

# The DEFINITE ARTICLE

*We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week it's the turn of novelist Jilly Cooper*

**The prized possession you value above all others...** Bluebell, my black rescued Irish greyhound. She's the greatest comfort when she curls up with her head on my shoulder in bed at night.

**The biggest regret you wish you could amend...** Putting two bossy ladies I knew in my book *The Common Years*. They always ticked me off for my dogs behaving badly on Putney Common in the 70s, so I got my own back by writing about them. I changed their names, but I still feel guilty because it was mean.

**The temptation you wish you could resist...** Alcohol, particularly when I interview someone over lunch for book research. It deteriorates into a party and next day I can't remember a thing and my notebook is empty.

**The book that holds an everlasting resonance...** *The Incredible Journey* by Sheila Burnford, a sweet children's story about two dogs and a cat travelling across Canada searching for their masters.

**The priority activity if you were the Invisible Woman for a day...** My next novel, called *Tackle!*, is set in the football world, so I'd go in the Chelsea dressing room to listen to the team talk and half-time rollocking.

**The pet hate that makes your hackles rise...** Cruelty to animals.

**The film you can watch time and time again...** *Pride And Prejudice* with Laurence Olivier from 1940. He's faint-makingly divine as Mr Darcy.

**The person who has influenced you most...** My darling husband Leo, who died in 2013 after suffering from Parkinson's. He wasn't frightened to tell me if something I'd written was rubbish, and he was incredibly funny, so I lifted his best lines for my characters.

**The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint...** Lord Byron because he was so witty and glamorous.

**The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child...** Always write thank-you letters, particularly when someone gives you a present because they will be so touched you'll get one next year.

**Laurence Olivier with Greer Garson in *Pride And Prejudice* from 1940. Above right: ornamental pond carp. Far right: Jilly's home in Gloucestershire**



'People think I'm nice but I can't resist gossiping and bitching behind people's backs. It's so much fun!'



**The event that altered the course of your life and character...** Meeting Godfrey Smith, *The Sunday Times* magazine editor, in 1968. I made him laugh and he commissioned an article, which led to a column. It was miraculous for a fat Fulham housewife to get such a job.

**The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity...** I'm mad about fish in ponds. I have three divine carp, which were given to me for my 80th birthday this year. I love watching them whizz around.

**The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again...** The ability to go for long walks in the countryside. Since I had a hip replaced two years ago I can only manage 20 minutes.

**The endless quest that drives you on...** To keep writing. Thinking about characters stops me being bored or lonely.

**The poem that touches your soul...** *For An Adopted Child* by Fleur Conkling Heyliger. Both my children [Emily, 46, and Felix, 48] are adopted because I couldn't have children. It sums up the wonder of adopting.

**The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase...** That I'm always nice. I can never resist gossiping and bitching behind people's backs. It's so much fun but not exactly nice.

**The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it...** I'd alter the law to make it easier for orphans to find loving families.

**The song that means most to you...** *Streets Of London* by Ralph McTell. It reminds me of my old greyhound Feather. I used to sing it to him.

**The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions...** I'd have a lie-in at home in Gloucestershire reading the *Daily Mail*, then go to York racecourse and ride the famous horse Gordon Lord Byron to a win. I'd have a seafood cocktail for lunch at the Butchers Arms near home before watching my local football team Forest Green Rovers win 10-0. I'd see Gangsta Granny with my

five grandchildren in the West End, then catch Verdi's *Don Carlo* at the Royal Opera House. Dinner would be at The Ivy with Lady Annabel Goldsmith and Paul O'Grady, who are as bats as me about dogs. I'd also invite Prince Charles because I think he's having a bad time over this Diana stuff. I'd have scallops and champagne. I'd end the day drinking on the terrace at home with friends and watching the Pegasus constellation gallop across the sky.

**The happiest moment you will cherish forever...** When my father Bill called my mother Elaine to say he was back safely from Dunkirk. I was only three but I remember her being in ecstasy.

**The saddest time that shook your world...** Felix having meningitis and nearly dying when he was five.

**The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you...** To keep all our local newspapers in print.

**The philosophy that underpins your life...** Do good things now, because you may not pass this way again.

**The order of service at your funeral...** It will be at All Saints Church near home with Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings* by Brahms. I'd go out to Eye Level, the theme music to TV show *Van Der Valk*.

**The way you want to be remembered...** She cheered people up.

**The Plug...** *Mount!* by Jilly Cooper is published by Corgi, priced £7.99. Visit [jillycooper.co.uk](http://jillycooper.co.uk). ■

*As told to Rob McGibbon*



## PS...

*Bill Nighy investigates a serial killer on the loose in *The Limehouse Golem*, in cinemas Friday. *The Script's* new album, *Freedom Child*, is out the same day. And Kipling's *The Jungle Book* opens as a circus spectacular at *The Lowry* in Manchester on Tuesday*



## NEXT WEEK

- Exclusive recipes from BBC2's *The Big Family Cooking Showdown*
- Monty Don reveals how easy it is to grow blueberries
- PLUS Britain's best TV listings guide