



“I WROTE MY FIRST NOVEL AT 60”

**DINAH JEFFERIES, 72, FROM CHELTENHAM, TURNED HER LIFELONG LOVE OF WRITING INTO A NEW CAREER IN HER SIXTIES AND IS NOW A BESTSELLING, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR**

“ I spent the first nine years of my childhood in Malaya – now Malaysia – where my father organised the postal and communication services, which the Japanese had destroyed in World War Two. I didn’t spend much

time reading in Malaya, as books were hard to get hold of and we lived a very outdoor life. We returned to live in England in 1957, and I’d spend hours with my head in books. I loved the way a book could take me into other lives and

other worlds, and I often kept a diary of sorts.

After leaving school, I had no real plan, and became an au pair for an Italian countess at 19 and had my first child, Jamie, when I was 22 and at university. I met my first husband two years later but we separated after ten years and I took a job teaching in Devon.

While there, Jamie, then 14, won a full scholarship to a public school. But on the day I dropped him off at the school – 21 September 1985 – he got on a motorbike belonging to one of the older boys, only for it to go out of control, and he drove through a glass door, severing the artery in his neck. He died almost instantly.

I’m not sure how I got through it – I read all I could find about death, spirituality and religion and tried to understand what it meant, but you deal with grief in your heart, not your head. Eventually, the pain died down slightly, and now I can think of him with love, whereas for ages it was too painful.

Throughout the difficult times, I would often write

about how I really felt, the despair over my son’s death, which I found cathartic, but it was years before I hatched a plan to write my first novel.

This happened in 2002 when I was living in Spain, with my second husband, Richard. However, I didn’t actually put pen to paper, so to speak, until 2008, aged 60, when the financial crash happened. After we lost a lot of money in the crash, it galvanised me into actually starting to write. We had to return to England so Richard could continue to work as a business consultant. It took two years to sell our house in Spain, during which time I wrote *The Spanish Legacy*. It has never been published but



it taught me how to structure a novel, and find my ‘voice’ as a writer. I sent it to agents in the UK and mostly heard nothing, but then I got a response from Caroline Hardman, who has been my agent ever since.

We came home in 2010 and when I went to see my mum, Dorrie, we looked through the photo albums of my childhood spent in Malaya. The plot for *The Separation* started to chatter away in my head. Returning to Malaya to research *The Separation* brought me back to life, to a time when I hadn’t had Jamie and he hadn’t died, though there will always be a Jamie-shaped hole inside me. Caroline loved it and ten days later, Penguin – strangely, on the anniversary of Jamie’s death – snapped it up.

My next book, *The Tea Planter’s Wife*, set in Ceylon in the 1920s, spent four months in the bestseller lists. I was 67, and people had said, ‘You won’t get published if you’re over 60’ – but I did!

I’m now on my ninth book, the second of a trilogy with my new publishers, HarperCollins,

and my modus operandi has moved closer to home. I don’t want to endure long-haul flights any more.

I’m someone who’ll still be making changes to my life in my eighties. Last autumn, I did a course in unleashing potential, which has helped me to try new things.

Life is all about learning, and every book you write teaches you something different. If you have a dream, whether it’s to write a book or something else, go for it. There’s no secret to success, you just have to get on with it, feel the fear and do it anyway. Nobody knows if they can do anything or what they’re capable of – be it a painting, a business, a piece of music, a book – until they try. Along the way you’ll discover what you can and can’t achieve. Say, ‘I can, I will’ and ignore your inner saboteur. Even now, I still have one of those!

\*The Tuscan Contessa by Dinah Jefferies is out now (Penguin, £7.99)

