

HICKEY

WHILE having enjoyed a busy acting career in her own right, Dame Judi Dench's daughter Finty Williams, pictured, reckons her mother's success makes landing plum stage roles a struggle.



Explaining she's never been hired to work for the Royal Shakespeare Company in the Bard's hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon – where she was raised by Judi and late actor father Michael Williams – Finty, 49, pointedly adds: "Not for want of trying." Appearing on the My Time Capsule podcast, she then laughs: "I do also think that a certain member of my family has got in there and played all the parts that I could now play. And amazingly, rather well!"

PETROLHEAD Jeremy Clarkson grumpily takes exception to seeing fellow presenter and Formula One fan James Corden appearing on his TV screen during Sky's coverage of the Miami Grand Prix. He unflatteringly inquires: "Why on earth are we listening to James Corden?"

SPEAKING of grouchy celebs, movie star and father-of-five Hugh Grant fumed yesterday: "What's this b***** about having to book online first at every museum, art gallery, zoo, I try to go?" Later focusing his frustration on a car park ticket machine in Hyde Park, Hugh angrily tweeted: "While I'm on a tech rant – who invented this piece of pure sadism?" Deep breaths, old boy...

FIVE years after being memorably branded a "snob" for claiming having a washing machine in the kitchen is "disgusting", posh property presenter Kirstie Allsopp, pictured, now controversially declares victory. The outspoken broadcaster, daughter of the sixth Baron Hindlip, sees fit to publicly announce she's won the argument – merely on the basis of a weekend media article on washing machines and subsequent discussion on Radio 4. "I took all sorts of flack for this, and it's taken five years, but turns out I was right," she triumphantly announces. Hold on a second, Kirstie!



THE daughter of Gyles Brandreth has suffered a setback to her political career after being among numerous Conservatives to lose their seats in the local elections. Having previously been Tory councillor for the Barnes ward in south-west London, Aphra Brandreth says: "It's been a huge honour to represent Barnes for the past four years. Sadly this result did not go my way." Ex-Conservative MP Gyles has long been keen to talk up his daughter's political talents – when he assured a local resident Aphra had "intelligence and integrity", the said voter cheekily replied: "Are you sure she's your daughter?"

PROMOTING his return as Obi-Wan Kenobi after 17 years in the upcoming TV series, Ewan McGregor voices reservations about the new toy replica figure of his alter-ego. "I don't know if it's just me," the Scot mischievously remarks. "They scan you, they have these machines, every data point in your body is recorded... and then still, it somehow doesn't look quite like you!"

Why 'magnificent' Zelensky is up there with Jack Reacher

As he steps out of his brother Lee's shadow ahead of their third thriller this autumn, Andrew Child pays tribute to Ukraine's real-life hero...



AMMUNITION, NOT A RIDE: Reacher-like Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky has shown one man can make a difference

EXCLUSIVE
By Matt Nixon

ASK Andrew Child if any real person could act as decisively or with such profound impact as Jack Reacher, the fictional former US Army cop created by his older brother Lee, and he hesitates momentarily before replying: "Volodymyr Zelensky." Reacher's unerring ability to find himself in the wrong place at the right time, lay waste to his enemies and solve otherwise intractable problems has propelled him to the top of bestseller lists and global TV success with a recent Amazon Prime adaptation. But while the soldier turned drifter's capacity to influence events in an almost superhuman way has driven his appeal among millions of readers, the possibility of real-life equivalence seemed slim before the Ukrainian president's dramatic arrival on the world stage.

"I think it was an expression coined for Winston Churchill but 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'," Andrew explains. "To a lot of people, Zelensky was this ex-comedian playing at being a politician. But when the chips were well and truly down, look at what he's done. He's been absolutely magnificent. The way that he has maintained the morale of his people and influenced sentiment throughout the world is just extraordinary. "And look at the lines he's come out with. When the US

and others offered him a safe haven, he said, 'The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.' What a great guy." It's hardly surprising Andrew – charged with taking on the Jack Reacher books as main writer after Lee, 67, decided to retire three years ago – should be drawn by such a compelling soundbite. The series' 26 novels, including *The Sentinel* and *Better Off Dead*, for which Andrew took the lead, arguably contain some of the most memorably punchy thriller writing of the last three decades. Andrew, who grew up in the Midlands, is speaking from Wyoming, America's least populous state, where he lives in glorious isolation with his writer wife Tasha Alexander, and where, only recently, the couple braved the worst winter in living memory. "Some people were getting quite freaked out but luckily Tasha and I work from home. We've got a ton of food, so we didn't care. It was horrible for a lot of people but we never did anything or went anywhere anyway," he says. "Now the spring has arrived, the wildflowers are out. It's absolutely beautiful." American public life, however, remains ugly, deeply fractured post-Donald Trump. "Politics has always been a game but it's being

played in such a cynical fashion now: in the old days, you'd have two parties with different ideas about how to get there but the destination was the same," says Andrew. "Now the destinations are completely different. If you look at the tax cuts under the last administration, they're all about making the rich richer and the poor poorer. "A lot of the things you're seeing in the real world – a terrible pandemic but people refusing the vaccine, or Trump losing 64 court cases and people still believing he was swindled out of the presidency – you couldn't put that in a book because no reader would believe it. "There's no critical thinking. People simply align themselves to a party or a cause. I was brought up to believe the States were more polite. If you met somebody they'd listen; you could have a discussion. Now, instantly, you're categorised as being in one camp or the other."

