

Author set up a date with destiny

FIRST PERSON

Summertown author Zoe May, who recently landed her first major publishing deal for her romance novel *Perfect Match*, talks about what it takes to get yourself in print

I'm not sure which bad date it was that tipped me over the edge and made me put pen to paper. Maybe it was the guy I met on PlentyOfFish, who seemed like a great catch until he requested foot photographs to arouse himself with. His exact words were: "Take a short vid of them, babe. Twirl the soles around."

Or maybe it was the Hugh Grant-lookalike who seemed perfectly charming, until a Google search revealed he'd spent the best part of his 20s banged up in a cell for Ketamine dealing.

Or maybe it was the banker who kept referring to himself in third person or the journalist who burped in my mouth as he kissed me goodnight, or the 17th guy who lied about his height only to be five inches shorter in person (we do notice, boys).

At some point, I figured that although I may not be attracting my true love, if I'm a magnet for funny, cringe-worthily awful dating stories then maybe I should at least write about them?

Like me, the heroine of my novel has been on a ton of bad dates (all inspired by real life!) and her faith in romance is being chipped away with each one. Then one night, her flatmate, who doesn't want her to give up on love, persuades her to join a new dating site. After a few glasses of wine, they create a profile, although this time, Sophia, my heroine, decides to stop beating around the bush about what she's looking for and instead, advertises for her perfect guy: a multi-millionaire Robert-Pattinson lookalike with an amazing body, a swanky city



Author Zoe May

apartment and a cool job. The profile is just a bit of fun and Sophia never expects to find a guy who fits the bill, and so she can't believe it when a man gets in touch who seems to be her perfect man. Has she finally lucked out or is he not all he seems?

I've never created a dating profile like Sophia's but there is a lot of me in her character. For one thing, we're both copywriters who dreamed of being novelists.

The book, called *Perfect Match*, took me around a year-and-a-half to write. I finished the first draft in six weeks, but I struggled with the ending and took a break to reflect on the story. Eventually I came back to the novel,

rewrote sections, added in a few characters and completely changed the final chapters.

Writing a novel is not easy as it feels like such a leap of faith. When your friends are sharing Facebook snaps of them having a great time on holiday and you're sitting alone in your room writing, it can be hard not to wonder if you're just totally deluded and wasting your time. I had moments of self-doubt but I persevered and eventually finished *Perfect Match*, getting it to the point that I felt it was strong enough to send to agents and publishers.

I was rejected by quite a few agents and was beginning to lose hope when I saw a tweet

from HQ Digital – the digital imprint of HarperCollins – calling for submissions. I thought I'd give it a shot and soon after, I got a call and was offered a book deal. I couldn't believe it! I started crying in the middle of Costa! It truly was a dream come true.

Perfect Match is out now and it's doing well. Last month it was the third bestselling book in the iBooks chart and it's made it into the top 100 on Amazon. The experience of writing a novel taught me that dreams can come true as long as you stay focused and determined, and that sometimes, bad experiences, like terrible dates, can have a silver lining, even if you can't see it at the time!

From under-employed to being over-worked

In the difficult moments towards the end of my DPhil, a useful motivation was the prospect of getting my life back once unburdened of the albatross.

A stack of novels awaited. Bulbs needed planting. Perhaps a walking holiday. The possibility of full-time employment went from the impossible to the very unlikely.

I felt that the upside of underemployment and reduced academic commitments was time. Not thinking and writing about it – for that was the topic of my dissertation – but enjoying it.

Alas, leisure was fleeting. After submitting I went from a shocking hangover to preparing for tutorials the following Monday. The work has only increased.

The root of the problem was miraculously getting a proper job. Since being doctored, I have gone from holding a small college lectureship to gaining a full-time (though fixed-term) departmental position.

Put differently, from at times being unsure if I would ever get a DPhil, I now have responsibility for marking exams. I even supervise a few masters students.

QUAD TALK

Lecturer in political theory Alexander Ewing delights in spreading the word about Hobbes



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Of course I kept the college lectureship too, not wanting to break commitments. So having been under-employed, I am now over-employed. I am the political theory tutor at Hertford and Oriel.

And aside from teaching, the admin that comes with being an organising tutor can eat up hours on email.

Yet the most exhausting and daunting of all was that I had a month before my first of seven lectures, starting with Hobbes and ending with Rousseau.

Preparing the lectures almost killed me, but delivering them (apart from two due to strike action) has been an absolute pleasure. Without getting too misty-eyed about this, I must admit that spreading the Word of Hobbes and friends has been emotional.

Reading many of these authors at university changed my life, you see, triggering an intellectual great awakening at 18. Returning the favour has been great fun.

The lectures need to cover the basics, but allow for elaborations and diversions. Hobbes on hot air and Montesquieu's experiment with a frozen sheep's tongue being two of my

favourites. In fact, both are vital to understanding their respective theories on the state.

Still, given the workload, I must admit that it has been a challenge to keep my head above water – and everyone happy. A large headache is deciding where to eat lunch, not wanting anyone to miss my idle chat. Following my column from last month on returning 'home' to Oriel, a Hertford colleague called me a traitor.

I worry my Hertford students feel slighted too, as if my first-born were not enough. Meanwhile some Oriel students think I don't sufficiently revel in the accomplishments of the rowing team.

It has also been strange moving from 'client' to colleague in the politics department. I have a nagging anxiety that some are sceptical, but I'm slowly getting used to being on different terms.

Booze helps. During a recent post-conference drink in the pub, one of my new colleagues told me what he really thinks about these columns, for instance. At least he hired me first.