

'Why you're never too old to follow your dreams'

They say life begins at 40 but, in many ways, it didn't start until 60 for bestselling novelist Dinah Jefferies. **Sheena Grant** reports

Dinah Jefferies is a great believer in positive thinking, so when she set out – at the age of 60 – to write her first novel, she stuck lots of encouraging Post-it Notes on the walls of her home to spur her on.

Scribbled on the little yellow slips of paper was a variety of things she wanted to achieve in what can only really be described as her wildest dreams. Things like “I have written a number one best-seller”, “I have an amazing agent and publisher” and “I have secured an incredible advance”.

“I believe you've got to focus on where you want to be and get on with getting there,” she says. “If you aim high you are probably going to fall a bit short, but if you don't aim high you'll fall a lot lower.”

Dinah, a grandmother with an unconventional past (she and her two children lived in a commune with a rock band, near Halesworth, for five years during the 1970s) didn't fall short. Quite the opposite.

Not only did she get an agent and a publishing deal with Penguin but last autumn, seven years after she first scribbled hopefully on those Post-it Notes and put pen to paper, she found herself top of the best-seller lists with her second novel, *The Tea Planter's Wife* – above established authors such as Jodi Picoult and Kate Mosse.

“It's knocked me off my feet, really,” she says.

And the scale of her success is all the sweeter because of the circumstances in which Dinah, who will be 68 this year, started to write. She and her husband, then living

in Spain, were hit badly by the financial crash in 2008.

“We had to sell up and come home,” she says. “I started writing as a way to distract myself from the awfulness of what was going on, really, and in the time it took to sell the house I had written my first book. Writing and the Post-it Notes were an exercise in positive thinking, so I didn't panic at our financial situation.”

That first novel turned out to be a learning experience but her second book, *The Separation*, attracted an agent. “When that book sold to

Penguin and four other countries within days of

my agent submitting it, I could hardly believe it,” says Dinah, who has worked in theatre, education and broadcasting over the years.

Until then she had been expecting to spend most of her time looking after her grandchildren when she returned to the UK, but instead she

found herself in demand at literary events and travelling the world to promote her books and research more novels.

Her third book, *The Silk Merchant's Daughter*, set in French Indochina in the 1950s as colonial rule crumbles, is due to be published later this month. Like her other books, its themes involve secrets and loss in its many guises, no doubt influenced by the tragic death of Dinah's son Jamie in a motorcycle accident at a school when he was just 14.

“One thing about writing later in life is that you have a great deal more experience to play with,” she says. “In part, *The Separation* (about a mother separated from her two



Photo: JENNY STEWART

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daughters during a time of unrest in 1950s Malaya, where Dinah herself grew up) is an exploration of love and loss, which meant that I had no choice but to draw on the experience of losing my own son to write the story. It was a difficult time of my life to revisit, but it was something I felt I had to do. The books do cover similar themes and I think that often happens with authors who explore recurring ideas in different ways. It comes down to your own life experience, I suppose.

“The road to getting a book published is paved with highs and lows. When I sent out the first book, I had to develop a thick skin to cope with rejections, of which there were about a dozen. It forced me to find

out what I really loved to write about and so I found my own voice, as opposed to sounding like others. *The Separation* came from my heart and soul, as well as my brain, and that's what gives it life.

“It's also what anyone wanting to write has to do, though it can leave you vulnerable and exposed. It doesn't matter. The thing is to keep going, keep writing day after day, even when it's terrible, and even when you think you can't.”

Although *The Separation* did well, Dinah thinks what really helped her hit gold with *The Tea Planter's Wife* was that it was promoted by the all-powerful Richard and Judy Book Club. “I knew that once it was chosen by them it would be

relatively successful,” she says. “But I never dreamed it would be in the best-seller lists for 16 weeks. It's the stuff dreams are made of and still feels a bit unreal.”

As part of her research for the second book, Dinah travelled to Sri Lanka, staying on an old colonial tea estate in hill country, exactly where her story is set. “It was an amazing experience,” she says.

But with success comes expectation and Dinah found herself working flat out when the publication of her third book was brought forward four months after *The Tea Planter's Wife* did so well.

“It's been lovely, of course, but I've been working harder than I've ever worked before,” she says. “I

My year of being thrifty

Sheena Grant

Your own best financial adviser

I've never believed you should trust your day-to-day financial affairs to anyone but yourself.

However financially illiterate you are, you're still usually better placed than anyone else to make sure you're getting the best deal possible.

That's because you have your own interests at heart in a way that others don't. Take "expert" advice by all means but always examine it with a questioning eye. And, as my own experience has shown in the last week, never ever trust a utility company when it comes to direct debits.

Regular readers may recall I've recently changed phone and broadband provider and am now paying £25 a month less than I was. But when I checked my final bill with the old company this week, I was surprised to see a month's advance direct debit payment was about to be taken, even though I would be using its phone services for only two days of that month.

