

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JILLY COOPER



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Bella



Jilly Cooper was a journalist, author and media superstar. The author of many number one bestselling books, she lived in Gloucestershire where her groundbreaking Rutshire Chronicles series was set.

Awarded honorary doctorates by the Universities of Gloucestershire and Anglia Ruskin, she also won the inaugural Comedy Women in Print lifetime achievement award in 2019, and was appointed DBE in 2024 for services to literature and charity. She died in 2025.

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By Jilly Cooper

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Rivals
Polo
The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous
Appassionata
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Pandora
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Jump!
Mount!
Tackle!

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How to Survive from Nine to Five
Jolly Super
Men and Supermen
Jolly Super Too
Women and Superwomen
Work and Wedlock
Jolly Superlative
Super Men and Super Women
Super Jilly
Class
Super Cooper
Intelligent and Loyal
Jolly Marsupial
Animals in War
The Common Years
Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with Patrick Lichfield)
How to Survive Christmas
Turn Right at the Spotted Dog
Angels Rush In
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Between the Covers

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Little Mabel's Great Escape
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The British in Love
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BELLA

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To Laura
with love

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Author's Note

I have always wanted to write a novel about an actress and I started writing BELLA in 1969. However, at that time I wrote it as a *novella*, called it COLLISION and it was serialized in *19*. Only now am I able to fulfil my original wish and present the story as a full-length novel – BELLA.

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BELLA

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Chapter One

Bella read faster and faster until she came to the final page then, giving a howl of irritation, hurled the book across the room. Narrowly missing a row of bottles, it fell with a crash into the waste-paper basket.

‘Best place for it!’ she said furiously. ‘How corny can you get?’

She escaped completely into every book she read, identifying closely with the characters. This time she was incensed because the heroine had slunk dutifully home to her boring husband instead of following her dashing lover up the Amazon.

She shivered and toyed with the idea of letting the water out and running more hot in, but she had done this four times already. Her hands were wrinkled and red from the dye of the book, and the sky that filled the bathroom window had deepened since she’d been in the bath from pale Wedgwood to deep indigo, so she knew it must be late.

She splashed cold water over her body, heaved herself out of the bath and stood, feeling dizzy, on the bath-mat. The bath was ringed with black like a

football sweater, but the char would fix that in the morning.

Taking her wireless, she stepped over the debris of her clothes, picked up the second post which was lying in the hall, and wandered into the bedroom.

She turned up the music, danced and sang a few bars, then caught sight of herself in the mirror, hair hidden in a mauve bath-cap, body glowing red as a lobster.

The Great British Public would have a shock if they could see me now, she thought wryly.

She pulled off her bath-cap and examined herself more carefully. She was a big girl with a magnificent body and endless legs. Her mouth was wide and her large sleepy yellow eyes rocketed up at the corners. A mane of reddish-blonde hair spilled over her shoulders. The overall impression was of a sleek and beautiful racehorse at the peak of its condition.

She opened her letters. One was from a journalist who wanted to interview her, another an ex-boyfriend trying to come back and several forwarded by the BBC from fans:

‘Dear Miss Parkinson,’ wrote one, in loopy handwriting, ‘I hope you don’t mind my writing. I know you must lead such a busy, glamorous life. I think it’s marvellous the way there’s never any breath of scandal attached to your name. Could you possibly send me a signed full-length photograph and some biographical details?’

Oh, God! thought Bella, feeling slightly sick, if only they all knew

The last letter was practical. It was headed the Britannia Theatre, and was from the director, Roger Field, who had written:

‘Dear Bella,

If you’re late again, I shall sack you. Can’t you see how it unnerves the rest of the cast? Stop being so bloody selfish.

Love, Roger.’

Roger, Bella knew, would be as good as his word. She looked at the alarm clock by the bed and gave another howl of rage. It was twenty past six, and the curtain went up at seven-thirty. Dressing with fantastic speed, not even bothering to dry herself properly, she tore out of the flat and was fortunate to find a taxi almost at once.

