

Why you're never too old to fall in love, by cookery doyenne Prue Leith, 68

Last updated at 8:42 AM on 17th February 2009

Why is it so difficult for anyone who has not yet hit the menopause to believe that anyone past it can possibly want, let alone indulge in, sex?

I know women in their 80s who have fallen in love: really, genuinely, seriously. I know women in their 70s who have met Mr Right and married him. I know dozens of women in their 50s, 60s and 70s who long for love.

The main problem is a lack of suitable chaps. It's not just a shortage of numbers; women are fussier than men. Men will happily marry a bimbo with half a brain and no conversation, but women still want to admire their partners, look up to them, respect them.



Latest targets for Cupid's arrow: Sir Ernest Hall, 78, and Prue Leith

I went to a dinner party when I had been on my own for nearly four years and considered myself to have cracked widowhood.

Not to like it, but to see its merits: like having meals at any time of the day or night, getting crumbs in the bed, putting the light out at two in the morning, not having to phone home and apologise for lateness and not having to shave my legs all the time.

Three of the guests were single women. After too much good wine, we all confessed to wanting a 'walker' - someone to go to the theatre with, to squire us when a squire was called for.

Most of all, someone to do nothing with, a male best friend. Preferably gay, we all said, so there would be no danger of embarrassing advances.

In my usual over-enthusiastic way, I became more specific. I specified someone in their 70s, Jewish and a musician.

I explained that someone ten years older than myself would regard me as young. And in my experience, Jewish men were more interested in the arts and business and were seldom nuts about sport. And a musician could do something about my utter ignorance of music.

One of the guests said he'd put an ad in the papers and vet any applicants for me. In the morning, however, I sobered up and chickened out. But then, a few months later, I went to the Canaries to spend a weekend holding the hand of a friend and business colleague I'd known for 20 years, Sir Ernest Hall, who is 78.

According to mutual friends, he was depressed by the double whammy of retirement and separation from his wife, and could do with some TLC.

To my astonishment, we fell in love. I was 66 and four years a widow. He is a pianist and in his 70s. Only one-eighth Jewish, though. But he's an entrepreneur, fascinated by business, mad about the arts and only very marginally interested in sport. So that's OK then. And I'm very glad he's not gay.

I shudder to think how easily we could have missed each other. I had twice postponed my trip because I had an idea Lanzarote was full of beer-swilling, lobster-tanned Brits bulging out of their bathers; I could not spare the time; I thought Ernest would be sad company.



Love blossomed in Lanzarote

And he, just wanting to be left alone and knowing I would force him into driving all over the entire island to see everything in a few days, thought of cancelling on me, but somehow failed to get round to it.

The airline managed to lose my luggage, so all I had for four days was the white T-shirt and cotton shorts Iberia's 'emergency pack' contained. I slept, swam, sunbathed and lunched in them. At night I wore a kaftan abandoned by Ernest's wife. I had no make-up.

I was certainly not looking for love. Whenever, as occasionally happened, some friend told me comfortingly that one day I would meet someone and misery would be behind me, I would want to punch them.

I had no desire, either. I did not lie awake dreaming of ageing beefcake like Harrison Ford. As I'd said, I was up for a walker, not a lover.

But, hey ho, Nature, or Cupid, or maybe Hormone Replacement Therapy, or the combination of sun, wine and music took a hand, and it was all exactly as I remembered the last time I'd fallen in love, and that was with my husband of 30-odd years.

Someone needs to do some of that clever brain-scanning research to discover why love does the same things for everyone of any age, be it 16 or 60.

Mooning around, willing the telephone to ring, discovering just how lovely the night sky is, a sudden interest in poetry, talking all night, feeling sick, shaking, every sense alert, the whole world singing - there is not a cliché in the book that lovers don't feel. And thank God for that!

Why are we so disapproving of the old, refusing to sit in a corner and knit? I read last week of cruise ships full of 50-plus women in search of Eastern European men who line the dockside to sweep them off to sun, sea and sex.

I have a friend, my age, who goes to Cuba because men will dance (and more) with her there. I rather admire her, as well as being deeply shocked. I am far too conventional for any of that. I once went salsa dancing at Bar Cuba in Kensington. I ended up fleeing the place.

It was so dark I was sure the young man determinedly grinding his groin into mine and kissing my neck had no idea how old I was.

I pulled back and in my most headmistressy voice ticked him off. 'Now, young man! I am old enough to be your mother, if not your grandmother. So stop that at once and teach me to do the rumba.'

Perhaps I expected him to turn tail and flee, but he leered and said: 'Don't worry, m'am, I like old women.' Well, not many do. I remember my mother, at 70, having a boob job. I, then aged 40, was censorious and unkind. 'Mum, you are 70!. Far too old to find a man! So who is going to see your boobs anyway?'

She protested that she had always hated the size and weight of them. She bared a shoulder to show me how her bra- strap cut into her flesh.

'I've carried these things around with me for 50 years, and I only put up with them because your father was fond of the things. And he's long dead, so I can do as I like and I am going to have small bosoms.'

And she did. And she was so delighted by them that she went on a diet and lost a couple of stone. And looked like 50. And got a really good part (she was an actress). And acquired two suitors - whom she rejected. And was happy.

The young, so free and easy about love themselves, find the thought that their elders should even think about such things, much less read or write about it, deeply embarrassing.

When I was writing my first novel, my husband said: 'There isn't going to be any sex in it, is there?'

'Of course there is. It's a modern love story.'

'Oh no, the children would be so embarrassed.'

I pointed out that the 'children' were 28 years old. But he had me worried, so I gave them a slightly raunchy chapter to read.

They both appeared vaguely surprised, as if their mother had no business knowing the facts of life. But they swallowed hard and said they could bear it.

'But,' said my son, 'I don't think Dad will be able to handle it.'

• **Choral Society is published by Quercus, £17.99. www.prue-leith.com**