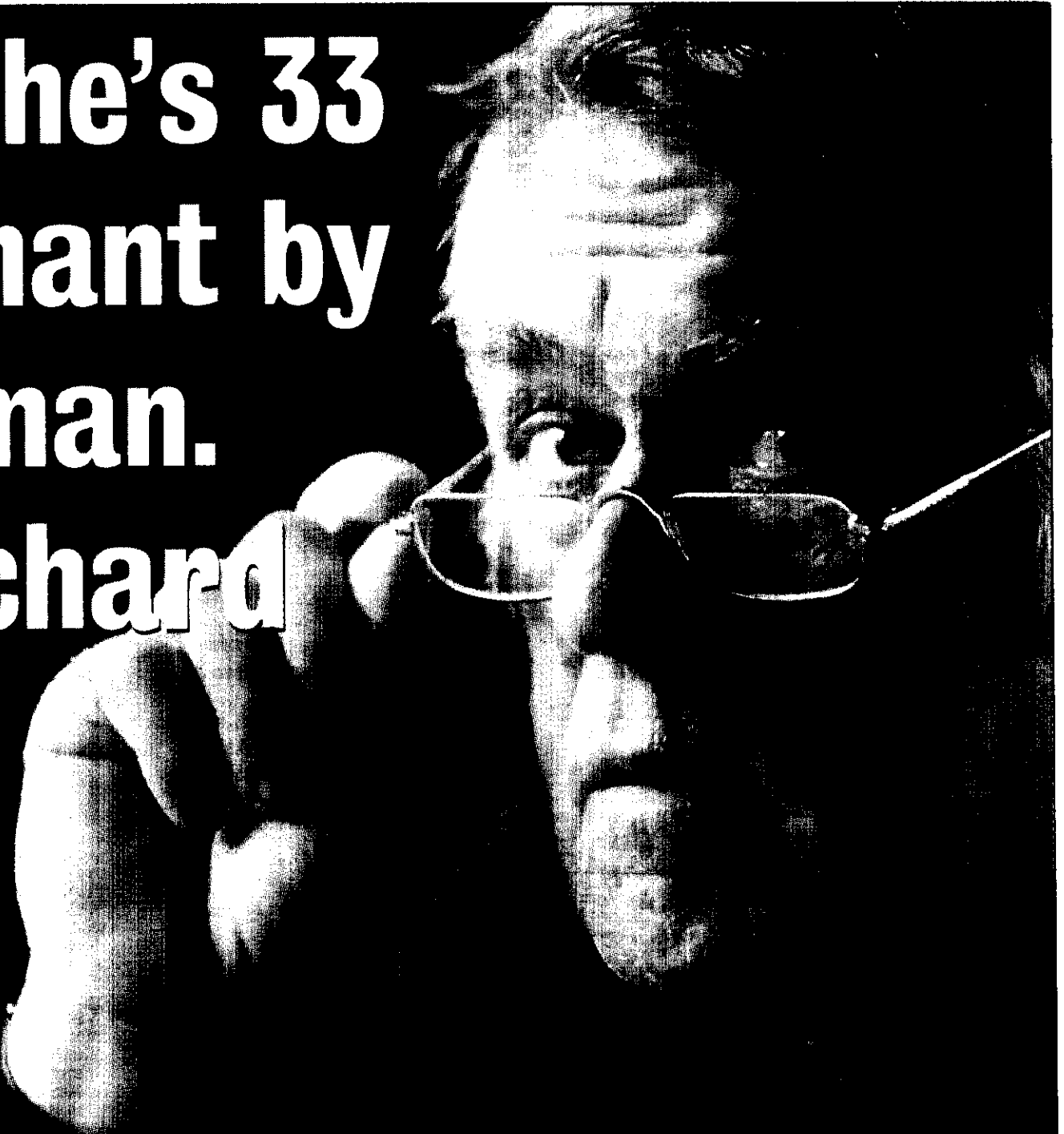


He's 60. She's 33 and pregnant by another man. Why is Richard Ingrams thinking of death?



