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Bridget Jones from the Airport**Helen Fielding on Tour with Bridget Jones**

by Elizabeth Michaelson

*Number of bestsellers written 2 (v. good)
number of people asking for my opinions hundreds (am clearly voice of wisdom)
number of suitcase mishaps 2 (so far) ...A possible entry to Bridget Jones' American diary.*

Since her self-titled debut in *Bridget Jones' Diary*, readers on both sides of the Atlantic have been enthralled by the adventures of London's most famous singleton. In the sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, our erstwhile heroine is in a functional relationship with an adult male—but can it last? As Bridget's mum might say, "Durr!"



Helen Fielding
Photo © Piers Fletcher

"I started off the tour picking up the wrong suitcase at the airport. I was supposed to be on TV first thing in the morning, and all I had was this man's clothes!"

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Bridget's capacity for self-analysis ("feel marvelous, rather like Posh Spice or similar

radiant newlywed posing with sucked-in cheeks and lipgloss while everyone imagines her in bed with David Beckham"), longing ("rude thoughts about Prince William 22, no. of times wrote 'Prince William and his lovely date Miss Bridget Jones at Ascot' on Hello! magazine 7") and self-delusion ("can definitely lose 3 lbs. before tomorrow using hospital frankfurter diet...frankfurters 12") remains unabated. Hurrah!

—Helen Fielding

Bridget's alter ego, novelist Helen Fielding, is in America to promote her bestseller. Just off the plane in Houston, she chats from her cell phone as she is whisked off to her hotel.

Suitcase Full of Men's Clothes

One might be forgiven for mistaking Fielding for her character: she's easy to talk to and, er, prone to accidents. While struggling with her seatbelt, Fielding explains: "I just came out the airport, and as I came towards the automatic doors, they closed on my suitcase!" This is no isolated incident, either: "I started off the tour picking up the wrong suitcase at the airport. I was supposed to be on TV first thing in the morning, and all I had was this man's clothes!"

Bridget is a star, even "the spirit of the age," according to one reviewer. One of the corollaries of Fielding's success is the flood of imitators her novel has spawned. Does she get tired of watching others trail her to the bestseller list? She demurs: "I like it very much when they put a blurb on the cover." She intones, "This is the gay, teenage, non-smoking Bridget Jones"... I find that very flattering." Does Fielding ever tire of Bridget?



**"Bridget Jones:
The Edge of
Reason"**

**"I like it very
much when
they put a
blurb on the
cover," says**

"The only time I really hated Bridget was one year she got thirteen Valentines and

I only got one," Fielding says judiciously. "It was horrible. But usually I'm quite fond of her. I'd been trying to be a writer for a very long time, so I'd have to be quite spoilt to not think this was great."

As for being identified with her hapless heroine, who doesn't know where Germany is, the Oxford-educated Fielding is equivocal. "The good thing

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**cover," says
Fielding of the
Bridget Jones
imitators.**

**"This is the
gay, teenage,
non-smoking**

***Bridget
Jones'... I find***

**that very
flattering."**

about being Bridget is that if something does go wrong, like I get the wrong suitcase, people just laugh," she explains. "So it's not like I'm promoting a self-help book. That would be embarrassing!" She giggles: "It'd probably be banned!"

empathy. One of the novels' most affecting—and recognizable—features is Bridget's reliance on magazines for her concept of happiness. When Bridget sighs: "Attracted yet massively undermined by *Vogue* world of Christmas. Realize own fashion look and gift ideas outdated and ought to be cycling, wearing slippy Dosa petticoat with eiderdown on top and puppy slung over shoulder, posing at parties with prepubescent model daughter," the reader relates. Bridget's credulity is part of the novel's humor, but her faith in advertising also satirizes the media's manipulation of women's expectations. Fielding agrees: "It's central to why people relate to her: I think we don't realize how affected we are by adverts. Everyone has this idea that they're supposed to be the girl in the twenty-four-hour mascara, the anorexic teenage model who runs from the gym to the board meeting, then home to be with her husband and kids.

"Bridget thinks she's going to end up with Brad Pitt loading the dishwasher, naked, feeding her ice cream," says Fielding. "But in a relationship, you have to let the other person know who you are, and not pretend to be something out of an advertisement. I think that's why a lot of people like Bridget: because she's not a superwoman."

