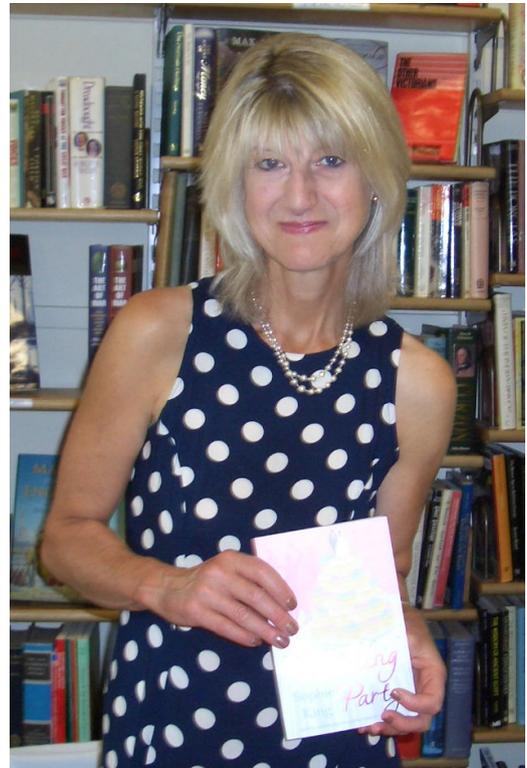


Multi-Tasking Mum-Lit Author Talks About Writing

Sophie King is a mother of three, a successful novelist, journalist, creative writing lecturer, writer-in-residence at a male prison, and the epitome of ‘the multi-tasking woman’. But how does she manage to pack it all in? Steve Barley finds out at the Oxfam Bookfest 2009.

Sophie King is the author of five successful novels, including *Mums@Home* and *Second Time Lucky*, and is also the pen name of Jane Bidder – a journalist with over twenty five years of writing experience. Her non-fiction books include the titles, *What Every Parent Should Know Before Their Child Goes to University* and *How To Write Short Stories for Magazines (and Get Published)*. A prolific short story writer, she won the prestigious RNA - Elizabeth Goudge Trophy in 2004 and the following year saw her debut novel, *The School Run*, turn into a bestseller.

With a writing CV that reads like the media equivalent of a Who’s Who? – her credits include national newspapers, magazines, books, radio and conference appearances to name but a few – Sophie’s writing career has been as hectic as her life at home as a wife and working mother to three children. But how does she manage to balance the two? And would she describe herself as a write-aholic? Sophie adds an interview to her workload as Steve Barley asks the questions to find out.



Sophie King at the Oxfam charity book festival, St Albans

Q. *Let’s talk briefly about how you started out. You’ve been a journalist for over 25 years, how did that begin and was it a deliberate career choice?*

SK. I started writing from the minute I could pick up a pen. I used to write lots and lots of poetry and, when I was 17, I won a competition in the Harrow Observer. That was amazing. I read English (at Reading University) because it was the only thing I wanted to do. I knew I needed a job which involved writing, so it was a toss up between publishing and journalism. I was lucky enough to be accepted on a magazine trainee scheme run by Thomson. The first thing we did was go to a coroner’s court and hear how a little boy was run over by a juggernaut, which was absolutely horrible. That was how I started my career as a journalist. Then I got married very young and when I had my first child I turned freelance because I wanted to be around at home.

Q. *Presumably, writing freelance, you had to grab the work whenever it came?*

SK. You never say no. I was lucky and freelanced for the Times, the Telegraph, Mail and Express, but it was very hard. We were bringing the children up in the country, but I didn’t have any full time help. I was trying to do it all. And you think you can do it all but you can’t. I only became a journalist because I wanted to write a novel and I got to my early thirties and realised I hadn’t written it yet. By then I had three children and a successful career, but I started to write a novel anyway; adding yet another thing to my rather overloaded work schedule.

Q. *Is it true you that wrote eleven novels before you had one published?*

SK. I sort of lost count in the end. Certainly ten. I call it my self-imposed apprenticeship. My way of finding my voice – the way I wanted to write. When my youngest son went to a different school, that's what gave me the idea for my first published novel, *The School Run*.



