

SALLY ON SALLY...



I was born in Birmingham, near the Cadbury's chocolate factory, though I grew up in Gray's Inn, central London, in Raymond Buildings. My family (my parents, my younger brother and I) lived there because both my parents were lawyers. When I was around age five they separated and later divorced. Both were to be very happily re-married.

I was badly bullied at school because I was different from other children. I had trouble tying my shoes, and coordinating my clothes, and I had no idea what C-A-T spelled once the teacher took away the picture. My brain was said to be a sieve rather than a sponge - I was the child who lost the information rather than retained it.



I stayed in kindergarten until I was really too old to be there and finally was asked to leave the school. This became a pattern that repeated itself throughout my learning years. At eleven I was told I was word-blind. This was before anyone mentioned the un-sayable, un-teachable, un-spellable word dyslexia, which, hey-ho, even to this day I can't spell!

I eventually ended up in a school for maladjusted children because there was no other school that would take me. I suppose this was the equivalent of what now would be a school for kids with ASBOs.

I had been classified as "unteachable" but at the age of fourteen, when everyone had given up hope, I learned to read. The first book I read was *Wuthering Heights* and after that no one could stop me. My mother, bless her cotton socks, said that if I got five O-levels I could go to art school, and much to my teachers' chagrin, I did just that. At art school I shot from the bottom to the top like a little rocket.

I left Central St. Martin's Art School with a First Class Honours degree and then went to Newcastle University Theatre, where I worked as a theatre designer. One of the first shows I worked on was *The Good Woman of Szechuan* by Bertolt Brecht which transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. After that I spent 15 years in the theatre, but gave up working as a set designer because I found my dyslexia to be a problem when drawing up technical plans for the sets. Instead I concentrated on costumes.

Ironically, when I went into publishing, where I assumed my dyslexia would be a true disability, it turned out to be the start of something amazing. I was more than blessed to meet an editor, Judith Elliot, who was to play an important part in my journey to being a writer. She is still my editor today and a great friend.

I strongly believe that dyslexia is like a Rubik's Cube: it takes time to work out how to deal with it but once you do, it can be the most wonderful gift. The problem with dyslexia for many young people - and I can identify with this - is that their confidence is so damaged by the negativity of their teachers and their peers that it takes a very strong character to come out of the educational system smiling.

Sally Gardner answers some questions

Who's your favourite author and favourite book? Great Expectations by Charles Dickens, Holes by Louis Sachar and The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame.

Where do you get your ideas? From everything and everywhere. I feel like I have a satellite dish on my head. But I have to think about them a long time before they form properly. What's the first book you remember reading? Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë.

Where and how do you write? I use my Apple G4 laptop and have been writing in the pub whilst I've had builders in the house. I will also have a studio in the garden when it's finished!

Who is your favourite literary character? Paddington Bear.

Do you have any children? I have grown-up children: two daughters, Freya and Lydia, and one son, Dominic.

Do you have any pets? I have a sausage dog, Oscar, with diminished legs, but a large heart! I also have two huge cats: Woody is a bully and Pushka is more than a hundred years old.

Describe yourself in three words. I've been described as a giant fairy.

What is your favourite food? Chocolate raisins.

What music do you like? I have eclectic taste: classical, jazz and Maroon 5.

Did you always want to be an author – if not, what did you want to be when you were little? I always wanted to illustrate children's books and I always told stories, but I honestly never thought it would be possible to write because of my dyslexia.

What do you do when you are not writing – what are your hobbies? Walking Oscar, visiting galleries, going to exhibitions and watching films.

Do you have a favourite country or place in the world? I love Paris, and I love France.

What three things would you take if you were to be stranded on a desert island? A mermaid tail, so that I could swim away, pink dye for my hair and a great frock!

What would you rescue from your house if it was on fire? My children, my animals and my laptop.

Any writing tips for budding young novelists? Story is king. Keep telling a good story.

What writers have the greatest influence on your work? Angela Carter and Charles Dickens. Raymond Carver. Meg Rosoff. The Brothers Grimm. Philip Pullman. Eve Ibbotson. And my hero, Edward Gory.