

Me and Mrs (Miss, Ms) JONES

Dating again, back in London and as hapless as ever... Helen Fielding and her alter ego Bridget Jones are back. *Chloe Fox* tries to separate the writer from our favourite everywoman. Photographs by *Jason Bell*

JULY 2013

Alcohol units: 0. Cigarettes: 0. Calories: 500. Weight: 5lbs lost (v disciplined, helped by trepidation about v intimidating Vogue photo shoot tomorrow).

On the surface, there's nothing Bridget Jones-like about the elegant woman tapping at her laptop with manicured nails when I arrive at the airy Primrose Hill pub she has chosen for our meeting. No chardonnay. No overflowing ashtray. Or expanded waistline, for that matter. Fielding is groomed, toned and honey-gold, dressed in a navy-blue silk Diane von Furstenberg shirtdress and tasteful gold jewellery. "It's my version of the Dalai Lama's robes," she smiles conspiratorially. "My failsafe. If I ever don't know what to wear – which is usually – I just wear the same thing, which is this."

Fielding, who doesn't look anywhere near her 55 years, still wears glasses, and has to put them on to read the menu. "Broad beans? No, too bloaty. Potatoes? Too fattening, I suppose. I've lost five

pounds recently and I can't walk past the scales without getting on and having a look, just so I can feel pleased all over again." She orders the first of four Diet Cokes ("I'm addicted, despite the fact that it gives me terrible wind") and then has to change her spectacles for her prescription sunglasses so that she can cut out the glare of the rays that are flooding in through the windows. "I can't tell you the number of times I've got home from the school run and thought, 'Oh God, everything is so dark and gloomy, I'm so depressed!' and then realised that it's actually because I've got my dark glasses on."

For the best part of the past year, Fielding has been "largely feral", writing *Mad about the Boy*, the much-anticipated third instalment of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. "When I was in the thick of it, I wore the same black trousers and black jumper with a dog on the front for months with my hair all over the place," Fielding continues. "Thank goodness for the children [Dash, nine, and Romy, seven] is all I can say. Having them forced me to stick to some sort of routine, rather >



"All these fabulous women were coming up to me at parties and telling me that they felt just like Bridget," says Helen Fielding. The new Bridget is, however, darker and "more bruised".
Hair: Maarit Niemela.
Make-up: Niamh Quinn.
Thanks to Vicky at Daniel Hersheson Base Studio.
Sittings editor: Fiona Goffar

Because Burton hadn't consulted her on his dinosaur purchase, Bonham Carter thought she had free rein to go ahead and fulfill one of her own lifelong fantasies by buying a railway carriage. (Much to the amusement of her grandee family, the carriage she bought was third class.) Back at home, in London, Bonham Carter invested in a shepherd's hut in the garden for her then-four-year-old daughter to sleep in. "Well, yes, in the garden, but still attached to the side of the house. It's so weird. I just can't understand why she didn't want to sleep in there, but she absolutely didn't. I would have thought it would be the best bedroom in the world."

"No one can be profoundly original who does not avoid eccentricity," wrote the French author André Maurois. Bonham Carter is certainly eccentric. ("It's not contrived," says Firth, "she honestly can't help it.") But that doesn't mean to say that she is unaffected by people's criticism or judgment. "I'm not indelibly confident," she says, of the hurt she feels when she reads a piece that pokes fun at the way she looks. "I love clothes and I love dressing-up, and I love the way that it makes me feel. So I'm always disillusioned when I see a photo of myself – which I try not to – because I think, 'No! That's not what I meant at all!' Any insult is hurtful, though, because you always think you look OK. Otherwise you wouldn't leave the house looking like you do, would you?" It should also be remembered that her mother thought nothing of arriving at the school gates in full African dress and a turban.

For a short time, Bonham Carter experimented with having a stylist. "That really didn't work out," she laughs. "I don't like being told what to do and I particularly don't like being told what to wear. I really resented paying someone to have an opinion and still getting bad reviews." It is a source of great frustration to her that the film industry has been hijacked by the fashion industry. For this year's Oscars ceremony, she flirted briefly with the idea of not wearing Westwood and borrowing a dress from another designer, only to be told that the rights to the designer in question had been bought entirely by another actress. "Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?" Still, none of it really bothers her at the end of the day. "Ultimately, I don't give a fuck," she laughs. "Because I'm still going to get another job, aren't I?"

