



TIME FOR TEA WITH DINAH

IT'S ONLY HER SECOND BOOK BUT CHELTENHAM AUTHOR DINAH JEFFERIES IS THE NEW NAME IN FICTION WRITING, TOPPING THE BESTSELLER CHARTS WITH THE TEA PLANTER'S WIFE WITHIN A MONTH OF ITS RELEASE. HELEN BLOW CHATTED TO HER ABOUT HOW SHE CAME TO WRITE HER SIZZLING SAGA

MAKING the top of a bestsellers chart is more than enough reason for any author to break out the bubbly but Dinah Jefferies has even more cause to celebrate. The Tea Planter's Wife is only her second published novel yet it has made the number one spot of two national bestselling paperback fiction lists within less than a month of its release.

The Cheltenham author is naturally delighted with its success and is already working on her third book, due out next summer.

In fact, The Tea Planter's Wife made it on to the bestseller charts less than two weeks after its release, just behind the latest tomes by Jeffrey Archer and Kate Mosse, no less.

It is also one of Richard and Judy's coveted Book Club choices, an honour that gives any author a pretty good chance of success.

"It's not a guarantee of it being a bestseller but it certainly gives it a leg up," said Dinah, whose first book, The Separation, was set in 1950s Malaya, a turbulent period of its history.

"It's really competitive even to get on to that; there are hundreds of books and only eight get on to the list three times a year."

The Tea Planter's Wife tells the story of 19-year-old Gwen who travels to Ceylon to begin her new life as a married woman – but the husband who greets her is distant and secretive.

As she starts to explore her new home, Gwen stumbles over a tiny, overgrown grave and trunks filled with dusty dresses – clues to a hidden, unspeakable past.

"Gwen travels out full of idealism and hope and has to confront a completely different world.

"One newspaper called it Rebecca with crocodiles," laughed Dinah. "There is one crocodile in it and a dead ex-wife.

"It's a book about destructive secrets but there's a lot more than that because it's also a period of history when the British were still in charge of Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka, as a colony but it is the beginnings of the Empire crumbling.

"She also has to confront racism which she doesn't understand, as well as the British sense of superiority and entitlement and the friction between the native Ceylonese and the Tamils brought in to work at the plantations.

"While Gwen's marriage is under threat so is the country, so they sort of reflect each other."

Dinah's inspiration for the story partly came from the fact that husband Richard's ancestors were in Ceylon as tea planters and his mother was born in India.

The couple travelled to Sri Lanka as part of her research for the book, staying in a former tea planter's bungalow beside a lake in the misty hill country.

"It gave us a taste of colonial life but then there was a cyclone that affected the area so badly that all the roads nearby were washed away," said Dinah.

"We had to leave to catch our flight so in the end we had to go in



Bestselling author Dinah Jefferies at Cheltenham's No 131 and above, her first novel The Separation

Picture: Jennie Banks

canoes across the lake. They were quite little canoes, one with us and one with all our luggage, and you had to check your ankles for leeches as you got in and out."

Dinah is no stranger to mishap during her travels. While in Vietnam researching her next book, she climbed on some railings to take a picture and dropped her phone on the other side. She had to fish it out with a stick but lost all the photos in the process.

The couple also lived in Spain for a period and it was there, during a very hot summer when she was unable to go out during the day, that she began to write.

"My first book was set in Spain and although it didn't get published, it got an agent interested in me, whom I later worked with for The Separation. She took that book and sold it straight away.

"When we came back to the UK I got the writing bug but I didn't expect it to take over my life the way it has. I don't have a social life any more, because my social life is with my characters.

"I've always loved reading; as a teenager it was my escape from anything that was difficult. These days it's quite difficult to get

the time to read because I'm so busy researching and writing my own books."

There is an element of loss in both her novels, coming in part from Dinah's own loss. Her son was killed in an accident at school at the age of 14.

"I wanted to write about loss but although it's not the loss I experienced, once you've tapped into those feelings it can help your writing. You can only ever really write from yourself so the more you have felt things, the more you have access to. The kind of books I write and enjoy will always somehow touch your heart."

Dinah is already writing her next book, due out next summer, which will be set in Vietnam in a silk shop in Hanoi and will be about a rivalry between two sisters.

"My books are upmarket, commercial fiction that not terribly difficult to read. I think the most important thing about fiction is that you're engaged with the characters. If you don't then it's unlikely

you're going to finish the book."

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THE TEA PLANTER'S WIFE, PENGUIN, £7.99