

*An exclusive interview with
Sheila O'Flanagan*

When did you start writing? Can you tell us about your very first readers?

Before I ever started writing I used to make up stories about characters in the children's books I read. So I robbed all of the characters of my favourite authors (like Enid Blyton, Elinor M Brent-Dyer, Noel Streatfeild, Malcom Saville, Anthony Buckeridge, Richmal Compton and many more) to create stories which I told to my two younger sisters. Then I wrote an entire boarding school story of my own where all sorts of unbelievable things happened to the girls. I used to give my sisters a chapter to read every time they did my household chores. I guess my sisters would have been my first readers because they did wait eagerly for the chapters which also meant my chores were done very quickly. But, in fairness, I was writing while they did them. (I still feel the same about household chores now. I prefer writing to vacuuming.)

I also wrote lots and lots of short stories and occasionally sent them to magazines although I never heard back from them. I think that all of that unpublished writing was important, though, as it gave me experience in creating

characters and plotting and actually working on something from start to finish.

My first published book was *Dreaming of A Stranger* and I couldn't believe it when readers began writing to me and saying that they enjoyed it. I was really moved and honoured by that and I'm still surprised and very pleased when readers get in touch.

What do you enjoy most about being a writer? Are there some aspects of writing that are particularly challenging?

I enjoy the creative part of it. I like imagining a character from scratch, wondering what she will be like and what events in her past life, her life before the book, have made her the way she is now. I also like to think about how the events in the book will change her for the future. I like to think that each character is a little bit like one of those Russian babushka dolls – with each chapter the reader learns more about them and, as the writer, I learn more about them too. I also enjoy writing about people who are very different from me. Giselle, in *Someone Special*, lives an entirely different life to mine and has a very different outlook to me. I couldn't spend the amount of time on clothes and make-up as she does and I'd hate to go to all those dinners and parties. But I really enjoyed writing about her. I also enjoy writing about people with different skills, like Isobel in *Isobel's Wedding*, because she actually made a wedding dress, whereas I can just about thread a needle.

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Doing research is really interesting – my two favourite research trips were to Dublin Airport to research air traffic control for Carey in *Too Good to be True* and Romy’s archaeological digs for *Someone Special*. The research itself always opens up new ideas and can be fascinating. While I was at Dublin Airport, a stray dog somehow got close to the runway, which obviously presented huge problems to the air traffic controllers as they had a stack of planes ready to land, as well as a queue waiting for take-off. Everything was delayed while the ground team rounded up the dog and I couldn’t help thinking of the people in the planes ahead, not knowing that the reason they were in a holding pattern was because there was a small, brown dog on the ground below!

The archaeological dig I visited for *Someone Special* was in Galway and I went there in winter, which was probably a mistake as I was frozen the whole time! Mostly when we think of archaeology, we think of places like Egypt, but there are thousands of digs in diverse places all over the world. The Galway dig produced lots of artefacts such as shroud pins and pottery and there’s no doubt but that it’s really exciting to see each piece being discovered.

As far as the challenging aspects of writing go – sometimes it’s hard to get your thoughts down on paper exactly as they are in your head and it can be very frustrating when the scene isn’t working in the way that you expected. There are times when you know you’re not ‘nailing’ it how you would like and you have to work very hard to get it spot

on. Of course, sometimes the characters also take you in directions that you weren't expecting and, although this is always great fun, it can mess with the original plot and you have to do a lot of work to get things back on track again. But I always allow my characters the freedom to change my original ideas – it's their book after all!

Do you have a favourite character in *Someone Special*, and if so, who?

That question is a bit like asking a parent if they have a favourite child. I'm fond of them all, in different ways! I understand Romy's frustration at feeling a misfit in her glamorous and successful family, but I also understand Veronica's desire to keep her looks and dress the way she always liked to dress. I do think that there is huge pressure on women to remain young-looking all the time and although all of us would like to keep our looks, there are times when you have to accept that all the anti-ageing creams in the world won't get rid of some of your wrinkles. I also think it's very odd to see women with surgically young faces but necks and hands which are much older.

