



Downton Abbey's leading lady:

MY SECRET OTHER LIFE

Elizabeth McGovern, 50, who plays American heiress Cora in *Downton Abbey*, talks to Victoria Young about love at second sight, gold harem pants – and her alter ego Sadie



After her 19-year-old debut in the Oscar-winning film *Ordinary People*, Elizabeth McGovern won an Oscar nomination for her role in *Ragtime*. She starred in films opposite stars including Robert de Niro and Dudley Moore before settling in London where she lives with her husband, producer Simon Curtis, and their daughters Matilda, 17, and Grace, 13. As well as acting, she fronts a band called Sadie And The Hotheads.

Being in something that becomes as successful as *Downton* is what all actors hope for. It involves a magic chemistry between script and actors – you can't do it if it's not there in the writing. When I first read it I knew I wanted the part. I'm an American who has come to live in England and has had to make those adjustments so it felt perfect for me – like a great fit.

I absolutely love the cast, and that's the joy for me. I get on particularly well with my three "daughters" and we're always joking around on set. Of course it's also fun getting dressed up in the costumes and inhabiting another era, and it's quite a peaceful thing to do because it's very ritualistic. It takes a long time travelling to the set and getting ready, even to shoot scenes that are quite short. There are no shortcuts, which suits my nature because it's not quick, and I'm sort of a plodder, really.

I was cleaning up a mess left by my Yorkshire terrier when the phone rang, and it was Gareth Neame, our producer, calling with news of the Emmy nomination. But that sums up my entire career because, for me, glory has always walked hand in hand with humiliation.

I now feel very psychologically lined up with England, but it took me a long time to adjust. The decision to live here was made for me because I got pregnant quite soon after my husband and I met, and he had a job here. Having to give myself over to this fate was probably the only way I could ever have made that kind of decision and commitment. Thank God it worked out okay – talk about luck and happy chance!

I knew immediately when I met Simon that he was the person I wanted to have

children with. I came to England for a play he was producing. It was more a feeling of being at home and settling in, rather than being swept away. It wasn't love at first sight. He actually had to remind me that we'd met once years before, through mutual friends. By the time we reconnected, he'd been married and divorced and I'd been through a series of love affairs. We were both a little bit more grown up.

We've always talked very easily and very well, and we've always laughed. And that's what has made our relationship work. Of course people change, but if the relationship is flexible enough, you can grow separately, but together too.

It helps that we want the same things out of life. Both of us love our work and are very ambitious but we both love the family slightly more; it's first in our hearts. We like thrashing out the domestic details of life together. You're never going to escape mundane details, like fixing the boiler, so you might as well embrace them.

I like cooking more than Simon does. Whenever he cooks he'll be in such a foul mood, it isn't worth it so I tend to do the cooking. But it can't be too fancy or then I get into a foul mood. I don't have a signature dish because I get bored repeating dishes. I go for simple recipes with very few ingredients, like marinated steak or a leg of lamb.

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My band Sadie And The Hotheads came about accidentally – and not because of any spectacular singing voice! I have an interest in writing songs and used to amuse myself on the guitar. Then I decided to take lessons and the teacher I found wrote songs too, so we started writing together. His brother was in music production and suggested we record them, so we did a first CD and created



a band. That was eight years ago and we've been performing ever since.

The performing side doesn't come naturally to me at all – it's a real challenge. So I created this alter-ego person called Sadie, who had a lot of confidence about getting in front of a mike. And the musicians I work with are all so self-effacing and low-key that I called them the hotheads, because that's their alter ego.

Being in a band gives me such pleasure – although I'm never sure if that pleasure is shared by anyone else! Being inside the music with that added frisson of sharing it with other people is just a total high – it's like a drug.

It's given me access to a whole different world. When I wanted to become more relaxed about performing, I started doing open mike pub nights. That felt very brave – because it's a long walk from that chair to the mike! I started making friends with all the other guys there, most of whom were about 19. One night I was playing with two guys from Kurdistan and Latvia, and I was having the time of my life. They couldn't care less >>

about who I am, and the fact that they would accept me made me euphoric.

Michelle Dockery, who plays my daughter Lady Mary in *Downton*, sang with the band last summer. I was ecstatic, because I idolise Michelle. She's inspiring to work with, makes me laugh... and she carries the tune. I get very confused because I look up to her and forget that I'm supposed to be her mother. I hope we can do some more gigs together, but for the time being, the band is trying to concentrate on finishing the second CD.

After being directed by Robert Redford in *Ordinary People* with Mary Tyler Moore and Donald Sutherland, I was so outwardly successful so quickly. At the time, though, I really didn't know what I was doing. It was very odd suddenly becoming successful overnight, particularly when all my friends were going to college and living normal lives. It was pretty lonely at times and it took me a while to adapt.

