

Date:

Author/Interview subject: Steve Backshall

Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth

Other speakers:

JF: I am loving that music; I was having a wee bit of a boogie there, embarrassingly caught on camera. Hello! A very warm welcome to Authors Live from Glasgow! Hi! So glad to have you along. I'm Janice Forsyth, how the heck are you? You're extremely well! I'm really glad to hear it! Well, I hope you're full of energy this morning because we've got tons to take you through today. We're going to learn about so much wonderful stuff, about the wonders of the natural world. We're going to be thinking hard about really important stuff like the environment and conservation. And as well as all of that we're going to get some top tips on writing and about creating wonderful stories. Are you ready for all of that? You are! That's fabulous.

And I can't hear you but I know that you're loving it already, but I did hear some voices here because yes, I'm joined by the very lovely pupils wearing blindingly white shirts, wonderful uniform, from St Nicholas Primary School in West Lothian. Aren't they lovely? And they're going to wave to you up here. Let's all wave. Aren't they smashing? They're fabulous, they're cheery and they're very, very well dressed. Hello also to all of you out there, thousands and thousands of children who are joining us through the BBC's Commonwealth Class. We're so delighted to have you along, and also a big hello to Burravoe Primary School in Yell in the Shetland Islands. Hi there. Thanks very much for joining us today. And also even further away than that from where we are in Glasgow, a big huge hello to Delhi Public School in India. Hi there. We might do that again. Shall we wave up there to them too? Yeah! Hello! Thanks so much.

Right, frankly, I'm exhausted already. No, energy levels up, Janice, because it's time to meet our author. He knows a thing or two about getting things done. He knows a thing or two about energy levels. He is an amazingly busy adventurer and he's taken time out of his ridiculously packed schedule to be with us today. How excited are you children here with me?

Aud: Really!

JF: They're really excited! And as well as talking about his books, Tiger Wars and Ghosts of the Forest, he's also going to be giving all of us a sneak previous of his new book, Wilds of the Wolf. Do you know something; it isn't even in the shops yet! That's how exclusive a preview it is. Are you ready? Shall we give a big roaring welcome to Steve Backshall! [applause]

SB: Hello all. Hi. Hello. How are you doing?

JF: Hello!

SB: Hello.

JF: I'm curtsying.

SB: My goodness.

JF: Welcome.

SB: You made me feel like a prince or something.

JF: He is a prince of the wilds! Ah! How are you?

SB: I'm doing very well.

JF: It's very strange to see you sitting in a seat in a room for a little while.

SB: As opposed to being in a hammock being poured on by jungle rains.

JF: Yeah, that sort of stuff.

SB: Yeah, I know what you mean.

JF: Yeah, indeed. You're in Scotland in case you didn't realise, just reminding you. Actually, you must become giddy at times thinking where am I? What country am I in?

SB: I do get a little bit of a sense of that, but I have to say Scotland is one of my favourite parts of the whole world. I mean I haven't gone on a foreign holiday for probably a decade or so. If I get some time off I come to Scotland I go sea kayaking around the Western Isles or I go and take my bike around the Cairngorms or go climbing up the north face of Ben Nevis. This is one of my favourite parts of the whole planet.

JF: Oh, fantastic. Any of you been kayaking, a canoe? Yeah, oh, lovely. A great way to see Scotland, that's for sure. Right, we've got tons to talk about; we'll begin

with talking about travel. And you mentioned Scotland, which is beautiful as you say, best place in the whole world. What's the most recent exotic far flung place that you've been to?

SB: Well, I spent the early part of this year in Antarctica. So I travelled down from the Falkland Islands at the very bottom of Latin America out into the southern ocean and down into South Georgia which is an extraordinary small island chain, which looks like someone's just taken a chunk of the Himalayas and dropped it in the ocean. Filming alongside colonies of half a million king penguins. Any one single king penguin is so entrancing and glamorous and glorious that you could stare at it for an hour. So imagine being at a colony where for every single foot there is at least one penguin, as far as the eye can see. And we got to dive with them underwater as well.

Before heading on down to the Antarctic Peninsula where we dived beneath turquoise and green icebergs in search of something called a leopard seal. And the leopard seal is a purely predatory seal, they feed on things like penguins and other seals, and I have to say it was one of the most intimidating experiences of my entire life. But such a triumph after spending the last 14 months traversing the whole planet from the artic all the way down to the Antarctic.

