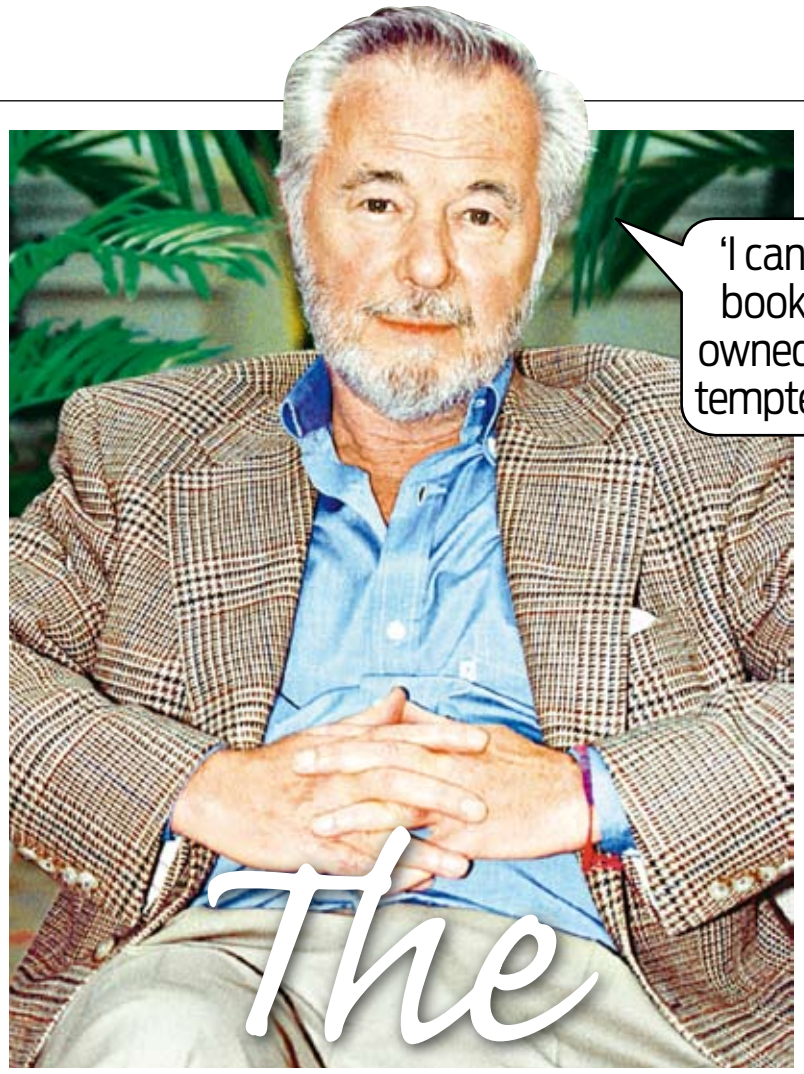
From top: Antigua, Napoleon, Bryan and Nanette Newman on their wedding day, Graham Greene, Whistle Down The Wind, the European Parliament in Strasbourg, and Nat King Cole



'I can't resist books. I had a bookshop for 37 years and owned about 10,000, so I was tempted to pinch from myself'

The DEFINITE ARTICLE

We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week it's writer and director Bryan Forbes

The prized possession you value above all others... My garden in Surrey, which I have fashioned from nothing since Nanette [actress Nanette Newman] and I bought our house when we got married in 1955. It has ten acres and was completely overgrown, and I became obsessed with making it beautiful. I'm 85 now and not very mobile, so I can't garden any more, which is sad.

The unqualified regret you wish you could amend... That I was never able to make my film of Napoleon and Josephine. I slaved over it for three years, then Warner Brothers junked it because Stanley Kubrick was going to make a film on the same subject, but never did.

The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions... I'd spend it with my three granddaughters [India, 26, Tilly, 22, and Lily, 15]. We'd fly by private jet to Antigua for breakfast on the beach, then on to New York for shopping. We'd have tea at the Carlyle Hotel there, go to a musical, then fly home on the private jet, missing all the delays we normally have to endure.

The temptation you wish you could resist... Buying books. I owned a bookshop for 37 years and had about 10,000, so there was a great temptation to pinch from myself!

The book that holds an everlasting resonance... The Good Soldier, Ford Madox Ford's brilliantly constructed tale of love, lies and adultery set just before World War I.

The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day... I'd reschedule all TV programming. We have 600 channels, yet there's never anything worth watching.

The pet hate that makes your hackles rise... Those politicians at the European Parliament in Strasbourg who complicate our lives with idiotic regulations.

The film you can watch time and time again... Jeux Interdits [Forbidden Games], a French classic about innocence that very much influenced me when I came to direct Whistle Down The Wind ten years later.

The person who has influenced you most... Graham Greene was a great mentor who always encouraged me. I used to see him a lot when he was living in the South of France. Once we had dinner and he turned up with a revolver in a plastic bag. He said, 'If a black Citroën drives by, duck. It will be the Marseille mafia coming to shoot me!' He was always one for great drama.

The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint... Marcel Proust. I'd like to know how he managed to keep on writing A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu for 13 years. It ran to more than 3,000 pages and had 2,000 characters. I would ask if he knew he was writing a masterpiece

The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child... Don't despise education – it could be the difference between happiness and abject failure.

The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity... Cooking. I can only cook three dishes – langoustine flambé, beef casserole and chicken – but I love it.

The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again... A signet ring Nanette gave me which came off while swimming in France in the 60s. I spent hours diving for it.

The unending quest that drives you on... To write something as good as Greene's The End Of The Affair.

The poem that touches your soul... Poetry has not been a great force in my life, so I don't really have one.

The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase... I was known as a jack-of-all-trades, which oddly seemed to inspire envy in people.

The event that altered the course of your life and character... When, in 1942, BBC producer Lionel Gamlin gave me a job as question master on the Junior Brains Trust, my life in showbiz began. He also suggested I change my name [Bryan's real name is John Clarke].

The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it... We are badly governed by politicians. It would be nice if they could all be obliterated.

The song that means most to you... When I Fall In Love as sung by the great Nat King Cole. I was directing the film King Rat in Hollywood in the 60s and one night at a cabaret Nat dedicated that song to me. He was desperate to be an actor and star in the film, but I had to tell him there wasn't a part.

The happiest moment you will cherish forever... Managing to buy our house and forging our life here.

The saddest time that shook your world... When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1975. It was a horrible time because it felt like I'd been given a death sentence. But the doctors later admitted the diagnosis was wrong.

The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you... I've been lucky and realised so many ambitions. I received a British Film Institute Fellowship earlier this year. I'm very proud of that.

The philosophy that underpins your life... Never take anything for granted.

The order of service at your funeral... I'm not very religious so I'd be happy for family and friends to remember my good bits, scatter my ashes in the garden and plant a tree in my memory.

The way you want to be remembered... As somebody not taken in by fame.

The Plug... Bryan's new novel, The Soldier's Story, is published by Quartet Books in July, priced £18. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon

PHOTOGRAPHS: XXXX