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**W**HEN I WAS WORKING ON my first novel, *The Book of Summers*, I felt as if I had a key to a secret garden. It was a gloriously personal project, and it was always a treat to spend time with it. I carried a notebook with me wherever I went, and during the working week I'd spend my lunchtimes away from the office tucked in a cafe, edging the story ever forward — and, inevitably, sometimes backwards. I'd always loved reading, but now my trips to bookshops had a quality of professionalism about them; every book I bought felt like the acquisition of assets: it was no longer simply about enjoyment, but about what I could learn too — and, for me, that intensified the pleasure. For the first time in my life I took to going for days out on my own: a trip to a literary festival to hear an agent talk, or a research trip to wander the residential streets of North Oxford (a location I later changed, but still...), and I relished the empowerment and freedom.

I saw writing as a profession more or less from the off: I hadn't yet spent enough time around writers to know that it was a rare few who made their living solely from their books; I was realistic enough not to harbour delusions, but I was also purposeful. In deciding to write a novel I felt like I was taking charge of my destiny; I felt like I had ownership of a creative, fulfilled, and imaginative life. Several novels down the line, though the rest holds, the idea of autonomy feels naive. In reflecting on how writing changes the writer, I realise I've drifted into how being published changes the writer: a Freudian slip.



Bernard Shaw said youth was wasted on the young; maybe first novels are wasted on those who write them. I don't mean publication, I mean the *before*: before anyone has decided it's a 'debut'; the private process, all the writing life up to that first moment of submitting to an agent or an editor. I know that writing my first novel was almost entirely a pleasure. I know that I had extraordinary self-belief. I know I found the act of committing to something fulfilling in itself. And yet I still look back on this version of me and I want to say *did you appreciate it all enough?* Because everything felt possible then.

I've had four novels published. I'm working on a fifth. In a lot of ways I'm a very lucky author. But what I consider to be possible is, now, influenced by experience. Being published is no longer a dream, but the way I make my living — and with that comes certain realities, pressures and concerns that just didn't enter my thinking before. But there's still enough of the 'first novel me' left inside, to keep me keeping on. To believe that it could all be so beautiful.