OPPOSITES ATTRACT: Richard Ingrams and his girlfriend Debbie Bosley

RICHARD INGRAMS, former editor of *Private Eye*, looks away as he shakes my hand. He's imposingly tall and wearing his habitual cords, a jumper full of holes and undone laces. He has a six o'clock shadow, dirty fingernails and could pass for the kind of small-business public-school gardener who "landscapes" patios in London's snootier boroughs. But he has a mellifluous voice and, unlike his curmudgeonly, buttoned-up reputation, proves charming and courteous.

During the 23 years that Ingrams was at *Private Eye*, he built up a phone directory of prejudices: "poofs", women priests, Jews, Esther Rantzen, Michael Parkinson, Jonathan Miller. But now lots of his targets — from Sir James Goldsmith to Robert Maxwell — have died, and oldie Ingrams has softened.

"I don't hate anyone. I feel well disposed towards everyone. I'm not sure I ever hated anyone," he says. "This thing about Jews is ridiculous and I can't share Jonah's (the late Sir John Junor, erstwhile Sunday Express editor, once said, 'Don't you think it's disgusting what they do?') revulsion about gays."

Now Ingrams edits *The Oldie*, a magazine of



**The
Caroline
Phillips**

Interview

Richard Ingrams
MAGAZINE EDITOR

stylish writing, obituary quizzes, wireless reviews, pensioner interviews and blimpish attacks on yooof culture amid advertisements for denture glue and arthritis cures. So it's curious to hear him talk about his lover of five years, Debbie Bosley — a former waitress who once admitted clubbing and taking lots of Ecstasy — who's nearly half his age and pregnant by another man.

Last month Ingrams turned 60. "It was a jolt. You can get by with persuading yourself that you're useful, even in your 50s." He talks

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PRIVATE EYE PARTNERS: Ingrams and Peter Cook, left, who died in 1995

A lot of people are start to think it's

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lugubriously, sighing heavily, and it would be possible to plant a garden in the pauses.

"A lot of people have been dying — Peter Cook, Willie Rushton, Jeff

Bernard. You start thinking it's your turn next."

In his youth, Ingrams had lots of girlfriends, but only two serious ones, including Mary, then a secretary at Private Eye, whom he wed. It was a traditional marriage, lasted 30 years, and he was against extra-marital affairs and promiscuity. Now opinions seem divided. It's said that Ingrams paws the waitresses in the Groucho Club, London's media's watering hole. "A canard." Others say that sexually he seems never to do anything. "No comment."

What is his attitude to sex? "Oh come off it, Caroline. Ask some reasonable questions." He tugs at his bushy eyebrows.

We return to the subject of his work — The Oldie, with a circulation of 25,000 and a cover price that will take care of pensioners' spending, at £2.20. Five years after it started, it is nearly breaking even.

Ingrams is paid a "token" salary of £10,000 for what he regards as this "semi-full-time job". In October there will be Oldie TV on BBC, "late at night, especially for oldie insomniacs". Will he again attack sacred cows such as Princess Anne and Sir David Attenborough? He won't divulge this year's offerings.

HE WORKS part time as chairman of "the Eye" and writes a column in The Observer. "They probably think of me as an old bore who's pretty weird and eccentric." He was one of the few people to raise a voice against the prevailing hysteria over the death of Princess Diana.

"I was disgusted by the whole thing and thought it nasty, partly because anyone who didn't go along with the general grief, as it was called, was made to feel unloved and unwanted."

But back to sex. There's a marvelous story of how, in the Swinging Sixties, Germaine Greer followed Ingrams to the lavatory in a train, joking that she was going to "f*** Richard", and reappeared several stations later, unsuccessful and admitting that she'd failed to excite him at all.

"Completely untrue," he states. Did she make it up? "No, some journalist did." But she never complained. "Maybe she has better things to do."

Anyway, Ingrams is currently an item with 33-year-old Debbie, now a novelist, whom he met at the Groucho Club. She was lonely after nursing her estranged husband as he died from Aids, and in 1991 Ingrams's wife had left him. Now Debbie and Ingrams live together only part of the time. "It's sensible, she has friends of her own age."

Isn't it odd to be going out with someone his daughter's age? "It feels as if we're equals." What's the basis of the relationship? "L-O-V-E," he spells out the word with a slight laugh and twinkle in his mischievous blue eyes. Will they marry? In 1995 he said he still felt married to Mary. "We might."

