

PERSONAL STORY

‘A writing course led to a bidding war for my first book’

Sally Green, 52, talks to Victoria Young about how taking a course led to discovering a passion for writing and a book that’s even had Hollywood knocking on her door

Sally lives in Cheshire with her husband Allan and 12-year-old son. Her book *Half Bad* is a supernatural thriller about witches living secretly among us in contemporary Britain. Advances for a *Half Life* trilogy are expected to earn her about £1 million, and *Twilight* producers have acquired the film rights.

When I signed up to a creative writing course a few years ago, I didn’t realise I was about to discover my true passion for the first time. I hadn’t written anything much, apart from postcards and accountancy reports. I’d done O-level English at school but then moved towards sciences and accountancy, and once I started working, I was too busy to hardly even read. Then when I was 40, it was a now-or-never moment if we wanted to have children, and we went on to have our son.

That was the beginning, really. Taking some time out of work after he was born made me think about what I wanted from the next stage of life. My husband had started his own import and distribution business, and we agreed we could have a spell of tightening our belts and learning to live without my full-time salary. I began working part-time for him.

It was a huge change but I was ready for it. I got into growing vegetables and making everything from bread and soup to jam, and we even kept our own chickens. When my son started school I had time to start reading again about the subjects I was interested in, which led to me enrolling for a social sciences course at The Open University.

That was a turning point for me. I really loved doing the course. By the end of the course all the other students were saying, “Thank goodness we don’t have to write another essay ever again.”

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But I was thinking, “Actually, that’s the part I enjoyed the most!” I loved writing the essays and

I realised that I’ve always loved coming up with the right words for things. I’d never thought about writing fiction though, mainly because I’d been conditioned by school to think that I had no imagination.

I intended to continue the next social sciences module that September. But suddenly during the summer I had all



PHOTOGRAPH MARK ALLEN

this free time, which coincided with a fiction idea, and I decided to have a go at writing a story. I fully expected I’d stop after half an hour.

In fact, I became obsessed. I wrote and wrote, and spent 24 hours a day thinking about it: I was ironing; I was weeding; I was cooking, but in my head, I was living this story, which was about witches and set in the same witchy world that became the setting for my book *Half Bad*.

By September, I’d finished it but I knew the writing needed a heck of a lot of improvement. So I decided to switch to a creative writing course. The OU fees have since gone up but at that point, for me, it was a case of thinking, “Well, I’ll pay for it if we miss a few dinners out and forgo that weekend away.”

I was a boring student who did every single assignment, and I just loved it. It was the first time I’d found something that I loved so much that they would have struggled to stop me doing it.

After honing my story with the help of that course, I sent out the first 50 pages to agents. I either got the usual no reply or rejections. Then the last agent I sent it to was Claire Wilson at Rogers, Coleridge and White. I was thrilled when she got in touch to ask me to send the rest of the book. Then she emailed back to say no, it wasn’t for them.

Claire was the only agent who gave me a tiny bit of feedback. She didn’t think the story had the necessary edge for the market but she said she liked my writing style and I just thought, “Hurrah!”

I started again with a different story. The first story was from a female point of view. It was in the past tense and it was a love story. So I decided to write from a male point of view. There is a love element to *Half Bad* but it’s more a quest; a boy trying to find his way to his future. Once I had the idea, I got really excited about it. Two weeks in, I’d done 20,000 words. I didn’t have

a plan; I knew where I was aiming to be by the end point – but how I got there was a bit of a surprise.

By January I had a finished manuscript and again sent 50 pages to Claire. A few days later, she sent an email asking to see the rest of it, at which point I went into a complete panic because I’d only honed those first 50 pages – to within an inch of their life!

I tried to stay up all night to work on it but my eyes gave out at 2am. I sent it to Claire anyway and the next day I came back from shopping to an email saying she loved it and she wanted to be my agent.

I wrote back saying “Yes, yes, yes!” I couldn’t really believe it. Claire sent it out to publishers and two hours later

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we had the first response from Puffin saying they loved it. Various other people came back too so the next thing I knew there was a bidding war going on. I was supposed to go to Sainsbury’s and pick up my son from school but I decided to scrap the shopping trip and hang by the phone because my heart was palpitating about not knowing what to do.

Eventually I said to Claire, “It’s getting late and I’m just frazzled – let’s leave it till tomorrow.” And I got in the car and drove to the restaurant where I was meeting my husband and some friends. I was just parking up when Claire rang back and said, “Puffin have offered more money.” So I said yes straight away – Puffin is my dream publisher. I got into the restaurant and ordered Champagne. My husband’s reaction was, “Oh, right. Well, of course you were always going to get a publisher.”

The fact that my husband has read my book is a positive sign because he doesn’t read a lot of fiction. My son is still into *Diary Of A Wimpy Kid* so he hasn’t read it, but my mum’s read it twice now, which, again, is a big thing because she doesn’t read an awful lot either.

The book then went to the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, where it was sold in more than 40 countries. The other thing that happened is that film scouts then film studios were interested, and that’s when I really had a serious shock.

I’d heard stories about writers signing away control. But I just thought, “I’m 51 – if it’s a reasonable offer, it would be daft to say no.” Just the chance of my idea being made into a film and hopefully seeing them filming it – I would actually pay them money to do that.

The key in my decision to saying yes to Fox 2000 was Karen Rosenfelt, who produced the *Twilight* films. I still can’t believe she’s actually read the book. She was lovely and ordinary in a way, and just very reassuring.

The main difference the money is going to make is that now I can carry on writing. I’m not that wild when it comes to spending money, but we definitely went through a lot of Champagne. And it’s an awful cliché, but splurging always comes down to shoes for me. There are certainly five or six more boxes of shoes in my cupboard than there were a while ago!

I certainly won’t be going back to accountancy. It was a wonderful career for me at the time but I’ve moved on. As a writer you’re told all the time that the chances of getting an agent and of getting published are minimal, and I think it puts people off because it can feel like there’s absolutely no point. My big advice would be – don’t be put off.

SALLY’S TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

- + Do as much reading and writing as you can.
 - + If you’re a beginner, do a course but make sure it’s a good one.
 - + Share your work. That’s the nice thing about doing things online – the anonymity of it takes away any inhibition.
 - + Write honestly and don’t try to copy somebody else’s style.
 - + It’s hard work, but writing should also be a pleasure.
- Half Bad* by Sally Green is published on 3 March. w&h