JF: Well, I can see these children here, their eyes are widening at the thought of all of that, and that's just a little of what you've done. So when you were the same age as some of the children here and watching around the country and around the commonwealth, were you doing any travelling then when you were in primary school, junior school?

SB: Yes. I'm very, very lucky in that my greatest inspiration in life is my parents. Both my mum and my dad basically committed their entire lives to making sure that my sister and I could travel from a very young age. So they both worked for the airlines, so we had discounted travel all over the world. And so we would go away to Africa and to India and to South America, and then once we got there we didn't have any money, so we lived like real wandering gypsies basically, just wandering around with our rucksacks on. So tough travel in the most exotic parts of the world was very, very natural to me from a young age.

But also we grew up on a small dilapidated, rundown old farm, and we were surrounded by rescue animals. Things like we had a donkey who was asthmatic and couldn't even get through a brae without collapsing. We had guard dog geese which we managed to get from someone. All these rescue animals which came from all over the local surrounding area. So being surrounded by animals, being surrounded by the Surrey Heaths, which is my local wildlife area, and

travelling around the world was something that was intrinsic to my life from four years old.

JF: Wow, that is amazing because I suppose for so many of us travelling, we spend time in airports and we're on the aeroplane, and the sense of travel has maybe lessened. Once we get there we might have a couple of weeks at the beach or something like that. But you really experience that sense of landing in a country, and as you say, not having anything planned particularly.

SB: Yeah, I mean my mum and dad are fantastic for that. They're in their 70s now, they've both retired and they have spent most of this year so far backpacking around India just the two of them.

JF: Aw.

SB: No plan, no fancy hotels, no beaches, just going to the most wild and exciting places they can. I mean they're pretty extraordinary people and they gave us such opportunities from a very young age. So I'm really grateful.

JF: Are they incredibly proud of you when they see you on the tele and all that and read the books? Are they like that's my boy?

SB: I think most of the time my mum will get through watching an episode and she will slap me around the back of the head and go what were you thinking? Have we taught you nothing for goodness sake! I mean the last one when she saw me diving with great white sharks outside of the cage, she said if you ever do that again I am going to be so cross. And it was almost like she was going to threaten to stop giving me my pocket money. My age, and she's still only the person that intimidates me most in the whole world!

JF: That's brilliant. Wales, sharks, tarantulas, he's most frightened of his mum.

SB: Yeah.

JF: I love that, Steve! Now, we've got a question actually from our audience here and we're going to get a microphone up to the second front row, and it's Caitlin who has a question. Hi there, Caitlin. What's your question for Steve?

Girl: How many countries have you been to?

SB: Well, it depends how you draw the boundaries, because there are lots of different ways that you can quantify how many countries there are in the world. On the most conservative level I've been to 105, but there are something like 260, maybe even more, countries than that in the entire world. So I'm not halfway

there, I'm not even close to halfway there. And actually some of those countries, Brazil for example, I've been to Brazil maybe six or seven times, but it's vast. It's absolutely huge. I haven't even scratched the surface. So despite the fact that I've spent most of the last 15 years travelling for television, before that I was travelling as an author, and my whole life I've been travelling with my family, I'm not even beginning to get there. So there's plenty, plenty more to see and do.

JF: Yeah. Does anyone else have a question about travel, about countries? Anything you want to ask at all? You put your hand up and ask a question? No, you're being shy. Oh, there's a question at the back row from the young man in the middle. Here comes your microphone so we can all hear you.

Boy: Have you ever been to Venezuela?

SB: I have, yes. Venezuela's a really, really exciting country. It's somewhere which is right at the union of South America and Central America, so it has phenomenal biodiversity. It's probably the best place on earth to go looking for the green anaconda, which is the largest and the heaviest of all the snakes, and it's also somewhere that has one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen, which is there's one set of caves where the largest species of centipede found on earth lives. It can get to be over 30cm in length. The amazing thing about it is though that this centipede will wander out in the evening around about dusk to the centre of the roof of the cave and hang down by its back legs into the air and catch bats as they fly in and out of the cave. I mean it's madness! Thinking of an invertebrate that can catch bats on the wing just completely blows my mind.

Also though, probably the best expedition I've ever done was in Venezuela. It was the first descent of a mountain called Upuigma, which was this remarkable jungle mountain. When we got to the top we knew for a fact that every single footprint we made was the first that a human being had made there, and almost every single animal we found was new to science. And it was the most exciting expedition I ever had. So yes, I've been to Venezuela and I absolutely adore it!

