

Brian Aldiss

Author

Brian Aldiss began his writing career in 1928, at the age of three. His mother, May, lovingly bound those early stories with pieces of left-over wallpaper and placed them alongside Dickens and HG Wells on the family's bookshelves.

Now aged 85, Brian's prodigious talent has been celebrated by the greatest writers of the age — his writing has been compared with that of Isaac Asimov and Aldous Huxley.

In 1977 he was elected chairman of The Society of Authors' Committee of Management and, in 2000, was made Grand Master of Science Fiction by the Writers of America.

His books have been a source of inspiration for many readers around the globe.

Brian was born in East Dereham, Norfolk, in 1925. His father, Stanley, expected the young Aldiss to join the family business — in particular the gentleman's outfitters which was a part of the extensive enterprise founded by his grandfather, Harry Hildyard Aldiss.

Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Brian's family moved to North Devon, eventually settling in Barnstable where, in 1939, Brian became a student at West Buckland School. In 1943 he enlisted and was sent with the Royal Signals to the Far East.

After being demobbed and having experienced the world beyond Devon, Brian decided Barnstable was not for him.

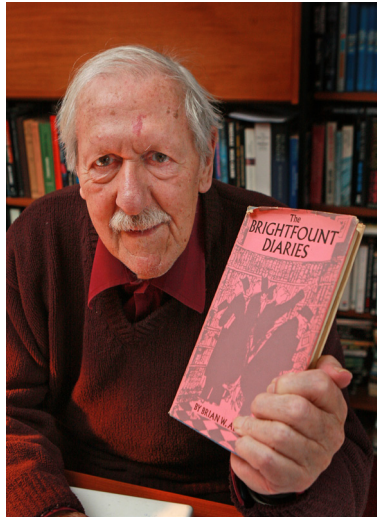
He had heard that Oxford was full of libraries and bookshops and so bought a train ticket to our city.

Wandering down the The High, he came across Sanders, which is now well known as the UK's largest seller of fine prints, maps and engravings. In those days it also sold books. Brian went inside and asked for a job and after questioning him, the owner asked when he could start work. Brian's confident reply

was 'Now'.

"Coming to Oxford was the best decision I ever made," Brian said. Here he wrote his 61 books and novellas and, with C S Lewis, founded the Oxford University Speculative Fiction Group, in 1955. He also became the literary editor of the Oxford Mail.

While working at Saunders he wrote a number of short pieces for a booksellers trade journal about life in a fictitious bookshop, and this attracted the attention of Charles Monteith, an editor at Faber and Faber. The result was Brian's first published book, *The Brightfount Diaries* (1955), a collection of his bookshop pieces.



"After life in the army, I did not adapt easily to a nine-to-five job but the experience was lightened by the characters who walked through the door of Sanders. I began writing sketches about them. Sanders subscribed to *The Bookseller* and I wrote to its editor suggesting he could enliven the magazine with a humorous column written by me.

"He suggested I write six of them for him to study — six without a guarantee of publication! But I did it and he published them all, week by week for two

years. Faber and Faber contacted me saying they were fans. Would I like to make a book out of the series? I agreed 'and could it be illustrated?'"

To be approached by a publisher must be every writer's dream — and Brian got his illustrator too.

The Brightfount Diaries came out with Pearl Falconer's sketches in November, 1955. That same year he won his first literary prize for a short story competition in *The Observer*.

No surprise then that a copy of his first book would be first choice to accompany him to our island.

"My copy of *The Brightfount Diaries* with the letters and reviews would be a bit of

nostalgia on the island,” he said.

“There was still some way to go before I could become a full-time writer. The manuscript of my first attempt at a novel is somewhere in a box, possibly in the Bodleian. I called it Shouting down a Cliff. It was 80,000 words long but I knew it was no good — too amateurish. I never looked at it again but I learned from that experience.”

His experiences in the forces are also reflected in his writing. Brian showed me a copy of his 1962 novel *Hothouse*.

