

# I don't feel any different *in my 50s* to when I was *in my 30s*

*Vogue* editor **Alexandra Shulman** talks to Victoria Young about her surprisingly healthy body image, the meaning of family – and writing her first novel



**Alexandra Shulman has been editor of *Vogue* for 20 years. She is divorced and lives in London with her son Sam, 17, and her boyfriend, journalist David Jenkins.**

**I have a terrible problem, which is that I can't do pretty much anything after lunch.** So an awful lot has to get crammed in from about 6am until 1pm, and then it's pretty much downhill from then.

**I always wanted to write a book, but thought it would have to wait until I left *Vogue*.** But then I didn't leave *Vogue* and I did feel that I'd been editing it for a long time and that it would be good to do something different. So when I lost my newspaper column and had some time, I thought, "Now is the moment."

**I wrote 30,000 words without knowing what the story was,** and sent it to an agent who said, "It's nicely written, but what's the story?" I just thought, "Oh well, obviously I'm not going to be able to do this." Then I decided that was a bit pathetic and I should give it another go.

**I've always had very good friends, particularly good girlfriends,** and so I

wanted the book to be about friendship. My book is set in the 80s and follows three friends who leave university and embark on adult life together. Bits of it resemble experiences I've had. Like one of the friends is a journalist, and I did work at the *Telegraph* for a year. But none are actually based on me or, indeed, any of my friends. It's also about young women and their parents, although I didn't draw on my own relationship with my parents – other than general irritation that one has with one's parents at that age.

**I've known my two oldest friends all my life.** One, who's an historian called Flora Fraser, I've known practically from when she was born. The other is called Jane Bonham-Carter. She's a Lib Dem peer and we met at school when we were seven. We've had very different lives, but I'm still in very close contact with them both.

**I like having friends.** I've made friends through work, my husband and son. And David is really gregarious – he has millions of friends. I know some people who say, "I've got enough friends – what do I want more friends for?" Whereas I get very excited at making a new friend.

**My life in books...**  
*I've just finished John le Carré's A Perfect Spy – brilliant! Jennifer Egan's A Visit From The Goon Squad is incredible. I'm currently reading Orhan Pamuk's The Museum Of Innocence. And I love Scandinavian thrillers.*

**I'm enjoying everything about this stage**  
*I spent my twenties and thirties angsty about men and whether I'd have children – a domestic state that seemed miles away. And now I've got a lovely home, a lovely child, a lovely boyfriend, a great job – and a cat! – and I feel very lucky.*

**I would have liked to have had more than one child, but it didn't happen.** I split up with Sam's dad when Sam was three and, by the time I got together with David, I was too old. And he would have died, I think, if I'd told him he was going to be a father again.

**Sam's in his first year of A levels and coping very well.** I'm the absolute opposite to a helicopter mother; I'm more like the battleship way out there that slowly emerges and steams in. But I dread the empty nest. He's thinking about future plans at the moment and

is very independent and opinionated. It's best to let him work out his own route – it always has been. And he's very used to being on his own. Having said that, he's an incredible party animal and there's not a party in any corner of London that's safe from him on a Saturday night.

**I'm not relaxed about it at all – I'm totally stressed.** I

had to go to Milan recently and I don't like flying, so was anxious anyway. My alarm was set for 6am to get to the airport and I was getting these texts from Sam (because that's the deal: "Text me where you are"). They were ping-ponging through all night – "I'm in Putney"; "I'm in Brook Green"; "I'm coming home"; "No, forget that, I'm going to stay at John's"; "No, scrap that – I am coming home". It was 4am before I got to sleep.

**My father died eight years ago, but I'm very close to my mother.** I ring her every week, although she never rings me, as she doesn't want to be clingy. She's still so involved in everything and very interested in contemporary culture; she reads everything, and sees everything at the theatre and cinema. She's fantastic.

**There are lots of wonderful things about editing *Vogue*.** But you don't get to work with some of the most creative people in the world without people being opinionated and uncompromising

– and that can be very stressful. I might have a cover shoot that's really important and I can cast it, but I don't have control over what happens beyond that point. That was one of the reasons I wanted to write the book – because it was something that was under my control.

**By rights, I should be anorexic. Growing up, my parents were quite critical of my weight.** I should be a size 3 and unable to look a piece of bread in the face. But somehow that has not happened. So, along with that and my job, it's a miracle that I've got such a healthy body image.

**I do think about my appearance, obviously. I'd like to be thinner and taller.** But when I came to *Vogue*, it was obvious I wasn't a fashion model; it was never what I wanted and I made a decision not to try to be a clothes horse.

**I didn't feel any different at 50 to when I was 30, and I probably won't when I'm 70.** And I love that there's much more of a generational mix than there used to be. I go on holiday with friends and their kids, and we all hang out together. I also love the music Sam introduces me to.

**I'm passionate about lots of things.** Music, reading – and I'm becoming quite passionate about running. I'm not remotely good at it, but I do enjoy it. Correction: I enjoy having done it. I also love sunbathing and I like shopping. I tend to go to multi-brand boutiques such as The Cross in Notting Hill, Browns and Matches. I also like Topshop and Cos, and I still like going down to Portobello Market and looking at second-hand clothes.

**Writing a book is one of the most exciting things that's ever happened to me.** But it's also terrifying; I'm terrified of people hating it and I'm not very cool about people's reactions: I will mind! At one point I said, "I'd better not read any reviews," but I'm far too egotistical and will be googling away the minute any come out. **w&h**



**Alexandra Shulman's novel, *Can We Still Be Friends* (Fig Tree), is out on 12 April. See our review on page 191.**

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