I queried the charge and was told, by someone in a call centre on

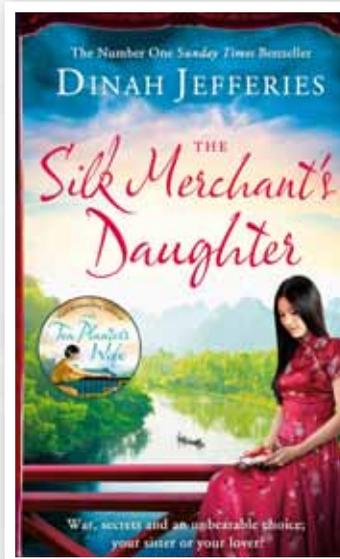
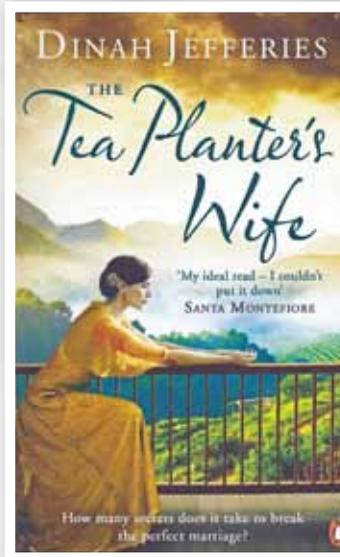
an entirely different continent, the charge would be refunded the following month. My attempts to argue that the money shouldn't be taken in the first place made no difference. So I did all I could do in the circumstances; I cancelled the direct debit, meaning they had to send me a bill for what I actually owed. It's a good job I did, as the outstanding amount was £40 less than what they had planned to take!

In the meantime, my £100 high street shopping vouchers that were also part of the phone-switching deal have arrived. Now, should I blow the money on something I don't really need or save it for a rainy day? I think we all know the answer to that one...

Inspired by thrifty reader Jean Clarkson, who wrote to me about her user-friendly, ethical phone and electricity providers, I've started recycling used envelopes. Jean's thrifty credentials were obvious to see before I'd even read a word of her letter, which came in a recycled pre-addressed envelope. Following her excellent example I delved into my recycling bin to salvage and re-use all the old and unwanted envelopes I had so carelessly tossed away. Thanks Jean!

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I did all I could do and cancelled the direct debit



■ Above, Dinah Jefferies in Southwold during the 1970s, when she and her children lived in a Suffolk commune. Top right, Dinah's best-seller, *The Tea Planter's Wife*; middle, her first book, *The Separation*, and, bottom right, her latest novel, *The Silk Merchant's Daughter*. 'If you've got something you want to do, just do it'

understand why – if one book does well, the publisher wants people who bought it to rush out and buy another. It's a business and I think people forget that, sometimes, when creativity is involved."

Listening to Dinah's story, it's impossible not to wonder if she would have ever taken up writing at all without the financial crash.

"I think I would have done it," she says. "It was something I'd been thinking about for months before. When we were first in Spain I was taken up overseeing building work on the house, but after that I had time on my hands. I was getting there. The crash just got me focussed."

Actually, it's not entirely true to say Dinah hadn't written before 2008. She did try her hand at a children's story some years ago but gave up after the first rejections. After completing her

first "learning experience" novel she started to read up on the craft of novel-writing, looking at things like structure, character, dialogue and setting before starting *The Separation*.

"As a result, I knew a bit more about it by then," she says. "I'd also got some fantastic feedback from my now-agent on that unpublished book. She told me to be sure to send her my next book, which I did. I didn't send it to anyone else. When I got a telephone call saying she'd love to represent me, that was an exciting day. I just knew it would be life-changing. I feel like the subsequent success of 'Tea Planter' has rewarded the faith my agent and publisher showed in me."

"The thing I've learned above all is that you can't be precious about your writing. If you are, you'll fail. It is about having the right book for the right time and

about luck too, I suppose." Dinah puts much of the positive thinking that was so instrumental in the early days of her writing down to a mountaineer friend who visualised herself at the summit before she even started a climb. That way, she didn't have to worry about whether or not she was going to make it. She could just get on and do it.

"I do the same with writing books," she says. "In a way, it does feel like my destiny, because of how things have happened."

"I wish I had started writing when I was younger but I feel lucky to have found it at all."

"Writing is an eternal search for perfection. I may have written three books and be about to start a fourth but a part of me still thinks I haven't got a clue what I am doing. You have to have a creative impulse – something that makes you feel you could write a wonderful story that will make people feel and think. That's what I want from a book."

"I don't believe it when people say 'If you're over 60 you don't stand a chance doing something like this'. I'm living proof that's wrong. The only thing that holds

The thing is to keep going, keep writing day after day, even when it's terrible, and even when you think you can't