



Sky's the limit: 'To have a chance to do something completely different and creative has helped me so much,' says Fern

'Botox? I'm either going to look odd or I'm going to look old, and I'd prefer to be the woman I should be'

I can see years of happiness ahead!

It's all-change for Fern Britton. She's excited about a new career, celebrating her new fitness by cycling across the nation and waving her children off to uni. And, as she tells GH, she wouldn't have it any other way...

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN SWANNELL INTERVIEW MOYA SARNER

You hear Fern Britton before you see her: gossiping with the make-up artist, playing around with the props and hooting with laughter as the photographer teases her at the GH cover shoot. After some very public tough times, she's clearly a woman who is comfortable with who she is - and who she is is changing. Fern is doing less television work, focusing on her novels and getting stuck into eye-watering charity feats to raise money for a cause that has become important to her. She talked to GH about learning to let go, not worrying about wrinkles and following up her roles in journalism, TV and fiction writing with yet another surprising career change...

You look so confident and full of energy - do you feel at home on a shoot like this?

You remember those no make-up selfies? Well, I rarely have make-up on when I'm at home. I'm at the Co-op, on the school run or walking in the woods with Phil and the dog - that's real life. And Phil is a very handsome

man, but at home he might walk around in his pants without having shaved for a few days. I'm not in the club of people who care about these things - I just don't care. Then I come on a shoot like this, and it's beautifully lit. John is a fantastic photographer, I had two hours in hair and make-up, and I'm styled to the enth-degree... It's just fun, it's make-believe - dressing up and having a jolly nice time. I can turn it on, but mostly it's turned off, and that's fine.

So focusing on how you look isn't top of your to-do list?

I am vain about being as fit as I can be, but not about my wrinkles. My bosoms are dropping? Blah - that's life! I've had that conversation with myself - should I do Botox, should I do this, should I do that - and I've talked myself out of it. I'm either going to look odd or I'm going to look old, and I'd prefer to be the woman I should be. I'm 57 and I look like a 57 year old, and I'm happy.

I see my contemporaries and they're changing all the time: noses, lips and eyes. And I think, well, you've chosen that route and that's fine - I won't judge you for it. But

don't judge me for preferring this route.

Is it frustrating to face these sorts of choices, simply because you're a woman?

You have people like the wonderful John Humphrys, who is bright, funny, and has so much energy, and he's working hard all the time. But if he was a woman with a little bit of grey hair and wrinkles, he wouldn't be on the telly. And what a loss that would be. My little girl, she's particularly feminist... I'm bringing up the next generation, and they are on it, especially the boys, who are getting it from the girls at university. They understand it. In recent history, it's not men who have put this pressure on us, it's women doing it to ourselves. I just think: stop it, stop it! Give us a break!

Writing must be a brilliant escape from all that - it's just you and your words...

I find writing liberating - I can let loose, and if I don't like a character, I can decide to sort him out! The seed of the idea for my new book, *A Good Catch*, came from an old story I heard on a cycling trip in Sri Lanka, about a prince who had an illegitimate son and then had to [CONTINUED OVER PAGE]



FERN WEARS JACKET: SOMERSET BY ALICE TEMPERLEY; TROUSERS: TFC LONDON.COM; EARRINGS: PEBBLE LONDON; RING: H STERN

New chapter: 'Writing is so liberating – if I don't like a character, I can sort him out!' says Fern



'I feel like I've been pruned and I'm sprouting again!'

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] marry another woman and have a legal prince and heir, and what happened to the two boys. It's a very violent story, so I got a bit violent in my story, too – it's a bit darker than my previous books. There were days when I'd write something that was quite awful, and I'd really enjoy it, all the gruesomeness!

Do you already know what you'll write next?

I'm turning over an idea in my head, just playing around with it... I really want to continue writing. I've been on the nursery slopes – learning, being shown how to do it by my editor. She's very good at encouraging you to push yourself. You have to sit down and write even when you don't want to – I want to drink coffee, I want to eat biscuits, I want to empty the cupboard under the stairs – anything other than write!

How has writing changed things for you?

It's very exciting! I was trained to be a stage manager, then in a newsroom for years and then presenting... Then I hit my mid-50s, and it changed again! To have got to this stage in my life, and to be given a chance to do something completely different and creative, has helped me so much. I feel like I've been pruned and I'm sprouting again! And it's improved my imagination, too.

In what way has writing helped you?

Recently, I was feeling very low, and I was lying in bed in the middle of the night with all these repetitive thoughts, whirling round my head. I wasn't dreaming, but suddenly I saw my brain open – like an oyster shell, but with no oyster inside. So I went in with my toothbrush and special brain cleaning fluid and I cleaned it all out, all the unhappiness and negativity that was churning away, until it was spotless, and then I shut it again. Then I saw a big cupboard in front of me, and it was so full it almost tipped on top of me – so I chucked everything out. And when I'd finished, I could see the floor, sides and top

of the cupboard, and it was empty. So, I put some hooks up, and under each hook

I wrote the names of all the people

I love most, and then I closed the door. It was very powerful

for me. We all carry baggage,

memories and thoughts,

but the next day, it felt

like the road ahead of

me was clear.