It is set in a far future where the earth has stopped rotating and plants are engaged in a constant frenzy of growth and decay. Small groups of elvish humans live beneath a giant banyan tree that covers the day side of the Earth.

“Penguin have just reprinted this as a Penguin Classic. When I was stationed in the Far East, I spent some time in Calcutta. I took a ferry across the Houghli to the botanical gardens. There stood this huge Banyan tree, which they claimed was the biggest tree in the world. It was not tall like a giant redwood but wide-spreading, branch after branch — as if it could eventually stretch around the world.

“The gardeners used forked posts to support each section because goats climbed into it. It was so surreal, it looked like a creation of Salvador Dali. Julian Huxley had written about that very tree. The idea for *Hothouse* was also born in those venerable branches”

While in the Royal Signals regiment in 1944, Brian was sent into a real hothouse, fighting the Japanese.

“Burma is a beautiful country but it is difficult to talk about war. The Battle of Kohima was fought from either side of a tennis court,” he recalled.

“When we were trying to take back Mandalay, at times, I was dropped with my radio set in the jungle, to pass messages from brigade ahead and division behind. But you did not know which was ‘front’ or ‘behind’.

“After Kohima, the Japanese army was breaking up, but that meant small groups could be anywhere. I tried to sleep with my rifle beside me but there were so many animal noises, mostly birds and rats in the undergrowth; but that same noise could be made by a Japanese soldier,” Brian said.

“After we had taken Mandalay and were back in Calcutta, I remember marching in uniform with my steel tipped army boots,

sten-gun over shoulder, passing by half-starved, half-naked barefoot people. I looked at their faces and was struck by their serenity. I thought, ‘We must be doing something wrong.’

“Eventually, we were shipped home. Our troop ship moored in Liverpool docks, in a deserted dockyard – absolutely no one to welcome us. Not so much as a sergeant-major!

“I took the train to Aldershot to sign off. People appeared weary and unfriendly. England seemed a miserable place after India.

“I made my way to Barnstable, but did not feel it was the place for me. The army experience, although disciplined, had given me a sense of independence. I guess that is how I was able to leave home and come to Oxford.”

Brian’s 1964 novel, *Greybeard*, is set in Oxford, decades after the Earth’s population has been sterilised as a result of nuclear bomb tests. The book shows an emptying world, occupied by an ageing, childless population.

“When my first wife left me to live in The Isle of Wight, I was devastated. I knew I couldn’t earn my living there — I felt that I had lost my children, Clive and Wendy, so precious! That intense emotion led me to imagine a whole world without children. That marriage was a flop. My second marriage to Margaret was different altogether,” Brian said.

“Margaret died in 1998 after a long illness, my daughter Charlotte and I went to Palaeohora, in Southern Crete.

“I was feeling shocked but we made the most of things. Wandering, I found myself in a forest of ancient, scabby, olive trees. In the middle of the forest was an abandoned private chapel. On the wall, in a state of decay, was a mural which I took to be of Mary with Jesus in her arms. I was intrigued.

I asked the local priest about it. He said ‘Oh no, that is not Mary, it is St Anna, Jesus’s grandmother.’ In the Near East there is a legend that, when Mary ran out of milk, Anna suckled the baby. I returned and took a photograph of the mural.

“Later my daughter and I were in a café by the seafront. The daughter of the owner was pressed into service as the waitress but we found her in a cramped space behind the door. When she was not waiting at table, she practiced painting in the Byzantine manner. I asked her to make a copy of the mural. I paid her enough for her to leave the café and go to Athens, where she probably paints pictures for tourists.”

Brian explained that the story doesn't really end there.