The Britannia Theatre Company was one of the great theatrical successes of the decade. It specialized in Shakespeare and more modern classics and generally had three plays running on alternate nights and three in rehearsal. Bella had joined the company a year ago and had risen from walk-on parts to a small speaking part in *The Merchant of Venice*. She had recently had her first real break playing Desdemona in *Othello*. The critics had raved about her performance and the play had been running to capacity audiences for three nights a week.

Lying back gazing out of the taxi window at the trees of Hyde Park fanning out against a rust-coloured sky, Bella tried to keep calm. From now

until her first entrance she would be in a nervous sweat, stage fright gripping her by the throat like an animal. She deliberately always cut it fine because it meant that she would be in such a hurry dressing and making up, she wouldn't have time to panic.

And yet, ironically, the only time when she felt really secure was when she was on stage, getting inside someone else's personality.

The taxi reached the theatre at five past seven.

'Evening, Tom,' said Bella nervously, scuttling past the man at the door.

He put down his evening paper and glanced at his watch. 'Just made it, Miss Parkinson. Here's a letter for you, and there're some more flowers in your room.'

Not bothering to glance at her letter, Bella bounded upstairs two steps at a time and fell into the dressing-room she shared with her best friend, Rosie Hassell, who played Bianca.

'Late again,' said Rosie, who was putting on eye make-up. 'Roger's been in once already, gnashing his teeth.'

Bella turned pale. 'Oh, God, I couldn't get a taxi,' she lied, throwing her fur coat on a chair and slipping into an overall.

'I think Freddie Dixon's after me,' said Rosie.

'You think that about everyone,' said Bella, slapping greasepaint on her face.

'I don't – and, anyway, I'm usually right. I know I am about Freddie.'

Freddie Dixon was the handsome actor playing

Cassio. Both Bella and Rosie had fancied him and been slightly piqued because he'd shown no interest in either of them.

'You know the clinch we have in the fourth act?' said Rosie, pinning on snakey black ringlets to the back of her hair. 'Well, last night he absolutely crushed me to death, and all through the scene he couldn't keep his hands off me.'

'He's not meant to keep them off,' said Bella. 'I expect Roger told him to act more sexily.'

Rosie looked smug. 'That's all you know. Look, you've got more flowers from Master Henriques,' she added, pointing to a huge bunch of lilies of the valley arranged in a jam jar on Bella's dressing table.

'Oh, how lovely,' cried Bella, noticing them for the first time. 'I wonder what he's on about tonight.'

'Aren't you going to read his letter?' said Rosie.

Bella pencilled in her eyebrow. 'You can – since you're so nosey,' she said.

Rosie took the card out of its blue envelope.

'"Dear Bella,"' she read. 'That's a bit familiar. It was "Dear Miss Parkinson" last time. "Good Luck for tonight. I shall be watching you. Yours, Rupert Henriques."' He must be crazy about you. That's the eighth time he's seen the play, isn't it?'

'Ninth,' said Bella.

'Must be getting sick of it by now,' said Rosie. 'Perhaps he's doing it for "O" levels.'

'Do you think he's that young?'

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‘Expect so – or a dirty old man. Nobody decent ever runs after actresses. They’ve usually got plenty of girls of their own.’

Bella fished a fly out of her bottle of foundation and had another look at the card. ‘He’s got nice writing though,’ she said. ‘And Chichester Terrace is quite an OK address.’

There was a knock on the door. It was Queenie, their dresser, come to help them on with their costumes. A dyed-in-the-wool cockney with orange hair and a cigarette permanently drooping from her scarlet lips, she chattered all the time about the ‘great actresses’ she’d dressed in the past. Bella, who was sick with nerves by this stage, was quite happy to let her ramble on.

‘Five minutes, please! Five minutes, please!’ It was the plaintive echoing voice of the callboy.

