

Q&A

COOK-TURNED-NOVELIST PRUE LEITH TALKS ABOUT HER LIFE, WORK AND GETTING OLDER

Tell us about your work with charitable organisations.

I've always been interested in the entrepreneurial side of charity. I've started a few: the more successful have included the 'Focus on Food Campaign' for food education; the RSA's initiative to get changing exhibitions of contemporary sculpture on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square; and the Hoxton Apprentice (a restaurant which provides skills and training for homeless and long-term unemployed people). The only charitable work I currently do is sitting on the board of Slow Food UK and chairing the government quango, the School Food Trust.

What does volunteering mean to you?

I'm a bossy type so I find it impossible not to want to get stuck in and fix something when it's broken. It is also hugely satisfactory to succeed in doing something useful.

As a renowned cook, do you have strong views on food for older people?

I certainly do. I once had a battle with a nutritionist in a hospital who wanted a skinny old lady – in for a broken hip – to give up fried white sliced bread and fried eggs for wholemeal toast and poached eggs, which she hated. If you have got to the age of 88 on a diet of fry-ups, this is no time for a change!

You have recently embarked on a career in novel-writing; why did you decide to do this and how easy is it to change your career path later in life?

I have always written professionally – journalism and cookbooks – so it wasn't such a huge jump. But getting taken seriously as a novelist when everyone thinks you still write cookbooks is tricky. I tend to be patronised by the critics, who sound astonished that a cook can write a good novel. But with this new one, *Choral Society*, I seem to have finally made it.

***Choral Society* is about three single 50-something women; is it difficult for older people to find love?**

There are a lot more 50-something women than men around, so I guess so. But older women do often find love,

and I've been lucky enough to be one of them. My husband died six years ago and after the first four years of widowhood I thought I had really cracked it. And then I met Sir Ernest Hall, the pianist and entrepreneur, and we fell for each other. I was astonished. I was 67 and he was 77, and we felt like a pair of teenagers.

What projects are you working on at the moment?

I'm still on one large company board: the Orient Express Hotels group, which is fun, not least because meetings are held in our hotels all over the world. And I am turning my listed tithe barn into my old-age home. I am also writing my next novel, which is a political one about the corruption of power, spin-doctors and scandal.

You were born in South Africa but have spent much of your life in London; what do you enjoy most about England?

I love the gentleness of the English countryside – the tameness of the storms, the softness of the rain. One of my novels, *The Gardener*, is about a woman gardener restoring a historic garden. I loved writing that – the research meant I wandered round the compost heaps and potting sheds of some of the great gardens of England and Ireland.

“ IF YOU HAVE GOT TO THE AGE OF 88 ON A DIET OF FRY-UPS, THIS IS NO TIME FOR A CHANGE ”

