



EVESHAM FESTIVAL OF WORDS: 30 June - 2 July, 2017

Prue's tasty new challenge

PRUE Leith is having the time of her life, with a TV blockbuster on the cards for her latest novels and a new husband on her arm. Evesham's 2017 Festival of Words headline speaker tells Lynne Powell why life is bliss.

PRUE Leith's smorgasbord of captivating careers is really enough to satisfy the hungriest of people. But, at 76, the restaurateur, caterer, cook, newspaper columnist, businesswoman, charity champion, TV star and now popular romantic fiction writer is eager for another challenge.

Prue has just published the second book in her Food of Love trilogy, which has been optioned for a TV series by Stephen Fry's company Sprout with Parallel Films.

If it comes off, and Prue's not counting her chickens, it will be the icing on the cake: "If it works - I'm nothing if not a dreamer - I could try to become a screenwriter, which would give me a new lease of life," she beams.

Most of us know Prue as the Michelin-starred (for Leith's) culinary queen with a vast larder of cookery books and newspaper columns, a string of food-related charities, plus Leith's School of Food and Wine and her Chef's Academy in South Africa, where she was born.

But actually, the lady who was awarded an OBE in 1989 and a CBE in 2010, hasn't

published a recipe in more than two decades, after ditching food writing to become an author of fiction, much to the alarm of her publishers.

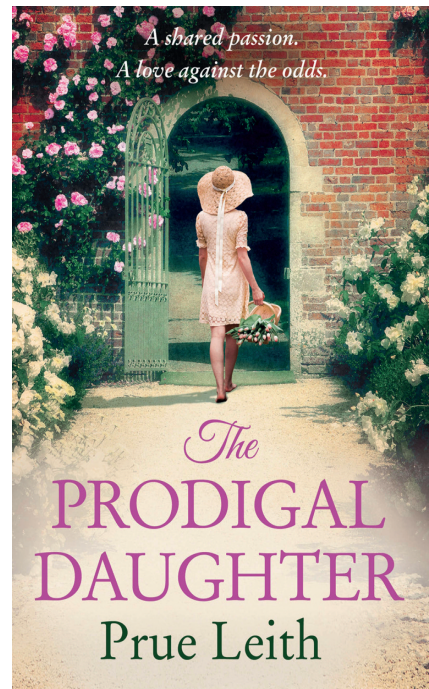
"It didn't feel brave at all," insists Prue, whose first novel - *Leaving Patrick* - was picked up by Penguin. Her latest - *The Prodigal Daughter* - has just been published by Quercus (£19.99, hardback).

"I'd been writing about food for a very long time and I was very conscious that I had become stale. Plus there were so many new cooks coming on, who were also wonderful writers and I needed to clear the decks to write a novel."

Her first book draft was savaged by her editor, but Prue, gulped, listened, honed and produced a winner, and a trail of successes thereafter.

Trouble is, people still see her in a metaphoric chef's hat. So Prue set up her website www.prue-leith.com to "persuade the world that I'm not a cook or restaurateur anymore, but now a full-time novelist."

But her expensive tome *Leith's Cookery Bible*, written with UK school partner



Caroline Waldegrave, is still selling like hot cakes and she still gets more website requests for advice on cooking than how to write fiction.

Moreover journalists like me can't resist asking her about the *Great British Bake Off*

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expert, a journalist, opens a pub, launches a catering business and does themed parties.

"My editor advised I drop a couple, saying no-one could possibly do all of that. I said it IS possible - I did it!"

The best advice she offers to an aspiring novelist is, well... to write.

"I despair of people who say they'll write when they retire or have time. Writing is like a disease - you just have to do it," says Prue, who first got the fiction bug writing children's stories when her two were nippers.

"Often when I finish a book, even though I enjoyed doing it, I think never again! Then after about three weeks, you get that itch and it's something you've just got to scratch."

