

Dirty money

Madeleine Collins meets the author famous for exposing the ugly truth behind some of the world's most influential tycoons

Tom Bower isn't exactly a household name. But to say he severely gets up the nose of the filthy rich and powerful who do so qualify, would be an understatement.

Richard Branson, Robert Maxwell, Tiny Rowland, Mohamed Al Fayed. All have fallen victim to Bower's unrepentant quest for the truth regarding how each made their fortunes, while simultaneously engineering public images that Bower claims are, well, poppycock, to put it politely.

His scathing but acclaimed unauthorised biographies of all of the above have not surprisingly frequently landed him in court. And he was in Dubai last week to tell me how and why he does it.

"They're all sharks," he says dryly, of his subjects. "Their success is generated and accompanied by myths. As they climb their greasy poles of success, they have to change their life stories, sanitise it, glorify it, to give themselves greater self-importance, when in fact they're quite ruthless."

"These men are always surrounded by an imperial court - servants, sycophants - they throw parties to seduce people who should know better," he goes on. "It is that agenda which always provokes me to ask: what are they trying to hide? The question, why are the buggers lying to me, is what I find the most motivating part of my career."

Bower seeks out those he says have been "defrauded, humiliated and destroyed" through Branson et al's climb up the greasy pole, and admits "It takes a lot of courage for people to stand up against these self-appointed goliaths and say what they're saying is not the truth."

In person, 62-year-old Bower looks rather like a gentle giant. His lanky frame, grey Friar Tuck hair style and matching shaggy moustache give him the appearance of a kindly uncle.

But he is a man some claim is as much of a shark as his subjects. His ferocious talent for investigative journalism was formed when he worked on Panorama, the BBC documentary program widely considered the benchmark worldwide for

investigative journalism. Prior to that, he was a barrister.

Bower's last devastating expose was on media baron Conrad Black and his "glamour puss" writer and socialite wife, Barbara Amiel. And he is unrepentant in where the blame lies. "Black was a nobody until he married Barbara Amiel ... he probably wouldn't be in prison, would not have been caught if he hadn't wanted to impress her with his wealth and his expertise."

Black's response to the humiliating tell-all? "Bower's keyhole smut-mongering portrayal of my wife as a man-eating, sex maniac prior to her marriage to me is disgusting," he said.

Black of course sued, but is now somewhat restricted from retaliating further. He was sentenced to six and a half years in prison last December for defrauding investors in his media empire, Hollinger International.

Bower remains expressionless when describing how his legal battle with Robert Maxwell ("a crook by any means"), was

saved when Maxwell, the then owner of the Daily Mirror, vanished, never to be seen again, days before he was due to face Bower in court. "November 5th, 1991, was a very important day in my life. I was about to go to court with Maxwell. I'd accused him of being a crook and a fraudster [in my book]; he said he was a very rich and honest man. I was in Moscow when the call came through that he had disappeared over the side of the boat. It was relief because there would be no court case ... but also a disappointment because finally, a man like Maxwell would have been held to account," he says, still deadpan.

Occasionally, Bower is beaten to the punch by his more paranoid victims. "I once got a letter from from Tiny Rowland's lawyers saying he was worried about my biography because it alleged Rowland had had homosexual practices. And Mohammed Al Fayed's lawyer wrote alleging that I claimed he was guilty of paedophilia. I was absolutely amazed because I hadn't grasped that either of them were guilty of that, and I thought, my goodness, what am I missing?!" At last, a smile.

The fight is "sometimes a pretty dirty one," admits Bower, referring to when Richard Branson sued him over the biography he wrote of him. The case cost each side half a million pounds, and Branson lost.

"Branson versus Bower" has now become a standard case in British libel law, which protects journalists who want to write fair criticism about hyper-sensitive tycoons," he says, rather proudly.

Fortunately, Bower has some powerful allies of his own. His wife is Veronica Wadley, the editor of the London Evening Standard and her boss, Jonathan Rothermere, the chairman of Associated Newspapers, has stood by Bower through thick and thin.

So why does Bower continue? Because, he says, of the support of newspaper proprietors like Rupert Murdoch and Rothermere who "believe in the press, believe in the truth, and believe in supporting people like myself. It is very expensive. But in the end, we are here only because the truth is more important than fiction." ♦

