

# The DEFINITE ARTICLE

*We ask a celebrity a set of probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week: historian Simon Schama, co-host of Civilisations*

**The prized possession you value above all others...** Locks of hair from my two children [Chloe, 35, and Gabriel, 32] when they were toddlers. I keep them in a 19th-century mahogany box, as beautiful mementos of when they were untouched by hardness in life.

**The biggest regret you wish you could amend...** I never learnt to ride a bike! I have tried in adult life, but I fall off.

**The temptation you wish you could resist...** Adjectives. I use them too often, I love their texture and function. They're the puddings of grammar.

**The book that holds an everlasting resonance...** War And Peace by Tolstoy. I read it aged 20 and was spell-bound. All human life is in it.

**The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity...** Baseball. I first went in 1980 to Fenway Park to watch the Boston Red Sox and I'm still a fan.

**The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day...** I'd see the 7th-century Mayan murals at Calakmul, Mexico, which are locked away.

**The pet hate that makes your hackles rise...** Noisy restaurants. I want reviews to give 'ears', not 'stars', to denote which of them are quiet.

**The person who has influenced you most...** My dad, Arthur, was an extraordinary storyteller who read Dickens to me. He died in 1978 aged 77 and his last words to me were, 'Be brave'.

**The film you can watch time and time again...** Singin' In The Rain. My mum [Gertie] and dad were wannabe performers and sang songs from it together, often at breakfast, so it brings back happy memories.

**The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint...** Mark Twain. I adore the bite of his language and his wit.

Left: Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds in Singin' In The Rain. Above: baseball. Right: Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco



'People mistake me for Ian McKellen – but he's much better looking and better at everything than me'

Vermeer's Woman In Blue Reading A Letter and Rembrandt's The Jewish Bride, which is my most beloved.

**The happiest moment you will cherish forever...** Lying in Hyde Park 15 years ago on a summer's evening listening to children yelling at each other in a playground. I remember thinking life is spectacularly wonderful. I live in New York, but London is in my heart.

**The saddest time that shook your world...** The assassination of John F Kennedy in 1963. It turned on something very dark in America.

**The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you...** To produce a musical, preferably Guys And Dolls or West Side Story. If anyone wants to offer me the job, I'm so available!

**The philosophy that underpins your life...** Generosity. Kindness. Passion. And never ever be snooty to a fan.

**The order of service at your funeral...** The Hebrew Kaddish will be read, and I want The Undertones' Teenage Kicks to be played. My body will float from Westminster Bridge to the Thames Estuary in Essex, where I spent part of my youth.

**The way you want to be remembered...** As a good cook, an excessively enthusiastic dancer and someone who made people happy to learn.

**The Plug...** Civilisations, presented by Simon, Mary Beard and David Olusoga, is on BBC2 at 9pm on Thursday. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon



**The piece of wisdom you'd pass on to a child...**

Spend your life doing what makes you happy. That's more valuable than anything in the bank.

**The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again...** Eight velvet smoking jackets in an array of colours from the 1970s – my peacock years! I gave them to charity years ago.

**The unending quest that drives you on...** To make the dead live again in people's imaginations with my work.

**The poem that touches your soul...** The Good-Morrow by John Donne, the greatest love poem ever written.

**The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase...** I get mistaken for Ian McKellen, but he's much better looking and better at everything.

**The event that altered the course of your life and character...** Not going to boarding school as I was meant to. My father, who was in the fabric trade, went broke, so I went to Haberdashers' day school in North London. I had fantastic teachers and was very happy.

**The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it...** I'd kidnap Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and keep them in Antarctica for ten years. Their government is degrading all I love about America.

**The song that means most to you...** More Than This by Roxy Music. I saw them play it in 1972 – I had shoulder-length hair and was dressed in velvet.

**The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions...** I'd begin at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, where they make the best coffee in the world. Then I'd go snorkelling at Kona on Hawaii's Big Island with all the family and our grandsons from Chloe – Moses, four, Franklin, two and Ulysses, three months. We'd eat fresh tuna sandwiches and admire the volcanic rocks. Later I'd watch Spurs win the Champions League final against Arsenal. I'd then spend the night camping in the 17th-century section of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. I'd look at



## PS...

*Kate Winslet is a scorned 1950s housewife in Wonder Wheel, in cinemas Friday. Only Human, the debut album from Calum Scott, is out the same day. And Rory Kinnear opens in Macbeth at London's National Theatre on Tuesday*



## NEXT WEEK

- James Nesbitt on the disasters that rocked Britain
- Make Mum's heart melt with our Mother's Day lunch
- Monty Don on the most heavenly hedges
- PLUS Britain's best TV guide