

Writing a novel is like having a secret love affair

Deborah Moggach, 58, is the author of 15 novels, including *Tulip Fever*, as well as the screenplay for *Pride & Prejudice*. She talks to Victoria Young about men, money and how she wrote her latest novel in just four months

My perfect day is to work incredibly well in the morning and write something wonderful, then take the dog for a walk and go for a swim in the ladies' ponds on Hampstead Heath or work in my allotment. Then I get tarted up in the evening and go out in London to dinner or the cinema.

But it doesn't often happen like that because usually I can't think of a word to write all morning, then I'll struggle with endless things, such as sorting out my council tax, in the afternoon.

I'm mad about gardening. I have an allotment on the other side of Hampstead Heath and I keep three hens in my garden.

I look in the mirror expecting to be 34 and see someone who is 58. What's that all about? I haven't even thought about turning 60 yet, but so many of my friends have celebrated it by now that it's lost its terror. And I don't mind being 58; it's just such a surprise when one doesn't feel it at all.

Being a single parent means you have a very different sort of relationship with your children. You are much more a friend than a parent as you can't lay down the law – partly because you've messed up yourself in a major way. You've made mistakes and they've suffered for them. My children, Tom, 30, and Lottie, 28, are fine, but I

know I caused them great pain by falling for someone and breaking up their family. That's a terrible thing to do.

I was in love with someone much older than me. He died after ten years and then I fell in love with a Hungarian painter who was 15 years my junior. I bought an old house and we did it up together with the help of his artist friends, who carved birds on fireplaces and panelled whole rooms. He built a huge Dutch fireplace and would light a fire in the morning. I'd lie on the rug writing *Tulip Fever* and he would bring me coffee and things. It was all really romantic.

It was very nice being with somebody much younger because it made me feel in touch with life and with youth. But then it sort of died of boredom after about seven years. Doing up houses is a passion killer; you end up just talking about skirting boards and fabric swatches. So we split up and I've been single for five years.

I'd love to be dating. I meet dazzling and wonderful men constantly through friends, work and parties, but they're all married and even the notorious adulterers have hung up their spurs! But I have a very good time. I haven't got a gorgeous bloke but that could happen at any time.

I've dabbled in Internet dating. I met about four people over one summer and liked them all, but that spark just wasn't there. However, I was pleased to have done it

and I'd probably do it again, although it's rather labour-intensive and quite exhausting. You're messing around with all kinds of hopes and dreams, so it's easy to think, "I can't be bothered; I'll watch telly instead".

But I never, ever feel lonely writing because I love it. I often go out in the evenings, although if I decide to stay at home, it's awful. Last Valentine's Day, for example, I didn't go out and ordered some things from a mail order company, which I've never done in my life. And I thought, "God, I'm buying wide-fitting shoes on Valentine's Day! So sad!"

Although I love earning money and spending it I find dealing with it very nerve-wracking. When my bank statements arrive, I come out in sweats and can't bear to open them. I don't use my money for clothes; I'd rather buy ancient bits of balustrade and old fireplaces or spend it on gardening and the theatre.

Money brings out all sorts of stuff in people – they can be very generous and also mean. I can't bear taking taxis because they are so expensive, but I give a lot of money away to about 20 different charities.

My favourite room in my house is easily the top room, which is a bedroom but also a bathroom, with a big, wooden carved bath, two huge fireplaces and a raised bit in the corner for performances. I've had some really lovely parties and poetry readings up there.



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Both my parents were writers, so creativity was always in the family – although that also made me resist it more. But even if they had been butchers, I think I would have become a writer in the end.

I trained as a teacher and went on to work in publishing. Then in my mid-twenties, I went to Pakistan with my husband, which is where I started writing, I think because it was separate from my background. It's liberating being somewhere new as everything is so different.

My first novel was very autobiographical and about a young girl at Bristol University; almost exactly like my own life. I thought nobody would ever publish it because I didn't feel it was that interesting.

When it was published I thought, "Gosh, I've got away with it," and that's something

every novelist I know feels. So I wrote another very autobiographical one and after that I'd finished with my own life. Then I started writing about things that I didn't know anything about. For the last 35 years it's been pretty much full-time. I am amazed how much I have written – but again, if you work every day, you suddenly find that you've had 17 books published.

I feel it's easier to write lying down. I used to work flat on the floor. Then, when I got more money, I had a room of my own which was great, but I still often end up stretched out on the bed or the floor. I write in longhand in an A4 exercise book, then I type it on a laptop the following week.

My new book *In the Dark* is about Victorian London after the war and it just came out in a rush. I wrote it incredibly

fast, in about four months. The same thing happened with *Tulip Fever* – I worked on it all the time. I write during the day, then at about half past six I have a gin and tonic to get me going again and I go back to work for another couple of hours.

I started writing TV scripts in the '80s because my last novel hadn't done as well as I expected. Instead of feeling bitter about it, I decided to go off and do something that I'd have a lot of fun with and would make lots of money. "Living well is the best revenge," I thought. So I started writing scripts, such as *To Have and To Hold*. Then *Pride & Prejudice* came along, which was a completely different world and I absolutely loved it.

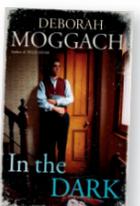
People say, "You must be so disciplined to write," but I think things like organising your car insurance, cleaning the bath or ringing up somebody you don't really want to talk to is much harder. Even when work is going badly, it's far more interesting than cleaning up one's desk.

Writing a novel is like having a secret love affair. You can be with people talking away but you know that something absolutely wonderful – that nobody knows about and that brings you huge joy – is waiting for you. But you can't talk to anybody about it because it lets the secret out. The only way to write is to keep it to yourself; otherwise, it disintegrates.

My big ambition is to learn to play the guitar. I used to be able to and I loved singing, but then I just stopped. I'd have to learn again from scratch, but nobody would have to listen. It gave me such pleasure that it seems silly to not have another go.

My ideal life would be to live in a walled vegetable garden in the middle of Soho, so I could issue forth in the evening and go back home and dig my cabbages. And I'd like to have some delicious grandchildren – if only my children would cooperate – for my sake not theirs! But as far as work goes, I'm quite happy.

Deborah Moggach's new book *In the Dark* will be on sale on 1 June, published by Chatto & Windus, £12.99 w&h



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