JF: Great questions, thank you very much. Maybe just one more questions about countries. We've got lots of other stuff to talk about, but could we come to the front row here, and this young lady? Thank you.

Girl: What's the hottest country you've been to?

SB: Well, I did a race called the Marathon des Sables in Morocco in 2005 and it was across the Sahara Desert. And we ran 160 miles across the Sahara on this race, and the hottest temperature that we had recorded was 54 degrees centigrade. Fifty four! It's not the hottest temperature that's ever been recorded

on earth, there have been about four or five degrees hotter than that recorded. But it's the hottest that I've ever experienced and it was horrific. The soles of people's shoes were melting. So yes, that's the hottest I've been to.

JF: And great question. And just to be quite clear; you were running?

SB: We were running. Running carrying everything that we needed on our backs.

JF: Of course you were! [laughter] I just don't know how that is humanly possible. But clearly you're capable of more than most humans. Let's just think about conservation because it's really important and it's a topic that's very close to your heart. And I think over the... When I was at school, when I was your age we didn't really think so much about this. But I think you guys, wherever you are in the world, I think we are thinking about it a bit more. Was there something that...well, you've perhaps already explained because of your parents and travelling the world. Was it just a natural extension perhaps of travel and also of the animals at home, that you were aware of how important all living creatures are?

SB: I think that you're absolutely right, you've hit the nail on the head. My generation, we knew nothing about green issues, about conservation, about the environment. It does give me tremendous hope that the people that are sat in front of me now will know far, far more about how to live sustainably than I ever did when I was young. But it's something that I've come to gradually. There are things where you generally just start thinking a little bit about the impact that you're having on the planet with every single thing you do, with every single thing you use, with everything you throw away. And it's quite a gradual realisation, but then when I started going and working in the field with a lot of wild animals and working with the scientists who work with them as part of their day-to-day life you start hearing the facts and you start hearing the figures and the realities of all of the various challenges that are facing wild animals across the planet start to become real for you.

So it's been a gradual process but one that is at times shocking and heart rendering, and at other times it gives you great hope. Because human beings have a tremendous power to change the way the world works and that's why it's so thrilling sitting here in front of an audience like this, because I know that this lot here have the power to make a difference.

JF: Yeah, I can see people nodding and smiling here, and I'm sure you are wherever you're watching this too, because you're absolutely right, you must at times just think oh no, this is so difficult. But the fact that so many young people are really

engaged with it now must be one of the biggest, most important aspects of progress actually. Because these guys will be making decisions later on.

SB: That's exactly it. And one single individual can make mountains of change. I mean we know about all of the fabulous figures who have made so much impact both on human issues and on wildlife issues around the planet. Every single one of those people started off as a child in a school learning about those issues for the first time through the media. There is no doubt that individuals can make a change, and we all need to know that because it is tremendously empowering. And now we have so many more tools available to us than my generation did, it's so much easier to find out information, it's so much easier to get in contact with organisations that can give you extra information and give you a chance to make a difference. So yes, there is more potential for the youngsters of this generation than there has ever been before.

JF: I think it's true and I'm aware that there are people watching this in all sorts of different locations, some people might be in big cities, we're in Glasgow right now, big cities, and there'll be people living...I've mentioned Shetland, there'll be people all over the world who are more aware of the rural environment or perhaps the sea and so on. But I'm wondering with you, moving on to doing your programmes and so on and doing those really interesting travels, were there particular peoples or locations or habitats that meant a lot to you suddenly, like a light bulb moment thinking gosh, this is related to where we are back home? Because I think if you are in a big city it's easy to forget about how we are all joined up essentially, aren't we?

SB: Yeah. Actually I'm not trying to bring this back to my books, but I am reminded of the subject of this book here; Ghost of the Forest. It's focused very much around a group of people who live in the Forest of Borneo called the Penan. And the Penan have an extraordinary hunter gather lifestyle which essentially hasn't changed for thousands of years. But their forests are shrinking and as their forest shrink the people are being driven out of their...these phenomenal lifestyles into quite sad, quite shoddy villages which are set up for them by the Government and losing the lifestyles that they've followed for thousands of years. A lifestyle that is very much in tune with the environment they live in.