Bella looked at herself in the mirror, her smooth, young face belying the torrent of nerves bubbling inside her. Then she sat down on the faded velvet sofa with the broken leg in the corner of the room and waited, clasping her hands in her lap to stop them shaking.

‘Beginners, please! Beginners, please!’ The sad echoing voice passed her door again.

Rosie, who didn’t come on until later, was doing the crossword. Bella took one more look round the dressing-room. Even with its bare floor and blacked-out windows, it seemed friendly and familiar compared with the strange brightly lit world she was about to enter.

‘Good luck,’ said Rosie, as she went out of the door. ‘Give Freddie a big kiss.’

They stood waiting by the open door under a faded orange bulb – Brabantio, Cassio and herself. Wesley Barrington, who was playing Othello, stood by himself, a huge handsome black man, six and a half feet tall, as nervous as a cat, pacing up and down, murmuring his lines like an imprecation.

The three of them left her. Help me to make it, she prayed.

Othello was speaking now in his beautiful measured voice: ‘Most potent, grave and reverend signiors.’

In a moment she would be on. Iago came to collect her.

‘Come on, beauty,’ he whispered. ‘Keep your chin up.’

It had begun. She was on. Looking round the stage, beautiful, gentle, a little shy. ‘I do perceive here a divided duty,’ she said slowly.

She was off, then on again, flirting a little with Cassio, and then Othello was on again. Here, where she found life a thousand times more real than in the real world, she had words to express her emotions.

But all too soon it was over. The appalling murder scene was ended and the play had spent its brief but all too vivid life.

And as she took her curtain calls, she had nearly reached the limits of her endurance. Three times Othello and Iago led her forward and the tears

poured down her cheeks as the roars of applause increased.

‘Well done,’ said Wesley Barrington in his deep voice.

Bella smiled at him. She fancied him so much when they were acting, but now he was Wesley again, living in Ealing with a wife and three children.

Bella would now go out for a cheap dinner with Rosie and in the morning she would lie sluttishly in bed until lunchtime. She avoided the busy, glamorous world that her fans imagined she lived in. It was a question of conserving her energy for what was important.

In their dressing-room, however, she found Rosie in a fever of excitement. ‘Freddie’s asked me out.’

‘I expect he wants to discuss the way you’ve been upstaging him,’ said Bella. She collapsed on to a chair and felt depression descending on her like dust on a polished table.

Not that she wanted Freddie to ask her out. She’d long ago decided his curly hair and neon smile weren’t for her. But if he started up a serious affair with Rosie, there’d be no more cosy little dinners, no more Rosie and Bella, united and gossiping together against the rest of the cast. Still, it was nice for Rosie.

‘Where’s he taking you?’

‘Somewhere cheap. He’s amazingly mean. Do you think one earring looks sexy?’

‘No, silly. As though you’d lost the other one.’

There was a knock on the door. It was Tom, the doorman. **Copyrighted Material**

‘There’s a Mr Henriques downstairs, Miss Parkinson. Wonders if he could come up and see you.’

‘Oh,’ said Bella, suddenly excited. ‘What’s he like?’

‘Looks orl right,’ said Tom, fingering a five pound note in his pocket.

‘Not a schoolboy?’

Tom shook his head.

‘Nor a dirty old man?’

‘No, quite a reasonable sort of bloke. Bit of a nob really. Plum-in-the-marf voice and wearing a monkey suit.’

‘Oh, go on, Bella,’ said Rosie. ‘He might be super.’

‘All right,’ said Bella. ‘I can always tell him to go if he’s ghastly.’

‘Great!’ said Rosie. ‘I’ll finish off my face in the loo.’

‘No!’ yelled Bella, suddenly nervous. ‘You can’t leave me.’

At that moment Queenie, the dresser, appeared at the door.

‘You’d better get out of that dress before you spill make-up all over it,’ she said to Bella.