Although I am always supportive of the female characters in my books, I do think that Keith is particularly understanding for a man . . .

Are your characters based on real people?

That's one of the questions I'm asked the most. I think it's because readers can sometimes find it hard to believe

that you can create an entire person in your head. But the truth is that it's actually easier to write about a person you've created than somebody you know. I never put real people into my books, although I suppose I can put certain types of people (bossy, jealous, glamorous, scruffy etc) into my books, and they might have a basis in someone I've met. When *Dreaming of a Stranger* was published, I was still working in financial services, which meant that I worked in an office full of men. All of them thought that Rory – the cheating husband – was based on them, even the guys who were (allegedly) happily married.

How long does it take you to write a novel?

About nine months. That includes some thinking time at the start when I'm playing around with the various ideas in my head and wondering if I can get it all to come together. I think it's important to spend a while getting the overall feel of the book and the characters in my mind before I actually start writing. Usually the story ends up being different to the one I was thinking of, but by then I know the characters more, and am happy with what they've decided to do.

I sometimes read about novelists who write a book in a few weeks and that always gives me a panic attack and makes me feel like a total time-waster. But I don't think I could physically write a book in such a short space of time because I like to allow thinking time between different stages of the book.

You've also written short stories. How different is that to writing a novel?

In a novel you've got more than 100,000 words to describe people and action and the reasons why they do what they do. In a short story you have to bring it all together in around 2,000 words. That means that you have to be very focused on the theme and the emotions that you're trying to get across and that you have to be much more selective about what information you're going to include. On the plus side, it's a lot quicker!

Where did your inspiration come from for *Someone Special*?

I'm very interested in family relationships, especially as these have changed so much over the last years because so many people are in second or third marriages now. Given that there are tensions in every family I was interested in how extended families deal with the relationships between all the different members. One of the issues in *Someone Special* is that Romy has always felt that her father, Veronica's second husband, has been compared unfavourably to Veronica's first husband. And a lot of her issues with Darragh and Kathryn stem from that feeling of being second-best. But she also has to deal with the fact that Dermot re-married and started another family which she doesn't really feel part of. I do think it's important for everyone to feel part of a family, even if we don't always get on with the other members of it!

In *Someone Special* I was also interested in exploring how the burden of care often falls on the youngest daughter, particularly if she's unmarried and therefore, as far as the others are concerned, doesn't have any other responsibilities. Romy's family continually refer to her as 'flighty' because she travels a lot, and despite the fact that it's part of her job, they think that she's just loafing around. Even though they accuse her of being selfish in not wanting to leave Australia to come home, it's a hard thing for her to do because she's leaving her friends and her job behind, and they're both very important to her. Of course in her case, too, the added difficulty is that she doesn't exactly get on with her mother, either.

Because I had an interest in archaeology I always wanted to write something that had archaeology as a background, and this story gave me a good opportunity to include it (though maybe I should have gone to some of the warmer places for my research!).

What tips would you give to an aspiring writer?

I'm sure aspiring writers get fed up with hearing the same thing from authors, but the truth is that the best thing you can do is sit down and write something. Most of us struggle with the fact that we never feel that we entirely do justice to our ideas, but you have to get something down on paper (or at least on your computer screen). Once you've got actual written material in front of you, you can edit and re-edit to get it how you want.

Another important thing is to write about what interests you. If you're bored with the topic and the characters, your readers will be too. If you've no interest in history, for example, but historical novels are popular, there's no point in you trying to jump on a bandwagon and write historical fiction. You'll get fed up and disillusioned. So tell the story you want to tell.