But the reason that that's happening is because the forests are being cut down for something called oil palm. And oil palm is a substance that is spreading like wildfire across Borneo and the reason for it is that it's used in products that we use right here in the UK. It's used in all kinds of soaps and oils and other things. So our consumption drives the extinction of lifestyles on the other side of the planet, which is why you have to think a tremendous... You have to learn as

much as you possibly can about these issues and then be careful about every single thing you consume, see where it comes from, find out how you could perhaps eat better food and use better products. I mean they're all small things but they can lead to very big effects.

JF: Well, I think we've got a question from Rachael about that, maybe...yeah. Rachael, hi, what's your question?

Girl: What can we do to help with conservation?

SB: That is a great question. It's a huge question. The important thing is to not to try and bite off too much too soon. The important thing is to start basically with your own life and with changing your own habits in your home, in your school, and then maybe with a couple of people around you turning off lights, not using too much water, recycling. And then I would say if you decide that if this is going to be the life for you start doing things like volunteering for your local wildlife charities. So things like the Woodland Trust, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, the Wildlife Trust, the RSPCA, the RSPB, we have a lot of them here in this country and they all do very good work and most of them have programmes that young people can get involved with. And essentially what you want to do is try and make an impact on your patch first and foremost. And once you've done that and once you've seen the successes that you can make, then you can start thinking about having big impacts around the world.

JF: A great question, thank you very much. A wonderful answer too because I think often you might think oh, it's up to the grownups to do that, but the fact that children can get involved, volunteering and as you say, working where they live, helping out there.

SB: Do you know what as well, I think now it's absolutely not about the grown-ups, because people of my generation...I've become very, very aware of conservation issues, but a lot of people of my generation still aren't. These are things that you can go back and you can tell your parents. It happens over and over again that adults have a tremendous amount to learn from young people. You're studying this stuff for new, now, every single day. There are definitely going to be things about conservation that you lot know that your parents don't. Don't be afraid to tell them.

JF: And I bet all of you... Give us a shout, give us a cheer if you go home and annoy your parents and tell them to recycle stuff instead of throwing it out. Give us a cheer if you do that?

SB: Total silence! [laughs]

JF: I'm surprised! I'm surprised because most children I know go home and tell their parents don't through that out; put it in the recycling bin. But I can hear you guys cheering throughout the world. Let's talk about writing because I cannot quite figure out how on earth you find the time to write all of your books and these amazing series of fiction, novels for younger readers. Is there a pattern to your writing or do you have to say okay, I'm not going to go and do filming for tele or whatever, I'm going to map out a few weeks or months or however long it takes to do this? What's the process, Steve?

SB: Actually, it's exactly the opposite.

JF: Is it!

SB: I do all of my writing while I'm on the road and the reason for that is that when I get back from an expedition there are some any jobs that need to be done, and I'll get back and all of a sudden you've got Wi-Fi and you've got mobile phone reception, and there are friends calling, there are charities calling, the television and the newspapers are all calling and wanting to get a little piece of you. And my house will be flooded and I have to take up the floorboards or I'll have to get it decorated, all these little jobs. Whereas if I'm sat in the back of a bus doing a ten hour drive across the country, or for example when I was travelling down to Antarctica earlier this year, we had six weeks, sixteen days of which was just purely on a boat travelling. We can't do any filming, there is no internet or Wi-Fi, the only thing I could do was sit and write. And so I'd write for eight or ten hours a day. And that kind of total shutting off of any distractions is really, really good for writing. And apart from anything else you're always in exciting, constantly changing, constantly evolving environments; it's quite a stimulating environment to write in. So I find that I can get more done while I'm on the road than I can do while I'm at home bizarrely.

JF: And that totally makes sense now that you describe that. And I'm wondering if you are stimulated or you're kayaking or goodness know what you're doing, if you come up with an idea are you somebody who can...can you keep it in your memory, or do you make a note? Do you write it down? Do you say something into your phone? How does it work? How do you keep a note of ideas?

SB: Probably the most important thing that I have ever done is keep a diary, keep a diary, keep a notebook and I would say that any of you out there who are thinking about writing, keeping a diary is just essential. And the reason it's essential is that if you're writing a story, the big things, the important things, you're always going to remember them. I'm always going to remember swimming out of a cage with a great white shark. That's not going to be a problem remembering that. I might not

remember the smell of the aftershave of the captain on the boat before I went in, or the fact that we were slopping around in fish guts on the deck just as we were trying to slip in the cage and worrying about what it was going to be like, that we actually had fish guts on the underside of our feet, we're about to go out in the water with a great white shark. But those are the things that make it into a story and those are the things that make it interesting to read, and make books appear...

