

# “Self-publishing is your showcase”



 Jenny Colgan talks to Eleanor Norford

*Discussing, among other things, baking and why all writers should pay for proof reading*

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**W**hat's the secret of a good novel and how do you get it published?

Produce a story with which people can identify – and in some cases – a happy ending. But getting it published is not so easy, as budgets are constantly being cut in the big publishing houses resulting in less first-time deals being offered. This is another reason why budding writers should self-publish to get noticed.

“Writers need to showcase their work,” says best-selling author, Jenny Colgan, who tried many

avenues of work before becoming a writer. To date she has penned nearly 20 novels from romantic comedy fiction, winning the Romantic Novel of the Year award in 2013, to sci-fi including writing for the *Dr Who* line of stories. She mostly writes under her own name, but also uses the pseudonyms Jane Beaton and J. T. Colgan.

Her novels sell. Chick-lit they may be, but her books strike a chord because they have an intrinsic sense of reality – acknowledging that life is messy. Her plots are built around real-life scenarios with all the good and bad traits of human nature rearing up in

equal measure. As well as being a good writer, Jenny knows how to interact with her audience, taking a unique approach of including delicious baking recipes in her books. Why? She wanted to share her culinary skills and show that baking can be fun.

Among the most popular of her novels is *Little Beach Street Bakery*, set in Cornwall, which tells the tale of a woman who loses everything before finding her bliss (baking), love (Huckle) and Neil the puffin. It also contains some great baking recipes. Sharing recipes might be an unusual way to connect with readers, but it works. Many of her

fans send her pictures of their efforts. With the second book in the series, *Summer At Little Beach Street Bakery*, recently published, will there be a third adventure for the book's heroine, Polly?

"Yes, I hope so. I'd like to see what they all get up to in the wintertime, plus I love Neil," admits Jenny, who talks to me about her love of fiction, what self-publishing can do for novices and finding her bliss...

**Tell us about your previous jobs, which include NHS trust worker, comedienne and cartoonist before becoming a writer.**

I left college and got a job in a hospital, but always wanted to be doing something more creative. I always thought of myself as a comedienne if you like, someone who did funny stuff, so I tried stand up. It was so hard and I didn't really have the performance skills.



## Budding writers should self-publish to get noticed...

That is a polite way of saying I was awful.

After that came cartooning, sketch writing, then I wrote a novel. Before becoming an author I tried everything creative I could think of and – like anyone else – I heard no, no, no a lot. Finally somebody said yes to my first novel.

**Your first book, *Amanda's Wedding*, was published in 2001, was it hard to get that first book deal?**

Funnily enough it wasn't that hard by the time I got to that point. It was quite straightforward because I'd already failed everywhere else and learned an awful lot. Where I've had a lot of luck is when my career went through a bit of a lull my publishers really stood by me and said no, don't worry, this is going to be fine, and it was. I've been very lucky with my publishers.

***Amanda's Wedding* later sold as film rights. Are there any more film option deals in the pipeline?**

I currently have something with a film company but you just never know. My friend Jojo Moyes is currently on set for the film of *Me Before You*, and I am so jealous; she is having the most awesome time. It's definitely a massive ambition.

***Little Beach Street Bakery* is perhaps one of your most popular novels; where did the story idea come from and did it involve much research?**

I spent my childhood holidays in Cornwall and really loved it there, so the idea came from that. I was always carried away by the romanticism of St Michael's Mount, that tidal island where you can get stranded, so it was a joy to set a novel there.

**How do you craft your characters – how did Polly in *Little Beach Street Bakery* evolve?**

Polly is based on those kind, capable women you see and wish you could be a bit like, or at least I do. I have a friend who will have twins and then toss a cheesecake together while looking unfazed and I'm so impressed with her all the time. Personally I'm a bit of a walking disaster area so I like capable women who take their choices into their own hands.