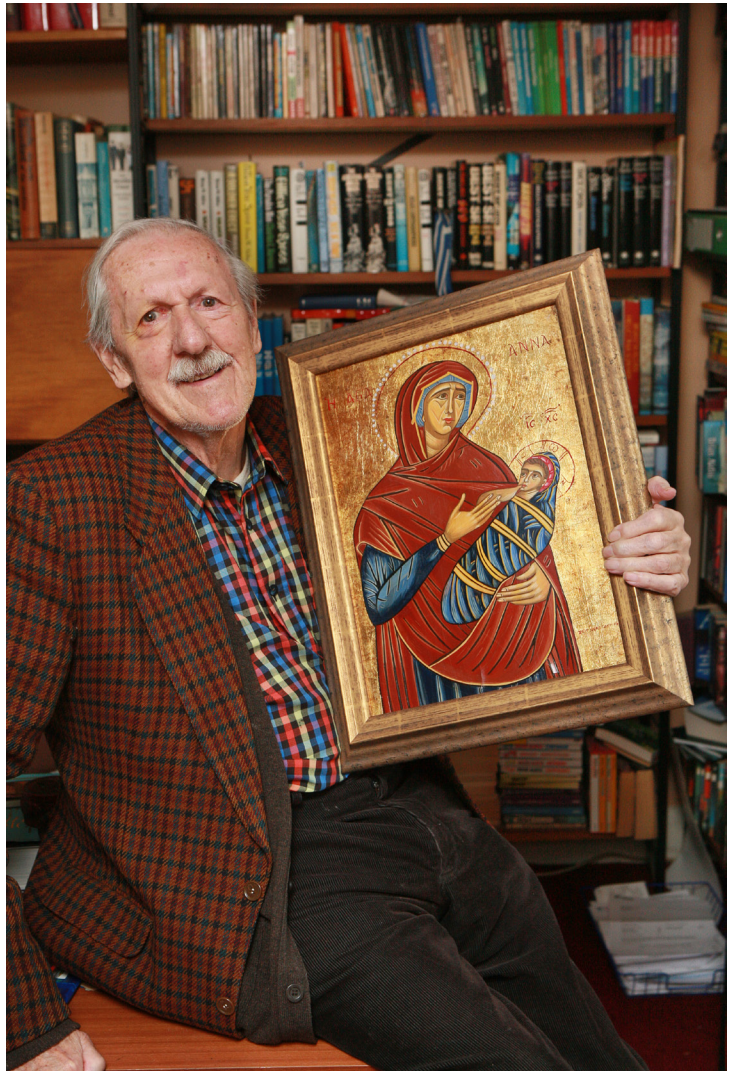
"A publishing company called Stratus had recently brought out Moreau's *Other Island* and *Last Orders* and some other out-of-print books of mine. They had come up with an idea called print-on-demand, which avoided paying expensive warehousing. But the general public were not ready for this idea and Stratus was struggling to survive. So I offered them the novel I had been working on. Its opening line was: 'What a bugger I said to myself in my

old-fashioned way, what an absolute bugger.'

"I guess that was how I felt at the time and I called that book *The Cretan Teat*. Charlotte and I had travelled inland from Palaeohora and discovered an unhappy town. Here the priest said, 'You know there is a curse on this town.' Wherever we went, people told us about what had happened there in the Second World War," Brian explained.

"Because it was mountainous country, the Germans parachuted their troops in and the partisans were able to shoot them down as they fell. In revenge the Germans rounded up the women and children, locked them in the church and set fire to it.

"After the war Willy Brandt, then Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, went to this little town to attempt to make amends. He had a bridge and road built, and a monument to the victims. When he finished rebuilding the church, a band played and the Germans marched away. But no one in that town clapped.



"I thought 'I must write about this.' That novel gradually changed into my imagined story, one of history, of blame, corruption, sex and the novelist growing old disgracefully. Stratus accepted the novel but the company was collapsing. The editor, Edna Grey had been given her notice but she doggedly worked on my novel and it was eventually published."

At this point Brian showed me a copy of *The Cretan Teat* and there on the cover was a reproduction of the picture of St Anna.

"I think this picture must have been painted by a celibate priest who had never seen a woman's breasts!" he laughed.

If I can only take one thing to the island, it has to be the portrait of St Anna because it has so many connections. "