Finding the extraordinary in daily life

Barnsley author Milly Johnson will soon release her 22nd novel. She tells John Blow how it was inspired by menopause, wills and life's other big changes.

DAVID CHARLES

BESTSELLER: Barnsley author Milly Johnson has written 23 novels and her work has been published in 20 countries.

MILLY Johnson was once enjoying herself at a do when she received a "Barnsley compliment", says the author.

"A lady came up to the front and lifted her glasses up and went, 'Oooh, aren't you ordinary?'"

Not everyone's idea of high praise, but Johnson, 61, was quite happy with it.

"I absolutely get what she meant. She just meant, you're one of us," says the writer. "It was nice. And yes, I am. I'm very ordinary and I write about ordinary women, and the extraordinary things that happen within ordinary life."

She has done extraordinarily well out of it too. Later this month, Johnson releases *Same Time Next Week*, her 22nd novel (she finished her 23rd the night before we spoke, in case you thought she was slacking). Millions of copies of Johnson's work have been sold throughout the world, having been published in more than 20 countries, and she has just got her first American deal.

"I never get tired of it, to be honest with you," says Johnson, referring to the upcoming release over a video call. "I mean it's a bit like pumping out about five kids and thinking, oh, I'm not excited about this one. It's just the same."

This book focuses on Amanda, who is fed up with her company managing women but asked to produce a report about supporting staff through menopause. She sets up a discussion group at the local diner – where she is quite taken with the Texan owner – and meets Sky, Mel, Erin and Astrid. The book is about female friendships as the women face marriage breakdowns, bereavements, caring duties and health problems.

Johnson says: "Luckily for me, I'm quite good at keying into things that I think, well, nobody's talking about this, but I think it's going to be a hot topic."

Menopause is one which she knew would become a bigger talking point but, she says, "it went the other way and it became 'yeah, let's let the menopause define women – it's a superpower'. Trust me, it's absolutely not."

She adds: "I think it's more serious now, because years ago, women had their babies earlier. These days, they're having them later and their parents are living longer. So when they're going through this phase in their life, they've still probably got kids at home and they've got elderly parents they're looking after. So not only have they got more duties, but also the menopause is battering them at the most vulnerable time in their life. I wanted to write this book, but not just about the menopause – because there are some people that go through it, fly through it – but at this age, you are losing people. 'We've lost a few friends in our 50s' and you start to get a different mindset. You start to think, God, I'm in this job, and I never did that, that I wanted to do, and it feels like there's a clock ticking. So it's not just about *the* change, it's about change as well."

Another thing she didn't see people writing about was wills – as in last will and testament.

While promoting her last book, Johnson was telling someone about the themes of this novel and one woman started laughing when she overheard. She told Johnson that "'me and my sister didn't speak for 20-odd years over my mother's table cloth'. At the time of wills, people's greed really ramps up," says Johnson.

Johnson was born and raised in Barnsley and spent four years at the University of Exeter studying Drama and Education. Later, after 13 years living in Haworth, she returned to live in her South Yorkshire hometown.

After 15 years of trying and being knocked back by publishers, her first book, *The Yorkshire Pudding Club*, came out in 2007, when the author was in her 40s. There were times when she did not believe her dream would come true, but thought: "I need to die an author."

Her success came after working numerous jobs she did not like, and some she did – including that of a professional joke writer (readers might remember the Purple Ronnie greetings cards, which some of Johnson's poems accompanied).

She was influenced by Catherine Cookson, a northern writer who was also in her 40s when first published, and Barnsley's own Barry Hines, the writer of *A Kestrel for a Knave*, which was adapted to become the Ken Loach film *Kes*.

And she does not appear to struggle for inspiration. Since her first novel was published, Johnson has released pretty much a book a year, and sometimes more.

"My stories start off very simple. Before you know it, I've got enough weaves and threads to make myself an Axminster Carpet. But I like that, because life is a rich tapestry," she says. "However perfect Instagram lives are, behind every closed door, everybody has got a trauma, everyone is going through something, everyone has got problems with the kids or is just bowled down with work, or is struggling."

When it comes to social media, writers now give readers unprecedented levels of access to their lives, which is a double-edged sword for Johnson, 61.

"When you're really busy and someone on Facebook says, 'Milly, I'm coming to Barnsley, can you let us know where the best fish and chip shops are?' I think, I haven't got time." But she adds: "Not every author is comfortable with that level of interaction. I am, and it's worked very, very well for me because the people of Barnsley and Yorkshire, the wider spread of people, have kind of lifted me up on their shoulders. They've claimed me as one of their own and they have bought my books, and they've sent them out to their friends."

Same Time Next Week is published on February 27 by Simon & Schuster UK, priced £16.99.

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