Bonham Carter (who came to the *Vogue* shoot – unprompted – with a fake moustache in her handbag) also has a light-hearted approach to growing old. "Of course I don't much like looking older – who does? – but I'm not going to lose sleep over it." In fact, she barely looks her age. Perhaps this is because she *does* sleep so much ("I could sleep forever") or because she never goes in the sun ("not for any reason other than because it's so unbelievably boring"). Or, perhaps, it is just because of the old cliché: she is happy on the inside. "I'm genuinely enjoying my life more now than I ever did," she admits. "My work is better, my relationships are richer and, of course, I have the children, which makes me feel as sexy and as womanly as I ever have."

"Helena is as real a person as you could ever hope to meet," says James Ivory, who confirms that, of all the actresses he has ever worked with, Bonham Carter is by a very long way his favourite. "She's loyal and supportive and kind. Plus, there's no nonsense about her. She is genuinely unaffected by the fact that she's a star."

Bonham Carter is a proper person in an industry densely populated by those who aren't. But she is also fabulously far from ordinary. As we part ways, in the lashing, gothic rain, she pulls me into a warm, genuine hug and then shouts directions. "Turn right at the second star and head straight on till morning, then keep going till you reach platform nine and three quarters!" And there it is: that unforgettable cackle, following me into the darkness. ■

his gallery in Hoxton Square. "That was when I met her," remembers Mario Testino. "She was part of this gang of gorgeous girls – Dasha Zhukova, Eugenie Niarchos, Olympia Scarry, Camilla Al Fayed, Tatiana Santo Domingo [who has just given birth to a son, Sacha, with Charlotte's brother Andrea] and Margherita Missoni." Testino shot them all together, and later guided Charlotte through one of her first photoshoots, for French *Vogue*. Was she a natural? "Absolutely not! She was very uncomfortable, but it was impossible to take a bad picture of her in any light, at any angle. She looks incredible." Later, Testino spent time with Charlotte and her mother on holiday in Brazil. "When I first met her, I thought she had a froideur," he says, "but she is not at all like that in private, she is so complete."

Charlotte and Alex lived a quiet life in London. They were both hardworking, Alex building his gallery, and she contributing to independent magazine projects. In 2009, with friends Alexia Niedzielski and Elizabeth von Guttman, she founded *Ever Manifesto*, the first issue of which was guest-edited by Italian *Vogue* editor Franca Sozzani and distributed for free at Colette and Corso Como. She also worked for the small publishing house Quercus. "I had done an internship in a publishing house in Paris and had really liked it," she remembers, fiddling constantly with her iPhone, which buzzes regularly in its white leather case. "They were doing a lot of French-to-English translations, which was interesting for me. And they were translating Stieg Larsson, too, really good stuff."

Despite returning to live in Paris last year, Charlotte continues to be fond of London. "I still love coming here. I like the museums, the Serpentine Gallery, the Tate..." She's a cultural polymath. "I read constantly," she says, "in French and English. Always five books at a time." She's currently reading *Heureux les Heureux*, by Yasmina Reza. "I love English poetry, too." Her favourite poet is Emily Dickinson, she says – the famously tortured American writer. Is Charlotte a romantic? "I don't know!" she says, shifting her body so dramatically on the sofa she looks as though she might do a backflip off it. "I don't know what romantic means any more..."

Since returning to Paris she has been dating the 42-year-old stand-up comedian and actor Gad Elmaleh. A Moroccan, originally from Casablanca, he has a 12-year-old son, Noé, from a previous relationship with the French actress Anne Brochet, and a reputation in France as one of its finest leading actors (he stars opposite Audrey Tautou in Michel Gondry's forthcoming *Mood Indigo*). The couple made their first official appearance together in March at the Monaco Rose Ball, hosted by her mother, which they attended with Karl Lagerfeld, her brother Andrea, and Prince Albert and Princess Charlene, and for which Charlotte wore a frothing, pink asymmetric gown by Chanel couture.

Although uncomfortable talking about herself in terms of fashion, Charlotte is not averse to dipping into that world. She recently guest-edited the fashion biannual *Self Service Magazine*, and last year formed a production company called Swoon with her childhood friend and actress Juliette Dol. "We have only been going about eight months," she emphasises, "but our aim is to work with young, creative people we know. We have started making small films, some music, some fashion ones – just little things for Chloé and Gucci."

