

Love, literally

They are the women behind Britain's best selling romantic novels – but where did they learn their lessons in love and what tips do they have for the rest of us? Six authors spill the beans about their private lives

Interviews by Maria McCarthy



Back, from left: Queens of romance Judy Astley, Katie Fforde, Jojo Moyes, Jenny Colgan. Front, from left: Adele Parks, Lorelei Mathias

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Judy Astley
Judy, 56, is the author of *Every Good Girl and Size Matters*. She lives in London with her husband Jon, 55. They have two grown-up daughters

"I was quite wild in my youth. I liked musicians and I've never been out with a man who couldn't play guitar. My second serious boyfriend was called Paul – he was the bass player in a band and I thought it would be forever. But we went to colleges a long distance apart and conducting a relationship based on occasional visits and long conversations in coin-operated phone boxes just didn't work.

Then one day I was in the college bar and this gorgeous boy with long, blond, corkscrew hair walked in and it was lust at first sight. After about two weeks I knew he was The One. Jon and I got married after four years together, when I was 24. We had a register office wedding and

then a party back at his family home. I wore a green flowery Liberty print dress and he got thrown in the swimming pool.

How have we stayed together? I think the secret of a happy marriage is not to have too much in common. You need your own interests, rather than being tied together all the time. Good sex is also important – getting away to different venues such as hotels helps keep things lively. Attractive underwear is important too – it helps you feel good. At the last count I had about 150 knickers and bras. I like them to match! On a more practical note, I think it's vital to present a united front to the children – don't let them play you off against each other.

I've enjoyed reading romance since I was a teenager. Back then I loved Jane Austen but I preferred the bad boys like Willoughby and Wickham to the romantic heroes like Mr Darcy. If I'd lived in that time I'd have been like Lydia, eloping with a man everyone disapproved of.

My own books focus on family relationships as well as love, but I do enjoy creating attractive heroes. If I were to have a passionate fling with any of my fictional characters I'd choose Ed from *Laying the Ghost*. He is loosely based on James May from *Top Gear*, who I fancy madly."

Laying the Ghost by Judy Astley is published by Black Swan, price £6.99.

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Adele Parks
Adele, 38, is the author of *Playing Away* and *The Other Woman's Shoes*. She lives in Surrey with her husband Jim, 36, and son Conrad, seven

"I went to a comprehensive in the North East, where dating started pretty early. But when I was 12 I developed a massive crush on Prince Andrew and decided to keep myself pure for him. By the time I'd given up on that I was 15 and quite swotty. I had to wait until university before my love life took off – I reinvented myself, got very flirty and had a great time.

After graduating I worked in advertising, which was a very fun, hectic environment. I had flings but I was always a romantic at heart – I was the sort of girl who'd wake up the next morning and decide she was in love.

When I met my first husband and got married at 25 I believed we'd be together forever – I even had plans for our 50th anniversary. We were married for six years and had a child but we grew apart as we grew up and he fell in love with someone else. I was devastated. I lost weight, lost my confidence and didn't want to go out. I'd become a romantic novelist by that point and was on my fourth book, and yet I was questioning my ability to write about love, given that my own love life was such a mess.

Then a girlfriend arranged her birthday party at a salsa club and insisted that I go along. One of the other groups there included Jim – we got dancing and really clicked. He's ridiculously good-looking so I instantly assumed he'd be unbearable. But he turned out to be gorgeous, charming, witty and caring. Our relationship became serious very quickly and we married in Las Vegas four years ago.

Our meeting was so totally by chance that it really revived my belief in love and fate. When I went out that night the very last thing on my mind was meeting anyone – and yet there he was."

Young Wives' Tales by Adele Parks is published by Penguin, price £6.99.



Katie Fforde
Katie, 55, is the author of *Restoring Grace* and *Practically Perfect*. She lives in Gloucestershire with her husband Desmond, 61. They have three grown-up children

"I attended an all-girls school, so finding boyfriends was quite hard work initially. But then I went to work as a secretary and joined the Young Conservatives – after that, I had a different boyfriend every week. None of them were serious, I was just enjoying dating. I was a huge fan of Georgette Heyer and modelled my behaviour on her characters. I think I was looking for one of her heroes – someone a bit older and more worldly than me.

I met Desmond at 18, the relationship quickly blossomed and we married at 19. Desmond was in

the Merchant Navy so I travelled the world in container ships and got used to being stuck in the cabin while he worked. It was quite boring at times, but I took up embroidery and read a lot.

When I first began writing I tried to get published by Mills & Boon. I wrote eight novels for them, all of which were rejected. Desmond was wonderful though – he worked so hard that I didn't have to worry about money. But I've now written 14 best-selling novels, so thankfully his faith in me has paid off.

We've been married for 35 years and we've both changed so much. I can only say our success is down to luck, in that we've both grown in the same direction, but my top tip for a happy marriage is not to stop flirting with each other. I feel it's important to be nice to your husband and not get all bossy and controlling and criticise him for minor stuff.

I also think it's important to say you love each other every day. It's easy to say it in the beginning but if you stop there might come a time when you both find it too difficult. I also think it's important to say sorry even if it's not your fault, because someone's got to do it and it might break the deadlock."