I absolutely love writing dialogue, I could write it all day, that's just my favourite bit of the process. I think characters come alive then. I don't really like reading descriptive passages, so I don't put many in myself. My editors always have to nudge me to write physical descriptions.

**What inspired you to put recipes in some of your novels?**

I moved to France when I had children and you have to learn to cook there – everybody does. Plus as I had three children under five, I never left the house. So I'd potter about the kitchen and basically learned how to do it. Then I thought it might be fun to



share what I'd learned, and some really simple recipes.

If you don't like recipes you can ignore them, but if you do, well, it's really fun to see what people make – they often send me pictures. And to realise that a lemon cake or a basic loaf of bread isn't really that hard.

**How did a sequel to *Little Beach Street Bakery* come about?**

I just like being in that world, if that makes sense. I like going down to Cornwall and hanging out with Polly and Neil and Huckle and Reuben. It's a very sunny mental space for me to be in.

**What appeals to you about writing series?**

I just get very attached to the characters, and enjoy seeing what happens in their lives after 'happy ever after'. Plus I really enjoy creating the locations.

Tell me about life as writer – do you work to a daily word count?

Of course, all professional writers do. Mine is 2,500, more or less. But it was 1,000 for years. I just got more efficient when I started having children.

**What three things have contributed to your success?**

I have fantastic agents, a fantastic publisher, I hit my deadlines and I try my absolute hardest not to be up myself. Which is four things, but all-important I feel.

**What are your thoughts on self-publishing?**

It gives you a chance to get your work out there, of course. It's also a good place for books that maybe mix up genres or aren't easily categorisable.

**Do you think it gives novice authors an opportunity to**

**showcase their work?**

Absolutely, but you'd have to be a stronger person than me not to push work to market that isn't ready. Pay for editing and listen to it, and pay for copy-editing too. Someone once sent me a link to their self-published book. It sounded interesting, I went and had a look and there was a big fat spelling error in the blurb.

Make sure any self-published work is edited to within an inch of its life; you won't regret it later, I promise. What would really worry me is if you were a writer full of promise and self-published something too early with errors in it that needed another pass, then if an agent was interested in you later, they might find it on Google and could change their minds when they read it. That to me

**Self-publishing is good for books that mix genres or aren't easily categorisable...**



Jenny Colgan lives mostly in France with her husband Andrew and their three children. For more details about her books, life and recipes visit <http://www.jennycolgan.com>

would be heartbreaking. Nothing on the Internet ever goes away.

### Your advice to budding writers hoping to make a living would be?

Write as much as you can. Don't limit yourself. Don't think you 'can't' write a particular thing – who knows until you try? If you get a commission, don't pepper the editor with questions and worries, just get it done, on time, and turn in the cleanest draft you can. And pitch, pitch, pitch; don't wait for people to ask.

Even now I pitch to people, constantly, to the point of irritation on their part and get knocked back all the time. It's just

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a part of the job. Don't take it personally – pitch and pitch again.

### Can you give our readers a preview of your next book?

It's called *Resistance is Futile*; it's a romantic comedy with a sci-fi twist, about a woman who discovers alien intelligence then accidentally falls in love with it. It's funny, sad, and perfect for fans of *Doctor Who*, *Bridget Jones*, *Independence Day* and *Splash*.

## Jenny Colgan's top 5 tips

- 1) Don't take the people working on your books for granted. They make the biggest difference.
- 2) Your editor is always right.
- 3) Make hay when the sun shines and say yes to everything.
- 4) Make friends with other writers; they're fantastic support and great fun.
- 5) Nobody thinks you're a special writer at home.



## women's novel competition 2015

'It will be worth your while to walk on strange streets.'

from *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande

## 1st prize £5,000

The winner and four other finalists will receive manuscript feedback from The Literary Consultancy and an invitation to a special networking event with literary agents

Closing date: 21 September 2015

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Di Speirs (Books Editor, BBC Radio &  
Music Production)

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