

I'm loving my life

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Fern Britton talks to Victoria Young
about reclaiming the empty nest,
writing her second novel – and
her passion for cycling

PHOTOGRAPHS TREVOR LEIGHTON

TV presenter and writer Fern Britton, 54, lives in Buckinghamshire and Cornwall with her husband, TV chef Phil Vickery, and her four children, aged between ten and 18. Her new novel is *Hidden Treasures* and she is currently working on her third novel, part of a second two-book deal with HarperCollins.

I'm nearly 55, I'm as healthy as I can be, I'm loving my life, and I like my body – I always have. It has worked very hard. It's had four children; it's fed children, it's had three caesareans, it's had a couple of husbands! I've never hated it. That should be the way we view our bodies as women. We have to love ourselves. It's tiresome when people make assumptions about what I'm thinking about my shape, my dress, my whatever it is, and it's all wrong.

There was a lady in the gym the other day who was gorgeous, very slim and beautiful, and she said to me, "Oh, we all have bits we hate, don't we?" And I said, "Well, no, we shouldn't." I have two working legs and two working kidneys. Yes, sure, my eyesight's going a bit, but everything else is here!

If I'm feeling a bit rubbish and have to face the world, I'll wash my hair and put some make-up on, and that usually does the trick. But I'm not a clothes horse, although I like jewellery very much. I love anything that sparkles. But I don't judge people by their clothes. And I don't want to be judged on my clothes or my appearance. When the kids were little I used to wear a big orange anorak, and I'd say, "If you get lost, look for this," because no one else would be in an orange anorak.

I enjoyed writing *Hidden Treasures*, much more than my first novel. I felt less nervous and actually enjoyed the process. It was lovely to find, at the age of 51, that I had another new opportunity.

It's set in Cornwall, and some of the characters are inspired by real people that we know. It's about a woman called Helen who decides to leave her philandering husband and start a new life in Cornwall, where she attracts the attention of two local men. Helen is based on one of the mums at school – she isn't her, but she looks like her. >>



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Phil travels a lot for work, but we never speak on the phone when he's away because it brings out the worst in us. He'll ring at 8pm his time, which is 1am my time, and then I get stroppy and so he gets stroppy, and then that's useless. So now we just text – and only a little bit!

The longest he's away is a couple of weeks. I don't mind because we're both control freaks. I like cooking what I want for the kids and leaving the washing up for the morning if I like. And I'm allowed to have the cats inside at night whereas he chucks them out! You know, little things.

Phil is the person I want to spend my time with more than anybody else. The truth is, I hate it when he goes away and I miss him very much. It translates itself as me being really quite cool with him when he gets back. It's like a cat coming back from the cattery – they're pleased to see you but then they're horrible to you; I fear that I have that in me. And of course he comes home and wants to go straight out and look at the pigs he rears – he's a proper farmer now – and I'm thinking, "What about me?" It's fine now that we've addressed that or at least recognised it – although it's more me accepting he needs to go and see the pigs!

We both cook but it's normal family stuff. The kids' favourite is breakfast for supper – bacon, eggs and sausages. And hotchpotch pie – leftover roast chicken or lamb, plus Yorkshires, spring greens, carrots and stuffing. We put it in a big dish, pour gravy all over it, slice up the leftover roast potatoes, put them on top and stick it in the oven. And it's delicious.

My mother was my only parent until I was in my twenties. Although I'd met my father, we only really started our relationship when I was about 18. So my mother is everything to me. She's had an interesting, difficult, exciting life. She's 88 but looks 68. She drives, shops, cooks and gardens. When my youngest daughter did the Second World War in history, my mum spent the afternoon with her class talking about her time in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. She had 30 kids saluting and marching around the room.

But some things are too painful for her to want to recall. I can understand

that. Our generation has been told to let it out, share it with everybody, and her generation hasn't. But there have been times when I've wanted to know – particularly when I was divorced. She'd had a sad divorce and I would love to have heard what she'd learned from hers. She was very supportive, but she didn't want to talk about it – she would just change the subject.

We talk virtually every day. She doesn't do email, she doesn't do text or mobiles – she refuses all that. It took me a long time to like email but I do now. And texting is the only way to correspond with my kids! But I don't do any social networking at all. I don't understand Twitter and, worse, if I did understand it, I'd probably be hooked. And I don't feel that people



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over a certain age have any right to be on Facebook – I don't even go on it to spy on my kids. I trust them, and they have never let me down yet. I think they have a right to a little bit of a private life.

