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'I'm angry and defensive about everything'



'I'm not very good at being happy'

'I'm a bit of a loner'

'I'm not Tim from The Office'

**WHO IS THE REAL  
MARTIN FREEMAN?**

Everyone thinks I'm their best mate. They'd like to go for a pint with me.

I think – 'No, you wouldn't'

Irascible, eccentric, outspoken? Nothing like his affable on-screen persona? It's strange what five months in the snowy wastes of Canada can do to a man – or is this the real Martin Freeman?

By Helena de Bertodano

PORTRAIT Jay Brooks



Freeman in the TV version of *Fargo*. Below: with Benedict Cumberbatch in *Sherlock*



**Y**ou can tell quite a lot about Martin Freeman from his excuse for arriving late for this interview. “I was in a really hot bath watching a documentary about Harold Wilson and I suddenly looked at the f\*\*\*ing time...”

Quirky, yes; a self-styled intellectual, yes (later, he tells me he is reading a book about the

Russian Revolution); prone to giving strangely intimate details about himself (yet very guarded on seemingly innocuous subjects); a bit grumpy, hence the constant swearing; head somewhat in the clouds, so doesn't notice trivial details such as time – which is probably why he is still talking the hind legs off a donkey three and a half hours later, fuelled by frequent infusions of peppermint tea, beer and coffee.

Freeman, 42, is on a career high – has been for a while now. In the hugely successful modern-day reworking of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories, he plays Dr Watson to Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock; he is Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, Peter Jackson's trio of epic fantasy adventure films – the first

**'Filming *Sherlock* was like a premiere: there were hundreds of female fans around; they slept there'**



two grossed nearly \$2 billion and the third will be released later this year. And now he is shooting a much-anticipated television series, *Fargo*, based on the Academy Award-winning 1996 film of the same name. Freeman plays Lester Nygaard, an interpretation of the William H. Macy role in the movie. “I'm f\*\*\*ing lucky,” says Freeman. “I've done four or five things in my career that most actors would give their right arm to have done just one of.”

And yet, despite everything he does, the role people still associate him with – at least in the UK – is Tim Canterbury from the TV sitcom *The Office* (2001-2003), playing opposite Ricky Gervais's David Brent. He is the loveable sales rep who fancies Dawn, sticks Gareth's stapler in jelly and whose job is going nowhere. And I have to say it is Tim who springs to mind as I catch sight of a solitary figure trudging through the swirling snow towards the restaurant in Calgary, Canada, where he has been holed up for the past five months shooting *Fargo*.

The restaurant is marooned on an island and accessible only by foot. Freeman pushes open the door, brushing the snow out of his

cropped, greying hair and stomping his long moccasins. He removes two thick jackets and rubs his hands together. I ask him if he is sick of the weather. "It depends if you're going to put it in [the article]," he replies. What? Surely the weather is not off limits? "They get easily offended," he explains. Off the record, he tells me his view – with lots of swearwords – on living through nearly half a year of sub-zero temperatures. But he also confesses that one of the reasons he took on *Fargo* (which purports to be a story from northern Minnesota) is: "I was interested in the idea of being that cold. I've got a bit of a Scott of the Antarctic fixation. On a couple of days they've had to stop filming because it's been -40C."

His *Fargo* character is stuck in a dead-end job, selling insurance, prompting comparisons with Tim from *The Office*, something I am stupid enough to mention, setting off a firestorm. "I don't think other actors are asked all the time about the similarities between their roles. I don't think Ben [Cumberbatch] or Daniel Craig are asked that. I think it stems from my so-called perceived approachability. And it is totally f\*\*\*ing perceived. I come across as a half-decent person and not very pretentious. I'm a good actor; I can pretend. Look," he says, calming down a bit, "I'm angry and defensive about everything. It just drives me slightly bananas because I know how hard I work. Tim is *nothing* like Bilbo Baggins either. People tend to think, 'Oh, you're just doing what you do.' It's a) insulting, b) f\*\*\*ing bulls\*\*\*, and c) I'd invite any other f\*\*\*er to try to do it."