Bella looked at herself in the mirror. Against the low-cut white nightgown, her tawny skin glowed like old ivory.

Let’s knock Mr Henriques for six, she thought.

‘Can I keep it on for a bit, Queenie?’ she asked.

‘And I’m supposed to hang about until you’ve finished,’ said Queenie sourly.

‘Come on, you old harridan,’ said Rosie, grabbing her arm and frog-marching her out of the room.

‘You can have a swig of Freddie’s whisky to cheer you up.’

Bella sprayed on some scent, then sprayed more round the room, arranged her breasts to advantage in the white dress and, sitting down, began to brush her hair.

There was a knock on the door.

‘Come in,’ she said huskily in her best Tallulah Bankhead voice.

As she turned, smiling, her mouth dropped in amazement. For the man lounging in the doorway was absurdly romantic looking, with very pale delicate features, hollowed cheeks, dark burning eyes, and hair as black and shining as a raven’s wing. He was thin and very elegant, and over his dinner jacket was slung a magnificent honey-coloured fur coat.

They stared at each other for a moment, then, smiling gently, he said: ‘May I come in? I hope it’s not a nuisance for you.’

He had an attractive voice, soft and drawling. ‘My name’s Rupert Henriques,’ he added as an afterthought.

‘Oh, please come in.’ Bella stood up, flustered, and found that her eyes were almost on a level with his.

‘You’re tall,’ he said in surprise. ‘You look so small on the stage beside Othello.’

Embarrassed, Bella tipped a pile of clothes off the red velvet sofa.

‘Sit down. Have a drink.’ She got out a bottle of whisky and a couple of glasses. She was furious that her hand shook so much. She rattled the bottle against the glass and poured out far too large a drink.

‘Hey, steady,’ he said. ‘I’m not much of a drinker.’

He filled the glass up to the top with water from the washbasin.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’

She shook her head and was pleased to see his hand was shaking as much as hers when he lit his cigarette. He wasn’t as cool as he looked.

As she sat down she knocked a jar of cold cream on to the floor. They both dived to retrieve it and nearly bumped their heads.

He looked at her and burst out laughing.

‘I believe you’re as nervous as I am,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you used to entertaining strange men backstage every night?’

Bella shook her head. ‘I’m always frightened they might be disappointed when they meet me in the flesh.’

‘Disappointed?’ He looked her over incredulously. ‘You must be joking.’

Bella was suddenly conscious of how low her dress was cut.

‘The flowers are heavenly,’ she said, blushing. ‘How on earth did you manage to get such beautiful ones in winter?’

‘Rifling my mother’s conservatory.’

‘Doesn’t she mind?’

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‘Doesn’t know. She’s in India.’ He smiled maliciously. ‘I’m hoping an obliging tiger might gobble her up.’

Bella giggled. ‘Don’t you like her?’

‘Not a lot. Do you get on with your parents?’

‘They’re dead,’ said Bella flatly, and waited for the conventional expressions of sympathy. They didn’t come.

‘Lucky you,’ said Rupert Henriques. ‘I wish I were an orphan – all fun and no fear.’

He had a droll way of rattling off these remarks which made them quite inoffensive. All the same, she thought, he’s a spoilt little boy. He could be quite relentless if he chose.

He picked up his drink. ‘You were even better than usual tonight.’

‘Don’t you get bored seeing the same play night after night?’

He grinned. ‘I’m glad it’s not a Whitehall farce. You’re the only reason I’ve been so many times.’

There was a knock on the door.

‘Hell,’ he said. ‘Do we have to answer it?’

It was Queenie.

‘I won’t be a minute,’ Bella said to her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she added to Rupert, ‘I shall have to change.’

He drained his glass, got up and moved towards the door.

‘I was wondering if you’d have dinner with me one evening next week,’ he said.

It’s Monday now, thought Bella. He can’t be that keen if he can wait at least a week to see me!