I wonder if she might be tempted in future to make full-length films. It's a neat idea that the soulful-looking granddaughter of Grace Kelly might take her family's legendary association with film in a new direction. "Maybe," she says cautiously, "Yes, maybe... Who knows?" She gives nothing more away. And with that teaser hanging in the air, Charlotte hops off the sofa, throws on a big black coat, says goodbye politely and, with her chaperone, publicist and security guard, quietly leaves the building. ■



HELEN WEARS SHIRT CANALI

"Having children forced me to stick to some sort of routine, rather than sitting at my computer day and night, chewing on old bits of cheese"



than sitting at my computer day and night, chewing on old bits of cheese."

Instantly confessional, with a sharp, self-deprecating sense of humour, Fielding is as hard not to like as the chaotic alter ego who has made her such a great literary success. But let's be clear: Helen Fielding is not Bridget Jones. "I wrote her as a made-up character to deflect the attention from me, but everyone thought it was me anyway," the author confides in her quiet northern lilt.

It is now 17 years since *Bridget Jones's Diary* – a novel that started life as a spoof column in *The Independent* – became a global publishing phenomenon and changed the life of its author who, like Bridget, was a thirtysomething singleton living in Notting Hill and working in the media. Up until that point, Fielding (who is now worth an estimated £17 million) had been living a fairly dead-end freelance existence, having graduated from Oxford with a 2:2 in English, working as a production manager on various children's shows at the BBC, including ("Eek, don't ask!") *Jim'll Fix It*. From the outset, though, she had a comic's skill for telling hilarious anecdotes. "Her description of how badly she was doing at work was part of her charm," says her one-time boyfriend Richard Curtis, who recalls her stories about being "a catalogue of chaos on *Blue Peter* and 'Noel Edmonds's Multi-Coloured Wop-Pop'," as she called *Swap Shop*. "Helen's ability to see the funniness in herself was definitely part of what became Bridget," he continues. "She obviously isn't Bridget but she can't deny that there is Bridget-like behaviour."

"I once wrote an article about car burglar alarms and sent it to *The Guardian*," says Fielding of her earliest failures as a freelance writer. "I would literally ring them every week asking if they'd read it. Every time, they would say they hadn't but they would get to it soon. After the whole *Bridget* thing happened, they asked me to write a piece for them. I said, 'Well, you've got that one on car burglar alarms you could use...'"

Nobody, least of all Fielding – who had plotted the novel version of the columns around Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for no reason other than "it was on the telly at the time and everyone seemed to like it" – expected anything to come of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. "We had a little publication party at L'Escargot," she remembers. "There were about 20 people there and I was so drunk when I was signing books that I just sort of scrawled

all over them." It wasn't until the book came out in paperback in 1997 that "the madness began".

Fielding was overwhelmed, to say the least. The day she got her first royalty cheque, she just sat and stared at it for what felt like forever. And for several months this feeling of confusion didn't go away. "I had to really figure out how the success thing worked and what it meant," she remembers. "To start with, I didn't really understand. I felt quite guilty and confused; I thought that if I went out and bought something extravagant, like a business-class ticket or a Gucci handbag, that all the money would go away."

Overnight, wherever she went, whatever she did, people wanted to talk about Bridget. "It was a bit startling really; all these fabulous women coming up to me at parties, spewing out every intimate detail of their lives and telling me that they felt just like Bridget did. It was almost like they were looking for

"The happy ending is just where you choose to end a book. Life, with its twists and turns, carries on beyond it"

absolution, that they needed me to say, 'Bless you, my child. You are normal.'"

"It was really very difficult for her," remembers her old friend, the writer Jane Wellesey. "It made her very unsettled and rather wary." On one occasion, Fielding got back to her house in Notting Hill to find a motorbike parked outside her house. Presuming it was the paparazzi, she got really angry – only to discover that it was in fact a Domino's Pizza delivery bike. "And having been in an affronted rage, I then veered into a state of self-pity. 'Oh... No one cares about me... Don't they know who I am?' I realised that wanting the Domino's Pizza man to be a press photographer so that I could be cross about it was quite a weird and messed-up place to be in."