Right. In fact, he has played a wide range of roles – from a lusty Rembrandt in *Nightwatching* (2007) to a shrewd Lord Shaftesbury in the BBC One drama *Charles II: the Power and the Passion* (2003). "People say, 'I've seen all your work,' and I think, 'No, you f\*\*\*ing haven't. No one has – even I haven't.'" He even found himself starring opposite Penélope Cruz ("a f\*\*\*ing delight") in *The Good Night*, a 2007 romantic comedy. And from July I he will be taking on Richard III for three months at the Trafalgar Studios in London. "It will be my first professional Shakespeare. At least I'll be at home, too."

He studies the menu, then puts it down with a sigh. "I don't only want egg and chips all my life, but the title of every dish here is like the first chapter of a book. I've never heard of bresaola. And what's bottarga – is that a cheese?" He does not eat meat (gave it up aged 14) so, after quizzing the waiter, he settles on a green salad (Heritage Greens, Venturi Balsamic Epsom, Parsnip Chips, Fairwinds Farm Caerphilly – he has a point), followed by a pickerel, which we establish is a white fish.

He's a family man, and the long stint in Canada is beginning to wear on him. He lives in Hertfordshire with the actress Amanda Abbington, who plays his screen wife in



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*Sherlock*, and their two young children, Joe, 8, and Grace, 5, but has only been home twice since filming started in October: "It's a very heavy price. My main priority in any job is when is the soonest I can get back to the three people I love most in the world. I even ummed and ahed over *The Hobbit*."

Freeman met Amanda on the set of Channel 4's *Men Only* in 2000, but doesn't want to say if they are married: "Let's leave that a mystery. What I like about our relationship is that we choose it. I'm not saying we're not married, though."

His phone rings and he sticks a finger in his ear to listen to one of his children. "Are you going to bed now?" He looks at me and mouths "Sorry," then wanders off to chat in private. When he returns, he tells me his kids sometimes find his fame tricky to handle: "Joe's just started a gymnastics class and he said to me: 'Daddy, people don't believe that you're my dad there, can you come in with me?' And I said, 'Of course I'll come in,' but I always try to say, 'It's much more important for people to like you for you than for me.' But when you're 8, and especially if people don't believe you, you want to show them. He is very proud of me, as I am very proud of him."

Despite his huge success and settled family life, he says he is "not brilliant at being happy". "If you ask my children and Amanda, they will definitely say I am pretty grumpy and hard to live with sometimes. I also know that I can be playful and full of joy..." Freeman describes himself as a hands-on father, happy to get up in the night when his children were babies. "I wasn't like a Fifties dad. Now, I enjoy reading and telling them spooky stories. I'm quite a disciplinarian: I can be a shouter. But I can be a very demonstrative kisser and hugger."

### With Mackenzie Crook in *The Office*

Some aspects of fatherhood surprised him: "It goes without saying that you're going to love your kids, but what you're not expecting is wanting to kill everybody in your house. I'm fortunate in that Amanda is generally a slightly nicer person than I am. If it were purely up to me, my kids would probably be vegetarian Catholic Marxists."

His children love watching their dad in *The Hobbit*. "I thought the spiders would really do Grace in, but she wasn't scared by the reel and the violence. The thing that most upset her was the bit where the dwarves come round and basically eat Bilbo out of house and home. Grace is inconsolable at the idea that they have stolen all Daddy's food – she thinks I'm being bullied."

Although he makes a very comfortable living, he says he is not as fabulously wealthy as people seem to think. "I understand why people think I am; it just happens not to be true. I'm certainly wealthier than anyone else in the history of my family."

Nor has he embraced many of the trappings of wealth. "I don't live large in that way, because that's not my taste. I drive a Mini. But I love going to Italy on holiday, being happy in the sunshine, eating the best food and looking after my family in that way."

