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Off-piste into the world of fiction

By Harriet Mills

A few years back I was at a drinks party with friends. We were conversing about the usual topics that crop up while the drinks party remains civilised. We spoke mainly of careers and everyone was doing well. Some were in advertising, others in marketing, others in sales. Some had completed degrees and others had gone straight into work, but all were doing well.

One conversation struck me. I was saying how I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write books. Fiction. Yes, I wanted to make up stories, write them down for the public to enjoy on a summer's holiday or a rainy Sunday afternoon.

I had only just finished my novel, *Dear Brannagh*, and was in the process of trying to get it published. I didn't know if I was going to make it as a writer or what people would think of my writing. All I knew was that I loved to write.

My friend's response will stay in my mind for ever and is a huge statement for working life. She said: "I would

happily halve my salary to love what I do." She who works and lives in London on a huge salary. She who doesn't have to think about spending. Budgeting doesn't cross her mind, yet she begrudges work every day. I wrote about this in a letter to *Writing Magazine* and this was the first thing that I had published in print.

While I still question whether I am pursuing a worthy career goal and whether or not I will be successful enough to make a living out of my words, I know that I love writing and how much it means to me. I think we all question ourselves sometimes, but I believe the main thing we must consider remains the same – happiness.

Dear Brannagh began in my Grandad's garden on my brand-new laptop with some detailed character profiles. I was just back from a trip to Dublin to see Ed Sheeran perform and while there I came up with the beginning of my debut novel. I saw a lady sitting on some steps with a striking facial expression. She could

have just been given the best news ever, or the very worst. My creative juices started to flow, and I simply couldn't stop. Especially as it was May and so I had all summer to write outside.

Every stage since has felt like a dream. The first time I held a copy of the book. The smell of it. Signing numerous copies off to happy buyers. It all felt surreal and truly thrilling.

Throughout university journalism was always at the forefront of my mind. I think it was because a degree in English Literature often leads on to a career in journalism, it was in the textbook. One thing I learnt from a young age is that I was so far away from the textbook of life!

I finished university and went travelling back when we could. I'm glad I did this because I met so many people, many in similar situations of feeling in limbo, all at varying stages of life. It was comforting to hear I wasn't on my own.

Tim Minchin's speech at his honorary graduation was inspirational. I used to listen to it every single morning before breakfast. One of the lessons is "don't rush". We all think life has time limits to certain goals. Married by twenty-five; with children by twenty-eight; a successful career by thirty. Minchin made it clear that this was not the case and the longer I live I am realising this too.

One thing I knew was that I had time. Time to travel, to be proud of all I had achieved, time to try out journalism and realise that it wasn't the career for me, time to write novels.

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I worked throughout all of this at a village stores in Moulton, Suffolk where I am now the manager. Occasionally people came in and asked me my plans for the future. I got pressure from a few saying that I couldn't leave university and continue to work there. London was the place to go. Interestingly, it wasn't until I said I wanted to be a writer, that the pressure turned into encouragement and the huge support remained from everyone else.

In fact, Moulton Stores has been huge in the first successes of my debut novel. *Dear Brannagh* was released on November 30th 2020 – lockdown number 2. No book shops were open while my publishers were trying to get the word out and they soon shut again after publication day. We encouraged locals to purchase a copy with their



Harriet with a copy of her debut novel

essential shopping and we have sold over 300 copies in the stores alone. The support I am continually receiving from the community is overwhelming and I will always be grateful.

Firstly, I wanted to get my dissertation published because I was proud of the idea and it felt unique. It was a piece of creative non-fiction and after about thirty submissions, an agent was interested. While nothing came of this project, I learnt so much through my emails with this agent. He threw so much industry jargon at me that I was forced to learn the meaning of some. I began to discover the publishing process. You can read all the books in the world, but sometimes real-life experience teaches you best. I also discovered how much quality material is out there and therefore how difficult it is to persuade agents that your work is for them.

While this was going on and commitments at work made me put off textbook career thoughts temporarily, I wrote *Dear Brannagh*. I stopped at fifty submissions with my Excel spreadsheet ready and waiting, each response given a colour. There was lots of red. There were hints of turquoise which was code for pending. There was no green. Austin Macauley was one of the turquoise and my manuscript was with the Board of Editors. In September 2018 I received a contract in the post. The excitement was huge. I couldn't believe that my book was going to be published.

Even with the turquoise, the encouraging feedback from many agents despite the decline and with a publishing deal, I was extremely nervous for publication day. Excited of course, but nervous too. Putting my

words out there, even though they are fictional, made me feel incredibly vulnerable. Not only did people assume that it was my life, but I also was nervous to hear opinions. I wasn't yet hardened for the negative stuff, but I've been very lucky and received extremely positive feedback so far.

Now more than ever we need an easy escape. To read about problems that aren't our own. To laugh, to cry, to gasp and to smile about the lighter aspects of life. I believe, and my readers have said to me, that *Dear Brannagh* provides just this.

■ *Dear Brannagh* is available at most book stores online and on Austin Macauley's website. It is also available in store at Moulton Stores. I continue to sign copies off to their new homes every day.



Dear Brannagh front cover