LEE, who has a ranch house nearby, was in New York and the UK during the storms, but the brothers are currently putting the final touches to their third collaboration, titled *No Plan B*. It's tempting to ask whether the pair had their own *Plan B* in case readers shunned the collaborative novels. But fears the books would suffer after Lee took a back seat have been groundless. Fans and critics alike have approved and sales figures remain as extraordinary as former US Army major Reacher himself. "Each of us had a different stake and a different concern going into it," Andrew admits. "Lee thought it was a good idea and was hoping it would work and people would like it. From my point of view, I was hoping I was up to it. Lee's just really, really happy

because it was his plan and you look at the sales numbers and it's worked. "Now I feel I can let the handbrake off and go for it. With the editors, when you finish a manuscript, they'll always say, 'What about this or that?' Especially with *The Sentinel*. It was a question of Lee saying, 'No we like this and we're leaving it', or 'OK, we'll change that'. Now I feel empowered to have a say." But despite the acclaim (and obvious financial benefits), isn't it just a tiny bit frustrating for Andrew, a former telecoms expert turned accomplished thriller writer in his own right, to be taking on his brother's character rather than creating his own? "I'd hoped I'd be able to keep going with my own books and I still hope I will but, with the transition, there hasn't been enough time – it's been purely Reacher." While Lee wanted Andrew, 53, to bring a little more technology into the books, Reacher has remained for the most part unchanged over the course of the 100-million-selling series. "Lee doesn't really do character development in the way a lot of authors do," Andrew says. "He wants Reacher to be the same Reacher we all know and love each time. There's an expression we stole from our father, 'the same, only different'. "You might see a different angle or side but he's the same guy, he hasn't turned into a tree hugger or anything like that." Despite that, Andrew, who studied drama and English literature at the University of Sheffield, co-founding a theatre company before going to work for British Telecom, has subtle changes in mind. "Thinking about the earlier books, it's not so much I'd change anything; actually I'd maintain more. Reacher was a lot more witty in some of those early books. Lee doesn't

know why but over the years he made Reacher increasingly tight-lipped to the point where he'll only say two words at a time. I think that took something away. "I remember reading [book four] *The Visitor* and literally laughing out loud as Reacher argues with another character and demolishes them with words. "Not only is it funny, but it gives an extra string to his bow. I've been gradually creeping a little of that back into the books. It's that wry sarcastic humour. It's not slapstick but it shows that side. Alan [Ritchson] nailed it perfectly in the new TV adaptation. "It comes from the way Reacher stands slightly apart and observes everything. He's able to spot these things that are funny or ironic and nonsensical and then reflect them back – that mirror to society." While America and, indeed, much of the world, remains deeply divided, readers can draw comfort from the fact Reacher remains strictly apolitical. "He's a data-driven person. He looks at the facts, draws a conclusion and then acts on it. We stay away from politics completely," says Andrew. "But if there was anything, I'd hope to show people that instead of aligning yourself with one cause, think about the issues, look at the evidence in front of you. Having done that, Reacher always does the right thing. He doesn't see if he could personally benefit, he doesn't look at the bottom line." This week Andrew, who met Tasha at a US book conference, is appearing at CrimeFest in Bristol, his first live event as co-writer. "It's a little bit nerve-wracking," he smiles. "It's so different from the rest of the year. You spend 90 per cent of the time in your bedroom in your pyjamas living in your head and making up stories. "You might not shower or shave – then all of a sudden you have to be presentable and speak in whole sentences!" Having drawn the comparison with Zelensky, it's inevitable he'll be asked about the Ukraine crisis. Sadly, in real life, there's little chance of the conflict cropping up in a future book. Vladimir Putin is just a bit too much of a villain even for Jack Reacher. "I think Reacher works a lot better when the scale is smaller, when you've got a problem that might, in the grand scheme of things, be pretty small," says Andrew. "Lee and I came up with this concept we call villain inflation. Each time you write a book, you want to avoid the need to make the villain bigger and badder than before. If someone blows up a nuclear bomb in the middle of New York, what happens next? It is two



OH BROTHER: Reacher writers Andrew, left, and Lee Child in Wyoming

nuclear bombs in Washington? Four nuclear bombs in LA? How do you keep that under control? There's a contradiction, Reacher works well on a small scale when you relate to personal issues even though he's a loner, drifting about without friends or family." **I**N THE current world of gender diversity and toxic masculinity, I wonder if as the ultimate tough guy, there is a risk of Reacher being cancelled? "Reacher's an equal opportunities killer," says Andrew. "I remember years ago, somebody was upset because one of the villains was female and Reacher killed them. Lee was saying at the time, 'Reacher only looks at whether a person is good or bad. Nothing else matters: gender or race.' If you're good he'll help you, if you're bad he'll kill you. "So, yes, he's violent and aggressive when he needs to be but his credentials stack up pretty well. He's not prejudiced. He doesn't have preconceptions about people. Even if it's something he's not come across. "When we were at school the idea of shifting genders wasn't really thought about. Reacher probably wouldn't have encountered it. But, if he did, he'd assess it and reach a reasonable and humane position." Just like he always does. ● *Better Off Dead* by Lee Child and Andrew Child (Penguin, £8.99) is out now. For free UK delivery on orders over £12.99, call Express Bookshop on 01872 562310 or order via expressbookshop.com. *Andrew Child is at CrimeFest in Bristol, May 12 to 15. Visit crimefest.com for more details*

NO PLAN B: Alan Ritchson plays Lee Child's former military cop in Amazon Prime's hit series *Reacher*

'The way he's maintained Ukrainian morale at home and influenced world sentiment is extraordinary'

PHOTOGRAPH AND ANDREW GRANT

