

## The world of Brian Aldiss, science-fiction writer

Brian Aldiss, 90, is a science-fiction author and anthologist. His career has spanned almost seven decades and seen him publish more than 100 books, among them the acclaimed *Helliconia* trilogy and *Frankenstein Unbound*. His short story *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* formed the basis of the Steven Spielberg film *AI Artificial Intelligence*. In 2000 Aldiss was named a grand master by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. The four volumes of *The Brian Aldiss Collection: The Complete Short Stories: The 1960s* have just been republished by Harper Voyager. He lives in Headington, Oxfordshire, and has four children and seven grandchildren.

**Routine** I get up at around 7am and have a bit of toast



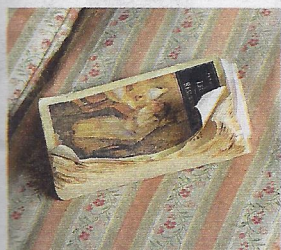
before settling down at my desk, starting by filling in my journal of the previous day. I've been doing it for decades; there are nearly 100 volumes now. After that I write and research until about midday. The rest of my day involves time with friends, a spot of gardening and often some fun in the evening – a cinema night or party.

**Tolstoy** I can't remember when I got interested in the





Russians, but they were always moaning about something, and that's what I wanted to hear when I was young. One automatically gets to Tolstoy after that, and I found him wonderful. He has seen all the ghastliness of life, yet he exults in it, knowing we only have to do it once. I've probably read *Resurrection* [pictured] eight times.



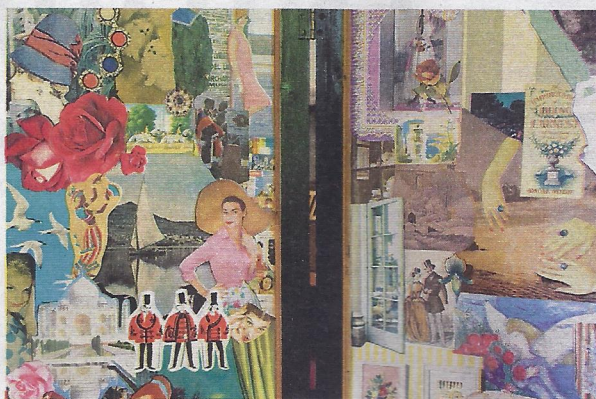
**Defence mechanism** My father was very unfeeling when I was growing up, and sent me off to boarding school when I was six. I was so upset that I used to wet the bed in the dormitory. To stop other boys teasing me, I told terrifying stories. If any of them cried out in horror for me to stop, I had triumphed; they were never going to mock me. Eventually I wrote the stories down. I intended to charge a penny per read, such was the demand. Unfortunately, everybody wanted to read, but they weren't so happy to pay.

**War** In 1943 I joined the Royal Signals, keen to escape living with my parents and looking for adventure. I was posted to the Far East and had my 19th birthday on the harbour frontier in Bombay. I fought in what became known as the Forgotten Army. We saw so many explosions, so much death and hardship, but I also made friends for life and grew fond of Asian culture [statue pictured, previous page].

**When I was a boy in Devon, I would write and illustrate stories in school exercise books to amuse my little sister, Betty. I must have been about 11, and she was six. Astonishingly, they've survived all through the war, and plenty of moves. Some were quite bloodthirsty, others fairly tame, and I did a regular series about the exploits of characters called Adventure Boy and Adventure Girl, based on the two of us.**

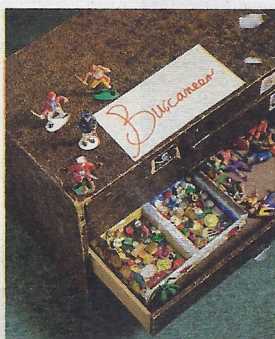
You can't ever truly escape memories of war, however, and in a way I was fortunate to have my stories to funnel some of those images into.

**Pebble** In many ways, this pebble [pictured] represents time itself. I found it on the beach in Norfolk when I was eight, and its markings are extraordinary. If you ponder just how many years it would have taken for such an appearance to form, the age it must be is staggering, and puts life in perspective.



**Painting** I have always been a painter, practically as long as I have been a writer. This [pictured] is one I did earlier this year. It's typical of the sort of style I do now, but that has changed a bit over the years. I've sold a few in my time, and have had one or two exhibitions in Oxford.

**Board game** I first played this Waddington's game of Buccaneer [pictured] at Christmas when I was about 10, before war broke out. Every generation in my family



has played it since, but I have added so many new rules and characters that it has morphed into something else entirely. My children say I adapted it so I would win, but I just made sure it kept up with them getting cleverer. It isn't very politically correct, though – I introduced slavery at one point.

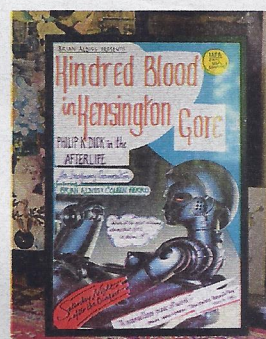
#### **Agatha Christie's secret**

When I was a young bookseller in Oxford, I was fortunate enough to have lunch with Agatha Christie at All Souls College. She was very grand but all sweetness, and I plucked up the courage to look for some writerly advice, asking how she came up with such complex novels that tie together so neatly. She told me she wrote the books as normal, all the way through, before pausing at the penultimate chapter. She'd then work out who was the least likely character to have committed the crime and go back to fix a few train timetables, alter some relationships and make sure it all made sense, before proceeding to the end.

**Creativity** My sister, Betty, is a very creative person. She went to art school and was once a costume designer for the BBC, and made this wonderful collage screen for me [pictured]. I have no idea where we got our creative genes from – neither of my

parents was good in that department – but I suppose it must have always been bubbling under.

**America** I used to go to a science-fiction convention called the Conference on the Fantastic, in Florida. They spoilt me no end, so I'd just generally show off at various events. This poster [pictured] was for one of them, an 'imaginary conversation with Philip K Dick'. It's called *Kindred Blood* after his middle name. I have always



been popular in America. Readers there are less stupid about science fiction. British people have – or had – a bit of a prejudice against it, but Americans understand that while it may take place in an alternate or future world, it deals with the present.

**Interview by Guy Kelly. Photographs by Rick Pushinsky**  
Next week: Gemma Cairney, radio presenter