

*What's your favourite thing about being a writer?*

Inventing people and places I can escape with and to. Being able to lose myself in another world, and being able to take readers to that place.

*Who is your favourite fictional hero? And your favourite heroine?*

Favourite fictional hero? Mr Darcy, of course, and my own Tom Cuthbert. Favourite fictional heroines include Cassandra Mortmain (*I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith), Olivia Curtis (*Invitation to the Waltz* by Rosamond Lehmann), the unnamed narrator in *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, and Bessy (*The Observations* by Jane Harris).

*Which song would be the soundtrack to your life?*

I'm not sure... perhaps Giacomo Puccini's aria 'O mio babbino caro', from *Gianni Schicchi*. I love the version sung by Angela Gheorghiu.

*What is your TV guilty pleasure?*

I'm quite boring when it comes to TV, because I don't watch a great deal of it. But I like *Masterchef*...and usually anything with costumes!

*Describe your dream dinner party line-up.*

How many am I allowed to have? I'd have to summon a few of the dead... Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, Jane Digby, Marie Antoinette, Pablo Picasso and Elvis Presley. And the living: Paul McCartney, Salman Rushdie, Mick Jagger, Tracey Emin and Diana Athill. (Oh, and maybe we could squeeze Colin Firth in at the end of the table, aka Mr Darcy.)

*What's your biggest indulgence?*

Books!

*What is your earliest memory?*

Clouds. Staring up at them.

*What were your aspirations when you were a teenager?*

To write.

*What keeps you awake at night?*

Plots, and the voices of my characters.

*Do you have any phobias?*

Spiders, mice, and sometimes the dark.

*Where are your favourite places in the world?*

My home in Hampshire; Rome, and almost anywhere in rural Italy; and the Grenadines (see below).

*Describe your perfect weekend.*

In winter, hanging out with friends and family, long walks and log fires; in summer, being able to sit in my garden with a good book is pretty perfect to me.

*Describe your perfect holiday.*

Anywhere in the Grenadines. I love the heat, the laid back attitude, and being able to sit on a beach with a rum punch and watch the sun go down.

*If you could take only three essentials with you to a desert island what would they be?*

*The Complete Works of Charles Dickens, a tin of Vaseline and my iPod.*

*What's your favourite time of year?*

I love every season...but if I have to pick one, probably spring, because of the light.

*What has been your greatest achievement?*

Bringing two very decent kind people into this world.

*What would be your specialist subject on Mastermind?*

Hmm. I think I'm quite unbeatable at Farrow & Ball paint colours. Friends defer to me all the time on paint colours...especially the many and varied shades of white.

*What could you never leave the house without?*

I leave the house all the time without anything!

*What's your most prized possession?*

I don't have one, as such, but I treasure some of the models and artwork my kids made when they were young, and their photographs. And I have a few crystals that are extraordinarily beautiful and precious to me. Those are the things I'd grab in a fire (after my husband and children!).

*What's your motto for life?*

Laugh as much as you breathe and love as long as you live.