

'Funny, smart and sassy' HELEN LEDERER

# TINKER, TAILOR, Schoolmum,



The  
name's  
Mum

Stressed  
Mum

## FAYE BRANN

WINNER OF THE COMEDY WOMEN IN PRINT PRIZE

# BOOK CLUB KIT

Resources inside: Questions for discussion - Essay by the author - Sangria recipe

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST FAYE BRANN AT YOUR BOOK CLUB?

Faye is offering to virtually visit book groups of 6 or more and can join your group for up to thirty minutes. To arrange a session, please visit the Contact tab on [fayebrann.com](http://fayebrann.com)

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did you identify with the dilemma Vicky faced between parenting and her career?
2. Vicky and Chris have a very stable marriage and obviously care for each other. Why do you think she didn't tell him about her return to the secret service?
3. Vicky and Matisse seem very different when they first meet. How did their friendship change by the end of the book?
4. Jonathan describes Vicky as being 'completely invisible.' As women enter mid-life, how does this invisibility affect them? Are there positives as well as negatives?
5. Do you think Vicky's choice to take her family with her to Dubai was the right one?
6. How would you feel about finding out your partner had a secret life as a spy?
7. What was it about the book that you found funny? Or, if you didn't, why didn't you?
8. Vicky has a lot of feelings of self-doubt about her ability to do the job. What makes her feel this way and how does she overcome it?
9. Did you disagree with any of Vicky's actions? What would you have done differently?
10. If this was a movie or a TV series, who would play Vicky? Sacha? Matisse?





## ON WRITING TINKER, TAILOR, SCHOOLMUM, SPY

When I first began writing, it was a terribly serious endeavour. I was studying for an MA while living in Dubai, and my tutor recommended I pen a narrative nonfiction about life as an expat – more specifically, an expat wife (or ‘trailing spouse’ as it was known back then!). When I mentioned I might like to give writing a novel a whirl instead, she advised me to stick to non-fiction if I wanted to be published as the odds were stacked against traditional publication for any debut writer. And I did want to be published. So I wrote the non-fic. The result was a slightly indulgent but very necessary piece of work for all sorts of reasons, not least of which was it taught me what writing 90,000 words felt like. But soon after I finished it, I returned to the UK and it didn’t feel like the right thing to pursue. I parked it in the proverbial drawer to gather dust and wondered what to do next.

Around the same time, I was diagnosed with premature menopause. Aged 42, it came as a bit of a shock. I realised I could either feel miserable about this state of affairs or embrace it. But it was hard. Repatriation is a lonely and largely unsympathetic business, as is the menopause, and I didn’t know what to do with myself a lot of the time. I was desperately trying to make friends, start a business and look after my family, all the while feeling emotionally and physically vulnerable. The idea for *Tinker, Tailor, Schoolmum, Spy* was born out of a need to do something that reflected all these experiences and emotions. I realised I wanted to write a book for and about women just like me – to create a window into the world of the mid-life woman, in all its horror and its glory. I didn’t want the novel to be romantic, or literary: I wanted it to be adventurous and fun – and funny, too. I’d always wanted to be a spy, I thought I’d make a really good one, don’t ask me why. The concept didn’t seem beyond the realms of possibility and as soon as I’d entertained the notion of a housewife-turned-secret agent, I knew I’d landed on the book I wanted to write.

I was warned off genre mashing by several people who said it would never be commercial enough to sell, that comedy was hard to get published and editors wouldn’t know what to do with a spy/commercial fiction combo. But I couldn’t shake the idea that a tongue in cheek book which revealed all the insecurities and craziness of modern-day middle-aged motherhood mixed with a license to kill would appeal if I could just put it in the hands of readers. So, I persisted – and lucky for me, the wonderful judges of the Comedy Women in Print Prize agreed. I won the prize in 2020 and a year later, I’m now a fully-fledged author, published with Harper Collins.

## ...CONT'D

Writing comedy is a little like putting life under a magnifying glass, and it helped enormously to have lived in Dubai for so many years, because it's a fairly bonkers sort of place. As the first draft progressed, I discovered the extremes and exaggerations that make successful comedy writing were not a huge leap – and even though most of the book is set in London, many of the experiences I'd had as an expat woman that I'd tried to express so earnestly in my previous manuscript ended up in Tinker, Tailor, Schoolmum, Spy as funny scenes or observations of one sort or another. However, as my characters developed, I realised that they needed to be a careful study: writing to stereotype for cheap laughs can get boring and two dimensional after a while, never mind insulting. I made it my mission to add depth to all my characters, to ensure they weren't just 'typical mums' or 'typical baddies' or – a common commercial fiction crime – 'typical husband'.

I've trained in and performed a lot of comedy improvisation, and I found that the toolkit I had built for improv really helped in creating a novel that had a bit more to it than just gags and goofs. It's exhausting for both reader and writer to try to be constantly funny, and generally speaking, 'trying' to be anything rarely results in success. Keith Johnstone, a master of comedy improvisation, says that when people go to see an improv show, they want a four-course meal, not 'ice cream followed by ice cream followed by ice cream followed by ice cream'. It's the same when writing a book – you need light and shade to make it interesting and providing moments of pathos and pause for thought helps shine a spotlight on the funny moments, too.

I believe that truth is a really important part of comedy, be it on stage or on the page. People laugh at what they can identify in themselves as being true. Audiences of improv shows love truth, they love the obvious thing, that they have spotted even before the people on the stage realise the connection. In a show or in a novel, you don't want a scene or a joke to be totally predictable, but you do want people to believe where the story is going and in the choices the characters make. Placing the story inside a reader's 'circle of expectation' is a key part of this. It needs to feel true, even if it is a bit unlikely.

Follow Faye on Insta and Twitter @writerfaye or connect with her on Facebook @FayeBrannWriter.

# VICKY'S SANGRIA RECIPE

750 ml bottle dry Spanish red wine

1/2 apple

2 oranges

1/3 cup brandy or vermouth

Optional: 2 tablespoons brown sugar

Optional: Carbonated beverage like lemon soda or soda water

Ice cubes

## Instructions

Optional: If you want to use sugar to make a sweeter sangria, dissolve the sugar in two tablespoons of water over low heat to create a syrup. Afterward, let it cool.

Juice 1 1/2 oranges so that you have around 3/4 cup of fresh orange juice.

Chop the remaining half orange and half apple into small pieces. Add any other fruit you like - strawberries, peaches, banana - it's up to you!

Stir together one bottle of dry red wine, the fresh orange juice, optional syrup, brandy or vermouth, and the fruit.

Add ice cubes (and optional a carbonated beverage) just before serving.

Enjoy your homemade sangria!