JF: Because your books are full of smells. They're quite smelly, Steve.

SB: Well, I think that...

JF: In a good way! [laughter] You're nodding, you feel as if you're there because you're describing everything.

SB: There's a very good reason for that. I think that we as a species are...we have tremendously lost touch with our sense of smell. But the old factory sense is the one that's closest to memory. It's the one that is most able to bring back a moment in time. I mean we've all sensed it, you've all had a scent of orange blossom or something that's made you think oh crumbs, that reminds me of that time I was... And you're taken back there instantly. And we have no idea quite how potent our sense of smell is and awful lot of our life is driven by it without us knowing. And so I try and describe things through scents and through odours because I actually think that they can take you there.

JF: Now, I know that quite a lot of the children who are with us and watching will have read your first two books. But for those who haven't can you just tell us a little bit about your main characters?

SB: Of course, yes. So the basic idea is that there are a young couple, Saker and Sinter. Sinter is an Indian girl of wealthy decent who lives on a tea plantation, and Saker is an acolyte of a shadowy organisation known as the Clan. Through various coincidences they end up on the run together, being chased by the Clan. And it takes them all around the world, to some of the places that I've been to on my expeditions and I know very intimately because of those expeditions. And on the way they have to learn how to survive and also they encounter all different kinds of wild environments and wild animals.

Underlying it all there are big conservation issues, but I try very, very hard not to hit those too hard to the reader. Very much like my television programmes, I think that basically first and foremost it needs to be exciting, it needs to be adventurous, it needs to be enjoyable, and if 99 per cent of the readers or the viewers of the programmes take nothing away other than that, that's fine?

Because if there is one per cent of the readership or the viewership who then want to learn more then you achieve great things. And so yes, each one of them does have in the background a very strong conservation issue and one that's very dear to my heart. In the first book it was tigers and particularly the use of tigers in illegal poaching, in illegal trafficking and Chinese traditional medicines. The second book is very much about the disappearance of the rainforest and about, as I've said, the tribal people, the Penan who live in Borneo.

And then the third book is about my very favourite animal, the wolf and the artic. And the artic is another environment that's very special to me. I'm actually going up there in a couple of weeks' time for an expedition. And yeah, it's about the fact that this animal that is to me an absolutely treasured species is one that is utterly misunderstood. Has been demonised over the years by human beings, totally unfairly, and is one that I have seen so rarely and I've had to work so hard to find and film in the wild, that they should be treasured, not hated.

JF: So the new book is called Wilds of the Wolf, and this is the moment we've been waiting for because Steve has very kindly for us here at Authors Live going to give us an exclusive preview of the book. Would you like that boys and girls?

Aud: Yes!

JF: You very much would like that.

SB: [laughs] They sounded like there was someone standing behind them saying you will say yes!

JF: You will!

SB: You will! [laughs]

JF: You really do, I know they do. They're huge fans of yours. So do you need to tell us where we are here or is it all...

SB: I'm just going to do a little bit from the very beginning.

JF: Brilliant.

SB: I'm not going to do too much because I don't want to bore them all senseless. But I'll just start from a little bit of the prologue, the very start of this book.

JF: Thank you.

SB: Under soft foot pads the crunch of thin crust from thawed then refrozen snow, these last few days have been too cold for fresh snowfall. Another crunch,

careful. The wolf moves forward letting his nostrils be his eyes, his muzzle drops to the ground and he fills his nasal cavities with delicious scents. Here in the dry, clear air of an arctic winter his canine nose sees the world in a kaleidoscope of odours. To him the air is as full of perfumes as a Turkish bazaar. Steam spumes streams from his snout, it's well below zero and his breath explodes like smoke. Again, he snorts, drawing in a faint faded ammonia scent, an elk urinated here more than a moon ago. A huge sniff and a memory bursts like a flame in his brain, a memory of spring. But it's just sweet chlorophyll from where the elk scraped and tore at grass stalks below the snow.

Under the pale umbrella of a pine the permafrost has been turned over by a squirrel, digging frantically to find its autumn nut hoard. It didn't succeed and went hungry the wolf notices. He is a male of five summers, amber eyes electric against his gunmetal blue fur. Now, the harshest part of winter is over and gunmetal has passed the test of leading the pack through the days of endless darkness. But they're hungry. They've eaten no more than the odd snow shoe hare and the pack is eight strong. They need a large meal and soon or there'll be no pack left to command. He trots lightly on furry foot pads, nose always to the ground snuffling, urgent. What is that? Something sets fireworks off in his brain. He halts as if frightened to blow away any trace of the smell. The other members of the pack sniffing, heads raised as one, watching their leader. Has he found something? A sniff again in exactly the same spot. Blood.

