



My characters tell their own stories

Bestselling author Jane Green reveals the secrets of her success and how her writing partner helps her get to the end of her first draft. As told to Mary Hogarth



There was no chick lit when I started out. I was just trying to write something that spoke to single women in the way Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* spoke to single men. I wanted to write an honest book about dating for single women in their 20s and 30s – *Straight Talking*. It coincidentally came out a couple of months after *BrIDGET Jones's Diary*, along with a few other books dealing with similar issues, and the media coined the phrase 'chick lit'.

Characters and theme are the elements I tend to work on first, with only a vague idea of the story, and even then, the beginning and the end. I plot the book in thirds, never more, because

once I reach the end of the first third, characters I thought would be crucial turn out to be irrelevant, and vice versa.

My characters tell their own stories. They are always created from scratch while I'm sitting at my desk, creating them in my head and jotting down notes. The more I think about them, the more real they become.

Sometimes they are inspired by a snapshot. Nan in *The Beach House* was inspired by a woman I used to see cycling around the beach at midnight, cigarette in hand, but I doubt very much my character is anything like the woman who inspired her.

Often characters will include bits of people I have met, seen or

know. But even when you think they are based on real people – and a couple of the characters in my early books started off that way – they quickly develop individual characteristics and become their own people.

Once the characters are formed the book will often take off in unexpected ways. Most of my work is character-driven, although I attempted to write something more plot-driven with *Girl Friday* (or *Dune Road* as it has been released as in the US). I enjoyed it as an intellectual exercise, but I think the character-driven novels come far more naturally to me.

I tried to write a mystery with *Dune Road*, but ended up taking most of the mystery out of it. I

am not sure I really have a genre any more.

I think it's unfortunate I have been pigeonholed as chick lit, because it conjures up images of twenty-something women in great pairs of high heels looking for Mr Right. I may have started with that, but as a mother in her 40s, I am writing for all ages. The protagonist of *The Beach House* is a 65-year-old widow, and I'm not sure that is anyone's definition of classic chick lit...

Although writer's block can sometimes be a problem, I am enormously disciplined – I was trained as a journalist, and was used to writing 1500 words on

Continued overleaf ►

Jane Green continued

command, which has served me very well. If I get a block I keep writing. If I gave in to it I would never get anything done, but I set myself a number of words every day and refuse to get up from my desk until those words are on the page.

Some days they flow and it is quick, easy and painless. Other days it is like drawing blood from a stone, but even if the words need to be edited mercilessly, I will not leave until they are written.

My writing partner Sarah [Laurence] is great at motivating me to write if I'm having a bad day. When I was working on *Girl Friday* there were days when, had Sarah not sent an email commanding me to write, the book would not have been finished as quickly as it was.

Do I have any vices when

If I get a block I keep writing. I refuse to leave my desk until the day's words are on the page

working? Well, internet shopping can be a wonderful distraction... Come to think of it, that's just one of my vices, writing be damned.

The hardest book to write so far was *The Other Woman*. It didn't come as easily and I found it a bit of a slog. This, I think, is apparent in my writing. It is not as light as the others, and there is little humour.

I did have a plot, and I planned

it in more detail than usual, but the problem was, as always, my characters took over. Then it all became incredibly complicated, and I wasn't sure how to tie up loose ends and strange connections. I ended up having to rely on my editor to advise me.

Although research is not a problem for me, I tend to tackle it reluctantly. I am happiest when dwelling in my imagination, but I will say the internet has made research shockingly easy. As a journalist I spent all day on the phone researching, so it is not something I dread, but as a bit of a hermit, I am always happiest when I am able to do my research from the quiet and privacy of my home office.

If I was asked to give a new author trying to write commercial fiction advice on how to be successful it would be along the lines of the following:

- Write what you know. It's a cliché but the qualifier for good women's fiction is emotional honesty, and it's hard to capture that when writing about things you haven't experienced. Later in your career is the time to move out of your comfort zone.
- Spend time getting to know your characters; once you have the characters right, they will tell their own stories.
- Remember that anyone can start a book but few can actually finish. Don't even think about getting it published until you have finished the book, and remember that a standard novel is anywhere from 70,000 to 125,000 words.
- When you are ready to be published, get an agent, and make sure it's someone who's good. Don't be put off by rejection letters, because all it takes is one person who loves and believes in your work.
- Lastly, do trust yourself. As



Jane: 'happiest living in my imagination'

tempting as it is to give your book to everyone you know for validation, everyone will have a different opinion, and too many cooks spoil the broth.

At the time of this interview, reviews for my latest book *The Love Verb* are flooding in. This is always the most nerve-racking time for a writer, as you have no real idea what the reviews will be like.

As an author I have no creative judgment whatsoever. More worryingly, I tend to think everything I've written is rubbish until someone I trust – my agent or editor – validates it. Then I relax and admit I actually do like it. Thankfully my writing partner Sarah was the first to post a blog review.

When I get an idea for the next book the first thing I do is to write it down so I don't forget it! I have the worst memory in the

world. I'll often sit at the computer and jot down some notes. A few weeks later, when I'm ready to go back to it, I can then objectively decide whether it's worth pursuing.

At the moment I'm gestating the next book. I've just started thinking through the characters, and I have the theme. But I'm not going to reveal any more than that...

• Jane Green Warburg has written 11 novels. She now lives in the USA with her husband Ian and their blended family of six children. When not juggling family life with writing she can be found whipping up a storm in the kitchen or planting seeds in her thriving vegetable garden.

Jane's latest novel, *The Love Verb*, is published by Penguin and available from most bookshops priced £7.99. A preview can be found at her website, www.janegreen.com

