

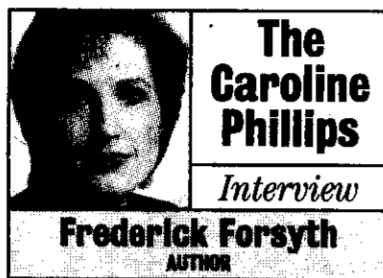
Thriller ace Blair as his new villain

MILLIONAIRE author Frederick Forsyth has been self-professedly publicity shy all his life. But this year, aged 59, Forsyth has become a very public and political animal. Few issues escape his attention as he fires off letters to newspapers, pens controversial articles and joins demonstrations.

The author of *The Day Of The Jackal*, *The Dogs Of War* and *The Fourth Protocol* is even talking for the first time about how he went on a blind date in 1989 with a woman who sent him a fan letter, and then married her — about which more later.

First Forsyth defended the royals in the controversial Carlton TV monarchy debate. Then he caused a furore with his letter in *Der Spiegel*, in which he likened the single currency to Hitler's Holocaust.

Next he became a prominent supporter of the Referendum Party. "Actually I didn't join," corrects Forsyth, who speaks in a voice so baritone that it sounds like a tape



recorder when the batteries are running low. "I had lunch with Jimmy, who I found dynamic and passionate, but I didn't agree with their tactics." Then he demonstrated at the Hyde Park Country Sports Rally. And here he shoots down our Government.

We've walked through his Queen Anne farmhouse to sit under a huge parasol in his garden with tennis court, gym and pool set amidst 175 acres. Nearby, he's building an aviary for exotic birds and his wife, Sandy, has started a Japanese garden.

Forsyth looks brooding and distin-

guished on his dust jackets, like a senior medical figure, perhaps. Well-built, handsome, with a questioning, amused face.

In the flesh, he's rugged and shinningly clean, in a neatly pressed denim shirt and trousers. He's lovely but seems shy, looks down, speaks knowledgeably but gobbles his words and smokes heavily through an ebony tipped holder. "It's not an affectation," he remonstrates. "It's to remove the tar. I've attempted to give up six times."

Now we talk about how he took a woman out on a blind date after she sent him a fan letter, and then married her. The woman is Sandy, a television script writer, who somewhat resembles Patricia Hodge and has been Mrs Forsyth since 1994.

Sandy first saw Forsyth in 1989 at a Foyle's literary lunch. "I signed her friend's book, nodded, smiled but didn't really see Sandy," says Forsyth. "Apparently she liked what she saw. Afterwards she wrote saying how much she'd like to meet me."

In 1988 when Forsyth divorced his first wife, Carrie, he received a few letters from interested women, but never responded. But Sandy's note, he says, was different because of her humour.

A month later, he rang her: "Do you want to have dinner?" he asked, and Sandy replied, "Yup."

"But," he retorted, "I haven't said which night yet." To which she responded, "Any night."

Forsyth didn't know anything about Sandy, not even what she looked like. But a "tall blonde" turned up at the restaurant, and they got on so well that soon she began visiting his Hertfordshire farm. "Eventually the visits became so consecutive that I said, 'You might as well bring your gear and move in'."

"Neither of us wanted children. I already have two sons, aged 18 and 20," continues Forsyth. "We have similar easy-going temperaments. But she's more explosive and galvanises me out of my habitual torpor."

The best-selling author seems unexcited now by his books, which have sold an estimated 40 million copies world wide. "They're things one does to earn a crust." He admits that the most he got for one book was "£4.5 million-ish". But it's unlikely that he'll write another thriller. "Less and less interests me to write about."

HE PENS meticulously-researched, low to middle-brow books about a testosterone world (SAS men, Tornado crews and such-like), books written in simple prose where plot is all. Lady Thatcher is a fan and (unlike Forsyth) has reread his books. But typically his readers are "menopausal males".

Years before it happened, Forsyth predicted correctly that we'd have a woman Prime Minister, that the Shah would fall in Iran, Russia invade Afghanistan, and Russia tear itself apart internally. Twenty five years after he described how the Nazis had stored gold in Swiss banks the story made headlines. So what does Mystic Fred predict now?

He's disturbed by Blair's Politburo-style government. "Behind his smile there are a lot of nasty things

going on. I don't think a nice guy needs a quadrille of half-thugs behind him." He pauses. "We have a constitution that has been good for us and kept us free of putsch and coup d'etat but which is now being systematically destroyed."

FORSYTH rails against New Labour's iron control and intolerance of disagreement; the smears and threats of deselection accorded those MPs who dare speak their minds; the Government's mighty computer Excalibur, which stores politicians' every quote and foible; of MPs forbidden to address the Press without clearing it with Mandelson and the Press gagging that Lord Irvine has already threatened.

Forsyth is one of five generations of Freddies. His father was called Freddie, as was his grandfather and great grandfather. In turn, Forsyth has named his own son Frederick Stuart. "I was called Derek as a boy. I couldn't change it until I did National Service aged 17. But," he laughs, "I didn't have a rotten, messed-up childhood."

Forsyth, an only child, was raised in Ashford, Kent in financially "comfortable" circumstances. His mother sold women's clothes, his father ("one of the kindest, most exceptional people

I've ever known") was a furrier. Unlike the local children, Forsyth wasn't evacuated for the Second World War.

"My father was fatalistic," he explains. "I enjoyed the war. I thought the night raids were fireworks for my benefit." He went to Tonbridge School on a scholarship, played truant to attend flying lessons, and left school at 17. Then he lived in Spain, training as a matador. He attained his RAF wings aged 19 (the youngest person so to do), then became a foreign correspondent for 12 years before starting to write novels.

So why has Forsyth, formerly so private, become so public? The change, he says, has come about because the things he holds dear are under attack. "These days I care *only* about six things: belief in Almighty God, my country's sovereignty, parliamentary democracy, the monarchy, preservation of the countryside and protection of my family." (He doesn't even mention friends.) In that order, I ask? "Yes." God above family? "Well," he laughs, "God is above most things."

We talk about the break-up of his 15-year marriage, which Carrie attributed to Forsyth's obsession with writing. "One's marital breakdown is a private tragedy," he counters. "But Sandy wasn't involved in it. Nobody was. One of my old fashioned characteristics is that I don't fool around." How much money did he settle on the ex Mrs Forsyth? "You'd better ask her," he smiles, adding that their relationship now is "friendly".

He says the future "doesn't hold much" for him. Does he fear getting old? "No." Is he scared of death? "No, I've come close to it a few times," he replies breezily. "I've looked down gun barrels, been in hails of machine gun fire and come out unscathed. One's grateful for that when there are lots of bodies lying around." A bit like one of his characters, perhaps?



BLIND PASSION: Forsyth with second wife Sandy, whom he met after she wrote him a fan letter



'Behind Tony's smile there are a lot of nasty things going on'

'I've looked down gun barrels, been in machine gun fire and come out unscathed'