He describes his house as "a gamekeeper's cottage" just outside a village – where they moved from London after Freeman grew sick of people ringing his doorbell at all hours to speak to "Tim". "I fell in love with the house and it was near where Amanda grew up. I had an idea that I would go with John, my father-in-law, to a local village pub, but the dual effect of *Sherlock* and *The Hobbit* means that now I just become the cabaret."

The most common misperception about him, he says, is that, "I'm everyone's best mate. When people say, 'I'd love to go for a pint with him,' I think, 'No, you f\*\*\*ing wouldn't.' It goes back to Tim from *The Office* – he was a very approachable, funny schlub. I don't think people go up to Ray Winstone and go, 'All right, you c\*\*\*?'"

Of course, there are many worse things than being seen as nice. "Definitely," he agrees. "But if you grow up small as a kid, it's like being mummied by the girls: 'You're so sweet.' That casts a long shadow."

Freeman grew up in Aldershot, Hampshire, the youngest of five children. "You never feel you're not the youngest. I'm a grown man, doing all right, and I still feel subconsciously as if I've got to earn my place in a room."

His parents divorced when he was 1 and he lived mostly with his father, a naval officer, until his sudden death from a heart attack ➔



when Freeman was 10. “At the time, I probably tried to brush my dad’s death under the carpet. I didn’t want people to feel sorry for me. I was small, I was pretty sickly and asthmatic; people already went ‘little Martin’. But when I was 17 or 18, I realised that losing a parent is a big deal. It was devastating in a way that I was unable to acknowledge at the time.” His eyes tear up. “Sometimes I wonder if I heard his voice now, would it be the same as it is my memory?”

He remains very close to his mother, who he describes as “a very egalitarian, principled, left-leaning snob. I never felt hard done by, because I always knew I was loved.”

Raised a Catholic, Freeman went to a Salesian school in Chertsey, Surrey, where the only thing that really rubbed off on him was the religion. “Catholicism goes in somewhere and it colours you for good and bad for ever. So does being the product of divorce. It’s all in there in little layers.”

He has stuck to his faith, although he does not go to church regularly. “I’m about as much of a practising Catholic as I am an astronaut, [but] I will occasionally pop into a church and light a candle and un-ironically pray.”

At school he was a “terrible student... I was pathologically lazy, the classic underachiever. I was a p\*\*\*-taker and a clown... Of the nine or ten GCSEs I took, I only got three: both English and RE. I didn’t get art or history, which really pissed me off.” But he is no idiot and says he owes his education to his home life and creative mother, who had wanted to be an actress herself. “I lived in a house where reading was fine, drawing was fine, I was reading George Orwell at 11... My house was full of books. Still is.”

When he left school, his options were limited. He had a vague plan to become a musician. He says he was “a good percussionist – but not good enough”. Having joined a youth theatre at 15, “Because I thought it would bring down Thatcher somehow, which it did, a mere four years later,” he went on to the Central School of Speech and Drama. He started to get small roles in TV series such as *Casualty*, *The Bill* and *This Life*, but it was not until *The Office* that he really established himself.

He quickly accepted that he was never going to be conventional heart-throb material. “When you first see yourself on screen and you realise you don’t look like Paul Newman, you think, ‘That’s a shame.’ But I was quite happy that I was getting work based on what I could do – as opposed to women swooning as soon as I appeared on screen.”

Although he describes himself as “a bit of a loner”, he clearly makes friends easily and counts many of those he works with as good friends now, including Cumberbatch: “After *Sherlock*, we both sodded off to do other things, so we don’t particularly hang out. But



With his partner,  
Amanda Abbington

## ‘Amanda is nicer than me. If it were up to me, my kids would be vegetarian Catholic Marxists’

we send the odd e-mail or text. I count [Sir Ian] McKellen as a friend. I’ve had him round for lunch and he’s had me round for lunch. He’s a delightful man; we talk about love and life... I would consider Bill Nighy a mate, because he’s into the same stuff I’m into: records and shoes. I love the sociability of my job. But I’m also very happy with my own company.”

