

Only Jeffrey Will Tell

JEFFREY ARCHER talks to TIM GRAHAM about **Only Time Will Tell** - the first book of his five-book series called 'The Clifton Chronicles' - and about the role that early support plays in fostering later success and how a writer balances pace with description.



Jeffrey Archer

Maybe it was after I asked the lesbian question that Jeffrey Archer decided to bring our conversation to a premature close. Book publishers normally ask their authors to set aside between 45 and 60 minutes for interviews with **gr**. But my conversation with the energetic 70-year-old British novelist – a former prisoner convicted of perjury and seller of over 250 million book copies – was wrapped up in a brisk 24 minutes.

It's possible, however, that Jeffrey Archer is just a man in a hurry. The author of a slew of phenomenally successful novels – including *Kane and Abel*, which is now in its 84th reprint – Jeffrey is now in the middle of writing the second novel of a five-book series. Titled 'The Clifton Chronicles', the ambitious series follows the fortunes of young Harry Clifton, who was born into impoverished circumstances in 1920s England but is determined to succeed.

'I think as the writing's gone on I've realised how ambitious it is, because the first book, **Only Time Will Tell**, has been completed,' said Jeffrey, talking to me by phone from his home on the Mediterranean island of Majorca. 'I think I realise more and more what a challenge writing *five* will be, particularly after the very kind things people have been saying about the first book.'

The glowing appraisals seem entirely justified. A page-turning read filled with chapters that end with cliffhangers, **Only Time Will Tell** is the compelling story of the first 20 years of Harry Clifton's life in

Bristol. His dockworker father dies in mysterious circumstances when Harry is very young, and his uneducated and illiterate mother, Maisie, is then forced to find work – as a waitress – partly to help pay for the education of Harry, who is starting to show promise as a student.

Young Harry feels hugely obligated to perform well at school to justify the sacrifices made by his genuinely heroic mother. He scores highly in the entrance exam to the exclusive St Bede's school, but brains and ambition alone do not guarantee him success. He must

endure the taunts of Fisher, a particularly sadistic prefect, and other boys who sneer at Harry's humble origins and mock his unfamiliarity with etiquette as practised by England's ruling classes. The torment pushes him to the brink of leaving school. Only the intervention of his close school friend Giles Barrington – who wielded the proverbial silver spoon from birth but was also blessed with the capacity to treat people kindly regardless of their origins – and the advice of a seemingly vagrant old man, Jack Tar, cause Harry to reconsider.

It becomes clear in reading the book, however, that although Harry Clifton is poor, he is surrounded by a team of people who support and encourage him. His mother dedicates virtually her

him, such as Miss Monday and Jack Tar. But I think there are rare and exceptional people who don't have even *that*, and succeed. In *Kane and Abel*, Abel didn't have those advantages, and yet he came through just the same.'

I mention to Jeffrey the story of Heath Ducker, the young author from Sydney who co-wrote *A Room at the Top*. In this autobiographical book, Heath outlines how he was one of 10 children born to the same mother but many different fathers. He grew up in a dilapidated house and lived in unimaginably squalid circumstances, but went on to become a lawyer. It's the kind of story we all love, the tale of triumph over almost insuperable odds. But it turns

a cracking pace without the deadweight of irrelevant detail. Is his brief description a deliberate technique, enabling him to accelerate the story's pace?

'Pace is very important because you have to move the story on,' Jeffrey said. 'Pace is usually dictated by speech – direct speech in particular. I want you to turn the page, so I'm always trying to make the book faster. People often say to me I could have taken another hundred pages. And I say, "Well, it's already 400 pages." So yes, I do try to write in a manner that makes you want to turn the page.'

And then we came to the lesbian question. About a third of the way into the book *Miss Tilly*, the coffee shop owner, announces that she and Miss Monday, the choir mistress, have found 'a delightful little cottage in St Mawes' to which they plan to retire. Up to this point in the book there had been no mention of any connection between the choir mistress and the café owner. I acknowledge that I'm unfamiliar with acceptable residential arrangements for unmarried women in interwar England. And so, from my naive 21st-century perspective, I asked Jeffrey if it were possible that Miss Tilly and Miss Monday could have been lesbians.

'If they were *what*?' said Jeffrey, almost as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'If they were lesbians,' I repeated.

'No, no. Never crossed my mind. And they *weren't*,' said Jeffrey with an emphatic tone.

'It just seemed unusual. I guess I'm reading that with a 21st-century mindset, thinking that two unmarried women who set up house together might possibly be in a relationship,' I said.

'No. That's not the sort of stuff I write.'

But if, as some writers claim, characters can take on a life of their own and end up behaving in ways that their creator never first imagined, who knows what Miss Tilly and Miss Monday might get up to in later novels in the series? 



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whole working life to Harry's academic success. And there are many others who hold Harry's interests very close to their hearts: elementary school teacher Mr Holcombe; Harry's choir mistress, Miss Eleanor Monday; Jack Tar, the elderly mentor with a mysterious military past; Mr Frobisher, the stern but caring teacher at St Bede's; and Miss Tilly, the wise and kindly proprietor of Miss Tilly's Café and employer of Harry's mother.

As I'm interviewing Jeffrey Archer the Australian Open tennis tournament is being played in Melbourne. Most of us don't often stop to think about it, but all these young tennis players have received a huge amount of support from their parents or others from a very early age. Yet the myth of the 'self-made man' is very powerful in Western culture. Given the huge amount of support that Harry was lucky enough to receive, I ask Jeffrey Archer if he thinks there are any truly self-made people in our society, who succeed without anyone's help.

'Oh, no, I think there are people who make it *totally* without parents, without *anything*,' he said. 'They are rare objects – I agree. It's a *very* big advantage to have the support of a strong family, and Harry does in Maisie, and all the people around

out that Heath Ducker had considerable support from a community organisation. Heath is entirely upfront about the support he has received. But given the allure of the myth of the self-made man or woman, I wonder if Jeffrey thinks some people might want to conceal or downplay the extent of help they may have had on their climb to the top, to make their achievements appear even more remarkable.

'I've never really given that a lot of thought,' said Jeffrey. 'It's a very interesting question. I think it is difficult to succeed without backing and without backup. But in the end, *you* have to have the talent and the energy, I'm afraid.'

We're now 17 minutes into our conversation and Jeffrey tells me we've been speaking for 25 minutes. He says that he'll have to get back to work soon. It's clear he's a man who doesn't like to waste time. This reminds me of a conspicuous feature of his writing style, at least in his latest book: the fast pace at which the story progresses and how few words he devotes to describing people or things. Some readers might consider the scant description a shortcoming. But in the right hands it can be a virtue, enabling the novelist to propel the story along at