Recently it was reported that they'd split up and by the time they were together again, in June, she was pregnant by someone else because Ingrams, father to two and a grandfather, didn't want more babies. He

●'Basically my wife wanted to get away from me. I don't know why.'

●'I felt relieved when my son died. There was no relationship.'

●'My girlfriend just had an affair and got pregnant. It was a mistake.'

says she didn't go off in search of a child provider. "She just had an affair and got pregnant. It was a mistake." Were they together at the time? "We were temporarily apart but I wouldn't say we'd split."

The baby is due in December. Is it true that the father is black? "No comment. I'd really rather you didn't identify him." How does Ingrams feel about becoming a "father" again? "I won't be a *father*. But I'll get on all right." Debbie has said she'd like four children. "I don't know about that," he says crossly. And does he approve of her clubbing and the fact that she once took Ecstasy? "I'm not interested in it." Does her working-class background matter to him? "No," he says, clearing his throat defensively.

He's also reluctant to talk about his marriage to Mary, a formidable and volatile woman. Apparently, they once went for eight months without speaking, but Ingrams insists that it was Mary who wasn't talking to him. Then she left in 1991.

"I can't go into it, it's too personal," he says. Was the breakdown to do with her drinking at that time? "Well, exactly. But once you go into all that..." He stops. "Basically, my wife wanted to live on her own. She wanted to get away from me and her children. I don't know why."

A HUGE strain was placed on the relationship because their son, Arthur, had cerebral palsy and died in 1977. Mary was unhappy and Ingrams immersed himself in work. His face clouds over as he talks. "One lived in hope for a while, but then had to accept that he wasn't going to develop at all. Mary had to do most of the coping and practical things. Aged four he had to go into care. Whatever you do, you're wrong." Arthur died aged seven. "There was no relationship. He gave absolutely nothing in return. I felt relieved when he died."

Ingrams himself was a sweet-natured, jovial child. One of four brothers, they were evacuated to

dying. You your turn

Aberdeenshire to live with their grandmother during the war.

Music was central to their lives and Ingrams played the cello in a quartet with his brothers. Their mother ensured they could read before they went to school aged five. He was then sent to boarding school aged seven, an experience he found "brutal".

His parents were unhappily married but Ingrams was not aware of it. His father was Roman Catholic and his mother Anglican and, curiously, they agreed they'd each have two children of their own religion. Ingrams was Anglican. "When you're young, you accept strange situations."

His father, involved in Intelligence, was absent during the war. "He was an aloof, distant figure. It didn't have much of an effect on me, aged 16, when he died."

Afterwards Ingrams did National Service and then went to Oxford, where he read Greats and took a third because he didn't work much.

HE STARTED drinking heavily in the Army but has not touched a drop for 30 years. "I'd think nothing of drinking a bottle of wine a night. I've an addictive personality. I don't think I'd got to the stage of being an alcoholic, though I might have later on."

He has also to guard against the occult, "because I'd become addicted

to Ouija boards and seances. There's something in it. I don't think it's a fraud. If you're an addict, you're not tempted to have one bit of chocolate, you need to have one bar. I'm like that".

He says his drinking was not related to any unhappiness, despite family tragedy. In 1963 his younger brother Rupert was killed in a car crash, aged 24. Ingrams looks askance and the colour in his face deepens again. "We were very good friends. I had to identify his body. It was very traumatic."

In 1975, his elder brother John Peter was killed in a mountaineering accident. "I've lost my parents, two brothers, a son. After a bit, you..." he exhales deeply. "Maybe we're just one of those unlucky families."

His mother Victoria died in June, aged 89. "It was a great shock. Your mother is your last protector, the person who always sticks up for you. She didn't like the Eye but would always defend me, write letters to Dempster when he attacked me and read my Observer column, which nobody else does."

Ingrams is delightful, funny and mischievous but also morose and glum. Is it true that he's narcissistic and solipsistic? "I don't know what those words mean." And has he finally gone nuts after leaving the Eye and his marital breakdown? "There may be some truth in that," he says, with a twinkle.



TURBULENT RELATIONSHIP: Richard and his wife Mary at home, before she decided to leave him