



'IN THE SPOTLIGHT'

Each month we put a different person 'in the spotlight' and pose 12 wide-ranging questions to them. This month, we feature **Helen Yendall**, who's a member of the Festival Steering Group. Helen runs our Twitter feed and leads the Festival Book Group.

1. Tell us an interesting fact about yourself that not many people know.

I was once the Warwick Poet Laureate. It was a fun year, in which I was commissioned to write poems. I also hosted an Open Mic poetry event and gave talks to various groups. It was a great experience and opened lots of doors for me.

2. What book made most impact on you as a child?

Not a book but a series! Like many youngsters, I was horse-mad and my favourite books were Ruby Ferguson's 'Jill' pony books. I galloped through them and loved them so much that I re-read them as an adult. They were just as good as I remembered.

3. What is your favourite film, and why?

'Dirty Dancing'. I love everything about it: the coming-of-age story, the music, dancing, romance, Patrick Swayze...! It's the only film I've ever watched more than a couple of times. My only regret is that I've never seen it at the cinema.

4. What are your main hobbies/interests, apart from reading, of course?

Writing and blogging (I blog at: www.blogaboutwriting.wordpress.com) I also enjoy swimming, playing tennis and walking the dog.

5. What would be the three things you would like to have if you were stranded on a desert island?

Obviously, she's not a 'thing' but I'd like to have my cocker spaniel, Bonnie with me. She'd keep me company on forays around the island (and might bark if she spotted a rescue ship on the horizon). I'd also like an inexhaustible supply of notepads and pens, so I could write and, as I can't function without regular cups of tea, perhaps a kettle and a few teabags?

6. What would a look at your bookshelves tell us about you?

That one of my favourite authors is Sarah Waters. I have all 6 of her novels on my bookshelf but otherwise, I tend not to keep books once I've read them because there's just not enough room in the house! (And, unless I really love a book or I'm reading it for one of my two book clubs, I don't re-read). I have stacks of books on my 'TBR' (to be read) pile because I can't resist buying books. I just wish I had more time to read them all.

7. If you could invite any three people, dead or alive, to a dinner party, who would they be, and why?

I like dinner parties, as long as they're informal and I can make something straightforward, well in advance. Top of my guest list would be Graeme Hall, 'The Dogfather'. I'm a big fan of his TV series and I've just finished reading his book 'All Dogs Great and Small' which is full of wise words about dog training. I'm sure he'd have lots of great tales to tell about dogs – and people – he's met. And then - again because I enjoy watching them on TV (and we're planning a kitchen extension, so I'd love their advice!), I'd have Phil and Kirsty from 'Love It



Or List It' and 'Location, Location, Location'. They'd be good company, I think and we'd have a laugh over dinner.

8. What kind of music do you like, and is there one favourite soundtrack?

I used to be a big music fan but as the years have gone on, strangely, I seem to listen to less and less. In my car, rather than listen to the radio or a CD, I play an audiobook now or, sometimes, I want silence so that I can think. But if I do play an album, it's likely to be Adele's '21'. I turn it up and sing along. I love every track on that album.

9. What are your favourite charities/good causes, and why?

The Warwickshire-based children's charity 'The Friendship Project' has a special place in my heart. They match carefully-vetted adult volunteers with disadvantaged children. I was a 'buddy' to a young boy, for outings at weekends, for several years and it was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. Later, I worked for the charity, recruiting and looking after volunteers in the Stratford area.

I also think 'Hearing Dogs' is a fabulous charity. Many deaf people suffer from isolation and depression and the difference a hearing dog can make to their lives is incredible.

10. Who is the person who has influenced you most/you most admire?

My mum has influenced my love of reading – and later, of writing – the most. She took me to join the library when I was two and taught me to read before I went to school. In her eighties now, she's still an avid reader.

11. What is your connection to Evesham?

I live in the North Cotswolds, just a 20-minute drive from Evesham and when Sue Ablett set up the Festival of Words in its present form, I badgered her with a list of workshops and events I could offer! She agreed to the Book Quiz, which my friend Chris Cherry and I ran at Raphael's restaurant, as a Festival 'opener' for a few years before Covid stopped us in our tracks (but we'll be back!). I've been a member of the Steering Group for a few years now, so, in normal times, I come to Evesham regularly.

12. What would you list as your greatest achievement to date?

I'm not sure that they count as 'great achievements' but I am proud of a couple of things I've done lately. I managed to run 3 writing groups, a 'coffee & chat' session for seniors and a book club on Zoom throughout lockdown. Many of the attendees lived alone and told me that the meetings had been a 'life line'.

And I've also, finally, finished a novel - a saga set in WW2 - which is due to be published in January 2022.