

Books have always been

EXCLUSIVE
By Jane Warren

DAME Penelope Wilton has an instantly recognisable face but her natural humility goes part way to explaining how she can shape-shift so convincingly into roles as varied as the strong-willed Isobel Crawley in *Downton Abbey* and the perennially put-upon Ann Bryce in BBC sitcom *Ever Decreasing Circles*, in which she starred opposite the late Richard Briers.

She's received six Olivier Award nominations for her stage work, winning one in 2015 for *Taken At Midnight*, while her film appearances include *Cry Freedom*, *Calendar Girls*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and last year's *Operation Mincemeat*. She also recently appeared opposite Ricky Gervais as wise widow Anne in his poignant comedy-drama *After Life*. Naturally rather shy and very un-starry, she rarely gives interviews. Her daily routine, she tells me, consists of long walks around London where she hopes not to be recognised.

"There is a funny myth about actors being very outward-going people. Some are and some are not. I'm definitely not," she explains earnestly. "I'm quite a private person. I like acting – particularly in the theatre – because I like being someone else."

Cloaking herself in a character remains constantly compelling, even mid-way into her eighth decade. "Every part I play is my favourite part while I'm battling with it," explains the 76-year-old grande dame of stage and screen.

"I like things that are difficult. Someone once said when you buy a painting, don't buy the first painting you immediately like because you'll soon get bored with it. Instead, choose something more complicated so you can live with it longer."

Despite her stellar success – she was made a Dame in 2016 – and the high esteem in which she is held, she remains frustrated at her lack of an academic education (she studied at drama college).

This in part has led her to support the inspirational charity Give A Book. Its 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.

It is the Daily Express Christmas fundraising partner for 2022. Founder Victoria Gray, widow of playwright and *Smoking Diaries* author Simon Gray, has praised Express readers for their support, despite the cost-of-living crisis and uncertainty over inflation and energy bills.

Give A BOOK'S illustrious patron is Lady Antonia Fraser, widow of playwright Harold Pinter whose *Betrayal* – based on his own clandestine affair with broadcaster Joan Bakewell in the 60s – gave Dame Penelope a huge break in her career. "It was a pivotal moment for me," she says. "It was a huge chance, especially as I'd just come out of hospital having just had a baby. I was 31 when I auditioned for the part."

HER premature daughter Alice was three months old, and Penelope left the tiny infant upstairs with theatre staff while she auditioned.

"I was more concerned with my baby than the audition," she admits. "As I went up the stairs I could hear this screaming baby and I was feeding her when Harold walked in and said, 'Penelope, I'd like you to be in my play'."

It was a key moment for the Scarborough-born actress, second of



VERSATILE: Penelope with Maggie Smith in *Downton Abbey*

As she backs the Daily Express campaign on behalf of Give A Book, the *Downton Abbey* and *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* star reveals her lifelong regret about not having enjoyed a more academic education... and how reading has helped plug vital gaps in her knowledge



three daughters of a Cambridge-educated barrister who became a businessman after the war. "My father absolutely adored us but he was very much more interested in the education of his granddaughters, than his daughters, so I had the most ghastly education," she admits today.

"He was busy working, so those decisions were left to my wonderful mother who thought we ought to go to boarding school, but sent us to one that majored in needlework!"

It is evident the now defunct convent, Oak Hall in Haslemere, Surrey, spent more time training young women to be ladies than educating them.

"Girls' education was seen as less important, so I've spent my whole life feeling rather resentful and having to do a lot of catching up. I wasn't very well educated, but I would like to have had a better education," she tells me.

"I can't pretend I'm brain of Britain. I've had to work very hard and do a lot of reading."

She attended the Drama Centre London from 1965 to 1968, but has an ongoing fascination with the degree she didn't do. "I was slightly dyslexic as a child, but I loved encyclopaedias because they had pictures in them. I also loved skeletons and was very keen on biology. It was all very interesting to me."

"I read a lot of American novels, detective type things, and all of Iris Murdoch. Then, once I was working

in theatre, I read a lot of plays and hence a lot of biographies in order to research writers such as Ibsen, Chekhov and Shakespeare."

Her favourite book *Renoir, My Father* – which she has read many times over the years – is a memoir of the French painter Auguste Renoir by his son Jean, the Oscar-winning film director. She also loves biographies of artists such as Matisse.