I'm always asked about dating Sean Penn, which I did for a while when I was 22 and we met on the set of *Racing With The Moon*. I didn't ever think I'd spend the rest of my life with Sean but I enjoyed going out with him. I run into him sometimes and it's always nice to see him.

I certainly should be ready for success by now. Whether I am or not I don't know. But I feel much more happy and settled personally, which must make a difference, so maybe I'll take it in my stride more.

I've just turned 50, and I honestly feel sexier, happier, more interesting than I ever have before. I think it must be to do with the cumulation of my experiences; you learn how to roll with the punches. But I didn't spend that much time dwelling on turning 50.

My mother was a teacher and my father is a law professor at UCLA. I think that true confidence comes from those very early years. My sister, brother and I all have an inner comfort with who we are that we can only really thank our parents for.

I found a man that was in every way probably the total opposite to my father. But they get on very well. We all try to see each other as much as possible but distance makes it hard. We don't use Skype. My family – and I include myself in this – aren't great keeper-in-touchers. But I feel like the bond is always there.

When I came to England my family were nothing but happy for me. My mother has always been a bit of an Anglophile, and in America people are much more used to the idea that their kids are going to move away. I think

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everyone was just relieved that I was settling down into life.

Growing up a child of California is still deeply in me. Food wise, I have a knowledge of what's good and bad. Knowing that some foods are going to make me fat and bloated just robs me of all pleasure so I just can't enjoy them.

I really like to exercise – I enjoy it. I love Pilates. I go to my local class and

chat with the girls and pretend that we're doing something.

I'm a saver, not a spender, and always have been. I hate it about myself – I wish I could be a bit more flamboyant, but I just haven't got it in me to have a real splurge; somebody else has to do it. My husband is more of a spender than I am.

I fear technology but I try not to succumb to the fear too much. I have an iPhone but I don't do Facebook. I don't like the idea of being "friends" with virtual strangers. It's a scary world for parents because kids are so technologically savvy. And they're completely obsessed by it. Occasionally, I suggest they do it less, but you turn your back and there they are, with their faces pressed up against a screen.

I'm quite house-proud – in a sloppy-chic kind of way. My house isn't tidy but I hope there's a pleasant aesthetic to the chaos. There tends to be a lot of sitting around the kitchen, which has a blue Aga and bright red kitchen chairs round a big oak table with lots of brightly coloured ceramic vases on display.

My style icon is Grace Kelly or Myrna Loy. I love the glamorous classic look of those old movies, when everything was so controlled. And I love Katharine Hepburn and Audrey Hepburn.

If I want to glam it up, I like a new designer called Henrietta Ludgate. She does everything in an eco-conscious way and she's also a good designer.

But I have a basic uniform of jeans and T-shirts. I get bored and fed up with it but don't stray because I don't take the time. I tend to buy inexpensive clothes. Recently I've been shopping

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I love the fact that it's making a point that sexiness isn't something that stops at age 26 or 27. And I really enjoyed the shoot – everyone was nice and unpretentious and grown-up. It was so nice having a stylist give me an outfit that looks fantastic. I'd never normally wear the feathers, but they brought out my hidden rock chick and I might have to start – it's never too late!

at Cos – their clothes are simple, but with a slight twist. I don't really enjoy shopping but my girls love it. They are good stylists and I'll often defer to them.

The problem with them being teenagers is that my wardrobe is never safe. I would never have wanted to wear my mother's clothes but they steal mine all the time – nothing is sacred.

I don't live by any rules about what to wear at this age. But I trust my kids will tell me if I'm getting it wrong. I recently had a pair of gold harem pants – which I thought were the cat's miaow – that they took to the back garden and torched! And then I had this red hat that suddenly and mysteriously disappeared.

I'm enjoying having a more adult relationship with my daughters – I'm truly fascinated by what they say. My oldest is a natural writer and I think the youngest rather likes the limelight, but I'm not sure. It wouldn't horrify me at all if they wanted to act, in fact, I'd be happy, because I can share with them. I've been a little bit blessed in that the profession has given me so much joy.

I don't so much advise my daughters as try to give them a belief in their own good judgement. And if I'm not sure their judgement is good, I try to give them the strength to realise that they'll learn from their mistakes. And I remind them that there is always another chance.

My oldest going to university this October will be bittersweet: I'm both dreading it and counting the days at the same time. It's going to be hell. But she's a teenager so of course they also drive you crazy. It's God's way of making that goodbye easier! **w&h**

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THE SECRET ME

Elizabeth, pictured, right, playing in her band, Sadie And The Hotheads: "I feel so happy being Sadie. When I'm Sadie, I'm not being mother and wife, and I love the feeling that I can write songs and have that sort of power that I never have as an actress." Far right, pictured with her daughter Matilda.