The follow-up, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, was written in a cottage in the Cotswolds in a blur of neurosis. "I was very lathered about it and aware of all the noise, full of worry and all over the place." Having been happy with the length of the first book, Fielding decided to make the second book exactly the same length. She finally submitted almost exactly the same number of pages to her publisher. But when the proofs came back, the book was double the

length; it turned out that she had double-spaced the first book, but not the second.

The resulting publicity tour took her to Los Angeles, which "seemed sort of miraculous with its sunsets and heady air of the Wild West", and Fielding spontaneously decided to make a move to get away from the hype. "Plus I realised that for the same price as my small, terraced house in Notting Hill I could get one of those flashy boxes with a swimming pool." As a child, Fielding had dreamt of having a swimming pool. "We used to go on our holidays in a camper van," she remembers. "Six of us, driving round Europe, looking for campsites with pools. To my mind, swimming pools were what writers had, and when I was a writer I was going to have my own."

Fielding was born in Morley, a small industrial town in Yorkshire, where her father was the manager of a mill that made cloth for miners' donkey jackets. The second of four children, she grew up wanting to be a writer (her paternal grandmother, fittingly, was the writer of an agony column) and, as a wilful, fiercely independent teenager, began writing poetry – "usually about kissing boys under motorway bridges". There was also one called, simply, "Stew", which

drew a complex analogy between stew and life. "My brother had it framed and put up in the toilet and at the bottom he wrote: 'Also available, Ham and Eggs'."

Even in her early work, Fielding can find her older writerly self, obsessively editing (endless crossings-out and rewordings) and very, very poor punctuation. "I still, to this day, have no idea where to put the apostrophe in *Bridget Jones's Diary*."

If comedy is Fielding's weapon, it is also her refuge. She is much happier making jokes than she is scouring the landscape of her own life. When she was just 24, her father was killed in a car accident. "It was horrible and shocking," she says quietly. "And it made me very aware that life is complicated and precarious. It's like the keys of a piano, isn't it? There are white notes and black notes. And there's a tragicomic element in my writing; the happy ending is just where you choose to end a book. Life, with all its twists and turns, carries on beyond it."

According to its author, the new, more grown-up Bridget Jones will be the star of a much darker book than the two that have come before. "She's older and tough things have happened to her," she says enigmatically, before confiding >240

what those tough things actually are. (Unfortunately, I can't tell you because then I would have to kill you, if the publishers at Jonathan Cape haven't killed me first.) The only titbit I can tempt you with is that Bridget, like her creator, is a single mother, trying to navigate the pitfalls of motherhood and middle age. "In the same way as the whole tragic, barren spinster thing was hopelessly outdated when I wrote the first book," she says, "the idea of a middle-aged woman being expected to start growing curly grey hair and wheeling a shopping bag is totally irrelevant. Women of my age are still dating, having sex and looking great. A woman's sell-by date is getting later and later, and quite right, too."

It is not a book she had ever intended to write. "The publishers gave up asking me years ago," she laughs. Within months of moving to Los Angeles, Fielding – by then in her forties – entered a new phase of life, falling in love with *The Simpsons* screenwriter Kevin Curran (they were engaged but never married) and giving birth to Dash, in 2004, and a daughter, Romy, two years later. "The hospital classified me as a geriatric mother," she laughs.

With motherhood, Fielding unearthed a whole new realm of comic potential (starting with an email announcing Dash's birth in which she forgot to delete a joke about having died, tragically, in childbirth). Having always feared that she might not have children, she was thrilled when she did. And totally unprepared. "I remember once holding Dash in the kitchen and thinking, 'Oh God, what if I put him in the microwave?'"

For a while Fielding turned her back on fiction writing, a fact brought home one day while visiting the library in Los Angeles with her children – the librarian looked at her card and announced that their mother "used to be a very famous author". But she didn't stop working: she had a hand in the screenplays for both Bridget Jones films, and is credited as an executive producer on *Bridget Jones's Diary*. For the past eight years she has also been heavily involved with the creation of a *Bridget Jones* musical – written by Fielding and scored by Lily Allen – which has reached the workshop stage. The project is currently on hold, but Fielding (who, one gets the impression, has exacting expectations) has high hopes for its future.

