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New Dawn

Losing her mum at a young age shaped Dawn O'Porter's life. Now the TV presenter has written her first novel for teens, celebrating female friendship and edited a book in aid of breast cancer

BY RUTH WALKER

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Dawn O'Porter is squealing so loudly down the phone, I have to lower the volume lest the entire office start earwiggling on our conversation's delicate subject matter. It's all boobs and bums and sex with this woman. At least that's the impression you could get.

"Dawn Porter sleeps with hundreds of men!" she squeaks loudly. If I didn't know better, I'd think the writer and broadcaster

was shocked. But it takes rather a lot to faze her. For a long time she was the go-to girl for editors or TV producers who required someone to investigate free love, for instance, or get the latest Hollywood treatment (a vagacial, as it happens – it doesn't take a massive amount of imagination to work it out). She 'went gay' for one production and, for another, slimmed down to a size zero, an experiment she admits, that left her suffering from headaches and mood swings, and feeling so tired she could barely get dressed in the morning.

Then Andrex paid her to run around the country asking the nation about their – um – bottom-wiping habits.

"They were the sort of jobs no-one else would do," she laughs. "I was quite open about sex early in my career – although in a controlled way, I wasn't trying to become a sexpert or anything – but I did a few things about sex and after that I got offered all those kind of shows. At the top of one, the treatment said, 'Dawn Porter sleeps with hundreds of men!'"

The squealing starts.

"I said, 'What's this all about?' And they just said, 'Oh, don't worry about that, we'll sort that out ...'"

And she laughs hard, spluttering.

"So I thought, 'OK, I need to pull back from the sex thing. If that's what they think I'm willing to do, I need to make it very clear that's not going to happen.'"

For the record, she didn't sleep with hundreds of men; she just



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married one of them – a bona fide Hollywood star, as it happens, changing her name in the process by adding the ‘O’ in honour of *Bridesmaids* actor Chris O’Dowd. In fact, it will be the couple’s first anniversary when she is in Edinburgh next week reading from her first novel, *Paper Aeroplanes*.

“He’s working unfortunately,” she says. “So the next morning I’m flying straight to Ireland and we’re spending the weekend together.”

The book is loosely based on O’Porter’s own experiences growing up in Guernsey in the 1990s, and tackles, perhaps not surprisingly, some tricky subjects including the death of a parent, jealousy, family separation and – yes – sex. Its central characters are Renee and Flo, and she admits Renee is not unlike her teenage self.

“She’s just a similar kind of person to me; she is very much inspired by me. Always with a first novel I think there are going to be parts of you in one of the characters, so that was definitely me channelling myself.”

But, while these days O’Porter has a tight-knit bunch of gal pals, including Caroline Flack and Radio 1’s Gemma Cairney, her own childhood was less cosy. “There never was a Flo, but I think I always wanted one,” she says. “Flo is very

much like one of my closest friends I have now and I thought about her a lot when I was writing the book.”

In fact, her original plan had been to write about adult female friendships, until her publisher suggested otherwise. “She asked if I wanted to write books for teenagers and I’d never considered it before. But, when I thought about it, I realised the exact same story works

if these two women are 15 years old. And suddenly it just became so much more interesting because those friendships that you develop at 15, whether they are friendships forever or not, they definitely shape your life. So after one phone call the whole thing changed and it was the best thing that could have happened – the whole thing made sense.”

Born in Scotland, O’Porter’s mother and father separated when she was just one and, while dad stayed in Dunbartonshire, O’Porter and her elder sister moved with ▶▶

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Dawn O’Porter, main; her debut novel, inset



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their mum to the other end of the British Isles, to live with their grandparents.

“Scotland was a really big part of my childhood,” she says. “We used to come up and have these great summer holidays and I still felt it was very much home. In fact, I always say I’m Scottish even though, when I moved to Guernsey, I couldn’t have got further away. My dad is so Scottish and I’m so proud of that.”

It was shaping up to be a pretty idyllic childhood, all in all. Then when O’Porter was seven, her mother died from breast cancer. “It just broke our hearts,” she says. “It’s the worst thing that can happen to a little girl. People rallied round but you feel like no-one’s around; no-one can penetrate your emotions. I think I probably blocked it out for nearly 15 years.”

At that stage there was always the option of going back to Scotland to live with their father but, she says, the consensus was that they should stay put. “I remember thinking we’d been through enough, we should have peace. We had our family, our friends, our school, all that, so we

stayed. But we had a huge emotional connection to Scotland. We loved it there very much.”

Losing her mum so young – she was 36 when she died, just two years older than O’Porter is now – has, she says, shaped every area of her life and influenced every decision she’s made.

“ I’m just one of those women who needs other women around ”

“I always think I’m going to run out of time, so am terribly ambitious. There are times when work hasn’t gone well and the main thing on my mind is, ‘If I die tomorrow I’ll be p****d off.’ It drives me forward all the time.

