going."

All of which explains why Toby, 53, whose roles have included Bond villain Gustav Graves opposite Pierce Brosnan in Die Another Day, Mr Rochester in the BBC's Jane Eyre and, more recently, baddie Damian Cray in the hit Amazon adaptation of Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider young adult thrillers, is a keen supporter of Give A Book.

The inspirational charity, whose aim is to promote books and the pleasure of reading in hard-to-reach places like prisons, mother and baby units and among disadvantaged children, is the Daily Express Christmas fundraising partner for 2022. Founder Victoria Gray, widow of playwright

EXCLUSIVE By Matt Nixon

and Smoking Diaries author Simon Gray, says readers had responded magnificently, despite the cost-of-living crisis and uncertainty over energy bills and inflation.

Toby continues: "Victoria was telling me about their work in prisons, getting inmates to write stories for their children or to read for them and that's such a great thing for them to be able to do, rather than just going, 'Okay we're shutting the door on you'."

"Part of the purpose of prison is reformative, to help inmates express themselves

better and expand themselves, and reading, alone or as a group activity, talking about writing and books, is such a great way for people to connect."

The actor got to know Simon while appearing in his play, Japes, about

the relationship with his brother in the early noughties. He recalls: "He had this incredible ability, his plays and diaries are so conversational in style, it's rather like acting."

"When you see people on stage, it's very easy to watch, it just looks like they're talking. And I think people have the misconception that, because it looks easy, it is easy. But it's incredibly difficult to get to that point where you sound that way."

"To have the ability to write conversationally is very difficult but Simon honed that in his diaries and I think that's why they were so successful. It was like you were listening to him speak. For me, it was just talking to him. He was so amusing and fascinating and his view on life was oblique in so many ways but very true. He articulated things in a way you hadn't heard but you went, 'Yes, that's exactly right'."

That's why, the London-based star, who has a son and two daugh-



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GIVE A Book puts books into the hands of those who need them most.

A £5 donation will provide one book; £10 will add a book bag; while £25 will give a whole book bundle. To support the Daily Express Christmas Campaign, please send donations (cheques only, payable to Give A Book) to:

**DX Give A Book Campaign,
112-114 Holland Park Avenue,
London W11 4UA**

**Or you can donate online via:
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ters with his actress wife Anna-Louise Plowman, insists that Give A Book is such a marvellous testament to Simon's memory and talents. But off-stage, I wonder, are we losing our ability to have such conversations because of the growth of social media, emojis, and textspeak?

TOBY laughs: "The text messages I get from my son are literally acronyms! But language is always metamorphosing and I hope this current phase we're in – this tech phase – is not completely reductive. I grew up without smartphones or computers so I have a chunk of my life when I didn't rely on them. "But I am a father and you can't deny children this whole area of their social lives. There's a point in their life when you have to hand this thing to them – their first phone – and you go, 'There you are, there's basically adulthood'."

"It's sort of coming earlier and earlier. I do see the way they interact with these things and it is scary but it's the job of every older generation to be scared of what's going on with the younger generation. 'Oh my God, it's terrible, it's the end of the world'." As a child, Toby loved the imagi-

nary worlds of The Wind In The Willows, Winnie The Pooh, and Alice In Wonderland.

"Compared to the writing we have now, and I'm not poo-pooing it, they're really complex," He says. "The language of AA Milne for example; I remember reading him to my kids and they're extremely funny. I was laughing more than they were."

"Alice In Wonderland and Through The Looking Glass are beautifully written, they're pretty hallucinogenic. There's something slightly eerie about them. I remember reading poems like [Lewis Carroll's] The Walrus and the Carpenter and thinking it's really quite creepy."

Toby has also returned to Roald Dahl's classic children's books with his own children. "They're beautifully wicked. There's a sort of darkness to all of them," he says.

"It's not patronising to kids, it's like: 'You can handle this and I bet you're going to really enjoy it'. The Twits is probably our favourite, one of the darkest. And the grandmother in George's Marvellous Medicine is so creepy."

Looking forward to Christmas with his family, Toby adds: "If you can support Give A Book it's the most brilliant present for someone you'll never know. But you'll have shared something special with them anyway... a love of books."