You've spoken before about your experiences of depression. How are you these days?

I haven't had an episode for a long time. I'm cross that it's been there and that it lurks around, but I've started to understand it more. I reached a stage where I knew when it was coming, and I thought: don't run away, just brace yourself and let it happen. Because I knew it would pass. People who are going through their first or second episode don't

trust that it will pass – but it really will.

This will pass – is that something you felt when your sons went to university, too?

Oh yes. One minute they're born, and it's mess and noise and love and bedtime stories, then driving tests and exams – and then, they're gone! It really hit me. But then I thought, hang on, parenting is about getting them to be individuals, and they are. This isn't a personal attack, they've just gone on to live their lives. Now I've relaxed about that, I can sit back and wallow in the splendour of what they're doing and how, magically, they're feeding themselves and doing their own laundry!

They never ask you?

One of my sons actually said to me, please don't do it, I'll do my own!

Do you worry how they'll manage the challenges facing young people?

They're so independent, they've really got everything covered. They understand finances, that we're doing what we can to get them through university without having a huge debt, and they know at the end there's a little bit of money to keep them going. But I think they can stand on their own two feet. Of course, if there's a big problem, I will do what I can, but this isn't the world I grew up in – I bought my first house in 1981, when I was 23, for £15,000! The world has changed, and if that means we're moving to a society where everyone rents, as they do in much of Europe, then I

shouldn't fret about it. I've always been freelance, so I know how scary that is – and yet something always turns up. And if it doesn't, you pull your finger out and do something about it. Is it the worst thing in the world if you don't own your own home? It probably won't be, because you'll be in the majority. You have to cut your cloth, and they're good at that.

Your nest is getting emptier... are you looking forward to it just being you and Phil?

Yes! My elder daughter is going this Autumn, and then we've got four or five years before my younger daughter leaves school and goes to university, or does whatever she wants to do. After that, it'll just be Phil and me – we can just wake up in the morning and say, let's go to Venice for the weekend! Let's drive down to the South of France! It's going to be such a wonderful, happy freedom, back to who we used to be, in a way, while watching our four successful, happy children. Well, that's the plan!

It's your 15th anniversary on 24 May – how will you be celebrating?

Well, this year I also turn 57, so I came up with the idea for Challenge 57 – I'm going to cycle from John O'Groats to Land's End for the Genesis Research Trust. It's around 57 miles a day for 21 days. Big boys do it in about 10 days, but we're all women of a certain age, so we're going to stop and take photographs and have an adventure! Phil is

going to join me for the last few days, and we finish on 21 May, so I expect we'll celebrate our anniversary by lying in a hot bath with a glass of Champagne!

Has your idea of romance changed?

Yes – for me it's when Phil brings me a cup of tea every morning in bed, which is the best thing! Once you get past the hearts and flowers, it's so easy to throw away a perfectly good relationship, just because it's changed. But you could think: now we're over that, we've got years of happiness ahead of us. Phil and I have a really, really good relationship – every day we tell each other we love each other – and there are also times when we would cheerfully bash each other as well! He's a really good person: he works hard, he's very creative. He's been a very good father and stepfather, and partner to me. He's the only person who's always been right in my corner. On the day we married – and nobody knew we were getting married then apart from the registrar – he told me, in the car, I will never let you down. That was a vow. And he never has. We've had our moments – it wouldn't be normal if we hadn't – but we're very solid. He's the person I want to spend my time with.

So what does the future hold?

Well, I've got a contract to write two more books – and then, I don't know! I might retrain to be a midwife... I'd love that. ◻
A Good Catch (£12.99, HarperCollins) is out on 23 April.

'MY FAVOURITE PLACE IN THE WORLD!'

All four of Fern's novels are set in Cornwall. Just what is it about the place that inspires her?

'It's just the most magical place. When I was little we would arrive for our holidays and suddenly I was allowed all this freedom. I'd run on the beach and paddle and jump into rock pools and go crabbing. And of course all the fish and chips and 99 ice creams! I love the drive, too. I'll be driving West, following the sun all the way, and then suddenly, when I'm a mile or two away, I'll open the windows and I can smell the sea air. When the kids were little, they'd be in the back of the car and I'd say, "Get your pointy fingers ready, first one to see the sea!" And one of my sons would always reply, "I'm sharpening mine, Mummy!" I love Cornwall and I love the Cornish people. The place holds such happy memories for me.'



Fern's six Cornish favourites...

- 1** Treyarnon Beach near Padstow (pictured) is beautiful. There's a little youth hostel up there with tables outside. I like to pop in for breakfast and enjoy the million-dollar view.
- 2** Bodmin Moor. I love a good brisk walk up to the Hurlers, a beautiful group of stone circles.
- 3** The St Kew Inn on the edge of Bodmin serves delicious food and has a lovely big open log fire.
- 4** Padstow boat trips offer a perfect way to see the bay. It's great value at around £6 for a quarter of an hour trip.
- 5** Newquay Zoo is brilliant for kids, as is the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, by the village of Gweek.
- 6** Bodmin Steam Railway – you can have a cup of tea, then have a chug on the train and come back again!