

My Story

Many of us may have craved the time to sit down and write the novel that has always been bubbling away within, and lockdown provided exactly that opportunity. For Essex Life contributor Chris Penhall, publishing her debut novel was a childhood ambition realised. Here she tells her story of literary success



When my novel, *The House That Alice Built*, won the Choc Lit Search for a Star competition in 2019, I was finally within reach of achieving my childhood ambition of becoming a published author.

It had taken quite a while to get there. Growing up, our house was full of books my parents had borrowed from the library and I still remember the excitement of receiving books such as *What Katy Did* and *Little Women* as gifts as a little girl. I can't remember not wanting to be a writer because I loved reading so very much.

It was when I lived in Cascais in Portugal, in the mid 1990s with my daughters and late husband, that I tried to write. Something about the change in environment and the beauty of the place inspired me, and I wrote a short story and a novel. I even tried my hand at a screenplay, which I entered in a competition. None of these were any good at all, but looking back, at least I managed to finish them. My time in Portugal also eventually became the background to my book. *The House That Alice Built* is a sunny, summer read set in the very country that got me writing in the first place.

When we moved back to the UK, life changed quite dramatically. I was a widow with two young children, and that was my focus for a while. I wrote for a few magazines, including *Essex Life* magazine, and started to work in local BBC radio. I also joined the Jibba Jabba Pods team as an associate producer of the Richard and Judy Book Club podcast, so I began to chat to authors regularly. One of the questions I used to ask was if they

had any tips for aspiring writers. I think I hoped one of them would say something like, you stand in the garden in the light of a full moon, turn around three times saying, 'I am an author' and that would do it. But none of them did. Basically, in one way or another, their advice was just to write and work hard at it.

So when I finally started to write *The House That Alice Built*, about nine years ago, that is exactly what I did. When I got stuck on the plot, I took an online romantic fiction course, and the tutor helped me to form the characters properly and develop the storyline more. I began to send the manuscript out to agents and got a lot of very kindly written rejections.

Then one day, along with the rejection itself, I got something positive. The note said that I definitely had something worth continuing with and I should develop it. That encouragement was so important as I was almost ready to give up, but instead I contacted a literary consultancy and invested in a mentor. With her help I restructured the story and sent it off once again. This time I also entered a competition, run by independent women's fiction publisher, Choc Lit.

I was at work when I checked my home emails last year. Honestly, my heart sank when I saw the word 'submissions' as I fully expected the normal, 'It's not you, it's us,' note. But this time it wasn't. I was so surprised that I looked over at my colleague and yelled something along the lines of, 'Oh my god!'

In May 2019 I was told *The House That Alice Built* was going to be published, and not only that, I had a three-book deal. My

life as an author had started.

There's been lots of happy skipping around since that day. I've had the genuine thrill of seeing my novel as an e-book and listening to it as an audio book, too, and from May I will have a copy of the paperback. I can't wait and it will be going on my bookshelf in pride of place. I'm busy working on the sequel, which will be out later in the year, and have the idea for the third novel firmly in my mind.

I have realised that there is a huge amount of support out there for writers, whether you are published or not. Whether it is through writing groups, online support groups, online courses or book groups, these all bring you close to other people who love the same thing you do, and that can make your ambition feel more achievable than if you are sitting alone at home struggling with an idea or a manuscript.

So my advice as a published author has nothing to do with the light of a full moon or turning around three times. Instead I would say, connect to this lovely, friendly community and see where it takes you.

I write because I love it and now I'm living my dream. The morale of my story is to never give up. ♦

The House That Alice Built is available on e-book, audio book and now paperback too. Visit chrispenhall.co.uk or rubyfiction.com for more information