Going Dutch by Katie Fforde is published by Arrow, price £6.99



Jojo Moyes
Jojo, 38, is the author of *Sheltering Rain* and *The Peacock Emporium*. She lives in Essex with her husband Charles, 44, and their children Saskia, 10, Harry, seven, and Lachlan, three

"My love life got off to a rather uninspiring start. I was mad about horses till about 16 and I was skinny with no boobs or bum. My first kiss was outside a kebab shop. We went out together for six weeks and he dumped me on Valentine's Day. At 17 I got engaged to a car mechanic who was lovely and built me a pink Mini as a romantic gesture, but the relationship fizzled out eventually.

After university I worked as a journalist for 10 years and developed a pattern of falling for damaged men. One of my friends

once said, 'You're a bit of an ambulance chaser, aren't you?' It took me years to work out that I was wasting my time on people who were incapable of looking after themselves, let alone me.

I met Charles through work – I was effectively his boss. I liked him and fancied him, but he had a girlfriend. We went out for a drink and there was a real vibe, but I told him nothing could happen because he was attached. He left the girlfriend and weeks later we were living together. We had our daughter within two years and married when she was five months old.

We've had our ups and downs, but 12 years on we're very happy. I think that kindness and affection are underrated virtues. It's wonderful to let go of the need for drama in relationships – it liberates so much energy.

I try to avoid advising other people on their love lives, but if they insist I'll tell them straight: if he doesn't phone it's because he's not interested, and if he "sees you as a friend" then it's not going to happen. The only reason I know the answers is because I made so many mistakes in the past!"

Silver Bay by Jojo Moyes is published by Hodder & Stoughton, price £6.99.

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Lorelei Mathias
Lorelei, 27, works as an advertising copywriter in London. Her debut novel was *Step On It, Cupid* and her latest is *Lost for Words*

"I've been single for five months and I'm loving it. It's exciting to know that I've not yet had my last first kiss, and I've got a gaggle of single friends who compare notes with on disastrous dates. That provides loads of raw material for my books.

Chick-lit gets a lot of criticism but I believe it has worthwhile messages – such as don't settle. If you're in a relationship that you're not totally sure about, don't be scared of ending it – you'll meet the right person eventually. I also think the books are valuable in that they inspire us to demand more from our own real-life Darcys; and they remind us what it feels like to fall in love during periods in our lives when we might have forgotten.



Jenny Colgan
Jenny, 36, is the author of *Amanda's Wedding* and *Working Wonders*. She lives in France with her husband Andrew, 42, and their children Wallace, two, and Michael-Francis, six months

"Although I write romantic novels, I want to avoid propagating the myth of the perfect man. My male characters are often flawed, although there are some flaws I really do think are unacceptable, like meanness. I once went out with a man for two years who didn't even buy me a birthday card. Thank goodness your self-esteem improves as you get older.

When I turned 30 I went on holiday to Miami with some girlfriends and we were invited to a party on a huge yacht. I spotted this tall, handsome guy mixing perfect Margaritas

behind the bar. He turned out to be Andrew, the boat's chief engineer, and really quickly, what I'd thought would just be a holiday romance turned into much, much more.

Andrew was such an inconvenient person to fall in love with. He was from New Zealand, worked all over the world, and on the surface it didn't look like we had much in common. But I went home, packed up my stuff and flew straight back to Miami to be with him. Looking back it sounds like a moment of romantic madness, but at the time it made perfect sense.

He's so not what I imagined as the perfect man – he reads about two books a year, hates parties and didn't even finish school. But he's a real man, great fun, a wonderful cook, he built his own house and once stitched up his own hand when he cut it open at sea. More importantly, while our interests are different, our deep-seated beliefs about life, work and family are very similar.

When something is right, you know straight away. You don't have to analyse text messages, or wait for him to call. I do believe that, in the end, real love can be remarkably hassle-free."

Operation Sunshine by Jenny Colgan is published by Little, Brown Books, price £10.99.

Writing about love as my own love life unfolds also gives me the opportunity to examine my approach. For example, in my first book, *Step on it, Cupid*, the heroine Amelie goes speed-dating. That helped me explore the question: do you let love happen or do you go out looking for it?

At the moment meeting men isn't a problem, it's just a case of meeting the right one – I'm very picky. I am a romantic though, so I wouldn't go up to a random guy in a bar and just give him my number, although I might try to catch his eye and say, 'Hi'. When you're too forward there's always a chance they'll see you as a bit odd or bunny-boiling. Also, I'm not into Googling men or checking them out on Facebook before first

dates – that takes away the mystery and the romantic potential of finding out about each other gradually.

My ideal man would be someone creative, inspiring and funny with a lust for life, but also someone grounded, who I can imagine settling down and having a family with – what my friends and I call a 'manageable kook'. But I won't panic if I don't meet my kook immediately. I see being young and single in London as a really fun, enjoyable time in my life and I don't want to rush it. Plus, what would I write about?"

Lost for Words by Lorelei Mathias is published by Little Black Dress, price £3.99. For all titles, see *Express Bookshop*, page 98.