JF: Brilliant. I think we need a round of applause please! [applause] That was tremendous, the Wilds of the Wolf, which is coming out when?

SB: Now, you've put me on the spot. I think it's in about three or four weeks.

JF: Oh, brilliant. And we've had an exclusive preview here, it sound fantastic. Smells fantastic. That was a perfect example there...

SB: It was, yes. [chuckles]

JF: ...of what we were just talking about. But also just the idea of just thinking about writing. How many of you are interested in writing? Do you write at school, write stories? Ah, everybody! Brilliant! Fantastic! And I think that, even just that little snippet was amazing from the point of view of the smells, but also the sounds, all the crunching and the idea of the air and all of that. Does it take you a while to... You described a wee bit about your grabbing time when you're out and about on the expeditions and stuff. But you must have to get into a wee private moment to create all of that.

SB: Do you know what, actually, this was written while I was in the arctic. So that really helped because those simple things are around you all the time. And one of the things about arctic environments as opposed to the rainforest where you have a phantasmagoria or smells and where everything is almost like too much for you to take in, there's nothing like the diversity in arctic environments. And if you have scents they will travel for an enormous distance because generally speaking there are nothing like as many smells. That's why the animals there are so driven by scent. Polar bears have been spotted going 20 miles in a dead straight line towards a seal carcass that they could only have smelt. That's the only way...

JF: Wow.

SB: ...that they could have located it. From 20 miles away! And so arctic animals are much more sensitive to smells because there are far fewer of them.

JF: I know it sounds as if I'm obsessed with smelly things but I'm just wondering, you're good at so many things, hanging off cliff faces, diving and all the rest of it, do you think your sense of smell has got better, more attuned because you're out there so aware of it?

SB: I think probably because I use it, yeah, and also because I mean I don't spend a lot of time in polluted cities, I've never been a smoker, that helps for sure. And yeah, I think I'm quite attuned to it. And if I do catch a little whiff of something I'll go what is that? And I try and follow it back and just hope that it isn't actually the camera man who just hasn't washed for a while! [chuckles]

JF: Yes, indeed. And that's the last question I'm going to ask about smelling things. What about the characters in the books then? Are those completely from your imagination or do you draw on people that you know?

SB: Do you know what, I thought they were completely from my imagination until someone said to me, it was probably only about three or four months ago, as if this was total fact and as if this was something that was just completely taken for granted, well, that's you and your sister, isn't it?

JF: Ah!

SB: And I went, well, no, it's... But they went, yeah, but he's a total misanthrope, he doesn't really like human beings very much but is really into wildlife and the outdoors, and he does lots of martial arts and stuff like that, and she's someone who's much more a people person and wants...my sister's a nurse, and Sinter is someone who cares about healing human beings and wants to be a doctor and

all this sort of stuff. And the two of them have this spikey relationship where they bounce off each other and secretly they love each other very much but actually they spend most of their time just basically...they hate each other. And they said it's you and your sister! And I went oh yeah! [laughs]

JF: Ah!

SB: And yeah, I think it kind of is. But I mean that was totally...

JF: Yeah, unconscious.

SB: ...not conscious.

JF: How fabulous! Where's Callum? Hello, Callum. You've got a question which I think mostly Steve might have talked about but can maybe elaborate on it. What's your question, Callum?

Boy: Do you write when you're working abroad or do you wait until you come back?

SB: Yeah, I very, very much write while I'm abroad and it is just down to the fact that at times I have far fewer distractions and it's almost always when I'm travelling. So big long plane journeys, long train journeys, in the back of a car, as I've said we're on the boat down to Antarctica and there's not much else you can do. For me that would be dead time otherwise. So I get a tremendous excitement out of using that time for something worthwhile. And so I'll get to the end of a day and a long drive and most of my friends will have been sat in the back snoozing or they'll have watched films over and over again on their laptops and I'll have done 4,000 words and it feels pretty good.

JF: I think that's really interesting though, Callum, because we know that you all write and all of us end up on tedious journeys, whether it's on a train or in the back of a car, whatever. And it might be that that's the time that you think oh, that's boring, I'll play a video game or something? That could be writing time, couldn't it? I mean you don't have to be in the Antarctic or some extraordinary place across the world.