SHE is a staunch advocate of prisoners being able to read to their own children and books in prison more generally, something Give A Book's partner organisation, Prison Reading Groups, specialises in. It connects inmates and families through books, including projects to help prisoners enjoy books with their children.

"There are many reasons why it's a good idea to have books in prison, not least because they are the only real escape," reflects Dame Penelope.

"Education comes through learning about other people's lives in every sense. Reading to a child, means a prisoner is contributing to a child's life, even though they are not with them all the time."

"What else do you talk about? You can't just sit there. But if you pop a small person on your knee and read to them, you are contributing in a proper way – doing something together."

Prison doesn't mean life has to come to an end. They have already been condemned, so to condemn them again by removing books could make someone even more resentful." She adds: "Books are a sort of redemption, I think."

● See the box, right, to help support Give A Book

SUPPORT: Penelope is backing the charity Give A Book



POIGNANT: Dame Penelope with Ricky Gervais in *After Life*

a sort of redemption...

Picture: WILL IRELAND/PINPEP



'There are many reasons why it's a good idea to have books in prison... it's the only real escape'

Shakespeare helped inspire the 'Jail Bard'

EXCLUSIVE

By James Murray

WHEN former repeat offender Errol McGlashan was serving time in prison, he found solace and hope in Shakespeare. "You can't go to prison without someone shoving Shakespeare at you," says the 59-year-old Londoner who has some 60 convictions for theft, violence and drugs.

"The first time I read Henry V I found it impenetrable. I had to watch a video of the play and then read it in a group and then I got into it a lot better. One of the greatest Shakespeare truisms is, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'.

"I truly believe that. We are all acting. That is why acting and drama is the pinnacle of self-development, especially if you can bring your own personal circumstances into role play."

Reading Shakespeare helped Errol turn his back on crime and unleash his creative talents, which is why the prisoner-turned-performance poet passionately backs our Christmas fundraising campaign in partnership with charity Give A Book.

"I enjoyed reading anything when I was young but I didn't get proper guidance so I stuck with Enid Blyton –

"I loved the adventures of the Famous Five," says Errol, who grew up in Hillingdon, West London.

"I never knew my dad. I was put into care when I was one. I was taken out when I was 11 and lived with my mum, my brother and two sisters. I got put back into care when I was 12 when everything got too much for my mum."

One of his biggest regrets from that time is that nobody was encouraging him to read or advising him on what he should be reading.

"When I was about 14 and on a trip to Spain with the boys' home, one of the social workers said to me, 'Don't you think you're a bit old to be reading Enid Blyton?' It never occurred to me to read books more suited to my age."

The social worker presented him with a copy of Ernest Hemingway's Spanish civil war classic, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, which he enjoyed. But as he grew up into adulthood, he started smoking marijuana and mixing with criminals, which inevitably led to jail.

"I soon realised that I could get through time spent in a police cell, remand or serving a prison sentence by making sure I had a book I could get locked into," he explains. "I was one of



PERFORMANCE
POETRY: Errol
McGlashan in action

those people who always had a book wherever I was. In prison, it's difficult having a decent conversation with someone. All our minds are numb because all we're doing is watching TV."

While in HMP Thameside, next to East London's notorious Belmarsh Prison, he joined three book groups. "That encouraged you to read the book because you knew you were going to be talking about it," he explains.

"I read all sorts of books – from fiction to poetry, travel writing, everything.

"I asked for a single cell so that I would read in peace. I was often reading passages in my cell on my own. I also ran a weekly poetry club."

Now a spoken word poet and pro-reading activist, Errol has written a 70-minute play called *Something To Take Off The Edge* which he performs as well. The story centres on cellmates Ezra and Terry who discover an unlikely friendship as they chat about drugs, Chocolate Hobnobs and Shakespeare.

As well as performing, Errol visits prisons on behalf of Give A Book's partner Prison Reading Groups, in order to spread the word about the importance of reading.

"A lot of prisoners go to the gym to stimulate their muscles, but there is not much mental stimulation going on inside," he adds. "I preferred the mental stimulation of reading. Reading improves your mood, helps your understanding and helps you reflect on yourself. When you read you understand things better. You've got that empathy thing going on. You understand how life is for others."

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