

Facts and fictions of an author's life

By Catherine Elelman

"EVEN if I'd never had my work published, I would still keep on writing".

Easy to say when you're a highly successful author with a string of best-selling novels to your name and you're signed up to one of the most respected publishers in the UK.

But there is no doubting that Freda Lightfoot is absolutely genuine. This petite, pretty woman exudes an absolute passion for expressing her stories, experiences and ideas on paper, and the fact that thousands of readers adore her work appears to be nothing more than a pleasant bonus.

In common with many well-known writers, Freda's literary success came after a career in a different field and raising a family. But she knew she wanted to be a writer even as a small child growing up in Lancashire.

"I loved books and I always had stories in my head. Teachers would tell me off in class for day-dreaming or for talking to my friends, but I would just be telling them my stories", she said.

When as a teenager Freda expressed an interest in joining the local newspaper as a cub reporter, her family and school talked her out of entering what in the 1950s was considered a rather risky profession.

"You'll spend your life making cups of tea", she was told. Instead, she was encouraged to become a primary school teacher.

Freda first began to take her writing seriously when she was at home full-time and bored

soon her work was appearing in annuals and guides and brownie magazines.

Her attempts to break into the adult market took rather more persistence, but as Freda tells budding authors, if you really want to write then you have to be prepared for knock-backs and just keep on trying.



Freda's Spanish house.

"I had a lot of rejections, but I have a stubborn streak", she said. Eventually, her work began to be accepted by the likes of *My Weekly* and the *Peoples' Friend* magazines.

"At that time I would write anything to get published", Freda said. "But it was also a period when I was finding out just what I could write, a time when I was finding my voice." Freda's preferred genre, she

discovered, is historical sagas with a romantic thread.

She approached world-famous publishers Mills and Boon and had her submissions rejected three times. But Freda took on board M&B's suggestions on structure and characterisation and was finally rewarded with the publication of five of her books.

When she began to find the Mills and Boon plot formula requirements restricting, she decided the time had come to try her luck at breaking into the mainstream market.

She sent the first three chapters of a novel based in the Lake District to Hodder and Stoughton. It was accepted immediately and, in 1993, *Luckpenny Land* was published.

Thirteen novels later, with a publishing deal to produce two books a year, she and her husband have just made the picturesque mountain village of Bédar in Almería their permanent base. It is a move which Freda describes as the reward for her literary success.

Freda and David will continue making regular trips to the UK for book launches and talks, but also for Freda to research her new novels.

She sets her novels against the background of a small quirk of 20th century social history. She has, for example, written

about the timber girls, an often forgotten branch of the Lancashire army during the second world war, while her latest book, *Ruby McBride*, takes the Manchester Ship Canal as its central theme.

Freda's books are inspired not only by her own working class roots and memories, but also by the first-hand recollections of ordinary people. Freda said that drawing on oral histories is not only fascinating, it is fundamental to her work, often providing the ideas for characters around which she weaves her story lines.

Her books are character rather than plot-driven, she told me. "Often, I don't have all the answers before I start, but I let the book grow like knitting by putting a character into a situation and imagining how they would cope with it. I think it's a good thing if I don't know the end before I start, because there's a good chance my readers won't guess the end either".

I wondered if Freda ever felt the pressure of producing two fresh books a year. Wasn't there the danger of running short of inspiration, or even going on to automatic pilot and simply churning out what the market demands.

Far from it, Freda told me. "I have so many ideas, the only problem is finding the time to use them all."