Q. *You're known for your distinctive characters and switching the narrative to tell the story from multiple angles and viewpoints, but that's not easy to execute. What made you choose to write that way?*

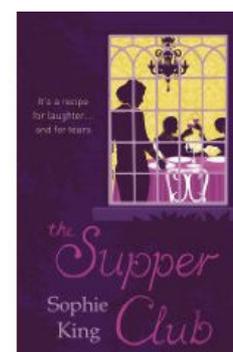
SK. It means I'm never stuck for plot. If you have four characters with lots to do in their lives there is always something happening. I also love the dynamics between people in real life. So I love putting that into fiction. But my two major characters are always a mum and a gran.

Q. *Does the humour you incorporate in your writing come naturally or do you have to work at it?*

SK. It's very difficult to sit down and think you've got to be humorous. A lot comes from my children. They say something funny, or naughty and I'll write it down. Children – and old people too - are less inhibited about the way they act, and great for doing strange and funny things.

Q. *So your humour comes from things you observe with your writer's eye?*

SK. Yes. For example, in my book, *The Supper Club*, there's a girl who's vegetarian and her mother-in-law dishes up a chicken casserole and says 'Yes, but you do eat chicken don't you, Dear?' I'm vegetarian and I cannot tell you the number of people who seem to think you'll eat chicken. So it's observational, real stuff that happens.



Q. *What aspect of your writing gives you the most satisfaction?*

SK. When I have the germ of a story and I start writing it. I'm in a world of my own. It's like moulding a lump of clay and getting lost in it. That's what I like best.

Q. *What do your children think about you being an author?*

SK. I think it's very hard for children when their mothers are working. I've always been aware that mummy's on the phone interviewing somebody or mummy's writing. I do really try to make sure mummy's also around for them but I have to say that was more when they were growing up. They're more independent now. How do they see me as an author? I think it's an aspect of me that sort of surprises and sort of doesn't if that makes any sense. They do say they're very proud of me, which is sweet of them but makes me feel slightly embarrassed because it's just what I do. Whereas, I'm really proud of them for what they're doing. My eldest, he's at Law School, my daughter's teaching, and my 18-year-old is a writer about to do a journalist course.

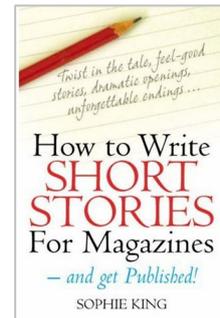
Q. *You're a novelist, journalist, creative writing tutor, editor and even, I understand, writer-in-residence at a prison. Would you describe yourself as a write-aholic?*

SK: Yes I am a write-aholic. I'm tetchy if I don't write, it's as simple as that. If I go anywhere, my laptop comes with me. I normally write in the mornings but I can write anywhere and I think that comes from when my children were little. As soon as they were asleep I'd write. When I (went through a divorce and) was on my own for four years, I could no longer rely on my income as a

freelance journalist, so I started teaching Creative Writing at Oxford University. I do less journalism now, but I tutor in a prison two days a week.

Q. *Do you have another novel in the pipeline?*

SK. Yes, but I never talk about the novel that I'm writing as I always think it's bad luck. But my book *How To Write Short Stories For Magazines (and Get Published)* came out last year and is being re-printed in December. And I'm writing two other non-fiction books, *How To Write Your First Novel* and *How To Write Your Life Story*.

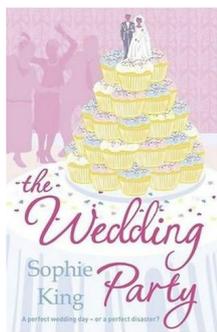


Q. *Finally, a hypothetical question. If you were forced to give up one of the following, what would it be: writing, chocolate, alcohol or men?*

SK: Oh gosh. I've just got married again so I can't say the latter, and I couldn't possibly give up writing as writing is like breathing. I only eat chocolate in the winter but I do like chocolate ice creams. I think I'd have to give up alcohol as I hardly drink anything anyway.

I'm glad you didn't give up writing! Thank you, Sophie.

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Many thanks to Sophie King for taking time out to be interviewed. Sophie's fifth novel, *The Wedding Party*, published by Hodder and Stoughton, is available in book stores now.

If you want to learn more about Sophie and her multi-tasking capabilities, then check out her website at www.sophieking.info.

Thanks also to Jeremy Guy from the Oxfam bookstore in St Albans. Oxfam Bookfest may be over, but you can still buy books from their online store at www.oxfam.org.uk. All profits from Oxfam's book sales help support their global fight against poverty.



A good book for a good cause sounds like a good deal to me!