In 2009, Fielding's relationship with Curran came to an amicable end and she

returned to London to educate the children (she still has a house in Los Angeles and returns there with the children in the school holidays). Newly single and living in Primrose Hill, Fielding found her life beginning to converge with that of her alter ego once more and an idea for a new book began to take shape. It wasn't until she actually started writing that she realised the novel's voice was Bridget's. "Because that is the voice I naturally write in, I suppose. The most fun in a way. Like an old friend."

For a long time, she didn't tell anyone what she was doing. "I had to write it from the outside in, not with an awareness of what people might want to read," she explains. "I didn't want it to become a parody of itself." Fielding had not felt that she had anything to say especially, but having started writing, she realised how much she did. And so the new, more bruised, Bridget Jones came to life: a born-again singleton re-entering the murky waters of looking for a man (the book's working title was *Born Again Virgin*).

In the years since she wrote *The Edge of Reason*, Fielding – who will say no more than that she is currently having a "very nice time" back in the dating game – has been collecting observations ("funny, stupid things that make me laugh") in her diary. Like the fact that there are 75 pages of self-help books on Amazon; like the expression "man-whore"; like the way modern parenting can sometimes resemble "a corporate exercise"; like the addictive, time-wasting opportunities of social media; like the fact that most modern dating is done over the internet. "The world today is an entirely different place to the world I wrote about all those years ago," Fielding whispers, wide-eyed. "It's almost overwhelming."

Albeit unwittingly, Fielding has become a spokesperson for modern womanhood. "In a way, she has been the best sort of girlfriend to every woman who has read and loved her books," says the actress Helena Bonham Carter. "She would always want to be seen as naturally poised and perfect and beautiful and sexy – and she is, all of those things – but she also makes it OK to be imperfect. Actually, it's better than that. She's like a human antidepressant – she makes imperfection a virtue. And, let's face it, it's much better to be liked than perfect."

Fielding and Bonham Carter, who first met in Los Angeles in the late Nineties when they were both, according to Bonham Carter, "sad, single, overworked Bridget Jones figures," had children of the same sexes at almost the same time and spend a

great deal of time together. "Only problem is, we are so happy together that we regularly forget that we are mothers and lose our children in the park," sighs Bonham Carter.

"Quite a lot of the book is about how hard motherhood can feel sometimes," Fielding admits. "Bridget wants parenting to be like an Italian fantasy – eating dinner under a tree while the children run happily around in the warm night air – but the reality is much harder. The thing she has to keep reminding herself is that she has at least kept them alive."

On Fielding's laptop are folder upon folder of topics and observations: "Texts", "Kids", "Nits", "Men Obsession", "Break-up", "Smugs", "Older Child Rearing", "List-making". "List-making!" she laughs. "Takes over my life. My diary is full of all these insane lists of Things To Do, not arranged in any sort of sensible priority: 'Respond to zombie apocalypse'; 'Why is fridge making that noise?'; 'Finish second draft of book'; 'Go to toilet'..." When she talks about her book (the reception of which she is "trying to stay Zen about") Fielding looks visibly happy. "I've really, really enjoyed this one," she admits. "Maybe it's because I'm older, or maybe it's because I'm a parent now. I can't sit and navel-gaze for hours on end because there's always a child that has got their foot stuck or something."

She still worries though. All the time. "The other day a woman came up to me and said that she hoped she looked as good as I do when she got to my age. I felt really pleased and then I thought, 'Hang on! How old does she think I am?'"

The topic she returns to, time and time again, is the precariousness of perfection. "Nobody's life is perfect and today, more than ever, I think women are under a huge pressure to be something, achieve something, look like something. We are all constantly constructing a façade. If there was one thing I could say to my younger self, it would be 'Stop worrying! It's all going to be fine.' But the irony is that I still do. And that's what I love about Bridget. Bridget is just an ordinary person, a flawed human being who muddles along and still, despite the blows, manages to find the lightness in life. 'Hurrah!' is what she says. It is all going to be all right."

I'm not sure that Helen Fielding – who is not Bridget Jones, you understand – should sell that house in Los Angeles any time soon. I have a feeling she's going to need a refuge from the hype all over again. ■

"Bridget Jones: Mad about the Boy" (Jonathan Cape, £19) is published on October 10