Fielding may deny that she's a superwoman, but so far she's had two successful careers. She grew up in the northern city of Leeds, and, after college, worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation in Bristol. "Initially, I worked on a light, end-of-the-day current affairs program. That was quite funny because it was an agricultural area, so you were constantly ending up with a flock of sheep in the studio and a farmer's wife who'd had her hair done. They'd wait 'til the show was on the air and then say, 'Sorry, Helen, we're dropping you!' So you're left with sheep and a hairdo'd, distraught farmer's wife."

In the late 1980s, Fielding went to Africa to make a series of documentaries, an experience which inspired her first novel, *Cause Celeb*. As television's charms waned, "I thought I'd try to get into newspapers. Changing careers wasn't easy, which is one of the reasons why it's so great now, though it wasn't the way I was expecting it to happen," Fielding admits. Her perseverance paid off and eventually she started writing for the *Sunday Times*, the doyenne of all Sunday papers.

When *The Independent* newspaper asked her to write a regular column about her life, Fielding instead suggested writing as a character from a sitcom she'd been attempting to develop. Soon readers were devouring excerpts from Jones's "diary."

Bridget's trademark literary style—e.g. her aversion to accepted grammar in the form of complete

sentences—actually started as an effort to outfox her editors. "They always make you cut your copy down to 950 words so I did it by cutting out words rather than whole paragraphs," she reveals. "Also [the satirical magazine] *Private Eye* ran this column called something like 'Self Obsession', where they counted the number of times columnists put the word 'I' in their columns. So I decided, 'I'll never put 'I', and then I'll never be in that column.'"

From her first appearance, Bridget's voice—authentic, if full of gags—fooled some readers. "I did the Thai episode [where Bridget ends up in a Thai jail, the stooge of a drug runner she meets on holiday] when it was a column. And we actually got a call from the government, saying, 'Look here, we're doing a lot to get this girl out!' I think," Fielding adds helpfully, "That was before some people realized she wasn't a real person." Fielding expanded the columns into a novel, and, a contemporary Cinderella, the *Diary*'s paperback edition was a huge hit. Fielding sold the film rights, and now Bridget's the subject of a biopic.

Dealing with a Fat-Free, Nonsmoking LA

Since the announcement that the beautiful Renee Zellweger (*One True Thing*) will play Bridget, speculation on which actor will fill Mark Darcy's wing tips has been rampant. Fielding pines for the Mr. Darcy nearest to Bridget's heart: "I hope it'll be Colin Firth." Firth, of course, played a different Mr. Darcy in the BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice*. The actor

"People are so healthy in L.A.; if you ask to light a cigarette it's like you've asked to urinate on someone!"

—Fielding

himself makes a guest appearance in *The Edge of Reason*. "It would be very postmodern," Fielding observes.

As befits a celebrity, Fielding now spends half of her time in Los Angeles, where the lifestyle is a constant source of amusement: "It's fantastic! If you order anything that's the slightest bit fattening they say, 'You know that contains dairy,' as if you ordered polar bear!" But L.A. residents are no more immune to Bridget's charms than people in cities with fewer personal trainers: "The book did very well in L.A., though I thought it wouldn't. But it just shows you, it's like an antidote to asceticism." She sniggers,

"People are so healthy in L.A. If you ask if you can light a cigarette, it's like you've asked to urinate on someone!"

Despite her exhausting schedule, Fielding has found the time to make notes for a new novel: "I'm not sure what form the new novel will take. I was going to start writing, but I can't really help myself, especially in L.A., it's so hilarious." Her next novel will not feature her celebrated diarist, but Fielding hasn't ruled out another sequel. As her car pulls up to the hotel, there is a sudden silence. "I just found out our hotel is connected to a shop," Fielding announces, awed. Is she in Texas? Another pause. Then, doubtfully: "I think so; we're in Houston." As she says goodbye, she breathes, "It's so great: we're going to be staying in a shop." Which sounded very Bridget-like, in the best possible way.

Elizabeth Michaelson graduated from Barnard College in '96 and City University, London's journalism program in '99. She is a reporter for a weekly paper and lives in New York City.