SB: True, very true.

JF: Right, any other questions about the books or about writing? I'm sure you will have. Let's have some hands here for Steve, come on. Yes, and we've got... Oh, we've got Callum again! Hello, Callum.

Boy: What was your most favourite book?

SB: When I was your age my favourite book was called Call of the Wild by someone called Jack London. And it's the story which even just thinking about it now puts the hackles up on the back of my neck. It's the story of a big dog, a pet dog that was taken during the gold rush, it was kidnapped essentially during the gold rush and turned into a sled dog up in the Yukon. And it's the transition from being a slightly overweight dog that's used to being pampered around the house, in a rich family's house, into becoming a hardened dog running alongside Alaskan huskies up in the harshest environments on earth. And that story just totally bewitched me when I was young and it really completely changed my life. So that, yeah, was definitely my favourite book.

Now, my favourite book is something called The Malay Archipelago by a very famous biologist called Alfred Russel Wallace. It's probably a little bit too...it'll be a few years before you'll really get the most out of it. But it's a great travel story, a great expedition, but at the same time it's about a man who was discovering 20, 30 new species every single day through his expeditions.

JF: Amazing.

SB: Extraordinary.

JF: Amazing.

SB: And a great period during what I think was the golden era of exploration and particularly biological exploration.

JF: Any other questions about Steve books? Yes, we've got a young lady in the front row here. Hiya, what's your question?

Girl: How many books have you written so far?

SB: I think 12. There's been a big mix. So there's been a mix of books which have just purely been on natural history and on wildlife. I've wrote a book that was just on venoms and poisons and natural toxins that animals have. I've written books that have been about how people can go out and watch wildlife and the ways that we here in the UK can engage with the outdoors and with animals. Then I've written a book which was about my expeditions in New Guinea, I've written several that have been just about predators. And then I've got these books, the full chronicle fiction novels. So yeah, I think it's 12.

JF: Great, thank you very much. That's a lot of books, isn't it? And just behind me we have another young man. Thank you, what's your question?

Boy: What was your favourite chapter?

- SB: My favourite chapter, of this one, of the new book that I've been writing or of something else?
- Boy: The new book.
- SB: I don't know actually. I like the whole of it. It's quite nice that it's about an animal I'm very passionate about, a part of the world that I absolutely love and I'm really quite proud of it. I'm hoping that other people will feel the same.
- JF: A good question about chapters because I wonder when you're writing a novel, is it quite nice to think oh, I've got to the end of that chapter. Does that feel like a nice achievement? You have a little rest or sometimes you race ahead with the next chapter?
- SB: I'm quite obsessive about the little word count tool that you have [laughs] on your laptop, and I'll go through the day and I'll be like I want today to be a 4,500 word day. I've done 3,800; I'll give it another hour! I'll give it another hour! And I do find myself tremendously motivated by seeing that number count tick up towards the end of the day. But as far as chapters feel sometimes you do get to the end of a chapter and go oh, that was really good. That's a really good one. And that feels fantastic. But no, I don't think that's the big driver.
- JF: I just wondered because I know if you're writing you'll be writing shorter stories, but the idea of creating a bigger one and maybe that's quite a good way to think about, just one story, one section of the story at a time because it makes it less daunting, doesn't it?
- SB: Yeah.
- JF: Do you have any other questions about the books? Yes, oh, we've got a sea of hands. How about we go to the boy next to Callum in the middle of the row here. Yes, hi.
- Boy: What's been the longest time you've ever wrote on a book?
- JF: What's the longest time?
- SB: The longest time was my book which is called looking for adventure which I first pitched...it was about, originally, my attempt to walk across New Guinea on my own at...I think I was 21 or 22 and I failed dismally and it was a very, very frightening expedition that I was probably quite lucky to get away with. And the first time I tried to...I'd written it completely and I tried to get it made with publishers when I was about 23 or 24, and I'd got it finally published when I was 35, and through all that time I was changing it and altering it and writing new bits

and adding bits to it and taking bits out of it. So in totality it was probably something like 12 or 13 years between starting that book and finishing it.

JF: A longer period of time than you've been alive [laughter] basically. One more question, just at the back there. Thank you.

Boy: What's the deadliest animal you've come across?

SB: The deadliest animal to us as human beings is the mosquito because of the disease that it spreads. This girl here's had her hand up right from the start...