His “ideal selfish day”, he says, is “meeting up with one of my mates in Soho, going to visit my tailor, poncing around and talking about whatever takes our fancy with like-minded silly men.” He takes clothes seriously: “Life’s too short to wear boring clothes.” Today he is wearing a long-sleeved navy polo shirt and jeans – garb that doesn’t strike me as particularly out there. “But if you know about stuff, you’ll go, ‘Oh yeah, that’s a Smedley.’ I can always spot someone in a Smedley; I know the cut of it. Bill [Nighy] and I talk about Smedleys a lot.”

Although he is accustomed to being recognised, the success of *Sherlock* and *The Hobbit* has taken it to another level. “It’s a daily thing. If the silhouettes are young women or girls, I know that it will be *Sherlock*, they’ll get very excited and they might follow me round for a while.” When *Sherlock* was being filmed in Gower Street, Central London, he and Cumberbatch were mobbed: “[Filming *Sherlock*] was like a premiere: there were hundreds of mainly female fans there the entire day; they sleep out there. It’s a great show, but the nature of that mania has nothing to do with Ben and me. We are just props.”

Perhaps surprisingly, when I ask him what he is proudest of, he mentions *The Office* first: “In terms of what’s nearest to my taste in humour.” He also mentions *The Voorman Problem* (2013), a short film that was nominated for an Oscar, in which Freeman

plays a doctor called in to examine a prisoner who believes he is God.

The *Fargo* offer surprised him. “It wasn’t obvious why they’d picked me. I thought it could be a terrible idea, but... it is one of the best-written things I’ve ever done.”

Freeman’s strengths as an actor may be subtle, but should not be underestimated: he is often a touchstone of “normality” – whether as the hapless Hobbit unwillingly dragged off on a crazy adventure, or the perplexed everyman being bounced around the galaxy in a towelling dressing gown as Arthur in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (2005). For the viewer, he acts as the ordinary conduit into an extraordinary world.

He has not allowed himself to rewatch the original *Fargo* since accepting the role. “The last thing I wanted to do was a William H. Macy impression. I’ve got enough s\*\*\* to deal with just with the accent.” The first episode packs such a punch, and leaves so many of the main characters dead, that it is hard to see how it can maintain its momentum. “That’s just the hors d’oeuvre,” says Freeman with a chuckle. It is slick and clever and funny in a macabre way – just as the original was.

He is not particularly interested in awards. “I get uncomfortable when people make Oscar speeches and say, ‘This is the dream.’ That’s not the dream; the dream is playing the part. If people are throwing Oscars around, I’ll happily have one. But you may as well follow a dream of meeting a unicorn. It’s pointless.”

Nor does he have any truck with the sort of actor who says he “becomes” the person he is playing. “It’s utter bulls\*\*\*. What you try to do is facilitate a story being told.”

Like most actors, says Freeman, he can be a bit of “a narcissistic p\*\*\*k”. We have left the restaurant and are clomping through the snow. “I think about myself a lot, and I think about how people see me a lot. There’s a certain type of intense actor who I think is embarrassed that they’re not really a coal miner or something manly. I’m quite happy poofing about acting; I think it’s a noble profession.”

And he takes pride – “When I allow myself to feel pride” – in the fact that he has never sold out: “Everyone has their own idea about what selling out is, but I’m glad I’ve not taken it up the arse just to further myself. Even when I was almost 24, with f\*\*\*-all money, I was turning down McDonald’s commercials. Without trying to make myself out to be Gandhi, I’ve always been driven by principle. I’ve always questioned myself. On my deathbed, I don’t want to be found wanting.” ■

*Fargo begins on Channel 4 on April 20*