And the pleasure well outweighs the pain. Prue says getting her first novel published gave her a bigger thrill than getting that Michelin star, CBE or the Businesswoman of the Year accolade.

"They were wonderful, but they are team awards and I wouldn't have got them without the people around me," she explains.

"Writing is all my own work and you never forget that amazing feeling of holding your first book in your hand."

◀ Happy times for Prue. Photo by JP Mascler

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furore, although, to be fair that is relevant as she's a star on two hot food TV shows herself - BBC 2's *Great British Menu* and the just-launched *My Kitchen Rules UK* on GBBO's new home, Channel 4.

"I'm not quite sure why I do television. I guess it's just ego, although it's fun too.

"It is quite nice when people recognise me in the supermarket," admits Prue, who tells a cracking tale of the taxi driver who recognised her as that food lady off the telly and then proceeded to rubbish her football team Norwich.

"Being mistaken for Delia is fine by me. I'm a great fan!"

And *Bake Off*? Well Prue's only seen one episode, Nadia's crowning final, but, says the 1990 Veuve Clicquot Businesswoman of the Year, business is business.

"Love Productions is a commercial company with a very valuable asset for which they've been offered more money. Why wouldn't they move?"

With big ticks for all of her own career shifts, Prue is a pretty happy lady... even happier now. She got wed again last month, after finding love for the third time in her life - and it has also rekindled her love for cooking.

"I've never cooked for two before and it's made me a lot more imaginative," says Prue, who's more used to catering for large numbers.

"John tells everyone I feed him leftovers. He says I just open the fridge, look at what's in it and invent something. He is good enough to add that it's always delicious and

he's never had the same dish twice." Her life, I say, sounds pretty darned perfect. She agrees: "I do feel extremely lucky. If the sword of Damocles came down today and that was the end, I'd think it's a fair cop because I have had such a nice life."

Could anything make it better, other than a big fat TV mini series? Well she and her new husband John Playfair, six years her junior, have a plan.

Currently the couple have separate houses two miles apart, near Moreton-in-Marsh. Their dream is to build a new home together, a project that will be led by hands-on John, who has already built the couple's five grandchildren a fabulous adventure playground.

"It will be great fun," says Prue, "although I tease him that we'll have to have my bungalow on one side, his on the other and the carers in the middle!"

* Book your tickets now at eveshamfestivalofwords.org for an evening with Prue Leith on June 30.

The write move

PRUE Leith will have plenty of tips for would-be novelists at Evesham's Festival of Words and top of the Do Not list is definitely don't start with a trilogy.

"I hadn't grasped, although my publishers did warn me, how difficult that is," she sighs.

"For a start, you have to kill off characters to make way for new ones and every book must stand on its own merit as well as part of three.

"You have to have an enormous timeline to ensure that you know where each character is at any point and map it against world events... otherwise you just get into a fantastic muddle."

Prue also has a huge file on every character's physical features, actions and foibles for her *Food of Love* treble, which stretches from WW2 to now.

"It's a logistical nightmare, but I like that because I'm quite organised."

When she's in full flow Prue usually writes for four hours in the morning, when she's at her most creative, and edits in the afternoon. "At the beginning I'm absolutely hopeless and do the odd bit when I feel like it.

"Then, as the deadline approaches and things get more desperate, I work out how many writing hours I need to finish the thing, put a big chart on the fridge door and no-one's allowed anywhere near me," adds Prue, who's been known to start tip-tapping away at 4am when the heat's on.

She heartily recommends being a member of a writing group to get your work critiqued, a good editor when it's time and a thick skin when they start slashing.

"My editors have been terrific, but they have to be fairly brutal. You have to fight the resentment when you see they've marked 25 things wrong and that's just on page one. They know what they're talking about.

"I am pretty obedient, but no editor expects you to obey her absolutely.

"In *The Prodigal Daughter*, for example, my heroine starts at cookery school and goes

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