My Winnie, who's ten, just got her first email address. I was upstairs writing the other night and the kids were downstairs. I'd got through a difficult bit so I emailed her saying, "Darling, it's Mummy up in the office. Can you get me a glass of red wine?" Within two minutes there it was! If I'd sent that to the boys, the response would have been a bit different!

My sons are doing A levels now, so are just about to hit the big exam time. They're taking it in their stride, but the pressure is on. All the children are at state schools and they have thrived in them.

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The boys are twins, but completely different. One of them is doing Politics, History and English, and the other is doing Art, Physics and Biology. One's having a year out and the other isn't. I allow them to make their choices. They don't involve me and I try not to give advice unsolicited, although they'd probably disagree with that! Phil and I don't do good cop, bad cop: together with my first husband we are a united front. It's pretty good teamwork.

Laughing is big in my family. My daughter Grace, who's coming up to 15, is incredibly funny. She has timing and wit. My mother is very funny too. And Phil makes me laugh like a drain.

It's a lot easier now the children are all older. The boys bat about in ancient little cars so they can get to school and pick me up from the station, which is brilliant – it's payback time!

I quite like having all these extra people in my house. But Phil and I sometimes retreat to the kitchen to take cover. All the boys' mates are so nice and polite – and gorgeous. They're never stinky, smelly oiks, not like the boys were when I was 18.

It's been an absolute joy, but I have to say, I'm quite looking forward to them leaving home. I'm looking forward to two empty, clean bedrooms, no laundry, and not worrying about them when they go out – although they're very good at texting.

My words of wisdom to my children are: "Hard work brings good things" – you can't just loll around on your backside. And also: "Always leave people and things better than you found them." I want them to have a faith in God, as I have, but I don't push them into it. I am a strong Christian, and though I don't go to church all the time – as I don't think you need to be there to speak to God – my faith is important to me.

Obviously, I could worry about their futures, and their jobs. But I don't believe in worrying about something until you know what the problem is because it wastes so much time and anxiety. I think life is so short, and we should just get on and enjoy what we've got. Today is a peaceful day. Tomorrow might not be.

If I feel any depression coming, which I haven't now for a long time, I take a very deep breath. The last time I felt it, I decided, "There's no point in running because it will get me, so I have to turn round and look it in the eye and let it run through me." It only lasted two or three weeks, and I just told the family I was feeling a bit rubbish and they were totally understanding.

When it comes to fitness, my thing is cycling. I cycle to raise money for the charity of which I'm patron, the Genesis Research Trust (jogt.org.uk). The Trust raises money for the largest UK-based collection of scientists and

GUILTY PLEASURE?

"A pedicure every two weeks – there's nothing like paddling in the ocean and seeing pillar-box red nails glinting underneath the water."

clinicians who are researching the causes and cures of conditions that affect the health of women and babies, and anyone can join us in supporting that work. We just came back from Vietnam and Cambodia, and soon I'm going to central South America. To train for that I did three spinning classes a week, which is totally addictive.

These rides give me so much. Not only are we raising money for really important things, but I get such a sense of achievement. Eight years ago, I could hardly get up a little slope, and now I'm not just riding over mountains, I'm actually attacking them – it's my Olympics. Plus, I meet fantastic women. They are brilliantly funny – with a filthy sense of humour. When we start we are a group of strangers, and within 24 hours we're all weeing in the bushes together with our pants down. It's very bonding.

I absolutely loved doing the *Strictly Come Dancing 2010* Christmas special. Even though it was only a fortnight, I was bereft afterwards. It's very nice indeed to be given a very handsome young partner who knows what he's doing. The way he holds you and looks into your eyes. To him, it's just work, of course, but you think, "Ooh!" It's lovely, it's make-believe and fantasy – but it's great. And then they start to tell you you're doing all right and you think, "God, I can dance, I can dance!" And of course you can't, but it's still lovely.

I'm very excited about the Olympics and also the Jubilee. We should all be really proud. The mystique of the monarchy is extraordinary. We're going to a local street party, and I'm really looking forward to just being Mrs Vickery that day.



Hidden Treasures by Fern Britton is out now (HarperCollins). w&h