The other important thing is to find your own voice. Some aspiring writers want their books to sound like their favourite author. That's flattering to the author, but the thing for you as a writer, is to write in the style that's most natural to you. I realised when I started writing that my style was conversational and that I enjoyed writing about everyday life. And so, even though I wondered whether anyone would ever be interested in reading what I'd written, I stuck to my own style.

You became Ireland's first woman Chief Dealer. What made you leave your city job? In what ways has the City working environment in Ireland changed for women since you left?

I left my job because, at that point, my novels were becoming successful outside of Ireland and I had to make a choice between continuing to work in the City or living my dream of being a writer. So it was a no-brainer really, although I have to admit that I found it very strange to be able to dress in jeans and jumpers instead of snappy suits. And I missed carrying my

briefcase around for a while. (It was a very nice soft leather briefcase!)

At the time I started work in the City it was very male-dominated and there were few women working in senior positions. There are a lot more women working there now, but we're still trying to crack the male-dominated boardrooms. Perhaps a few more women around the oval desks in the banking offices might have prevented the sub-prime loans crisis.

Describe your perfect day.

That depends on my mood. If I'm writing, my perfect day is sitting at the laptop, feverishly getting the words down and hoping that my characters are driving the story (which, in my perfect day, they are). I like to go walking along the seafront in Clontarf, where I live, because I love the air near the sea. And, after a good day's writing, I enjoy doing something active so I'll head to my badminton club where we are both competitive and social. I've made lots of friends playing badminton and I'll often find that after a tough game, I'll get inspiration for a piece of the plot that's been bothering me. That's actually another tip for aspiring writers – if you're feeling stuck, do something completely different for a while!

How do you relax?

My absolute, totally relaxing moment is sitting out in my back garden when the apple tree is in blossom and looking

up at the sky through the pink flowers. I always feel completely at peace when I do that. I'm also very lucky because I have a holiday house in Spain and I go there from time to time to get away from it all. I like Spain very much and enjoy travelling around the country and practising my dreadful Spanish on the patient Spaniards.

I suppose, though, the thing about being a writer is that you're never totally relaxed as you tend to absorb everything around you, which can eventually make its way into a novel. I'm terrible for eavesdropping on conversations on the bus or train, for example, and though it really irritates me when people have loud mobile phone conversations in public, they can be very interesting!

Probably the one time that I'm totally switched off from anything to do with books is when I'm playing badminton, which is my favourite sport. You can't really think of your characters when you're running around in a sweat trying to figure out how to beat your opponent. This year my team has been very successful in our competitions and winning always gives me a great buzz.

Who are your favourite authors? How much time do you have to read other books?

I do most of my reading on holiday and in the summer but I read less when I'm writing myself and will usually read something very different to my own work – a crime

or legal thriller, for example. I really like Lee Child and Michael Connolly for those types of books.

Tell us about your next book?

My next book is called *The Perfect Man* and the inspiration for this came when I was travelling. My partner and I took a cruise which went through the Panama Canal and I was inspired both by the amazing locations and by life on a cruise ship. So I thought it would be interesting to write about an author (which I've never done before), who is invited onboard a ship to give talks about writing. The cruise is called the Valentine Cruise because it takes place in February and she's been asked because her book was a blockbusting romantic bestseller. The only problem is that the author used to work as a divorce lawyer, doesn't believe in romance, and wrote the book as therapy to get over her own divorce. She hadn't wanted to do the trip but her agent thought it would be a good idea and she didn't feel able to say no. So she's terrified about making a mess of everything. Her sister, who's a single mum and very romantic at heart, comes on the cruise with her as her assistant. The two girls haven't been particularly close, but being together on the cruise brings them closer. It also means that they start interfering in each other's love lives with some unforeseen consequences, both onboard the ship and afterwards, when they get back home.

Although I'm obviously writing from experience as far as being an insecure novelist goes, I'm very, very different

to Britt, the main character. She fell into writing by mistake, whereas it was something I always wanted to do! And I'm very glad that I got the chance.