



Writing as a second career

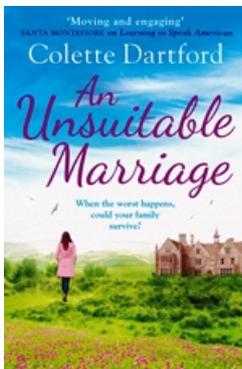
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A change of scenery spurred Colette Dartford to become a novelist



When I'm asked what I do and reply that I'm a writer, people tend to react in one of two ways. Either they tell me they're thinking of writing a book too, and proceed to describe it in detail, or they express surprised admiration because they understand that it's hard to write a book and even harder to get it published. The surprise goes up a notch when I confide that I was in my 50s before I even attempted to pen a novel, and without any background or training in creative writing.

For me, writing was a second career, and came after many years as a research consultant in the healthcare sector. This did involve writing, of course - mainly papers and reports for clients - but the style was factual and evidential. Writing fiction requires a very different skill set, and it wasn't until I moved from my home in Somerset to California's glorious Napa Valley that I even thought of writing a novel. Being surrounded by such physical beauty was the catalyst that spurred me to try my hand at creative writing. I wanted to celebrate the Napa Valley in words - bring it to life through language. I had always been a prolific reader, but this was the first time I thought maybe I could be a writer too. A story was forming in my head - taking shape and depth - and one day I simply sat down and started to write it. That story became my debut novel, *Learning To Speak American*, and paid homage to the abundant sunshine, verdant landscapes and warm, welcoming people of Northern California.



But writing as a career means producing more than one book, and once I had moved back to England, I distracted myself from pining for sunshine and vineyards by working on another novel, set in deepest Somerset. It was a leap of faith writing a second book while the first was still unpublished, but the story had been bubbling in my imagination ever since my children were at school, and it was a joy finally to have the time and skill to write it. Having two novels helped me get a contract with an agent. Even though he loved *Learning To Speak American*, he was concerned that it might be a one-off, but when he read a draft of *An Unsuitable Marriage*, and I outlined my ideas for a third and fourth novel, he could see I was serious about writing as a career.

Timing is everything - isn't that what they say? I don't think it was a coincidence that I waited until my 50s before I started to write. My children were grown up, and the terms of my American visa meant I wasn't allowed to work. I know many authors have families and full-time



jobs, and I admire them tremendously, but once I started to write I found it all-consuming. I knew I couldn't have squeezed it in between school runs or business meetings. There was also the matter of lived experience. I write about relationships in crisis - relationships between spouses, lovers, parents, children, siblings - and having a more mature perspective has definitely helped with that.

There are many trajectories that can lead an ambitious amateur to the Holy Grail of being a published author. For me, a Californian sojourn unlocked creative potential that I didn't know I possessed, and once I started writing, I didn't want to stop. So while I can't claim that I have always harboured a burning desire to be a novelist - such a thing seemed far beyond my talents - I can claim that it has been an exciting and extraordinary journey. As second careers go, I can't imagine a better one.

Colette Dartford's *An Unsuitable Marriage* is out today from Bonnier Zaffre.

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