

# Q&A with Allison Pearson

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***I Don't How She Does It* started a global conversation about working mothers. What kinds of conversations do you hope *How Hard Can It Be?* will spark?**

I really hope it will give people confidence to discuss and call out ageism. Why do men on TV get to be grey-haired and important while women the same age suddenly 'disappear'? The book says that middle-aged women like Kate are absolutely amazing. If you've brought up kids and run a home while organising your husband, looking out for your friends and taking care of elderly parents, then, quite frankly, holding down a job is a piece of cake. I want there to be more appreciation of what a huge asset women with life experience can be, both in the workplace and in society as a whole.

Also, and equally important, I want us to have a national conversation about how tough it is parenting kids in the age of social media. Like so many kids, Kate's daughter suffers from anxiety after online humiliation. There is an epidemic of depression and self-harm among our teenagers. I'd love *How Hard Can It Be?* to get that issue the prominence it deserves.

**You write about Kate's menopausal struggles so well. Why did you choose to highlight this particular issue?**

Amazingly, no novel before has had menopause as a subject. It's treated as this totally hidden and mortifying thing, even though half the population will go through it. I laughed out loud when I saw Whoopi Goldberg on TV and she said,

'Nobody tells you about the balding pudenda'. So true. Balding pubes and a beard growing on your own chin are a big surprise!

I had a really tough menopause myself, although I didn't understand what was happening to me. I felt exhausted all the time, I kept forgetting things and I lost a lot of confidence. I even developed a fear of escalators! When I was writing the novel, I found out that huge numbers of menopausal British women are prescribed anti-depressants incorrectly. They're not depressed, they're hormonal. Doctors hardly study the menopause at all in their medical training, which is crazy. I wanted to break open the taboo that surrounds what our grandmothers called, The Change. Why should we be embarrassed about it? Women need information and support, not silence. I tried to write the menopause scenes as truthfully as possible – including the horrible bloody accident Kate has at work. I thought, I'll be the Quentin Tarantino of menopause! The good news is, if you use Hormone Replacement Therapy, which saved my life, then you can have a wonderful time after menopause and feel like your old self again. That's a story worth telling.

**A lot of readers have related to Kate's experiences in this book. How many of Kate's experiences in this novel are also your own?**

I certainly had a lot of the menopausal symptoms which Kate has and I also drew on the experiences of my friends. Two girlfriends told me they were lying about their age at work because their colleagues were young enough to be their children. They were scared they'd be fired or lose respect if people knew they were over 50. Another friend gave up work to take care of her three children. When she tried to resume her career, she was told by a dreadful headhunter that she had

'nothing of interest to offer' an employer. I was so upset and angry for her that I put that patronising bastard straight into the book! I found out about Women Returners groups, which help women to get back into the workplace, and I decided to make that part of the novel.

Kate's teenagers in the book are rather different characters from my two, although I borrowed some of the conversations we've had, and the text messages. The worries I have about my daughter and son living their lives through social media, which can be a pretty brutal place, definitely colour the book. Every mum I know is worried about the same thing.

The huge importance of female friends as you get older – that's certainly drawn from my own life – and the love and joy you get from owning a dog!

**Kate is pretty much a national treasure – is this the end of the road for you and Kate, or will we be lucky enough to see her again in the future?**

Every time I finish writing a novel, I'm so shattered I always say, 'Never again!' But readers seem to really like catching up with Kate at this very different stage in her life. I think people love knowing that they're not alone, that other women are going through the same stresses and strains. Several have already said they'd love to see how Kate copes with being a grandmother, so that's definitely a possibility, although my daughter says she's not planning on babies for a good few years. So I'll have to wait.