“I’m 34, I’ll be 35 in January. Mum died a year later, at 36, so I feel very vulnerable healthwise at the moment and I feel very lucky that I’m healthy and am determined

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– more determined than I’ve ever been – to stay that way. I feel like my life’s just begun. I’ve just got married, everything’s going so well.”

She and O’Dowd live in London but she goes back to Guernsey often, and still sees her friends from school. “I hang out with them all the time. I wouldn’t say they’re my best mates, but we’re definitely still really close,” she says. “They all still look exactly the same. And we still talk about school, as if we were still there.

“My friendships have been vital in my life,” she adds. “I met my best friend when I was about 21 when I was at college, then another really good friend I got close with when I was about 30. Then I have some new friends I’ve met in the last three years who have become so important in my life.

“I’m one of those women who just really needs other women around me. The conversation and the honesty and the lack of judgment I have with them is crucial. I love my husband and we have a great relationship but there’s just something about female friendship that, when it’s right, is so powerful.”

That honesty means she tells her friends everything. “Really. Everything. And that goes both ways – they tell me everything too. There are some things you just can’t tell your husband. I don’t mean I have secrets from Chris,” she adds hastily. “Women just listen differently. Women understand women and I’m an emotional person. I like long, long conversations and that’s what women are really good at. Men just get bored after a few minutes.

“I also think women are stronger and funnier and generally better when men aren’t around. I see that a lot when I’m working in TV. Panel shows are a good example – when you get the token woman who’s outnumbered she’s never going to be the funniest person there. Whether they mean to or not, there’s a male dominance that happens, especially in comedy. All the women I know in TV are so much funnier when men aren’t there because there’s this freedom; it’s not competitive at all. I love that. I love putting groups of women together because we have the funniest times.”

Always the performer, O’Porter was destined for a career on the

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stage from the age of four. "I wanted to be an actress and show off," she says. "Then I went to drama school, but I got really frustrated with acting. I wanted to do something where I had a voice and tried to rewrite the lines all the time.

"A couple of years into drama school, I knew I wanted to be more of a broadcaster and journalist, and have an opinion. In fact, at my wedding my dad read out a story I'd written when I was five called *Nightmare on Albert Square*, when Dot Cotton got taken up by aliens, so I think it was always in my mind that I would work with stories. And it was the only thing I was any good at at school."

Her magazine columns are always refreshingly candid, and she talks openly about life with O'Dowd in a way that is not often seen in celebrity coupledom. "I'm really proud of our marriage," she says. "It's the most important thing in my life and I talk about it because I love him. We have friends in the public eye who won't be seen in public together and I'm like, 'Marriage first.' I don't understand that attitude.

"If I have a big night or Chris has a big night, we'll hold each other's hand through the whole thing. I don't care if people are taking pictures of us, I just want to be there for Chris. We're happy for people to know we support each other. If we started to let the industry we're in be a part of our marriage, and not be able to be a proper couple and talk excitedly about each other and be proud of each other, I just think that would be really sad.

"And as far as talking about personal stuff goes, he knows my entire career has been based on honesty about my life and that's part of the deal. But I really don't give an awful lot away, to be honest."

Anyway, she disputes that 'celebrity couple' label, insisting they have a completely normal life in their London house, with their fostered dog called Potato and Siamese cat called Lilu. "We're really only in the press when we're promoting work we're proud of. We spend a lot of time with our families, we live in a house in Bermondsey, we have an old lady on one side and a Liberal Democrat on the other, so

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Dawn O'Porter
with her husband
Chris O'Dowd

PHOTOGRAPHS: TESSA HALLMANN/CAMERA PRESS; GETTY



we don't feel like celebrities at all." They have talked about starting a family, but that will be sometime in the future. "I just have so much stuff going on," she says.

And, in the meantime, her books are her babies. As well as *Paper Aeroplanes*, next month will see the publication of *The Booby Trap*, a compilation of stories, thoughts and confessions from celebrities that is being sold in aid of breast cancer charities and that has been edited by O'Porter. "I'm so proud of this one. People were so generous and they've written some brilliantly funny and moving and interesting pieces. It was just a lovely experience putting it together.

"I love doing TV," she adds, "and I don't know what the future holds, but writing *Paper Aeroplanes* was just the best experience

of my life. I love the process – even though I say I don't because it's so stressful – and I love promoting something and people being interested in something that's all mine.

"The thing with TV is that I do my job then 100 people interfere with it. Sometimes I want a project where I do my job and no-one touches it; where the words are my words and I created the story. Even if people don't like it, I can take it because it's all mine. On my book tour I hugged everyone, I was so grateful for those people holding my book. That's a very different feeling to making a TV programme, and it's the feeling I want to have throughout my life. I'm sure TV won't go away completely but writing this book has really put into perspective what my dream is."

Dawn O'Porter is appearing at the Edinburgh Book Festival on Friday, 5pm (www.edbookfest.co.uk).

Paper Aeroplanes, published by Hot Key Books, £7.99.

The Booby Trap And Other Bits And Boobs is published on 19 September, £7.99 (£1 from each sale goes to breast cancer charities). 

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