JF: Thank you very much, you can see her. Thank you.

SB: Yeah. [laughs]

JF: Thank you, Steve.

SB: Just here in the second row.

Girl: Who's the most inspirational artist to you?

SB: That's a super question. It probably would be someone like Darwin or Alfred Russel Wallace, and I know that really the level of creativity of art in their work is perhaps not as great as it might be in others. But from a creative point of view it could be someone called Gabriel García Márquez who was a Columbian author, Nobel Prize winning Columbian author who wrote tales that have a style which came to be known as magic realism. And there was such a sense of delight in his books and he would write things that would seem to be totally real and then something would happen that was just completely bonkers and off the wall and utterly metaphysical. And I was just entranced by his writing, particularly one book called A Hundred Years of Solitude, which is probably the book that I've read most often. I think I've read it about six or seven times. So yeah, I think Gabriel García Márquez would be my...

JF: Thank you very much.

SB: ...inspiration.

JF: Well, I can see a sea of hands but actually we've got a bit of a challenge for you, Steve, in a minute...

SB: Okay, right.

JF: ...because Mrs Smith and all of primary three and four and Aith Junior High School in the Shetland Islands have pulled together a quick fire quiz. Last time

they were finding out about Australia, they made up their own deadly 60 programmes based on Australian mammals. The class are massive fans of yours. Hello there! Thank you for watching. One group even changed all their surnames to Backshall when they delivered their presentations...

SB: By deed poll?

JF: ...to the rest of the class.

SB: Are they always going to be Backshall?

JF: Not quite! With the remaining time we have left shall we see how you get on with some quick fire questions?

SB: Fire away.

JF: You'll be really, really good at it and keep your answers very short! Right, here we go. Do you get nervous when you handle an animal you've never seen before?

SB: Sometimes.

JF: What's the deadliest animal you've ever seen?

SB: The mosquito.

JF: What is the funniest animal you've ever seen?

SB: Baby chimps.

JF: Oh, I love baby chimps. Do you have a favourite animal?

SB: The wolf.

JF: Of course. What's the weirdest animal on the planet?

SB: The platypus.

JF: Oh yes, it would have to be. Oh Janice, keep going. If you went to Australia which animal would you most like to see?

SB: The Inland Taipan.

JF: Of course. What is the biggest animal you've ever seen?

SB: The blue whale.

JF: Is it painful handling deadly animals? [laughs]

- SB: Occasionally.
- JF: These are good answers. How many times have you been beaten?
- SB: More than I could possibly count.
- JF: Oh, you couldn't keep a diary for that. What's the noisiest animal?
- SB: The loudest is the male sperm whale, 220 decibels.
- JF: Can you do the noise for us?
- SB: It sounds like a metal pipe being hit with a hammer.
- JF: A lovely noise, I'm glad you didn't do it. What is the scariest animal?
- SB: The hippo.
- JF: Is there an animal you think is really extraordinary?
- SB: All of them. Parasites are the most extraordinary.
- JF: Urgh! The first animal you met?
- SB: Probably grass snakes in my mum and dad's manure heap.
- JF: Lovely! Hmm, nice smell! What age were you when you started handling all the animals?
- SB: Probably three or four.
- JF: If you could have any pet out of all the deadliest ones which one would you pick?
- SB: A wolf.
- JF: Which animal would you never have as a pet?
- SB: A wolf. [laughter]
- JF: First pet you ever had?
- SB: Was a donkey called Barney Rubbles.
- JF: Oh! Most favourite TV programme or episode you've ever done?
- SB: Would be lost land of the jaguar.
- JF: I think we might be out of time. Will you come to Shetland to look at animals some time?

SB: Of course I will.

JF: Yey! A round of applause quickly. [applause] Fantastic. Thank you all very much indeed for your questions and thank you for answering them, particularly...

SB: Not at all.

JF: ...the last quick fire round. If you have any more questions about anything, animal, conservation, adventures, you can join Steve for the Commonwealth class discussion at 12 noon GMT. Of course if you're watching on demand you won't be able to take part in the online discussion, and remember, just before we go you can download all the other Authors Live events and all the free learning resources which are quite something, from scottishbooktrust.com/authorslive. It's a joint production between the Scottish Book Trust, BBC Scotland Learning supported by Creative Scotland. I've done nothing and I'm exhausted! Thank you very much for watching, a huge round of applause from all of you for the fabulous Steve Backshall. [applause]

SB: Thank you all very much!