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Vince and Joy
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Q: One of the most striking and moving elements of *Vince and Joy* is the way that magical coincidence keeps bringing these two people back together, and then the choice is up to them. Would you discuss your own ideas about magical coincidence?

A: I'm not as sure as I once was about the concepts of magical coincidence, destiny, serendipity, whatever you want to call it. When I was at the height of my love affair with my husband and my career as a writer had just taken off in fairy-tale fashion I was a true believer in magic. Eleven years down the line, life is more mundane and I now feel a bit more pragmatic about these things. I think when it comes to love, emotions are so heightened, hormones so powerful, that you can begin to believe in almost anything. I don't believe in God, I have no faith in anything except the individual. But I do believe in the power of electricity and I do believe that if you want something badly enough somehow the waves of your desire or your belief will reach their destination. I think it's more scientific than romantic!

Q: This is not at all a conventional love story, which is part of its power and charm. It's also filled with unconventional characters, many of which prove themselves to be true friends and good people. Do you think there is any such thing as a "normal person"?

A: Yes, definitely. I think most people are normal. There is an expression that goes 'it's always the quiet ones' which suggests that it's the people you don't notice who turn around and do the most bizarre things, but in my experience people who seem normal on first meeting generally tend to be just that. I can always tell within a split second of meeting someone if there is something not quite right about them and I often say, 'hmmm, I'm not sure about X. They're the sort of person who you wouldn't be surprised to read about in the newspapers one day.' Normal people may have unusual jobs, appearances, histories or stories to tell, but they conform to a basic social template that the majority of the population feel comfortable with. Well, that is my definition of a normal person, anyway! With *Vince and Joy*, the two main protagonists were so low key and pleasant that I really needed to throw a whole heap of unconventional characters into the mix, just to spice things up a bit.

Q: Do you have a particular method of writing? Do you have rituals that help you to focus?

A: No, but I have a whole heap of rituals to help me procrastinate! I post in a writers' chat room and I probably write more words there than I do in my manuscript some days. I check it obsessively every few minutes and also spend far too much time on eBay buying what my husband describes as 'other peoples' crap'. My writing has a sort of arc to it. When I start a book I barely manage a sentence or two a day. Once I've hit around chapter three and I've got a better idea of what it is I'm writing about, I manage a page or two a day. Towards the end of the book when I know exactly what's happening and the deadline's looming, I can write a chapter a day, sometimes two or three. This is the only time that I feel like a 'proper' writer!

Q: How do your ideas come to you? Writers are always asked if their main characters are self-portraits. Do you use fragments from your own life, or base characters entirely on real people?

A: I have used bits of myself in all my characters, even the men. I am nothing like Joy, but her experience of meeting a strange man in the classifieds and then, inexplicably going on to marry him, is exactly what happened to me when I was her age. Likewise, with Vince, I once worked for a company who made tacky porcelain dolls and had also seriously considered applying for a job as a driving instructor when I was unemployed in my twenties. My books are littered with references to things I like and dislike, experiences I've had and people I know or have just walked past once in the street, but it's very scattergun. No character or event is based 100 percent on fact. The book I've just finished writing was inspired by an amazing house I saw in my sister's neighbourhood and a funny-looking bloke who used to hold an advertising board outside my local tube station. I put the funny-looking bloke in the amazing house and built a whole world for him in there!

Q: Does being a writer change or influence the way you look at the world?

A: I think, more importantly, that writers naturally see the world in a very particular way. I've always been excessively excited about unusual sunsets and unexpected vignettes and peculiar characters and stories about the weird knots that peoples' lives can get tangled up into. I'm happy to look at photographs of people I don't know, to sit and watch the world go by for hours on end, to talk to strangers about themselves at great length, to stroll through London absorbing the atmosphere. If anything, as a writer, you have to try a bit harder to retain that view of the world, as writing is such aN isolating occupation and you don't tend to get out of the house quite as much as you once did. I have to force myself to get out there and grab a bit of the stuff of life, just to keep my imagination well-stocked!